

Above the Law

by Max Brand, 1892-1944

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In his first western tale, »Above the Law« ... [Faust's] villain, the bandit Black Jim, has the books of Scott, Shakespeare, Poe, Byron, Malory at his bunk. Poetic passages are found in practically every Faust story. These unexpected—and to action-addicts maybe unwelcome—interludes are Faust's invitation to "walk a long distance into the minds of one another" as he states in Evan Evans' »Montana Rides!« where his triumphant hero proclaims, „I feel as if I owned the whole green world.“

Roy Meador, »Frederick Faust, Pulp Writer and Poet«,
Book Source Magazine, July 2005.

Chapter I

Two Thousand Dollars' Reward.

HER eyes were like the sky on a summer night, a color to be dreamed of but never reproduced. From the golden hair to the delicate hands which cupped her chin a flower-like loveliness kept her aloof from her surroundings, like a rare pearl set in base metal. Her companion, young and darkly handsome, crumpled in a hand, scarcely less white than hers, the check which the waiter had left. In the mean time he gazed with some concern at his companion. Her lips stirred; she sighed.

"Two dollars for ham," she murmured. "Can you beat it, Freddie?"

"He sort of sagged when we slipped him the order," answered the dark and distinguished youth. "I guess the hens are only making one-night stands in this country."

"They've got an audience, anyway," she returned, "and that's more than we could draw!"

She opened her purse and passed two bills to him under the table.

"Why the camouflage?" he asked, as he took the money.

"Freddie," she said, "run your glass eye over the men in this joint. If they see you pay for the eats with my money, they'd take you for a skirt in disguise."

A light twinkled for an instant far back in her eyes.

"Take me for a skirt?" said Frederick Montgomery, in his most austere manner. "Say, cutie, lay off on the rough stuff and get human. The trouble with you, La Belle Geraldine, is that you forget your real name is Annie Kerrigan."

Her lazy smile caressed him.

"Freddie," she purred, "you do your dignity bit, the way Charlie Chaplin would do Hamlet."

Mr. Montgomery scowled upon her, but the dollar bills in the palm of his hand changed the trend of his thoughts at once.

"Think of it, Jerry," he groaned, "if we hadn't listened to that piker Delaney, we'd be doing small big-time over the R. and W.!"

"Take it easy, deary," answered La Belle Geraldine, "I've still got a hundred iron men; but that isn't enough to take both of us to civilization."

Montgomery cleared his throat, frowned, and raised his head like a patriot making a death-speech in the third act.

"Geraldine," he said solemnly, "it ain't right for me to sponge on you now. You take the money. It'll get you back to Broadway. As for me—I—I—can go to work in one of the mines with these ruffians!"

La Belle Geraldine chuckled.

"You couldn't do it without make-up, Freddie. And besides, think of spoiling those hands with a pick-handle!"

Mr. Montgomery regarded his tender palms with a rather sad complacency.

"There's no other way out, Jerry. Besides, I can, I can—"

His voice trailed away drearily, and La Belle Geraldine regarded him with the familiar twinkle far back in her eyes.

"You're a born hero, Freddie—on the stage. But we're minus electric lights out here, and the play's no good."

"We're minus everything," declared Freddie with heat, overlooking the latter part of her speech. "This joint hasn't even got a newspaper in it, unless you call this rag one!"

He pulled out a crumpled paper, a single sheet poorly printed on both sides. Geraldine took it and regarded it with languid interest.

"The funny thing," she muttered, as she read, "is that I sort of like this rube gang out here, Freddie."

"Like them?" snorted her companion, as he shook down his cuffs and tightened his necktie. "Say, Jerry, you're talking in your sleep. Wake up and get next to yourself! Pipe the guy in the corner piling fried potatoes on his knife with a chunk of bread."

She turned her head.

"Kind of neat action, all right," she said critically. "That takes real courage, Freddie. If his hand slipped, he'd cut his throat. Don't be so sore on them. As parlor snakes, they aren't in your class, but don't spend all your time looking at the stage set. Watch the show and forget the background, Freddie. These boys may eat with knives and get a little too familiar with their revolvers, but they strike me as being a hundred percent men."

"You always were a nut, Jerry," yawned Montgomery. "For my part, give me the still small voice, but not the wilderness. I can see all the rough nature I want in the Central Park Zoo."

He pushed back his chair.

"Wait a minute, Freddie. Hold the curtain while I play the overture. I've got an idea. Listen to this!"

She spread out the Snider Gulch Clarion and read:

"Attention, men of Snider Gulch, it's up to us! The citizens of Three Rivers have organized to rid the mountains of Black Jim. Prominent miners of that town have placed two thousand dollars on deposit, and offered it for the capture of the bandit, dead or alive. Men, is Snider Gulch

going to be left behind by a jerk-water shanty village like Three Rivers? No! Let's get together. If Three Rivers can offer two thousand dollars for the capture of Black Jim, Snider Gulch can offer three thousand easy. We've got to show Three Rivers that we're on the map!"

"How's that for a line of talk, Freddie?"

"What's the point?" he queried. "What do you get out of that monologue?"

"Wait a minute, the drums are still going out in the orchestra and your cue hasn't come yet; but before I get through I'm going to ring up the curtain on a three-act melodrama that'll fill the house and give the box office insomnia."

She went on with the reading.

"We can't expect to land Black Jim in a hurry. The reward money will probably get covered with cobwebs before it's claimed. The men who get it will have their hands full, that's certain. If they can even find his hiding-place, they will be doing their share of work.

"There are a number of theories about the way he works. Some people think that he lives either in Snider Gulch or Three Rivers and does his hold-ups on the side. No man has ever seen his face because of the black mask he wears over his eyes. All we know is that his hair is black and that he always rides a roan horse. But that ought to be enough to identify him.

"Some hold that he hides in some gulch with a lot of other outlaws. They don't think he leads a gang, because he always works alone, but they believe that other gunmen have found his hiding-place and are living near him. If that is the case, and Black Jim can be found in his home, we will clean out the bandits who have given our town a black name.

"If Black Jim is caught, he will surely hang. He hasn't killed anyone yet, but he's wounded nine or ten, and if he's ever pressed hard, there's sure to be a lot of bloodshed. However, it's up to the brave men of Snider Gulch to take the chance. If they get him they'll probably get the rest of the gun-fighters who have been sticking up stages (which is Black Jim's specialty), and robbing and killing lone miners and prospectors, which is the long suit of the rest of the crowd.

"In conclusion, all we have to say is that the men who gets the money for Black Jim's capture will earn it, and our respect along with it."

She dropped the paper.

"Now do you see, Freddie?"

"I'm no psychic wonder, Jerry," he answered with some irritation. "How can I tell what act you're thinking of? Wait a minute!"

He gaped at her with sudden astonishment.

"Say, Jerry," he growled, "have you got a hunch that I'm going to go out and catch this man-eating Black Jim?"

She broke into musical laughter.

"Freddie," she said, when she could speak again. "I'd as soon send you to capture the bandit as I'd send a baby with a paper knife to capture a machine gun. No, deary, I know you want to get out of here, but I don't want you to start east in a coffin. It costs too much!"

"Slip it to me easy, Jerry," he said, "or I'll get peeved."

"Don't make me nervous," she mocked. "I don't ask you to do anything rough except to put on clothes like the ones these fellows around here are wearing— heavy boots, overalls, broad-brimmed hat, red bandanna around the neck."

He stared at her without comprehension.

"Do you think they'll pay to see me in an outfit like that?"

"They ought to, and it's my idea to make them. It's a nice little bit for us both, Freddie. First act starts like this. Stage set: A western mining town, Three Rivers. Enter the lead—a girl, stunning blonde, wears corduroy walking skirt."

Montgomery grinned but still looked baffled.

"You hate yourself all right," he said, "but lead on the action."

"Nobody knows why the girl is there, and nobody cares, because they don't ask questions in a mining town."

"Not even about the theater," groaned Montgomery.

"Shut up, Freddie," cut in La Belle Geraldine, "you spoil the scene with your monologue stunts. I say, the swell blonde appears and buys a seat on the stage which starts that afternoon, running towards Truckee. She kids the driver along a little and he lets her sit on the seat beside him. As soon as she gets planted there she begins to talk—let me see—yes, she begins to hand out a swift line of chatter about what she can do with a revolver. Then she shows him a little nickel-plated revolver which she carries with her. He asks her to show off her skill, but she says 'Nothing stirring, Oscar.' Finally they go around a curve and out rides a masked bandit on a roan horse. Everybody on the stage holds up their arms as soon as he comes out with his gun leveled."

"How do you know they would?" said Montgomery.

"Because they always do," answered Geraldine. "Nobody thinks of making a fight when a masked man on a roan horse appears, because they know it's Black Jim, who can shoot the core out of an apple at five hundred yards, or something like that. Well, they all hold up their hands except the girl, who raises her revolver and fires, and though she used a blank cartridge the gun jumps out of the grip of the bandit as if a bullet hit it. Then he holds up his hands and everybody in the stage cheers, and the girl takes the bandit prisoner. The stage turns around and carries them back to Three Rivers.

"The people of the town come to look at Black Jim—"

"And they see I'm not the guy they want. Then the game's blown."

"Not a hope," said Jerry. "They don't know anything about this man-killer except the color of his horse. They'll take you for granted."

"Sure," groaned Montgomery, "and hang me to the nearest tree, what?"

"Take it easy, Freddie. There's some law around here. You just keep your face shut after they take you. They'll wait to try you the next day, anyway. That'll give me time to cash in the reward. I'll be fifty miles east before they get wise. The next morning when they come in to stick a rope on your neck, you simply light a cigarette and tell them it's all a mistake. Let 'em go to Snider Gulch to the hotel and they can find a hundred people to recognize you as a ham actor. Tell them you were merely trying a little act of your own when you stuck up the stage, and that your partner flashed the gun from the driver's seat. Say, kid, the people of Three Rivers will see the laugh is on them, and they'll buy you a ticket to Denver just to get rid of you. I'll meet you there, and then we'll trot on to Broadway, savvy? It's a dream!"

"A nightmare," growled Montgomery, though light entered his face; "but still—"

"Well?"

"Jerry, I begin to think it wouldn't be such a hard thing to get away with this! But what if you couldn't get me out of the town? What if they started to lynch me without waiting for the law?"

"That's easy," smiled Geraldine. "Then I step out and tell them it's simply one grand joke. All we would have to be sorry about is the money we spent on your horse and clothes and gun. It's a chance, Freddie, but it's a chance that's worth taking. Two thousand dollars reward!"

Montgomery's eyes hardened.

"Jerry," he whispered, "every stage that leaves Three Rivers has a lot of pure gold in the boot. Why not play the bandit part legitimate and grab the gold? It's a lot simpler, and there's no more risk."

Geraldine studied him curiously.

"You've got the makings of a fine crook, Freddie. It's in your eye now."

He colored and glanced away.

"It's no go, deary. If we cheat these miners with my little game, at least we know that the money comes only from the rich birds who can afford to put up a reward. But if we grab the cash in the boot, how can we tell we aren't taking the bread and jam out of the mouth of some pick-swinger with a family to support?"

She finished with a smile, but there was a suggestion of hardness in her voice.

"Jerry," he answered, "you're certainly fast in the bean. I'd go a ten-spot to a Canadian dime that you could make up with one hand and darn stockings with the other. We'll do it your way if you insist. It'll be a great show,"

"Right you are, Freddie. You've got the face for the act."

They had to spread a hundred dollars over a horse, a revolver, and Montgomery's clothes. He spent most of the day shopping and at night came home with the necessary roan, a tall animal which was cheapened by bad ring-bones. His clothes; except the hat and boots, were very inexpensive, and he managed to buy a secondhand revolver for six dollars.

While he made these purchases, La Belle Geraldine, now registered at the "hotel" as Annie Kerrigan, opened a conversation with the girl who worked in the store. She proved diffident at first, with an envious eye upon Jerry's hat with its jaunty feather curled along the side; but in the end La Belle's smile thawed the cold.

"She handed me the frosty eye," reported Jerry to Montgomery that evening, "until I put her wise on some millinery stunts. After that it was easy. She told me all she knew about Black Jim, and a lot more. People say he's a big chap—so are you, Freddie. His complexion is dark—so is yours. One queer thing is that he has never killed any one. The paper said that and the girl said it, too. It seems he's a big-time guy with a gun, and when he shoots he can pick a man in the arm or the leg, just as he pleases. I don't suppose you can hit a house at ten yards, Freddie, but it's a cinch they aren't going to try you out with a revolver—not as long as they have a hunch you're Black Jim."

That night Montgomery learned all that could be told about the stage route and the time it left Three Rivers. By dawn of the next day he and Jerry were on the road toward Three Rivers by different routes.

Chapter II

Hands Up!

THE happiness of women, say the moralists, depends upon their ability to preserve illusions. Annie Kerrigan punched so many holes in that rule that she made it look like a colander.

Illusions and gloom filled her earlier girlhood in her little Illinois hometown. Those illusions chiefly concerned men. They made the masculine sex appear vast in strength and illimitable in mystery.

She remembered saying to a youth who wore a white flower in his lapel and parted his hair in the middle and curled it on the sides: "When I talk to you, I feel as if I were poking at a man in armor. I never find the real you. What is it?"

The youth occupied two hours in telling her about the real you. He was so excited that he held her hand as he proceeded in the revelation. When he left she boiled down everything he had said. It was chiefly air, and all that wasn't air was surrounded with quotation marks so large that even Annie Kerrigan could see them. So she revised her opinion of men a little.

In place of part of the question marks she substituted quotations. As she grew older and prettier she learned more. In fact she learned a good deal more than she wished to know about every attractive youth in her town.

So Annie Kerrigan started out to conquer new worlds of knowledge.

Her family balked, but Annie was firm. She went to Chicago, where she found the stockyards—and more men. They smiled at her in the streets. They stared at her in restaurants. They accosted her at corners. So the mystery wore off.

About this time Annie was left alone in the world to support herself. She starved for six months in a department store. Then an enterprising theatrical manager offered her a chance in a third-rate vaudeville circuit.

Before that season ended she had completed her definition of men. In her eyes they were one-half quotation marks and the other half bluff. Every one of them had his pet mystery and secret. Annie Kerrigan found that if she could get them to tell her that secret, they forged their own chains of slavery and gave her the key to the lock.

In time she held enough keys to open the doors of a whole city full of masculine souls. But she never used those keys, because, as she often said to herself, she wasn't interested in interior decoration. The exceptions were when she wanted a raise in salary or a pleasure excursion.

In this manner Annie Kerrigan of many illusions and more woes developed into La Belle Geraldine with no illusions: a light heart and a conscience that defied insomnia. She loved no one in particular—not even herself—but she found the world a tolerably comfortable place. To be sure, it was not a dream world. La Belle Geraldine was so practical that she knew cigarettes stain the fingers yellow and increase the pulse. She even learned that Orange Pekoe tea is pleasanter than cocktails, and that men are more often foolish than villainous.

Without illusions, the mental courage of Jerry equaled that of a man. Therefore she commenced this adventure without fear or doubt of the result.

It was a long journey, but her lithe, strong body, never weakened by excess, never grown heavy with idleness, shook off the fatigue of the labor, as a coyote that has traveled all day and all night shakes off its weariness and trots on, pointing its keen nose against the wind. So she went on, sometimes humming" an air, sometimes pausing an instant to look across the valley at the burly peaks—and far beyond these, range after range of purple-clad monsters, like a

great hierarchy whose heads rise closer and closer to heaven itself. She found herself smiling in spite of herself, and for no cause whatever.

She had estimated the distance to Three Rivers at about ten miles. Yet it seemed to her that she had covered scarcely a third of that space when the road twisted down and she was in the village. It was even smaller than Snider Gulch. The type of man to which she had grown accustomed during the past few weeks swarmed the street. They paid little attention to her, even as she had expected. Mountains discourage personal curiosity.

The six horses were already hitched to the stage and baggage was piled in the boot. After she bought a passage to Truckee, her money was exhausted. If she failed, the prospect was black indeed. She could not even telegraph for help, particularly since there was not a telegraph line within two days' journey. She shrugged this thought away as unworthy.

When the passengers climbed up to select their seats, Geraldine remained on the ground to talk with the driver about his near leader, a long barreled bay with a ragged mane and a wicked eye. The driver as he went from horse to horse, examining tugs and other vital parts of the harness, informed her that the bay was the best mountain horse he had ever driven, and that with this team he could make two hours' better time than on any of the other relays between Three Rivers and Truckee.

She showed such smiling interest in this explanation that he asked her to sit up on his seat while he detailed the other points of interest about this team.

Her heart quickened. The first point in the game was won.

As they swung out onto the shadowed road—for the canons were already half dark, though it was barely sunset—she made a careful inventory of the passengers. There were nine besides herself and all were men. Two of them sitting just behind the driver, held sawed off shotguns across their knees and stared with frowning sagacity into the trees on either side of the road, as if they already feared an attack. Their tense expectancy satisfied La Belle Geraldine that the first appearance of her bandit would take the fight out of them. The others were mostly young fellows who hailed each other in loud voices and broke into an immediate exchange of mining gossip. She feared nothing from any of these.

The driver worried her more. To be sure his only weapon was a rifle which lay along the seat just behind him, with its muzzle pointing out to the side, a clumsy position for rapid work. But his lean face with the small, sad eye made her guess at qualities of quiet fearlessness. However, it was useless to speculate on the chances for or against Montgomery! The event could be scarcely more than half an hour away.

They had scarcely left Three Rivers behind when she produced the small revolver from her pocket. The driver grinned and asked if it were loaded. It was a sufficient opening for Geraldine. She sketched briefly for his benefit a life in the wilds during which she had been brought up with a rifle in one hand and a revolver in the other. The stage driver heard her with grim amusement, while she detailed her skill in knocking squirrels out of a treetop.

"The top of a tree like that one, lady?" he asked, pointing out a great sugar pine.

"You don't believe me?" asked Jerry, with a convincing assumption of pique, "I wish there was a chance for me to show you."

"H-m!" said the driver. "There's a tolerable lot of things for you to aim at along the road. Take a whirl at anything you want to. The horses won't bolt when they, hear the gun."

"If I did hit it," said Jerry, with truly feminine logic, "you would think it was luck."

She dropped the pistol back into the pocket of her dress. They were swinging round a curve which brought them to the foot of the long slope, at the top of which Montgomery must be waiting.

"I hope something happens," she assured the driver, "and then I'll show you real shooting."

"Maybe," he nodded, "I've lived so long, nothin' surprises me, lady."

She smiled into the fast-growing night and made no answer. Then she broke out into idle chatter again, asking the names of all the horses and a thousand other questions, for a childish fear came to her that he might hear the beating of her heart and learn its meaning. Up they drudged on the long slope, the harness creaking rhythmically as the horses leaned into the collars, and the traces stiff and quivering with the violence of the pull. The driver with his reins gathered in one hand and the long whip poised in the other, flicked the laggards with the lash.

"Look at them lug all together as if they was tryin' to keep time!" he said to Geraldine? "I call that a team; but this grade here keeps them winded for a half an hour after we hit the top."

The rank odor of the sweating horses rose to her. A silence, as if their imaginations labored with the team, fell upon the passengers. Even Geraldine found herself leaning forward in the seat, as though this would lessen the load.

"Yo ho, boys!" shouted the driver.

"Get into that collar, Dixie, you wall-eyed excuse for a hoss! Yea, Queen, good girl!"

His whip snapped and hummed through the air.

"One more lug altogether and we're there!"

They lurched up onto the level ground and the horses, still leaning forward to the strain of the pull, stumbled into a feeble trot. Jerry sat a little side-wise in the seat so that from the corner of her eye she could watch the rest of the passengers. One of the guards was lighting a cigarette for the other!

"Hands up!" called a voice.

The driver cursed softly, and his arms went slowly into the air; the hands of the two guards shot up even more rapidly. Not three yards from the halted leaders, a masked man sat on a roan horse, reined across the road: and covered the stage with his revolver.

"Keep those hands up!" ordered the bandit. "Now get out of that stage—and don't get your hands down while you're doin' it! You—all there by the driver, get up your hands damned quick!"

Chapter III

The Mixed Cast.

A GREAT tide of mirth swelled in Jerry's throat. She recognized in these deep and ringing tones, the stage voice of Freddie Montgomery. Truly he played his part well!

She crouched a little toward the stage driver, whipped out the revolver, and fired,—but a louder explosion blended with the very sound of her shot. The revolver spun out of her fingers and exquisite pain burned her hand.

Her rage kept her from screaming. She groaned between her set teeth. This was an ill day for Frederick Montgomery!

"For God's sake!" breathed a voice from the stage behind her. "He'll kill us all now! It's Black Jim!"

"Down to the road with you," cried the bandit, in the same deep voice, "and the next of you-all that tries a fancy trick, I'll drill you clean!"

Warm blood poured out over her hands and the pain set her shuddering, but the white-hot fury gave her strength. Jerry was the first to touch the ground.

"You fool!" she moaned. "You big, clumsy, square-headed, bat-eyed, fool! They'll stick you in the pen for life for this!"

"Shut up!" advised a cautious voice from the stage, where the passengers stood bolt upright, willing enough to descend, but each afraid to move. "Shut up or you'll have him murdering us all!"

"Sorry, lady," said the masked man, and still he maintained that heavy voice. "If I had seen you was a girl I wouldn't have fired!"

"Aw, tell that to the judge," cried Geraldine, "You've shot my hand off! I'll bleed to death and you'll hang for it! I tell you you'll hang for it!"

He had reined his horse from his position in front of the leaders and now he swung from his saddle to the ground, a sudden motion during which he kept his revolver steadily leveled.

"Steady in there!" he ordered, "and get the hell out of that stage or I'll blow you out!"

He gestured with his free hand to Jerry.

"Tear off a strip from your skirt and tie that hand up as tight as you can! Here, one of you, get down here and help the lady. You can take your hands down to do that!"

But there was another thought than that of La Bella Geraldine in the mind of the practical stage driver. His leaders stood now without obstruction. He had lost one passenger, indeed, but the gold in the boot of his stage was worth a hundred passengers to him. He shouted a warning, dropped flat on his seat and darted his whip out over the horses. At his call the other passengers groveled flat, which put the thickness of the boot between them and the bullets of the bandit. The horses hit the collars and the stage whirled into the dusk of the evening.

To pursue them was folly, for it would be a running fight with two deadly shotguns handled by men concealed and protected. The masked man fired a shot over the heads of the fugitives and turned on Jerry. She was weak with excitement and loss of blood and even her furious anger could not give her strength for long. She staggered.

"I'm done for, all right—" she gasped, "As a bandit, you're the biggest cheese ever. My hand—blood—help—"

Red night swam before Jerry's eyes, and as utter dark came, she felt an arm pass round her. When she woke from the swoon her entire right arm ached grimly. She was being carried on horseback up a steep mountainside. The trees

rose sheer above her. She strove to speak, but the intolerable weakness flooded back on her and she fainted again.

She recovered again in less pain, lying in a low-roofed room, propped up on blankets. A lantern hung against the wall from a nail, and by its light she made out the form of the man who stooped over her and poured steaming hot water over her hand. He still wore the mask. She closed her eyes again and lay gathering her wrath, her energy, and her vocabulary, for the supreme effort which confronted her.

"So you did your little bandit bit, did you?" she said at last with keen irony, as she opened her eyes again, "You had to pull the grand-stand stunt with a fine audience of ten to watch you? You had to—"

"Lie still; don't talk!" he commanded, still in that deep, and melodramatic bass which enraged her. "You have a fever, kind of; it ain't much. Just keep quiet an' you'll be all right."

It was the crowning touch! He was still playing his part!

"Deary," she said fiercely, "this is the first time in my life I ever wished I was Shakespeare. Nobody, but the old boy himself could do you justice—but I'm not Billy S. and I can only hint around sort of vague at what I think of you. But of all the tinhorn sports—the ham-fat, small-time actors, you're the prize bonehead. Honey, does that begin to percolate? Does that begin to get through the armor plate down to that dwarfed bean you're in the habit of calling your brain?"

He went on calmly pouring the hot water over her hand. She had not credited him with such self-control. He did not even blush as far as she could make out. It made her throat dry with impotence.

"An old woman's home, that's where you belong," she went on. "Say, you're wise to keep that mask on. You'd need a disguise to get by as a property man on small-time. Deary, you haven't got enough bean to be number-two man in a monologue,"

He stared at her a moment and then went on with the work of cleansing the bullet wound in her hand. Evidently he did not trust himself to speak. It was not a severe cut, but it had bled freely, the bullet cutting the fleshy part between the thumb and forefinger. To look at it made her head reel. She lay back on the pile of blankets and closed her eyes.

When she opened them again he was approaching with a small bottle half full of a brownish-black fluid, iodine. She started, for she knew the burn of the antiseptic. She tucked her wounded hand under her other arm and glared at him.

"Nothing doing with that stuff, cutie," she said, shaking her head. "This isn't my first season, even if I'm not on the big-time. You can give that bottle to the marines. Go pour that on the daisies, Alexander W. Flathead, it'll kill the insects. But not for mine!"

She saw his forehead pucker into a frown above the mask. He stopped, hesitated.

"Take it away and rock it to sleep, Oscar," she went on, "because there's no cue for that in this act. It won't get across—not even with a make-up. Oh, this will make a lovely story when I get back to Broadway. I'm going to spill the beans, deary. Yep, I'm going to give this spiel to the papers. It'll make a great ad for you—all scare-heads. You can run the last musical comedy scandal onto the

back page with a play like this. Here! Let go my arm, you big simp—do you think—"

He caught her wrist and drew out the injured hand firmly. She struggled weakly, but the pain in the hand unnerved her.

"Go ahead—turn on the fireworks, Napoleon! Honey, they'll write this on your tombstone for an epitaph."

He spread her thumb and forefinger apart, poured some of the iodine onto a clean rag, and swabbed out the wound. The burning pain brought her close to a faint, but her fury kept her mind from oblivion. She clenched her teeth so that a tortured scream became merely a moan. When she recovered he was making the last turn of a rather skilful bandage. She sat up on the blankets.

"All right, honey, now you've played the music and I'll dance. What's the way to town from here?"

He shook his head.

"Won't tell me, eh? I suppose you think I'll stay up here till I get well? Think again, janitor."

She rose and started a bit unsteadily to the door. Before she reached it his step caught up with her. She was swung up in strong arms and carried back to the blankets. While she sat dumb with hate and rage, he took a piece of rope and tied her ankles fast with an intricate knot which she could never hope to untie with her one sound hand.

"You'll stay here," he explained curtly.

"Listen, deary," she answered between her teeth, "I'm going to do you for this. I'm going to make you a bum draw on every circuit in the little old U. S. I'm going to make you the card that doesn't fill the straight, that's all. Get your shingle ready, cutie, because after this all you can get across will be a chop-house in the Bowery."

"Lie still," growled the deep voice. "There ain't any chance of you getting away. Savvy?"

He turned.

"Deary," she cried after him, "if you don't cut out that ghost-voice stunt, I'll—"

The rickety door at the back of the shack closed upon him.

"I never knew," said Jerry to herself, "that that big Swede could do such a swell mystery bit. He ought to be in the heavies, that's all."

She settled herself back on the blankets again more comfortably. The last sting of the iodine died away and left a pleasant sense of warmth in her injured hand. Now she set about surveying her surroundings in detail. It was the most clumsily built house she had ever seen, made of rudely trimmed logs so loosely set together that the night air whistled through a thousand chinks.

Two boards placed upon saw horses represented a table. A crazily constructed fireplace of large dimensions was the only means of heating the shack. Here and there from pegs and nails driven into the wall hung overalls, deeply wrinkled at the knees, heavy mackintoshes, and two large hats of broad brim. On the floor were several pairs of heavy shoes in various states of dilapidation. In the corner next to the hearth the walls were garnished with a few pots and pans. On the table she saw a heavy hunting knife. There were three doors. Perhaps one of them led to a second room. To know which it was, was of vital significance to her. If it was the door through which the masked man had disappeared then he was still within hearing distance. If that were

true she could hardly succeed in reaching that knife upon the table unheard, for she would make a good deal of noise dragging herself across the floor to the table. She determined to make the experiment. If she could cut the bonds and escape she made no doubt that she could find the road to Three Rivers again, and even to wander across the mountains at night with a wounded hand was better than to stay with this bungler. Moreover, there was something in his sustained acting which made her uneasy. She knew his code of morals was as limited as the law of the Medes and the Persians and of an exactly opposite nature. On the stage, in the city, she had no fear of him. He was an interesting type and his vices were things at which she could afford to shrug her shoulders. But in the wilderness of the silent mountains even the least of men borrows a significance, and the meaning he gave her was wholly evil.

She commenced hunching herself slowly and painfully across the floor toward the table. Half, three-quarters of the distance was covered. In another moment she could reach out and take the knife.

A door creaked behind her. She turned. There he stood again, still masked and with his hands behind him. He started. His mouth gaped. She made another effort and caught up the knife. At least it was a measure of defense, even if it were too late for her to free herself.

Chapter IV

Black Jim.

"JERRY!" said, in a strange, whispering voice.

She eyed him with infinite disgust.

"Playing a new role, Freddie, aren't you?" she sneered.

He merely stared.

"You're versatile, all right," she went on. "First the grim bandit, and then the astonished friend. Say, deary, do you expect 'warm applause'? No, cutie, but if I had some spoiled eggs, I'd certainly pass them to you."

"Jerry, you're raving!"

She gritted her teeth.

"I'm through with the funny stuff, you one-syllable, lock-jawed baby. Now I mean business. Get me out of this as fast as they hooked you off the boards, the last time you tried out in Manhattan."

"Do you—have—will—"

"Bah!" she said. "Don't you get next that I'm through with this one-night stand? Drop the curtain and start the orchestra on 'Home, Sweet Home.' Talk sense. Cut this rope. I'm starting and I'm starting alone."

"For God's sake, Jerry—"

"Lay off on that stuff, deary. If words made a cradle, you'd rock the world to sleep."

"How—how did you come here?"

She stared at him a moment and then broke into rather sinister laughter.

"I suppose you've been walking in your sleep, what? I suppose I'm to fall for this bum line, Freddie? Not me! You can't get by even in a mask, Mr. Montgomery."

"Geraldine."

"Call me Annie for short."

"Upon my word of honor—"

"Can the talk, cutie. You can tell the rest to the judge."

"But how can I help you?" he asked. He turned and she saw his hands tied securely together behind him!

While she still stared at this marvelous revelation, the door opened again and another Montgomery strode into the room. He was the same build as the other man. He wore the same sort of mask. His hair was black. He could not be Montgomery. It was only when they stood together that she felt a significant difference in this man.

Seeing Jerry with the hunting knife in her hand, he crossed the room and leaned above her.

"Give me the knife," boomed the musical bass voice.

She shrank back and clutched the heavy handle more closely.

"Keep away," she cried hoarsely.

"Give me the knife."

"Black Jim!" breathed Jerry, for the first time wholly frightened, while her mind whirled in confusion, "Is the whole world made up of doubles or am I losing my brain? Keep off, Mr. Mystery, or I'll make hash of you with this cleaver!"

She held the knife poised and the man observed her with a critical eye.

"Fighter," he decided.

He leaned again; his hand darted out with the speed of a striking snake. She cut at him furiously, but the hand caught her wrist and stopped the knife while it was still an inch from his face. He shook her hand, and the numbing grasp made her fingers relax. The knife clattered on the floor and he carried her back to the pile of blankets. When she opened her eyes she saw Black Jim loosing the hands of Montgomery.

"No use in we-all stay in' masked anymore," said the bandit, "I've been down an' seen the other boys. I thought maybe they'd vote yes on turnin' the girl loose agin. I told 'em she was too sick to see anything when I brought her in. I told 'em I'd blindfold her when I took her out to the road agin. But they-all sort of figure she'd be able to track back with a posse followin' jest a sense of direction like a hoss. They vote that she stays here, an' so it makes no difference what she sees."

He finished untying Montgomery's hands, and drew off his mask.

Her faintness left Jerry. She saw a lean-faced man with great, dark eyes, singularly lacking in emotion, and forehead unfurrowed by worries. Montgomery, likewise withdrew his mask and showed a face familiar enough, but drawn and colorless.

"All I'm askin'," said Black Jim, "is have you got anything against me?"

"I?" queried Montgomery, and he drew a slow hand across his forehead as if he were partially dazed.

"Yes, you," said the other, and the dark eyes dwelt carefully on Montgomery's face. "If you've got any lingerin' suspicion that there's something coming from you to me, we'll jist nacherally step out an' make our little play where there's room."

"Not a thing against you, my friend," said Montgomery with a sudden heartiness for which Jerry despised him. "You had the drop on me and I guess you had special reasons for wanting that stage."

The outlaw shrugged his shoulders. "I got to go out agin," he said, "an' I'm goin' to ask you to watch this girl while I'm gone."

"Glad to," said Montgomery.

Black Jim turned, paused, and came back.

"If anything happens to her, my friend." He hesitated significantly. "The boys seemed to be sort of excited when I told them about her bein' in my cabin," he explained. "If they-all come up here, don't let 'em come in. You got a gun!"

He stepped to the door and was gone. The eyes of Jerry and Montgomery met.

"Quick!" she ordered. "Talk out and tell me what has happened, Freddie, or I'll go crazy! I'm half out of my head now!"

"It's Black Jim!" he said heavily.

"I knew that half an hour ago. Your brains are petrified, Freddie. Start where I'm a blank. How'd you come here?"

"He held me up!"

"Black Jim?"

"Yes. I was waiting behind the rock with my mask on. I heard a horse coming up the road from behind and when I turned I was looking into the mouth of a pistol as big as a cannon. I put up my hands. I just stared at him. I couldn't speak. He said he was sorry he couldn't leave the job to me. He said there were two things clear to him. He went on thinking them over while his gun covered me. Then he told me that he couldn't leave me alive near the road. He had to take me up to his camp. Then he came up behind me and tied my hands behind my back. Jerry, I felt that if he hadn't thought me one of his own sort, he'd have dropped the curtain on my act forever!"

He shuddered slightly at the thought.

"He made me ride before him up here," he went on, "and he put me in this cabin. As far as I can make out we're in a little gulch of the mountains. It's a sort of bandits' refuge—the sort of thing that paper told about. When we rode over the edge of the hill and dipped down into the valley, I saw some streaks of smoke down the canon. There must be a half dozen places like this one, and some of the outlaws in every one. What'll we do, Jerry, for God's sake, what will we do?"

"Shut up!" she said fiercely, and her face was whiter than mere exhaustion could make it. "Lemme think; lemme think!"

Montgomery had no eye for her. He strode up, and down the room with a wild eye. He seemed to think of her as an aftermath.

"What happened to you? Was it Black Jim again?"

"I pulled my gun and shot in the air. He shot the pistol out of my fingers and put my hand on the blink. I fainted. He brought me up here. That's all."

Her thoughts were not for her troubles.

"I'm going to make a break for it!" he cried at last. "Maybe I can get free!"

She recognized him without emotion.

"And leave me here?" she asked.

He flushed, stammered, and avoided her eyes.

"It doesn't make any difference," he muttered, "I couldn't find my way out, and maybe they'd take a pot shot at me as I tried to get away. It's better to die

quick than starve in the mountains. But, my God, Jerry, what'll he do when he finds out that I'm not an outlaw like himself?"

"Stop crying like a baby," she said. "I've got to think."

"There's only one thing for you to do," she said at last, raising her head, "and that's for you to play your part as he sees it. You can act rough. Go down and mix with them—but be here with me when Black Jim is here. They can only kill you, Freddie, but me—"

Her eyes were roving again.

"Maybe I can do it," he said rapidly, half to himself. "Pray God I can do it!"

Chapter V

The Stage Man.

HER upper lip curled. "You're in a blue funk—a blue funk," she said. "Freddie, here's your one chance in a life to play the man."

Do you see my condition? Do you see the little act that's mapped out ahead for me? It's as clear as the palm of your hand. He brought me up here because he thought I'd die if he left me in the road. Even his heart was not black enough for that! But once he had me here it wasn't in his power to send me away again. That's what he meant when he said he had talked to the 'boys.' They wouldn't let me go because they thought I might be able to find the way back and bring a posse after them. Don't you see? They have me a prisoner. And you're all that I have to protect me."

She stopped and moaned softly.

"Why was I ever born a woman?"

He moistened his lips.

"I'll do what I can," he mumbled, "but—did you see that devil's eye? He isn't human, Jerry!"

"I might have known," she murmured to herself, "I might have known he was only a stage man." She said aloud: "There's one chance in a thousand left to me, Freddie, but there's no chance at all unless you'll help me. Will you?"

"All that I can—in reason," he stammered miserably.

"It's this," she went on, trying to sweep him along with her. "You had your eyes open when you came up here. Maybe you could find the way out again. Freddie, you said on the road today that you loved me. Freddie, I'll go to hell and slave for you as long as I live, if you'll fight for me now. Tell me again that you love me and you'll be a man!"

His lips were so stiff that he could hardly speak in answer.

"I didn't tell you one thing," he said. "When we came over the top of the lull, at the edge of the valley, we passed an armed man. They keep a sentry there."

She pointed with frantic eagerness.

"You have your gun at your belt! That will free us, I tell you. "It is only one man you have to fight."

He could not answer. His eyes wandered rapidly around the room like a boy already late for school and striving miserably to find his necessary book.

"Then if you won't do that, cut the rope that holds my feet and I'll go myself!" she cried. "I'll go! I'd rather a thousand times die of starvation than wait for the time when the eyes of that fiend light up with hell-fire."

"Black Jim," he answered, and stopped.

She loosened her dress at the throat as if she stifled.

"For God's sake, Freddie. You have a sister. I've seen her picture. For her sake!"

He was utterly white and striving to speak.

"He would know it was me who did it," he said at last, "and then—"

Voices sounded far away. They listened with great eyes that stared at each other but saw only their own imaginings.

The voices drew closer.

"The door! The door!" she whispered. "Lock the door! They're coming—the men he warned us about!"

He was frozen to the spot on which he stood.

"Hello!" called a voice from without.

"Montgomery!" she moaned, wringing her hands.

At last he walked hastily to the door.

"You can't come in here," he answered.

"Why the hell not?" roared one of them.

"Because of Black Jim."

A silence followed.

"Is he in there?"

"No, but he wants no one else to come in while he's gone."

They parleyed.

"Shall we chance it?"

"Not me!"

"Why not?"

"Let's see his woman."

"Sure. Seein' her doesn't do no harm."

"Who's in there?"

"It's the pal he brought up."

"Are we goin' to act like a bunch of short horns?" asked a deeper voice. "I'm goin' in!"

A dozen men broke into the room. At the first stir of the door Jerry dropped prone to the blankets and feigned sleep. The crowd gathered first about Montgomery, searching him with curious eyes.

"Here's the new lamb," said a lithe white-faced man, and he grinned over yellow teeth. "Here's another roped for the brandin'. Let pass on him now, boys!"

A chuckle which rang heavily on the heart of Montgomery ran around the circle, but though his soul was lead in him, his art came to his rescue. After all, this was merely a part to be played. It was a dangerous part, indeed, but with a little effort he should be able to pass before an uncritical audience. He leaned back against the wall and smiled at the group. It required every ounce of his courage to manage that smile.

"Look me over, boys," he responded, "take a good long look, and in case you're curious, maybe you'll find something interesting on my right hip!"

He broke off the smile again. For one instant the scales hung in the balance. What he said might have been construed as a threat, but the smile took the

sting out of his words. After all, a man who had been passed by Black Jim himself had some rights among them.

"You're a cool one, all right," grinned a man who was bearded like a Russian, with his shirt open, and a great black, hairy chest partially exposed, "but where'd you get that color? Been doing inside work?"

"Mac," said Montgomery, easily, for the last remark gave him courage, "and some of the boys call me 'Silent Mac.' I'm a bit off color, all right. That's because some legal gents got interested in me. They got so damned interested in me that they thought I shouldn't be out in the sun so much. They thought maybe it was spoiling my complexion, see? They fixed a plant and sent me up the river to a little joint the government runs for restless people. Yep, I've just had a long rest cure, and now I'm ready for business!"

A low laugh of understanding ran around the group. A jailbird has standing in the shadow of the law.

"You'll do, pal," said the yellow-toothed one.

"You can enter the baby show, all right," said another. "I'm the Doctor."

"I've heard of you," said Montgomery, as the crowd passed him to examine Jerry.

"Know anything about the calico?" asked one of Montgomery.

"Not a thing," answered the latter carelessly, "except that Jim picked it off the stage."

"And a damned bad job, too," growled he of the beard. "Where's he goin' to fence her up in a corral like this?"

"Bad job your eye!" answered one who leaned far over to glance at her partially concealed face. "She's a looker, boys—she's a regular Cleopatra."

They grouped closely around her.

"Wake her," suggested one, "so's we can size her up."

One who stood closer stirred her rudely with his foot. She sat up yawning, rubbing her eyes, and smiled up to their faces.

"Turn me into a wall-eyed cayuse!" muttered one of them, but the others were silent while their eyes drank.

Montana Pete, with a mop of tawny hair falling low down on his forehead, dropped to a squatting position, the better to look into her eyes.

"Well, baby blue-eyes," he grinned, "what d'you think of your new pals?"

"Oh," she cried, with a semblance of pretty confusion, "I—I—where am I? Oh, I remember!"

"Boys," said Montana Pete rising, "we ain't the kind to have a king, but I'm all for a queen! What?"

"Sure," said the Doctor. "There ain't nothing like the woman's touch to make a home."

They roared with laughter.

"Look out! She's remembering some more and here comes the waterfall!" called another.

Jerry, in order to get time to plan her campaign, broke into heart-rending sobs. The bearded man, who rejoiced in the name of Porky Martin, now came forward again.

"Lemme take care of her," he said. "I had two mothers, six sisters, an' fourteen sweethearts. I know all about women!"

He dropped to one knee and put his arm around her.

"Take it easy, kid. You're runnin' loose now an' we'll give you all the rope you want, except enough for hangin' yourself. Look around you, kid, here's enough men to make a jury and you got a home with every one. Am I right, boys?"

"Let me—alone!" wailed Jerry, and she shuddered under the caress.

"Huh!" growled Porky Martin. "She's proud, damn her."

"Give her time, give her time," said the Doctor. "The kid's hurt. She don't savvy yet, boys, that she's in a real democracy where everything's common property."

"No more foolin'," advised Montana Pete. "Jim'll be coming back any time. He'll sure be glad to find us here, I guess not."

"Who's Black Jim?" snarled Porky Martin. "I've stood for enough of his nutty ideas. I say to hell with Black Jim. We've had enough of him!"

"Say that to him," said Montana easily. "I won't hold your hands, Porky. Take it easy, kid"—this to Jerry—"we ain't all swine!"

"Wha' d'ya mean?" said Porky in a rising voice.

Jerry trembled, for she knew that if the men began fighting over her, her fate was sealed.

"You ain't deer, I reckon," said Montana Pete, with obvious scorn.

"Let me go!" cried Jerry, not that she hoped for freedom, but because she thought there was some chance of changing the issue. "Let me go! I won't tell about you! I swear I won't!"

She extended her hands, one slender and white, and then the other in its ominously stained bandage, first to Porky Martin and then to Pete.

"Look at that," said Pete. "We're a fine gang to stand around makin' life hell for the kid."

He dropped to one knee beside her.

"We'll give you a square deal, you lay to that, but we can't let you go. There ain't a hope of that, understand."

She shrank against the wall, her sobs coming heavily at intervals.

"What I say is this," orated Porky Martin. "What do you make out of Jim bringin' in two people in one day—and one of them a woman?"

"Why, you poor fat head," said the Doctor soothingly, "Mac over there was blockin' one of Jim's plays an' to get him out of the way Jim took him up here. Anyway, Mac's one of us. What's bitin' you? She was hurt. Besides, maybe Jim wanted that woman's touch around his house."

"Aye," said Porky, "but there's a lot more to be said about that. As far as I go I'm sick of this feller who stays away from the rest of us—never even gets drunk with us—and now he gets a woman!"

"Look out!" warned a voice, "I think—"

Several heads turned to the open door which framed Black Jim. His eyes ran slowly from face to face until they settled on Montgomery. The men stirred uneasily.

"I told you-all to keep these out," he said calmly. By his contemptuous gesture he might have been referring to dogs of the street.

"They said you'd changed your mind," explained Montgomery.

"I ain't ever done that yet," said the bandit. "Hope you've enjoyed yourselves, boys."

"Look here," said Porky Martin, blustering. "What we want to know is about the calico here—we—"

"I told you about her before," said Black Jim softly, "and you sat around am' hollered an' said she was to stay here. It's too late to get rid of her now. She's seen us all. She could identify every one of us."

"We ain't askin' you to send her off," said Porky, "but as long as she's goin' to stay here we don't see no nacheral reason why she has to hang around here in one cabin. We're boostin' for a lot of changes of scenery,"

"We?" asked Black Jim and he frowned.

"You heard me before, damn you!"

He was half crouched with the fighting fury in his face. The rest of the men moved quickly back, leaving an open space between the two. Porky's hand tugged and writhed about the handle of his revolver as though he found difficulty in drawing it, but Black Jim made no movement toward his weapon. His soft, dark eyes dwelt without change on the face of his opponent. Jerry watched, utterly fascinated. She saw Montgomery staring in the background. The rest of the men stood closer to Porky, as if they sympathized with him, and their eyes were fixed with a sort of mute horror on Black Jim. An instinct told her that the moment he made a motion toward his revolver every gun in that room would be out and leveled at him. Yet when the strange sympathy troubled her throat, it was not for the bandit who faced the roomful of enemies, but for the crouched, tense figure of Porky Martin.

His big beard quivered. She saw his jaws stir. A strange, gurgling sound came in his throat, and yet he could not draw his revolver.

"My God!" breathed the Doctor.

It was as if some spell broke with his voice. A dozen breaths were audible in quick succession. Porky Martin drew a long pace back and half straightened. His hand left the butt of his revolver, and then both hands moved in slow jerks up toward his head. The gurgling rose louder in his throat. It formed into gasping words.

"Jim—don't shoot—for God's sake!"

The whole of that great body shook. A moment before he had been the most awe-inspiring of them all, and the center of Jerry's fears.

"Hypnotism," she murmured to herself, but she did not believe her own diagnosis.

"Take your hands down, Porky," said Black Jim. "I ain't asked you to put 'em up there."

In spite of this permission, the big man's arms remained as if fixed in air.

"Get out," ordered Black Jim, and gestured toward the door.

Porky started side-wise, edging past Black Jim as if he feared to take his eyes off him. At the door he whirled and bolted suddenly into the dark. The order of the bandit had apparently been directed at Porky alone, but all the rest obeyed, each man moving silently, keeping his face with a religious earnestness toward Jim and his hand on his revolver until he came to the door through which each vanished with startling swiftness. They were all gone; Montgomery alone remained. Jim faced him.

"Get out," said the bandit, "an' tell the rest of 'em that there's a deadline drawn at the edge of the trees. They can cross it when they get tired of livin'."

Jerry made vain motions to him with lips and hands to stay and wondered why she dared not sneak out; but his eyes were not for her. Like the rest he moved side-wise, and darted out into the night. Black Jim turned to Jerry and

she set her teeth to make her glance cross his boldly. There was a subtle change of his expression. He jerked a hand toward the door.

"That last man," he said, "did you really want him to stay?"

"Yes," she said faintly, "I'm afraid!"

Chapter VI

Greek Meets Greek.

TO her astonishment he nodded slowly. "Yes," he said, "they-all ain't much more'n cattle."

With that he disappeared into the next room. He came back at once bearing a bolstered revolver which he dropped beside her carelessly.

"They're a rotten gang, all right," he went on, "and that last man—why did you want him to stay?"

Under the direct question of his eyes, her own dropped till they fell upon the revolver-butt, significantly protruding from the holster.

"You don't need to tell me," he said gently, "I guess you thought you'd be safer with two. But that pale-faced one ain't a man. He's a skunk. I told him to keep 'em out."

She did not answer. Her head remained bowed with wonder. Montgomery had been no protection to her. Even now there were twelve grim men who were twelve dangers to her. Yet in the presence of this man-queller, she felt unutterably safe. She glanced at her injured hand and smiled at her sense of security. Black Jim retreated. He came back with a great armful of logs.

Hunger and weariness fought like drugs against the stimulus of fear. She found herself drowsing as she stared into the growing blaze of flames. Her ear caught the chink, the rattle, and the hiss of cookery. Then she watched as through a haze the tall figure of Black Jim, swart against the fire. Through her exhaustion, her suffering, and her fear, that shadowy figure became the symbol of the protector.

He came before her again carrying a tin plate that bore a steaming venison steak flanked with big chunks of bread and a cup of black coffee. She tasted the coffee first and it cleared her mind, pumped strong blood through her body again.

Another woman would have roused to a paralyzing terror when her faculties returned; but now the strange schooling of Annie Kerrigan stood her in good stead. She was used to men, but she was not used to the fear of them. After all, what difference was there between this man and those she had known before? She had felt helpless indeed when the twelve filled the room. She had seen and she should never forget a certain flickering light of hunger in their eyes. They were dangerous, but that element of danger she did not see in Black Jim. Some men are dangerous to men alone. Others threaten all nature; born destroyers. She knew that Black Jim was of the first category. Nothing told her except a small inner voice that chanted courage to her heart. Consequently when the hot coffee gave her strength she sat erect, propping herself with her sound hand.

"I say!" she called. He started where he sat before his food at the table, lifted his head, and stared at her.

"What about these hobbles, deary?" she went on. His eyes widened, but he answered nothing.

"Cut out the silent treatment, cutie," said Jerry, her courage rising, "and this rope. You've got your stage guarded. There's no fear that I'll jump through the curtain to get to the audience. I can't run away, I'm not very slow, but bullets are a little faster. So drop the hobbles, Alexander. They're away out of date."

He sat with knife poised and ear canted a trifle to one side as if he strained every effort to follow the meaning of her slang. At last he comprehended, nodded, and set her free with a few strokes of a knife.

"It's all right to let you go free," he said, "but you got to remember that this shack may be watched from now on. You could get away any time. I won't stop you. But outside you'll find, maybe no bullets, but some of the boys who were in here a while ago. Savvy?"

She understood, but she shrugged the terror away, as she would have shrugged away self-consciousness on the stage.

"All right, Jimmy," she said cheerfully, "I savvy. Lend me a hand, will you?"

She reached up with a smile for him to assist her to her feet. His astonishment at this familiar treatment made his eyes big again, and Jerry laughed.

"It's all right, cutie," she said. "You've got a funny name, but you can't get by as a nightmare as far as I'm concerned. Not without a make-up. Can the glassy eye, and give me your hand."

He extended his hand hesitatingly, and she drew herself erect with some difficulty, for she had remained a long time in a cramped position.

"It's all right to feed some Swede farmhand in the corner, Oscar, but not La Belle Geraldine. Nix. It isn't done. There's no red light on that table, is there?"

"Red light?" he repeated.

"Sure. I mean there's no danger sign. Say, deary, do I have to translate everything I say into 'Mother Goose' rimes? I mean, may I eat at the table, or do I have to stay on the floor?"

He regarded her a moment with his usual somber concern. Then he turned and carried a stool to the table and brought her food to it.

"This is solid comfort," declared Jerry, as she settled herself at the board, and she attacked the venison with great vigor.

There were certain difficulties, however, against which she had to struggle. Her right hand was useless to manage the knife, but she managed to steady the fork between the third and fourth fingers. With her left hand she tried to cut the meat, but progress in this way was highly unsatisfactory. In the midst of her labors a brawny hand carried away her plate.

She looked up with a laugh and surrendered her knife and fork.

"After all," she said, "you flashed the gun that put my hand to the bad. So it's up to you to do the prompting when I break down."

He raised his eyes a moment to consider this statement, but he failed to find the clue to its meaning, went on silently cutting up the meat, and finally passed it back to her. Dumfounded by this reticence, Jerry kept a suspicious eye upon him. Among the people with whom she was familiar silence meant anger, plots, hatred. Evidently he turned the matter over seriously in his mind, for his gaze was fixed far away.

"Lady," he said at last, meeting her inquiry with his dull, unreadable eyes, "was you-all born with that vocabulary, or did you jest find it?"

Jerry rested her chin upon a clenched white fist while she smiled at him.

"You're wrong twice, Solomon," she answered, "an angel slipped it to me in a dream."

"Which a dream like that is some nightmare," nodded Black Jim. "Would you-all mind wakin' up when you talk to me?"

He chuckled softly.

"Say, Oscar," said Jerry, "I'd lay a bet that's the first time you've laughed this year."

He was sober at once.

"Why?"

"The wrinkles around your eyes ain't worn very deep."

He shrugged his shoulders and confined his attention to his plate for a time, as if the matter no longer interested him, but when she had half forgotten it he resumed, breaking into the midst of her chatter: "Speakin' of wrinkles, you don't look more'n a yearling yourse'f. Which I would ask, how old are you, ma'am?"

The instinct of the eternal feminine made her parry the question for a moment.

"I'm old enough," she answered; "but take it from me, I don't have to wear a wig."

"H-m!" he growled, considering this evasive return. "What I want to know is where you-all got to know so much?"

"Know so much?" repeated Jerry, "On the level, Oscar, or speaking with a smile? I mean, do you ask that straight?"

"Straight as I shoot," he said.

She leaned back, curiosity greater than her mirth.

"Honest," said La Belle Geraldine, "you've got me beat. You've got me feeling like a toe-dancer in the mud. You're the original mystery, all right. To hear people talk of you, you'd think Black Jim put the 'damn' in 'death'; but if I just met you at a dance, I'd think you were so green you didn't know the first violin from the drummer."

"Speakin' in general," replied the bandit carefully, "I get your drift, but even if I begin allowing for the wind—"

"Meaning the way I talk, I suppose," broke in Jerry.

"Even allowin' for that," went on Black Jim, "I don't think I could shoot straight enough to ring the bell. You've got me side-stepped."

"Go on," said Jerry, "I'll keep them amused till you bring on the heavy stuff. What do you mean?"

"Well," drawled Black Jim, "you look a heap more like a picture of a lady I once saw in a soap ad than anything else. You're all pink an' white an' soft, with eyes like a two-day calf."

"Go right on, Shakespeare," murmured La Belle Geraldine; "you can't make me mad."

"When I brought you up here," said Black Jim, "I figured that when you come to, you'd begin yellin' an' hollerin' an' raisin' Cain. I was sort of steelin' myself to it when you opened your eyes a while ago. Lady"—here he leaned across the table earnestly—"I was expectin' a plumb hell of a time." He grinned broadly. "I got it, all right, but not the kind I thought."

"I sure panned you some," nodded Jerry. "I thought—"

She stopped. To tell Black Jim that she thought she was talking to Frederick Montgomery when she recovered from her faint, would be to expose that worthy; for once it were known that he was only a temporary bandit, his days in the valley would be short indeed. In his pose as a man-killer, an ex-convict, a felon in the shadow of the law, he was as safe as a child in the bosom of his family. Otherwise, a dozen practiced fighters would be hot on his trail. "I was just sore," concluded La Belle, "to think I had balled up everything by flashing a small-time act on a big-time stage."

The pun amused her so that she broke into hearty laughter. The sound reacted on both her and the bandit. Though he fell silent again and scarcely spoke for the next hour or more, she thought that she could detect a greater kindness about his eyes.

He went about cleaning up the tin dishes with singular deftness. When he concluded he turned abruptly upon her.

"Time to turn in. You sleep there. I bunk in the next room. S'long!"

He turned at the entrance of the other apartment.

"How's your hand?"

"Doing fine," smiled Jerry. "S'long, Jim!"

Chapter VII

Jerry Takes Lessons.

SHE was still smiling when she slipped down among the blankets. For some time she lay there wondering. By all the laws of Nature she should not have closed an eye for anxiety. She pictured all the dangers of her position one by one, and then—smiled again! She could not be afraid of this man. The very terror he inspired in others was a warm sense of protection around her. The weary muscles of her body relaxed by slow degrees. The wind hummed like a muted violin through the trees outside. She slept.

When she woke, a fire burned on the hearth brightly again, and the room filled with the savor of fried bacon and steaming coffee. Black Jim sat at the table draining his tin cup. Jerry sat up with a yawn.

"Hello, Jim!" she called. "Say, this mountain air is all the dope for hard sleeping; what?"

He lowered the cup and smiled back at her.

"I'm glad you-all slept well," he drawled, and rose from the table.

"I'm goin' off on a bit of a trip today," he said, "but before I go I want to tell you—"

"My name's Geraldine," she answered, "but most people shorten it up to Jerry."

"Which I'd tell a man jest about hits you off," he answered. "You ain't seen much of the valley. I suppose you'll want Jo explore around a lot, an' you can go as far as you like; but jest pack that shootin'-iron with you by way of a friend. Come here to the door and I'll show you how far you can go."

She followed him obediently, and standing at the entrance to the shack looked out over the silver-misted valley. Four guardian peaks surrounded a gorge about a mile and a half long and half a mile wide, narrowing toward the

farther end, where the entrance gap could not have been more than a hundred yards in width. The shack of Black Jim huddled against the precipitous wall of rock at the opposite extremity of the valley and stood upon ground higher than the rest of the floor. Great trees rose on all sides, and what she saw was made out through the spaces between these monsters.

"Where are the others?" she asked.

He waved his hand in a generous circle.

"All around. Maybe you could wander about for a month and never find where they stay. But if you meet 'em they'll be gladder to see you than you'll be to see them."

"And if I stay right here," she asked him, "would I be in danger from them here?"

"They came last night," he said grimly, "but I got an idea they won't be in no hurry to come again. At the edge of those trees is a deadline. They know if they come beyond that they're takin' their own chances. If you see 'em come, make your gun talk for you."

He stepped through the door and she followed him a pace into the open air. The big roan horse, lean of neck and powerful of shoulder, stood near, his bridle-reins hanging over his head. Black Jim swung into the saddle.

"Jest hobble this one idea so it don't never get outside your brain," said Black Jim. "The men in this valley are only up here because they wanted to get above the law—and they are above it. The only law they know, the only law I know, is to play square with each other. Partner, I've busted that law by bringin' you in here. Accordin' to all the rules there ain't no place for any one here exceptin' the men that's beyond the law. I dunno what they'll do. Maybe it's war. Maybe it ain't. Rope that idea and stick a brand on it. S'long, Jerry. An' don't get near that gap down to the far end of the valley."

He spurred the roan through the trees and disappeared, leaving Jerry to listen to the rapidly diminishing sound of the horse's feet.

Then the silence dropped like a cloak about her, save for the light humming of the wind through the upper branches. She went back and buckled the revolver with its holster about her waist. She felt strangely as if that act placed her at once among the ranks of those who, as Black Jim said, were "above the law."

A great impulse to collapse in the middle of the floor and weep rose in her. All that life of gaiety, of action, of many butterfly hopes, was lost to her. Years might pass before she could break away from this valley of the damned. Perhaps she might actually grow old here, away from men, away from the lure of the footlights. Hopelessness tightened about her heart—and Jerry began to sing while the tears ran down her face. After all, she was trained to fight against misery, and she fought now until the tears stopped and her voice was sure. The very sound of the song was a cure to all ills.

She set about examining the cabin with the practical mind of any one who had had to make a home of a dressing room in a theater, and who can give a domestic touch even to a compartment in a Pullman.

The main room could be made more attractive. When her hand healed she could cut some young evergreens and place them here and there. That floor could be cleaned. Those clothes, if they had to hang on the wall, might at least be shaken free from dust and covered with sacking. She turned her attention to the adjoining room.

Here was the bunk of Black Jim, covered with a few tumbled blankets. Another pair of lanterns sat in a corner. More clothes lay here and there about the floor. Beyond this roof lay the horse-shed. She turned back to examine Jim's belongings. What caught her eye was a little pile of books upon a rudely made shelf. She took them down one by one. Here was the explanation of the bandit's mixed English, sometimes almost scholarly and correct, but again full of Western vernacular. It was a cross between the slang of cowboy and mountaineer, and the vocabulary of the educated.

There were six volumes all told. The first she opened was Scott's "Redgauntlet" which fell open at "Wandering Willie's Tale." Next came a volume of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies—"Othello," "Macbeth," "King Lear," and "Hamlet"; "Gil Bias"; a volume of Poe's verse, and another of Byron's; and finally quaint old Mallory's "Morte d'Arthur."

"Can you beat it?" whispered Jerry to the blank wall. "And me—I haven't read a single one of 'em!"

How he had got them she could not imagine. Perhaps he took them with other loot from a stage. At any rate, they were here, and their presence made her strangely ill at ease.

There is a peculiar reverence for books in the minds of the most illiterate. It is a superstition which runs back to the days when the written word had to be copied by hand and a man was esteemed rich if he possessed three or four manuscripts. That legendary reverence grew almost to worship in the early Renaissance, and when the invention of John Fust finally brought literature within the grasp of the poorest man, the early respect still clung to ink and paper—clings to it today.

Of books Jerry knew little enough and consequently had the greater respect. In school she had gone as far as the "Merchant of Venice," but blank verse was an impassable fence which stood between her and the dramatic action. When she started out on her own gay path through the world she found small time for reading and less desire. Books were all very well, and the knowledge which might be found in them was doubtless desirable, but for Jerry as unattainable as the shining limousines which purr down Fifth Avenue.

Her first impulse when she saw this little array of books was a blind anger, whose cause she could scarcely discover. It seemed as if the reading of those books had suddenly placed the bandit as far away from her as he was away from the law. But when the anger died away a tingling excitement followed.

Perhaps through these books she could gain the clue to the inner nature of Black Jim. If these were his only books he might be molded by the thoughts he found in them. Therefore, through them, she might gain a power over him which, in the end, would avail to bring her safely from the valley. With this purpose before her, Jerry formulated a plan of campaign.

She must in the first place win the liking of the bandit. When this was done all things would be possible, but she also knew that there was much work before her until this end could be accomplished. His gentleness had not deceived her. It was the velvet touch of the panther's foot with the steel-sharp claws concealed.

Those claws would be out and at her throat the moment she attempted an escape, or even a rash movement. In the mean time she must work carefully, patiently, to win first his respect, and then, perhaps, his affection. It was dangerous to attempt this. Yet it was necessary, and once this was done much

might be accomplished. Possibly she could persuade him to attempt flight with her. If so, there was a ghost of a chance that he might be able to fight off the rest of the bandits and take her away from the valley.

The eyes of Jerry brightened again with even this faint hope to urge her on; and all that day she did what she could, with her one hand, to clean and arrange the rooms. By nightfall she was utterly weary but expectant. The expectancy was vain.

Black Jim arrived long after dark, and she heard him moving about in the shed as he put up his roan. It was her signal to commence the cooking of supper. She waited with bated breath for his entrance and his shout of surprise when he saw the changes she had worked in a single day, but when he did come it was in silence. He gave no more heed either to her or her work than an Indian gives to his squaw.

Jerry fumed in quiet as long as she could. Then her plans and resolutions gave way before anger. She dropped a big pan, clattering to the floor. Black Jim, who sat near a lantern at a table, reading and calmly waiting for his meal, did not raise his head from his book.

"Say, Lord Algernon," she cried, "wake up and slide your eye over this room! Am I your hired cook, maybe? Am I the scrubwoman at eight per?"

He let a vague and unseeing eye rove toward her, and was immediately lost in his book again. She repressed a slight desire to pick up the pan from the floor and hurl it at him.

"All right, deary," she said, "go on dreaming this is a play, but the finale is going to take you off your feet. The silent treatment is okay for some, cutie, but if you keep it up on me, this show will turn out wilder than a night of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' down in New Orleans."

She resumed her cooking in silence. Black Jim had not favored her with even a glance during this oration. That evening was a symbol of the days to come. He ate in silence, without thanks or regard to her. Apparently now that her wound was no longer troubling her greatly, his attitude was changed. She felt it was not that he was indifferent; she had simply vanished from his mind. He had cared for her hurt; he had warned her of the dangers she might find in the valley; he had armed her against them. Thereafter she ceased to exist in his mind, for his code was fulfilled.

She fumed and fretted under this treatment at first, and still attempted to follow out her original campaign of winning Black Jim to her side. In all respects she failed miserably. She attempted to read his books; the verse wearied her; the vulgarity of "Gil Blas" stopped her in twenty pages; she could not wade through the opening exchange of letters in "Redgauntlet." Her mind turned back to Montgomery many times during the first ten days, but he never appeared and she quickly forgot him.

Black Jim was never at home during the day. He either rode out on the roan or else he went off on foot and returned at night with game, so that they never lacked meat. Cooking, short walks through the trees, endless silences, these things occupied the mind of Annie Kerrigan.

Yet she was not unhappy. She was of the nature which loves extremes, and to her own astonishment, growing every day, she discovered that the hush of the mountains filled her life even more than the clattering gaiety of the stage. Slight, murmuring sounds which would scarcely have reached her ear a month

before, now came to her with meaning—the thousand faint stirs which never cease in the forest.

Heretofore she had never had a thought which she did not speak. Now she learned the most profound wisdom of all when the mind speaks to itself and the voice is still.

Whatever of the old restless activity remained in her found a vent in the ceaseless study of the bandit. She picked up a thousand clues little by little, but they all led in different directions. At the end of a month she felt that she was farther away from the truth than she had been at the first.

All that she really knew was what he had told her. He lived above the law. She knew him well enough to see that he was not a criminal because of hate for other men, or even because he loved the thrill of his night riding. He simply avoided that other world of men because it was a world where life was constrained by a thousand rules.

To her mind he was like a powerful and sinisterly beautiful beast of prey which hunts where it will through the forest, and when it is pressed in its haunts by man turns and strikes him down. She carried the animal metaphor still farther.

She saw it in his singular silence, which was not reticence, but the speechlessness of a man to whom words are of no use. She saw it most of all in the singularly fathomless eyes. They never mocked her. They were simply veils through which she could not look.

The face changes expression only because man lives among fellows, whom he wishes to read his emotions, his anger, his pleasure, his contempt. Therefore his features grow mobile.

Black Jim lived alone. When he was with men and wished to express an emotion he did not pause to express his will in anything save action. At first, when the endless chatter of La Belle Geraldine disturbed him of an evening, he simply rose and left the cabin to walk (through the woods. It was long before she understood why.

The clock which ticks out our lives in the cities of men had no place in his house. He rose in the morning early, because, like an animal again, he could not sleep after the light came. He felt no measuring of time by which to check and control his actions. He ate at any hour, now and then, once a day, often four times. Jerry fell into his habits through the strong force of a near example; the ticking of the clock no longer entered her consciousness, and in its place flowed the broad and tideless river of life.

Chapter VIII

The Sign of the Beast.

The deadline which Black Jim said he had drawn around his cabin certainly had its effect, for never after the first day did she see one of the bandits. Now and again she caught the sound of distant firing when they practiced with their guns. Three or four times she heard drunken singing through the night as they held high festival. Otherwise she knew naught of them or their actions, though

her mind retained the grim gallery of their portraits. The day would surely be when Black Jim should fail to return from one of his expeditions, and then—

That day came. She waited till late at night, but he did not come. She could scarcely sleep, and when the morning came she sat in the cabin guessing at a thousand, horrors.

A voice took up a song in the distance, and then came closer and closer. Jerry stood up and felt for her revolver with a nervous hand. The voice rose clearer and clearer. She could make out the words:

"Julia, you are peculiar;
Julia, you are queer."

Jerry dropped her hands on her hips and drew a long breath, partly of vexation and partly of relief.

"It's Freddie," she muttered.

"Truly, you are unruly,
As a wild Western steer.
Some day, when we marry,
Dear one, you and I;
Julia, you little mule, you,
I'm going to rule you,
Or die."

The song ended as the singer approached the edge of the open space before Black Jim's cabin. Jerry stepped through the door to see Montgomery standing in the shadow of the trees.

"Yea, Jerry!" he yelled. "Is the gunman around?"

"He's not here," she answered. "You don't have to be afraid of anything, Freddie."

"Oh, don't I?" came the reply. "Didn't he make this a deadline, La Belle? Suppose he should come back and find me on the other side of it? Not me, Jerry; I like life too well!"

"Where've you been?" said Jerry, approaching him—"and what in the world have you been doing, Freddie?"

For as she drew closer she found herself looking upon a Frederick Montgomery who, in voice alone, remained the man she had known. A vast stubble of black beard and whiskers, unshaven for full two weeks or more, obscured the fine outline of his features. His broad hat, pushed back from his forehead, allowed a mop of tangled hair to fall down almost to his eyes. Overalls, soiled and marred with wrinkles, a shirt torn savagely across the side, muddy boots, and the heavy revolver completed his equipment. Jerry was aghast!

"What's the matter, Jerry?" asked Montgomery. "Some hit, this costume; eh? It isn't make-up, kid. It's the real thing."

"And I suppose you're the real thing under it?" said Jerry in deep disgust.

"Sure," said he, easily. "Stack all your chips and put 'em on me, kid. I'm the real stuff!"

"Why haven't you been around?" asked Jerry sharply, and bitter anger took her breath, "You knew I was left here at the mercy of Black Jim. And you haven't done a thing to help me! Why?"

"Why?" repeated the other, but not peculiarly embarrassed. "There's a reason, kid. I've been too busy living."

"Too busy getting dirty, you mean," snorted La Belle Geraldine. "Go make yourself decent and then come back if you want to talk with me! But if you've got dirt in your mind, Freddie, water won't help you."

He growled deep in his throat and she stepped back a pace. She had never heard such an ominous sound from him before: now she scanned him more closely. It seemed to her that his eyes were sunken and shadowed significantly.

"Don't try that line on me any more, Jerry," he answered, "You could get by in the old days, but it won't do up here."

"Won't it, deary?" asked Jerry, with a rather dangerous sweetness.

"Not a hope, kid," answered he, "I'm through with all that stuff. Down in the States a jane could pull that line now and then and get by with it, but up here, it's a man's country, and it's up to you to sidestep when anything in pants comes along."

"As a man," returned Jerry, yet for some reason she did not feel as brave as her words, "as a man, cutie, you come about as close to the real article as a makeup will let you. But I'm behind the scenes and it won't quite do, Mr. Montgomery, it won't quite do."

He scowled but he softened his tone as he answered.

"Look here, Jerry," he said, "I didn't come here looking for a fight. Am I your friend or am I not?"

"Do you remember how you backed out of the room when Black Jim simply looked at you, Freddie?" she asked gently.

"Sure I do," he growled, "but you can't hold that up against me, Jerry. There isn't a man of the bunch that would take a chance face to face with Black Jim. He ain't human, you ought to know that. The only difference between him and a tiger is that he uses a gun. He's just—"

"Cut it out, Freddie," she broke in. "I'm tired of you already. Ring off. Hang up. You're on the wrong wire."

"Say, kid," he said with gravity, "Do I gather that you stand for that man-eater?"

"Take it any way you like," she said coldly.

He laughed disagreeably.

"Of course you don't," he went on, "You're simply kidding me along. What if I could show you the way out of the valley tonight, Jerry?"

She caught her breath.

"The way out? Freddie! Are you playing me straight?"

"I don't know," he said, with a trace of sullenness, "but this is my night on duty at the gap."

"Then I'm free!" she cried, "I'll start as soon as it's pitch dark and—"

"Wait a minute," he interrupted, "don't run away with yourself. If you disappeared Black Jim would know I let you pass and when he found out that his—"

"Stop there," she said. "Freddie, what do you mean—do you think—"

"Lay off on that, Jerry," returned Montgomery. "You're a swell dancer, but you can't get away with heavy stuff like this. You've been all alone with him here, haven't you?"

She touched her hand to her forehead and wondered at its coldness in a vague way.

"Why should I care?" she murmured, "Let him think what he will."

"But I'm still strong for you," Montgomery was saying. "Don't get white and scared, kid. I don't hold it against you, much. What I say is, why not get rid of Black Jim? You can take him off his guard. Say the word and I'll hang around at night and you can signal me when he's asleep. Then I'll come and do the work. It'd be a risky job, but for your sake, kid, I'd—"

"You've said enough," she answered, and then summoning her courage and fighting back her disgust, for here was her one chance to gain freedom. "If you're afraid of him, why not go with me? What's your idea? Do you really intend to stay here. Freddie, you haven't become one of those swine!"

He laughed heavily.

"Swine?" he repeated; "Say, kid, did you ever see swine with this stuff hanging around in their hides?"

He slid a hand into his hip pocket and brought it out again full of gold pieces of three denominations. He poured it deftly back and forth.

"Take a slant at it, Jerry," he said. "Listen to 'em click! One little job I pulled last week brought me this and about twice as much more. Easy? say, it's a shame to take the coin. It's like robbing the cradle. Do you think I'd leave this game even to go off with you, Jerry? Not till I'm blind, kid! Get wise! Say the word and we can pull a stunt on Black Jim that'll give us the cabin and all the loot that's stacked up in it."

His eyes glittered.

"How much has he got stowed away in there, kid?"

She retreated another pace. He was half a dozen yards away now.

"I don't know," she murmured. Fear was growing in her, and horror with it. In a sudden desperation she held out her hand to him and cried: "Freddie what is it? You were pretty clean when you first came up here. What has changed you? What's happened?"

"What's happened?" he asked, dully, as if he could not follow her meaning.

"Yes, yes! Open your lungs—taste this air. Isn't that enough in itself to make a man of you? And the scent of the evergreen, Freddie—and the nearness of the sky—and the whiteness of the stars—"

"And the absence of the law, kid," he broke in. "Don't forget that. A man makes his own law up here, which means no law at all. We're above it, that's what we are. Stay here a little longer and you'll get it, too!"

She stared at him with great eyes while her mind moved quickly. She was beginning to understand, not the gross-minded brute which Frederick Montgomery had become, but the singular influence of the wild, free life. Of those other twelve and of Montgomery, the open license made animals. There was a difference between them and Black Jim. She had felt the touch of the animal in him, too, but in another manner. The others were like feeders on carrion; he was truly a great and fearless beast of prey. The solemn silences of the mountains imparted to him some of their own dignity. The mystery and the terror of the wilderness were his.

"Above the law?" she said. "No, you're beneath it. I wish—I wish I were a man for half a minute—to rid the world of you all!"

She turned and fled back to the cabin.

"Jerry! Oh, Jerry!" he shouted from the edge of the clearing where the deadline of Black Jim still held him.

She turned at the door.

"Have you made up your mind about it finally?"

She shuddered so that she could not answer.

"Then, by God, I'll have you, if I have to get Black Jim first, and I'll get his other loot when I get you!"

He disappeared among the trees and she went back into the cabin, weak at heart, and filled now with a strange yearning for the return of Black Jim. The vultures, she felt, circled above the valley, waiting for her. He was the strong eagle which would put them to flight.

Evening drew on. He did not come. Night settled black over the valley and the white stars brushed the great trees that fringed the cliffs. Still he did not come. The hearth fire remained unlighted. The damp cold of darkness numbed her hands and her heart. She waited, bowed and miserable. He was delayed, but delay to Black Jim could mean only death. No other force could take all this time for his return. This grew more certain in her mind as the hours passed. In that gloom every minute meant more than whole hours during the day.

At last she made up her mind. Montgomery—not the light-hearted man she had known, but a hot-eyed beast—threatened her. Not he alone, but perhaps all of the other twelve were so many dangers. Now that Black Jim was gone she was helpless in their hands.

By the next day they would know of his long absence and come for her—for her and for the rest of the loot, as Montgomery had said. She must get away from the valley that night. The sentinel was there, to be sure, but that sentinel was Montgomery and she felt that there was a fighting chance that she could pass him safely in the gap. If necessary she could fight, and perhaps she could handle a revolver as well as he. Perhaps she could surprise him. He would not look for the attempt and if she could get him under the aim of her revolver, she knew that he was not a hero.

Once out of the gap there was an even chance for life. She might wander through the mountains until she starved to death. On the other hand she might find a road and follow it to town.

She weighed the chances in her own practical way; rose from the stool; saw that her cartridge belt was well filled; strapped a canvas bag full of food on the other hip, and left the cabin.

She kept as closely as possible to the center of the valley, for she felt that the habitation of the gang must lie close to the wall, on which side she could not know. As she approached the gap she went more and more slowly, for here the valley began to narrow rapidly, and the chance that she might encounter one of the twelve grew greater. At every step she feared a discovery, for it was impossible to guess what lay immediately before her. The valley floor was not only thick with great trees, but mighty boulders. They had evidently been split by erosion from the cliffs around and lay here and there, a perfect hiding place for a veritable army. The keen scent of wood-smoke reached her nostrils. She paused a moment, uncertain from which direction it came, for the air was still.

Then she turned to the right and stole on with careful steps. Each crackling of a twig beneath her feet made her heart thunder.

Chapter IX

Jerry Decides.

THE scent of smoke grew fainter, ceased, and came again. A murmur like the sound of voices brought her to a dead halt to listen. She heard nothing further for a moment and went on again until a great stone, full forty feet in height, blocked her progress and she began to circle it. As she turned the corner of the boulder she stopped short, and dropped to the ground.

The big stone and several smaller ones close to it lay in a rough circle, and in the center of the space smoked a pile of wood, which would soon break into flames. Already little crimson tongues of flames licked up along the edges, quivered, and went out, to be replaced by others. By the dim light of this rising fire, she made out shadowy figures one after another, nine in all, and she could not see all of the circle.

"Start it yourself, Porky," said a voice.

A snatch of flame jerked up the side of the pile of wood and flickered a moment like a detached thing at the top. By that light she saw the big bearded fellow leaning against a rock just opposite her.

"Not me," he answered, "Mac will be back maybe. If he don't come, I'll start the ball rollin'. Gimme time."

The fear which made her drop to the ground still paralyzed Jerry, so that she heard these things as from a great distance. With all her heart she wished for the strength to creep back from the rock, but for the moment she had no strength. The clatter of a galloping horse drew up to the rocks and stopped. Montgomery entered the circle and threw himself down beside Porky. A general silence held the group. The fire flamed up and clearly showed the round of somber faces as they turned to Montgomery.

New heart came to Jerry, for Montgomery had evidently abandoned his place in the gap and now the way of her flight lay clear. She rose cautiously from her prone position to her hands and knees and began to draw softly back.

"Did he come through?" asked a voice.

"Just passed me," answered Montgomery, "and he was riding hard. The roan looked as if he'd covered a hundred miles today."

Jerry paused, all ears, and her heart leaped. They must mean that Black Jim had ridden through the pass. The black shadow of the rock concealed her perfectly and unless some one actually walked upon her, through the aperture between the two big boulders, there was practically no chance that they could discover her presence. Black Jim has returned, and now she connected his return to the valley, for some unknown reason, with this assemblage in the night. She could not forget the threat which Montgomery had made earlier in the day.

"Put it to them straight, Mac," said Porky to Montgomery. "Give 'em the whole idea, just the way you talked it over with me. They're all set to listen. I sort of prepared the way."

"All right," agreed Montgomery, "I'll tell you where I stand. I'm tired as hell of having Black Jim walk all over us. I say if we're men we've got to put an end to it, savvy?"

Another of those little ominous silences fell on the circle.

"It appears to me, partner," drawled Montana, "that you're talkin' a powerful lot, when a man might say you're only jest come among us."

"He ain't askin' you to come in on the plan," broke in Poriky aggressively. "Neither am I. Jest listen, an' if you don't like the idea a mighty sight, nobody's goin' to hurt you for staying out."

"Nacherally," agreed the Doctor, "but kick out with your hunch, Mac."

Jerry went cold, yet she edged a little closer for fear that a single low-pitched word might escape her.

"I haven't been here long," said Montgomery, "but while I've been here I've learned enough about Black Jim for him to make me sick."

"He generally makes folks feel that way," said a voice, and a chuckle followed, which broke off short, for Poriky was glowering from face to face.

"You remember what he did the day after he brought the girl into the valley?"

"I reckon he brought you-all in about the same time," said the man of the pale face and yellow teeth, grinning.

Montgomery frowned black.

"He took me from behind," he said savagely. "I didn't have no chance to get at my gun, or maybe the story wouldn't be the same."

"Go on, Silent," encouraged Poriky. "Don't let 'em throw you off the trail."

"All right. You remember he came down here and told us all he had a deadline drawn around his cabin at the edge of the trees and if any of us crossed it he was no better than dead meat?"

A general growl rose, for the memory angered them to their hearts.

"We all were pretty still when he spoke," said Montgomery, "and my way of looking at it, we acted like a bunch of whipped dogs."

"Kind of smile when you say that, partner," said the pale-faced man, "or pretty soon maybe you'll be riding your idea to death!"

"I'm telling you what it seemed to me," said Montgomery. "I say, what right has Black Jim got to make rules up here? This valley is above the law, isn't it?"

"It ain't the first thing he done," said Poriky. "He's been makin' laws of his own all the time, an', by God, I ain't the man to stand for it no longer, which I say, Black Jim is always a bluffin' from a four-flush."

"Me speakin' personal," added the Doctor, "I got no use for a man that won't liquor up with the boys now an' then. It shows he ain't got any nacheral trust for his pals."

"I say it's come to a show down," said Montgomery. "Either we've got to move out and leave the valley to Black Jim, or he's got to move out and leave it to us. Am I right?"

"All savin' one little thing," drawled a voice. "You-all seem to be forgettin' that Black Jim ain't partic'lar willin' to move for anybody. Ef it comes to movin' him, he'll have to be carried out feet first, in a way of speakin'."

"And why not move him that way?" asked Montgomery.

Once more the breathless silence fell. Jerry could see each man flash a glance of question at his neighbor and then each pair of eyes fell glowering upon the fire. A little gritting sound caught her, and she found that she was

grinding her teeth savagely. All her wild, loyal nature revolted against this cool and secret plotting.

"Because it ain't no way possible," said the Doctor, "to ride Black Jim without buckin' straps an' a Spanish bit."

"Maybe not for one man," said Montgomery softly, "but here's twelve men can all shoot straight and every one knows his gun. Can Black Jim stand up against us all at one time?"

"Maybe not," said the Doctor, "but he ain't no gun-shy paint-pony, an' before we're through flashin' guns, some of us are goin' to start out on the long trail for the happy huntin' grounds. You can stack your chips on that, partner!"

"Then, by God!" cried Porky, starting to his feet with such suddenness that the others shrank a little, "if you're goin' to quit cold, me an' Silent Mac'll take on the game by ourselves, and we split the loot between us. There'll be a lot of it. He don't never spend it any ways I can see—no liquor, no gamblin', no nothin'. Boys, the stuff must be piled up to the roof!"

Without hardly knowing what she did Jerry drew out the revolver from her holster and drew a deadly bead on Porky's breast. She checked herself with horror at the thought that a single pressure of her finger would bring a man to his death. Three or four other men rose around the circle.

"If it comes to a show down, Porky," said one of them, "we'll stack our chips with yours. I'm ag'in' Black Jim, an' I'd jest as soon tell him so from the talkin' end of a gun."

"Me, too," said another, and a clamor of voices rose in affirmation.

Jerry began to draw back, her head whirling.

"Then there's no time like tonight," called Montgomery, "and I tell you how we can work best."

He lowered his tone as he spoke, and as Jerry drew back behind the jutting angle of the rock, she heard only a confused murmur of sounds. There she crouched a long moment, thinking as she had never thought before.

The way out of the valley lay clear before her. If she rose and walked on she would be free within ten minutes and in fifteen escape beyond the reach of pursuit.

The other alternative was to turn back to the cabin of Black Jim and warn him of the danger which threatened. If she did this, it meant that she would be involved in the same ruin which was soon to involve the solitary bandit.

Thirteen men that night would attack him. When he fell, she would be the prize of the victors. Jerry moaned aloud.

Then she rose, still crouching, and hurried off among the trees towards the gap of the valley. Terror drove her faster and faster. When she reached the last rise of ground up to the gap, she broke into a stumbling run. In another moment she stood at the farther end of a narrow pass, and paused an instant to take her breath. Below her the ground pitched steeply down, down to freedom. On that outward trail she would be started again for happiness, for the applause of the gay hundreds, for the shimmer of the footlights, which had been to her like signal fires which led on finally to fame. She looked back to the valley. It was black as death. She looked up, and there were the cold, white stars very near. One of them seemed to burn in the top of a tall pine, a lordly tree.

A great weakness mastered Jerry, and she dropped to her knees, her shoulder pressing against the cliff which fenced the gap. Perhaps the thirteen

were even then prowling toward the cabin of Black Jim. Perhaps Jim was stooped over the hearth, kindling the fire. Perhaps he even thought of her, at least to wonder carelessly where she had gone. Big tears formed in her eyes and ran hotly down her cheeks. She threw her arms up toward the pallid Stars, and her hands were fiercely clenched.

"O God," she said, whispering the words, "tell me what's the big-time thing to do! How'm I going to put over this act right? I've been on the small-time so long I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do!"

Surely there was an answer to that prayer, for her tears ceased at once. She rose and looked once more longingly down the slope that led to liberty. Then she turned and went back into the double night of the valley.

She went on at a swinging step and hope came to her as she walked. Surely the crew of Porky and Montgomery would deliberate some time longer, laying their plans for the attack. She had heard enough to know that they feared Black Jim worse than death and they would not be the men to take greater chances than necessary. If that were so she might reach the cabin in time. Once or twice she started to run, but she stopped and swung into the walk again for she must not exhaust her strength. There might be need for it all, before the night was done.

Chapter X

A Straight Game with a Fixed Deck.

SHE grew more and more cautious as she approached the farther end of the valley, and for a time she hesitated at the edge of the circle of trees around the cabin, watching and listening. She found nothing suspicious. When she moved a little to one side she saw a shaft of light fall from a window of the house. It was a golden promise to Jerry, and her heart beat strongly again with hope. Once with Black Jim she felt at that moment as if they could fight off the whole world between them.

She went tiptoeing across the open space like a child that is stealing up to catch a playmate by surprise. At the open door she stood a moment, peeking around the corner and into the interior. The shock of the discovery unnerved her, even more than the plot which she had overheard, scarcely an hour before.

By the lantern light she saw Black Jim standing with folded arms beside her bunk. He stared down at an array of woman's clothes which was spread out on the blankets. She saw a long, rose-colored scarf, a dress of blue silk that shimmered faintly in the dim light, light shoes on the floor, a small round hat, and there were other articles at which she could only guess, for they were not all exposed.

"Jim!" she called softly, and then stepped into the door.

He whirled with a clutching hand on the butt of his revolver. He was pale but a deep color poured into his face and his eyes wavered to the floor under her shining glance.

"I thought you were gone," he said. "I thought—"

He raised his head and went to her with outstretched hand.

"Jerry," he said, as she met his grasp, "I was thinkin' awhile ago that I didn't care for anything livin' except the roan. But I reckon I'd have missed you!"

The confession came stammeringly forth. Jerry pressed his hand in both of hers.

"You're just—you're just a dear," she cried, and in a moment she was on her knees, turning over the finery, article by article. Tears brimmed her eyes again.

"I thought you never noticed me," she said, turning to him. "I thought I was no more than the blank wall to you, Jim!"

"Which a man would be blind that didn't see your clothes was getting some worn, Jerry," he said, and she saw that his eyes were traveling slowly over her from head to foot, as if to make sure that she had really come back to him. It thrilled her with a happiness different from any she had ever known in her life. She forgot the danger! of the thirteen gangsters and the warning which she had come back to tell Black Jim at such a peril to herself. She leaned over the clothes to conceal the hot color in her face and to fight against a sudden sense of self-consciousness. It was more like stage fright than anything else, yet it was different. It was not the fear of many critical eyes. It was an awful knowledge that her own searching vision was turned back upon her soul and every corner of her heart lay exposed. And still that quivering, foolish, childish happiness sang in her like the murmur of a harp-string.

She left a slight touch at her side. Black Jim had opened the canvas bag and glanced at the contents. He stepped back, a frown and a smile fighting on his face.

"You did start on the out-trail, Jerry?" he asked.

She remembered now with horrible suddenness all that she had come back to tell him. It brought her slowly to her feet, white, tense.

"I did start," she answered. "You were gone so long—I thought you were hurt—killed—and that I was left here at the mercy of—"

She stopped, and then hurried on.

"I started to go down the valley and on the way I came to the same crowd of men who were in this room the night you brought me here. They were around a fire. I hid beside the rock and listened to their talk. They were threatening you, Jim! They planned to come up here tonight and attack you—because of the gold you have—and me! They were all there. They hadn't even left a man to guard the gap!"

"Which left you plumb free to go on out of the valley," said Jim, half to himself, and entirely disregarding the rest of her speech.

"We must leave at once!" she cried. "We must try to sneak off down the valley before they arrive to make their attack—"

"But you come back here to tell me," he went on, musing, "when you might have got away."

She caught him by the arm and shook it savagely.

"Wake up!" she called. "Listen to me! Don't you understand what is going to happen?"

"I didn't think there was no man would do that," he said; "leastwise, not up here, above the law. But now a woman has done it—for me!"

For the wonder of it he shook his head slowly.

"Jerry, I've been consider'ble of a fool!"

"Yea, Jim!" called a voice from the night.

"Git down!" whispered Black Jim, and dragged her to the floor. "Keep low when the bullets start comin', an' stay down. Hell is just startin' around here!"

"Don't go!" she pleaded, clutching him. "They want you to go out and then they'll shoot at you from the shelter of the trees."

His faint chuckle answered her.

"After all, Jerry, I'm not a plumb fool!"

He ran softly to the open door and swung it to.

"Who's there?" he called.

He whispered to Jerry: "I can see four of them among the trees, an' Silent Mac an' Porky are standin' by the dead line waiting for me to come out. Watch them from the other side of the cabin. They might try to rush from that side."

"Come out!" answered the voice of Montgomery from without. "We got to see you, Jim, or let us come across your deadline."

Jerry ran to the narrow window on the farther side of the room and peered cautiously out. The new-risen moon shed so faint a light that she could see nothing at first.

"What d'you want with me?" she heard Black Jim say.

Now as she strained her eyes she made out one, two, three dim figures moving behind the trees. The cabin was surrounded on all sides.

"We need you, Jim," answered Porky's voice. "They's a passel of men camped in the gap. When day comes they'll start cleanin' out our valley."

Black Jim chuckled.

"Jest a minute, boys," he called. "Wait there, an' I'll be with you,"

He crossed hurriedly to Jerry.

"They are out on this side, too, Jim," she breathed. "They have us surrounded! It's death to us both, Jim! There's no escape!"

"Remember this!" he whispered, and his hand closed on her shoulder, "Whatever happens, keep close to the floor. They got us trapped. Maybe there ain't any hope. Anyway, it'll be a fight they'll remember—"

"I will! I will!" she answered, and her voice trembled, for he seemed to have caught at her whole soul with his hand, "but before it begins—I've got to say—I've got to tell you—"

She stopped, then went on with a great effort: "Jim, before we die—"

"Hush!" he said. "There ain't goin' to be no death for you!"

"Before we die," she pressed on, "remember that I love you with all my heart and soul, Jim!"

"Jerry, you're talkin' loco!"

"It isn't much to be loved by a smalltime actress, and I've never once been behind the lights on the real big time. But, oh, Jim! I wish I was keen in the bean like Cissy Loftus, because then—"

Slowly, fumbling, his arms went around her and tightened.

"Jerry!" he whispered.

"Yes?" she answered in the same tone.

"It seems to me—"

"Dear Jim!"

"It won't be so partic'lar hard—"

"Dear—dear old Jim!"

"To pass out now. But it's too late to ask for a new deal. This deck's already shuffled and stacked. Jerry, we'll play a straight game even with a fixed deck. An', an' I love you, honey, more 'n the roan an' my six-gun put together!"

He gathered her close with powerful arms, but the kiss which touched her eyes and then her lips, was gentle and reverent.

"Are you sleepin', Jim?" called a voice.

He turned and went with drawn revolver o the door, still slightly ajar. From behind him, Jerry could see Montgomery and Porky standing in the moonlight.

"I ain't sleepin'," replied Black Jim, "but I'm figurin' why I ain't shot such hounds as you two, without warnin'!"

As if he had pressed a spring which set automata in motion, they whirled and leaped behind trees.

"Take warning!" called Black Jim, "I could have bagged you both with my eyes shut, an' the next man of you that I see I'll let him have it"

For reply a revolver barked and a bullet thudded into the heavy door. Black Jim slammed it and dropped the heavy latch. A series of wild yells sounded from the trees on all sides and a dozen shots rang in quick succession. After this first venting of their disappointed spleen, the bandits were silent again. Jerry poised her revolver and searched the trees carefully. A hand dropped on her arm and another hand took away the revolver.

"If there's shootin' to be done," said Black Jim, "I'll do it, The blood of a man don't wash off so easy, even from soft white hands like yours, Jerry!"

"Then when you shoot, shoot to kill!" she said fiercely. "They are trying for your life like bloodhounds, Jim"

"Kill?" he repeated, taking up his place at the small window with his revolver raised. "Jerry, I've never killed a man yet, no matter what people say, an' I'm not goin' to begin now. While a bullet in the leg or the shoulder puts a man out of the way jest as well as if it went through the heart. Git down closer to the floor!"

His gun exploded; a yell from the edge of the trees answered him; and then a chorus of shouts and a score of bullets in swift succession smashed against the logs, Through the silence that followed they heard a distant, faint moaning.

Black Jim, running with his body close to the floor, crossed the room to the window on the other side. Almost instantly his gun spoke again, and a man screamed in the night of the trees.

"Too high!" she heard Jim saying. "I meant it lower."

"They're beaten, Jim!" she called softly. "They don't dare try to rush the cabin. They're beaten!"

"Not yet!" he answered. "Unless they're plumb crazy they'll tackle us from the blind side. There ain't any window in the shed, Jerry!"

Chapter XI

Back to the Law.

FROM three sides of the house he could command the approaches through the door and the two slits in the wall which answered in place of windows. On the side of the shed where the roan was stabled, there was not the smallest chink through which he could fire. Jerry sat twisting her hands in despair.

"Take the ax, Jim," she said at last, "and chop away a hole in the logs. They're all light and thin. You could make a place to shoot from in a minute!"

"Jerry, girl," he said; "you've a heart of gold!"

He started to fumble about in the dark for the ax. But the weak side of the cabin was too apparent to be overlooked by the besiegers. Before the ax was found, a great crackling of fire commenced outside the shed and a cry of triumph rose from the men without. The sound of the fire rose; the roan whinnied with terror. Black Jim slipped his revolver back into his holster, and turned with folded arms to Jerry.

"So this is the finale," she said with white lips. "Where's our soft music and the curtain, Jim?"

"Let the girl out!" shouted the voice of Montgomery. "We won't hurt her! Come out, Jerry!"

"Go on out, honey," said Black Jim.

She went to him and drew his arm about her.

"Do you think I'd go out to them, Jim?"

"I don't think," he said; "I know. There's nothin' but death in here!"

A gust of wind puffed the flames to a roar up the side of the shed outside, and they heard the stamping of the roan in an agony of panic.

"There's only two ways left to me," she said, "and dying with you is a lot the easiest, Jim. Give back my gun!"

"Honey," he said, and she wondered at the gentleness of his voice, "you're jest a girl—a bit of a slip of a girl—an' I can't no-ways let you stay in here. Go out the door. They won't shoot."

"Give back my gun!" she said.

She felt the arm about her tremble, and then the butt of a revolver was placed in her hand. The fire hissed and muttered now on the roof of the cabin. Red glimmers of light showed before the windows and filled the interior with grim dance of shadows.

"I never knew it could be this way, Jerry," he said.

"Nor I, either," she answered, "and the day I make my final exit is the day I really began to live. Jim, it's worth it!"

Through another pause they listened to the fire. Outside Montgomery was imploring the girl to leave the house, and as the fire mounted, an occasional yell from the crowd applauded its progress.

"Seein' we're goin' out on the long trail together," said Black Jim, "ain't there some way we can hitch up so's we can be together on the other side of the river?"

She did not understand.

"I mean, supposin' we were married—"

She pressed her face against his body to keep back a sob.

"Seems to me," he went on, "that I can remember some of a marriage I fence read. Do you suppose, Jerry, that if me an' you said it over now, bein' about to die, that it would mean anything?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried eagerly. "We're above the law, Jim, and what we do is either sacred or damned."

"The part I remember," he said calmly, though the room was hot now with the rising fire, "begins something like this, an' it ain't very long Is Jerry your real name, honey?"

"My real name is Annie Kerrigan. And yours, Jim?"

"I was never called nothin' but Black Jim. Shall I begin?"

"Yes!"

"I, Black Jim, take thee, Annie—"

"I, Annie, take thee, Black Jim," she repeated.

"To have and to hold—"

"To have and to hold."

"For better or worse—"

"For better or worse."

"Till death do us part—"

"Jim, dear Jim, can that part us?"

"Nothin' between heaven an' hell can, honey! Annie, there was the ring, too, but I ain't got a ring."

The room was bright with the firelight now. She raised her left hand and kissed the third finger.

"Jim, dear, this is a new kind of marriage. We don't really need a ring, do we?"

"We'll jest suppose that part."

The roan made the whole cabin tremble with his frantic efforts to break from his halter.

"An' old Roan Bill goes with us," said Black Jim; "everything I wanted comes with me in the end of things, honey. But he ought to die easier than by fire!"

He drew his revolver again and stepped through the doorway into the shed, Jerry followed him and saw Roan Bill standing crouched and shuddering against the wall, his eyes green with fear. Black Jim stepped to him and stroked the broad forehead. For a moment Bill kept his terrified eyes askance upon the burning wall of the shed. Then he turned his head and pressed against Jim, as if to shut out the sight. With his left hand stroking the horse gently along the neck, Jim raised his revolver and touched it to the temple of Roan Bill. Another cry broke from the crowd without as if they could look through the burning walls and witness the coming tragedy and glory in it.

"Old pal," said Black Jim, "we've seen a mighty pile of things together, an' if hosses get on the other side of the river, I got an idea I'll find you there. So-long!"

"Wait!" called Jerry. "Don't shoot, Jim?"

He turned toward her with a frown as she ran to him.

"The wall, Jim! Look at the wall of the shed!"

The thin wall had burned through in many places and the wood was charred deeply. In several parts the burning logs had fallen away, leaving an aperture edged with flames.

"I see it," said Black Jim. "It's about to fall. Get back in the cabin."

"Yes," she answered, fairly trembling with excitement, even a strong puff of wind would blow it in! Listen! I see the ghost of a chance for us! Blindfold Roan Bill so that the fire won't make him mad. We'll both get in the saddle. Then you can beat half of that wall down at a single blow. We'll ride for the woods. They won't be watching very closely from this side. We may—we may—there's one chance in a thousand."

He stared at her a single instant. Then by way of answer jerked the saddle from a peg on the wall of the cabin and threw it on the roan's back. Jerry darted into the cabin and came out with the long scarf, which she tied firmly around the horse's eyes. In two minutes their entire preparations were completed and a money-belt dropped into a saddlebag. Jerry in the saddle with

the roan trembling beneath her, and the reins clutched tight in one hand, a revolver in the other. Black Jim caught up a loose log-end, fallen from the wall.

"There in the center," she called. "It's thinnest there!"

"The minute it falls start the roan," he said; "I'll swing on behind as you pass!" With that he swung the stick around his head and drove it against the wall. A great section fell. He struck again. A yell came from without as another width crushed down, and Jerry loosened the reins.

At the very moment that Black Jim caught the back of the saddle, the roan stepped on a red-hot coal and reared away, but Jim kept his hold and was safe behind the saddle as the horse made his first leap beyond the burning timbers.

"They're out! This way!" shouted a voice from the trees, and two shots in quick succession hummed close to them.

Fifty yards away lay the trees and safety. The roan lengthened into a racing stride. A chorus of yells broke out around the house and Jerry saw a man jump from behind a tree, and the flash of a revolver in his hand. The long arm of Black Jim darted out and his gun spoke once and again. The man tossed up his arms and pitched forward to the ground. Still another revolver barked directly before them and she saw, by the light of the flaming house, the great figure of Porky Martin, half-hidden by a tree-trunk. A bullet tore through the horn of the saddle.

The woods were only a fraction of a second away from them. Martin stood in their path. Once more the revolver of Black Jim belched, and as they plunged into the saving shadow of the trees, she saw the outlaw stagger and clutch at his throat with both hands.

"To the left! To the left!" said Black Jim, "and straight down the valley for the gap!"

* * * * *

A WEEK later a golden-haired girl rode down a broken trail on the side of one of the lower Sierras. By her side walked a tall man with quick, keen eyes. When they broke from the edge of the forest, she checked her horse and they stood looking down on the upper valley of the Feather River.

Far away the water burned jewel-bright under the sun, and almost directly below them were the green and red roofs of a small village. Here the trail forked, one branch winding west along the mountainside and the other dropping straight down toward the village.

"Which way shall it be?" she asked. "I don't know where the west trail leads, but this straight one takes us down to the village, and that means the law."

"Jerry," he answered, "I've been thinkin' it over, an' it seems to me that it'd be almighty hard to raise kids right above the law. Let's take the trail for the village!"

