

THE TWO GUN MAN

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CHAPTER 1

THE STRANGER AT DRY BOTTOM

From the crest of Three Mile Slope the man on the pony could see the town of Dry Bottom straggling across the gray floor of the flat, its low, squat buildings looking like so many old boxes blown there by an idle wind, or unceremoniously dumped there by a careless fate and left, regardless, to carry out the scheme of desolation.

Apparently the rider was in no hurry, for, as the pony topped the rise and the town burst suddenly into view, the little animal pricked up its ears and quickened its pace, only to feel the reins suddenly tighten and to hear the rider's voice gruffly discouraging haste. Therefore, the pony pranced gingerly, alert, champing the bit impatiently, picking its way over the lumpy hills of stone and cactus, but holding closely to the trail.

The man lounged in the saddle, his strong, well-knit body swaying gracefully, his eyes, shaded by the brim of his hat, narrowed with slight mockery and interest as he gazed steadily at the town that lay before him.

"I reckon that must be Dry Bottom", he said finally, mentally taking in its dimensions. "If that's so, I've only got twenty miles to go."

Halfway down the slope, and still a mile and a half from the town, the rider drew the pony to a halt. He dropped the reins over the high pommel of the saddle, drew out his two guns, one after the other, rolled the cylinders, and returned the guns to their holsters. He had heard something of Dry Bottom's reputation and in examining his pistols he was merely preparing himself for an emergency.

For a moment after he had replaced the weapons he sat quietly in the saddle. Then he shook out the reins, spoke to the pony, and the little animal set forward at a slow lope.

An ironic traveler, passing through Dry Bottom in its younger days, before civic spirit had definitely centered its efforts upon things nomenclatural, had hinted that the town should be known as "dry" because of the fact that while it boasted seven buildings, four were saloons; and that "bottom" might well be used as a suffix, because, in the nature of things, a town of seven buildings, four of which were saloons, might reasonably expect to descend to the very depths of moral iniquity.

The ironic traveler had spoken with prophetic wisdom. Dry Bottom was trying as best it knew how to wallow in the depths of sin. Unlovely, soiled, desolate and verdure, dumped down upon a flat of sand in a treeless waste, amid cactus, crabbed yucca, scorpions, horned toads, and rattlesnakes, Dry Bottom had forgotten its morals, subverted its principles, and neglected its God.

As the rider approached to within a few hundred yards of the edge of town he became aware of a sudden commotion. He reined in his pony, allowing it to advance at a walk, while with alert eyes he endeavored to search out the cause of the excitement. He did not have long to watch for the explanation.

A man stepped out of the door of one of the saloons, slowly walking twenty feet away from it toward the center of the street. Immediately other men had followed. But these came only to a point just outside the door. For some reason which was not apparent to the rider, they were giving the first man plenty of room.

The rider was now able to distinguish the faces of the men in the group, and he gazed with interested eyes at the man who had first issued from the door of the saloon.

The man was tall--- nearly as tall as the rider--- and in his every movement seemed sure of himself. He was young, seemingly about thirty-five, with shifty, insolent eyes and a hard mouth whose lips were just now curved into a self-conscious smile.

The rider had now approached to within fifty feet of the man, halting his pony at the extreme end of the hitching rail that skirted the front of the saloon. He sat carelessly in the saddle, his gaze fixed on the man.

The men who had followed the first man out, to the number of a dozen, were apparently deeply interested, though plainly skeptical. A short, fat man, who was standing near the saloon door, looked on with a half-sneer. Several others were smiling blandly. A tall man on the extreme edge of the crowd, near the rider, was watching the man in the street gravely. Other men had allowed various expressions to creep into their faces. But all were silent.

Not so the man in the street. Plainly, here was conceit personified, and yet a conceit mingled with a maddening insolence. His expression told all that this thing which he was about to do was worthy of the closest attention. He was the axis upon which the interest of the universe revolved.

Certainly, he knew of the attention he was attracting. Men were approaching from the other end of the street, joining the group in front of the saloon---which the rider now

noticed was called the "Silver Dollar." The newcomers were inquisitive; they spoke in low tones to the men who had arrived before them, gravely inquiring the cause.

But the man in the street seemed not disturbed by his rapidly swelling audience. He stood in the place he had selected, his insolent eyes roving over the assembled company, his thin, expressive lips opening a very little to allow words to filter through them.

"Gents," he said, "you're goin' to see some shootin'! I told you in the Silver Dollar that I could keep a can in the air while I put five holes in it. There's some of you gassed about bein' showed, not believin'. An' now I'm goin' to show you!"

He reached down and took up a can that had lain at his feet, removing the red lithographed label, which had a picture of a large tomato in the center of it. The can was revealed, naked and shining, in the white sunlight. The man placed the can in his left hand and drew his pistol with the right.

Then he tossed the can into the air. While it still rose his weapon exploded, the can shook spasmodically and turned clear over. Then in rapid succession followed four other explosions, the last occurring just before the can reached the ground. The man smiled, still holding the smoking weapon in his hand.

The tall man on the extreme edge of the group now stepped forward and examined the can, while several other men crowded about to look. There were exclamations of surprise. It was curious to see how quickly enthusiasm and awe succeeded skepticism.

"He's done it, boys!" cried the tall man, holding the can aloft. "Bored it in five places!" He stood erect, facing the crowd. "I reckon that's some shootin'!" He now threw a glance of challenge and defiance about him. "I've got a hundred dollars to say that there ain't another man in this here town can do it!"

Several men tried, but none equaled the first man's performance. Many of the men could not hit the can at all. The first man watched their efforts, sneers twitching his lips as man after man failed.

Presently all had tried. Watching closely, the rider caught an expression of slight disappointment on the tall man's face. The rider was the only man who had not yet tried his skill with the pistol, and the man in the street now looked up at him, his eyes glittering with an insolent challenge. As it happened, the rider glanced at the shooter at the instant the latter had turned to look up at him. Their eyes met fairly, the shooter's conveying a silent taunt. The rider smiled, slight mockery glinting his eyes.

Apparently the stranger did not care to try his skill. He still sat lazily in the saddle, his gaze wandering languidly over the crowd. The latter plainly expected him to take part in the shooting match and was impatient over his inaction.

"Two -gun," sneered a man who stood near the saloon door. "I wonder what he totes them two guns for?"

The shooter heard and turned toward the man who had spoken, his lips wreathed satirically.

"I reckon he wouldn't shoot nothin' with them," he said, addressing the man who had spoken.

Several men laughed. The tall man who had revealed interest before now raised a hand, checking further comment.

"That offer of a hundred to the man who can beat that shootin' still goes," he declared. "An' I'm taking off the condition. The man that tries don't have to belong to Dry Bottom. No stranger is barred!"

The stranger's glance again met the shooters. The latter grinned feline. Then the rider spoke. The crowd gave him its polite attention.

"I reckon you-all think you've seen some shootin'," he said in a steady, even voice, singularly free from boast. "But I reckon you ain't seen any real shootin." He turned to the tall, grave-faced man. "I ain't got no hundred," he said, "but I'm goin' to show you."

He still sat in the saddle. But now, with an easy motion he swung down and hitched his pony to the rail.

CHAPTER 2

THE STRANGER SHOOTS

The stranger seemed taller on the ground than in the saddle and an admirable breadth of shoulder and slenderness of waist told eloquently of strength. He could not have been over twenty-five or six. Yet certain hard lines about his mouth, the glint of mockery in his eyes, the pronounced forward thrust of the chin, the indefinable force that seemed to radiate from him, told the casual observer that here was a man who must be approached with care.

But apparently the shooter saw no such signs. In the first glance that had been exchanged between the two men there had been a lack of ordinary cordiality. And now, as the rider slid down from his pony and advanced toward the center of the street, the shooter's lips curled. Writhing through them came slow-spoken words.

"You runnin' sheep, stranger?"

The rider's lips smiled, but his eyes were steady and cold. In them shone a flash of cold humor. He stood, quietly contemplating his insulter.

Smiles appeared on the faces of several of the onlookers. The tall man with the grave face watched with a critical eye. The insult had been deliberate, and many men crouched, plainly expecting a serious outcome. But the stranger made no move toward his guns, and when he answered he might have been talking about the weather, so casual was his tone.

"I reckon you think you're a plum man," he said quietly. "But if you are, you ain't showed it much - - buttin' in with that there wise observation. An' there's some men who think that shootin' at a man is more excitin' than shootin' at a can."

There was a grim quality in his voice now. He leaned forward slightly, his eyes cold and alert. The shooter sneered experimentally. Again the audience smiled.

But the tall man now stepped forward. "You've made your play, stranger," he said quietly. "I reckon it's up to you to make good."

"Correct," agreed the stranger. "I'm goin' to show you some real shootin'. You got another can?"

Someone dived into the Silver Dollar and returned in a flash with another tomato can. This the stranger took, removing the label, as the shooter had done. Then, smiling, he took a position in the center of the street, the can in his right hand.

He did not draw his weapon as the shooter had done, but stood loosely in his place, his right hand still grasping the can, the left swinging idly by his side. Apparently he did not mean to shoot. Sneers reached the faces of several men in the crowd. The shooter growled, "Four-flush."

There was a flash as the can rose twenty feet in the air, propelled by the right hand of the stranger. As the can reached the apex of its climb the stranger's right hand descended and grasped the butt of the weapon at his right hip. There was a flash as the gun came out; a gasp of astonishment from the watchers. The can was arrested in the first foot of its descent by the shock of the first bullet striking it. It jumped up and out and again began its interrupted fall, only to stop dead still in the air as another bullet struck it. There was an infinitesimal pause, and then twice more the can shivered and jumped. No man in the crowd but could tell that the bullets were striking true.

The can was still ten feet in the air and well out from the stranger. The latter whipped his weapon to a level, the bullet striking the can and driving it twenty feet from him. Then it dropped. But when it was within five feet of the ground the stranger's gun spoke again. The can leaped, careened sideways and fell, shattered, to the street, thirty feet distance from the stranger.

Several men sprang forward to examine it.

"Six times!" ejaculated the tall man in an awed tone. "An he didn't pull his gun 'til he'd thrown the can!"

He approached the stranger, drawing him confidentially aside. The crowd slowly dispersed, loudly proclaiming the stranger's ability with the six-shooter. The latter took his honors lightly, the mocking smile again on his face.

"I'm lookin' for a man who can shoot," said the tall man, when the last man of the crowd had disappeared into the saloon.

The stranger smiled. "I reckon you've just seen some shootin'," he returned.

The tall man smiled mirthlessly. "You particular about what you shoot at?" he inquired.

The stranger's lips straightened coldly. "I used to have that habit," he returned evenly.

"Hard luck?" queried the tall man.

"I'm rollin' in the wealth," stated the stranger, with an ironic sneer.

The tall man's eyes glittered. "Where you from?" he questioned.

"You c'n have three guesses," returned the stranger, his eyes narrowing with the mockery that the tall man had seen in them before.

The tall man adopted a placative tone, "I ain't wantin' to butt into your business," he said. "I was wantin' to find out if anyone around here knowed you."

"This town didn't send any reception committee to meet me, did they?" smiled the stranger.

"Correct," said the tall man. He leaned closer. "You willin' to work your guns for me for a hundred a month?"

The stranger looked steadily into the tall man's eyes.

"You've been right handy askin' questions" he said. "Mebbe you'll answer some. What's your name?"

"Stafford," returned the tall man. "I'm managin' the Two Diamond, over on the Ute."

The stranger's eyelashes flickered slightly. His eyes narrowed quizzically. "What you wantin' of a gun-man?" he asked.

"Rustler," returned the other shortly.

The stranger smiled, "Figger on shootin' him?" he questioned.

Stafford hesitated. "Well, no," he returned. "That is, not until I'm sure I've got the right one." He seized the stranger's arm in a confidential grip. "You see," he explained, "I don't know just where I'm at."

"There's been a rustler workin' on the herd, an' I ain't been able to get close enough to find out who it is. But rustlin' has got to be stopped. I've sent over to Raton to get a man named Ned Ferguson, who's been workin' for Sid Tucker, of the Lazy J. Tucker wrote me quite a while back, tellin' me that this man was plum slick at nosin' out rustlers. He was to come to the Two Diamond two weeks ago."

"But he ain't showed up, and' I've about concluded that he ain't comin'. An' so I come over to Dry Bottom to find a man." "You've found one," smiled the stranger. Stafford drew out a handful of double eagles and pressed them into the other's hand. "I'm goin' over to the Two Diamond now," he said. "You'd better wait a day or two, so's no one will get wise. Come right to me, like you was wantin' a job."

He started toward the hitching rail for his pony, hesitated and then walked back.

"I didn't get your name," he smiled.

The stranger's eyes glittered humorously, "It's Ferguson," he said quietly.

Stafford's eyes widened with astonishment. Then his right hand went out and grasped the others.

"Well now," he said warmly, "that's what I call luck."

Ferguson smiled. "Mebbe its luck," he returned. "But before I go over to work for you there's got to be an understandin'. I c'n shoot some," he continued, looking steadily at Stafford, "but I ain't runnin' around the country shootin' men without cause. I'm willin' to try an' find your rustler for you, but I ain't shootin' him---unless he goes to crowdin' me mighty close."

"I'm agreein' to that," returned Stafford. He turned again, looking back over his shoulder. "You'll sure be over?" he questioned.

"I'll be there the day after tomorrow," stated Ferguson.

He turned and went into the Silver Dollar. Stafford mounted his pony and loped rapidly out of town.

Chapter 3

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

It was the day appointed by Ferguson for his presence at the Two Diamond ranch, and he was going to keep his word. Three hours out of Dry Bottom he had struck the Ute trail and was loping his pony through a cottonwood that skirted the river. It was an enchanted country through which he rode; a land of vast distances, of white sunlight, blue skies, and clear, pure air.

Mountains rose in the distances, their snowcapped peaks showing above the clouds like bald rock spires above the calm level of the sea. Over the mountains swam the sun, its lower rim slowly disappearing behind the peaks, throwing off broad white shaft of light that soon began to dim as vari-colors, rising in a slumberous haze like a gauze veil, mingled with them.

Ferguson's gaze wandered from the trail to the red buttes that fringed the river. He knew this world; there was no novelty here for him. He knew the lava beds, looming gray and dead beneath the foothills; he knew the grotesque rock shapes that seemed to hint of a mysterious past. Nature had not altered her face.

On the broad levels were the yellow tinted lines that told of the presence of soap-weed, the dark lines that betrayed the mesquite, and the sac atone belts that marked the little gullies. Then there were the aberrances, the arid stretches where the sage-brush and the cactus grew. Snaky octilla dotted the space; the crabbed yucca had not lost its ugliness.

Ferguson looked upon the world with unseeing eyes. He had lived here long and the country had not changed. It would never change. Nothing ever changed here but the people.

But he himself had not changed. Twenty-seven years in this country was a long time, for here life was not measured by age, but by experience. Looking back over the years he could see that he was living today as he had lived last year, as he had lived during the last decade---a hard life, but having its compensations.

His coming to the Two Diamond ranch was merely another of those incidents that during the past year, had broken the monotony of range life for him. He had had some success in breaking up a band of cattle thieves which had made existence miserable for Sid Tucker, his employer, and the latter had recommended him to Stafford. The promise of high wages had been attractive, and so he had come. He had not expected to surprise anyone.

When during his conversation with the tall man in Dry Bottom he had discovered that the latter was the man for whom he was to work he had been surprised himself. But he had not revealed his surprise. Experience and association with men who kept their emotions pretty much to themselves had taught him the value of repression when in the presence of others.

But alone he allowed his emotions full play. There was no one to see, no one to hear, and the silence and the distances, and the great, swimming blue sky would not tell.

Stafford's action in coming to Dry Bottom for a gunfighter had puzzled him not a little. Apparently the Two Diamond manager was intent upon the death of the rustler he had mentioned. He had been searching for a man who could "shoot," he had said.

Ferguson had interpreted this to mean that he desired to employ a gunfighter who would not scruple to kill any man he pointed out, whether innocent or guilty. He had had some experience with unscrupulous ranch managers, and he had admired them very little. Therefore, during the ride today, his lips had curled sarcastically many times.

Riding through a wide clearing in the cottonwood, he spoke a thought that had troubled him not a little since he had entered Stafford's employ.

"Why," he said, as he rode along, sitting carelessly in the saddle, "he's wantin' to make a gunfighter out of me. But I reckon I ain't goin' to shoot no man unless I'm pretty sure he's gunnin' for me." His hips curled ironically. "I wonder what the boys of the Lazy J would think if they knowed that a guy was tryin' to make a gunfighter out of their old straw boss."

"I reckon they'd think that guy was loco---or a heap mistaken in his man. But I'm seein' this thing through. I ain't ridin' a hundred miles just to take a look at the man who's hirin' me. It'll be a change. An' when I go back to the Lazy J ----"

It was not the pony's fault. Neither was it Ferguson's. The pony was experienced; behind his slant eyes was stored a world of horse-wisdom that had pulled him and his rider through many tight places. And Ferguson had ridden horses all his life; he would not have known what to do without one.

But the pony stumbled. The cause was a prairie-dog hole, concealed under a clump of matted mesquite. Ferguson lunged forward, caught at the saddle horn, missed it, and pitched head-foremost out of the saddle, turning completely over and alighting upon his feet. He stood erect for an instant, but the momentum had been too great.

He went down, and when he tried to rise a twinge of pain in his right ankle brought a grimace to his face. He arose and hopped over to a flat rock, near where his pony now stood grazing as though nothing had happened.

Drawing off his boot, Ferguson made a rapid examination of the ankle. It was inflamed and painful, but not broken. He believed he could see it swelling. He rubbed it, hoping to assuage the pain. The woolen sock interfered with the rubbing, and he drew it off.

For a few minutes he worked with the ankle, but to little purpose. He finally became convinced that it was a bad sprain, and he looked up, scowling. The pony turned an inquiring eye upon him, and he grinned, suddenly smitten with the humor of the situation.

"You ain't got no call to look so doggoned innocent about it," he said. "If you'd been tendin' to your business, you wouldn't have stepped into no damned gopher hole."

The pony moved slowly away, and he looked whimsically after it, remarking: "Mebbe if I'd been tendin' to my business it wouldn't have happened, either." He spoke again to the pony. "I reckon you know that too, Mustard. You're some wise."

The animal was now at some little distance from the rock upon which he was sitting. He arose, hobbling on one foot toward it, carrying the discarded boot in his hand. He thought of riding with the foot bare. At the Two Diamond he was sure to find some sort of liniment which, with the help of a bandage, would materially assist nature in---

He was passing a filmy mesquite clump---the bare foot swinging wide. There was a warning rattle; a sharp thrust of a flat, brown head.

Ferguson halted in astonishment, almost knocked off his balance with the suddenness of the attack. He still held the boot, his fingers gripping it tightly. He raised it, with a purely involuntary motion, as though to hurl it at his insidious enemy. But he did not.

The arm fell to his side, and his face slowly whitened. He stared dully and uncomprehendingly at the sinuous shape that was slipping noiselessly away through the matted grass.

Somehow, he had never thought of being bitten by a rattler. He had seen so many of them that he had come to look upon them only as targets at which he might shoot when he thought he needed practice. And now, he was bitten. The unreality of the incident surprised him. He looked around at the silent hills, at the sun that swam above the mountain peaks, at the great, vast arc of sky that yawned above him.

Hills, sky and sun seemed also unreal. It was as though he had been suddenly thrust into a land of dreams.

But presently, the danger of the situation burst upon him, and he lived once more in the reality. He looked down at his foot. A livid, pin-point wound showed in the flesh beside the arch. A tiny stream of blood was oozing from it. He forgot the pain of the sprained ankle and stood upon both feet, his body suddenly rigid, his face red with a sudden, consuming anger, shaking a tense fist at the disappearing rattler.

"You damned sneak!" he shouted shrilly.

In the same instant he had drawn one of his heavy guns and swung it over his head. Its crashing report brought a sudden switching from beneath the grass, and he hopped over closer and sent three more bullets into the thrashing brown body. He stood over it for a moment, his teeth showing in a savage snarl.

"You won't bite anyone else, damn you!" he shouted.

The impotence of this conduct struck him immediately. He flushed and drooped his head, a grim smile slowly wearing down his expression of panic. Seldom did he allow his emotions to reveal themselves so plainly. But the swiftness of the rattler's attack, the surprise when he had not been thinking of such a thing, the fact that he was far from help and that his life was in danger--- all had a damaging effect upon his self-control. And yet, the smile showed that he was still master of himself.

Very deliberately he returned to the rock upon which he had been sitting, ripping off his coat and tearing away the sleeve of his woolen shirt. Twisting the sleeve into the form of a rude rope, he tied it loosely around his leg, just above the ankle. Then he thrust his knife between the improvised rope and the leg, forming a crude tourniquet. He twisted the knife until tears of pain formed in his eyes.

Then he fastened the knife by tucking the shaft under the rope. His movements had been very deliberate, but sure, and in a few minutes, he hobbled to his pony and swung into the saddle.

He had seen men who had been bitten by rattlers---had seen them die. And he knew that if he did not get help within half an hour there would be little use of doing anything further. In half an hour the virus would have so great a grip upon him that it would be practically useless to apply any of the antidotes commonly known to the inhabitants of the country.

Inquiries that he had made at the Dry Bottom had resulted in the discovery that the Two Diamond ranch was nearly thirty miles from the town. If he had averaged eight miles an hour he had covered about twenty-four miles of the distance. That would still leave about six. And he could not hope to ride those six miles in time to get any benefit from an antidote.

His lips straightened, he stared grimly at a ridge of somber hills that fringed the skyline. They had told him back in Dry Bottom that the Two Diamond ranch was somewhere in a big basin below those hills.

"I reckon I won't get there, after all," he said, commenting aloud.

Thereafter he rode grimly on, keeping a good grip upon himself---for he had seen men bitten by rattlers who had lost their self-control---and they had not been good to look upon. Much depended upon coolness; somewhere he had heard that it was a mistake for a bitten man to exert himself in the first few minutes following a bite; exertion caused the virus to circulate more rapidly through the system. And so he rode at an even pace, carefully avoiding the rough spots, though keeping as closely to the trail as possible.

"If it hadn't been a diamond-back---an' a five-foot one---this rope that I've got around my leg might be enough to fool him," he said once, aloud. "But I reckon he's got me." His eyes lighted savagely for an instant. "But I got him, too. Had the nerve to think that he could get away after throwin' his hooks into me."

Presently his eyes caught the saffron light that glowed in the western sky. He laughed with a grim humor. "I've heard tell that a snake don't die till sundown---much as you hurt him. If that's so, an' I don't get to where I c'n get some help, I reckon it'll be a stand-off between him an' me as to who's goin' first."

A little later he drew Mustard to a halt, his gaze upon a tall cottonwood tree that rose near the trail. His heart was racing madly, and in spite of his efforts, he felt himself swaying from side to side. He had often seen a rattler doing that---flat, ugly head raised above his coiled body, forked tongue shooting out, his venomous eyes glittering, the head and the part of the body rising above the coils swaying gracefully back and forth.

Yes, gracefully, for in spite of his hideous aspect, there was a certain horrible case of movement about a rattler---a slippery, sinuous motion that partly revealed reserve strength, and hinted at repressed energy.

Many times, while watching them, he had been fascinated by their grace, and now, sitting in the saddle, he caught himself wondering if the influence of a bite were great enough to cause the person bitten to imitate the snake. He laughed when this thought struck him

and drove his spurs sharply against Mustard's flanks, riding forward past the cottonwood at which he had been staring.

"Hell!" he ejaculated, as he passed the tree, "what a fool notion."

But he could not banish the "notion" from his mind, and five minutes later, when he tried again to sit steadily, he found the swaying more pronounced. The saddle seemed to rock with him, and even by jamming his uninjured foot tightly into the oxbow stirrup he could not stop swaying.

"Mebbe I won't get very far," he said, realizing that the poison had entered his system, and that presently it would riot in his veins, "but I'm goin' on until I stop. I wouldn't want that damned rattler to know that he'd made me quit so soon."

He urged Mustard to a faster pace, even while realizing that speed was hopeless. He could never reach the Two Diamond. Convinced of this, he halted the pony again, swaying in the saddle and holding, for the first time, to the pommel in an effort to steady himself. But he still swayed. He laughed mockingly.

"Now, what do you think of that?" he said, addressing the silence. "You might think I was a plum tenderfoot an' didn't know how to ride a horse proper."

He urged the pony onward again, and for some little time rode with bowed head, trying to keep himself steady by watching the trail. He rode through a little clearing, where the grass was matted and some naked rocks reared aloft. Near a clump of sage-brush, he saw a sudden movement---a rattler trying to slip away unnoticed. But the snake slid into Ferguson's vision and with a sneer of hate he drew one of his weapons and whipped it over his head, its roar awakening echoes in the wood. Twice, three times, the crashing report sounded. But the rattler whisked away and disappeared into the grass---apparently uninjured.

For an instant, Ferguson scowled. Then a grin of mockery reached his flushed face. "I reckon I'm done", he said. "Can't even hit a rattler no more, an' him a brother or sister of that other one." A delirious light flashed suddenly in his eyes, and he seemed on the point of dismounting. "I'll cert'nly smash you some!" he said, speaking to the snake---which he could no longer see. "I ain't goin' to let no snake bite me an' get away with it!"

But he now smiled guiltily, embarrassment shining in his eyes. "I reckon that wasn't the snake that bit you, Ferguson," he said. "The one that bit you is back on the trail. He ain't goin' to die 'til sundown. Not 'til sundown," he repeated mechanically, grimly; "Ferguson ain't goin' to die 'til sundown."

He rode on, giving no attention to the pony whatever, but letting the reins fall and holding to the pommel of the saddle. His face was burning now, his hands were twitching, and an unnatural gleam had come into his eyes.

"Ferguson got hooked by a rattler!" he suddenly exclaimed, hilarity in his voice. "He run plum into that reptile; tried to walk on him with a bare foot." The laugh was checked as suddenly as it had come, and a grim quality entered his voice. "But Ferguson wasn't no tenderfoot---he didn't scare none. He went right on, not sayin' anything. You see, he was reckonin' to be man's size."

He rode on a little way, and as he entered another clearing a rational gleam came into his eyes. "I'm still a-goin' it," he muttered.

A shadow darkened the trail; he heard Mustard whinny. He became aware of a cabin in front of him; heard an exclamation; saw dimly the slight figure of a woman, sitting on a small porch; as through a mist; he saw her rise and approach him, standing on the edge of the porch, looking at him.

He smiled, bowing low to her over his pony's mane.

"I shot him, ma'am," he said gravely, "but he ain't goin' to die til sundown."

As from some great distance a voice seemed to come to him. "Mercy!" it said, "What is wrong? Who is shot?"

"Why, the snake, ma'am," he returned thickly. He slid down from his pony and staggered to the edge of the porch, leaning against one of the slender posts and hanging dizzily on. "You see, ma'am, that damned rattler got Ferguson. But Ferguson ain't reckonin' on dyin' 'til sundown. He couldn't let no snake get the best of him."

He saw the woman start toward him, felt her hands on his arms, helping him upon the porch. Then he felt her hands on his shoulder, felt them pressing him down. He felt dimly that there was a chair under him and he sank into it, leaning back and stretching himself out full length. A figure flitted before him and presently there was a sharp pain in his foot.

He started out of the chair, and was abruptly shoved back into it. Then the figure leaned over him, prying his jaws apart with some metal like object and pouring something down his throat. He choked as he swallowed, vainly trying to brush away the object.

"You're a hell of a snake," he said savagely. Then the world blurred dizzily, and he drifted into oblivion.

CHAPTER 4

A "Different Girl"

Ferguson had no means of knowing how long he was unconscious, but when he awoke the sun had gone down and the darkening shadows had stolen into the clearing near the cabin. He still sat in the chair on the porch. He tried to lift his injured foot and found to his surprise that some weight seemed to be on it. He struggled to an erect position, looking down. His foot had been bandaged, and the weight that he had thought was upon it was not a weight at all, but the hands of a young woman.

She sat on the porch floor, the injured foot in her lap, and she had just finished bandaging it. Beside her on the porch floor was a small black medicine case, a sponge, some yards of white cloth, and a tin wash basin partly filled with water.

He had a hazy recollection of the young woman; he knew it must have been she that he had seen when he had ridden up to the porch. He also had a slight remembrance of having spoken to her, but what the words were he could not recall. He stretched himself painfully. The foot pained frightfully, and his face felt hot and feverish; he was woefully weak and his nerves were tingling---but he was still alive.

The girl looked up at his movement. Her lips opened and she held up a warning hand. "You are to be very quiet," she admonished.

He smiled weakly and obeyed her, leaning back, his gaze on the slate-blue of the sky. She still worked at the foot, fastening the bandage; he could feel her fingers as they passed lightly over it. He did not move, feeling a deep contentment.

Presently she arose, placed the foot gently down, and entered the house. With closed eyes he lay in the chair, listening to her step as she walked about in the house. He lay there a long time, and when he opened his eyes again he knew that he must have been asleep, for the night had come and a big yellow moon was rising over a rim of distant hills.

Turning his head slightly, he saw the interior of one of the rooms of the cabin---the kitchen, for he saw a stove and some kettles and pans hanging on the wall and near the window a table, over which was spread a cloth. A small kerosene lamp stood in the center of the table, its rays glimmering weakly through the window. He raised one hand and passed it over his forehead. There was still some fever, but he felt decidedly better than when he had awakened the first time.

Presently, he heard a light step and became aware of someone standing near him. He knew it was the girl, even before she spoke, for he had caught the rustle of her dress.

"Are you awake," she questioned. "Why, yes, ma'am," he returned. He turned to look at her, but in the darkness he could not see her face.

"Do you feel like eating anything?" she asked.

He grinned ruefully in the darkness. "I couldn't say that I'm exactly yearnin' for grub," he returned, "though I ain't done any eatin' since mornin'. I reckon a rattler's bite ain't considered to help a man's appetite any."

He heard her laugh softly. "No," she returned; "I wouldn't recommend it."

He tried again to see her, but could not, and so he relaxed and turned his gaze on the sky. But presently he felt her hand on his shoulder, and then her voice, as she spoke firmly.

"You can't lie here all night," she said. "You would be worse in the morning. And it is impossible for you to travel tonight. I am going to help you to get into the house. You can lean your weight on my shoulder."

He struggled to an erect position and made out her slender figure in the dim light from the window. He would have been afraid of crushing her could he have been induced to accept her advice. He got to his uninjured foot and began to hop toward the door, but she was beside him instantly protesting.

"Stop!" she commanded firmly. "If you do that it will be the worse for you. Put your hand on my shoulder!"

In the darkness he could see her eyes flash with determination, and so without further objection he placed a hand lightly on her shoulder, and in this manner they made their way through the door and into the cabin.

Once inside the door he halted, blinking at the light and undecided. But she promptly led him toward another door, into a room containing a bed. She led him to the bedside and stood near him after he had sunk down upon it.

"You are to sleep here tonight," she said. "Tomorrow, if you are considerably better, I may allow you to travel." She went out, returning immediately with a small bottle containing medicine. "If you feel worse during the night," she directed, "you must take a spoonful from that bottle. If you think you need anything else, don't hesitate to call. I

shall be in the next room." He started to voice his thanks, but she cut him short with a laugh. "Goodnight," she said. Then she went out and closed the door after her.

He awoke several times during the night and each time took a taste of the medicine in the bottle. But shortly after midnight he fell into a heavy sleep, from which he did not awaken until the dawn had come. He lay quietly for a long time, until he heard steps in the kitchen, and then he rose and went to the door, throwing it open and standing on the threshold.

She was standing near the table, a coffee pot in her hand. Her eyes widened as she saw him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You are very much better!"

He smiled. "I'm thankin' you for it, ma'am," he returned. "I cert'nly wouldn't have been feelin' anything if I hadn't met you when I did." She put the coffee pot down and looked gravely at him.

"You were in very bad shape when you came," she admitted. "There was a time when I thought my remedies would not pull you through. They would not had you come five minutes later."

He had no reply to make to this, and he stood there silent, until she poured coffee into a cup, arranged some dishes, and then invited him to sit at the table.

He needed no second invitation, for he had been twenty-four hours without food. And he had little excuse to complain of the quality of the food that was set before him. He ate in silence and when he had finished he turned away from the table to see the girl dragging a rocking chair out upon the porch. She returned immediately, smiling at him.

"Your chair is ready," she said. "I think you had better not exert yourself very much today."

"Why, ma'am," he expostulated, "I'm feelin' right well. I reckon I could be travelin' now. I ain't used to bein' babied this way."

"I don't think you are being 'babied,' " she returned a trifle coldly. "I don't think that I would waste any time with anyone if I thought it wasn't necessary. I am merely telling you to remain for your own good. Of course, if you wish to disregard my advice you may do so."

He smiled with a frank embarrassment and limped toward the door. "Why, ma'am," he said regretfully as he reached the door, "I cert'nly don't want to do anything which you

think ain't right, after what you've done for me. I don't want to belittle you, and' I think that when I said that I might have been gassin' a little. But I thought mebbe I'd been enough trouble already."

It was not entirely the confession itself, but the self-accusing tone in which it had been uttered that brought a smile to her face.

"All the same," she said, "you are to do as I tell you."

He smiled as he dropped into the chair on the porch. It was an odd experience for him. Never before in his life had anyone adopted toward him an air of even partial proprietorship. He had been accustomed to having people---always men---meet him upon a basis of equality and if a man had adopted toward him the tone that she had employed there would have been an instant severing of diplomatic relations and a beginning of hostilities.

But this situation was odd---a woman had ordered him to do a certain think and he was obeying, realizing that in doing so he was violating a principle, though conscious of a strange satisfaction. He knew that he had promised the Two Diamond manager, and he was convinced that, in spite of the pain in his foot, he was well enough to ride. But he was not going to ride; her command had settled that.

For a long time he sat in the chair, looking out over a great stretch of flat country which was rimmed on three sides by a fringe of low hills, and behind him by the cottonwood.

The sun had been up long; it was swimming above the rim of distance hills---a ball of molten silver in a shimmering white blur. The cabin was set squarely in the center of a big clearing and about an eighth of a mile behind him was a river---the river that he had been following when he had been bitten by the rattler.

He knew from the location of the cabin that he had not gone very far out of his way; that a ride of an eighth of a mile would bring him to the Two Diamond trail. And he could not be very far from the Two Diamond. Yet because of an order, issued by a girl, he was doomed to delay his appearance at the ranch.

He had seen no man about the cabin. Did the girl live here alone? He was convinced that no woman could long survive the solitude of this great waste of country---some man---a brother or a husband---must share the cabin with her. Several times he caught himself hoping that if there was a man here it might be a brother, or even a distant relative. The thought that she might have a husband aroused in him a sensation of vague disquiet.

He heard her moving about in the cabin, heard the rattle of dishes, the swish of a broom on the rough floor. And then presently she came out, dragging another rocker. Then she

re-entered the cabin, returning with a strip of striped cloth and a sewing basket. She seated herself in the chair, placed the basket in her lap, and with a half-smile on her face began to ply the needle. He lay back contentedly and watched her.

Hers was a little, vigorous figure in a white apron and a checkered dress of some soft material. She wore no collar; her sleeves were shoved up above the elbows, revealing a pair of slightly browned hands and white, rounded arms. Her eyes were brown as her hair---the latter in a tumble of graceful disorder. Through half-closed eyes he was appraising her in a riot of admiration that threatened completely to bias his judgment. And yet, women had interested him very little.

Perhaps that was because he had never seen a woman like this one. The women that he had known had been those of the plains-towns---the unfortunates who through circumstances or inclination had been drawn into the maelstrom of cow-country vice, and who, while they may have found flattery, were never objects of honest admiration or respect.

He had known this young woman only a few hours, and yet he knew that with her he could not adopt the easy, matter-of-fact intimacy that had answered with the other women he had known. In fact, the desire to look upon her in this light never entered his mind. Instead, he was filled with a deep admiration for her---an admiration in which there was a profound respect.

"I expect you must know your business, ma'am," he said, after watching her for a few minutes. "An' I'm mighty glad that you do. Most women would have been pretty nearly flustered over a snake bite."

"Why," she returned, without looking up, but exhibiting a little embarrassment, which betrayed itself in a slight flush, "I really think that I was a little excited---especially when you came riding up to the porch." She thought of his words, when, looking at her accusingly, he had told her that she was "a hell of a snake," and the flush grew, suffusing her face. This, of course, he had not known and never would know, but the words had caused her many smiles during the night.

"You didn't show it much," he observed. "You must have took right a-hold. Some women would have gone clean off the handle. They wouldn't have been able to do anything."

Her lips twitched, but she still gave her attention to her sewing, treating his talk with a mild interest.

“There is nothing about a snake bite to become excited over. That is, if treatment is applied in time. In your case the tourniquet kept the poison from getting very far into your system. If you hadn’t thought of that it might have gone very hard with you.”

“That rope around my leg wouldn’t have done me a bit of good though, ma’am, if I hadn’t stumbled onto your cabin. I don’t know when seein’ a woman has pleased me more.”

She smiled enigmatically, her eyelashes flickering slightly. But she did not answer.

Until noon she sewed, and he lay lazily back in the chair, watching her sometimes, sometimes looking at the country around him. They talked very little. Once, when he had been looking at her for a long time, she suddenly raised her eyes and they met his fairly. Both smiled, but he saw a blush mantle her cheeks.

At noon she rose and entered the cabin. A little later she called to him, telling him that dinner was ready. He washed from the tin basin that stood on the bench just outside the door, and entering sat at the table and ate heartily.

After dinner he did not see her again for a time, and becoming weary of the chair he set out on a short excursion to the river. When he returned she was seated on the porch and looked up at him with a demure smile.

“You will be quite active by tomorrow,” she said.

“I ain’t feelin’ exactly lazy now,” he returned, showing a surprising agility in reaching his chair.

When the sun began to swim low over the hills, he looked at her with a curiously grim smile.

“I reckon that rattler was fooled last night,” he said. “But if foolin’ him had been left to me I expect I’d have made a bad job of it. But I’m thinkin’ that he done his little old dyin’ when the sun went down last night. An’ I’m still here. An’ I’ll keep right on, usin’ his brothers an’ sisters for targets---when I think that I’m needin’ practice.”

“Then you killed the snake?”

“Why sure, ma’am. I wasn’t figgerin’ to let that rattler go a-fannin’ right on to hook someone else. That’d be encouragin’ his trade.”

She laughed, evidently pleased over his earnestness. "Oh, I see," she said. "Then you were not angry merely because he bit you? You killed him to keep him from attacking other persons?"

He smiled. "I sure was some angry," he returned. "An' I reckon that just at the time I wasn't thinkin' much about other people. I was havin' plenty to keep me busy."

"But you killed him. How?"

"Why I shot him, ma'am. Was you thinkin' that I beat him to death with somethin'?"

Her lips twitched again, the corners turning suggestively inward. But now he caught her looking at his guns. She looked from them to his face. "All cowboys do not carry two guns," she said suddenly.

He looked gravely at her. "Well, no, ma'am, they don't. There's some that claim carrin' two guns is clumsy. But there's been times when I found them right convenient."

She fell silent now, regarding her sewing. A quizzical smile had reached his face. This exchange of talk had developed the fact that she was a stranger to the country. No Western girl would have made her remark about the guns.

He did not know whether or not he was pleased over the discovery. Certain subtle signs about her had warned him in the beginning that she was different from the other women of his acquaintance, but he had not thought of her being a stranger here, of her coming here from some other section of the country---the East, for instance.

Her being from the East would account for many things. First, it would make plain to him why she had smiled several times during their talks, over things in which he had been able to see no humor. Then it would answer the question that had formed in his mind concerning the fluency of her speech.

Western girls that he had met had not attained that ease and poise which he saw was hers so naturally. Yet, in spite of this accomplishment, she was none the less a woman---demure eyes, ready to blush and become confused as easily as a Western woman. Assured of this, he dropped the slight constraint which up 'til now had been plain in his voice and an inward humor seemed to draw the corners of his mouth slightly downward.

"I reckon that folks where you come from don't wear guns at all, ma'am," he said slowly.

She looked up quickly, surprised into meeting his gaze fairly. His eyes did not waver. She rocked vigorously, showing some embarrassment and giving undue attention to her sewing.

"How do you know that?" she questioned, raising her head and looking at him with suddenly defiant eyes. "I am not aware that I told you that I was a stranger here! Don't you think you are guessing now?"

His eyes narrowed cunningly. "I don't think I need to do any guessin', ma'am," he returned. "When a man sees a different girl, he don't have to guess none."

The "different" girl was regarding him with furtive glances, plainly embarrassed under his direct words. But there was much defiance in her eyes, as though she was aware of the trend of his words and was determined to outwit him.

"I think you must be a remarkable man," she said, with the faintest trace of mockery in her voice, "to be able to discover such a thing so quickly. Or perhaps it is the atmosphere---it is marvelous."

"I expect it ain't exactly marvelous," he returned, laboring with the last word. "When a girl acts different, a man is pretty apt to know it." He leaned forward a little, speaking earnestly. "I know that I'm talkin' pretty plain to you, ma'am," he went on. "But when a man has been bit by a rattler an' has sort of given up hope an' has had his life saved by a girl, he's to be excused if he feels that he's some acquainted with the girl. An', then when he finds that she's some different from the girls he's been used to seein', I don't see why he hadn't ought to take a lot of interest in her."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her eyes drooping. And then, her eyes dancing as they shot a swift glance at him---"I should call that a pretty speech."

He reddened with embarrassment. "I expect you are laughin' at me now, ma'am," he said. "But I wasn't thinkin' to make any pretty speeches. I was tellin' you the truth."

She soberly plied her needle, and he sat back, watching her.

"I expect you are a stranger around here yourself," she said presently, her eyes covered with drooping lashes. "How do you know that you have any right to sit there and tell me that you take an interest in me? How do you know that I am not married?"

He was not disconcerted. He drawled slightly over his words when he answered.

"You wouldn't listen at me at all, ma'am; you cert'nly wouldn't stay an' listen to any speeches that you thought was pretty, if you was married," he said. Plainly, he had not lost faith in the virtue of woman.

"But if I did listen?" she questioned, her face crimson, though her eyes were still defiant.

He regarded her with pleased eyes. "I've been lookin' for a weddin' ring," he said. She gave it up in confusion. "I don't know why I am talking this way to you," she said. "I expect it is because there isn't anything else to do. But you really are entertaining!" she declared, for a parting shot.

Once Ferguson had seen a band of traveling minstrels in Cimarron. Their jokes (of an ancient vintage) had taken well with the audience, for the latter had laughed. Ferguson remembered that a stranger had said that the minstrels were "entertaining." And now he was entertaining her. A shadow passed over his face; he looked down at his foot, with its white bandage so much in evidence. Then he looked straight at her, his eyes grave and steady.

"I'm glad to have amused you, ma'am," he said. "An' now I reckon I'll be getting' over to the Two Diamond. It can't be very far now."

"Five miles," she said shortly. She had dropped her sewing into her lap and sat motionless, regarding him with level eyes.

"Are you working for the Two Diamond?" she questioned.

"Lookin' for a job," he returned.

"Oh!" The exclamation struck him as rather expressionless. He looked at her.

"Do you know the Two Diamond folks?"

"Of course."

"Of course," he repeated, aware of the constraint in her voice. "I ought to have known. They're neighbors of your'n."

"They are not!" she suddenly flashed back at him.

"Well, now," he returned slowly, puzzled, but knowing that somehow he was getting things wrong, "I reckon there's a lot that I don't know."

"If you are going to work over at the Two Diamond," she said coldly, "you will know more than you do now. My ----"

Evidently she was about to say something more, but a sound caught her ear and she rose, dropping her sewing to the chair.

“My brother is coming,” she said quietly. Standing near the door she caught Ferguson’s swift glance.

“Then it ain’t a husband after all,” he said, pretending surprise.

CHAPTER 5

The Man of Dry Bottom

A young man rode around the corner of the cabin and halted his pony beside the porch, sitting quietly in the saddle and gazing inquiringly at the two. He was about Ferguson's age and, like the latter, he wore two heavy guns. There was about him, as he sat there sweeping a slow glance over the girl and the man, a certain atmosphere of deliberate certainty and quiet coldness that gave an impression of readiness for whatever might occur.

Ferguson's eyes lighted with satisfaction. The girl might be an Easterner, but the young man was plainly at home in this country. Nowhere, except in the West, could he have acquired the serene calm that shone out of his eyes; in no other part of the world could he have caught the easy assurance, the unstudied nonchalance that seems the inherent birthright of a cowpuncher.

"Ben," said the girl, answering the young man's glance, "this man was bitten by a rattler. He came here, and I treated him. He says he was on his way over to the Two Diamond, for a job."

The young man opened his lips slightly. "Stafford hire you?" he asked.

"I'm hopin' he does," returned Ferguson.

The young man's lips drooped sneeringly. "I reckon you're wantin' a job mighty bad," he said.

Ferguson smiled. "Takin' your talk, you an' Stafford ain't very good friends," he returned.

The young man did not answer. He dismounted and led his pony to a small corral and then returned to the porch, carrying his saddle.

For an instant after the young man had left the porch to turn his pony into the corral, Ferguson had kept his seat on the porch. But something in the young man's tone had brought him out of the chair, determined to accept no more of his hospitality. If the young man was no friend of Stafford, it followed that he could not feel well disposed to a puncher who had avowed that his purpose was to work for the Two Diamond manager.

Ferguson was on his feet, clinging to one of the slender porch posts, preparatory to stepping down to go to his pony, when the young woman came out. Her sharp exclamation halted him.

"You're not going now!" she said. "You have got to remain perfectly quiet until morning!"

The brother dropped his saddle to the porch floor, grinning mildly at Ferguson. "You don't need to be in a hurry," he said, "I was intending to run your horse into the corral. What I meant about Stafford don't apply to you." He looked up at his sister, still grinning. "I reckon he ain't got nothing to do with it?"

The young woman blushed. "I hope not," she said in a low voice.

"We're goin' to eat pretty soon," said the young man. "I reckon that rattler didn't take your appetite!"

Ferguson flushed. "It was plum ridiculous, me bein' hooked by a rattler," he said. "An' I've lived among them so long."

"I reckon you let him get away?" questioned the young man evenly.

"If he's got away," returned Ferguson, his lips straightening with satisfaction, "he's a right smart snake."

He related the incident of the attack, ending with praises of the young woman's skill.

The young man smiled at the reference to his sister. "She's studied medicine—back East. Lately, she's turned her hand to writin'. Come out here to get experience---local color, she calls it."

Ferguson sat back in his chair, quietly digesting this bit of information. Medicine and writing. What did she write? Love stories? Fairy tales? Romances? He had read several of these. Mostly they were absurd and impossible. Love stories, he thought, would be easy for her. For---he said, mentally estimating her---a woman ought to know more about love than a man. And as for anything being impossible in a love story. Why most anything could happen to people who are in love.

"Supper is ready," he heard her announce from within.

Ferguson preceded the young man at the tin wash basin, taking a fresh towel that the young woman offered him from the doorway. Then he followed the young man inside.

The three took places at the table, and Ferguson was helped to a frugal, though wholesome meal.

The dusk had begun to fall while they were yet at the table, and the young woman arose, lighting a kerosene lamp and placing it on the table. By the time they had finished semi-darkness had settled. Ferguson followed the young man out to the chairs on the porch for a smoke.

They were scarcely seated when there was a clatter of hoofs, and a pony and rider came out of the shadow of the nearby cottonwood, approaching the cabin and halting beside the porch. The newcomer was a man of about thirty-five. The light of the kerosene lamp shone fairly in his face as he sat in the saddle, showing a pair of cold, steady eyes and thin, straight lips that were wreathed in a smile.

"I thought I'd ride over for a smoke an' a talk before goin' down the crick to where the outfit's working," he said to the young man. And now his eyes swept Ferguson's lank figure with a searching glance. "But I didn't know you was havin' company," he added. The second glance that he threw toward Ferguson was not friendly.

Ferguson's lips curled slightly under it. Each man had been measured by the other, and neither had found in the other anything to admire.

Ferguson's thoughts went rapidly back to Dry Bottom. He saw a man in the street, putting five bullets through a can that he had thrown into the air. He saw again the man's face as he had completed his exhibition---insolent, filled with a sneering triumph. He heard again this man's voice, as he himself had offered to eclipse his feat:

"You runnin' sheep, stranger?"

The voice and face of the man who stood before him now were the voice and face of the man who had preceded him in the shooting match in Dry Bottom. His thoughts were interrupted by the voice of his host, explaining his presence.

"This here man was bit by a rattler this afternoon," the young man was saying. "He's layin' up here for tonight. Says he's reckonin' on gettin' a job over at the Two Diamond."

The man on the horse sneered. "Hell!" he said; "bit by a rattler!" He laughed insolently, pulling his pony's head around. "I reckon I'll be goin'," he said. "You'll nurse him so's he won't die?" He had struck the pony's flanks with the spurs and was gone into the shadows before either man on the porch could move. There was a short silence, while the two men listened to the beat of his pony's hooves. Then Ferguson turned and spoke to the young man.

“You know him?” he questioned.

The young man smiled coldly. “Yep,” he said; “he’s range boss for the Two Diamond!”

CHAPTER 6

At The Two Diamond

As Ferguson rode through the pure sunshine of the morning his thoughts kept going back to the little cabin in the flat---"Bear Flat," she had called it. Certain things troubled him---he, whose mind had been always untroubled---even through three months of idleness that had not been exactly attractive.

"She's cert'nly got nice eyes," he told himself confidentially, as he lingered slowly on his way; "an' she knows how to use them. An' no girl has ever done that. An' her hair is like"---he pondered long over this---"like---why, I reckon I didn't just ever see anything like it. An' the way she looked at me!"

A shadow crossed his face. "So she's a writer---an' she's studied medicine. I reckon I'd like it a heap better if she didn't monkey with none of them fool things. What business has a girl got to---", he suddenly laughed aloud. "Why I reckon I'm pretty near loco," he said, "to be ravin' about a girl like this. She ain't nothin' to me; she just done what any other girl would do if a man come to her place bit by a rattler."

He spurred his pony forward at a sharper lope. And now he found that his thoughts would go back to the moment of his departure from the cabin that morning. She had accompanied him to the door, after bandaging the ankle. Her brother had gone away an hour before.

"I'm thankin' you, ma'am," Ferguson said as he stood for a moment at the door. "I reckon I'd have had a bad time if it hadn't been for you."

"It was nothing," she returned.

He had hesitated---he still felt the thrill of doubt that had assailed him before he had taken the step that he knew was impertinent.

"I'll be ridin' over here again, some day, if you don't mind," he said.

Her face reddened a trifle, "I'm sure brother would like to have you," she replied.

"I don't remember to have said that I was comin' over to see your brother," was his reply.

"But it would have to be he," she said, looking straight at him. "You couldn't come to see me unless I asked you."

And now he had spoken a certain word that had been troubling him. "Do you reckon that Two Diamond range boss comes over to see your brother?"

She frowned. "Of course!" she replied, "He is my brother's friend. But I---I despise him!"

Ferguson grinned broadly. "Well, now," he said, unable to keep his pleasure over her evident dislike of the Two Diamond man from showing in his eyes and voice, "that's cert'nly too bad. An' to think he's wastin' his time---ridin' over here."

She gazed at him with steady, unwavering eyes. He could still remember the challenge in them. "Be careful that you don't waste your time!" was her answer.

"I reckon I won't," was his reply, as he climbed into the saddle. "But I won't be comin' over here to see your brother!"

"Oh dear!" she said, "I call that very brazen!"

But when he had spurred his pony down through the crossing of the river he had turned to glance back at her. And he had seen a smile on her face. As he rode now he went over this conversation many times, much pleased with his own boldness; more pleased because she had not seemed angry with him.

It was late in the morning when he caught sight of the Two Diamond ranch buildings, scattered over a great basin through which the river flowed. Half an hour later he rode up to the ranch house and met Stafford at the door of the office. The manager waved him inside.

"I'm two days late," said Ferguson, after he had taken a chair in the office. He related to Stafford the attack by the rattler. The latter showed some concern over the injury.

"I reckon you didn't do your own doctorin'?", he asked.

Ferguson told him of the girl. The manager's lips straightened. A grim humor shone from his eyes.

"You stayed there over night?" he questioned.

"I reckon I stayed there. It was in a cabin down at a place which I heard the girl say was called "Bear Flat," I didn't ketch the name of the man."

Stafford grinned coldly. "I reckon they didn't know what you was comin' over here for?"

"I didn't advertise," returned Ferguson quietly.

"If you had," declared Stafford, his eyes glinting with a cold amusement, "you would have found things plum lively. The man's name is Ben Radford. He's the man I'm hirin' you to put out of business!"

For all Stafford could see, Ferguson did not move a muscle. Yet the news had shocked him; he could feel the blood surging rapidly through his veins. But the expression of his face was inscrutable.

"Well, now," he said, "that sure would have made things interestin'. An' so that's the man you think has been stealin' your cattle?" He looked steadily at the manager. "But I told you before that I wasn't doin' any shootin'."

"Correct," agreed the manager. "What I want you to do is to prove that Radford's the man. We can't do anything until we prove that he's been rustlin'. An' then---" he smiled grimly.

"You reckon to know the girl's name too?" inquired Ferguson.

"It's Mary," stated the manager. "I've heard Leviatt talk about her."

Ferguson contemplated the manager gravely. "An' you ain't sure that Radford's stealin' your cattle?"

Stafford filled and lighted his pipe. "I'm takin' Dave Leviatt's word for it," he said.

"Who's Leviatt?" queried Ferguson. "My range boss," returned Stafford.

"He's been ridin' sign on Radford an' says he's responsible for all the stock that we've been missin' in the last six months."

Ferguson rolled a cigarette. He lit it and puffed for a moment in silence, the manager watching him.

"Back at Dry Bottom, said Ferguson presently, "there was a man shootin' at a can when I struck town. He put five bullets through the can. Was that your range boss?"

Stafford smiled. "That was Leviatt---my range boss," he returned. "We went over to Dry Bottom to get a gunfighter. We wanted a man who could shoot plum quick. He'd have to be quick, for Radford's lightnin' with a six. Leviatt said shootin' at a can would be a good way to find a man who could take Radford's measure---in case it was necessary," he added quickly.

Ferguson's face was a mask of immobility. "Where's Leviatt now?" He questioned.

“Up the Ute with the outfit.”

“How far up?”

“Thirty miles.”

Ferguson’s eyelashes flickered. “Has Leviatt been here lately?” he questioned.

“Not since the day before yesterday.”

“When you expectin’ him back?”

“The boys’ll be comin’ back in a week. He’ll likely come along with them.”

“U---um. You’re giving me a free hand?”

“Of course.”

Ferguson lunged to the door. “I’m lookin’ around a little,” he said, “to kind of size up things. I don’t want you to put me with the outfit. That strike you right?”

“I’m hirin’ you to do a certain thing,” returned Stafford. “I ain’t tellin’ you how it ought to be done. You’ve got ‘til the fall roundup to do it.”

Ferguson nodded. He went to the corral fence, unhitched his pony, and rode out on the plains toward the river. Stafford watched him until he was a mere dot on the horizon. Then he smiled with satisfaction.

“I kind of like that guy,” he said, commenting mentally. “There ain’t no show work to him, but he’s business.”

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