

The Mountain Man

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CHAPTER I — JOAN FRENCH.

There was a sound of music. Joan was playing a violin. She was not playing it, as you might assume, in a cool drawing room or studio; nor was she playing it, if you had known, in the great rancho far below among the pepper trees, where she lived. She was playing high on the eastern shoulder of Smoky Butte among the junipers.

She played well, but you would not have recognized the melody. For the music was sweet and sighing, loud and chanting, weird and haunting; a singing in the strings of the wind in the junipers, of the shimmering heat waves that hid the oasis of the rancho, of the blue, slaty haze that smothered the horizon, of the black, forbidding outlines of distant lava hills—Joan's was a song of the spirit of the desert, which was her own.

She would not have played like this at home. The same inspiration was not to be had indoors. She would have loosed the spirits of the great masters there, or filled the long, cool living room with crooning, throbbing lullabies, and old

Zeb French would heave his tremendous frame into a great chair, and stroke his white beard, and stare at his willful daughter out of faded, blue eyes brimming with pride and appreciation.

But sometimes, when the notes unexpectedly soared in wild exultation, the expression in Zeb's eyes would change and troubled lights would shade them, and he would shift uneasily in his chair. Zeb French loved this girl, who was the living spirit of her dead mother; loved her to distraction—and he was afraid of her. For Joan did strange things, and gave free rein to an imagination which created a longing for strange adventures. But this side of her character he could not know nor understand; he realized its existence, the irresistible lure it held for that other side which he did know, and did not fear.

Sometimes her brothers, Will and Frank, would sit on the low stoop of the patio and listen also. And they sensed the meaning of those high, soaring notes; and they would look at each other in understanding. And, too, at such times as these, the old Mexican housekeeper would live in heaven.

The brothers had heard Joan play in the high junipers, and on the wide, yellow stretches of the desert, and in the deep, wild ravines along the border; but they never spoke of these times to old Zeb, nor did Zeb expect it. He had been left alone with his sons and daughter when they were young; when certain

activities had kept him away from home for days and weeks at a time; and the Mexican woman and the desert had reared them. True, a school-teacher had come from somewhere and lived at the rancho for three years for her health. She had taught them a good deal, and had sent them books, which Joan had read, to her brothers' scorn. And she had seen to it that the girl's natural musical talent was developed; but Joan could now instruct her former teacher. All this notwithstanding, the desert had been the schoolmaster, and it had found willing pupils.

This day Joan played with greater strength than usual. Wild, tempestuous notes softened the yearning strains, and climbed the heights again. She was at her best. Her horse stood near, motionless, ignoring the luscious feed about him, listening—a splendid, iron-gray stallion whom none but Joan could touch. So they were, girl and beast, communing with the spirits of that desolate land of burning sands, dry washes, lava hills—juniper, greasewood, cactus, sage—and slimy, creeping things, under a sky of brass.

But they were not alone.

High on the shoulder of the butte the heat beat down upon a horseman. He was covered with gray dust, and there were ridges on the shoulders and flanks of his mount where the sweat had run in streams. He had come far, this rider,

far and fast; too fast for desert travel. He leaned forward on his saddle horn and listened. Wonder, awe, and incredulity were commingled in the gaze that swept downward. At last, he urged his tired horse down the juniper slope.

As he was riding into the wind instead of with it, the man was favored in his effort to surprise the player. Had it been otherwise, the wind would have carried the scent of his horse to the stallion and his presence would have been betrayed at once. The junipers, too, aided him; for they were high enough to screen his advance.

Nevertheless, the stallion's head went up with a snort, and he turned, giving warning of the man's nearness before the latter could spring his surprise. He drove in his spurs, but the player had laid aside the violin, made some quick motions, and had risen when the newcomer rode out of the high junipers.

He whistled in astonishment. It was a girl, and she was masked! As he rode toward her, she made a lightning move with her right hand and covered him with a .45.

"That's far enough!" she called sharply. "An' don't reach for anything but the sky, unless you think I'm fooling."

He checked his mount and elevated his hands. He was not smiling nor grinning because she was a girl; he was looking at her keenly, taking in every detail of her appearance. Her hair was covered by the big range hat she wore. He could only see the lower part of her face, but the lips were full and ruby, her cheeks and chin well molded. Her hands were slim and beautiful. Her riding habit was well worn, but her boots were new and betrayed small, dainty feet.

"A gun girl!" he ejaculated, not realizing that he spoke aloud.

"Yes, a gun girl, if you think so," was the retort, in a cold, hard, feminine voice. "An' I don't hanker to have no long rider spying on me!" Her eyes flashed through the mask, but he could not determine their color. They were shaded by the hat, too.

"I wasn't spying," he said sternly. "I saw——"

"Don't lie!" she broke in. "I could make you pay for it, too; an' nobody'd know a thing about it."

"Yes," he drawled, "you could shoot me, but I couldn't shoot you."

"Why not?" she demanded suspiciously. "I wouldn't trust you far."

"You can trust me that far," he said dryly. "I might shoot a man, an' maybe I have, but I couldn't very well shoot a woman."

She was nonplused at this, and found herself believing him. His eyes were good, and a woman is apt to know much of a man by his eyes. His face was good, too; he would be right good looking after a hard wash. Young and well built. Well, she had seen them come bad, young, well built and good looking!

"You might lower that gun," he suggested. "Not that I'm afraid it might go off, for I take it you know your business; but I'd sure like to roll a cigarette. I heard the playing—an' it was good playing—up above, but I couldn't make out who was making the music. So I came down."

She lowered her weapon. "You can make your cigarette," she said, "but don't try any tricks. It just happens that I'm able to shoot from the hip."

He nodded in approval, and for the first time he smiled, betraying a fine set of white, even teeth against his tan. "I had a hunch you could do that very thing from the first." He nodded again, took out tobacco and papers and started to build his smoke. "That's not a lady's pearl-handled affair you're packing; it's a man's gun."

"An' I know how to use it," she said coolly. "Where you from?"

"Up north," he replied, calmly lighting his cigarette. "You live aroun' here?"

"I'm not answering questions; I'm asking 'em," she returned. "I suppose there's no use asking you your right name. Anyway, you—where you going?"

"Down south," he grinned. "I don't reckon there'd be any use asking you your name, but mine's Deadwood Dave."

He saw the flush on the lower part of her face. "In your case, it ain't none too safe to get fresh," she said angrily, raising the gun again.

"Listen, gun girl, I'm peaceful, understand?" he drawled. "An' if you're going to shoot anything with that gun, shoot the end of this cigarette off, instead of my head."

He had hardly held the cigarette out in insolent challenge when her gun broke sharply on the stillness. He held half his cigarette between his fingers! He regarded it thoughtfully. Then he took off his hat and bowed to her. There was no twinkle in his eyes; only genuine respect. "You're the first girl I ever met who could pull that trick," he said soberly.

"An' I've got more up my sleeve," she said harshly, to conceal her appreciation of his flattering remark. "I reckon you better be on your way."

"I was thinking the same thing," he said. "If you don't mind, I'll stow this away as a souvenir." He carefully placed the short portion of cigarette in his hat rim and put the big Stetson on his head. "By the way, could you tell me where Sunrise is?"

"Down in this country it's in the east, an' early in the morning for them as gets up," was the blistering reply.

"Why—I had in mind a town," he said, looking grieved. "I was told there was a town down this way called Sunrise—a right smart town, too, 'twas said."

"Just keep on east an' you'll see it early in the morning," she answered. "Me—I'm saying good-by or getting mad; one of the two."

"I wouldn't want you to get mad," he said soberly, shaking out his reins. "But I hate to say good-by, an' maybe it isn't any such thing. So long."

He spurred his horse and threaded his way down through the junipers, leaving her thinking hard over his last remark. She put up her gun suddenly, called the stallion, put the violin in its case, mounted with it, and rode at a sharp pace southward. Not until she gained the lower mesa did she remove the mask.

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CHAPTER II — THE OASIS.

The rider went on down the east slope, pondering deeply over the unexpected and brief meeting with the masked gun girl. "Gun girl she sure was," he muttered. "Now, where——" He kept a sharp lookout in all directions. The girl lived somewhere about, that much was certain. "Why the mask?" he kept asking himself. And why, indeed? She could have sent him on his way, unmasked, and without any gun demonstration, just as easily. And he would have had just as much of a chance of finding her. In fact, if she had not been masked, and had not acted as she did, he would have merely asked directions and gone on. He had no time in particular for women. But now he wanted above all things to see this wild creature again. Proficient as he was with his own weapon, respected, and feared, and outlawed, he had met a girl who could apparently match his skill. She had said Sunrise was eastward and he might reach it by morning. He doubted if his horse could make it and tried to shake off the conviction that the beast could not. He was nearly spent himself and just began to realize it.

The junipers gave way to sage and greasewood. The heat increased, drove in upon him like a wall of fire. His mouth and throat were dry. He dared take but a

sip at a time of the scanty supply of water in the canteen which hung from the horn of his saddle. With each sip he had to tilt it a bit higher, and he was tilting it dangerously close to straight up. He had ridden long and far, and he was weary, and was beginning to slump in the saddle as he dreamed of cool mountain brooks, and ice-cold springs—lakes, rivers, oceans of water! Water! He brought himself to with a jerk and looked about with eyes that were rapidly becoming bloodshot. It seemed to him that the terrific heat struck him suddenly like a blast out of a furnace.

He had reached the floor of the desert—the inferno. What a fool he had been to come south in August! He should have taken to the high mountains. He could see the glistening peaks, the tall stands of pine and fir, the flower-splashed meadows with their ambling brooks, the foothills—

Why, there they were straight ahead! Tall trees and a lake! He spurred his horse toward the mirage. The animal stumbled and threw him. He sprawled on his hands and knees in the hard, burning sands. He had been thrown by a horse! He—Louis Lane—had been thrown by a horse—by his own horse! Had been thrown—

He toppled forward on the hot floor of the desert. Then he scrambled unsteadily to his feet. This would not do. What was the matter with him? He

had been too long in the north and the inferno was getting him fast. But could the thing he feared happen so quickly? Everywhere was that bluish haze, and at hand was the dazzling sunlight, thrown up into his eyes by the yellow floor of the desert. And ahead, or far behind, were the trees and the water. But he knew them for what they were—the deadly, deceitful lures of the desert. To try to reach them was the first sign of the end. He knew that end: swollen lips and black tongue, tearing off of clothes, digging in the sand, and at the finish—the Death Watchman. When he came, it was over.

He staggered to his drooping horse and clutched the canteen. He unscrewed the cap and tipped the canteen to his lips. He would take just a sip, just a sip. The bottom of the canteen tilted upward, and upward. He had not the power to draw it from his lips. He would have to save at least one drink. And now nothing came. He was looking straight up into the mocking, blazing sky. Gone! He threw the empty canteen down.

But the drink had refreshed him and some of his strength returned. He climbed into the saddle. His horse lurched ahead, wavered, and stood trembling. He dismounted and, walking slowly, led his mount. Relieved of his weight, the beast followed well enough. But Lane's lips were pressed tightly. This would be the last phase. Who would give out first, himself or the horse? What was that in the sky? A dark speck—no, two specks, and three—buzzards!

Lane laughed, and the hoarse, unearthly cackle that came from his lips frightened him. It was his imagination, of course. There were no buzzards. Why should they come so soon? Why should they come at all? It was all trash, this buzzard business. Desert gossip. Like the coyotes on the northern ranges. Buzzards and coyotes! Bosh! But the specks did not disappear. They continued to drift about up there in the sky. But Lane no longer looked up. He looked at the ground just ahead, nodding. There was cactus now, towering giants which lifted their spiny arms above him; las chollas, and ocotillo, and yucca. And straight ahead were feathery pepper trees. It was only a picture of hope, but it lured him on.

Lane cackled again, stumbled and fell. He got to his feet with difficulty. The mirages were getting close, coming to him. And yet—he croaked in excitement and staggered on. They were trees! Pepper trees close at hand! An oasis! He tried to run, fell—crawled on his hands and knees——

It was Will French who came running to help him. He got Lane to his feet and supported him so he could walk in under the trees of the oasis. He put him down in the flickering shade of the peppers and called loudly in Spanish. A Mexican appeared shortly and French snapped out an order in the same language. The Mexican took the horse away.

Lane looked up out of blurred eyes. "Don't—give that horse—too—too much water to start," he breathlessly mumbled.

"Don't worry," said Will. "We know how to take care of your horse, an' you, too."

"Touch—of sunstroke," Lane muttered.

"Sure." Will nodded grimly. "But it would have been more than that if you hadn't stumbled on this place when you did."

The Mexican returned presently with a canteen of water. Lane grasped it eagerly as Will French held it to his lips. "Easy," said Will, withdrawing it after Lane had had a swallow. "You're not so strong at present that you can take this away from me. You talk about watching out for your horse an' then try to make a fool of yourself. Now, take another swallow."

It was fully half an hour before Lane had had two cupfuls of water. His eyes had cleared. "Thanks, old-timer," he said, surveying his rescuer. "It got me all of a sudden out there," he explained wryly, with a yawn. "I'd had a long ride," he added.

"What you need now is some sleep, an' plenty of it," said French. "When you've had it, you can talk, if you want to. I guess you can walk."

Lane waved aside the proffered aid and got to his feet. But he was still unsteady and French took his arm and led him to the house. They turned into a room directly off the patio. The thick adobe walls shut out the heat. There was a bed, a table with a lamp upon it, two chairs.

Lane took off his coat and hat. But he had to be helped with his boots and the rest of his clothes. He was asleep before French could get him into bed. French examined the gun and belt he had thrown on the table. He hefted the money belt he had removed from about Lane's waist. He opened the pockets, one by one, and his eyes gleamed. He muttered to himself in Spanish. He looked about uncertainly, stared at the face on the pillow. Then he carefully went through Lane's clothes. Apparently, what he found did not interest him, for he took the money belt and went out.

Some time afterward he returned with his father. Zeb French looked long at the face on the pillow and shook his head. "Never saw him," he said. "Too young, anyway. I was scoutin' around before he was born."

They went out, both so tall they had to stoop going through the door. Will French was the elder of the two boys, about thirty. His brother, Frank, was

twenty-five. Thus, Joan at twenty-two was the "baby" of the family. This day Frank was in Sunrise and would not return until the cool of the night—if he returned then.

The next visitor to Lane's room was the old Mexican housekeeper. She left a jug of water and a stone mug on Lane's table. And she, too, looked long at the stranger. Visitors at the rancho were few and far between, except when friends came.

With the sunset, Lane had another visitor. It was Joan. She stole in silently and a single glance at the sleeper's face sufficed. She tiptoed out, walked rapidly around a small fountain which played in the center of the patio, made her way through an opening in the opposite wall, and hurried to the low adobe barn. The Mexican in attendance there ran toward her eagerly.

"Take the stallion to the lower pasture at once, an' see that he stays there, where the strange senor cannot see him," she commanded crisply in Spanish. She turned back for the house, her face clouded. "Might have known he'd stumble into the place," she said to herself.

She was not pleased over Lane's arrival and had fully expected him to die in the desert. For there were no springs between Smoky Butte and Sunrise. If Lane had known it, he was the first man who ever had surprised her playing on the

butte or elsewhere. She did not like it; she did not like men—strange men who were young and good-looking. The very fact that she kept thinking of him annoyed her. She took her violin from its accustomed place in the living room and put it in her bedroom. Then she curtly told her father and Will that they were not to mention that she played. They shrugged. They had no intention that the stranger should even see her.

The twilight came swiftly and was brief, as is the case in the Southwest desert areas. Stars filled the purple night sky. Lane slept on, the sleep of utter exhaustion—deep and dreamless. But a Mexican squatted on guard without his door until the silver light of dawn streaked the eastern horizon and the household was astir.

Lane was sitting up in bed yawning after his long rest when Will French came to the room. Outside the door the patio was flooded with golden spangles as the rays of the sun broke through the trees. Birds were singing sweetly. A soft breeze was filtering through the latticed window.

"Morning," Lane said to French. "I reckon I took some snooze. I was about all in."

"I guess you had it coming," Will answered. "You was pretty well played out. Better come an' have a bath."

"Eh?" Lane was out of bed and putting on his clothes in no time. "That's the sweetest invitation I've had since—" He bit off his words with his hands patting his waist. Then his eyes narrowed and he looked at Will French squarely. "Did you take it?" he asked coldly.

French smiled. "I shore did," he answered. "Think I was going to leave your money out here with you dead to the world? We've got a pretty good bunch of Mexicans on the place, but I wouldn't trust one of 'em on a bet where there's a stake in sight. Your money's safe enough. It's in the house. Better leave it there till after you've had your bath."

Lane looked relieved. "It's everything I've got, 'cept my horse, saddle, and gun," he said in explanation. "An' I had a hard enough time getting it," he added grimly.

French betrayed his interest only with his eyes. When Lane was ready, he led him across the patio and out the doorway to a little adobe house where Lane, to his surprise, saw an open pool. It was walled in with stones and the top of the walls had been worn by countless bare feet. He looked at French questioningly.

"Agua caliente," said Will. "These hot mineral springs have been here nobody knows how long. This one was closed in by the Indians years before my

father ever saw this country, an' he's eighty. Help yourself, an' when you're through your grub will be ready."

"Say, you're white people!" Lane exploded impulsively. "Honesty an' hospitality don't always run together, but in this case they sure do. I appreciate it. My name's Louis Lane, an' I'm just down from the northern ranges." He held out his hand.

French took it, looking at his guest keenly. "We've got to do what we can for each other in the desert, Lane," he said gravely. "You're at the French ranch, an' my name's Will French. We're not bad people in some ways." With that he turned and went out.

On a stool was soap and a huge, rough towel. Lane undressed quickly and plunged into the warm, soothing water. His bath lasted half an hour and when he came out of the water he rubbed his fine, muscular body with the rough towel until his skin was fiery. He felt fit as a man could feel as he donned his clothes.

He came out into the bright sunlight and entered the patio to come face to face with a dark-haired girl who stopped as if struck and stared at him out of dark-brown eyes in which all the mysterious lights of the desert sparkled. She was dressed in white and held an armful of flowers.

He was so taken with her beauty and freshness of youth that he forgot to greet her. And Joan French forgot her animosity as she looked at this man she had met the day before. His damp, tousled hair—a true bronze in color—his hazel eyes and clean-cut features fascinated her. It was as if he had been made anew. And she saw he didn't recognize her.

"Good morning," Lane stammered finally.

"Good morning," she said in a low, sweet voice and hurried past him.

"Your breakfast is ready, Lane," came Will French's voice sharply from across the patio.

Lane hurried toward his room.

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CHAPTER III — SUNSET AND SUNRISE.

Something told Lane, as he looked at Will French, that it would not be policy to ask about the girl. He recognized the resemblance between this tall, dark, young man and the girl and knew at once that she was his sister. He saw his breakfast on the table. For a few moments he resented his not having been invited into the house; then as quickly came the realization that he was a stranger about whom they knew nothing. He smiled at French.

"That bath was worth a yellow chip in any sized game," he said, as he sat down to eat. "You can have it any time you say."

"Your money belt is under the pillow," Will remarked dryly and left the room.

Lane knew men. No word had been spoken, no look had been flashed. Still, Lane was convinced that Will French was very angry. The reason was plain: Lane's meeting with the girl had not been intended nor expected. There would be talk in the house.

"Anyway, I saw her," Lane muttered and attacked the excellent breakfast before him with gusto.

When he had finished, he leisurely rolled a cigarette and smoked contentedly. A Mexican woman came to take away the dishes. He reached into a

pocket and brought forth a silver dollar which he gave her. She smiled and nodded brightly. When she had gone, Lane secured his money belt and counted the contents of the pockets. The sum it had contained when Will French took it was intact. He buckled it about his waist next to his skin and felt better. He had seen the barn when he had gone for his bath and now he crossed the patio and made his way there. Joan French had foreseen this move on his part. She knew any experienced rider would keep an eye on his mount. Which was why she had had the stallion taken from its stall in the barn.

Lane found his horse all right and gave the Mexican who had looked after the animal a five-dollar gold piece. He got the same grin and nod of thanks that he had received from the housekeeper. He considered his next move. It was getting fearfully hot and he dreaded the ride to Sunrise under that blazing, relentless sun. At this thought the events of the day before passed in bold review before him in swift mental pictures. The girl in the mask! He wondered if it would be policy to ask Will French if he knew of her. Then a startling thought occurred to him. Could there be any connection between the girl he had seen that morning and the gun girl? The idea was no sooner born in his mind than he dismissed it as being absurd. Will French's sister was not only beautiful; she was demure. She had a soft, sweet voice, whereas the gun girl had tones that were knife-edged. She was the kind one could not hire to wear a simple, white frock

and gather flowers. "Not that girl," Lane told himself as he entered the patio. He saw Will beckoning to him from the rear of the house and his heart gave a bound. He was to see the dainty desert flower again, then; perhaps meet her. He hurried toward Will French.

"Was over to look at my horse," he explained. "He seems none the worse for the way I've mistreated him lately."

"Come in an' have a smoke," Will invited in a casual tone.

Lane followed him into the house, through the kitchen and dining room to the long living room. Zeb French was there, sitting in his big chair, but as Lane's eyes swept the room even to the shadows in the corners, he saw no sign of the girl. They were not going to permit him to meet her after all. Well, why in the world should he care? What did it matter? He never would see her again anyway.

"Have a cigar," Zeb French invited, pointing to an open box of Havanas on the table. "Reckon you don't pack many cheroots with you on the trail."

"It isn't hard to take you up on that proposition," said Lane, helping himself from the box. "No, I travel light."

He caught a significant look that passed between father and son. He knew he had been invited into the house to be questioned. He took a comfortable chair which Will indicated and lighted his weed.

"Traveling far?" old Zeb asked casually.

"Sunrise is my next stop, an' I hope it's not far," Lane replied easily. "Just how far is it?"

"'Bout thirty-five miles or so east," the old man answered. "Three-four hours' ride in the cool, but it's all day in the heat. You'd never made it yesterday."

"An' well I know it," said Lane energetically. "Mighty good thing I struck this place, Mr. French, an' I want to thank you so much for treating me so white."

"We ain't in the habit of lettin' folks die in the desert," said the old man dryly. "I've had too many years of it myself."

Silence followed this retort. Lane looked from the old man to Will French. The latter regarded him languidly. And, somehow, Lane felt or sensed that other eyes were looking at him; hidden eyes—the girl was watching and listening from somewhere. The silence grew heavier. Lane decided to take the initiative.

"Gentlemen," he said behind a cloud of cigar smoke, "I know the signs. I see you want to know more about me. Of course, I'm ready to leave any minute. As I said, my name's Lane. I'm not a line rider, nor a long rider, but I don't follow the trail just to be exercising my horse. I'm a gambler. I'm a good gambler, an' a square gambler—so long as the other gents in the game are square. I've worked the North clean. I had to correct a little fault of the dealer in the last game I played in"—he smiled and waved his cigar in an aimless gesture—"an' I lit out in a hurry. I had to discourage some of the gentleman's friends from following me, as I wasn't wanting company. So I'm on my way to this town of Sunrise, which I hear is up an' going at all hours of the day an' night. I'm not so particular about the days. Now you have it."

He resumed his cigar, relishing the attention his audience had given to his simple statement.

"Waal, it ain't no crime to gamble," Zeb French observed. "Least it wasn't no crime in such places as I've been in, an' Sunrise is one of 'em. An' I didn't suppose you packed that smoke wagon of yours to shoot squirrels with." He paused, but Lane made no comment. "Any place in view after Sunrise, son?"

"None as I know of yet," said Lane. "I take one place at a time an' let it go at that."

"You are figurin' on goin' in to Sunrise tonight, wasn't you, Will?"

"Thinking about it," Will answered.

Lane thought Will appeared more cheerful. The old man seemed in better humor, too. Lane assumed that his statement had clarified the atmosphere regarding himself. People living in isolated places always want to know something about the strangers who happen their way. It also seemed to him that these two were more pleased with the nature of his profession, or occupation, than if he had been in a more legitimate business—if it could be called such. There were other things he could have told had he so wished, but he had no intention of doing so.

"Reckon you wouldn't mind, Will, if Lane, here, rode along with you," Zeb French suggested.

"Not a bit," said Will cheerfully, turning to Lane. "We'll start a little after sunset, when it's cooler. I'll be able to show you around a bit. Ain't much to Sunrise, but what there is of it is hot stuff."

"Sounds promising," was Lane's comment. For some inexplicable reason which he did not try to fathom, Lane felt a vague suspicion of this pair. With the announcement of his calling, his status in the household had automatically

changed. He thought swiftly. While the oasis which constituted the rancho was large, it was hardly large enough for cattle raising, and the desert surrounding it offered no range. To assume that French was farming was preposterous. Yet the very room in which Lane sat was richly furnished, and there were actual indications of wealth on every hand. This was no ordinary hacienda. Could it be, then, that the French boys also were gamesters? On the face of it, it looked that way. And the old man's suggestion that Will French take him in to Sunrise—it amounted to nothing more than that—and Will's ready and cheerful acquiescence—did they propose to fleece him in Sunrise? This did not appear plausible in view of the fact that they had taken good care of his money—not a small amount, by any means. All this passed through Lane's mind in the space of split seconds. He gave it up. But he could not shake off the feeling that some scheme was afoot.

"All right," said Will French, "that's settled." He rose. "An', by the way, Lane, we'll meet up with my kid brother in town. His name is Frank. Treat him easy; he's just feeling his oats."

Lane rose, as it was plain the interview was ended. He followed Will out through the dining room and kitchen to the patio. No sign of the girl. Yet he could actually feel her presence! In all his thirty years or so, Lane could not remember when he had toiled with so many conflicting emotions. But one

conviction was uppermost in his mind. Adventure—perhaps dangerous adventure—strode beside him.

The boiling heat of the desert was now pouring down upon them. He yawned as they entered the patio. He wanted a chance to think; he wanted to be alone.

"You know," he said to Will French, "I think, after the time I've spent in the North country, this heat has got me. I feel sleepy."

Will French laughed. "Take an early siesta," he advised. "Sleep won't hurt you none. An' I can tell you without giving away any secret that you may not get so much in Sunrise—so much sleep, I mean."

They paused before the door of Lane's room and Will French faced him. "You know, Lane, I like you," said Will impulsively. "We're about the same age an' build; an' we've got a lot of ideas, I take it, that hook up. I reckon we'll get on. Take your snooze. I'm going over to look at the horses an' then I'm goin' to do the same thing. So long."

"So long," said Lane. He entered his room more puzzled than ever. "Going to get on," he muttered to himself. Now just what did Will French mean by that?

He lay down on the bed. He had not been joking when he told Will that the heat was affecting him. He fell asleep almost immediately.

The sun was slanting in the west when he was awakened by a commotion in the direction of the barn. There were shouts, and the heavy pound of hoofs.

"It's Nero!" he heard Will French cry. "I knew he wouldn't stay down there! Let him in the barn, Pedro!"

Lane leaped from the bed and hurried across the patio and through the doorway. There he stopped suddenly as a great iron-gray stallion dashed past. Lane went cold, then hot—and then he found his senses and darted back to his room, where he lay upon the bed, his heart throbbing. What did it mean? What could it mean? What—how—but one thing was certain.

The great stallion was the same magnificent animal he had seen with the gun girl—the girl who had played the violin, and who faced him masked!

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CHAPTER IV — "WE HAVE MET BEFORE!"

It still was insufferably hot. It would undoubtedly be some time after the sun went down before he and Will French would start for town. In the meantime, Lane wanted above all other things an opportunity to speak to the girl he had met accidentally that morning. The sight of the iron-gray stallion had given rise to a startling surmise. Could it be that the girl of the rancho was his gun girl—the girl of the mask?

It seemed absurd, preposterous, actually ridiculous; but there could be but one such stallion in that country. He could not possibly mistake it. So—here was the stallion, and here was a girl. He could not help but link the two. Still, there might be another girl at the rancho whom he had not seen. He gave it up, but he was resolved to see the girl again before he left.

As he was at the lower end of the patio, it stood to reason that the girl, since she apparently did not wish to see him, was keeping to the front of the house. Therefore, that was the place to find her. Lane decided to get up there some way. He looked out his door and made sure no one was in sight. Will French was

at the barn helping take care of the stallion; he would probably be there some time. The old man possibly had not finished his siesta; old men of the desert like to sleep during the heat of the day.

Lane walked around to the rear of the house. No one was about; there were no sounds. He slipped along the side of the house. On either side of the house was a narrow passage between walls, for the place was so constructed that there were really two patios, one in front and one in the rear, with the house proper as a separate unit. As Lane reached the front of the house he slipped behind a hedge which partially hid the wall and made his way to a point where he had an excellent view of the front of the house and the front patio.

The patio was larger than the one in the rear. It also had a fountain and there were many flowers, showing plainly that this was the favorite playground of the mistress of the rancho. Now, could a girl so inclined to be one to go to a mountain top, face a man masked, draw a gun, and talk as the girl whom Lane had met? He shook his head. It just was not in the picture; but he wanted to meet her again just the same.

Lane was musing on this when the girl suddenly appeared, coming from the house. She was dressed in white, and he marveled at her beauty. She was a veritable desert flower, a delicate, beautiful flower, such as springs up on the

floor of the desert during the rains, and vanishes when the hot sun comes to rule again.

She walked up to the patio and was lost among the shrubs beyond the fountain. Lane waited a short space and then boldly followed. He found her among the flowers at the upper end. She did not appear startled, but looked at him gravely out of large, questioning eyes. He removed his hat and gallantly bowed.

"Senorita," he said soberly, "I could not leave without seeing you again."

"Why should you wish to see me?" she asked. Her voice was low and sweetly questioning. It was not anything like the voice of the girl of the mask. But he had made his resolution and he would live up to it.

"Because I believe we have met before," he replied, smiling.

"Yes?" Her brows lifted slightly in surprise. "But you are mistaken, of course."

"I don't think so," said Lane, shaking his head slowly. "Of course I did not see all of your face, senorita, but there are other reasons why I am sure. I saw the big stallion this afternoon. There can be no other horse like that hereabouts,

nor anywhere else. I know horses, senorita, and I remember the markings. And there is the shoulder brand, too." He smiled pleasantly.

A dark light glowed in her eyes. "But what has a stallion, or any horse except my own saddle animal, to do with me?" she said in the same low voice.

"Do you not play the violin?" he asked boldly.

She looked him steadily in the eye. "My father and brother have been hospitable to you," she said coldly. "You repay them, then, by attempting to flirt with me? I do not talk with strange men who might come from anywhere or be anything. Please go."

Lane was thrilled. In this speech there was more than a hint of that voice which he had heard high up on the shoulder of Smoky Butte. He was convinced.

"But I am not mistaken," he said in a sterner voice. "I can understand your motive in donning the mask. Beauty such as yours should be concealed in wild country before a stranger. But, senorita, I have not forgotten the gun!"

Her eyes flashed. "I half believe you're crazy," she said angrily, with a harsher note in her voice. "If you do not go, I shall call my brother. It would not be well for him to find you here. Are you going?"

"Of course," Lane answered, bowing. "Now that I have learned that which I wished to know, I am going. But we'll meet again, my gun girl. I won't mention this coincidence to any one. Adios!"

With that he slipped off and made his way hurriedly back to his own room.

Joan stood for some time, her hands clenched, fire in her eyes. The fool! But he could not know his danger. The fire died away. This was no ordinary long rider, no tinhorn gambler. He was different from the young men who came to the rancho and whom she scorned. She could not scorn this man. He was far too clever. She knew in her heart that he was convinced of her identity. What of it? Wasn't he riding to Sunrise with Will that night? She would never see him again. A word to Will and she would be sure of not seeing him again. Yes, that was the best way. A word in Will's ear—

She started at a swift pace for the house, her pretty lips pressed tightly in the heat of her resolve. But as she neared the house her pace slackened; she walked more and more slowly, biting her lip. Finally, she stopped and idly plucked a flower. A word to Will—

But she knew in her heart that the word never would be spoken. It irritated and puzzled her. This man was to be invited into the house for supper. She would not eat with them, of course. But she would watch him covertly, study

him, and listen to what he said. Yes, that would be best—and there would be no word to Will!

Lane's thoughts were crowding each other as he entered his room. The interior was in shadow because of the heavy foliage which darkened the window, and he started with surprise, his hand automatically whipping to his gun, as he perceived a man sitting by the table. He recognized Will French, and laughed.

But French did not laugh. He looked at Lane coolly as the latter sat down on the edge of the bed. "Where have you been?" he asked slowly.

"Oh, looking aroun'," Lane replied casually. "Don't know as I ever saw such a snug layout in the desert. You've sure got water enough. Where does it all come from?"

French ignored the question. "You've been up there trying to talk with my sister," he said. "Lots of 'em have tried that an' learned better. Can't say as I blame you, exactly, but it don't go, Lane. Understand? It don't go!" His eyes burned into Lane's.

"I found that out from her," said Lane, shrugging, and taking out tobacco and papers. "You can't blame a man for wanting to talk to such a girl as your

sister. You know I met her out there this morning——"

"Don't try to see her again!"

Will French's tone was more than convincing; it was a threat which could not be misunderstood. His eyes had narrowed and the look he gave Lane backed up his words. And Lane felt that this attitude on the part of Will supported his conviction that the man's sister was the gun girl. It was palpable that her family did not want any one to know of her ramblings in the lava hills and of her proficiency with her weapon. But why? There was nothing wrong in these things.

"Don't worry," was all he said.

Will French's mood changed instantly. "We'll be taking on some supper shortly and at sundown we'll start," he said in an ordinary tone. Evidently, the incident was closed. "How'd you like a good stiff game of cards, Lane?"

Lane looked at him sharply. So that was the play. Will French was scheming to get him into a game for big stakes with some other sharpers—no doubt Will was one himself—and clean him of his stake. He smiled wryly and looked at French with a new light in his eyes.

But French read his thoughts and laughed with genuine delight. "I've got you pegged," he said merrily. "I know just what you're thinking about. You're thinking that I'm scheming to get you into a crooked game and fleece you." He chuckled gleefully. "Why, I reckon you could take care of yourself. Anyway, that ain't the play, Lane"—his voice became serious—"an' I was inviting you into a select game. There are a few of us, who can afford it, who play pretty high. We play square an' we watch each other like hawks. I merely suggested it as a favor since you said——"

"Oh, I'll come in," Lane interrupted, convinced the thing was on the square although he, too, would watch the others like a hawk. "The point is, when do we eat?"

"Come on," said Will, rising.

He led Lane to the house, where supper was ready. There were only the three of them—old Zeb French, Will, and Lane. The girl did not appear and Lane had not expected to see her. He suspected that she was watching and listening, and in this he was correct. His every remark was guarded.

It was a strange meal, with the old man doing most of the talking. His conversation dealt mostly with the old days, and Will French winked at Lane

several times when his father started off to tell something, remembered there was a stranger present, and ceased abruptly.

After the meal they went into the big living room for a smoke. Still no sign of the girl. But Lane sensed the invisible eyes and ears of his gun girl of the mask.

Above the lava hills in the west burned the sunset fires. Gradually the crimson changed to gold—to purple—to blue, and the twilight fell swiftly. They went out to the barn for their horses, and when they rode out of the oasis it was dark.

Through the soft desert night, with the star clusters dancing above them, with the shadows lying in grotesque patterns across the desolate land, with the giant cacti standing like sentinels to mark their path, they sped in silence toward town.

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CHAPTER V — THE TEST.

A faint glow among the pepper trees ahead betrayed the location of Sunrise. They seemed to come upon it suddenly—a dark shadow on the desert which swept toward them, becoming larger and larger as they neared the water wells which gave reason for the town's situation. "That's her," Will French called. Lane nodded. He was glad to be near a town again.

Sunrise was a collection of adobe houses, a few stores and cafes, several resorts, all with narrow doorways, with signs painted in black on their front walls. The one street was a lane of dust, lined with hitching rails. At this hour of midnight, the lights shone only from the narrow windows of resorts and cafes, and the one hotel.

They proceeded to the hotel and put up their horses in the livery behind it. Then Will French led the way up the dusty street to a resort labeled "El Cantina." It was a low building, dull and drab on the exterior, but its outward appearance belied the nature of the numerous activities within.

A long room, with a dirt floor and a low ceiling; a short bar; numerous gaming tables; benches along one wall; hanging lamps. The crowd was a motley one, with Mexicans in the majority. But there were no Mexicans at the front bar. And then Lane noticed another bar in the rear, which evidently was reserved for those from below the border. There was a door back there, too, which Lane

surmised led to private rooms; rooms, for instance, where the big games were played. They went to the bar for a drink, and Will motioned to a dark youth who was playing poker at a near-by table. The youth played out his hand, rose, tipped his chair against the table where his chips were stacked, and sauntered to a place beside them. Lane caught the resemblance at once.

"This is my brother Frank, Lane," said Will casually.

"Hullo, Lane," said the young fellow, holding out a hand. "New in town?"

"Haven't been branded yet," smiled Lane in reply.

Both brothers gave him a queer look. It was a peculiar statement, they thought. "Oh, you'll get branded soon enough—if you're the right sort," drawled Frank.

"Lane's from the North," Will explained. "Found him all in on the desert near home yesterday an' took him in. We rode in to see if there's anything doing."

"Plenty doin' for you, I take it," said Frank with a trace of bitterness in his words. "You've got the cluckers to play the big stuff. I have to stick to piker games. But I'm a decent winner tonight at that."

Lane surmised that the feeling between the brothers was not of the best. The younger was very jealous of the elder.

"When you've won your spurs you'll be with the big ones, Frank," Will remarked dryly. "Who's on deck?"

"Most of the gang," was the reply; "'Mesquite Sam' is back there." He jerked a thumb toward the door in the rear. "If there ain't anything more, I'll settle into my game again. I hope this break don't change my luck. So long." He flashed a look at Lane and turned back to his table.

Will French's eyes were sparkling as he looked at Lane. "You don't mind meeting a hard character, do you?" he asked with a grin.

"Been meeting 'em all my life," Lane replied cheerfully. "Oh, I'll take one, maybe two, but that's the limit." This last as Will motioned to the bartender. "I'm not a drinking man," he added.

Will French nodded in approval. "I think you're a smooth article," he said, raising his glass. "Anyway, you don't punch cows for a living, an' none of the rest of us does." He looked at Lane meaningly and again Lane sensed the premonition that Will had some kind of a scheme afoot.

"Who's this hard character you mentioned?" he asked.

"Oh, Mesquite Sam?" Will shrugged. "He isn't so terrible hard, at that; but he's bad. Fast with his gun an' a killer. He's playing in the back, according to the kid. You'll meet him. Watch him, for he's mean. But there's worse than he is aroun' here."

"I'd admire to have a look at him," was Lane's comment. "Bad folks interest me. Have the next one on me and I'm through with this department."

They drank again, and if Will French noted that Lane merely took a sip of the vile, white liquor, he said nothing. He failed to drain his own glass. He turned to Lane.

"I'll go in an' take a look aroun', an' then I'll come back an' tell you the lay," he said, dropping into the easy vernacular of open country and open towns. "Look on at one of the games for a minute." He strode toward the rear door.

Lane sauntered over to Frank French's table. To all appearances he was merely a casual spectator without a care on his mind. But he was thinking deeply. This preliminary investigation of the rear room provided more thought material. He fully believed what Will had said to the effect that no frame-up in the way of a card game was contemplated. But, nevertheless, his native intuition

—a sixth sense which is possessed by men who live by their wits or follow the long, long trails—told him that Will had something in mind. And Lane's thoughts continually reverted to the girl at the French rancho—his gun girl of the violin. He could not deliberately go back there without some reasonable excuse. And he wanted to see her again. He decided that the logical way to accomplish this would be through a member of the family—through Will French, for instance. With this realization, he made up his mind. He would fall in with whatever scheme or frolic Will French had in mind in the hope that through him he would be able to meet the girl again. He had hardly made this resolve when Will returned.

"They're having a quiet little game in there for easy stakes," he told Lane. "More amusement than anything else. Want to take a hand? Sam's the little fellow in the beaded sombrero; we never give introductions aroun' here." He winked.

"Always ready for entertainment," said Lane.

He followed Will through the rear door and found himself in a short passageway with a door at the rear and one on either side. Will opened the door on the left and they entered a small room. It contained nothing except a card table in the center over which was a hanging lamp with a reflector arranged to

throw the light downward. About the table were five men, absorbed in the game of stud poker. None looked up at their entry save one, a wizen-faced man, slight, who wore a beaded sombrero. This, as Lane knew, was Mesquite Sam. He met the small man's flashing look with a curious glance. Will had pulled out two chairs and Lane sat down beside him with a casual inspection of the others in the game. Four were typical men of the desert or the hills; the fifth, a pasty-faced individual with a pair of black sleevelets and a green eyeshade, was without the slightest doubt the house man.

The play was desultory, the stakes low, and there were few hotly contested pots. Mesquite Sam grumbled and growled continually and tried to force the play, which resulted in frequent losses when he permitted his irritation to get the better of his judgment. At such times he indulged in a stream of profanity. His attitude in time affected Lane, who was more or less disgusted. He availed himself of every opportunity to play Sam to the limit and frequently won. This did not improve the latter's humor. Finally, when Lane raked in a particularly sweet pot, Sam looked up angrily.

"So I suppose you think you're a slicker," he sneered.

"I've never thought of myself in that way," said Lane calmly.

The man who was shuffling the cards ceased his labor.

Lane's cool reply seemed to enrage the man across the table who wore the big sombrero. "You seem to know how to rake in the pots," he said in a mean voice. "I ain't been watchin' none too close."

"What I've won is all stacked up here in front of me in case you haven't seen it before," drawled Lane.

"I don't mean that," said the other harshly; "I mean I ain't been watchin' your play."

"All my cards, save one, have been exposed right along," was Lane's rejoinder. "Maybe you need glasses."

Mesquite Sam half rose. "Why, you dirty——"

"I wouldn't get too personal!" Lane broke in sharply.

The other sat down and leaned on his elbows on the table, his dark eyes glittering with malice. "Did you sit in this game intending to ride me?" he asked in a low voice that was almost a whisper.

Lane leaned on the table in a similar attitude. "No," he said, in the same tone that had been used by the other. "But it begins to look to me as if you have started something I will have to finish!"

"Then I'll give you a chance to finish it!" roared the other, leaping to his feet and kicking back his chair even as Lane leaned back in his.

Will French struck at Lane's right arm, but too late. Lane's hand came up like a flash of light and the room rocked to the roar of his gun. A howl of astonishment and pain came from Mesquite Sam's lips as his weapon crashed to the floor, and he grasped his right arm with his left hand.

Lane rose, sheathing his gun. Then Mesquite Sam dropped suddenly down behind the table. Lane was over the top of it in a single leap and the table toppled over on the man on the floor, who had secured his gun with his left hand. Lane grasped the wrist and flung it upward just as the weapon spit its message of flame and lead. Six times Mesquite Sam in his rage pulled the trigger uselessly, and the bullets thudded into the roof, bringing down a rain of dry adobe.

Lane picked Sam up and flung him against the wall as Will French and the others caught him and held him.

"Take that fool home!" French shouted, pointing to the wounded man. "An' get out of here, all of you!"

He loosed his hold on Lane as the men left. He was frowning heavily. "There wasn't supposed to be any shooting," he grumbled.

"No?" drawled Lane, lifting his brows. "I suppose it was to be a bit of play acting."

"I was tryin' you out," said Will sharply, "an' that simple ass lost his head. Well, I guess you'll do."

"In that case, perhaps you'll tell me what it's all about," said Lane.

"When the time comes," Will French retorted. "Come along."

He led the way out of the room and out the rear door into the cool, starlit desert night. Had he looked at Lane closely, he would have been puzzled by the quality of the latter's smile. But he did not look, and they made their way toward the hotel.

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CHAPTER VI — THE GAME.

Lane and Will French were given rooms at the rear of the hotel, a long, one-story adobe building. They had to pound hard upon the door to gain admittance and were shown to their quarters by an old Mexican who carried a smoking lamp at a perilous angle. He accepted Will at once, but peered long and suspiciously at Lane.

Lane did not undress. He put out the light and sat by the window, looking through a gap in the line of pepper trees to the vast, unending expanse of desert, coldly white in the moonlight. So Will had planned to test him and had said he would do! This meant that whatever was afoot did not merely concern cards. Had the test been meant to try his mettle, or ascertain the speed of his draw? He shrugged. He had demonstrated both.

It was considerably after midnight, but Lane was not sleepy. He had slept long the night before and the afternoon of yesterday. It was hot and stuffy in the little room, which lacked ventilation. He decided to go out. He had noticed a rear door when he was shown to his room and now he slipped stealthily into the

narrow hallway, drew back the bolt of the outside door, and stepped out into the cooler air. He closed the door noiselessly, intending to return before daylight. He knew of no reason why Will French should know of this little nocturnal excursion. He did not know that before he returned he would be bound as if with chains to Will French; a ready volunteer for any scheme French and those with him might have in mind; a willing prospect to take part in any enterprise, regardless of its nature.

The Cantina, with its numerous games, was an irresistible lure for Lane. He had spoken the truth when he had told old Zeb French and Will that his business was gambling. He had been forced into it by a series of unfortunate circumstances, and he had followed the green tables for a little less than three years. But, as he turned up the street, he realized that the shots in that rear room must have been heard, must have raised some kind of a turmoil, and must have led to an investigation, even though all had left immediately after the affair. Mesquite Sam might have friends ready to take up his cudgels, if they knew. Pshaw! The affair had been framed. He had nothing to fear on that score. But Frank French was in there——

He stood at the corner of the gambling place in indecision. From up the street came the soft tattoo of a horse's hoofs in the dust. The rider was coming in from the desert; coming in from the same direction he and Will French had

come from that same night. Lane drew back into the shadow of some trees near the rear of the Cantina, expecting to obtain a glimpse of the rider as he passed on the way to the livery, if that was his destination.

But the rider, instead of proceeding down the street, turned in and rode to the rear of the Cantina, passing within a few feet of Lane. In the shadows, Lane stood struck motionless and dumb. For under the big hat was the fair face of Will French's sister—he did not know her name was Joan—and she was dressed in the same worn riding togs in which he had seen her high on Smoky Butte!

He brought himself to with a jerk and stole through the shadows to where he could see the rear door. The girl dismounted and went inside. Evidently she gave some one a message, for she returned almost immediately and waited by the door. The moonlight shone full upon her face and the thrills raced up and down Lane's spine as he saw that she wore her mask. This was doubtless a protection against recognition by the man to whom she had given her message. For a wild moment Lane felt an impulse to rush out and confront her, but he swiftly realized it would be folly. Then Frank French came out the door.

"Joan!"

It was thus that Lane learned her name. Pretty name, he thought to himself, and strained his ears in a futile effort to hear what they were saying. But they

talked in an undertone. He caught only a few of Frank's words when the youth raised his voice: "Foolishness—can't be done—has to end some time—no!" Then Joan became angry and impatient. She stamped her foot and started for her horse. But she turned and, raising her voice, spoke so that Lane could hear.

"I tell you I'm going along! It may be the last time, but I'm going. You come for me, Frank, or send word, or I'll follow an' maybe turn up at the wrong time—if you want that. I heard Will an' dad talkin' an' you can't fool me. Tell Will I said so." She swung into the saddle. "An' tell him I didn't ride over here just to get the night air!"

With that Joan French was on her way, beating around the corner of the building, tearing off her mask as she rode. She left two people in an excited state of mind. Frank French was swearing as he turned back into the gambling place; Louis Lane was experiencing a series of thrills of greater intensity than he had ever known before.

What luck! That was what it was—pure luck! He had no business there, had had no business to leave his room; but the Goddess of Luck had taken him firmly by the hand and led him forth to give him some priceless information. An expedition of some kind was contemplated and Joan French insisted on going

along! And, from the events of that night, as Lane saw it, he was to be asked in on the enterprise.

He stole back to the hotel and let himself in silently. He threw himself on the bed to wait for morning.

That night he met Brule.

Not once during the day was he out of the company of either Will or Frank French. For some reason best known to himself, and to which Lane offered no objection, Will did not want him circulating about town alone. He experienced the queer feeling of being watched, but he did not know why. He noticed, however, that while he was subjected to many keen glances of inspection, men mostly looked at him respectfully.

Will was with him during the morning and until after lunch. They took a siesta, and by that time Frank was up. He played cards most of the afternoon at a table with the younger brother. He had taken a liking to the dark-faced youth at once. Anyway, he did what he thought Will French wanted him to do, because of all things he wanted to win his friendship and confidence after what he had heard and seen during the early morning hours.

At sundown Will came into the place and took him out of the game, a moderate winner. They took a look at their horses and had supper. They sat on a bench in front of the livery in the cool in the twilight, smoking. Lane asked about Mesquite Sam.

Will French grunted. "He'll be all right," he said. "Your lead didn't hit the bone. If you'd shot him in the head the bullet would have glanced off." Which showed that Will did not have any too good an opinion of the man! Lane let it go at that and asked no more questions. They smoked in silence, as Will evidently was deep in thought. Lane could not shake off the premonition that he was to learn things this night.

After some three or four cigarettes, when the night was an hour gone, Will French rose suddenly. "Come on, Lane, let's go up to the joint," he said cheerfully.

When they entered the place, Will led the way straight to a man who was lounging against the bar. "Brule, meet a friend of mine," Will said in introduction. "Name's Lane." He turned about. "Lane, this is Brule. We'll have a drink, an' then, if it's jake with you, we'll sit in for a little session."

Lane found himself looking into a pair of cold, gray eyes—eyes that seemed to look through him and read his very thoughts. They were cruel eyes, too.

Without noticing anything else about the man, Lane realized that whatever the nature of the enterprise in which Will and his associates might be engaged, here was the leader. Brule's face was brutal: swarthy, thick-lipped, with a flat, pudgy nose, a square chin that was blue-gray after a recent shave. He was as tall as Lane and of heavy build. The black sateen shirt he wore was open at the throat, showing a large, short neck. Everything about the man suggested tremendous strength. But after his quick appraisal, Lane's gaze came back to those cold, cruel eyes with a glint in their depths that would have caused most men to shiver. Here was a killer, thought Lane, if he ever had seen one.

Brule held out a hand and his grip was far from gentle. "Howdy," he said. "Stranger in this end of nowhere, I take it."

"Not so long as my friend here is around," said Lane, indicating Will French. "I get acquainted fast—with some people."

Brule laughed; but the laugh jarred on Lane's sensibilities. In it there was no suggestion of mirth. It had a metallic ring like the clashing of steel drills.

They drank and sauntered into a rear room, with the eyes of most of the men in the place following them. As Brule passed the Mexican bar at the rear of the room, Lane noted that the Mexicans nearest the door crowded back against the

others. He did not miss the looks directed at the big man's back. For some reason—and probably a good one—the Mexicans feared and hated this man.

Four men were playing when they entered the room. It was palpable to Lane that this game had been arranged, since there were three empty chairs about the table. Brule bought in for a thousand, and both Lane and Will followed his example.

"These are just markers," said Brule in his coarse, throaty voice. "Any player can overbid what he has on the table and dig into his kick afterward. Ain't that so, Will?"

"That's the way we play," said Will.

"Suits me," said Lane, "so long as you gents have money in your kicks." Brule's quick look gave him a thrill of satisfaction.

The game did not prove spectacular, although the bets were high. In time, Lane came to believe that the game they were playing was not being played with cards. The session had been arranged to give Brule an opportunity to study him.

Lane held his own, won a little. For three hours they played without a sensational pot. Then, with Brule shuffling, Lane saw what he half expected was

coming. Brule's manipulation of the cards was perfect. Only the most experienced of gamblers could have caught the swift movements, which probably escaped the notice of the others at the table. Lane received a king in the hole. He knew Brule had dealt himself an ace. Then Lane got another king, which made kings back to back. Brule dealt himself a seven. The betting was moderate, however. When four cards were out, Lane had two kings in sight and one in the hole. Brule had an ace in sight and Lane was certain he had another in the hole. On the next turn, Brule would deal himself another ace, making three, and beat Lane out for the pot.

Lane bet a hundred dollars.

Brule studied his hand. "Oh, I'll step in here," he said easily. "I'll raise you a thousand."

Lane yawned. "Gentlemen, I'm not making any donations," he drawled, turning over his third king and bunching his cards. "That's good."

Brule tossed the pack into the center of the table, raking in the checks. Out of the corner of his eye, Lane saw him nod slightly to Will French. Then he spoke to the house man.

"Count these up an' put a checker in the drawer," he said. "I'm quitting for the present."

He left the room and at Will's suggestion he and Lane cashed in and went out in front. Brule had left the place. They took a drink at the bar.

"I'm ridin' out to the ranch," said Will in a casual tone. "Want to come along?"

"Nothing else to do," said Lane indifferently.

Inwardly he was jubilant. Whatever the game was to be, he had been accepted. Brule's nod had done the business.

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CHAPTER VII — A PROPOSITION

A wave of exhilaration swept over Lane as they raced their horses over the hard, even floor of the desert in the hour before dawn. There was just a suggestion of a breeze from the Wizard Mountains far to southward—mountains that towered eight thousand feet, with long, velvety slopes of pine, cold streams, and fragrant meadows. There were mines there, as Lane knew. And this faint breeze brought a cool breath to the desert which stimulated man and beast alike.

Will French was in an excellent mood. He whistled and sang snatches of range songs. At times he looked at Lane and chuckled.

"Why all the hilarity?" asked Lane when they finally slowed their pace.

"I'm thinking of the way you pegged Brule," Will replied. "It tickled him, too. But I don't mind telling you that if you hadn't been wise, he'd have kept that thousand. He would have had to. Brule isn't such a bad sort, as long as he isn't crossed. You have to watch him. His gun hand an' his temper are both greased lightning."

"Worse than that Mesquite chap, I figure," Lane observed.

Will French laughed. "An' then some," he avowed. "You'll get better acquainted with him if you come along with us, an' we can use a man like you—

if you've got the nerve." The last was uttered in a matter-of-fact voice, but Lane knew it was the first step toward a disclosure of Will's plans.

"I've been known to have it," Lane said, laconically.

"Well, if you hook up with us, you'll sure need it," said Will, favoring Lane with a keen glance.

The moon was dipping in the west and the stars were dimming, but the desert was a cold gray and practically shadowless. They could see each other plainly. Will had checked their pace to an easy walk, although the horses wanted to run. By this sign he showed Lane he was inclined to talk.

"Where y'all planning on going?" Lane asked, striving not to appear too eager.

"Well, that's goin' ahead pretty fast," Will replied, leaning on the horn of his saddle and eying Lane. "I take it you haven't gone in for anything stronger than gambling; am I right?"

"That's been strong enough at times," Lane evaded, frowning.

"Well, you didn't edge down this way lookin' for a job as cowhand, or mine mucker, or store clerk, did you?" Will asked sharply.

"Not so as you could notice it," Lane answered. "I came first because I had to slope up North, an' second because I wanted excitement. Excitement an' I have been pals ever since I can remember. What you got on your mind, French?"

"Dangerous business," came the quick reply, as Will French's eyes narrowed. "Business that takes a rider like yourself, a brain—which you seem to have—an' a gun hand like you've exhibited. It won't be no pink-tea party. I suppose you know there isn't any money in the cattle game around here."

"I'd figured as much," said Lane, "although you've got a pretty nice place."

"Not big enough," said Will, shaking his head. "Never was. I don't mind tellin' you the gang was looking you over in town."

"I thought as much," said Lane. "I'm not dead in the head an' I'm not blind. What was the verdict?"

"We're willing to take a chance. You can't double-cross us an' get out of it with a whole skin, anyway. We don't ask everybody in on our game, but you've got the goods, an' if you're not afraid of hot lead an' posses an' twelve- or fifteen-hour shifts in the saddle you could trail along with us to the big money."

Will French was deadly serious, and Lane hesitated. He knew the men he had met and played with in town were outlaws, and so were the French boys, and the old man, too, probably. To join up with them would be automatically to put himself in the same category. Then he thought of Joan French and of what she had told Frank about going along. His mind fairly leaped to a decision.

He looked steadily at Will French. "I'm not afraid of the little things you mention," he said soberly. "I'm ready to join up an' go through with whatever you've got on, an' you're not taking a chance. Is that good enough?"

"That's good enough—if you mean it!"

"It looks to me," drawled Lane, "as if you'd have to take my word for it."

Will French held out his hand and Lane grasped it. Then Will smiled. "You've hooked up with the toughest outfit between the Gila and the border!" he said cheerfully. "Brule usually does the leading. All the men you played with in town are with us. Frank trails along, but we have to keep an eye on him, for he's wild. You'll stand high because of your gun work. We'll start for the Wizards tonight. But just now we're goin' to the ranch. Come on."

They spurred their horses and sped westward, with the rosy dawn at their backs. In an hour they were riding in among the pepper trees of the oasis. They

turned their horses over to Pedro at the barn and repaired immediately to the house, where the Mexican housekeeper already was up and preparing for breakfast. Lane's hopes of seeing Joan were high, since she could not know of their coming or arrival.

"We'll eat right here in the kitchen an' then get some sleep," said Will French. "Better hug our bunks all day, for it may be some time before we get another chance."

Lane's hopes crashed as they washed and sat down to breakfast. No one appeared during the meal and afterward Will took Lane to the room he had occupied before and announced that he would bunk next door. As Lane had no sleep during the night, and very little the night before, he dropped off into a deep slumber as soon as he was in bed.

He awoke when the sun was dying in the west. A look into the next room showed that Will French already was up. He crossed the patio and went out to the mineral bath, where he spent half an hour. As he returned to the patio he stopped suddenly and listened with an appreciative grin on his face. From the front of the house came the strains of a violin. Joan was playing—which signified that she was not aware of his presence. He might see her yet!

In the doorway of his room he sat down to roll a cigarette and pondered this matter of his interest in Joan French. He was not a woman's man; he had never really had a girl—a sweetheart—in his life. Then why was he so worked up over Joan? "She's different from the others," he told himself, and smoked contentedly as he listened to the music.

Will French came striding from the rear of the house. "Get inside out of sight an' stay there," he said as he passed Lane. And, as Lane obeyed, he heard the soft hoofbeats of a horse under the trees. Then came Will French's voice:

"Hello, sheriff! Pretty hot riding, isn't it, in daytime? Thought you knew better."

"Lo, Will," answered a drawling voice. "I just crossed from Smoky Ridge. Wasn't so bad. I'll put up my hoss an' stay to supper, if you're agreeable."

"You're always welcome here, sheriff," said Will heartily. "You ought to know that. Ride right across to the barn. I think supper's brewin' in the kitchen."

Lane risked a stealthy look as the pair started for the barn and saw a tall, spare man, with sandy mustaches and a thin, narrow face, riding a chestnut gelding. A sheriff!

"'Always welcome' is right," the official was saying. "I'm wondering if the time'll come when I won't be so welcome. Been doin' much ridin', Will?"

"In an' out of town quite regular," replied Will French easily. "Nothing much else to do till you chase out those gamblers down there, sheriff."

"No long trips, Will?"

Lane caught the last question, but as the two men left the patio he could not hear Will French's answer. Still, what he had heard started him thinking. The sheriff evidently was aware of the operations of the French boys, or at least had definite suspicions; but it was plain he had no proof and, as things stood, was a friend of the family. Will had been wise to warn him—Lane—for, so far as he knew, no sheriff in this district knew him by sight. In a short time, Will French and the sheriff came from the barn and proceeded to the house. Lane sat down on the bed and rolled a cigarette. He became aware that the music had stopped. Well, there would be no seeing Joan unless she should happen to come out into the patio. It was certain he would not get into the house for supper while the sheriff was there. Lane swore softly. But soon afterward the Mexican woman came to his room, bringing a bounteous supper with a pot of strong coffee. It was after sunset and he ate in the fast-gathering twilight, fearing to light the lamp.

As night fell, Will French came out of the house with the sheriff. The old man called good-bye from the rear porch. The two walked rapidly toward the passage to the barn.

"So you're not figurin' on any long trips, Will?" Lane heard the sheriff ask.

Will French's laugh rang cheerfully in the patio. "If I was, sheriff, you'd be the last man I'd tell," he said, chuckling.

"It's bad business, Will," said the sheriff in a tone which was almost mournful.

With that they passed out of hearing. It was not long, however, before they reappeared. The sheriff was riding his chestnut. They passed along the road that ran through the lower end of the patio.

"So long, Will." With that the sheriff was off like a shot, making a getaway that astonished Lane in view of the fact that the official had appeared to be such a mild-mannered man.

"That was Sheriff McClure from the county seat," Will explained, as Lane came out of his room to meet him. "Been over west somewheres, an' now he's on

his way to Sunrise. He won't get up to bother us where we're goin', until it's too late."

"An' we're going——"

"Into the Wizards," said Will gruffly. "Go see the horses are ready. I'll get our grub pack. We're starting pronto."

Lane saw to the horses and Will came with two packs to be wrapped in their slickers and tied on the rear of their saddles. Old Zeb French came out and peered closely at Lane in the yellow rays of the lantern. He said nothing, but Lane sensed that he knew everything. As they rode out of the oasis and turned southeast toward the distant Wizard Mountains, Frank French came racing in from town. He waved to them, and that was all. Lane wondered if he had come for Joan.

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CHAPTER VIII — THE RENDEZVOUS.

They started out at an easy trot as Will had explained that they had an all-night ride, most of which would be over a treacherous mountain trail. Will's spirits seemed to soar as they sped over the hard floor of the desert, cold white under the moon and stars. He called to Lane frequently.

"His nibs, the sheriff, won't see any of our crowd in Sunrise," he said jubilantly. "Brule an' the others started out, one at a time, long ago."

"Sounded to me, the way he talked, that he's sort of suspicious," Lane vouchsafed.

Will laughed and shook out his reins. "Sure he is, old-timer. That's part of his job—to be suspicious. But what he doesn't know would fill a lot of books. I thought it was just as well he didn't see you, for he's a stickler for asking questions in that mouse voice of his. McClure isn't any fool, though."

This ended the comment on the sheriff, for Will French dismissed him and his activities with a wave of the hand. They pushed on at an easy lope, a pace both horses could maintain for hours if need be, and the great, shadowy bulks of the Wizards marched toward them, beckoning with their cool slopes of pine, and, after a time, sending a light breeze, harbinger of comforting relief day and night from the searing heat of the inferno.

As yet, Lane had no inkling of the enterprise upon which he was engaged, or their actual destination. Under ordinary circumstances, even if he had consented to engage in an act of outlawry, he would have demanded full details well in advance. But in this case he was "going blind" because of his interest in Joan French. And now that he was actually on the way to take part in whatever the band proposed to do, he had his first misgivings. Why should he outlaw himself merely because he had taken a fancy to Joan? It was very doubtful that she had any interest in him; at least, she had shown none. So Lane began to look upon himself as a fool. It angered him, and gave rise to a feeling of animosity toward Will French, although he liked him. But it was too late to back out; he had to go through with it. There was just one thing, he told himself: Brule would have to watch his step so far as he, Lane, was concerned.

They now were climbing the first long slope toward the foothills of the Wizards. This slope was a great "forest" of giant cactus, with smaller varieties scattered about. Far off to eastward, Lane thought he could catch the faint glow of the lights in Sunrise. It lacked an hour of midnight.

The cacti gradually gave way to juniper. The slope became steeper and they started zigzagging. Then Lane realized they were on a trail. Will French went on ahead. Soon they were on a ridge and the first pines appeared. In an hour they were winding about ridges, crossing them, passing through ravines, splashing in

small streams, and then they entered a forest. The trail was hard, with gentle grades in the main, but they were climbing continuously.

The size and height of the pines increased. They rested their horses frequently. Will French was strangely silent. Lane was busy with conflicting thoughts. Only one thing was certain: if Joan came he would confront her, and, if necessary, tear the mask from her face. Under the spell of the cool forest his resentment toward Will French died. For Lane was more of a mountain man than he was of the desert.

In another hour they halted, after a hard climb to the top of a high ridge which ranged southward to the shoulder of a towering peak. Below was a long, narrow valley, deep in shadow, and Will French pointed up this valley. Lane looked and made out a faint glow against the side of the mountain.

"What is it?" he demanded abruptly.

"That's Running Wolf Canyon up there, an' where you see the light is the mining town of Raysville," Will replied. "It's one of the liveliest camps in the Wyzards."

"I suppose that's the place we're goin' to hit," Lane conjectured.

"You said it," Will confirmed. "That's where we make the big cleanup. We'll have to scatter to the ends of the earth afterward," he finished grimly.

Lane was struck by his tone. "Must be high-powered stuff," he ventured.

"The bank an' the Ace of Clubs gambling hell," said French slowly. "The plunder ought to figure two hundred thousand, an' the beauty of it is, they can afford it. Gold proposition—everybody rolling in money. That's why I said something about nerve, remember?"

Lane remembered. He had caught his breath when French had mentioned jobs and the amount. He had not stepped into any mild raid. He had thought they might try him out on something small. Now he saw the reason for his admission to the band. In this desperate undertaking they needed his gun! There would be no carrying out such an enterprise without shooting. Never! But would Will allow Joan to come on such an occasion? Lane surmised from what he had heard pass between the girl and her brother Frank in Sunrise that she had been in the habit of accompanying them on various raids; but this venture

—

Will started on, with Lane following. They rode along the crest of the ridge toward the mountain for two miles or more. The valley had narrowed and deepened into a canyon. Finally they began to descend, but instead of going

down into the canyon they came upon a plateau or shelf above the chasm that was thickly timbered. They followed a trail through the timber and at last came out into a large meadow through which flowed a small stream.

There were some dilapidated cabins here. Lane saw horses grazing and men moving about. Light streamed from the windows of two of the cabins, and Lane realized that they had reached the rendezvous of the outlaws. They stopped before a large cabin which was dark. Many saddles hung on pegs driven into the chinking between the logs. They unsaddled, hung up saddles and bridles, and hobbled their horses.

Then Will led the way to one of the lighted cabins. Here they found Brule, sprawled in a big chair at one end of a long table. There were a dozen men sitting or lying on benches along the walls. Lane had heard laughter and loud voices from the other lighted cabin, where more men of the outfit were making merry. From the number of horses he had seen grazing in the meadow, he estimated there were at least twenty-four men in the band. And he confessed to himself that they were a hard-looking lot.

Brule sat up at his coming and looked at him keenly out of his cold, hard, gray eyes. "Took us up, did he?" he said, evidently addressing Will French, although he continued to look at Lane.

"Called the turn," said Will laconically. "I reckon he'll do."

"He'd better do," said Brule in a threatening voice. "Suppose you know what you're up against?"—this last to Lane.

"I haven't been told all the particulars," said Lane curtly.

"Well, there's mighty few of 'em," said Brule, with a heavy frown. "We're goin' to take a bank an' a gamblin' joint—the bank first, then the joint; or both together, 'cording to how things come up. You, an' Neff, there"—he pointed to a tall, stoop-shouldered, dark man on the bench—"an' myself are goin' to be the lads who'll guard operations. If anybody near you gets frisky, it's your job to start shooting, an' there's only one thing to remember—don't miss! I don't look for trouble, but if trouble comes, Raysville will mark time from tomorrow night."

"Sounds exciting," was Lane's cool comment.

Brule's frown darkened. "You don't seem very enthusiastic," he observed.

"What am I supposed to do?" Lane asked in the same cool, even voice. "Jump up an' down an' cheer?"

Brule leaped to his feet. "Don't talk back to me, do you hear?" he shouted, while the others in the place sat up and took notice and Will French stepped to the table.

But Lane's clear, ringing tones cut through the room. "You've given your orders, Brule. I'm not deaf, an' I've brains enough to understand. Let it go at that!"

He turned abruptly, showing his back to Brule as he stepped to the door. Brule clenched his fists and fumed but remained silent. Finally, regaining control of himself, he said: "I suppose a little spirit is a good sign in a new man. Well, don't forget your orders." He sat down and Lane went out, with Will French following.

"I told you not to cross him," Will complained.

Lane whirled. "Don't talk to me about crossing him," he said hotly. "I'm in this thing an' now that I'm in, I stay; but if that big bully tries to ride me, I'll make him draw!"

Will French did not comment on this. Very possibly he realized that Lane meant exactly what he said. He asked him if he wanted to join in the game in the

other cabin, and when Lane refused, saying he would snatch some sleep, he directed him to still another cabin and joined the game himself.

But Lane did not want any sleep, having slept most of the day. He walked around behind the cabins and strode up and down in the shadows of clumps of pines, thinking. He knew he had made an enemy of Brule, although the outlaw leader had striven to smooth things over. Lane had a sneaking idea that Brule would attempt to cheat him out of his share of the loot. With this thought, Lane stopped dead in his tracks. Did he want any of the loot? He realized, with a grim smile, that he not only did not want any of the loot, but that he had no intention of shooting anybody in this affair. He made a desperate decision. If Joan did not show up, he would not take part in the bank robbery and gambling holdup. Thus began the complications with which he wrestled as the sky grew gray in the east.

Fate is a trickster. Lane had no sooner made up his mind than there came to him on the soft breeze the message he had been half expecting—the throbbing notes of the wild, weird melody Joan had played high on the shoulder of Smoky Butte.

It came from somewhere up the slope, he thought; no, from the timber off to the left below the cabins. He started in that direction. He could barely hear the

subdued strains of the violin; sometimes they were lost altogether—drowned in the plaintive wail of the vagrant wind blowing through the pines.

As he entered the timber, he stopped dead still again, startled. Frank French came out of the trees some little distance away and hurried toward the cabin. Lane edged down to the spot where Frank had emerged, and discovered a faint trail. The dawn was breaking and Lane had no difficulty in following the trail. Thus he came to a clearing so small that there was room for only one tiny cabin—the abandoned temporary home of some wandering prospector—and a small corral in which were two horses.

Lane noted these things instinctively. What interested him was the figure of Joan French, clad in the worn riding habit, her gun on her right side, the big hat pulled over her hair, sitting on a bench by the cabin door, her violin tucked under her chin.

For some little time he watched her and listened to the peculiar melody which flowed from the strings of her instrument; then he stepped boldly into the meadow and walked slowly toward her.

The violin went down on the bench instantly and the girl's gun was out in a flash. In her eyes was a look of commingled consternation and astonishment.

"You needn't draw on me, Miss Joan," said Lane gravely; "I'm one of the crowd." He stopped near her, noting that she did not raise the gun.

"How—how did you get here?" she stammered.

"Rode up with Will," Lane replied. "Are you in on this business, too?"

"And if I am—what of it?" she asked defiantly.

"Hardly seems the thing for a nice girl like yourself," he said soberly. "I wouldn't expect——"

"Don't preach!" she broke in impatiently, stamping her foot. "Look at yourself—I might have known. I was beginning to think you were halfway honest, or——" She broke off her speech abruptly, biting her lip.

There were several answers Lane could have made to this and he saw she realized it. "It's my first try at the game," he said lamely. Then, frowning: "But I'm in it an' I'm going through with it. I suppose you'll be going back before—before things begin to happen."

"You haven't any right to suppose anything about me," she said haughtily. "An' you had no business coming down here."

"There are no restrictions on my movements that I know of," he returned; "an' the traffic in these hills is wide open. If I were you, Joan, I'd go back."

Her brows arched. "You're giving me advice?" She burst into scornful laughter. "When I really do want advice, I know where to go for it an' I can depend upon it. I haven't asked any yet. An' drop the first name. I'm Miss French to you."

Lane bowed. "You may not have asked for any advice, Miss French, but you sure need it," he said soberly.

The girl's face flushed an angry red, which made her look more beautiful than ever. She groped for words with which to frame the proper scathing remark.

"I'm not trying to be smart, Miss French," said Lane earnestly. "An' I'm not tryin' to annoy you or bust into your business. What I've said, I've said simply because I like you an'—well, you're in more or less danger here."

"I've been in danger before," she returned.

"I don't know where you've been before, although I have reason to think you've been out on raids in the past, but this is big turkey. From what I know of

the gang's plans, this job will be no grand-stand exhibition."

Instead of angering her further, Joan appeared to be interested. "How'd you happen to be taken in on this?" she asked curiously.

"Because I can handle a gun," he replied truthfully.

"They lost a good man a while back," she said, sheathing her weapon. "I guess that's why they picked on you."

"Oh, I joined the outfit willingly enough," he said lightly. "But I had a reason."

"What was it?" She was eager.

"I can't tell you. Anyway, I won't. Some time, perhaps. In a way, it concerns yourself."

Her eyes widened and she flushed slightly. "In that case, I don't suppose I should ask." Her hauteur returned to some extent. Then a frightened look came into her eyes as she looked over Lane's shoulder.

He turned quickly and saw Will and Frank French striding toward them.

CHAPTER IX — THE RAID.

Lane turned his back on the approaching pair and smiled at Joan, whose chin was tilted in defiance. "Will doesn't like the idea of my meeting you," he said. She flashed him a friendly look of understanding as the two brothers came up.

"I thought I told you to stay home," Will French said harshly, addressing the girl and ignoring Lane.

"I didn't promise," said Joan curtly.

"You're going back," wrathfully said Will, while Frank looked at Lane with an amused smile.

"Who said so besides yourself?" said Joan saucily.

Will bit his lip and shook his head, raging inwardly. It was plain to Lane that the brothers had no control over this willful sister. Will French's manner showed that he knew he was beaten at the start, and Lane surmised that Joan held the upper hand because the brothers had permitted her to accompany

them on previous occasions. Still, it was no business for a girl to be mixed up in and French was right in ordering her home.

"Now listen to reason, Joan," said Will, striving to control his temper and his voice. "This business isn't like some of the jaunts you've been on. We've got to scatter an' scatter fast after—after our work is done. You'd only be in the way. Don't you see?"

"I've got a good horse," replied the girl, "an' I can ride as well as any of the rest of you. Besides, I haven't had any excitement in months. Suppose they did run across me; would they think I had anything to do with your schemes?"

"But don't you see, Joan, you would be in the way," Will pleaded. And then, seeing the uncompromising look in her eyes, he lost his temper, which, under the circumstances, was the worst thing he could do.

"You've got to go back, that's all," he said in an angry voice. "If you won't go willingly, I'll have you taken back! You can make the ranch before noon—or you can wait an' go tonight. I guess that would be best. But you've just got to go, Joan."

"Oh, let it go at that, then," said the girl, turning away.

For the first time Will French seemed to notice the presence of Lane. He scowled heavily at the new recruit and seemed on the point of making a sharp remark, but held the words on the tip of his tongue. In fact, he was so exasperated that he was not sure of himself.

"Come on back to camp," he said gruffly, and he and Lane started back through the trees to the rendezvous, leaving Frank with his sister.

Although the sun was mounting steadily, throwing its burning rays into the seething desert, it was cool in the mountain retreat of the outlaws. Will French paused before one of the cabins and faced Lane. "I'd take it as a favor if you'd forget about this business, and stay away from that place down there," he said, looking Lane straight in the eyes.

"My memory can be poor when necessary," Lane replied, "an' I've no intention of going down there again—unless your sister should send for me, which, of course, isn't likely."

Will French gave him a queer look and turned into the cabin. "I'm going to get some sleep," he said. "We'll be forty-eight hours without it, startin' tonight."

Lane made no comment. He went into another cabin where some of the men were having coffee and a bite of breakfast, and took his morning meal with

them. He spoke to no one and none spoke to him. He was wondering if Joan really would go home. Her last words, "Let it go at that," had been uttered in a tone which conveyed a meaning to him that was apparently lost on Will French. In his heart, Lane did not believe the girl would go home. Her wild, adventurous spirit was roused. She might pretend to go back, but she would not. Of this, Lane felt certain. Had he been sure that Joan would go home, he would have laid his plans for his own escape from the desperate enterprise. He walked for a time after the scanty meal and then sought a bunk in the cabin where Will French was sleeping.

Raysville was an old mining camp that had a past, a present, and a future, so far as actual mining operations were concerned. It had first been a silver camp of small proportions, abandoned when the price of silver "dropped into the sump," as the saying went. But several old prospectors who had never lost faith in the camp kept one or two of the mines working on a small scale and continued to prospect. Then had come the discovery of gold-bearing quartz; the camp became a gold proposition, flowered into a boom overnight, and now was the most prosperous town in the Wizards, with prospects of even greater prosperity as the veins widened and the ore became more and more plentiful.

The Miners' State Bank had been established and carried large surpluses of cash against the regular pay days. There were several stores and cafes, two

hotels, other business houses, and many resorts, the largest of which was The Golden Nugget. This was both a drink emporium and a gambling place. It was the chief rendezvous of miners, prospectors, professional gamblers, hangers-on and the riffraff of a booming mining camp. Large amounts of cash were carried in the safe in the front office against the no-limit games which were played at the tables, the roulette wheels, craps, and blackjack. Everything was cash in Raysville, which was the lure that attracted Brule and the band of which the French boys were members.

It lacked an hour of midnight when a cavalcade of riders filed slowly down a trail perilously steep above Raysville. The trail wound through the timber, along the rims of precipices, across treacherous shale slopes, and ever downward. It was little more than a game trail and used only by occasional prospectors. There were no mines or habitations near it, and it let Brule and his band into the timber on either side of Raysville unobserved.

Shortly afterward there was a faint glimmer of light in the bank, which was situated near the upper end of the street. Behind the bank were horses and men. A rear window was open. Down the street, in the trees behind The Golden Nugget, were other horses and men. The street was quiet, but the resorts were booming.

Lane was with the men behind The Nugget. Neff was in charge of this unit of the raiding band—a nervous, shifty-eyed man who was plainly suspicious, or jealous, of Lane. Lane knew that any attempt on his part to make a break would draw a bullet from this lieutenant of Brule's.

Will and Frank were with the men at the bank. Frank had come into the rendezvous camp at nightfall and had told his brother that Joan had gone. Lane had overheard him. "Sloped before I woke up," Frank had said. "Fiddle an' all. For once she's showing some sense." And Lane had smiled to himself, for he had not believed that Joan had gone home. But now, after the trip down the dangerous trail at the head of the canyon, he had his doubts. No girl would be likely to try to negotiate such a trail alone at night, and to enter town by the main road from the foothills would be inviting recognition.

Lane was turning these thoughts over in his mind when a man came hurrying around the corner of the building. Neff's gun was out in a flash, but Brule's huge form was readily recognized in the moonlit space between the clump of trees and the rear of the resort.

"All right, Neff, we're goin' to take 'em both together," said the chief in a guarded tone. "When you hear my whistle in front, go in the back way with the bunch an' go fast. Drive 'em back against the wall an' keep 'em reaching. Lane,

you edge up front toward the office. I've picked some men to clean the table drawers. We'll go down the road afterward."

That was all. It already was understood that they would gather at a town near the border in a week's time. Brule slipped away, and Neff and the others held their guns in readiness. Lane reluctantly drew his weapon. Then the old spirit of reckless adventure seized him. He forgot his qualms in these moments of waiting. Joan could not very well censure him for taking part in an enterprise in which her brothers were engaged. Nor could Will or any one else at the rancho object to his seeing her after this. He would make straight for the ranch after——

A sharp whistle sounded in the street in front of the resort. "C'mon!" Neff commanded, and they started on the run for the rear door of The Nugget. But the door proved to be bolted on the inside. Neff swore horribly and turned back against the others. "The front!" he shouted. But at this moment the bolt was shot back, the door opened, and several men plunged out, running full into the midst of the outlaws. At once there was a melee, the outlaws flailing right and left with their heavy gun barrels.

"Let 'em go," yelled Neff, leaping inside.

Lane and the others followed him. In the short space during which they had been delayed, Brule's men had started operations. The place was in a turmoil, with Brule, brandishing two guns, roaring orders; his men, covering the crowd, were driving them back against the wall. The hands of the players and bar patrons were elevated. Tables and chairs were overturned in the scramble to reach the wall; men fell, and curses came thick and fast. Already two of the outlaws were emptying the money drawers of the poker tables. Another leaped over the bar to secure the bank notes and gold in the money boxes there. And from up the street came a dull rumble of thunder as a blast shattered the doors of the bank's vault.

Lane slipped toward the front, where Brule was herding the white-faced proprietor of the place into the office to open the safe. At this moment a shot rang out at the lower end of the long room. The glass partition of the office was shattered a scant foot from Brule's head. The outlaw whirled and emptied the gun in his left hand. Two men in the line against the wall went down, shot in the back.

Lane cried out in protest involuntarily. A gambler shook a derringer out of his sleeve and shot at him twice. Both shots missed. And then the whole double line of men seemed to turn at once. Some dropped to the floor to be out of the way of flying lead; guns appeared as if by magic, and the battle was on.

Bullets shattered the hanging lamps, the dripping oil took fire, one lamp exploded. The other lamps, ranged along the wall in reflector sockets, cast a weird, yellow glow over the scene. Men took refuge behind overturned tables. Several of the outlaws went down before the fire of the intended victims. Lane leaped over the bar to safety. Brule was roaring inarticulate orders from the office, where the owner of The Golden Nugget was working with feverish fingers at the combination dial of the safe.

There was firing outside now, signifying that the outlaws had left the bank and were in the street. Lane's practiced ear caught the difference in the reports of weapons. "Rifles!" he ejaculated. "The miners are out!" And then a tall, stoop-shouldered figure appeared in the front entrance. It was Sheriff McClure.

Brule came running out of the office through a door that opened into the bar. In one hand was a sack and the other held a gun. He whipped his gun hand over to shoot at the sheriff, but at this moment Lane, as if by accident, bumped against him and the shot went wild.

Brule staggered back, cursing, and deliberately turned his gun on Lane. For the first time that night, Lane shot. Brule's weapon went spinning to the floor. Into Lane's mind came the thought of flight. The bank robbery might have succeeded, but the holdup of the Nugget had failed!

His gaze flashed to the rear and his heart seemed to stop beating. Standing at the entrance to the narrow hallway leading to the private rooms was a slight figure in worn riding togs, masked!

He went over the bar in a twinkling with bullets whistling in his ears. Some one was shooting out the lights along the walls and the remaining outlaws were fighting their way toward the front doors, presumably to aid their comrades in the street. Lane plunged into the melee, swinging his gun right and left and striking out with his left fist. He caught sight of a flashing star on a man's vest which showed he was a deputy. The man was making for Joan. Lane could see men crowding into the passage behind her, saw her turn and then whirl about, gun in hand, as the deputy made a lunge for her. His leap fell short and Joan's gun cracked above the uproar. The deputy went down. Then Lane reached the girl.

"Follow me!" he commanded.

At this juncture the last of the lights went out. Lane grasped the girl by the arm with his left hand and drew her with him as he threw himself against the crowd behind her, using his pistol barrel as a bludgeon. In this way he literally battered his way to the rear door and outside.

"Take off that mask; it makes you a target," Lane ordered. He did not wait for her to comply but jerked at the mask, breaking the cords which held it. Even in that fleeting moment in the moonlight, he had time to see the wide-eyed look Joan gave him. It was not terror and it was not fright. It was more a look of puzzled astonishment. But there was no time for delay. A bullet cut between them, to bury itself in the rear wall of the resort. The miners were firing rifles from their cabins on the canyon slopes. Lane dragged Joan toward the clump of trees as men came running toward them.

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CHAPTER X — CAPTURE.

In planning the raid on Raysville, Brule had made one fatal mistake. This mistake was the choosing of the hour before midnight for the start of operations. Raysville had not yet gone to bed when the outlaws swept into town. The street had been fairly well lighted and, while apparently deserted, the resorts were teeming with life. Moreover, the denizens of the town were far from

tame. The camp had drawn rough characters from all along the border: men who would use fists or firearms at the drop of the hat. Brule had been actuated in selecting the early hour because he wanted several hours for flight. Now, with the safe of the Golden Nugget rifled, and much of the money taken from the cash drawers of the gaming tables, the hour of flight had arrived.

In the darkness in the gambling hall it was impossible to tell friend from foe. The firing ceased and the crowd surged toward the wide front doors, which crashed outward with the impact of scores of struggling men. Pandemonium raged in the street, with riderless horses dashing about, mounted men charging the crowd, guns winking like fireflies against the shadows. As Brule and the other outlaws emerged from the resort, they caught horses and mounted, or ran around the building to get their horses which had been left in the trees. And Brule, still clinging to his bag of plunder, headed the dash for the road out of town.

Lane and Joan reached the shelter of the trees with bullets clipping the leaves over their heads. The man left with the horses had been unable to keep them together and they had scattered.

"Where'd you leave your horse?" Lane asked Joan.

She pointed up along the slope. "Did—did I kill him?" she asked.

"I don't know," returned Lane sharply. "An' this is no time to be thinking about that. Lead me to your horse, an' hurry!"

At this juncture the outlaws coming from the front of the building clashed with the men who were running after Lane and the girl. The night became hideous with shouts, yells, and curses. A man came plunging into the timber. It was Neff. He stopped short when he made out Lane.

A curse came from his lips. "Brule would have got McClure if it hadn't been for you, you double-crosser!" he shouted hoarsely.

His gun whipped up, but Lane's weapon spit fire from his hip a fraction of a second before Neff's shot went wild. Neff wavered and fell backward, full length, under the trees, the moonlight spattering his still form with silver spangles through the interlaced branches.

Lane again grasped Joan's arm and they hurried along the slope to where the girl's horse was tethered to a sapling. Lane jerked the tie-knot loose and ordered her into the saddle. The shooting now came from down the road, where residents of the lower town were trying to stop the flight of the outlaws. Escape in that direction was impossible. Lane had no horse. To attempt to make the street in hopes of catching a mount, or to remain and search the slope, was out of the question. There was but one thing to do.

"It's the upper trail," he told Joan. "Did you come in that way?"

The girl shook her head. "I came up from below," she answered.

"I'll lead you out," he said quickly, and started afoot along the slope for the perilous trail at the head of the canyon.

They reached the foot of the trail and started up. Lane warned the girl to let her horse have its own way on the narrow path above precipices and across the shale slopes, for the animal's instinct could be trusted to keep it on the trail. Joan now was taking his orders willingly. She asked only one question, and that concerned her brothers.

"I didn't see them after we split up in town," said Lane. "They went to the bank. But they had plenty of chance for a getaway."

This seemed to satisfy her and they went on up the ridge. But escape was not to be so easy, as Lane discovered almost immediately. The whole camp had been roused by the commotion at The Nugget. The word spread quickly that bandits were holding up the town. From cabins, boarding houses and mine bunk houses, men swarmed with whatever weapons they possessed, eager for a fight, for a chance to shoot and kill! And some of these, coming down from a mine at the head of the gulch, spotted the pair going up the steep trail. They followed

with shouts and yells and occasional shots, scrambling up the trail after the fugitives.

Lane stopped at a wide place in the trail and motioned Joan on. "Follow this trail to the top of the ridge," he told her; "then you can go north an' down an' hit the trail for home. You can't get lost because you can't get off this——"

"What about yourself?" she demanded.

"I'm goin' to hold this crowd until you're well away," he said. "An' you better get goin' or I won't be able to do it."

"I'll stick with you," she flashed. "Two guns are better than one."

"I'm not goin' to do it with my gun!" he cried. "Go on! Don't you see you'll get both of us caught?"

He slapped her horse on the flank and the animal started ahead. Then Lane scrambled up the steep slope above the trail and picked his way along to where the trail narrowed above a cliff. Boulders were plentiful and, as the vanguard of the pursuers hove in view, Lane sent a boulder hurtling down the slope and across the trail. The men coming up stopped in their tracks as another boulder followed the first, breaking off a portion of the edge of the trail. They turned and

crowded back upon each other. One man slipped, lost his footing, and went over the cliff with a horrible cry. The others started pellmell back down the dangerous path.

Lane's own position was extremely perilous. He had scarcely any footing and was holding to a cedar bush with his left hand. But he had an inspiring idea. It was to dislodge a huge boulder above him and send it crashing down to demolish the trail over the cliff and thus effectively prevent further pursuit.

Slowly, inch by inch, he succeeded in getting up the slope behind the great boulder, which was balanced on an outcropping of granite. He clung to a bush and pushed with his feet. The big stone rocked. He pushed again to give it momentum and then made the supreme effort. The boulder rolled off its base and plunged downward, cutting a wide gash in the trail and dropping hundreds of feet to the base of the cliffs below.

But with the sudden loosening of the rock, Lane's full weight tugged at the bush and it came out by the roots. He slid downward in the path the rushing boulder had made. He threw out his arms, grasping at whatever came within reach, digging his fingers into the dirt, bruising them and breaking his nails on loose rocks. But he stayed the speed of his slide and with a twist of his body succeeded in rolling to one side, so that he slipped down on the trail and came

to a stop with an arm and a leg over the edge. He drew back and lay on his back, panting and looking up at the cold stars. For some moments he experienced a feeling of weakness because of his narrow escape.

Meanwhile, his predicament was observed by the men below. With cries of triumph, they started back up the trail. Lane got to his feet, his hand whipping to his holster. It was empty. His gun was somewhere in the dirt above. He looked about quickly. To attempt the steep slope from that spot was suicide. The great boulder had cut a deep gash in the trail and the gash was filled with loose gravel; also it sloped downward. To cross to the farther side of the trail was, therefore, out of the question.

Lane smiled. At least there would be no pursuit of Joan. He walked down the trail toward the mob. Fierce yells greeted him. He held up a hand.

"Just turn around an' march back," he said in a loud, clear voice. "I'll follow you, an' I'm unarmed." He raised his hands and turned around slowly so the men could see his empty holster.

The men were undecided, yet what Lane suggested seemed the only thing to do. "All right," said the leader, "but if you try any tricks you'll find out that I've got eyes in the back of my head."

"An' a gun in your hand," said Lane sarcastically; "that ought to be enough."

They went down the trail, with the men continually twisting their necks to keep an eye on their captive. When they reached the floor of the canyon they spread about him and walked down the middle of the street. There were cries from both sides of the street and soon a crowd was following. "They've got another one," Lane heard a man shout. It told him that some of the outlaws had been taken—perhaps all of them. It made him uneasy because of Will and Frank French. He hoped the brothers had got away. "He had a boy with him," was another sally from his captors that disturbed Lane.

They turned in at a building at the lower end of the street. Here was a large crowd and there were ominous mutterings, cries, and threats as Lane was led inside. He saw Sheriff McClure at a desk, and several others, evidently special deputies, standing about. This, as Lane knew at sight, was the Raysville jail.

When McClure saw Lane, he rose from his desk and stepped into another room. "Bring him along," he told one of the deputies. "I want to speak to him alone."

This seemed to excite some curiosity, but Lane speedily found himself alone with Sheriff McClure in a little private office. "Sit down," said the sheriff, indicating a chair on the opposite side of the desk.

Lane sat down as directed and drew tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket.

"Who was that boy with you?" asked the official in his soft, drawling, tired voice.

"What makes you think I had a boy with me?" Lane countered. He knew, of course, that Joan French, with her trim, slender figure, soft cheeks, and smooth chin, could readily be mistaken for a boy.

"I have eyes an' can see," said the sheriff. "What's your name?"

"Lane," came the reply after a few moments of hesitation. Then: "You got anything in particular against me, sheriff?"

"I have something very particular against all who were in with Brule on this deal," replied McClure. "You came in here, blew the bank safe, an' made off with a good bunch of cash besides what was taken at The Nugget. It might even have been worse if I hadn't happened up this way just by chance, arriving when the festivities were at full blast. If I had been half an hour sooner, nothing would have happened. How'd you come to join up with Brule, or did he send for you?"

"He didn't send for me, which is about all I've got to say along that line," Lane replied.

McClure leaned over the desk, tapping its surface with the fingers of both hands. "Peculiar thing," he said, looking up suddenly into Lane's eyes. "You didn't stumble into Brule accidentally when he turned to draw down on me; you did it on purpose."

"What makes you think so, sheriff?" asked Lane pleasantly.

"As I said before, I have eyes an' can see," replied the sheriff in a complaining voice. "You didn't want Brule to plug me, for some reason I do not know but would like to know; an' I didn't want to plug Brule because I wanted to capture him. So you helped things all aroun'."

"Did you capture him?" Lane asked casually, affecting little interest.

"Not tonight," the sheriff confessed. "You're the only important man we got." He took a cigar out of his vest pocket and bit off the end.

"Me!" Lane exclaimed. "Important? Where'd you get tangled up with that notion, sheriff?"

McClure calmly put the match to his cigar and puffed slowly before he replied. "You're a stranger aroun' here an' you don't belong to that gang. You've just joined up. You're no bank robber or holdup man, an' I don't think you're an outlaw. If you was, you'd never have bumped into Brule tonight an' then shot the gun out of his hand instead of givin' it to him in the heart when he drew down on you. You had some reason for goin' in with the gang, but it doesn't look to me like it was just to make some money out of a robbery. You had another reason. That's why you're important. An' that boy you helped out shot one of my deputies. That's another reason why you're important."

Lane laughed. "You're mistaken, sheriff," he said, sobering. "It wasn't the—the boy who shot your man, it was myself. I don't want the boy to take the blame for something he didn't do."

The sheriff nodded amicably. "That makes you, an' the boy, too, all the more important—you wanting to take the blame, I mean. I'm goin' to hold you in hopes that you'll see the light an' talk, an' I'm giving you my word that you won't lose anything by it." He rose and went to the door, indicating to Lane that he was to follow.

The sheriff led the way through another door into the cell room. "I want this fellow kept away from the rest of 'em," he told the turnkey. "Put him in the

scrub room."

Lane was led to a small cell at the end of the tier which was used as a storeroom for pails, mops, brooms, and other cleaning implements. The barred door clanged shut after him, a key grated in the lock, and he found himself alone.

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CHAPTER XI — ESCAPE.

Lane sat down on the bench, which was littered with old newspapers and magazines. There was no bunk in the place, for it was not intended as a regular cell. He was thinking of the sheriff's statement to the effect that he, Lane, was the only important prisoner taken. That meant that the French brothers had got away; for, had they been taken, the sheriff certainly would have considered them important prisoners.

It was also news to learn that, to some extent at least, the bank robbery had been successful. The outlaws who had got away would meet in the town near the border and divide the spoils. But what about those who had been captured? Would Brule find a way to get them out on bail? Would he even try? And if they did get out on bail, would they dare to show up for trial? Lane smiled grimly. He suspected what would happen.

But Joan was safe and Lane was satisfied. When he got out, she could not refuse to see him and to talk to him. She had, of course, done a foolhardy thing, and she was responsible for his present predicament; but she would never get a word of reproof from him. And he had nearly lost his life in protecting her from pursuit by rolling down that huge boulder. He wondered vaguely if she had seen. Something told him she had paused up the trail to see what he was going to do. If that was the case, she had seen plenty. It gave Lane a thrill of intense satisfaction to suspect that Joan had seen him risk his life for her. For the first time he confessed to himself that he had more than a mere ordinary liking for the girl. And this thrilled him, too.

He rose and began pacing back and forth, busy with his thoughts. It was some time before he showed any particular interest in his surroundings. Then he began to look about him. The light was dim, as there were only two lamps in the cell room and these were on the front wall near the corridor. In the gloom he

could vaguely discern the forms of mops, brooms, and a variety of other things. It was not until he looked up that he became interested.

About three feet below the high ceiling was a window. This window was about four feet wide and two feet deep. That there should be a window was not surprising, yet Lane looked at it from every possible angle from below. Then he sat down on the bench and stared straight ahead. He had good reason for his interest, for the window was not barred! Evidently, the room he was in had never been intended to hold prisoners; possibly, for the building was practically new, the bars were yet to be installed. But the fact remained that the window was free of bars and offered a means of egress if he could reach it.

Lane immediately began to consider means of getting up to the window. The wall which separated him from the other cells and the rear wall were smoothly plastered and offered no foothold of any description. The mops and broom offered no solution. He paced about restlessly, puzzling his brain. Then came an idea.

He placed the bench upright against the wall under the window. But the next problem was to get up on the end of the bench. He tried standing on a pail and pulling himself up, but his weight brought the bench out from the wall. He tried with the bench slanting, but saw that even if he got up on its end he would

be unable to reach the window. He put the bench back in its place and sat down in disgust.

The jail was quiet, the other inmates apparently having gone to sleep. Lane nodded himself as he sat on the bench, and then he was suddenly wide awake and alert, staring at the wall under the window. There, writhing like a brown snake against the white plaster, a rope dangled.

Lane could hardly believe his eyes. He looked at the rope stupidly for several seconds. Then he sprang forward and grasped it, tested it with his weight. It held firm. In a flash, he understood. Some one had thrown the rope through the window and it was secured outside. Moreover, it was a cow rope and had seen service. Lane grasped it and went up hand over hand. He reached the window and slipped through, clinging to the sill with his hands. Then he dropped.

To his surprise the drop was not so far as he had anticipated, for he landed on a high pile of dirt left during the construction of the building. He clambered down from this heap, pulling down the rope. A soft whistle came from the trees some little distance behind the jail, and when he hurried over Joan French stepped out to meet him. Lane could only stare in dumb astonishment.

"I didn't know it would be you," the girl said hurriedly in a guarded voice. "I saw the open window up there an' took a chance. I figured somebody would

come out. I'm glad it was you. Is Will or Frank in there?"

Lane shook his head. "I don't believe so," he said. "But how did you get here, an' why did you come back?"

"I had to find out some way about my brothers. I didn't know how I was going to find out till I saw that window. Then I took a chance on the rope. It was too risky to call. I went up that awful trail an' raced around to where I could get down into the canyon again. I saw what happened up there on the trail." She paused, then added: "You'd better come with me, for I know where there are some horses."

She touched his hand and started down the canyon in the shelter of the trees along the creek. Raysville had quieted down. They crossed the deserted street at the lower end of town and plunged into the timber on a steep slope. Soon they reached the horses which had wandered there after breaking away from behind The Nugget. Lane gave a peculiar whistle and repeated it several times as he moved about the horses. Finally, he got an answering whinny, and in a few moments he had found his own mount.

"Pure luck," he murmured; "an', Joan, I don't know whether to call you a brick, or an angel, or just a foolish little girl." He took one of her hands and they

walked up the slope a short distance to where Joan's horse was tethered. There they mounted.

"I'm going to take you to a place where you can hang out for a spell," said Joan. "They'll take it for granted, I reckon, that you went the easiest way—by the road."

They followed the slope by a zigzagging game trail, with Joan in the lead, and Lane noticed for the first time the small case on the rear of the girl's saddle which contained her violin. When they reached the top of the ridge above the canyon, Joan waited for Lane to bring up alongside and then handed him her gun.

"You'd better take this," she said, "an' you needn't be in any big hurry about returning it."

Lane understood and took the weapon. "I told the sheriff that I shot that deputy," he said, "so don't forget if it should come up any time. He saw you an' he thinks you're a boy."

"Is he—dead?" asked the girl, her tone sharp with anxiety.

Lane shook his head. "No," he answered cheerfully. "If he had been dead, or even seriously wounded, the sheriff would have mentioned it."

"We'll go on," said Joan, and they started, pushing their way higher and higher into the mountains.

With the first gray light of dawn streaking the eastern horizon, they came to a cup in the shoulder of a high peak. It was a natural bowl in the mountain, with a waterfall at its upper rim and an entrance by means of a narrow creek on its lower side. The bottom of the bowl was a flower-splashed meadow, with a clump of firs in the center.

"We can stay here today," said Joan. "Tonight I will show you a trail that leads over the Wizards and down to the border desert. They may come up this way, but I don't think any one except my brothers an' I know of this place."

"I will try an' find Will an' Frank," said Lane as they dismounted. "They'll have to be warned. Joan, some of those fellows McClure captured are sure to talk to get out of it easier. They know they haven't a chance in jail, an' I know Brule well enough to say that he won't help them. Will an' Frank should not turn up at that rendezvous in the south."

Joan looked at him soberly. "It was bad business when my brothers got mixed up with that Brule," she said slowly. "They would have been better off to have kept on their own."

Lane unsaddled the horses and opened his slicker pack. In it was the package of emergency rations brought from the ranch. They ate beside the stream in the cool shade of the firs with the sun swinging up in the east casting its glory on the towering peaks.

"Joan," said Lane when they had finished and he had built a cigarette, "I'm going over the range to hunt for Will an' Frank. I'll find them somewhere an' talk cold turkey to them. I reckon Will has sense enough to listen to reason. Then I'm coming back to the ranch to see you. After that, the sheriff can do what he pleases."

The girl was silent, but she was looking at him surreptitiously. If Lane had caught the glow in her eyes at that moment he would have learned much.

"You saved the sheriff's life last night," she said in a low voice. "He won't be forgetting that. It happened just as I came in."

"Maybe I saved Brule's instead," said Lane with a wry smile.

"Lane, why did you hook up with that outfit?" Joan asked, after a short silence.

"Why did you double back an' show up at The Golden Nugget?" he asked.

She looked at him out of troubled eyes. "Because I like the excitement," she replied, and he saw that she spoke the truth. "My brothers have been my only companions almost since I can remember. They taught me to draw an' shoot, an' thought it was fun. But I never turned my gun on any one until last night. I was excited an' when I saw that deputy's star I became frightened. I didn't think the raid was going to be such—such hot stuff. I've trailed along with Will an' Frank for the fun of the thing. I've been sort of a boy at heart. But I can't explain it so you would understand. I'm two persons, I guess."

"I believe I understand," said Lane. "Joan, I know it makes you happy to play your violin an' I like to hear the music you make in the hills. Will you play for me?"

The girl flushed and her eyes sparkled. If Lane had but known it, it was the very thing she wanted to do; the thing that would give her an outlet for her pent-up feelings and soothe her nerves. She took the instrument from its case, made sure of its tuning, tucked it under her chin, and played.

Lane lay upon the grass, looking up at her, fascinated by her soft beauty, the sheen of her hair in the sunlight; charmed and stirred by the enchanting music that flowed from the strings. She played on and on. In her eyes was a dark, mysterious glow, with an occasional spark of fire. There was everything in the notes that swelled and sang and wavered on the faint mountain breeze—hot love, and swift death, the blistering heat of the inferno, and the cool shadows of silent forests, the wind in the pines, rippling brooks, and moonlight. For Joan played of the great desolate wastes of desert, of the black lava hills, of the mountains—of the wide outdoors which she loved. And then a softer note of wistful yearning seemed to come into her music. Lane thrilled at the change of mood. It was almost as if she were conveying a message with her bow.

She stopped suddenly. The violin was lowered and she stood looking up at the towering mountain. Lane could not stifle the impulse that seized him. He rose, stepped to her side, trembling. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

With the kiss, she broke free. Her eyes flashed. "You had no right!" she cried. The bow fell and her hand dropped to her empty holster.

Lane quickly drew the weapon from his own holster and held it out to her on the palm of his hand.

She looked at him steadily and slowly the angry look in her eyes died. "You must never do that again," she said slowly.

"Only with your consent, Joan," he said softly; "and some day you will give it."

Any answer she might have made to this was checked by an exclamation from Lane, who leaped forward, flipping the gun into place in his right hand as a rider came splashing up the creek at the entrance to the bowl. But Lane did not fire, nor did he cover the rider who drew up before them, looking keenly at Joan in her boyish clothes. It was Sheriff McClure.

The official dismounted leisurely. He looked at Lane with a quizzical light in his eyes. "I thought you had a reason for joining up with Brule besides the prospect for loot," he said in his drawling voice of complaint. "You needn't scowl," he went on in sharper tones. "I've known for some time that the young lady, here, had a fancy for these jaunts with Will an' Frank. I knew her last night the moment I saw her. Lane, you threw in with Brule because you expected the girl to be present when things happened, an' you can't deny it!"

Lane was frowning. "Isn't there some way we can leave Joan out of it?" he said curtly. "She was merely out for the—for the excitement of the thing." Joan was looking at him with wide eyes.

"Exactly," nodded the sheriff. "An' one of my deputies has a smashed collar bone, thanks to a bullet from her gun. That's sure exciting."

"You know how it could happen," said Lane. "I don't have to explain to you."

"Nope," said the sheriff, almost cheerfully. "We all know how bullets are sent about their business." He looked sternly at Joan, who was pale but defiant. Then he turned back to Lane. "Did you kill Neff?"

"Yes," Lane replied laconically.

"Not a bad job," drawled McClure. "I suppose he got frisky. Do you know where the gang was to meet for the split?"

"I do," nodded Lane. "But I'm not telling."

"No reason why you should," said the sheriff. "You've got plenty of money to bail yourself out, I take it. One of my official friends up North mentioned you in a letter some time ago. Said you were dangerous but square, an' a wizard with the cards. Name's Lane?"

"That's it," was the answer, accompanied by a scowl.

"The men I captured seem to think you're a double-crosser," the sheriff went on, "but I told them they were probably mistaken. Some of them talked an' I expect to have the whole outfit rounded up an' cooling their heels in jail in less than a week. I had a sneaking hunch that it would be something like this that would wreck Brule. An' when I asked Will at the ranch if he was considering any long rides, he as much as told me so in the look he gave me. I figured it might be Raysville."

"It's kind of you to tell me all this, sheriff," said Lane, "but there's no need of worrying Joan. You want me, an' I'm ready to go. But I'll tell you that I was merely goin' south to warn the gang an' then I was coming back. Don't think I'm asking any clemency. I don't give a dog-gone for you an' your court. But maybe you'll be fair enough to leave Joan out of it."

"I don't care what he does!" Joan exclaimed.

Sheriff McClure nodded approvingly. "Good spirit," he said. "There was some of it in that music you were playin' which steered us over here. You don't have to promise you won't go on any more of these expeditions, because there won't be any more. I'm going to send you home."

"Good!" exclaimed Lane, smiling at Joan. "I'll saddle up, sheriff, an' we'll be on our way!"

When they rode out of the bowl, they were met by several men, and Lane surmised that the sheriff, suspecting that he, Lane, and possibly some of the others had made for the trail over the range, had come up that way. Then, too, the tracks left by their horses could be picked up on the lower slopes.

They rode back down the shoulder of the mountain, down to the lower ridges, down past the point where the trail turned off for Running Wolf Canyon and Raysville. "He's going to take me to the county seat, wherever that is," thought Lane. They rode on to where the trail turned westward and led down the long slopes to the burning floor of the desert and the French rancho. Here the sheriff called a halt. He motioned to the members of the posse to draw back out of earshot. He pointed down the trail, looked Lane steadily in the eye as he spoke:

"You go home with her and stay there until I tell you your next move. There's still a job for you to do."

Lane looked at him in surprise. But the sheriff forestalled a question. He turned to the girl.

"Joan, I hold you responsible for this man. See that he does as I have ordered. He is not to leave the ranch."

A minute later, Lane and Joan were riding down the winding trail toward the desert, where the heat waves shimmered and a dark spot showed the location of the rancho.

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CHAPTER XII — THE LAST JOBS.

In from the blistering, blinding, burning heat of the inferno, Lane and Joan drank long and deep of the cool waters of the rancho spring, while Pedro took the horses in charge. As they walked up the lower patio, old Zeb French came out on the rear porch. He merely glanced at Joan, and then looked searchingly into Lane's eyes. What he saw there caused him to pass a faltering hand over his brow.

Joan went to her room and Lane followed the old man into the big, cool living room. There French sat in his great chair, his gnarled hands lying palm downward on the arms, and listened while Lane smoked and told the story of

the affair in Raysville and the aftermath. When he had finished, Lane rose and stood as if he expected the old man to ask some questions. But none came. Zeb French waved a hand in a gesture of dismissal. He seemed suddenly to have grown very old, and his chin dropped upon his breast.

Lane went to his room, where he took some clean garments from his slicker pack. Then he had a bath and a long siesta, waking with the setting of the sun. Joan was at the supper table. It was a silent meal and at almost every sound from the kitchen Zeb French would start and cock his left ear. His attitude was one of expectation.

After supper Lane walked in the lower patio, smoking. He half expected Joan to come out and join him, but she did not come. She had changed with the return to the rancho. Now she seemed as remote as ever. If the sheriff had not found them in the mountain retreat when he did——

Lane wondered.

Then, from the front of the house, came the strains of Joan's violin. Lane walked around to the front porch, seated himself in a chair there, listened to Joan's playing, while the twilight shadows gathered and deepened into night. For an hour she played—sweet, wonderful music of a different quality than that she had played in the fastnesses of the mountains. Then all was still. Lane

looked into the living room after a time. It was dark and empty. He went back to his room.

Soon he was pacing the patio in the moonlight. "Another job," he muttered to himself. What did the sheriff mean by that? What kind of a job did he have for him? Lane puzzled over this, and over Joan's attitude. Was he still the stranger—the long rider she had hinted that day on the shoulder of Smoky Butte? Had he made no progress after rescuing her in The Nugget and risking his life for her on the treacherous trail above Running Wolf Canyon? She had seen what had happened up there, for she had said so.

His ruminations were terminated by the pound of hoofs. Will and Frank French swept in from the desert. In a few minutes, Will and Lane were sitting in the latter's room and Lane was explaining what happened. Will gave an occasional grunt. He plainly was nervous.

"I've got the bank money," he said when Lane had finished. "I thought I'd be as well off here as anywhere till it came time for the split. McClure hasn't got anything on me. He didn't see me or Frank. Those rats in jail can talk their heads off an' McClure can't prove a thing. I'm goin' to bed."

Lane followed Will French's example. Next day he saw Joan only twice. He and Will and Frank talked. Will would not listen to Lane's suggestion that they

go into the county seat and see Sheriff McClure.

"You fool!" cried Will angrily. "That would mean my giving up my gun, and that would mean——" He broke off, sputtering, and went into the house.

Lane was in the living room after supper, deliberately holding forth in a chair in hopes that Joan would come in. He intended to talk to her this night. His face was rather pale with the firmness of his resolve. Shouts came from the lower patio.

Lane hurried to the dining room as Zeb French came running into the kitchen. The old man took down a Winchester that had rested on pegs above a window. Through the open door in the rear, Lane could see the cause of the trouble. Brule was walking slowly up the patio!

In a trice, Lane had wrested the rifle from Zeb French's clutch and tossed it out the window. Then he strode out upon the back porch and down the steps. Brule's face went black as he saw him. Frank and Will French stood on either side of the steps, watching breathlessly. The old man came out on the porch, croaking hoarsely in an effort to speak. There was a little cry, and Lane knew Joan was with her father.

"C'me on, you double-crossing rat!" cried Brule hoarsely. "Sent 'em after us, eh? Wanted to save your own skin. Well, you haven't done any damage yet. C'me on, you begged for it, now take it!"

The soft silence of the twilight hour was split by the roar of guns. Lane was down, his left hand and right knee on the ground. Smoke curled from his right hip. Brule staggered toward him, arms outflung, his gun hand empty. Then he plunged forward on his face and lay still.

Lane stood motionless, while a sigh came from the spectators. Then Sheriff McClure rode into the patio, dismounted, and walked swiftly to Lane. He looked at the still form of the outlaw leader on the ground at his feet. "That was the job I spoke of yesterday," he said in a grave voice, addressing Lane. "I knew he'd come here." He beckoned to Will French. "Will," he said in his mournful voice, "I'll take the bank money back with me. What Brule got is in his saddle bag. Don't keep me waiting, Will; I have a long ride tonight."

Will French, white-faced, looked the sheriff in the eye. He wet his lips. "And then, sheriff?" he said quietly.

"Are you goin' to take any more long rides, Will?" asked the official.

Will French shook his head impatiently. "This is kid stuff," he said crossly. "Well, if you must have it—no!"

"That's right, Will. Get the bank money. You'll have to come into town later, on a few matters. Maybe we can smooth 'em out. I'm not forgettin' your dad did me a good turn once by dragging me back from the edge of kingdom come. Get the bank money, Will."

Will went into the house for his saddle bag, which contained the plunder taken from the Raysville bank.

Lane looked about and was surprised to find Joan standing behind him. Now the sheriff was speaking to her. "You got him out of jail, little lady—now you take care of him." Joan's cheeks bloomed with roses.

Will French came out of the house and handed over the saddle bag.

Joan had finished playing. She came out on the porch where Lane was sitting in the gathering twilight. He rose and led her down into the cool patio, fragrant with the breath of countless flowers. They walked hand in hand, walked to the far end of the patio. There they stopped. Lane took her hands in his.

"I used to think of you as my gun girl," he said softly, "but Joan, I want to think of you as my sweetheart. I'm not worthy, but there are ways of making a living besides at the green tables. I'd change for you, Joan."

There was a period of tense silence. Then Joan's arms went suddenly about his neck. "Just so your heart doesn't change," she whispered.

The sunset flamed in a last crimson glow; then the twilight cast its purple veil over the golden desert, and over the man and the girl, fast in each other's arms.

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