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The Ramblin' Kid

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The Ramblin' Kid

A NIGHT LETTER

Sand and gravel slithered and slid under the heels of Old Pie Face as Skinny Rawlins whirled the broncho into the open space in front of the low-built, sprawling, adobe ranch house of the Quarter Circle KT and reined the pinto to a sudden stop. Skinny had been to Eagle Butte and with other things brought back the mail. It was hot, late June, the time between cutting the first crop of alfalfa and gathering, from the open range, the beef steers ready for the summer market. Regardless of the heat Skinny had ridden hard and his horse was a lather of sweat. A number of cowboys lounged, indolently, in the shade of the bunk-house, smoking cigarettes and contentedly enjoying the hour of rest after the noon-day dinner. Another, lean-built, slender, boyish in appearance and with strangely black, inscrutable eyes, stepped from around the corner of the house as Skinny jerked Old Pie Face to a standstill.

"Where's Old Heck?" Skinny asked excitedly. "I brought the mail---here, take it to him!"

The other, known on the Kiowa and the range of western Texas and Mexico only as "the Ramblin' Kid," strolled leisurely out through the sagging, weight-swung gate and up to the panting horse from which Skinny had not yet dismounted.

"Asleep, I reckon," he replied in a voice peculiarly low and deliberate, "---what's your spontaneousness about? You act like a special d'livery or somethin'."

"Old Heck's got a letter," Skinny said, jerkily; "maybe's it's bad news an' he ought to have it quick," as the Ramblin' Kid reached for a yellow envelope held in the outstretched hand.

At that instant Old Heck, owner and boss of the Quarter Circle KT cow outfit, stepped from the shadow of the open ranch-house door. He was short and stocky, red-faced, somewhere near the fifties, and a yellowish-gray mustache hung over tobacco blackened lips. Overalls, a checked blue and white shirt, open at the throat, boots into which the trousers legs were loosely jammed comprised his attire. He was bareheaded and the sun glistened on a wrinkly forehead, topped by a thin sprinkling of hair.

"What's the matter?" he asked drowsily, his small, gray-blue eyes blinking in the yellow sun-glare and still sluggish from the nap disturbed by the noise of Skinny's arrival.

"Nothin'. Skinny's just got a letter an' is excited about it," the Ramblin' Kid said, handing the envelope to him. "It's for you."

"My Gawd!" Old Heck exclaimed, "it's a telegram!"

The cowboys resting in the shade of the bunk-house rose to their feet, sauntered over and surrounded Old Heck and the Ramblin' Kid, commenting meanwhile, frankly and caustically, on the fagged condition of the broncho Skinny was on:

"Must 'a' been scared, the way you run that horse," Parker, range foreman of the Quarter Circle KT, a heavy-built, sandy-complexioned man in the forties, remarked witheringly to Skinny as the cow-puncher climbed from the saddle and slid to the ground.

"He's mine, I reckon," Skinny retorted, "an' I figure it's nobody's darn' business how I ride him---anyhow I brought Old Heck a telegram!" he added triumphantly.

"Blamed if he didn't!" Charley Saunders, with a trifle of awe, pretended or real, in his tone, said. "It sure is!"

"My Gawd!" Old Heck repeated, slowly turning the envelope over in his hand, "it's a telegram! Wonder what it's about?"

"Why don't you open it and see?" Parker suggested.

"Yes, open th' blamed thing and find out," Skinny encouraged.

"I---I've a notion to," Old Heck whispered.

"Go on and do it, it won't take but a minute," Charley Saunders entreated.

"Maybe he's one of these mind-readers and can read it through the envelope," Bert Lilly volunteered.

"Aw, shut up and give him a chance!"

Trembling, Old Heck tore open the envelope and silently read the message.

"My Gawd!" he groaned again. "The worst has come to the worst!"

"That ought to make it middlin' bad," Charley remarked soberly.

"Ought to," Bert added sententiously.

Parker crowded forward on sympathy bent.

"Tell us what's in it," he said; "if it's sorrowful we'll be plumb glad to condole!"

"It's worse than sorrowful---"

"Melancholical?" Skinny inquired.

"My Gawd!" Old Heck said again, his weatherworn features working convulsively, "it's more than a mortal man can endure and stand!"

"Bet somebody's dead!" Bert whispered to the Ramblin' Kid.

"Probably. Most everybody gets to be sooner or later," was the answer without emotion.

Sing Pete, Chinese cook for the outfit, dish-rag over his shoulder, edged out of the kitchen door and shuffled around to the group. Glimpsing the yellow slip of paper held in the shaking hand of Old Heck and the awed interest of the cowboys gathered about the boss, he queried:

"Teleglam?"

No answer.

"Teleglam? Maybe alle samee somebody sickee?" he continued, cheerfully confident that questions enough would ultimately bring a reply. He was rewarded:

"What do you know about 'teleglams'? You slant-eyed burner of beef-steaks!"

"Who's it from?" Charley asked. "Anybody we know---"

"My Gawd," Old Heck mourned once more, "she's comin'!"

"Who's she?" Parker coaxed.

"A female," Old Heck replied, "she's a female!"

"The darned old cuss has had a wife sometime and run off from her and deserted her and she's pursuing him and trailing him down to earth!" Chuck Slithers, doubting Thomas of the outfit and student of Sherlock Holmes, cunningly suggested. "I always imagined he was a varmint with a past---a' ex-heart breaker of innocent women or a train-robber or---"

"Aw, hell," the Ramblin' Kid rebuked, "him have a wife? Don't insult th' female population!"

"*Carramba!*" exclaimed Pedro Valencia, Mexican line-rider for the Quarter Circle KT, "perhaps she will stick him with the dagger, or shoot him with the gun when she arrive! The ladies with love kill quick when the love is---what you call him?---the jilt?"

"And I'd almost forgot I ever had one!" Old Heck continued talking as if to himself.

"What'd I tell you?" Chuck exulted.

"Shut up! He's confessin'---let him alone an' he'll get it out of his conscience sooner or later!"

"Had a what?" Parker urged sympathetically. "Maybe you didn't have one---maybe you only imagined you did!"

"Had a brother---anyhow a half a one---our mothers was the same but different fathers on account of mine dyin' when I was little and his marrying our mother again; we was playmates together in our innocent childhood and infancy until I run away and went to sea and finally anchored on the Kiowa and got to raisin' cattle---"

"Where does he come in at?" Parker questioned.

"He said it was a female, to start with," Skinny added.

"---and his name is Simeon Dixon on account of his father's being the same thing, and he went in the street railroad business in a place named Hartville in Connecticut, and he got married and had a wife---she was Zithia Forbes, and she's dead, and I knowed that, and he's rich I reckon and---"

"An' Amrak begat Meshak an' Meshak begat Zimri an' Zimri was th' founder of th' House of Old Heck," the Ramblin' Kid chanted. "What in thunder does details amount to, anyhow?"

"But you was mournin' about a she!" Parker insisted.

"Well, I reckon it ain't a wife---at least not the one I was thinking about," Chuck murmured disappointedly, "but I bet he's had one somewhere in his vari'gated career and is hiding out from her in fear an' tremblin'---"

"And there will not be the grand, the beautiful murder?" Pedro sighed, questioningly.

"Wait a minute," Skinny pleaded, "---give him air!"

"---and he's got a female daughter---and I didn't know that---and he's---oh, Gawd!---he's sending her out to the Quarter Circle KT!"

"How big is she?" Parker whispered.

"She's---she's twenty-two---"

"Inches around or what?" Charley gasped.

"---and Ophelia is coming with her---Ophelia Cobb---C-o-double-b it is---is coming with her for a chaperon---"

"Great guns!" Skinny breathed,"---two females!"

"Hold still and I'll read it---no, you do it, Parker---I'm too full of emotion---my voice'd quiver---"

Parker read:

"Josiah Heck, Eagle Butte, Texas:

> "Am sending my daughter, Carolyn June, out to your ranch for a while. She needs a change. She has broke all the he-human hearts in Hartville---that is all of them old enough or young enough to be broke---and is what's called a love-stimulator and won't settle. She is twenty-two and it's time she was calmed. Hoping six months on the Kiowa range will gentle her quite a lot, I am sympathetically your 1/2 brother, Simeon.

"P.S.---Mrs. Ophelia Cobb, a lady widow, is coming with her for a chaperon. Beware of both of them. They will arrive at Eagle Butte the 21st.---S."

"Gee, it's a long one!" Chuck said admiringly.

"It's one of these 'Night Letters,'" Parker explained.

"I knowed it was bad news," Skinny exclaimed, "---poor old Heck!"

"Better say, 'Poor we all!'" Bert declared. "Farewell peace and joy on the Quarter Circle KT!"

"The Lord have mercy on Old Heck!" Charley cried with dramatic fervor.

"Holy smoke," Parker murmured desperately, "*two of them on the twenty-first---and that's to-morrow!*"

CHAPTER II

A BLUFF CALLED

The Quarter Circle KT was a womanless ranch. Came now, like a bolt from the clear sky or the sudden clang of a fire-alarm bell, the threat of violation of this Eveless Eden by the intrusion of a pair of strange and unknown females. The arrival of the telegram telling of the coming of Carolyn June Dixon, Old Heck's niece, and Ophelia Cobb, her chaperon, filled with varying emotions the hearts of Old Heck, Parker and the cowboys.

To Old Heck their presence meant nothing less than calamity. Long years of he-man association had made him dread the petty restraints he imagined would be imposed by intimate contact with womankind. Good lord, a man wouldn't be able even to cuss freely, and without embarrassment, with a couple of women in the house and prowling around the ranch!

Skinny, Bert, Chuck, Pedro, Charley, the Ramblin' Kid, even the Chink cook and Parker, quivered with excitement and curiosity behind thinly veiled pretense of fear and horror. Secretly they rejoiced. It was marvelous news borne by the telegram Skinny brought. Here would be diversion ample, unusual, wholly worth while and filled with possibilities of romance as luring as the first glimpse of a strange new land shadowed with mystery and promise of thrilling adventure.

Sing Pete paddled back to the unfinished business of the kitchen, chattering excitedly. The cowboys stood mutely and stared at Old Heck and the fatal slip of yellow paper.

"What'll I do?" Old Heck asked the group despairingly. "They'll ruin everything."

"Can't you head 'em off, somehow?" Parker suggested.

"Can't be done. They're already on their way and probably somewhere this side of Kansas City by now."

"Find out which train they're on and let the Ramblin' Kid and me cut across to the Purgatory River bridge and wreck it," Skinny Rawlins, always tragic, darkly advised.

"I ain't particular about killin' females," the Ramblin' Kid objected, "besides, we ain't got no dynamite."

"Send them a telegram and say Old Heck's dead and not to come," Bert Lilly volunteered.

"Aw, you blamed idiot, they'd come anyhow then, just to attend the funeral---"

"I got an idea," Chuck Slithers exclaimed; it's a telegram too. Send them one C.O.D. in care of the train that will get to Eagle Butte the twenty-first and tell them we've all got the smallpox and we're sorry but everybody's dangerously sick and to please answer!"

"That might work," Parker said; "they'd be mighty near sure not to want to catch it."

"We'll try it," Old Heck agreed. "Chuck wants to ride over to Eagle Butte anyway and he can have the depot agent send it and wait for a reply."

"Go get your horse ready, Chuck," Parker said, "we'll write it while you're saddlin' up!"

Chuck hurried to the corral while Old Heck went into the house for pencil and writing-paper. Parker and the cowboys moved in a group to the shade of the porch in front of the house.

"What'll we tell them?" Old Heck asked, reappearing with writing materials. "Here, Parker, you write it."

"Dear niece Carolyn June Dixon and Chaperon: Sorry, but there's an epidemic of smallpox at the Quarter Circle KT and you can't come. Chuck is dying with it. Old Heck's plumb prostrated, Bert is already broke out, Pedro is starting to and Skinny Rawlins and the Ramblin' Kid are just barely able to be up. I love you too much to want you to catch it. Please go back to Hartville and give my regards to your pa and don't expose yourself. Answer by return telegram so I'll know your intentions. Affectionately and absolutely your Uncle Josiah Heck," Parker read after writing a few moments. "How's that?"

"Sounds all right."

"Got it ready?" Chuck called from the fence, while Silver Tip, the trim-built half-blood Hambletonian colt he was riding, reared and pranced, eager for the road and a run.

"For lord's sake hurry up, Chuck," Old Heck yelled as the Ramblin' Kid handed the paper to Chuck and the cowboy whirled his horse into a gallop toward Eagle Butte. "Have the agent send it in care of whatever train they might be on and get an answer, then come back as quick as possible ---–waiting is agony!"

It was a long afternoon for Old Heck and the cowboys of the Quarter Circle KT. A band of colts were in the circular corral to be gentled to rope, saddle and hackamore. Old Heck sat on the top pole of the corral and moodily watched the struggle of the men and horses in the dry, dusty enclosure as one by one each young broncho was roped, saddled and ridden. Frequently he turned longing eyes toward Eagle Butte, anxious for sight of the cloud of dust from which Chuck would emerge bringing, he hoped, word that Carolyn June and Ophelia Cobb had heeded the misleading message.

The sun crept across the western sky and dropped lower and lower until it hung at last, a blazing disk of fire, close above the highest peaks of the Costejo mountain range. The poplars in front of the house flung slim black shadows across the low adobe buildings and splashed the tip of their shade in the dust-cloud that filled with haze the corral a hundred yards away. Sing Pete stepped from the door and beat a tattoo on the iron triangle suspended by a piece of wire from the lowest branch of a mesquit tree at the corner of the house, announcing by the metallic clamor that the work of the day was finished and supper was ready and waiting. Parker swung back the heavy gate at the corral entrance and the dozen colts, sweat streaks on heads and backs and bellies where hackamore, saddle and cinches told of the lessons of the afternoon, pushing and jamming and with a clatter of hoofs, whirled out to freedom, around the stable and down a lane into an open meadow.

Kicking off their chaps the cowboys tossed them on the riding gear, piled already against the fence of the corral, and straggled stiffly toward the house. On the wire enclosing the back yard Sing Pete had hung a couple of heavy towels, coarse and long. Some basins and several chunks of yellow laundry soap were on a bench beside an irrigation ditch that ran along the fence just inside the gate. Old Heck, Parker and the cowboys stopped at the ditch, pitched their hats on the grass and dipping water from the ditch scoured the dust and sweat from their faces and hands.

All were silent as if each was troubled with thoughts too solemn to be spoken aloud.

At last, Skinny, handing a towel to Bert after drying his own sun-tanned face and hands, remarked inanely:

"Chuck ain't come, has he?"

"Slupper!" Sing Pete called.

They filed into the kitchen and each took his regular place at the long, oilcloth covered table. The food, wholesome, plain and abundant, was already served.

Silently each heaped his plate with the viands before him while Sing Pete circled the table pouring coffee into the white porcelain cups. The Quarter Circle KT was famous for the excellence of its grub and the Chink was an expert cook.

"Lordy, oh, lordy," Old Heck groaned, "it don't seem possible them women are coming!"

"Maybe they won't," Parker sympathized. "When they get that telegram they ought to turn around and go back---"

"Chuck's coming!" Bert Lilly exclaimed at that moment and the sound of a horse stopping suddenly at the front of the house reached the ears of the group at the table.

"Go ask him if he got an answer, somebody, quick!" Old Heck cried.

As Charley Saunders sprang to his feet Chuck yelled, "They got it and sent an answer! I got one---" and rushed excitedly through the house and into the kitchen waving an envelope, twin to the one Skinny had brought earlier in the day. "They're on Train Number Seventeen, the agent said---"

"My Gawd!" Old Heck gasped, "what does it say? Give it here!" reaching for the message the cowboy held in his hand.

"Good lord, it didn't work!" he groaned as he read the telegram and handed it across the table to Parker.

"Read it out loud," several spoke at once.

"'We've both had it,'" Parker read, "'and are not afraid. Anyhow we think you are a darned old lovable liar. Will arrive according to schedule. If you are not a liar we'll nurse you back to health and happiness. If you are, watch out! Your affectionate but suspicious little niece Carolyn June Dixon. Postscript: Are there any nice wild, untamed, young cowboys out there?---Carolyn J.'"

"Hell-fire!" Skinny said, "what'll we do?"

No answer. Chuck went moodily out to attend to his horse, and the meal was finished in silence. Even Sing Pete seemed deeply depressed. After supper Old Heck straightened up and in a do-or-die tone said:

"We'll all go out where it's cool and hold a caucus and figure what ought to be done."

"There ain't nothing we can do but surrender, as far as I can see," Parker observed gloomily as they gathered on the porch in front of the house. "They seem plumb determined to arrive---"

"I've already give up hope," Old Heck answered, "but what will we do with them when they get here? We can't just brand 'em and turn them loose on the range."

"I make a motion we elect Skinny to ride herd on 'em!" Bert Lilly suggested.

"Damned if I do!" Skinny exclaimed uneasily.

"It's a good idea," Parker said. "From all accounts the young one expects to be made love to and if she ain't she'll probably be weeping around all the time---"

"Well, I can't stand sobbin'!" Old Heck declared. "Any female is hard enough to endure and one that gets to mourning is plumb distasteful!

"That's probably the best thing to do," he continued, "just appoint Skinny to be official love-maker to Carolyn June while she's at the Quarter Circle KT. It will probably save confusion---"

"I brought the telegram telling about them coming and I've done my share," Skinny protested; "somebody else can be delegated to do the love-making!"

"That's just the reason it ought to be your job," Old Heck argued; "you went and got the telegram in the first place and are sort of responsible for them being here."

"Aw, let th' Ramblin' Kid do it," Skinny pleaded, "he's an easy talker and everything---"

The Ramblin' Kid straightened up and started for the gate.

"Where you going?"

"To catch Capt'n Jack," he drawled; "after that for a little ride down to th' Pecos or over in Chihuahua somewhere a couple hundred miles. I decline with enthusiasm to fall in love on th' spur of th' moment for any damned outfit!"

"You come on back," Parker called, "Skinny'll have to do it. He can have all his time for it and just pretend he's in love and sort of entertain her. He don't need to go and do it in earnest. Come on back, you darned chump, I need you on the beef hunt!"

"What'll I have to do?" Skinny asked cautiously.

"Just set on the front porch with her at night and make your eyes roll up like a calf's that's being branded and kind of sigh heart-broken once in a while," Bert volunteered. "It'll be easy when you get used to it---"

"If you know so much about it why don't you enlist yourself?" Skinny asked irritably. "Some of you fellows go on and volunteer," he pleaded dolefully.

"I would in a minute," Chuck chipped in, "if I was good-looking like Skinny and had a white shirt---"

"What's a white shirt got to do with it?"

"Listen to the innocent child," Chuck laughed, "as if any darned fool didn't know that the first thing a professional love-maker has to have is a white shirt!"

"That settles it," Skinny declared with emphasis, "I won't wear a white shirt to make love to no blamed woman---"

"Chuck's locoed," the Ramblin' Kid interposed; "you don't need to have no white shirt---of course it would be better but it ain't downright necessary---women don't fall in love with shirts, it's what's inside of them."

"Where did you find out so much about women?" Bert queried.

"I didn't find out---I'm just guessin'---"

"There ain't no use arguing," Old Heck broke in. "Skinny will have to be expert love-maker for that Carolyn June niece of mine---I'll allow him ten dollars a month more wages while he's doing it. I ain't going to have her writing letters to her pa and telling him she didn't have no conveniences or nothing. Anyhow, she's young and I reckon it's sort of necessary."

"What about th' other one---Ophelia Cobb or whoever she is?" Bert Lilly asked.

"She's past the age for it, probably," Parker said uneasily.

"They don't pass it," the Ramblin' Kid interrupted laconically; "when females get too old to want to be made love to they die---"

"I'd like to know where in hell a juvenile like you got your education about women!" Bert insisted to the Ramblin' Kid.

"I ain't got none---I'm just guessing I told you," the other replied, "but it's the truth, anyhow."

"Well, if I've got to make love to the young one Old Heck or Parker or somebody's got to do it for the other one," Skinny declared positively.

"Ophelia don't need it," Old Heck said hastily, "she's a widow and has done been---"

"Widows are th' worst," the Ramblin' Kid drawled; "they've had experience an' don't like to give it up."

"Th' Ramblin' Kid's right," Chuck broke in. "I read a book once that said that's the way they are. It's up to Old Heck or Parker to represent Cupid to the widow---"

"Who the hell's Cupid?" Skinny asked curiously.

"He's a dangerous little outlaw that ain't got no reg'lar range," the Ramblin' Kid answered for Chuck.

"I'll not do it---" Old Heck and Parker spoke at once.

"Then I won't either," Skinny declared flatly, "I'll quit the dog-goned Quarter Circle KT first!"

"Let Sing Pete make love to the widow," Bert suggested.

"No, no! Me busy cookee," Sing Pete, who had been listening from the open doorway, jabbered and darted, frightened, back into the house.

"Anyhow I'd kill him if he did," the Ramblin' Kid said softly; "no darned Chink can make love to a white woman, old, young or indifferent, in my presence an' live!"

"Well, Old Heck'll have to do it, then," Skinny said; "hanged if I'm going to be the only he-love-maker on this ranch!"

"Let Parker and Old Heck divide up on Ophelia," Chuck advised, "one of them can love her one day and the other the next---"

"That's reasonable," Bert declared, "she'd probably enjoy a change herself."

"I tell you I ain't got time," Parker protested.

"Neither have I," Old Heck added.

"All right then, I ain't either!" Skinny declared. "If you two ain't willing to take turn about with the widow and love her off and on between you I'll be everlastingly hell-tooted if I'm going to stand for a whole one by myself all of the time! I'll go on strike first and start right now!"

"We'll stay with you, Skinny," the Ramblin' Kid exclaimed with a laugh, "th' whole bunch will quit till Parker an' Old Heck grants our demands."

"We'll all quit!" the cowboys chorused.

"Oh, well, Parker," Old Heck grumbled, "I reckon we'll have to do it!"

"It won't be hard work," the Ramblin' Kid said consolingly, "all you got to do is set still an' leave it to Ophelia. Widows are expert love-makers themselves an' know how to keep things goin'!"

It was settled. Skinny Rawlins, at an increase of ten dollars a month on his wage, protestingly, was elected official love-maker to Carolyn June Dixon, Old Heck's niece, speeding unsuspectingly toward the Quarter Circle KT, and Old Heck and Parker between them were to divide the affections of Ophelia Cobb, widow and chaperon.

In the mind of every cowboy on the ranch there was one thought unexpressed but very insistent that night, "Wonder what She looks like?" thinking, of course, of Carolyn June.

Old Heck and Parker also were disturbed by a common worry. As each sank into fitful sleep, thinking of Ophelia Cobb, the widow, and his own predestinated affinity he murmured:

"What if she insists on getting married?"

CHAPTER III

WHICH ONE'S WHICH

Eagle Butte sprawled hot and thirsty under the melting sunshine of mid-forenoon. It was not a prepossessing town. All told, no more than two hundred buildings were within its corporate limits. A giant mound, capped by a crown of crumbling, weather-tinted rock, rose abruptly at the northern edge of the village and gave the place its name. Cimarron River, sluggish and yellow, bounded the town on the south. The dominant note of Eagle Butte was a pathetic mixture of regret for glories of other days and clumsy ambition to assume the ways of a city. Striving hard to be modern it succeeded only in being grotesque.

The western plains are sprinkled with towns like that. Towns that once, in the time of the long-horn steer and the forty-four and the nerve to handle both, were frankly unconventional. Touched later by the black magic of development, bringing brick buildings, prohibition, picture shows, real-estate boosters, speculation and attendant evils or benefits as one chooses to classify them, they became neither elemental nor ethical---mere gawky mimics of both.

When western Texas was cow-country and nothing else Eagle Butte at least was picturesque. Flickering lights, gay laughter---sometimes curses and the sounds of revolver shots, of battles fought close and quick and to a finish---wheezy music, click of ivory chips, the clink of glasses, from old Bonanza's and similar rendezvous of hilarity lured to the dance, faro, roulette, the poker table or the hardwood polished bar.

The Mecca it was in those days for cowboys weary with months on the wide-flung range.

To-day Eagle Butte is modest, mild and super-subdued.

A garage, cement built, squatty and low and painfully new, its wide-mouthed entrance guarded by a gasoline pump freshly painted and exceedingly red, stands at the eastern end of the single, broad, un-paved business street. All of the stores face one way---north---and look sleepily across at the railroad track, the low-eaved, yellow, Santa Fe station and the sunburnt sides of the butte beyond. Opposite the station the old Occidental Hotel with its high porch, wide steps, narrow windows, dingy weather-board sides and blackened roof, still stands to remind old-timers of the days of long ago.

A city marshal, Tom Poole, a long, slim, Sandy-mustached Missourian, completes the picture of Eagle Butte. Regularly he meets the arriving trains and by the glistening three-inch nickel star pinned to his left suspender announces to the traveling world that here, on the one time woolly Kiowa, law and order at last prevail. Odd times the marshal farms a ten-acre truck patch close to the river at the southern edge of the town. Pending the arrival of trains he divides his time between the front steps of the old hotel and the Elite Amusement Parlor, Eagle Butte's single den of iniquity where pocket pool, billiards, solo---devilish dissipations these!---along with root beer, ginger ale, nut sundaes, soda-pop, milk shakes and similar enticements are served to those, of reckless and untamed temperaments.

From the open door of the pool hall the marshal saw a thin, black streak of smoke curling far out on the horizon---a dozen miles---northeast of Eagle Butte.

"Seventeen's comin'," he remarked to the trio of idlers leaning against the side of the building; "guess I'd better go over an' see who's on her," moving as he spoke out into the sizzling glare of the almost deserted street. Glancing toward the east his eyes fastened on a cloud of dust whirling rapidly along the road that came from the direction of the lower Cimarron.

"Gosh, lookey yonder," he muttered, "that must be Old Heck drivin' his new automobile---th' darn fool is goin' to bust something some day, runnin' that car the way he does!"

Walking quickly, to escape the heat, he crossed the street to the station.

Two minutes later the cloud of dust trailed a rakish, trim-lined, high-powered, purring Clagstone "Six" to a stop in front of the Occidental Hotel and Old Heck and Skinny Rawlins climbed glumly and stiffly from the front seat, after the thirty-minute, twenty-mile run from the Quarter Circle KT.

Old Heck had his peculiarities. One of them was insistence for the best---absolutely or nothing. The first pure-bred, hot-blood stallions turned on the Kiowa range carried the Quarter Circle KT brand on their left shoulders. He wanted quality in his stock and spent thousands of dollars importing bulls and stallions to get it. When the automobile came it

was the same. No jit for the erratic owner of the last big genuine cow-ranch on the Cimarron. Consequently the beautiful car---a car fit for Fifth Avenue---standing now in front of the old hotel in Eagle Butte.

The smoke on the northeastern sky-line was yet some miles away.

The lanky marshal had reached the station.

"It's a good thing there's prohibition in this town," Skinny muttered as he stepped from the car and started brushing the dust from his coat;

"Why?"

"'Cause I'd go get drunk if there wasn't--. Wonder if a feller could get any boot-leg liquor?"

"Better leave it alone," Old Heck warned, "that kind's worse than none. It don't make you drunk---just gives you the hysterical hydrophobia!'

"Well, I'd drink anything in an emergency like this if I had it," Skinny declared doggedly.

"Train's comin'," Old Heck said shortly; "reckon we'd better go over to the depot---"

"Let's wait here till they get off first," Skinny said. "We can see them from where we are and kind of size 'em up and it won't be so sudden."

"Maybe that would be better," Old Heck answered.

A moment later Number Seventeen, west-bound Santa Fe passenger train, stopped at the yellow station. The rear cars were obscured from the view of Skinny and Old Heck by freight sheds along the track. With the exception of the engine, baggage, mail and express cars, which were hidden by the depot, the rest of the train was in plain sight.

A couple of men got off the day coach. These were followed by a gawky, weirdly dressed girl of uncertain age carrying an old-fashioned telescope traveling bag. At sight of the girl Skinny caught his breath with a gasp. Immediately following her was the tallest, homeliest woman he had ever seen. Thin to the point of emaciation, a wide striped, ill-fitting dress of some cheap material accentuated the angular lines of her body. A tiny narrow-brimmed hat, bright green, with a white feather, dingy and soiled, sticking straight up at the back made her more than ever a caricature. The woman also carried a bag. The two stepped up to the marshal, standing at the cornet: of the station, apparently asking him a question. He answered, pointing as he did to Old Heck and Skinny leaning silently against the side of their car. The woman and girl started toward them.

Fascinated, the cow-men watched them approach.

"My Gawd!" Old Heck hoarsely whispered, "that's them!"

"Let's go!" Skinny exclaimed, sweat starting in unheeded beads on his forehead. "Good lord, let's get in the car and go while we got a chance!"

Old Heck made a move as if to comply, then stopped. "Can't now," he said gloomily, "it's too late!"

As Old Heck turned the woman shrieked in a rasping voice:

"Hey---hey you! Wait a minute!"

The cow-men looked around and stared dumbly, dazedly, at her.

"Can I get you to take me an' my daughter out to that construction camp where they're buildin' a ditch or something?" she asked; "that policeman said maybe we could get you to---" she continued. "I got a job cookin' out there an' Lize here is goin' to wait on table."

Old Heck, still looking up in her eyes, with horror written on every line of his face, his lips twitching till he could scarcely speak, finally managed to say:

"Ain't---ain't you Ophelia?"

"Ophelia? Ophelia who?" she asked, then before he could speak she answered his question: "Ophelia---huh! No, I ain't Ophelia! I'm Missus Jasamine Swope an' a married woman an' you'd better not try to get fresh or---"

Simultaneous with Old Heck's question, Skinny, his eyes riveted on the dowdy girl, asked in a voice barely audible:

"Are you---are you Carolyn June?"

"No, I ain't Carolyn June," she snorted. "Come on, ma; let's go! Them two's crazy or white slavers or somethin'!"

Expressing their scorn and disdain by the angry flirt of their skirts, the woman and girl whirled and walked briskly away toward the garage at the end of the street.

"Praise th' heavens," Old Heck breathed fervently as he gazed spell-bound after the retreating pair, "it wasn't them!"

"Carolyn June and the widow probably went back after all," Skinny said without, looking around and with the barest trace of disappointment, now that the danger seemed past, in his voice. "Maybe they got to thinking about that telegram and decided not to come at last."

"More than likely that was it," Old Heck answered.

Steps sounded behind them. Skinny and Old Heck turned and again they almost fainted at what they saw. The marshal, a leather traveling bag in each hand, accompanied by two smartly dressed women, approached.

"These ladies are huntin' for you," he said to Old Heck, dropping the bags and mopping his face with the sleeve of his shirt. "Guess they're some kind of kin folks," he added.

Concealed by the freight sheds Carolyn June Dixon and Ophelia Cobb had stepped from the Pullman at the rear of the train, unseen by Old Heck and Skinny. Nor had either noticed, being engrossed with the couple that had left than a moment before, the trio coming across from the station.

As the cook and her daughter by their very homeliness had appalled and overwhelmed them, these two, Ophelia and Carolyn June, by their exactly opposite appearance stunned Old Heck and Skinny and rendered them speechless with embarrassment. Both were silently thankful they had shaved that morning and Skinny wondered if his face, like Old

Heck's, was streaked with sweat and dust.

For a moment the group studied one another.

Carolyn June held the eyes of Skinny in mute and helpless admiration. Despite the heat of the blazing sun she looked fresh and dean and pleasant---wholly unsoiled by the marks of travel. A snow-white Panama hat, the brim sensibly wide, drooped over cheeks that were touched with a splash of tan that suggested much time in the open. An abundance of hair, wonderfully soft and brown, showing the slightest glint of coppery red running it in vagrant strands, fluffed from under the hat. The skirt of her traveling suit, some light substantial material, reached the span of a hand above the ankle. White shoes, silk stockings that matched and through which glowed the faint pink of firm, healthy, young flesh, lent charm to the costume she wore. Her lips were red and moist and parted over teeth that were strong and white. A saucy upward tilt to the nose, hinting that Carolyn June was a flirt; brown eyes that were level almost with Skinny's and that held in them a laugh and yet deep below the mirth something thoughtful, honest and unafraid, finished the wreck of the cowboy's susceptible heart. Trim and smooth was Carolyn June, suggesting to Skinny Rawlins a clean-bred filly of saddle strain that has developed true to form.

Old Heck gazed in equal awe at the more mature Ophelia.

Somewhere near forty she may have been, cozily plump and solid. She had gray-blue eyes that were steady and frank yet clearly accustomed to being obeyed. Her hair was a trifle darker in shade than the silky brown on the head of Carolyn June. She was dressed with immaculate neatness and taste and carried that well-preserved assurance no woman in the world save the American of mature development acquires.

There was energy in every line of her body and Ophelia gave Old Heck, the embarrassed owner of the Quarter Circle KT, more thrills in that one moment of silent scrutiny than he ever before had felt in the presence of any woman.

As they looked, Skinny and Old Heck Instinctively, a bit awkwardly perhaps, removed the Stetson they wore on their heads.

"Howdy-do!" Old Heck finally managed to say.

Skinny gulped like an echo, another "Howdy-do!" in the direction of Carolyn June.

"I reckon you are Carolyn June and Missus Ophelia Cobb," Old Heck stammered "Which one of you is which?" unconsciously paying tribute to the well preserved youthfulness of the widow.

"Oh, Ophelia, beware!" Carolyn June laughed, not in the least offended; "the gay old rascal is at it already!"

"He didn't mean nothing" Skinny interposed, sensing that Old Heck some way had made a blunder. "I guess you must be Carolyn June?" looking questioningly at the girl.

"Excuse me," Old Heck said, "I'm your uncle, I suppose, and this is Skinny Rawlins---"

"Howdy-do; I'm glad to meet you," Skinny muttered, reaching for the hand Carolyn June frankly extended.

"I'm glad, too," she replied candidly; "and this is Mrs. Ophelia Cobb---just Ophelia---Uncle Josiah," Carolyn added, turning to Old Heck who clumsily shook hands with the widow while his weather-tanned face flushed a burning, uncomfortably red.

"We was expecting you," he said, retaining life hold on her hand.

"That was very kind," Ophelia murmured. "I am sure we are delighted to be here."

"Now I guess we are all acquainted," Carolyn June said with a little laugh. "It's easy for folks to get acquainted, isn't it?" turning suddenly to Skinny.

"Seems like it after they once get started," Skinny answered.

"We'd better be heading for home I reckon," Old Heck said, releasing at last the widow's hand and lifting the bags in the car. "Sing Pete will have dinner ready by the time we get there."

"We have some trunks," Carolyn June said, "can we take them with us?"

"Yes," Old Heck replied, "get in, and we'll drive over to the depot and get them."

With Carolyn June and Ophelia in the rear seat and Skinny and himself in the front Old Heck drove the car across to the station and the trunks were fastened with ropes on the hood of the engine and running-boards of the car.

As they started away Carolyn June asked:

"Which way now, Uncle Josiah?"

"Out to the ranch."

"Hadn't we better stop at the drug store," she asked soberly, "and get some medicine?"

"Medicine? Who for?" Old Heck inquired innocently.

"Why, the patients, of course," Carolyn June answered with a mischievous chuckle.

"What patients?"

"Out at the Quarter Circle KT where that epidemic of smallpox is raging!" she answered sweetly.

"That's all a mistake," Old Heck said hastily; "we thought is was smallpox but it wasn't---"

"No, everybody's got over it," Skinny added nervously; "they're all cured!"

"Yes, they was just broke out with the heat and didn't have the smallpox at all---" Old Heck explained.

"Liars, both of them," Carolyn June said laughingly to Ophelia; "they just didn't want us to come!"

"Very likely," Ophelia answered.

"No, honest, we thought we had it," Old Heck stammered.

"We were plumb uneasy for fear you wouldn't arrive," Skinny declared. "After we found out it wasn't smallpox we were going to send a special delivery message and tell you it was all a misunderstanding and to come anyhow!"

"Shall we forgive them?" Carolyn June asked the widow.

"Perhaps, this time---their first offense!"

"I'll tell you," Carolyn June said, "well suspend sentence pending good behavior!"

Skinny leaned close to Old Heck.

"Stop a minute at the Golden Rule," he whispered; "I want to do some personal trading."

"If it ain't important," Old Heck answered, "we oughtn't to take the time. What do you want to buy?"

"I want to get me a white shirt---"

"Gosh," Old Heck exclaimed, "that bad already! What'll he be in week?"

"Did you speak, Uncle Josiah?" Carolyn asked.

"Huh---no, I---Skinny just thought I was going to hit a rock!" he answered, and giving the engine more gas, he headed the car, at a thirty-mile clip, toward the east and the Quarter Circle KT.

The party rode in silence. The speed of the car and the fan of the warm wind against their faces made conversation difficult. A mile from Eagle Butte they crossed the long, low, iron-railed bridge over the Cimarron River and climbed out on to the bench away from the bottom lands. From that point on to the Quarter Circle KT the road followed the brow of the bench on the south side of the river. It was smooth and good.

Carolyn June thrilled at the bigness of it all as they swept quickly past the irrigated district close to the town and sped out on the open unfenced range. For miles the country was level with here and there arroyos cross-sectioning into the river valley. Long stretches with the barest undulations made driving a joy and the winding road was a natural speedway. Scattered over the plain were dusters of mesquit and in the low sags where moisture was near the surface patches of thorns. Carolyn June loved the width and breadth of the great range, strange and new to her. Here was freedom sweeping as the winds of heaven. Dimly, on the southern horizon she could see the blue outline of Sentinel Mountain standing alone out on the plain. To the left green pasture-lands lay along the river. A narrow strip of cottonwood trees marked the curving path of the Cimarron. Beds of white quicksand, treacherous and fatal and dreaded by every rider of the open country could be seen, occasionally, through openings in the trees showing the bed of the river itself. In the distance behind them was Eagle Butte, towering above the town they had left a few brief moments before, and beyond that the Costejo Mountains, rugged and massive and covered in part on their lower slopes with blue-green thickets of pine. Across the river was a choppy sea of sand-dunes stretching away to the north as far as sight could reach. Here and there a high-flung mound, smooth and oval or capped with ledges of black, glistening rode broke the monotony of the view.

Engrossed in the study of the almost primitive picture Carolyn June forgot the flight of time and the speed at which they were traveling.

"Yonder's the ranch!" Skinny announced suddenly, turning half around in his seat and pointing ahead and to the left toward the river.

The valley widened till it was a mile or more across. The Cimarron swung sharply to the north and hugged the foot of the bench as if unwilling to spoil the meadowlands past which it flowed. In a great half-crescent---"Quarter Circle," Old Heck called it---the green basin-like area lay spread out before them. It was a half dozen miles in length, reaching from the canyon gate at the upper end of the valley where the river turned abruptly northward, to the narrow gorge at the south through which it disappeared.

A blue crane lazily flapped across the valley.

"Seven thousand acres in the bottoms," Skinny volunteered.

"Beautiful!" Carolyn breathed.

"Splendid!" Ophelia exclaimed.

Half-way down the valley, a quarter of a mile from the bench, the buildings of the Quarter Circle KT clustered together in a group---the low adobe house, bunk shack, stables, graineries. Out in the fields were hay yards with half-built stacks of alfalfa---over the tops of the stacks white tarpaulins. In a pasture beyond the house were horses and cattle, perhaps a hundred head in all. Climbing the hills north of the river were a number of moving figures, dimly seen through the haze.

"Are those cattle," Carolyn June asked, "those things across the river?"

"Where?" Skinny inquired.

"Over there, on the hills," pointing toward the objects.

Old Heck glancing in the direction she indicated answered for Skinny:

"That's Parker and the boys, going over to the North Springs---they're checking up on some yearlings we just turned across from this side of the range." Then, speaking to Skinny: "They've already had their dinner and won't be in till supper-time---"

"Are they cowboys?" Carolyn June asked.

"I reckon," Old Heck responded.

"Is Skinny one?" she inquired naively.

"Sort of, I suppose," Old Heck chuckled while Skinny felt his face coloring up with embarrassment, "but not a wild one."

"Oh, who is that?" Carolyn June cried suddenly as a lone rider whirled out of the corral, around the stables, and his horse sprang into a gallop straight down the valley toward the harrows at its lower end.

"That," Skinny said after a quick glance, "oh, that's th' Ramblin' Kid---Where in thunder do you reckon the darned fool's going now?" he added to Old Heck.

"Can't tell nothing about where he's going," Old Heck said. "He's liable to be heading for anywhere. What's he riding?" he asked without looking up.

"Captain Jack," Skinny replied. "Wonder if he ain't going over to Battle Ridge to find out if it's so about them sheep coming in over there?"

"Maybe," Old Heck grunted, "either that or else he's took a notion to hunt that Gold Dust maverick again"---–referring to a strange, wonderfully beautiful, outlaw filly that had appeared on the Kiowa range a year before and tormented the riders by her almost fiendish cunning in dodging corral or rope---–"if he's riding Captain Jack that's probably what he's after."

"Who is he, what's his real name?" Carolyn June asked with interest.

"Just th' Ramblin' Kid, as far as I know," Old Heck answered.

"Does he live at the Quarter Circle KT?" Carolyn June continued curiously as she studied the slender form rising and falling with the graceful rhythm of his horse's motion---–as if man and animal were a single living, pulsing creature.

"Off and on," Old Heck replied, "when he wants to he does and when he don't he don't. He's a witch with horses and knows he's always got a job if he wants it, and I reckon that makes him kind of undependable about staying in any one place long at a time. That's why they call him th' Ramblin' Kid---–he's liable to ramble any minute."

The car curled down the narrow dugway off of the bench and a moment later stopped at the gate in front of the ranch house of the Quarter Circle KT.

"We're here," Skinny said, as Sing Pete, the Chinese cook, appeared at the open door.

"They've come, Sing Pete," Old Heck called, climbing out of the car; "this is them! Is dinner ready?"

"All leady---–waitee!" the Oriental answered, shuffling out to the car to help with the luggage and twisting and squirming as he kept bowing in greeting.

"This is great!" Carolyn June said, as she stepped on the long cool porch in front of the house and paused a moment before entering the open door, "---–it's cool and pleasant, I'm going to like it," she added, as she went into the big low-ceilinged room.

The floor was bare of carpet but spotlessly clean; shades, but no curtains, were over the windows; in the center stood a large flat-topped reading table; at one end of the table was a Morris chair upholstered in brown Spanish leather; a wolf-skin rug was thrown on the floor before an old-fashioned Mexican fire-place built into one corner of the room; in another corner was a smaller table on which was a graphophone; a rocker and several chairs were set about the room and against the north wall; between two doors, evidently opening into twin bedrooms, was an upright grand piano--.

"Oh, a piano!" Carolyn June exclaimed delightedly noticing the instrument. "Who plays?"

"Nobody," Old Heck answered foolishly, "I---–I---–well, what's the use of lying?---–I bought it one day, before prohibition come, when I was drunk and just had it brought out because I didn't know what else to do with it---–"

"You funny old uncle!" Carolyn June laughed, "I love you already.---–Ophelia plays," she added.

"Not so well or so much as Carolyn June," Ophelia said.

"Maybe we'll have some music then some day; that ain't canned," Skinny suggested eagerly.

"You women can use them rooms," Old Heck said, referring to the doors on each side of the piano. "Parker and me did have them but we've arranged to sleep in the bunk-house while you are here."

"Carolyn June and I need but one," Ophelia said, "it isn't fair to run you out---"

"You ain't running us," Old Heck answered, "we've talked it over and would rather."

After dinner Ophelia and Carolyn June spent their time in settling themselves in their rooms. A small bath closet connected the two---crude a bit and somewhat unfinished; but a hot tub, the water supplied from a tank at the kitchen range, was enjoyed by both.

Old Heck and Skinny helped with the trunks and then withdrew to the bunk-house.

Old Heck shaved and Skinny put on a clean shirt.

Skinny was not sure but this official love-making job was going to be interesting work and Old Heck himself was uncertain whether to cuss or rejoice---sometimes he was almost sorry to-morrow would be Parker's day to love and entertain Ophelia.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNUSED PLATE

At sundown, when Parker and the cowboys rode in from the northern hills, the Quarter Circle KT lay under a mantle of sullen, torturing heat. Not a breath of air fanned the poplars, straight and motionless, in front of the house. The sun buried itself in a solid wall of black that rose above the Costejo peaks, hidden now in the shadow of the coming storm. The horses were dripping with sweat---their coats as glossy and wet as if they had swum the river. At the corral the animals wearily tossed their heads, low hung with exhaustion, seeking to shift the sticky clutch of head-stall or hackamore, while their riders dismounted and quickly removed saddle and riding gear. Freed from their burdens the bronchos dragged tired heels through the dust as they whirled and trotted unsteadily away to the pasture, eager to roll and relax their aching muscles.

"Holy cats, but it's hot!" Bert Lilly exclaimed as he slipped off his chaps and started toward the house, leaving saddle and outfit lying beside the gate of the corral.

"Better put them things in the shed," Parker advised, "looks like a whale of a storm is coming."

"Reckon that's right," Bert answered, turning back and carrying his riding gear into the shelter where the other cowboys already had taken theirs.

"Wonder if them women come?" Chuck Slithers queried as they moved toward the gate.

"More than likely---Bet Skinny and Old Heck have had a hell of a time making love to 'em," Charley Saunders remarked.

"You want to be careful about cussin'," Parker warned. "It ain't polite when women are around!"

"Listen at him!" Bert said with a laugh, "practising already---Parker is getting polite---to-morrow is his day to be affectionate to the widow, Ophelia---"

"Which is she, Parker," Charley asked soberly, "a grass or natural?"

"Shut up, you blamed fools, they're liable to hear you," Parker growled angrily. "Anyhow, it ain't my fault they come!"

"Parker oughtn't to kick," Chuck chimed in, "look at poor old Skinny---he's got a steady job lovin' the other one!"

"Darned if I wouldn't rather love both of them at once," Charley observed, "than to take another ride like that was to-day. I'm kind of anxious to see what they look like," he continued.

"Well, don't go and get excited at the supper table and eat your pie with a spoon!" Chuck laughed.

"Aw, hell," Charley retorted, "I guess I know how to act---"

"Old Heck's going to buy some finger-bowls for you to wash your hands in," Bert said scornfully, "him and Parker---"

"Shut up, I told you, you darned idiots," Parker snapped. "They're out on the front porch and can hear you!"

"Be careful about your cussin'---" Bert mimicked with a snicker.

Notwithstanding their raillery every man in the group, including Pedro, gave unusual care to scrubbing his face and smoothing his hair preparatory to entering the kitchen for supper and where they would meet, for the first time, Ophelia and Carolyn June.

Sing Pete glided out of the kitchen door and hammered the triangle announcing the evening meal.

At the instant Parker and the cowboys filed into the kitchen from the rear, Ophelia and Carolyn June, followed by Old Heck and Skinny Rawlins, both looking sheepish and somewhat ashamed, stepped into the room from the front.

All stood waiting and Old Heck, ill at ease and in a voice that trembled, gave the party formal introduction:

"Missus Ophelia Cobb and Miss Carolyn June Dixon," motioning first at the widow and then the girl, "Mister Parker, Mister Bert Lilly, Mister Charley Saunders, Mister Chuck Slithers, Mister Pedro Valencia---" indicating each in turn with his hand as he called the names, "---I reckon you're already acquainted with Skinny!"

The cowboys mumbled greetings which Carolyn June and Ophelia graciously acknowledged.

Sing Pete had laid two extra covers.

"You boys can take your regular places---all except you, Parker," Old Heck said, "---you set at that side on this end," pointing to the seat at the left next to the head of the table. "Carolyn June, you can set at that end and Ophelia at this end---I'll set here," taking the seat at the widow's right and directly across from Parker.

This placed Old Heck, Bert Lilly, Pedro and Skinny Rawlins on the right of the table in the order named, Skinny sitting at the end on Carolyn's left. On the opposite side sat Parker, Chuck Slithers and Charley. Next to Charley, at the right of Carolyn June, and opposite Skinny, was a vacant chair.

"Who is this for?" Carolyn June inquired, indicating the unoccupied seat.

"That's th' Ramblin' Kid's place," Old Heck replied; "he may come in and again he mayn't---"

"It was him you saw to-day," Skinny added, "riding down toward the Narrows when we was coming from Eagle Butte."

"Do you know; where he went, Parker?" Old Heck asked.

"No. When we started over to the Springs he was here. Said he reckoned we could get along without him and he wouldn't go---"

"He's just got one of them lonesome spells," Bert said, "and wanted to get off by himself somewhere."

"He knowed we was going to have company, too," Chuck observed.

"More than likely that's why he went," Skinny suggested.

"Is he afraid of women?" Carolyn June laughed.

"Not particularly," Skinny replied; "he don't bother with them, that's all."

"I think he went after that Gold Dust maverick," Charley said. "He'll probably come in when he sees how it's going to storm---"

"He don't give a darn for storms," Bert declared. "---Pass them frijoles, Pedro.---Remember that time it blowed the hay derrick down and he wouldn't come to the house, just stayed out and watched the wind and lightning?"

"He is funny that way," Charley admitted.

"Well, he'll never catch that mare," Parker said, "she's too---"

"Oh, I don't know," Chuck interrupted, "look how he has tamed Captain Jack," referring to the Ramblin' Kid's own horse, one time a famous renegade.

"How was that?" Carolyn June inquired carelessly.

"Captain Jack was an outlaw, too," Bert explained. "He run over on the East Mesa on the Una de Gata. Charley and me and th' Ramblin' Kid got him to going one day when there was some ranch mares in his bunch. One of them was a hand-raised filly, was a pet and she was---well, pretty hot! We worked them over the rim of the Mesa and into the canyon, it was a box-gorge from where they hit it to its head, and at the upper end there was a wing corral. The mare swung up the canyon towards the ranch and---Jack wouldn't quit her! We was pounding right on their heels and before he knowed it we had them penned---"

"That shows what happens when a he-thing goes locoed over a female critter," Chuck whispered to Parker; "you and Old Heck want to watch out!"

"Be careful, you danged fool!" Parker hissed as he kicked at Chuck's shins under the table. Excited, he made a mistake in the foot he should have used and viciously slammed his left toe against Ophelia's dainty ankle.

The widow looked startled and suddenly sat up very straight in her chair.

Parker realized his error, turned red, choked, leaned close to Chuck and breathed hoarsely, "I'll kill you some day for that!"

"He sure went crazy when he found he was corraled," Charley said, "and forgot all about the mare."

"He sure did," Bert continued, while Carolyn June listened intently, "and was plumb wild to bu'st down the pen and be free again. Charley nor me didn't want him and so th' Ramblin' Kid said he'd take him. Just then Tony Malush---–we was punchin' for him---–come riding up and was going to shoot Captain Jack on account of wanting to clean the range of the outlaw stallions. He yanked out his gun and started to pull a drop on old Jack's head. Th' Ramblin' Kid jerked his own forty-four and told Tony he'd kill him if he shot the renegade broncho. Tony backed up, but it made him sore and he fired th' Ramblin' Kid. The darned little cuss set there a minute thinking, then slid off his horse, stripped him of riding gear, flung saddle, blanket and bridle over the bars into the corral. Before we knowed what he was aiming to do he climbed up and dropped down inside, on foot, with just his rope, and faced that outlaw battin' around trying to get outside---–"

Carolyn June leaned forward on the table listening with breathless interest. The others stopped eating and gave all their attention to the story Bert was telling.

"Captain Jack saw him, stopped for just a second, sort of surprised, then went right at th' Ramblin' Kid---–head down, eyes blazin' like coals, mouth wide open, ears laid back and strikin' with both front feet---–"

"He was some wicked!" Charley ejaculated.

"He sure was," Bert went on. "Tony and Charley and me just set on our horses stunned---–thinkin' th' Kid had gone clean loco and was flirtin' with certain and pronto death. As Captain Jack rushed him th' Ramblin' Kid give a jump sideways, his rope went true, a quick run to the snubbin' post and he throwed him dead! The broncho hit his feet, give a squeal and come straight back! Th' Ramblin' Kid run once more, yankin' like blazes to get the slack! That time when he went down---–well, before we realized it, th' Ramblin' Kid had him bridled and saddled and was safe on deck---–"

"I'm tellin' you too, Captain Jack went higher than a kite when he felt the rowels in his flanks!" Charley interrupted.

"Th' Ramblin' Kid yelled for us to let him out," Bert continued. "Charley and me flung down the bars to the corral and Captain Jack come out sun-fishin' and hittin' the breeze like a streak of twisted lightning! That was just before dinner in the forenoon. That afternoon and night th' Ramblin' Kid rode the outlaw to the Hundred and One---–ninety miles away! We didn't see either of them any more for a month and when they hit the Kiowa again Captain Jack was a regular baby after th' Ramblin' Kid and would follow him around like a dog---–"

"That's the way he's been ever since," Charley said, "them two are just like sweethearts."

"Nobody else ever rides him---–" Bert added.

"They can't," Chuck said. "He's a one-man horse and th' Ramblin' Kid is the man. Captain Jack would die for th' Ramblin' Kid!"

"Yes, and kill any one else if he could!" Parker exclaimed.

"Has no one but---but the Ramblin' Kid"---Carolyn June hesitated queerly over the name---"ever ridden him?"

"Never that we know of," Bert said; "several have tried it---the last one was a fellow from down on the Chickasaw. Guess he was trying to steal him. Anyway, we was all up at Eagle Butte and had left our horses out in front of the Occidental Hotel while we was in the dining-room eating our dinners. We got outside just in time to see the stranger hit the ground and Captain Jack jump on him with all four feet doubled up in a bunch---he's buried in that little graveyard you might have noticed on the hill this side of the river bridge."

"Killed him?" Carolyn June gasped.

"Seemed like it." Bert answered, with a grin; "anyway, we buried him."

"What did the---the Ramblin' Kid do?" she asked.

"He just laughed kind of soft and scornful," Skinny said, "and got on Captain Jack and rode away while we was picking the fellow up!"

During the rest of the meal Carolyn June's eyes looked frequently and curiously at the unused plate at her right. She felt, some way, that an affront had been shown her by the absence of the one for whom it was laid. The other cowboys, it was quite evident to her intuitive woman's mind, had looked forward with considerable eagerness to the arrival of herself and Ophelia. The Ramblin' Kid, at the very moment almost of their reaching the Quarter Circle KT, had deliberately mounted Captain Jack and ridden away. It seemed like little less than an intentional snub! In addition to the half-resentment she felt, there remained in her mind an insistent and tormenting picture of the slender, subtle, young rider swaying easily to the swing of Captain Jack as he galloped down the valley earlier in the day.

Bert, Charley, Chuck, before the meal was finished cast frankly admiring glances at Carolyn June and Skinny plainly was gaining confidence at a rapid rate, while Pedro, silent throughout it all, kept, almost constantly, his half-closed eyes fixed in a sidelong look at the girl at the end of the table.

Attention and admiration, Carolyn June expected from men. They had always been hers. She was beautiful and was conscious of it. Had the cowboys of the Quarter Circle KT not registered appreciation of her charms by their looks Carolyn June would have believed something was wrong with her dress or the arrangement of her hair. Her eyes---she was sure of them---without effort lured men to her feet.

"It's hotter than blue blazes in here," Old Heck said when all had finished; "we'd better go out into the big room. Maybe Carolyn June will play some on the piano."

"The boys and me will go on out on the porch," Parker said as they reached the front room, speaking significantly to Old Heck, but in a tone both Ophelia and Carolyn June heard. "We'll leave you and Skinny with the ladies and not intrude---"

"You won't be intruding if you remain," Ophelia said brightly. "Carolyn June and I are not partial at all and want you to feel that we enjoy meeting you all."

"Yes, stay," Carolyn June added, somewhat reluctant that of the entire group only one should be left to the wiles of her unconsciously intentional coquetry; "there is plenty of room in here and it's cool---"

"We're much obliged," Bert said, "but we'd better do the way Parker mentioned. Anyhow that was the agreement."

"Agreement?" Ophelia spoke with a questioning lift of her brows.

"Yes," Chuck said, evidently trying to relieve the embarrassment of Old Heck, Parker and Skinny who looked daggers at Bert when he spoke of an agreement, "Parker and Old Heck was to take turn about---"

"Bert meant," Parker interrupted hastily, "---he meant they---they had to agree not to loaf in this room before Old Heck would give them jobs on the Quarter Circle KT!"

"Yes," Old Heck added quickly, "that was the bargain on account of---of---getting it mussed up and everything and making too much work for Sing Pete to clean it up!"

Ophelia and Carolyn June looked curiously at each other as if they suspected some secret that had to do with their presence at the Quarter Circle KT.

Outside, the cowboys lounged on the porch or lay spread full length on the grass smoking their cigarettes, and silent. Each was busy with thoughts of his own. Carolyn June had been very impartial during the evening meal, distributing her smiles and little attentions freely among them all. Now she was sitting at the piano playing snatches of random melodies as they came to her mind, while Skinny sat stiffly on a high-backed chair at the corner of the instrument.

A drone of voices reached the ears of Parker and the cowboys as Old Heck, skilfully led on by Ophelia, told about the ranch, the Kiowa range and the traditions of western Texas.

"Can you play *La Paloma?*" Skinny asked as Carolyn June paused after running over a dainty and vivacious one-step, memories of which made her think of Hartville and the fashionable ballrooms where she had reigned as princess at least if not as queen, and which seemed now very far away.

"I'm afraid not---unless I have the music, but I'll try," she answered, and her fingers again sought the keys.

The dreamy Mexican air drifted seductively out on the sultry motionless night.

Bert looked through the window and saw Skinny lean back in his chair, his eyes closed and an expression of supreme content stealing over his face.

"Skinny's gone---he's surrendered," he said to Chuck, lying full length on the porch at his side; "look at the poor cuss with his eyes shut and grinning as if he was seeing visions of Paradise!"

"That combination would capture most anybody," Chuck answered. "I'm starting to feel affectionate myself."

Bert didn't reply, Chuck having expressed too nearly his own swelling emotions.

"Uncle Josiah!" Carolyn June called, suddenly whirling around on the piano stool as she finished the last bars of *La Paloma*, "may I have a horse?"

Old Heck, grown silent under the spell of the music, and, like Skinny, sitting dreaming dreams that almost frightened him, started quickly.

"A---a what?" he asked.

"A horse---" she answered, "a broncho to ride!"

"Oh, uh---sure! Skinny, go get her one!" he replied confusedly.

"Not now," Carolyn June laughed, "to-morrow---any time, whenever I want to use it!"

"Can you ride?" Skinny asked eagerly.

"Ever since I can remember," Carolyn June said, "daddy has kept horses---I love 'em! Ophelia rides, too," she added.

"In automobiles---" Ophelia corrected.

"That's a good arrangement," Skinny said; "it will make everything work out all right."

"I don't understand," Carolyn June said; "what arrangement?"

"We'd better be going to bed, Skinny," Old Heck interposed anxiously, "it's getting late!"

"Guess we had," Skinny said reluctantly. "Gosh, it's warm to-night!"

"You can leave the door and windows open," Old Heck said to Ophelia and Carolyn June as he and Skinny moved toward the door; "we don't have burglars out here."

Parker and the cowboys straightened up when they heard Skinny and Old Heck preparing to leave and went around the corner of the building toward the bunk-house.

Ophelia and Carolyn June stepped out on the porch with Old Heck and Skinny.

The air was oppressively still and hot. The black cloud bank that had hung over the Costejo Mountains earlier in the evening now covered the whole western half of the sky. Night sounds seemed almost stifled by the suffocating heat. From the pasture below the stables the faint call of a kill-deer suddenly shrilled out, followed by intense silence. No lightning flash filled the wall-like blackness slowly creeping over the earth from the west. A pale glow on the rim of the rolling hills across the valley, herald of the moon not yet above the horizon, intensified the pall beneath the approaching cloud. A sullen roar, throbbing angrily, rising and falling in volume, could be heard coming out of the depths of the storm.

"Acts like it's going to be a bad one," Old Heck observed, studying the cloud they all were watching.

"Wicked," Skinny said, "one of them mutterin' kind until it breaks and then all hell tears loose."

"If th' Ramblin' Kid is out in the sand-hills to-night he'll---"

A withering stream of fire poured from the cloud almost over their heads; it was accompanied by a crashing peal of thunder that rocked the earth under their feet and stopped the words on Old Heck's lips. The flame lighted the whole valley. They had an instant's glimpse of a writhing, overhanging curtain of dust and rain sweeping toward them. In the glare they saw a giant cottonwood that stood alone in the meadow west of the house reel and sway like a drunken thing and pitch to the earth.

"It's here! It struck that tree!" Old Heck yelled. "Run for the bunk-house, Skinny, maybe we can make it! You women go inside and shut the door!"

Carolyn June and Ophelia sprang---were blown almost---inside the house and slammed the door as another bolt fell, flooding the room with a blaze that made the light from the lamp on the reading table seem faint and dim. Old Heck and Skinny darted around the corner as the tempest pulled and tugged at the buildings of the Quarter Circle KT.

For an hour Ophelia and Carolyn June sat and listened to the storm and while it still raged went to bed.

Carolyn June fell asleep watching the incessant glare of the lightning as flash after flash filled the room with light and illumined the world outside, while the rain and wind lashed the trees in the garden near her window. Above the tumult the words of Old Heck: "If the Ramblin' Kid is out in the sand-hills to-night"---kept repeating themselves over and over in her mind. Try as she would, she could not shut out the picture of a slender young rider, alone, far out on the range in the storm-mad night, unsheltered from the fury and wrath of the elements.

CHAPTER V

A DUEL OF ENDURANCE

When the storm broke over the Quarter Circle KT the Ramblin' Kid was twenty miles away following the Gold Dust maverick. Old Heck's surmise that he had gone in search of the outlaw filly was but half correct. It was not with the definite purpose of trying for the renegade mare that he had mounted Captain Jack and headed him toward the Narrows at the moment Carolyn June Dixon and Ophelia Cobb arrived at the ranch. Nor was it to escape meeting the women. Their coming meant nothing to the Ramblin' Kid.

He simply wanted to be alone.

The ride with Parker and the boys to the North Springs meant talk. The Ramblin' Kid did not want to talk. He wanted to be with his thoughts, his horse and silence.

Should he happen on to the maverick he might give her a run. Since her first appearance on the Kiowa, the Ramblin' Kid had seen her many times. More than once, from a distance, he had watched the mare, getting a line on her habits. Sooner or later he expected to test Captain Jack's endurance and skill against the filly's speed and cunning. Without success other riders of the Kiowa had tried to corral the outlaw or get within roping throw of her shapely head. So far she had proved herself faster and more clever than any horse ridden against her. The Ramblin' Kid believed Captain Jack was master of the beautiful mare, that in a battle of nerve and muscle and wind the roan stallion could run her down. Some day he would prove it.

At the Narrows the trail forked. One branch turned sharply to the right and followed a coulee out on to the divide between the Cimarron and the lower Una de Gata; the other swung toward the river, slipped into it, crossed the stream, and was lost in the sand-hills beyond.

The broncho, of his own will, at the prongs of the road wheeled up the coulee and climbed out on the level bench south of the Cimarron. A half-dozen miles away Sentinel Mountain rose abruptly out of the plain. Toward the lone butte Captain Jack turned. He knew the place. On the north slope there was a tiny spring, fenced with wire to keep the stock from trampling it into a bog; near by was a duster of pinon trees; below the seep in the narrow gorge was a thin strip of willows. It was a favorite rendezvous sought by the Ramblin' Kid when in moods such as now possessed him. Silently he rode to the group of pinons and dismounted.

The Ramblin' Kid stretched himself under the trees while Captain Jack drank at the little water course. Then, with his bridle off, the broncho fed contentedly on the bunch grass along the hillside. After a time Captain Jack quit feeding and came into the shade of the pinons. The Ramblin' Kid, flat on his back, stared through the scant foliage of the trees into the sky---–overcast now with a dim haze, forerunner of the storm gathering above the Costejo peaks. Thousands of feet in the air a buzzard, merely a black speck, without motion of wings, wheeled in great, lazy, ever-widening circles.

As the sun dropped into the cloud bank in the west a band of mares and colts came from that direction and rounded a spur of Sentinel Mountain. At their heads was the most beautiful horse ever seen on the Kiowa range.

In color a coppery, almost golden, chestnut sorrel; flaxen mane and tail, verging on creamy white; short-coupled in the back and with withers that marked the runner; belly smooth and round; legs trim and neat as an antelope's and muscled like a panther's; head small, carried proudly erect and eyes full and wonderfully clear and brown.

"Th' filly!" the Ramblin' Kid breathed, "with a bunch of Tony Malush's Anchor Bar mares and colts!"

Captain Jack saw the range horses and lifted his head.

"Psst!" the Ramblin' Kid hissed and the neigh was stopped.

The rangers moved toward the east and over the crest of a ridge a quarter of a mile away. On the flat beyond the rise they stopped, the colts immediately teasing the mares to suck. The filly withdrew a short distance from the herd and stood alert and watchful.

For half an hour the Ramblin' Kid studied the Gold Dust maverick.

He looked at the clouds climbing higher and higher in the west, then long and thoughtfully at Captain Jack.

"Let's get her, Boy!" he murmured; "let's go an' get her!"

His mind made up, the Ramblin' Kid slipped the bridle again on Captain Jack, removed the saddle and with the blanket wiped the sweat from the broncho's back, smoothed the blanket, reset the saddle, carefully tightened front and rear cinches and mounting the little stallion guided him slowly down the ravine in the direction of the horses on the flat. A hundred yards away the mares and colts, alarmed by the sudden half-whinny, half-snort, from the filly, discovered the approaching horse and rider.

Instantly the wild horses crowded closely together and galloped toward the Una de Gata. Captain Jack leaped into a run, rushing them. The maverick wheeled quickly and dashed away to the south alone.

"Her pet trick!" the Ramblin' Kid muttered as he headed Captain Jack after the nimble creature. "She absodamnedlutely will not bunch---–seems to know a crowd means a corral, a rope and at last a rider on her shapely back!"

For two miles it was a race. The Ramblin' Kid held Captain Jack to a steady run a couple of hundred yards in the rear of the speeding mare. At last he pulled the stallion down to a trot. The Gold Dust maverick answered by running another fifty yards and then herself settling into the slower stride. "Like I thought," the Ramblin' Kid said to himself, "it's a case of wear her out---a case of seasoned old muscle against speedy young heels!"

It became a duel of endurance between Captain Jack, wiry, toughened and fully matured, with heavier muscles, and the nimble, lighter-footed Gold Dust mare.

At dark they were on the edge of the Arroyo Grande and Captain Jack had closed the distance between them until less than a hundred yards was between the heels of the filly and the head of the stallion behind her. She turned east along the arroyo, followed it a mile, seeking a crossing, then doubled straight north toward the Cimarron. Captain Jack hung to her trail like a hound. In the blackness that preceded the storm she could not lose him. With almost uncanny sureness he picked her out---following, following, never giving the maverick a moment's rest. Yet it seemed that the distance she kept ahead was measured, so alert and watchful was she always. Both were dripping with sweat. Try as he would, it seemed impossible for Captain Jack to win those few yards that would put the filly in reach of the rope the Ramblin' Kid held ready to cast until the inky darkness made it impossible to risk a throw.

The mare splashed into the Cimarron.

A dazzling zigzag flash of lightning, the first of the storm, and the Ramblin' Kid saw the filly struggling in the yellow wind-whipped current. A moment later and Captain Jack was swimming close behind her. On the north side of the river the mare yielded to the drive of the tempest and turned east down the stream. A rocky gorge running at right angles toward the north offered shelter from the lashing wind and rain. Up the ravine the maverick headed. A rush of muddy water down the canyon sent pursued and pursuer slipping and sliding and climbing for safety high up on the brush-covered, torrent-swept hillside. The constant blaze and tremble of lightning illumined the whole range. A wolf, terrified by the storm, seeking cover, crouched in the shelter of a black rock-cliff. The Ramblin' Kid saw the creature. His hand instinctively slipped under his slicker and gripped the gun at his hip.

"Hell! what's th' use of killin' just to kill?" he murmured. His hold on the gun relaxed. A bolt of lightning slivered the rock above the wolf; there was an acrid odor of burning hair. The next flash showed the wolf stretched dead twenty feet below the cliff. "Well, I'll be damned!" the Ramblin' Kid whispered as he bowed his head before the gale, "that was funny! Guess God himself figured it was time for that poor cuss to die!"

In the last quarter of the night, at the North Springs, when the storm had spent itself and the white moon looked down on a drenched and flood-washed earth, the 'Ramblin' Kid dropped his rope over the head of the Gold Dust maverick---barely twenty feet ahead of the horse he rode---conquered by the superior nerve, muscle and endurance of Captain Jack, still the greatest outlaw the Kiowa range had ever known!

The touch of the rope fired the filly to a supreme effort; she lunged forward; Captain Jack set himself for the shock---he threw her cold, full length, in the soft mud; instantly the little stallion sprang forward to give the mare slack, she came to her feet, squealing piteously, and plunged desperately ahead---again Captain Jack braced himself for the jar and put her down, "It's hell, Little Girl," the Ramblin' Kid said with a catch in his throat; "but you've got to learn!" The third time the maverick tested the rope and the third time Captain Jack threw her in a helpless heap. That time when she got to her feet she stood trembling in every muscle until Captain Jack came up to her side and the Ramblin' Kid reached out and laid his hand on the beautiful mane. She had learned. Never again would the wonderful creature tighten a rope on her neck.

Trailing the filly, the Ramblin' Kid forced her back toward the Cimarron, into its raging flood, multiplied a hundredfold by the torrential rain of the night; side by side she and Captain Jack swam the stream, and in the gray dawn, while the

Quarter Circle KT still slept, he turned the mare and Captain Jack into the circular corral. He removed the saddle from Captain Jack, took the rope from the filly's neck, threw the horses some hay and on the dry ground under the shed by the corral, lay down and went to sleep.

For fourteen hours, without rest, the Ramblin' Kid had ridden.

The sun was up when Sing Pete electrified the Quarter Circle KT into life and action by the jangle of the iron triangle sending out the breakfast call.

Old Heck stepped to the door of the bunk-house and looked out across the valley. The Cimarron roared sullenly beyond the meadow. The lower field was a lake of muddy water, backed up from the gorge below. He glanced toward the circular corral.

"What th'---Who left horses up last night?" he asked of the cowboys dressing sleepily inside the bunk-house.

"Nobody," Parker answered for the group.

Skinny Rawlins came to the door. "It's Captain Jack," he said, "and---and darned if th' Ramblin' Kid ain't got the filly!"

"Aw, he couldn't have caught her last night," Bert Lilly said.

"Well, she's there," Skinny retorted, "somebody's corraled her---that's certain!"

Hurriedly dressing, the cowboys crowded out of the bunk-house and down to the circular corral. The Gold Dust maverick leaped to the center of the enclosure as the group drew near and stood with head up, eyes flashing and nostrils quivering, a perfect picture of defiance and fear. The swim across the river had washed the mud from her mane and sides and she was as clean as if she had been brushed.

"Lord, she's a beauty!" Chuck Slithers exclaimed.

"Sure is---be hell to ride, though!" Bert commented. "Wonder where the Ramblin' Kid is---"

"S-h-hh! Yonder he is," Charley Saunders said, observing the figure under the shed, "---asleep. Come on away and let him rest!"

"Breakfast's ready anyhow," Old Heck added.

"And Skinny ain't shaved or powdered his face yet---" Chuck laughed; "these lovers ought to fix themselves up better!"

"Shut up, you blamed idiot, ain't you got no respect?" Parker said as they turned toward the house.

"Listen at Parker, he's one of them, too," Chuck continued; "this is his day to be a sweetheart to the widow!"

"I'd rather have Skinny's job," Bert said with a snicker, "I'd be afraid of Ophelia---"

"Why?"

"She acts too gentle to start with"---"

"Give her time," Charley suggested, "she'll bu'st loose when she gets better acquainted!"

"Her and Old Heck got pretty well introduced last night, holding hands the way they did, and---"

"Dry up," Old Heck interposed with a foolish grin, "and come on to breakfast!"

Carolyn June and Ophelia were charmingly fresh and interesting in dainty blue and lavender morning gowns. A bowl of roses, plucked by Ophelia from the crimson rambler by the south window, rested in the center of the table. The cowboys saw the flowers and exchanged glances. Old Heck and Skinny blushed.

Carolyn June noticed the vacant place at her right.

"Th' Ramblin' Kid ain't up yet," Skinny volunteered.

"Then the storm did drive him to shelter, after all?" Carolyn June asked with the barest trace of contempt in her voice.

"I wouldn't hardly say that," Bert Lilly remarked, holding his cup for Sing Pete to fill with coffee; "---he brought in the Gold Dust maverick."

"Yes," Chuck said with mock gravity, "it was quite an undertaking---he sprinkled salt on her tail---"

"How clever!" Ophelia exclaimed, looking interested, "and is that the way they catch---mavericks?" stumbling over the unusual word.

"Chuck's joking," Parker said; "he always was foolish---"

"Uncle Josiah," Carolyn June asked suddenly, "can you take Ophelia to Eagle Butte to-day?"

"I---Parker can," Old Heck answered, "if he can drive the car. Still there are probably some pretty bad washouts---"

Ophelia looked quickly at Old Heck, interested by the note she detected in his voice.

"I---I---got some work to do," he continued, "if you could wait till to-morrow"---addressing the widow---"I could more than likely go myself---"

"I guess I can handle the car all right," Parker said, looking significantly at Old Heck; "the roads will be dried up in a little while."

"It's Parker's day anyhow and he don't want to miss---" Chuck started to say.

"After breakfast," Old Heck interrupted, scowling at the cowboy, "Chuck and Pedro had better both ride-line on the upper pasture. The cattle probably went against the fence in the storm last night and knocked off a lot of wire. Of course, Skinny will have to stay here," he added, "and the rest of us, except Parker, ought to look after the fences in the east bottoms---from the looks of the river this morning a lot of posts and wire must be washed out."

"Whoever gets up the saddle horses had better catch them in the pasture corral," Parker declared, "it won't do to turn them in with that wild filly and Captain Jack."

"I think I shall go see that wonderful filly," Carolyn June said as they left the table, "she may be the particular broncho I will want to ride---"

"Not much," Old Heck objected, "these outlaws ain't exactly the kind of horses for women to fool with. You can use Old Blue. He's gentle."

"Did I tell you I wanted a 'gentle horse'?" Carolyn June asked with a bit of impatience.

"No, but I figured that was the kind you'd need on account of being raised back east---"

"Well, I am going to see the Gold Dust maverick," Carolyn June said with emphasis, "and if she suits me I'll---I'll ride her!"

"I'll go with you," Skinny offered as Carolyn June stepped from the kitchen door and started toward the circular corral.

"Never mind!" she spoke shortly, "---you can go catch 'Old Blue' and"---with scorn in her voice---"if he's able to walk, maybe it will be safe for me to ride him to the end of the lane and back---Ugh! 'Old Blue!' The very name sounds as if he was dead!"

"Old Blue's a good horse," Skinny protested, "---we work him on the hay derrick---"

But Carolyn June was gone, walking rapidly across the open ground in the direction of the corral in which the Ramblin' Kid had turned Captain Jack and the Gold Dust filly.

"Jumpin' eats!" Bert exclaimed as the cowboys started toward the stable, "didn't the young one show her teeth sudden?"

"Skinny's going to have his hands full if he don't look out," Charley Saunders remarked sagely. "Still that kind ain't as dangerous as the ones that act plumb gentle like the widow has acted so far."

"Any female is treacherous," Chuck observed grimly. "They're just like cinch-binders---you can't tell when they're going to rare up and fall over backwards!"

"I'll bet Ophelia turns out to be a W.C.T.U. or something," Bert predicted solemnly.

"If she does it's all off with the Quarter Circle KT, because Parker and Old Heck are both in love already," Charley said as they rounded the corner of the barn.

Carolyn June gave a gasp of admiration as she stepped up to the circular corral and saw the Gold Dust maverick closely.

"Oh, you beauty! You adorable beauty!" she breathed.

Captain Jack and the filly were near the fence next to the shed. Carolyn June passed in between the low building and the corral to be closer to the horses. The sky was cloudless and a wonderful liquid blue; the sun glistened on the rich, golden, brown sides of the mare and made her coat shine like delicate satin. When Captain Jack and the filly saw Carolyn June they stood for a moment as rigid as though cast in bronze, heads held high, eyes fixed curiously yet without fear on the slender girlish figure.

Captain Jack took a step forward in a half-challenging way. The maverick stood perfectly still.

"You beauty," the girl repeated, "you wonderful golden beauty! You are going to be my horse---I'm going to ride you---*just you*---"

"You'll get you're neck broke if you do!" a voice, deliberate and of peculiar softness, said behind her.

Carolyn June turned, startled, toward the shed from where the voice had come. She knew, even before she looked, that the speaker was the Ramblin' Kid. Evidently he had just awakened. He had not risen and still lay stretched on the ground, his head resting on the saddle he had used for a pillow. Carolyn June could not help wondering how long he had been lying there studying her back. The thought confused her. In spite of her efforts at self-control a slow flush crept over her cheeks. The Ramblin' Kid saw it and the faintest hint of a smile showed on his lips---or was the suggestion of amusement in the twinkling glance of his eyes? Carolyn June could not tell. The subtlety and queerly humble impudence of it filled her with anger.

While she looked into his eyes Carolyn June appraised the physical appearance of the Ramblin' Kid. Certainly he was not handsome, sprawling there in his rough clothing. She knew his age was somewhere near her own, perhaps he was a year, surely no more than that, older than herself. Yet there was an expression about the face that suggested much experience, a sort of settled maturity and seriousness. His mouth, Carolyn June thought, showed a trace of cruelty---or was it only firmness? The teeth were good. If he stood up her own eyes would have to angle upward a trifle to look into his and if hers were brown the Ramblin' Kid's were positively black---yes, she would say, a brutal, unfathomable black, penetrating and hard. His cheeks were smooth and almost sallow they were so dark, and she could tell there was not an ounce of flesh save tough sinewy muscle on his body. He was fully dressed except for the white weather-beaten Stetson lying beside the saddle and the chaps and spurs kicked off and tossed with the bridle and rope near by on the ground. A dark woolen shirt open at the throat, blue overalls faded and somewhat dingy, black calfskin boots on a pair of feet that could not have been larger than sixes, comprised his attire.

So this was the Ramblin' Kid, Carolyn June thought. Someway she had pictured him a blue-eyed, yellow-haired sort of composite Skinny Rawlins, Chuck, Bert Lilly, Charley Saunders all in one and with the face of a boy in the teens!

He was different. She wondered, and almost laughed at the absurd thought, if he was bow-legged. A glance at the straight limbs stretched in repose on the ground dispelled the doubt.

The suddenness with which the Ramblin' Kid had spoken and the tone he used, Carolyn June thought, was utterly unfair. She felt as if she had been ambushed. How could she know he was sleeping under the shed? Why wasn't he in the bunk-house where he belonged? Her own embarrassment made her cross. She wanted to say "damn!" and stamp her foot or throw something at him, lying there so completely self-possessed! Instead, she looked steadily into the eyes of the Ramblin' Kid. Someway as she looked they seemed not so unkind, more sorrowful they were, on closer scrutiny, than cruel. She started to speak, her cheeks began to burn---

Without a word she turned and walked rapidly toward the house.

As she moved away Carolyn June felt something snap at her knee. She did not stop. Reaching down she gathered the soft folds of the loose gown about her and hurried away from the corral.

"God!" the Ramblin' Kid whispered as he straightened up, "she's built like th' Gold Dust maverick---an' just as game! They was made for each other."

He went to the corral and leaned against the fence, studying the filly thoughtfully, while Captain Jack with a friendly whinny came and nosed at the fingers thrust through the bars. After a time the mare cautiously moved up beside the roan

stallion and stretched her own velvety muzzle toward the hand the Ramblin' Kid held out.

"You want to be loved, too, you little devil!" the Ramblin' Kid laughed gently, "---–you thought I was mean last night, didn't you?"

For a while he fooled with the horses, then started toward the kitchen. A few steps from where Carolyn June had been standing he glanced down at a broad pink satin elastic band lying on the ground. It had been fastened with a silver butterfly clasp. The clasp was broken. The Ramblin' Kid stooped and picked it up.

"I'll be--!" he chuckled as he fingered, almost reverently, the dainty thing, "it's a---–a---–darned pretty little jigger!"

Smiling whimsically the Ramblin' Kid slipped his find in his pocket and sought Sing Pete to tease him for a bite of breakfast.

CHAPTER VI

YOU'RE A BRUTE

Carolyn June went directly to her room when she reached the house. She wished to investigate the feeling of looseness at her knee. The satin band that belonged there was gone. She felt her cheeks grow hot. Doubtless she had lost it at the corral---–the Ramblin' Kid would pick it up! The thought tormented her. Once more she wanted to swear vigorously and with extreme earnestness. Instead she---–laughed! It was all so absurd. The strange interest this rough cowboy inspired in her; the confusion she felt when he had spoken to her---–no man among all the clever, carefully groomed, ultra-sophisticated suitors she had left in Hartville ever stirred her emotions as had the Ramblin' Kid with a few drawling words and one long look from his black, inscrutable eyes. That look! She had the feeling, someway, that her whole soul was naked before it. She was almost afraid of him. It was silly! She detested him---–or---–anyway, he needed punishment! No, he wasn't worth it! He was only an ignorant rider of the range---–why trouble at all about him?

Quickly changing her dress for a riding suit of khaki---–the skirt sensibly divided---–and the morning slippers for stout, tan, laced boots, she stepped into the front room. Ophelia was in her own room dressing to go to town. Carolyn June heard voices in the kitchen. Sing Pete's shrill chatter mingled with an occasional slow word from the Ramblin' Kid. Thought of the garter she had lost flashed into her mind. Perhaps the cowboy had not found it. She would run out to the corral and see. Passing quickly out the front way Carolyn June hastened again toward the circular corral. Old Heck and Parker were at the garage getting the car ready for the drive to Eagle Butte; Pedro and Chuck were riding across the valley toward the upper pasture. The other cowboys saddled their horses near the barn.

As she walked, Carolyn June scanned the ground. At the corral she looked carefully where she had been standing. Her search was fruitless. She smiled queerly. Again she glanced at the Gold Dust maverick.

"You darling," she whispered, "I am going to have you---–I am---–I absolutely am!"

Turning, her eyes rested on the saddle, chaps and riding gear lying in the shed where the Ramblin' Kid had slept. Carolyn June stepped close to the outfit.

"I have a notion to---–to spit on you!" she said vehemently, "or kick---–" but she didn't finish the sentence. One tan shoe had been drawn back as if to be swung viciously at the inoffensive pile of riding gear; it paused, suspended, then gently, almost caressingly, pushed the leather chaps which suddenly seemed to Carolyn June to look limp and worn and pathetically tired.

As Carolyn June returned to the house Parker drove the car around to the front; Old Heck joined the cowboys, already mounting their bronchos, and with them rode down the lane in the direction of the lower field. Skinny came out of the barn, leading Pie Face and Old Blue. He left the horses standing and at the back-yard gate overtook Carolyn June. As they stepped inside the yard the Ramblin' Kid appeared at the kitchen door.

"There's the Ramblin' Kid now," Skinny said as they approached. "Hello, Kid," he continued, "I see you got the filly---Excuse me, I guess you folks ain't acquainted."

Haltingly he introduced them.

Without the flicker of an eyelid the Ramblin' Kid looked into the eyes of Carolyn June. He had seen her coming from the corral and guessed correctly the reason for her second visit to the enclosure. Indeed at that moment his hand was in his pocket toying with the delicate souvenir for which she had gone to search. Yet his face was utterly without emotion as he lifted his hat and stood aside, acknowledging with formal words the introduction. "It's sure a surprisin' day an' pleasant---" he finished, emphasizing "surprisin'" and "pleasant" till Carolyn June could have sworn there was a veiled taunt in the words he spoke.

She was equally calm. Smiling sweetly and with not a hint of a previous meeting she said: "I think I have heard of the Ramblin' Kid." Pausing a moment: "It's always peaceful after a storm!" she added enigmatically. And the Ramblin' Kid, as Skinny and the girl passed around to the front of the house, knew that Carolyn June had hurled a lance!

"A natural born heart-breaker," he said to himself as he went toward the bunk-house, "a genuine, full-grown vampire, part intentional an' part because it's in her---but she's a pure-bred---" He grew pensive and silent, a look of gentleness came to his face, followed quickly by an expression of extreme humility. "Oh, hell," he exclaimed aloud, "what's th' use!" Entering the building the Ramblin' Kid seated himself at the table at the end of the room. He pulled the pink satin elastic from his pocket and gazed at it, rubbing the soft fabric tenderly with the end of his thumb. His eyes lighted suddenly with anger and contempt. He threw the band violently across the room into a corner. "I wasn't raised to associate with luxuries like that!" he exclaimed with mingled bitterness and scorn, "---a damned ign'rant cow-puncher dreamin' dreams about an angel!" he finished with a harsh laugh. For a while he sat silent, gazing down at the table. Then he got up, went over and lifted the garter from where it had fallen and replaced it in his pocket. "Oh, well," he chuckled less bitterly and whimsically added, "---any idiot can smile at th' mornin' star even if th' darned thing is beyond his reach! Besides, she don't need to ever know---" Leaving the bunk-house he went toward the circular corral.

Parker climbed from the car and entered the house, asking if Ophelia was ready.

"In just a moment!" the widow called from her room.

"What are you and me going to do?" Skinny asked Carolyn June as they stepped on to the porch, "take a ride?"

"On 'Old Blue'?" Carolyn June questioned scornfully, then, with resignation, as they went inside the house: "Oh, well---I suppose, after a while. I have some letters to write now," and she entered her room leaving Skinny standing perplexed by her varying moods. He looked foolishly at Parker a moment. Going to the graphophone he put on a record---

"*I'm forever blowing bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air*!"

wailed disconsolately through the house.

"Good heavens," Carolyn June called, "do you blow bubbles this early in the morning?"

"Don't you like it?" Skinny asked soberly. "I thought that was a pretty good tune."

"I'm crazy about it!" Carolyn June answered sarcastically. "There and then, but not here and now---"

"Where and when?" Skinny queried innocently.

"In the valley of the moon at the end of a perfect day!" she laughed back. "---Forgive me, I couldn't help it!"

"What does she mean?" Skinny asked Parker in a whisper. "Is she making fun of me?"

"No, you blamed fool," Parker replied, "she feels good and is just joking---"

Skinny brightened up immediately.

"That's a good one," he called to Carolyn June with a snicker; "I never thought of it before!"

A ripple of laughter came from Carolyn June's room.

"Really, I don't mind," she said; "play *Bubbles* as much as you like---I think it's rather soothing, but truly I must write my letters now so Ophelia can take them to town."

Half an hour later Ophelia appeared dressed for the drive to Eagle Butte. Carolyn June and Skinny went out on the front porch and watched the widow and Parker climb into the Clagstone "Six." As Parker started the engine Skinny suddenly called to him. Parker sat with his foot on the clutch while Skinny hurried out to the car.

"What do you want?" he asked impatiently, "We've got to be going!"

"Lean over here," Skinny said, his face flushing scarlet, "I want to tell you something."

"Well?"

"Stop at the Golden Rule and get me a white shirt size number fifteen and---a purple necktie if they've got any!" Skinny whispered.

Ophelia heard and choked back a laugh.

"Thunderation, he's plumb locoed!" Parker exclaimed, as he jammed the clutch into gear and the car sprang forward.

"Don't forget it, Parker," Skinny called earnestly, "I actually need it!"

Carolyn June and Skinny stood on the porch and watched the car climb the grade and out on to the bench. The storm of the night before had washed the earth clean and cooled the air. A faint after-breeze fanned the tree-tops. The Costejo peaks stood out, with stereoscopical clearness, against a cloudless sky. The day was a challenge to one who loved the open.

"You may saddle 'Old Blue,'" Carolyn June said to Skinny. "---I'll see if I can 'stick on him' long enough to ride as far as the river!"

"He's already saddled," Skinny replied, "him and Old Pie Face both."

"Man, dear," she cried in mock misunderstanding, "you surely are not expecting me to ride the two of them at once!"

"No," he answered meekly, "Old Pie Face is my horse, I'm going to ride him and go with you."

"Indeed!" she exclaimed, then laughing mischievously. "Oh, certainly---that's a good one---I hadn't thought of it before!"

"Don't you want me to go?" Skinny asked doubtfully.

"Surely. I should be utterly unhappy if you didn't---I'll get my hat."

"Blamed if I can figure her out," Skinny said to himself as Carolyn June ran lightly into the house. "She keeps a feller freezing to death and burning up all at once---sort of in heaven and hell both mixed together."

A white, medium-brimmed felt hat was set jauntily on the fluffy brown hair when she reappeared. Skinny's heart leaped hungrily. Carolyn June was a picture of perfect physical fitness. The cowboy silently wondered how long he could keep from making "a complete, triple-expansion, darned fool of himself!"

"I'm glad you want me to go," he said, renewing the conversation as they started around the house, "because I wanted to and, well, anyhow it's my job---"

"What do you mean 'your job'?" Carblyn June asked quickly.

Skinny was stricken silent. He realized he was on dangerous ground. He wasn't sure it would be wise to tell her what he meant. Someway he felt Carolyn June would resent it if she knew he was drawing wages for acting the lover to her. It seemed wholly impossible for him, just at that moment, to explain that, although Old Heck was paying him ten dollars a month extra salary to court, temporarily, his attractive niece, he, Skinny Rawlins, would personally be overjoyed to reverse the order and give his entire income, adding a bonus as well, for the privilege of continuing indefinitely and of his own choice the more than pleasant employment. Yet this was the literal truth, so quickly had his susceptible heart yielded to the charms of the girl. But he dared not try to tell her. He knew the words would not come and if they did he would probably choke on them and she, not believing the truth, would detest him. Skinny had heard of men who courted girls of wealth to win their money and with sincere contempt he despised these degenerates of his sex. Now, suddenly, he felt that he himself was in their class. The thought made him sick, actually caused his stomach to quiver with a sort of nausea.

"Skinny Rawlins," Carolyn June said sternly, stopping and looking straight at the confused and mentally tortured cowboy, "tell me---and don't lie---what you meant when you said to go with me was 'your job!'"

Skinny raised his eyes; in them was piteous appeal.

"I meant---I---" he hesitated.

"Tell me the truth," she ordered relentlessly, "or I'll---I'll---do something awful!"

"I meant it was my job---" suddenly inspired, he blurted out, "to ride Old Pie Face. He's---he's dangerous and has to be rode every so often to keep him from getting worse and to-day's the day to ride him!"

"Skinny," Carolyn June spoke gently, "I feel sorry for you. I want to like you and I'm disappointed. It breaks my heart to say it but you are a liar---you're just a common double dashed liar---like Uncle Josiah was when he sent that telegram saying there was smallpox at the Quarter Circle KT---"

"Am I?" Skinny asked humbly.

"You are," she retorted impatiently, "and you know it---"

"Do I?" as if dazed.

"You do, and did all the time---"

"Did I?" he felt like a parrot.

"You did!" Carolyn June snapped. "Good heavens," she continued, "why do men think they have to lie to women? Common sense and experience ought to teach them they can never fool them long---I hoped out here in the big West I would find one man who wouldn't lie---"

"Th' Ramblin' Kid won't," Skinny said as if suddenly struck by a bright thought, "---he wouldn't lie to you!"

Carolyn June laughed scornfully.

"Oh, yes he would," she declared, "all of them do---every last one of the poor frail"---contemptuously---"turtles!"

"But th' Ramblin' Kid wouldn't," Skinny persisted; "he won't lie to anybody."

"Not even to a woman?" she questioned incredulously.

"No," he answered positively, "I'm sure he wouldn't."

"And why wouldn't he?" she asked.

"Well," Skinny replied, "for one thing he don't give a darn. Th' Ramblin' Kid don't care what anybody, man, woman or anything else thinks about him or whether they like what he says or not so there ain't any use of him lying. Maybe he wouldn't tell what was in his mind unless you asked him, but if you did ask him he'd say what it was whether he thought it satisfied you or not. He's funny that way. He just naturally don't seem to be built for telling lies and he wouldn't do it---"

"Oh, Skinny, poor simple Skinny!" Carolyn June laughed. "You don't know men---men when they're dealing with women! Through all the unnamed years of my life I've never found one man who was absolutely truthful when talking with a 'female.' They think they have to lie to women. They do it either to keep from hurting them---or else they do it intentionally for the purpose of hurting them, one or the other! And they are so stupid! No man can hide anything long from a woman---"

Reaching over she jerked a spray of tiny roses from the rambler at the window near which they were standing; tapping the blossoms against her lips, beginning to smile whimsically, she continued: "Why, I can almost read your own thoughts right now! If I wanted to I could tell you more about what is in your mind than you yourself could tell---"

"Could you?" Skinny said, a guilty look coming in his eyes.

"For one thing," Carolyn June went on, ignoring the inane question, "you are in love---"

"I ain't!" the over-hasty denial slipped from his lips unintentionally.

"Lie!" she laughed, "you can't help telling 'em, can you? And you are thinking---" She paused while her eyes rested demurely on the roses in her hand.

"What am I thinking?" Skinny asked breathlessly.

Before she could reply an agonized spitting, yowling and hissing, accompanied by the rattle of tin, came from behind the kitchen. "What's that?" Carolyn June cried half frightened at the instant a yellow house cat, his head fastened in an old tomato can, came bouncing backward, clawing and scratching, from around the corner.

"Gee whiz!" Skinny exclaimed, "it's that darned cat again---Sing Pete goes and dabs butter in the bottoms of the cans and the fool cat sticks his head in trying to lick it out and gets fastened. It looks like the blamed idiot would learn sometime. It's what I call a rotten joke anyhow!"

Sing Pete appeared at the kitchen door cackling with fiendish joy at the success of his ruse.

Carolyn June stared, apparently stricken dumb by the antics of the struggling animal.

"Sun-fish! Go to it---you poor deluded son-of-sorrow!" The Ramblin' Kid, who, unnoticed by Carolyn June and Skinny, at that moment had come from the corral and stood leaning against the fence, chuckled half pityingly, yet making no move toward the creature.

"Catch him and take it off," Carolyn June cried, "it's hurting him!"

Skinny started toward the rapidly gyrating jumble of claws, can and cat.

"I will if the darn' thing'll hold still a minute!" he said.

Carolyn June looked at the Ramblin' Kid, still leaning against the fence watching the cat's contortions.

"Why don't you help him?" she asked impatiently. "Skinny can't do it alone---can't you see it's choking?"

"No, he's not choking," the Ramblin' Kid replied without moving from where he stood, "---he's sufferin' some, but he ain't chokin'. He's got quite a lot of wind yet an' is gettin' some valuable experience. That cat's what I call a genuine acrobat!" he mused as the terrified creature leaped frantically in the air and somersaulted backward, striking and clawing desperately to free itself of the can tightly wedged on its head.

Carolyn June was accustomed to obedience from men creatures. The Ramblin' Kid's indifference to her request, together with his apparent cruelty in refusing to aid in relieving the cat from its torturing dilemma, angered and piqued the girl.

"Help Skinny take it off, I tell you!" she repeated, "haven't you a spark of sympathy---"

The Ramblin' Kid resented her tone and detected as well the note of wounded pride. Instinctively he felt that at that instant the cat, with Carolyn June, had become a secondary consideration.

"Well, some, I reckon," he answered, speaking deliberately, "generally a little, but right now darned little for that old yaller cat. I figure he's a plumb free moral agent," he continued as if speaking to himself; "he got his head in that can on his own hook an' it's up to him to get it out or let it stay in *this time*, just as he pleases---"

"But Sing Pete put butter in the can!" Carolyn June said, arguing.

"He's done it before," the Ramblin' Kid answered with a glance at the Chinese cook still gleefully enjoying the results of his cruel joke. "He won't no more. But that don't make no difference," he laughed, "th' darn' cat hadn't ought to have yielded to temptation!"

"You're a brute!" she exclaimed passionately, "---an ignorant, savage, stupid brute---" The harsh words sprang from the lips of Carolyn June before she thought. The Ramblin' Kid flinched involuntarily as if he had been struck full in the face. A look came in his eyes that almost made her regret what she had said.

"I reckon I am," he replied, gazing steadily at her without feeling or resentment and speaking slowly, "yes, I'm an 'ign'rant, savage, stupid brute,'" deliberately accenting each word as he repeated the stinging phrase, "---but---what's the use?" he finished with a mirthless laugh. "Anyhow," he added, glancing again at the cat and Skinny's futile efforts to catch it, "I ain't interferin' this time, at least, with that damned cat!"

Carolyn June knew she had hurt with her unintentionally cruel words. For an instant there was a humane impulse to temper their severity.

"I---I---didn't---" she started to say, but the Ramblin' Kid had turned and, ignoring the cat, Skinny and herself, was leaning on the fence with his back to her, looking off across the valley, apparently lost in thought. She did not finish the sentence.

The cat bucked its way to the fence. As it went under the wire the can caught on a barb of the lower strand. Jerking furiously, the animal freed itself from the can, leaving splotches of hair and hide on the ragged edges of tin. Still spitting and clawing, with its tail standing out like an enormous yellow plume, it dashed toward the barn, eager to put distance between itself and the thing that had been torturing it.

"Gosh a'mighty," Skinny said, sweating with the exertion and the excitement of trying to catch the cat, "it'll be noon before we get started for that ride!"

"We'll go now," Carolyn June answered, "---before some other horrible thing occurs."

"We're going over to the river and maybe out on the sand-hills a ways," Skinny casually remarked to the Ramblin' Kid as Carolyn June and he passed through the gate. "Oh, yes," he added, "Chuck said tell you he took your rope---there was a weak spot in his and he didn't get it fixed yesterday!"

The Ramblin' Kid did not answer.

Skinny had been wrong about the Ramblin' Kid not caring what any one thought of him. He was supersensitive of his roughness, his lack of education and conscious crudeness, and the words of Carolyn June were still in his mind. When Skinny and the girl were going toward their horses the Ramblin' Kid turned and entered the gate. Sing Pete was still at the kitchen door.

The Ramblin' Kid stepped up to him.

"You damned yellow heathen," he said in a level voice, "if you ever play that trick on that cat again th' Quarter Circle KT will be shy a cook an' your ghost'll be headin' pronto for China!"

Without waiting for a reply he went back to the gate and watched Skinny and Carolyn June ride down the lane. The deftness and skill with which the girl handled the horse she rode forced a smile of admiration to the lips of the Ramblin' Kid. She sat close in the saddle and a glance showed she was a born master of horses. "She's a wonder," he said to himself, "a teetotal wonder---" A shade of melancholy passed over his face. "An ign'rant, savage, stupid brute!" he murmured bitterly, "well, I reckon she was right---Hell!" he exclaimed aloud, "I wonder if Skinny'll remember about that upper crossin' bein' dang'rous with quicksand after the rain---Guess he did," he finished as the two riders turned to the right toward the lower and more distant river ford and disappeared among the willows and cottonwood trees that fringed the Cimarron.

CHAPTER VII

THE GREEDY SANDS

When the Ramblin' Kid, working the rope-conquered and leg-weary Gold Dust maverick from the North Springs back to the Quarter Circle KT, crossed the Cimarron at dawn Captain Jack and the filly swam a raging, drift-burdened river. Less than twelve hours later Carolyn June and Skinny, at the lower ford, rode into a stream that again was normal. Old Blue and Pie Face splashed through water barely reaching the stirrup leathers. Only the fresh rubbish flung out on the meadows by the flood's quick anger or lodged in the willows, still bent by the pressure of the torrent that had rushed over them and slimy with yellow sediment left on their branches and leaves, told the story of the swift rise and fall of the Cimarron the night before.

On the bluff north of the river Carolyn June and Skinny checked their horses while the girl gazed down on the panorama of green fields, narrow lanes, corrals and low buildings of the Quarter Circle KT. The sight thrilled her. On all the Kiowa range there was no more entrancing view.

"It's kind of pretty, ain't it?" Skinny ventured.

"Beautiful!" she breathed.

"I'd---I'd like to stand here and look at it always---if you---if you'd enjoy it!" he said and was instantly appalled by his own audacity.

Carolyn June flashed a quick look at him.

"We had better go on," she said, then added lightly: "Does it always affect you so when you get this view of the valley?"

"No. But, well, somehow it's different this morning---maybe it's because you are here!" he blurted out hurriedly.

"Please," she said, starting Old Blue toward the west along the crest of the ridge, "don't be sentimental. I'm afraid---" she added, intending to say it would spoil their ride.

"You needn't be, with me along!" Skinny interrupted hastily, misinterpreting her meaning.

She laughed and without explaining urged her horse forward.

Skinny followed pensively on Old Pie Face.

The Ramblin' Kid, while going from barn to corral, glanced across the valley and saw Carolyn June and Skinny as they rode along the ridge. It was two miles from the ranch to the bluff on which they were riding, but so clear was the rain-washed air that the horses and riders were easily recognized. He watched them until they reached the corner of the upland pasture. There the roads from the lower and upper fords came together. The couple turned north along the fence and disappeared beyond the ridge.

For a mile Carolyn June and Skinny rode without speaking. He felt already a reaction from his over-boldness of a while ago and silently swore at himself for his rashness. She was not eager to resume a conversation that had threatened a painfully emotional turn. She was quite content to enjoy the fresh air of the morning, the changing scenes through which they passed and the easy motion of the horse on which she was mounted.

The bronchos pricked forward their ears at the sound of galloping hoofs.

"Somebody's coming," Skinny spoke as Pedro, riding rapidly toward them, rounded the point of a low hill a little distance ahead.

"What's wrong?" Skinny questioned, when the three met and stopped their horses.

"The pasture fence is bu'sted," Pedro answered; "at the northeast corner it is broke. The cattle are out. Ten---fifteen maybe---are dead---the lightning strike them perhaps. The others all of them are gone. They go pronto, stampede I think, toward the Purgatory. Chuck and me can not get them alone---I go to tell Old Heck so the boys will come and help!"

It was plain to Skinny what had occurred. The cattle had drifted before the storm until stopped by the wire. While crowded against it a bolt of lightning had struck the fence, followed the metal strands, and killed the animals touching or nearest to it. In the fright the others plunged madly forward and had broken their way to freedom. Five hundred Diamond Bar steers, recently bought by Old Heck and brought from the Purgatory forty-five miles north of the Quarter Circle KT were out and rushing back to their former range.

"You go help Chuck," Skinny said to Pedro. "Carolyn June and me will turn around and take the news to Old Heck and send some of the boys to help you. If them cattle ain't bunched before they hit the Purgatory and get scattered over their old range it will take a month to gather them and get them back again!"

"Why don't you yourself go with Pedro and Chuck?" Carolyn June asked Skinny. "I can ride to the ranch alone and tell the others about it."

"I'm supposed to stay with---" he begun.

"With me, I presume," she interrupted. "Well, this is one time you don't. Go on with the boys. You are needed after those steers a lot more than you are to 'herd' me back to the ranch!"

Without waiting to argue she wheeled Old Blue toward the Quarter Circle KT. Skinny watched her a moment, then started with Pedro in the other direction. Suddenly checking his horse he swung around in the saddle.

"Go back the way we came!" he called after the girl. "Don't try the upper ford!"

Carolyn June looked around and threw up her hand, motioning toward the north. Thinking that she understood, Skinny touched Old Pie Face with the spurs and soon overtook the Mexican.

He was mistaken. Carolyn June had not understood the warning. The distance was too great for his words to reach her distinctly. She thought he was merely protesting against her going alone. At the fork of the road she saw that the trail that led to the upper ford was much the nearer way to the ranch. Reining Old Blue into it she rode swiftly along the ridge and down the slope toward the dangerous crossing.

* * * * *

The Ramblin' Kid spent the morning at the circular corral. He was studying the moods and working to win the confidence of the Gold Dust maverick. He was watching her and thinking always a little ahead of the thought that was in the mind of the mare. His love for a horse and understanding of the wonderfully intelligent animals was as natural as were the brown eyes, the soft low voice, the gentle but strong touch, by which it was expressed. He wooed the outlaw filly thoughtfully, carefully, as a lover courts a sweetheart. The beautiful creature reminded him of Carolyn June. "They was made for each other!" he repeated softly as he worked with the mare. From the corral he could see the road across the river where Skinny and the girl had gone. Often he turned his eyes in that direction.

He was fingering the garter in his pocket and looking toward the river when Carolyn June appeared on the ridge as she returned alone to the ranch. He stood and watched her. The ugly words she had spoken at the gate came into his mind and a bitter smile curled his lips. Still he watched the girl, expecting Skinny would ride into view. She turned down the ridge toward the upper ford.

"That's funny," he thought, "wonder where Skinny's at?" Then it flashed through his mind that something must be wrong for the girl was riding alone. "Hell!" he exclaimed aloud, "she's by herself an' headin' straight for th' upper ford!" Only an instant he paused. "Jack!" he cried sharply, running to the corral gate and swinging it partly open. "Come---*quick*!"

The roan stallion started at a trot toward the gate, then, trained to obey instantly the word of the master he loved better than life, leaped nimbly through the opening. Slamming and fastening the gate the Ramblin' Kid ran to the shed, the broncho at his side. He threw the blanket and saddle on the little roan, cinched quickly but carefully the double gear, slipped the bit into the waiting mouth of the horse and without stopping to put on his chaps sprang on Captain Jack's back and whirled him in a dead run around the corner of the shed and down the lane toward the north. At the pasture corral below the barn he guided the broncho close to the fence and scarcely checking him leaned over and lifted a rope, coiled and hung on a post near the gate, from its place---the one Chuck that morning had left because of the flaw.

"God!" he groaned, "---an' a bad rope!"

He glanced toward the ridge across the river. Carolyn June had disappeared down the trail that led to the upper ford.

"Go, Little Man, go---for th' love of God, go!" the Ramblin' Kid whispered as he leaned forward over the neck of the horse. Captain Jack answered the agonized appeal as he would never have responded to the cruel cut of spurs and leaped ahead in a desperate race to beat Old Blue and his precious burden to the greedy sands of the Cimarron.

As he rode, the Ramblin' Kid slipped his hand around the coils of the rope till his fingers found the broken strands that told of the weakness that caused Chuck to leave it behind that morning. Bending over it, while his horse ran, he worked frantically to weave a rawhide saddle string into the fiber and so strengthen the dangerous spot.

* * * * *

Thinking only to reach the ranch as quickly as possible Carolyn June guided Old Blue down the trail and through the thin patches of willows and cottonwood trees that grew along the river. The stream looked innocent enough and the crossing perfectly safe. Swift but apparently shallow water flowed close to the northern bank. Beyond that was a clean, pebble strewn bar and then a smaller, narrower prong of the river. On the south side stretched a white, unbroken expanse of sand a hundred feet or more wide and ending against the low slope of the meadow land.

At the brink of the stream Old Blue stopped short and refused to go on.

"What's the matter," Carolyn June laughed lightly, "---afraid of getting your 'little tootsies' wet?"

The horse reared backward when she tried to urge him ahead and wheeled half around in an effort to get away from the water.

"Look here, Old Fellow," she spoke sharply, tightening the reins as she touched his flank with her spur, "we haven't time for foolishness! Generally, in fact always," accenting the last word, "horses---and men---go in the direction I want them to go! Why, you're as stubborn---as---as the Ramblin' Kid!" she finished with another laugh as Old Blue, with a snort of fear, yet not daring to resist further the firm hand and firmer will of his rider, stepped into the water.

"Gee, when you do start you go in a hurry, don't you?" Carolyn June said as the broncho went rapidly forward as if eager to negotiate the crossing, seeming to know that safety lay in the quickness and lightness of his tread. As he lunged ahead the girl had the sensation that the saddle was sinking from under her. Reaching the firmer footing of the gravel bar in the center of the stream Old Blue tried again to turn about.

"Go on!" Carolyn June cried impatiently yet with a feeling somehow of impending danger she could not wholly define, "---you've got to do it, so you had as well quit your nonsense and go ahead!" at the same time raking the horse's sides sharply again with the spurs.

Crossing the shallow branch of the river the broncho reached the smooth, firm appearing beach of sand.

With his head down, his muzzle almost touching the ground, as if scenting, feeling, his way, he went forward stepping rapidly, easily, as possible. At each step his foot slipped lower into the yielding, quivering mass. Carolyn June felt him tremble and the sensation that the horse was being pulled from under her grew more and more pronounced. She noticed how he sank into the sand and observed also the sweat beginning to darken the hair on the neck of her mount.

"Pretty soft, isn't it?" she said, speaking to the broncho kindly as though to encourage him and perhaps at the same time to allay a bit the queer sense of uneasiness she felt, for even yet she did not realize the danger into which she had unknowingly ridden.

Half-way to the firm black soil of the southern bank of the stream Old Blue's front feet seemed suddenly to give way beneath him. He began to plunge desperately. Then it was the truth came to Carolyn June. Her cheeks grew white.

"The quicksand!" she exclaimed aloud, at the same time trying to help the horse with a lift of the reins. It was too late to turn back. Her only salvation lay in reaching the solid ground such a few yards ahead---and yet so fearfully far away. Old Blue struggled madly to go forward, gaining a little but at each effort sinking deeper into the sand. Carolyn June tried to encourage him with words:

"Come on, come on! Good Little Horse---you can make it! Keep trying---that's it---now!---you're doing it! Brave Old Blue---don't give up---don't give up, Boy!" she pleaded, pity for the horse causing her almost to forget her own terrible peril.

It was useless.

Twenty-five feet from safety Old Blue's front quarters went down until his breast was against the sand. The hind legs were buried to the stifles. He wallowed and floundered helplessly. His hoofs touched nothing solid on which to stand. He stretched his head forward, straining-to lift himself away from that horrible, clinging suction. His efforts only forced him down---down---always down!

Carolyn June's own feet were in the sand. She threw herself from the saddle---as far to one side and ahead of the horse as she could. With her weight removed perhaps Old Blue could get out. Anyway it was death to stay on the horse. Perhaps alone she could escape---she was lighter---the sand might hold her up---by moving rapidly surely she could go that short twenty-five feet to the firm ground ahead of her. At the first step she sank half-way to her thigh. She fell forward thinking to crawl on her hands and knees. Her arms went into the mass to the shoulder. Silently---without a word---but with horrible fear gripping her heart she fought the sand. She sank deeper---slowly---steadily---surely. The hellish stuff closed about her body to the waist. If she only had something---anything---solid to hold to! She took off her hat, grasped the edges of the brim, reached her arms out and tried to use the frail disk of felt for a buoy. It held a moment then gradually settled below the surface of the shifting, elusive substance. Again and again she lifted the hat free from the sand and sought to place it so it would bear a part at least of her weight. Her efforts were vain. The insidious mass crept higher and higher on her body. She remembered reading that one caught in the quicksand by his struggles only hastened his own destruction. She tried to be perfectly still. In spite of all she was sinking---sinking---the sand was engulfing her.

During all her struggles Carolyn June remained silent. She had not thought to cry out. Somehow she could not realize that she was to die. The sun was bright, the sky cloudless, the trees along the river-bank barely swayed in a little breeze! How beautiful the world! How queer that such a little distance away was the green grass of the meadow and the firm black earth in which it was rooted and she---she was held fast and helpless in the embrace of the deadly sand! Strange thoughts rushed through her mind. She wondered what they would think at the ranch when night came and she did not return. Would they know? Would they guess the thing that had happened? Would the sand draw her down---down---until it covered her so none would ever know where or how she died? She looked at Old Blue. "Poor old fellow!" she whispered, "I am sorry---I didn't know---it looked so white and firm and safe!" The sand was half-way up the sides of the horse and he swayed his body in pathetic, futile efforts to free himself.

A strange calm came over Carolyn June. So this was the end? She was to die alone, horribly, in the treacherous sands of the Cimarron? Surely it could not be---God would not let her die! She was so young! She had just begun to live---She thought of Hartville, her father, the old friends. How far away they seemed! How queer it was---she could not image in her mind any of the familiar scenes, the face of her father or any of the friends she had known so well! She tried to think of her Uncle Josiah, Ophelia, Skinny Rawlins---poor fellow, how susceptible was his big, innocent, boyish heart! She

called each one up in a mental effort to remember how they had looked, the sound of their voices---they were only names---dim shadowy names! There was nothing in the whole world but Old Blue---herself---and the sand---the sand---an eternity of sand pulling, dragging, sucking her down! She closed her eyes tightly, thinking to shut out the impression of utter loneliness. The face of the Ramblin' Kid flashed into her mind! She could see him! She saw him lying under the shed, as he had looked that morning, his head resting on the saddle, his eyes gazing steadily into her own; she saw him again as he had looked when she stung him with her harsh words at the gate. She seemed to see the agonized humility in his expression and hear the low tenseness of his voice as he repeated aloud the words she had used---"An ign'rant, savage, stupid brute!" She laughed almost hysterically. "Why can I see him---just him---and not the others? Has he come to---to---haunt me?" she finished with a gasp.

The sand had reached her breast. How long before it clutched at her throat? Her mouth? Her eyes? Ah, would she hold up her arm as she went down---down---and reach out her hand as if to wave the world a last, long farewell? "I will---I will!" she cried, the pressure around her body almost stopping her breath, "I---I---will---and---wiggle my fingers to the end!" she added with a choking half-hysterical laugh, so tightly did she cling to life. Her mood changed. "I---guess---I ought to pray!" she said, "but---I---God---God knows anyhow!" her voice trailing away to a whisper as if she had grown suddenly, utterly, tired. She stretched out her hands once more with the hat, trying to use it to buoy her up. Under the weight of her arms it sank in the sand. She tossed it to one side. "It will---stay---on top by itself," she choked. "I---I---will leave it---maybe they will find it---and know---" She felt her senses were leaving her. Even yet she had not called for help. It had not occurred to her that rescue was possible. As if it were an echo to her thoughts there came the throbbing tattoo of hoofs pounding the earth. She listened intently. Some one was riding down the lane toward the river from the ranch! The horse was evidently running---running madly, desperately. Would he cross at the upper or lower ford? Her heart pulsed with heavy dull throbs. The sand was crushing her chest. A wave of weakness swept over her. She almost fainted. At that instant Captain Jack, carrying the Ramblin' Kid, leaped through an opening in the willows and stopped---his front feet plowing the firm ground at the edge of the quivering beach of sand.

"Pure luck!" the Ramblin' Kid breathed fervently, his eye quickly measuring the distance to the nearly exhausted girl; "she's close enough I can reach her with th' rope! God, if it'll only hold!" Already the coils were in his hand. With a single backward fling of the noose and forward toss he dropped the loop over the head of Carolyn June.

"Pull it up---close---under your arms!" he commanded shortly, "an' hang on with your hands to take th' strain off your body!"

The girt obeyed without a word.

He double half-hitched the rope to the horn of the saddle, swung Captain Jack around. "Look out!" he called to the girl as he started away from the brink of the sand. "Steady, Boy, be careful---" to the broncho. The slack gradually tightened. The strain drew on Carolyn June's arms till it seemed they would be pulled from the sockets. The rope cut cruelly into her body under her shoulders. She wanted to cry---to scream---to laugh. She did neither. She threw back her head and clung with all her strength to the rough lariat, stretched taut as a cable of steel.

The Ramblin' Kid leaned forward in the saddle, his body half turned, eyes looking back along the straight line of the severely tested rope. He swore softly, steadily, under his breath. "God---if it will only hold---if it only don't break!"

Slowly, surely, the little stallion leaned his weight against the tensely drawn riata and Carolyn June felt herself lifted, inch by inch, out of the sand that engulfed her. At last she fell forward---her body free. Without stopping the horse the Ramblin' Kid continued away from the river-bank and dragged the girl across the yielding surface to the solid earth and safety. The instant she was where he could reach her he whirled Captain Jack and rode quickly back. Carolyn June was trying to get to her feet when he sprang from the broncho and helped her to the firm ground on which he stood. She was

panting and exhausted.

"Get---get---Old Blue out!" she gasped and dropped limply down on the grass, fingering at the rope to remove it from around her body.

"Danged if she ain't got more heart than I thought she had!" the Ramblin' Kid said to himself as he lifted the loop from over her head. "I'm goin' to," he said aloud, "if I can---but---I'm afraid he's gone. I'll try anyhow---you lay there an' rest---" at the same time remounting his horse.

The sand covered the rump of Old Blue. The saddle, Parker's it was, was nearly submerged, only the horn and cantle showing above the slimy mass. His head, neck and the top of his withers were yet exposed. He still struggled, wallowing feebly, vainly resisting the downward pull of the sand. Crouching, as if fascinated by the terrible scene, Carolyn June watched as the Ramblin' Kid, waiting his opportunity, at the instant the horse in the sand lifted his head deftly flung the rope over his neck. With a short jerk of the wrist he tightened the noose till it closed snugly about the throat of the broncho. Again turning Captain Jack away from the bank he urged him slowly forward. The rope stiffened. The little stallion bunched himself and desperately strained against the dead weight of Old Blue, multiplied many times by the suction of the sand. The Ramblin' Kid leaned far over the neck of Captain Jack to give the horse the advantage of his own weight and looked back, watching the supreme efforts of the mired broncho as he fought to climb out of the sand. A moment it looked as if the little roan would drag him out. Slowly he seemed to be raising and moving forward. There was a sharp snap. Half-way down its length the lariat parted. At the weak spot the strain was too great. Captain Jack plunged forward to his knees, his nose rooting the earth, and the Ramblin' Kid barely saved himself from pitching over the horse's head.

"That's what I was dreadin'---" he said as he turned and rode back to the edge of the sand.

Carolyn June gazed, wide-eyed, speechless with horror, at the horse in the sand. When the rope broke, Old Blue, with a groan almost human, sank back and quickly settled down until only his head and part of his neck were exposed to view. The Ramblin' Kid looked at the broken rope---the end fastened around the throat of Old Blue had whipped back and was lying far beyond the cowboy's reach. The piece half-hitched to the saddle horn was too short for another throw. Old Blue was doomed. Carolyn June saw him sinking gradually, surely, into the sand. It seemed ages. His eyes appealed with dumb pathos to the group on the bank. They could hear his breath coming in harsh, terrible gasps. The sand seemed to be deliberately torturing him as though it were some hellish thing, alive and of fiendish cunning, that grasped its victim and then paused in his destruction to gloat over his hopeless agony.

The Ramblin' Kid sat Captain Jack and watched.

"Why did God ever want to make that stuff anyhow!" sprang hoarsely from his lips. He was torn between blind unreasoning anger at the quicksand and pity for the struggling horse. Suddenly he jerked the forty-four, always on his saddle, from its holster. As the gun swung back and then forward there was a crashing report and Old Blue's head dropped, with a convulsive shudder, limp on the sand.

Carolyn June screamed and buried her face in her hands.

At the sound of the shot Captain Jack stiffened and stood rigid. The Ramblin' Kid, his face white and drawn, sat and looked dry-eyed at the red stream oozing from the round hole just below the brow-band of the bridle on the head of the horse he had killed.

"I---I---would have wanted somebody to do it to me!" he said softly and rode to the side of the girl huddled on the ground. He dismounted and stood, without speaking, looking down at her shaking form. After a time she looked up, through eyes drenched with tears, into his face. Then as if drawn by an irresistible impulse---one she could not deny---she turned her head and looked at the spot where Old Blue had fought his last battle with the quicksands of the Cimarron. A crimson stain, already darkening, on the white surface; a few square feet of disturbed and broken sand, even now settling into the smooth, innocent-looking tranquillity that hid the death lurking in its depths; a short length of rope, one end drawn beneath the sand, the other lying in a sprawling coil; her hat resting a little distance to one side, were all that remained to tell the story of the grim tragedy of the morning. She shuddered and looked once more into the pain-filled eyes of the Ramblin' Kid.

"We'd better be goin'," he said quietly, "you're wet an' them clothes must be uncomfortable. You can ride Captain Jack!"

She stood up weak and trembling.

"I---I---thought Captain Jack was an outlaw," she said with a faint smile. "He won't let me ride him, will he?"

"He'll let you," the Ramblin' Kid answered dully, "no woman ever has rode him---or any other man only me---but he'll let you!"

As she approached the stallion he raised his head and looked at her with a queer mixture of curiosity and antagonism, curving his neck in a challenging way.

"Jack!" the Ramblin' Kid spoke sharply but kindly to the horse, "be careful! It's all right, Boy---you're goin' to carry double this one time!"

The broncho stood passive while the Ramblin' Kid helped Carolyn June to his back.

"You set behind," he said, "it'll be easier to hold on an' I can handle th' horse better!"

She slipped back of the saddle and he swung up on to the little roan. With one hand Carolyn June grasped the cantle of the saddle, the other she reached up and laid on the arm of the Ramblin' Kid---the touch sent a thrill through her body and the cowboy felt a response that made his heart quiver as they turned and rode toward the Quarter Circle KT.

For a mile neither spoke.

"I---I---am sorry for what---I said this morning," Carolyn June whispered at last haltingly, feeling intuitively that the cruel words---"an ignorant, savage, stupid brute"---were repeating themselves in her companion's mind.

"It's all right," he answered without looking around and in a voice without emotion, "it was th' truth---" with a hopeless laugh. "I'm a damn' fool besides!"

CHAPTER VIII

QUICK WITH A VENGEANCE

Old Heck rode in advance of Charley and Bert as the trio returned from repairing the fences wrecked by the flood that had swept over the east bottom-lands of the Quarter Circle KT. All morning he had been silent and morose. Only when necessary had he spoken while he directed the cowboys at their labor, helped them reset posts, or untangle twisted wires

and build up again that which the rush of water had torn down. The damage had not been great and by noon the fence was as good as new. As soon as the breaks were mended the moody owner of the Quarter Circle KT mounted his horse and started for the house.

"Them women coming or something has got Old Heck's goat," Bert remarked to Charley as they climbed on their horses and followed a moment later.

"Something's got it," Charley answered, "he ain't acted natural all day---do you reckon he's sore because Parker took the widow to town?"

"Darned if I know," Bert said doubtfully, "that might be it."

"Well, he's feverish and disagreeable for some reason or other and that's the way people generally get when they're jealous," Charley observed sagely.

"He hadn't ought to be," Bert argued, "it's Parker's day to keep company with Ophelia, and Old Heck and him agreed to split."

"If he's in love he won't split," Charley retorted with conviction, "I never saw two men take turn about loving the same woman yet. It can't be done!"

"The woman wouldn't object, would she?" Bert queried.

"Probably not," Charley replied, "at least not as long as double doses of affection was coming her way. From what I've heard most of 'em sort of enjoy having as many men make love to 'em as possible, but---" he paused.

"But what?"

"They kick if a man loves several women at once!" was the sophisticated reply. "But as far as that's concerned," he continued, speaking as a man wise in the ways of the world, "men and women ain't much different in that respect. When it comes to loving, both sides are plumb willing to divide up 'a-going' but want it to be clean exclusive when it comes to 'coming!'"

"It's funny, ain't it?" Bert commented.

"No, it ain't funny," Charley declared. "It's just natural---"

"Maybe Parker and Old Heck will have a fight about Ophelia," Bert suggested hopefully. "Which do you suppose would lick?"

"It's hard telling," Charley said thoughtfully. "Old Heck's the heaviest, but Parker's pretty active."

"Well, it sure does seem like wherever women are trouble is, don't it?" Bert observed meditatively.

"Blamed if it don't," Charley agreed; "there's something about them that's plum agitating!"

Old Heck, riding a short distance ahead of the cowboys, was troubled with similar thoughts. He was trying to analyze his own feelings. Years without association with womankind had made him come to regard them with a measure of

indifference and suspicion. He had developed the idea that women existed chiefly for the purpose of disorganizing the morale of the masculine members of the race. He was very sincere in this belief. Yet he was forced, now, to confess that he found something interesting in having a couple of attractive females at the Quarter Circle KT. The situation was not so disagreeable as he had expected. Already he was proud of his kinship to Carolyn June. She was a niece worth while. Ophelia also had proved herself a pleasant surprise. He had pictured her as a strong-minded, assertive, modernized creature who would probably discourse continuously and raspingly about the evils of smoking, profanity, poker, drinking and other natural masculine impulses. Instead, she had proved herself, so far, a perfect lady. Without doubt she was the most sensible widow he had ever met. The thought of Parker's long, intimate ride with her to Eagle Butte made him uncomfortable. It was a darned fool arrangement---that agreement that he and his foreman were to divide time in the entertainment of Ophelia. He could have done it alone just as well as not. Anyway the dual plan was liable to cause confusion. Oh, well, Parker would be out on the beef hunt next week. By rights it ought not start for ten days yet, but---well, it wouldn't hurt to move it up a little. He would do that. Then he remembered the frank admiration the cowboys had shown toward Carolyn June. This suggested complications in that direction.

"Thunderation!" he said aloud, "it's a good thing we fixed it up for just Skinny to make love to her---if we hadn't there'd have been a regular epidemic of bu'sted hearts on this blamed ranch! There wouldn't have been a buckaroo on the place that could have kept from mooning around sentimental---unless it was th' Ramblin' Kid," he added; "that blamed cuss is too independent and indifferent to fall in love with any female!"

At the barn Charley and Bert overtook Old Heck. The three unsaddled and fed their horses and started toward the house for dinner. Sing Pete had seen them coming and immediately pounded the triangle.

"Th' Ramblin' Kid's gone somewhere again," Bert observed as he noticed the Gold Dust maverick alone in the circular corral. "Captain Jack's not with the filly---"

"Yonder th' Ramblin' Kid comes now," Charley said, looking toward the north; "he's been over to the river---what the devil kind of a combination is that?" he exclaimed as he got a better view of the horse coming up the lane. "Him and that girl both are riding Captain Jack."

"Blamed if they ain't," Bert said curiously; "it's a wonder Captain Jack'll let them. But how does that come, anyhow? Where's Skinny? I thought it was his job to ride herd on Carolyn June---"

"It is his job," Old Heck interrupted, "I don't understand---something must have gone wrong," he added excitedly as the stallion with his double burden drew near. "Carolyn June's all wet and she's lost her hat."

Turning his horse toward the house, when he reached the end of the lane and with but a glance at the trio standing at the barn, the Ramblin' Kid rode straight to the back-yard gate. Old Heck and the cowboys hurried across the open space and reached the gate just as Carolyn June rather stiffly dismounted from the little roan. Her hair was disarranged, her riding suit soiled and wet from the sand and water, but her eyes were bright, cheeks flushed, and she showed only a trace of nervousness.

"What's the matter?" Old Heck asked uneasily, "what's happened? Where's Skinny?"

In a few words, while the Ramblin' Kid sat silently on the back of Captain Jack, Carolyn June told of the ride across the river; the meeting with Pedro and the message he brought that the cattle were out and some had been killed by lightning; of sending Skinny with the Mexican to help with the steers; of her return alone toward the ranch, the struggle in the quicksand and the death of the horse she had been riding.

"Poor Old Blue---poor old fellow!" she finished with a little catch in her voice.

Old Heck's cheeks whitened as he listened.

"Good lord," he half-groaned, "you had a close call! It's lucky th' Ramblin' Kid saw you coming toward the upper ford---if he hadn't---you'd never got out! But go on into the house and get some dry clothes on. Boys, we'll have to hurry up and eat dinner and then go help get them steers back. I wish Parker was here---we'll need all the help we can get. You'd better catch up another horse," he continued, speaking to the Ramblin' Kid, "Captain Jack is probably worn out from chasing that Gold Dust maverick last night, and if you ain't too tired yourself, go with us---"

"I ain't too tired," the Ramblin' Kid replied quietly, "I'll go---an' ride Captain Jack---he ain't done up." He took the broncho to the corral, removed the saddle and turned him in with the outlaw mare. After giving the horses fresh hay---there was water in the corral, supplied by a small ditch that was fed from the larger irrigation canal and which ran under one side of the fence---he joined the others at dinner.

An hour later Old Heck, Bert, Charley and the Ramblin' Kid rode away from the ranch to help Chuck, Skinny and Pedro round up and return to the big pasture the cattle that had broken out and were rushing toward their old range on the Purgatory.

Carolyn June was left alone with Sing Pete, the Chinese cook at the Quarter Circle KT. She still felt somewhat shaken from her experience of the morning, although a bath, clean dry clothing and the meal had refreshed her considerably. She carried a chair to the front porch, thinking to spend the afternoon resting. The events of the day raced in review through her mind. It did not seem possible so much could have happened in so short a time. Only yesterday had Ophelia and she arrived at the ranch. Already she had the feeling that they both were fixtures, and had been indefinitely, at the Quarter Circle KT. The elemental atmosphere of the range country had completely enveloped her, seemed to have absorbed her, and made her a part of it. Some way she rather delighted in this sensation of permanency. Her rescue by the Ramblin' Kid and the close view she had been able to get of his impulses made her thrill with a queer mixture of admiration and pity for him even while his brutal answer when she had apologized for her harsh words still echoed in her mind.

"Gracious," she thought with a whimsical smile, "things move fast in this western country!"

She had seen, already, that both her Uncle Josiah and Parker were yielding to the charms of Ophelia. The fancy made her chuckle. She remembered Skinny's too rapidly developing tenderness toward herself. "Poor fellow," she murmured, slowly shaking her head, "I wish he wouldn't! But I suppose he can't help it---I wonder why men are always falling in love with me, anyhow? I'm sure I don't try to make them! I never saw one yet I really wanted to care---" she stopped suddenly while a warm flush spread over her body as the Ramblin' Kid was imaged rather vividly in her mind. "Nonsense!" she said aloud with a soft, throaty laugh. "Carolyn June, you are getting silly!"

She sprang up and went into the house.

"Sing Pete," she said, stepping into the kitchen, "may I have some sugar---I'd like the lumpy kind if you have it?"

"Sure! You have him sugal---how muchee you want?" as he held out to her a tin containing squares of the desired article.

"Oh, enough to win a heart!" Carolyn June answered laughing, at the same time taking a handful from the can.

"You eat him?" Sing Pete asked with a grin.

"No," she replied, "I feed it to broncho---–to Gold Dust maverick. Some folks sprinkle salt on bird's tail to catch him---–I put sugar on horse's tongue to make him love me---–"

"Lamblin' Kid, he do that. Allee time him gettee sugal for Clap'n Jack!"

"Feeds 'Clap'n Jack' sugar, does he?" Carolyn June said pensively. "Captain Jack's a nice little broncho," she added, "he deserves sugar." She paused a moment. "'Lamblin' Kid's' a funny fellow, don't you think so, Sing Pete?" she finished idly.

"Not funny---–him dangelous!" the Chinaman replied earnestly. "He gettee velly mad 'cause I puttee butter in can so cat catchee his head in an' go lound an' lound---–buckee like a bloncho---–havee lots a good time! He not talkee much, Lamblin' Kid don't---–just dangelous---–that's all!"

Carolyn June felt sudden interest.

"When did he get mad about the cat?" she asked quietly.

"Allee same to-day---–when you an' Skinny go 'way. Lamblin' Kid cussee me lot---–tellee me not do him any more. Him dangelous! I not do him next time!" Sing Pete explained seriously.

"You are wise, Sing Pete," Carolyn June laughed as she left the kitchen by the back door and started toward the corral where the Gold Dust maverick was restlessly pacing about. "Don't do it any more! 'Lamblin' Kid' is 'dangelous'---–dangerous in ways that you don't understand!" she finished softly, her eyes lit with a strange light and her heart elated and beating quickly because of what the Chinese cook had told her.

The outlaw filly leaped to the far side of the corral and stood trembling, her head up and breath coming in whistling snorts of defiance and fear, as Carolyn June opened the gate and stepped boldly inside. Apparently paying no attention to the frightened horse, the girl walked to the center of the corral and facing the mare leaned her back against the snubbing post. Both stood perfectly still while the eyes of each appraised the other.

After a time the filly seemed to relax and she slowly lowered her head, yet watching, alertly, the motionless figure of Carolyn June. The girl talked to the horse, her words gentle, her voice soothing and low. The Gold Dust maverick became quieter still. Presently she circled the corral, trotting swiftly and crowding closely against the fence. Carolyn June turned, keeping her eyes always on the broncho, and continued the quiet pleading of her voice. It was an hour before the filly shyly and cautiously came up to the girl---–before curiosity mastered her fear. Carolyn June held out her hand and the outlaw nosed it timidly, ready instantly to spring away. A lump of sugar was pressed into the Gold Dust maverick's mouth---–she drew back, working the morsel about with her tongue and lips and finally spitting it out. Several times this was repeated. At last the beautiful creature tasted the sugar and greedily ate the lumps, permitting Carolyn June gently to stroke the velvety muzzle. Then the girl's hand crept higher and higher on the horse's neck and after a little an arm was slipped over the filly's neck.

"You darling!" Carolyn June breathed softly, "I love you! I wonder what the Ramblin' Kid would say if he knew I was stealing your heart?" she added demurely as she laid her face against the silky mane of the mare.

She remained at the corral until the afternoon was nearly gone. The poplars along the front-yard fence were beginning to throw their shadows across the corral. When at last Carolyn June started to return to the house the filly followed her to

the gate of the corral and whinnied a little protest against her going.

"I don't believe you are a bit mean," the girl said as she looked back affectionately at the nervous, high-strung animal; "you are just lonely and want to be loved---and understood---that is all, and I doubt if you'd buck a single buck if I rode you right this minute!"

As she reached the gate the Clagstone "Six" glided quietly down the grade from the bench and a moment later Ophelia and Parker joined Carolyn June on the porch. The widow's cheeks were glowing and Parker looked embarrassed and rather upset. His arms were full of bundles.

"Have a good time?" Carolyn June greeted them.

"Fine," Ophelia replied, "spent oodles of money shopping, saw the minister's wife, talked with the editor of the paper and we are going to organize a Chapter---I think we shall call it 'The Amazons of Eagle Butte.'"

"Great," Carolyn June laughed, "you are a hustler, Ophelia! Uncle Josiah will have a fit. Does Parker know?"

"Yes," the widow answered, her eyes twinkling, as she looked at the sweating foreman of the Quarter Circle KT. "I told him all about it and he is going to give us his moral support."

"Where is Skinny?" Parker interrupted hastily, looking more uneasy and foolish than ever; "why ain't he here?"

Carolyn June told of the happenings of the morning.

"My dear, my dear!" Ophelia cried, shuddering when she heard of Carolyn June's narrow escape from the quicksand. "You must never cross that terrible river again! It's too horrible to think about!"

"It was just 'experience,'" Carolyn June said lightly. "I don't mind it a bit now that it is over. Of course," she added seriously, "I feel badly about Old Blue---and losing Parker's saddle."

"Don't worry about the saddle, I can get new riding gear lots easier than Old Heck could have got another niece!"

"Carolyn June needs a saddle of her own," Ophelia suggested.

"I am going to get one; and then I'll ride the Gold Dust maverick!"

"I doubt if th' Ramblin' Kid will let you ride the filly," Parker said, "he's funny that way---"

"I think he will," Carolyn June interposed. "I'll steal her if no other way!"

"Maybe he will, but it's doubtful," Parker continued, "but Old Heck is aiming to get you a saddle. He spoke about it this morning when we were getting the car out to go to town---"

"Dear old uncle," Carolyn June said warmly, "I love him already---don't you, Ophelia?"

Parker colored and looked quickly, with a worried expression on his face, at the widow. She flushed also.

"That's personal, my dear," she answered, "and rather abrupt!"

Parker went out to put the Clagstone "Six" in the garage.

"Carolyn June," Ophelia said when they were alone, "I have made a discovery---"

"It is?" questioningly.

"That western Texas is the 'quickest' country in the world!" the widow answered.

"Please explain," Carolyn June said, "although," demurely, with certain memories fresh in her mind, "I fancy I can almost guess---"

"Yesterday," Ophelia continued rather breathlessly, "we arrived at the Quarter Circle KT; last night at the supper table I met Mr. Parker for the first time; ten minutes later he kicked me---accidentally, I think---on the shins; I saw him again at breakfast this morning; to-day we drove to Eagle Butte and this afternoon"---she paused and then with a quick, nervous laugh finished---"he asked me to marry him!"

"Good lord," Carolyn June gasped, "that is---'pronto'---as these cowboys say! 'Quick' with a vengeance! There must be something in this western air that makes them do it!"

"It was all I could do this morning to keep Skinny from---" she started to say, then shifted again to the subject of Parker. "Did he know that you are---"

"National Organizer for the 'Movement,'" Ophelia filled in. "Yes, I had already confessed. I told him as we were driving to town---and the other---the shock---came just after we crossed the bridge when we were returning home!"

"He is a bold, dangerous man!" Carolyn June exclaimed, in mock seriousness, "trying to get ahead of Uncle Josiah!"

"I inferred as much," the widow explained; "he told me that to-morrow would be your uncle's 'day'---whatever he meant by that; the next he, Mr. Parker himself, would be 'around' again. 'Unless Old Heck took some fool notion or other;' before long he would be away on the beef hunt and one can never tell what might happen while one is gone and, well, that's the way he felt about it, so he just said it---"

"And you?"

"Naturally was completely surprised, entirely non-committal, and made no definite agreement!" Ophelia laughed softly.

CHAPTER IX

OLD HECK'S STRATEGY

It was late when Old Heck and the cowboys returned to the ranch. The runaway cattle had been overtaken on the sand-hills beyond the North Springs and it took the entire afternoon to bunch them and work the restless animals back to the Quarter Circle KT, into the big pasture, and repair the fence so it was safe to leave them for the night.

Ophelia, Carolyn June and Parker were in the front room when Old Heck and the hungry cowboys clattered, long after dark, into the kitchen for the supper Sing Pete had kept warm for them.

After the meal Skinny went into the room where Parker and the women were. Old Heck followed and talked for a few moments with Parker about the affairs of the ranch, then joined the cowboys at the bunk-house where they had gone directly after leaving the table. On Skinny's bed Parker had tossed a bundle.

"What in thunder do you reckon Skinny's been buying, now?" Chuck questioned as he picked up the package and examined it curiously. "Blamed if it don't feel like a shirt."

"I'll bet that's what it is," Bert said with a laugh as Old Heck stepped inside the door, "the darn fool has gone and got him a white shirt---"

"Who has?" Old Heck asked, hearing only the latter part of Bert's remark.

"Skinny," Charley answered for Bert, "he's fixing up to make love in style---"

"Aw, the blamed idiot," Old Heck grunted, then glancing over toward Parker's bed: "---Did you notice whether Parker got him one, too, or not?"

Before the question was answered Parker and Skinny appeared at the bunk-house door.

"What's the matter?" Chuck said, still holding the bundle in his hand, "---ain't it too early for lovers to bu'st up for the night? Or did the widow and Carolyn June blow out the lights on you---"

"Forget it, you danged fool!" Skinny said crossly. "Can't you ever get over your dog-goned craziness? They was just tired and went to bed. Give me that package, it's mine and private!" reaching for the bundle.

Chuck, with a laugh, threw it at him. It landed on the Ramblin' Kid's bunk where the latter was lying, his clothing still on, his eyes staring straight up while he smoked a cigarette.

"When are you going to ride the Gold Dust maverick?" Skinny asked as he picked up the package.

For a moment the Ramblin' Kid did not answer. Then, without changing his position, replied:

"I don't know as I'll ever ride her. Maybe I'll turn her loose again on th' range."

"What did you catch her for?" Bert queried. "Don't you want her?"

"I caught her, 'cause I wanted to," the Ramblin' Kid answered, "but that ain't no sign I intend to keep her. Hell, what's the use?" he finished indifferently.

"If you want to sell her," Old Heck said, "I'll buy her."

"She ain't for sale," the Ramblin' Kid answered shortly, "not to anybody."

"She would be a thunderin' sight better off if she was used."

"Would she?" the Ramblin' Kid questioned dully. "I ain't so sure about that."

"Of course she would," Old Heck insisted, "she'd be fed regular and---"

"An' be mauled around by some darned human!" the Ramblin' Kid interrupted with sudden vehemence. "If I was a horse," he continued, speaking passionately while his black eyes burned with the spirit of rebellion, "I'd rather be a short-grass cay-use nippin' th' scatterin' feed on th' north hills an' be free to snort an' raise hell when I blamed please than have my belly stuffed with alfalfa hay three times a day an' have to gnaw th' iron of some damned man's bit in my mouth or carry his saddle on my back!"

Silence followed the outburst.

Old Heck and the cowboys knew the Ramblin' Kid was in one of his "moods," and experience had taught them that at such times argument was neither discreet nor safe. The thing they did not know was that his heart was torn by memory of the agony of Old Blue in the quicksand and his mind tortured by the picture of dumb suffering a bullet from his own gun had, that morning, mercifully ended.

After a time he spoke again, more quietly and with a note of weariness in his voice:

"Oh, well, I reckon I'll keep th' filly. In a day of two, when she gets rested up a little, I'll ride her,"

"You ought to break her for Carolyn June," Skinny suggested.

"Had I?" the Ramblin' Kid said with a queer laugh---it was just the thought that was in his mind and against which he was struggling. "That's a bright idea! Maybe I'll study about it an' take a notion to do it. If I do she can ride th' maverick When you an' her go on your honeymoon---"

"What's a honeymoon?" Skinny queried innocently.

"It's what two people take when they first get married; go off somewhere by themselves---like they was locoed---to find out how bad they got stung!" the Ramblin' Kid laughingly answered.

"We'd better all go to bed," Old Heck said; "it's late and we have to get up early in the morning. Parker, you and some of the boys will have to go skin them dead steers---we've got to save the hides at least."

"Old Heck wants to go to sleep so he can dream about the widow," Chuck snickered, "it's his turn again to-morrow to love her---"

"How did she act to-day, Parker?" Bert broke in; "was she pretty affectionate?"

"Aw, shut up! Ain't you got any respect for anything---"

"I'll bet he proposed to her and she throwed him down," Chuck hazarded, not realizing how nearly he had come to guessing the truth.

Parker looked angrily at Chuck, then his cheeks grew red, he bent over and began tugging at his boots in an effort to hide the tell-tale confusion in his eyes.

Old Heck furtively studied the face of his foreman.

"Or else she confessed to being a Bolshevik or local-optionist or something and the news broke his heart," Charley volunteered, joining in the baiting of the range-boss.

"She didn't neither confess," Parker denied hastily, aggravated into a reply, "she ain't either one of them! She's an 'Organizer---'"

Dead silence greeted this sudden announcement. Every eye was turned in astonishment on Parker while Old Heck and the boys awaited further explanation. Parker offered no additional information.

"She's a what?" Old Heck finally managed to whisper, leaning toward Parker, while a look of fear and incredulity spread over his face.

Parker noticed the anguish in Old Heck's eyes and a sudden new look of cunning came into his own.

"An 'Organizer' I said," he repeated impressively, "she's an 'Organizer' for some kind of 'Movement' or other---"

"A dis-organizer, you'd better say!" Chuck laughed uncertainly, "judging from the way she's got you and Old Heck stampeding already!"

"Great guns!" Old Heck half groaned, "what---what sort of a---a---'Movement' did she say it was, anyhow?"

"Swiss, probably!" came in a chuckling undertone from the direction of the Ramblin' Kid's bed. "Hell, what's the difference?"

"She said it was connected someway with 'feminine obligations and woman's opportunity,'" Parker answered, ignoring the frivolous interruptions.

"I know what she is!" Charley exclaimed, "---it's just what I expected! She's one of these self-starting female suffragettes! That's what she is. I knowed she was too gentle acting to be harmless!"

"She just had to break loose sooner or later," Bert said in an awed voice.

"My Gawd!" Old Heck murmured hopelessly. "Holy gosh a'mighty!"

The owner of the Quarter Circle KT was really shocked and worried. He had surrendered quickly to his first impression concerning the widow. The original meeting at Eagle Butte, when she and Carolyn June appeared as visions of feminine loveliness, as contrasted with the homely cook and her daughter whom he and Skinny had mistaken for, and feared were, the Quarter Circle KT's prospective guests, had caused a psychic effect on his feelings toward Ophelia. The sense of relief that came when he found that the cook was not Ophelia, together with the widow's unexpected graciousness, had instantly disarmed his suspicions and, metaphorically speaking, hurled his heart into her lap. He had found the widow charming, interesting, very feminine, and already dreams had shaped themselves in his mind. The sudden revelation that Parker had made brought tremendous disappointment. Ophelia had not shown the least indication of obnoxious strong-mindedness or that disagreeable intellectuality which Old Heck firmly believed was a necessary attribute of all women who participated in politics or "movements."

Ophelia was an "Organizer"! It was unbelievable! The thought gave him a sickening feeling at the pit of his stomach and actually made his head ache.

Old Heck's first impulse, when Parker made the startling announcement, was to assert his authority as boss of the outfit and annul the every-other-day arrangement whereby he and his foreman were to share and share alike in the widow's society. He would let Parker do it all---have her all of the time! He wouldn't take any chances! On second thought he

decided to wait at least another day. Besides, it was against his principles, contrary to the ethics of the range, to back up on a bargain and he never asked an employee to do a thing he hadn't the courage to do himself. He would stick it out, come what may, and see the thing through to a finish. However, there was still a means of escape. If Ophelia developed any really serious suffragette tendencies during the next day or two he would go on the beef hunt himself and let Parker remain at the ranch!

When finally he went to sleep Ophelia was still on his mind. The first thought that came to him when he awakened the next morning was the sickening news Parker had brought.

Old Heck and the cowboys were silent and had about them an air of depression when they filed into the kitchen for breakfast.

Each cast furtive, curious glances at Ophelia. The information that she was an "Organizer"---–presumably for a "Movement" involving woman's political rights---–caused them to view her with a kind of reverential awe and fear. The widow and Carolyn June, apparently, were wholly unconscious of the thoughts in the minds of the men. Both women were as innocent-looking and attractive as ever---–matching with their early morning freshness the bowl of roses Carolyn June, before the call to breakfast, had gathered and placed on the table.

The Ramblin' Kid sat at the right of Carolyn June. It was the first time they had met at the table. He said nothing and seemingly was lost in thought. When they had entered the kitchen Carolyn June and he had spoken and for a moment he looked into her eyes with an expression that caused her own to drop and the warm blood to rush over her throat and face. She had felt that same sensation of "soul-nakedness" she experienced when she looked into his eyes that first time when she was at the circular corral and he was lying under the shed. Neither spoke of the incidents of the previous day.

The other cowboys and Old Heck studied Ophelia with a sort of fascination, casting shy upward glances at her from over their plates.

Parker and the Ramblin' Kid only, were at ease and undisturbed.

"You wouldn't think she was one by looking at her, would you?" Chuck said in an undertone to Charley.

"Some of them's so blamed slick they can't hide it."

"I reckon that's right," Chuck whispered back, "it's an awful jolt to Old Heck, ain't it?"

"Yes, he's taking it pretty hard," Charley mumbled.

"Her forehead does bulge out a good deal in front, when you come to look at it, don't it?" Chuck observed under his breath.

"Quite a lot," Charley answered in the same tone; "that's one indication!"

Parker gazed at the widow with an expression undeniably adoring. Old Heck saw it and straightened up with a look of sudden resolution on his face. If Parker wasn't afraid of Ophelia, by golly, he wouldn't be! The widow had returned the foreman's look with understanding, while more than a trace of tenderness and sympathy was registered in her eyes.

"To-morrow is Sunday," Old Heck announced suddenly with startling distinctness, "and we'll get things in shape to begin the beef round-up on Monday!"

There was immediate interest.

"I'll be darned," the Ramblin' Kid murmured half audibly, "Old Heck is goin' to 'Uriah' Parker!"

"Huh?" Skinny queried across the table.

"Nothin'," the Ramblin' Kid answered with a laugh, "I was just reminded of somethin' I read in a book one time---"

Carolyn June caught the subtle reference to the Bible story of King David's unfortunate romance with another man's "woman" and chuckled.

"Ain't you starting the beef hunt too early?" Charley asked.

"I don't know as I am," Old Heck answered doggedly.

"Aw, that'll put us right in the middle of it on the Fourth of July when the Rodeo is going on in Eagle Butte---" Bert began.

"And I ain't going to miss that, either," Chuck interrupted, "that Y-Bar outfit over on the Vermejo took everything in the two-mile sweepstakes last year and they've been bragging about it ever since. They think that Thunderbolt horse of theirs can't be beat. I was going to put Silver Tip in this year. He can put that black in second place---"

"No, he can't," the Ramblin' Kid remarked quietly, "---you'd lose your money. There's only one animal on th' Kiowa range that can outrun that Vermejo horse."

"What animal is that?" Charley asked.

"She's in th' circular corral," the Ramblin' Kid answered laconically.

"The Gold Dust maverick?" Bert questioned.

"That's the one I mean," the Ramblin' Kid replied in a low voice, "for two miles---or five---there ain't nothin' in western Texas, or Mexico either, that can catch her."

"Why don't you take her in when the Rodeo is on and run her in the sweepstakes then?" Chuck asked eagerly. "I ain't caring what Kiowa horse gets the money just so that Y-Bar outfit is taken down a notch or two. Ever since they got that Thunderbolt horse and beat Old Heck's Quicksilver with him they've been crowing over the Quarter Circle KT and I'm getting plumb sick of it---"

"Old Heck lost three thousand dollars on that race!" Bert interrupted rather triumphantly.

"I didn't neither," Old Heck corrected sullenly, "it was only twenty-five hundred!"

"Well, that Vermejo crowd has got a hundred of mine," Chuck said vindictively, "but I don't give a darn for that---I'd be willing to lose twice that much again just to set that Thunderbolt horse of theirs back in second place!"

"Why don't you run the outlaw filly?" Charley asked coaxingly of the Ramblin' Kid.

"Yes, go on and put her in," Skinny urged, "---you ought to!"

The Ramblin' Kid remained silent, seemingly indifferent to the teasing of the others.

Carolyn June leaned over and said, in a voice audible only to him, while her eyes grew mellow with a look that tested his composure to the uttermost but which wrung no sign from him:

"Please, race the maverick---I---want you to---Ramblin' Kid!"

It was the first time she had used his name in speaking directly to him and the tone in which it was spoken made him tremble in spite of himself. For a moment he returned her gaze. Her words and manner were so different that by their very difference they reminded him of what she had called him yesterday---"an ignorant, savage, stupid brute"---when he had refused to interfere with the cat when its head was caught in the can. He started to make a cynical reply. Then he remembered her sympathy for Old Blue, her apology later for the harsh words---anyhow he knew or felt in his heart they were true---and suddenly he seemed to see the pink satin garter he still carried in his pocket. The look that came into his eyes made Carolyn June lower her own. He smiled a whimsical but hopeless smile, as, replying apparently to the pleading of Charley and Skinny, he said, softly, the single word:

"Maybe!"

Old Heck had forgotten the annual Rodeo held in Eagle Butte, for some days each summer, around the Fourth of July. His sudden determination and eagerness to have the beef round-up begin earlier than usual in order to get Parker away from the widow had driven all else but that one idea from his mind. The protests reminded him of his oversight. He had not intended to deprive the cowboys of the opportunity to enjoy the one big event happening yearly in the Kiowa country and which temporarily turned Eagle Butte, for a few days each summer, into a seething metropolis of care-free humanity.

"I think it's a darned shame to spring the beef hunt so it will interfere with the Rodeo," Bert grumbled, "---and us have to be out on the hills wrangling steers while the celebration is going on!"

"I'm not-goin! to be out on th' hills then," the Ramblin' Kid said quietly but with unchangeable finality.

"You can all go to the Rodeo," Old Heck interposed, not feeling just right in his conscience about sending Parker away in advance of the time expected, and wishing to make amends,"---Parker and all of you. You can 'break' the round-up for a few days during the Rodeo and what cattle you've got gathered by then can be turned into the big pasture and held there till it's over. That'll let you all get into Eagle Butte for the Fourth---I'd like to see that blamed Thunderbolt horse beat myself! But we'll start the beef hunt Monday the way I said in the first place---"

"Who's going to cook, this year, on the round-up?" Charley queried. "You can't take the Chink from here this time, can you?"

"I reckon Sing Pete'll have to go along as usual," Old Heck answered; "it'll make it a little unhandy at the ranch, but---"

"Ophelia and I can 'batch' while you are gone," Carolyn June suggested. "We won't mind being alone and it will be fun to cook our own meals."

"We will enjoy it," Ophelia added agreeably.

"You ain't going to be alone," Old Heck said; "Skinny and me will be here. When it comes to the cooking maybe between the four of us we can get along some way!"

"Well, if the round-up's got to start Monday," Parker declared sullenly as they left the table, "I'll have to go down to town again to-day and get me a new saddle. Mine was on Old Blue."

"I'll go with you," Old Heck said in a conciliatory way. "Charley and the other boys can be working on them dead steers till we get back. We'll go in the car and ought to make the round-trip by noon."

CHAPTER X

FIXING FIXERS

The widow and Carolyn June were alone at the house. Old Heck and Parker went immediately from the breakfast table to the garage to get the car out to go to Eagle Butte. The cowboys were at the barn preparing to begin the day's work. Skinny had excused himself, ostensibly to attend to some ranch chores, but in reality to get away to the bunk-house and "fix up" for the day's courtship of Carolyn June. He planned, when the cowboys were gone, to put on the white shirt Parker brought, yesterday, from Eagle Butte.

"Ophelia," Carolyn June said mysteriously as they stepped out on the front porch and filled their lungs with the clean air of the morning, "you made a 'discovery' yesterday, I believe?" pausing questioningly.

"Yes," the widow smiled, recalling their conversation relative to Parker's abrupt proposal of marriage.

"To-day," Carolyn June continued impressively, "it is my turn---–I have made one!"

"And it is?"

"You and I have been 'framed!'" was the answer spoken solemnly yet scarcely louder than a whisper, while the brown eyes of Carolyn June sparkled with a mixture of suppressed anger, merriment and indignation.

"Framed?" the widow repeated inquiringly, "just what does 'framed' mean, my dear?"

"Framed means," Carolyn June replied wisely, "'tricked,' 'jobbed,' 'jinxed,' 'fixed,' or whatever it is people do to people when they scheme to do something to them without the ones to whom they are doing it knowing how it is done!"

"Exceedingly lucid, my love," the widow laughed, "but you are so agonizingly fond of suspense---–"

"Come inside," Carolyn June said as she led the way into the house, "and in a dark corner---–no, that would be too near to the walls and their proverbial 'ears,' in the center of the room is better---–I will expose the whole diabolical plot!"

At the end of the reading table they stopped and faced each other.

"And now?" Ophelia said, expectantly.

"And now," Carolyn June repeated, her voice low and carefully guarded. "Listen: Before Ophelia Cobb and Carolyn June Dixon ever arrived at this Quarter Circle KT their 'lovers' were already picked out for them---–officially chosen, delegated, appointed, foreordained and everything! The 'arrangements' had all been made---–"

"I don't understand," the widow said, bewildered by the rapid flow of legal-sounding words.

"Nor did I at first," Carolyn June went on, "but I have figured it all out! I have 'discovered' what all this mysterious hinting about 'arrangements,' 'the agreement,' 'Old Heck's day,' 'Parker's time,' 'Skinny's job,' and so forth means! I have studied it out. Why is Skinny Rawlins thrown into my lap as my 'regular' lover? It's his 'job'---that is why! And why the day-and-day-about courting of yourself by Uncle Josiah and Parker? It is the 'agreement'---the one is to have you one day and the other the next! Before we came some such arrangement was fixed up. I am sure of it---"

"Impossible," Ophelia protested, "preposterous!"

"Outrageous!" Carolyn June added vehemently, "but truth just the same! To start with they didn't want us to come. That telegram lying about them all having the smallpox proved as much. We were, for some reason or other, considered 'afflictions,' Why, I don't know. I guess they thought we were a pair of female vampires or something and had to be disposed of in advance to prevent our stirring things up and causing a lot of murders or suicides or duels on the Quarter Circle KT!"

"I can't believe it," Ophelia muttered as if stunned. "Why, that would be 'dealing' with us just as though we were cattle!"

"That's it!" Carolyn June exclaimed vindictively, her auger for the moment getting the better of her sense of the ridiculous, "they 'dealt' in us! More than likely they played poker to decide how to divide us up---to see who should love you and which should love me! As if the heart of a woman can be made to run in a groove cut to order by the hand of any masculine---insect!" she finished, thoughtless of the incongruous metaphor.

"Then Skinny and your Uncle Josiah," the widow murmured, "and Parker---are---are---pretending?"

"No," Carolyn June answered, "they started out 'pretending,' but they've stepped into their own trap! They are painfully serious now---they are 'intending!'"

"What shall we do about it?" Ophelia asked helplessly.

"We ought to assassinate them!" Carolyn June snapped, then laughed as the absurdity of the situation dawned upon her and her sense of humor overcame the moment of anger and indignation. "I have it---I've got it! We will Vamp' them in dead earnest! We'll fix the 'fixers,' we'll frame the 'framers'!"

"But how?" doubtfully.

"From now on," Carolyn June replied decisively, "I am going to flirt, individually and collectively---desperately and wickedly---with the whole male population of this ranch! We'll show them what premeditated love-making really is! When it comes to Uncle Josiah and, well, possibly Parker, you will have to take care of that giddy pair yourself and, incidentally, you might work some on Charley Saunders," mentioning the oldest of the cowboys. "I'll just flicker an eyelid occasionally at Parker, unless you object?"

"Not in the least," Ophelia answered, blushing a trifle.

"Well, then, we will make it a free-for-all," Carolyn June said, "and---"

"How about the Ramblin' Kid?" the widow interrupted, "do you think he is one of the conspirators---is in on the---the---'frame-up?' Is he also to be a 'Victim'?"

Carolyn June colored the least bit, paused a moment before she replied, then said rather stiffly:

"He---yes, he is probably having more fun watching us being 'officially' made love to than any other one of the entire bunch. The Ramblin' Kid will have to take his medicine along with the rest! Every man-thing on the Quarter Circle KT---eliminating Sing Pete from that classification ---is my meat!"

"When does the slaughter begin?" Ophelia laughed.

"Right now!" Carolyn June answered. "War is declared---"

She stopped suddenly as a step sounded on the porch and a moment later Skinny entered the room. He was painfully "dressed up." The instant Old Heck and Parker, in the Clagstone "Six," started for Eagle Butte and the cowboys disappeared down the lane in the direction of the big pasture, Skinny struggled into the white shirt. He planned to try its effect on Carolyn June while the others were away. If it did not produce results he would slip back to the bunk-house before they returned and change again to his normal dress.

When Skinny stepped into the room he was fully conscious of his unusual appearance. The morning was warm and he had not put on a coat. The shirt billowed over his shoulders, arms and chest in a snowy cloud. It seemed impossible to Skinny that anything in all the world could be so vividly, persistently white as the cloth that literally enveloped the upper half of his body. It actually gleamed. The sleeves of the shirt were too long. A pair of sky-blue, rosette-fastened, satin ribbon sleeve-holders above his elbows kept the cuffs from slipping over his hands. Parker had been unable to get the purple necktie and had brought, instead, one that was a solid Shamrock green. Skinny swore when he saw the tie, but decided to wear it anyhow. Parker had explained by saying he had forgotten the errand until he was starting from town and then stepped into Old Leon's---a cheap general store in Eagle Butte---and purchased the outfit from the Jew. That accounted also for the surplus length of sleeve---the shirt was a size and a half larger than Skinny had ordered and for which Parker declared positively he had asked. Eternal hatred for all Hebrews was born in Skinny's heart the moment he saw the layout. But, well, it was there; he was anxious to see if a white shirt would have any effect, and he would wear it anyway.

Skinny knew instantly that he made an impression on Carolyn June.

She looked at him once and was speechless!

"By gosh," he said to himself, "Chuck was right! It sure does beat hell how clothes affect a woman!"

Carolyn June, unquestionably, was overcome. The surprise had been too much for her. He had knocked her cold! The shirt had done the work! She bit nervously at the nail of her thumb, pressed desperately against her teeth. Her whole body trembled. Her face flamed scarlet. Skinny saw her agitation and resolved at that moment that he would never again be without a white shirt!

Ophelia also was visibly affected. The widow gave one look at Skinny, glanced quickly at Carolyn June, then, with her hands clasped tightly against her breast, she leaned weakly against the table and chewed at her underlip. She started to speak and stopped.

"Well, I---I---got back!" Skinny said, breaking the spell while he grinned somewhat sheepishly and yet with an air of complete satisfaction.

"I---I---see you---did!" Carolyn June choked hysterically.

"I was gone longer than I aimed to be," Skinny continued, rapidly gaining confidence as he saw the confusion of the women; "after I got the chores done I concluded to fix up a little. This is the first time I ever wore this shirt," he went on, feeling that a bit of explanation was entirely proper and would probably help in restoring the composure of Carolyn June and the widow. "Parker just brought it out yesterday and it was a good deal of trouble to make the collar work right. It seemed like it was pretty stiff or something. Generally speaking the whole outfit's bigger than it really ought to be, but maybe it'll shrink up some when it's washed," he finished in a casual matter-of-fact way.

"It---it---is wonderful!" Carolyn June stammered, "it is---I don't think I ever saw one that was---was---whiter---"

"It looked that way to me," Skinny interrupted as if glad some one else had noticed a peculiarity of the garment that already had troubled him somewhat, "I thought it was uncommonly white!"

"Perhaps it just seems that way because we are not used to it," Ophelia suggested sympathetically.

"That's it!" Carolyn June exclaimed feverishly, "it is because we are not used to it---it will be perfectly all right when we have looked at it a little more!"

Skinny decided he would risk the gauntlet of comment from Parker, Old Heck and the cowboys and wear the shirt the rest of the day.

Carolyn June was really sorry for Skinny, but---she needed air---she felt she must have it.

"Please," she cried suddenly and with, an effort, "excuse me! I---I---have something I wish to do! You," speaking to Skinny, "and Ophelia stay here and visit each other a while!"

Without waiting for an answer she stepped quickly into the kitchen, asked Sing Pete for a handful of sugar and hurried out to the circular corral.

"Oh, Skinny, Skinny, you are so funny," she laughed aloud as she went through the back-yard gate. "It breaks my heart to break your heart---but you are one of the 'fixers' and you've got to be 'fixed.'"

The Gold Dust maverick at first was shy when Carolyn June opened the gate and entered the corral. After a few moments she recognized the girl and was soon eating the sugar from the hand of Carolyn June. Before the supply was exhausted the friendship and confidence of the two, begun yesterday, was firmly reestablished. The maverick allowed Carolyn June to swing her weight from the glossy withers, to clasp her arms tightly about the trim, clean-built neck, and when, after an hour, the girl started toward the house, the outlaw mare protested so eagerly against being left alone that she turned back to the corral and leaning against the fence stroked the soft muzzle thrust between the bars.

Carolyn June was cooing endearing terms to the filly and playing with the quivering underlip when she heard a horse galloping swiftly up the lane and past the barn. Instinctively she stepped back and turned just as the Ramblin' Kid, riding Captain Jack, wheeled around the end of the shed near the corral.

His sudden appearance surprised her. She had thought he was with the cowboys over at the upland pasture helping skin the steers killed by the lightning.

When they left the ranch the Ramblin' Kid had ridden away with Charley and the others, but not with any intention of going to the big pasture. Where the road turned toward the lower ford he held Captain Jack to the left.

"Ain't you going with us," Charley Saunders asked, "and help skin them steers?"

"No," the Ramblin' Kid replied quietly. "I ain't. I've got something else to do. Anyhow, I ain't a butcher---–I work with live cattle, not dead ones!" he concluded as Captain Jack continued in the direction of the upper crossing.

"He's the independentest darn' cuss I ever saw!" Charley remarked to his companions as the Ramblin' Kid disappeared. "It's a wonder Old Heck don't fire him."

"He can't," Bert laughed. "Th' Ramblin' Kid don't stay at the Quarter Circle KT by the grace of Old Heck, but by the choice of th' Ramblin' Kid! Anyhow, he's too good with horses---–" His voice trailed away to a low mutter as they turned in among the willows and cottonwood trees along the bank of the Cimarron.

At the upper crossing on almost the same spot where he had lifted Carolyn June from the quicksand to the solid ground of the meadow land, the Ramblin' Kid stopped Captain Jack. He looked out over the placid, unbroken surface of the sand-bar and saw the end of the broken rope coiled loosely where Old Blue had been drawn under. A few yards away the white felt hat Carolyn June had tossed to one side, to be a mute and pathetic messenger of her fate, when she thought death was certain, still rested on the smooth surface of the sand. It was to get the hat the Ramblin' Kid had come again to the scene of yesterday's tragedy. He had seen it lying there when Carolyn June and he rode away on Captain Jack and thought then of trying to get it, but the part of the broken rope attached to his saddle was too short to reach it and it was impossible to secure it in any other way. Chuck had returned the Ramblin' Kid's rope to him yesterday when they were after the runaway steers and it was now on his saddle. He lightly tossed the noose so that it fell circling the object he sought. Gently flicking the rope toward him he tightened the loop about the crown of the hat and drew it to the edge of the quicksand. He picked up the hat, looked curiously at it, remounted Captain Jack, paused a moment and gazed at the treacherous surface beneath which the body of Old Blue was hidden and with a savagely muttered something about "th' damned stuff!" whirled the little stallion and rode rapidly in the direction from which he came.

As Captain Jack galloped along the lane the Ramblin' Kid looked at the hat curiously, turning it first one way and then the other. With a laugh he reached into his pocket and drew out the pink satin garter. An expression of tenderness, followed by a look of deep humility that quickly changed into savage anger, came into his eyes as he looked first at the hat, soiled and dirty, and then at the dainty bit of elastic he held in his hand.

"A swell pair of souvenirs," he said bitterly, "for an 'ign'rant, savage, stupid brute' of a cow-puncher to be packin' around!"

Before reaching the barn the Ramblin' Kid dropped the garter again into his pocket. Rounding the end of the shed he rode Captain Jack directly up to Carolyn June. Dismounting, he left the little roan standing, not troubling to drop the reins over the broncho's head, stepped toward the girl and extended the hat, saying simply and without emotion.

"Here's your hat!"

There was no embarrassment now or humility in his eyes as he looked steadily at Carolyn June. His expression was as cold as if the one to whom he spoke was an utter stranger.

"I---–" Carolyn June hesitated, "oh, I thank you! It was kind of you to think about it and ride back---–back---–there," she involuntarily shuddered when she thought of the upper crossing, "and get it!"

The simple, unexpected thoughtfulness of the deed touched her. It was the natural, instinctive act of a gentleman. She had forgotten the hat. He had not. As she looked at him she felt that, someway, she might have known such a thing was

exactly what he would do.

"You're welcome," he said quietly, starting to turn away.

A spirit of mischief suddenly flared up in her heart. She thought of the pink elastic she had lost and which she believed he was carrying now in his pocket.

"Is the hat all---didn't you---" she intended to say "find something else?" but quickly stopped. The Ramblin' Kid paused and turned again toward Carolyn June. She hesitated in confusion. It had flashed to her mind that if he had the garter he would not lie about it. He would say as much and offer to return it to her. Someway, she did not wish that---she wanted him to keep it, but she did not want him to know that she wanted her garter to be carried by him!

His black eyes looked keenly at her, as if they would force from her lips the thing she evidently dared not say.

"I---I was just getting acquainted with the Gold Dust maverick!" Carolyn June finished lamely with a nervous laugh.

"You want to be careful," the Ramblin' Kid said with the slightest curl of his lips at her obvious shifting of meanings, "she ain't exactly a 'lady's animal' yet. She'll fight. Skinny started to go in th' corral this morning an' had to back up. Th' maverick went at him to kill. She's goin' to be a 'one-man' horse th' same as Captain Jack."

"Perhaps it was because she was afraid of him," Carolyn June suggested.

"Maybe it was because Skinny was afraid of her," the Ramblin' Kid chuckled.

"Aren't you going to ride the filly in that race at Eagle Butte?" she asked suddenly with a hint of coquetry in her eyes and voice.

"Why?" he shot back at her, observing the changed inflection and look.

"I---I---would like you to," Carolyn June murmured demurely as she followed up the feminine method of mastering a man, "it would be fun to see her run!"

"Is that all?" the Ramblin' Kid asked gently and with a peculiar emphasis.

"Isn't that enough?" the girl countered in a tone bordering close to the tender.

The answer was slow in coming.

"Th' Gold Dust maverick will be in th' sweepstakes," the Ramblin' Kid finally said, a note of contempt in his voice. "I'll ride her"---as he jerked the saddle from Captain Jack, turned the stallion into the corral, then started toward the bunk-house, while Carolyn June moved away in the direction of the back-yard gate---"I'll ride her," he repeated, emphasizing strongly the last ten words, "*to beat that Thunderbolt horse from over on th' Vermejo*".

CHAPTER XI

A DANCE AND A RIDE

Old Heck and Parker returned from Eagle Butte before noon. Parker climbed silently from the Clagstone "Six" and lifting out a new saddle went toward the stable. Old Heck carried another---–a beautiful thing, artistically scrolled, the horn and stirrups silver trimmed---–and laid it on the front porch as Carolyn June, Ophelia and Skinny stepped out of the big room.

"It's yours," he said to Carolyn June.

"Oh, you darling old uncle!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around his neck and giving a tight squeeze while she kissed him full on the mouth.

He reddened. "I ain't so darned old!" he laughed as he withdrew from her embrace and, glancing up, caught sight of Skinny in the immaculate shirt. "My Gawd!" he whispered under his breath.

Parker immediately saddled a horse and rode away to join the cowboys at their work. Lunches for the party had been taken with them when they left the ranch in the morning. During the trip to Eagle Butte Old Heck and his foreman had talked but little. There was a feeling of restraint between Parker and him that made each hesitate to start a conversation that would be almost certain to work around to a discussion of Ophelia---–a subject uppermost in the minds of both.

At noon the Ramblin' Kid came to the house for dinner.

He and Skinny occupied their usual places. He looked once at Skinny's shirt, murmured softly and in a tone of infinite disgust and pity, "Hell!" then ate his food in silence. During the meal Carolyn June ignored him, but smiled tenderly and often at Skinny. Old Heck and the widow, at the far end of the table, carried on a low-voiced dialogue.

During the afternoon the Ramblin' Kid remained away from the house. A couple of times, glancing out of the window, Carolyn June saw him at the circular corral petting and caressing Captain Jack or the Gold Dust maverick.

When Sing Pete hammered the iron triangle announcing supper Parker and the cowboys had returned, the hides from the dead steers had been unloaded and the men were ready for the meal.

As Carolyn June and Ophelia went into the kitchen they exchanged a look of understanding. Skinny lagged behind Old Heck. He dreaded the shock of the white shirt on the other cowboys. When he stepped into the room his face flamed scarlet and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He expected merciless, sarcastic chiding---–thinly veiled but cruel. He was disappointed. The cowboys looked at him for a moment, exchanged winks, then sat silently and solemnly down to the table. The presence of the women had saved, for the time being, the suffering Skinny.

Carolyn June distributed tender words and velvety looks impartially among the younger cowboys, while Ophelia alternated sweet nothings between Parker and Old Heck, with an occasional sidelong glance at Charley that brought a heightened color to his sun-browned cheeks.

Chuck sighed dolefully.

"Why so sad?" Carolyn June asked gently, looking with melting sympathy at the pensive cowboy.

"I---–I---–was just thinking of a---–a---–funeral I saw once!" he answered, gazing steadily and with pretended awe at Skinny's white shirt. "Some colors always remind me of funerals or---–or---–weddings!" he explained.

A suppressed snicker circled the table.

"Don't be down-hearted," Carolyn June laughed, "it may not go that far.

"Uncle Josiah," she added suddenly, "Ophelia and I have a wonderful surprise for you and the boys."

Old Heck looked at her without replying while he awaited an explanation.

"We are going to give a dance!" Carolyn June went on.

"A dance?" he repeated incredulously, "when---"

"To-night---in the front room," she hastened to explain, "not a big dance---just a little one for you and the boys. The graphophone will furnish music, there are some good one-step and waltz records---Skinny and I were playing them this afternoon---and every blessed cowboy on the Quarter Circle KT must be there!"

A short silence followed her words, then a chorus of "Well be there!" greeted her.

"In an hour," Carolyn June said, smiling sweetly at the cowboys, as they left the kitchen, "everybody be back at the house. We'll fix the room and have it ready---don't any one bother to 'dress up,'" she added as an afterthought.

"Old Heck's niece acts kind of stampedish, don't she?" Bert remarked as Parker and the cowboys filed out of the back-yard gate toward the bunk-house.

"Yes," Charley answered. "I'm going to shave."

"So am I," said Chuck, as they hurried in the direction of their sleeping quarters.

"Me, too," laughed Bert. "Gee, didn't Skinny shine in that shirt?" as they disappeared inside the building and there was a rush to hunt out razors, brushes and other toilet necessities or clean handkerchiefs and ties.

The Ramblin' Kid alone seemed uninterested. He dropped down on his bed and idly watched the others prepare for the evening's diversion.

"Ain't you going?" Chuck asked him, noticing his indifference.

A short, half-cynical laugh with "Oh, maybe I'll go set on the porch an' listen to th' music!" was the answer.

When Parker and the cowboys reappeared at the house it was plain that all had disobeyed Carolyn June's injunction not to "dress up." Each had paid tribute in some way, by a smooth-scraped face, a dean shirt, a tie or something, to the vanity of his own heart and the desire for the good opinion of either Carolyn June or the widow.

Both women noticed it. They exchanged glances while Carolyn June softly whispered to Ophelia: "Stir them up---it's coming to them!"

The widow smiled understandingly.

Old Heck fidgeted uncomfortably. The situation was entirely beyond his control. By right he and Ophelia ought to be sitting there quietly making love, while Skinny and Carolyn June, in another corner of the room or out on the porch, were doing the same thing. He would just have to await developments.

Parker was elated. Carolyn June's proposal had broken up Old Heck's evening alone with the widow. Perhaps---the thought thrilled the foreman ---Ophelia herself had planned it!

"Skinny can keep the graphophone working," Carolyn June laughed. "Put on a one-step first," she said as he rather grudgingly went to the corner and started the music. "Come on, Bert, we'll dance this one," she cried merrily, as she stepped up to the blushing cowboy and put her hand, with a tender little pressure, on his arm. "It's 'ladies' night,' you know---Ophelia, pick your pardner!"

"Aw---don't you reckon you ought to choose one of the others first?" Bert, considerably embarrassed by the sudden attention, mumbled as he moved with pretended reluctance but secret eagerness out on to the floor.

"I know who I want to dance with!" Carolyn June whispered significantly with another squeeze of his arm while her warm breath fanned his cheek.

For a moment Ophelia stood as if undecided while Old Heck and Parker each tried by their looks to register unconcern, their hearts meanwhile leaping with uncertain expectancy and hope. Suddenly turning from both and going up to Charley, she said softly and with well-feigned shyness:

"I---I---please, won't you dance this one with me?"

"With the most exceeding pleasure!" Charley replied gallantly, arising and reaching out his hands.

Parker and Old Heck gulped their astonishment and disappointment---each swallowing as if he had something in his throat that would not go down---and glared savagely at each other.

Skinny next put on a waltz record. Carolyn June and Chuck swung through its dreamy rhythm while her hair brushed the cowboy's neck and her eyes, half closed, looked alluringly into his. "I---I---could do this forever---with you!" she breathed, accenting the last word and making Chuck want to yell for joy.

At the beginning of the waltz Ophelia paused a moment before Old Heck, glanced demurely at Parker, took a step toward the latter, turned quickly to the first and flooding him with a look of tenderness held out her hands while she spoke the simple entreaty:

"Please!"

Old Heck leaped to his feet, hitched nervously at the belt of his trousers, ran his fingers around the inside of his collar, and, with a look of triumph at Parker, led the widow through the dance. She permitted her body to relax and lean against her partner, dancing with an abandon that not only fired the emotions of Old Heck to fever heat, but was as well like dippers of oil on the flame of the foreman's jealousy.

Parker gritted his teeth and followed Old Heck with a look that meant nothing less than the desire to kill!

As Ophelia and Old Heck, and Carolyn June with Chuck circled the room Skinny leaned weakly against the graphophone. He was tortured agonizingly by the strange action of Carolyn June. He was her lover, her official, absolute lover! Why did she want to go and get things all mixed up like this? It wasn't fair. The other boys were not supposed to make love to her! They had elected him to do it and he was getting along all right till she thought of having this blamed fool dance. He began to doubt the efficacy of the white shirt and frequently drew one of the loose, baggy sleeves---rapidly losing their snowy spotlessness---across his face to rid himself of beads of perspiration.

The waltz was followed by another one-step and Ophelia granted this favor to Parker while Old Heck sat and swore steadily under his breath---regretful that he had not sent the foreman and the cowboys out on the beef hunt a week ago!

Outside, the Ramblin' Kid half-reclined on the edge of the porch. With a cigarette between his teeth, a sneering smile on his lips, he watched, through the open door, the group within. He was convinced now that Carolyn June was utterly frivolous. She danced and flirted with Bert, Chuck, Charley---and even Pedro---one after the other and occasionally Parker. Poor Skinny alone was neglected. She seemed to have forgotten that he existed save when, from time to time, she suggested that he put this or that record on the graphophone. To each of the cowboys she whispered tender little sentiments, gave soulful looks and insinuating smiles---all but caressed them openly. Ophelia did like things to Old Heck, Parker and Charley.

In very truth it was a "slaughter."

It was hot After an hour Carolyn June stepped out on the porch for a breath of air while Skinny Bought in the cabinet for a record she had asked him to play. The Ramblin' Kid straightened up as she came out of the door. He was disgusted, angry, heart-sickened. He had seen enough and was starting to leave.

Carolyn June had noticed the absence of the Ramblin' Kid. She had believed, all evening, he was on the porch and that was the real reason she had come outside. She saw him. "Oh, is.---is---that you, Ramblin' Kid?" she exclaimed as if surprised, and went quickly to where, at the sound of her voice, he had paused.

He did not answer. The light shone full on his face and he knew that she knew---and had known before she spoke---that he was there. His eyes were filled with a look queerly blending scorn, loathing, pity and pain.

"Why---why---don't you come in and dance?" she asked lightly, not certain of his mood.

"I don't want to," he replied coldly: "anyhow---" he added with a sneer and a brutal laugh as he slowly moved away in the darkness, "when I decide to *hug* I'll hug in private!"

Carolyn June started almost as though he had struck her. The taunt was an insult! A flood of anger swept over her. "The brute!" she whispered passionately and with utter contempt in her voice. She stood a moment. Suddenly she remembered the reckless abandon with which she had been dancing and flirting with the cowboys inside the house. Her face flamed scarlet. She looked out into the blackness toward the circular corral. Her expression changed and a pitying smile crossed her lips: "Poor Ramblin' Kid---he just---does not understand!" she murmured and stepped back into the house.

As the Ramblin' Kid passed through the back-yard gate he muttered savagely under his breath: "Playin' with their hearts like marbles---th' damned fools!" He paused a moment and added, as though tired, "Oh, well, I reckon she thinks she has to do it---it's her breed---she was raised that way I guess!"

The snuffling sound of a horse blowing hay-powder or other dust from its nostrils came from the direction of the circular corral. The Ramblin' Kid stopped in his walk and turning went thoughtfully through the darkness toward where Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick were quietly feeding. He leaned against the bars of the corral and looked at the shadowy forms of the two horses standing a little distance away. Captain Jack quit eating and came to the fence.

"God! Little Horse"---the Ramblin' Kid spoke tensely and without repression---"why can't humans be as decent an' honest as you?"

The black dome of night was studded with innumerable stars that gleamed like points of silver sprinkled over a canopy of somber velvet some infinite hand had flung, in a great arch, from rim to rim of a sleeping world. The call of a night bird shrilled softly from the cottonwood trees along the Cimarron. A hint of a breeze swung idly from the west and rustled the leaves in the tops of the poplars in front of the house. Faintly as a distant echo came the wailing strains of a waltz, drifting out from the lighted windows and the open door of the room where Carolyn June and Ophelia, in a spirit of sport and for revenge, juggled the hearts of men afraid of nothing in all the world but the look in a Woman's eyes.

The music tortured the soul of the Ramblin' Kid. It breathed the unfathomable strife of life---of love, longing, hope, despair---almost, yet subtly, elusively, would not tell the eternal "Why?" of all things.

Not heeding time, he stood and listened. The crunching sound made by the Gold Dust maverick, munching at the pile of hay on the ground in the corral, blended with and seemed a queer accompaniment to the melody that came from the scene of revelry up at the house.

The orange disk of a late-rising moon showed above the rim of the sand-hills at the lower end of the valley. The Ramblin' Kid watched it---until it grew into a rounded plate of burnished, glistening silver. The Gold Dust maverick was suddenly flooded with a glare of light as the moonbeams poured over the top of the shed and streamed through the bars of the circular corral. The filly lifted her head.

An impulse to ride---ride---ride, to get away from it all---far out on the wide unpeopled plains where there was nothing above but God, and the unmeasured depths of His heavens, and nothing beneath but the earth and the rhythmic beat of his horse's feet, came over the Ramblin' Kid. Men, and the works of men---their passions, their strifes, their foolishness---and women---women who played with love---he wanted to forget, to leave miles and miles behind.

He started to open the gate, thinking to saddle Captain Jack and obey the impulse of the moment. Carolyn June's words, spoken of the Gold Dust maverick: "It would be fun to see her run!" and uttered lightly and in a spirit of coquetry that morning when she teased him to enter the outlaw filly in the race against the Thunderbolt horse from the Vermejo, came to his mind. The selfishness of the plea maddened him. She cared nothing for the price in effort---the straining muscles, the panting breath---the agony the beautiful mare must pay to defeat the black wonder from the other part of the range. She wanted only to see the maverick run---to coax him to yield and run the filly merely to please the cheap vanity of her sex! No doubt also she counted on entertainment when, to-morrow, he would ride the outlaw for the first time. It would be a kind of show---the battle for mastery between himself and the high-bred untamed mare. The whole bunch---Old Heck, Parker, Ophelia, Carolyn June, the cowboys---yes, even that damned Chink---unquestionably would be crowded about the corral to watch the fear and pain of the maverick as she learned her first hard lesson of servitude to man! They would laugh at her frenzied efforts to throw him.

He would fool them. He would ride the filly to-night!

He went to the shed, slipped his legs into the worn leather chaps, took saddle, bridle, blanket and rope and returned to the corral.

Stepping inside he closed the gate behind him.

Captain Jack came to him and nosed at his shoulder.

"No, Little Man," the Ramblin' Kid said gently, "this ain't your turn. You can go with us though, if you want to!" he laughed.

The Gold Dust maverick stood, half-afraid, at the other side of the corral. She had not yet wholly conquered her dread of him. She did not, however, offer to fight as she had done that morning when Skinny entered the enclosure.

The Ramblin' Kid spoke to the filly and, as she began to move shyly away, with one toss threw the loop over her head. The instant the mare felt the rope she stopped and stood trembling a moment, then came straight up to him. She was "rope-wise." The experience at the North Springs the night he caught her, and when she had, three separate times, been cruelly thrown by this same rope; had taught the Gold Dust maverick the power that lay in those pliant strands.

She flinched from the touch of the blanket. The Ramblin' Kid worked easily, carefully, but in absolute confidence, with her. As he cautiously saddled the mare he talked in a low, drawling monotone, uttering endearing phrases and occasionally slipping a lump of sugar---a supply of which he had got that night from the kitchen---into her mouth. She ate it ravenously.

"Darn, Little One," he laughed, "you sure have got a sweet tooth---you gobble that sugar like an Indian squaw eatin' choc'late candy!"

At last the mare was saddled. Still holding to the rope, the Ramblin' Kid, without trying to get the filly to follow, moved over and opened the gate, giving it a push and swinging it wide. During the performance the Gold Dust maverick stood perfectly still, save for a constant chewing at the iron bit between her teeth.

The Ramblin' Kid went quietly up to her, coiling the slack of the rope as he advanced. Without bothering to tighten the reins, but watching closely the look in the maverick's big brown eyes and the nervous twitching of her ears, he laid one hand on the withers of the outlaw, with the other he grasped the horn of the saddle and slipping his foot in the stirrup swung quickly and lightly on to her back.

For the space of a deep breath the maverick crouched, grew tense in every muscle, slowly arched her back, gathered herself together for a great effort.

A quiet smile curled the lips of the Ramblin' Kid as he looked down on the curving neck of the beautiful creature.

With a tremendous leap the Gold Dust maverick sprang high into the air, lunging forward while all her hoofs were off the ground. Her forefeet came down across the back of Captain Jack---she had all but cleared the little roan. The shock almost threw the stallion to the ground. As he surged from under her the filly slid and sprawled on her shoulder and side. Instantly she was on her feet, the Ramblin' Kid still in the saddle. His spurs had not touched the mare---instead he had been careful not to let their steel points so much as ruffle the golden-chestnut hair of her belly or flank. Only when the outlaw fell had he thrown forward his right leg and hooked the sharp rowels into the strong fiber of the forward cinch. With the left hand he loosely held the reins, giving the maverick her head---the other hand he brushed with a caressing upward movement along her glossy neck.

Twice the Gold Dust maverick circled the corral, plunging, bucking "side-winding," desperately---her nose between her knees, squealing pitifully---as she tried vainly to rid herself of the weight of the Ramblin' Kid.

"Go to it, Baby Girl, go to it!" he chuckled; "you've got to learn! Sooner or later you'll find out it can't be done!" He rode limply, loosely, low in the saddle, and while he made no effort to urge the filly into greater frenzy he did not try in any way to prevent her bucking her hardest in, the futile attempts to hurl him off her back.

The second time the outlaw mare came to the gate she whirled and dashed through the opening, out of the corral, across the open space, past the corner of the front-yard fence and along the road that led up to the bench and toward Eagle

Butte. Captain Jack trotted around the corral once, then followed at a long, swinging gallop.

The noise of the filly bucking inside the corral reached the ears of the dancers in the big room at the house.

"What in thunderation's that commotion?" Old Heck exclaimed, starting up---–he and Ophelia had just finished a two-step and Skinny was winding the graphophone to play his favorite, the alluring *La Paloma*.

There was an instant's pause, then a rush for the door.

Carolyn June reached the porch just in time to see the Gold Dust maverick "hitting the breeze"---–careering madly, wildly pitching as she ran past the opening in front of the house and up the road out on the bench. It was almost as though a phantom horse and rider had passed before her sight.

"Lord! Look at them go!" Charley cried admiringly.

At first the girl had not recognized the outlaw mare or her rider.

"Who---–what---–is it?" she asked Chuck, who was standing beside her.

Bert answered for Chuck. "It's that darn-fool Ramblin' Kid---–he's riding the Gold Dust maverick!" he said. "Ain't that just like the blamed idiot---–to go and ride that filly to-night?"

"Aw, he's liable to do anything," Charley commented, "he's---–"

Before the sentence was finished the beautiful mare and her apparently careless rider, with Captain Jack a hundred yards behind, disappeared over the brink of the bench and in the silence that followed the group on the porch heard only the distant thudding of hoofs beating an ever fainter tattoo through the calm, moonlit night.

Carolyn June went back into the house with conflicting emotions surging through her heart. She believed she knew why the Ramblin' Kid had elected to ride the outlaw filly to-night. But her thoughts she kept to herself.

For an hour longer the dance continued. But not with the spirit of earlier in the evening. The interruption took something of the eagerness to punish Old Heck, Parker and the cowboys, out of the heart of Carolyn June. A bit of doubt that the role she and Ophelia were playing was worthy of true womanhood crept into her mind.

When the widow and Carolyn June were alone Ophelia laughed.

"Whew!" she exclaimed, "that was a strenuous party! I've danced till my feet ache! Do you think our little 'counterplot' was a success?"

"Entirely!" Carolyn June replied with an uncertain chuckle. "Uncle Josiah, Parker and Charley will dream dreams about you and fight duels in their sleep to-night!"

"I think the others---–" the widow started to say, then pausing, finished: "Wasn't it queer the Ramblin' Kid decided to ride that outlaw horse to-night instead of coming to the house to dance?"

"Oh, I don't know," Carolyn June answered indifferently.

"I guess it's as Charley says," Ophelia remarked: "'You can't tell what th' Ramblin' Kid's liable to do'---"

"I suppose not," Carolyn June replied wearily as she went into her room. "Good night!"

"Good night!" Ophelia echoed.

CHAPTER XII

YOU'LL GET YOUR WISH

It was a silent group that gathered in the bunk-house after the dance. Old Heck, Parker, Charley and the other cowboys had been unduly stimulated by the music, the laughter and the bright smiles of Carolyn June and Ophelia. When they stepped out of the house into the cool night these all were left behind. The cow-men quickly sobered down and by the time they reached their sleeping quarters on the faces of all were half-ashamed looks as if they had been playing at a game not quite dignified enough or proper for men of maturity and seriousness.

All were thoughtful and none seemed eager to start conversation.

Skinny was dejected and utterly miserable.

He felt that he had been cruelty treated. Carolyn June had acted all evening as though his only object in living was to stand in the corner and wind up that blamed graphophone, while she openly flirted with the other cowboys. Skinny was grateful to the Ramblin' Kid who, alone of all the cow-punchers, had decency enough to stay away and not interfere with the original agreement. The Ramblin' Kid had some sense and was square. He had realized that any fellow officially elected to make love---especially when he didn't want to do it in the first place---ought to be allowed to go ahead and make it without having a lot of darned buckaroos butting in on the job.

The way the others had acted was a regular disgrace!

Chuck, Bert, Charley and Pedro were nervously happy. In the heart of each was a thrill, caused by the memory of some secret---or what he thought was a secret---manifestation of Carolyn June's interest. Perhaps it was no more than the brushing of a stray whiff of odorous brown hair against a weather-tanned cheek, the pulsing of a warm breath on the side of a muscular neck, a melting look from a pair of luminous eyes, some low-spoken word or the pressure of a hand, but whatever it was, each of the cowboys was reasonably certain he had been singled out for special favors. Charley was doubly blessed. In addition to Carolyn June's seductive advances he had the memory, also, of Ophelia's attentions. His mind was awhirl with the effort to figure out which one, by rights, he ought to consider as a permanent possibility.

Old Heck and Parker were in a quandary.

Neither was sure of his standing with Ophelia although each had reason to believe that he was her favorite. Her interest in Charley added an unexpected and perplexing equation to their problem.

"Gosh," Chuck finally exclaimed, "that dance sure was some blow out!"

"I should say it was!" Bert Agreed emphatically and with a satisfied grin. "But didn't that widow act funny for an 'anti-he' suffragette?"

Old Heck looked up, startled, as if he had been reminded of a disagreeable subject and one he wished to forget.

"Are you plumb positive that she is one, Parker?" Chuck asked.

"I told you what she was," Parker growled, "she's an 'Organizer' for some sort of 'Movement' or other."

"Well, I'll be blamed if her 'movements' to-night showed any 'anti-he' inclinations," Charley interrupted. "She carried on more like a female vampire than one of these advocaters of woman's rights!"

"Aw, shut up and go to bed," Old Heck grunted. "It's too late to start any argument!"

The moon crept across the heavens and was hanging above the shadowy peaks of the Costejo Mountains when the Ramblin' Kid returned to the sleeping Quarter Circle KT, slipped the saddle from the back of the Gold Dust maverick and turned the filly and Captain Jack into the circular corral.

He had ridden the outlaw mare almost to Eagle Butte.

She had learned her lesson. She knew, when he caressed her muzzle and pressed the last lump of sugar into her mouth, before he turned away to the bunk-house, that the Ramblin' Kid was not only her master but her friend as well---–understanding and sympathetic. Never again would she doubt his will or resist the gentle yet firm strength of his hand. From that moment the Gold Dust maverick, like Captain Jack, was a one-man horse, ready to serve, to trust and obey only the Ramblin' Kid.

"You little beauty," he laughed tenderly as he playfully shook the underlip of the filly and started toward the gate, "---–you're a runner---–gee!---–but you're a runner!"

The others were fast asleep when the Ramblin' Kid noiselessly opened the door of the bunk-house, went in, and without undressing, stretched himself on his bed.

Old Heck awakened the cowboys as the sun poured its first slanting rays through the open un-draped window.

The stir aroused the Ramblin' Kid.

He made no move to arise.

"Ain't you going to get up?" Old Heck said garrulously.

"When I damn please!" was the independent reply. "Skinny, tell th' Chink to keep me a cup of hot coffee!"

Old Heck snorted but said no more.

Parker and the cowboys dressed silently, half-moodily. They hardly knew yet how they felt after the excitement of the night before. Skinny started to put on the white shirt, looked at it contemptuously a moment, and with a muttered oath threw it viciously on the bed.

In a few moments the Ramblin' Kid was left alone in the bunk-house. He lay, hands clasped at the back of his head, studying. His eyes were closed, but he was not asleep. Presently he smiled and opened his eyes. He drew the pink satin elastic from his pocket and looked at it. "That's a hell of a thing to be packin'---–wonder why I keep it?" he muttered. It suddenly occurred to him that if he was not at breakfast Carolyn June would think he was afraid or ashamed to meet her. He got up, straightened his disarranged clothes, went to the house and after stopping at the ditch by the fence and

washing his face, walked indifferently into the kitchen and sat down at his regular place. The others already were eating. Carolyn June glanced at him with a meaningless smile and acknowledged, without feeling, his quiet "Good morning!"

The cowboys were nervous. Memory of last night was fresh in their minds. It made them cautious in their talk.

Ophelia and Carolyn June, also, were a bit restrained.

They were not sure but they had started more than it would be easy to stop. The expressions in the eyes of the cowboys paid tribute to the success of the two women's efforts at wholesale heart-wrecking. The child-like acceptance of a simple flirtation as the real thing, by these husky riders of the range, was little less than appalling.

It all but frightened Carolyn June and the widow.

Old Heck saw the worship in the eyes of the cowboys.

"Things sure are in a devil of a mix-up!" he growled to himself.

Skinny was so dejected Carolyn June felt half-guilty and tried to cheer him up. She began talking, in a low voice, directly to the melancholy-looking cowboy.

"To-day---or some time---when the others are away," she said caressingly, "you and I will dance all the dances by ourselves!"

His heart leaped joyously. He was sorry, now, that he had not put on the white shirt. He resolved, after a while, to sneak out to the bunk-house and change.

The confidential talk between Carolyn June and Skinny galled Chuck. He decided to break it up.

"What was your idea in riding the Gold Dust maverick last night?" he said abruptly to the Ramblin' Kid.

There was a general pause for the answer. Carolyn June stopped in the middle of a sentence and looked curiously at the Ramblin' Kid. He took his time to reply.

"Because I wanted to!" was the slow unsatisfactory retort.

"Why didn't you wait till to-day, so the rest of us could see how she acted?" Charley asked.

"What do you think you are"---he started to say---"a bunch of lawyers cross-examinin' a witness?" thought better of it and with a careless laugh answered: "If you're huntin' entertainment, why don't you go up to Eagle Butte to th' picture show? Th' maverick an' me ain't no exhibition!"

"Did she buck?" Charley continued, ignoring the sarcastic remark.

"Some," the Ramblin' Kid drawled.

"What you going to do with the filly while we're out on the beef hunt?" Chuck queried, wishing to keep the conversation general.

"Ride her!" was the laconic reply.

"Ain't you afraid she'll break away from the *caballero* and you'll lose her again?" Charley asked.

"When I ain't usin' her I'll 'neck' her to Captain Jack," the Ramblin' Kid answered patiently, referring to the method of fastening a wild horse to one that is gentle and prevent its running away, by attaching a short length of rope to the neck of each. "I don't believe she'd leave th' stallion anyhow!"

"By golly," Chuck said earnestly and half-pleadingly, "I wish you'd put her against that Y-Bar outfit's Thunderbolt horse in the two-mile sweepstakes this year! It would be---"

"Fun to see her run!" the Ramblin' Kid interrupted, looking up quickly and straight into the eyes of Carolyn June as he finished the contemptuous quotation of her words, spoken the day before at the corral. She flushed, but gazed back at him without flinching. "Well," he continued, "I reckon you'll get your wish---th' maverick is goin' to run against th' Vermejo horse!"

"The Fourth of July is a week from next Wednesday," Charley said calculatingly. "The Rodeo starts on Tuesday, the roping and bucking finals come on Thursday. That makes the big race come Friday---a week from next Friday, ain't it?"

"That's right," Bert concurred. "Th' Ramblin' Kid's got nearly two weeks to get the maverick in shape."

"Nothing will be in shape for anything," Old Heck broke in, getting up from the table, "unless we move around and get things ready to begin the beef round-up to-morrow morning. Some of you boys will have to bring in those saddle horses from across the river. Each one of you can ride your regular 'string' this year"---alluding to the term used to designate the group of several horses used exclusively by each individual rider working on a round-up. "Skinny won't be with you, but you'd better take his horses along for extras. Parker can be getting the grub-wagon in shape---I reckon you'll have to work Old Tom and Baldy on it. Sing Pete ought to be able to handle them."

"Where do we start in?" Charley asked as they went toward the barn.

"Over in the Battle Ridge country," Old Heck answered, "and work everything east of the big pasture first. It'll take just about a week to clean up that side---it's pretty rough riding over there. Then you can finish the west end after the Rodeo is over."

"What all you aiming to gather?" Bert queried.

"Everything above a three-year-old," Old Heck replied in a businesslike way; "pick up the dry cows, too, if they're fat enough. Prices are better than usual and I want to sell pretty close on account of that storm knocking the hay the way it did the other night. There'll be three hundred and fifty or four hundred good beef critters on the east range. You ought to have them bunched and in the big pasture by Saturday night. Then, until the Rodeo is over you can all do what you darn' please---"

"I know what I'm going to do," Chuck laughed.

"What?" Bert asked.

"Draw all my wages, borrow all I can, and make a clean-up on that Y-Bar outfit on the race between the Gold Dust maverick and Thunderbolt!" he exclaimed vindictively.

"Probably there will be some of the rest of us have a little Quarter Circle KT money up on that race, too," Charley insinuated.

"I know blamed well there will be!" Old Heck added earnestly as they scattered to go about their respective employments.

It was a busy Sunday at the Quarter Circle KT. Chuck, Charley and Pedro spent the morning and most of the afternoon getting the saddle horses from across the river. Bert helped Parker and Old Heck about the ranch. Sing Pete baked a supply of light-bread and stocked the grub-wagon with provisions. The Ramblin' Kid volunteered to "ride-line" on the big pasture and see that the Diamond Bar steers had not broken out again. He rode a sorrel colt---one that had had its "first-riding" in the circular corral the day before Carolyn June and Ophelia arrived at the Quarter Circle KT. When he came to the corner of the pasture where the bodies of the cattle, killed by lightning, lay, a flock of buzzards were tearing at the carcasses. As the gorged creatures flapped heavily into the air the young broncho wheeled, and bucking frantically, jolted away from the gruesome scene. The Ramblin' Kid forced the animal to turn about and made him pass, rearing and plunging, among the skinless and already decaying forms. Before sundown the Ramblin' Kid was back at the ranch.

In the afternoon Skinny and Carolyn June went for a ride down the valley. It was her first opportunity to try the new saddle. Skinny was mounted on Old Pie Face and Carolyn June rode Browny, a dependable old cow-horse.

"Gee," Carolyn June remarked as they passed the circular corral. "I'd like to ride the Gold Dust maverick with this outfit!"

"It would be a dandy combination," Skinny said admiringly, "but I doubt if anybody but th' Ramblin' Kid will ever be able to ride the filly. So far, she acts like she's going to be a worse one-man horse than Captain Jack is. She tried to kill me yesterday when I went into the corral!"

"What makes her that way?" Carolyn June asked.

"Blamed if I know," Skinny replied, "some horses are naturally like that. Th' Ramblin' Kid says it ain't in the horse---it's in the human. If the human don't understand the horse the horse won't trust the human and where there ain't trust there's fear and where there's fear there's hate. He's got some funny ideas!"

"Sounds sort of sensible, though, doesn't it?" Carolyn June said musingly.

"Maybe it does," Skinny retorted, "but he goes a little too far with his fool notions sometimes, it seems to me."

"How is that?" Carolyn June questioned.

"Well, for one thing," Skinny replied, "he says any man or woman a horse don't trust ain't a good man or woman for a human to depend on---says they ain't right inside! It looks to me like that's a pretty hard slam on people just because some darned idiot of a broncho won't make up with them!"

Carolyn June leaned back in the saddle and laughed.

"Some 'range philosopher'---this Ramblin' Kid person!" she exclaimed lightly. "Where did he come from and who is he, anyway?"

"Nobody knows," Skinny answered; "he just kind of growed up, here in the Southwest. I've heard that his mother died when he was born and his father was a preacher or something doing missionary work---I reckon that's what you'd call it---among the Mexicans and Indians and got the smallpox while he was nursing them through an epidemic and it killed him, which left th' Ramblin' Kid an orphan when he wasn't much more than a baby. The Mexicans or Indians took care of him till he was old enough to ride and then he began to ramble around and has always kept it up just as if he was hunting for something---"

"How interesting!" Carolyn June exclaimed, "almost like a story!"

"It is kind of unusual," Skinny continued, "of course it may not all be true, but one thing is sure---th' Ramblin' Kid seems to have some sort of fascination for the Greasers and the Indians; they all worship him, and he's a witch when it comes to handling horses!"

"He seems to be," Carolyn June commented thoughtfully.

"Yes," Skinny answered, "look how that Gold Dust maverick has made right up with him---I don't believe she ever will have anything to do with anybody else!"

Carolyn June laughed softly to herself. She did not tell Skinny of her visits to the circular corral and that the outlaw mare already had accepted her as a good friend.

She and Skinny loafed idly as far down the valley as the Narrows, and when Sing Pete sounded the supper gong they were again back at the house.

After the evening meal the cowboys hung around the house for a while until a suggestive look from Old Heck caused them reluctantly to follow him to the bunk-house, leaving Parker and Skinny with Ophelia and Carolyn June.

It was the foreman's last evening with the widow before the beef round-up. She was rather diffident and held him in safe channels of conversation. Skinny and Carolyn June sat on the porch until it was quite dark, then went into the house. She drummed carelessly and lightly on the keys of the piano---her thoughts evidently far away. Parker and Skinny left the house early. At the door the foreman whispered to the widow:

"Don't forget what I spoke about coming out from town!"

Ophelia flushed and murmured, "No, indeed, but---" she did not finish the sentence. She was about to say, "don't build false hopes!"

When Parker and Skinny entered the bunk-house Old Heck and all the cowboys except the Ramblin' Kid were asleep. He was half-reclining on his bed, smoking. At the entrance of Skinny and Parker be got up and without speaking strolled outside and through the darkness toward the circular corral. The night was warm and the stuffy air of the bunk-house, together with the noisy snoring of Old Heck, made him restless. He stood a few moments looking at Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick. Then, moving back into the shed, dropped down and laid with his shoulders and head on his saddle, which was thrown on the ground under the shelter. The side of the building, next to the corral, was open and the Ramblin' Kid could see, from where he was lying, the dark bulks of the two horses at the farther side of the corral.

Ophelia went directly to bed after Skinny and Parker left.

Carolyn June sat for a while in the Morris chair in the large room. She seemed abstracted and in a mood for meditation. The vague history Skinny had given her of the life of the Ramblin' Kid interested her. She thought it explained a good many of his elemental impulses and idiosyncrasies. He was a creature of the plains. In his life among the Indians and Mexicans he had absorbed their stoical ways and almost brutal directness, yet, sometimes he showed a sensitiveness that was utterly impossible for Carolyn June to understand. Her thoughts turned to the Gold Dust maverick. To-morrow Ramblin' Kid would take the filly away for the round-up. She truly loved the beautiful mare. She would slip out, while the others slept, and have one more visit with the splendid creature. Rising, Carolyn June passed out through the kitchen, stopped for a handful of sugar---–she had learned where Sing Pete kept the can---–and bareheaded and without a wrap walked swiftly out to the circular corral.

The Ramblin' Kid heard Carolyn June step up to the gate of the corral and from the heavy shadow in which he lay saw the light dress and instinctively recognized this late visitor to Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick His first impulse was to call out and warn her to keep away from the horses---–that both were dangerous for men to fool with, much less was it safe for a woman to undertake familiarities with them. His next thought was that his sudden appearance would only startle the girl and---–well, cause a lot of useless talk. He remained quiet.

A low trill came from the throat of Carolyn June. The two horses stopped feeding and looked around toward the gate. The bird-like call was repeated. The Ramblin' Kid was astonished to see Captain Jack and the outlaw mare move eagerly in the direction from whence the sound had come. He heard Carolyn June talking to the bronchos in soft endearing tones. After a moment she opened the gate and stepped inside the corral.

"Well, I'll be--!" he breathed inaudibly.

For half an hour Carolyn June petted the little stallion and the Gold Dust maverick. Both animals seemed hungry for her caresses.

"Oh, your darling---–you wonder!" the Ramblin' Kid Heard Carolyn June say, as she gave the maverick's head a tight squeeze just before running lightly back to the house. "I hope you beat that old Y-Bar horse so bad he'll never want to run again! Even if that Ramblin' Kid lover of yours," she added softly, "does think I'm nothing but a silly woman-thing and hates me with all his queer, lonesome heart!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" the Ramblin' Kid exclaimed when she was gone.

He raised himself on one elbow and lay thus for a long time silently thinking.

At last he got up, went to the corral gate, and he himself stepped inside with the horses. He gave Captain Jack's ear a loving twitch, then turned to the Gold Dust maverick. She permitted him, without protest, to fondle her head and neck. His hand lingered long on the silky mane in which, a little while before, Carolyn June had twined her fingers.

"Oh, Queen of th' Range!" he said with a low laugh, unconsciously using the poetical phrase, as he gave the warm cheek of the filly a tender parting pinch before turning away to go to the bunk-house, "we'll whip that devil-horse of th' Vermejo---–we'll show that Thunderbolt runner what hearts that ain't afraid an' nimble hoofs can do!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE ELITE AMUSEMENT PARLOR

An hour after breakfast, on Monday morning, Old Heck, Ophelia, Skinny and Carolyn June Were alone at the Quarter Circle KT. Parker and the cowboys were climbing out on the sand-hills north of the Cimarron, traveling in the direction of Battle Ridge, where the beef hunt was to begin.

The circular corral was empty.

The Ramblin' Kid was riding the Gold Dust maverick. Captain Jack was with the saddle horses which Pedro, the Mexican, had wrangled on ahead of the other riders an hour before.

The filly made no effort to throw the Ramblin' Kid on this her second riding. She seemed perfectly willing to carry the burden on her back. Carolyn June watched the beautiful mare as she stepped lightly and daintily along beside the other horses, and when the group disappeared among the rolling ridges across the river the ranch someway seemed deserted and she felt strangely alone, although Ophelia, Old Heck and Skinny were standing at her side.

Sing Pete followed the riders, jolting along in the grub-wagon, awkwardly driving, with much clucking and pidgin-English, Old Tom and Baldy hitched to the heavy, canvas-covered vehicle with its "box-kitchen" and mess-board protruding gawkily out from the rear.

Old Heck heaved a sigh of relief. There was a feeling of serene peace in his heart, now that Parker and the cowboys were safely away on the round-up. In Skinny's heart the feeling was echoed.

For a week or more they would be able to love Ophelia and Carolyn June without the constant fear of interruption.

Only one thing troubled Old Heck. The widow had not yet exposed her hand in that suffragette movement or whatever it was. He dreaded the form in which it might, sooner or later, break out. But at that he would be glad to have it over. At present he felt as though he were sitting on the edge of a volcano, or above an unexplored blast of dynamite at the bottom of a well. Meanwhile he would have to wait and watch---–and hope for the best.

The week that followed was heaven and hell, mixed together, for Old Heck and Skinny.

The women were lovely and lovable to the last degree, but cautious and tormentingly self-restrained when it came to loving. At the first intimation of dangerous sentimentality on the part of Old Heck the widow would suddenly and without an instant's warning change the subject. When Skinny had been pensive and silent for half an hour or so and would then start, in a halting and quivering voice, to say something, Carolyn June invariably interrupted with a remark about the weather, the Gold Dust maverick, the Ramblin' Kid, Old Heck, Sing Pete, the yellow cat, the coming Rodeo, Ophelia or something else.

They paired on the work of preparing the meals, Carolyn June and Skinny and Ophelia and Old Heck taking shift and shift about in the kitchen. In this way the work was made a joke, with friendly rivalry between the couples in the preparation of tasty dishes.

Old Heck and Skinny surprised the women with their knowledge of cooking. Nor was there the least embarrassment on the part of either when, with one of Sing Pete's aprons tied about his waist, he worked at the range or kitchen table. As a matter of course every cow-man must know something of how to cook a meal and, also, naturally and as a matter of course, Old Heck and Skinny, without the slightest thought that it was "womanish" or beneath the "dignity" of men, peeled potatoes, fried meat, washed dishes or did whatever there was to do.

Indeed each was proud of his skill.

Ophelia herself was clever, particularly at making biscuits and dainty salads.

Carolyn June's sole accomplishment in the art of preparing food was the making of coffee-jelly. This she had learned at college---taught, perhaps, by the other girls during stolen midnight frolics. Probably this, also, was the reason she usually made it the last thing at night before Skinny and Old Heck left to go to the bunk-house. Coffee-jelly was the regular, inevitable, evening meal dessert for the entire week.

"It ain't so very filling," Skinny remarked the first time he tasted the delicate dish, "but it's tender and has a dandy flavor!"

Carolyn June blushed at the compliment.

"It is pretty good," Old Heck agreed, "but these biscuits Ophelia made are just what was needed to set it off!"

The widow smilingly showed her pleasure.

Twice during the week Skinny rode "line" on the big pasture to look after the Diamond Bar steers. Carolyn June accompanied him. Each time she rode Browny, the old cow-horse. On these days Old Heck and Ophelia, in the Clagstone "Six," drove to Eagle Butte. The second trip to town Ophelia asked to be left at the minister's house. Old Heck was to call in an hour and get her. During the hour he slipped into the dentist's and had his teeth cleaned. When the tobacco-blackened tartar was scraped away they were surprisingly white and even. He stopped at the drug store and bought a tooth-brush and a tube of paste.

Ophelia noticed the wonderful improvement in his appearance, guessed the reason, and the thought sent a warm thrill through her body.

"Like a big boy," she laughed to herself, "when he begins to wash his neck and ears!"

"It ain't healthy to have your teeth so dirty," Old Heck explained, coloring and in an apologizing manner, when Skinny discovered him, after supper that evening, carefully scrubbing his molars.

Skinny watched the performance, saw the result, and murmured:

"Guess I'll get me one of them layouts!"

On Friday the quartette went to Eagle Butte, Old Heck driving, with Ophelia beside him, and Carolyn June and Skinny in the rear seat of the Clagstone "Six."

It was on this trip, while Ophelia and Carolyn June were in the Golden Rule doing some shopping, that Old Heck and Skinny strolled into the Elite Amusement Parlor. Lafe Dorsey, owner of the Y-Bar outfit and to whom belonged the black Thunderbolt horse; Newt Johnson, Dave Stover and "Flip" Williams---the latter three cowboys on the big Vermejo ranch---were playing a four-handed game of billiards at one of the tables near the front of the place.

Dorsey noticed the entrance of the pair from the Quarter Circle KT. All were range men and were well known to one another. The Y-Bar owner had been drinking. Boot-leg liquor was obtainable, if one knew how and where, in Eagle Butte.

"Hello, there, Old Heck!" Dorsey greeted them hilariously and with a half-leer. "Howdy, Skinny! How's the Cimarron? Don't reckon you've taught Old Quicksilver to run yet, have you?" with a boisterous laugh as he referred to the race in which Thunderbolt had defeated Old Heck's crack stallion.

The taunt stung Old Heck while it called out a suppressed snicker from the cowboys who were with Dorsey and the loafers in the pool-room. The bull-like guffaw of Mike Sabota, the gorilla-built, half-Greek proprietor of the Amusement Parlor roared out above the ripple of laughter from the others. The racing feud between the Y-Bar and the Quarter Circle KT was well known to all and Sabota himself had cleaned up a neat sum when the black horse from the Vermejo had outstepped the runner from the Quarter Circle KT.

Old Heck reddened at Dorsey's words but replied quietly:

"The Cimarron is middling---–just middlin'. No, we ain't been paying much attention to teaching horses how to run lately. Old Quicksilver's pretty fair. Of course he ain't the best horse in the world but he'll do for cows and general knocking around. Horses are a good deal like men, you know, Dorsey---–there's always one that's a little bit better!"

The Vermejo cow-man colored at the thrust.

"Any of you Quarter Circle KT fellers going in on anything at the Rodeo, this year?" one of the Y-Bar riders asked Skinny before Dorsey could reply.

"Charley said he might go in on the 'bull-dogging' and Bert is figuring some on the bucking events---–but I don't reckon they'll either one enter," Skinny carelessly; "both of them got first money in them entries last year and they ain't caring much. The Mexican," referring to Pedro, "will probably do some roping---–"

"What about you and the Ramblin' Kid?" Flip Williams interrupted, "ain't neither of you going to take part?"

"Probably not," Skinny drawled. "I ain't aiming to, and I don't know what th' Ramblin? Kid is figuring on. He ain't much for showing off. He only rode in the bucking contest last year because after that Cyclone horse killed Dick Stanley everybody said there wasn't any one that could ride him and the blamed little fool just wanted to demonstrate that there was. You never can tell what he'll do, though. He may be intending to go in on something or other."

"Guess you people ain't got anything out there for the two-mile sweepstakes this year, have you?" Dorsey broke in with a sneer. "Old Thunderbolt's too much for them sand-hill jumpers from the Cimarron."

"Oh, I don't know as he is," Old Heck said in a voice emotionless as an Indian's. "The Quarter Circle KT will probably be represented in the big event. It seems to me I heard Chuck mention entering that Silver Tip colt of his and, let's see, I believe th' Ramblin' Kid said something about running a new filly he's been riding some, didn't he, Skinny?"

"Since I come to think of it I believe he did," Skinny answered as if it were a matter without especial interest; "if I remember right he did speak something of it a day or two ago."

"Well, bring 'em on!" Dorsey exclaimed boastfully, "the Y-Bar will take all the money you Kiowa fellers feel like contributing! Old Thunderbolt's as fit as a new rawhide rope and is just aching to rake in another three or four thousand of Quarter Circle KT *dinero* if you people have got the nerve to back your judgment!"

There was a dead hush as the crowd in the pool-room waited for Old Heck's reply to Dorsey's drunken challenge.

"We'll kind of remember that invitation, Dorsey," Old Heck said in tones as hard and smooth and cold as ice, while his gray eyes narrowed and bored the boastful cow-man like points of steel, "we'll sort of bear in mind that suggestion of yours. The Quarter Circle KT will send a horse into the big race that will beat that Thunderbolt critter of yours just three times as bad as he set old Quicksilver back---–and we'll give you action on any amount of money, cattle or anything else you want to name! You can put your friends here in on it too, if you want to---–" with a scornful glance around the pool-room at the loafers in the place. "Come on, Skinny," he added as he started toward the door, "more than likely Ophelia and Carolyn June are through with their trading and ready to go home."

All stood silent until Skinny and Old Heck stepped out of the door, then Mike Sabota broke into a coarse, taunting laugh. As they turned up the street Old Heck and Skinny heard Dorsey and the crowd inside join in the merriment.

"Damn that fool, Dorsey!" Old Heck exclaimed viciously, as he heard the shouts of derisive laughter. "I'm going to wipe him out on that race---–if he's got the guts to come across and back up that Thunderbolt horse as hard as he blows about him!"

"I think I'll hook Sabota for a few hundred on the sweepstakes, myself," Skinny replied with a good deal of feeling, "I don't like the way that dirty cuss acts any better than I like Dorsey's bragging!"

Carolyn June and Ophelia were waiting when Old Heck and Skinny arrived at the Golden Rule.

When the Clagstone "Six" whirled past the Amusement Parlor a few moments later Dorsey and Sabota were standing in the door.

Carolyn June glanced at them.

"Heavens," she said as her eyes rested an instant on the burly, low-browed, Greek proprietor of the place, "what a big brute of a looking fellow that is!"

The two men stared insolently at the occupants of the car and as it passed Sabota made some remark, evidently vulgar, that caused Dorsey to burst into another round of coarse laughter.

Old Heck was moody during the drive home.

For nearly two years Dorsey had been crowing because of the defeat of Quicksilver by the black racer from the Vermejo. It was becoming more than idle jesting. It looked as if, for some reason, he was trying to torment Old Heck until something serious was started. Old Heck was a good loser but he was growing tired of the persistent nagging. He had not whimpered at the loss of the twenty-five hundred dollars Dorsey won from him on the race. Even the humiliation of seeing his best horse put in second place by the Y-Bar animal had been endured philosophically and without malice because he believed the thing had been run square and the faster horse had won. But Dorsey on every occasion since had, drunk or sober, boasted of Thunderbolt's victory and taken a devilish delight in rubbing it in on the owner of the Quarter Circle KT.

To-day the Vermejo cattleman had been worse than usual, due, no doubt, to the rotten boot-leg whisky the brute-like proprietor of Eagle Butte's rather disreputable Amusement Parlor was supposed secretly to dispense to those who had the price and the "honor" to keep sacred the source of supply.

Old Heck was sore and he was ready to go the limit in backing the Gold Dust maverick. Both he and Skinny had purposely refrained from mentioning the horse the Ramblin' Kid would enter. The fame of the outlaw filly extended

throughout all of southwestern Texas and if the Vermejo crowd had learned that the Ramblin' Kid had finally caught her and was intending to put her against Thunderbolt it was doubtful if the black horse would be entered at all in the sweepstakes. Even if he was, Dorsey and his crowd would be shy of the betting.

This was one reason Old Heck had so played the conversation that Dorsey definitely threw down the challenge and which was so coldly accepted.

The Vermejo cow-man would have to come in heavy on the betting or be placed in the role of a bluffer.

By the time they reached the ranch Old Heck's good humor was restored. He thoroughly enjoyed the supper Skinny and Carolyn June prepared and joked the girl about her coffee-jelly.

"She's learning how to make French toast, now," Skinny said proudly; "it won't be long till she's a darned good cook!"

"Why not?" Carolyn June laughed. "See who I have to teach me!" and Skinny flushed while his heart hammered joyously.

"Well, I reckon anybody could live on fried bread and coffee-jelly in a pinch," Old Heck joked back, "but for my part I'd be a good deal happier to mix a biscuit or two like Ophelia makes once in a while in with it"---–giving the widow a worshipful look.

It was Ophelia's turn to register pleasurable confusion.

After supper Old Heck and the widow washed the dishes. When they were finished Ophelia went into the front room. Old Heck took a glass of water, stepped out of the kitchen door, and diligently scrubbed his teeth. While he was still at it Skinny came out with a dipper in his hand and sheepishly drawing a tooth-brush from his hip pocket faithfully imitated the actions of the other.

"I figure a man's taking a lot of chances if he don't keep his teeth clean and everything," Skinny spluttered as the water splashed down his chin.

"Yes, that's right," Old Heck agreed, "there's germs and so on in them!" as he flipped the water from his own brush, dried his lips on his shirtsleeve and turned back into the kitchen.

The next morning, Saturday, Old Heck came to the breakfast table again in a pensive mood.

"I was thinking about that man Dorsey," Skinny remarked, observing Old Heck's mental depression and attributing it to the meeting the day before in the pool-room at Eagle Butte. "Do you reckon the filly can really beat that Thunderbolt horse?"

"Of course she can," Old Heck answered. "Th' Ramblin' Kid knows. All I'm afraid is that when Dorsey finds out it's the Gold Dust maverick Thunderbolt has got to go up against he won't bet much on it."

"The boys ought to be in to-day," Skinny said, abruptly switching the subject; "they figured on getting the Battle Ridge cattle gathered and in the big pasture by to-night, didn't they?"

"Yes," Old Heck replied, "that was what was in my mind. Parker will be---–" he stopped suddenly, "butting in again" he had started to say but caught himself and finished lamely, "---–probably pretty anxious to hurry through as soon as

possible and get the beef animals in the upland pasture!"

"How are you going to work things when he gets back?" Skinny asked with, a significant look at Old Heck.

"Blamed if I know--–" Old Heck said uncertainly, stopping before he finished the sentence. He understood what Skinny meant and just that had been worrying him. He had reached the point where he could not endure the thought of going back to the old arrangement of day and day about with Parker in the enjoyment of the widow's society. Yet if Parker, on his return, insisted on dividing Ophelia's time with him in conformity with their original agreement, Old Heck knew he would have to yield. He thought for a moment he would get the widow away from Skinny and Carolyn June after breakfast and make a full confession of the whole thing, ask her to marry him, and have it done with. But he had not yet been able to get at the bottom of Ophelia's suffragette activities. What if she married him and then suddenly broke loose as a speech-maker or something for woman's rights? It wouldn't pay to take the risk. "It sure does keep a man guessing!" he murmured under his breath, the sweat starting to bead his forehead from the mental effort to solve the problem before him.

Carolyn June and Ophelia exchanged sly winks as they guessed the thing that was in Old Heck's mind.

Skinny, himself, was a bit worried as the time drew near for the return of the cowboys. He hoped Carolyn June wouldn't spring another dance or similar opportunity for indiscriminate love-making.

Nor had Carolyn June forgotten that to-day was Saturday and Parker and the cowboys were expected back from the first half of the beef round-up. The week had been pleasant enough but she had missed the Ramblin' Kid and the Gold Dust maverick more than she cared to confess. She wondered if the outlaw filly would remember her.

Saturday was a day of considerable tension for all at the Quarter Circle KT. Night came and Parker and the cowboys had not returned. Nor did they come on Sunday. Evidently the beef round-up had gone more slowly than was expected.

It was late Monday afternoon when the grub-wagon grumbled and creaked its way up the lane and stopped near the back-yard gate. Sing Pete climbed clumsily down from the high seat. Old Heck and Skinny unhitched Old Tom and Baldy while the Chinese cook chattered information about Parker, the cowboys and the round-up. He had left the North Springs early that morning. Two nights before the herd had run--–it was a stampede--–some sheep had been where the cattle were bedded. Maybe that was it. Chuck and Bert were on night guard and could not hold them. The steers mixed badly with the rangers. Nearly two days it took to gather them again. That was why they were late. Now everything was all right The cattle were being driven to the big pasture. Pedro would be along soon with the saddle cavallard. By dark maybe the others would be at the ranch.

It was midnight before Parker and the cowboys came in.

When Carolyn June stepped out on the porch Tuesday morning she glanced toward the circular corral, which for more than a week had been empty. Her heart gave a leap of delight.

Captain Jack was standing at the bars of the corral and behind him the early sunlight glinted on the chestnut sides of the Gold Dust maverick.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GRAND PARADE

Eagle Butte was a jam of humanity. It was Tuesday noon. At one o'clock the Grand Parade would circle the mile track at the "Grounds"---a hundred level acres enclosed by a high board fence lying at the west edge of Eagle Butte, between the Cimarron River and the road that led out to the Vermejo---swing down the main street of the town, return again to the enclosed area, flow once more past the grandstand, salute the judges of the coming events, and the Fifth Annual Independence Rodeo of Eagle Butte would be officially opened.

Special excursion rates had brought thousands from all parts of western Texas, New Mexico and Colorado. Hundreds of tourists, sight-seeing the West, had so arranged their itineraries that they might be present at the big exhibition of riding, roping, racing, bull-dogging and other cow-country arts,---arts rapidly becoming mere memories of a day too quickly passing.

Moving-picture machine operators were seeking advantageous locations for their outfits; pedestrians dodged, indiscriminately, high-powered automobiles and plunging bronchos; the old and the new were slapped together in an incongruous jumble in the streets of Eagle Butte.

The best range men and women of the West were gathered in the western Texas town.

New Mexico, Arizona, Idaho, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Oregon, Texas herself, were represented by their most famous riders, ropers, bull-doggers, cow-experts, and noted outlaw horses.

There were many masqueraders.

Imitation cow-people, they were, made up in fancy wild-west costumes, long-haired chaps, mammoth black sombreros, gaudy neck-cloths, silver-spangled saddles, spurs and bridles---typical moving-picture cowboys, cowgirls and rough riders. But there were, as well, hundreds of real range people. People whose business it is to work every day at the "stunts" they were, for the next five days, to play at for the pleasure of proving their skill and winning the applause of the multitude of spectators packed each day in the grandstand behind the judges' box at the Eagle Butte Rodeo.

Every outfit in western Texas sent its most clever riders.

Indians and Mexicans, in picturesque attire, sprinkled the milling mass of humanity with a dash of rainbow color.

Dance-halls were running, fare layouts were operating, roulette wheels were spinning. For the time, with the consent of the sheriff and other reformed authorities, Eagle Butte tried hard to be as Eagle Butte was twenty---thirty---years ago.

The entire Quarter Circle KT crowd left the ranch early Tuesday morning'. Parker had surprised Old Heck, and filled his mind with misgivings, by calling him to one side after breakfast and stammering:

"I---I---reckon you'd just as well go ahead the rest of this week and---and---look after the widow by yourself---"

"What's the matter?" Old Heck asked suspiciously; "have you found out anything dangerous about that 'Movement' or whatever it is Ophelia's mixed up in?"

"No, it ain't that," Parker assured him, "I just thought I'd kind of---well, like to be free, to knock around at the Rodeo without being bothered with a woman or anything."

The truth was Parker was trying to hedge. When he had got away on the beef hunt and began to figure things out he had come to doubt the wisdom of his sudden infatuation for the widow. Thinking it over, out on the open range, he was

appalled by his rash, headlong falling in love. He had never married, nor had he, until Ophelia came, been even near it. Someway, the moment Carolyn June and the widow arrived at the Quarter Circle KT some sort of devil seemed to possess him. He couldn't explain it. Maybe it had been just an impulse to get ahead of Old Heck. Whatever it was, Parker was worried. What would he do with a wife if he had one? All he wanted now was to let the thing blow over. Perhaps the widow would forget his impetuous proposal or fall in love with Old Heck.

Old Heck, his heart filled with a queer mixture of elation and uncertainty---–with a sort of joy and sinking sensation all at once---–agreed to Parker's suggestion.

Parker rode into Eagle Butte with the cowboys. Old Heck, Ophelia, Skinny and Carolyn June went in the Clagstone "Six." Chuck led Old Pie Face for Skinny to ride in the parade and Bert took Red John, Old Heck's most showy saddle horse---–a long-legged, high-stepping, proud-headed, bay gelding---–for Carolyn June to use, for she, too, had declared her intention of joining in the grand promenade with which the Rodeo would open.

The Ramblin' Kid left the Gold Dust maverick in the circular corral and rode Captain Jack to Eagle Butte. It would be necessary for him to register the filly, with the entry judges, on the first day of the Rodeo if she was to run in the two-mile sweepstakes.

The rules of the Rodeo required, also, that all who expected to participate in any of the events of the coming week must "show" in the grand march or parade. The animals that were to be used might also be paraded, but this was not compulsory.

Accompanied by Chuck, the Ramblin' Kid went directly to the entry offices of the Rodeo, which were roughly boxed-up compartments under the rear of the grandstand.

A group of "hot-dog" vendors and "concession spielers" looked curiously at the two as they left Captain Jack and Silver Tip, with bridle reins dropped over their heads, standing in front of the office and stepped inside.

Lafe Dorsey and Flip Williams were at the clerk's desk.

The Vermejo cattleman had just registered Thunderbolt, with Flip as rider, for the big race.

They looked around as the Ramblin' Kid and Chuck came in.

"Well, is the Quarter Circle KT getting up sand enough to go against old Thunderbolt again?" Dorsey asked with a curl of his lip and an ugly sneer.

"Oh, I reckon we've got a little nerve left," Chuck answered with mock humility, "not much, but a little, maybe. I was going to put Silver Tip in the sweepstakes," he went on, "but I guess I won't. Th' Ramblin' Kid's got an entry and it looks like a darned shame for one outfit to want to hog it all and grab first and second money both, so I'll stay out this time."

"You talk pretty loud," Dorsey snarled, catching instantly, as Chuck intended he should, the covert slur at the black Y-Bar stallion. "Maybe your money won't make so damned much noise!"

"Here's a couple hundred," Chuck said, pulling a roll of bills from his shirt pocket. "I'll invest that much on my judgment that Thunderbolt ain't as good as you think he is."

"I'll take it!" Dorsey snapped, jerking a wad of money from his own pocket and counting out the amount which he handed to the clerk as stake-holder. "And here's another hundred---or a thousand if you want it!"

"That two hundred is about all I can handle this morning," Chuck laughed. "But I understand Old Heck's aiming to bet a little," he drawled suggestively; "probably you'd like to see him?"

"I'll see him---and raise him till he squeals!" Dorsey sneered.

The Ramblin' Kid ignored the tilt between Dorsey and Chuck and leaned indifferently against the counter waiting for the clerk to fill out the entry blank.

"Event?" the clerk questioned.

"Two-mile run," was the quiet answer.

"Rider---and horse?" glancing up.

Dorsey and Flip paused and turned their heads to catch the names the Ramblin' Kid gave.

"I'm the rider, I reckon," the Ramblin' Kid replied, "I guess you know who I am. Th' name of th' horse? Well, now ain't that funny?" he said with a little laugh, "I never have bothered to name that critter yet! But---oh, hell, what's the difference? We'll just call her 'Ophelia' for th' time bein'---in honor of a lady-widow that's visitin' out at th' ranch!"

"The Quarter Circle KT's getting to be quite a female institution, ain't it?" Dorsey said contemptuously. "I suppose this wonder horse of yours is one of the ranch fillies and regular lightning!"

For a second the Ramblin' Kid's eyes narrowed, then he replied coldly to the last half of Dorsey's sentence:

"Well, th' filly's been runnin' in that neighborhood an'"---with a laugh that had in it just the hint of a sneer---"she's pretty fair---good enough, I figure, to beat hell out of old Thunderbolt!"

"Are you backing that with money?" Dorsey and Flip spoke together.

"No," the Ramblin' Kid answered slowly, "money ain't no object with me in a horse-race. I don't run 'em for that purpose. Anyhow, poker is my favorite method of gamblin'!"

Dorsey and Flip whirled angrily out of the office and walked rapidly toward the stables where they had left their horses.

After reserving a box stall, which was to be occupied by Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick, the Ramblin' Kid and Chuck left the entry office and mounting their bronchos rode toward the section of the grounds, over by the stables, where the parade was already forming.

As they passed through the entrance to the track and the inside field which lay beyond Chuck and the Ramblin' Kid rode within a few feet of the Clagstone "Six," which was parked near the east end of the grandstand. Old Heck and Ophelia were in the front seat of the car watching the riders assemble for the parade. Carolyn June was standing on the running-board waiting for Skinny to come with Old Pie Face and Red John, the boys having left the horses at the stables.

Carolyn June looked up with a bright smile at Chuck. As her eyes met the Ramblin' Kid's there was a question in them. She was not sure yet that she had forgiven him for the brutal rebuff the night of the dance. If there was any feeling in his heart, either of resentment or otherwise, toward the girl the Ramblin' Kid hid it. The look he gave her was one of unfathomable humility and indifference.

Chuck wheeled Silver Tip to the side of the car and stopped. His eyes were filled with frank admiration as he gazed at the girl. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, her white felt hat sat jauntily on the crown of brown hair, her eyes were sparkling and in the close-fitting riding suit she was the picture of youthful charm and grace. The Ramblin' Kid nodded to Old Heck, glanced at Ophelia with a smile, looked steadily an instant at Carolyn June and raising his hat to the two women passed on with the remark: "I reckon I'll go on over an' see what they're doin'."

"Has he entered the outlaw filly for the sweepstakes, yet?" Old Heck asked Chuck as the Ramblin' Kid reined Captain Jack down the race track.

"Yes," Chuck answered, "he signed her up."

"Did he name her as the Gold Dust maverick?" Old Heck inquired anxiously.

"No," Chuck grinned, "he called her 'Ophelia!'"

Old Heck leaned back in the seat and roared with laughter in which Carolyn June and the widow joined.

"Dorsey was there," Chuck said with another grin, "he'd just finished entering Thunderbolt for the big race when th' Ramblin' Kid and me got to the registering office. I bet him two hundred dollars. He was bragging a good deal---"

Old Heck's eyes flashed and the mirth left them.

"He was blowing, was he?" he said with a hard laugh, "the damn---darned fool!" he corrected, remembering Ophelia at his side. "Well, 'egg' him on---the higher he flies the worse he'll flop when he bu'sts a wing!"

In the parade Skinny rode with Carolyn June. Parker and the Quarter Circle KT cowboys were in a group directly behind them. The Vermejo crowd, with Dorsey himself mounted on Thunderbolt, had a place just ahead of Skinny and Carolyn June. The beautiful black Y-Bar stallion was really a wonderful horse. Speed, strength and endurance radiated with every movement of the glossy, subtle body. Without doubt he was the most handsome animal on the grounds. Dorsey was a splendid rider and a man---he was in the early forties---of striking appearance. He was fully conscious of the magnificent showing he made on Thunderbolt. The racer danced proudly, prancing forward in short, graceful leaps as the column swept past the grandstand and the consolidated Eagle Butte and Vegas bands crashed out the strains of a stirring march. A ripple of applause ran over the crowd in the grandstand as Dorsey, at the head of the Vermejo cowboys, rode by the judges' box. He lifted his sombrero and waved it in pleased acknowledgment.

The Ramblin' Kid was in line a little distance behind Carolyn June, Skinny and the Quarter Circle KT cowboys. He rode alone just back of a quartette of Indians from down on the Chickasaw.

His plain rigging, the slick, smoothly worn, leather chaps, the undecorated saddle, bridle and spurs, his entire work-a-day outfit contrasted vividly with the gaudy get-up of most of the other riders. Captain Jack moved along easily and freely, but quietly, and with an air of utter boredom with all the show and confusion about him. The Ramblin' Kid's attitude, whole appearance, matched perfectly the mood of his horse. He sat loosely in the saddle and carelessly smoked a cigarette. The truth was his mind was far from the pageant of which he and the little stallion were a part. He scarcely

heard the music nor did he seem to see the thousands of human beings, packed tier above tier, under the mammoth roof of the grandstand. His thoughts were at the upper crossing of the treacherous Cimarron, out at the Quarter Circle KT; he was seeing again, Carolyn June, as she looked up into his eyes when he dragged her out of the quicksand---he was hearing, once more, her cry of agony as the bullet from his gun buried itself in the brain of Old Blue.

Louder hand-clapping, stamping of feet, and calling voices, than any that had sounded before, rolled out from the grandstand as the lone rider, on the quiet, unexcited little roan, came down the stretch in front of the great crowd.

Carolyn June looked back, saw the waving hats and handkerchiefs, heard hundreds of voices shouting:

"Th' Ramblin' Kid! Th' good old Ramblin' Kid!"

The crowd had recognized him as the slender rider who, a year ago, after the untamable Cyclone horse had killed Dick Stanley before their eyes and in front of where they sat, had ridden, straight-up and scotching him at every jump, that vicious, murderous-hearted outlaw.

Carolyn June's eyes moistened and she felt a thrill of pride.

The Ramblin' Kid barely glanced at the sea of faces, a faint smile hung for an instant on his lips, as he jerked his hand, the one in which he held the cigarette, to the brim of his hat when he came opposite the judges' stand.

When the parade swung down the wide, one-sided, main street of Eagle Butte, Mike Sabota, from the door of the Elite Amusement Parlor, watched it pass. He was standing there, by the side of the lanky marshal and surrounded by a group of pool-room loafers and "carnival sharks" when Carolyn June and Skinny came by. She looked around in time to see him staring, with a vulgar leer, straight into her eyes.

"There is that big, dirty, animal-looking fellow we saw the other day!" she said, with a frown of disgust, to Skinny. "He's horrible---"

Skinny glanced at Sabota.

"Yes, he is ornery," he said. "He runs that joint and boot-legs on the side. He's got a reputation as a slugger and keeps the crowd around him buffaloed. They say he killed a feller---beat him to death---in a fight over at Sapulpa before he came to Eagle Butte. I don't like the filthy cuss. He's mean!"

"He looks it!" Carolyn June exclaimed, with the uncomfortable feeling that the big Greek's look had touched her with something vile and unclean.

After the parade disbanded Carolyn June and Skinny rode back to the car where Old Heck and Ophelia had remained.

"You made a darned good-looking cowgirl!" Old Heck said proudly to her as she stopped Red John by the side of the Clagstone "Six."

"She and Skinny both presented a very fine appearance!" the widow added, while Carolyn June playfully blew a kiss at each in acknowledgment of the compliment. Skinny sat on Old Pie Face and felt a warm glow of satisfaction at the words of Old Heck and Ophelia. He had known all the time that Carolyn June and he had shown up well, but he was glad to find that others besides himself had noticed it.

Dorsey, on a black stallion, cantered past.

A moment later the Ramblin' Kid came jogging off the race course on Captain Jack. He threw up his hand in greeting and passed on out of the grounds.

Parked next to the Clagstone "Six" was a handsome touring car, occupied by a party consisting of a girl about Carolyn June's own age, a woman a few years older and a couple of immaculately dressed young men who wore flaring brimmed black felt hats that contrasted absurdly with their expensively tailored suits. Evidently all were "big town" people from a distance---very "superior" and patronizing in their attitude toward the "natives." They had been free and voluble in their comments on the various riders. Dorsey, on the magnificent Thunderbolt, drew a murmur of admiration from the lips of the girl. As the Ramblin' Kid, the next moment, rode by on Captain Jack one of the young fellows said loudly and with a laugh of ridicule:

"Look at that one, Bess," addressing the girl; "there's the 'wild and woolly' West for you! I'll bet if that horse sneezed he'd fall down and the lonesome-looking little runt that's riding him would tumble off and root his nose in the dust!"

A cackle of derisive laughter greeted the cheap witticism.

Before any of the others could speak Carolyn June's eyes blazed with sudden wrath. She turned her body in the saddle and faced the speaker, her hands tightly clenched, her cheeks white with passion and her lip curling wickedly.

"Which shows," she said slowly, every word stinging like the bite of a whip-lash, "that you are running, true to form and there is one fool, at least, still unslaughtered! That"---she continued with a proud toss of her head---"'lonesome-looking little runt' is the Ramblin' Kid! Not another man in Texas can ride the horse he is on---and there is not a horse in Texas that he can't ride!"

She turned again toward the Quarter Circle KT group and a shamed silence settled over the swell "out-of-town" car.

Old Heck chuckled with delight at Carolyn June's show of temper.

A whirlwind program of racing, roping, bull-dogging---this event is that in which a rider springs from a running horse, grasps by the horns a wild steer running at his side, twists the animal's head up and backward and so throws it down and then holds the creature on the ground---rough-riding and other Rodeo sports followed immediately after the parade.

Pedro and Charley Saunders were the only Quarter Circle KT cowboys participating in the events of the first day of the Rodeo. The Mexican did a fancy roping stunt in front of the grandstand and finished his exhibition directly before the Clagstone "Six" in which Carolyn June, Ophelia, Old Heck and Skinny were sitting. At the conclusion of his performance Pedro bowed to the little audience in the car and swept his sombrero before him with all the courtly grace of a great matador. Carolyn June generously applauded the dark-skinned rider from the Cimarron and waved a daintily gloved hand in acknowledgment of his skill with the rope. Skinny gritted his teeth while a pang of jealousy shot through his heart.

Charley took part in the bull-dogging event. He drew a black steer, rangey built, heavy and wicked. When he lunged from his horse on to the horns of the brute it dragged him for a hundred feet before he could check its mad flight. At last he slowly forced its nose in the air and with a quick wrench of the head to one side threw its feet from under it. Man and beast went down in a heap---the neck of the steer across the cowboy's body. A groan went up from the crowd in the grandstand and Carolyn June's cheeks paled with horror---it looked as if one horn of the creature had pierced Charley's breast. But it had missed by the fraction of an inch. Straightening himself up to a sitting posture the cowboy bent

forward and sunk his teeth in the upper lip of the prostrate animal and threw up both hands as a signal to the judges that the brute was "bulldogged." But the fight had been too hard for him to win first place. Buck Wade, a lanky cow-puncher from Montana, in three seconds less time, had thrown a brindle Anchor-O steer and taken first money.

* * * * *

Before the sun dipped into the Costejo peaks the Ramblin' Kid left the Rodeo and returned alone to the Quarter Circle KT. He told Parker and the cowboys, all of whom intended to remain in Eagle Butte every night during the Rodeo, that he would be back in town the next afternoon and bring with him the Gold Dust maverick. Word had been passed among the Quarter Circle KT crowd to keep Dorsey and his bunch in the dark as long as possible regarding the fact that the filly, Ophelia, was the famous outlaw mare of the lower Cimarron.

After supper Parker, Chuck, Bert and Charley drifted into the Elite Amusement Parlor. The place was crowded. Mike Sabota immediately singled out the Quarter Circle KT group and began jollying them about the coming two-mile sweepstakes. Dorsey and Flip Williams had been in the pool-room earlier in the evening and told him of the Ramblin' Kid's entry of the filly against the Thunderbolt horse.

Within ten minutes Bert and Charley had placed two hundred and fifty dollars each against five hundred of Sabota's money that the Vermejo stallion would not finish in first place in the big race.

Old Judge Ivory, who happened to be present, was agreed upon as stake-holder.

"That Thunderbolt horse, he is the devil," Sabota laughed evilly as the money was handed over to the gray-haired judge. "And Satan, he takes care of his own!"

"Well!" Parker drawled, "if you feel inclined to send any more money to hell I might help you---" pulling a wad of bills from his pocket and throwing the certificates on the soft-drink bar at which they were standing.

Sabota's eyes gleamed greedily.

"I think there's two thousand in this roll," Parker continued, "and I'm willing to bet it all that the Ramblin' Kid's filly not only goes under the wire first in the two-mile run, but that she'll be kicking dirt in old Thunderbolt's face---if he ain't too damned far behind---when she does it!"

The Greek covered the wager eagerly.

As Judge Ivory pocketed the money Dorsey and Flip Williams stepped into the pool-room. Sabota glanced up.

"These Quarter Circle KT *hombres* are getting bad," he laughed sneeringly to Dorsey; "they think th' Ramblin' Kid's got a colt that can beat Thunderbolt!"

"The Ramblin' Kid must have a hell of a fast horse!" Dorsey snarled contemptuously, "a hell of a fast horse!" he repeated, "when the Ramblin' Kid himself declines to risk a dollar of his own money on the running qualities of the critter!" referring to the conversation a few hours before in the entry judges' office.

As he finished speaking he turned and looked squarely into the cold gray eyes of Old Heck who, with Skinny, had entered the Amusement Parlor while Dorsey was talking and heard the Vermejo cattleman's sneering insinuation.

CHAPTER XV

MOCHA AND JAVA

Old Heck and Skinny had left Ophelia and Carolyn June at the Occidental Hotel, where a room was reserved by Old Heck for the use of the two women during the Rodeo. They had then gone direct to Mike Sabota's place for the express purpose of running into Dorsey and his crowd. Old Heck knew that if any large bets were to be laid on the two-mile sweepstakes the only chance would be to place them before the Ramblin' Kid brought the Gold Dust maverick to Eagle Butte and the Vermejo bunch discovered the identity of the horse Thunderbolt was up against.

The Quarter Circle KT cow-men stepped into the pool-room at exactly the instant most favorable for their purpose.

Dorsey had made his boast in the presence of a crowd.

He would hardly dare back up without covering, at least to some worth-while extent, his words with his money.

For a full minute Old Heck drilled Dorsey with a look such, as a hound dog might have in his eyes after he has cornered a coyote and pauses before he springs.

Instinctively the crowd stepped back from the two cattlemen while a death-like hush fell over the place.

"Th' Ramblin' Kid don't need to back the filly with his money, Dorsey," Old Heck said slowly and in a voice audible in every part of the room; "I'm here to back her with mine! You've done a lot of talking---now, damn you, cover your chatter with coin or shut up!" the end of the sentence coming like the crack of a whip.

With a nervous laugh the Vermejo cattleman jerked a wallet from his pocket.

"Here's a thousand that says Thunderbolt does the same thing to the Ramblin' Kid's filly that he done to Quicksilver!" Dorsey snapped.

Old Heck threw back his head and laughed scornfully.

"A thousand? I thought you were a sport, Dorsey!" he sneered. "Match this," he continued, reaching for his check-book and fountain pen and quickly filling out a check payable to "Cash" for ten thousand dollars, which he laid on the hardwood bar. "Match that, or admit you're a cheap, loud-howlin' bluffer!"

Dorsey paused just an instant as he noted the amount of the check.

"I'll match it!" he exclaimed, flushing angrily, drawing his own check-book from his pocket, and then, carried away by his passion added, throwing down the bars completely as Old Heck had hoped he would, "and go with you to the end of the trail!"

"Good!" Old Heck laughed, "now you are talking like a sport! Let's see," he added calculatingly, "how many Y-Bar cattle do you figure you've got running on the Vermejo range---five thousand?"

"There's that many," Dorsey started to say.

"Call it fifty-five hundred!" Old Heck flung at him. "Steer for steer, cow for cow, hoof for hoof---I'll put Quarter Circle KT critters against every brute you own that th' Ramblin' Kid lands his horse tinder the wire ahead of Thunderbolt!"

Dorsey paled, then a purple-red of fury spread over his neck and face, and with an oath he cried:

"I'll call you!"

Bills of sale were drawn and turned over to Judge Ivory, to be delivered, after the race, to the winner.

"Now," Old Heck said with a hard laugh, "maybe you'd like to own the Quarter Circle KT ranch, Dorsey? It's worth twice as much as your Vermejo holdings but I'll just give you that percentage of odds and call it an even bet that your black stallion don't outrun the little animal th' Ramblin' Kid has entered in the sweepstakes!"

But Dorsey did not answer except with a muttered: "Hell, a man's crazy that---" He had gone his limit. He had suddenly come to his senses and grown suspicious.

Before Skinny and Old Heck left the pool-room the former managed to get a bet of five hundred dollars with Sabota.

The next afternoon the Ramblin' Kid rode into Eagle Butte on Captain Jack. By his side he led the Gold Dust maverick. The noise and confusion in the streets filled the mare with nervousness and she crowded closely against the little roan stallion. Before he got the outlaw filly to the stables a half dozen cowboys had recognized the Cimarron maverick. Within an hour Dorsey and Sabota knew the identity of the Ramblin' Kid's entry in the big race that was to be run Friday afternoon and which was the big and closing event of the Rodeo.

The Greek was furious.

Wednesday night he called "Gyp" Streetor, a carnival tout, who had one time been a jockey but was ruled off the track for crooked work and was now picking up "easies" at the Eagle Butte Rodeo, into a side room of the Amusement Parlor.

For half an hour the two talked earnestly and furtively.

"Nothin' doin'---absolutely nothin'!" the tout finally said in reply to some suggestion of Sabota's. "That Captain Jack horse would murder any man but th' Ramblin' Kid that tried to get in the stall---"

"Well, by hell!" the Greek exclaimed, clenching his hairy fists, while his mouth twitched with passion, "that filly's got to be kept out of the sweepstakes someway or other---"

"You can't get to her, I tell you," Gyp said sullenly, then with a look of cunning suddenly coming into his eyes: "They say she's a one-man brute like the stallion---nobody can ride her but th' Ramblin' Kid," significantly looking at Sabota. "If you could---but he don't drink!"

The Greek laughed.

"There are other ways!" he said. "He eats, don't he? Listen: To-morrow and Friday you take that 'sandwich and coffee' run at the stables---" referring to the concession to peddle lunch stuff among the horsemen who seldom left their charges, a concession which Sabota, with other privileges, had purchased the right to operate. "Th' Ramblin' Kid eats off the trays---it will be your business to see that he ain't feeling well when the sweepstakes is called! I'll get the 'pills' for you to-night---"

"No killin', Sabota!" Gyp warned.

"Just enough to put him out for an hour or two!" the Greek answered.

Wednesday night the Ramblin' Kid slept in the stall with the Gold Dust maverick and Captain Jack. Thursday he remained close to the horses. Thursday night he again slept on a pile of hay in one corner of the box-compartment. Under no circumstances would he leave the animals. Occasionally Parker or some of the Quarter Circle KT cowboys came down to the stables.

Each night Old Heck and Skinny, with Carolyn June and Ophelia, after the evening program was concluded, drove out to the ranch in the Clagstone "Six," returning early the following day.

Friday forenoon Old Heck drove the car down to the stall in which Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick were confined. The two horses were standing, side by side, with their heads out of the door, the upper half of which was swung back. The Ramblin' Kid leaned against the door at the side of the horses.

To Carolyn June he looked tired and worn.

"How's the filly?" Old Heck asked, as the outlaw mare sprang back away from the door when the car stopped.

"She's all right."

"Hadn't you ought to exercise her?" Skinny asked.

"She don't need it," the Ramblin' Kid replied with a note of weariness in his voice. "She'll get enough exercise this afternoon!"

"You're all right, yourself, are you?" Old Heck asked a bit anxiously.

"Of course I'm all right," was the rather impatient reply. "Don't be uneasy," he added with a laugh; "---th' filly'll be in th' race an' beat old Thunderbolt!"

"Good luck!" Carolyn June cried, as Old Heck turned the car about and started back toward the grandstand.

"Good luck!" the Ramblin' Kid muttered to himself, watching the car as it whirled away. "Ign'rant, savage, stupid brute!" he repeated bitterly, then with a queer smile in which was a world of tenderness he pulled the pink satin elastic garter he had picked up at the circular corral, from his pocket and looked at it long and wistfully. "Good luck?" he exclaimed again questioningly. "Well, maybe that little jigger'll bring it!" and he slipped the band back in his pocket.

"Th' Ramblin' Kid acts like he's got the blues this morning," Skinny said as the Clagstone "Six" rolled away from the stables. "He looks to me like a feller that's in just the right humor to get on a whale of a drunk---"

"That's one thing about him you can depend on," Old Heck broke in, "---he never poisons himself with liquor. That's why when he says he'll do anything you can bet all you've got he'll do it!"

"Well, if he ever does break loose," Skinny retorted, "it'll be sudden and wild!"

"Probably," Old Heck replied as though there wasn't the slightest danger of such an eventuality.

That morning Gyp purposely avoided going as far, with his stock of provisions, as the stall in which were Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick. Nor did he come with his lunch tray and tin pot of coffee until nearly one o'clock.

The Ramblin' Kid had no breakfast. To secure it he would have been required to leave the horses. That he would not do. Of course he might have told Old Heck or Skinny to bring or send him something, but he did not feel inclined to mention, in the presence of Carolyn June and Ophelia, that he was hungry. Anyhow, well, they were having a good time and what was the use of bothering them?

When Gyp finally came with the lunch the Ramblin' Kid was outside the stall and had walked a little way up the stable street. Captain Jack and the filly were in a compartment at the end of the string of stalls. The one next to it, back toward the grandstand, was unoccupied, and adjoining that was a hay room. Gyp stopped opposite the open door of the compartment in which the bales of hay and straw were piled. He paused a moment and turned as if to go back.

"Hold on there!" the Ramblin' Kid called to him. "What you tryin' to do? Starve me to death?"

"D' last thing I'd want to do, Bo!" Gyp laughed good-naturedly. "Did I miss you this mornin'? Here, come inside where I can set this bloomin' junk down on a bale of hay for a minute an' I'll fix you up!"

The Ramblin' Kid followed Gyp into the stall.

The tout stooped over, with his back to the other, and slipped a capsule containing a white powder into a coffee cup which he filled quickly with the black liquid from the tin pot he carried. He handed the cup to the Ramblin' Kid. The latter took it and sat down on a bale of hay lying opposite. The coffee was just hot enough to melt, instantly, the capsule and not too warm to drink at once. The Ramblin' Kid was thirsty as well as hungry. Lifting the cup to his lips, while Gyp, fumbling for a sandwich, watched him furtively, he drained it without stopping.

"That's---–what was in that?'" he asked, eying the tout keenly. "It tastes like--!"

"Just good old Mocha an' Java!" Gyp interrupted lightly. "Maybe it's a little strong. Here, take another one!" reaching for the cup.

The Ramblin' Kid started to hand the cup to Gyp to be refilled---–a queer numbness swept over him---–the cup fell from his hand---–he swayed---–tensed his body in an effort to get up---–mumbled thickly:

"What th'---–what th'--?"

The tout backed away toward the door, crouching like a cat ready to spring, his beady eyes half-frightened, watching the poison deaden the faculties of the other. He leaped through the door, glanced up and down the stable street---–deserted at that hour except for a few drowsy attendants lounging in front of their stalls---–jerked the door shut, hooked the open padlock through the iron fastenings, snapped its jaws together and muttered, as he hurried away:

"I guess that guy won't ride the Gold Dust maverick in any two-mile sweepstakes to-day!"

As the door slammed shut the Ramblin' Kid pitched forward, unconscious, on the bale of hay.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SWEEPSTAKES

The Clagstone "Six" was parked, Friday afternoon, in its usual place near the east end of the grandstand and close to the entrance to the track. Old Heck and Ophelia were alone in the car. Carolyn June and Skinny, on Pie Face and Red John, watched the afternoon program from the "inside field" across the race track. Parker and the Quarter Circle KT cowboys were also mounted on their horses and in the field opposite the grandstand.

Never had there been such a jam at a Rodeo held in Eagle Butte.

The two-mile sweepstakes, itself the "cow-man's classic" and the great derby event of western Texas, always drew record crowds the day on which it was run.

This Friday the grandstand creaked under its load of humanity.

The racing feud between the Quarter Circle KT and the Y-Bar and the thousands of dollars Old Heck and Dorsey were known to have bet on their respective favorites acted as tinder on the flame of public interest in the big event.

Thunderbolt had a great reputation. Last year, and the year before, he had mastered the field of runners put against him.

The Gold Dust maverick---–named in the race "Ophelia"---–was a wonder horse in the minds of the people of western Texas who had heard of the beautiful, almost super-creature, that had tormented, with her speed and endurance, the riders of the Cimarron and now at last was caught, and to be ridden in the sweepstakes, by the Ramblin' Kid.

At two-forty a special exhibition of "Cossack Riding"---–participated in by Lute Larsen, of Idaho; Jack Haines, from Texas, and Curly Piper, a Colorado cowboy, finished in front of the grandstand.

The announcer trained his megaphone on the vast crowd:

"The next event," he bellowed, "two-mile sweepstakes! Purse one thousand dollars! Five entries! Naming them in their order from the pole: Thunderbolt, black Y-Bar stallion, Flip Williams, rider; Say-So, roan gelding, from the Pecos River, Box-V outfit, Jess Curtis, rider; Ophelia, Gold Dust filly, the Cimarron outlaw from the Quarter Circle KT, th' Ramblin' Kid, rider; Prince John, sorrel gelding, from Dallas, Texas, 'Snow' Johnson, rider; Dash-Away, bay mare, from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Slim Tucker, rider. Race called at three o'clock sharp! Horse failing to score on the dot will be ruled out! Range saddles to be used. Entries for the two-mile sweepstakes will show at once on the track!"

Dead silence ensued during the announcer's drawling oration.

It was followed by the hum of five thousand voices as they chattered in eager expectancy.

The band crashed out *Dixie* and a medley of southern melodies.

Chuck and Bert reined their bronchos up to Parker.

"We're going over and see how th' Ramblin' Kid is making it," Chuck said. "He might need that filly herded a little to get her through this jam." And they galloped their horses across the track toward the stables.

Carolyn June and Skinny decided to watch the sweepstakes from the car, with Old Heck and Ophelia. They rode Pie Face and Red John over to the Clagstone "Six." Carolyn June dismounted and stepped up on the running-board of the car, holding Red John loosely by the bridle rein.

"Gee," she laughed, "but I'm nervous!"

Old Heck reached over and patted her hand.

"Wait till they start to run before you get hysterical," he chuckled. "There'll be time enough then for excitement!" One could never have told, by his actions, that within the next few moments he would lose or win fifty thousand dollars.

Chuck pulled Silver Tip to a stop in front of the stall where Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick were standing.

"They're getting ready for the sweepstakes!" he called, thinking the Ramblin' Kid was in the compartment with the horses. "You'd better be putting your rigging on the filly," as he slid from his broncho and stepped to the door of the stall.

There was no answer. He peered into the half-gloom of the place.

It was empty save for the two horses.

"That's funny as thunder," he said, puzzled, to Bert. "Where'd you reckon th' Ramblin' Kid is?"

"Darned if I know---ain't he there?" Bert answered, riding up so he could look into the door.

"Look around a little," Chuck said anxiously. "Maybe he's just stepped away for a minute---Hey!" he called to an attendant of a stall a short distance down the stable street, "have you seen anything of th' Ramblin' Kid---the feller that has these horses?"

"Naw," was the careless answer, "I ain't seen him for two hours."

"Something must be wrong!" Chuck exclaimed. "You stay here and watch! I'll go see Old Heck---maybe he knows where he is."

"Hell, yes!" Bert said as the other started Silver Tip in a run toward where the Clagstone "Six" was parked. "He's got to be found! Nobody else but him can ride the maverick!"

At the car, before his horse was fairly stopped, Chuck leaned over and asked, tensely:

"Have any of you people seen th' Ramblin' Kid?"

Old Heck straightened up.

"Ain't he at the stables?" he inquired uneasily. "He was there this morning---"

"No," Chuck replied hurriedly, "he's been gone two hours!"

"Good lord," Old Heck exclaimed, "he's got to be found! The race starts in ten minutes."

"And nobody but him can ride the filly!" Skinny interrupted. "I wonder if he's---" he started to say "drunk," but stopped as Carolyn June looked quickly at him. The word was in both their minds.

"It ain't natural!" Old Heck cried; "there must be something dirty! You boys go look for him; I'll, keep my eyes open here!"

As Old Heck said "dirty" the picture of Mike Sabota flashed into Carolyn June's mind. Some intuition seemed to couple, in her inner consciousness, the big Greek with the Ramblin' Kid's disappearance.

The horses for the two-mile sweepstakes were already beginning to come on to the track. Flip Williams was walking Thunderbolt up and down in front of the grandstand, trying to keep the high-spirited stallion quiet until time came to mount; the rider of Say-So was doing the same thing with his entry; Slim Tucker was already sitting on Dash-Away, the trim Wyoming mare standing unruffled near the starting line, while Snow Johnson, like Tucker, already on his mount, was circling Prince John in wide loops behind the others.

Carolyn June was stunned for a moment by the thought that had come into her mind when the picture of the burly Greek flashed before her. She clenched her hands and her cheeks whitened.

"Come on, Skinny!" she said suddenly, stepping off the running-board of the car and swinging on to Red John, "we'll go help look for the Ramblin' Kid!"

She whirled the big bay around the end of the grandstand and rode in a fast gallop straight for the box stall, Skinny and Chuck following close behind her. A quick resolution formed in her mind: "Nobody but the Ramblin' Kid could ride the filly?"

She could ride the mare!

Even if the Ramblin' Kid was not found Sabota and his crowd should not be allowed to win by dirty work---if dirty work had been done!

At the stall Carolyn June sprang from Red John.

Bert was nervously walking about, calling occasionally the name of the missing Quarter Circle KT cowboy.

"Have you found him?" Carolyn June asked as Skinny and Chuck came up behind her.

"No," Bert answered glumly, "he ain't showed up yet! There ain't no signs of him around here."

"What'll we do?" Skinny asked excitedly. "The race is almost ready to start and---do you reckon you could ride the filly, Bert?" he finished with a gleam of hope.

"I doubt it, but, well, I'll try her---if Captain Jack'll let me get her out."

"You boys keep back!" Carolyn June interrupted, stepping to the door of the stall and opening it, "Captain Jack knows me and---I---I---think the filly does, too---I can handle her---" as she stepped boldly inside the compartment with the horses.

"Don't go in there!" Skinny cried, "Car---Carolyn June, they'll kill you!"

"You boys keep away!" she laughed. "And don't get the horses nervous! They won't hurt me!" she answered, going ahead toward the animals.

Captain Jack looked at her suspiciously an instant

"Jack-Boy---Jack-Boy!" she called with a caress in her voice. "Careful! We're friends!" The attitude of the stallion changed instantly and the menace was gone from his eyes.

The Gold Dust maverick heard the voice and with a friendly little nicker rubbed her head against the outstretched hand.

In a corner was the Ramblin' Kid's saddle, bridle, blanket and worn leather chaps.

With a light pat of the outlaw filly's cheek Carolyn June turned and began quickly and deftly putting the riding gear on the beautiful mare.

* * * * *

For an hour and a half the Ramblin' Kid lay as he had fallen when he started to hand the coffee cup back to Gyp. Breathing heavily, his face flushed, he was as one in the deep stupor of complete intoxication. At last he stirred uneasily. An unconscious groan came from his lips. His eyes opened. In them was a dazed, puzzled look. Where was he? He tried vainly to remember---the clean life, the iron constitution and youth---aided perhaps by an indomitable subconscious will protesting against this something that had happened to him---were throwing off the effects of the drug hours before an ordinary man would have regained even a hint of sensibility.

He stood up---reeling unsteadily. He was deathly sick. Lightning flashes of pain throbbed through his head. Waves of blackness rolled before his eyes. Surges of numbness swept over his legs and arms. He tried hard to remember. There was something---what was it? Th'---th'---what th' hell?---*th' race*! That was it---th'---th'---th' sweepstakes! In an instant the thought was gone. It kept beating back: *Th' sweepstakes---th' race*---What time was it? Had it been run? He staggered to the door. It was locked! His head was bursting. If he could only get over the nausea. He felt his knees start to give way. No! No! My God, he wouldn't give up! He---oh, yes. *Th' race! Captain Jack---no---th'---th'---maverick---he had to ride*---He must get out! There was a---a---window---sometimes they had them---in the back of the stalls. Maybe the hay was over it. He climbed on the bales. Behind them he could see the opening. God, he was weak! With the sweat of terrible nausea bursting from every pore of his body he pulled the bales back. He fell over the bale on which he had been lying. One hand brushed his hat which had fallen from his head. Mechanically, with stiff fingers, he picked it up and jammed it on again. Then he climbed---crawled---over the hay and pitched forward through the opening, in a limp heap, on the ground outside.

For a moment he lost consciousness completely again: *Th'---th' race---th' maverick! he mustn't forget*---

He fought his way to his feet and groped along back of the building---the stall---which way was it? Down there? No---the other way---

As Carolyn June tightened the rear cinch on the Gold Dust maverick and turned toward the door of the stall with: "Look out, boys---I'm coming out!" the Ramblin' Kid, clutching at the side of the building, reeled around the corner of the stall. The cowboys saw him. He himself saw only black shapes where their horses were.

"Good God!" Skinny cried, "he's drunk!"

Carolyn June heard Skinny's exclamation at the instant the Ramblin' Kid, catching at the half-open door, almost fell into the stall. His eyes stared with a dull, puzzled, unrecognizing vacancy first at Carolyn June and then the Gold Dust maverick. "*Who th' hell*---" he mumbled stiffly. "What---th'---oh, yes---there's th' filly---*th'---th'---race*. It

must---be---time. Th' mare's saddled! That's---that's---funny! I can't remember. Th' race---th' sweepstakes---that's it---"

Reaching over he jerked the reins from the hand of Carolyn June.

"Who---who---get the---" came like the thick growl of a beast from his throat. "You---you---can't ride---she'll---*she'll---kill---*"

Carolyn June shrank back as if she had been struck. She pressed her hands against her cheeks and stepped away with a look of horror and disgust as the Ramblin' Kid backed out of the stall with the Gold Dust maverick. Outside he fumbled grotesquely at the silky mane and climbed weakly into the saddle.

Chuck and Bert started toward him.

"Get---the---hell---" he snarled as he saw their horses---mere shadow shapes they were to him---approach.

"Let him alone!" Skinny said. "He's drunk! You'll just scare the filly and make her hurt him!"

The boys let him go.

With blanched cheeks Carolyn June mounted Red John and with Skinny, Bert and Chuck, rode back to the Clagstone "Six." Her heart was utterly sick. So this was it? It had come out---the brute---the beast that was in him!

They reached the car as the Ramblin' Kid, at the horse entrance, at the other end of the grandstand, came on the track with the Gold Dust maverick.

Old Heck looked up when the group approached. He saw the agony in Carolyn June's eyes and started to speak.

"Th' Ramblin' Kid's drunk," Skinny said dully. "He showed up---yonder he is---" as the beautiful copper-tinted, chestnut filly appeared behind the other horses entered for the two-mile sweepstakes.

"Drunk?" Old Heck cried incredulously. "Are you sure?"

"Watch him!" Chuck said miserably.

The starter was standing with arm outstretched and flag ready to fall. The filly came down the track jumping nervously from side to side in short springing leaps. The starter paused, watch in hand. A shout of admiration and wonder went up from the crowd as the splendid creature dancing down the track was recognized. The next instant it was succeeded by a cry of horror that rolled in a great wave from a thousand throats.

"Th' Ramblin' Kid is drunk! He's drunk---the mare will kill him!" as they saw the slim rider weaving limply in the saddle, his head dropped forward as if he were utterly helpless.

"Rule that horse off the track!" Dorsey, who was standing with Mike Sabota, in a box-seat just below the judges' stand, shouted as he saw the Ramblin' Kid, even in his half-conscious condition, reining the Gold Dust maverick with consummate skill into position, "her rider's drunk!"

The Ramblin' Kid heard the voice and---by some miracle of the mind---recognized it, although his eyes, set and glassy, could not see the speaker.

He turned his head in the direction from which the cry came and answered, slowly measuring each word:

"Go---go---t' hell---you---you---*coyote*!"

The next instant the starter dropped the flag. As it went down the filly crouched and reared straight into the air.

That one second gave the other horses the start.

Then the outlaw mare leaped forward directly behind Thunderbolt, running against the inside rail. Say-So, the Pecos horse, jammed close to the side of the black stallion; Snow Johnson, rider of Prince John, pushed the big sorrel ahead with his nose at the roan's tail; Dash-Away hugged against the heels of Prince John. The Gold Dust maverick was "pocketed!"

A breathless hush fell over the crowd in the grandstand after the first mighty roar:

"They're off!"

Black devils of torture clutched the throat, the mind, the body of the Ramblin' Kid. Streams of fire seemed to be flowing through his veins. He couldn't see---he was blind. "What th'---what th'---hell!" he muttered over and over. He was vaguely conscious of the thunder of hoofs around him---under him. Dimly, black shadows were rushing along at his side. He fought with all his will to master his faculties. Where was he? What was it? Was it a---a---stampede? What? *Oh, yes, th' race---th'---th'--- sweepstakes---that---that was it*---Over and over the fleeting flashes of consciousness kept throwing this one supreme idea on the mirror of his mind!

Not a word was spoken by any of the party at the Clagstone "Six" as the five fastest horses ever on the Eagle Butte track swept past the car toward the first quarter-turn of the course.

Carolyn June's face was as white as marble. Her breast heaved and fell as if it would burst. Dry-eyed, every nerve tense, she stared at the straining racers. Unconsciously she gripped into hard knots of flesh and bone, both hands, while she bit at her underlip until a red drop of blood started from the gash made in the tender skin by her teeth.

"*Drunk*!" she thought, "*drunk!* Beastly drunk---and throwing away the greatest race ever run on a Texas track!"

Old Heck sat impassive as though carved from stone and said nothing.

Ophelia nervously chewed at the finger of her glove while her eyes moistened with sympathy and pity.

Skinny, Chuck and Bert sat gloomily, moodily, on their bronchos and watched Thunderbolt lead the quintette of running horses.

For the life of him Skinny could not keep from thinking of the five hundred dollars he had bet with Sabota, on the race, and the number of white shirts and purple ties he might have bought with the money!

Over in the track-field Parker, Charley and Pedro saw the start of the race and each swore softly and silently to himself.

Sing Pete, alone of the Quarter Circle KT crowd, in the jam of the grandstand, stretched his neck and followed with inscrutable eyes the close-bunched racers. The start had puzzled him, yet he murmured hopefully:

"Maybe all samee Lamblin' Kid he beatee hell out of 'em yet!"

The loyal Chinese cook had wagered the savings of a dozen years on the speed of the Gold Dust maverick's nimble legs and his faith in the "Lamblin' Kid."

A blanket might have covered the five horses as they swung around the first mile.

The speed-mad animals roared down the homestretch, finishing the first half of the race in the almost identical position each had taken in the getaway.

The Ramblin' Kid rode the mile more as an automaton than as a living, conscious human being. He had no memory of time, place, events---save for the instants of rationality he forced his will to bring.

Gradually, though, his mind was clearing.

But which was it---the first half?---the last half? How long had they been running? How many times had they gone around the track? He could not remember!

Down the straight stretch the racers came in a mighty whirlwind of speed.

"Thunderbolt is taking it!"

"The Y-Bar horse leads!"

"Th' black's got 'em!" roared from the throats of the crowd in the grandstand and the mass of humanity crushing the railing along the track.

Dorsey and Sabota leaped to the edge of the box as the horses thundered past the judges' stand. The voice of the owner of Thunderbolt shrieked out in a hoarse bellow:

"Hold him to it, Flip! Keep your lead---you've got the filly!"

The Ramblin' Kid heard again---or thought he heard again---the voice of the Vermejo cattleman. He caught, as an echo, a note of triumph in it. It was like a tonic to his drug-numbed faculties.

Suddenly he saw clearly. He had just a glimpse of Sabota standing by the side of Dorsey. He understood. In a flash it all came to him. The first half of the great sweepstakes race was behind them! Once more they were to circle the track. The glistening black rump of Thunderbolt rose and fell just ahead of the Gold Dust maverick's nose---at her side, crowding her against the rail, was another horse. Which one? It didn't matter! Back of it was another. He was "*pocketed*!" Hell, no wonder Thunderbolt was ahead of the outlaw mare!

Half-way around the quarter-turn he pulled the filly down.

She slackened ever so little. Thunderbolt---the horse at her side---all of them---shot ahead.

He was behind the bunch---clear of the field!

The crowd saw the filly dart to the right. It looked as though she would go over the outside rail before the Ramblin' Kid swung her, in a great arch, to the left clear of, but far behind, the other horses.

He was crazy! The Gold Dust maverick was getting the better of the Ramblin' Kid. He had lost control of the wonderful mare!

So thought the thousands watching the drama on the track before them.

Away over, next to the outside fence, on the far side of the track, open now before him for the long outfield stretch, the Rambling Kid straightened the Gold Dust maverick out. The other racers were still bunched against the inner rail---lengths ahead of the filly.

Leaning low on the neck of the maverick, the Ramblin' Kid began talking, for the first time, to the horse he rode.

"*Baby---Baby! Girl*!" he whispered incoherently almost. "*Go---go*---damn 'em! *'Ophelia'*"---he laughed thickly, reeling in the saddle. "*Hell---no---'Little---Little---Pink Garter!---that's---that's*---what y' are! Little---Pink---Garter_---" he repeated irrationally. "*That's it---show 'em---damn 'em---show 'em what---what runnin'---what real runnin' is!*" fumbling caressingly at the mare's neck with hands numb and stiff and chuckling pitifully, insanely, while his face was drawn with agony nearly unendurable.

Then the Gold Dust maverick ran!

Never had ground flowed with such swiftness under the belly of a horse on a Texas track.

"Good God!" Skinny yelled, "looky yonder! He's passin' them! Th' Ramblin' Kid is passin' 'em!"

No one answered him.

His voice was drowned in the mighty roar that surged from five thousand throats and rolled in waves of echoing and re-echoing sound across the field.

"He's ridin' round 'em!"

"Th' Ramblin' Kid is goin' around them!"

"Great heavens! Look at that horse go!"

"She's a-flyin'! *She's a-flyin*'!"

The Gold Dust maverick closed the gap---she caught Dash-Away---she evened up with Prince John---she left the big sorrel behind---she passed Say-So---nose to nose for a few rods she ran opposite the black wonder---the Thunderbolt horse from the Vermejo.

Flip Williams, spurs raking the flanks of Dorsey's stallion, looked around.

The Ramblin' Kid leaned toward him:

"Hell--–why--–don't you--–*make that--–thing run*!" he sneered at the Y-Bar rider.

The next instant the Gold Dust maverick's neck and shoulders showed in the lead of the Y-Bar stallion.

At the turn for the home stretch the outlaw filly shot ahead of the wonderful black horse from the Vermejo, swung close to the inside rail, and like a flash of gold-brown darted down the track toward the wire.

The grandstand was turned into a madhouse of seething humanity. The immense crowd came to its feet roaring and shrieking with frenzy. Men smashed their neighbors with clenched fists--–not knowing or caring how hard or whom they struck--–or that they themselves were being hit. Women screamed frantically, hysterically, tears streaming from thousands of eyes because of sheer joy at the wonderful thing the Gold Dust maverick was doing. Even the stolid Sing Pete was jumping up and down, shouting:

"*Come on--–come on--–Lamblin' Kid! Beat 'em--–beatee hell out of 'em*!"

Full three lengths in the lead of the "unbeatable" Thunderbolt the Gold Dust maverick flashed under the wire in front of the judges!

Dorsey, shaken in every nerve, lips blue as though he were stricken with a chill, reeled out of the box from which he had watched his whole fortune swept away by the speed of the Cimarron mare. At his side, profaning horrible, obscene oaths staggered Mike Sabota.

Old Heck, white-faced, but his lips drawn in a smile of satisfaction, stood up in the Clagstone "Six" and watched the Ramblin' Kid--–his eyes set and staring, his body twitching convulsively, check the filly, swing her around, ride back to the judges' stand, weakly fling up a hand in salute and then, barely able to sit in the saddle, rein the Gold Dust maverick off the track and ride toward the box stall.

Skinny drew a hand across his eyes and looked at Carolyn June.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XVII

OLD HECK GOES TO TOWN

It was Monday morning, clear and cloudless, with a whiff of a breeze kissing the poplars along the front-yard fence at the Quarter Circle KT. On the sand-hills north of the Cimarron, Pedro was pushing the saddle cavallard toward Rock Creek, where the last half of the beef round-up was to begin. Parker and the cowboys were just splashing their bronchos into the water at the lower ford. Sing Pete, on the high seat of the grub-wagon, was once more clucking and cawing at Old Tom and Baldy as they drew the outfit along the lane and followed the others to the open range.

Old Heck, Skinny, Ophelia and Carolyn June again were alone at the Quarter Circle KT.

The Eagle Butte Rodeo had closed, with one last riotous carnival of wildness at midnight Saturday night.

Once more the straggling town, its pulse gradually beating back to normal, lay half-asleep at the foot of the sun-baked butte that stood silent and drowsy beyond the Sante Fe tracks.

Tom Poole, the lank marshal, loafed as usual about the Elite Amusement Parlor, over which hung a sullen quiet reflecting the morbid emotions of Mike Sabota, its brutish-built proprietor, resulting from his heavy losses on Thunderbolt in the two-mile sweepstakes when the Gold Dust maverick, ridden by the drug-crazed Ramblin' Kid, darted under the wire lengths ahead of the black Vermejo stallion.

Friday evening Old Heck had met Dorsey in the pool-room.

Judge Ivory handed over to the owner of the Quarter Circle KT the Y-Bar cattleman's check for ten thousand dollars and the bill of sale he had recklessly given and which transferred to Old Heck all the cattle the Vermejo rancher owned.

Dorsey was game.

"You put it on me," he said to Old Heck "but the Ramblin' Kid won square and I'm not squealing!"

Old Heck turned the check slowly over in his hand and looked at it with a quizzical frown on his face:

"I reckon this is good?"

"It's my exact balance," Dorsey replied; "I saw to that this morning."

For a long minute Old Heck studied the bill of sale that made him owner of every cow-brute burnt with the Y-Bar brand.

"My men will gather the cattle within fifteen days," Dorsey said dully, noting the half-questioning look on Old Heck's face, "or you can send your own crew, just as you please. I suppose you'll meet me half-way and receive the stock in Eagle Butte?"

"Can Thunderbolt run?" Old Heck asked irrelevantly.

"Not as fast as that imp of hell of the Ramblin' Kid's!" Dorsey answered instantly and with a short laugh.

Old Heck chuckled.

"You say you'll turn the Y-Bar cattle over to me within fifteen days?" he asked again, reverting to a study of the paper he held in his hand.

"Yes," Dorsey replied; "is that satisfactory?"

"You're a pretty good sport, after all, Dorsey," Old Heck said quietly. "I'll cash this check"---–glancing at the yellow slip of paper---–"and this thing, here---–we'll just tear it up!" as he reduced the bill of sale to fragments. "Keep your cattle, Dorsey," he added, "ten thousand dollars is enough for you to pay for your lesson!"

Dorsey flushed a dull red.

"I ain't asking---–"

"I know you're not," Old Heck interrupted, "and that's the reason I tore up that bill of sale!"

"Old Heck," Dorsey said, his voice trembling, "you're white! I'd like to shake---–"

The rival cattlemen gripped hands and the racing feud between the Quarter Circle KT and the Y-Bar was ended.

A week later Dorsey sent Flip Williams to the Quarter Circle KT. The Vermejo cowboy led the beautiful black stallion that had mastered Quicksilver and had in turn been whipped by the Gold Dust maverick.

"Dorsey said, Tell Old Heck Thunderbolt's a pretty good saddle horse,'" Flip explained, "'and he'd do to change off with Quicksilver once in a while! So he sent him over as a sort of keepsake!'"

The Ramblin' Kid did not return to the Quarter Circle KT until late Sunday night. After the two-mile sweepstakes he was horribly ill. All Friday night he laid, in a semi-conscious condition, in the stall with Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick.

Parker and some of the cowboys visited the stall after the race, but they thought the Ramblin' Kid was drunk and the best thing was to allow him to sleep it off.

"I can't figure it out," Chuck said as they turned away, "he never did get drunk before that I knew of---"

"You can't tell what he's liable to do," Charley interrupted, "he sure took an awful chance getting on a tear at the time he did!"

"Well, he won the race," Parker said admiringly, "drunk or sober, you've got to give him credit for that!"

Saturday the Ramblin' Kid got Pedro to stay with the horses while he went over to the Elite Amusement Parlor. He had nothing to say to Sabota or any of the loafers in the place.

He was looking for Gyp Streetor.

Until Sunday afternoon he searched Eagle Butte, trying to find the tout. All he wanted was to locate the man who had sold him that cup of coffee---he could remember drinking the coffee; after that until the following morning all was hazy.

But Gyp was gone.

When the Gold Dust maverick, with the Ramblin' Kid swaying uncertainly on her back, had appeared on the track for the two-mile run, the tout, his eyes like those of a harried rat, sneaked out of the crowd in front of the book-makers' booths and hurried toward the Santa Fe railroad yards. An hour later he slipped into an empty freight car---part of a train headed for the West---and Eagle Butte saw him no more.

It was midnight Sunday when the Ramblin' Kid reached the Quarter Circle KT, turned Captain Jack and the outlaw filly into the circular corral, and without disturbing Old Heck, Parker, or the cowboys, already asleep in the bunk-house, sought his bed.

Monday morning he was at breakfast with the others.

Throughout the meal the Ramblin' Kid was silent. Carolyn June, still shocked by what she thought was his intoxication the day of the race, and believing he had remained in Eagle Butte over Saturday night and Sunday to continue the debauch, ignored him.

None of the others cared to question him and the Ramblin' Kid himself volunteered no information.

Once only, Old Heck mentioned the race.

"That was a pretty good ride you made in the two-mile event," he said, addressing the Ramblin' Kid; "it looked at first like the filly---"

"You won your money, didn't you?" the Ramblin' Kid interrupted in a tone that plainly meant there was nothing further to be said.

That was the only reference to the incidents of Friday afternoon.

After breakfast the Ramblin' Kid saddled the Gold Dust maverick, turned Captain Jack with the cavallard, and with Parker and the other Quarter Circle KT cowboys rode away to help gather the beef cattle from the west half of the Cimarron range.

The week that followed passed quickly.

During the entire period the Kiowa lay under a mantle of sunshine by day and starlit skies by night.

Carolyn June once more provided the evening dessert of coffee-jelly and Skinny finished teaching her the art of dipping bread in milk and egg batter, frying it in hot butter, and calling the result "French toast"

Skinny again put on the white shirt and the shamrock tinted tie. He had not dared to wear what Chuck called his "love-making rigging" during the week of the Rodeo. It would have made him entirely too conspicuous among the hundreds of other cowboys gathered at Eagle Butte for the big celebration. Situations filled with embarrassment would have been almost certain to develop.

"It's getting so it needs a washing a little," Skinny remarked to Carolyn June the first time he reappeared in the once snowy garment.

He was quite right.

Carolyn June herself had noticed that the shirt had lost some of its immaculateness.

"It doesn't look hardly as white as it did at first!"

"No, it don't," Skinny answered seriously. "I guess I'll wash it to-morrow. I never did wash one but I reckon it ain't so awful hard to do---"

"I'll help you," Carolyn June volunteered. "I've never washed one either, but it will be fun to learn how!"

The next day they washed the shirt.

The ceremony was performed in the kitchen after they had finished doing the breakfast dishes. Ophelia, after water for a vase of roses, came into the room while Skinny was rinsing the shirt in the large tin dishpan.

The garment was a sickly yellow.

"Darned if I know what's wrong with it," Skinny said, a trifle discouraged, while Carolyn June, her sleeves rolled above dimpled elbows, stood by and watched the slushy operation. "Carolyn June and me both have blamed near rubbed our fingers off trying to get it to look right again but somehow or other it don't seem to work."

"Did you put bluing in your rinse water?" Ophelia asked with a laugh.

"Bluing?" Carolyn June and Skinny questioned together. "What does that do to it?"

"Bleaches it---makes it white," the widow replied with another laugh as she returned to the front room.

"By golly, maybe that's what it needs!" Skinny exclaimed hopefully.

"Of course," Carolyn June cried gaily. "How silly we were not to think of it! Any one ought to know you put bluing in the water when you wash things. Wonder if Sing Pete has any around anywhere?"

They searched the kitchen shelves and found a pint bottle, nearly full, of the liquid indigo compound.

"How much do you suppose we ought to put in?" Carolyn June asked, pulling the cork from the bottle and holding it poised over the pan of water in which the shirt, a slimy, dingy mass, floated drunkenly.

"Darned if I know," Skinny said, scratching his head. "She said it would make it white---I reckon the more you put in the whiter the blamed thing'll be. Try about half of it at first and see how 'it works!"

"Gee, isn't it pretty?" Carolyn June gurgled as she tipped the bottle and the waves of indigo spread through the water, covering the shirt with a deep crystalline blue.

"You bet!" Skinny exclaimed. "That ought to fix it!"

It did.

The shirt, when finally dried, was a wonderful thing---done in a sort of mottled, streaky, marbled sky and cloud effect.

But Skinny wore it, declaring he liked it better---that it more nearly matched the shamrock tie---than when it was "too darned white and everything!"

To Parker and the boys on the beef hunt everything was business.

The days were filled with hard riding as they gathered the cattle, bunched the fat animals, cut out and turned back those unfit for the market, stood guard at night over the herd, steadily and rapidly cleaned the west half of the Kiowa range of the stuff that was ready to sell.

It was supper-time on one of the last days of the round-up.

The outfit was camped at Dry Buck. Bed rolls, wrapped in dingy gray tarpaulins or black rubber ponchos, were scattered about marking the places where each cowboy that night would sleep. The herd was bunched a quarter of a mile away in a little cove backed by the rim of sand-hills. Captain Jack and Silver Tip, riderless but with their saddles still on, were nipping the grass near the camp---the Ramblin' Kid and Chuck were to take the first watch, until midnight, at "guard mount." Parker and the cowboys were squatted, legs doubled under them, their knees forming a table on which to hold

the white porcelain plate of "mulligan," in a circle at the back of the grub-wagon. Sing Pete trotted around the group and poured black, blistering-hot coffee into the unbreakable cups on the ground at the side of the hungry, dusty riders.

The sun had just dipped into the ragged peaks of the Costejo range and a reddish-purple crown lay on the crest of Sentinel Mountain forty miles to the southeast.

"It looks to me like Parker's sort of losing out," Chuck suddenly remarked, as he wiped his lips on the back of his hand after washing down a mouthful of the savory stew with gulps of steaming coffee. "Ophelia stuck closer than thunder to Old Heck all through the Rodeo."

Parker reddened and growled: "Aw, hell---don't start that up again!"

"By criminy, she didn't stick any closer to Old Heck than Skinny stuck to Carolyn June," Bert complained. "Nobody else had a look-in!"

"Skinny's sure earning his money," Charley muttered half enviously.

"Bet he's got on that white shirt and having a high old time right now! They're probably in the front room and she's playing *La Paloma* on the piano while Old Skinny's setting back rolling his eyes up like a bloated yearling!" Chuck laughed.

"And Old Heck and Ophelia are out on the porch holding hands and looking affectionate while the mosquitos are chewing their necks and ankles!" Bert added with a snicker.

"Her and Old Heck'll probably be married before we get back," Chuck said solemnly, with a wink at the Ramblin' Kid and a sly glance in the direction of Parker.

"Do you reckon there's any danger of it?" Parker asked in a voice that showed anxiety, but not of the sort the cowboys thought.

"They're darned near sure to," Chuck replied seriously, heaving what he tried to make resemble a sigh of sympathy.

"What makes you think so?" Parker questioned, seeking confirmation from the lips of other, of a hope that had been rising in his heart since the first moment he had begun to regret his rash proposal of marriage to the widow.

"Well, for one thing"---Chuck began soberly---"the way they'd look at each other---"

"I saw her squeeze Old Heck's arm once!" Bert interrupted.

"Aw, she's done that lots of times," Chuck said airily; "that ain't nothing special! But the worst indication was them flowers she wore on her bosom every day---*Old Heck bought 'em*!" he finished dramatically, leaning over and speaking tensely as though it pained him immeasurably to break the news to Parker while he fixed on Old Heck's rival a look he imagined was one of supreme pity.

"Yeah, he had them sent up from Las Vegas," Bert added, picking up the cue and lying glibly. "I saw the express agent deliver a box of them to him one day. There was four dollars and eighty cents charges on 'em!"

A gleam, which the cowboys misunderstood, came into Parker's eyes.

"Why don't you and Old Heck fight a duel about Ophelia?" Bert suggested tragically and in a voice that was aimed to convey sympathy to the Quarter Circle KT foreman. "You could probably kill him!"

"Sure, that's the way they do in books," Chuck urged.

"Yes," the Ramblin' Kid broke in with a slow drawl, "fight one with sour-dough biscuits at a hundred yards! That'd be sensible---then both of you'd be genuine heroes!"

"Gosh, th' Ramblin' Kid's awake!" Bert laughed. "How does it happen you ain't fell in love with Carolyn June?" he asked, turning toward the slender, dark-eyed, young cowboy. "So far you're the only one that's escaped. The rest of us are breaking our hearts---"

For an instant the Ramblin' Kid flashed on Bert a look of hot anger while a dull red glow spread over his sun-tanned cheeks.

"There's enough damned fools loose on th' Kiowa range without me bein' one, too!" he retorted slowly, getting up and going toward Captain Jack.

"Blamed if he'll stand a bit of joshing on that subject!" Bert muttered, his own face flushing front the look the Ramblin' Kid had given him.

"Not a darned bit," Chuck added, "but it is funny; the way he shys off from Carolyn June!"

"Th' Ramblin' Kid ain't interested in women," Charley said, as they pitched their plates to one side and the meal was finished. "He ain't the kind that bothers with females!"

When Chuck had idly suggested that Old Heck and Ophelia might be married before Parker and the Quarter Circle KT cowboys returned to the ranch from the beef hunt, he did not know it, but the words he spoke in jest voiced the very thought at the same instant in the mind of Old Heck---miles away though he was. Perhaps it was mental telepathy, thought vibration, subconscious soul communication---or a mere coincident, that caused Chuck, far out on the open range, to speak the thing Old Heck, sitting at supper with Carolyn June, Ophelia and Skinny, at the Quarter Circle KT was thinking.

Ever since Parker had voluntarily surrendered during the Rodeo, his right to alternate, day and day about, with Old Heck in the widow's society, the owner of the Quarter Circle KT had been watching Ophelia, covertly and carefully, for any sign of "Movements" or an outbreak as a dreaded suffragette.

While he watched her the widow was becoming more and more a necessity in the life of Old Heck.

The night of the conversation between Parker and the cowboys, away over at Rock Creek, Old Heck sat at the supper table in the kitchen at the ranch and debated in his mind the future relationships of Parker, Ophelia and himself. In a few days Parker would return. Almost certainly the foreman would again wish to share, fifty-fifty, in the courtship of the widow. Old Heck felt that if such were so those odd days, when Parker was with Ophelia, would be little less than hell. Yet, he dreaded that suffragette business. If she would only break loose and let him see how bad she was liable to be he could easily make up his mind. He was almost ready to take a chance, to ask Ophelia to marry him and settle it all at once.

Throughout the meal he was moody. After supper he had little to say and the next few; days he brooded constantly over the matter.

Tuesday Parker and the cowboys were expected to return with the beef cattle. Monday morning, at breakfast, the widow asked Old Heck if he would take her to Eagle Butte that day.

"I must see the minister's wife," she said, as Old Heck steered the Clagstone "Six" up the grade that led out to the bench and to Eagle Butte, "---it is very important"

Old Heck murmured assent and drove silently on. Probably she was going to start a "Movement" or something to-day! To-morrow, Parker would be back. It sure did put a man in a dickens of a fix!

Before they reached the long bridge across the Cimarron a mile from Eagle Butte Old Heck's mind was made up.

"You want to stop at the preacher's house?" he asked.

"If you please," Ophelia replied, "for some little time. There are things to discuss---"

"Would you mind if I drove around to the court-house first?" Old Heck questioned again.

"Not at all," she answered sweetly.

A few moments later Old Heck stopped the Clagstone "Six" in front of the yellow sandstone county building. Leaving Ophelia in the car with the remark, "I'll be out in a minute!" he went inside and hurried along the dark corridor that led to the clerk's office.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SHAME TO WASTE IT

In Old Heck's eyes was a set, determined look when he came out of the court-house and stepped up to the Clagstone "Six" in which he had left Ophelia a few moments before. The end of a long yellow envelope protruded from the side pocket of his coat. His face was flushed and his hand trembled slightly as he opened the door of the car and climbed into the front seat beside the widow. He pressed his foot on the "starter," threw the clutch into gear and turning the car about drove slowly toward the home of Reverend Hector R. Patterson, Eagle Butte's only resident clergyman.

He did not speak until the car stopped at the gate of the little unpainted parsonage beside the white, weather-boarded church.

"Wait a minute," he said as Ophelia started to get out of the Clagstone "Six," "maybe I'll go in with you!"

"Splendid," the widow replied, settling again against the cushions. "I'd be delighted to have you come along and I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Patterson would be glad to see you!"

"Well, it---it"---Old Heck stammered, not knowing how to begin what he wanted to say---"it---it all depends on you! Here"---he said abruptly as a bright thought came to him---"read that and---and---tell me what you think about it!" at the same time pulling the yellow envelope from his pocket and handing it to Ophelia.

With a questioning lift of her eyebrows the widow drew the folded, official-looking document from the envelope.

"Why, it's a---it's a---" she started to say and stopped confused, her cheeks blazing crimson.

"It's a marriage license---" Old Heck said, coming to her rescue, "---made out for you and me. I---I---didn't know what to tell the clerk when he asked me how old you was---so I just guessed at it!"

The widow looked shyly down at the names written on the document.

The license granted "Ophelia Cobb, age *twenty-three*, of Hartville, Connecticut, and Josiah Alonzo Heck, age forty-eight, of Kiowa County, Texas," the right to marry.

Ophelia's actual years were thirty-nine!

From under drooping lashes she glanced up suspiciously into the earnest gray eyes beside her. She saw that Old Heck had been sincere in his "guess."

"But---but---"

"I know it's kind of unexpected," Old Heck interrupted nervously, "---perhaps I had ought to have said something about it first, but, well, I figured I'd go on and get the license and show that my intentions was good and---and---sort of risk the whole thing on one throw! It always seemed like there was something missing at the Quarter Circle KT," he went on, his voice grown softer and trembling a bit, "and---and when you came I---I---found out what it was---"

Ophelia sat silently with downcast eyes, her pulse racing, the license unfolded on her lap, while she bit uncertainly at the tip of the finger of her glove.

"I---I---know I ain't very good-looking or---or---anything," Old Heck continued, "but I thought maybe you---you---liked me a little---enough anyhow to get married---that is if you--. Oh-h---thunder, Ophelia!" he exclaimed in despair, feeling that he was hopelessly floundering, "I---I---love you! Please let's use that license! Let's use it right away ---to-day---and get it over with!" he urged as the widow still hesitated.

"But---I---I'm not suitably dressed---" she stammered.

"I think that dress you've got on is the prettiest goods I ever saw in my life," he interrupted, looking adoringly at the clinging summer fabric caressing Ophelia's shapely form, "I always did think it would be awful appropriate for us to---to---get married in!" he finished pleadingly.

"But---Carolyn June and---and---Parker---" Ophelia murmured.

At the mention of Parker, Old Heck started while a look of anguish came into his eyes. So she loved Parker! That was why she was so backward, he thought. Well, the Quarter Circle KT foreman was a little better-looking, maybe, and some younger! He couldn't blame her.

His head dropped. For a moment Old Heck was silent, a dull, sickening hurt gripping his heart. A deep sigh escaped from his lips. He reached over and picked up the license.

"I---I---guess I made a mistake," he said numbly. "We'll just---just---tear this thing up and forget about it!"

Ophelia looked demurely up at him, her mouth twitching. One small gloved hand slipped over and rested on the strong brown fingers that held the license. Roses flamed over the full round throat and spread their blush to her cheeks. Her eyes were like pools of liquid blue:

"Don't tear it---it---up!" she whispered with a little laugh---a laugh that sent the blood leaping, like fire, through Old Heck's veins, "it---it would be a shame to waste it!"

For an instant Old Heck was dazed. He looked at her as if he could not believe he had heard aright. Suddenly a wave of undiluted happiness swept over him.

"Ophelia!" he cried huskily. "Oh, Ophelia!" and the minister's three small sons, pausing in their play in the grassless yard at the side of the house, while they watched the beautiful car standing in front of the parsonage gate, saw the owner of the Quarter Circle KT, in broad daylight, on the principal residence street of Eagle Butte, before the eyes of the whole world---if the whole world cared to look---throw his arms around the plump lady sitting beside him and press one long, rapturous kiss on her moist, unresisting lips!

A moment later Ophelia and Old Heck, both much embarrassed but tremulously happy, stepped inside the door of the parsonage.

They were driving away from the minister's house---going to the Occidental Hotel for a little all-by-their-ownselves "wedding luncheon"---before either thought of the matter concerning which Ophelia had desired to see the clergyman's wife.

"Gee whiz!" Old Heck exclaimed, "you forgot that consultation or whatever it was with Mrs. Patterson to start your woman's suffrage 'movement'---"

"To start my what?"

"Your 'woman's rights,' 'female voter's organization'---or whatever it is!" Old Heck explained, a new-born tolerance in his voice. "I didn't mean to interfere with your political activities---"

Ophelia threw back! her head, while a ripple of laughter trilled out above the purr of the Clagstone "Six."

"Why, my dear---dear---Old Boy!" she cried, "I am not engaged in 'political activities,' or 'suffragette movements!' Of course," she continued archly, "I believe women ought to be allowed to vote---if they haven't intelligence enough for that they haven't brains enough to be good 'pardners' with their husbands---"

"By gosh, you're right!" Old Heck agreed, "I never thought of it that way before!"

"And," she continued, "naturally I shall vote whenever the opportunity comes, but I'm not an 'Organizer' for anything of that kind. Mrs. Patterson and I are going to organize the wives, sisters and sweethearts, in Eagle Butte, into a club for the study of 'Scientific and Efficient Management of the Home!' We think we should be as proficient in those arts---and which we believe are peculiarly womanly functions---as the men are in the direction of the more strenuous business affairs in which they themselves are engaged."

"So that's what you're an 'Organizer' for?" Old Heck queried while a radiant contentment spread over his face.

"That is it," Ophelia said simply, adding with a most becoming heightening of color, "it is so we will be---will be---better wives!"

"My Gawd!" Old Heck breathed fervently. "My Gawd! The Lord has been good to me to-day!"

While Old Heck and Ophelia were in Eagle Butte getting married, Skinny and Carolyn June had been riding line on the upland pasture fence. They had just returned to the Quarter Circle KT, unsaddled their horses, turned them into the pasture, gone to the house and stopped a moment on the front porch to watch the glow in the west---the sun was dipping into a thundercap over the Costejo Mountains---when the Clagstone "Six" rolled down the grade and up to the string of poplars before the house.

"Gee, we thought you two had eloped!" Carolyn June laughed as the couple climbed out of the car and came, rather bashfully, in at the gate. Old Heck and Ophelia looked at each other guiltily.

"We did come darn near it!" Old Heck chuckled, plunging at once into the task of breaking the news. "We got married---I reckon you'd call that the next thing to eloping!"

"Got married?" Skinny and Carolyn June cried together.

"Who---who---got married?" Skinny repeated incredulously.

"Ophelia and me," Old Heck answered with a sheepish grin but proudly. "Who else did you think we meant? We just thought," he continued by way of explanation, "we'd go ahead and do it kind of private and save a lot of excitement and everything!"

Carolyn June threw her arms around Ophelia and kissed her.

"Good-by, chaperon," she laughed With a half-sob in her throat, "h---hello, 'Aunt.'" Then she strangled Old Heck with a hug that made him gasp.

"What the devil---are you trying to do---choke me?"

"Well, by thunder, Old Heck!" Skinny finally managed to ejaculate, "it was the sensiblest thing you ever done! I---I've---been"---with a sidelong look at Carolyn June---"kind of figuring on doing it myself!"

Carolyn June saw the expression in Skinny's eyes. A pained look came into her own. She had known, for a long while, that sooner or later there would have to come an understanding between this big, overgrown, juvenile-hearted cowboy and herself. She resolved then that it should come quickly. Further delay would be cruel to him. Besides, she was sick of flirtations. Her disappointment in the character of the Ramblin' Kid, her realization of his weakness, when he had gotten, as she believed, beastly drunk at the moment so much depended on him the day of the two-mile sweepstakes, had hurt deeply. Somehow, even his magnificent ride and the fact that, in spite of his condition, he won the race, had not taken the sting away. She had thought the Ramblin' Kid was real---rough and crude, perhaps, but all man, rugged-hearted and honest. Sometimes she wondered if the queer unexplainable antagonism between herself and the sensitive young cowboy had not, in a measure, been responsible for his sudden moral breaking down. The thought caused her to lose some of that frivolity that inspired the dance and the wild flirtations she carried on that night with all the cowboys of the Quarter Circle KT. After all, these plain, simple-acting men of the range were just boys grown big in God's great out-of-doors where things are taken for what they seem to be. No wonder an artless look from sophisticated brown eyes swept them off their feet!

She made up her mind to disillusion Skinny at once.

After supper the quartette gathered in the front room.

"Come on, Skinny," Carolyn June said with forced gaiety, "let us take a walk. That pair of cooing doves"---–with a playfully tender glance at Ophelia and Old Heck---–"wish nothing so much as to be permitted to 'goo-goo' at each other all by their little lonelies!"

Bareheaded she and Skinny strolled out the front gate and along the road that led up to the bench. At the top of the grade they sat down, side by side, on a large boulder that hung on the brink of the bench. The Quarter Circle KT lay before them---–restful and calm in the shadows of early evening. The poplars along the front-yard fence stood limp in the silent air. Across the valley the sand-hills were mellowing with the coming softness of twilight. Up the river, to the west, beyond Eagle Butte, a summer thunder-cloud was climbing higher and higher into the sky. In the direction of Dry Buck, far toward the northwest, a fog of dust was creeping along the horizon, gradually approaching the upland pasture. Skinny saw it.

"By golly," he cried, "that's either Parker and the boys coming in with the cattle---–or else it's a band of sheep! It surely can't be 'woollys'---–they never get over in there! If it's our outfit, though, they've got through quicker than they figured!"

A few moments later the dim bulk of the "grub-wagon" appeared, miles away, slowly crawling toward the Quarter Circle KT.

For a time Skinny and Carolyn June were silent.

Skinny's hand crept slyly across the rock and found the pink fingers of Carolyn June. She did not draw away.

"Carolyn June," he whispered haltingly, "Carolyn June---–I---–Old Heck and Ophelia have got married---–let's you and---–and---–"

"Please, Skinny, don't say it!" she interrupted, her voice trembling. "I---–I know what you mean! It hurts me. Listen, Skinny"---–she hurried on, determined to end it quickly---–"maybe you will despise me, but---–I like you, truly I do---–but not *that* way! I don't want to grieve you---–I wish us to be just good friends---–that's why I'm telling you! Let's be friends, Skinny---–just friends---–we can't be any more than that---–"

Skinny understood. A dull, throbbing pain tightened about his throat. His fingers gripped Carolyn June's hand an instant and then relaxed. The whole world seemed suddenly blank.

"Can't you---–won't you---–ever---–ca---–care?" he asked in a voice filled with despair.

"I do care, boy," she replied softly, "I do care---–but not that way! Oh, Skinny," she exclaimed, wishing to make it as easy as possible for the sentimental cowboy at her side, "maybe I have done wrong to let you go ahead, but, well, I found out---–I guessed the 'arrangements'---–how you had been chosen to make 'love' to me and how Parker and Uncle Josiah were to divide Ophelia between them. Perhaps that is why I have flirted so---–just to punish you all! Truly, Skinny, I'm sorry. Please don't hate me like---–like---–the Ramblin' Kid does!" she finished with a shaky little laugh.

"He---–don't hate you," Skinny answered dully, "at least I don't think th' Ramblin' Kid hates you---–or anybody. And you knowed all the time that I was getting paid to make love to you? Well, I was," he added chokingly, "but I'd have done it for nothing if I'd had the chance!"

"Yes, Skinny," she replied, "I knew---I know---and I don't blame you!"

"I don't blame you, either," he said humbly, "it was a---a---excuse me, Carolyn June---a damned mean trick to frame up on you and Ophelia that way---but we didn't know what to do with you! I reckon," he continued in the same despairing tone, "I was a blamed fool!"

For a long moment they sat silent.

"Carolyn June," Skinny finally said, a sigh of resignation breaking from his lips, "I'll be what you said---just a good friend---I always will be that to you! But before we start in, do you mind if I---if I---go up to Eagle Butte and get---drunk!"

In spite of herself she laughed. But in it was a tenderness almost mother-like.

"Poor disappointed, big boy," she answered and her eyes filled, "if it will make you happy, go ahead and get---get---drunk, 'soused,' all over---just this once!"

With only a passing pang Carolyn June was willing for Skinny to get drunk---to do the thing she had been scarcely able to forgive in the Ramblin' Kid!

For an instant she wondered why.

A half-hour later Skinny and Carolyn June went silently down the grade to the ranch house. They had gone up the hill---lovers; they returned---"good friends"---and such they would always be.

* * * * *

It was nearly ten o'clock when Sing Pete stopped the grub-wagon at the bunk-house; Pedro wrangled the saddle cavallard into the pasture below the barn; Parker and the cowboys jogged their bronchos to the stable door and the Ramblin' Kid, riding the Gold Dust maverick---Captain Jack at her heels---rode to the circular corral, jerked the saddle from the filly's back and turned the little roan stallion and the outlaw mare inside the corral.

Old Heck and Skinny heard the commotion and went out to where Parker and the cowboys were unsaddling their horses.

"Well, you got through, did you?" Old Hack questioned casually.

"Yes," Parker replied, "we've got the beef critters in I guess---they're in the upland pasture. There are seven hundred and ninety, I think it is, that'll do for the market."

"That's pretty good," Old Heck answered with satisfaction. "We'll push them right on into Eagle Butte to-morrow or next day and ship them. The cars will be in to-night, the agent said. I'm sending them to Chicago this time. I'd like to see you, private, a minute, Parker!" he finished abruptly.

"What do you want?" Parker asked suspiciously, as he followed Old Heck around the corner of the barn.

"It's about Ophelia---" Old Heck began.

Parker's heart leaped and then dropped with a sickening foreboding of something disagreeable. The widow, he thought instantly, had told Old Heck about that darned fool proposal of marriage and was going to insist on him coming across and making good! There was no way out.

"I---I---reckon I'll have to do it if she's determined," Parker stuttered; "but---aw, hell---I must have been crazy---"

"Who's determined on what?" Old Heck asked, puzzled by the queer jumble coming from the lips of the Quarter Circle KT foreman, "and how crazy?"

"Ophelia determined on marrying me!" Parker blurted out.

"Ophelia marry *you*?" Old Heck exclaimed. "Marry you! She can't! Her and me have already done it. We got married to-day---that was what I wanted to tell you!"

Momentarily a pang of regret shot through Parker's heart. It was quickly followed by a sense of relief.

"You---you---and Ophelia married?" he stammered.

"We sure are," Old Heck answered positively. "We done it to-day!"

Suddenly Parker determined to "cover up."

"My, lord!" he half-groaned, pretending terrible grief, "this is awful!
It---it---come so sudden---but there ain't no hard feelings, Old Heck!
I---I---wish you both joy and happiness!"

"Darned if that ain't white of you, Parker!" Old Heck exclaimed, immensely relieved. "I won't forget it! When you and the boys take them steers to Chicago, stay over a week or so and have a good time and count it in on expenses!"

Parker turned his head and in the darkness winked solemnly at a yellow star above the peak of Sentinel Mountain.

He and Old Heck started toward the house.

"Hey, you fellows!" Old Heck called, pausing and turning toward the barn where the cowboys were putting away their saddles, "when you get through all of you come on up to the house! Ophelia and me's married and the bride is waiting to be congratulated!"

"Good lord," Charley gasped, "hear that, fellers? Old Heck said him and the widow's married!"

"Gosh!" Chuck laughed, "it must have been a jolt to Parker! I bet his heart's plumb bu'sted!"

As soon as their saddles were put away the cowboys hurried toward the house. They met the Ramblin' Kid, crossing from the circular corral to the bunk-house.

"Come on," Bert called to him, "Old Heck and Ophelia's gone and got married! We're going up to the house to sympathize with the widow!"

"I ain't needed," the Ramblin' Kid answered with a careless laugh. "You fellers can take my 'love' to th' afflicted couple!"

After the cowboys had gone to the house Skinny went and got Old Pie Face. Stopping at the stable, he saddled the pinto and strolled over to the bunk-house. The Ramblin' Kid was lying stretched on his bed. Skinny rolled the white shirt carefully into a bundle and wrapped a newspaper around it.

"What you goin' to do?" the Ramblin' Kid asked.

"I'm goin' to town!" Skinny answered shortly. "I'm going up to Eagle Butte and get on a hell of a drunk---if I can get hold of any boot-leg whisky---Carolyn June and me have bu'sted up on our love-making!"

"Going to get drunk, are you?" the Ramblin' Kid queried with a note of scorn in his voice, "an' forget your sorrows?"

"Yes," Skinny retorted, "I'm going to get drunk as you was the day of the race!"

"Drunk as I was th' day of th' race?" the Ramblin' Kid repeated quizzically. "Oh, hell, yes---now I understand---" pausing, while a smile curled his lips.

"Yes," Skinny retorted again. "Where'd you get yours that day?"

"Never mind," was the answer. "I guess I'll go to Eagle Butte with you! You'll need somebody to ride herd on you while you're snortin' around. Anyhow, I feel like goin' on a tear myself---not a drunk---a man's a darned fool that'll let any woman make a whisky barrel out of him! But I got an itchin' for a little poker game or somethin'. Wait till I get Captain Jack!"

"Where's Skinny and th' Ramblin' Kid?" Old Heck asked after he and Parker and the cowboys were at the house and the first flush of embarrassment had passed.

Carolyn June thought she knew where Skinny was, but did not answer.

"I don't know what's become of Skinny," Parker said. "Th' Ramblin' Kid's probably out mopin' somewhere. I think he's getting ready to 'ramble' again---he's been acting plumb despondent ever since the Rodeo in Eagle Butte!"

Carolyn June stepped to the door. Dimly through the darkness she saw two riders pass up the grade that led to the bench and turn their horses to the west, toward Eagle Butte, and ride straight into the outflung shadow of the thunder-storm---from which now and then leaped jagged flashes of lightning---and which was rolling from the Costejo Mountains across the Kiowa range in the direction of the Quarter Circle KT.

Silent and with a heavy heart she turned away from the door.

CHAPTER XIX

THE GREEK GETS HIS

It was long after midnight when the Ramblin' Kid and Skinny rode into Eagle Butte and the heels of Captain Jack and Old Pie Face echoed noisily on the board floor of the livery stable as the bronchos turned into the wide, open doorway of the barn. A drowsy voice from the cubby-hole of an office called:

"In just a minute---I'll be out!"

"Aw, thunder," Skinny answered, "go on back to sleep, we'll find stalls and put 'em up!"

Captain Jack and Old Pie Face cared for, Skinny and the Ramblin' Kid stepped out into the deserted street.

Eagle Butte was sleeping.

Here and there a blaze of light from a store window invited belated passers to covet the bargains offered within; a half-dozen incandescent bulbs, swung on cross-wires at intervals along the street, glowed feebly as if weary with the effort to beat back the darkness clutching at the throat of the town; over the sidewalk in front of the Elite Amusement Parlor an illuminated red and green sign told that Mike Sabota's place was still open; across the porch of the Occidental Hotel and spilling itself on the ground out in the street a stream of light guided weary travelers to the portals of that ancient, though hospitable, institution; from the sides of the Butte beyond the railroad tracks a coyote yelped shrilly a jerky, wailing challenge---a dozen dogs, suddenly aroused in different parts of the town, answered.

"Pretty dead-lookin'," the Ramblin' Kid remarked. "Let's go down to Sabota's."

"All right," Skinny replied, and they moved down the street.

The pool-room offered nothing of interest. A couple of traveling men, waiting for the early morning train, were playing a listless game of billiards at one of the tables; a pair of Jap sugar-beet workers and a negro section hand sat half-asleep and leaned against the wall; "Red" Jackson, Sabota's chief lieutenant, with an air of utter boredom, lounged behind the soft-drink bar. Sabota was not there.

"What's happened to everybody?" Skinny asked; "where's Mike?"

"Everybody's got religion, I guess," Red yawned, "and gone to bed. What do you want with Sabota?" looking suspiciously at the Ramblin' Kid; "he's over at Vegas; won't be back till to-morrow---or to-day it is now, I reckon---evening sometime!"

"Th' Ramblin' Kid and me have been out in the rain," Skinny said suggestively, "and thought we might take cold---"

"Nothing doing!" Red laughed, "ain't a drop around! When Mike gets back he'll fix you up, maybe---that's what he's gone after!"

"We'd just as well go to bed!" Skinny grumbled disgustedly to the Ramblin' Kid.

"I reckon," was the laconic answer.

They returned to the hotel, roused the clerk from his doze, secured a room and retired.

It was eight o'clock when they got up.

Both went directly to the livery stable and saw that Captain Jack and Old Pie Face were properly attended to. While at the barn Skinny took the bundle he had wrapped in the bunk-house at the ranch from the saddle where he had tied it.

"What's that?" the Ramblin' Kid queried.

"It's that darned shirt!" Skinny retorted. "I'm going to make Old Leon eat it---it wasn't the size Parker asked for!"

The Ramblin' Kid laughed, but said nothing.

They returned to the hotel and had breakfast. Manilla Endora waited on them. Before Carolyn June and Ophelia came to the Quarter Circle KT Manilla's yellow hair and blue eyes were the flames that fanned the affections of Skinny. He felt guilty as, sweetly as ever and without a hint of reproach, Manilla took their orders and served them with their ham and eggs and coffee.

After breakfast Skinny and the Ramblin' Kid explored the town.

Eagle Butte had come to life. The stores were open. Business was brisk. The "dray" was delivering the express accumulated the night before at the depot. Here and there a morning shopper was passing along the street. At the post-office there was quite a crowd.

Skinny carried the shirt, wrapped in the soggy, rain-soaked newspaper. As he and the Ramblin' Kid came near the dingy, general merchandise establishment kept by the squint-eyed Jew from whom Parker had bought the unfortunate garment a sudden look of cunning gleamed in the eyes of Skinny. He laughed aloud. A box of eggs, ten or twelve dozen it contained, was set, with other farm produce, in a display on the sidewalk at the side of the door of the store.

"Hold on a minute," Skinny said to the Ramblin' Kid, stopping in front of the Jew's place of business, "I got an idea---By golly," he continued argumentatively and with apparent irrelevancy, in a loud voice, "I tell you I'm the lightest man on my feet in Texas!" and he winked knowingly at the Ramblin' Kid. "I can walk on eggs and never bu'st a one! I've done it and"---as Leon came to the door---"I'll bet four-bits I can jump in that box of eggs right there and never crack a shell!" The Ramblin' Kid understood.

"Aw, you're crazy," he laughed. "I don't want to win your money!"

"What's the matter?" Leon asked curiously, having heard only part of Skinny's boast.

"This locoed darn' fool thinks he can walk on them eggs an' not mash 'em!" the Ramblin' Kid laughed again. "He wants to bet me four-bits he can---"

"Walk on them eggs and not preak them?" Leon exclaimed disdainfully. "You ought to lock him up! He iss crazy!"

"By gosh," Skinny argued, "you don't realize how light-footed I am---I can jump on them, I tell you, and I got money to back it up!" And he pulled a half-dollar from his pocket.

"Put away your money, you blamed idiot---" the Ramblin' Kid began.

"I'll bet him four-bits he can't!" Leon cried, jerking a coin from his own pocket.

Skinny and Leon each handed the Ramblin' Kid fifty cents.

"By thunder, I can," Skinny said, pausing, "that is, I'm willing to bet my money on it---"

"Vhy don't you go ahead and do it, then?" Leon exclaimed. "Vat you standing there for? Vhy don't you do it if you're so light on your feet?"

"Well, I can!" Skinny argued, still hesitating.

"Den go ahead and chump---chump I told you---into the box!" Leon shouted excitedly.

Skinny jumped. The eggs crushed under the heels of his riding boots. In an instant the box was filled with a squashy mass of whites, yolks and broken shells. Skinny pawed around until there wasn't a whole egg left in the box.

At the first crunch Leon laughed hilariously.

"I knowed you'd lose!" he cackled. "Giff me the money!"

"You win, Leon!" the Ramblin' Kid laughed, handing over the wager. "Skinny wasn't as delicate on his feet as he thought he was!"

"Thunderation, that's funny!" Skinny said soberly as he stepped out of the box; "it wouldn't work that time! Something must have slipped!"

With a grin he calmly unwrapped the one-time white shirt and with it began to wipe the slimy mess from his boots.

"The next time you won't be so smart!" Leon cried, then paused in consternation, his eyes riveted on the scrambled mixture in the box. "But mine eggs!" he exclaimed, suddenly suspicious. "Who pays for the eggs? There vas twelve dozen---they are worth seventy cents a dozen---that is more as eight dollars. Pay me for the eggs!"

"Pay, hell!" Skinny said. "I didn't agree to furnish no eggs! You won my fifty cents and th' Ramblin' Kid gave it to you---"

"That's right, Leon," the Ramblin' Kid chuckled, "you got th' four-bits---that's all you won!"

"But pay me---" Leon whined.

"I'll pay you, you dirty crook!" Skinny snapped as he slapped the soppy, egg-splattered shirt in Leon's face. "I'll pay you with that! The next time," he added as he and the Ramblin' Kid started down the street---"anybody asks for a size fifteen shirt don't give them a sixteen and a half!"

The day was spent idling about town waiting for Sabota to return so Skinny could get some whisky and drown his disappointment in love in intoxicated forgetfulness.

After supper Skinny and the Ramblin' Kid went to the picture show---Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays were "movie nights" in Eagle Butte---and saw a thrilling "wild-west" drama in which a band of Holstein milk cows raced madly through an alfalfa field in a frenzied, hair-raising stampede! When the show was over the Ramblin' Kid started toward the livery barn.

"What you going to do?" Skinny queried.

"I was just goin' to get Captain Jack," the Ramblin' Kid replied.

"What for?" Skinny asked as they moved toward the barn. "There ain't no hurry about getting back to the ranch. We won't be going out till to-morrow or next day---there ain't no use getting the horses out to-night."

"I don't know," the Ramblin' Kid answered, without stopping, "I just got a hunch to get him in case I need him. Anyhow, it won't hurt him to stand out a while---they've been eatin' all day."

"Then I'll get Old Pie Face, too," Skinny replied.

They saddled the bronchos and rode out of the barn.

"Where'll we go?" Skinny asked.

"Reckon we'd better go back down to Sabota's," the Ramblin' Kid said as they turned their horses in the direction of the pool-room, "if you still insist on makin' a blamed fool of yourself an' gettin' drunk. Maybe Mike's back by now. Anyhow, there might be a little poker game goin' on---I saw a couple of the fellers from over on th' Purgatory come in a while ago!"

They left Captain Jack and Pie Face standing, with bridle reins dropped, across the street and in the broad shaft of light streaming from the open door of the pool-room, and went into the resort.

The place was well filled. Sabota had returned, evidently with an ample supply of the fiery stuff he called "whisky." Like vultures that unerringly seek and find the spot where a carcass has fallen the thirsty of Eagle Butte had gathered at the Elite Amusement Parlor.

Inside the door of the pool-room and at the left, as one entered, was a hardwood bar eighteen or twenty feet long and over which at one time, in the days before Eagle Butte "reformed," had been dispensed real "tarantula juice." The back bar, with its big mirrors and other fixtures, was as it had been when the place was a regular saloon. At the right of the room, opposite the bar, were several round, green-topped card tables. In the rear was the billiard and pool equipment, which entitled the place to the name "pool-room." Just across from the farther end of the bar and near the last card table a half-dozen hard-looking, small-town "toughs"---creatures who loafed about Sabota's and aided him, as occasion required, in his boot-legging operations or other questionable enterprises---were lounging, some standing, some sitting, watching a slow poker game going on at the last table. Cards, under the laws of Texas, are taboo, but for some reason Sabota managed to get by and games were allowed in his place.

The two cowboys the Ramblin' Kid had mentioned, a rancher from the irrigated section near Eagle Butte and "Jeff" Henderson, one of Sabota's henchmen, who was playing for the house, were sitting in at the game.

Half-way down the room at one side against the wall a mechanical player piano was grinding out garish, hurdy-gurdy music.

"Red" Jackson was dispensing soft drinks from behind the bar.

Sabota himself, with one heel caught on the brass foot-rail, was leaning indolently but with a lordly air against the front of the polished, imitation mahogany counter.

He had been drinking and was in his shirt-sleeves.

As Skinny and the Ramblin' Kid stepped into the pool-room Sabota glanced around. For an instant he eyed the Ramblin' Kid keenly while a nasty sneer curled his lips. As they approached he turned the grin into a hypocritical smile of welcome. The Ramblin' Kid barely noticed the Greek and passed on to where the card game was in progress. Skinny paused and said something in a low tone to Sabota. The two walked to the rear end of the bar where the proprietor of the

place in turn spoke to Red and the latter furtively handed a pint bottle to the cowboy and which he dropped into the bosom of his flannel shirt.

The Ramblin' Kid was recognized by the cowboys from the Purgatory.

"Come on and get into the game!" one of them invited, moving over.

"Yes," Henderson added, hitching his own chair to one side to make room for another, "the cards are running like"---–he paused---–"like the Gold Dust maverick for everybody but the house!" There was a laugh at the subtle reference to the outlaw filly that had cost Sabota so much in losses on the sweepstakes at the Rodeo.

The Greek scowled.

"In that case," the Ramblin' Kid drawled, "I reckon I'll ride 'em a few rounds!" dropping into the chair he had dragged forward and which placed him with his back toward the bar.

"What they costin' a stack?" he questioned, reaching to the left breast pocket of his shirt for a roll of bills.

In the same pocket was the pink satin garter Carolyn June had lost the morning of his first meeting with her at the circular corral.

"Five bones!" Jeff answered languidly.

"Well, give me a couple of piles," the Ramblin' Kid replied, glancing around at the cowboy sitting at his right, who had invited him into the game. "How's the Purgatory?"

As the bills came from the Ramblin' Kid's pocket the silver butterfly clasp of the garter caught in the paper currency and the elastic band was drawn out and dropped, at the side of his chair, on the floor next to Sabota.

The Greek and Skinny saw, at the same time, the dainty satin ribbon.

Sabota stepped quickly forward and with the toe of his shoe kicked the garter toward the bar, where all could see it.

"Look what th' Ramblin' Kid's been carrying!" he exclaimed with a coarse laugh. "Some size garter, that!" And guessing at random that it had belonged to Carolyn June, he added: "Old Heck's niece must be---–damned convenient and accommodating!"

A laugh started from the lips of the crowd. It was instantly checked and a dead silence followed as the Ramblin' Kid looked around, saw Sabota leering down at the trinket and heard his vulgar insinuation. He slowly pushed his chair back from the table and with eyes half-closed---–the lids tightening until there were but narrow slits through which the black pupils burned like drops of jet---–he began slowly to straighten up. Not a sound came from his lips save the deep, regular breathing those sitting near could hear and which was like a bellows fanning embers into a white heat. His mouth was drawn back in a smile, almost caressing in its softness, but a thousand times more menacing than the black scowl on the face of the Greek.

The Ramblin' Kid's gun was at his hip, but he made no move to draw it.

Sabota watched the slender young cowboy. A look of contempt and derision was in his eyes. The Greek was no taller, but full eighty pounds heavier than the other. But he forgot that the other's lithe body moving with the calm, undulating grace of a panther preparing to spring was all clean youth, muscle and courage, unbroken by any debauchery!

"That's a hell of a thing for a *man* to pack," the giant bully cried nastily, "and it's a hell of a *lady* that gives it to a man to pack!"

With a sneering laugh he raised his foot and brought it down on the garter, grinding the silver clasp and the satin ribbon under the sole of his shoe.

"You damned black cur!" The Rambling' Kid spoke scarcely louder than a whisper, yet his voice echoed throughout the tense silence of the room. "*I'll put my heel in your face for that*!"

Sabota threw back his head to laugh.

For a second of time the Ramblin' Kid crouched, then shot through the air like a wire spring drawn far back and suddenly released, and with an his hundred and forty pounds of nerve and sinew behind it his right fist smashed the big Greek squarely on the half-open mouth, splitting the thick lip wide and causing a red stream to spurt from the gash. Sabota staggered back and, would have fallen had he not crashed against the hardwood bar.

As the Greek reeled away from the garter the Ramblin' Kid stooped quickly forward, picked up the elastic and dropped it again into his pocket.

With a roar like a mad bull Sabota rushed his slight antagonist. Lunging forward, blind with rage, he aimed a murderous blow at the head of the Ramblin' Kid. The cowboy ducked, but not in time to escape the wide swing of the massive, hairy fist. The Greek's knuckles raked the side of the Kid's face and the blood rained down his cheek from a cruel cut under the eye. The Ramblin' Kid spun around like a top and for the fraction of a second stood swaying uncertainly.

For a moment they faced each other, crouching, watching for an opening. Sabota's great hands worked convulsively, eager to grasp and crush his wiry opponent; the Ramblin' Kid, with lips curled back from white teeth, like a pure-bred terrier circling a mastiff, bent forward, every muscle tense as drawn copper, his eyes cold as a rattler's as he searched for a place to strike!

The crowd in the pool-room instinctively kept far back and gave the unequal combatants ample room.

From Sabota's lips poured a steady torrent of blasphemy. The Ramblin' Kid made no sound as, with body swaying slowly from side to side, his shoulders heaved with the full, heavy breaths that reached to the bottom of his lungs.

Suddenly, like some wild beast, Sabota sprang forward. The Ramblin' Kid met him---in mid-air---right and left jolting, almost at the same instant, into the beefy jaws of the Greek. At the impact a claw-like hand shot out and the gorilla fingers of the left hand of the brute-man the Ramblin' Kid fought, closed over the throat of the cowboy. Sabota threw his right arm around the back of his antagonist, gripping the shoulder on the far side of his body and drew the slender form toward him---pinning the Ramblin' Kid's left arm and hand to his side.

Skinny's hand dropped to the butt of his gun and rested there.

The Ramblin' Kid struggled desperately in the strangling grasp of the crazed Greek. The two reeled back and forth, crashing chairs and tables to the floor, and lunged against the bar. The Ramblin' Kid's gun fell from its scabbard at the

side of the brass foot-rail. Sabota's eyes glared down into the face of the man he was choking to death---gleaming with the ferocity of an animal gone mad---Awhile bloody foam spewed from his bleeding lips. The cowboy's face was beginning to flush a terrible purple as the breath was gradually crushed from his body.

As the Greek forced him back, bending him down and over, the Ramblin' Kid, his eyes burning like fire while a million flashes of light seemed to stab the darkness before them and needles darted through every fiber of his flesh, wrenched his right arm free and gripping the back of Sabota's shirt with his left hand to give purchase to the blow, with all the strength left in his body, drove the knuckles of his right fist into the left temple of the Greek.

The blow went home.

A film, like a veil drawn across the fiendish glare in them, spread over the eyes of Sabota, his grip on the throat of the cowboy relaxed and as a bull, struck by the hammer of the butcher, he dropped to the floor.

The Ramblin' Kid crouched, panting, over the massive bulk.

Sabota slowly opened his eyes and started to raise his battered head. With a laugh the cowboy swung terrible right and left blows into the Greek's face. The head dropped back.

Again the Ramblin' Kid stooped low, waiting for another sign of life from the prostrate form.

Red Jackson slipped from behind the bar, half bent forward, moved stealthily up behind the Ramblin' Kid; one hand drawn partly back held, by the neck, a heavy beer bottle. Skinny saw his intention. Instantly the Quarter Circle KT cowboy's forty-four was jerked from its holster and the blue-steel barrel swung against the side of the bartender's head. He pitched over in a limp heap and the bottle crushed against the brass foot-rail, breaking into a thousand fragments. A half-dozen of Sabota's crowd started forward. Skinny's gun whipped around in front of him.

"Keep back, y' sons-of-hell!" he snarled, "Sabota's gettin' what's coming to him!"

The Greek's eyes opened. His fingers touched the butt of the Ramblin' Kid's revolver and began to close slowly over the handle of the weapon.

"Make him quit," one of the pool-room loafers whined; "he's killed him!"

The Ramblin' Kid saw Sabota reach for the gun. He answered the speaker and the Greek's effort to get the forty-four at the same time:

"Not yet---*but now*!" he cried with a low laugh and leaped with both heels squarely on the bloody face of Sabota! There was a horrible crunching sound as of bones and flesh being ground into pulp. The fingers about to close on the handle of the revolver grew limp, the Greek's head, a hideous, scarcely recognizable mass, slumped to one side and lay perfectly still.

An instant longer the Ramblin' Kid looked at him, then reached over, picked up his gun and slipped it into the holster at his hip.

As he straightened up, Tom Poole, the marshal, rushed into the pool-room. He covered the Ramblin' Kid with his revolver and placed him under arrest.

"You don't need to get excited, Tom!" the Ramblin' Kid laughed. "I didn't do nothin' but kill that damned black cur layin' there! Come on---–I want to get out in th' air---–I never like to stay around where dead skunks are!"

They moved toward the door.

Poole dropped his gun back in its scabbard and walked at the side of the now apparently peaceful young cowboy.

At the door the marshal looked around:

"Some of you fellers get the doctor or undertaker---–whichever he needs---–and take care of Sabota!" he called to the group around the body of the Greek.

Like a flash the muzzle of the Ramblin' Kid's gun was pressed against the side of Poole.

"Put 'em up, Tom!" he snapped, "*I* don't want to kill you, but I will if I have to---–I ain't goin' to rot in no jail just for stampin' a dirty snake-to death!"

The marshal's hands shot into the air as if operated by springs.

The Ramblin' Kid, with his left hand, jerked Poole's revolver from its holster. He backed into the street toward where Captain Jack and Old Pie Face were standing, still with his own gun covering the officer.

"Jack!" he cried sharply, "meet me!"

The little stallion moved toward him.

With the thumb of the hand in which he held the marshal's gun the Ramblin' Kid threw open the breech and flipped the shells on the ground. He tossed the empty forty-four to one side, threw the reins over Captain Jack's head and the next instant was in the saddle. The broncho wheeled and was gone, in a dead run, toward the west.

The marshal rushed into the street and picked up his gun, jerked some cartridges from his belt, slipped them into the cylinder and fired quickly at the fleeing horse and rider.

The bullets whistled past the ear of the Ramblin' Kid.

He raised his own weapon, half-turned in the saddle, dropped the muzzle of the gun forward until it pointed at the flashes spitting from the officer's revolver. His finger started to tighten on the trigger.

"Hell," he muttered, "what's the use? Tom's just doin' what he thinks he has to do!" and the Ramblin' Kid slipped the gun, unfired, back into its holster.

A moment later Captain Jack whirled to the right across the Santa Fe tracks and bearing a little to the east, in the direction of Capaline, the dead volcano that rises out of the lavas northwest of the Quarter Circle KT, between the Purgatory and the Cimarron, disappeared in the black starlit night.

CHAPTER XX

MOSTLY SKINNY

It is a week to the day since the fight in the Elite Amusement Parlor in Eagle Butte. Since the Ramblin' Kid, followed by the wicked sing of the bullets from the marshal's gun, disappeared in the darkness no word has come from the fugitive cowboy, who beat to a pulp the burly Greek.

The Gold Dust maverick paces uneasily about in the circular corral and the Quarter Circle KT has settled into the hum-drum routine of ranch life.

Parker, Charley, Chuck and Bert are gone to Chicago with the train-load of beef cattle. Skinny bosses a gang of "picked-up" hay hands Old Heck brought out from Eagle Butte to harvest the second cutting of alfalfa. Pedro rides line daily on the upland pasture and Sing Pete hammers the iron triangle morning, noon and night, announcing the regular arrival of meal-time. The Chinaman is careful when he throws out empty tomato-cans---turning back the tin to make it impossible for the yellow cat again to fasten his head in one of the inviting traps, and the cook would imperil the hope of the return of his soul to the flowery Orient before he would put butter in the bottom of a can to entice the animal into trouble.

Old Heck and Ophelia are like a pair of nesting doves and there is a new vigor to the step of the owner of the Quarter Circle KT, a revived interest in affairs generally; years seem to have fallen from his shoulders.

Carolyn June smiles sweetly as ever at Skinny, spends much time riding alone over the valley and hills; in her eyes there has come a more thoughtful---often a wistful---expression.

Sabota did not die.

After the escape of the Ramblin' Kid the marshal reentered the pool-room and had the big Greek removed to the hotel. A doctor was called and set as well as possible the broken jaws, the crushed nose, picked out the fragments of bone and the loosened teeth, sewed up the terrible gashes on Sabota's face and left the bully groaning and profaning in half-conscious agony.

The night of the fight Skinny took Old Pie Face back to the barn.

The cowboy's heart was heavy with remorse. He blamed himself for all the trouble. Had he not wanted to make a fool of himself and get drunk the Ramblin' Kid would not have come to Eagle Butte, the fight would not have occurred, the friend he had ridden with through storm and sunshine---whom he had stood "night guard" and fought mad stampedes into "the mill"---would not now be an outcast sought by the hand of the law.

News of the beating the Ramblin' Kid gave Sabota traveled fast.

It was flashed over Eagle Butte that the Greek was dead.

"So th' Ramblin' Kid killed old Sabota, did he?" the hostler at the livery barn asked Skinny as he stepped out to care for the cowboy's horse. "What was it over? Sabota having th' Ramblin' Kid 'doped' the day of the sweepstakes?"

Skinny looked keenly, searchingly, at the stableman.

"What do you mean---'Sabota having th' Ramblin' Kid doped?'" he asked sharply.

"Why, didn't you know?" the hostler replied. "I thought everybody knowed. Gyp Streetor told me about it the day of the race---I used to know Gyp when he was a kid back east. I saw him as he was beating it to get out of town. He borrowed

five dollars from me. Said Sabota hired him to put 'knock-out' in some coffee for th' Ramblin' Kid and he reckoned the dose wasn't big enough or something. Anyhow, it didn't hold him under long as they thought it would and when he saw the Gold Dust maverick show up on the track he got scared---was afraid it would leak out or th' Ramblin' Kid would suspect him and try to 'get' him after the race, so he ducked out of town---"

"You ain't lying about that?" Skinny asked.

"What would I want to lie about it for?" the other replied. "Wasn't that what made th' Ramblin' Kid kill the Greek?"

"No, it was something else," Skinny answered; "but Sabota ain't dead. He's just crunched up pretty bad---th' Ramblin' Kid jumped on him, like Captain Jack did on that feller from the Chickasaw that tried to steal him!"

Skinny's mind was in a whirl.

So the Ramblin' Kid was not drunk the day of the race! He was drugged--- sick---yet, in spite of everything, rode the Gold Dust maverick and beat the black wonder-horse from the Vermejo! Lord! and they had all thought he was on a tear!

The bottle of whisky was still in the bosom of Skinny's shirt.

He had not touched it. He felt a sudden revulsion for the vile stuff.

"Here," he said, jerking the flask from its hiding-place and handing it to the hostler, "maybe you'd like that bottle of 'rot-gut'---I've swore off!"

"I ain't," the stableman laughed and took it eagerly.

Skinny remained in town that night and the next day, waiting for Parker and the Quarter Circle KT cowboys to come in with the beef cattle. They arrived about noon. Old Heck drove in with the Clagstone "Six." Ophelia and Carolyn June came with him. Skinny met them when Old Heck stopped the in front of the Occidental Hotel. He told them, while they still sat in the automobile, of the fight and the escape of the Ramblin' Kid.

"A drunken brawl!" Carolyn June thought, a wave of disgust sweeping over her.

"Th' Ramblin' Kid hadn't touched a drop," Skinny said, explaining the fight and almost as if he were answering her unspoken thought. "If he'd been drinking, I reckon Sabota would have killed him instead of his beating the Greek blamed near to death. I know now what he used to mean when he'd say, 'A man's a fool to put whisky in him when he's facin' a tight squeeze!' The little devil sure needed everything he had---nerve and head and muscle and all---for the job he tackled last night!"

Skinny didn't tell them that his hand had rested on the handle of his own gun---determined that he, himself, would kill Sabota if the brute succeeded in choking the Ramblin' Kid to death.

"What was the fight about?" Old Heck asked.

"A pink ribbon or something with a little silver do-funny on it---it looked like a sleeve-holder or a garter---dropped out of th' Ramblin' Kid's pocket and Sabota made a nasty remark about it," Skinny said.

Carolyn June caught her breath and her face flushed.

"The Greek said something about Carolyn June, I didn't just hear what," Skinny continued, "and then he smashed the ribbon under his foot. The next instant th' Ramblin' Kid was trying to kill him!

"It's a pity he didn't succeed!" Old Heck exclaimed. "The damned filthy whelp---excuse me, Ophelia, for cussing, but I just had to say It!"

"It's all right," was the laughing rejoinder, "I---I---wanted to say it myself!"

Carolyn June's eyes glowed. Her heart felt as if a weight had been lifted from it So, the Ramblin' Kid had kept the odd souvenir, and he cared---he cared!

"Go ahead," she whispered to Skinny; "what then?"

"I reckon that's about all," Skinny answered. "Th' Ramblin' Kid smashed Sabota and as he staggered back, picked up the ribbon---then he didn't quit till he thought the Greek was dead. Tom Poole arrested him, but th' Ramblin' Kid got the drop on him and got away. He was justified in beating Sabota up anyhow," he added, "on account of the dirty cuss hiring a feller to 'dope' him so he couldn't ride the maverick the day of the big race---"

"'Dope' him?" Old Heck interrupted, puzzled.

"Yes," Skinny explained, "the Greek had a feller named Gyp Streetor put some stuff in th' Ramblin? Kid's coffee. He wasn't drunk at all---he was just poisoned with 'knock-out!'"

"Good lord!" Old Heck exclaimed. "And he rode that race when he was drugged! While we all thought he'd gone to pieces and was drunk!"

Carolyn June's cheeks suddenly turned pale. He cared, but he was gone! Perhaps never to come back! If seemed as if an iron hand was clutching at her throat!

She and Ophelia went into the hotel and Old Heck and Skinny drove the car over to the stock-yards where the cattle were being loaded.

After Parker and the cowboys were on their way east with the steers and before he returned to the ranch Old Heck went into the room in which Sabota lay. The Greek's head was a mass of white bandages. His eyes battered and swollen shut, he could not see the face of his visitor.

For a moment Old Heck looked at him, his lips parted in a smile of contempt lightened with satisfaction.

"Well, Sabota," he said at last, "th' Ramblin' Kid didn't quite do his duty, did he? If he had gone as far as he ought to you wouldn't be laying there---they'd just about now be hiding your dirty carcass under six feet of 'dobe!'"

Sabota mumbled some guttural, unintelligible reply.

"Listen, you infernal skunk," Old Heck went on coldly, "as quick as you're able to travel you'll find Eagle Butte's a right good place to get away from! You understand what I mean. If I catch you around, well, I won't use no fists!" And without waiting for an answer he turned and left the room.

The owner of the Quarter Circle KT then hunted lip the marshal of Eagle Butte.

"Tom," he said, "I reckon you'll be looking some for th' Ramblin' Kid, after what happened last night, won't you?"

The marshal had heard of Sabota's effort to Have the young cowboy drugged the day of the race and also the immediate cause for the fight.

"Oh, I don't know as I will," he said, "unless the Greek makes some charge or other. I don't imagine he'll do that"

"I know blamed well he won't!" Old Heck interrupted. "But how about th' Ramblin' Kid putting his gun in your ribs---resisting an officer and so on?"

"Putting his gun in my ribs? Resisting an officer?" the lanky Missourian answered with a sly grin; "who said he put a gun on me---or resisted an officer or anything? I ain't heard nothing about it!"

Two days later Sabota, with the help of "Red" Jackson, managed to get to the Santa Fe station. He was able to travel and he did travel. Jackson said he went to the "Border." Eagle Butte did not know or care---the Cimarron town was through with him.

When Old Heck, Carolyn June and Ophelia returned to the Quarter Circle KT the evening of the day following the fight, the Gold Dust maverick whinnied lonesomely from the circular corral as the Clagstone "Six" stopped in front of the house.

"What are we going to do with that filly?" Old Heck asked, looking at the beautiful creature with her head above the bars of the corral gate.

"I am going to ride her!" Carolyn June said softly. "Until the Ramblin' Kid comes back and claims her she is mine! She loves me and I can handle her!"

"I'm afraid---" Old Heck started to protest.

"You need not be," Carolyn June interrupted, "the Gold Dust maverick and I know each other---she understands me and I understand her---she will be perfectly gentle with me!"

The next day Carolyn June rode the wonderful outlaw mare. It was as she said. The filly was perfectly gentle with her. After that, every day, the girl saddled the Gold Dust maverick and, unafraid, took long rides alone.

* * * * *

The night the cattle were shipped Skinny had supper in Eagle Butte. He sat alone at a small table at one side of the dining-room in the Occidental Hotel. The cowboy was the picture of utter misery. Parker, Charley, Chuck, Bert were gone to Chicago with steers; the Ramblin' Kid was gone---nobody knew where; Skinny's dream about Carolyn June was gone---she didn't love him, she just liked him; even his whisky was gone, he had given it to the hostler at the barn; he didn't have any friends or anything.

"What's the matter, Skinny?" Manilla Endora, the yellow-haired waitress, asked softly, as she stepped up to the table and looked down a moment at the dejected cowboy. There was something in her voice that made Skinny pity himself more than ever. It made him want to cry. "What's wrong?' Manilla repeated almost tenderly.

"Everything!" Skinny blurted out, dropping his head on his arms. "The whole blamed works is shot to pieces!"

A little smile stole over Manilla's rosy lips.

"I know what it is," she said gently, unreproachfully; "it's that girl, Carolyn June. Yes, it is," as Skinny started to interrupt. "Oh, I don't blame you for falling for her!" she went on. "She is nice---but, well, Skinny-boy," her voice was a caress, "Old Heck's niece is not the sort for you. You and her wouldn't fit at all---the way you wanted---and anyhow, there---there---are others," coloring warmly.

Skinny looked up into the honest blue eyes.

"You ain't sore at me or anything are you, Manilla?" he asked.

"Sore?" she answered. "Of course not!"

Hope sprung again into his heart. "I---I---thought maybe you would be," he stammered.

"Forget it!" she laughed. "The old world still wobbles!"

"Manilla, you---you're a peach!" he cried.

She chuckled. "Did you hear about that dance next Saturday night after the picture show?" she asked archly.

"No. Is there one?" with new interest in life.

"Yes," she replied, her lashes drooping demurely; "they say the music is going to be swell."

"If I come in will you---will we---go, Manilla?" he asked eagerly.

They would.

"Poor Skinny," Manilla murmured to herself as she went to the kitchen to get his order, "poor cuss---he can't keep from breaking his heart over every skirt that brushes against him, but"---and she laughed softly---"darn his ugly picture, I like him anyhow!"

After supper Skinny hurried to the Golden Rule store. It was still open.

"Give me a white shirt---number fifteen," he said to the clerk; "and be blamed sure it's the right size---they ain't worth a cuss if they're too big!"

CHAPTER XXI

A GIRL LIKE YOU

Alone rider guided his horse in the early night, among the black lavas, on the desolate desert near Capaline, the dead volcano. He rode to the south, in the direction of the Cimarron. Silently, steadily, like a dark shadow, the broncho picked his way among the fields of fire-blistered rock and held his course, unerringly, through the starlit gloom hanging over the earth before the late moon should flash its silver disk above the sand-hills miles to the east.

The rider was the Ramblin' Kid; the little horse---Captain Jack.

For a week, following the fight in Eagle Butte, the Ramblin' Kid had found shelter in the hut of "Indian Jake"---a hermit Navajo who, long ago, turned his face toward the flood of white civilization rolling over the last pitiful remnants of his tribe and drifted far toward the land of the rising sum. Among the scenes of desolation around the grimly cold volcano, alone, the old Indian made his last stand, and in a rude cabin, beside a tiny spring that seeped from under the black rock on the mountain-side, lived in splendid isolation---silent, brooding, desiring only to be left in peace with his few ponies, his small herd of cattle and the memories and traditions of his people.

The Ramblin' Kid and the lonely Navajo were friends since the Ramblin' Kid could remember.

The aged Indian's face was pitted with horrible scars---marks of the same disease that had cost the wandering cowboy his father and left him, years ago, an orphan, almost worshiped, because of the sacrifice his parent had made fighting the epidemic among the tribes of the Southwest.

Often the "Young Whirlwind"---the name by which the Indians knew the Ramblin' Kid and which old Jake himself always called the cowboy---spent a night, sometimes days, with his stoical friend among the lavas.

To him the cabin door was always open.

As Captain Jack, followed by the bullets from the marshal's revolver, dashed madly down the street of Eagle Butte, instinctively the Ramblin' Kid had turned the stallion toward the hut of the old Navajo.

The fugitive cowboy believed Sabota was dead.

Naturally the law would demand vengeance, even though the brutal Greek had deserved to die. Posses, undoubtedly, would scour the country, searching for his slayer. The Quarter Circle KT would be watched.

There was no regret in the heart of the Ramblin' Kid. Instead he felt a strange elation. With his fists and heels he had beaten the giant Greek into a lifeless mass!

"'Ign'rant---savage---stupid---brute!" he muttered as Captain Jack sped from the scene of fight; "I reckon she *was pretty near right!*"

At gray dawn he swung down from the back of the little stallion at the door of the Indian's hut.

Old Jake asked no questions.

The Ramblin' Kid himself volunteered:

"Killed a man---Sabota---got to lay low, Jake---some three, four, five days! Then I go---south---Mexico!"

"The Young Whirlwind had cause?" the Navajo grunted sententiously.

"Sure---plenty!" the Ramblin' Kid laughed, slipping his hand to his breast pocket and caressing the pink satin garter.

"It is good," the Indian said. "The Navajo will watch!"

For seven days the Ramblin' Kid rested, securely, in the lonely hut among the lavas and "pot-holes" of the desert. Then he saddled Captain Jack and when the full shadow of night had settled over the desolation about him mounted the little broncho and turned him to the south, in the direction of the Cimarron, toward the Quarter Circle KT, where the Gold Dust maverick waited, alone, in the corral.

Carolyn June could not sleep. The night was more than half gone and still she sat on the front porch and watched the gradual spread of a misty, silvery sheen over the brow of the bench and the distant peaks of the shadowy Costejo range as the pale moon, in its last half, lifted itself above the sand-hills at the gap through which the Cimarron tumbled out of the valley.

Old Heck and Ophelia had retired hours ago.

The Quarter Circle KT was sleeping. From the meadows the heavy odor of wilted alfalfa hung on the night air as the dew sprinkled the windrows of new-cut hay.

A strange restlessness filled the heart of the girl.

Something seemed to be holding her in a tense, relentless grip. She had no desire to seek her room. Indeed, she felt that the air of the house would stifle her. She arose and strolled idly through the gate, past the bunk-house where Skinny, Pedro and the hay hands snored peacefully, as she wandered aimlessly through the slanting moonlight down to the circular corral.

The Gold Dust maverick seemed to reflect the girl's own uneasy mood.

The filly moved with quick nervous strides about the corral. As Carolyn June leaned against the bars and stretched out her hand the mare whinnied softly, tossed her head, nosed an instant the white fingers and trotted in a circle around the enclosure.

"What's the matter, Heart o' Gold?" Carolyn June laughed sympathetically, "can't you either?"

In the shed at the side of the corral, on the spot where, that first morning, the Ramblin' Kid's saddle had rested and the cowboy slept, Carolyn June's own riding gear was lying. She glanced at the outfit For a second she fancied she saw again the slender form stretched in the shadow upon the ground while a pair of black inscrutable eyes looked with unfathomable melancholy up into her own.

"Seein' things!" she laughed jerkily, with a little catch in her throat. "I'll ride it off!"

Quickly she stepped over, picked up the saddle, bridle and blanket, returned to the corral gate, swung it open and entered.

The Gold Dust maverick came to her, as if eager, herself, to get out into the night.

A moment later Carolyn June was in the saddle and the mare, dancing lightly, pranced out of the gate. She turned swiftly toward the grade that led out to the bench and to Eagle Butte. They had almost reached the foot of the grade, when some impulse caused Carolyn June to whirl the filly about and gallop back past the barn and down the lane toward the Cimarron.

As the feet of the outlaw mare splashed into the water at the lower ford the Ramblin' Kid rode past the corner of the upland pasture fence and stopped Captain Jack on the brink of the ridge looking down at the crossing. Below him the

river whirled in dark eddies under the overhanging curtains of cottonwoods and willows; the Quarter Circle KT lay in the hollow of the valley, like a faint etching of silent restfulness; through the tops of the trees a white splash of moonlight struck on the smooth level surface of the treacherous quicksand bar that had drawn Old Blue down to an agonizing death and from which, scarcely a month ago, the Ramblin' Kid had dragged Carolyn June.

This, the Ramblin' Kid believed, was his last long look at the Quarter Circle KT.

He would ride down to the circular corral, turn out the Gold Dust maverick---give her again to the range and freedom---and while the unconscious sleepers at the ranch dreamed he would pass on, silently, toward the south and Mexico should throw about him her black arms of mystery!

For a while he sat and gazed down on the shadowy scene while his mind throbbed with memory of the incidents of the last few weeks. He drew the pink satin garter from his pocket, looked at it a long moment---suddenly crushed it tightly in his hand while his eyes closed as if renouncing a vision that had come before them---then carefully, that the dainty thing might not be lost, replaced it in the pocket that was over his heart.

At last he swung to the ground and tightened the front cinch of his saddle.

As he pulled the leather into place the sound of nervous hoofs kicking the gravel on the grade that led to the ridge on which he stood shattered the silence around him. The Ramblin' Kid whirled and faced the direction in which the approaching horse, would appear. His hand dropped to his gun and without raising the weapon from his hip he leveled it to cover the turn in the road a few feet away.

The waxy mane of the outlaw filly rocked into view as she sprang up and around the turn on to the ridge.

On the maverick's back, bareheaded, her brown hair tumbled about her neck, was Carolyn June.

Captain Jack pricked forward his ears at the sound of hoofs and as the beautiful mare leaped around the turn and appeared above the bank of the grade the little roan squealed a nicker of recognition. The filly sprang forward, swerved to the side of the stallion, and with an answering whinny stopped.

"Oh!" Carolyn June gasped, as the horses met and she saw the Ramblin' Kid, his gun still in his hand, standing beside Captain Jack.

There was a brief, questioning silence.

"What th' hell!" he breathed.

"What the---'*hell*---yourself!" she laughed nervously. "Is---this---is this a hold-up?"

"What are *you* doin' here---this time of night---an' on that filly?" he asked without heeding her question.

"I'm riding that---this---filly!" Carolyn June shot back independently. "And what are *you* doing here---at this time of---Oh," she added, before he could answer, "I---I---believe my saddle's slipping!" and she swung lightly from the back of the outlaw mare.

"That filly'll kill you," he began.

"She will not!" Carolyn June interrupted with a pout. "I---I---guess you're not the only one, Mister 'Nighthawk,' that knows the way to the heart of a horse! If you were just as wise about---" but she stopped, her blush hidden as she turned her back to the rising moon.

"They was made for each other!" the Ramblin' Kid muttered to himself. Then he spoke aloud: "I reckon you know," he said slowly, "why I'm ridin' at night---about me killin' Sabota---I'm leavin'---"

"But Sabota isn't dead," she interrupted again. "You don't need to go away!"

"Sabota ain't dead!" the Ramblin' Kid exclaimed. "Then I'll go back to Eagle Butte instead of---Mexico!"

"Why?" Carolyn June asked.

"To finish th' job!" and his voice was dangerously soft.

"You can't finish it," she laughed. "He isn't in Eagle Butte! The Greek has gone away and---well, it---it---was a good 'job'---good enough the way you did it! I---I---don't want you 'teetotally' to kill him---clear, all the way dead," she stammered. "The way it is you---you---won't have to---leave!"

"What's th' difference?" he said dully. "It's time I was ramblin' anyhow!"

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Listen, Ramblin' Kid," she broke in, "I---I---know all about everything---about what started the fight---"

"You do?" looking quickly and keenly at her. "Who told you?"

"Skinny," she answered; "he saw it. Said it was a pale pink ribbon or something with a little silver 'do-funny' on it!" she finished with a laugh.

"I---I---reckon you want it back, then?" the Ramblin' Kid said, reaching to his left breast. "You wouldn't want---"

"Did I say I wanted it?" Carolyn June questioned naively.

"And I know," she hurried on, "about you being drugged the day of the race! Why didn't you say you were sick? We---we---thought you were drunk!"

"Nobody asked me," he answered without interest.

"Does everybody have to---to---ask you everything?" she questioned suggestively. "Don't you ever---ever---'ask' anybody anything yourself?"

"What are you tryin' to do?" he said almost brutally, "play with me like you played with them other blamed idiots th' night of th' dance?"

"You're mean---" she started to say.

"Am I?" he interrupted, and spoke with sudden intenseness. "Maybe you think I am. Maybe you think a lot of things. Maybe you think God put them brown eyes in your face just so you could coax men, with a look out of them, to love you an' then laugh because th' damned fools do it!"

"You're unfair!" she replied. "I was just paying the boys back the night of the dance for---for---'framing' up on Ophelia and me the way they did!"

For a moment they looked squarely into each other's eyes. Captain Jack and the Gold Dust maverick nosed each other over the shoulders of their dismounted riders.

"Oh, well, it don't matter," the Ramblin' Kid finally said, wearily; "it don't matter, you're what you are an' I reckon you can't help it!"

Carolyn June said nothing.

"I---I---was goin' to turn th' filly back to th' range," he continued in the same emotionless voice, "but---well, you can have her---I'll trade her to you for---for---th' thing that started th' fight. You can ride th' maverick till you go back east---"

"I'm not going back east," she said in a hurt tone, "at least not for a long time. Dad is going to---to---get me a stepmother! He's going to marry some female person and he doesn't need me so I'm going to live---most of the time---with Uncle Josiah and Ophelia! Anyhow I---I---like it out west---or that is---I did like it---"

There was another little period of silence between them.

"Ramblin' Kid," Carolyn June spoke suddenly very softly, "Ramblin' Kid---why---why do you hate me?"

"Me hate you?" he answered slowly. "I don't hate *you*---I hate myself!"

"Yourself?" with a questioning lift of her voice.

"Yes, myself!" he replied with a short, bitter laugh. "Why shouldn't I---bein' an 'ign'rant, savage, stupid brute!'"

Carolyn June flinched as he repeated the cruel words she herself had spoken, it seemed, now so long ago.

"You are right!" she said, after a pause, while a ripple of quivering, mischievous laughter leaped from her lips and she laid her hand lightly on his arm. "Oh, Ramblin' Kid, you are indeed an 'ign'rant, savage, stupid brute!' You are 'ign'rant,'" she continued while he looked at her with a puzzled expression in his eyes, "of the ways of a woman's heart; you are 'savage'---in the defense of a woman's honor; you are 'stupid'---not to see that it is the *man* a woman wants and not the thin social veneer; you are a 'brute'---an utter brute, Ramblin' Kid--- to---to---make a girl almost tell you---tell you---that she---she---"

The sentence was not finished.

The Ramblin' Kid caught her by both shoulder. He pushed her back---arm's length---and held her while the clean moonlight poured down on her upturned face and his black eyes searched her own as though to read her very soul.

An instant she was almost frightened by the agony that was in his face.

Then she opened her mouth and laughed---such a laugh as comes only from the throat of a woman when love is having its way!

"By God!" he whispered, his voice hoarse with passion, his hot breath fanning the brown hair on her forehead; "this has gone far enough! I'll tell you what you want me to say---I'll say it! And it's the truth---I love you---love you---*love you*! Yes!" And he shook her toward him. "Do you hear me? I love you---love you---so much it hurts! Now laugh! Now make fun of me! I know I'm a fool. I know where I stand! I know I don't belong in your crowd---I ain't fit to mix with 'em! I ain't been raised like you was raised. You don't need to tell me that! I know it already! I know there's somethin' a man has to have besides what he gets on th' open range among th' cattle---an' th' bronchos---an' th' rattlesnakes ---he's got to be ground in th' mill of schoolin'---of books; he's got to be hammered into shape under th' heels of 'civilization'; he's got to be trained to jump through and roll over an' know which fork to eat with before a girl like you---"

His Hands relaxed, but before his fingers loosened their grip on her shoulders Carolyn June's own soft palms reached up and caught the man's sun-tanned cheeks between them. Her eyes burned back into its own. Once more the laugh rippled from the full pulsing throat.

"Ramblin' Kid, oh, Ramblin' Kid," she murmured, while the long lashes lifted over brown pools tenderness, "a man---my man---does not need to be or to know all of those things, any of those things, before a girl like me---"

He crushed her to him and stopped the words on her lips.

"My God---don't fool me---be sure you know!" he cried, his whole body quivering with the intensity of his feelings; "don't tell me you love me---unless you mean it! I can stand to love you---without hope---in silence---alone! But I can't---an' I swear I be lifted up to Paradise just to be dropped again into the depths of hell! Don't say you love me unless you know it is *all* love! Half love ain't love---it's a lie! An' love ain't to play with! Don't insult God by makin' a joke of th' thing He made an' planted in th' hearts of all Creation to hold th' Universe together."

"Ramblin' Kid," she whispered softly, "God himself is looking down into my heart!"

He smothered her mouth with his own---they drank each other in, their souls mingled in a mad-sense-reeling, time-defying pressure of lips!

It was their hour, as was the next and yet the one that followed that.

When the old-rose of dawn melted the gray above the sand-hills behind them and the white moon was fading in the zenith above the Kiowa; when the cottonwoods beside the Cimarron began to shake their leaves in the morning breeze that tripped across the valley; when the low buildings of the Quarter Circle KT silhouetted against the bench beyond the meadows; when the smooth surface of the beach of quicksand under which the body of Old Blue was hidden began to look smoother yet and still more firm, the Ramblin' Kid and Carolyn June parted.

"I'm goin' away," he said; "I'm goin' away, Carolyn June, but I'm goin' for another reason now. I'm goin' away an' make myself so you'll never have a chance to be ashamed of me! I'm goin' away an' learn how to talk without cussin' 'most every other word---I'm goin' away an' get that polish I know; women love in men th' same as they love their own shoes to be shiny an' their own dresses to be soft an' dainty! When I've got that I'll come back! I ain't goin' to Mexico. I'm going to ride into that world that you come out of an' when I'm so you'll be proud to walk in that world with me---when I'm so you won't need to apologize for me in Hartville or any other place, I'm comin' back an' a preacher can O.K. th' bargain you an' me have made! Will you keep faith an' be true, Carolyn June? Will you keep faith an' be true--? Will

you be waitin'?"

"I'll be waiting," she whispered, "---and keep faith and be true!"

And he rode away into the face of the red glow rising above the sand-hills. He rode away---to meet the morning sun---hidden yet behind the eastern horizon---to conquer himself, to master the ways of men, in the world that lay beyond!

Carolyn June watched him go.

Then she guided the outlaw filly down the grade, across the Cimarron and along the lane, in the gently stirring dawn, back to the still sleeping Quarter Circle KT. In her heart was a song; in her eyes a new light; in her soul a great peace---on her lips, a smile. She carried in her bosom their secret---hers and the Ramblin' Kid's---and she knew he would return, for he would not lie.

THE END