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THE LONE TEXAN

FRANK
RICHARDS

COMPLETE AND
UNABRIDGED

THE LONE TEXAN

by

FRANK RICHARDS

All characters in this story are
fictitious and imaginary and bear
no relation to any living person.

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Fresh aimed to mind his own business but fate decided otherwise. What was it that made Fresh turn off the trail to find the results of the latest raid by the unknown of the Western Ranges? Squaw Range held many secrets that needed looking into and the latest killing decided the turn of events for a six-gun cow-poke like Fresh.

Colonel Carfax, rich landowner and a rancher to reckon with, needs all the help and advice that can be given in the fight to stave off the menace of the raiding gangs from New Mexico.

FRANK RICHARDS, world-known writer of modern fiction, here portrays a story of adventure and six-gun slinging of the roaring Westerns.

Chapter I

A Tragedy of the Range!

Fresh reined in the black broncho, shaded his eyes with his hand, and stared steadily across the sun-scorched llano.

The semi-tropical sun of southern Texas blazed down on him.

Round him, far and wide, stretched the waving grass-lands: spacious, solitary, glistening in the sun. Far ahead, a silvery glimmer showed where a creek cut the plain, and on its bank stood a timber hut with a rusty corrugated-iron roof—a lonely stockman's hut. As lonely a location, Fresh reckoned, as any he had seen in Texas: a good twenty miles from the Bar-Seven Ranch, to which it belonged. Fresh opined that he did not envy the Bar-Seven puncher his spell of duty on that lonely range.

But he had been glad to raise that distant hut: for he had ridden a long trail that day, and the dust of the plains was thick upon his goatskin chaps. At the stockman's hut he counted upon the unlimited hospitality of the cow country: and he reckoned, too, that the man on the range would be glad to welcome a stranger, if only to chew the rag a piece after long silent days. He had been pushing on at a gallop under the sun-blaze, when suddenly, something that struck upon his sight caused him to draw rein, and stare.

What he saw was a black dot in the sky, swooping down to earth with the speed of an Apache arrow.

And now that he noted it, he noted other black dots against the blue: all moving in the direction of the stockman's hut.

Fresh did not need telling what those distant black dots were. He knew that they were vultures: the scavengers of

the prairie. And he knew that where the vultures gathered, there was carrion—and had been death!

His boyish brow grew grim under the brim of his Stetson.

What was it that lay, hidden from his eyes by the high waving grass, so near the range-rider's hut?

A dead steer, possibly—or a horse—or——? There were rustlers in the valley of the Rio Frio: he had heard the guys in Nuce chewing the rag about the rustlers, when he had stopped for eats in the cow-town at noon. And where was the herd of which the man stationed at the lonely hut was in charge? So far as his eye could reach, there was no sign of a single long-horn on the llano. Not a cow to be seen, and the vultures swooping down at something hidden in the grass close by the hut!

"I'll tell a man!" muttered Fresh.

For a long minute, he sat in the saddle, staring. Then he shook out his reins, gave his broncho a flick of the quirt, and rode on at a gallop.

If there had been trouble at the range hut, Fresh was the guy to help the puncher there, if yet he could be helped. He had been thinking of rest, and shade from the sun: of water and feed for his horse. But he was not thinking of these now. He was thinking of what it was that drew the black vultures—more and more of the obscene birds winging from all quarters.

He rode hard.

been given him when he was hardly fore than stirrup-high. a man in all else. "Fresh" he was called: the nick-name had been given him when he was hardly more than stirrup-high. He had been called "Fresh" so long that he almost forgot that his name was Kit Canroy. Old Man Peterson, at the Chicken River Ranch, had found him too fresh for his taste, and had fired him: for which he cared not a baked bean. He had his horse, his guns, his slicker-pack, and a light heart, when he rode away from the Chicken River: and what more did a guy want? If there was room for a new man in the

Bar-Seven outfit, Fresh reckoned that he would sign on there: if there was not, all Texas was before him.

But his heart was not so light, as he galloped towards the hut by the creek, where the black vultures swooped.

As he came closer, he could see that the door of the hut swung open on its hide hinges. And it was within a riata's length of the open doorway that the carrion birds were dropping from the sky.

Closer, he made out a figure that lay stretched in the grass. It was not a dead steer or horse that drew the vultures. They hopped and croaked round a figure in blue shirt and chaparejos, that lay very still.

But, as his keen eyes noted at once, they had not touched it. Some of them squatted round it, with obscene eyes watching—others hopped and croaked: but as yet no beak or claw had desecrated that still form.

The man was not dead. Not till their prey was dead would the carrion birds venture. Fresh knew that life yet lingered in that inert figure.

He gave his horse a touch of the spur, and came up with a clatter of hoofs, and a cracking quirt, that scared the vultures from their prey.

He leaped from the saddle.

Savage slashes from the quirt scattered the carrion birds, driving them screeching away. Some of them took to the wing: but more settled down again at a little distance, watching—and waiting!

Fresh threw down the quirt, and dropped on his knees beside the still figure in the grass.

The man did not stir.

One glance was enough.

"Hard luck, old-timer!" muttered Fresh. His sunburnt face was full of pity, "Hard luck! I guess you've had yours."

Over the puncher's breast, the blue shirt was thick with blood, round the bullet-hole. The puncher had been shot

through the chest at close range. There was a six-gun grasped in the inert right hand. But he had had no chance to use it. Fresh reckoned that he had come running out of the hut, at some alarm, and had been shot down as he came.

With a grim brow, Fresh rose to his feet, his hand on his own gun in the low-slung holster. His keen eyes scanned the surrounding plain. He would have been glad, just then, to get sight of the rustler who had shot up the Bar-Seven puncher.

But he was too late on the scene.

Only the solitary prairie stretched round him. He knew why he had seen no sign of a herd of long-horns as he came. The cows on that lonely range of the Bar-Seven had been driven: by the rustlers who had left behind them the puncher in charge of the herd, for the vultures and coyotes: left him for dead where he had fallen.

"The pizen skunks!" muttered Fresh.

Hours ago, he reckoned, the raid had taken place. The rustlers and the driven herd were probably safe in the hills by that time. The puncher had lain there ever since, with the vultures gathering, but not venturing to touch him while a spark of life yet lingered.

Fresh unhooked his water-canteen, and knelt again by the side of the unconscious puncher. The colourless set face showed no sign of life. Yet he still lived, or beak and claws would have already been busy. Fresh placed the canteen to his lips, and the cool water trickled out. There was a stirring of the closed eyelids, and slowly, heavily, they opened, and glazed eyes stared up at Fresh, and there was a momentary feeble motion of the gun-hand.

"You dog-goned rustler——" It was the faintest of whispers.

"Forget it, feller," said Fresh, gently, "you're in a friend's hands, old-timer. I guess I jest found you here."

The glazed eyes stared at him, but the man seemed to comprehend. The lips moved, and Fresh bent low to catch the

faint words.

"I guess I got mine! If you're a friend, ride to the Bar-Seven and tell them that Jimy Casey's been shot up on the Squaw Range. I guess the Colonel and the bunch will get after them dog-goned rustlers——." The faint whisper trailed off.

"I'll ride to the Bar-Seven with the news, partner," said Fresh, softly. The heavy eyes closed, and for the moment, he feared that the man was gone. But they opened again: and there was a struggling whisper.

"Tell him——tell the boss——."

"Yes!" breathed Fresh, bending lower with listening ear. But the feeble whisper died out. "What'll I tell the boss, partner?"

Again the lips moved.

"Tell him——tell the boss——young Arthur——."

But it was the stricken man's last effort. The heavy eyes closed—and remained closed. A slight shiver ran through the Bar-Seven puncher: and then he lay very still.

Fresh rose to his feet, with a sigh. It was a dead man who lay there in the burning sunlight, his intended message to the boss of the Bar-Seven unspoken.

What had he aimed to say? Who was "young Arthur," and what had he to do with the tragedy at the lonely range-hut? Fresh did not know, and could not guess.

There was nothing more he could do for Jim Casey, except save him from the beaks of the vultures. Fresh reckoned that he would carry him into the hut, lay him in his bunk there, and lock the door on him: and then ride to the ranch with the news. That was all he could do. With a clouded face, he bent over the dead man, to lift him from the ground.

Thud! thud! thud!

He started up again, and stared round, at the beat of horse's hoofs on the plain. Apart from the vultures and the chirping cicadas, there had not been a sign of life on the prairie a few minutes ago. But as he heard those rapidly approach-

ing hoof-beats, Fresh reckoned that other eyes had discerned the swooping vultures, from a distance. From the direction of the ranch, far out of sight under the rolling prairie, a rider came spurring—a boyish-looking rider on a handsome pinto, coming suddenly from beyond a clump of pecans. Fresh, as he looked, fancied for a moment that it was a boy who was galloping towards him, deceived by the natty riding-breeches. But the next moment he saw that it was a girl. Under her hat, her hair blew out in the wind as she rode at a mad gallop.

With a whirl of dust and a clatter of hoofs, she came up, and dragged in the panting pinto. The next moment she was out of the saddle, her dark eyes taking in the scene at a glance. And as Fresh was about to swoop off his Stetson in salute, a silver-mounted revolver, in the girl's hand, gleamed in the sun, as she levelled it at his astonished face, her finger on the trigger. Sharp and clear came the command:

"Hands up, you murderer!"

Chapter II

Hands Up!

Fresh simply stared.

A puncher, raised in the cow country, he knew what a guy had to do, with a gun looking him in the face, with a finger on the trigger. Fresh was not slow on the up-take: far from it. But he was too surprised to take it in at once, and he did not lift his hands. He only stared blankly at the girl's face under the shady brim of the hat: at the dark eyes that flashed at him as he stood by the body of the dead cow-puncher.

"Say, miss——!" he ejaculated.

She interrupted him sharply: repeating her words.

"Hands up, you murderer."

"But——!" stammered Fresh.

"Up—or I shoot you in your tracks!" From the red lips the words came in a snap: and the trigger stirred under the pressure of a finger.

There was death in that little silver-mounted revolver: death in the dark eyes that flashed over it. Fresh realised it, and his hands went up above his head, in obedience. Fresh Canroy was as quick on the draw as any man twice his age in the Lone Star State. But he would have had no chance to draw now, had he wanted. But he did not want. He did not figure on pulling a gun on a woman, even one who covered him with a six-gun, and was evidently prepared to shoot him dead where he stood if need were.

Up went his hands over his Stetson: and a whimsical smile came over his face.

"It's your say-so, miss!" he drawled, "I sure ain't the guy to argue at the wrong end of a gun. But what's biting you, miss, if a galoot may ask respectful? What do you call this game?"

"Keep them up!"

"Sure! As long as you like, miss!" said Fresh, "I was sure taught to be polite to a female, where I was raised on the Chicken River. Mebbe you'd tell me why you was holding up a guy this-a-way?"

"You know as well as I can tell you." The dark eyes snapped scorn at him, "You murderer——!"

The colour crept into Fresh's face.

"That's a hard word, miss," he said quietly, "and it don't fit me nohow. If you figure that I hurt that hombre that lies in the grass here——"

"I can believe what I see! Jim Casey has been shot up, and I find you standing over his body."

"Miss, that unlucky guy was shot up long afore I hit this spot," said Fresh, earnestly, "I was jest in time to drive off the buzzards. I was figuring that I'd lift him to the hut, to keep him clear of them, while I burned the wind to the Bar-Seven with the news. That guy was shot up by rustlers,

miss."

"And you are one of them!"

"Not on your life, miss. You want to believe me," said Fresh. "Me, I'm jest a puncher from the Chicken River."

The girl watched him closely. Perhaps a momentary doubt flickered in her face. But the revolver remained as steady as a rock. Fresh scanned her with curious interest, as he stood with his hands above his head. He reckoned that he had never seen a more beautiful face in all the long trails he had ridden in the ranch-lands of Texas. A mere slip of a girl, not near twenty yet, he reckoned: but she handled her gun as efficiently as any rider of the ranges.

"You're a stranger in this section!" she snapped.

"You said it, miss," agreed Fresh.

"Who are you?" Her voice was musical, but there was a sharp snap in it, "Your name?"

"Fresh!"

"Fresh!" she repeated, "that's not a name."

"Correct." He nodded, "I guess they called me Fresh because they reckoned that I was fresh, miss, and it's stuck, and on the Chicken River they never called me Kit Canroy. But that's the name if you want it, miss."

"What are you doing here?"

"Holding up my hands at your orders, miss, and looking at the prettiest face in all Texas!" answered Fresh.

Her eyes darkened.

"That will do!" she snapped. "Tell me what you're doing here, on my father's ranges."

"Your father's, miss?"

"Colonel Carfax is my father. I am Barbara! I want to know what you are doing on these ranges, and I want to know now." Her gun-hand made a menacing motion.

"You sure are the kid to sing out the orders, miss!" smiled Fresh. "But there ain't no secret about it. I allow I was aiming to hit the Bar-Seven before sundown."

"And why?"

"Looking for a bunch to join on to," explained Fresh. "If there's room for a good man in the Bar-Seven outfit, I'm the guy they want."

"Anyone know you there?"

"I guess not, miss! It's a long trail this-a-way from the Chicken River."

"And I find you standing here, with a Bar-Seven man dead at your feet!" said Barbara Carfax. "Maybe you're telling the truth—I wouldn't know. Jim Casey was a good man—a fine man—one of the best in the bunch. And now he lies there." The red lip trembled for a moment. But her face hardened again at once. "His murderer is going up on a rope."

"I'd sure be pleased to lend a hand with that rope, miss," said Fresh.

"Maybe! More likely to go up at the end of it!" snapped Barbara, "I'm riding you to the ranch, Mr. Fresh, or Canroy, or whatever you may call yourself: and Colonel Carfax will be the judge."

"But, miss——"

"Quit talk, and get on your horse!" she commanded, "I'll take your gun first. Hand it over—holding it by the barrel. I'm taking no chances with the murderer of Jim Casey"

"Miss, if you was to blow a dozen holes through my cabeza, I reckon I wouldn't pull a gun on no female!" said Fresh. "Hyer it is, if you want it, miss."

She watched him like a hawk, as he drew the gun from the low-slung holster. He shrugged his shoulders, and handed it to her by the long barrel. She took it in her left hand.

"Now mount your horse! If you attempt to escape, I shall shoot—get that clear!"

"You're the doctor, miss!" said Fresh, resignedly, "but I'll say you're handing me the hard stuff, miss. I reckon when you ride me into the ranch, the bunch won't want a lot of evidence before they string up a galoot who was found with the body of their side-kicker. You'll be riding me to

a rope and a branch, miss, and there's no two ways about that."

"You've got to take your chance of that."

"Not a healthy chance, miss. But it's your say-so, you holding the gun, and I guess I got to jump to orders."

"You can bank on that!" snapped Barbara Carfax. "Get on that horse."

"Jest as you say, miss!" sighed Fresh.

Meekly, he stepped towards the black broncho. Her eyes were on him watchfully, the muzzle of the six-gun following him as he moved. One suspicious sign, and she was ready to pull the trigger. Evidently there was little doubt in her mind, if any, that it was the slayer of the Bar-Seven puncher that she held under the gun. All appearances were against the rider from the Chicken River: and the rancher's daughter judged by what she saw. Se was going to ride him to the ranch, for Colonel Carfax to judge.

Fresh did not blame her. He was a stranger in the Bar-Seven country, a stranger from afar: and he had been caught in the most suspicious circumstances. He figured that in Barbara Carfax's place he might have fallen for the same mistake. But while he did not blame her, he had no idea, if he could help it, of being taken to the Bar-Seven as a suspected murderer. Only too well he knew what was likely to happen there. The bunch would be wild with fury at the news of Jim Casey's death, and what Barbara had to say, would be enough evidence for them—more than enough. It was a Texas dollar to a Mexican cent that they would lynch him out of hand. Fresh reckoned that he was not honing for a rope and a branch. The Bar-Seven Ranch was not a healthy place for the puncher from the Chicken River.

Meek and resigned as his manner was, Fresh's thoughts were working quickly. He was in a tight corner, with a gun looking at him — a woman's hand on the gun, but a woman's hand as firm and steady as any man's. She had dropped his six-gun into the grass, but her own followed his

every movement. But Fresh had been in tight corners before, and pulled out of them. He did not reckon that a woman, and a slip of a girl at that, was going to ride him to the rope of Judge Lynch.

Stepping to his horse, he stooped and picked up his quirt. His left hand was on the saddle—the quirt carelessly in his right. But suddenly—so suddenly that a flash of lightning had nothing on it—the quirt jerked, and the end of the thing curled round a silver-mounted revolver, and jerked it from the slim hand that held it. Fresh was an old hand at handling the quirt: he could have picked a mosquito from the back of a running steer, with a flick of the whip.

So sudden, so unexpected, was the action, that Barbara Carfax hardly knew that the gun had been whipped from her hand, for a moment. She uttered a startled cry, as it fell into the grass.

Before she could make a movement to recover it, or think of making a move, Fresh leaped. His foot was on the silver-mounted revolver, and with a sweeping stoop, he caught up his own gun from the grass. Erect again, he grinned whimsically at the startled face that had suddenly become white.

"I'm sure sorry to make you jump, that-a-way, miss," said Fresh, apologetically, "I do sure hate to scare a female: but I'll tell a man, I ain't riding to no ranch for a rope and a branch. Nope! Now, miss, I guess we'll talk turkey—and me at the trigger end of the gun, miss!"

Chapter III

Fresh Makes a Friend

Barbara Carfax stood panting.

The red in her cheeks had faded out. The dark eyes that had flashed at Fresh were dilated. Her hands were tightly clenched. For a second her scared eyes turned to her horse: but she did not move, for she knew that she could not mount

the pinto unless the puncher chose. She stood facing the man she believed to be the murderer of Jim Casey, panting and panting.

But it was only for a moment or two, that fear lay upon her like an icy chill. The look that came over Fresh's sun-burnt face, as he read the fear in hers, was reassuring.

He thrust his gun into his holster. Stooping, he picked up the silver-mounted revolver from the grass. Holding it by the barrel, he extended it towards her. She stared, dumb-founded.

"Miss," said Fresh, earnestly, "don't look at a guy that-a-way! I'm sure a harmless guy, miss, and I wouldn't hurt a woman, no more'n I'd leap my cayuse down from the Staked Plain into Texas. You don't want to be scared that-a-way, miss. I'd sure rather the bunch at the Bar-Seven strung me up on a cottonwood, miss, than have a female look at me so. Hyer's your gun, miss, if you feel safer with a gat in your grip: and if you choose to ride me to the ranch, miss, it's your say-so, and I ain't got no kick coming."

Mechanically, she took the gun from his hand.

But she did not raise it.

Fresh eyed her anxiously.

"Say, miss, you want a guy to stick up his hands agin?" he asked. "You only got to say so, miss! You're the doctor."

Barbara laughed.

She slipped the silver-mounted revolver into the little holster buckled to her belt. She was quite herself again now. Fresh's anxious face cleared.

"You figure that you won't want a gun after all, miss?" he asked.

"No!" said Barbara. "If I'd needed that gun, Mr. Fresh, you wouldn't have handed it to me."

"You said it, miss," agreed Fresh, "if I was the dog-goned skulking rustler skunk that shot up that puncher, I guess you would want a gun bad, miss, but I'll say that a murderer wouldn't hand you one."

She nodded.

There was no doubt in her look now, or in her mind. The young puncher's simple action had cleared away all doubt. She had been at his mercy, alone on the solitary prairie: and he had thought of nothing but reassuring her and banishing her fears. Now she once again had the upper hand, if she chose to use it. But now there was no need.

"You believe me now, miss?" asked Fresh, "I'm telling you agin that I came up and drove off the buzzards from that guy you call Jim Casey."

"I believe you now," said Barbara.

"That's good to hear, miss," said Fresh. "If you knowed me as they knowed me back on the Chicken River, you'd never have got that idea into your pretty head. Mebbe I'm a fresh guy, like they call me: but I sure ain't no gunman or rustler."

"I'm sure of that—now! I'm sorry——"

"Okay, miss," said Fresh, cheerfully, "I allow it looked sorta suspicious, the way you found me here: and I guess that if it had been the Bar-Seven bunch that found me instead of you, miss, they'd have filled me as full of holes as a colander, without stopping to ask questions."

"I am glad that it was I," said Barbara, "but——" The smile died off her face as she glanced at the still, silent figure in the grass.

Fresh's face clouded.

"That ain't no sight for you, miss," he said, and he moved to interpose between her and the body. "Mebbe, miss, you'd ride back to the ranch, and put them wise, so that the boys can hump along and see what's happened to Jim Casey, and plant him clean and decent. You can trust me, miss, to see that the buzzards don't get no claws on that poor guy."

She hesitated.

"I'll help you!" she said.

Fresh shook his head.

"I don't need no help, miss, nor it ain't work for pretty

hands like yourn. You ride to the ranch, miss, and give them the office, and leave it to me."

There was a moment's pause: and then she nodded.

"Very well," said Barbara, "I'll do as you say. And I'll say again that I'm sorry——"

"You don't need to, miss," said Fresh. "It's me that's a scallywag for scaring you the way I did. You jest forget it, miss, and it's okay."

She stepped to the pinto.

"I'm going," she said, "and if you care to ride to the Bar-Seven, Mr. Fresh, I'll put in a word with my father. You've made a friend."

"Thank you kindly, miss," said Fresh. He swept off his Stetson, as the girl leaped lightly into the saddle.

She waved a hand, and rode away at a gallop. Fresh stood with his hat in his hand, staring after her as she rode. His boyish face had a strange expression on it. Fresh had never in his young life given much thought to women except to respect them from a respectful distance. Horses and cows and guns and riatas were more in his line than women. But he stood looking after Barbara Carfax as she galloped away, and still stood motionless, staring, long after a fold of the prairie had hidden her from sight.

But he stirred at last.

The vultures were still watching, and croaking, at a distance. He stooped, and lifted the inert figure from the grass. Jim Casey was a bulky weight: but the weight seemed little to the slim, lithe young puncher: he lifted the dead man almost with ease, and carried him into the range-hut.

There he laid him in the rough bunk, and covered him with the blanket.

He glanced round the interior of the hut. It was like any other of a hundred stockmen's huts on the cattle-ranges: little more than four walls with a slanting corrugated-iron roof. There was little furniture but a bench, a rough, trestle-table, a rusty iron stove, a tin food-locker. On the table

lay the remnants of an unfinished meal: It looked as if the cow-man had been sitting at his "eats" when the alarm came, that had drawn him forth, to meet his death a lasso's length from the door. Fresh's boyish face was dark and saddened as he looked.

But suddenly it became alert.

At one end of the table, innumerable cigarette-stumps were scattered on the earthen floor. It looked as if someone had sat there, smoking cigarettes, one after another—the burnt cigarette-ends were all in one spot. Fresh's momentary thought was that Jim Casey had been some considerable cigarette-smoker. But the reddening sunset, shining in at the open door, caught something on the table that gleamed. It was a silver cigarette-case.

"Sho!" breathed Fresh.

He picked it up and looked at it with keen eyes. The stumps on the floor showed what had become of its contents: it was empty save for a single cigarette.

"Sho!" repeated Fresh, his eyes gleaming.

It was a valuable article. Fresh reckoned that it had set back its owner a good many dollars when he bought it. He did not need telling that it did not belong to the cow-man on the range—it was not the kind of gadget a cow-puncher would carry. It belonged to someone who had more money to burn than a range-rider was likely to possess. And as he turned it over in his hands, Fresh discerned a monogram engraved in the metal—and the letters in the monogram were "A.C." C might have stood for Casey: but A certainly did not stand for Jim.

"Sho!" breathed Fresh, for the third time.

Someone had been in the hut with Casey — someone, it looked, who had sat on one end of the table and smoked cigarettes, while the cow-man at the other end sat on the bench at his "eats." That was how it looked to Fresh Canroy. The cow-man had not been alone, then, the range-hut had had a visitor before Fresh arrived.

Back into his mind came the last faintly muttered words of the man who had been shot up by rustlers. "Young Arthur." Who was "Arthur"? A stood for Arthur. Did that handsome, expensive, monogrammed silver cigarette-case belong to the "Arthur" of whom the Bar-Seven puncher had tried to speak?

"I'll tell a man!" said Fresh aloud.

The man to whom that cigarette-case belonged had been in the hut. He had left the case there—forgotten—when he went. Why? Was it because he had been startled by the same alarm that had drawn out the puncher to his death? But if he was a friend of Casey's, where was he—why had he not shown up? He had not been shot up by the rustlers—it was only in a single spot that the vultures had gathered.

It was a puzzle.

But it was in Fresh's mind that that silver cigarette-case, left behind by its owner in some hurry or flurry or alarm, was a clue to the slayer of the range-rider. "A.C.," whoever "A.C." was, could tell more than Fresh knew of what had happened at the lonely hut.

He slipped the cigarette-case into his pocket.

"I guess the sheriff at Nuce is going to see that, and make what he can of it," Fresh reflected.

He gave a last glance round, and stepped out of the hut. The black vultures still watched and waited. Fresh drew the door shut and locked it, leaving the key in the lock for the Bar-Seven men when they came. With a thoughtful brow, he walked back to his broncho.

Fresh mounted and rode.

But he did not follow the trail left by Barbara Carfax's pinto. He was no longer thinking of hitting the Bar-Seven and joining up with the outfit there, although Barbara had said that she would put in a word for him. Barbara had been reassured: but Fresh reckoned that he would be under suspicion at the ranch, more likely to hit trouble than anything else. He reckoned that his best guess was to ride to

Nuce, and put the sheriff wise: and it was in the direction of the cow-town that he galloped.

Chapter IV

Arthur!

"Aw shucks!" snapped Fresh, contemptuously.

The sight of a riderless horse, saddled and bridled, brought that exclamation from the young puncher from Chicken River.

Fresh had ridden long miles from the stockman's hut. He had given the Bar-Seven ranch a wide berth. Now he was riding on the well-worn trail, marked by countless hoofs and wheels, that ran from Yellow Pine to Nuce. It was Nuce for which he was aiming, and the cow-town was already in sight, in the far distance, roofs glistening in the red rays of the sinking sun. But he slowed down the black broncho to a walk, as he sighted the riderless horse ahead of him on the trail.

A saddled and bridled horse, astray on the plains, meant only one thing: that the rider had been thrown. Fresh, bred to horses, had only an amused contempt for a guy who could not sit any cayuse, even a wild buck jumper. And the horse, browsing by the trail, did not look anything like a buck-jumper. It was a handsome chestnut, with expensive trappings: Fresh, looking at it, would have figured that it belonged to some wealthy rancher. To whomsoever it belonged, its owner was lying somewhere, having fallen from the saddle, leaving the animal to wander—a rich prize for any hobo who might have come along the Nuce trail.

The stray horse lifted its head, as it heard the hoof-beats of the black broncho. It made a movement to leave the trail and plunge into the high grass that bordered it.

Fresh gave a dissatisfied grunt.

Both he and his broncho were fatigued by long trails that

day. They had had no rest, and no eats, at the stockman's hut. Fresh was anxious to hit Nuce, make his report to the sheriff, and get food and rest for himself and his steed. He did not want to burn time on account of some jasper who had tumbled off his horse.

"You gol-darned gink!" He spoke to himself, "You was always too fresh. You got to horn into another guy's funeral! Shucks!"

But though he grumbled, he did not hesitate. He unhooked the riata from his saddle. Somewhere in the grass along the Nuce trail lay the man who had failed to keep his seat: and the fact that he was not looking for his horse indicated that he was hurt by his fall. Fresh was not the hombre to leave him to it, deep as was his scorn for any guy who would permit himself to be thrown.

The fifty-foot rope whizzed in the air, and the noose settled over the neck of the chestnut. There was a loud squeal, as the stray horse was dragged back into the trail. Fresh coiled in the rope, and hitched it, leaving a length on which to lead the chestnut. Then he pushed on again, with keen eyes scanning the trail, and the high grass on either side, in search of the rider who had taken the tumble. The man was not on his feet, or Fresh would have seen him: and that could only mean, so far as Fresh could see, that the fall had meant broken bones. The Chicken River puncher had the task before him of toting an injured man half-a-dozen miles to the cow-town.

"Sho!" ejaculated Fresh, as his scanning eyes fell on a pair of handsome riding-boots projecting from the grass beside the trail. He had found the man he was seeking.

He jumped from the saddle, and tramped into the grass. There, he stared down at a young man who lay on his back, just off the trail. He was no puncher: his riding-clothes were well cut and expensive — neat and natty to the point of dandyism. Neither, as Fresh saw at once, was he injured by his fall: that was not the reason why he lay in the grass

and left his horse to stray. Fresh's lip curled with contempt, and he was more than half disposed to remount his broncho and ride on, leaving the fellow where he lay. The flushed face, the glazed eyes that stared at him stupidly, told their own tale. It was the fire-water at some saloon in Nuce that had caused the accident. The young man who lay in the grass had ridden out of Nuce in a state of intoxication, with the result that Fresh was now looking at.

"I'll tell a man!" muttered Fresh, in disgust.

But he did not turn away. Good nature prevailed. He could not leave the fellow there, dismounted, with night coming on. Even if it was the potent fire-water that was the cause of the trouble, the guy was helpless, and Fresh was going to help him.

It looked as if he had been sleeping after his fall in the grass. But he was awake now, emerging from his drunken stupor. There was intelligence in his eyes, glazed as they were, as he looked up at Fresh.

"Say, feller, I guess you been hitting the hooch too hard," said Fresh. "You want a helping hand, I guess."

"My horse——!" muttered the man in the grass.

"You won't want to worry any about your cayuse," said Fresh, "I've sure roped him in on the trail."

There was relief in the flushed face. It was a handsome face in spite of the too visible effects of strong drink. He was a young man, not more than twenty-two or three, Fresh reckoned: pitiful to see in such a state.

He made an effort to rise, but fell back again in the grass. Evidently his head was swimming.

Fresh grinned.

"You wait a piece, feller," he said.

He stepped back to his broncho and unhooked his canteen. He dashed the cool water into the flushed, burning face. The young man gasped for breath: but the effect of the cold douche was almost immediate. He sat up, with the water running down his face.

"Give me a hand up!" he muttered.

Fresh, with a swing of a sinewy arm, hooked him to his feet. He stood unsteadily, leaning on the arm of the Chicken River puncher.

"You'll do!" said Fresh, "I guess you've slept off the worst of it, hombre, and you'll sit in a saddle with a friend's hand to hold you riding. I'm aiming for Nuce, and I'll sure see you through."

The young man shook his head. Then he gave a gasp of pain. That shake of the head gave him sharp pangs. His head ached and spun, and he leaned more heavily on the puncher's arm.

"Steady!" said Fresh. "Say, young feller, you're beginning early on the hooch trail. I guess you aint more'n a year or two older'n me. And you been hitting the fire-water like a Greaser soaking pulque. It sure is a bonehead's game, feller."

The flush had faded from the young man's face. Now it came back, crimson. There was shame in every feature.

"It was——was only this once," he muttered, "I——I wanted to forget——to forget something——"

"I get you," assented Fresh, "but that ain't the way to forget trouble, feller, only for a little while. Then you still got the trouble, and the hooch on top of it."

The young man smiled faintly.

"You said it!" he muttered. "I've been a fool! But——but I had to forget it——to get it out of my head, if only for hours——" His voice trailed away.

Fresh looked at him in wonder. He could not surmise what it was that the man had wanted to drown out of his mind. Judging by his youth and his handsome looks, possibly some love affair. He waited for more: but no more came. The man, as if recollecting himself, and realising that he was talking too freely to a stranger, shut his lips hard.

"I guess I could sit my cayuse now," he said abruptly. "Maybe you'd help me on—I'm not steady yet."

"Surest thing you know, and I'll ride you into Nuce if you want——"

"I was aiming for the Bar-Seven."

Fresh started.

"The Bar-Seven!" he repeated.

"Yes: my uncle's ranch."

"Oh, sho!" said Fresh. "If the boss of the Bar-Seven is your uncle, feller, you'll be Colonel Carfax's nevvvy."

"I am his nephew, Arthur Carfax."

Fresh started again, more sharply than before. The name of "Arthur" rang a bell in his memory. Young Arthur had been the name on the lips of the dying cow-man at the stock-man's hut.

Was this, then, the "young Arthur" of whom Jim Casey had spoken: was he the guy who had been in the hut, and left his cigarette-case there? But the rancher's nephew, mixed up in the murder of one of the outfit—it was wildly impossible. Fresh shut the fantastic thought from his mind.

"You want to hit the ranch, not Nuce, then?" he asked.

"Sure."

"I guess I'll stack you on your critter."

"Thanks."

Leaning on the puncher's arm, Arthur Carfax stepped out into the trail. With Fresh's help, he clambered on the chestnut, and gathered up the reins. Fresh cast loose the riata. But he eyed the young man, sitting unsteadily in the saddle, very doubtfully.

"Reckon you'll make it?" he asked.

"I guess I'll try." The young man smiled again. He had a pleasant engaging smile, and Fresh reckoned that he liked his looks. "Say, puncher, you're a stranger in this section, I guess."

"Me from the Chicken River," answered Fresh.

"That's a long trail." Carfax paused, "Say, you don't want to talk about the way you found me, when you hit town, puncher. May be you'd keep your mouth shut about

it."

"Sure."

"It would displease my uncle, if he heard, muttered Carfax, colouring again, "and——and if she heard——" He broke off, and left Fresh wondering whether the "she" was Barbara Carfax, who would be his cousin, if the Colonel was his uncle. "You look a straight guy, puncher—I'll trust you! Thanks again for helping me."

With that he rode.

Fresh stood in the trail, gazing after him. The fumes of drink were clearing off, but Carfax was by no means steady. He swayed in the saddle as he rode. It was a dozen good miles to the Bar-Seven: and Fresh did not believe that he would make it.

He stood in doubt. He wanted to hit Nuce, and he did not want to hit the Bar-Seven. Only too likely trouble awaited him there, even if Miss Carfax stood by him. Fresh had no fear of trouble, and he was as handy with a gun as a Texas cow-puncher needed to be: but he did not want trouble with honest men enraged by the dastardly murder of a comrade. But as he stood and gazed after the swaying figure on the trotting chestnut, he reckoned that he could not leave him to it.

His mind was suddenly made up, as Arthur Carfax, swaying widely, almost fell from the saddle. He righted again and rode on: but that was enough for Fresh. He leaped on the black broncho, and galloped after the young rancher.

Carfax glanced round at the sound of the galloping hoofs. Fresh slowed down at his side.

"I guess you ain't too safe on that cayuse, jest at present, Mr. Carfax," said Fresh, "I'm riding you to your ranch."

"I'd sure be glad of a hand."

"That goes, then!" said Fresh.

And he rode by the side of the young rancher, with a helping hand keeping him steady in the saddle.

Chapter V

At the Bar-Seven!

"Arthur!"

Fresh figured that the tall, lean man, standing in the open gateway, with grizzled contracted brows, staring at them as they came, would be Colonel Carfax, boss of the Bar-Seven. His glance passed the lean man, and took in the ranch-house, an extensive building with a green verandah along the front: the bunk-house and the corrals at a little distance. Outside the bunk-house, in the red sunset, five or six punchers were in a group, talking and gesturing: one of them waving a six-gun in the air. Fresh guessed that they had the news of what had happened at the stockman's hut on the Squaw Range, and were wildly excited about it. His glance returned to the rancher, who came striding out into the trail to meet the two riders.

"Arthur! What's all this?" rapped the rancher.

Arthur Carfax was sober now—cold sober, though still unsteady. His face was pale and almost sick in its look. He avoided meeting his uncle's eyes as he answered:

"I've had a fall, uncle!"

"A fall?"

"And this puncher picked me up, and helped me in."

"A fall?" repeated Colonel Carfax. "You're not hurt?"

"No, no: only a shake-up," muttered Arthur.

The rancher stared at him grimly.

"I guess a Carfax would know how to ride," he rapped. "A fall—pah!" He dismissed the matter with that, and turned his eyes on Fresh, less grimly, "I'm sure obliged to you, puncher, for picking up my nephew and riding him in, if he needed it."

"More'n welcome, sir!" said Fresh politely. He gave another glance at the bunch outside the bunk-house. All of them were looking at him. "I guess I'm through, Mr. Car-

fax, now you're to home," he went on, "I'll sure have to burn the wind to hit Nuce afore dark."

"Hold in your horse, puncher," said Colonel Carfax, as Fresh was about to wheel in the trail, "you're welcome to bed down at the ranch for the night, after helping my nephew. You'll get a good supper in the bunk-house."

"You're sure kind, sir," answered Fresh, "but I guess it's me for Nuce." He shook out his reins.

"Hold in, I tell you!" exclaimed Colonel Carfax, imperiously, "I want a word with you before you hit the trail, puncher."

Fresh pulled in the broncho again.

"Anything you like, rancher," he answered, amiably. But his jaw set a little. The men at the bunk-house were coming towards the spot and their eyes, as they came, were on him, keenly, suspiciously.

Fresh reckoned that any stranger in the locality would be an object of suspicion and distrust on the Bar-Seven, after they had had the news from the Squaw Range. From sheer good-nature, he had ridden the rancher's nephew home, knowing that he might be riding into trouble. Now he could feel the trouble in the air.

The Colonel was scanning him searchingly, from under his grizzled brows.

"You're a stranger here," he said, "I'm obliged to you for helping my nephew, as I've said: and I'll say you look a straight guy: but after what's happened on this ranch to-day, I guess we want a stranger to give an account of himself. If you're on the level, you've got no kick coming at that."

"Sure I'm on the level, rancher," smiled Fresh.

"Where are you from?"

"The Chicken River, rancher."

"Far enough from here," grunted Colonel Carfax. "You've got a name, I reckon?"

"Sure! The name's Kit Canroy, if you want it. Back on the Chicken River they call me Fresh."

"Fresh!" The rancher gave a start, almost a jump, at the name.

"Sure!"

From the punchers, now within hearing, came a mutter that was like a deep growl. Evidently that name struck them, as it had struck the rancher.

Arthur Carfax had slipped down from his addle. He stood looking from one to the other. The colour came into

"Uncle," he muttered, "this man helped me, after a fall from my horse—he's ridden me back. I guess he can claim his face.

civil words here."

The rancher gave him a glance.

"You don't know what's happened yet, Arthur," he snapped, "I guess they haven't got the news in town so far: and you've been all afternoon in Nuce."

"What's happened?" The young man's voice was husky: and Fresh's eyes dwelt curiously on him. Did he know? Only too plainly, to Fresh's eyes, there was some emotion in him that he found hard to suppress.

"Jim Casey has been shot up!" said Colonel Carfax.

"Jim Casey?" muttered Arthur.

"He was the rider on the Squaw range," snapped the Colonel. "He was found shot up this afternoon, and his herd driven."

"Oh!" panted Arthur Carfax, "who found him?"

"Your cousin Barbara."

"Good heavens!" breathed Arthur Carfax, his face white as chalk, "Barbara—she found him——" His voice wavered and died.

"Barabara brought us the news," said the rancher, "I've sent men to the Squaw Range to look after poor Casey. They're not back yet. But that's not all that Barbara found, from what she allows—she found a puncher, a stranger in this section, standing over his body, and that stranger's name was Kit Canroy—Fresh, as he seems to call himself."

"Oh!" gasped Arthur.

"The guy that toted you home," said the rancher. "You ain't denying, puncher, that you're the guy my daughter found with Jim Casey?"

"Not so's you'd notice it, rancher," drawled Fresh, "I sure was that guy, and I'll mention that I proved up to Miss Carfax that I was not the hombre that shot up that unlucky galoot."

"Mebbe!" said the Colonel, "mebbe!"

The bunch were all on the spot now. One of them, a brawny man in a red shirt, pushed forward. His eyes, from a bronzed bearded face, glittered at the young puncher from the Chicken River.

"That's the guy, sir!" he said. "That sure is the guy that was found standing over a murdered man: and I'll say that this bunch ain't so easy to satisfy as Miss Barbara was. Jim Casey was my side-partner, and as good a man as ever rode a cayuse in Texas, and I guess I've got a gun for the man who shot him up." His hand was on the butt of a six-gun as he snarled out the words. A deep growl from the other punchers followed.

"Keep your gun where it is, Bud Lick!" said Colonel Carfax, drily.

"I'm telling you, boss——"

"Tell me nothing!" snapped the Colonel, "when you're boss of this ranch, Bud, it will be your say-so: so long as you're foreman, you'll leave it to me."

"Boss, that guy ain't riding away from this ranch, and a Texas dollar to a Mexican cent that he's the pesky fire-bug that shot up poor Jim!" said the foreman of the Bar-Seven, hoarsely.

"He ain't riding a whole lot," said the rancher, "if he's the guy that shot up Jim Casey, there's a rope and a branch on the Bar-Seven: and I guess we won't trouble the sheriff at Nuce to handle him. But we ain't stringing up the wrong guy, Bud, and the murderer riding off and laughing in his

leeve."

"You're sure talking hoss-sense, sir!" said Fresh, "I'll tell a man, you've spilled a hatful."

The rancher turned to him again.

"You're safe here, Fresh, if you call yourself Fresh," he said, "unless it comes out that you had a hand in the murder, which I guess don't look likely: for you'd be plumb loco to ride here if you had. But I guess you can see that there's suspicion, and we ain't fixed to take chances. We're going to get the man who shot up Jim Casey, if we have to hunt him all over Texas, from the Rio Grande to the Staked Plain. You're going to bed down here, puncher."

Arthur Carfax broke in.

"The puncher's innocent, uncle! Let him ride. Is this the way to treat a stranger who horned in to help your own nephew? Let him ride."

The rancher did not heed him. His eyes were fixed on Fresh.

"I guess my daughter's told me what you allowed, when she found you on the Squaw Range," he said. "You said you was aiming for the Bar-Seven, and looking to join the bunch if a man was wanted."

"Sure thing," assented Fresh.

"Well, then, what's made you change your mind?" demanded the rancher. "Here you are at the Bar-Seven, where you was aiming for."

Fresh laughed lightly.

"I guess I changed my mind, after the mistake your daughter made, sir, and she covering me with her gun," he said, "I kinda reckoned that some of the guys here might make the same mistake, and not burn time listening to a guy before they burned powder. If I hadn't horned in on your nephew on the Nuce trail, I guess you wouldn't have seen me on this ranch, sir." He laughed again, "I'll tell a man, it was my best guess to leave Mr. Carfax where I picked him up, and ride clear. But I was always too fresh."

The rancher nodded, slowly.

"Mebbe," he said, "but now you're here, I'm making you an offer. If you're a straight guy, as I allow you look, there's a place for you in the bunch. I'll sign you on, and you'll ride with the outfit. How'll that suit you?"

"Meaning," said Fresh, quietly, "that I'm to bed down on this ranch, whether I like it or not, and stay watched till you find out who shot up Jim Casey."

"That's about the size of it," said Colonel Carfax, with a nod, "but if you've told the truth, it's what you want, and you've got no kick coming."

Fresh sat in the saddle, thinking it over. The Bar-Seven punchers eyed him almost like hawks. It was only too clear, that if he wheeled his horse to ride, every gun there would leap from its holster. A desperate affray, and a wild ride for life, lay ahead of the puncher from the Chicken River, if he refused. But Fresh guessed that he had no call to refuse.

"Well?" rapped the rancher.

Fresh smiled, his boyish smile.

"Sir, I guess I'm taking that offer," he said, "I should sure hate to shoot up good boys like this hyer bunch, sir, and I guess I can see that every guy here is honing to pull a gun."

"You said it!" grunted Bid Lick.

"I'll tell a man, I was sure a bonehead to ride here at all," said Fresh, "but seeing that I'm here, I'm your man, rancher. I'll bed down here, and join the bunch if you'll sign me on—and every man in the outfit can watch me all he wants, but he won't find me looking to light out." He slipped lightly from the saddle.

"That goes!" said Colonel Carfax, "Bud Lick, you look after the new man, and see that there's no trouble in the bunk-house."

"Sure, boss!" muttered the foreman.

"Come, Arthur!" added the rancher: and the young man, who had stood silent and pale, followed his uncle without speaking, and they disappeared into the ranch-house.

Fresh, with the reins of the black broncho over his arm, went with the punchers. And if he knew that his life hung on a thread, in the midst of the bunch whose comrade had been murdered, his cool and easy and friendly manner did not indicate that he realised it.

Chapter VI

Lynch Law!

It came suddenly.

Not often was Fresh Canroy taken by surprise. And in the strange circumstances on the Bar-Seven ranch, he was as wary as a cougar. But he was thinking of other things, and he was off his guard when the rush came.

It was bright morning on the grasslands of Texas.

The new man in the Bar-Seven bunch had slept peacefully in his bunk, in the bunk-house. Bud Lick, though he eyed him with grim suspicion, carried out the boss's orders, and under his eye there was no trouble. In the morning, Fresh turned out for his bacon and beans from the chuck-house, under hostile eyes, and without a word spoken to him. There was suspicion in every face: and from suspicion to action, as Fresh well knew, it was but a step: he had seen lynch mobs in the cow-towns. He knew that he might need his gun at any moment, and his hand was never far from the butt, though his manner was easy. Casey, he gathered, had been a popular man in the outfit: and every man on the Bar-Seven was breathing vengeance on his murderer. In that mood there was little desire to wait for definite proof.

So far, however, there had not been hostility: only dark looks, muttered words, and a bitter silence towards the new man. If Fresh addressed one of the punchers, he received only a black stare in response. When he spoke to Bud Lick, the foreman of the Bar-Seven turned his back on him. Once, when Tex, the horse-wrangler, made a stride towards Fresh,

his hand on a butt, the foreman rapped out sharply to him to pack it up: and Tex packed it up, though with lowering looks. Bud was keeping the peace: but with what thoughts, and what feelings, it was easy for the puncher from Chicken River to guess.

If that was going to be the way of it, Fresh reckoned that the Bar-Seven was the last bunch in Texas that he wanted to join.

Yet he was not sorry that he was there. It was a good bunch, and he liked their looks, little as they seemed to like his. But for the Colonel's authority, they would gladly have crowded him to a cottonwood and strung him up at the end of a riata. But Fresh could make allowance for that, in the circumstances—their comrade had been shot up, and they suspected the man who had been found with the body: Fresh reckoned that their feelings were natural. He hoped that he would be able to put himself right with the bunch, and find friends where now he was in the midst of foes. In any case he had no choice: for it was quite clear that if he sought to ride away from the ranch, he would be riddled with bullets as he rode. He was under suspicion, and under watch: he had put his head into this hornet's nest, and he had to make the best of it.

But he was not thinking of riding. He did not want to ride. In the sunny morning, he had had a glimpse of a fair face in the verandah of the ranch-house. Barbara Carfax had seen him, and given him a smile, as he lifted his Stetson. That was what Fresh was thinking of, as he sat on the bench outside the bunk-house, and waited for orders from the foreman—which did not come. There was plenty of work to be done on a ranch, and Fresh was ready and willing to take his share: but Bud seemed to have no use for him. The boss had signed him on: but he knew that that was little but cover for keeping him a prisoner on the ranch. It was not good enough, Fresh reckoned: and yet he did not want to ride. He smiled at himself for thinking so much of a pair

of bright eyes that had glanced at him from the verandah of the rancho: but he did not want to ride away from Barbara Carfax.

It was of Barbara that he was thinking, when the rush came suddenly, and took him off his guard. He had not observed that Bud Lick had ridden out on the trail: but others had observed it. Tex, the horse-wrangler, Long Bill, Yuba, Mexican Pete, had gathered in a little bunch at the corner of the bunk-house, watching Bud till his Stetson dipped below the grass. Then, with an exchange of glances, but no spoken word they went suddenly into action. At the rush of feet Fresh started out of his reverie, and his hand flew to his holster—too late! rawny hands grBapsed and pinioned him, and he was dragged off the bench to his feet.

Three or four more punchers came clattering up. Fresh, in the midst of the crowd, gave a fierce wrench to free his arms—but one was grasped by Tex, the other by Yuba, and they held on like iron. He was helpless in the hands of the punchers, and already two or three guns were out: his own snatched from the holster.

"I guess you can wriggle all you want, you dog-goned murderer!" said Tex, in a deep, savage growl, "it won't buy you anything."

"Stand clear, you Tex!" said Long Bill. His Colt was half raised.

"Pack your gun, Bill!" snapped the horse-wrangler, "that guy is going up on a rope. You got the riata, Pete?"

"Sure!" grinned Mexican Pete.

"Have him round to the back of the bunk-house, so they won't see from the rancho," said the horse-wrangler. "We don't want the boss horning into this, or young Arthur either, and it won't be no sight for Miss Carfax."

The crowd surged round the bunk-house, dragging Fresh in their midst. Behind the building, which screened them from view from the rancho, they halted, where a tall cottonwood tree grew close to the wall, its thick, wide branches

extending over their heads. Fresh wrenched, and wrenched again savagely: and for some moments he rocked, and Tex and Yuba rocked with him. But they held him fast, while Mexican Pete tossed the rope over a high branch.

Fresh panted.

"You dog-goned locoed gecks!" His eyes blazed at the circle of grim faces, "You bunch of Digger Injuns, I'm telling you that I had no hand in shooting up Jim Casey, and Miss Carfax can tell you the same——"

"That's your say-so!" jeered Tex. "You was found with Jim, all shot up, and I'll say we ain't looking further for his murderer."

"We sure ain't!" growled Yuba. "Jim was a white man, as white as any guy in Texas, and the hombre that shot him up is going up on that rope."

"I'm telling you that I ain't that hombre, you pesky locoed bonehead!" shouted Fresh. "That hombre drove Jim Casey's herd, and you want to look for him in the hills with the cows."

"I guess you could tell us jest where to look for them cows, too, if you wanted," jeered Tex. "It ain't no use chewing the rag puncher. You could put it across a little miss like Miss Barbara, but you can't put it across this bunch. We're stringing up the galoot that shot Jim Casey."

"You locoed gink——"

"That's enough from you. Shove that rope on him, Pete."

"Sure!"

Fresh struggled again, savagely, madly. So fierce and desperate was his struggle that he wrenched his right arm loose: and, as Mexican Peter looped the noose of the lasso over his head, he struck out, and his clenched fist crashed into Pete's face, sending him spinning backwards. The lasso trailed on the ground, as the cow-man crashed.

But the next moment, he was pinioned again, and now three or four pair of hands were on him. Still resisting, he was held powerless.

Mexican Pete staggered to his feet. His hand was to his face, and he tottered dazedly, and leaned on the back wall of the bunk-house. Tex glanced at him.

"Jumpin' gophers! That guy sure does pack a punch!" he said, half admiringly, "I'll say that he sure does pack a punch."

"And a gun, too, if a guy had a chance to use it," panted Fresh. "Give me a chance with my gun, and I'll sure wipe out the whole bunch of you."

"I'll say you larned to talk tall, on the Chicken River, jeered Tex. "Pick up that rope, Bill, an' fix him."

Mexican Pete, leaning on the bunk-house groaning, was out of the circus. But Long Bill snatched up the riata.

"Hyer goes!" he said.

Fresh made another desperate effort. But there were too many brawny hands on him now. Helpless, he stood as the noose was slipped over his neck. Half a dozen punchers grasped the other end of the rope, and dragged.

A moment more, and the young puncher from the Chicken River would have been swinging in the air. But at that moment came an interruption.

"Stop!"

It was a shriek, as a graceful form appeared round the end of the bunk-house.

"Stop!"

Barbara Carfax shrieked out the word, as she came. In a moment she reached the puncher who stood with the rope round his neck, already feeling the choke of it. She caught at the rope, and dragged it down. Under the blaze of her angry eyes, the Bar-Seven men released the riata, and it slithered over the branch and dropped beside the girl, and the man she had saved from sudden death.

A Close Call!

Fresh panted for breath.

His hands went up to his throat, where he could still feel the choke of the rope. He panted and panted.

Barbara's eyes flashed round at the Bar-Seven punchers. Their eyes dropped before hers. Even as he stood dizzy from his narrow escape, hardly believing that he was yet living, Fresh noted how the slim girl dominated the crowd of rough, hostile cow-punchers. Not a hand stirred to touch the rope that had slithered over the branch and fallen. They stood with downcast looks: uneasy, furtive, some of them edging away.

Barbara lifted her hand, and jerked the noose from Fresh's neck. She threw it to the ground, with an angry gesture.

"How dare you?" she panted, "How dare you? Are you cowards on the Bar-Seven—a crowd of you on to one man—hardly more than a boy? Do you want to do murder on my father's ranch?"

Tex shifted uneasily. The others looked at him. It was the horse-wrangler who had led the lynch party, and they left it to him to speak. Tex stood six-feet-four in his cow-hide boots, towering over Barbara. But he stood before her like a chided schoolboy.

"I guess that's a hard word, Miss Barbara," he stammered, "I'll say it ain't murder to string up the guy that shot up a man in this outfit."

"He did not!" snapped Barbara.

"That's your say-so, miss," said Tex, stubbornly, "I guess he could pull the wool over a girl's eyes, miss: but he can't fool this bunch any."

She stamped her foot.

"Talk sense!" she snapped. "Do you fancy that he would have ridden here, with my cousin, yesterday, if he was the

man that shot Jim Casey?"

"I allow he's got gall!" said Tex. "He's sure got gall enough for a whole team, and a dog under the waggon. But he can't bluff this bunch."

"He sure can't, miss!" ventured Yuba.

"My father trusted him with you. You're not to be trusted. All this while the murderer of Jim Casey is riding safe," snapped Barbara, "I guess he would be glad to hear that an innocent man had been lynched in his place. Look for the man who shot Jim and leave this boy alone."

"I reckon we ain't fur to look!" muttered Tex.

Fresh broke in:

"Guess again, feller," he said, "you got to look for that guy where Jim Casey's herd was driven, and I reckon that's in the hills."

Tex gave him a glare.

"That's all from you!" he snarled. "You ain't wanted to chew the rag."

"I'll sure chew the rag all I want, and then some!" answered Fresh coolly, "and I'll tell you some more, hombre. I've struck some boneheads in my time, but for a bunch of gol-darned, all-fired ginks, I never struck a bunch like you-uns. You sure ought to go back to your school-marms, and learn to behave. But I guess you couldn't learn nothing, nohow. I'll say you've got less brains in your cabezas than I've got in my feet."

There was an angry growl from the punchers.

Barbara smiled faintly.

"They gave you the right name, on the Chicken River," she said. "You sure are plenty fresh."

"Too fresh for this outfit," growled Tex. "Miss, I'm asking you to walk back to the house, and keep clear of this circus."

"You can ask!" said Barbara disdainfully. "You will answer to my father for this. Give this boy back his gun."

There was a pause. But at length Tex produced the six-

gun that had been snatched from the prisoner's holster. Unwillingly, with a black brow, he held it out by the barrel, and gladly Fresh's fingers closed on the butt. But he slipped it into the holster, and stood with empty hands.

"Now come with me to the house," said Barbara. "Your life is not safe among these men—come with me."

Fresh did not stir.

"Miss, I thank you kindly for horning in," he said earnestly, "I sure am grateful, miss, for what you done, and I guess I'll never forget it, miss, and if ever you wanted a guy to die for you, I'll say that I'm the guy, and I'd be glad. But I sure ain't hiding behind a woman, miss, if you're excuse me, and not think it too fresh of me to say so, miss."

"Are you loco?" snapped Barbara.

"I sure hope not, miss," said Fresh.

"Do you want to be strung up on that cottonwood, as soon as I've left you?" exclaimed Barbara, impatiently.

A smile came over Fresh's surnburnt face: a smile that was grim.

"I guess I ain't going to be strung up a whole lot, miss, now that I've got a gat to grip!" he answered, "I was kinda took by surprise, when that bunch roped me in a piece ago: but I'll tell a man, I've got my eyes peeled now. There will sure be some new hands wanted in the bunch, afore they get a riata round my neck again. They knowed on the Chicken River that I was no slouch with a gun."

Tex gave a savage snort.

"You figure you could shoot up the whole outfit, like you did poor Jim Casey on the Squaw range?" he snarled.

"I never did a thing to Jim Casey, except save him from the buzzards," said Fresh. "But I'll sure try my hand at shooting up this outfit, if you figure on carrying on with this lynching game."

His hand rested on the butt of the gun in his holster as he spoke. There were nearly a dozen Bar-Seven men on the scene, and every man packed a gun. But the puncher from

the Chicken River was cool as ice.

Barbara gazed at him almost blankly.

"I'm telling you to come away," she said, "my father will protect you."

Fresh gave a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"I ain't asking no man's protection, miss, even a guy that I respect as much as your father," he answered. "That ain't the way I was raised."

"I'll call my father!" exclaimed Barbara.

"Don't you worry the Colonel any, miss," said Fresh. "This ain't the Colonel's funeral. You jest mosey off, miss, and don't look back. If these hombres want a rookus, I'm the guy they're looking for: but it wouldn't be a sight for your pretty eyes, miss: you jest mosey off and leave it at that."

She stamped her foot again.

"Tex!" she rapped.

"Yup, miss," muttered Tex.

"Will you give me your word that there shall be no more of this, and that Fresh will be safe with the bunch? Or must I call my father?"

Tex shifted uneasily, and the crowd of punchers exchanged glances. Very clearly they did not want the boss of the Bar-Seven on the scene, to find them disobeying his orders. But that was not all. There was a subtle change in the looks they cast at the Chicken River puncher. Fresh had made an impression on the Bar-Seven bunch.

"Sure, miss, if you want," muttered the horse-wrangler. "Mebbe we been a piece hasty—I allow that mebbe we been a piece hasty."

"Mebbe!" muttered Yuba.

"More'n a piece, I guess, feller," said Fresh, "but I guess I know how you feel with a side-partner shot up by some lobo-wolf that's run off with his herd, and I'll tell a man, I ain't got no kick coming. The boss has signed me on in this bunch, and I'll tell a man, you'll trust me when you know me better."

"Mebbe!" grunted Tex.

"I can trust you?" Barbara's glance swept from face to face.

"You got my word, miss," said Tex. "There ain't going to be no lynching, not at least till the boss gives the word. I guess that puncher won't get away, if he's wanted for a rope when the Colonel gives the word."

Fresh smiled.

"I'm telling you, I don't hone to get away," he said, "I'm signed on, on the Bar-Seven, now, and I'm sure freezing to the Bar-Seven. You can watch me all you want, but you don't need to—I ain't looking to ride away."

Barbara looked at him.

"You're staying here, with the bunch — after what's happened?" she said.

"Sure, miss," said Fresh, "ain't I signed on by the boss?" She smiled.

"You been kind to me, miss," went on Fresh, "and mebbe, now the boys is so peaceable, and there ain't going to be no rookus, mebbe, miss, you'd be so kind as not to put the boss wise about this leetle spot of trouble? He sure would be horn mad with the bunch, miss, and there ain't no call to get them the rough edge of his tongue, nohow. They're good boys, miss, and they'll like me a whole lot better when they know me."

Barbara laughed.

"That goes," she said.

"Thank you kindly, miss," said Fresh, "I should sure hate to start trouble on this ranch. We're all going to be friends here, I reckon."

She hesitated a moment or two, and then, with a smile to Fresh, and a nod to Tex, she walked away and disappeared round the corner of the bunk-house. Fresh was left alone among the crowd of punchers who, a few minutes ago, had been savagely bent on stringing him up on the cottonwood. But there was a change of mood now. His gun was in his

holster, and his hand was ready to grasp it, but he knew that he did not want a gun now. If there was still doubt in the minds of the bunch, they were at least prepared to give him the benefit of it.

Tex gave him a half-shamefaced look.

"Mebbe we was a piece hasty," he mumbled.

"Mebbe you was!" agreed Fresh, "I'd like you boys to believe that when it comes to stringing up the guy that shot Jim Casey, I'll lend a hand with the rope as soon as any hombre here."

"Mebbe, mebbe!" muttered the horse-wrangler, "I'll say I'm glad that Miss Barbara horned in, afore you went up on that branch."

"Feller," said Fresh, "you ain't half so glad as I am!" And there was a laugh from the crowd of punchers.

"If you're white, you're O.K. with this bunch," said Tex, slowly, "and if you ain't, I guess the boss will sort it out. There won't be no more talk about lynching, feller. That's the whole piece for now."

Tex tramped away, and the crowd dispersed after him. Fresh was left standing under the cottonwood tree behind the bunk-house. He glanced up at the branch over his head, and shrugged his shoulders. He had been as near death, as a guy could go, and live: but that cut little ice with the cool puncher from Chicken River. He was humming the tune of a Mexican fandango as he sauntered away.

Chapter VIII

Put to the Test!

"You Fresh!"

Bud Lick grunted out the words.

Fresh gave him a cheery smile.

He was loitering by the bunk-house. Every other man on the Bar-Seven was busy: but the new man had received no

orders from his foreman. Bud had not addressed a word to him, and evidently had no use for him. Fresh had no hunch for idling, and he had given his broncho an extra rub down in the corral, cleaned his harness, and so filled in time. It was as he came away from the corral that the foreman of the Bar-Seven called to him.

"Hyer, feller," he answered, "what's the orders? I'm telling you, I'd sure like to earn my keep in this bunch."

"Beat it along to the house—the boss wants you!" answered Bud, shortly, and he turned his back with that.

Fresh gave a shrug. If other members of the Bar-Seven bunch were beginning to thaw to him, Bud was as grim and uncompromising as ever. He was still under strong suspicion in that quarter, at least.

He walked away to the rancho.

Under the verandah, a peon was holding a horse: the handsome chestnut Fresh had seen Arthur Carfax riding the previous day. Apparently he had the horse ready for the rancher's nephew to come out.

Fresh's brows knitted slightly, as he glanced at it. It reminded him of young Carfax: of the name of "young Arthur" on the lips of the dying puncher on the Squaw Range, and of the silver cigarette-case that was still in his pocket. Of all that, he had said nothing so far.

He had ridden for Nuce the day before, to tell what he knew to the sheriff. It was, he reckoned, the sheriff's business. But his meeting with Arthur Carfax had changed his destination: and now he was glad of it. He was not sure now that he was going to put the sheriff wise. For the present at least he was keeping his own counsel. He figured that it needed a big think-up before he loosed his mouth.

He passed the peon and the chestnut, and set his foot on the steps of the verandah. A voice came to his ears as he did so—the voice of Barbara Carfax.

"You're riding this morning, Arthur?"

"Sure, Barbara."

"To Nuce?" There seemed to Fresh's ears to be a sort of chill in the girl's pleasant voice as she asked that curt question.

No answer came.

"Arthur! My dear, you're through with that man Jas Calhoun? You promised my father——"

Fresh clattered his cowhide boots loudly on the verandah steps. What was being said by the cousins was not for his ears, and he was prompt to give warning that he was within hearing.

He heard a startled breath, and a light footstep. When he tramped up into the verandah, he found Arthur Carfax alone there. The young man, with a flushed face, gave him a quick inquiring glance. But Fresh's face expressed nothing. He touched his hat to the rancher's nephew.

"Mornin', Mr. Carfax, sir!" he said cheerily.

"Oh! Good morning!" said Arthur. His face cleared: he was satisfied that the puncher had heard nothing. "So you're in the bunch now, Fresh?"

"Yup! The boss was kind enough to sign me on, sir!" said Fresh, with a grin. "Some of the bunch don't exactly cotton to me, but there ain't nary a guy anxious to see me ride away!"

Arthur frowned.

"The gecks!" he muttered. "You did me a good turn yesterday, Fresh."

"More'n welcome, sir."

"You've said nothing——?" Arthur's voice faltered, "about——about the way you found me——"

"Didn't I allow I wouldn't, sir?"

"Yes, yes: I know I can trust you not to talk idly," said the young man, hastily. "You've seen Miss Carfax—my cousin? You can guess that I should just hate her to know."

"I sure do understand that, sir," said Fresh. "You want

to believe, sir, that I've no hunch to talk about what don't concern me any."

"Yes, yes! As for your being under suspicion here, about the—the affair on the Squaw Range, that needn't worry you a lot," said Arthur. He did not look at Fresh as he spoke: his glance wandered among the palms in tubs that stood along the verandah. "They—they'll come round, and see sense. My cousin has told me of her meeting with you on the Squaw Range, and I trust you as she does. You can bank on me standing by you, and telling the world that you had no hand in what happened to poor Jim Casey."

Fresh stood very still, for a moment, looking at him. The young man spoke earnestly: he believed what he said. He at least was assured of the puncher's innocence. "How come?" was the thought that flashed into Fresh's mind. Was Arthur Carfax so sure of it because he had his own knowledge of what had happened on the Squaw Range? It seemed to Fresh, for a moment, that the silver cigarette-case was burning a hole in his pocket.

But it was an ungrateful thought, and he dashed it from his mind. He could not and would not suspect the man who did not suspect him.

"Thank you for that, sir," said Fresh, "I own I've been getting some pizen looks, but I guess the bunch will come round when they know me. I was sent for to speak to the boss, sir," he added.

"You are to ride with me to-day," said Arthur.

Fresh raised his eyebrows.

"With you, sir?"

"Yes: the Colonel will tell you——"

There was a heavy tread, and Colonel Carfax came out into the verandah. He gave Arthur a smile, and Fresh a nod.

"Mornin', sir!" said Fresh.

"Morning!" said the rancher. "How are you pulling with the bunch, Fresh?"

"Jest about what a guy could expect, sir, seeing that he's

under suspicion, and signed on to keep him from hitting the horizon, sir."

Colonel Carfax knitted his grizzled brows, staring at him. Fresh met that grim, searching gaze equably.

"You wanting to hit the horizon?" asked the Colonel, abruptly.

Fresh shook his head.

"Not so's you'd notice it, sir," he answered, "I guess I like the bunch, though they don't like me a whole lot so far. And if I was to ride, I guess I'd leave every guy on the ranch believing that I was the dog-goned lobo-wolf that shot up Jim Casey, and I sure don't want that, sir."

"They could believe nothing else, if you escaped!"

"I'm wise to that, sir! No escape in mine!" said Fresh. "If I was a prisoner, now, I don't mind letting you know that I'd kick the end-boards out of this ranch and get loose. But you've signed me on in the bunch, and that goes. I'll prove up to you that I'm a good man if you give me the chance."

"You'll have your chance," said the Colonel.

"Mebbe you'd trust me as fur as riding herd, sir: but if you want to keep me under your eye, sur I'll cut alfalfa if you want."

"You're going to ride with my nephew."

"Jest as you say, sir."

"As matters stand, the bunch don't care to work with you. You can guess that."

"I've had a sorta hint on the subject, sir," said Fresh, with a grin.

"My nephew's riding for the Squaw hills—the other side of the Squaw Range where Casey was shot. You'll ride with him."

Fresh's eyes sparkled.

"Looking for sign of them cows that was run off?" he said.

"Exactly!"

"Mebbe I might be some use, sir," said Fresh. "They could tell you on the Chicken River that I'm as good as an Injun on the trail."

"My nephew's willing to ride with you——"

"And nobody else ain't!" sighed Fresh.

"Perhaps—at present! My nephew at least trusts you."

"I take it kindly of him, sir, and I sure won't let him down."

"Get your cayuse out of the corral."

"Yup!"

Fresh clattered down the verandah steps. The Colonel's grim eyes followed him as he went. Then he looked at his nephew.

"You trust that man, Arthur?"

"All the way!"

"Well, we shall see. Barbara believes he's square, and she's a girl with hoss-sense. But we shall see. If he's guilty, he's got his chance to escape, on a thirty-mile ride, and he won't miss it. If he goes——" The rancher's face set like iron. "If he goes, he shall be hunted down like a wolf, and strung up on the nearest tree. But if he plays fair, O.K. This puts him to the test."

"I guess he will play fair," said Arthur. "He won't go."

"We shall see! Get to your cayuse now."

Arthur Carfax went down the verandah steps to his horse. Five minutes later, he was riding away from the ranch, with Fresh on the black broncho riding at his side. Many eyes followed them as they went: and there was growling among some of the Bar-Seven men, and Bud Lick scowled blackly. Few of the bunch, probably, expected to see the boy puncher on the Bar-Seven again, now that he was given a chance to ride free. But Colonel Carfax's word was law on the Bar-Seven: and the punchers scowled after Fresh as he went, and left it at that.

Chapter IX

Jas Calhoun!

Fresh opened his lips to speak—but closed them again. He was puzzled.

But he figured that it was not for him to ask questions. He was riding with the boss's nephew, under orders. It was for Arthur Carfax to give the lead, and for the puncher to follow where he led. And the way Arthur Carfax led did not aim direct for the Squaw hills, the destination named by the rancher. The Squaw hills lay to the west, on the further side of the feeding-range where Jim Casey had met his fate, and it was a ride of thirty miles. For six or seven of those miles, they had headed west: and then Arthur had changed the direction. Now a patch of smoke in the sky indicated that it was the cow-town of Nuce that lay ahead of them. To ride to the Squaw hills by way of Nuce was to take a roundabout trail adding a dozen miles to the ride.

It came into Fresh's mind that Arthur Carfax had headed west, till well out of sight of the ranch, for his own reasons. Barbara's words in the verandah came back to him. He guessed that Arthur did not want either his uncle or his cousin to know that he was hitting Nuce that morning. If that was so, there was something surreptitious about it, that jarred on him. But it was not for him to kick, and he rode the black broncho in silence.

Arthur's look did not invite questions, if Fresh had been disposed to ask them. He had spoken hardly a word since leaving the ranch: and now he was sunk in a deep and moody silence. Indeed, he seemed to have forgotten the puncher riding with him. Fresh glanced at him from time to time, and noted the cloud that settled deeper and deeper on his face. He wondered what the young man's reflections might be, to bring that cloud to his brow. Could it be the knowledge of guilt? Was that what he had wanted to forget, when he

had soaked himself in hooch the previous day? It was in Fresh's mind to draw the silver cigarette-case from his pocket, and ask plain questions. But he remained silent.

He liked young Arthur: all the more, perhaps, because he could read in the handsome face signs of indecision and weakness of will. There was nothing indecisive about Fresh: he was simple, direct, and irrevocably resolute. He was the younger of the two by several years, but he was the man Arthur Carfax was never likely to be. He remembered Barbara's words and the anxious note in her voice. Who was Jas Calhoun, and what? Some guy in Nuce, Fresh reckoned, whose acquaintance the young rancher would be better without. Fresh's thoughts were busy, as well as Arthur's, as they rode in silence on the Nuce trail.

It was not till they were about to enter the rugged, irregular Main Street of the Texas cow-town, that Arthur seemed to remember Fresh. He turned suddenly towards him, his troubled face flushing.

"We're stopping a piece in Nuce," he said abruptly.

"Yup!"

Arthur's colour deepened.

"We're hitting the Squaw hills, as my uncle said, but I—I've a spot of business to see to in Nuce, that can't wait. You've shown that you know how to keep your mouth shut, Fresh."

"Sure!" said Fresh.

"You don't want to mention at the ranch that we came round by way of Nuce."

"Nope."

"I—I'd rather not have what I do talked about." Arthur looked away from him, as he muttered, "I guess you've noticed already that my uncle rides herd with a good grip on the rein."

Fresh smiled.

"I'll say that, that's jest about how I should size up the boss, sir," he answered, "I reckon he hasn't a lot of use for

back-chat."

"He's a good man, and a kind man, and a generous man, but he rides a guy hard," said Arthur. "Maybe it's for a guy's own good, too. But—but I'd rather not have things to explain to him."

"I get you, sir," said Fresh, cheerily. "I'm under your orders on this trail, sir, and it's your say-so."

Arthur looked relieved. He said no more, and they rode into Nuce. There were many people in the wide main street, and many of them saluted Arthur Carfax as he rode by. He was well known there, and Fresh reckoned that he was popular with the Nuce folks. He drew rein at a rambling timber building, on which a sign announced that it was the Lone Star Hotel, and Fresh followed his example. This, he reckoned, was young Arthur's destination in Nuce.

The young man dismounted, and threw his reins over the hitching-rail. Fresh slipped from the saddle.

Arthur gave him an almost stealthy glance.

"I've got to see a man here," he muttered. "You'll stay with the horses, Fresh. I won't keep you long."

"Jest as you say, sir."

"Hello, Carfax!" A man leaned from the hotel piazza, and called to the young rancher.

Arthur looked up quickly, and the blackness that came over his face startled Fresh. He followed Arthur's glance. The hail from the piazza was friendly: but Arthur Carfax looked, for the moment, as if he had heard the voice of a mortal enemy. Fresh scanned the man curiously, his lips setting a little. The next moment Arthur Carfax's expression changed, and he answered the hail:

"Hello, Jas!"

Fresh stood watching the man in the piazza. So this was Jas—Jas Calhoun, of whom Barbara had spoken. A lean, lithe man, dressed in "store" clothes, well-cut: though a bulge under his coat testified that he packed a gun, like most of the citizens of Nuce. It was his face that riveted Fresh's

attention: a lean, cold, hard face, with eyes that seemed of ice: a smile on it that went no further than the lips. A gunman, Fresh reckoned, and as tough a guy as any gunman in the Lone Star State, for all his store clothes, and his boiled shirt, and the diamond in his tie.

Fresh breathed a little hard.

If this was Arthur Carfax's friend in Nuce, there was no doubt that Arthur needed someone to ride herd over him. Gunman, gambler, killer: that was Fresh's size-up of Jas Calhoun.

The man hardly glanced at Fresh. His nod and smile were for the young rancher.

"I reckoned I'd be seeing you," he said. He laughed, displaying a gleam of white, even teeth. "You sure was full when you hit the trail last evening, Carfax. I'd have ridden herd over you if you'd wanted."

"I didn't!"

"You sure was ornery," smiled Jas Calhoun. "But I guessed I'd be seeing you. Come right up."

Arthur Carfax tramped up the steps of the piazza. He joined the gunman, and for a few minutes they talked in low tones. Fresh stood with the horses, giving his attention to the scene round him. But Arthur's voice, suddenly raised, came to his ears.

"No! I tell you, no! I've promised my uncle."

"Aw, forget it."

"And it's not only that! I tell you, I'll never touch a card again, Jas Calhoun. Look where it led me."

"You gink, do you want to tell all Nuce?" snapped the gunman. "There's your puncher with his ears wide open."

"I don't care! I've a mind to tell all Nuce, and all Texas!" exclaimed Arthur, passionately. "I'm through with you, Jas."

The ice-cold eyes glittered. The gunman's brows contracted over them.

"You don't want to shout it out," he said, "I pack a gun

to answer talk like that, Carfax."

Carfax laughed contemptuously.

"Do you think I'm afraid of your gun, Jas? Talk sense!"

"There's some notches on the butt, Carfax," said Calhoun, in a low voice of menace, "I wouldn't like to put another, to your name, and you a friend."

"Aw cut it out! We're not friends."

Fresh stood looking up, shifting a little to get a clearer view of the two standing at the top of the steps. His hand was very near his holster. If the gunman drew on Arthur Carfax, Fresh reckoned that he was going to horn in, pronto. Fresh was a puncher, and Calhoun a gunman: but Fresh figured that if it came to shooting, he would show that gunman that he had learned to draw quick and sudden, on the Chicken River.

But Calhoun did not make a move to his gun.

"We got to chew this over," he said, quietly.

"I tell you I'm through."

Calhoun's answer was in low tones that did not reach the puncher below. For several more minutes, the low-voiced talk went on. It went to Fresh's heart to see the haggard look on the young rancher's face: the cold, ruthless determination in the gunman's. Arthur Carfax did not fear the desperado's gun: there was nothing like fear in him. But it was clear to Fresh that he was somehow under the gunman's domination.

Suddenly his voice came, raised again.

"If she knew—oh, heaven, if she knew——"

Calhoun laughed.

"Pack it up, you fool! There's your puncher staring at you—do you want him to tell all the boys in the bunk-house?"

Arthur's voice sank again, as he answered. Again there was muttered talk. Then an exclamation from Arthur:

"I'm through with you, I tell you, Jas. You'll never get me on that trail again—never!"

"That's a long word!" drawled Jas, "I guess you got to forget it, and you got to forget it soon."

Arthur Carfax looked at him almost wildly. Then, without another word, he turned his back on the gunman, and clattered down the steps to the street. Jas stood looking after him with a smile: a smile that almost made Fresh pull his gun on him. Arthur Carfax went almost blindly to his horse.

"We're riding, sir?" asked Fresh.

"Yes, yes, get on your cayuse, man. Don't stand chewing the rag there!" snapped Carfax, harshly.

Fresh took that in silence. He reckoned that the young puncher's nerves were in rags, after that strange interview with the gunman at the Lone Star. The rough edge of his tongue did not hurt Fresh. Carfax threw himself upon the chestnut, and without another word or glance to Fresh, went galloping down the street, to the prairie trail beyond. Fresh rode after him: unheeded by the man in the piazza. Jas Calhoun's icy eyes were fixed on the young rancher as he galloped away, and a smile was on his lips—such a smile as might have been on a panther's lips, who knew that his prey was within reach of teeth and claws.

Chapter X

Sharp Shooting!

"Smoke!" said Fresh.

Arthur Carfax did not heed.

It was late in the afternoon.

The sunset was red on the stony, dusty hills.

Fresh had been loitering idly, keeping down his impatience, waiting for word from the boss's nephew. Arthur uttered no word. He was plunged in thoughts in which the puncher had no share.

After leaving Nuce, they had ridden hard, heading for the

Squaw hills. Carfax set the pace, and he set it at a gallop. Mile after mile of prairie fled under the galloping hoofs. Without a word, never looking at his companion, hardly looking where he was riding, Arthur Carfax galloped on: like a man seeking to ride away from his own thoughts. But black care rode behind the horseman. Mile after mile, till they struck the creek, flowing down from the hills, that rippled past the stockman's hut on the lonely range. But they did not ride near the hut where Jim Casey had met his death: and Fresh wondered whether he could guess why young Carfax wanted to ride clear of it.

They followed the creek into the hills. The weary horses slowed down to a trot. Fresh had figured on a halt for eats: but Arthur Carfax did not pull rein: and the young puncher said nothing. But he was perplexed and worried. According to what the boss of the Bar-Seven had said, they were riding in quest of the cows that had been driven from Jim Casey's range. That meant trailing: and the puncher from Chicken River was a good man at sign. It was easy to guess that the stolen herd had been driven into the hills, but riding at random in that barren, stony waste, was not likely to raise a single cow. It came into Fresh's mind that the boss's nephew was not in earnest.

But it was for the boss's nephew to lead, and the puncher to follow. Arthur Carfax rode on, only too clearly not giving a single thought to Jim Casey's herd. Fresh could only follow his lead. Not till the chestnut was utterly weary, did the rancher's nephew draw rein at last.

They halted by the bank of the Squaw creek, and Arthur threw himself from the saddle. Fresh produced cold flapjacks and beef and a can of cold coffee, and they ate in silence.

Then Carfax sat leaning against a rock, not meeting the glances Fresh cast at him, while the horses cropped the scant herbage by the edge of the creek. Fresh moved about restlessly. Again and again he looked at Carfax, but Arthur did not meet his eyes, and did not stir.

Fresh loitered idly, while the sun sank lower and lower towards the mountains of New Mexico: Time was passing: the hills were red in the sunset, and Fresh reckoned that if they were going to look for Jim Casey's cows, they had little more time to cut to waste. But there came no sign from Carfax, weary from the long ride, and deep in haunting thoughts: and Fresh waited, and waited, with all the patience he could. And it was while he loitered, that a thin curl of smoke, in the far distance, became visible to his eyes. It was so distant, and so vague, that few eyes would have picked it up. But Fresh Canroy's eyes were as keen as an eagle's. He stood for several minutes, watching that blur of smoke against the sky over the barren draws and dry arroyos, and then, at last, he turned to Arthur Carfax and spoke. His eyes were gleaming.

"Smoke!" he repeated.

Carfax did not look at him.

"You want to jump to it, sir!" said Fresh, "I reckon we're on the track of them cows, Mr. Carfax, sir."

The rancher's nephew heeded, at that. He was on his feet in a moment, staring at the puncher.

"What do you mean?" he snapped.

Fresh jerked a thumb towards the blur on the sky.

"That's smoke," he said.

Arthur's eyes followed the direction of the thumb. He contracted his brows, and stared hard.

"I can see nothing," he snapped.

"Mebbe, sir, mebbe," said Fresh, good humouredly, "but you take my word, sir, that it's smoke. There's a fire yonder."

Carfax stared at him, and laughed harshly.

"You figure the rustlers would light a campfire—if they're in the hills at all?" he jeered. "In this blaze!"

It was hot: the rocks around them baked with heat. But Fresh smiled.

"I guess it ain't no campfire, sir," he answered, "but I

reckon there's a fire burning, all the same, in them hills."

"And why?"

"Brand blottin'," said Fresh, tersely.

The young rancher caught his breath.

"Brand blotting!" he repeated.

"Well, jest think it out, sir," said Fresh. "They've run the cows into the hills—there ain't nary a doubt about that. But I guess there ain't much feed for cows in the barrens, sir. They got to get them back to grass. They ain't rustled two hundred head of cattle jest for play, sir. Them cows is worth dollars to them, and nothing else."

"Well?" snapped Arthur.

"They got to drive that herd, sir," said Fresh, "and I guess they don't dare drive them with the Bar-Seven brand on their hides, sir. There's too many guys lookin' out jest now for cows with the Bar-Seven brand. They got to change the brands afore they can get them cows away where they're worth dollars."

Arthur Carfax stood silent.

"I reckon that's the game, sir," said Fresh. "You was raised on a ranch, sir, and you know how it works. Once they got a new brand on them cows, they could drive them under the winders of the Bar-Seven, and under the noses of Bud Lick and the bunch, and no guy the wiser. I reckon there's some rancher in this section open to buy cows without asking too many questions. Mebbe you'd know of such a guy, sir?" added Fresh, his eyes keenly on the young man's face.

Arthur Carfax caught his breath.

"How should I know?" he muttered.

"Wal, that's how I shape it out, sir," said Fresh, "and I'm telling you, sir, that once they've changed the brand, the Colonel can whistle for his cows. We got to horn in on this, sir."

"If you're right, there'd be a gang of them——"

"Mebbe," assented Fresh.

"I guess we'd better get back to the ranch with the news—if you're right."

Fresh's sunburnt face set obstinately.

"They've had nigh on a day, sir, to run the runnin'-iron over them cows," he said, "I reckon they'll be getting through. We ain't got no time to lose, sir, and us thirty miles from the ranch. It was jest luck spotting that smoke, sir—and we ain't throwing away that luck."

Carfax set his lips.

"You figure that two men can tackle a gang of rustlers?" he asked.

"Sure!" said Fresh, coolly, "I'll tell a man, I wouldn't lose this chance of roundin' up them cows, if all the dog-goned rustlers in Texas stood in the way. If it comes to gun-play, sir, I'll mention that I learned how to shoot, on the Chicken River. I'm jest honing, sir, to get a bead on them rustlers that shot up an honest puncher and lifted his cows. I sure am, sir, by the great horned toad!"

"If it's as you think, Fresh——"

"It sure is, sir!" said Fresh.

"I'll take your word for it! We'll ride back to the ranch, and give word," said Arthur. "Get on your cayuse."

"But I'm telling you, sir——"

"You've told me enough! Get on your cayuse," snapped Arthur, and he stepped towards the chestnut.

Fresh did not stir. A grim look was coming over his sunburnt face.

"I guess, sir," he said quietly, "that you ain't afeared of them rustlers, even if there's a bunch of them. You wasn't afeared of that gunman galoot back in Nuce, as I see with my own eyes, although I allow he was bad medicine, and a tougher guy I never saw in Texas. You ain't afeared, sir."

The rancher's nephew turned, to give him a haughty look.

"I'm not a coward, if that's what you mean," he snapped.

"Sure, sir," said Fresh, "but if we let this chance slip by, sir, I'll say that the boys at the Bar-Seven will allow that it

was cold feet, sir, and I ain't standing for that. You ride with me, sir, and——"

"You'll ride with me," snapped Arthur.

"To round up them cows, sir?"

"No: back to the ranch."

Fresh breathed hard.

"I ain't riding for the ranch a whole lot, sir," he said quietly, "I'm riding for them rustlers. You ride home if you want, sir—I ain't asking you to chip in if you don't want. But it's me for them brand-blotters."

"You're under my orders," rapped Carfax, "I guess you forget that you're talking to your boss's nephew."

"I don't forget nothing, sir. But I'm riding for them rustlers," said Fresh.

Arthur Carfax, his hand on the chestnut's bridle, stood looking at him, with a flash in his eyes. Fresh met his angry stare calmly. Their eyes met like steel.

"Now, look here, Canroy!" said Arthur, in a low concentrated voice, "you've been signed on at the Bar-Seven, and you'll obey orders. You'll ride back with me."

Fresh shook his head.

"Listen!" The young man was growing angrier and angrier, though there was something more than anger behind this, as Fresh could see. "You're under suspicion at the Bar-Seven. You're signed on, to keep you under watch. You know that."

"I know, sir."

"You've got a chance to ride free now, if you choose. I guess the bunch don't expect to see you again, once you're out of sight of the ranch. My uncle only half expects it. I am the only guy that trusts you, on the ranch. But I don't stand for keeping a man there against his will. You can ride—and I'll keep my eyes shut while you hit the horizon."

Fresh breathed hard and deep.

The suspicion he had determined to drive from his mind, came back in full force. "Young Arthur," the dying puncher

had said: and he had found the silver cigarette-case in the stockman's hut: and now——! Now Arthur Carfax, supposed by his uncle to be riding in search of the cattle-rustlers, was bent on keeping out of contact with them. It was not fear—he had not feared the icy-eyed gunman at Nuce. But if it was not fear, what was it? What hand had Arthur Carfax had in the tragedy at the stockman's hut?

For that was what it boiled down to.

He had burned time in idling. By sheer luck, that glimpse of a distant wisp of smoke had put Fresh on the trail. But for that, the hunt might have gone on for days or weeks without success in the trackless barrens, where even an Apache might have failed to pick up a sign. But that wisp of smoke, on a day of burning heat, was a clue—Fresh had no doubt what it meant. The rancher's nephew was determined not to follow it up. What did that mean?

"Well?" snapped Arthur, as the young puncher did not speak.

"I ain't hitting the horizon, sir, and letting the Bar-Seven believe me a guilty man on the run," said Fresh, quietly, "I'm sticking to the ranch, sir, unless the Colonel fires me. And I'm going after the boss's cows, sir. The boss has been robbed of two hundred head of long-horns, sir, and I guess they're going back to the Bar-Seven, if I can work the riffle."

"You'll go alone then."

"I guess that suits me, sir."

The young rancher looked at him, with glinting eyes. His hand hovered near the butt of his six-gun. Fresh watched him like a cat. If ever he had seen a desperate man, he saw one now, and he was wary.

"You'll take orders from me," said Arthur, thickly, "if you refuse to ride back with me, or to ride free——"

"There ain't no two ways about that, sir."

"Then you'll ride back under my gun, and by heaven, if you don't obey my orders, you get yours!" Carfax pulled his gun as he spoke.

A moment more, and it would have covered Fresh. But in that moment, the puncher's hand moved like lightning. He fired from the hip, but his aim was as accurate as if he had dwelt on it. The crack of the six-gun woke the echoes of the rocks, and Arthur's revolver, even as he drew it from the holster, was shot shattered from his grasp.

The young man uttered a startled cry, and staggered. His shattered gun clattered on the stony earth. He stood staring almost stupidly at his numbed hand. The bullet had not touched it—not a spot of blood was drawn. But the shock had jarred him from hand to shoulder.

"I guess I'm sorry, sir," said Fresh. "You ain't hurt, sir—I jest shot your gun away, sir, seeing you was pulling on me. I sure ain't riding back to the Bar-Seven under no guy's gun, sir. I'm getting after them rustlers."

With that, Fresh holstered his gun, walked to the black broncho, and mounted. Arthur Carfax, nursing his numbed right hand with his left, only stared at him, as he mounted and rode. With a clatter of hoofs, Fresh disappeared up the bank of the creek, leaving the rancher's nephew still nursing a numbed hand and staring.

Chapter XI

Fresh Horns In!

"Brand-blottin'!" muttered Fresh. "The dog-goned scallywags."

He had been sure of it. Now he knew.

Looking down into the rocky draw, the scene was clear before his eyes.

He had ridden far from the spot where he had left Arthur Carfax. By stony draw and dry arroyo, baking in the semi-tropical sun, he had pushed deeper and deeper into the barren, trackless hills. Not a sign, on the iron-hard earth, told of the cattle-drive: but he knew where to look for the Bar-Seven

cows: that wisp of smoke against the blue was enough. It grew darker and more easily visible as he drew nearer. But still it was little more than a wisp. The brand-blotters were wary, and they were doing their nefarious work at the bottom of a deep draw: the fire, and most of the smoke, hidden by the surrounding rocks. Only that wisp escaped to meet an eye as keen as that of a soaring eagle.

Closer at hand, Fresh left his horse, staked out in a thicket of scrub, and proceeded on foot. He did not want the ring of hoofs on the hard stony soil to alarm the rustlers. He figured on taking them by surprise.

Gladly he would have had the rancher's nephew at his side, with a gun in his hand, to back his play. Only too well he knew that there might be desperate work ahead. But he was prepared, with cool resolve, to tackle it on his lonesome. Arthur he had dismissed from mind.

Now, from the high rocks, he looked down into the draw—hot as an oven in the sun. Sunset was red in the west, but the heat had not abated. The rocks were hot to the touch. Fresh reckoned that the brand-blotters, working the running-iron by the fire, must be sweating some. He figured that they were losing no time in changing the brands, in haste to get the stolen herd away.

Fresh watched.

There were three of them. They looked like punchers: but three rougher-and-tougher guys Fresh had never seen. Further up the draw was a herd of cows—he was looking, he knew, at the herd that had been driven the previous day from the Squaw range on the Bar-Seven. He could make out the Bar-Seven brand on the rugged hides of some of them. One of the gang, a dark-skinned Mexican in an immense sombrero, was mounted, and he was riding herd. The other two were at work.

A fire of scrub and pine knots burned hot and red. It glowed back the glare of the sun. A red-bearded burly man was stooping by the fire, his hand stretched to take out an

iron. The other man, a dusky half-breed, held a riata that secured a cow led from the herd.

As Fresh watched, the man by the fire rose, with red-hot running-iron in his hand. With his other hand he dashed sweat from his face. He came towards the cow struggling in the rope held by the half-breed, and in the clear air, Fresh heard him cursing as he came.

The half-breed grinned at him.

"Hot!" he said.

"Hell with the lid off!" snarled the red-bearded man.

"I guess we'll be through before sundown."

"Aw! Has it been one hell of a long day?" growled the red-bearded man. "Keep that critter still, dog-gone you."

"Sure, Cactus."

The half-breed tipped over the struggling cow. Cactus, as he called the burly man with the red beard, jammed the hot iron on the hide. Fresh heard the squeal of the cow as it seared.

His brows knitted, as he watched the brand-blotting: the deadliest of sins in the eyes of a rancher. It was hot and laborious work: but it was simple. The Carfax brand was a bar and a number:

7

The hot running-iron traced a circle over the 7. The sprawling 7 was changed into a circle, the bar remaining untouched.

0

A Bar-Seven cow had become a Bar-Circle cow! Fresh, new to the Nuce country, had never heard of the Bar-Circle: but he reckoned that there was a ranch of that brand around. Whatever guy ran the Bar-Circle, was not particular where his stock came from. Some dog-goned cow-thief, Fresh reckoned, was the boss of the Bar-Circle, who added to his herds from the surrounding ranches, blotting the brands. It

was a safe game, if played in secret: for only by the brands could the cattle, running loose on the prairie, be picked out at the round-up. Fresh's brow grew darker and darker as he watched.

Close on two hundred head of cattle had been driven from the Squaw range of the Bar-Seven, up into the recesses of the trackless hills—the property of Colonel Carfax. But when they were driven back to the plains, they would be the property of the owner of the Bar-Circle ranch, whoever that guy was. Fresh would have liked to meet up with him, and look at him over the barrel of a Colt.

The squealing cow, now a Bar-Circle beast by the brand, was released from the riata, and lumbered squealing back to the herd. The half-breed followed, riata in hand, to rope in another cow for the same process.

Cactus stood cursing, and fanning himself with his Stetson, while he waited. Fresh watched the half-breed. In the herd guarded by the mounted Mexican, he picked out scores of cows marked with the Bar-Circle brand: they far outnumbered the beasts still bearing the original mark of the Bar-Seven. The brand-blotters looked like getting through before sundown, as the half-breed had said.

Fresh smiled grimly.

They were not going to get through by sundown, he reckoned, or through at all.

But for the wisp of smoke that had betrayed them to eyes as keen as an eagle's, all would have been clear for them. It was plain, from their looks and actions, that they had no fear of being tracked down in that pathless waste, before their work was done. But eyes were upon them now, and a hand that never missed closing on the butt of a six-gun.

Fresh was going to give the brand-blotters a chance to put up their hands. If they jumped to it, O.K. If they did not, there was going to be gun-play, and he figured that he would get in his fire first. He was ready for gun-play—one against three. Two against three if the rancher's nephew had stood

by him: but it was useless to think of that. Those three rough-necks were bad medicine: but the Chicken River puncher reckoned that he was good for the three, if it came to shooting. Good or not, he was going to drive home the Carfax cows, or leave his bones for the buzzards in the desert barrens.

His gun was in his hand, when he stirred, at last.

The half-breed had roped in a cow and led it back to the fire. Cactus had heated the running-iron again. Intent on their hot and weary work, they never glanced up, as Fresh emerged from cover, and descended with rapid steps into the draw.

But from the mounted Mexican, riding herd over the cows at a little distance, came a startled stare, and a shout of warning. He had spotted the newcomer.

His sudden shout caused the other two to start, and stare round. Cactus shouted back at him.

"What's biting you, Pancho?"

"Look out!" yelled the Mexican. He pointed to Fresh with his quirt, and the two rough-necks stared round, and saw the Chicken River puncher.

Fresh quickened his pace. His gun was up.

"Hands up, you-uns!"

His voice rang with a snap.

Cactus stood with the hot running-iron in his hand, staring. But the half-breed, quicker on the uptake, reached for his revolver. It was rising in his hand as Fresh fired.

Bang!

It was for life or death now: a dead cow-thief or a dead puncher. It was the cow-thief who staggered back with a bullet through his body, and crashed. The half-breed rolled on the rocks and lay quiet.

"Gosh!" panted Cactus.

He flung down the running-iron. But the smoking Colt looking at him daunted him, and he did not reach to his belt.

"Put 'em up!" snarled Fresh.

"You gol-darned——!" began Cactus, hoarsely. A motion of the Colt cut him short, and his hands went up over his Stetson. The half-breed lay dead on the rocks; and there was death in the levelled Colt, and the eyes that gleamed over it. Cactus's bearded face was red with rage: but his hands went up, and stayed up.

"Keep 'em up, you cow-thief, or you get yours!" snapped Fresh: and his eyes went past the burly red-bearded rough-neck, to the Mexican on his horse, at a little distance up the draw. He was ready to shift his aim, and fling the swarthy rider from his saddle with a bullet, if he touched a gun.

But the Mexican did not touch a gun. He stared at Fresh, with dark dilated eyes, and then, suddenly wheeling his mustang, flashed away at a gallop up the draw. The half-breed dead, and Cactus with his hands up, seemed enough for Pancho, and he did not hone for gun-play with the fire-eyed stranger who had come so suddenly and unexpectedly on the scene. The clattering hoof-beats died away up the draw: the Mexican was gone in a matter of moments.

Fresh laughed.

"My game, I guess," he said.

"You pesky, gol-darned puncher——" Cactus choked with rage.

"That's all I want from you, feller," interrupted Fresh. "Keep them paws up, you pizen skunk. I'd jest as soon send you over the range, after your pard there, as not. You sure won't blot any more brands on the Bar-Seven, anyhow."

He stepped closer, jerked the brand-blotter's gun from his belt, and tossed it away into a crevice in the rocks. With his left hand, he picked up the dead half-breed's riata.

"Stick them paws this way!" he snapped. The revolver in his right enforced obedience. Cactus, shaking with rage, obeyed.

Fresh looped the rope round the brawny wrists, and drew it tight, with his left. Then, holstering his gun, he knotted it. Cactus, his hands bound, was a helpless prisoner, glaring

fury. Fresh tipped him unceremoniously over, and knotted the other end of the rope round his legs.

"I'll say that keeps you safe, feller," he remarked.

Cactus glared up at him.

"What you figure on doin' with me?" he snarled.

"I guess I'm driving them cows back to the Bar-Seven ranges, and I'll tell a man you're going along," answered Fresh. "You got to answer for changin' brands on them cows from Bar-Seven to Bar-Circle. Mebbe the Colonel will hand you over to the sheriff—mebbe the bunch will string you up—I guess it cuts no ice with this baby. You got yours coming."

Leaving the rustler cussing, Fresh tramped away to fetch his horse. His sunburnt face was cheery, and he hummed a tune as he went. Fresh figured that that day's trail was going to set him right with the Bar-Seven bunch. Even Bud Lick, he reckoned, would have a glad hand for the puncher who had recovered two hundred head of rustled cattle, and roped in the cow-thief who had changed the brands. Every guy on the ranch would welcome the news, with perhaps one exception: Fresh could not feel sure how Arthur Carfax would take it. His sunny face clouded for a moment, as he remembered Arthur, whom he had left by the creek. But he had his duty to do by his boss, whatever might be the outcome for the boss's nephew. He tramped over the rocks, and reached the thicket of scrub where he had staked his broncho, a quarter of a mile away. With a light heart, he mounted and rode back to the draw: and as he came clattering down to the spot where the embers of the fire smoked, a man standing there waved a hand to him. It was Arthur Carfax.

Chapter XII

In Doubt!

"Young Arthur!" muttered Fresh.

For a moment, as he saw the rancher's nephew standing by the smoking embers, his face brightened. He had figured that Arthur, left by the creek, had ridden on the home-trail. Now he knew that Carfax had followed him into the hills, and arrived at the draw, while he was gone for his horse. Too late for the fight with the rustlers, but proving that he was not, as Fresh had been driven to suspect, in some way involved with them.

That was Fresh's first thought, as he saw Carfax in the draw. He waved back a cheery hand.

But a moment or two later his expression changed.

Arthur Carfax stood there, beside his chestnut, a few yards from the body of the half-breed who had fallen in the fight. But there was no sign of Cactus, whom Fresh had left there bound hand and foot. The red-bearded rustler was gone. And Fresh's face grew grim, as he rode up, and jumped from the saddle. Fresh had learned how to knot a rope, on the Chicken River: he knew that the rustler could not have escaped from the knotted riata unaided. His doubt of Arthur Carfax, banished for a moment, came back with redoubled force.

Carfax gave him a sidelong look. He seemed unable to meet the clear, steady eyes of the young puncher.

Fresh spoke very quietly.

"Where's that guy I left roped up here, Mr. Carfax, sir?"

"Did you?" muttered Carfax.

"I did, sir!"

"What's happened here?" asked the young rancher, "I reckoned I'd follow on, Canroy, I couldn't leave you to tackle the gang alone. But I guess you was through before I came up. I heard the shooting, and found that breed here—that's

all I know." He made a gesture towards the still form of the half-breed. "You shot that guy up, I reckon?"

"It was him or me, sir—he pulled his gun," said Fresh, "I guess that ain't worrying me any. There was three—one of them a Greaser, who lit out on his cayuse like he was sent for: and a guy called Cactus, who put up his hands under my gun. I left him roped up here whilst I went for my hoss."

"He must have worked the rope loose, then."

Fresh breathed hard.

"I guess I know how to hog-tie a steer, Mr. Carfax, and I sure hog-tied that galoot like he was an ornery steer. He never worked that rope loose while I was gone. He sure never did."

"Looks like it," said Arthur, indifferently.

"It don't look like it, a whole lot, to me, sir," said Fresh, "I'm telling you that he was hog-tied safe, that guy was, and he never got out of the rope without a helping hand."

The colour crept into Carfax's cheeks. But he still assumed a manner of indifference.

"You say there was a Mexican, who lit out?"

"There sure was."

"Maybe he came back, while you were gone for your horse, and helped the other guy to get away."

"He sure did not look like coming back, the way he lit out!" said Fresh. "That wasn't the way of it, sir."

Arthur Carfax shrugged his shoulders.

They stood looking at one another, in the red glow of the sunset. Why had Arthur Carfax, coming on the scene during Fresh's absence, released the bound rustler, and allowed him to escape?

That was the way of it: Fresh could hardly doubt it. What was it that Arthur Carfax feared might come to light, if Cactus had been taken a prisoner to the ranch?

Fresh, breathing hard, stood silent.

He was at a loss.

It was possible—barely possible, at least—that Cactus had

somehow escaped before Carfax came on the scene. Everything pointed to some strange and mysterious collusion between the rancher's nephew and the gang of rustlers and brand-blotters who had run off a herd of Bar-Seven cows. Yet, looking at him, Fresh could not believe that he had had a hand in the murder of Jim Casey. He was Colonel Carfax's nephew—Barbara's cousin. The rancher's nephew—the cousin of Barbara—in cahoots with a gang of desperadoes—it was wildly improbable. Fresh could foresee the burst of scorn, of angry derision, that would greet such a tale on the Bar-Seven. And yet——!

Arthur Carfax broke the silence.

"You've found the cows, Fresh."

"Sure!" said Fresh.

"That's good, at any rate."

"Yup!"

"You were right after all." The young man spoke haltingly. "It was brand-blotting — you figured it out O.K., Fresh. I guess I'm sorry I lost my temper with you, back on the creek. But—you sure were fresh. I guess they didn't give you that name for nothing. What you figure to do now?"

"We got to get them cows back to the Bar-Seven ranges, sir." Fresh spoke quietly. His suspicions of the rancher's nephew were deep and strong, amounting almost to certainty. Yet in spite of all, he knew that he liked Carfax, and would gladly have thought up some explanation that would see him clear. At any rate he would not voice what he suspected, without more to go upon. What was the use? He realised that he had to carry on as if he suspected nothing. And he clung to a hope that, in some inexplicable way, his suspicion might prove unfounded.

"I guess my uncle will be pleased to know that the cows have been trailed down," said Arthur.

"He sure will, sir."

Arthur Carfax glanced at the sky.

"We got no time to burn if we're getting the cows out of the hills before dark," he said. "No time for chewing the rag, Fresh. Get going."

"Jest as you say, sir."

No more was said. Arthur Carfax mounted the chestnut, and Fresh the black broncho. With cracking quirts, the herd were driven down the draw. The sun sank lower, and long shadows darkened in the hills, as the drive went on. By rocky draw, by stony arroyo, by shadowy gulch and canyon, the long-horns lumbered on, with the rancher's nephew and the Chicken River puncher riding herd. The stars were bright in a sky of dark velvet, when at length the barrens were left behind, and the cows herded back to the plains. But before the Squaw range was reached, Fresh's ears failed to pick up the crack of Arthur's quirt, and his eyes to discern a horseman looming in the shadowy starlight among the lumbering cows. The rancher's nephew, without a word, had galloped away into the night, and Fresh was left to ride herd alone.

Chapter XIII

News for the Bar-Seven

Barbara smiled.

Colonel Carfax stared under his grizzled brows.

Bud Lick, coming out of the bunk-house, stopped dead in his tracks, staring. Tex the horse-wrangler, stared over the corral bar. Five or six punchers, here and there, all stared, in the same direction.

All eyes were fixed, in the bright sunshine of the Texas morning, upon a horseman cantering to the ranch.

Few at the Bar-Seven had expected to see Fresh Canroy again.

Barbara had not doubted: her father had half-doubted. But to everyone else on the ranch it seemed a sure cinch that the

suspected man, given a chance to ride free, would ride fast and far.

Bud Lick and the rest of the bunch did not doubt that Arthur Carfax would ride back alone, with the news that the guy from Chicken River had eluded him and fled.

But Arthur had not ridden back yet: though the night had passed, and bright morning was shining on the plains. One of the two was now returning: but it was not young Arthur: it was Fresh.

"Gee whiz!" said Bud.

"That guy!" said Tex. "He sure ain't beat it, while he had the chance."

"I allow he's got gall!" grunted the foreman.

In the verandah of the rancho, Colonel Carfax stood and stared. Barbara gave her father a smile.

"It's Fresh, coming back," she said.

"It sure is!" assented the rancher, "Arthur's not with him. I reckoned they'd be back, one or both of them, last night. I was putting that young guy to the test—and I guess he's come through."

"I knew he would!" smiled Barbara.

Bud Lick strode to meet the rider, as he cantered up. Horse and rider looked dusty and fatigued. But Fresh grinned at the foreman, as he slowed to a walk.

"Mornin', Bud," he said, cheerily.

Bud eyed him grimly.

"So you've got back!" he muttered.

"Right in one."

"I reckoned young Mr. Arthur wouldn't see your critter's heels for dust, once you was out of sight of the ranch.

Fresh laughed.

"You got to think again, Bud," he said. "Ain't Mr. Carfax handed out the news?"

"He ain't rode in yet. What's the news?"

"Oh!" The grin faded from Fresh's face. Arthur Carfax had left him, in the dark of the prairie, without a word.

Fresh had hoped to find him at the Bar-Seven. He hated the thought that young Carfax had had a secret motive for leaving him alone with the herd. "Say, Bud, you sure Mr. Carfax ain't back?"

"Surest thing you know," grunted Bud. "We was expecting to see him, and he ain't showed up—but we wasn't expecting to see you agin nohow. I figured you'd be burnin' the wind for New Mexico afore this."

"Forget it," said Fresh, "if Mr. Carfax ain't back yet, you ain't had the news, I reckon. You want to send a man to the Squaw range, Bud, to see the cows safe there."

The foreman blinked at him.

"What you giving me?" he snapped. "There ain't nary a cow on the Squaw range, since Jim Casey was shot up, and his herd rustled."

"They're back on the range."

"Eh?"

"We sure raised them, in the barrens, and drove them home," said Fresh, grinning again at the amazement and incredulity in the foreman's tanned face. "Mebbe there's two or three cows missing—I wouldn't know. But there's close on two hundred head on the Squaw range this minute, Bud, and I left them there feeding good and fine."

And Fresh rode on to the ranch, leaving Bud Lick staring after him blankly. If Bud had been surprised to see the Chicken River puncher ride back, he was still more surprised by the news the puncher brought.

Fresh dismounted at the ranch-house. He swept off his Stetson to the Colonel and his daughter, looking down at him from the verandah.

"Mornin', miss! Mornin', sir! I got news for you, sir, seeing as Bud allows that Mr. Carfax ain't rode home yet."

"Come up!" said the rancher.

Fresh tramped up the steps into the verandah. Barbara gave him a smile: the rancher, a puzzled, searching look.

"What's the news?" he asked, abruptly.

"You ain't had word from your nephew yet, sir?"

"Arthur hasn't ridden in yet. Give me the news."

"We got the cows, sir," said Fresh. He deliberately put it into words that implied that Arthur Carfax had played a full part. "I guess we found the whole caboodle hidden away in the hills, sir, and drove them back to the Squaw range. I'd have hit the ranch sooner, sir," added Fresh, apologetically, "but I'll own up I was tired a few, sir, likewise my cayuse, and I figured I'd get a spot of eats and sleep at the stockman's hut on the Squaw creek, sir, once the herd was safe back, and ride home in the morning."

"You've got back the herd that was rustled off'n Jim Casey's range," exclaimed the rancher.

"Sure thing, sir! It was jest luck," explained Fresh. "There sure ain't no trail in them barrens, sir, that an Apache or a Yaqui could foller: and if they hadn't had to burn a fire for brand-blottin', I guess them cows would have been safe in the hills for keeps. But we spotted the smoke, sir."

"Brand-blotting!" repeated the Colonel.

"That was the game, sir!"

"Tell me what's come?"

"We was up the creek, sir, when I picked up that spot of smoke in the hills," said Fresh. "I jest went to take a look-see, and dropped on them, sir."

"Alone?" exclaimed the rancher.

"It jest happened like that, sir—jest trailing around for a look-see, and droppin' on them," said Fresh. "There was three of them, and it was through before Mr. Carfax, sir, could come up. He heard the shootin'."

The rancher looked at him hard.

"There was shooting?" he asked.

"I guess it couldn't be helped, sir, seeing as they was pulling guns," said Fresh. "One of them went down for keeps, sir, and—and——" He hesitated for a second.

"Well?"

"One of the gang, a Greaser they called Pancho, lit out

on a cayuse, like he was sent for, sir. He got away. The other——” Again Fresh hesitated a second. But he went on equably. “The other, sir, a tough bull-dozer I heard them call Cactus, put up his hands, and I roped him up while I went to fetch my horse that I’d left staked out. But I guess he got loose and hit the trail, sir — he got away like the Greaser. I’d sure have liked to tote him along to the ranch, sir, with his runnin’-iron, but he was clean gone, sir.”

“It was over before my nephew came up, then?”

“It didn’t last a minute, sir,” said Fresh.

“And the cows——?”

“They was in the draw, sir, where the rustlers was changin’ the brands with a runnin’-iron. Mr. Arthur and me, sir, we drove them back out of the hills to the Squaw range.”

“Where is Arthur now? Why did he not ride back with you?” asked the rancher, puzzled.

“We kinda missed one another in the dark, sir,” said Fresh, “I wouldn’t know, sir—mebbe his cayuse might have fallen lame, sir. We had sure put in some hard riding, sir, and the cayuses was hard beat.”

Colonel Carfax nodded.

“Then the cows are safe on the range again?” exclaimed Barbara.

“Yes, miss, waitin’ for a range-rider to be sent to take charge, miss,” answered Fresh.

“I’ll see to that!” said the rancher, “but—you say that the rustlers were changing the brands?”

“That was the game, sir, when I horned in on them sudden. I’ll tell a man, most of the herd carry a new brand now, sir: but they’re your cows.”

Colonel Carfax drew a deep breath.

“And the brand?” he asked.

“Bar-Circle, sir. I guess they was leaving the bar jest as it was, and burnin’ the seven into a circle, sir.”

“Bar-Circle!” Colonel Carfax gave a start, and his eyes

blazed, "You're making no mistake about that, Fresh?"

"Sir, there's a hundred and fifty Bar-Seven cows branded Bar-Circle, in that herd, sir," said Fresh. "And I watched the branding, sir, before I horned in. That guy Cactus had a runnin' iron, and I guess he was slick at the work, too. I'll tell a man, they ain't the first brands that guy has blotted."

"The Bar-Circle!" breathed Barbara. "Father, that's Jas Calhoun's ranch."

Fresh jumped, almost clear of the verandah planks. The name struck him like the lash of a quirt. Jas Calhoun—the ice-eyed gambler and gunman whom Arthur Carfax had seen at the Lone Star in Nuce! Jas Calhoun—the connecting link between Arthur Carfax and the gang of rustlers! In his sudden surprise, Fresh made a step towards the girl.

"Miss! Did you say Jas Calhoun?" he panted.

Barbara looked at him.

"Yes! You wouldn't know him, being a stranger here: but he's well known in this section—he owns the Bar-Circle, in the Yellow Pine country."

"I guess I seen him, once, miss!" muttered Fresh.

"He's not a whole lot on his ranch," added Barbara, with a curl of the lip. "Oftener in Nuce, with a pack of cards in his hand, I guess, Fresh. You've seen him?"

"Jest once, for a few minutes, miss." Fresh had no intention of mentioning that it was in company with Arthur Carfax, only the previous day, that he had seen the gunman rancher. "I'll say, miss, he looked a bad hombre."

"As bad as he looks, and more," said Barbara, with a hard compression of her lips, which told of bitter feelings. She turned from Fresh to her father, whose bronzed face was set and grim, "Father! If the cows were branded Bar-Circle, as Fresh tells us, they were going to be driven to Jas Calhoun's ranges."

"I guess so, Barbara," said the rancher. "There's sure been plenty talk that there are more cows on the Bar-Circle than were ever raised there. Ranchers have been missing

cows long enough, in this section, and if the puncher's got it right, I reckon we know where they went — with the brands blotted. By the great horned toad, I've suspicioned Jas Calhoun for dog's ages, and this will fix him." He shouted over the verandah rail, "Here, you Pedrillo!"

A peon came running.

"Get my cayuse."

"Si, senor."

The peon hurried away. Colonel Carfax fixed his eyes on Fresh. He was breathing excitement now.

"You made no mistake, you Fresh? You seen the Bar-Circle brand put on my cows, with your own eyes?"

"Sure, sir, with a runnin'-iron," said Fresh, "I guess I'm ready to swear to that before the sheriff, sir, if you want."

The rancher gave a snort.

"I guess we ain't worrying no sheriff," he snapped. "The Bar-Seven knows how to deal with rustlers and brand-blotters, if we get on their trail. My nephew will bear out what you say when he rides in?"

"Sure, sir!"

"That's good enough! I guess I got to see them cows with my own eyes, and then, by hokey, I'll deal with Jas Calhoun."

The rancher tramped down the verandah steps. Fresh was about to follow, but Barbara made him a sign to remain, and he stopped. She did not speak: and in silence, they watched the rancher. At a little distance, Bud Lick and the punchers gathered round him, and there was excited talk that did not reach the ears in the verandah. Then the peon came up with the Colonel's horse, and he mounted and rode away with the foreman, on the trail to Squaw creek, followed by Yuba and Long Bill. Barbara watched them till they were out of sight on the prairie, before she turned to Fresh again. Her dark eyes fixed on the puncher's face with a curious penetration, and Fresh felt an inward uneasiness. He had told his tale carefully to keep Arthur clear. Not unless the proof

was daylight plain, and perhaps not even then, was Fresh going to utter a word that would shame the girl's near kinsman. He dreaded questions, and the searching look in Barbara's eyes told that he mind was not at ease.

"Why did not my cousin ride back with you, Fresh?" asked Barbara, quietly.

"I wouldn't know, miss, seeing as I missed him in the dark."

"Where did you leave him?"

"I didn't 'zackly leave him, miss, sorta lost sight of him."

"Where?" she almost snapped.

"I reckon it was between the barrens and the Squaw range, miss. We was driving the cows home, and I sorta missed him in the dark."

"Before you reached the stockman's hut?"

"Yup."

"You figure that his horse had fallen lame?"

"It's jest likely enough, miss."

"If that was it, he would have rejoined you later, as you stayed the night at the hut."

"Mebbe, miss," said Fresh, uneasily.

"But he did not?"

"Nup!"

Her glance, for a moment, swept over the wide prairie. But there was no sign of a horseman riding for the ranch. It returned to Fresh. Her lips were compressed, and there was a gleam in the dark eyes. Fresh wondered uneasily what thoughts were passing in her mind. In his own, since he had learned that Jas Calhoun was the owner of the Bar-Circle, was the suspicion that Arthur Carfax had ridden off in the dark, hell for leather, to warn an associate at Nuce that the game was up. Not for worlds would he have breathed that suspicion to Barbara Carfax. But he wondered apprehensively whether some such thought was in her mind, remembering the words she had spoken to her cousin the previous day. Arthur had been a friend of Jas Calhoun, whatever he was

now.

She stood looking at Fresh, as if further questions trembled on her lips. If so, she did not utter them. She gave him a curt nod, at last, and went into the house. Fresh, with a clouded brow, went down the steps. Something was in the girl's mind, he knew that: just what, he did not know. Was her cousin Arthur in cahoots with the rustlers, a traitor to the ranch, a traitor to the outfit, with a guilty knowledge of the murder of Jim Casey? It looked that way, Fresh knew: but he knew, too, that it should never look that way to Barbara if he could help it. He shut his teeth on that.

Tex, the horse-wrangler, gave him a nod and a grin, as he led the black broncho into the corral. Two or three punchers called out a cheery word to him.

"Say, feller, I'm sure glad you never went up on that cottonwood," said Tex, "I allow we was on the wrong trail, seeing what the boss says."

Fresh laughed.

"I sure would have gone up, but for Miss Barbara," he said, "I'll tell a man, that little miss has got more hoss-sense than the whole bunch of you-uns."

"You said it, puncher," agreed Tex.

Fresh rubbed down the black broncho before he went to the bunk-house for eats. Five or six punchers were there, when he tramped in. Every one of them had a friendly word for the new man in the bunch. There was a spot of worry at the back of Fresh's mind, which did not show in his cheery face. But at any rate, doubt and suspicion were things of the past now: he was O.K. with the Bar-Seven bunch.

Chapter XIV

The Cousins

"Arthur!"

"Well?"

Arthur Carfax looked tired. He leaned back in the rocker, in the verandah of the rancho, listlessly. There was a cloud on his handsome face, and his eyes were fixed moodily on space, in the direction of Squaw creek, far away under the rolling prairie. He did not seem to hear a light step, as Barbara came out into the verandah, and she stood looking at him, for some moments, before she spoke. Under the westering sun, Stetson hats were bobbing in the far distance: Colonel Carfax and Bud Lick were riding back from the Squaw range. Barbara glanced at them, and then her eyes fixed again on Arthur. The cloud on his face was reflected on hers. She spoke at last, and he answered with a monosyllable, without looking at her.

"You've heard—since you came in—that Fresh Canroy was back this morning?" she asked.

"Tex told me, when I turned my cayuse into the corral," he answered, indifferently, "I reckoned he would be here ahead of me."

"He was here ahead of you, although he stayed the night at the stockman's hut on Squaw Creek," said Barbara.

He did not answer that.

"Why have you been away all this time, Arthur?"

"I guess my cayuse fell lame," he answered, still without looking at her, "I was sure riding him hard yesterday."

"You had a night on the prairie?"

"Why not?"

She noted that he did not answer the question directly, and her lips set a little. But she did not repeat the question. It was as if she dreaded to force him to lie to her.

"My father's ridden over to Squaw creek, to give Jim Casey's herd the once-over," she said. "He will see for himself that the brands were changed from Bar-Seven to Bar-Circle, on almost the whole herd, as Fresh tells us."

"Sure!" muttered Arthur.

"That fixes it on Jas Calhoun."

Arthur Carfax stirred uneasily.

"Mebbe not," he muttered. "The Bar-Circle is Jas's ranch, I know that. But he ain't often on his ranch—I guess poker at the Red Dog in Nuce is more in his line than running a ranch. Mebbe the rustlers picked out his brand, jest to get the cows safe away from Bar-Seven boys, and him never knowing."

"The rustlers were his own men, Arthur."

"How'd you know?"

"The man Fresh roped up, and who got away, was called Cactus by the others. We all know that Jas's foreman at the Bar-Circle is called Cactus."

Arthur breathed quickly.

"Cactus ain't a name," he said. "Any dog-goned rough-neck might be nicknamed Cactus. That's no proof, Barbara."

Plenty proof, if Fresh had been able to ride him in," said Barbara. "But anyhow, Canroy will identify him—if he's still on the Bar-Circle when he's looked for."

"If he's the man, I guess he'll ride," muttered Arthur.

"Very likely," said Barbara, drily.

Arthur sat silent, his eyes on the bobbing Stetsons far out on the prairie.

"My father's coming back," said Barbara. "The next move will be to deal with Jas Calhoun. You're not standing for him, Arthur?"

"Why should I?" muttered Arthur. "Haven't I told my uncle, that I'm through with Jas." The colour came into his cheeks, "I've been a fool, Barbara, and I've owned up to it. I lost money to Jas at poker, and I couldn't pay. I couldn't throw the man down, owing him money. You know that I asked my uncle for five hundred dollars." His face flamed, "It wasn't pleasant to ask, Barbara."

"I know!" she said softly.

"And what was the use?" said Arthur, bitterly, "I don't say he was wrong. He's a good man and a straight man, and he's been as good as a father to me, an orphan thrown on his hands. I get my pay on the ranch, and I've no kick

coming about that. I'd no right to ask him. If I played away my pay at poker, it was my own funeral. But I went in too deep and couldn't pay. I'd as soon have jumped into the Rio Frio as ask for the money. But—I did! You know what followed."

"I'm sorry——"

"I know! I didn't get the five hundred dollars—I got a storm," said Arthur. "You heard your father blowing off steam, and came in—and I tell you, I'd sooner have died a hundred times than let you know. But you got the whole story, and you despised me as much as your father did." His voice cracked.

"No! No! No!" exclaimed Barbara. "Never that, Arthur. Dear Arthur, you know that it was never, never anything like that."

He looked at her.

"I'll tell you this, Barbara," he said. "it was only for your sake that I stood for it. Your father made me promise to throw over Jas—or else ride away from the Bar-Seven without looking back. And I tell you I'd have taken him at his word, and neither of you would ever have seen me again, but—but——"

"But——!" whispered Barbara.

"But I couldn't," he muttered, moodily. "There was all Texas before me, and I guess I'm no slouch on a ranch—I could have made the grade. But what's all Texas to me without you? They could give me the whole Lone Star State on a plate, and it wouldn't count a continental red cent without you, Barbara."

"Dear!" she whispered.

"Not that I'm worth a look or a word from you," he muttered, "I ain't worth holding your stirrup for you."

"You're worth all Texas to me, Arthur, and all the world too."

"Mebbe it would have been better for you, if I'd hit the horizon there and then. But—I couldn't."

"I'm glad you couldn't."

"And I kept that promise, too," he went on. "You believe me, Barbara, I've never touched a card in a poker game since that day."

"Of course I believe you, Arthur."

"I'm through with Jas, as I promised. But—but I had to be civil to a guy, owing him money. I guess I was saving my pay to get clear: but all the while I was owing Jas money. I couldn't throw him down."

"But you can't stand for him now, Arthur, now it's known that he stocks his ranch by blotting the brands of cows on other ranches," said Barbara, earnestly. "Don't say a word for Jas when my father comes, Arthur. It will only enrage him."

"He sure does ride herd hard," said Arthur.

"I guess he will be riding into Nuce to see Jas, with some of the bunch," said Barbara. "It's got to come to a showdown. He will want you to ride with him."

Arthur Carfax gave her a strange look.

"Ride with him to Nuce, to corral Jas Calhoun!" he said. "As like as not, the boys would want to string him up. They sure don't stand on ceremony with rustlers and brand-blotters in this section." He shrugged his shoulders, "Well, if my uncle wants me to ride with him to Nuce, why not?"

"You'll ride?"

"Sure!"

"If they don't find him in Nuce, Arthur, they'll ride on to the Bar-Circle to look for him there. And you——"

"I'll ride where my uncle wants me to ride. Why not?"

Barbara looked immensely relieved.

There was a clatter of hoofs, as Colonel Carfax and Bud Lick dashed up. They dismounted at the gate, and while Bud strode away to the bunk-house, the rancher came tramping to the ranch-house. He looked up at Barbara and called to her.

"Arthur back yet?"

"Here, father."

"Here!" said Arthur, rising from the rocker, and stepping to the rail. His uncle gave him a slightly grim look.

"You've taken your time," he said. "Young Canroy was back this morning. Never mind that now. I've seen the cows at the Squaw creek. I guess it was good work, you and young Canroy getting back the herd. Now we got to see Jas Calhoun. You and young Fresh will be wanted. Get your cayuse."

Barbara gave her cousin an anxious look. But there was no reluctance in Arthur's face. Plainly he had no objection to riding into the cow-town in quest of the gunman-rancher. He gave Barbara a smile, as he went down the steps. She stood in the verandah, watching, as a bunch of punchers, with Fresh among them, gathered. Her look was relieved, as she saw Arthur mount a pinto. He was leaving his chestnut in the corral, which bore out his tale of his horse having fallen lame. Perhaps she had doubted it.

With a clatter of hoofs, and a cracking of quirts, the bunch dashed away, on the trail to Nuce. Barbara watched them till they were out of sight. There was a shade of anxiety on her face. The Bar-Seven bunch, as Arthur had said, would not stand on ceremony with a rustler and a brand-blotter, as they knew Jas Calhoun to be: and Jas was not the man to be handled without pulling a gun. Barbara hoped that the gunman-rancher might have taken the alarm in time, and hit the trail while the going was good. Cactus, or the Mexican Pancho, might have ridden to Nuce to warn him—but she shook her head at that. Cactus and Pancho were more likely to think of their own skins, and to ride wide of Nuce. If Calhoun had not been warned, the Bar-Seven bunch would find him there—but—but—— She had expected Arthur to object, if not to refuse, to ride with his uncle, to call Jas to account: but he had gone willingly. Had Jas been warned, and did Arthur know it?

"No!" whispered Barbara, "No!"

But a few minutes later she was looking over the corral bar, and calling to the horse-wrangler.

"Tex!"

Tex, rubbing down a pony, looked round, and came running.

"Here, miss."

"You've looked after Mr. Carfax's horse—the chestnut?"

"Sure, miss!" said Tex. "That critter been on a long trail, miss, and he was sure dead beat. I picked out a pinto for Mister Arthur to ride to Nuce."

"Lame?" asked Barbara.

"That chestnut? Nope, miss," answered Tex. "He's O.K., miss, don't you worry any. He sure is dead beat with riding a long trail, but he ain't lame none."

Barbara gave him a nod, and walked back to the house. She went with a heavy heart. The only consolation was, that there would be no lynching, and no shooting, at Nuce: no surprise to Barbara Carfax when the Bar-Seven bunch rode back to the ranch under the stars, angry and disappointed, having failed to find Jas Calhoun either at Nuce, or at the Bar-Circle. Jas had been warned in time: and Barbara knew who had warned him.

Chapter XV

Show-down!

"You Fresh!"

Fresh did not answer.

He did not seem to hear.

Bud Lick stared at him.

Bud was accustomed to any man in the bunch jumping at his word. His brows knitted at the young puncher sitting on the bench outside the bun-house, leaning back against the timber wall, and staring into vacancy.

But they cleared the next moment. He could see that Fresh was deep in thought, and that it was gloomy thought.

He figured that there was some trouble on the mind of the puncher from the Chicken River. The boyish sunburnt face was deeply clouded.

It was several days since the affair of the brand-blotters, and since the Bar-Seven men had ridden into Nuce for Jas Calhoun—and failed to find him. During those days, Fresh had ridden with the bunch, on the best of terms with the whole outfit. He had made good at the Bar-Seven: and but for one gnawing misgiving at the back of his mind, he would have settled down happily to punch cows on the Carfax ranch. But that misgiving was too deep for him to drive it away: and with each passing day, it troubled him more. He was thinking of it now, as Bud Lick stood staring at him from a little distance, his call unanswered, unheeded.

"Sho!" murmured Bud. He trampel towards the bench, heavy in his cowhide boots. "You Fresh! Gone to sleep?"

Fresh started, and looked up.

He coloured under the stare of the foreman.

"You call?" he stammered.

"Sure!" Bud scanned him curiously, "You got a grouch, Fresh?"

"Nup!"

"You looked like you had."

"I'll tell a man, I've got no grouch," answered Fresh.

"What would I have a grouch for, Bud? I was jest thinking a piece——"

"You ain't thinking about what happened your first day here?" asked Bud. "The boys sure was hasty, but you know how it looked, and they was wild about poor Jim Casey being shot up. You proved up by gettin' back that herd that was rustled, and showing up that lobo-wolf, Jas Calhoun. Tex, who put the rope on your neck, would sure pull a gun on any guy that said a word agin you now. You don't want to chew on that, Fresh."

Fresh smiled.

"I ain't chewing on that, feller," he answered. "It's a

good bunch, and I sure like every hombre in it, and Tex as much as any, though he came near making it last sickness for me, but for Miss Barbara chipping in like she did."

"Then it ain't that?"

"Nup!"

"Mebbe the boss has been giving you the raw edge of his tongue." Bud grinned, "You don't want to let that worry you any, Fresh. The Colonel sure does shoot off his mouth, when his dander is riz, but he's a good boss, and I'll tell you that he thinks a whole heap of you."

"I ain't had the raw edge of his tongue yet, Bud—and I guess I could take it smiling if I did," said Fresh. "I respect the Colonel a whole lot, and I'm proud to ride for him."

"You ain't had any trouble with young Arthur?"

Fresh started.

For the moment, he wondered whether Bud guessed that it was young Arthur of whom he had been thinking. He stared at the foreman without speaking.

"Young Arthur's a good boy," said Bud, quietly. "He was a piece wild at one time, and I guess the boss rode him hard for it—the boss ain't got no use for guys like Jas Calhoun, and if young Arthur had, he had trouble to look for. But he's a good boy, Fresh, and he stood for you when all the bunch suspicioned you. You don't want to have no grouch agin Mr. Arthur."

Fresh was still silent.

During his days on the ranch, he had carefully kept out of Arthur Carfax's way. Since that day in the Squaw hills, he had not exchanged a word with the rancher's nephew. Once or twice, when Arthur had come into the bunk-house Fresh had slipped quietly out. When he had been assigned to ride herd with him, he had contrived to change with another puncher. He had never guessed that any man in the bunch would notice it—but it seemed now that Bud had.

"I tell you I've no grouch, Bud," he said, at last, "I'll tell a man, I like Mr. Arthur, and sorta liked him the first day

I met him, on the Nuce trail."

The foreman gave him a doubtful look.

"Wal, if you like him, you'll be glad to hear that you're to ride with him this morning," he said.

Fresh gave another start.

"That's why I was callin' you," said Bud. "You're to saddle up, and get ready to ride with Mr. Arthur."

"I guess I'm here to take orders, Bud," said Fresh. "But—but I'd sooner ride with punchers than with the boss's nephew. Mebbe Mr. Arthur would be jest as pleased if you sent another man."

"Meebee not, as he's specially asked for you," said the foreman, a little gruffly. "Why don't you want to ride with him?"

Fresh breathed rather hard.

"I'll ride with him, and pleased, if he wants," he said. He rose from the bench. "I'll sure get my cayuse, Bud."

He left Bud Lick frowning, as he walked away to the corral, his saddle under his arm.

His own brow was dark as he saddled up the black broncho. He did not want to ride with Arthur Carfax. It was true, as he had told Bud, that he liked the young rancher—liked him, in spite of his dark suspicions of him. But those suspicions burned in his mind, as the silver cigarette-case seemed to burn in his pocket. He had said no word—he was going to say no word. The bare thought of the look on Barbara's face, if she knew what he could have told, was more than enough to seal his lips: even if the case had been daylight clear. And after all, was there not a chance of a doubt? Fresh clung to that. But he wanted to ride clear, all the same, of Arthur Carfax.

However, there was no help for it now, and he saddled up the broncho, and led him down to the gate, to wait there for the rancher's nephew. He found Arthur already there with the chestnut.

The young man gave him a keen, searching look, as he

came up.

"Mornin', Fresh," he said, lightly.

"Mornin', sir!" answered Fresh.

"We got to ride to Long Bill's range on the Rio Frio," said Arthur. "Orders are to cut out fifty head and drive them to Sunset Ranch."

"Yup!"

Fresh knew that it was a ride of seven miles to the range, and a good ten more to the Sunset Ranch. It looked like a day in Arthur Carfax's company. Why had Arthur specially asked for him to ride with him? Fresh could not help thinking that he had a reason behind it. Did he want a show-down?

They rode out in silence. In silence they rode for several miles, Fresh keeping a little behind the rancher's nephew.

But Arthur looked round at last, and beckoned with his quirt.

"Ride level," he snapped.

"Yup!"

Fresh rode level, with a troubled mind. Arthur wanted to talk—and that was why he was riding with him that day. It was going to be a show-down. Fresh hardly knew whether he was glad or sorry that it was coming to that.

If Arthur wanted to talk, he was in no hurry to begin. His face was dark with thought, and he glanced several times at his silent companion: but it was till they were riding along the green bank of the Rio Frio that he broke the silence at last.

"You've been riding clear of me, Fresh," he said, "I've noticed it, and I guess mebbe the bunch might. What's the trouble?"

"I guess you wouldn't care about a puncher riding clear of you, sir, and you a rich rancher's nephew," said Fresh.

"My place is with the boys, sir, not with the boss's nephew."

"That's not your reason."

Fresh was silent.

"You gave me a helping hand, the day I first met up with you," said Arthur, "I liked your looks, and I've liked you since. You kept your mouth shut about the way you found me, and I'd have been shamed to death if my cousin knew. I owe you a heap Fresh."

"Forget it, sir."

"I don't choose to forget it. We had a spot of trouble on the Squaw range the next day, and I was bonehead enough to pull a gun." Arthur laughed, "You sure showed me that you was tops at that game, Fresh. You learned how to draw sudden, when you punched cows on the Chicken River. I was sorry—and said so."

"That's nothing, sir."

"Well, what is it, then?" said Arthur, irritably, "Are you ehewing on a grouch, that you can't give name to?"

Fresh breathed deep.

"You want me to shout it out?" he asked.

"I'm asking you."

"I'll speak out if you want, sir!" said Fresh. "And if you could explain, I'd be gladder than if the Colonel made me a present of the Bar-Seven, lock, stock and barrel. I sure do like you a lot, sir, and it's been heavy on my mind. But——"

"Oh, spill it!" snapped Arthur.

"I'll come clean, sir," said Fresh. "I've been in two minds about speaking out, but now you ask me, I'll put the cards on the table. That rustling guy Cactus, the other day, never got out of the rope I tied on him, without help."

"Is that all?"

"Nup! You wasn't keen to get on the track of them rustlers at all, sir," said Fresh. "You'd have stopped me, if you could."

Arthur Carfax flushed.

"You figured that out?" he said.

"It was plain enough for any guy to see, sir, though I tried hard not to think so," said Fresh. "I reckon it stuck

out a mile."

"Any more?"

"Jas Calhoun was warned in time that his game was up, and lit out of Nuce before the bunch got after him. Who warned him, sir?"

Carfax rode on in silence for several minutes. Fresh rode by his side, silent too, on the grassy margin of the Rio Frio.

But the rancher's nephew spoke at last.

"You've come clean, Fresh," he said, "and sure I'll come clean too. You've been a week on the Bar-Seven, and I guess you've heard things. Jas Calhoun was by way of being a friend of mine, as I reckon you'll know. I never knew then that he had a hand in rustlin' and brand-blottin'—he always had plenty of money, but I reckoned he made more in poker games at the Red Dog than on his ranch. I'll say he was a poker sharp more than anything else. But I'd never have sat in a game with him, or touched him at a riata's length, if I'd known what he was all the time. You can believe that."

"I believe every word of it, sir."

"Mebbe," went on Arthur, after a long pause, "mebbe I've stood by a man who was once by way of being a friend. Mebbe I'd rather have lost my uncle a herd, than have it all out about Jas. You see, I'm trusting you, Fresh! A word of this to Colonel Carfax, and it's me for the trail, and Barbara crying over my disgrace."

Fresh winced.

"I'd bite out my tongue, sir, sooner than say a word to hurt Miss Barbara," he said.

"That's where the cinch cuts!" muttered Arthur, "I'll tell you, Fresh, I've been a fool, and mebbe a scallywag too: and if I left you that night, Fresh, to put Jas wise in time so that he could beat it good and fine before a necktie party came for him from the Bar-Seven, I had the reasons I've told you—and more that I can't tell you. It's over now, Fresh—I reckon Jas will never dare show his face in this

section again: I'm through with him for ever. I don't even know where he's gone—over the border into Mexico, most like. I guess I'm going to forget him, if I can, and forget a lot more—if I can. Can't you do the same, Fresh—wash it all right out?"

"I'd be powerful glad, sir, if I could. But——"

Arthur gave him a dark look.

"Is there more to it?" he snapped.

"Yup."

"Spill it, then."

"I reckon, sir, that I'd keep my mouth shut, and wash it all out as you say, if that was all," said Fresh, slowly. "But it ain't, sir! All the cards are coming out now, sir. Jim Casey was shot up on his range——"

Arthur started.

"What about that?" he exclaimed, breathlessly.

"Was you there, sir?"

Arthur Carfax pulled in his horse. He sat in the saddle, staring at Fresh, with every trace of colour drained from his face. Fresh halted also. That look on the young rancher's face cut him hard. But he was going through with the show-down now.

"You—you suspect——?" Arthur choked.

"Look at this, sir. I found it in Jim Casey's hut, after he was shot up."

Fresh groped in his pocket. There was a glimmer of silver in the bright sunshine, as he drew the cigarette-case from his pocket. He held it up for Arthur to see, and the young man's eyes bulged at it. Fresh did not need to ask him whose were the initials "A.C.," cut on the case.

"That's yourn, sir, I guess," said Fresh, quietly.

"You found it—where?"

"In the stock-rider's hut on Squaw creek, sir, after I'd found him shot up," said Fresh, in the same quiet tone. "Some guy had been sitting there, sir, smoking cigarettes, and I guess talking to Casey—and somethin' made him forget

his cigarette-case, sir, when he went—something that rattled him a whole heap, I guess.”

“You’ve said nothing of this?”

“Nup!”

“And why not?”

“I guess I was on my way to Nuce, sir, to hand it over to the sheriff, when I met up with you on the Nuce trail. You’ll remember I rode to the ranch with you, and after that——”

“Well—after that?”

“After that, I shut my teeth on it, sir.”

There was a long silence.

“It’s yourn, sir?” said Fresh. Perhaps, even at that moment, against all reason, he hoped that Arthur Carfax might be able to say something that would see him clear.

“Let me look at it,” muttered Carfax. He stretched out his hand.

Fresh handed him the silver cigarette-case.

Carfax’s fingers closed on it, almost convulsively. For a moment, he sat in the saddle, clutching it. Only for a moment.

There was a sudden flash of silver in the sunshine. The cigarette-case described an arc, over the waters of the Rio Frio. With all the force of his arm, Arthur Carfax had flung it out into the middle of the river. There was a faint distant splash.

Fresh set his lips. The evidence that might have placed a rope round the neck of the rancher’s nephew was gone—gone for ever. Fresh was not sorry to see it go, if it came to that. But he knew that he could not ride with Arthur Carfax.

He wheeled his broncho.

“Mebbe you’d let me ride back to the ranch, sir!” he said, quietly.

“Ride and be durned!” snapped Arthur.

He put his spurs to his horse, and dashed away at a gallop

up the river bank. He did not want the puncher's company now, any more than Fresh wanted his. Fresh rode slowly back to the Bar-Seven. His last faint hope that he might see the rancher's nephew in the clear was gone now—utterly gone. And it was borne in upon his mind that, knowing what he knew, the Bar-Seven was no longer a place for him. It was his cue to say nothing, for Barbara's sake—and to ride without looking back.

Chapter XVI

Quit!

"You young geck!"

"Sir——!"

"You dog-goned young gink!"

Fresh stood silent.

Colonel Carfax's face was red with anger. He sat bolt upright in the rocker, in the verandah of the rancho, staring at Fresh, his brows beetling, his cigar unheeded between finger and thumb. The boss of the Bar-Seven had a quick and hasty temper, as all the bunch knew, though Fresh, so far, had not had the raw edge of it. He was getting it raw now.

His face was a little downcast, as he stood before the angry rancher. But it was resolute.

He had let two or three days pass, since his ride with Arthur to the Rio Frio. He had not spoken to the rancher's nephew since, and had hardly seen him. He did not want the talk of the bunk-house to connect his departure with Arthur. He was going—his determination was fixed on that. But he had no reason to give, and he reckoned that the boss had a right to shoot off his mouth if he wanted. The Colonel certainly was shooting off his mouth. And he glared at Fresh, as if the young puncher had been an enemy, instead of a rider he liked and esteemed.

"What's the trouble?" he snorted. "Ain't the pay good

enough for a puncher raised on the Chicken River?"

"The pay's better'n I ever drew on the Chicken River, sir," answered Fresh, "I ain't got no kick coming about that, sir."

"Don't the boys treat you well? Don't you like the bunch?"

Fresh sighed involuntarily.

"I like the bunch a whole lot, sir," he answered, "I'll tell a man, there ain't a better bunch in all Texas, from the Gulf to the Staked Plain."

"They was on edge at first, on account of Jim Casey! You can't kick at that, you a stranger here, and how it looked."

"I'm telling you I ain't got any kick, sir."

"Then what the thunder have you asked for your time for?" roared Colonel Carfax. "You walk up and ask for your time, and you can't give a name to any dog-goned thing that's got your goat."

"I jest want to ride, sir."

"Aw, can it!" snapped the rancher. "You don't aim to ride without a reason." He waved his cigar at the young puncher, "Forget it! Go back to the bunch, and forget it. You ain't going away from this ranch."

"I guess, sir, that losin' a puncher from the outfit wouldn't worry you a whole lot," said Fresh. "There's plenty guys in this section, sir, will jump into my place, and glad."

"Mebbe!" said Colonel Carfax. "Mebbe!" His voice became kinder, "You're a young gink, Fresh, and I figure that you're too fresh, like they called you on the Chicken River. But you're a good man and I ain't losing you. If you got a grouch, spill it, and I'll set it right."

"I got no grouch, sir."

"Listen to me, boy," said the rancher, "I've had my eye on you, and I like you a lot. You got back that rustled herd for the ranch, and you showed up that dog-goned scallywag Jas Calhoun, and the section's rid of him: and there's more'n one reason why I'm glad he had to light out. That ain't

all. Bud allows that you're as good a man as any in the bunch, and you a boy or little over. And I tell you that I like you, and want you on the ranch."

"That's kind of you, sir."

"Barbara likes you too—she's told me so," said Colonel Carfax. "She sure stood for you from the start, when the boys would have been powerful glad to string you up on suspicion. My nephew, too—he trusted you from the first. I'm telling you that both of them would be sorry to see you go."

A faint colour came into Fresh's cheeks. Barbara had always been kind and friendly, careless or forgetful of any distinction between a rich rancher's daughter, and a puncher in the bunch. Every word from her, every glance from her dark eyes, he had treasured and remembered. It was hardest of all to figure on never seeing Barbara Carfax again.

But he had to ride. He knew too much and he had to ride.

"Forget it," went on the rancher, as Fresh did not speak.

"You're going to ride for the Bar-Seven, Fresh. I ain't letting you go. That's the lot."

Colonel Carfax leaned back in the rocker, and put his cigar in his mouth, as if the talk was at an end. But Fresh did not go.

He stood where he was, flushed and miserable, but firm.

"I guess I'm sorry, sir——!" he said.

"That's all I want," interrupted the rancher.

"I'm powerful sorry——"

"Pack it up."

"But I got to go, sir," said Fresh, doggedly, "and with your leave, sir, I'll saddle up and ride."

The thunder came back to the rancher's brow. He pitched his cigar across the verandah, and sat bolt upright again, with a glare at the puncher.

"You say you got no kick?" he roared.

"Nup!"

"And you want to go?"

"Yup!"

"Then go, dog-gone you, and the sooner I see your back, the better I'll like it," thundered Colonel Carfax. "Get your cayuse and ride, and be durned to you. Ask Bud for your pay, and hit the trail."

"Sure!" said Fresh, "and thank you, sir! You been a good boss, the short while I've been here, sir, and I'd be proud to ride for you, but I got to go."

"Beat it, you!" snapped the rancher.

"Yup!"

Fresh tramped out of the verandah, leaving the rancher fuming. He had had to ask for his time: he could not go without a word. But he was glad that it was over, and that he was free to ride. Bud Lick was out on the ranges, neither did Fresh care a continental red cent for his due pay: he was only anxious to get clear quietly, leaving the bunch to learn that he was going only after he had gone. He lost no time in packing his roll and saddling-up the black broncho.

Colonel Carfax, puzzled and annoyed and perturbed, was still fuming, when Arthur came out into the verandah. He glanced at the Colonel, and then at Fresh, leading his horse out at the gate, and then at the Colonel again. The rancher gave him a glare, as he stood lighting a cigarette.

"You wise to this, Arthur?" he snapped.

"To what?"

"That young gink Canroy has asked for his time."

Arthur Carfax glanced again at the departing puncher. Fresh had mounted now, and was riding away towards Nuce. A strange look came over Arthur's face.

"Canroy going?" he asked.

"Yep! Dog-gone him, let him go!" growled the rancher, "but I'd sure like to know why."

Arthur shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't know a thing about it?" asked his uncle.

"How should I know? I'm sorry he's going, but I guess he knows his own business best."

The rancher grunted angrily. He was accustomed to having his lightest wish regarded as law, on the Bar-Seven. He had told Fresh that he wanted him to stay: and the puncher had ridden all the same. It was more than enough to get the goat of a man imperious by nature, and impatient of contradiction.

But if his uncle was sore, there was something like relief in Arthur Carfax's face, as he stood watching Fresh's Stetson sinking to the prairie, till it disappeared in high grass. It was mingled with regret: but the relief predominated. The man who knew much, and suspected more, was gone, and Arthur had no doubt why he was gone — he could guess Fresh's motives. He liked the young puncher, and was grateful to him for keeping his mouth shut: but he was a constant reminder of what Arthur Carfax wanted to forget. Now he was gone, and what he knew and suspected was gone with him.

He turned his head, as he heard Barbara's voice. She was in the doorway, and speaking to her father in a laughing tone.

"What is it, pop? More cows rustled?"

"Nope!" grunted the rancher.

"Why the black look, then?"

Snort, from Colonel Carfax.

"I guess it gets my goat, Barbara," he said. "That fresh young guy, Canroy, has asked for his time, and hit the trail. The Bar-Seven ain't good enough, it seems, for a puncher from the Chicken River. He allowed he hadn't a kick, but he's asked for his time and gone."

Barbara's laughing face changed.

"Fresh gone?" she exclaimed.

"You said it."

"But why?"

"He wouldn't let on, if he's got a reason," growled the Colonel.

"He must have a reason."

"I'll say he kept it packed up, if he had."

Barbara glanced across at her cousin.

"Do you know, Arthur?"

"How'd I know?" muttered Arthur. He looked at her, and there was a gleam of jealousy in his look, "What do you care, Barbara, if a puncher chooses to quit?"

She turned back into the house without answering. Colonel Carfax, with a final snort, dismissed Fresh from mind, and lighted another cigar. Arthur stood with a dark look on his face. Barbara's unconcealed interest in the young puncher did not please him, and it started distrustful thoughts in his mind. And his dark brow grew darker, as he saw Barbara, a few minutes later, dash away on her pinto. His gleamed after her, as he watched her ride away at a gallop on the Nuce trail—the way the Chicken River puncher had gone.

Chapter XVII

Roped In!

The whiz of the riata came as a surprise to Fresh.

No thought of danger was in his mind.

Other thoughts were there, that clouded his sunburnt face. But of peril on the Nuce trail, riding from the ranch to the cow-town, he never dreamed. He had, so far as he knew, no enemies in the Nuce section. Jas Calhoun, he could not have doubted, would have been glad of a chance to pull a gun on him; and Cactus, the rustler-foreman of the Bar-Circle, as glad as his master. But both of them had fled the section, and neither could ride in the Nuce country again except at the risk of a necktie party. He did not even remember them, as he rode.

His broncho had fallen into a walk, the reins loose on the glossy neck. Fresh had lost no time in getting clear of the Bar-Seven ranges: he did not want to fall in with Bar-Seven men, who would have asked questions he did not care

to answer. But once beyond the confines of the ranch, he slacked speed, and let the broncho walk. He was in no hurry to get to Nuce—in no hurry to get anywhere. All Texas was before him: but there was only one spot in all Texas that drew him—and that was behind him now.

The trail, where he was riding, wound through a clump of timber. Great ceiba trees grew, high and shady, with Spaniard's-beard pendant from the branches, mesquite and juniper and tree-ferns tangled among the trunks. The foliage overhead shut off the blaze of the Texas sun: it was pleasant and shady after the sun-blaze on the open prairie. He was content to let the broncho make its own pace, while he gave himself up to thought.

He had had to ride. He could not stay on the Bar-Seven, knowing what he did—and suspecting what he did. The rancher's nephew, mixed up with the rustlers—concerned, the way it looked, in the murder of Jim Casey. That incident on the Rio Frio had settled it for him—Arthur's action had left no further doubt. Arthur Carfax had been at the stockman's hut on the Squaw range when the puncher there was shot up: that was certain now. He had been there in league with the gang who had rustled the herd. Maybe it was his finger that had touched off the trigger! What would the bunch think, if they knew what he could tell them—what would the sheriff at Nuce think, if he was told? Fresh knew only too well: but he could not speak. He could not bring shame and disgrace on the name of Carfax — on Barbara's name. It was better to go, and ride a long, long trail from the ranges of the Bar-Seven.

But——!

"You dog-goned gink!" muttered Fresh, speaking to himself. "You was always too fresh, you always was! You a puncher riding herd, and falling for a rancher's daughter—and the richest rancher in the section. What'd she say if she was wise to it? Mebbe laugh—and sure, you pesky geck,

the laugh's on you. Dog-gone you, you got your cayuse, and your guns, same as when you hit the trail from the Chicken River. You got to forget that little miss, you sure have. I'll tell a man, she'll forget you fast enough, you bonehead—you got to forget her too. You figure that she'd look twice at a pesky puncher, you jay? Sho! "

He laughed aloud at the idea.

But the next moment the sunburnt face clouded over again. Dark eyes haunted him as he rode: it seemed as if he was leaving all the sweet savour of life behind him. Every stride of the broncho carried him further and further from Barbara Carfax, and his heart was like lead.

But his resolve did not falter. He had to ride—and what, after all, was the use of a moth fluttering round a candle? Barbara was as far from him as the stars, even if he had stayed to punch cows on the Bar-Seven. Some guy very different from a cow-puncher would come some day to claim her. All that Fresh had to do was to bite on the bullet, and ride!

In that mood, leaving the pace and the trail to his horse, Fresh was not likely to be on his guard, even if he had looked for danger on the Nuce trail. A blue jay, rising suddenly from a thicket, might have been a warning, if he had noted it—but he did not. He rode on slowly, at a walk, seeing nothing—and he was taken utterly off his guard when the riata flew.

He did not know that the rope was coming, till it came. Then it was too late. The noose dropped over his shoulders, flung by a practised hand, and the drag on the rope tightened it as soon as he knew it was there. The grip pinned his arms to his sides, and the jerk of the rope dragged him from the saddle, to crash into the grass as helplessly as a sack of alfalfa.

" Shucks! " gasped Fresh, as he crashed.

The riderless horse backed, whinnying, as a swarthy Mexican leaped from cover, and ran to the fallen man, dragging and coiling the rope as he came. His swarthy face and black eyes blazed with triumph. Fresh, rolling in the grass,

was struggling savagely, desperately, with the gripping rope. But he was powerless. The grip of the rope was like an iron vice, pinning him: he was utterly at the mercy of the rough-neck who had lassoed him and held the rope. The ruffian bent over him, grinning, twisting the rope in his hand.

"We meet again, senior!" he chuckled.

Fresh's eyes burned at him.

"You Pancho!" he breathed. He recognised the Mexican rustler, who had ridden for his life, that day in the Squaw hills, when the half-breed had gone down, and Cactus had put up his hands. Not a thought had Fresh wasted on the Greaser since. But he was in Pancho's hands now.

"Yo soy Pancho!" grinned the Mexican. "You remember me, senior?"

Fresh panted, and wrenched at the rope.

"You dog-goned Greaser! I guess I was an all-fired jasper not to put a bullet in your back when you lit out that day."

"Tarde—demasiado tarde," grinned Pancho. "Too late, senior! It is my turn now—and the Senior Calhoun's turn!" He laughed aloud.

Fresh ceased his efforts. He could not break loose, and he knew it. He stared up at the grinning swarthy face.

"You gol-darned rustler!" he breathed. "What's this game? I reckoned you was sixty miles at least out of this section, along with Cactus and Calhoun. You moseyed back to look for a rope round your greasy neck?"

"The senior Calhoun is not so far away as you think," grinned Pancho. "He has had to abandon his ranch, and he no longer plays cards at the Red Dog in Nuce—but he will not ride a ruined man, so long as he has a friend on the Bar-Seven who is in the money." He laughed again, with a flash of white teeth. "And he has left me to watch for you, seniorito. We are through with rustling cows and blotting the brands, in this section, and for that our thanks are to you! But you will not live to boast of it in the bunk-house." His left hand gripped the riata, holding Fresh help-

less. His right hand sought the long Mexican knife in his belt. "For many days, amigo, you have been watched for—and now you have been found! It is the end of your trail, *senorito*."

Fresh caught his breath.

No one on the Bar-Seven had doubted that Jas Calhoun and his associates had ridden fast and far. Fresh knew better now—too late to be of use to him. Jas Calhoun was not through with Arthur Carfax yet: nor was he the man to ride without revenge on the puncher who had blown up his game. Pancho, skulking in cover, had been watching and waiting for a chance—and now it was his. There was a glitter, in the sunlight that filtered through the foliage overhead, as the Mexican drew the knife from his belt.

He grinned down at Fresh.

"I wait—I wait—I keep in cover—it seems as if a chance will never come—and then you ride into my hands, *senor*!—and I rope you in like a steer! The end of the trail, *senor*—the end of the trail!"

"If I'd a hand free—and a gun in it——!" breathed Fresh. Pancho chuckled.

"Your gun is in your holster, *senorito*, and you cannot reach it!" he said, banteringly. "That day in the Squaw sierra you held the gun—now it is I who hold the knife. I fled from your gun, *senor*, but you cannot flee from my *cuchillo*!" There was a glitter in the sunrays as his hand went up.

Thud! thud! thud!

Crack! crack!

A rider dashed round a bend of the winding trail in the timber, and came suddenly on the scene. So suddenly, that for a moment Barbara Carfax wondered whether she was dreaming, at what she saw under the branches of the *ceibas*.

But the Texan girl was quick on the uptake.

The silver-mounted revolver seemed to leap into her hand. She was firing as she came galloping up, and the Mexican,

about to strike, reeled back, as a bullet tore through his sombrero, through his thick black hair, and sent a stream of blood running down his face. He leaped away with a frantic yell, and a second bullet grazed his shoulder, and drew blood again, as he plunged headlong into the thickets. Twice again the girl pulled the trigger, the bullets searching into the mesquite as the assassin fled.

"Fresh!"

She reined in her pinto, and leaped from the saddle. The rustling in the timber died away unheeded, as she leaned over Fresh, the smoking revolver in her hand, her face tense.

"Fresh!" she panted.

"You, miss!" breathed Fresh. He wrenched the noose of the lasso loose, and leaped to his feet. "You, miss!"

"You're hurt?"

"Not so's you'd notice it, miss!" He smiled at her, "But I guess, miss, that a guy was never nearer to the long jump, and this is the second time you've saved my life, miss! And it's yours, miss, if you ever wanted it."

Chapter XVIII

The Back Trail!

Barbara stood panting.

Her face had gone white: but the colour flushed back into it now. She cast a quick look round. But the Mexican was gone: the last sound of his flight had died away in the timber: and she slipped the revolver back into her holster.

Fresh stood looking at her.

Never, he thought, had Barbara of the Bar-Seven looked so beautiful. He could have rejoiced that the Mexican had roped him in, as it had given him this chance of seeing her once—yet once more, before he rode on his lonely trail. His eyes were upon her face as if they could not leave it. He stood like a man in a trance, gazing at her.

Barbara gave him a smile.

"You're sure you're not hurt?"

"Jest a bruise or two, miss, tumbling on the ground in that rope." Fresh pulled himself together, "Jest nothing, miss."

"That man—he was Pancho, the Mexican—one of Jas Calhoun's men on the Bar-Circle! I've seen him in Nuce."

"Yup!" Fresh nodded, "From what he allowed, after he roped me, he's been watching the trails for me, dog-gone his yellow hide. And I sure let him rope me in like I was a steer on the range. It would have been last sickness for me, miss, if you hadn't rode up when you did. That Greaser sure was after blood."

"I'm glad I rode after you."

The puncher's eyebrows lifted.

"You rode after me, miss?"

"Did you think it was by chance that I was riding this trail?"

"I figured so, miss."

"Guess again, then," said Barbara. "I rode after you, Fresh, as soon as I heard you had quit."

"I take that very kindly, miss," said Fresh, softly, "I jest hated to ride away without a word, miss, and you so good and kind: but I figured that you wouldn't have any use for a puncher saying goodbye, miss."

"I'm not going to say goodbye, Fresh." She laughed, "I'm going to ride you back to the Bar-Seven."

"Me, miss!" exclaimed Fresh.

"You, Fresh."

"That ain't why you rode this trail, miss?"

"That is exactly why I rode this trail."

"But—miss——!" stammered Fresh. He stared at her, in bewilderment. "What'd you care, miss, if a guy hit the trail?"

She laughed again.

"I like you, Fresh," she said, with cool frankness.

"Oh, miss!" stammered Fresh.

"You're a good hombre, and I like you a whole lot," said Barbara. "Didn't I tell you that day on the Squaw range, that you'd made a friend?"

"You was very kind, miss. But——"

"But you don't value a girl's friendship?" asked Barbara.

"Oh, miss!" gasped Fresh, "if you ever wanted a guy to die for you, miss, you'd only have to lift your little finger, and I'd be that guy, and glad."

"We're friends, then," said Barbara.

"If you say so, miss."

"Then you'll ride back to the Bar-Seven with me, and tell my father you've changed your mind, and you're not quitting."

Fresh stood silent. To refuse the lightest request from Barbara Carfax was too hard for him. But he could not ride back to the Bar-Seven.

"Well?" said Barbara.

Still he did not speak.

"Why did you hit the trail, Fresh?"

"There was reasons, miss," stammered Fresh.

"Are they reasons that you could tell me?"

"Nup!" he muttered.

"Perhaps I can guess them."

He started.

"Oh, miss, don't you worry your pretty head about it," he said, earnestly. "You jest let me ride, and forget that such a guy ever hit the Bar-Seven ranges. I'm telling you, miss, that I gotta ride."

"And you a friend, that I can trust: and me in need of one, and you'll ride and leave me to it," said Barbara.

"You in need of a friend, miss?" said Fresh, blankly. "Why, miss, there ain't a guy on the Bar-Seven that wouldn't ride the Rio Frio at full flood, if you wanted."

"You're the friend I need."

"Oh, miss."

"Listen to me." Her voice sank. They were alone, on

the timber trail, but instinctively she lowered her voice. Her face was very grave. "You'll tell me the truth, Fresh—you couldn't do anything else. You're quitting because of my cousin Arthur."

He stood dumb.

"You know that he was mixed up with Jas Calhoun. I guess you know that he rode, that night after you'd found the herd, to warn Jas that his game was up, and to get out while the going was good."

He was still dumb. There was dismay in his face. What he would never have told her, she knew. But she did not know all that he could have told, and never should.

Barbara smiled faintly, at his look. But her face became very grave again at once.

"I'm anxious about Arthur, Fresh," she said. "More than anxious. And you know I've got reasons to be. Mind, I'm telling you this because I can trust you. Arthur's a good boy, Fresh—good, and kind, and brave, and generous—too kind and generous for his own good sometimes. We've been together since we were children, both of us motherless, Fresh, and Arthur means a lot to me—and to my father, too: for stern as he is, he does truly look on Arthur almost as a son, and it would be a terrible blow for him, if—if—if—" Her voice seemed to fail, for a moment. But she went on, "If—if any disgrace fell on him, Fresh. It would hurt him terribly—and it would hurt me very hard, Fresh, if—if—" She stopped again, and then resumed without finishing the sentence, "You know that Arthur is—is—no, not weak—but—but—irresolute in some ways. Likely to be led by others, Fresh."

"I reckon," said Fresh.

"He was friendly with Jas Calhoun, and I—I hated it," said Barbara, "Jas had a lot of influence over him, and all for the bad."

"There wouldn't be any doubt about that, miss! I seen that guy, and I sure got him taped as bad medicine."

"I want you to stand by Arthur, Fresh."

"Me, miss!"

"I can trust you. I'd feel less anxious about my—my cousin, Fresh, if you were around. I like to see you riding with him. I know in my heart that he will come to no harm when you're along."

"Oh, miss!" muttered Fresh.

He understood now. Barbara wanted him to ride herd over Arthur: over the hombre he knew to have been in league with the rustlers, and who had a guilty knowledge of the murder of Jim Casey. To ride herd over the man who was the cause of his quitting the Bar-Seven. To ride herd over the man whom he ought by rights to have handed over to the sheriff!

"You see how I'm trusting you, Fresh. A word of this to Arthur, and he would be mad with anger."

"I guess so, miss," said Fresh. He knew that. All the more because he was weak-willed, irresolute, easily led, Arthur Carfax would resent the merest suggestion of being looked after and cared for. "He sure would be horn mad, miss."

"But you like him, Fresh, don't you?" She almost pleaded.

"Sure, miss," said Fresh, honestly, "I liked him a whole lot from the first minute I seen him."

She smiled.

"I'm glad of that, Fresh. If—if anything happened—if—if—some disgrace fell on him, you'd feel it, like his own folks, Fresh."

"I sure would, miss."

"I'm putting all the cards on the table, Fresh. That's what I'm afraid of," said Barbara, "I wouldn't dare to say this, even to my father, Fresh. But I'm saying it to you. That's what I'm afraid of—since I knew that Arthur rode that night to warn Jas, I've been terribly afraid——" Her voice faltered, "That villain is gone—but he may not be gone for good—I fear him, Fresh, for Arthur——" She

broke off, and stepped to her pinto, and picked up the reins, "I've said my piece, Fresh. Will you ride back to the Bar-Seven with me?"

Fresh drew a deep, deep breath.

"But for you, miss, I'd be lying a dead guy on this trail," he said.

"Cut that out," said Barbara. "That doesn't count. I'm asking you to be the friend I'm in need of, Fresh, because I like and trust you."

Fresh felt his heart beating hard. She liked and trusted him. Was that all there was to it—all there might be? Was there a chance of an impossible dream becoming possible—a golden dream coming true? For a moment the thought of love and Barbara made him almost dizzy. He would have given all the ranchlands of Texas, all the gold-mines of California, to have taken her in his arms at that moment. But he shook himself, shaking away the dream.

"Miss." His voice was a little husky, "Miss, I'm jest yours to do what you want with, and if you say Bar-Seven, it's your say-so—I'm riding where you want, miss."

"The Bar-Seven, then!" said Barbara.

His problems were unsolved: he was going back to what he had ridden from. He was going to ride herd over her kinsman, a traitor to the ranch, maybe a murderer. He was going to do anything that Barbara wanted. They rode out of the timber together, on the back-trail to the Bar-Seven.

Chapter XIX

Bitter Blood!

Colonel Carfax sat at his desk, in the office-room in the ranch-house, turning over papers. His nephew stood at his elbow. The French windows were wide open, the green shutters thrown back, letting in a flood of sunlight. The

rancher was deep in papers: but Arthur, as he stood, turned his glance continually on the sunny window, every now and then his brows knitting darkly. The ranch was thinking of a deal in cows: his nephew was thinking of Barbara, who had ridden out at the gate two or three hours ago, and had not yet returned. He was wondering, distrustfully, why she had ridden on the trail of the puncher who had quit.

The rancher looked up, and frowned slightly at his nephew's clouded face.

"What's biting you, Arthur?" he snapped.

The young man gave a little start, and answered curtly:

"Nothing."

"You look it!" grunted his uncle.

Arthur Carfax made an irritable movement. He knew that his uncle had a strong regard for him, though he showed little of it in his manner. But he always felt like a schoolboy under the rancher's grim eyes.

"You said you wanted me," he muttered, "if you don't, I'll go for my cayuse. I'd like to ride."

"I guess I want you to ride," said Colonel Carfax. "You're to ride over to the Double-Star to-day, to give Old Man Sampson's herd the once-over. You know he's selling out."

"I know!" muttered Arthur.

"Five thousand dollars don't grow on every bush," said the rancher, "and I guess we want to keep our eyes peeled dealing with Old Man Sampson. Now——" He broke off, as a shadow darkened the sunny window.

He stared at a young puncher in dusty chaps, Stetson in hand.

"You!" he ejaculated.

"Me, sir!" said Fresh.

The rancher stared at him. Arthur Carfax gave him a dark look, with a glitter in his eyes.

"So you've come back!" said Colonel Carfax. He knitted his brows.

"Yup!" said Fresh, "I guess I've changed my mind, sir,

if you'd be so kind as to give a guy another chance. I ain't hitting any old trail, sir, if you'll let me stay on with the bunch."

"You dog-goned young bonehead," growled the rancher. "You come and ask for your time, and the same morning you come back and tell me you've changed your mind. You locoed young gink. I'll say that they never put much hoss-sense into your head on the Chicken River where you was raised."

"Mebbe not, sir," said Fresh, meekly.

Arthur Carfax broke in.

"So you've changed your mind, puncher. No reason why my uncle should change his. You've quit. Get back to the trail."

Fresh reddened.

"If that's what the boss says, too, sir, I guess I got to hit the trail," he said, quietly. "But it's for the boss to say."

"Aw, can it, Arthur," snapped the rancher. "The guy's only a boy, and boys have their fancies. If he's changed his mind, I'm glad to see him back on the Bar-Seven. There ain't a better hand with a hoss, or a cow, in the bunch. Fresh, you young geck, you're back in the bunch, and if you change your mind agin, and tell me you're quitting, I'll sure take a quirt to you."

"I sure won't be telling you again that I'm quitting, sir," said Fresh. "The Bar-Seven for me, sir, if you'll forget what I said this morning."

"I guess I'll forget it!" The rancher's grim, tanned face broke into a smile, "I sure like you around, Fresh, as I've told you. You're back in the bunch, and don't you talk foolish any more."

"Thank you kindly, sir," said Fresh. And he backed out of the doorway, Stetson in hand, without another look at Arthur.

The rancher gave an impatient glance at his nephew's sulky face.

"What the great horned toad is biting you, Arthur?"

he exclaimed. "What have you got agin that kid puncher?"

"Nothing," muttered Arthur.

"You was friendly with him, and looked like liking him good and fine, and you stood for him when the bunch were honing to string him up. Now you look at him like he was something the dog found on the prairie. What's the matter with the boy?"

"Nothing," repeated Arthur. "If I were boss of the ranch, I wouldn't stand for a puncher chopping and changing that-a-way, that's all."

"Aw, forget it," grunted the rancher. "He's a good lad, and I'm glad he came back after thinking it over a piece."

Arthur's lip curled bitterly. He did not figure that Fresh Canroy had come back after thinking it over a piece. It was someone else who had thought it over a piece, and ridden after him on the Nuce trail.

But he could not tell his uncle that: neither could he tell him that it had been a relief to see the last of a hombre who knew too much.

He stood sullenly silent.

Colonel Carfax dismissed the matter, and went on talking cows. Arthur listened to him with all the patience he could: but he was glad when, at length, he was able to get away. It was not easy for him to fix his mind on such a matter as a deal in cows at the present time with his mind hot with jealous suspicion.

When he came out into the verandah, a smiling face greeted him there. But he passed Barbara without a word, almost without a look, and tramped down the steps, leaving the girl looking after him blankly.

"Arthur!" she called.

He did not seem to hear.

He tramped away to the corral, where he reckoned he would find Fresh. Fresh was there, rubbing down the black broncho. There was no one else in the corral excepting Tex, who was doctoring a lame pony at a distance. Arthur strode

directly towards the Chicken River puncher.

Fresh looked up: and his face clouded, at the look on Arthur's. The rancher's nephew gave him a stare of unconcealed hostility.

"So you've come back!" said Arthur, in a low, savage voice.

"Yup!" said Fresh, quietly.

"And why?"

"I reckon I changed my mind, sir, like I told the boss."

"Or someone else changed it for you?"

Fresh did not answer that.

"That's for the boss to say, sir."

"They called you Fresh on the Chicken River," said Arthur, "I guess they had you tabbed. You are too fresh for this ranch, Canroy."

Arthur set his teeth.

"You quit!" he said, "now you come crawling back, where you're not wanted. I'd be glad to see the last of you."

Fresh ceased to rub down the broncho. He stood looking steadily at the rancher's nephew. His manner was very quiet.

"Them's hard words, sir," he said. "I sure never was the guy to horn in where I'm not wanted, but you're the only hombre on this ranch that doesn't want me, sir. And I'm sorry to hear it."

"You've horned into my affairs——!" muttered Arthur.

"I never wanted to, sir. And I've kept my mouth shut," said Fresh. "A guy can't help knowing what he knows: but you don't figure that a guy is going to spill it all over the bunk-house, Mr. Carfax, or carry it to the sheriff at Nuce. You got no call to be afeared, sir, with me around."

"It's not only that, and you know it."

Fresh stared at him.

"What else, then?" he asked.

"Will you quit the ranch?" breathed Arthur.

Fresh shook his head.

"You won't go?"

"Nup!"

"You've been asked to stay?"

"I guess I ain't got to give my reasons to you, sir! The boss has been kind enough to take me back after I'd asked for my time, and that's the whole heap. I got to respect you, sir, as the boss's nephew, but you ain't my boss: and if you'll excuse me, sir, I got work to do, and no time for chewing the rag." With that, Fresh turned to the broncho again.

Arthur Carfax stood looking at him. His quirt was under his arm, and he let it slip down into his hand. His eyes blazed at the puncher.

"Will you answer me?" he breathed.

Fresh answered over his shoulder:

"I ain't got nothing to say, sir."

"You'll answer me, or I'll quirt you like a cayuse——" The rancher's nephew gripped the quirt almost convulsively.

"Better not, sir," Fresh, quietly, "I ain't a guy to be quirted, sir, nohow. And I got nothing to say."

The quirt whistled in the air, as the young rancher struck. But Fresh was wary. He moved quickly, and the lashing thong missed him by a foot. The next moment the quirt was wrenched from Arthur's hand, and tossed over the corral fence. Panting with rage, Carfax reached for his gun.

"Don't, sir!" Fresh's voice was quiet, almost soft. But his six-gun was looking at Arthur, before the young rancher could touch his gun, "I'd jest hate to spill your juice, sir—but don't pull that gun."

Arthur Carfax trembled with rage. It was not the first time that he had found the Chicken River puncher too quick on the draw.

It seemed, for a moment, that he would grasp his gun, even with the puncher's Colt looking him in the face. But he checked his hand. He gave Fresh one long look of bitterness and hate, and turned on his heel, and strode out of the corral. Fresh heaved a sigh of relief, as he packed his gun. Barbara had called him back to ride herd over her cousin—

and they had come near to burning powder! Fresh resumed rubbing down the broncho, but his face was clouded. What Barbara wanted, was a law to Fresh; but he figured that riding herd over Arthur Carfax was going to be a tougher proposition than riding herd over the wildest bunch of steers in all Texas.

Chapter XX

The Letter!

"Arthur!"

Barbara's voice was soft and low.

Perhaps Arthur Carfax did not hear it, for he did not look up. He was seated in the trellised summerhouse in the rancho garden, smoking one cigarette after another, his eyes moodily fixed on the earth. Round him was a litter of cigarette-stumps and burnt matches. He seemed plunged in the deepest thought and dejection, and Barbara's face grew troubled as she looked at him. She stood looking in, an envelope in her hand, which she forgot as she watched his face.

"Arthur!"

He gave a sudden start, and looked up. But his face did not clear. He gave her a gloomy look, without speaking.

"What's the trouble, Arthur?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Can't you tell me?"

"I've nothing to tell."

She compressed her lips a little. Probably she cared for him all the more, because his was a weak nature, and hers a strong one. He was older than she by several years, but she had always had a protective feeling towards him. She stepped quietly into the summerhouse.

"I did not see you yesterday evening, Arthur."

"I was late back from the Sampson's ranch," he muttered.

"You know I had to ride over and look at the herd, that your father's thinking of buying, now that Old Man Sampson is selling out."

"I know! But—I did not see you this morning."

"I was riding." His lip curled, "I guess I've got to earn my keep, even if I'm on my uncle's ranch. Your father has no use for slackers."

"Come clean, Arthur," she said, almost sharply, "why are you avoiding me?"

He did not answer.

"What have I done?"

"Nothing."

A gleam came into her dark eyes. But it faded away again. He looked so like a sulky boy that she could not be angry with him. She smiled.

"You've got a grouch, Arthur," she said. "You've had a grouch since yesterday morning, when Fresh came back——" She broke off, startled by the black look that came over his face. "Is it that, Arthur? Did you want Fresh to go?"

He sneered.

"What should I care about one puncher more or less in the bunch?" he snapped.

"Then it is that."

He was sulkily silent.

"But why?" asked Barbara. "You liked him at first, and father likes him, and I like him."

"I know you like him."

"Well, why not?" asked Barbara. "I think anyone would like him: a good, simple, honest-to-goodness boy like Fresh."

"A good-looker, too!" sneered Arthur.

"Oh, quite," said Barbara. "Did you want him to quit?"

"I don't care a coffee-bean."

"I'd like to see you friends, Arthur."

"I'm not looking into the bunk-house for friends."

"You could do worse," said Barbara, and there was a sharp

note in her voice again, "You'd find better friends in the bunk-house, than in the Red Dog at Nuce."

"That again?" sneered Arthur, "I've had enough from your father, Barbara, about being friends with Jas Calhoun. And it's over—he's gone for good. I don't expect ever to see him again, and I don't want to. Can't you let that rest?"

"Why are you angry with me, Arthur."

"I'm not angry with anybody."

"You are!" said Barbara, "and I guess it's about Fresh. What has he done?"

"Nothing."

"I'd like to see you riding with him again, Arthur."

"I don't care to ride with him."

"Why not?"

"I don't like him."

"You did like him?"

"Mebbe I did! I don't now. He's too fresh for me," said Arthur. "If I were boss here, he would be fired so quick it would make his head swim. He could ride back to the Chicken River, and be durned to him."

She stood looking at him in perplexity, the forgotten letter in her hand. She was accustomed to moods in Arthur Carfax: he was quick in his likes and dislikes. But she was quite puzzled now.

"So you're angry because I called him back?" she said, at last.

He gave a little start.

"You don't mind telling me that you called him back!" he exclaimed.

"Why should I?"

"I guess there's reasons why you should!" he muttered. "We're as good as engaged—you're going to marry me some day. At least you've promised to. Mebbe that's a thing you'd rather forget now."

"What has that to do with Fresh?"

"A whole heap, I guess, when a girl rides hell-for-leather

after a guy that's quit, and rides him back to the ranch."

She stared at him blankly for a moment or two. Then, to Arthur's surprise, she burst into a ringing laugh, as it dawned on her.

He gave her a dark look.

"It's a laughing matter to you," he muttered. "Mebbe I'm a fool to care."

"You've said it!" said Barbara, still laughing. "You're sure loco, Arthur. I've been wondering what your grouch was, but sure I'd never have guessed that you were jealous of Fresh—that kid puncher! I guess he would laugh if he knew you fancied that I'd fallen for a puncher from the Chicken River. Ha, ha!"

He looked at her half shame-faced, half uncertain.

"Why did you call him back, then?" he muttered.

She laughed again.

"Because I like him — because I'd like you to like him, Arthur. Because—oh, heaps of becauses." Her face became grave again. "But if that's the kind of thought you have of me, Arthur Carfax, perhaps we'd better forget that I've promised to marry you, as you said. Keep your grouch."

She turned away.

Arthur Carfax leaped to his feet.

"Barbara!" His arms were round her, "Forgive me—I'm a fool—a fool! I'm not good enough for you, Barbara, I've always known that. But—but—I do love you so much, Barbara, and if you turned from me, I guess I'd go jump into the Rio Frio. You got to forgive me."

He would have kissed her, but she drew back her head.

"I'll forgive you," she said, "on one condition."

"Any you like."

"That you make friends with Fresh."

"I'll make friends with a Digger Injun if you want."

"Fresh will do! Is it a bargain?"

"Sure! If he'll be friends, sure I'll be his side-kicker if

he wants. If only you love me, Barbara, what does else matter?"

"I do love you, Arthur," said Barbara, softly, "and I guess I could never love anybody else in a hundred years. Not even Fresh!" she added, laughing.

He kissed her, again and again, till she drew herself from his arms. She remembered the letter in her hand, and held it up.

"I came to give you this," she said.

"I'm glad you came, Barbara. I guess I was feeling the miserablest coyote in Texas," said Arthur. "What's that letter?"

"The post rider from Nuce brought it. I guessed you'd like to have it," said Barbara.

"Thanks."

He took the letter carelessly enough. But as he glanced at the superscription, he gave a violent start. Evidently, he knew the hand, and the sight of it gave him a shock.

As if forgetful of the girl's presence, he tore open the envelope, and dragged out the folded letter inside. His face whitened as he read it hurriedly. She was looking at him with startled eyes.

"What is it, Arthur? Bad news?"

He thrust the letter into his pocket.

"No—yes——" He stammered, "Nothing—nothing—I got to see a man, that's all. Nothing—nothing—only I got to see a man!" He tried to collect himself, "Okay, Barbara dear—I jest got to see a man—I'll be seeing you at supper! Jest now I've got to ride."

She caught his arm, as he was leaving her hurriedly:

"Arthur! Tell me! That letter——"

"I've got to ride——"

"Is that letter from Jas Calhoun?"

She knew by the look on his face that she had guessed it. But he did not answer in words. He drew his arm loose and hurried away without speaking again: and in a matter

of minutes, he was mounted, and riding away from the ranch at a gallop.

Chapter XXI

Up to Fresh!

"Fresh!"

He heard his name called from a distance.

He was thinking of Barbara, when he heard her voice.

Fresh was mending a fence at a little distance from the ranch-house. He was working very cheerily at his task. Every kind of work came the way of a rider on a ranch: and Fresh could turn his hand to anything that came. He hummed a Mexican fandango tune as he worked.

There were problems on Fresh's mind. Standing friend to a man who might pull a gun on him, practically riding herd over a guy who had only angry and bitter words for him, was no alluring prospect. But it was for Barbara's sake. Back of his mind was a doubt whether Arthur Carfax was through with Jas Calhoun and his gang of rustlers. He had heard Arthur tell the gunman-rancher, at the Lone Star in Nuce, that he was through: but that cut little ice. Only too well he had seen and noted the wavering irresolution of young Carfax's character: a friend one day, an enemy the next, and then like enough a friend again—wavering like a leaf in the wind. Wax in the hands of a cold-hearted, unrelenting galoot like Jas Calhoun, Fresh reckoned. He had been led into crime, for that was what it came to—led into treachery to the ranch, led into taking a hand in rustling his own uncle's herds: and what he had been led into once, he might be led into again. Fresh knew it, and knew that the task he had taken on was a far harder one than Barbara dreamed.

But he was going to do all he could, for Barbara's sake. Barbara did not know how low her kinsman had fallen, and

she should never know, if Fresh could help it. And her faith and trust in him warmed his heart. Faith and trust and friendship—and might there not be more to follow? Perhaps she even guessed that he loved her with all his simple heart, and was not displeased. Was it possible that a golden dream might come true? She had called him back—she had ridden after him in the Nuce trail to call him back. It was a slight foundation, no doubt, on which to build a golden dream. But that dream was very sweet to Fresh: and it made him happy, as he worked. And then came Barbara's breathless call, and he started, and looked round.

She was hurrying towards him, along the fence—breathlessly. Fresh ran to meet her, sweeping off his Stetson.

"Miss Barbara——!"

She came to a panting stop.

"I asked Bud where you were—I came to speak to you——" She panted, "Fresh, you've got to help me."

"You only got to give it a name, miss," said Fresh, in wonder. He could not surmise what had happened, to bring Barbara running in search of him. But it was like a song in his heart. In trouble she came to him, who would have died for her gladly.

"Fresh, you said you'd stand my friend — and Arthur's friend——" She panted for breath again.

"Sure thing, miss," said Fresh.

"I've got to tell you—I dare tell no one else—least of all my father. If he knew—oh, heaven! You see how I trust you, Fresh. Only you can save him—if you can. You'll help me, Fresh."

"Surest thing you know, miss. But what's happened?"

"Arthur has gone to meet Jas Calhoun."

Fresh stood very still.

The words confirmed his own lurking doubts. The rancher's nephew was not through with the rustlers.

"You know what that means, Fresh! It means disgrace and ruin for my—my cousin. Jas is known as a rustler, a

brand-blotter—he dare not ride openly in this section—the sheriff's posse would round him up, if he were seen. Worse than that, Fresh—worse than that—for the gang that rustled the cows on the Squaw range, shot up poor Jim Casey, and one of them at least is wanted for murder—as likely as not Jas himself. There were four of them on the Bar-Circle—Jas, and Cactus, and Pancho, and the half-breed. One of them shot up Jim Casey, when they rustled the herd. One of that four.”

Fresh did not speak.

Only he knew that there were not only four, but five, who had been concerned in the rustling on the Squaw range.

“That man, Jas Calhoun, is a murderer, or the side-partner of a murderer, Fresh. If the bunch could get hands on him, they'd string him up to the nearest tree. The sheriff at Nuce has been looking for him. And—and—and my—my cousin has gone to meet him. Not to hand him over to the law, Fresh—not to hand him over to the bunch. If my father knew——” Her voice broke.

“You're sure, miss?”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“I guess the Colonel would be horn mad,” said Fresh, slowly, “I guess the bunch would be wild. You wouldn't breathe a word of this, miss, 'cepting to me.”

“Not a syllable, Fresh. I've got to tell you—I know you'll help me if you can.” She clasped her hands, “Fresh, what does it mean? That man had influence over Arthur, I know—but now he's known to be a hunted rustler, known to be a cow-thief and maybe a murderer, why does Arthur stand by him? Why, Fresh?” She lowered her voice almost to a whisper, “What hold can he have over my cousin, Fresh—for that's what it comes to—nothing else can explain it.”

Fresh was not likely to answer that question.

“And what does he want with Arthur?” she went on, “I don't know, Fresh—but I'm afraid—terribly afraid. What

is his game, Fresh?"

The puncher shook his head.

"I wouldn't know, miss."

"He is a bad man—a wicked man—he has some purpose to serve: he must be aiming to make use of Arthur in some way. I can't guess how."

Fresh's face set hard. If Jas was still on the rustling game, a traitor on the ranch would be useful to him. Was it that? He did not speak.

"If that villain could be roped in, Fresh, Arthur would be clear of him," said Barbara, "I can't speak to Arthur—he would only be angry and resentful, and he would tell me nothing. I'm afraid for him, Fresh. If it came out that he's still standing by Jas Calhoun, he would be driven off the ranch, Fresh—my father could never forgive him—why, even the bunch would turn on him, Fresh. You know how they feel about Jim Casey. Fresh, his life wouldn't be safe."

Fresh nodded. He knew all that.

"Fresh, what can you do to help me? If—if—if only that villain could be roped in, and put safe in the county jail for trial——"

Fresh did not meet her eager eyes. To Barbara, that seemed a solution. It did not seem so to Fresh. Roped in, Jas Calhoun would talk—and what he could say meant shame and disgrace to Arthur Carfax of the Bar-Seven, even if it did not mean his standing trial by the side of the rustler. Roping in Jas would not help Arthur out of the pit he had dug for his own feet.

"Fresh, why don't you speak? Can't you help me?"

"I'll sure do what a guy can, miss," said Fresh, slowly, "but——" He paused, and then went on, "Miss, you're dead sure that Mr. Arthur has gone to meet that lobo-wolf?"

"I am sure of it."

"You wouldn't know where?"

"He rode away towards the river — the Rio Frio. Jas

wouldn't dare come anywhere near the ranch. Somewhere on the Frio——"

"How long since he burned the wind?"

"Not half an hour."

"I guess he's got a good horse," said Fresh, "but I'll tell a man, my bronc could beat any critter in Texas. Miss, you leave it to me, and I'll sure do all a guy can, to see that Mr. Arthur don't meet up with any lobo-wolf on the Rio Frio. I guess I can work the raffle, miss—anyways I'll do my durndest."

"But what——?"

"You jest leave it to me, miss," said Fresh, "and if you'll allow me, miss, I got to burn the wind."

"If—if you can help, Fresh——"

"I hope I can, miss."

"If you could keep him clear of that man, Fresh—if only somehow you could keep him clear of Jas Calhoun——!" breathed Barbara.

"That's what I'm going to try on, miss," said Fresh.

"You think he might listen to you, and heed you?" Barbara's look was hopeful, but doubtful.

Fresh's face was grim, for a moment.

"I guess the way I'm thinking of putting it, miss, he won't say no," he answered. "If I can ride him down afore he meets up with Jas, miss, I guess it will be O.K. You leave it to me, miss—I got to burn the wind now."

"God bless you, Fresh."

He swept off his Stetson, ran back to his broncho, tied up to the fence he had been repairing, and cast the animal loose. He had forgotten his work now—for the first time, Bud Lick was going to find a job unfinished that had been assigned to Fresh Canroy. Fresh was not thinking of that. He leapt into the saddle and rode.

Barbara stood gazing after him. She trusted him: she knew that he would help if he could. If he could keep Arthur clear of Jas Calhoun—but how? He might listen to a man

when he would not listen to a woman—that would be in accord with his wayward, irresolute character. Yet it was not likely. But she had faith in Fresh, and her heart was lighter as she walked back to the ranch.

Fresh was riding like the wind for Rio Frio. The black broncho's hoofs seemed hardly to touch the grass as he galloped.

His keen eyes swept the prairie ahead of him, seeking to pick up a Stetson over the waving grass.

Arthur's chestnut was a good cayuse: but the black broncho was swifter by a long way. Fresh reckoned that on Bucko he could ride down any guy in Texas. And he knew the direction that the rancher's nephew had taken. There was a chance, a good chance, of overtaking Arthur Carfax before he kept that appointment with the gunman-rancher. And once within a lasso's cast, Arthur would not ride on to meet Jas Calhoun! Barbara did not guess, or dream of it—but that was the simple, direct plan in the simple, direct mind of the Chicken River puncher. Arthur Carfax had to be kept clear of Jas Calhoun: and if all else failed, Fresh was going to rope him in like a refractory steer, and lead him back to the ranch on the rope!

Chapter XXII

Shot For Shot!

Another shot came from the chapparral, and Fresh Canroy tumbled headlong from his saddle, and crashed in the long thick grass.

The first rifle shot had spun the Stetson on his head. The second grazed his cheek, drawing a spot of blood. But if it had struck home, he could not have pitched more suddenly from the saddle.

"Sho!" breathed Fresh.

The Rio Frio glistened wide and bright in the sunshine.

Along the bank grew a belt of thick chapparral: shady, green and tangled. Fresh was skirting the chapparral, still riding at a rapid gallop. Probably it was the speed of the broncho that saved him, for both bullets from the cover of the thicket had gone close, though the range was long. The unseen marksman could have had little doubt that the puncher had been shot from the saddle, as he watched him crash, and watched a riderless horse trampling wildly. And Fresh, as he lay in the grass, reckoned that a third shot would sure have made it last sickness for him, had he not acted so promptly. But he had tumbled in time. A bullet through the brim of his hat, and another ripping his cheek, had been warning enough for him.

The grass into which he so promptly tumbled waved two feet high. He was hidden deep from the watching eyes in the chapparral. But if he had lifted his head above the grass, he knew that another rifle shot would have come: and he lay where he was, breathing hard.

He dabbed a spot of blood from his cheek, and pulled his six-gun. The broncho had careered a lasso's length, and then come to a halt. Fresh did not heed him. He knew that Bucko would not wander. His thoughts concentrated on the unseen gunman who had fired on him from the cover of the chapparral.

He had seen nothing, so far, of the rider he was following. But more than once he had picked up the tracks of the chestnut, and he knew that he was on Arthur Carfax's trail, and not far behind. Jas Calhoun's place of appointment, he was quite sure, was at a good and safe distance from the ranch: and Fresh reckoned that he would ride Arthur down before he reached it. But those shots from the chapparral had to change his plans. It was death to ride on—death to lift his head above the grass—he had to burn time now, if he was to live.

"The dog-goned skunk!" breathed Fresh. His grip closed

hard on the butt of his gun, "The all-fired, dog-goned polecat! That sure was a close call, and I guess that lobo-wolf in the chapparral figures that he's plugged me for keeps! But who'd it be? That Breaser guy, I reckon."

Fresh had little doubt of that.

Jas Calhoun, he reckoned, would shoot at sight, if they met. But it could not be Jas, who was somewhere far ahead, waiting for Arthur Carfax to join him. It was Fresh's idea that if he could have seen the face of the man with the rifle, he would have seen a swarthy face and glinting black eyes: the face of Pancho, the Mexican rustler, who had roped him in on the Nuce trail: and who, he reckoned, was looking for another chance at him. It was not the riata this time: the rough-neck was skulking in thick cover, too far off for a lasso's cast—this time it was a rifle shot from the chapparral along the Frio. But it was Pancho, Fresh reckoned.

"That Greaser!" he muttered, "Sure he's still gunning after me, and I reckon he figured it was jest pie, when he saw me riding, and him in cover. Sure it was the chance that pesky Greaser was looking for. I'll say he figures that he's got me fixed—dead or as good as. It sure was a close call—but mebbe it won't be this infant that comes out at the little end of the horn."

His jaw set grimly.

Lying in the grass, he waited, figuring it out. What was the lurking assassin likely to do, if he made no sign? Fresh reckoned that he would watch, warily, for a time, and then mosey along to make sure.

If he found a spark of life in his victim, when he came, he would riddle him with lead. Fresh smiled grimly at that thought. The Mexican, if he came, would find more than a spark of life in him.

He was losing time—losing the man he had been pursuing. But there was no help for that: it was futile to kick. It would not help Arthur, and it would not help Barbara, to lift his head and get a bullet through it. He had to deal with the

gunman in the chapparral before he could ride on his way: and the next move was up to the gunman: the puncher had to lie low and wait.

He could see nothing around him but high grass, and the tops of the taller trees in the chapparral by the river. But he could hear: and his ears were as keen as those of a prairie wolf. He listened intently: and at last a sound reached him.

There was a stirring in the high grass.

Fresh's eyes glinted. His hand closed hard on his drawn gun. His enemy was coming!

But he did not stir. Not till the last moment was the gunman to know that he had so much as a kick in him. And then, reckoned, it would be too late to buy him anything.

The grass stirred and waved. Fresh had a glimpse of a sombrero. It was the Mexican.

But Pancho was cautious and cunning. He came slowly, watchfully, looking for the fallen man in the long, thick grass: his rifle under his arm, but ready for instant use.

Fresh suppressed his breathing.

Suddenly, a swarthy face was looking down at him, and black eyes glinted: white teeth flashed in a savage grin.

"Carambo! We have met again—for the last time!" grinned Pancho. He lifted the rifle, to stream bullets on the fallen puncher, whom he believed to be dead, or at the point of death, grinning as he lifted it.

Bang!

It was not the rifle that spoke. It was the six-gun in the hand of the puncher stretched like a dead man in the grass.

The rifle dropped from nerveless hands. The Mexican staggered, his knees sagging under him. For a split second, surprise and fear and rage were blended in the swarthy face. But it was only for that brief second that Pancho was conscious of anything, after the six-gun cracked. There was a thud as he crumpled and fell—shot through the heart.

Fresh leaped up, smoking gun in hand. His finger was on the trigger, ready for a second shot if it had been needed.

But it was not needed. Pancho lay crumpled and dead at his feet.

Fresh looked down on him grimly.

"Feller," he said, "I guess you've had yours." And with that, and without a second glance, he turned away, and called to his horse.

The black broncho came whinnying up. Fresh, in the saddle again, urged on the broncho with a crack of the quirt. On the wretch who lay behind him in the long grass he did not waste a thought.

As he rode away, black dots appeared in the blue sky: and one after another, the vultures swooped to the spot where the dead Mexican lay. Fresh did not cast a glance backward. He rode hard: his late peril, and the rustler who had fallen to his gun, dismissed from mind.

He doubted that he had lost too much time, to have a chance left of riding down Arthur Carfax before he met up with the man he had gone to meet. But for the Mexican, he reckoned, he would have ridden Carfax down in time. Pancho had paid for it with his life: but he had delayed him too long. But Fresh would not give in while the remotest chance remained: and he dashed on at a fierce gallop under the burning sun—his keen eyes searching the prairie ahead as he urged on the galloping broncho. But he knew that too much time had been lost. He saw nothing of Arthur Carfax: and the riata remained unused at his saddle-bow.

Chapter XXIII

The Meeting

Jas Calhoun smiled: an evil, sardonic smile.

He stood leaning against the massive trunk of a ceiba tree, smoking a Mexican cheroot. Near at hand a horse was tethered.

Far up the bank of the Rio Frio, a good fifteen miles from

the Bar-Seven ranch-house, the clump of trees stood: an island in the sea of grass. Great ceiba trees grew with immense interlocked branches, with masses of Spaniard's-beard hanging from them, and tangled mesquite among the trunks. Round the timber-island stretched the endless prairie, an ocean of waving grass.

Jas was waiting. He had no doubt that the rancher's nephew would come, as he was bidden: and he smiled that evil smile as he heard the sound of distant approaching hoof-beats.

But he was cautious. He had no doubt that Arthur Carfax was coming, in obedience to his call. But it might be some puncher seeking shade from the burning sun on the plains: and only too well Jas knew that if a Bar-Seven puncher sighted him, it would be shooting on sight. He stepped away from the ceiba on which he was leaning, pushed through the mesquite, and looked out on the sun-scorched plain. A Stetson hat bobbed over the grass: and under it was a face he knew.

He lounged back to the ceiba, and leaned on the trunk again, and resumed smoking the cheroot. It was Arthur Carfax who was coming, as he had not doubted that it was: coming to his call like a dog!

He heard the horseman ride into the timber, and the jingle of stirrup and spur as he dismounted. Leaving his horse, Arthur Carfax pushed through the thickets, and came under the vast branches of the great ceiba. Evidently he knew the spot where Jas was waiting.

Jas gave him a friendly nod.

"I reckoned you'd come," he said amicably. He smiled with his lips: but his cold eyes were like ice as he scanned the young rancher's flushed face.

Carfax's look, in return, was not amicable. There was repulsion, even hatred, in the look he gave the gunman-rancher.

"What do you want?" he snapped, or rather snarled. "I

got your letter—and I've come! What do you want?"

"A word with a friend——!" said Jas.

Carfax made an angry gesture.

"Cut that out! I told you in Nuce that I was through with you! Heaven knows I wish I'd listened to my uncle, and ridden clear of you from the start. A friend!" Arthur laughed savagely, "I'd sooner call a Digger Injun friend—or a prairie dog! You're lower down than either, Jas Calhoun."

Calhoun's deep-set, icy eyes glinted. But he still smiled.

"You feel that way——!" he drawled.

"You know I do—since what happened on the Squaw range," said Arthur, hoarsely. "Can't you let me forget it?"

"Yet you rode in, the day that dog-goned puncher got back the herd, to warn me!" smiled Jas. "That sure was friendly."

"They'd have lynched you!" muttered Arthur. "If you hadn't got out in time, I tell you the Bar-Seven boys would have strung you up."

"Aw, can it," said Calhoun, contemptuously, "A heap you'd care if they strung me up, and Cactus and Pancho along with me. You warned me because you knew I'd talk, if the Bar-Seven bunch got hold of me."

Arthur Carfax did not answer that.

"What do you want with me?" he asked. "Are you thinking of raiding herds on the Bar-Seven again? Do you figure you could rope me into your game a second time—after what it led to?" He shuddered, "Heavens! Shall I ever forget what I felt, when poor Jim Casey went down—a man I'd ridden with and fed with——" His voice trailed away.

"That ain't the game now," said Calhoun, quietly, "I guess this section is too hot for me, since it's come out about the rustling and the brand-blotting. It was a good game so long as it lasted—I guess I made a good thing out of the Bar-Circle, so long as it lasted. But it's through."

"And what have you got to show for it?" jeered Carfax.

"You've had to leave your ranch to run to weeds, and ride for your neck. I guess you'd have done better with honest ranching, than rustling cows, and playing poker at the Red Dog in Nuce."

Calhoun shrugged his shoulders.

"Mebbe," he said, carelessly.

"I've asked you what you want with me?" snapped Carfax. "If it's not rustling cows, what's the game? If it's the dollars I owe you, I've not got the money. But I'll save it out of my pay, and send it to you, anywhere you like, as soon as I get it scraped up. Five hundred dollars don't grow on every bush, and you know my uncle closed up like a clam when I asked him for the money—I've told you so. Mebbe I could borrow some of it—I'm telling you, Jas Calhoun, that you'll get it, the first minute I can: heaven knows I want to be clear of you."

Calhoun laughed.

"You ain't clear yet," he said. "You're too deep in, feller, to get out easy. Five hundred dollars, even if you can scrape it up out of your pay on the ranch, ain't no use to me. I tell you, this section is too hot for me—I guess I'm taking big risks coming as near the Bar-Seven as this."

"You are!" snapped Arthur, "If I'd said a word, after getting your letter, you'd have seen a bunch of Bar-Seven men here instead of me, and you'd be up on one of those branches by this time."

"And you never said a word!" said Calhoun, banteringly. "I kinda guessed you wouldn't, feller, seeing what I should have spilled to them punchers before they strung me up on a branch."

"I've asked you what you want with me."

"Five thousand dollars," said Calhoun, crisply.

Arthur Carfax stared at him blankly.

"You're mad!" he said.

"You'll be madder if you don't pony up," said Jas, coolly, "I'm telling you, hombre, that I've got to get out while the

going is good. I guess I got friends over in Arizona: once I ride, you'll never see me agin, or hear from me either. I'm through with Texas, and through with you. But I got to have stake money—and you got to pony up the stake." His thin lip curled, "You're in the money at the Bar-Seven, feller—Old Man Carfax is known to be the richest rancher this side of the Rio Frio."

"I tell you I have my pay, and nothing more!" said Arthur, hoarsely. "My uncle took me an orphan, with nothing to my name. It's good pay—I reckon I could have saved if I'd never played poker with you, Jas. But I've got nothing—nothing—and if I asked my uncle for five thousand dollars, he'd sure be madder than when I asked him for five hundred, which he never gave. Forget it."

"Mebbe the little miss could help."

Arthur gave him a black and bitter look.

"Don't you speak of her, Jas. Barbara wanted me to take her money, when her father refused me: but I haven't come down to begging of a woman. And five hundred is her limit, anyway. Five thousand! You're mad."

"Not so's you'd notice it!" drawled Jas, "I guess Rancher Carfax often has more than that in his safe at the ranch."

Arthur started, as if a tarantula had stung him.

"You villain—you dastard!" he breathed. "You dare to suggest——"

"Aw, cut it out," sneered Calhoun. "Chew on this, young Carfax? I got to ride for Arizona, and I got to have a stake before I ride. I've lost all I had, and I guess I've lost it because you was too soft to put a bullet through that puncher from the Chicken River, when he trailed down the cows and found Cactus blotting brands. If you'd sent him after Jim Casey——"

"You villain!" muttered Arthur.

"Chewing the rag won't help," said Jas. "Chew on this instead." He made a gesture towards the trunk of the great ceiba. "You know the hollow in that trunk, jest over my

head? You got to pack a roll of five thousand dollars there, for me to cinch when I come for it, and you got to do it within the week. And if I don't find it when I come for it——" Calhoun's eyes glittered, and his voice was full of menace, "If I don't cinch that roll, Carfax, I guess I'll ride for Arizona without it—but afore I ride, I'll see that Colonel Carfax knows who kept Jim Casey in talk in the hut on the Squaw range while the cows was rustled, and more to it, too."

Carfax stood quite still.

"I guess the Colonel would ride you off'n his ranch, if the bunch didn't string you up before you could hit the trail," sneered Calhoun. "They'd sure like to know who had a hand in shooting up Jim Casey. And Miss Barbara—you want her to know?"

Arthur Carfax's hand made a move towards his holster.

Jas laughed contemptuously.

"Draw, if you're tired of life," he jeered, "I guess I can beat you at that game, Carfax. And if you beat me to it, you bonehead, what's the use, when Cactus and Pancho know as much as I know, and could shout it out as loud?"

Arthur's hand was still again.

Calhoun laughed.

"You want the little miss to know?" he jeered. "Don't I know that you aim to marry her, and cinch the ranch when Old Man Carfax goes? You figure she'd stand for you if she knew?"

Arthur shuddered.

"Chew on it," said Jas. "You got a week." He threw away the stump of his cheroot, and stepped towards his horse. The young rancher's eyes smouldered at him. But he made no move, and did not speak.

The rustler cast loose the tether, and mounted. Still Arthur Carfax watched him in silence. But as Calhoun gathered up his reins, he found his voice.

"Jas! I tell you——"

"Tell me nix! You got a week!" 'snapped Calhoun: and

the next moment he was riding away through the thickets, leaving Arthur Carfax alone in the timber-land.

Chapter XXIV

The Only Way!

"Uncle——!"

Arthur Carfax broke off, as he glanced round the office-room at the rancho, and saw that it was vacant. He had stepped in by the French windows on the verandah, expecting to find the rancher there. But Colonel Carfax was not there.

He frowned and threw himself into a rocker, his handsome face irritated and discontented.

He was in no equable mood that sunny morning.

The sunlight, streaming in at the open French windows, showed his face lined, and harassed, his eyes almost haggard, his lips never still. Nearly a week had passed since he had met Jas Calhoun at the timber-land on the Rio Frio. Those days had been days of torment to Arthur Carfax. The problem on his mind was one that he could not solve. That Jas and Cactus would ride for Arizona, and be glad to ride, he had no doubt—but they would not ride without a "stake." He was in the hollow of Jas's hand: it was utter ruin for him if the rustler told what he knew. Not only ruin—he could have faced that: he could have mounted his horse and ridden over the border into Mexico, and left it all behind him—but Barbara? There bare thought of the horror in her face, if she knew, was like ice in his heart. The anger and scorn of his uncle would be bitter enough—but Barbara? He could not face her scorn.

He could not ride. He had to keep it from Barbara. And there was only one way, and that was to pay Jas's price.

He shifted miserably in the rocker. His eyes, glancing across the rancher's desk, fixed on the safe in the corner of the office. Likely enough, the sum he wanted might be there:

and Jas had made the suggestion. He shivered. He had sunk low enough already—he was already an object of contempt in his own eyes—but could he sink to that? Yet that, even that, was better than letting Barbara know the truth. She loved him, and he knew she loved him: but he knew, too, that she would turn from him in horror and scorn if she knew.

What was he going to do?

Suddenly he gave a start. There was a glint of sunlight on something bright that lay on the rancher's desk.

He caught his breath, as he stared at it. It was a little steel key.

He knew what it was: he had seen his uncle use the key of the safe often enough. Seldom, if ever, was it out of Colonel Carfax's keeping. Evidently, he had used it that morning, and laid it on his desk momentarily forgetting it when he was called out of the office. There it lay, gleaming in the shaft of sunlight: and Arthur Carfax stared at it, his heart beating almost to suffocation.

He sat very still, his thoughts racing.

He stirred at last.

His glance shot round to the door on the hallway. There was no sound of the rancher coming. He had told his nephew that he wanted him in the office, but some other business had called him away. There was time——

With a face white as chalk, Arthur Carfax rose from the rocker. It was the way out—the only way out! Who would know—who could suspect the Colonel's nephew. He could throw the key into the river: and there was no locksmith nearer than Yellow Pine. It would be long before what he had done would be discovered—and who would dream of connecting him with it?

He stepped to the desk, and picked up the key.

There were clots of perspiration on his brow. His head was in a whirl. But his mind was desperately made up. It was the only way out—the only way—he had to pay Jas's price to keep the truth from Barbara. Key in hand, he stepped

round the desk to the safe.

"Arthur!"

It was a sweet and soft musical voice that spoke his name, as a shadow darkened the sunny window on the verandah. But a thunderclap could not have startled Arthur Carfax more.

He spun round, the key still in his fingers, his back to the safe, staring at Barbara as she looked in.

She gave him a smile.

"Isn't my father here, Arthur? What——"

She ceased to speak, suddenly, as she saw the look on his face, and the key in his hand. Her smile faded out, and her cheeks blanched.

"Arthur!" Her voice was a mere whisper, "Arthur! What——?"

How he pulled himself together, he did not know. But he knew that he must drive that sudden, half-formed suspicion from her mind, that fear from her eyes. Her voice failed: but her eyes were asking him what he was doing at her father's safe, with a key in his hand. He made to answer that unspoken question.

Somehow he contrived to smile.

"Your father's been careless for once, I guess, Barbara," he said. He was astonished to hear himself speaking lightly. "This looks to me like the key of the safe——"

"It is the key of the safe. How——"

He laughed.

"I picked it up! I was just going to try it on the lock, and see whether it was the safe key. I can't understand my uncle dropping it about, if it is, but it looks like it."

"Oh!" breathed Barbara.

With a strange self-possession, he turned to the safe again, and tested the key in the lock, Barbara watching him. But he did not open the safe. He threw the key on the desk.

"It's the key all right," he said, and lounged back to the rocker. "I guess uncle will be stamping when he misses it."

He laughed again, and did not know how cracked that laugh sounded. "Come in, Barbara! I've got to wait here till your father comes—he wants me for something this morning."

She was breathing quickly. She did not come in, but stood looking at him, with the streaming sunlight behind her. She was telling herself that it was impossible—impossible—Arthur, the Arthur she loved, the Arthur she was to marry some day—how could such a doubt have flashed into her mind? Yet he had looked so startled, so guilty—— She drove the thought away.

"Arthur!" he voice was soft.

He smiled at her.

"You're in trouble, Arthur! I know it! Arthur, what is it that that man wants of you?"

He was on his guard at once.

"That man?" he repeated: "Who, Barbara?"

"Jas Calhoun!"

"Oh, Jas," he said, carelessly.

She did not believe that he had been going to use that key. She could not and would not let the idea lodge in her mind. Yet her thoughts had gone at once to Jas Calhoun, whom she knew he had ridden out to meet. Fresh had had to return unsuccessful: he had seen nothing of Arthur on the plains. Arthur had ridden in at a late hour, and gone to his room. He had said nothing: but she knew he had met up with Jas Calhoun. She had not yet ventured to speak to him on the subject. But she spoke now.

"You went to meet that man, Arthur, the day the letter came?"

He did not answer.

"What did he want, Arthur?"

She could see a denial trembling on his lips. He had lied about the lamed horse that night he had ridden to warn the rustler in Nuce. Was he going to lie now? But he did not deny the meeting.

"I guess Jas wanted to collect what I owe him," he said,

casually. "He's got to ride clear, Barbara, and I reckon he wants that five hundred dollars I lost to him at poker, before he hits the trail out of Texas."

"Oh!" She drew a breath of relief, "Is that all?"

"What else?"

She stood looking at him. Was that all? She loved him, but she could not rely on his word.

"I guess it's through now, Barbara! I know what your father, and the bunch, would feel, if they knew I'd met up with Jas, without pulling a gun on him, or handing him over to the sheriff. But I couldn't throw him down, owing him money, Barbara—the easy way of paying debts, I guess. I'm through now."

"You're through?"

"Sure!" he said, easily, "Jas is riding for Arizona, and I got to send him the five hundred dollars at Tombstone, when I've raised it——"

"Arthur, you know I have the money—I asked you to take it from me, to get clear of that man——!"

"I'm not using your money, Barbara. Jas will wait till I've saved it from my pay. I guess he's got to, over in Arizona." He shrugged his shoulders, "I'm through now, Barbara. You don't want to worry about Jas."

"Oh! If only he is gone——!" breathed Barbara.

"He's gone."

He hardly knew how he lied so easily. But he had to keep it from Barbara—he had to keep it from her!

She was about to speak again, when the door from the hall-way opened, and Colonel Carfax came in. Arthur made a gesture towards the desk, where the steel key glistened in the sunshine.

"You left your safe key around, uncle," he said.

"Sure I'm getting careless," said Colonel Carfax. He picked up the key, and dropped it into an inside pocket. He smiled at Barbara, and she smiled back, and moved away along the verandah. The Colonel fixed his eyes on his nephew,

"I've had to keep you waiting, Arthur—I guess that guy Tex has been chewing the rag some."

"Okay," said Arthur.

"I guess I want you to ride over to Yellow Pine to-day, to the bank," said Colonel Carfax, "I've settled on buying that herd from Old Man Sampson, and you got to ride over to the bank at Yellow Pine, and ride back with five thousand dollars, Arthur."

Chapter XXV

Fresh Rides!

Bud Lick came into the harness-room, and beckoned to Fresh.

Fresh was polishing buckles: but he had paused in his work, and was looking from the window. In the distance he had a glimpse of a graceful figure mounted on a pinto. His heart was in his eyes, as he watched Barbara Carfax cantering away. And a cloud was on his brow. Once or twice, in the past few days, he had contacted the rancher's daughter, and Barbara had been kind and friendly: she had not held it against him that he had failed to help her when she had asked his help. But he had failed, and it was heavy on his mind. That interview between her cousin and Jas Calhoun had taken place: and into what trouble, into what crime, perhaps, was that cold-eyed, cold-hearted desperado leading a weak and irresolute dupe?

It was not, Fresh figured, more rustling. Since that day, no cows had been missing on the ranges: and Arthur Carfax, he knew, had not left the ranch at all during those days. He had not spoken to Arthur: but he had seen him many times, and noted his harassed looks. Something—something evil—was coming from Jas Calhoun, he felt rather than knew: and he knew, too, that the same fear was in Barbara's mind. She had believed that he could help: and he would have died to

help her: but he had failed. All he could do now was to keep posted, as far as he could, of Arthur movements, and ride herd over him—if he could! But it was not easy.

He watched the girl canter away: and turned his head, as Bud came tramping into the harness-room.

"You're wanted, Fresh," said the foreman.

"I guess I ain't through with the harness yet, Bud."

"You can forget it! The boss wants you," said Bud.

"You'll find him in his office."

"Okay!"

Fresh wondered what the boss wanted, as he headed for the ranch-house. He went in by the hall, and tapped at the office door, and entered.

Colonel Carfax was seated at his desk. Arthur was leaning back in the rocker, with his legs crossed. Fresh gave him a glance, but Arthur did not meet his eyes, only giving him a stealthy sidelong look for a moment. The rancher was frowning, but he gave Fresh a nod.

"Bud allows you want me, sir," said Fresh.

"Sure! I want you to ride over to Yellow Pine," said the Colonel, "I was sending my nephew here, but he tells me he's hurt his leg, and ain't good for a ride of fifteen miles and back."

The rancher grunted rather than spoke. Plainly he was displeased, as his glance at his nephew showed. Arthur coloured under that glance.

"I guess my cayuse jammed my leg against the corral wall," he muttered, "I've said I ain't good for the ride."

The rancher acknowledged that only with another grunt.

Fresh carefully avoided looking at Arthur. He could feel the young man's discomfort. Colonel Carfax had little use for slackers, and Fresh knew that Arthur had been idling on the ranch for days. Now he pleaded a hurt leg when he was wanted to ride. Fresh wondered a little that the rancher did not guess that there was something on his nephew's mind. But no such thought had occurred to Colonel Carfax.

"Well, Arthur can't go, and I'm sending you instead, Fresh," he said.

"Ready and willing, sir," said Fresh.

"You got to ride to the bank at Yellow Pine, and carry a draft for five thousand dollars," said the rancher, "I guess you want to take care of the roll, Fresh, when you ride back with it."

Fresh smiled.

"I guess I'll take care of it, sir," he said.

"There's a heap of rough-necks at Yellow Pine, that would ride after you, if they was wise to that roll, Fresh."

"I reckon!" agreed Fresh. "But no guy at Yellow Pine will be wise to it, sir. I sure won't shout it out on Main Street, sir."

Arthur Carfax looked up suddenly.

"You want to watch out, at Yellow Pine, Canroy," he said, "I've heard that that guy Cactus has been seen there—you'd remember that guy——"

"I sure remember him, sir," said Fresh, "and I'd sure be glad to meet up with that brand-blottin' skunk, with a gun in my hand. But being on the boss's business, sir, I wouldn't go gunning after Cactus. What I got to do to-day is to ride back with the Colonel's rolls safe in my chaps."

"You said it!" said Colonel Carfax. "Well, here's the draft, Fresh, and ride as soon as you like."

"Sure, sir!"

Fresh packed the draft in the pocket of his chaparejos, and left the office. He went cheerily to the corral for his horse. Fresh was ready to turn his hand to any work that came, but he figured that he preferred the saddle to the harness-room; and the ride to Yellow Pine was welcome. And it was pleasant to him, too, to know that the rancher trusted him to carry such a sum as five thousand dollars. Fresh reckoned that there were hombres who with such a sum in their chaps, would have ridden for the Mexican border, instead of back to the ranch. But evidently the rancher knew that he was

not that brand of hombre.

He saddled up the black broncho, and led him out at the gate. Arthur Carfax had come down from the office, and was lounging at the gate, and he gave Fresh that strange, stealthy, sidelong look he had given him in the office.

"You want to remember what I said about that galoot Cactus, Fresh," said Arthur. It was the first time he had spoken to Fresh since the scene in the corral. But his manner was friendly. Whatever it was that had been "biting" him then, he seemed to have forgotten it. Fresh little guessed what it was that had been biting him: only surmising that what he knew was irksome to young Carfax.

"I'll sure remember, sir," said Fresh. To a frank, simple-hearted guy like Fresh, Arthur's changes of mood were puzzling: but he was getting accustomed to them, and he was glad, at any rate, that the young man was friendly again. "I'll watch out for that hombre, sir."

"If he got wise to that roll you'll be carrying——"

Fresh laughed.

"How could he, sir? Nobody knows but you and the boss and me."

"Might see you at the bank——!"

"I guess I won't be many minutes at the bank, sir. I don't aim to stay in Yellow Pine longer'n it'll take to cinch the roll for the boss. I ain't taking chances with five thousand dollars, sir."

A strange gleam came into Arthur's eyes, as he named that sum. But he nodded carelessly.

"Well, watch out," he said. "The Colonel sure would be hopping mad if you was held up on the trail, and that roll cinched by a guy like Cactus."

"I'll sure watch out, sir."

Fresh mounted the broncho and rode. Arthur Carfax stood looking after him, with a strange, intent gaze till he was out of sight. Then he walked slowly back to the ranch-house. And when, later, he led out the chestnut, he seemed to have

forgotten that he had a hurt leg: there was no sign of it as he mounted and rode away. And he, too, rode on the trail for Yellow Pine, as Fresh had done an hour earlier.

Fresh was many miles away by that time. He rode at an easy gallop, by the trail that was marked only by hoofs. For many miles, his way lay by open prairie, on which cattle branded with a bar-seven were grazing, and occasionally he exchanged a cheery "Hi-yi!" with some Bar-Seven puncher riding range. But within a few miles of Yellow Pine, the trail ran through a belt of pinewoods on hilly ground, where the branches gave a welcome shade from the burning sun. It was a solitary trail through the dark, thick woods, and Fresh's eyes were keenly on the alert as he rode. He had not forgotten how he had been roped in by the Mexican on the Nuce trail. Pancho had gone to his account: but Fresh reckoned that if Cactus was around Yellow Pine, he needed to keep his eyes peeled.

But he sighted neither friend nor foe on the lonely trail, and he rode cheerily into Yellow Pone, clattered down Main Street, and threw his reins over the hitching-rail at the cow-town bank. He did not linger there. Five minutes later he was riding out of Yellow Pine again, on the trail for the Bar-Seven, with a roll of five thousand dollars in the pocket of his chaps.

Chapter XXVI

Trouble on the Trail

Fresh smiled.

It was a grim smile.

He had glanced back, after riding out of Yellow Pine. That glance had shown him a horseman riding out of the cow-town on his trail. There was nothing to that: horsemen came and went incessantly, in a burg like Yellow Pine. At the distance, all he could see of the rider was a ten-gallon

hat and sheepskin chaps. But there was something familiar in the burly figure, and Fresh fancied that under the Stetson he had glimpsed a red beard. He had not forgotten the looks of the red-bearded rough-neck he had cinched blotting brands in the Squaw hills. And the thought was in his mind, that an enemy's eyes had fallen on him in the crowded Main Street at Yellow Pine, and that it was not by chance that a horseman was riding out of the cow-town after him.

He gave a second glance back, a few minutes later.

The ten-gallon hat was still bobbing at the same distance. The horseman was keeping pace, coming no nearer. Maybe a puncher riding on his own business, without a thought of the man ahead—or maybe a desperado biding his time till they were at a safe distance from the cow-town, before he came to close quarters and gun-play.

Fresh could not be sure: but he was going to know.

He gave a crack of the quirt, and the black broncho broke into a gallop. The pine woods lay a mile out of Yellow Pine, and he was rapidly approaching the woods. He gave another glance back.

The horseman behind him was galloping now. He was spurring on to keep pace with Fresh. The brim of his hat was drawn down to shade his face, and Fresh could not see it. But he glimpsed the red beard.

He had no doubt now.

It was Cactus, the rustler and brand-blotter, who was riding on his trail—keeping pace with him, till they should reach the solitary woods. Cactus, Fresh reckoned, couldn't know a thing about the dollars in his chaps. Arthur Carfax's suggestion that the rustler might hold him up on the trail for the dollars seemed to Fresh merely an unfounded surmise. Cactus couldn't know a thing: but he had seen Fresh in the cow-town, and followed him, and his game was the same as Pancho's. If Fresh had been less on his guard, that ride would have finished with a bullet in the back under the pine trees. That, Fresh reckoned, was the rustler's game, and like

as not he was grinning, under the drawn-down hat, at the easy prospect.

The smile on Fresh's sunburnt face grew grimmer.

It was in his mind to wheel the broncho, and ride back, and meet the rustler face to face, and gun to gun.

But he shook his head.

He was riding on the boss's business: there was a large sum of money packed in his chaps, and he could not risk the boss's dollars. Sorely against the grain, he made up his mind to ride, and ride fast, trusting to the speed of the black broncho. To ride in flight from a rustler and a cow-thief got his goat: but that was what he had to do, with the Colonel's roll in his chaps: and at a crack of the quirt, the broncho stretched to full gallop.

He rode out of the sunshine, into the shade of the pine trees.

Thud! thud! thud!

He could hear the hoof-beats behind him now. His pursuer was spurring on his horse to full speed. Fresh glanced back, and caught a glint of metal as a six-gun glimmered in the sun.

Crack!

There was no disguise now. The rustler had pushed back his Stetson, and Fresh could see the hard, tanned, red-bearded face, the eyes glinting with revenge. Cactus came on at a breakneck gallop, firing as he came.

Crack! crack!

At the distance, and with the horses in rapid motion, the firing was wild. But hot lead whistled past Fresh as he rode. Cactus was well-mounted, but the black broncho could beat him in a race. In a few minutes he would be out of the range of a Colt. But there came a sudden squeal from the broncho. A bullet had grazed the heaving flank, drawing a startled squeal from Bucko.

Fresh's eyes burned.

The rustler was firing at his horse, to halt him. That settled it, for Fresh Canroy. With the boss's dollars in his

chaps, he would have ridden clear, if he could. But Cactus was pressing him too hard.

His hand shot to his gun. It had to be gun-play now, and he was ready for it—more than ready. With the reins in his left hand, the six-gun in his right, he wheeled the broncho in the trail under the pine branches. A bullet tore by as he wheeled.

The next moment, he was riding back at Cactus, firing as he rode, his eyes blazing over the gun. A bullet whirled the Stetson on his head.

But Cactus did not pull the trigger again. His gun arm sank to his side, as a bullet crashed through flesh and bone. Desperately wounded, his tanned face suddenly white, he sagged in the saddle: but even then, he clutched his Colt in his left hand, to fire again. But he did not fire. Fresh was still shooting, and twice the hot lead went home, and the rustler spun out of the saddle, to crash down into the trail, the Colt spinning from his grasp.

The riderless horse backed, and squealed, and dashed away down the trail, the way the rustler had come. Fresh did not heed it.

He drew rein, and stared down grimly at the fallen rustler. The glazing eyes glared up at him.

"You got me!" muttered Cactus.

Fresh nodded.

"You figured you was getting me, Cactus: but I sure got you!" he said. "You won't blot any more brands on Texas ranges, feller."

The rustler groaned.

"You got Pancho, and you got me, you dog-goned puncher! But I guess Jas will get you some time—I sure guess——" He choked.

"Jas is sure welcome to get me if he can," said Fresh. "I'll tell a man, I'd sure smile to meet up with Jas."

Dog-gone you! You——!"

Cactus ceased to speak, and sank heavily back. Fresh gave

him one look—only one. Then he wheeled his broncho and rode on, at an easy trot. There was no need for haste now. It was a dead man that lay in the trail under the shadowy pines.

Fresh's sunburnt face was sober, as he trotted under the pine branches. He had not sought gun-play: it had been crowded on him; and it was the rustler who had passed in his chips. Fresh reckoned that Texas was well rid of him, if it came to that. But his face was sober as he rode on.

At all events, he was through: and the Colonel's roll was safe in the pocket of his chaps. That roll was going safe to Colonel Carfax at the Bar-Seven. Or was it?

The miles slid under the broncho's trotting hoofs. Fresh was almost through the wood—already, he had a glimpse ahead of the open prairie where stretched the ranges of the Bar-Seven. But he was still amid the pines, when a figure stepped suddenly from behind a tree into the trail, and the sun-rays glistened on a level barrel.

"Halt! Hands up!"

The revolver, not ten feet away, looked him full in the face. Over it, two eyes glittered through eye-holes in a neck-scarf drawn across a face to hide it. A finger was on the trigger; and it was sudden death that was looking at the puncher from the Chicken River. And Fresh, who knew when he had a chance, and when he had none, pulled in his horse, and lifted his hands above his head.

Chapter XXVII

The Man in the Mask!

Fresh sat motionless in the saddle, his hands lifted, the black broncho as still as a statue under him. Covered by the six-gun in the masked man's hand, there was no help for it.

He was held up—held up on the trail: but not, he reckoned,

for the rancher's roll, packed in his chaps. No one outside the Bar-Seven knew that he carrying five thousand dollars from the bank at Yellow Pine—and on the ranch, only Colonel Carfax and his nephew knew. Whoever this bull-dozer was, he could know nothing of the dollars, Fresh reckoned, or dream that there was anything of value packed in the pocket of a puncher's chaparejos. So long as the rancher's roll escaped thievish hands, Fresh cared little about his own handful of dollars in his pockets. He was prepared to let the hold-up man go through him, to that extent—so long as he was at the wrong end of the gun! There was in fact a smile on his face as he scanned the man in the neck-scarf.

"Keep them up!"

The spread neck-scarf covered the face, from the forehead to the chin. The hold-up man's voice came muffled from under it. All that was revealed of him, was the glitter of eyes through the eye-holes cut in the scarf.

Fresh nodded, coolly.

"You're the doctor!" he said, lightly, "I guess I'm the guy to do as I'm told, when a Colt is looking me in the eye. I'll sure reach for the sky jest as long as you want, hombre."

The masked man came a step nearer.

"That's sense!" he snapped. "You're a dead man if you try to touch your gun."

"You said it!" agreed Fresh, with a nod.

He scanned the man, wondering whether he would have known the face under the neck-scarf. The hold-up man's clothes looked as if he had had hard luck—a dirty well-worn blue shirt, patched jeans, and dusty chaparejos—an outfit that might, Fresh reckoned, have been picked off a dust-heap around Nuce. He was so careful to hide his identity, that it was likely that he belonged to the locality, and might be seen again by the puncher he had robbed. Some rough-neck of Nuce, Fresh opined, who had left all he had at the Red Dog saloon, and was looking for a chance to make a raise on the trails. He was welcome to raise Fresh's few dollars—so

long as he held the gun. Unless he came on the roll in the pocket of the chaps!—in that event, there was desperate work ahead. Fresh was not going to lose the boss's dollars so long as he was a live man.

"I guess I'll take your gun!" The muffled voice, under the neck-scarf, was husky. The man was disguising his voice, as well as his face.

Fresh gave a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"I ain't saying nup!" he smiled.

Still keeping the puncher covered with his right, the hold-up man stretched out his left hand, drew the six-gun from Fresh's holster, and dropped it into the trail, behind him.

"Get off that cayuse! You can drop your paws now."

"Anything you say!" drawled Fresh.

The hold-up man stepped back, as if watchful for a sudden spring. Fresh dismounted, and stood beside his horse. His hands were down—but he was disarmed, and the trail-thief's revolver looked him in the face. There was no chance for him—yet! But Fresh was as watchful for a chance, as the hold-up man was to see that he did not get one.

"Now you got to pony up!" came the husky voice.

Fresh laughed.

"Feller," he said, "I guess you must be dead broke, to hold up a puncher for a dollar and a half."

"Turn out your pockets into the trail."

"Yup!"

Fresh turned out his pockets, dropping the various articles into the grass. The glittering eyes through the neck-scarf watched them as they fell. A small roll of small bills was all the money that was to be seen. It did not seem to interest the masked man.

"That's not the lot!" he snapped.

"All I got, feller," drawled Fresh. "The pay's good on the Bar-Seven: but punchers don't roll in dollars. I'm telling you that that little roll is all the dollars I've got to my name."

"Mebbe! But you did not ride to the bank for nix, I

guess."

Fresh started.

The hold-up man knew that he had ridden to the bank at Yellow Pine. How did he know that? Certainly he had not followed him from the cow-town. Cactus had trailed him: but no one else: This man had been ahead of him on the home-trail. Yet he knew——

"Turn out the pocket of your chaps."

Fresh breathed quickly. But his voice was cool and careless as he answered:

"I'm telling you, feller, that that little roll is all the dollars I've got to my name."

"Your own, mebbe. Chew on this!" came the husky voice under the neck scarf, "You was watched in Yellow Pine, puncher, and I'm telling you I rode out to get ahead of you on your trail back. And I guess I'd sooner shoot you than not, seeing that it was you put paid to the brand-blotting game in the Squaw hills. You had the gun that time, puncher—I guess I've got it now, and you got to dance to my tune, like I danced to yours when you roped me up. Got that?"

Fresh stared at him, blankly.

From the words, he could hardly have doubted that the man who stood before him, covering him with the Colt, was Cactus, the rustler and brand-blotter—but he had left Cactus dead on the trail miles behind him. The hold-up man, for some reason of his own, wanted him to believe that he was Cactus: evidently utterly unaware of what had happened to Cactus miles back on the trail.

"Got that?" snapped the hold-up man, impatiently. "You was seen at the bank, and I guess you didn't mosey into it jest to pass the time of day with the cashier. You got dollars from the bank, I reckon. Turn out the pocket of your chaps. It ain't in your rags, so I reckon it's there."

Fresh stood quite still.

The masked man made a motion with the Colt.

"Snap to it!" he rapped, "I ain't waiting! You got a roll from the bank in your chaps, puncher—pony up, or by the great horned toad, you go up, and I'll take it from your carcase."

"I sure won't give you all that trouble, feller," said Fresh, "I was brought up too careful, on the Chicken River, to argue with the guy holding the gun. It's your say-so! I guess I got to ride home without the Colonel's roll."

His manner was wholly submissive, as he thrust a hand into the pocket of his chaps, and drew out the roll. But his mind and his heart were desperate. He was under a gun, with a finger on the trigger. But he was not going to ride back to the Bar-Seven without the rancher's roll. If he did not ride back with that roll, he was not going to ride back at all—he was going to take the wildest of chances rather than fail in his trust. That was his fixed determination: but his manner could not have been more submissively resigned.

"Yourn, feller," he said, and he held out the roll for the hold-up man to take.

With the revolver still raised in his right, the masked man held out his left hand to take it. Fresh dropped it into the outstretched hand: but, as the greedy fingers clutched it, the puncher's submissive obedience dropped from him like a cloak, and he made a spring like a panther, grabbing at the masked man's gun-arm to force it up. It was a level chance of life or death: the Colt roared almost at the same second.

Bang!

Fresh felt the bullet score through his hair. The swiftness of his spring, and a split second, had saved him: the gun-arm was going up, even as the trail-thief pulled the trigger: the bullet grazed the top of his head, tearing away a lock of hair.

Bang!

The Colt roared again, but Fresh's grip was on the gun-arm now, like an iron vice, forcing it high: and the second bullet soared away among the pine-branches. The hold-up man had no chance of a third shot. A savage twist of his

arm, and the Colt dropped from his hand.

"Now, you coyote——!" breathed Fresh, between his teeth.

His grasp was on the masked man, who, panting with rage, returned grasp for grasp. The roll of bills dropped into the grass, unheeded, as they closed in desperate strife. Both unarmed now, they fought and struggled savagely, madly, for the mastery. Locked in a deadly grip, they rocked face to face, foot to foot, each exerting his strength to the utter limit.

But the Chicken River puncher was the stronger of the two. Slowly, but inevitably, he gained the upper hand. The masked man fought like a wildcat, in utter desperation: but his breath was coming in agonised gasps, and at length Fresh forced him down: down on his back in the grass, and planted a sinewy knee on his chest. Pinned by that gripping knee, breathless, exhausted, the trail-thief lay at the puncher's mercy. Fresh, panting too from the struggle, stared down at him with gleaming eyes.

"You dog-goned thief, I guess I got you!" he panted. "You'd cinch the boss's roll, and him trusting me to ride it safe to the ranch. You'd make me believe you was that rustler Cactus, the very guy I shot up on this trail back around Yellow Pine! You trail-robbin' coyote, I guess I'm going to see who you are, and tote you along for a rope and a branch."

The eyes through the neck-scarf were wildly dilated. The fallen man made a feeble effort to throw Fresh's hand aside, as he reached at the neck-scarf that masked the unknown face. Fresh struck his hand away, grasped the neck-scarf, and tore it from the hidden features.

"Now, you thieving coyote——!" he panted. "Now I guess I'll see—oh, great jumping catamounts."

He broke off, the neck-scarf falling from his hand. The face of the trail-robber was revealed, staring up in despair. And Fresh, thunderstruck, stared down with almost unbelieving eyes at the face of Arthur Carfax.

The Death of a Dream!

"Carfax!"

Fresh stuttered the name.

He rose to his feet, his eyes still on the face of the man who lay panting in the trail. The trail-thief was free of his grip, free to renew the struggle, if he wanted. But his strength was exhausted: and there was black despair in his heart, and in his look. He lay on his elbow, panting and panting.

"You!" breathed Fresh.

He stood looking down at Arthur Carfax, his brain almost in a whirl. Arthur Carfax—the rancher's nephew—Barbara's cousin! It was he, the near kinsman of the girl Fresh loved with all his honest, simple heart, who had held him up on the trail, and sought to rob him of the roll of dollars. Fresh knew now how the trail-thief had known of those dollars.

"You!" repeated Fresh, his voice quivering. "You—a thief on the trail! I knowed you was in cahoots with them rustlers, but I figured that that lobo-wolf, Jas Calhoun, had somehow roped you into it, and that you was no such scally-wag at heart. I reckoned you might pull out, and throw it away and forget it, and live decent, if only for the sake of little miss, not to bring shame on her name. And you'd rob me on the trail—you'd rob your own uncle—your own blood! You!"

Arthur Carfax groaned aloud.

"You've beaten me to it," he muttered, thickly. "It's the end for me. Put a bullet through me and finish."

Fresh did not answer that. He stooped, and picked up his six-gun, and thrust it back into the holster. He stamped on the gun the trail-thief had dropped, to put it out of action. Then he picked up the roll of bills and restored it to the pocket of his chaps. He had saved the rancher's roll, at the

risk of his life. He could almost have wished that he had lost it, rather than have discovered that Barbara's kinsman was a thief on the trails.

Arthur watched him in miserable silence. All the kick was gone out of him now. He was crushed—broken—overwhelmed with shame and despair. As Fresh did not heed him, he crawled to his feet—but his strength was spent, and he leaned weakly against a tree.

Fresh looked at him. The scorn in his face cut the wretched young man like a lash. A flush came into his pale cheeks.

"What you going to do?" he muttered.

Fresh shook his head.

"I dunno!" he said, "I got to think."

"You've got your gun! I'd have shot you to get that roll—you know that——"

"I know," said Fresh, quietly.

"I was mad, I guess—jest mad—but I'd have shot you up, I tell you, for that roll," said Arthur Carfax, huskily. "Now you got the gun—I'm not asking you to go easy—pull your gun and finish."

"Nup!"

"You figure I'll let you ride me to the ranch?" breathed Arthur. "To face my uncle—to face her! Dog-gone you, pull your gun! I tell you, I'd have shot you dead for that roll. Didn't I tell you, for my uncle to hear, that Cactus had been seen around Yellow Pine! Didn't I speak like I was Cactus, holding you up for the dollars. I reckoned this hold-up would be put down to Cactus—that was the game! I've slipped up on it, and it's the end."

"I sure did not figure that you was Cactus, seeing that I met up with that guy 'way back on the trail, and left him deader'n mutton," said Fresh. "But I'd never have figured that it was you—though sure I might have, seeing that you was side-partner in the rustling game, and nobody else knowed that I was riding this trail with a roll of dollars. I guess you

sure are pizen, Mr. Carfax."

Fresh's eyes gleamed at him.

"I've tried to put it out of my mind that you had a hand in shooting up Jim Casey, on the Squaw range," he said. "I knowed you was there when they rustled the cows—you might as well have told me so, when you throwed that cigarette-case into the Frio. I knowed it, but I've tried hard to believe that you had no hand in the murder, and you little miss's cousin. But now—now, you dog-goned polecat, you'd have shot me up to thief your uncle's dollars! By the great horned toad, the murderer of Jim Casey is going up on a rope, if I can cinch him. And now, how'd I know that it wasn't your finger on the trigger—you that would have shot me up for your uncle's dollars—like you shot Jim Casey—!"

"No! No! No!" breathed Arthur.

"How'd I know?" muttered Fresh.

"I swear that!" breathed Arthur, "I—I'll come clean, Fresh. I'm not asking you to go easy! I'm only asking you never to let Barbara know—this! Shoot me if you like, but never let her know! I tell you, I had no hand in what happened to Jim Casey. Heaven knows how it has haunted me. I was there, you know I was there. I owed Jas money I couldn't pay—money lost at poker. My uncle wouldn't help me out, and I was desperate. I was a fool—a villain—a rascal—anything you like, but I let Jas talk me into paying off my debt by helping him to run the cows—he didn't get me easy, Fresh, but—but he got me—I fell for it!"

He broke off, with a groan.

"I never knew—I never dreamed of what would come of it! Believe that, Fresh. I tell you, my part in the game was to keep Jim Casey in talk, in the stockman's hut, while the cows was run off into the hills by Jas and Cactus and Pancho and the breed. Jim trusted me, like he would his boss's nephew, and I sat on the table and smoked while he sat at his eats, and kept him talking, and him never suspecting a thing: and that would have been the whole heap, Fresh,

but—but——”

“But what?” snapped Fresh. He did not know what to believe. But he knew that, if the blood of the murdered puncher was on Arthur Carfax’s hands, he could not and would not spare him, even for Barbara’s sake.

“But he got wise to it that something was going on, out on the range,” almost whispered Arthur. “Some of the long-horns squealed when they was driven, I reckon—anyway, Jim got wise to something going on, and he jumped up and ran to the door. I—I—I knew there’d be shooting, if he came on them—Jim wasn’t the man to let his herd be rustled, while he stood alive in his boots—and I—I caught him by the arm, to stop him—I hardly knew what I was doing—I was jest frantic to keep him clear of Jas and his gang, and then—then——”

His voice trailed off.

“Then——?” snapped Fresh. “You pulled a gun——”

“No! No! No!” The wretched man, sagging against the tree, almost shied, “No! No! No! Jim shook me off, and I saw in his face that he suspected me—he pitched me aside, and ran out of the hut, reaching for his gun. Then—then I heard the shot.”

Fresh watched him closely. He figured that this was the truth. The misery, remorse, and horror, in Carfax’s face, as he told the tale, were evidence of it.

“Who fired?” he asked, quietly.

“Jas!” muttered Arthur. “The gun was smoking in his hand, when I came out of the hut—and Jim lay dead in the grass. Dead—and I had betrayed him into their hands.” He shuddered from head to foot.

“Not dead,” said Fresh, “I guess they figured he was, but Jim Casey was still alive when I came, hours later I reckon—and he tried to give me a message for the boss—and it was your name that he spoke.”

“He told you——!”

“I guess he passed out speaking your name, and could tell

me nothing. But I sure suspicioned you some," said Fresh. "But——" He paused.

"I've told you the truth," groaned Carfax. "You know how you found me on the Nuce trail that evening. I had soaked myself in hooch to forget it, if I could. But—I couldn't ever forget."

He gave the puncher a beseeching look.

"You believe what I've told you, Fresh?"

"I believe you," said Fresh, quietly.

"I had no hand in it—I'd rather Jas had burned powder on me," muttered Arthur. "A hand in the rustling, yes—but nothing more—nothing more! And then—the next day—you rode with me to look for the cows—I guess you know how I tried to stop you——"

"I know."

"I was in Jas's hands! I—I had to warn him to ride, that night—I had to—if the bunch had got a grip on him, the whole story would have come out, and she—she—Barbara would have known——"

Fresh's face softened.

"I guess you cared about that, at least," he said.

Arthur stared at him.

"Cared about that?" he said. "Do you figure that I cared about anything else? If she knew—if she ever knows——" He shuddered again, "But for Barbara, I'd have pulled out that day, and ridden for Mexico. But how could I leave her, and her loving me as she does, Fresh? She's going to marry me—and she wouldn't touch me with the end of a quirt if she knew! But it would break her heart, Fresh—it sure would break her heart if she knew——"

Fresh Canroy stood as if turned to stone.

For a moment, a haze seemed to pass before his eyes. Barbara loved this weakling, this tool in the hands of a rustling gang! Was it so? Was that what his golden dream came to—was his whole loyal heart, all the love in his simple nature, given to a woman already pledged to another man?

He had never guessed it—suspected it—dreamed of it. He had looked at her, loved her, from afar—knowing, dreaming, nothing of this. Was it true?

He did not speak. He stood gazing at the wretched young man leaning on the tree, the colour ebbing from his sunburnt cheeks. For the moment, he was conscious only of bitter pain. But was it true?

"Fresh," Arthur's voice was going on. "Fresh, she's been kind to you—she's been good to you, as she is to everyone. You wouldn't hurt her, Fresh? Keep this a secret, for her sake. You wouldn't want to hurt her."

Fresh could have laughed. Hurt her—her for whom he would have died, and gladly. He pulled himself together.

He knew that it was true. Now that he knew, he remembered a heap of signs that might have told him so. The girl's deep concern for Arthur was not merely concern for a kinsman: it was her love for him that made her so anxious, so full of misgivings. She was going to marry Arthur Carfax: and Fresh had dreamed a dream that could never come true.

Arthur Carfax was watching him eagerly, perplexed by the changing expressions on the sunburnt face.

"I've told you, I'm not asking you to go easy, Fresh," he muttered. "Shoot me if you feel like it—but keep this secret! Keep it from her! Only keep it from her, and don't let her be shamed for me."

Fresh found his voice.

"I guess there ain't much that I wouldn't do for that little miss," he said, and his voice was steady, "I ain't riding you to the ranch, Arthur Carfax—and I ain't spilling anything about what's happened on this trail. I guess I got the boss's dollars safe, and that's good enough." He breathed very hard, "I reckon you got a cayuse somewhere back among them pines?"

Arthur nodded.

"Get to it, and ride!" snapped Fresh.

The young rancher caught his breath.

"You'll keep silent?"

"Ain't I said so?" snapped Fresh, roughly. "Get to your cayuse and ride. You sure do make me sick, Mr. Carfax, but I ain't shooting you none, and I ain't saying a word at the ranch. You can beat it."

Arthur Carfax made a move. But he turned back, his eyes appealingly on the young puncher.

"I'm sorry, Fresh," he muttered, "I guess I was horn mad, to hold you up as I did, and handle a gun. But if you knew how I was fixed——" He broke off, "I guess you think hard of me, Fresh, but if knew how I was fixed, mebbe you wouldn't think so hard."

He moved away among the pines.

A few minutes later Fresh heard the thud of horse's hoofs. Arthur Carfax was gone. But Fresh did not remount the black broncho to ride on. Long he stood, and again and again, Bucko lifted his head, and looked round at him inquiringly. But at length he stirred, and a deep sigh escaped him. In that sigh the young puncher said good-bye for ever to a golden dream—a dream that had died! And at last he mounted the broncho and rode on to the Bar-Seven.

Chapter XXIX

The Watcher!

"I gotta!" muttered Fresh.

He lay sleepless in his bunk.

In the shadowy bunk-house, a dozen punchers were sleeping: but the puncher from the Chicken River could not sleep.

Indeed he did not want to sleep, even if slumber would have come. The trouble on his mind was too deep for that.

He stirred restlessly, staring into the darkness. A glimmer of moonlight from the window, falling on his face, showed it pale and harassed.

Fresh Canroy was no longer the carefree puncher who had joined the Bar-Seven bunch. Black care rode him that night. Barbara was in his thoughts: Barbara who, as he knew now, never had and never would look on him as anything but a

simple friend: Barbara whose heart was given to a man unworthy of her. That was where the cinch pinched.

His own love, his own dreams, he could have buried deep in his breast, never allowing a word or a sign to escape him: content to see her happy, with a simple, unselfish devotion. But how could that be, when the man she loved was weak, irresolute; who had been led into crime, and who seemed, in the hands of Jas Calhoun, like clay in the hands of the potter? Fresh was keeping his secret, for Barbara's sake: even of the attempted robbery on the Yellow Pine trail he had said no word, and intended to say no word. Colonel Carfax had received the roll of five thousand dollars, and locked it up in his safe in the ranch office, never dreaming how narrow an escape it had had of falling into thievish hands—and those the hands of his own nephew, who was to marry Barbara! Fresh's heart was heavy as lead as he thought of it—and of Barbara!

If she knew—if she even dreamed——!

She should never know, never dream of it, if Fresh could help it. Apache tortures would never have wrung a word from him, that could bring a cloud to her face, the tears to her eyes. Arthur had said that it would break her heart if she knew: and Fresh reckoned that he was right.

Keeping the secret and riding herd over him to keep him from further folly, that was all that he could do for Barbara's sake—if he could do that much. She had called him back, when he would have quit, trusting him to help Arthur—the man she loved—in the trouble of which she knew a little, and suspected much. And Fresh, as he lay sleepless in the bunk-house, figured that if he was going to ride herd over Arthur Carfax, and save him for Barbara's sake, it was that very night that he was wanted. His thoughts were haunted by the knowledge of the roll of five thousand dollars in the rancho, and of Arthur's mad attempt to cinch it on the trail. What was Arthur Carfax thinking of that night? Was he

asleep in his room at the rancho, or——?

There was no bitterness towards him, in Fresh's heart. In spite of all, he had not lost his liking for the young rancher. He was a good lad, Fresh reckoned, as Barbara believed him to be—it was the influence of that lobo-wolf, Jas Calhoun, that had caused his only lapse, and his remorse and repentance were sincere enough. Free of Jas, Fresh did not doubt that he would run straight—the lesson he had had was assurance of that. But he was not free of Jas.

Jas was still somewhere in the section, only Arthur knew where: and only too clearly Arthur was in his grip. It was Jas who was behind that hold-up on the trail: Fresh was sure of that. It had failed: Fresh had brought the dollars safe to the ranch. But they were now under the same roof as Arthur Carfax: in an old safe that was little more than a tin box—which Fresh reckoned he could have opened with a can-opener. Would that roll of five thousand dollars be still there in the morning?

"I gotta!" muttered Fresh, again, "I gotta ride herd over that guy—I gotta. I guess Jas Calhoun has got that young geck dancing on a string—he don't don't dare kick when Jas calls the tune. I gotta ride him clear."

He lay thinking it over, miserably.

In his mind's eyes, he could see Arthur Carfax stepping quietly from his room, stepping softly and silently down the stair, stealing into the dark deserted ranch office—while his uncle slept unsuspectingly, and Barbara, if she was dreaming, never dreaming of that! It was easy—easier than a hold-up on the trail, which Jas's dupe had tried and slipped up on.

It was like a picture before the puncher's eyes in the dark.

It would happen this night, if it happened at all. On the morrow, the roll would go to Old Man Sampson in payment for his herd. But what was going to happen during the night?

Not before midnight, Fresh reckoned. Arthur, desperate

as he was, reckless as he was in his desperation, would surely have caution enough for that. But the puncher could not feel sure. He figured that if he was going to ride herd over Arthur that night he had to be on the watch by the time the last light in the rancho went out. Better too early than too late.

He moved, at last, his mind made up.

He slipped quietly from his bunk, and dressed himself in the dark. Quiet as he was, there was a stir of someone awakening.

"That you, Fresh?" came Bud Lick's sleepy voice.

"Yup!"

"What you turnin' out for, you gink?" asked the foreman.

"I guess I can't sleep, Bud! I'm going to take a turn outside," answered Fresh. "It's sure one dandy of a night.

Bud's answer was a grunt, as he settled down to sleep again. Fresh left the bunk-house, and closed the door after him quietly.

Outside, there was a silvery glimmer from a crescent moon. It showed the ranch-house a black mass against the sky. Fresh trod softly past the corral wall, and stopped in the shadow of a tree, to scan the rancho.

From the deep verandah, came a glimmer of light. It glimmered through the slats of the shutters of the rancher's office. Colonel Carfax, evidently, had not yet gone to bed: he was at his office desk, on some business of the ranch. It was a relief to Fresh to see that glimmer. If Arthur had any secret plans for that night, he could not have carried them out yet. It was yet an hour to midnight: and Fresh reckoned that he was scheduled for a long watch. That cut no ice: he was prepared to wait and watch till the dawn came up over the Rio Frio and the wide grass-lands, if needed. He only hoped that his watch would be in vain: that nothing would happen during the dark hours. Under the tree, close to the end of the verandah, he leaned on the trunk, and waited:

hidden in darkness if any eye glanced out.

A few minutes later, the sound of a footfall in the verandah told him that others, as well as the rancher, were still wakeful.

"Arthur!"

It was Barbara's voice, in low tones.

Fresh breathed hard. Within a few yards of him, as he knew now, Arthur Carfax was in the verandah, in the gloom. What was he thinking of, as he sat there? Fresh reckoned he could guess.

He heard the young man's voice, in reply.

"Barbara! I thought you'd gone to bed."

"I'm worried, Arthur."

"What about?"

"I—I hardly know! But I'm scared, Arthur—scared for you! I've been scared ever since that day you went to see Jas——"

"Hush!"

"Arthur, can't you tell me what the trouble is? Can't you trust me—I who love you so much, my dear."

Fresh felt a tremble in his limbs, at the soft, clinging note in the girl's voice. What would he not have given, to hear her speak to him in that tone? He choked down a sigh.

Arthur's reply came softly:

"I know you love me, Barbara—just as well as I know that I don't deserve it. Heaven knows I love you, darling—but for that, I should be over the border in Mexico now. But—but——"

"Then trust me, Arthur!"

His voice changed.

"There's nothing—nothing! I've told you there's nothing. I tell you I've seen Jas for the last time. Forget it."

"If—if he really has gone——"

"I'm telling you, I saw him that day in the timber-island

on the Frio, and he told me he was riding for Arizona. Isn't that good enough?"

Fresh did not want to hear—he did not want to play the eavesdropper: still less did he want to hear Arthur Carfax lying to Barbara, for that he was lying Fresh could not doubt. He would have moved away—but Barbara, now, was standing by the rail, in a glimmer of moonlight—he could make out her graceful head, and the shoulders in a Spanish shawl: she was so near, that he dreaded that she might hear him if he stirred, perhaps glimpse him in the glimmer of the moon. Barbara must not know that he was on the watch that night.

"Go in, Barbara! I'm going to bed when I've finished my smoke! I shall be riding early in the morning."

"Arthur, tell me——"

"Tell you—what?"

"I know all is not well with you. I fear that man—you tell me he is gone, but—but I still fear him. I—I fear——!" She broke off.

"What do you fear?"

She did not answer that.

Arthur did not know, and Fresh could not know, that the recollection was in her mind of what she had seen in the ranch office that morning—of Arthur with the steel key in his hand, turning suddenly from the safe with a startled, guilty face. She had driven that recollection from her mind—again and again, she had driven it away: but always it would return, tormenting her with an unacknowledged fear.

"Well?" Arthur Carfax peered at her, in the shadows, "What is it you fear—what do you mean, Barbara?"

She could not tell him. She could not admit that fear even to herself. She did not speak.

"You've no need to worry darling." Arthur's voice was soft again. Fresh heard the creak of a rocker, as he rose to his feet. "Barbara, darling——!" He took the girl in his arms.

Fresh stirred. As silently as he could, he moved away—he had to go. But cautious as he was, cautious as a creeping Apache, some faint sound reached the girl's ears, so near at hand. He heard a startled exclamation.

"What—who is that?"

"Nothing, dear——" said Arthur.

"I heard——" The girl detached herself from him, and leaned over the rail, staring into the shadows, "Look—that is someone moving——"

Fresh, blotted behind a tree-trunk, hardly breathed. But he heard Arthur's reassuring voice the next moment.

"Nothing, dear—a shadow of the moonlight, that is all. I saw nothing——"

"I—I thought——"

"You're nervous, dear! Go in now—I'll look round before I go in. Good-night, darling."

"Good-night, dear one."

Fresh heard a door close. Barbara was gone into the house. Arthur Carfax stood looking over the rail. But he did not descend the steps to look round: evidently he believed that Barbara's momentary alarm was nothing but a nervous fancy. Fresh heard the scratch of a match, as he lighted another cigarette.

For long minutes, he stood there, smoking one cigarette after another, tossing the stumps over the rail. But at length Fresh heard him move. Again he heard the sound of a closing door. Arthur Carfax had gone in—to bed? Fresh wondered.

There was still a glimmer of light through the shutters of the ranch-office: Colonel Carfax was still there. But at last, that glimmer of light suddenly went out, and all was dark.

Dark, silent—but sleeping? Fresh wished that he could believe so. But he did not believe so, and with tireless patience, he waited and watched.

A Thief in the Night!

Chapter XXX

Creak!

Fresh's heart jumped.

It was a faint sound. But in the deep stillness of the night it sounded loud to listening, straining ears.

Midnight had long passed. Clouds had drifted over the moon, and all was deep shadow. Every one in the rancho should have been deep in slumber. But one, at least, was wakeful. Fresh had been sure of it. He knew it now.

Creak!

That faint sound came from the darkness of the verandah, and he knew from what spot—the shuttered French window of the rancher's office. Someone was at that window. Fresh did not need to see who it was. He knew.

Standing there, a dark shadow in the dark, for long hours, he had tried to figure out what Arthur Carfax would do, if indeed Carfax's intention was what he feared. He would have to make it appear that the robber of the night came from outside the rancho. That was his best guess: and it was easy enough. He could have descended to his uncle's office to do what he had to do—but he would never dare to let it be seen that the thief was within the house. That robbery, when it was discovered in the morning, was to be supposed to be the work of some thief in the night, some desperate rough-neck of Nuce. What else was Colonel Carfax to think, if the signs were found of entry from without?

That, Fresh figured, would be the game: and it was easy—fatally easy. Arthur Carfax had only to let himself quietly out of the house into the verandah, and move along in silence to the shuttered window. The shutter, as Fresh knew, was fastened by a simple catch, easy to force from outside with a bowie-knife. The French window inside it was merely

dah. He had to chip in. He had to prevent the intended robbery. He had to save Arthur Carfax from his own mad folly, for Barbara's sake. He had promised to ride herd over Arthur, and never had the wretched young man needed it more.

A glimmer of flickering light caught his eyes.

It came from the ranch office.

A candle had been lighted there. The shutters, already forced, stood wide—the French window within was open—already the thief was in the office, and had lighted a candle there. Fresh moved silently along to the open doorway, and looked in from the night.

His face was pale and set.

He had to stop this. Even if it came to shooting, he had to stop it. But, if he could, in silence—without awakening anyone in the household. He had to save Barbara's kinsman from crime: but he had to save him, too, if he could, from disgrace and shame—shame that would overwhelm Barbara as well as the wretched culprit. Could he?

He looked in.

The candle, standing on the rancher's desk, cast a flickering light over the room. It flickered on the man standing at the safe behind the desk—Fresh could see only his back, but he knew that it was Arthur Carfax. The safe door was open—it was, as Fresh had figured, easy to crack: Arthur, evidently, had found it easy enough. He had belted the bowie-knife he had used, and his hand was groping in the safe.

As Fresh looked, that groping hand came out. Clutched in it was the roll that the Chicken River puncher had brought from Yellow Pine that day. Arthur turned from the robbed safe.

Fresh could have pitied him, as he saw his face. It was white as chalk, thick with perspiration: the eyes almost wild. It was not the face of a thief: it was the face of a man driven to utter desperation, loathing himself for what he was doing

—hating himself for it—yet driven to carry on. With the latch. Fresh had been several times in the rancher's office, and knew how it was fixed. Putting himself in Arthur's place, in his thoughts, Fresh figured it out: and as he heard that faint creak in the still night, he knew that he had figured it out correctly. As he listened, with a heavy heart, the shutter was creaking as the knife forced the catch.

Silently, he moved.

There was no sound, as he mounted the steps of the veran-roll of five thousand dollars in one hand, he leaned the other on the desk, as if for support—as if his limbs were sagging under him, and he would have fallen. Fresh's set face softened as he watched him. He had never seen, or dreamed of seeing, so much despair and haggard misery in the face of any living man.

If Arthur Carfax had looked towards the verandah, he must have seen the puncher looking in. But he did not glance in that direction. He stood leaning on the desk, the perspiration running down his face.

Then, suddenly, he made a move—turning back to the safe. Fresh's heart lightened as he saw it—he could read what was in the young rancher's mind—to replace what he had taken, before it was too late. Fresh backed a little from the window, though his eyes were still fixed on Arthur Carfax in the candlelight. If he replaced the roll, if he went as he had come, with unstained hands, he need never know that the puncher had watched him—Fresh could return to the bunk-house and sleep in peace. From the darkness, he watched with tense anxiety.

But Arthur turned from the safe again. Fresh saw him slip the roll into an inside pocket.

The die was cast!

Fresh drew a deep breath. In silence, if he could: keeping the secret if he could, he had to intervene. If Arthur Carfax went to the door with that roll in his pocket—

With unsteady steps, as of a drunken man, Arthur Carfax came towards the French window. He was leaving the ranch office with his plunder, but not by way of the door on the hall-way: he was coming out into the night. Fresh guessed that he understood. The wretched thief dared not take his plunder to his room—he dared not keep it within the walls of the rancho. It was to be hidden somewhere without—somewhere out of the possibility of discovery or recovery. He was coming out, forgetting, in his desperate misery, the candle burning on the desk: as he had forgotten the silver cigarette-case at the stockman's hut on the Squaw range.

But, as he was stepping out, he seemed to remember: for he turned back, and blew out the candle.

All was darkness, and he disappeared from Fresh's sight. He came unsteadily out: Fresh could hear, if he could not see him. He crossed the verandah to the steps, and came into a faint glimmer of moonlight.

And as that glimmer fell on him, a grasp was laid on his arm: and at the sudden and utterly unexpected contact, he gave a faint, husky cry, and staggered. For the moment, it seemed that he would fall at the puncher's feet.

"Who——!" He panted the word.

"I guess it's me, Mr. Carfax——!"

Carfax peered at him, in the dim glimmer. A spasm of rage convulsed his face, as he recognised who had grasped him.

"You!" he breathed.

"Jest me," said Fresh, quietly.

"You! Fresh! What are you doing here?" Arthur Carfax hissed the words, "What do you want?"

"I guess I want that roll, to put back in your uncle's safe, Mr. Carfax," said Fresh, "I ain't standing for robbing the boss, nohow."

"You dare——!"

"Can it, sir," said Fresh, in the same quiet tone. "I guess

I watched the whole thing, suspicioning what you was going to do. You got that roll in your pocket, and it's got to go back where it belongs."

"You hound——"

"Quiet!" breathed Fresh. "Do you want to wake any guy, sir? For Pete's sake, give me that roll to put back, and I'll never spill a word of this, for the little miss's sake. You got to pony up that roll, sir." His grasp was on Arthur's left arm, and he saw the young man's right hand slide towards a holster. "Don't sir! You figure you could handle a gun without waking every galoot on the ranch? We got to keep this quiet, sir."

Arthur Carfax did not touch his gun. He sagged helplessly against the verandah rail, and Fresh released his arm. Sagging there he stared at the puncher with haggard, desperate eyes, his face colourless in the dim glimmer of the clouded moon. But he made no move to hand over the roll.

Fresh waited.

Caught!

The silence lasted long minutes. Arthur Carfax made no move. His back against the rail, as if he would have fallen without its support, he stared at Fresh. He could read pity in the puncher's face: but he could read determination also. Pity, mingled with scorn: but determination that was like iron.

He found his voice at last.

"You've been watching?"

"Yup!"

"You suspected——?"

"Sure: after that hold-up!"

"She fancied she saw someone in the dark—it was you——?"

"You said it."

"A thousand curses——"

"That won't buy you anything, sir!" said Fresh. "Jest you think a minute, sir. What you done already is pizen enough. You let that polecat Jas Calhoun rope you into rustling your uncle's herds. You was there when that skunk shot up an honest puncher. Ain't all that bad enough? But robbing your uncle while he lies asleep—I'm telling you, sir, that if you got away with this, if I let you get away with it, you'd never sleep in peace agin. And if it came out, and the little miss knowed that her cousin was a thief——"

Arthur shuddered.

"It's for her sake!" he breathed. "Can't you understand? I'd cut off my hand sooner—but it's for her sake——"

"How come?"

"Can't you understand? Why do you figure I've taken this money?" breathed Arthur.

"I guess that polecat Jas is pulling the strings, like he was in the rustling game," said Fresh. "But you ain't dancing to his tune to this extent."

"You reckon I'd dance to his tune if I could help it?" hissed Carfax, "I tell you I'm in a cinch. He's got me in a rope like I was a steer. Listen to me, Fresh! Listen! You got to let me get by with it, and keep mum! You got to, for her sake! I tell you it's for Barbara's sake. But for that, I'd have put a bullet through my head rather. Listen! Last week I had word from Jas, and I met up with him in the timber-island on the Frio—you know the place——"

"I know."

"He told me he was riding for Arizona, but—but—he's a ruined man, Fresh, and he won't ride with empty hands and empty pockets."

"I guess he must, if he rides at all."

"Will you understand?" said Carfax, hoarsely, "I've got to stake him five thousand dollars, and then I shall see the last of him. That's his price for going with his mouth shut."

"Search me!" muttered Fresh.

"That—or what he can tell——!" breathed Arthur.

"I guess he wouldn't be honing to tell tales to the sheriff, and him the guy that shot up Jim Casey——"

"Fool! Fool! It's Barbara!" hissed Arthur, "Jas gave me a week to come through. Listen! You've seen the big ceiba in the timber-island. There's a hollow in the trunk just over a guy's head. Jas has got to pick five thousand dollars out of that hollow, within the week, or else——"

"Or else?"

"Or else Barbara will know all that Jas can tell her," groaned Arthur. "My uncle—Barbara—both will know. The bunch will know—Bud, and Tex, and Yuba—the whole crowd—and the whole section. I guess I could ride for Mexico before the sheriff came for me—but—but—Barbara! You couldn't hurt her like that, Fresh."

Fresh stood very still.

He had had no doubt that it was Jas Calhoun who was behind this, but he had not known how it stood. Now he knew. This was the outcome of Arthur's meeting-up with Jas, the day he had failed to rope him in.

"You know now why I held you up on the Yellow Pine trail!" whispered Arthur. "That was why! I'm telling you, Fresh, I've been nearly loco with the strain of it, the past days. I'm telling you, Barbara must not know. She knows already that something's wrong, and she knows it has to do with Jas. I've had to fend her off, and spin lies—lies—I'm at the end of my tether, Fresh! Do you think I'd have done this, for any reason but one? I'm telling you, Fresh, it would break her heart if she knew—if she knew what I was! Is that what you want?"

Fresh winced.

"This will see me through," went on Arthur's hoarse whisper, "Jas will ride when he gets his stake, and I shall be free of him. Do you figure that I'll ever ride a wrong trail again, after this? God knows I've learned a lesson. Give me this chance, Fresh—give me only this chance to pull clear, and Barbara shall never have cause to feel shame for me again. You believe that, Fresh."

"Sure!" muttered Fresh. "But——"

"Then give me this chance! Go back to the bunk-house—say nothing! I've fixed it up for my uncle to think that some thief came from outside—I'm going to hide the roll on the prairie, and ride with it to-morrow morning for the timber-land on the Frio. Then—then Jas will be gone. Give me this chance, Fresh."

Fresh slowly shook his head.

"I couldn't stand for it, sir, even if it was any use. But think a minute—jest think! Jas has got you in a cinch: there ain't no two ways about that. But you figure that he would let you loose if he got a roll of five thousand dollars so easy?"

"He's made this section too hot for him—he dare not show his face—he is keen to get out——"

"Mebbe!" said Fresh. "But he ain't letting up on you, nohow, sir, if you hand him five thousand dollars to easy. You wouldn't have heard the last of Jas, Mr. Carfax—you'd hear agin from him, fast enough, when he wanted more dollars. You can't buy off a lobo-wolf of Jas's heft."

"I—I can trust him that far——"

"Mebbe you think so, sir," said Fresh. "But I guess Jas would be milking you good and fine, after this, if he got five thousand bucks so easy. That ain't the way out, sir, even if I could stand for it, which I couldn't nohow. That roll has got to go back where it belongs."

"If you can't spare me, Fresh, spare her——!" groaned Arthur.

"I'm thinking of her, sir," said Fresh, "and if giving my life would keep one tear from her eyes, I guess I'd give it, and glad. You listen to me, sir. Your nerves is jest in rags, and you can't think clear. I got to think this out, and you got to leave it to me——"

"I'm telling you——"

"You got to chew on it, sir, that that lobo-wolf that murdered Jim Casey ain't riding clear with five thousand of the boss's dollars in his belt," said Fresh, quietly and firmly. "That ain't the way out, sir, nohow—that's only the way to more trouble, sir, and worse trouble: the deeper you go into the mud, sir, the tighter that skunk will have his cinch on you. I got to think this out, and I guess I'll find a way. But that roll has got to go back, sir."

"Never! I——" Arthur's hand moved towards his gun again.

Fresh's jaw squared.

"Leave that gun alone, sir! I guess I'm quicker on the shoot than you are, if it came to that. Do you want a shot to bring the whole ranch awake, to find you with your uncle's

dollars in your pocket? ”

“ Give me a chance, Fresh—— ”

“ I’m giving you a chance, sir, if you could see it—I’m saving you from what you could never forget, from what would make you ashamed ever to look little missy in the face again. Give me that roll.”

Arthur did not move.

But he made no resistance, as Fresh stretched out his hand, and drew the roll from his pocket.

Fresh did not speak again. He left the young rancher leaning weakly on the rail, in helpless despair, and went quietly back to the door of the office. Arthur’s haggard eyes followed him, but he did not stir.

In the darkness, Fresh stepped through the open French windows into the office. He groped his way to the rancher’s desk, struck a match, and re-lighted the candle. The flickering light showed the snapped lock of the safe, the door half open as Arthur had left it. There was no disguising that a lawless hand had been at work there: that could not be helped. But at least the dollars would be there in the morning. That was all that Fresh could do.

He stretched out a hand to pull the safe door wider open: the roll in his other hand. A moment more——

In that moment there came a sound from the hall-way. Fresh gave a start, as the door from the hall-way opened.

“ Arthur! In pity’s name, Arthur—what——? ” It was Barbara’s voice.

Fresh spun round.

In the open doorway, from the hall, stood Barbara, the Spanish shawl round her shoulders, as he had glimpsed her in the moonlight on the verandah. Her eyes were fixed on him: and her words told that she had fancied that it was Arthur there. But as he turned, and she saw his face in the candle-light, the horror in her white face changed to wonder,

And the bitter, indignant scorn in her voice cut him to the
She came quietly in.

"Fresh! You!"

and to relief. He stood transfixed, staring at her.
very heart.

Chapter XXXII

For Her Sake!

Fresh stood still.

He could not speak.

He could only stand looking at the girl's face, pale and scornful in the flickering candlelight: stand there, with the open safe door behind him, the roll of bills in his hand: frozen still.

"You!" repeated Barbara.

He knew, as he looked at her, what had been in her mind. The name of "Arthur" had been on her lips. When she went in from the verandah, she had not, as he had believed, as Arthur had believed, gone to bed: the uneasiness in her mind had been too deep for rest or slumber. He did not know what had caused that suspicion in her mind: but he knew now that she had doubted Arthur: that she had not slept: and no doubt some faint sound had caught her wakeful ears in the stillness of the night, and brought her here. And when she saw him at the safe, she had fancied for the moment that it was Arthur! Ten minutes earlier it would have been Arthur! Even in his dismay Fresh was conscious that he was glad that she had not come earlier.

"You!" she repeated.

He could not speak: he could only look at her. Her eyes left his face, for a moment, and went to the rolls in his hand. The crimson crept into Fresh's face. He knew what she thought. What else was she to think?

Her voice came again, like a whip-lash.

"You—a thief! You—a thief in the night! You!—I trusted you—my father trusted you! You, that I believed my friend, and Arthur's friend—that I believed would help me, and help him—you!"

He did not speak.

"That is the roll you brought from Yellow Pine?"

He nodded.

"My father trusted you! You could have ridden across the border with it trusted as you were." Her lip curled in contempt, "That was not good enough! You preferred this way—you would have stayed on, unsuspected, with my father's dollars in your keeping, laughing at us for trusting you! You—you coyote!"

He winced as if a quirt had struck him across the face.

"If I had not been wakeful—if I had not had reason to be wakeful—if I had not stayed up to listen, instead of sleeping—you would have got by with this! No one would have suspected you, when the safe was found broken and robbed in the morning—you, least of all! You whom we trusted!"

He tried to speak: but the words would not come. His lips seemed to be burnt dry. What was he to say?

Outside, in the darkness of the verandah, was the man who had robbed the safe. A word would have been enough.

He could not utter that word.

"Place that roll on the desk."

He obeyed her in silence.

She stood looking at him. Her look had always been kind, when her eyes fell on him. But there was no kindness in it now. There was relief in it—relief, he knew, because

it was not Arthur whom she had found at her father's safe, her father's money in his hand. Else, there was only scorn, mingled with wonder.

"You coyote!" The bitter word came again, "I hardly know why I don't call my father, to deal with you."

He found his voice.

"Miss! Don't! Don't do that!" His voice was cracked and husky, "I—I—I couldn't tell you how it was, miss, but it's not so bad as you think. I'll go, miss—I'll ride as soon as you want." A spasm of pain crossed his face, "You won't call me back again, miss, like you did on the Nuce trail."

She gave a contemptuous laugh.

"No! I was deceived in you—you played a clever game, Fresh Canroy—the simple, honest-to-goodness puncher, and all the while—all the while—you were this!"

"You don't rightly understand, miss," muttered Fresh.

"I understand that I have caught you robbing my father!"

The sweat trickled down his forehead.

"Miss, it ain't so bad as it looks!" breathed Fresh, "If—if I could jest explain, miss—but—but——"

She interrupted him with a scornful gesture.

"Don't think up any more falsehoods. You have told enough already. You leave the ranch this night."

"Oh, miss!"

"You coyote!" Her face set. "You deserve to be handed over to the bunch. They would ride you off the ranch on a rail. They'd use their quirts on a detected thief!"

His face flamed. It was for her sake that he was silent—for her own sake that he listened to bitter, lashing words. Why should he? Why should he take this, when it was her own kinsman who was the thief, lurking out in the dark verandah? Why should he not speak?

Her voice went on:

"You heard what I said when I came in! I knew that

someone was here—at the safe! I never dreamed of you! Heaven forgive me, it was my own cousin—it was Arthur—you heard me speak his name, and you know that! I doubted him—I fancied that I had reason to doubt—and when I saw you standing at the safe, I believed it was Arthur—heaven forgive me! You know it! And if I had not been wakeful, if I had not come down and caught you, if the robbery had not been discovered till the morning, I should never have thought of you—I should only have thought of Arthur!” Her lips trembled, “Can you guess the rest, you coyote? If I had believed my cousin, the man I love, to be a thief, if I had had to believe that, I could not have lived knowing it—I should have thrown myself into the Rio Frio.”

Fresh trembled.

The words of exculpation had almost leaped to his lips. But they were choked back now. He had to stand for this.

“But what would you have cared?” she added, contemptuously, “I am wasting words on you, you coyote. Go! I shall take that roll to my father’s room. I give you half an hour before I go to my father. Make the most of it! Mount your horse, and ride. If you are still on the ranch when he knows, you have no mercy to expect from him. Colonel Carfax has no use for a thief!”

“Oh, miss!” muttered Fresh, miserably.

Her look grew less hard, as she watched his tortured face. Something of softness came into her scornful eyes, and into her voice as she spoke again.

“Oh, Fresh! Why did you do this? I trusted you—I liked you—I thought of you as a friend for Arthur, to help him from wild ways—I thought of you as my own friend! I’d have trusted my life to you! Why, why could you not be what I thought you?”

He did not answer. He was all that she had thought him, and more: but he could not tell her! Not without dealing her such a blow as would break her heart. And that he could not

do. Better her scorn, better her lashing words, than the white horror and misery he would see in her face if she knew the truth. He would have died for her: and indeed the bitterness of death was in his heart, as he stood dumb under her wondering, scornful eyes.

"You have nothing to say?"

"Nup!" muttered Fresh. "Only——"

"Only what?"

"Only don't think harder of me than you can help, miss. Try to think that it wasn't so bad as it looks, miss," said Fresh, huskily. "Try to think that there was some good, miss, in a guy that would have died for you, and willing. That's all I got to spill, miss." He made a movement, "I'm going, miss—I'll ride, and you'll never see me agin, but—but—but——" His voice almost broke, "But—but I'd take it kindly, miss, if you'd say good-bye."

There was pity in her face now.

"Good-bye, Fresh," she said, softly.

He stumbled to the open window. There he turned, to give her a last look.

"Good-bye, miss, and God bless you!" he said.

And then he was gone, into the dark night.

Hitting the Trail

Chapter XXXIII

Arthur Carfax had not stirred.

Leaning on the verandah rail, as if all strength had gone from his limbs, he watched, dully, the glimmer of light from the open window of the ranch-office. He wondered, without caring, why Fresh was so long there. It should not have taken him many moments to replace the roll in the safe: yet he was still there, and the light still glimmered and flickered. Once or twice he fancied that a murmur of voices reached him, but that, he reckoned, was only a fancy of his jumping nerves. But suddenly the light went out.

He heard faint stumbling footsteps in the dark verandah. He did not move. He cared for nothing now. The game was up: only that roll of dollars could have saved him: and that was now beyond his reach. He leaned there like a sack of alfalfa, in dull despair.

But he started, a little, as a white face came into the glimmer of the moon. Was that Fresh's face, white as death: white and tortured? He hardly recognised him, for a moment.

Fresh touched his arm.

"Come!" he whispered.

"Leave me alone! You've done me all the harm you can!" muttered Carfax, "I'm down and out—finished! Leave me alone."

"Hush! She might hear——" breathed Fresh.

"She?" repeated Arthur.

"Come, I'm telling you! I gotta speak to you, afore I go—I gotta hit the trail, pronto, but I gotta speak to you first. Don't let her hear."

"Barbara——?" breathed Arthur.

"Yup! Quiet, you bonehead."

In utter wonder, the young rancher allowed Fresh to draw him away. They trod silently down the steps, and under the trees. Not till they were at a distance from the ranch-house, did Fresh stop. Then he released the young man's arm, and stood facing him in the shadow of the branches.

Arthur did not speak. He only stared at the puncher in mute, desperate inquiry. Barbara! What did Barbara know?

"I gotta ride." They were at a safe distance, safe from all ears, but Fresh's voice was low. "You're O.K., sir, if you keep your mouth shut. She don't know a thing—about you!"

"She was there——?" Arthur's voice was husky.

"I guess she suspicioned something, and came down," said Fresh, "Yup—she was there—she came in, and—and——"

"And caught you?"

"Yup!"

Arthur groaned.

"That finishes it! She knows!"

"I'm telling you that she don't know a thing. What'd she think, seeing me at the safe, broke open, with the roll in my hands?"

"Good heavens! You don't mean——?"

"Jest that!"

Arthur peered at him, in the shadows.

"But you never stood for that! You never stood for letting her think you a thief—robbing her father——!"

"Yup!"

"You couldn't——!"

"I guess there ain't much that I couldn't do for that little miss, loving her as I do," said Fresh, quietly. "Never mind that!"

"You let her believe——?"

"What else?"

"But—but——" Carfax stammered helplessly, "If you could stand for that, Fresh, I can't! I'll go to her—I—I—"

I—— ”

“Forget it,” said Fresh. “I don’t matter, and you don’t, either—it’s little miss we got to think about. You got to keep it packed up.”

“I can’t! I—— ”

“You gotta!” said Fresh. “Don’t I keep on telling you that it’s little miss, and not us guys, that matters?”

“You said nothing of me?”

“Nix!”

“She thinks—she believes——?”

“Yup! Let her, if it’s a comfort to her dear heart,” said Fresh, “I’ll say I love the ground that little miss walks on, and if she’s going to be happy when I’ve hit the trail, I guess I’ll ride joyful.”

“Fresh!” groaned Arthur.

“She called me back, when I quit, and asked me to be a friend to her. I guess she never needed one more than now. I got to stand for this, sir, and I’ll ride with the blame in my shoulders, leaving you clear.”

Fresh paused a moment.

“Mr. Arthur, sir, you’ve got to ride straight after this! You got to ride straight, for little missy’s sake.”

“Do you think I haven’t learned my lesson?” muttered Carfax, hoarsely. “Give me a chance, and I’ll make good. But—but—— ”

“But what?” snapped Fresh.

“You’ve forgotten Jas!” muttered Arthur. “You’ve said nothing to Barbara—you’ve let her think you a thief rather than tell her—but I’m telling you, she will know it all from Jas, unless he gets his price—— ”

Fresh’s pale face set like iron.

“She won’t get a word from Jas!” he said. “You can trust me for that, sir!” Jas Calhoun—the lobo-wolf who showed up an honest puncher, who led you into the rustling game, and

who's the real cause why I got to ride with the name of thief tacked on me——” His eyes burned, “I guess I know how to deal with Jas, sir, and you ain't no call to be afeared' that word will ever come from him to this ranch.”

Carfax started.

“If you mean gun-play, when he comes to the timber-island on the Frio for the roll in the hollow tree——!”

Fresh smiled grimly.

“I ain't meaning gun-play, sir! But I'm telling you that I can fix that guy so he'll never breathe a word of what he knows to little miss.”

“I don't get you——”

“Mebbe not! Leave it at that!” said Fresh. “There was three that knowed—Cactus, and Pancho, and Jas—and I'll tell a man, Cactus and Pancho won't be spilling nothing: and I can fix Jas. All you got to do, sir, is to keep your mouth shut, and ride straight, and little miss will never know a thing.”

“But——!”

“That's the whole heap, sir! I got to go for my cayuse now, and ride. I'm through with the Bar-Seven.” An involuntary sigh escaped him. “I'll tell a man, it's a good ranch, and a good bunch, and a good boss, and I reckoned I'd be riding the ranges good and fine till the cows came home—but it's got to be, and it sure ain't no use yammering about it. Good-bye, sir.”

Arthur Carfax stood looking at him. The struggle in his mind was visible in his tormented face.

“For her sake!” whispered Fresh.

Arthur nodded.

“Only for her sake!” he muttered.

He held out his hand. Fresh gave it a grasp: and turned away, and disappeared into the darkness. Arthur Carfax was left standing under the shadowy trees: listening—listen—

ing for the sound of hoof-beats that would tell that the man who had saved him was gone. The minutes dragged by: then, faintly from a distance, came the thud of hoofs, dying away into the silence of the night. Fresh Canroy was hitting the trail!

Chapter XXXIV

The Last of Jas Calhoun

Jas Calhoun rode in from the sunlit prairie, and dismounted under the shady branches of the timber-land on the Frio.

His cold, searching eyes were watchful. The timber-land was far from the Bar-Seven—the distance was safe. But anywhere in the valley of the Rio Frio, the rustler carried his life in his hand. Now that he was known for what he was, any guy that met up with him was apt to pull a gun on sight. The sheriff at Nuce was looking for him: the Bar-Seven bunch had a rope ready for his neck. What he had told Arthur Carfax was true—he was anxious to ride out of Texas, and seek a new country in the west, where foes might not start up at every step of his cayuse. But he was going to ride with a roll in his pockets: he was not going ruined, with empty hands. And he reckoned that he could bank on the rancher's nephew at the Bar-Seven for what he wanted.

He hitched his horse to a low branch, and stepped through the thickets towards the tall, soaring ceiba, that rose high over the other trees in the motte: a landmark for miles over the llano.

There was a sardonic smile on his hard, cold face, as he stopped at the massive trunk, where a week ago he had met Arthur Carfax.

He knew—at least he had no doubt—that he would find what he sought, in the hollow in that thick trunk, over the level of a man's head. The week he had given his victim was up: and Carfax dared not fail him. Well he knew that Carfax dared not fail, for failure to meet his demand meant disgrace and ruin, shame on the name of Carfax, shame on the girl the young bonehead was to marry: more, much more, than his dupe could face. Howsoever he found a way of helping himself to the dollars, he would find it—Jas did not

doubt that for a moment, and as he reached up to the hollow over his head, he felt that the roll was as good as in his hand. His sardonic smile reflected the cynical thoughts in his mind. He was going to ride with five thousand dollars: and if he had luck in a new country, Texas would never see him again: but if luck went the wrong way, if the dollars melted at poker or on the faro table, there was the trail back and a fresh demand that Carfax would never dare refuse. With a sneering face, he groped in the hollow in the trunk, never doubting what awaited his groping fingers.

A sudden change came over his face.

"Search me!" he breathed.

He stood on his toes, and drove his groping hand deeper into the dusty hollow in the ceiba trunk. He groped and groped in every corner. But it was in vain: nothing was there but dust.

He withdrew his hand at last, breathing fury, his eyes smouldering with rage and revenge. The money was not there. Carfax, after all, had failed him. He turned from the trunk, shaking with rage.

There was a rustle in the mesquite. He spun round, and glimpsed a Stetson hat in the thickets. He panted.

"Carfax! You fool—you bonehead—you dog-goned geck! I was reckoning you'd thrown me down, but you're here——!"

"Put 'em up!" came a quiet voice.

It was not Carfax, as Jas expected. It was a young puncher in goatskin chaps who stepped from the thicket, with a six-gun in his hand, levelled at the gambler's livid face. Over the levelled barrel, Fresh Canroy's eyes gleamed like cold steel.

"You!" breathed Jas.

"Me!" said Fresh. "You puttin' up them paws of yours?"

Slowly, very slowly, Jas raised his hands above his head.

His eyes burned at the puncher from the Chicken River. That day in Nuce, when Fresh had ridden in with Arthur, he had given the puncher hardly a careless glance. But he knew him at once: knew the man who had rounded up the stolen herd in the Squaw hills, who had shown up the brand-blotting game, who had shown him up for what he was and made him a fugitive in the section. And in his hatred and fury he could scarcely resist reaching for his gun. But the levelled Colt was not six feet from his face, and he dared not.

His burning eyes fixed on the puncher. The revolver in Fresh's hand never wavered. Over his left arm, a riata was looped. Jas hardly noticed it: his eyes were on the puncher's sunburnt face.

"Keep 'em up!" said Fresh. He reached out with his left hand, dragged the gun from Jas's holster, and pitched it far into the mesquite.

"Is Carfax here?" hissed Calhoun.

"Nup!"

"You figure you've trapped me?"

Fresh nodded.

"Surest thing you know!" he answered, "I guess I been around a long time, Jas Calhoun, campin' in this timber, and waitin' for a lobo-wolf about your size to horn in. I sure been patient, feller, like a guy has to be when he's hunting a wolf. And now I got you dead to rights, you skunk."

"Carfax sent you here?" Jas choked with rage. "The dog-goned double-crossin' scallywag—he sent you here—instead of the dollars——"

"I sure come instead of the dollars, feller," said Fresh. "But Carfax never sent me, and I guess he don't know a thing, 'cept that I told him I knowed how to stop you from spilling the beans."

"You know a heap!" sneered Jas, watching him like a

panther. If the puncher gave him a chance—the remotest chance—for a sudden spring——!

"Sure!" said Fresh. "You want to chew on it, Jas Calhoun, that I'm wise to the whole story. I know how you fooled that young gink into losing money at poker, and I guess you had cards up your sleeve when you played him for a sucker. I know how you led him into the rustling game, him owing you money he couldn't pay. And I know that it was you shot up Jim Casey on the Squaw range—shot up an honest puncher at his duty, you murdering skunk." Fresh's eyes blazed, "And I know that you'd screw money out of the man you've fooled and shamed, not caring how he got it—and you'd break the heart of a woman you ain't fit to breathe the same air with, and never care a continental red cent! I sure got you down fine, Jas Calhoun. And I'm telling you, feller, that you're going up on a rope for the killing of Jim Casey, if for nothing else—though I reckon that if you had a dozen necks, I'd put the rope round every dog-goned one of them, and joyful."

Jas's eyes glittered.

"You figure you're riding me in for a rope?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I?" said Fresh. "What's to stop me from roping you on your cayuse, and riding you into Nuce for the sheriff?"

"I guess you're standing for Carfax—and the girl!"

"Sure thing."

Jas gave a harsh laugh.

"And me shouting out to all Nuce what I can tell them about that young guy, and making the name of Carfax a by-word in the section? I guess Arthur would go to the county jail with me, puncher, and the girl—you figure that she'd ever hold up her head in the section again?"

Fresh looked at him steadily over the Colt.

"That your game?" he asked. "You'd sell the lad you

dragged into your own crooked ways, and you'd shame a girl that never harmed you?"

"Chew on it," said Jas.

"I'm sure chewing on it," said Fresh, quietly. "That's the card up your sleeve, is it, you skunk? I'll say that I only wanted to hear that from your mouth, Jas Calhoun—jest to make sure that you was such a pizen polecat that a rope round your neck is too good for you. Wal, I ain't riding you into Nuce to spill the beans, and I ain't shooting you dead in your tracks. I sure told Carfax that I wasn't after gun-play, and I sure ain't! I wouldn't waste honest lead on a skunk like you, Jas Calhoun. I got a rope for you, you rattlesnake, and you're going up on it, in this here timber. You're riding a trail out of Texas that you won't ride back."

He lowered the Colt: and, as he lowered it, Jas sprang. Fresh jammed the gun into the holster: and gave grasp for grasp. For a long minute, in silence, they rocked in a desperate grip: and then the rustler was on his back in the grass, and a sunburnt face looked down at him, with a deadly glint in the eyes, as the puncher from the Chicken River handled the riata. Five minutes later, Fresh was spurring the black broncho on the prairie: and behind him, as he rode, the man who had shot up Jim Casey swung from a branch in the wind.



Far away, in the Yaqui country, Fresh Canroy rode new trails—far from the Carfax ranges. Often, as he rode Bucko in the long grass, his thoughts trailed back to the valley of the Frio. But if Barbara was happy with the man she loved, that was all, Fresh reckoned, that mattered, and he was con-

tent. And sometimes, he wondered, she might remember him: and even, perhaps, have a kind thought for Fresh, once of the Bar-Seven.

THE END

