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The Heritage of the Sioux

by B.M. Bower

May, 1998 [Etext #1299

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THE HERITAGE OF THE SIOUX by B.M. Bower

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THE HERITAGE OF THE SIOUX by B. M. Bower

CHAPTER I. WHEN GREEN GRASS COMES

Old Applehead Furrman, jogging home across the mesa from Albuquerque, sniffed the soft breeze that came from opal-tinted distances and felt poignantly that spring was indeed here. The grass, thick and green in the sheltered places, was fast painting all the higher ridges and foot-hill slopes, and with the green grass came the lank-bodied, big-kneed calves; which meant that roundup time was at hand. Applehead did not own more than a thousand head of cattle, counting every hoof that walked under his brand. And with the incipient lethargy of old age creeping into his habits of life, roundup time was not with him the important season it once had been; for several years he had been content to hire a couple of men to represent him in the roundups of the larger

outfits--men whom he could trust to watch fairly well his interests. By that method he avoided much trouble and hurry and hard work--and escaped also the cares which come with wealth.

But this spring was not as other springs had been. Something--whether an awakened ambition or an access of sentiment regarding range matters, he did not know--was stirring the blood in Applehead's veins. Never, since the days when he had been a cowpuncher, had the wide spaces called to him so alluringly; never had his mind dwelt so insistently upon the approach of spring roundup. Perhaps it was because he heard so much range talk at the ranch, where the boys of the Flying U were foregathered in uneasy idleness, their fingers itching for the feel of lariat ropes and branding irons while they gazed out over the wide spaces of the mesa.

So much good rangeland unharnessed by wire fencing the Flying U boys had not seen for many a day. During the winter they had been content to ride over it merely for the purpose of helping to make a motion picture of the range, but with the coming of green grass, and with the reaction that followed the completion of the picture that in the making had filled all their thoughts, they were not so content. To the inevitable reaction had been added a nerve racking period of idleness and uncertainty while Luck Lindsay, their director, strove with the Great Western Film Company in Los Angeles for terms and prices that would make for the prosperity of himself and his company.

In his heart Applehead knew, just as the Happy Family knew, that Luck had good and sufficient reasons for over-staying the time-limit he had given himself for the trip. But knowing that Luck was not to be blamed for his long absence did not lessen their impatience, nor did it stifle the call of the wide spaces nor the subtle influence of the winds that blew softly over the uplands.

By the time he reached the ranch Applehead had persuaded himself that the immediate gathering of his cattle was an imperative duty and that he himself must perform it. He could not, he told himself, afford to wait around any longer for luck. Maybe when he came Luck would have nothing but disappointment for them, Maybe--Luck was so consarned stubborn when he got an idea in his head--maybe he wouldn't come to any agreement with the Great Western. Maybe they wouldn't offer him enough money, or leave him enough freedom in his work; maybe he would "fly back on the rope" at the last minute, and come back with nothing accomplished. Applehead, with the experience gleaned from the stress of seeing luck produce one feature picture without any financial backing whatever and without half enough capital, was not looking forward with any enthusiasm to another such ordeal. He did not believe, when all was said and done, that the Flying U boys would be so terribly eager to repeat the performance. He did believe--or he made himself think he believed--that the only sensible thing to do right then was to take the boys and go out and start a roundup of his own. It wouldn't take long--his cattle weren't so badly scattered this year.

"Where's Andy at?" he asked Pink, who happened to be leaning boredly over the gate when he rode up to the corral. Andy Green, having been left in nominal charge of the outfit when Luck left, must be consulted, Applehead supposed.

"Andy? I dunno. He saddled up and rode off somewhere, a while ago," Pink

answered glumly. "That's more than he'll let any of us fellows do; the way he's close-herding us makes me tired! Any news?"

"Ain't ary word from Luck--no word of NO kind. I've about made up my mind to take the chuck-wagon to town and stock it with grub, and hit out on roundup t'morrer or next day. I don't see as there's any sense in setting around here waitin' on Luck and lettin' my own work slide. Chavez boys, they started out yest'day, I heard in town. And if I don't git right out close onto their heels, I'll likely find myself with a purty light crop uh calves, now I'm tellin' yuh!" Applehead, so completely had he come under the spell of the soft spring air and the lure of the mesa, actually forgot that he had long been in the habit of attending to his calf crop by proxy.

Pink's face brightened briefly. Then he remembered why they were being kept so close to the ranch, and he grew bored again.

"What if Luck pulled in before we got back, and wanted us to start work on another picture?" he asked, discouraging the idea reluctantly. Pink had himself been listening to the call of the wide spaces, and the mere mention of roundup had a thrill for him.

"Well, now, I calc'late my prope'ty is might' nigh as important as Luck's pitcher-making," Applehead contended with a selfishness born of his newly awakened hunger for the far distances. "And he ain't sent ary word that he's coming, or will need you boys immediate. The chances is we could go and git back agin before Luck shows up. And if we don't," he argued speciously, "he can't blame nobody for not wantin' to set around on their haunches all spring waiting for 'im. I'd do a lot fer luck; I've DONE a lot fer 'im. But it ain't to be expected I'd set around waitin' on him and let them danged Mexicans rustle my calves. They'll do it if they git half a show--now I'm tellin' yuh!"

Pink did not say anything at all, either in assent or argument; but old Applehead, now that he had established a plausible reason for his sudden impulse, went on arguing the case while he unsaddled his horse. By the time he turned the animal loose he had thought of two or three other reasons why he should take the boys and start out as soon as possible to round up his cattle. He was still dilating upon these reasons when Andy Green rode slowly down the slope to the corral.

"Annie-Many-Ponies come back yet?" he asked of Pink, as he swung down off his horse. "Annie? No; ain't seen anything of her. Shunky's been sitting out there on the hill for the last hour, looking for her."

"Fer half a cent," threatened old Applehead, in a bad humor because his arguments had not quite convinced him that he was not meditating a disloyalty, "I'd kill that danged dawg. And if I was runnin' this bunch, I'd send that squaw back where she come from, and I'd send her quick. Take the two of 'em together and they don't set good with me, now I'm tellin' yuh! If I was to say what I think, I'd say yuh can't never trust an Injun--and shiny hair and eyes and slim build don't make 'em no trustier. They's something scaley goin' on around here, and I'd gamble on it. And that there squaw's at the bottom of it. What fur's she ridin' off every day, 'n' nobody knowin' where she goes to? If Luck's got the sense he used to have, he'll git some white girl to act in his

pitchers, and send that there squaw home 'fore she double-crosses him some way or other."

"Oh, hold on, Applehead!" Pink felt constrained to defend the girl. "You've got it in for her 'cause her dog don't like your cat. Annie's all right; I never saw anything outa the way with her yet."

"Well, now, time you're old as I be, you'll have some sense, mebby," Applehead quelled. "Course you think Annie's all right. She's purty,'n' purtyness in a woman shore does cover up a pile uh cussedness--to a feller under forty. You're boss here, Andy. When she comes back, you ask 'er where she's been, and see if you kin git a straight answer. She'll lie to yuh--I'll bet all I got, she'll lie to yuh. And when a woman lies about where she's been to and what she's been doin', you can bet there's something scaley goin' on. Yuh can't fool ME!"

He turned and went up to the small adobe house where he had lived in solitary contentment with his cat Compadre until Luck Lindsay, seeking a cheap headquarters for his free-lance company while he produced the big Western picture which filled all his mind, had taken calm and unheralded possession of the ranch. Applehead did not resent the invasion; on the contrary, he welcomed it as a pleasant change in his monotonous existence. What he did resent was the coming, first, of the little black dog that was no more than a tramp and had no right on the ranch, and that broke all the laws of decency and gratitude by making the life of the big blue cat miserable. Also he resented the uninvited arrival of Annie-Many-Ponies from the Sioux reservation in North Dakota.

Annie-Many-Ponies had not only come uninvited--she had remained in defiance of Luck's perturbed insistence that she should go back home. The Flying U boys might overlook that fact because of her beauty, but Applehead was not so easily beguiled--especially when she proceeded to form a violent attachment to the little black dog, which she called Shunka Chistala in what Applehead considered a brazen flaunting of her Indian blood and language. Between the mistress of Shunka Chistala and the master of the cat there could never be anything more cordial than an armed truce. She had championed that ornery cur in a way to make Applehead's blood boil. She had kept the dog in the house at night, which forced the cat to seek cold comfort elsewhere. She had pilfered the choicest table scraps for the dog--and Compadre was a cat of fastidious palate and grew thin on what coarse bits were condescendingly left for him.

Applehead had not approved of Luck's final consent that Annie-Many-Ponies should stay and play the Indian girl in his big picture. In the mind of Applehead there lurked a grudge that found all the more room to grow because of the natural bigness and generosity of his nature. It irked him to see her going her calm way with that proud uptilt to her shapely head and that little, inscrutable smile when she caught the meaning of his grumbling hints.

Applehead was easy-going to a fault in most things, but his dislike had grown in Luck's absence to the point where he considered himself aggrieved whenever Annie-Many-Ponies saddled the horse which had been tacitly set aside for her use, and rode off into the mesa without a word of explanation or excuse. Applehead reminded the boys that she had not acted like that when luck was

home. She had stayed on the ranch where she belonged, except once or twice, on particularly fine days, when she had meekly asked "Wagalex Conka," as she persisted in calling Luck, for permission to go for a ride.

Applehead itched to tell her a few things about the social, moral, intellectual and economic status of an "Injun squaw"--but there was something in her eye, something in the quiver of her finely shaped nostrils, in the straight black brows, that held his tongue quiet when he met her face to face. You couldn't tell about these squaws. Even Luck, who knew Indians better than most--and was, in a heathenish tribal way, the adopted son of Old Chief Big Turkey, and therefore Annie's brother by adoption--even Luck maintained that Annie-Many-Ponies undoubtedly carried a knife concealed in her clothes and would use it if ever the need arose. Applehead was not afraid of Annie's knife. It was something else, something he could not put into words, that held him back from open upbraidings.

He gave Andy's wife, Rosemary, the mail and stopped to sympathize with her because Annie-Many-Ponies had gone away and left the hardest part of the ironing undone. Luck had told Annie to help Rosemary with the work; but Annie's help, when Luck was not around the place, was, Rosemary asserted, purely theoretical.

"And from all you read about Indians," Rosemary complained with a pretty wrinkling of her brows, "you'd think the women just LIVE for the sake of working. I've lost all faith in history, Mr. Furrman. I don't believe squaws ever do anything if they can help it. Before she went off riding today, for instance, that girl spent a whole HOUR brushing her hair and braiding it. And I do believe she GREASES it to make it shine the way it does! And the powder she piles on her face--just to ride out on the mesa!" Rosemary Green was naturally sweet-tempered and exceedingly charitable in her judgements; but here, too, the cat-and-dog feud had its influence. Rosemary Green was a loyal champion of the cat Compadre; besides, there was a succession of little irritations, in the way of dishes left unwashed and inconspicuous corners left unswept, to warp her opinion of Annie-Many-Ponies.

When he left Rosemary he went straight down to where the chuck-wagon stood, and began to tap the tires with a small rock to see if they would need resetting before he started out. He decided that the brake-blocks would have to be replaced with new ones--or at least reshod with old boot-soles. The tongue was cracked, too; that had been done last winter when Luck was producing The Phantom Herd and had sent old Dave Wiswell down a rocky hillside with half-broken bronks harnessed to the wagon, in a particularly dramatic scene. Applehead went grumblingly in search of some baling wire to wrap the tongue. He had been terribly excited and full of enthusiasm for the picture at the time the tongue was cracked, but now he looked upon it merely as a vital weakness in his roundup outfit. A new tongue would mean delay; and delay, in his present mood, was tragedy.

He couldn't find any old baling wire, though he had long been accustomed to tangling his feet in snarled bunches of it when he went forth in the dark after a high wind. Until now he had not observed its unwonted absence from the yard. For a long while he had not needed any wire to mend things, because Luck had attended to everything about the ranch, and if anything needed mending he

had set one of the Happy Family at the task.

His search led him out beyond the corrals in the little dry wash that sometimes caught and held what the high winds brought rolling that way. The wash was half filled with tumble-weed, so that Applehead was forced to get down into it and kick the weeds aside to see if there was any wire lodged beneath. His temper did not sweeten over the task, especially since he found nothing that he wanted.

Annie-Many-Ponies, riding surreptitiously up the dry wash--meaning to come out in a farther gully and so approach the corral from the west instead of from the east--came upon Applehead quite unexpectedly. She stopped and eyed him aslant from under her level, finely marked brows, and her eyes lightened with relief when she saw that Applehead looked more startled than she had felt. Indeed, Applehead had been calling Luck uncomplimentary names for cleaning the place of everything a man might need in a hurry, and he was ashamed of himself.

"Can't find a foot of danged wire on the danged place!" Applehead kicked a large, tangled bunch of weeds under the very nose of the horse which jumped sidewise. "Never seen such a maniac for puttin' things where a feller can't find 'em, as what Luck is." He was not actually speaking to Annie-Many-Ponies--or if he was he did not choose to point his remarks by glancing at her.

"Wagalexha Conka, he heap careful for things belong when they stay," Annie-Many-Ponies observed in her musical contralto voice which always irritated Applehead with its very melody. "I think plenty wire all fold up neat in prop-room. Wagalexha Conka, he all time clean this studio from trash lie around everywhere."

"He does, hey?" Applehead's sunburnt mustache bristled like the whiskers of Compadre when he was snarling defiance at the little black dog. The feud was asserting itself. "Well, this here danged place ain't no studio! It's a ranch, and it b'longs to ME, Nip Furrman. And any balin' wire on this ranch is my balin' wire, and it's got a right to lay around wherever I want it t' lay. And I don't need no danged squaw givin' me hints about 'how my place oughta be kept--now I'm tellin' yuh!"

Annie-Many-Ponies did not reply in words. She sat on her horse, straight as any young warchief that ever led her kinsmen to battle, and looked down at Applehead with that maddening half smile of hers, inscrutable as the Sphinx her features sometimes resembled. Shunka Chistala (which is Sioux for Little Dog) came bounding over the low ridge that hid the ranch buildings from sight, and wagged himself dislocatingly up to her. Annie-Many-Ponies frowned at his approach until she saw that Applehead was aiming a clod at the dog, whereupon she touched her heels to the horse and sent him between Applehead and her pet, and gave Shunka Chistala a sharp command in Sioux that sent him back to the house with his tail dropped.

For a full half minute she and old Applehead looked at each other in open antagonism. For a squaw, Annie-Many-Ponies was remarkably unsubmitive in her bearing. Her big eyes were frankly hostile; her half smile was, in the opinion

of Applehead, almost as frankly scornful. He could not match her in the subtleties of feminine warfare. He took refuge behind the masculine bulwark of authority.

"Where yuh bin with that horse uh mine?" he demanded harshly. "Purty note when I don't git no say about my own stock. Got him all het up and heavin' like he'd been runnin' cattle; I ain't goin' to stand for havin' my horses ran to death, now I'm tellin' yuh! Fer a squaw, I must say you're gittin' too danged uppish in your ways around here. Next time you want to go traipsin' around the mesa, you kin go afoot. I'm goin' to need my horses fer roundup."

A white girl would have made some angry retort; but Annie-Many-Ponies, without looking in the least abashed, held her peace and kept that little inscrutable smile upon her lips. Her eyes, however, narrowed in their gaze.

"Yuh hear me?" Poor old Applehead had never before attempted to browbeat a woman, and her unsubmitive silence seemed to his bachelor mind uncanny.

"I hear what Wagalexa Conka tell me." She turned her horse and rode composedly away from him over the ridge.

"You'll hear a danged sight more'n that, now I'm tellin' yuh!" raved Applehead impotently. "I ain't sayin' nothin' agin Luck, but they's goin' to be some danged plain speakin' done on some subjects when he comes back, and given' squaws a free rein and lettin' 'em ride rough-shod over everybody and everything is one of 'era. Things is gittin' mighty funny when a danged squaw kin straddle my horses and ride 'em to death, and sass me when I say a word agin it--now I'm tellin' yuh!"

He went mumbling rebellion that was merely the effervescing of a mood which would pass with the words it bred, to the store-room which Annie-Many-Ponies had called the prop-room. He found there, piled upon a crude shelf, many little bundles of wire folded neatly and with the outer end wound twice around to keep each bundle separate from the others. Applehead snorted at what he chose to consider a finicky streak in his secret idol, Luck Lindsay; but he took two of the little bundles and went and wired the wagon tongue. And in the work he found a salve of anticipatory pleasure, so that he ended the task to the humming of the tune he had heard a movie theatre playing in town as he rode by on his way home.

CHAPTER II. THE DAUGHTER OF A CHIEF

In spite of Andy Green's plea for delay until they knew what Luck meant to do, Applehead went on with his energetic preparations for a spring roundup of his own. Some perverse spirit seemed to possess him and drive him out of his easy-going shiftlessness. He offered to hire the Happy Family by the day, since none of them would promise any permanent service until they heard from Luck. He put them to work gathering up the saddle-horses that had been turned loose when Luck's picture was finished, and repairing harness and attending to the numberless details of reorganizing a ranch long left to slipshod make-shifts.

The boys of the Flying U argued while they worked, but in spite of themselves the lure of the mesa quickened their movements. They were supposed to wait for Luck before they did anything; and they all knew that. But, on the other hand, Luck was supposed to keep them informed as to his movements; which he had not done. They did not voice one single doubt of Luck's loyalty to them, but human nature is more prone to suspicion than to faith, as every one knows. And Luck had the power and the incentive to "double-cross" them if he was the kind to do such a thing. He was manager for their little free-lance picture company which did not even have a name to call itself by. They had produced one big feature film, and it was supposed to be a cooperative affair from start to finish. If Luck failed to make good, they would all be broke together. If Luck cleared up the few thousands that had been their hope, why--they would all profit by the success, if Luck--

I maintain that they showed themselves of pretty good metal, in that not even Happy Tack, confirmed pessimist that he was, ever put the least suspicion of Luck's honesty into words. They were not the kind to decry a comrade when his back was turned. And they had worked with Luck Lindsay and had worked for him. They had slept under the same roof with him, had shared his worries, his hopes, and his fears. They did not believe that Luck had appropriated the proceeds of The Phantom Herd and had deliberately left them there to cool their heels and feel the emptiness of their pockets in New Mexico, while he disported himself in Los Angeles; they did--not believe that--they would have resented the implication that they harbored any doubt of him. But for all that, as the days passed and he neither came nor sent them any word, they yielded more and more to the determination of Applehead to start out upon his own business, and they said less and less about Luck's probable plans for the future.

And then, just when they were making ready for an early start the next morning; just when Applehead had the corral full of horses and his chuckwagon of grub; just when the Happy Family had packed their war-bags with absolute necessities and were justifying themselves in final arguments with Andy Green, who refused point-blank to leave the ranch--then, at the time a dramatist would have chosen for his entrance for an effective "curtain," here came Luck, smiling and driving a huge seven-passenger machine crowded to the last folding seat and with the chauffeur riding on the running board where Luck had calmly banished him when he skidded on a sharp turn and came near upsetting them.

Applehead, stowing a coil of new rope in the chuck-wagon, took off his hat and rubbed his shiny, pink pate in dismay. He was, for the moment, a culprit caught in the act of committing a grave misdemeanor if not an actual felony. He dropped the rope and went forward with dragging feet--ashamed, for the first time in his life, to face a friend.

Luck gave the wheel a twist, cut a fine curve around the windmill and stopped before the house with as near a flourish as a seven-passenger automobile loaded from tail-lamp to windshield can possibly approach.

"There. That's the way I've been used to seeing cars behave," Luck observed pointedly to the deposed chauffeur as he slammed the door open and climbed out. "You don't have to act like you're a caterpillar on a rail fence, to play safe. I believe in keeping all four wheels on the ground--but I like to see

'em turn once in awhile. You get me?" He peeled a five-dollar banknote off a roll the size of his wrist, handed it to the impressed chauffeur and dismissed the transaction with a wave of his gloved hand. "You're all right, brother," he tempered his criticism, "but I'm some nervous about automobiles."

"I noticed that myself," drawled a soft, humorous voice from the rear. "This is the nearest I ever came to traveling by telegraph."

Luck grinned, waved his hand in friendly greeting to the Happy Family who were taking long steps up from the corral, and turned his attention to the unloading of the machine. "Howdy, folks!--guess yuh thought I'd plumb lost the trail back," he called to them over his shoulder while he dove after suitcases, packages of various sizes and shapes, a box or two which the Happy Family recognized as containing "raw stock," and a camera tripod that looked perfectly new.

From the congested tonneau a tall, slim young woman managed to descend without stepping on anything that could not bear being stepped upon. She gave her skirts a little shake, pushed back a flying strand of hair and turned her back to the machine that she might the better inspect her immediate surroundings.

Old Dave Wiswell, the dried little man who never had much to say, peered at her sharply, hesitated and then came forward with his bony hand outstretched and trembling with eagerness. "Why, my gorry! If it ain't Jean Douglas, my eyes are lyin' to me," he cried.

"It isn't Jean Douglas--but don't blame your eyes for that," said the girl, taking his hand and shaking it frankly. "Jean Douglas Avery, thanks to the law that makes a girl trade her name for a husband. You know Lite, of course--dad, too."

"Well, well--my gorry I I should say I do! Howdy, Aleck?" He shook the hand of the old man Jean called dad, and his lips trembled uncertainly, seeking speech that would not hurt a very, very sore spot in the heart of big Aleck Douglas. "I'm shore glad to meet yuh again," he stuttered finally, and let it go at that "And how are yuh, Lite? Just as long and lanky as ever--marriage shore ain't fattened you up none. My gorry! I shore never expected to see you folks away down here!"

"Thought you heard me say when I left that the Great Western had offered to get me Jean Douglas for leading lady," Luck put in, looking around distractedly for a place to deposit his armload of packages. "That's one thing that kept me--waiting for her to show up. Of course a man naturally expects a woman to take her own time about starting--"

"I like that!" Jean drawled. "We broke up housekeeping and wound up a ranch and traveled a couple of thousand miles in just a week's time. We--we ALMOST hit the same gait you did from town out here today!"

Rosemary Green came out then, and Luck turned to greet her and to present Jean to her, and was pleased when he saw from their eyes that they liked each other at first sight. He introduced the Happy Family and Applehead to her and to her husband, Lite Avery, and her father. He pulled a skinny individual forward and

announced that this was Pete Lowry, one of the Great Western's crack cameramen; and another chubby, smooth-cheeked young man he presented as Tommy Johnson, scenic artist and stage carpenter. And he added with a smile for the whole bunch, "We're going to produce some real stuff from now on believe me, folks!"

In the confusion and the mild clamor of the absence-bridging questions and hasty answers, two persons had no part. Old Applehead, hard-ridden by the uneasy consciousness of his treason to Luck, leaned against a porch post and sucked hard at the stem of an empty pipe. And just beyond the corner out of sight but well within hearing, Annie-Many-Ponies stood flattened against the wall and listened with fast-beating pulse for the sound of her name, spoken in the loved voice of Wagalex Conka. She, the daughter of a chief and Luck's sister by tribal adoption--would he not miss her: from among those others who welcomed him? Would he not presently ask: "Where is Annie-Many-Ponies?" She knew just how he would turn and search for her with his eyes.

She knew just how his voice would sound when he asked for her. Then, after a minute--when he had missed her and had asked for her--she would come and stand before him. And he would take her hand and say to that white woman; "This is my Indian sister, Annie-Many-Ponies, who played the part of the beautiful Indian girl who died so grandly in *The Phantom Herd*. This is the girl who plays my character leads." Then the white girl, who was to be his leading woman, would not feel that she was the only woman in the company who could do good work for Luck.

Annie-Many-Ponies had worked in pictures since she was fifteen and did only "atmosphere stuff" in the Indian camps of Luck's arranging. She was wise in the ways of picture jealousies. Already she was jealous of this slim woman with the dark hair and eyes and the slow smile that always caught one's attention and held it. She waited. She wanted Wagalex Conka to call her in that kindly, imperious voice of his--the voice of the master. This leading woman would see, then, that here was a girl more beautiful for whom Luck Lindsay felt the affection of family ties.

She waited, flattened against the wall, listening to every word that was spoken in that buzzing group. She saw the last bundle taken from the machine, and she saw Luck's head and shoulders disappear within the tonneau, making sure that it was the last bundle and that nothing had been overlooked. She saw the driver climb in, slam the fore-door shut after him and bend above the starter. She saw the machine slide out of the group and away in a wide circle to regain the trail. She saw the group break and start off in various directions as duty or a passing interest led. But Wagalex Conka never once seemed to remember that she was not there. Never once did he speak her name.

Instead, just as Rosemary was leading the way into the house, this slim young woman they called Jean glanced around inquiringly. "I thought you had a squaw working for you," she said in that soft, humorous voice of hers. "The one who did the Indian girl in *The Phantom Herd*. Isn't she here any more?"

"Oh, yes!" Luck stopped with one foot on the porch. "Sure! Where is Annie? Anybody know?"

"She was around here just before you came," said Rosemary carelessly. "I don't know where she went."

"Hid out, I reckon," Luck commented. "Injuns are heap shy of meeting strangers. She'll show up after a little."

Annie-Many-Ponies stooped and slid safely past the window that might betray her, and then slipped away behind the house. She waited, and she listened; for though the adobe walls were thick, there were open windows and her hearing was keen. Within was animated babel and much laughter. But not once again did Annie-Many-Ponies hear her name spoken. Not once again did Wagalex Conka remember her. Save when she, that slim woman who had come to play his leads, asked to see her, she had been wholly forgotten. Even then she had been named a squaw. It was as though they had been speaking of a horse. They did not count her worthy of a place in their company, they did not miss her voice and her smile.

"Hid out," Wagalex Conka had said. Well, she would hide out, then--she, the daughter of a chief of the Sioux; she, whom Wagalex Conka had been glad to have in his picture when he was poor and had no money to pay white leading women. But now he had much money; now he could come in a big automobile, with a slim, white leading woman and a camera man and scenic artist and much money in his pocket; and she--she was just a squaw who had hid out, and who would show up after a while and be grateful if he took her by the hand and said, "How!"

With so many persons moving eagerly here and there, none but an Indian could have slipped away from that house and from the ranch without being seen. But though the place was bald and open to the four winds save for a few detached outbuildings, Annie-Many-Ponies went away upon the mesa and no one saw her go.

She did not dare go to the corral for her horse. The corral was in plain sight of the house, and the eyes of Wagalex Conka were keen as the eye of the Sioux, his foster brothers. He would see her there. He would call: "Annie, come here!" and she would go, and would stand submissive before him, and would be glad that he noticed her; for she was born of the tribe where women obey their masters, and the heritage of centuries may not be lightly laid aside like an outgrown garment. She felt that this was so; that although her heart might burn with resentment because he had forgotten and must be reminded by a strange white woman that the "squaw" was not present, still, if he called her she must go, because Wagalex Conka was master there and the master must be obeyed.

Down the dry wash where Applehead had hunted for baling wire she went swiftly, with the straight-backed, free stride of the plainswoman who knows not the muscle-bondage of boned girdle. In moccasins she walked; for a certain pride of race, a certain sense of the picture-value of beaded buckskin and bright cloth, held her fast to the gala dress of her people, modified and touched here and there with the gay ornaments of civilization. So much had her work in the silent drama taught her. Bareheaded, her hair in two glossy braids each tied with a big red bow, she strode on and on in the clear sunlight of spring.

Not until she was more than two miles from the ranch did she show herself upon

one of the numberless small ridges which, blended together in the distance, give that deceptive look of flatness to the mesa. Even two miles away, in that clear air that dwarfs distance so amazingly, Wagalex Conka might recognize her if he looked at her with sufficient attention. But Wagalex Conka, she told herself with a flash of her black eyes, would not look. Wagalex Conka was too busy looking at that slim woman he had brought with him.

That ridge she crossed, and two others. On the last one she stopped and stood, straight and still, and stared away towards the mountains, shading her eyes with one spread palm. On a distant slope a small herd of cattle fed, scattered and at peace. Nearer, a great hawk circled slowly on widespread wings, his neck craned downward as if he were watching his own shadow move ghostlike over the grass. Annie-Many-Ponies, turning her eyes disappointedly from the empty mesa, envied the hawk his swift-winged freedom.

When she looked again toward the far slopes next the mountains, a black speck rolled into view, the nucleus of a little dust cloud. Her face brightened a little; she turned abruptly and sought easy footing down that ridge, and climbed hurriedly the longer rise beyond. Once or twice, when she was on high ground, she glanced behind her uneasily, as does one whose mind holds a certain consciousness of wrongdoing. She did not pause, even then, but hurried on toward the dust cloud.

On the rim of a shallow, saucer-like basin that lay cunningly concealed until one stood upon the very edge of it, Annie-Many-Ponies stopped again and stood looking out from under her spread palm. Presently the dust cloud moved over the crest of a ridge, and now that it was so much closer she saw clearly the horseman loping abreast of the dust. Annie-Many-Ponies stood for another moment watching, with that inscrutable half smile on her lips. She untied the cerise silk kerchief which she wore knotted loosely around her slim neck, waited until the horseman showed plainly in the distance and then, raising her right hand high above her head, waved the scarf three times in slow, sweeping half circles from right to left. She waited, her eyes fixed expectantly upon the horseman. Like a startled rabbit he darted to the left, pulled in his horse, turned and rode for three or four jumps sharply to the right; stopped short for ten seconds and then came straight on, spurring his horse to a swifter pace.

Annie-Many-Ponies smiled and went down into the shallow basin and seated herself upon the wide, adobe curbing of an old well that marked, with the nearby ruins of an adobe house, the site, of an old habitation of tragic history. She waited with the absolute patience of her race for the horseman had yet a good two miles to cover. While she waited she smiled dreamily to herself and with dainty little pats and pulls she widened the flaring red bows on her hair and retied the cerise scarf in its picturesque, loose knot about her throat. As a final tribute to that feminine instinct which knows no race she drew from some cunningly devised hiding place a small, cheap "vanity box," and proceeded very gravely to powder her nose.

CHAPTER III. TO THE VICTORS THE SPOILS

"Hey, boys!" Luck Lindsay shouted to Applehead and one or two of the Happy Family who were down at the chuck--wagon engaged in uneasy discussion as to what Luck would say when he found out about their intention to leave. "Come on up here--this is going to be a wiping out of old scores and I want to get it over with!"

"Well, now, I calc'late the fur's about to fly," Applehead made dismal prophecy, as they started to obey the summons. "All 't su'prises me is 't he's held off this long. Two hours is a dang long time fer Luck to git in action, now I'm tellin' yuh!" He took off his hat and polished his shiny pate, as was his habit when perturbed. "I'm shore glad we had t' wait and set them wagon-tires," he added. "We'd bin started this mornin' only fer that."

"Aw, we ain't done nothing," Happy Jack protested in premature self defense. "We ain't left the ranch yet. I guess a feller's got a right to THINK!"

"He has, if he's got anything to do it with," Pink could not forbear to remark pointedly.

"Well, if a feller didn't have, he'd have a fat chance borrying from YOU," Happy Jack retorted.

"Well, by cripes, I ain't perpared to bet very high that there's a teacupful uh brains in this hull outfit," Big Medicine asserted. "We might a knowed Luck'd come back loaded fer bear; we WOULD a knowed it if we had any brains in our heads. I'm plumb sore at myself. By cripes, I need kickin'!"

"You'll get it, chances are," Pink assured him grimly.

Luck was in the living room, sitting at a table on which were scattered many papers Scribbled with figures. He had a cigarette in his lips, his hat on the back of his head and a twinkle in his eyes. He looked up and grinned as they came reluctantly into the room.

"Time's money from now on, so this is going to be cut short as possible," he began with his usual dynamic energy showing in his tone and in the movements of his hands as he gathered up the papers and evened their edges on the table top. "You fellows know how much you put into the game when we started out to come here and produce The Phantom Herd, don't you? If you don't, I've got the figures here. I guess the returns are all in on that picture--and so far She's brought us twenty-three thousand and four hundred dollars. She went big, believe me! I sold thirty states. Well, cost of production is--what we put in the pool, plus the cost of making the prints I got in Los. We pull out the profits according to what we put in--sabe? I guess that suits everybody, doesn't it?"

"Sure," one astonished voice gulped faintly. The others were dumb.

"Well, I've figured it out that way--and to make sure I had it right I got Billy Wilders, a pal of mine that works in a bank there, to figure it himself and check up after me. We all put in our services--one man's work against every other man's work, mine same as any of you. Bill Holmes, here, didn't have any money up, and he was an apprentice--but I'm giving him twenty a week

besides his board. That suit you, Bill?"

"I guess it's all right," Bill answered in his colorless tone.

Luck, being extremely sensitive to tones, cocked an eye up at Bill before he deliberately peeled, from the roll he drew from his pocket, enough twenty dollar notes to equal the number of weeks Bill had worked for him. "And that's paying you darned good money for apprentice work," he informed him drily, a little hurt by Bill's lack of appreciation. For when you take a man from the streets because he is broke and hungry and homeless, and feed him and give him work and clothes and three meals a day and a warm bed to sleep in, if you are a normal human being you are going to expect a little gratitude from that man; Luck had a flash of disappointment when he saw how indifferently Bill Holmes took those twenties and counted them before shoving them into his pocket. His own voice was more crisply businesslike when he spoke again.

"Annie-Many-Ponies back yet? She's not in on the split either. I'm paying her ten a week besides her board. That's good money for a squaw." He counted out the amount in ten dollar bills and snapped a rubber band around them.

"Now here is the profit, boys, on your winter's work. Applehead comes in with the use of his ranch and stock and wagons and so on. Here, pard--how does this look to you?" His own pleasure in what he was doing warmed from Luck's voice all the chill that Bill Holmes had sent into it. He smiled his contagious smile and peeled off fifty dollar banknotes until Applehead's eyes popped.

"Oh, don't give me so dang much!" he gulped nervously when Luck had counted out for him the amount he had jotted down opposite his name. "That there's moren the hul dang ranch is worth if I was t' deed it over to yuh, Luck! I ain't goin' to take--"

"You shut up," Luck commanded him affectionately. "That's yours--now, close your face and let me get this thing wound up. Now--WILL you quit your arguing, or shall I throw you out the window?"

"Well, now, I calc'late you'd have a right busy time throwin' ME out the window," Applehead boasted, and backed into a corner to digest this astonishing turn of events.

One by one, as their names stood upon his list, Luck called the boys forward and with exaggerated deliberation peeled off fifty-dollar notes and one-hundred-dollar notes to take their breath and speech from them.

With Billy Wilders, his friend in the bank, to help him, he had boyishly built that roll for just this heart-warming little ceremony. He might have written checks to square the account of each, but he wanted to make their eyes stand out, just as he was doing. He had looked forward to this half hour more eagerly than any of them guessed; he had, with his eyes closed, visualized this scene over more than one cigarette, his memory picturing vividly another scene wherein these same young men had cheerfully emptied their pockets and planned many small personal sacrifices that he, Luck Lindsay, might have money enough to come here to New Mexico and make his one Big Picture. Luck felt that nothing less than a display of the profits in real money could ever quite

balance that other scene when all the Happy Family had in the world went in the pot and they mourned because it was so little.

"Aw, I betche Luck robbed a bank er something!" Happy Jack stuttered with an awkward attempt to conceal his delight when his name was called, his investment was read and the little sheaf of currency that represented his profit was laid in his outstretched palm.

"It's me for the movies if this is the way they pan out," Weary declared gleefully. "Mamma! I didn't know there was so much money in the world!"

"I'll bet he milked Los Angeles dry of paper money," Andy Green asserted facetiously, thumbing his small fortune gloatingly. "Holding out anything for yourself, Luck? We don't want to be hogs."

"I'm taking care of my interests--don't you worry about that a minute," Luck stated complacently. "I held mine out first. That wipes the slate--and cleans up the bank-roll. I maintain The Phantom Herd was so-o-ome picture, boys. They'll be getting it here in 'Querque soon--we'll all go in and see it."

"Now we're all set for a fresh start. And while you're all here I'll just put you up to date. on what kind of a deal I made with Dewitt. We come in under the wing of Excelsior, and our brand name will be Flying U Feature Film--how does that hit you? You boys are all on a straight board-and-salary basis--thirty dollars a week, and it's up to me to make you earn it!" He grinned and beckoned to Jean Douglas Avery and her companions in the next room.

"Mrs. Avery, here, is our leading woman--keeping the name of Jean Douglas, since she made it valuable in that Lazy A serial she did a year or so ago. Lite is on the same footing as the rest of you boys. Her father will be my assistant in choosing locations and so on. Tommy Johnson, as I said, is another assistant in another capacity, that of scenic artist and stage carpenter. Pete Lowry, here, is camera man and Bill Holmes will be his assistant. The rest of you work wherever I need you--a good deal the way we did last winter. Annie-Many-Ponies stays with us as character lead and is in general stock. Rosemary--" he stopped and smiled at her understandingly--"Rosemary draws fifteen a week--oh, don't get scared! I won't give you any foreground stuff! just atmosphere when I need it, and general comforter and mascot of the company!"

Luck may have stretched a point there, but if he did it was merely a technical one. Rosemary Green was hopelessly camera-shy, but he could use her in background atmosphere, and when it came to looking after the physical and mental welfare of the bunch she was worth her weight in any precious metal you may choose to name.

"You better put me down as camp cook and dishwasher, Luck Lindsay," Rosemary protested, blushing.

"No--thank the Lord you won't have to cook for this hungry bunch any longer. I've got a Mexican hired and headed this way. There'll be no more of that kind of thing for you, lady--not while you're with us.

"Now, boys, let's get organized for action. Weather's perfect--Lowry's been raving over the light, all the way out from town. I've got a range picture all blocked out--did it while I was waiting in Los for Jean to show up. Done anything about roundup yet, Applehead?"--

Poor old Applehead, with his guilty conscience and his soft-hearted affection for Luck so deeply stirred by the money laid in his big-knuckled hand, shuffled his feet and cleared his throat and did not get one intelligible word past his dry tongue.

"If you haven't," Luck hurried on, spurred by his impatient energy, "I want to organize and get out right away with a regular roundup outfit--chuck-wagon, remuda and all--see what I mean. While I'm getting the picture of the stuff I want, we can gather and brand your calves. That way, all my range scenes will be of the real thing. I may want to throw the Chavez outfit in with ours, too, so as to get bigger stuff. I'll try and locate Ramon Chavez and see what I can do. But anyway, I want the roundup outfit ready to start just as soon as possible--tomorrow, if we could get it together in time. How about that cracked tongue on the chuck-wagon? Anybody fixed that?"

"We-ell, I wired it up so'st it's as solid as the rest uh the runnin' gear," Applehead confessed shamefacedly, rolling his eyes apprehensively at the flushed faces of his fellow traitors.

"Yuh did? Good! Tires need setting, if I recollect--"

"Er--I had the boys set the tires, 'n'--"

"Fine! I might have known you fellows would put things in shape while I was gone! How about the horses? I thought I saw a bunch in the big corral--"

"I rustled enough saddle horses to give us all two apiece," Applehead admitted, perspiring coldly. "'Tain't much of a string, but--"

"You did? Sounds like you've been reading my mind, Applehead. Now we'll grubstake the outfit--"

"Er--well, I took the chuck-wagon in yest'day and loaded 'er up with grub fer two weeks," blurted Applehead heroically. "I was figurin'--"

"Good! Couldn't ask better. Applehead, you sure are there when it comes to backing a man's play. If I haven't said much about how I stand toward you fellows it isn't because I don't appreciate every durned one of you."

The Happy Family squirmed guiltily and made way for Applehead, who was sidling toward the open door, his face showing alarming symptoms of apoplexy. Their confusion Luck set down to a becoming modesty. He went on planning and perfecting details. Standing as he did on the threshold of a career to which his one big success had opened the door, he was wholly absorbed in making good.

There was nothing now to balk his progress, he told himself. He had his

company, he had the location for his big range stuff, he had all the financial backing any reasonable man could want. He had a salary that in itself gauged the prestige he had gained among producers, and as an added incentive to do the biggest work of his life he had a contract giving him a royalty on all prints of his pictures in excess of a fixed number. Better than all this, he had big ideals and an enthusiasm for the work that knew no limitations.

Perhaps he was inclined to dream too big; perhaps he assumed too great an enthusiasm on the part of those who worked with him--I don't know just where he did place the boundary line. I do know that he never once suspected the Happy Family of any meditated truancy from the ranch and his parting instructions to "sit tight." I also know that the Happy Family was not at all likely to volunteer information of their lapse. And as for Applehead, the money burned his soul deep with remorse; so deep that he went around with an abject eagerness to serve Luck that touched that young man as a rare example of a bone-deep loyalty that knows no deceit. Which proves once more how fortunate it is that we cannot always see too deeply into the thoughts and motives of our friends.

CHAPTER IV. LOVE WORDS FOR ANNIE

In Tijeras Arroyo the moon made black shadows where stood the tiny knolls here and there, marking frequently the windings of dry washes where bushes grew in ragged patches and where tall weeds of mid-May tangled in the wind. The roundup tents of the Flying U Feature Film Company stood white as new snow in the moonlight, though daylight showed them an odd, light-blue tint for photographic purposes. On a farther slope cunningly placed by the scenic artist to catch the full sunlight of midday, the camp of the Chavez brothers gleamed softly in the magic light.

So far had spring roundup progressed that Luck was holding the camp in Tijeras Arroyo for picture-making only. Applehead's calves were branded, to the youngest pair of knock-kneed twins which Happy Jack found curled up together cunningly hidden in a thicket. They had been honored with a "close-up" scene, those two spotted calves, and were destined to further honors which they did not suspect and could not appreciate.

They slept now, as slept the two camps upon the two slopes that lay moon-bathed at midnight. Back where the moon was making the barren mountains a wonderland of deep purple and black and silvery gray and brown, a coyote yapped a falsetto message and was answered by one nearer at hand--his mate, it might be. In a bush under the bank that made of it a black blot in the unearthly whiteness of the sand, a little bird fluttered uneasily and sent a small, inquiring chirp into the stillness. From somewhere farther up the arroyo drifted a faint, aromatic odor of cigarette smoke.

Had you been there by the bush you could not have told when Annie-Many-Ponies passed by; you would not have seen her--certainly you could not have heard the soft tread of her slim, moccasined feet. Yet she passed the bush and the bank and went away up the arroyo, silent as the shadows themselves, swift as the coyote that trotted over a nearby ridge to meet her mate nearer the mountains.

Sol following much the same instinct in much the same way, Annie-Many-Ponies stole out to meet the man her heart timidly yearned for a possible mate.

She reached the rock-ledge where the smoke odor was strongest, and she stopped. She saw Ramon Chavez, younger of the Chavez brothers who were ten-mile-off neighbors of Applehead, and who owned many cattle and much land by right of an old Spanish grant. He was standing in the shadow of the ledge, leaning against it as they of sun-saturated New Mexico always lean against anything perpendicular and solid near which they happen to stand. He was watching the white-lighted arroyo while he smoked, waiting for her, unconscious of her near presence.

Annie-Many-Ponies stood almost within reach of him, but she did not make her presence known. With the infinite wariness of her race she waited to see what he would do; to read, if she might, what were his thoughts--his attitude toward her in his unguarded moments. That little, inscrutable smile which so exasperated Applehead was on her lips while she watched him.

Ramon finished that cigarette, threw away the stub and rolled and lighted another. Still Annie-Many-Ponies gave no little sign of her presence. He watched the arroyo, and once he leaned to one side and stared back at his own quiet camp on the slope that had the biggest and the wildest mountain of that locality for its background. He settled himself anew with his other shoulder against the rock, and muttered something in Spanish--that strange, musical talk which Annie-Many-Ponies could not understand. And still she watched him, and exulted in his impatience for her coming, and wondered if it would always be lovelight which she would see in his eyes.

He was not of her race, though in her pride she thought him favored when she named him akin to the Sioux. He was not of her race, but he was tall and he was straight, he was dark as she, he was strong and brave and he had many cattle and much broad acreage. Annie-Many-Ponies smiled upon him in the dark and was glad that she, the daughter of a chief of the Sioux, had been found good in his sight.

Five minutes, ten minutes. The coyote, yap-yap-yapping in the broken land beyond them, found his mate and was silent. Ramon Chavez, waiting in the shadow of the ledge, muttered a Mexican oath and stepped out into the moonlight and stood there, tempted to return to his camp--for he, also, had pride that would not bear much bruising.

Annie-Many-Ponies waited. When he muttered again and threw his cigarette from him as though it had been something venomous; when he turned his face toward his own tents and took a step forward, she laughed softly, a mere whisper of amusement that might have been a sleepy breeze stirring the bushes somewhere near. Ramon started and turned his face her way; in the moonlight his eyes shone with a certain love-hunger which Annie-Many-Ponies exulted to see--because she did not understand.

"You not let moon look on you," she chided in an undertone, her sentences clipped of superfluous words as is the Indian way, her voice that pure, throaty melody that is a gift which nature gives lavishly to the women of savage people. "Moon see, men see."

Ramon swung back into the shadow, reached out his two arms to fold her close and got nothing more substantial than another whispery laugh.

"Where are yoh, sweetheart?" He peered into the shadow where she had been, and saw the place empty. He laughed, chagrined by her elusiveness, yet hungering for her the more.

"You not touch," she warned. "Till priest say marriage prayers, no man touch."

He called her a devil in Spanish, and she thought it a love-word and laughed and came nearer. He did not attempt to touch her, and so, reassured, she stood close so that he could see the pure, Indian profile of her face when she raised it to the sky in a mute invocation, it might be, of her gods.

"When yoh come?" he asked swiftly, his race betrayed in tone and accent. "I look and look--I no see yoh."

"I come," she stated with a quiet meaning. "I not like cow, for make plenty noise. I stand here, you smoke two times, I look."

"You mus' be moonbeam," he told her, reaching out again, only to lay hold upon nothing. "Come back, sweetheart. I be good."

"I not like you touch," she repeated. "I good girl. I mind priest, I read prayers, I mind Wagalex Conka--" There she faltered, for the last boast was no longer the truth.

Ramon was quick to seize upon the one weak point of her armor. "So? He send yoh then to talk with Ramon at midnight? Yoh come to please yoh boss?"

Annie-Many-Ponies turned her troubled face his way. "Wagalex Conka sleep plenty. I not ask," she confessed. "You tell me come here you tell me must talk when no one hear. I come. I no ask Wagalex Conka--him say good girl stay by camp. Him say not walk in night-time, say me not talk you. I no ask; I just come."

"Yoh lov' him, perhaps? More as yoh lov' me? Always I see yoh look at him--always watch, watch. Always I see yoh jomp when he snap the finger; always yoh run like train dog. Yoh lov' him, perhaps? Bah! Yoh dirt onder his feet." Ramon did not seriously consider that any woman whom he favored could sanely love another man more than himself, but to his nature jealousy was a necessary adjunct of lovemaking; not to have displayed jealousy would have been to betray indifference, as he interpreted the tender passion.

Annie-Many-Ponies, woman-wily though she was by nature, had little learning in the devious ways of lovemaking. Eyes might speak, smiles might half reveal, half hide her thoughts; but the tongue, as her tribe had taught her sternly, must speak the truth or keep silent. Now she bent her head, puzzling how best to put her feelings toward Luck Lindsay into honest words which Ramon would understand.

"Yoh lov' him, perhaps--since yoh all time afraid he be mad." Ramon persisted,

beating against the wall of her Indian taciturnity which always acted as a spur upon his impetuosity. Besides, it was important to him that he should know just what was the tie between these two. He had heard Luck Lindsay speak to the girl in the Sioux tongue. He had seen her eyes lighten as she made swift answer. He had seen her always eager to do Luck's bidding--had seen her anticipate his wants and minister to them as though it was her duty and her pleasure to do so. It was vital that he should know, and it was certain that he could not question Luck upon the subject--for Ramon Chavez was no fool.

"Long time ago--when I was papoose with no shoes," she began with seeming irrelevance, her eyes turning instinctively toward the white tents of the Flying U camp gleaming in the distance, "my people go for work in Buffalo Bill show. My father go, my mother go, I go. All time we dance for show, make Indian fight with cowboys--all them act for Buffalo Bill-Pawnee Bill show. That time Wagalex Conka boss of Indians. He Indian Agent. He take care whole bunch. He make peace when fights, he give med'cine when somebody sick. He awful good to them Indians. He give me candy, always stop to talk me. I like him. My father like him. All them Indians like him plenty much. My father awful sick one time, he no let doctor come. Leg broke all in pieces. He say die plenty if Wagalex Conka no make well. I go ticket wagon, tell Wagalex Conka, he come quick, fix up leg all right.

"All them Indians like to make him--" She stopped, searching her mind for the elusive, little-used word which she had learned in the mission school. Make him adop'," she finished triumphantly. "Indians make much dance, plenty music, lots speeches make him Indian man. My father big chief, he make Wagalex Conka him son. Make him my brother. Give him Indian name Wagalex Conka. All Indians call that name for him.

"Pretty soon show stop, all them Indians go home by reservation. long time we don't see Wagalex Conka no more. I get big girl, go school little bit. Pretty soon Wagalex Conka come back, for wants them Indians for work in pictures. My father go, my mother go, all us go. We work long time. I," she added with naive pride in her comeliness, "awful good looking. I do lots of foreground stuff. Pretty soon hard times come. Indians go home by reservation. I go--I don't like them reservations no more. Too lonesome. I like for work all time in pictures. I come, tell Wagalex Conka I be Indian girl for pictures. He write letter for agent, write letter for my father. They writes letter for say yes, I stay. I stay and do plenty more foreground stuff."

"I don't see you do moch foreground work since that white girl come," Ramon observed, hitting what he instinctively knew was a tender point.

Had he seen her face, he must have been satisfied that the chance shot struck home. But in the shadow hate blazed unseen from her eyes. She did not speak, and so he went back to his first charge.

"All this don't tell me moch," he complained. "Yoh lov' him, maybe? That's what I ask."

"Wagalex Conka my brother, my father, my friend," she replied calmly, and let him interpret it as he would.

"He treats yoh like a dog. He crazee 'bout that Jean. He gives her all smiles, all what yoh call foreground stuff. I know--I got eyes. Me, it makes me mad for see how he treat yoh--and yoh so trying hard always to Please. He got no heart for yoh--me, I see that." He moved a step closer, hesitating, wanting yet not quite daring to touch her. "Me, I lov' yoh, little Annie," he murmured. "Yoh lov' me little bit, eh? Jus' little bit! Jus' for say, 'Ramon, I go weeth yoh, I be yoh woman--'"

Annie-Many-Ponies widened the distance between them. "Why you not say wife?" she queried suspiciously.

"Woman, wife, sweetheart--all same," he assured her with his voice like a caress. "All words mean I lov' yoh jus' same. Now yoh say yoh lov' me, say yoh go weeth me, I be one happy man. I go back on camp and my heart she's singing lov' song. My girl weeth eyes that shine so bright, she lov' me moch as I lov' her. That what my heart she sing. Yoh not be so cruel like stone--yoh say, 'Ramon, I lov' yoh.' Jus' like that! So easy to say!"

"Not easy," she denied, moved to save her freedom yet a while longer. "I say them words, then I--then I not be same girl like now. Maybe much troubles come. Maybe much happy--I dunno. Lots time I see plenty trouble come for girl that say them words for man. Some time plenty happy--I think trouble comes most many times. I think Wagalex Conka he be awful mad. I not like for him be mad."

"Now you make ME mad--Ramon what loves yoh! Yoh like for Ramon be mad, perhaps? Always yoh 'fraid Luck Lindsay this, 'fraid Luck that other. Me, I gets damn' sick hear that talk all time. Bimeby he marree som' girl, then what for you? He don' maree yoh, eh? He don' lov' yoh; he think too good for maree Indian girl. Me, I not think like that. I, Ramon Chavez, I think proud to lov, yoh. Ramon--"

"I not think Wagalex Conka marry me." The girl was turning stubborn under his importunities. "Wagalex Conka my brother--my friend. I tell you plenty time. Now I tell no more."

"Ramon loves yoh so moch," he pleaded, and smiled to himself when he saw her turn toward toward him again. The love-talk--that was what a woman likes best to hear! "Yoh say yoh lov' Ramon jus' little bit!"

"I not say now. When I say I be sure I say truth."

"All right, then I be sad till yoh lov' me. Yoh maybe be happy, yoh know Ramon's got heavy heart for yoh."

"I plenty sorry, you be sad for me," she confessed demurely. "I lov' yoh so moch! I think nothing but how beautiful my sweetheart is. I not tease yoh no more. Tell me, how long Luck says he stay out here? Maybe yoh hear sometimes he's going for taking pictures in town?"

"I not hear."

"Going home, maybe? You mus' hear little bit. Yoh tell me, sweetheart; what's

he gone do when roundup's all finish? Me, I know she's finish las' week. Looks like he's taking pictures out here all summer! You hear him say something, maybe?"

"I not hear."

"Them vaqueros--bah! They don't bear nothings either. What's matter over there, nobody hear nothing? Luck, he got no tongue when camera's shut up, perhaps?"

"Nah--I dunno."

Ramon looked at her for a minute in mute rage. It was not the first time he had found himself hard against the immutable reticence of the Indian in her nature.

"Why you snapping teeth like a wolf?" she asked him slyly.

"Me? I don' snap my teeth, sweetheart." It cost Ramon some effort to keep his voice softened to the love key.

"Why you not ask Wagalex Conka what he do?"

"I don' care, that's why I don' ask. Me, it's' no matter."

He hesitated a moment, evidently weighing a matter of more importance to him than he would have Annie-Many-Ponies suspect. "Sweetheart, yoh do one thing for Ramon?" His voice might almost be called wheedling. "Me, I'm awful busy tomorrow. I got long ride away off -to my rancho. I got to see my brother Tomas. I be back here not before night. Yoh tell Bill Holmes he come here by this rock--yoh say midnight that's good time--I sure be here that time. Yoh say I got something I wan' tell him. Yoh do that for Ramon, sweetheart?"

He waited, trying to hide the fact that he was anxious.

"I not like Bill Holmes." Annie-Many-Ponies spoke with an air of finality.

"Bill Holmes comes close, I feel snakes. Him not friend to Wagalex Conka--say nothing--always go around still, like fox watching for rabbit. You not friend to Bill Holmes?"

"Me? No--I not friend, querida mia. I got business. I sell Bill Holmes one silver bridle, perhaps. I don' know--mus' talk about it. Yoh tell him come here by big rock, sweetheart?"

Annie-Many-Ponies took a minute for deliberation--which is the Indian way. Ramon, having learned patience, said no more but watched her slant-eyed.

"I tell," she promised at last, and added, "I go now." Then she slipped away. And Ramon, though he stood for several minutes by the rock smiling queerly and staring down the arroyo, caught not the slightest glimpse of her after she left him. He knew that she would deliver faithfully his message to Bill Holmes, she had given her word. That was one great advantage, considered Ramon, in dealing with those direct, uncompromising natures. She might torment

him with her aloofness and her reticence, but once he had won her to a full confidence and submission he need not trouble himself further about her loyalty. She would tell Bill Holmes--and, what was vastly more important, she would do it secretly; he had not dared to speak of that, but he thought he might safely trust to her natural wariness. So Ramon, after a little, stole away to his own camp quite satisfied.

The next night, when he stood in the shadow of the rock ledge and waited, he was not startled by the unexpected presence of the person he wanted to see. For although Bill Holmes came as cautiously as he knew how, and avoided the wide, bright-lighted stretches of arroyo where he would have been plainly visible, Ramon both saw and heard him before he reached the ledge. What Ramon did not see or hear was Annie-Many-Ponies, who did not quite believe that those two wished merely to talk about a silver bridle, and who meant to listen and find out why it was that they could not talk openly before all the boys.

Annie-Many-Ponies had ways of her own. She did not tell Ramon that she doubted his word, nor did she refuse to deliver the message. She waited calmly until Bill Holmes left camp stealthily that night, and she followed him. It was perfectly simple and sensible and the right thing to do; if you wanted to know for sure whether a person lied to you, you had but to watch and listen and let your own eyes and ears prove guilt or innocence.

So Annie-Many-Ponies stood by the rock and listened and watched. She did not see any silver bridle. She heard many words, but the two were speaking in that strange Spanish talk which she did not know at all, save "Querida mia," which Ramon had told her meant sweetheart.

The two talked, low-voiced and earnest, Bill was telling all that he knew of Luck Lindsay's plans--and that was not much.

"He don't talk," Bill complained. "He just tells the bunch a day ahead--just far enough to get their makeup and costumes on, generally. But he won't stay around here much longer; he's taken enough spring roundup stuff now for half a dozen pictures. He'll be moving in to the ranch again pretty quick. And I know this picture calls for a lot of town business that he'll have to take. I saw the script the other day." This, of course,, being a free translation of the meaningless jumble of strange words which Annie heard.

"What town business is that? Where will he work?" Ramon was plainly impatient of so much vagueness.

"Well, there's a bank robbery--I paid particular attention, Ramon, so I know for certain. But when he'll do it, or what bank he'll use, I don't know any more than you do. And there's a running fight down the street and through the Mexican quarter. The rest is just street stuff--that and a fiesta that I think he'll probably me the old plaza for location. He'll need a lot of Mexicans for that stuff. He'll want you, of course."

"That bank--who will do that?" Ramon's fingers trembled so that he could scarcely roll a cigarette. "Andy, perhaps?"

"No--that's the Mexican bunch. I--why, I guess that will maybe be you, Ramon.

I wasn't paying much attention to the parts--I was after locations, and I only had about two minutes at the script. But he's been giving you some good bits right along where he needed a Mexican type; and those scenes in the rocks the other day was bandit stuff with you for lead. It'll be you or Miguel--the Native Son, as they call him--and so far he's cast for another part. That's the worst of Luck. He won't talk about what he's going to do till he's all ready to do it."

There was a little further discussion. Ramon muttered a few sentences--rapid instructions, Annie-Many-Ponies believed from the tone he used.

"All right, I'll keep you posted," Bill Holmes replied in English. And he added as he started off, "You can send word by the squaw."

He went carefully back down the arroyo, keeping as much as possible in the shade. Behind him stole Annie-Many-Ponies, noiseless as the shadow of a cloud. Bill Holmes, she reflected angrily, had seen the day, not so far in the past, when he was happy if the "squaw" but smiled upon him. It was because she had repelled his sly lovemaking that he had come to speak of her slightly like that; she knew it. She could have named the very day when his manner toward her had changed. Mingled with her hate and dread of him was a new contempt and a new little anxiety over this clandestine intimacy between Ramon and him. Why should Bill Holmes keep Ramon posted? Surely not about a silver bridle!

Shunka Chistala was whining in her little tent when she came into the camp. She heard Bill Holmes stumble over the end of the chuck-wagon tongue and mutter the customary profanity with which the average man meets an incident of that kind. She whispered a fierce command to the little black dog and stood very still for a minute, listening. She did not hear anything further, either from Bill Holmes or the dog, and finally reassured by the silence, she crept into her tent and tied the flaps together on the inside, and lay down in her blankets with the little black dog contentedly curled at her feet with his nose between his front paws.

CHAPTER V. FOR THE GOOD OF THE COMPANY

All through breakfast Applehead seemed to have something weighty on his mind. He kept pulling at his streaked, reddish-gray mustache when his fingers should have been wholly occupied with his food, and he stared abstractedly at the ground after he had finished his first cup of coffee and before he took his second. Once Bill Holmes caught him glaring with an intensity which circumstances in no wise justified--and it was Bill Holmes who first shifted his gaze in vague uneasiness when he tried to stare Applehead down. Annie-Many-Ponies did not glance at him at all, so far as one could discover; yet she was the first to sense trouble in the air, and withdrew herself from the company and sat apart, wrapped closely in her crimson shawl that matched well the crimson bows on her two shiny braids.

Luck, keenly alive to the moods of his people, looked at her inquiringly. "Come on up by the fire, Annie," he commanded gently. "What you sitting away off there for? Come and eat--I want you to work today."

Annie-Many-Ponies did not reply, but she rose obediently and came forward in the silent way she had, stepping lightly, straight and slim and darkly beautiful. Applehead glanced at her sourly, and her lashes drooped to hide the venom in her eyes as she passed him to stand before Luck

"I not hungry," she told Luck tranquilly, yet with a hardness in her voice which did not escape him, who knew her so well. "I go put on makeup."

"Wear that striped blanket you used last Saturday when we worked up there in Tijeras Canon. Same young squaw makeup you wore then, Annie." He eyed her sharply as she turned away to her own tent, and he observed that when she passed Applehead she took two steps to one side, widening the distance between them. He watched her until she lifted her tent flap, stooped and disappeared within. Then he looked at Applehead.

"What's wrong between you two?" he asked the old man quizzically. "Her dog been licking your cat again, or what?"

"You're danged right he ain't!" Applehead testified boastfully. "Compadre's got that there dawg's goat, now I'm tellin' yuh! He don't take nothin' off him ner her neither."

"What you been doing to her, then?" Luck set his empty plate on the ground beside him and began feeling for the makings of a cigarette. "Way she side-stepped you, I know there must be SOMETHING."

"Well, now, I ain't done a danged thing to that there squaw! She ain't got any call to go around givin' me the bad eye." He looked at the breakfasting company and then again at Luck, and gave an almost imperceptible backward jerk of his head as he got awkwardly to his feet and strolled away toward the milling horses in the remuda.

So when Luck had lighted his fresh-rolled cigarette he followed Applehead unobtrusively. "Well, what's on your mind?" he wanted to know when he came up with him.

"Well, now, I don't want you to think I'm buttin' in on your affairs, Luck," Applehead began after a minute, "but seein' as you ast me what's wrong, I'm goin' to tell yuh straight out. We got a couple of danged fine women in this here bunch, and I shore do hate to see things goin' on around here that'd shame 'em if they was to find it out. And fur's I can see they will find it out, sooner or later. Murder ain't the only kinda wickedness that's hard to cover up. I know you feel about as I do on some subjects; you never did like dirt around you, no better'n--"

"Get to the point, man. What's wrong?"

So Applehead, turning a darker shade of red than was his usual hue, cleared his throat and blurted out what he had to say. He had heard Shunka Chistala whinnying at midnight in the tent of Annie-Many-Ponies, and had gone outside to see what was the matter. He didn't know, he explained, but what his cat Compadre was somehow involved. He had stood in the shadow of his tent for a

few minutes, and had seen Bill Holmes sneak into camp, coming from up the arroyo somewhere.

For some reason he waited a little longer, and he had seen a woman's shadow move stealthily up to the front of Annie's tent, and had seen Annie slip inside and had heard her whisper a command of some sort to the dog, which had immediately hushed its whining. He hated to be telling tales on anybody, but he knew how keenly Luck felt his responsibility toward the Indian girl, and he thought he ought to know. This night-prowling, he declared, had shore got to be stopped, or he'd be danged if he didn't run 'em both outa camp himself.

"Bill Holmes might have been out of camp," Luck said calmly, "but you sure must be mistaken about Annie. She's straight."

"You think she is," Applehead corrected him. "But you don't know a danged thing about it. A girl that's behavin' herself don't go chasin' all over the mesa alone, the way she's been doin' all spring. I never said nothin' 'cause it wa'n't none of my put-in. But that Injun had a heap of business off away from the ranch whilst you was in Los Angeles, Luck. Sneaked off every day, just about--and 'd be gone fer hours at a time. You kin ast any of the boys, if yuh don't want to take my word. Or you kin ast Mis' Green; she kin tell ye, if she's a mind to."

"Did Bill Holmes go with her?" Luck's eyes were growing hard and gray.

"As to that I won't say, fer I don't know and I'm tellin' yuh what I seen myself. Bill Holmes done a lot uh walkin' in to town, fur as that goes; and he didn't always git back the same day neither. He never went off with Annie, and he never came back with her, fur as I ever seen. But," he added grimly, "they didn't come back together las' night, neither. They come about three or four minutes apart."

Luck thought a minute, scowling off across the arroyo. Not even to Applehead, bound to him by closer ties than anyone there, did he ever reveal his thoughts completely.

"All right--I'll attend to them," he said finally. "Don't say anything to the bunch; these things aren't helped by talk. Get into your old cowman costume and use that big gray you rode in that drive we made the other day. I'm going to pick up the action where we left off when it turned cloudy. Tomorrow or next day I want to move the outfit back to the ranch. There's quite a lot of town stuff I want to get for this picture."

Applehead looked at him uncertainly, tempted to impress further upon him the importance of safeguarding the morals of his company. But he knew Luck pretty well--having lived with him for months at a time when Luck was younger and even more peppery than now. So he wisely condensed his reply to a nod, and went back to the breakfast fire polishing his bald head with the flat of his palm. He met Annie-Many-Ponies coming to ask Luck which of the two pairs of beaded moccasins she carried in her hands he would like to have her wear. She did not look at Applehead at all as she passed, but he nevertheless became keenly aware of her animosity and turned half around to glare after her resentfully. You'd think, he told himself aggrievedly, that he was the one

that had been acting up! Let her go to Luck--she'd danged soon be made to know her place in camp.

Annie-Many-Ponies went confidently on her way, carrying the two pairs of beaded moccasins in her hands. Her face was more inscrutable than ever. She was pondering deeply the problem of Bill Holmes' business with Ramon, and she was half tempted to tell Wagalex Conka of that secret intimacy which must carry on its converse under cover of night. She did not trust Bill Holmes. Why must he keep Ramon posted? She glanced ahead to where Luck stood thinking deeply about something, and her eyes softened in a shy sympathy with his trouble. Wagalex Conka worked hard and thought much and worried more than was good for him. Bill Holmes, she decided fiercely, should not add to those worries. She would warn Ramon when next she talked with him. She would tell Ramon that he must not be friends with Bill Holmes; in the meantime, she would watch.

Ten feet from Luck she stopped short, sensing trouble in the hardness that was in his eyes. She stood there and waited in meek subjection.

"Annie, come here!" Luck's voice was no less stern because it was lowered so that a couple of the boys fussing with the horses inside the rope corral could not overhear what he had to say.

Annie-Many-Ponies, pulling one of the shiny black braids into the correct position over her shoulder and breast, stepped soft-footedly up to him and stopped. She did not ask him what he wanted. She waited until it was his pleasure to speak.

"Annie, I want you to keep away from Bill Holmes." Luck was not one to mince his words when he had occasion to speak of disagreeable things. "It isn't right for you to let him make love to you on the sly. You know that. You know you must not leave camp with him after dark. You make me ashamed of you when you do those things. You keep away from Bill Holmes and stay in camp nights. If you're a bad girl, I'll have to send you back to the reservation--and I'll have to tell the agent and Chief Big Turkey why I send you back. I can't have anybody in my company who doesn't act right. Now remember--don't make me speak to you again about it."

Annie-Many-Ponies stood there, and the veiled, look was in her eyes. Her face was a smooth, brown mask--beautiful to look upon but as expressionless as the dead. She did not protest her innocence, she did not explain that she hated and distrusted Bill Holmes and that she had, months ago, repelled his surreptitious advances. Luck would have believed, for he had known Annie-Many-Ponies since she was a barefooted papoose, and he had never known her to tell him an untruth.

"You go now and get ready for work. Wear the moccasins with the birds on the toes." He pointed to them and turned away.

Annie-Many-Ponies also turned and went her way and said nothing. What, indeed, could she say? She did not doubt that Luck had seen her the night before, and had seen also Bill Holmes when he left camp or returned--perhaps both. She could not tell him that Bill Holmes had gone out to meet Ramon, for that, she

felt instinctively, was a secret which Ramon trusted her not to betray. She could not tell Wagalex Conka, either, that she met Ramon often when the camp was asleep. He would think that as bad as meeting Bill Holmes. She knew that he did not like Ramon, but merely used him and his men and horses and cattle for a price, to better his pictures. Save in a purely business way she had never seen him talking with Ramon. Never as he talked with the boys of the Flying U--his Happy Family, he called them.

She said nothing. She dressed for the part she was to play. She twined flowers in her hair and smoothed out the red bows and laid them carefully away--since Wagalex Conka did not wish her to wear ribbon bows in this picture. She murmured caresses to Shunka Chistala, the little black dog that was always at her heels. She rode with the company to the rocky gorge which was "location" for today. When Wagalex Conka called to her she went and climbed upon a high rock and stood just where he told her to stand, and looked just as he told her to look, and stole away through the rocks and out of the scene exactly as he wished her to do.

But when Wagalex Conka--sorry for the harshness he had felt it his duty to show that morning--smiled and told her she had done fine, and that he was pleased with her, Annie-Many-Ponies did not smile back with that slow, sweet, heart-twisting smile which was at once her sharpest weapon and her most endearing trait.

Bill Holmes who had also had his sharp word of warning, and had been told very plainly to cut out this flirting with Annie if he wanted to remain on Luck's payroll, eyed her strangely. Once he tried to have a secret word with her, but she moved away and would not look at him. For Annie-Many-Ponies, hurt and bitter as she felt toward her beloved Wagalex Conka, hated Bill Holmes fourfold for being the cause of her humiliation. That she did not also hate Ramon Chavez as being equally guilty with Bill Holmes, went far toward proving how strong a hold he had gained upon her heart.

CHAPTER VI. "I GO WHERE WAGALEXA CONKA SAY"

That afternoon Ramon joined them, suave as ever and seeming very much at peace with the world and his fellow-beings. He watched the new leading woman make a perilous ride down a steep, rocky point and dash up to camera and on past it where she set her horse back upon, its haunches with a fine disregard for her bones and a still finer instinct for putting just the right dash of the spectacular into her work without overdoing it.

"That senora, she's all right, you bet!" he praised the feat to those who stood near him; "me, I not be stuck on ron my caballo down that place. You bet she's fine rider. My sombrero, he's come off to that lady!"

Jean, hearing, glanced at him with that little quirk of the lips which was the beginning of a smile, and rode off to join her father and Lite Avery. "He made that sound terribly sincere, didn't he?" she commented. "It takes a Mexican to lift flattery up among the fine arts." Then she thought no more about it.

Annie-Many-Ponies was sitting apart, on a rock where her gay blanket made a picturesque splotch of color against the gray barrenness of the hill behind her. She, too, heard what Ramon said, and she, too, thought that he had made the praise sound terribly sincere. He had not spoken to her at all after the first careless nod of recognition when he rode up. And although her reason had approved of his caution, her sore heart ached for a little kindness from him. She turned her eyes toward him now with a certain wistfulness; but though Ramon chanced to be looking toward her she got no answering light in his eyes, no careful little signal that his heart was yearning for her. He seemed remote, as indifferent to her as were any of the others dulled by accustomedness to her constant presence among them. A premonitory chill, as from some great sorrow yet before her in the future, shook the heart of Annie-Many-Ponies.

"Me, I fine out how moch more yoh want me campa here for pictures," Ramon was saying now to Luck who was standing by Pete Lowry, scribbling something on his script. "My brother Tomas, he liking for us at ranch now, s'pose yoh finish poco tiempo."

Luck wrote another line before he gave any sign that he heard. Annie-Many-Ponies, watching from under her drooping lids, saw that Bill Holmes had edged closer to Ramon, while he made pretense of being much occupied with his own affairs.

"I don't need your camp at all after today." Luck shoved the script into his coat pocket and looked at his watch.

"This afternoon when the sun is just right I want to get one or two cut-back scenes and a dissolve out. After that you can break camp any time. But I want you, Ramon- -you and Estancio Lopez and Luis Rojas. I'll need you for two or three days in town--want you to play the heavy in a bank-robbery and street fight. The makeup is the same as when you worked up there in the rocks the other day. You three fellows come over and go in to the ranch tomorrow if you like. Then I'll have you when I want you. You'll get five dollars a day while you work." Having made himself sufficiently clear, he turned away to set and rehearse the next scene, and did not see the careful glance which passed between Ramon and Bill Holmes.

"Annie," Luck said abruptly, swinging toward her, "can you come down off that point where Jean Douglas came? You'll have to ride horseback, remember, and I don't want you to do it unless you're sure of yourself. How about it?"

For the first time since breakfast her somber eyes lightened with a gleam of interest. She did not look at Ramon--Ramon who had told her many times how much he loved her, and yet could praise Jean Douglas for her riding. Ramon had declared that he would not care to come riding down that point as Jean had come; very well, then she would show Ramon something.

"It isn't necessary, exactly," Luck explained further. "I can show you at the top, looking down at the way Jean came; and then I can pick you up on an easier trail. But if you want to do it, it will save some cut-backs and put another little punch in here. Either way it's up to you."

The voice of Annie-Many-Ponies did not rise to a higher key when she spoke, but it had in it a clear incisiveness that carried her answer to Ramon and made him understand that she was speaking for his ears.

"I come down with big punch," she said.

"Where Jean came? You're riding bareback, remember."

"No matter. I come down jus' same." And she added with a haughty tilt of her chin, "That's easy place for me."

Luck eyed her steadfastly, a smile of approval on his face. "All right. I know you've got plenty of nerve, Annie. You mount and ride up that draw till you get to the ridge. Come up to where you can see camp over the brow of the hill--sabe?--and then wait till I whistle. One whistle, get ready to come down. Two whistles, you, come. Ride past camera, just the way Jean did. You know you're following the white girl and trying to catch up with her. You're a friend and you have a message for her, but she's scared and is running away--sabe? You want to come down slow first and pick your trail?"

"No." Annie-Many-Ponies started toward the pinto pony which was her mount in this picture. "I come down hill. I make big punch for you. Pete turn camera."

"You've got more nerve than I have, Annie," Jean told her good-naturedly as she went by. "I'd hate to run a horse down there bareback."

"I go where Wagalex Conka say." From the corner of her eye she saw the quick frown of jealousy upon the face of Ramon, and her pulse gave an extra beat of triumph.

With an easy spring she mounted the pinto pony, took the reins of her squaw bridle that was her only riding gear, folded her gay blanket snugly around her uncorseted body and touched the pinto with her moccasined heels. She was ready--ready to the least little tensed nerve that tingled with eagerness under the calm surface.

She rode slowly past luck, got her few final instructions and a warning to be careful and to take no chances of an accident--which brought that inscrutable smile to her face; for Wagalex Conka knew, and she knew also, that in the mere act of riding down that slope faster than a walk she was taking a chance of an accident. It was that risk that lightened her heart which had been so heavy all day. The greater the risk, the more eager was she to take it. She would show Ramon that she, too, could ride.

"Oh, do be careful, Annie!" Jean called anxiously when she was riding into the mouth of the draw. "Turn to the right, when you come to that big flat rock, and don't come down where I did. It's too steep. Really," she drawled to Rosemary and Lite, "my heart was in my mouth when I came straight down by that rock. It's a lot steeper than it looks from here."

"She won't go round it," Rosemary predicted pessimistically. "She's in one of her contrary moods today. She'll come down the worst way she can find just to scare the life out of us."

Up the steep draw that led to the top, Annie-Many-Ponies rode exultantly. She would show Ramon that she could ride wherever the white girl dared ride. She would shame Wagalex Conka, too, for his injustice to her. She would put the too, for big punch in that scene or--she would ride no more, unless it were upon a white cloud, drifting across the moon at night and looking, down at this world and upon Ramon.

At the top of the ridge she rode out to the edge and made the peace-sign to Luck as a signal that she was ready to do his bidding. Incidentally, while she held her hand high over her head, her eyes swept keenly the boulder-strewn bluff beneath her. A little to one side was a narrow backbone of smoother soil than the rest, and here were printed deep the marks of Jean's horse. Even there it was steep, and there was a bank, down there by the big flat rock which Jean had mentioned. Annie-Many-Ponies looked daringly to the left, where one would say the bluff was impassable. There she would come down, and no other place. She would show Ramon what she could do--he who had praised boldly another when she was by!

"All right, Annie!" Luck called to her through his megaphone. "Go back now and wait for whistle. Ride along the edge when you come, from bushes to where you stand. I want silhouette, you coming. You sabe?"

Annie-Many-Ponies raised her hand even with her breast, and swept it out and upward in the Indian sign-talk which meant "yes." Luck's eyes flashed appreciation of the gesture; he loved the sign-talk of the old plains tribes.

"Be careful, Annie," he cried impulsively. "I don't want you to be hurt." He dropped the megaphone as she swung her horse back from the edge and disappeared. "I'd cut the whole scene out if I didn't know what a rider she is," he added to the others, more uneasy than he cared to own. "But it would hurt her a heap more if I wouldn't let her ride where Jean rode. She's proud; awfully proud and sensitive."

"I'm glad you're letting her do it," Jean said sympathetically. "She'd hate me if you hadn't. But I'm going to watch her with my eyes shut, just the same. It's an awfully mean place in spots."

"She'll make it, all right," Luck declared. But his tone was not so confident as his words, and he was manifestly reluctant to place the whistle to his lips. He fussed with his script, and he squinted into the viewfinder, and he made certain for the second time just where the side-lines came, and thrust half an inch deeper in the sandy soil the slender stakes which would tell Annie-Many-Ponies where she must guide the pinto when she came tearing down to foreground. But he could delay the signal only so long, unless he cut out the scene altogether.

"Get back, over on that side, Bill," he commanded harshly. "Leave her plenty of room to pass that side of the camera. All ready, Pete?" Then, as if he wanted to have it over with as soon as possible, he whistled once, waited while he might have counted twenty, perhaps, and sent shrilling through the sunshine the signal that would bring her.

They watched, holding their breaths in fearful expectancy. Then they saw her flash into view and come galloping down along the edge of the ridge where the hill fell away so steeply that it might be called a cliff. Indian fashion, she was whipping the pinto down both sides with the end of her reins. Her slim legs hung straight, her moccasined toes pointing downward. One corner of her red-and-green striped blanket flapped out behind her. Haste--the haste of the pursuer--showed in every movement, every line of her figure.

She came to the descent, and the pinto, having no desire for applause but a very great hankering for whole bones in his body, planted his forefeet and slid to a stop upon the brink. His snort came clearly down to those below who watched.

"He won't tackle it," Pete Lowry predicted philosophically while he turned the camera crank steadily round and round and held himself ready to "panoram" the scene if the pinto bolted.

But the pinto, having Annie-Many-Ponies to reckon with, did not bolt. The braided rein-end of her squaw bridle lashed him stingingly; the moccasined heels dug without mercy into the tender part of his flanks. He came lunging down over the first rim of the bluff; then since he must, he gathered himself for the ordeal and came leaping down and down and down, gaining momentum with every jump. He could not have stopped then if he had tried--and Annie-Many-Ponies, still the incarnation of eager pursuit, would not let him try.

At the big flat rock of which Jean had warned her, the pinto would have swerved. But she yanked him into the straighter descent, down over the bank. He leaped, and he fell and slid twice his own length, his nose rooting the soil. Annie-Many-Ponies lurched, came hard against a boulder and somehow flung herself into place again on the horse. She lifted his head and called to him in short, harsh, Indian words. The pinto scrambled to his knees, got to his feet and felt again the sting of the rein-end in his flanks. Like a rabbit he came bounding down, down where the way was steepest and most treacherous. And at every jump the rein-end fell, first on one side and then along the other, as a skilled canoeman shifts the paddle to force his slight craft forward in a treacherous current.

Down the last slope he came thundering. On his back Annie-Many-Ponies lashed him steadily, straining her eyes in the direction which Jean had taken past the camera. She knew that they were watching her--she knew also that the camera crank in Pete Lowry's hands was turning, turning, recording every move of hers, every little changing expression. She swept down upon them so close that Pete grabbed the tripod with one hand, ready to lift it and dodge away from the coming collision. Still leaning, still lashing and straining every nerve in pursuit, she dashed past, pivoted the pinto upon his hind feet, darted back toward the staring group and jumped off while he was yet running.

Now that she had done it; now that she had proven that she also had nerve and much skill in riding, black loneliness settled upon her again. She came slowly back, and as she came she heard them praise the ride she had made. She heard them saying how frightened they had been when the pinto fell, and she heard Wagalex Conka call to her that she had made a strong scene for him. She did

not answer. She sat down upon a rock, a little apart from them, and looking as remote as the Sandias Mountains, miles away to the north, folded her blanket around her and spoke no word to anyone.

Soon Ramon mounted his horse to return to his camp. He came riding down to her --for his trail lay that way--and as he rode he called to the others a good natured "Hasta luego!" which is the Mexican equivalent of "See you later." He did not seem to notice Annie-Many-Ponies at all as he rode past her. He was gazing off down the arroyo and riding with all his weight on one stirrup and the other foot swinging free, as is the nonchalant way of accustomed riders who would ease their muscles now and then. But as he passed the rock where she was sitting he murmured, "Tonight by the rock I wait for you, querida mia." Though she gave no sign that she had heard, the heart of Annie-Many-Ponies gave a throb of gladness that was almost pain.

CHAPTER VII. ADVENTURE COMES SMILING

Luck, in the course of his enthusiastic picture making, reached the point where he must find a bank that was willing to be robbed--in broad daylight and for screen purposes only. If you know anything at all about our financial storehouses, you know that they are sensitive about being robbed, or even having it appear that they are being subjected to so humiliating a procedure. What Luck needed was a bank that was not only willing, but one that faced the sun as well. He was lucky, as usual. The Bernalillo County Bank stands on a corner facing east and south. It is an unpretentious little bank of the older style of architecture, and might well be located in the centre of any small range town and hold the shipping receipts of a cattleman who was growing rich as he grew old.

Luck stopped across the street and looked the bank over, and saw how the sun would shine in at the door and through the wide windows during the greater part of the afternoon, and hoped that the cashier was a human being and would not object to a fake robbery. Not liking suspense, he stepped off the pavement and dodged a jitney, and hurried over to interview the cashier.

You never know what secret ambitions hide behind the impassive courtesy of the average business man. This cashier, for instance, wore a green eyeshade whenever his hat was not on his head. His hair was thin and his complexion pasty and his shoulders were too stooped for a man of his age. You never would have suspected, just to look at him through the fancy grating of his window, how he thirsted for that kind of adventure which fiction writers call red-blooded. He had never had an adventure in his life; but at night, after he had gone to bed and adjusted the electric light at his head, and his green eyeshade, and had put two pillows under the back of his neck, he read--you will scarcely believe it, but it is true--he read about the James boys and Kit Carson and Pawnee Bill, and he could tell you--only he wouldn't mention it, of course--just how many Texans were killed in the Alamo. He loved gun catalogues, and he frequently went out of his way to pass a store that displayed real, business- looking stock-saddles and quirts and spurs and things. He longed to be down in Mexico in the thick of the scrap there, and he knew every prominent Federal leader and every revolutionist that got into the

papers; knew them by spelling at least, even if he couldn't pronounce the names correctly.

He had come to Albuquerque for his lungs' sake a few years ago, and he still thrilled at the sight of bright-shawled Pueblo Indians padding along the pavements in their moccasins and queer leggings that looked like joints of whitewashed stove-pipe; while to ride in an automobile out to Isleta, which is a terribly realistic Indian village of adobe huts, made the blood beat in his temples and his fingers tremble upon his knees. Even Martinez Town with its squatty houses and narrow streets held for him a peculiar fascination.

You can imagine, maybe, how his weak eyes snapped with excitement under that misleading green shade when Luck Lindsay walked in and smiled at him through the wicket, and explained who he was and what was the favor he had come to ask of the bank. You can, perhaps, imagine how he stood and made little marks on a blotter with his pencil while Luck explained just what he would want; and how he clung to the noncommittal manner which is a cashier's professional shield, while Luck smiled his smile to cover his own feeling of doubt and stated that he merely wanted two Mexicans to enter, presumably overpower the cashier, and depart with a bag or two of gold.

The cashier made a few more pencil marks and said that it might be arranged, if Luck could find it convenient to make the picture just after the bank's closing time. Obviously the cashier could not permit the bank's patrons to be disturbed in any way--but what he really wanted was to have the thrill of the adventure all to himself.

With the two of them anxious to have the pictured robbery take place, of course they arranged it after a polite sparring on the part of the cashier, whose craving for adventure was carefully guarded as a guilty secret.

At three o'clock the next day, then--although Luck would have greatly preferred an earlier hour--the cashier had the bank cleared of patrons and superfluous clerks, and was watching, with his nerves all atingle and the sun shining in upon him through a side window, while Pete Lowry and Bill Holmes fussed outside with the camera, getting ready for the arrival of those realistic bandits, Ramon Chavez and Luis Rojas. On the street corner opposite, the Happy Family foregathered clannishly, waiting until they were called into the street-fight scene which Luck meant to make later.

The cashier's cheeks were quite pink with excitement when finally Ramon and the Rojas villain walked past the window and looked in at him before going on to the door. He was disappointed because they were not masked, and because they did not wear bright sashes with fringe and striped serapes draped across their shoulders, and the hilts of wicked knives showing somewhere. They did not look like bandits at all--thanks to Luck's sure knowledge and fine sense of realism. Still, they answered the purpose, and when they opened the door and came in the cashier got quite a start from the greedy look in their eyes when they saw the gold he had stacked in profusion on the counter before him.

They made the scene twice--the walking past the window and coming in at the door; and the second time Luck swore at them because they stopped too abruptly at the window and lingered too long there, looking in at the cashier and his

gold, and exchanging meaning glances before they went to the door.

Later, there was an interior scene with reflectors almost blinding the cashier while he struggled self-consciously and ineffectually with Ramon Chavez. The gold that Ramon scraped from the cashier's keeping into his own was not, of course, the real gold which the bandits had seen through the window. Luck, careful of his responsibilities, had waited while the cashier locked the bank's money in the vault, and had replaced it with brass coins that looked real--to the camera.

The cashier lived then the biggest moments of his life. He was forced upon his back across a desk that had been carefully cleared of the bank's papers and as carefully strewn with worthless ones which Luck had brought. A realistically uncomfortable gag had been forced into the mouth of the cashier--where it brought twinges from some fresh dental work, by the way--and the bandits had taken everything in sight that they fancied.

Ramon and Luis Rojas had proven themselves artists in this particular line of work, and the cashier, when it was all over and the camera and company were busily at work elsewhere, lived it in his imagination and felt that he was at least tasting the full flavor of red-blooded adventure without having to pay the usual price of bitterness and bodily suffering. He was mistaken, of course--as I am going to explain. What the cashier had taken part in was not the adventure itself but merely a rehearsal and general preparation for the real performance.

This had been on Wednesday, just after three o'clock in the afternoon. On Saturday forenoon the cashier was called upon the phone and asked if a part of that robbery stuff could be retaken that day. The cashier thrilled instantly at the thought of it. Certainly, they could retake as much as they pleased. Lucks voice--or a voice very like Luck's--thanked him and said that they would not need to retake the interior stuff. What he wanted was to get the approach to the bank the entrance and going back to the cashier. That part of the negative was under-timed, said the voice. And would the cashier make a display of gold behind the wicket, so that the camera could register it through the window? The cashier thought that he could. "Just stack it up good and high," directed the voice. "The more the better. And clear the bank--have the clerks out, and every thing as near as possible to what it was the other day. And you take up the same position. The scene ends where Ramon comes back and grabs you."

"And listen! You did so well the other day that I'm going to leave this to you, to see that they get it the same. I can't be there myself--I've got to catch some atmosphere stuff down here in Old Town. I'm just sending my assistant camera man and the two heavies and my scenic artist for this retake. it won't be much--but be sure you have the bank cleared, old man--because it would ruin the following scenes to have extra people registered in this; see? You did such dandy work in that struggle that I want it to stand. Boy, your work's sure going to stand out on the screen!"

Can you blame the cashier for drinking in every word of that, and for emptying the vault of gold and stacking it up in beautiful, high piles where the sun shone on it through the window--and where it would be within easy reach, by

the way!--so that the camera could "register" it?

At ten minutes past twelve he had gotten rid of patrons and clerks, and he had the gold out and his green eyeshade adjusted as becomingly as a green eyeshade may be adjusted. He looked out and saw that the street was practically empty, because of the hour and the heat that was almost intolerable where the sun shone full. He saw a big red machine drive up to the corner and stop, and he saw a man climb out with camera already screwed, to the tripod. He saw the bandits throw away their cigarettes and follow the camera man, and then he hurried back and took up his station beside the stacks of gold, and waited in a twitter of excitement for this unhoped-for encore of last Wednesday's glorious performance. Through the window he watched the camera being set up, and he watched also, from under his eyeshade, the approach of the two bandits.

From there on a gap occurs in the cashier's memory of that day.

Ramon and Luis went into the bank, and in a few minutes they came out again burdened with bags of specie and pulled the door shut with the spring lock set and the blinds down that proclaimed the bank was closed. They climbed into the red automobile, the camera and its operator followed, and the machine went away down the street to the post-office, turned and went purring into the Mexican quarter which spreads itself out toward the lower bridge that spans the Rio Grande. This much a dozen persons could tell you. Beyond that no man seemed to know what became of the outfit.

In the bank, the cashier lay back across a desk with a gag in his mouth and his hands and feet tied, and with a welt on the side of his head that swelled and bled sluggishly for a while and then stopped and became an angry purple. Where the gold had been stacked high in the sunshine the marble glistened whitely, with not so much as a five-dollar piece to give it a touch of color. The window blinds were drawn down--the bank was closed. And people passed the windows and never guessed that within there lay a sickly young man who had craved adventure and found it, and would presently awake to taste its bitter flavor.

Away off across the mesa, sweltering among the rocks in Bear Canon, Luck Lindsay panted and sweated and cursed the heat and painstakingly directed his scenes, and never dreamed that a likeness of his voice had beguiled the cashier of the Bernalillo County Bank into consenting to be robbed and beaten into oblivion of his betrayal.

And--although some heartless teller of tales might keep you in the dark about this--the red automobile, having dodged hurriedly into a high-boarded enclosure behind a Mexican saloon, emerged presently and went boldly off across the bridge and up through Atrisco to the sand hills which is the beginning of the desert off that way. But another automobile, bigger and more powerful and black, slipped out of this same enclosure upon another street, and turned eastward instead of west. This machine made for the mesa by a somewhat roundabout course, and emerged, by way of a rough trail up a certain draw in the edge of the tableland, to the main road where it turns the corner of the cemetery. From there the driver drove as fast as he dared until he reached the hill that borders Tijeras Arroyo. There being no sign of pursuit to this point, he crossed the Arroyo at a more leisurely pace. Then he went

speeding away into the edge of the mountains until they reached one of those deep, deserted dry washes that cut the foothills here and there near Coyote Springs. There his passengers left him and disappeared up the dry wash.

Before the wound on the cashier's head had stopped bleeding, the black automobile was returning innocently to town and no man guessed what business had called it out upon the mesa.

CHAPTER VIII. THE SONG OF THE OMAHA

"Me, I theenk yoh not lov' me so moch as a pin," Ramon complained in soft reproach, down in the dry wash where Applehead had looked in vain for baling wire. "Sometimes I show yoh what is like the Spanish lov'. Like stars, like fire--sometimes I seeng the jota for you that tell how moch I lov' yoh. 'Te quiero, Baturra, te quiero,'" he began humming softly while he looked at her with eyes that shone soft in the starlight. "Sometimes me, I learn yoh dat song--and moch more I learn yoh--"

Annie-Many-Ponies stood before him, straight and slim and with that air of aloofness which so fired Ramon's desire for her. She lifted a hand to check him, and Ramon stopped instantly and waited. So far had her power over him grown.

"All time you tell me you heap love," she said in her crooning soft voice.

"Why you not talk of priest to make us marry? You say words for love--you say no word for wife. Why you no say--"

"Esposa!" Ramon's teeth gleamed white as a wolf's in the dusk. "When the padre marry us I maybe teach you many ways to say wife!" He laughed under his breath. "How I calls yoh wife when I not gets one kees, me? Now I calls yoh la sweetheart--good enough when I no gets so moch as touches hand weeth yoh."

"I go way with you, you gets priest for make us marry?" Annie-Many-Ponies edged closer so that she might read what was in his face.

"Why yoh no trus' Ramon? Sure, I gets padre! W'at yoh theenk for speak lies, me? Sure, I gets padre, foolish one! Me, I not like for yoh no trus' Ramon. Looks like not moch yoh lov' Ramon."

"I good girl," Annie-Many-Ponies stated simply. "I love my husband when priest says that's right thing to do. You no gets priest, I no go with you. I think mens not much cares for marry all time. Womens not care, they go to hell. That's what priest tells. Girls got to care. That's truth." Simple as two-plus-two was the rule of life as Annie-Many-Ponies laid it down in words before him. No fine distinctions between virtue and superwomanhood there, if you please! No slurring of wrong so that it may look like an exalted right. "Womens got to care," said Annie-Many-Ponies with a calm certainty that would brook no argument.

"Sure theeng," Ramon agreed easily. "Yoh theenk I lov' yoh so moch if yoh not good?"

"You gets priest?" Annie-Many-Ponies persisted.

"Sure, I gets padre. You theenk Ramon lies for soch theeng?"

"You swear, then, all same white mans in picture makes oath." There was a new quality of inflexibility under the soft music of her voice. "You lift up hand and says, 'Help me by God I makes you for-sure my wife!'" She had pondered long upon this oath, and she spoke it now with an easy certainty that it was absolutely binding, and that no man would dare break it. "You makes that swear now," she urged gently.

"Foolish one! Yoh theenk I mus' swear I do what my hearts she's want? I tell yoh many times we go on one ranch my brother Tomas says she's be mine. We lives there in fine house weeth mooch flowers, yoh not so moch as lif' one finger for work, querida mia. Yoh theenk I not be trus', me, Ramon what loves yoh?"

"No hurt for swears what I tells," Annie-Many-Ponies stepped back from him a pace, distrust creeping into her voice.

"All right." Ramon moved nearer. "So I make oath, perhaps you make oath also! Me, I theenk yoh perhaps not like for leave Luck Leensay--I theenk perhaps yoh loves heem, yoh so all time watch for ways to please! So I swear, then yoh mus' swear also that yoh come for-sure. That square deal for both--si?"

Annie-Many-Ponies hesitated, a dull ache in her breast when Ramon spoke of Luck. But if her heart was sore at thought of him, it was because he no longer looked upon her with the smile in his eyes. It was because he was not so kind; because he believed that she had secret meetings with Bill Holmes whom she hated. And in spite of the fact that Bill Holmes had left the company the other day and was going away, Wagalex Conka still looked upon her with cold eyes and listened to the things that Applehead said against her. The heart of Wagalex Conka, she told herself miserably, was like a stone for her. And so her own heart must be hard. She would swear to Ramon, and she would keep the oath--and Wagalex Conka would not even miss her or be sorry that she had gone.

"First you make swears like I tells you," she said. "Then I make swears."

"Muy bueno!" smiled Ramon then. "So I make oath I take you queek to one good friend me, the Padre Dominguez. Then yoh be my wife for sure. That good enough for yoh, perhaps? Queeck yoh make oath yoh leave these place Manana--tomorra. Yoh go by ol' rancho where we talk so many time. I leave horse for yoh. Yoh ride pas' that mountain, yoh come for Bernalillo. Yoh wait. I come queeck as can when she's dark. Yoh do that, sweetheart?"

Annie-Many-Ponies stilled the ache in her heart with the thought of her proud place beside Ramon who had much land and many cattle and who loved her so much. She lifted her hand and swore she would go with him.

She slipped away then and crept into her tent in the little cluster beside the house--for the company 'had forsaken Applehead's adobe and slept under canvas

as a matter of choice. With Indian cunning she bided her time and gave no sign of what was hidden in her heart. She rose with the others and brushed her glossy hair until it shone in the sunlight like the hair of a high-caste Chinese woman. She tied upon it the new bows of red ribbon which she had bought in the secret hope that they would be a part of her wedding finery. She put on her Indian gala dress of beaded buckskin with the colored porcupine quills--and then she smiled cunningly and drew a dress of red-and-blue striped calico over her head and settled the folds of it about her with little, smoothing pats, so that the two white women, Rosemary and Jean, should not notice any unusual bulkiness of her figure.

She did not know how she would manage to escape the keen eyes of Wagalex Conka and to steal away from the ranch, especially if she had to work in the picture that day. But Luck unconsciously opened wide the trail for her. He announced at breakfast that they would work up in Bear Canon that day, and that he would not need Jean or Annie either; and that, as it would be hotter than the hinges of Gehenna up in that canon, they had better stay at home and enjoy themselves.

Annie-Many-Ponies did not betray by so much as a flicker of the lashes that she heard him much less that it was the best of good news to her. She went into her tent and packed all of her clothes into a bundle which she wrapped in her plaid shawl, and was proud because the bundle was so big, and because she had much fine beadwork and so many red ribbons, and a waist of bright blue silk which she would wear when she stood before the priest, if Ramon did not like the dress of beaded buckskin.

A ring with an immense red stone in it which Ramon had given her, she slipped upon her finger with her little, inscrutable smile. She was engaged to be married, now, just like white girls; and tomorrow she would have a wide ring of shiny gold for that finger, and should be the wife of Ramon.

Just then Shunka Chistala, lying outside her tent, flapped his tail on the ground and gave a little, eager whine. Annie-Many-Ponies thrust her head through the opening and looked out, and then stepped over the little black dog and stood before her tent to watch the Happy Family mount and ride away with Wagalex Conka in their midst and with the mountain wagon rattling after them loaded with "props" and the camera and the noonday lunch and Pete Lowry and Tommy Johnson, the scenic artist. Applehead was going to drive the wagon, and she scowled when he yanked off the brake and cracked the whip over the team.

Luck, feeling perchance the intensity of her gaze, turned in the saddle and looked back. The eyes of Annie-Many-Ponies softened and saddened, because this was the last time she would see Wagalex Conka riding away to make pictures--the last time she would see him. She lifted her hand, and made the Indian sign of farewell--the peace-go-with-you sign that is used for solemn occasions of parting.

Luck pulled up short and stared. What did she mean by that? He reined his horse around, half minded to ride back and ask her why she gave him that peace-sign. She had never done it before, except once or twice in scenes that he directed. But after all he did not go. They were late in getting started that morning, which irked his energetic soul; and women's whims never did

impress Luck Lindsay very deeply. Besides, just as he was turning to ride back, Annie stooped and went into her tent as though her gesture had carried no especial meaning.

Then in her tent he heard her singing the high, weird chant of the Omaha mourning song and again he was half-minded to go back, though the wailing minor notes, long drawn and mournful, might mean much or they might mean merely a fit of the blues. The others rode on talking and laughing together, and Luck rode with them; but the chant of the Omaha was in his ears and tingling his nerves. And the vision of Annie-Many-Ponies standing straight before her tent and making the sign of peace and farewell haunted him that day.

Rosemary and Jean, standing in the porch, waved good-bye to their men folk until the last bobbing hatcrown had gone down out of sight in the long, low swale that creased the mesa in that direction. Whereupon they went into the house.

"What in the world is the matter with Annie?" Jean exploded, with a little shiver. "I'd rather hear a band of gray wolves tune up when you're caught out in the breaks and have to ride in the dark. What is that caterwaul? Do you suppose she's on the warpath or anything?"

"Oh, that's just the squaw coming out in her!" Rosemary slammed the door shut so they could not hear so plainly. "She's getting more Injuny every day of her life. I used to try and treat her like a white girl--but you just can't do it, Jean."

"Hiu-hiu-hi-i-ah-h! Hiu-hiu-hi-i-ah-h-h--hiaaa-h-h!"

Jean stood in the middle of the room and listened. "Br-r-r!" she shivered--and one could not blame her. I wonder if she'd be mad," she drawled, "if I went out and told her to shut up. It sounds as if somebody was dead, or going to die or something. Like Lite says your dog will howl if anything --"

"Oh, for pity sake!" Rosemary pushed her into the living room with make-believe savageness. "I've heard her and Luck sing that last winter. And there's a kind of a teetery dance that goes with it. It's supposed to be a mourning song, as Luck explains it. But don't pay any attention to her at all. She just does it to get on our nerves. It'd tickle her to death if she thought it made us nervous."

"And now the dog is joining in on the chorus! I must say they're a cheerful pair to have around the house. And I know one thing--if they keep that up much longer, I'll either get out there with a gun, or saddle up and follow the boys."

"They'd tease us to death, Jean, if we let Annie run us out."

"It's run or be run," Jean retorted irritably. "I wanted to write poetry today--I thought of an awfully striking sentence about the--for heaven's sake, where's a shotgun?"

"Jean, you wouldn't!" Rosemary, I may here explain, was very femininely afraid of guns. "She'd--why, there's no telling WHAT she might do! Luck says she carries a knife."

"What if she does? She ought to carry a few bird-shot, too. She's got nothing to mourn about--nobody's died, has there?"

"Hiu-hiu-hia-a-a,ah! Hia-a-a-a-ah!" wailed Annie-Many-Ponies in her tent, because she would never again look upon the face of Wagalexa Conka--or if she did it would be to see his anger blaze and burn her heart to ashes. To her it was as though death sat beside her; the death of Wagalexa Conka's friendship for her. She forgot his harshness because he thought her disobedient and wicked. She forgot that she loved Ramon Chavez, and that he was rich and would give her a fine home and much love. She forgot everything but that she had sworn an oath and that she must keep it though it killed faith and kindness and friendship as with a knife.

So she wailed, in high-keyed, minor chanting unearthly in its primitive inarticulateness of sorrow, the chant of the Omaha mourning song. So had her tribe wailed in the olden days when warriors returned to the villages and told of their dead. So had her mother wailed when the Great Spirit took away her first man-child. So had the squaws wailed in their tepees since the land was young. And the little black dog, sitting on his haunches before her door, pointed his moist nose into the sunlight and howled in mournful sympathy.

"Oh, my gracious!" Jean, usually so calm, flung a magazine against the wall. "This is just about as pleasant as a hanging! let's saddle up and ride in after the mail, Rosemary. Maybe the squaw in her will be howled out by the time we get back." And she added with a venomous sincerity that would have warmed the heart of old Applehead, "I'd shoot that dog, for half a cent! How do you suppose an animal of his size can produce all that noise?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Rosemary spoke with the patience of utter weariness. "I've stood her and the dog for about eight months and I'm getting kind of hardened to it. But I never did hear them go on like that before. You'd think all her relations were being murdered, wouldn't you?"

Jean was busy getting into her riding clothes and did -not say what she thought; but you may be sure that it was antipathetic to the grief of Annie-Many-Ponies, and that Jean's attitude was caused by a complete lack of understanding. Which, if you will stop to think, is true of half the unsympathetic attitudes in the world. Because they did not understand, the two dressed hastily and tucked their purses safely inside their shirtwaists and saddled and rode away to town. And the last they heard as they put the ranch behind them was the wailing chant of Annie-Many-Ponies and the prodigious, long-drawn howling of the little black dog.

Annie-Many-Ponies, hearing the beat of hoofs ceased her chanting and looked out in time to see the girls just disappearing over the low brow of the hill. She stood for a moment and stared after them with frowning brows. Rosemary she did not like and never would like, after their hidden feud of months over such small matters as the cat and the dog, and unswept floors, and the like. A mountain of unwashed dishes stood between these two, as it were, and forbade

anything like friendship.

But the parting that was at hand had brushed aside her jealousy of Jean as leading woman. intuitively she knew that with any encouragement Jean would have been her friend. Oddly, she remembered now that Jean had been the first to ask for her when she came to the ranch. So, although Jean would never know, Annie-Many-Ponies raised her hand and gave the peace-and-farewell sign of the plains Indians.

The way was open now, and she must go. She had sworn that she would meet Ramon --but oh, the heart of her was heavier than the bundle which she bound with her bright red sash and lifted to her shoulders with the sash drawn across her chest and shoulders. So had the women of her tribe borne burdens since the land was young; but none had ever borne a heavier load than did Annie-Many-Ponies when she went soft footed across the open space to the dry wash and down that to another, and so on and on until she crossed the low ridge and came down to the deserted old rancho with its crumbling adobe cabins and the well where she had waited so often for Ramon.

She was tired when she reached the well, for her back was not used to burden-bearing as had been her mother's, and her steps had lagged because of the heaviness that was in her chest. It seemed to her that some bad spirit was driving her forth an exile. She could not understand. last night she had been glad at the thought of going, and if the thought of leaving Wagalexá Conka so treacherously had hurt like a knife-thrust, still, she had sworn willingly enough that she would go.

The horse was there, saddled and tied in a tumble-down shed just as Ramon had promised that it would be. Annie-Many-Ponies did not mount and ride on immediately, however. It was still early in the forenoon, and she was not so eager in reality as she had been in anticipation. She sat down beside the well and stared somberly away to the mountains, and wondered why she was so sad when she should be happy. She twisted the ring with the big red stone round and round her finger, but she got no pleasure from the crimson glow of it. The stone looked to her now like a great, frozen drop of blood. She wondered grimly whose blood it was, and stared at it strangely before her eyes went again worshipfully to the mountains which she loved and which she must leave and perhaps never see again as they looked from there, and from the ranch.

She must ride and ride until she was around on the other side of that last one that had the funny, pointed cone top like a big stone tepee. On the other side was Ramon, and the priest, and the strange new life of which she was beginning to feel afraid. There would be no more riding up to camera, laughing or sighing or frowning as Wagalexá Conka commanded her to do. There would be no more shy greetings of the slim young woman in riding skirt--the friendship scenes and the black-browed anger, while Pete Lowry turned the camera and Luck stood beside him telling her just what she must do, and smiling at her when she did it well.

There would be Ramon, and the priest and the wide ring of shiny gold -what more? The mountains, all pink and violet and smiling green and soft gray -the mountains hid the new life from her. And she must ride around that last, sharp-pointed one, and come into the new life that was on the other side--and

what if it should be bitter? What if Ramon's love did not live beyond the wide ring of shiny gold? She had seen it so, with other men and other maids.

No matter. She had sworn the oath that she would go. But first, there at the old well where Ramon had taught her the Spanish love words, there where she had listened shyly and happily to his voice that was so soft and so steeped in love, Annie-Many-Ponies stood up with her face to the mountains and sorrow in her eyes, and chanted again the wailing, Omaha mourning-song. And just behind her the little black dog, that had followed close to her heels all the way, sat upon his haunches and pointed his nose to the sky and howled.

For a long time she wailed. Then to the mountains that she loved she made the sign of peace-and-farewell, and turned herself stoically to the keeping of her oath. Her bundle that was so big and heavy she placed in the saddle and fastened with the saddle-string and with the red sash that had bound it across her chest and shoulders. Then, as her great grandmother had plodded across the bleak plains of the Dakotas at her master's behest, Annie-Many-Ponies took the bridle reins and led the horse out of the ruin, and started upon her plodding, patient journey to what lay beyond the mountains. Behind her the black horse walked with drooping head, half asleep in the warm sunlight. At the heels of the horse followed the little black dog.

CHAPTER IX. RIDERS IN THE BACKGROUND

Luck, as explained elsewhere, was sweating and swearing at the heat in Bear Canon. The sun had crept around so that it shone full into a certain boulder-strewn defile, and up this sunbaked gash old Applehead was toiling, leading the scrawniest burro which Luck had been able to find in the country. The burro was packed with a prospector's outfit startlingly real in its pathetic meagerness. Old Applehead was picking his way among rocks so hot that he could hardly bear to lay his bare hand upon them, tough as that hand was with years of exposure to heat and cold alike. Beads of perspiration were standing on his face, which was a deep, apoplectic crimson, and little trickles of sweat were dropping off his lower jaw.

He was muttering as he climbed, but the camera fortunately failed to record the language that he used. Now and then he turned and yanked savagely at the lead rope; whereupon the burro would sit down upon its haunches and allow Applehead to stretch its neck as far as bone and tough hide and tougher sinew would permit. Someone among the group roosting in the shade across the defile and well out of camera range would laugh, and Luck, standing on a ledge just behind and above the camera, would shout directions or criticism of the "business."

"Come on back, Applehead," Luck yelled when the "prospectorp" had turned a corner of rock and disappeared from sight of the camera. "We'll do that scene over once more before the sun gets too far around."

"Do it over, will ye?" Applehead snarled as he came toiling obediently back down the gulch. "Well, now, I ain't so danged shore about that there doin' over--'nless yuh want to wait and do it after sundown. Ain't nobody but a

danged fool It would go trailin' up that there gulch this kinda' day. Them rocks up there is hot enough to brile a lizard--now, I'm tellin' ye!"

Luck covered a smile with his moist palm. He could not afford to be merciful at the expense of good "picture-stuff," however, so he called down grimly:

"Now you're just about fagged enough for that close-up I want of you, Applehead. You went up that gulch a shade too brisk for a fellow that's all in from traveling, and starved into the bargain. Come back down here by this sand bank, and start up towards camera. Back up a little, Pete, so you can 'pam' his approach. I want to get him pulling his burro up past that bank--sabe? And the close-up of his face with all those sweat-streaks will prove how far he's come--and then I want the detail of that burro and his pack which you'll get as they go by. You see what I mean. Let's see. Will it swing you too far into the sun, Pete, if you pick him up down there in that dry channel?"

"Not if you let me make it right away," Pete replied after a squint or two through the viewfinder. "Sun's getting pretty far over--"

"Ought to leave a feller time to git his wind," Applehead complained, looking up at Luck with eyes bloodshot from the heat. "I calc'late mebbly you think it's FUN to drag that there burro up over them rocks?"

"Sure, it isn't fun. We didn't come out here for fun. Go down and wait behind that bank, and come out into the channel when I give the word. I want you coming up all-in, just as you look right now. Sorry, but I can't let you wait to cool off, Applehead."

"Well now," Applehead began with shortwinded sarcasm, "I'm s'posed to be outa grub. Why didn't yuh up In' starve me fer a week or two, so'st I'd be gaunted up realistic? Why didn't yuh break a laig fer me, sos't I kin show some five-cent bunch in a pitcher-show how bad I'm off? Danged if I ain't jest about gettin' my hide full uh this here danged fool REELISM you're hollerin' fur all the time. 'F you send me down there to come haulin' that there burro back up here so's the camery kin watch me sweat 'n' puff my danged daylights out--before I git a drink uh water, I'll murder ye in cold blood, now I'm tellin' ye!"

"You go on down there and shut up!" Luck yelled inexorably. "You can drink a barrel when I'm through with this scene--and not before. Get that? My Lord! If you can't lead a burro a hundred yards without setting down and fanning yourself to sleep, you must be losing your grip for fair. I'll stake you to a rocking-chair and let you do old grandpa parts, if you aren't able to--"

"Dang you, Luck, if you wasn't such a little runt I'd come up there and jest about lick the pants off you! Talk that way to ME, will ye? I'll have ye know I kin lead burros with you or any other dang man, heat er no heat Ef yuh ain't got no more heart'n to AST it of me, I'll haul this here burro up 'n' down this dang gulch till there ain't nothin' left of 'im but the lead-rope, and the rocks is all wore down to cobble-stone! Ole grandpa parts, hey? You'll swaller them words when I git to ye, young feller--and you'll swaller 'em mighty dang quick, now I'm tellin' ye!"

He went off down the gulch to the sand bank. The Happy Family, sprawled at ease in the shade, took cigarettes from their lips that they might chortle their amusement at the two. Like father and son were Applehead and Luck, but their bickerings certainly would never lead one to suspect their affection.

"Get that darned burro outa sight, will you? Luck bawled impatiently when Applehead paused to send a murderous glance back toward camera. "What's the matter--yuh PARALYZED down there? Haul him in behind that bank! The moon'll be up before you get turned around, at that rate!"

"You shet yore haid!" Applehead retorted at the full capacity of his lungs and with an absolute disregard for Luck's position as director of the company. "Who's leadin' this here burro--you er me? Fer two cents I'd come back and knock the tar outa you, Luck! Stand up there on a rock and flop your wings and crow like a danged banty rooster--'n' I was leadin' burros 'fore you was born! I'd like to know who yuh think you BE?"

Pete Lowry, standing feet-apart and imperturbably focussing the camera while the two yelled insults at each other, looked up at Luck.

"Riders in the background," he announced laconically, and returned to his squinting and fussing. "Maybe you can make 'em hear with the megaphone," he hinted, looking again at Luck. "They're riding straight up the canon, in the middle distance. They'll register in the scene, if you can't turn 'em."

"Applehead!" Luck called through the megaphone to his irritated prospector. "Get those riders outa the canon--they're in the scene!"

Applehead promptly appeared, glaring up at luck. "Well, now, if I've got to haul this here dang jackass up this dang gulch, I cal'clate that'll be about job enough for one man," he yelled. "How yuh expect me t' go two ways 't once? Hey? Yuh figured that out yit?" He turned then for a look at the interrupting strangers, and immediately they saw his manner change. He straightened up, and his right hand crept back significantly toward his hip. Applehead, I may here explain, was an ex-sheriff, and what range men call a "go-getter." He had notches on the ivory handle of his gun--three of them. In fair fights and in upholding the law he had killed, and he would kill again if the need ever arose, as those who knew him never doubted.

Luck, seeing that backward movement of the hand, unconsciously hitched his own gun into position on his hip and came down off his rock ledge with one leap. Just as instinctively the Happy Family scrambled out of the shade and followed luck down the gulch to where Applehead stood facing down the canon, watchfulness in every tense line of his lank figure. Tommy Johnson, who never seemed to be greatly interested in anything save his work, got up from where he lay close beside the camera tripod and went over to the other side of the gulch where he could see plainer.

Like a hunter poising his shotgun and making ready when his trained bird-dog points, Luck walked guardedly down the gulch to where Applehead stood watching the horsemen who had for the moment passed out of sight of those above.

"Now, what's that danged shurf want, prowlin' up HERE with a couple uh

depittys?" Applehead grumbled when he heard Luck's footsteps crunching behind him. "Uh course," he added grimly, "he MIGHT be viewin' the scenery--but it's dang pore weather fur pleasure-ridin', now I'm tellin' ye! Them a comin' up here don't look good to ME, Luck--'n' if they ain't--"

"How do you know it's the sheriff?" Luck for no reason whatever felt a sudden heaviness of spirit.

"Hey? Think my eyes is failin' me?" Applehead gave him a sidelong glance of hasty indignation. "I'd know ole Hank Miller a mile off with m' eyes shet."

By then the three riders rode out into plain view. Perhaps the sight of Luck and Applehead standing there awaiting their arrival, with the whole Happy Family and Big Aleck Douglas and Lite Avery moving down in a close-bunched, expectant group behind the two, was construed as hostility rather than curiosity. At any rate the sheriff and his deputies shifted meaningly in their saddles and came up sour-faced and grim, and with their guns out and pointing at the group.

"Don't go making any foolish play, boys," the sheriff warned. "We don't want trouble--we aren't looking for any. But we ain't taking any chances."

"Well now, you're takin' a dang long chance, Hank Miller, when yuh come ridin' up on us fellers like yuh was cornerin' a bunch uh outlaws," Applehead exploded. But Luck pushed him aside and stepped to the front.

"Nobody's making any foolish play but you," he answered the sheriff calmly. "You may not know it, but you're blocking my scene and the light's going. If you've got any business with me or my company, get it over and then get out so we aim make this scene. What d'yuh want?"

"You," snapped the sheriff. "You and your bunch."

"Me?" Luck took a step forward. "What for?"

"For pulling off that robbery at the bank today." The sheriff could be pretty blunt, and he shot the charge straight, without any quibbling.

Luck looked a little blank; and old Applehead, shaking with a very real anger now, shoved Luck away and stepped up where he could shake his fist under the sheriff's nose.

"We don't know, and we don't give a cuss, what you're aimin' at," he thundered. "We been out here workin' in this brilin' sun sense nine o'clock this mornin'. Luck ain't robbed no bank, ner he ain't the kind that DOES rob banks, and I'm here to see you swaller them words 'fore I haul ye off'n that horse and plumb wear ye out! Yuh wanta think twicet 'fore ye come ridin' up where I kin hear yuh call Luck Lindsay a thief, now I'm tellin' ye! If a bank was robbed, ye better be gittin' out after them that done it, and git outa the way uh that camery sos't we can git t' work! Git!"

The sheriff did not "git" exactly, but he did look considerably embarrassed. His eyes went to Luck apologetically.

"Cashier come to and said you'd called him up on the phone about eleven, claimin' you wanted to make a movin' pitcher of the bank being robbed," he explained--though he was careful not to lower his gun. "He swore it was your men that done the work and took the gold you told him to pile out on the--"

"_I_ told him?" Luck's voice had the sharpened quality that caused laggard actors to jump. "Be a little more exact in the words you use."

"Well-I--somebody on the phone 't he THOUGHT was you," the sheriff amended obediently. "Your men--and they sure WAS your men, because three or four fellers besides the cashier seen 'em goin' in and comin' out--they gagged the cashier and took his keys away from him and cleaned the safe, besides taking what gold he'd piled on the counter for y--for 'em."

"So," he finished vigorously, "I an' my men hit the trail fer the ranch and was told by the women that you was out here. And here we are, and you might just as well come along peaceable as to make a fuss--"

"That thar is shore enough outa YOU, Hank Miller!" Applehead exploded again. "I calc'late you kin count ME in, when you go mixin' up with Luck, here. I'm one of his men--and if he was to pull off a bank robbery I calc'late I'd be in on that there performance too, I'm tellin' you! Luck don't go no whars ner do nothin' that I AIN'T in on."

"I've had some considerable experience as shurf myself, if you'll take the trouble to recollect; and I calc'late my word'll go about as fur as the next. When I tell ye thar ain't goin' to be no arrest made in Bear Canon, and that you ain't goin' to take luck in fer no bank robbery, you kin be dang shore I mean every word uh that thar!" He moved a step or two nearer the sheriff, and the sheriff backed his horse away from him.

"Ef you kin cut out this here accusin' Luck, and talk like a white man," Applehead continued heatedly, "we'd like to hear the straight uh this here robbery. I would, 'n' I know Luck would, seein' they've gone t' work and mixed him into it. His bunch is all here, as you kin see fer yourself. Now we're listenin' 's long's you talk polite--'n' you kin tell us what men them was that was seen goin' in and comin' out--and all about the hul] dang business."

The sheriff had not ridden to Bear Canon expecting to be bullied into civil speech and lengthy explanations; but he knew Applehead Furrman, and he had sufficient intelligence to read correctly the character of the group of men that stood behind Applehead. Honest men or thieves, they were to, be reckoned with if any attempt were made to place Luck under arrest; any fool could see that--and Hank Miller was not a fool.

He proceeded therefore to explain his errand and the robbery as the cashier had described it to the clerks who returned after lunch to finish their Saturday's work at the bank.

"Fifteen thousand they claim is what the fellers got. And one of your men that runs the camera was keeping up a bluff of taking a pitcher of it all the time--that's why they got away with it. Nobody suspicioned it was anything more'n

moving-pitcher acting till they found the cashier and brought him toy along about one o'clock. It was that Chavez feller that you had working for yuh, and Luis Rojas that done it--them and a couple fellers stalling outside with the camera."

"I wonder," hazarded Pete Lowry, who had come down and joined the group, "if that wasn't Bill Holmes with the camera? He was a lot more friendly with Ramon than he tried to let on."

"The point is," Luck broke in, "that they took advantage of my holdup scene to pull off the robbery. I can see how the cashier would fall for a retake like that, especially since he don't know much about picture-making. Gather up the props, boys, and let's go home. I'm going to get the rights of this thing."

"You've got it now," the sheriff informed him huffily. "Think I been loading you up with hot air? I was sent out to round you up--"

"Forget all that!" snapped Luck. "I don't know as I enjoy having you fellows jump at the notion I'm a bank-robber--or that if I had robbed a bank I would have come right back here and gone to work. What kind of a simp do you think I am, for gosh sake? Can you see where anyone but a lunatic would go like that in broad daylight and pull off a robbery as raw as that one must have been, and not even make an attempt at a gateway? I'll gamble Applehead, here, wouldn't have fallen for a play as coarse as that was if he was sheriff yet. He'd have seen right away that the camera part was just the coarsest kind of a blind."

"My Lord! Think of grown men--officers of the law at that--being simple-minded enough to come fogging out here to me, instead of getting on the trail of the men that were seen on the spot! You say they came in a machine to the bank and you never so much as tried to trace it, or to get the license number even, I'll bet a month's salary you didn't! It was a moving-picture stall, and so you come blundering out here to the only picture company in the country, thinking, by gravy, that it was all straight goods--oh, can you beat that for a boob?" He shook back his heavy mane of gray hair and turned to his boys disgustedly.

"Pete and Tommy, you can drive the wagon back all right, can't you? We'll go on ahead and see what there is at the bottom of this yarn."

CHAPTER X. DEPUTIES ALL

At the ranch, whither they rode in haste, Luck meant to leave his boys and go on with the sheriff to town. But the Happy Family flatly refused to be left behind. Even old Aleck Douglas--whom years and trouble had enfeebled until his very presence here with Jean and Lite was a health-seeking mission in the wonderful air of New Mexico--even old Aleck Douglas stamped his foot at Jean and declared that he was going, along to see that "the boy" got a square deal. There wouldn't be any railroading Luck to the pew for something he didn't do, he asserted with a tragic meaning that wrung the heart of Jean. It took Lite's arguments and Luck's optimism and, finally, the assurance of the sheriff that

Luck was not under arrest and was in no danger of it, to keep the old man at the ranch. Also, they promised to return with all speed and not to keep supper waiting, before the two women were satisfied to let them go.

"Oh, Luck Lindsay," Rosemary bethought her to announce just as they were leaving, "you better keep an eye out for Annie, while you're in town. She's gone--and the dog and all her clothes and everything. Maybe she took the train back to the reservation. I just wanted you to know, so if you feel you ought to bother--"

"Annie gone?" Even in his preoccupation the mews came with a stab. "When did she go?"

"We don't know. She set up an awful yowling when you boys went to work. And the dog commenced howling, till it was simply awful. So we rode in to town after the mail, and when we came back she was gone, bag and baggage. We didn't see anything of her on the trail, but she could dodge us if she wanted to-- she's Injun enough for that."

So Luck carried a double load of anxiety with him to town, and the first thing he did when he reached it was to seek, not the beaten cashier who had accused him, but the ticket agent at the depot, and the baggage men--anyone who would be apt to remember Annie-Many-Ponies if she took a train out of town.

You might think that, with so many Indians coming and going at the depot, selling their wares and making picturesque setting for the curios which are purveyed there, that Luck stood a very slight chance of gaining any information whatever. But a Sioux squaw in Albuquerque would be as noticeable as a Hindoo. Pueblos, Navajos--they may come and go unnoticed because of their numbers. But an Indian of another tribe and style of dress would be conspicuous enough to be remembered. So, when no one remembered seeing Annie-Many-Ponies, Luck dismissed the conjecture that she had taken the train, and turned his attention to picking up the trail of the bank- robbers.

Here the Happy Family, with Applehead and Lite Avery, had managed to accomplish a good deal in a very short time. The Native Son, for instance, had ridden straight out from the bank into the Mexican quarter, as soon as he learned that the red automobile had gone up Silver Street and turned south on Fourth. By the time Luck reached the bank Miguel came loping back with the news that the red machine had crossed the lower bridge and had turned up toward Atrisco, that little Mexican hamlet which lies between the river and the bluffs where the white sand of the desert spills over into the nearest corrals and little pastures.

The others had learned definitely that Bill Holmes had manipulated the fake camera while the bank was being robbed, and that the man with him, who had also driven the machine, was a certain chauffeur of colorless personality and an unsavory reputation among other drivers; and that the number of the automobile was a matter of conjecture, since three different men who were positive they remembered it gave three different numbers.

In company with the sheriff they called upon the cashier, who was in bed with his head bandaged and his nerves very much unstrung. He was much calmer,

however, than when he had hysterically accused Luck of betraying him into putting the money out to be stolen. He admitted now that he was not at all sure of the voice which talked with him over the phone; indeed, now when he heard luck speak, he felt extremely doubtful of the similarity of that other voice. He protested against being blamed for being too confiding. He had never dreamed, he said, that anyone could be so bold as to plan a thing like that. It all sounded straight, about the spoiled negative and so forth. He was very sorry that he had caused Luck Lindsay any inconvenience or annoyance, and he begged Luck's pardon several times in the course of his explanation of the details.

They left him still protesting and apologizing and explaining and touching his bandaged head with self-pitying tenderness. In the street Luck turned to the sheriff as though his mind was made up to something which argument could not alter in the slightest degree.

"I realize that in a way I'm partly responsible for this," he said crisply.

"The scenes I took the other day made this play possible for Ramon and his bunch. What you'd better do right now is to swear Applehead and me in as deputies--and any of the boys that want to come along and help round up that bunch. We'll do it, if it's to be done at all. I feel I kind of owe it to that poor simp in there to get the money back--sabe? And I owe it to myself to bring in Ramon and Bill Holmes, and whoever else is with 'em on this; young Rojas we know is for one."

"Where do you aim to look for 'em, if you don't mind telling?" Hank Miller was staring doubtfully down at Luck.

"Where? Miguel here says they went toward Atrisco. That means they're hitting for the Navajo reservation. There's three hundred miles of country straight west, and not so much as a telegraph pole! Mighty few service stations for the machine, too, when you think of it--and rough country to travel over. If they try to go by automobile, we'll overhaul them, most likely, before they get far. Also, we can trace 'em easy enough."

The sheriff pulled at his stubby mustache and looked the bunch over. "You know that country?" he asked, still doubtfully. "Them Navvies are plumb snaky, lemme tell yuh. Ain't like the Pueblos--you're taking a risk when yuh ride into the Navvy country. They'll get yuh if they get a chancet; run off your horses, head yuh away from water--they're plumb MEAN!"

"Well, now, I calc'late I know them Navvies putty tol'ble well," Applehead cut in. "I've fit 'em comin' and goin'. Why, my shucks! Ef I notched my gun for the Navvies I've got off an' on in the course uh my travels, she'd shore look like a saw-blade, now I'm tellin' yuh!"

"Yes, an' yuh got a couple too many fer to go monkeyin' around on their groun' agin," the sheriff informed him bluntly. "They ain't forgot the trip you made over there after Jose Martinez. Best fer you to keep off'n that reservation, Applehead--and I'm speakin' as a friend."

"As a friend you kin shet up," Applehead retorted pettishly. "Ef Luck hits fer the Navvy country after them skunks, I calc'late ole Applehead'll be somers

close handy by--"

"Hurry up and swear us in," Luck interrupted. "We've got to get to the ranch and back with an outfit, yet tonight, so we can hit the trail as soon as possible. No use for you to take the oath, Andy--what you better do is to stay at the ranch with the women folks."

"Aleck will be there, and Pete and Tommy and the cook," Andy rebelled instantly. His hand went up to take the oath with the others.

There on the corner of the street where the shadows lay under a gently whispering box-elder tree, Hank Miller faced the group that stood with right hands uplifted and swore them as he had sworn--with the oath that made deputy sheriffs of them all. He told them that while he did not believe the thieves had gone to the reservation, and would look for them elsewhere, the idea was worth acting upon--seeing they wanted to do it anyway; and that the sheriff's office stood ready to assist them in any way possible. He wished them luck and hurried away, evidently much relieved to get away and out of an uncomfortable position.

In the next two hours Luck managed to accomplish a good deal, which was one of the reasons why he was manager and director of the Flying U Feature Films. Just for example, he went to a friend who was also something of a detective, and put him on the job of find Annie-Many-Ponies--a bigger task than it looked to Luck, as we have occasion to know. He sent some of the boys back to the ranch in a machine, and told them just what to bring back with them in the way of rifles, bedding rolls, extra horses and so on. The horses they had ridden into town he had housed in a livery stable. He took the Native Son and a Mexican driver and went over to Atrisco, routed perfectly polite and terribly sleepy individuals out of their beds and learned beyond all question that a red automobile with several men in it had passed through the dusty lanes and had labored up the hill to the desert mesa beyond and that no one had seen it return.

He sent a hundred-and-fifty-word message to Dewitt of the Great Western Company in Los Angeles, explaining with perfect frankness the situation and his determination to get out after the robbers, and made it plain also that he would not expect salary for the time he spent in the chase. He ended by saying tersely, "My reputation and standing of company here at stake," and signed his name in a hasty scrawl that made the operator scratch his ear reflectively with his pencil when he had counted the words down to the signature. After that, Luck gave every ounce of his energy and every bit of his brain to the outfitting of the expedition.

So well did he accomplish the task that by one O'clock that night a low-voiced company of men rode away from a livery stable in the heart of the town, leading four pack-horses and heading as straight as might be for the bridge. They met no one; they saw scarcely a light in any of the windows that they passed. A chill wind crept up the river so that they buttoned their coats when the hoofbeats of the horses sounded hollow on the bridge. Out through the lane that leads to Atrisco, which slept in the stolid blackness of low adobe houses with flat roofs and tiny windows, they rode at a trot. Dogs barked, ran but to the road and barked again, ran back to the adobe huts and kept on barking. In

one field some loose horses, seeing so many of their kind in the lane, galloped up to the fence and stood there snorting. These were still in their colthood, however, and the saddle-horses merely flicked ears in their direction and gave them no more heed.

"I'm glad you're sure of the country, up here on top," Luck said to Applehead when they had climbed, by the twisting, sandy trail, to the sand dunes that lay on the edge of the mesa and stretched vaguely away under the stars. To the rim-rook line that separated this first mesa from the higher one beyond, Luck himself knew the sand-hills well. But beyond the broken line of hills off to the northwest he had never gone--and there lay the territory that belongs to the Navajos, who are a tricky tribe and do not love the white people who buy their rugs and blankets and, so claim the Navajos, steal their cattle and their horses as well.

At the rim of lava rock they made a dry camp and lay down in what comfort they could achieve, to doze and wait for daylight so that they could pick up the trail of the red automobile.

CHAPTER XI. ALL THIS WAR-TALK ABOUT INJUNS

Over his second cup of coffee the pale eyes of Big Medicine goggled thoughtfully at the forbidding wall of lava rock that stretched before them as far as he could see to left or right. There were places here and there where he believed that a man could climb to the top with the aid of his hands as well as his feet, but for the horses he was extremely skeptical; and as for a certain big red automobile. . . . His eyes swung from the brown rampart and rested grievously upon the impassive face of Luck, who was just then reaching forward to spear another slice of bacon from the frying pan.

"Kinda looks to me, by cripes, as if we'd come to the end uh the trail, he observed in his usual full-lunged bellow, as though he had all his life been accustomed to pitching his voice above some unending clamor. "Yuh got any idee of how an autyMOBILE clumb that there rim-rock?"

Old Applehead, squatting on his heels across the little camp-fire, leaned and picked a coal out of the ashes for his pipe and afterwards cocked his eyes toward Big Medicine.

"What yuh calc'late yuh tryin' to do?" he inquired pettishly. "Start up an argyment uh some kind? Cause if ye air, lemme tell yuh I got the yer-ache from listenin' to you las' night."

Big Medicine looked at him as though he was going to spring upon him in deadly combat--but that was only a peculiar facial trick of his. What he did do was to pour that last swallow of hot, black coffee down his throat and then laugh his big haw-haw-haw that could be heard half a mile off.

"Y' oughta kep Applehead to home with the wimmin folks, Luck," he bawled unabashed. "Night air's bad fer 'im, and the trail ain't goin' to be smooth goin',--not if we gotta ride our hawses straight up, by cripes!"

"We haven't got to." Luck balanced his slice of bacon upon the unscorched side of a bannock and glanced indifferently at the rim of rock that was worrying the other. "I swung down here to make camp off the trail But it's only a half mile or so over this rise that looks level to you, to where the lava ledge peters out so we can ride over it easier than we rode up off the river-flat in that loose sand. That ease your mind any?"

"Helps some," Big Medicine admitted, his eyes going speculatively to the rise that looked perfectly level. "I'm willin' to take your word fer it, boss. But what's gittin' to worry me, by cripes, is all this here war-talk about Injuns. Honest to grandma, I feel like as if I'd been readin'--"

"Aw, it's jest a josh, Bud!" Happy Jack asserted boredly. "I betche there ain't been a Injun on the fight here sence hell was a tradin' post!"

"You think there hasn't?" Luck looked up quickly to ask. But old Applehead rose up and shook an indignant finger at Happy Jack.

"There ain't, hey? Well, I calc'late that fer a josh, them thar Navvies has got a right keen sense uh humor, and I've knowed men to laff theirselves to death on their danged resavation--now I'm tellin' yuh I It was all a josh mebby, when they riz up a year or two back 'cause one uh their tribe was goin' t' be arrested er some darn thing! Ole General Scott, he didn't call it no joke when he, went in thar to settle 'em down, did he? I calc'late, mebby it was jest fer a josh them troops waited on the aidge, ready to go in if he didn't git back a certain time! 'N' that wasn't so fur back, shorely, -only two years. Why dang your fool heart, I've laid out there in them hills myself and fit off the Navvies -'n' _I_ didn't see nothin' much to laugh at, now I'm tellin' yuh! Time I went there after Jose Martinez--"

"Better get under way, boys," Luck interrupted, having heard many times the details of that fight and capture. "We'll throw out a circle and pick up the trail of that machine, or whatever they made their getaway in. My idea is that they must have stached some horses out here somewhere. I don't believe they'd take the risk of trying to get away in a machine; that would hold them to the main trails, mostly. I know it wouldn't be my way of getting outa reach. I'd want horses so I could get into rough country, and I've doped it out that Ramon is too trail-wise to bank very high on an automobile once he got out away from town. Applehead, you and Lite and Pink and Weary form one party if it comes to where we want to divide forces. Pack a complete camp outfit on the sorrel and the black--you notice that's the way I had 'em packed first. Keep their packs just as we started out, then you'll be ready to strike out by yourselves whenever it seems best. Get me?"

"We get you, boss," Weary sang out cheerfully, and went to work gathering up the breakfast things and putting them into two little piles for the packs. Pink led up the black and the sorrel, and helped to pack them with bedding and supplies for four, as Luck had ordered, while Lite and Applehead saddled their horses and then came up to help throw the diamond hitches on the packs.

A couple of rods nearer the rock wall Happy Jack was grumbling, across the canvas pack of a little bay, at Big Medicine, who was warning him against

leaving his hair so long as a direct temptation to scalp-lifting. Luck had already mounted and ridden out a little way, where he could view the country behind them with his field glasses, to make sure that in the darkness they had not passed by anything that deserved a closer inspection. He came back at a lope and motioned to Andy and the Native Son.

"That red automobile is standing back about half a mile," he announced hurriedly. "Empty and deserted, looks like. We'll go back and take a look at it. The rest of you can finish packing and wait here till we come back. No use making extra travel for your horses. They'll get all they need, the chances are."

The red automobile was empty of everything but the upholstery and a jack in the toolbox. The state license number was gone, and the serial number on the engine had been hammered into illegibility. What tracks there were had been blown nearly full of the white sand of that particular locality. There was nothing to be learned there, except the very patent fact that the machine had been abandoned for some reason. Luck took a look at the engine and saw nothing wrong with it. There was oil and there was "gas"--a whole tank full. Andy and Miguel, riding an ever-widening circle around the machine while Luck was looking for evidence of a breakdown, ran across a lot of hoofprints that seemed to head straight away past the rim-rock and on to the hills.

They picked up the trail of the hoofprints and followed it. When they returned to the others they found the boys all mounted and waiting impatiently like hounds on the leash eager to get away on the chase. Six horses there were, and even old Applehead, who was in a bad humor that morning and seemed to hate agreeing with anyone, admitted that probably the four who had committed the robbery and left town in the machine had been met out here by a man who brought horses for them and one extra pack horse. This explained the number in the most plausible manner, and satisfied everyone that they were on the right trail.

Riding together -since they were on a plain trail and there was nothing to be gained by separating--they climbed to the higher mesa, crossed the ridge of the three barren hills that none of them but Applehead had ever passed, and went on and on and on as the hoofprints led them, straight toward the reservation.

They discussed the robbery from every angle--they could think of, and once or twice someone hazarded a guess at Annie-Many-Ponies' reason for leaving and her probable destination. They wondered how old Dave Wiswell, the dried little cattleman of The Phantom Herd, was making out in Denver, where he had gone to consult a specialist about some kidney trouble that had interfered with his riding all spring. Weary suggested that maybe Annie-Many-Ponies had taken a notion to go and visit old Dave, since the two were old friends.

It was here that Applehead unwittingly put into words the vague suspicion which Luck had been trying to stifle and had not yet faced as a definite idea.

"I calc'late we'll likely find that thar squaw putty tol'ble close to whar we find Bill Holmes," Applehead remarked sourly. "Her goin' off same, day they stuck up that bank don't look to me like no happenstance--now I'm tellin' yuh!

'N' if I was shurf, and was ast to locate that squaw, I'd keep right on the trail uh Bill Holmes, jest as we're doin' now."

"That isn't like Annie," Luck said sharply to, still the conviction in his own mind. "Whatever faults she may have, she's been loyal to me, and honest. Look how she stuck last winter, when she didn't have anything at stake, wasn't getting any salary, and yet worked like a dog to help make the picture a success. Look how she got up in the night when the blizzard struck, and fed our horses and cooked breakfast of her own accord, just so I could get out early and get my scenes. I've known her since she was a dirty-faced papoose, and I never knew her to lie or steal. She wasn't in on that robbery--I'll bank on that, and she wouldn't go off with a thief. It isn't like Annie."

"Well," said Big Medicine, thinking of his own past, "the best uh women goes wrong when some knot-headed man gits to lovemakin'. They'll do things fer the wrong kinda man, by cripes, that they wouldn't do fer no other human on earth. I've knowed a good woman to lie and steal--fer a man that wasn't fit, by cripes, to tip his hat to 'er in the street! Women," he added pessimistically, "is something yuh can't bank on, as safe as yuh can on a locoed horse!" He kicked his mount unnecessarily by way of easing the resentment which one woman had managed to instil against the sex in general.

"That's where you're darned right, Bud," Pink attested with a sudden bitterness which memory brought. "I wouldn't trust the best woman that ever lived outa my sight, when you come right down to cases."

"Aw, here!" Andy Green, thinking loyally of his Rosemary, swung his horse indignantly toward the two. "Cut that out, both of you! Just because you two got stung, is no reason why you've got to run down all the rest of the women. I happen to know one--"

"Aw, nobody was talking about Rosemary," Big Medicine apologized gruffly. "She's different; any fool knows that."

"Well, I've got a six-gun here that'll talk for another one," silent Lite Avery spoke up suddenly. "One that would tip the scales on the woman's side for goodness if the rest of the whole sex was bad."

"Oh, thunder!" Pink cried, somewhat redder than the climbing sun alone would warrant. "I'll take it back. I didn't mean THEM--you know darned well I didn't mean them--nor lots of other women I know. What I meant was--"

"What you meant was Annie," Luck broke in uncompromisingly. "And I'm not condemning her just because things look black. You don't know Indians the way I know them. There's some things an Indian will do, and then again there's some things they won't do. You boys don't know it--but yesterday morning when we left the ranch, Annie-Many-Ponies made me the peace-sign. And after that she went into her tent and began to sing the Omaha. It didn't mean anything to you--Old Dave is the only one that would have sabed, and he wasn't there. But it meant enough to me that I came pretty near riding back to have a pow-wow with Annie, even if we were late. I wish I had. I'd have less on my conscience right now."

"Fur's I kin see," Applehead dissented impatiently, "you ain't got no call to have nothin' on your conscience where that thar squaw is concerned. You treated her a hull lot whiter'n what she deserved--now I'm tellin' ye! 'N' her traipsin' around at nights 'n'--"

"I tell you, you don't know Indians!" Luck swung round in the saddle so that he could face Applehead. "You don't know the Sioux, anyway. She wouldn't have made me that peace-sign if she'd been double-crossing me, I tell you. And she wouldn't have sung the Omaha if she was going to throw in with a thief that was trying to lay me wide open to suspicion. I've been studying things over in my mind, and there's something in this affair I can't sabe. And until you've got some proof, the less you say about Annie-Many-Ponies the better I'll be pleased."

That, coming from Luck in just that tone and with just that look in his eyes, was tantamount to an ultimatum, and it was received as one. Old Applehead grunted and chewed upon a wisp of his sunburned mustache that looked like dried cornsilk after a frost. The Happy Family exchanged careful glances and rode meekly along in silence. There was not a man of them but believed that Applehead was nearer right than Luck, but they were not so foolish as to express that belief.

After a while Big Medicine began bellowing tunelessly that old ditty, once popular but now half forgotten:

"Nava, Nava, My Navaho-o I have a love for you that will grow-ow!"

Which stirred old Applehead to an irritated monologue upon the theme of certain persons whose ignorance is not blissful, but trouble-inviting. Applehead, it would seem from his speech upon the subject, would be a much surprised ex-sheriff--now a deputy--if they were not all captured and scalped, if not worse, the minute their feet touched the forbidden soil of these demons in human form, the Navajo Indians.

"If they were not too busy weaving blankets for Fred Harvey," Luck qualified with his soft Texan drawl and the smile that went with it. "You talk as if these boys were tourists."

"Yes," added Andy Green maliciously, "here comes a war-party now, boys. Duck behind a rock, Applehead, they're liable to charge yuh fer them blankets!"

The Happy Family laughed uproariously, to the evident bewilderment of the two Indians who, swathed in blankets and with their hair knotted and tied with a green ribbon and a yellow, drove leisurely toward the group in an old wagon that had a bright new seat and was drawn by a weazened span of mangy-looking bay ponies. In the back of the wagon sat a young squaw and two papooses, and beside them were stacked three or four of the gay, handwoven rugs for which the white people will pay many dollars.

"Buenas dias," said the driver of the wagon, who was an oldish Indian with a true picturepostal face. And: "Hello," said the other, who was young and wore a bright blue coat, such as young Mexicans affect.

"Hello, folks," cried the Happy Family genially, and lifted their hats to the good-looking young squaw in the wagon-bed, who tittered in bashful appreciation of the attention.

"Mama! They sure are wild and warlike," Weary commented drily as he turned to stare after the wagon.

"Us little deputies had better run home," Pink added with mock alarm.

"By cripes, I know now what went with Applehead's hair!" bawled Big Medicine. "Chances is, it's weaved into that red blanket the old buck is wearin'-- Haw-haw-haw!"

"Laff, dang ye, laff!" Applehead cried furiously. "But do your laffing where I can't hear ye, fer I'm tellin' ye right now I've had enough of yore dang foolishness. And the next feller that makes a crack is goin' to wisht he hadn't now I'm tellin' ye!"

This was not so much an ultimatum as a declaration of war--and the Happy Family suddenly found themselves all out of the notion of laughing at anything at all.

CHAPTER XII. THE WILD-GOOSE CHASE

Because they had no human means of knowing anything about the black automobile that had whirled across the mesa to the southeast and left its mysterious passengers in one of the arroyos that leads into the Sandias Mountains near Coyote Springs, nine cowpuncher deputy-sheriffs bored their way steadily through sun and wind and thirst, traveling due northwest, keeping always on the trail of the six horses that traveled steadily before them. Always a day's march behind, always watching hopefully for some sign of delay--for an encouraging freshness in the tracks that would show a lessening distance between the two parties, Luck and his Happy Family rode -from dawn till dusk, from another dawn to another dusk. Their horses, full of little exuberant outbursts of horse-foolishness when they had left town, settled clown to a dogged, plodding half walk, half trot which is variously described upon the range; Luck, for instance, calling it poco-poco; while the Happy Family termed it running-walk, trail-trot, fox-trot--whatever came easiest to their tongues at the time. Call it what they pleased, the horses came to a point where they took the gait mechanically whenever the country was decently level. They forgot to shy at strange objects, and they never danced away from a foot lifted to the stirrup when the sky was flaunting gorgeous bantiers to herald the coming of the sun. More than once they were thankful to have the dust washed from their nostrils and to let that pass for a drink. For water holes were few and far between when they struck that wide, barren land ridged here and there with hills of rock.

Twice the trail of the six horses was lost, because herds of cattle had passed between those who rode in baste before, and those who followed in haste a day's ride behind. They saw riders in the distance nearly every day, but only occasionally did any Indians come within speaking distance. These were mostly

headed toward in wagons and rickety old buggies, with the men riding dignifiedly on the spring seat and the squaws and papooses sitting flat in the bottom behind. These family parties became more and more inclined to turn and stare after the Happy Family, as if they were puzzling over the errand that would take nine men riding close-grouped across the desert, with four pack-horses to proclaim the journey a long one.

When the trail swung sharply away from the dim wagon road and into the northwest where the land lay parched and pitiless under the hot sun, the Happy Family hitched their gun-belts into place, saw to it that their canteens were brimming with the water that was so precious, and turned doggedly that way, following the lead of Applehead, who knew the country fairly well, and of Luck, who did not know the country, but who knew that he meant to overhaul Ramon Chavez and Bill Holmes, go where they would, and take them back to jail. If they could ride across this barren stretch, said Luck to Applehead, he and his bunch could certainly follow them.

"Well, this is kinda takin' chances," Applehead observed soberly, "unless Ramon, he knows whar's the water-holes. If he does hit water regular, I calc'late we kin purty nigh foller his lead. They's things I don't like about the way this here trail is leading out this way, now I'm tellin' yuh! Way we're goin', we'll be in the Seven Lakes country 'fore we know it. Looks to me like them greasers must stand in purty well with the Navvies--'n' if they do, it'll be dang hard pullin' to git 'em away 'n! outa here. 'N' if they don't stand in, they'd oughta bore more west than what they're doin'. Looks dang queer to me, now I'm tellin' ye!"

"Well, all I want is to overtake them. We'll do it, too. The little grain these horses get is showing its worth right now," Luck cheered him. "They're keeping up better than I was afraid they would. We've got that advantage--a Mexican don't as a rule grain his horses, and the chances are that Ramon thought more about the gold than he did about carrying horse-feed. We can hold on longer than he can, Applehead."

"We can't either," Applehead disputed, "because if Ramon takes a notion he'll steal fresh horses from the Injuns."

"I thought you said he stood in with the Injuns," Weary spoke up from the ambling group, behind. "You're kinda talkin' in circles, ain't you, Applehead?"

"Well, I calc'late yuh jest about got to talk in circles to git anywheres near Ramon," Applehead retorted, looking back at the others. "They's so, dang many things he MIGHT be aimin' to do, that I ain't been right easy in my mind the last day or two, and I'm tellin' ye so. 'S like a storm--I kin smell trouble two days off; that's mebbly why I'm still alive an' able to fork a boss. An' I'm tellin' you right now, I kin smell trouble stronger'n a polecat under the chicken-house!"

"Well, by cripes, let 'er come!" Big Medicine roared cheerfully, inspecting a battered plug of "chewin'" to see where was the most inviting corner in which to set his teeth. "Me'n' trouble has locked horns more'n once, 'n' I'd feel right lonesome if I thought our trails'd never cross agin. Why, down in

Coconino County--" He went off into a long recital of certain extremely bloody chapters in the history of that famed county as chronicled by one Bud Welch, otherwise known as Big Medicine--and not because of his modesty, you may be sure.

Noon of that day found them plodding across a high, barren mesa under a burning sun. Since red dawn they had been riding, and the horses showed their need of water. They lagged often into a heavy-footed walk and their ears drooped dispiritedly. Even Big Medicine found nothing cheerful to say. Luck went out of his way to gain the top of every little rise, and to scan the surrounding country through his field glasses. The last time he came sliding down to the others his face was not so heavy with anxiety and his voice when he spoke had a new briskness.

"There's a ranch of some kind straight ahead about two miles," he announced. "I could see a green patch, so there must be water around there somewhere. We'll make noon camp there, and maybe we can dig up a little information. Ramon must have stopped there for water, and we'll find out just how far we are behind."

The ranch, when they finally neared it, proved to be a huddle of low, octagon-shaped huts (called hogans) made of short cedar logs and plastered over with adobe, with a hole in the center of the lid-like roof to let the smoke out and a little light in; and dogs, that ran out and barked and yelped and trailed into mourning rumbles and then barked again; and half-naked papooses that scurried like rabbits for shelter when they rode up; and two dingy, shapeless squaws that disappeared within a hogan and peered out at one side of the blanket door.

Luck started to dismount and make some attempt at a polite request for water, and for information as well, but Applehead objected and finally had his way.

If the squaws could speak English, he argued, they would lie unless they refused to talk at all. As to the water, if there was any around the place the bunch could find it and help themselves. "These yer Navvies ain't yore Buffalo- Bill Sioux)" he pointed out to Luck. "Yuh can't treat 'em the same. The best we kin look fer is to be left alone--an' I'm tellin' ye straight."

Luck gave the squalid huts a long stare and turned away toward the corral and a low shed that served as a stable. A rusty old mower and a toothless rake and a rickety buckboard stood baking in the sun, and a few stunted hens fluttered away from their approach. In the corral a mangy pony blinked in dejected slumber; and all the while, the three dogs followed them and barked and yapped and growled, until Pink turned in the saddle with the plain intention of stopping the clamor with a bullet or two.

"Ye better let 'em alone!" Applehead warned sharply, and Pink put up his gun unfired and took down his rope.

"The darned things are getting on my nerves!" he complained, and wheeled suddenly in pursuit of the meanest-looking dog of the three. "I can stand a decent dog barking at me, but so help me Josephine, I draw the line at Injun curs!"

The dog ran yelping toward the hogans with Pink hard at its heels swinging his loop menacingly. When the dog, with a last hysterical yelp, suddenly flattened its body and wriggled under a corner of the shed, Pink turned and rode after the others, who had passed the corral and were heading for the upper end of a small patch of green stuff that looked like a half-hearted attempt at a vegetable garden. As he passed the shed an Indian in dirty overalls and gingham shirt craned his neck around the doorway and watched him malevolently; but Pink, sighting the green patch and remembering their dire need of water, was kicking his horse into a trot and never once thought to cast an eye over his shoulder.

In that arid land, where was green vegetation you may be sure there was water also. And presently the nine were distributed along a rod or two of irrigating ditch, thankfully watching the swallows of water go sliding hurriedly down the outstretched gullets of their horses that leaned forward with half-bent, trembling knees, fetlock deep in the wet sand of the ditch-banks.

"Drink, you sons-uh-guns, drink!" Weary exclaimed jubilantly. "you've sure got it coming--and mama, how I do hate to see a good horse suffering for a feed or water, or shelter from a storm!"

They pulled them away before they were satisfied, and led them back to where green grass was growing. There they pulled the saddles off and let the poor brutes feed while they unpacked food for themselves.

"It'll pay in the long run," said Luck, "to give them an hour here. I'll pay the Injuns for what grass they eat. Ramon must have stopped here yesterday. I'm going up and see if I can't pry a little information loose from those squaws and papooses. Come on, Applehead--you can talk a little Navvy; you come and tell 'em what I want."

Applehead hesitated, and with a very good reason. He might, for all he knew, be trespassing upon the allotment of a friend or relative of some of the Indians he had been compelled to "get" in the course of his duties as sheriff. And at any rate they all knew him--or at least knew of him.

"Aw, gwan, Applehead," Happy Jack urged facetiously, sure that Applehead had tried to scare him with tales of Indians whose pastoral pursuits proclaimed aloud their purity of souls. "Gwan! You ain't afraid of a couple of squaws, are yuh? Go on and talk to the ladies. Mebby yuh might win a wife if yuh just had a little nerve!"

Applehead turned and glowered. But Luck was already walking slowly toward the hogans and looking back frequently, so Applehead contented himself by saying, "You wait till this yere trip's over, 'fore ye git so dang funny in yore remarks, young man!" and stalked after Luck, hitching his six-shooter forward as he went.

At the shed, the Indian who had peered after Pink stood in the doorway and stared unwinkingly as they came up. Applehead glanced at him sharply from under his sorrel eyebrows and grunted. He knew him by sight well enough, and he took it for granted that the recognition was mutual. But he gave no sign of

remembrance. Instead, he asked how much the Indian wanted for the grass the horses would eat in an hour.

The Indian looked at the two impassively and did not say anything at all; so Applehead flipped him a dollar.

"Now, what time did them fellows pass here yesterday?" Applehead asked, in the half Indian, half Mexican jargon which nearly all New Mexico Indians speak.

The Indian looked at the dollar and moved his head of bobbed hair vaguely from left to right.

"All right, dang ye, don't talk if ye don't feel like it," Applehead commented in wasted sarcasm, and looked at Luck for some hint of what was wanted next. Luck seemed uncertain, so Applehead turned toward the ditch, and the food his empty stomach craved.

"No use tryin' to make 'em talk if they ain't in the notion," he told Luck impatiently. "He's got his dollar, and we'll take what grass our hosses kin pack away in their bellies. That kinda winds up the transaction, fur's I kin see."

"I wonder if another dollar--"

But Applehead interrupted him. "Another dollar might git him warmed up so's he'd shake his danged head twicet instid uh once't," he asserted pessimistically, "but that's all you'd git outa him. That thar buck ain't TALKIN' today. Yuh better come an' eat 'n' rest yer laigs. If he talked, he'd lie. We're a heap better off jest doin' our own trailin' same as we been doin. That bunch come by here; the tracks show that. If they went on, the tracks'll show where they headed fur. 'N' my idee is that they'll take their time from now on. They don't know we're trailin' 'em up. I'll bet they never throwed back any scout t' watch the back trail, In' they're in Navvy country now--whar they're purty tol'ble safe if they stand in with the Injuns. 'N' I'm tellin' yuh right now, Luck, I wisht I could say as much fer us!" Applehead lifted his hat and rubbed his palm over his bald pate that was covered thickly with beads of perspiration, as if his head were a stone jar filled with cold water. "If we have to sep'rate, Luck, you take a fool's advice and keep yore dang eyes open. The boys, they think I been stringin' 'em along. Mebby you think so too, but I kin tell ye right now 't we gotta keep our dang eyes in our haids!"

"I'm taking your word for it, Applehead," Luck told him, lowering his voice a little because they were nearing the others. "Besides, I've heard a lot about these tricky boys with the Dutch-cut on their hair. I'm keeping it all in mind don't worry. But I sure am going to overhaul Ramon, if we have to follow him to salt water."

"Well, now, I ain't never turned back on a trail yit, fer want uh nerve to foller it," AppleHead stated offendedly. "When I was shurf--"

The enlivened jumble of voices, each proclaiming the owner's hopes or desires or disbelief to ears that were not listening, quite submerged Applehead's remarks upon the subject of his wellknown prowess when he was "shurf." The

Happy Family were sprawled in unwonted luxury on the shady side of an outcropping of rock from under which a little spring seeped and made a small oasis in the general barrenness. They had shade, they had water and food, and through the thin aromatic smoke of their cigarettes they could watch their horses cropping avidly the green grass that meant so much to them. The knowledge that an hour later they would be traveling again in the blazing heat of midday but emphasized their present comfort. They were enjoying every minute to its full sixty seconds. Laughter came easily and the hardships of the trail were pushed into the background of their minds.

They were not particularly anxious over the success or failure of Luck's trip to the hogans. They were on Ramon's trail (or so they firmly believed) and sooner or later they would overhaul him and Bill Holmes. When that happened they believed that they would be fully equal to the occasion, and that Ramon and Bill and those who were with him would learn what it means to turn traitor to the hand that has fed them, and to fling upon that hand the mud of public suspicion. But just now they were not talking about these things; they were arguing very earnestly over a very trivial matter indeed, and they got as much satisfaction out of the contention as though it really amounted to something.

When Luck had eaten and smoked and had ground his cigarette stub under his heel in the moist earth beside the spring, and had looked at his watch and got upon his feet with a sigh to say: "Well, boys, let's go," the Happy Family (who by the way must now be understood as including Lite Avery) sighed also and pulled their reluctant feet toward them and got up also, with sundry hitchings-into-place as to gun-belts and sundry resettlings as to hats. They pulled their horses more reluctant even than their riders--away from the green grass; resaddled, recinched the packs on the four animals that carried the camp supplies, gave them a last drink at the little irrigating ditch and mounted and straggled out again upon the trail of the six whom they seemed never able to overtake.

They did not know that the silent Indian with the dingy overalls and the bobbed hair had watched every movement they made. Through all that hour of rest not even a papoose had been visible around the hogans--which, while there was nothing warlike in their keeping under cover, was not exactly a friendly attitude. Applehead had kept turning his keen, bright blue eyes that way while he ate and afterwards smoked an after-dinner pipe, but when they were actually started again upon the trail he appeared to lay aside his misgivings.

Not even Applehead suspected that the Indian had led a pony carefully down into a draw, keeping the buildings always between himself and the party of white men; nor that he watched them while they spread out beyond the cultivated patch of irrigated ground until they picked up the trail of the six horses, when they closed the gaps between them and followed the trail straight away into the parched mesa that was lined with deep washes and canons and crossed with stony ridges where the heat radiated up from the bare rocks as from a heating stove when the fire is blazing within. When they rode away together, the Indian ran back into the draw, mounted his pony and lashed it into a heavy, sure-footed gallop.

CHAPTER XIII. SET AFOOT

The tracks of the six horses led down into a rock-bottomed arroyo so deep in most places that all view of the surrounding mesa was shut off completely, save where the ragged tops of a distant line of hills pushed up into the dazzling blue of the sky. The heat, down here among the rocks, was all but unbearable; and when they discovered that no tracks led out of the arroyo on the farther side, the Happy Family dismounted and walked to save their horses while they divided into two parties and hunted up and down the arroyo for the best trail.

It was just such vexatious delays as this which had kept them always a day's ride or more behind their quarry, and Luck's hand trembled with nervous irritability when he turned back and banded Applehead one of those small, shrill police whistles whose sound carries so far, and which are much used by motion-picture producers for the long-distance direction of scenes.

"I happened to have a couple in my pocket," he explained hurriedly. "You know the signals, don't you? One long, two short will mean you've picked up the trail. Three or more short, quick ones is an emergency call, for all hands to come running."

"Well, they's one thing you want to keep in mind, Luck," Applehead urged from his superior trail craft. "They might be sharp enough to ride in here a ways and come out the same side they rode in at. Yuh want to hunt both sides as yuh go up."

"Sure," said Luck, and hurried away up the arroyo with Pink, Big Medicine, Andy and the Native Son at his heels, leading the two pack-horses that belonged to their party. In the opposite direction went Applehead and the others, their eyes upon the ground watching for the faintest sign of hoofprints.

That blazing ball of torment, the sun, slid farther and farther down to the skyline, tempering its heat with the cool promise of dusk. Away up the arroyo, Luck stopped for breath after a sharp climb up through a narrow gash in the sheer wall of what was now a small canon, and saw that to search any farther in that direction would be useless. Across the arroyo--that had narrowed and deepened until it was a canon--Andy Green was mopping his face with his handkerchief and studying a bold hump of jumbled boulders and ledges, evidently considering whether it was worth while toiling up to the top. A little below him, the Native Son was flinging rocks at a rattlesnake with the vicious precision of frank abhorrence. Down in the canon bottom Big Medicine and Pink were holding the horses on the shady side of the gorge, and the smoke of their cigarettes floated lazily upward with the jumbled monotone of their voices.

Andy, glancing across at Luck, waved his hand and sat down on a rock that was shaded by a high boulder; reached mechanically for his "makings" and with his feet far apart and his elbows on his thighs, wearily rolled a cigarette.

"How about it, boss?" he asked, scarcely raising his voice above the ordinary conversational tone, though a hard fifteen-minutes' climb up and down

separated the two; "they never came up the arroyo, if you ask ME. My side don't show a hoof track from where we left the boys down below."

"Mine either," Luck replied, by the power of suggestion seating himself and reaching for his own tobacco and papers. "We might as well work back down and connect with Applehead. Wish there was some sign of water in this darn gulch. By the time we get down where we started from, it'll be sundown." He glanced down at Bud and Pink. "Hey! You can start back any, time," he called. "Nothing up this way."

"Here's the grandfather of all rattlers," Miguel called across to Luck, and held up by the tail a great snake that had not ceased its muscular writhings. "Twelve rattles and a button. Have I got time to skin him? He tried to bite me on the leg--but I beared him and got outa reach."

"We've got to be moving," Luck answered. "It's a long ways back where we started from, and we've got to locate water, if we can." He rose with the deliberateness that indicated tired muscles, and started back; and to himself he muttered exasperatedly: "A good three hours all shot to pieces--and not a mile gained on that bunch!"

The Native Son, calmly pinching the rattles of the snake he had not time to skin, climbed down into the Canon and took his horse by the bridle reins. Behind him Andy Green came scrambling; but Luck, still faintly hoping for a clue, kept to the upper rim of the arroyo, scanning every bit of soft ground where it seemed possible for a horse to climb up from below. He had always recognized the native cunning of Ramon, but he had never dreamed him as cunning as this latest ruse would seem to prove him.

As for Bill Holmes, Luck dismissed him with a shrug of contempt. Bill Holmes had been stranded in Albuquerque when the cold weather was coming on; he had been hungry and shelterless and ill-clad--one of those bits of flotsam which drift into our towns and stand dejectedly upon our street-corners when they do not prowl down alleys to the back doors of our restaurants in the hope of being permitted to wash the soiled dishes of more fortunate men for the food which diners have left beside their plates. Luck had fed Bill Holmes, and he had given him work to do and the best food and shelter he could afford; and for thanks, Bill had- as Luck believed-made sly, dishonest love to Annie-Many-Ponies, for whose physical and moral welfare Luck would be held responsible. Bill had deliberately chosen to steal rather than work for honest wages, and had preferred the unstable friendship of Ramon Chavez to the cleaner life in Luck's company. He did not credit Bill Holmes with anything stronger than a weak-souled treachery. Ramon, he told himself while he made his way down the arroyo side, was at least working out a clever scheme of his own, and it rested with Luck and his posse to see that Ramon was cheated of success.

So deeply was he engrossed that before he realized it he was down where they had left Applehead's party. There was no sign of them anywhere, so Luck went down and mounted his horse and led the way down the arroyo.

Already the heat was lessening and the land was taking on those translucent opal tints which make of New Mexico a land of enchantment. The far hills

enveloped themselves in a faint, purplish haze through which they seemed to blush unwittingly. The mesa, no longer showing itself an and waste of heat and untracked wilderness, lay soft under a thin veil of many ethereal tints. Away off to the northeast they heard the thin, vague clamor of a band of sheep and the staccato barking of a dog.

Luck rode for some distance, his uneasiness growing as the shadows deepened with the setting of the sun. They had gone too far to hear any whistled signal, but it seemed to him reasonable to suppose that Applehead would return to their starting point, whether he found the trail or not; or at least send a man back. Luck began to think more seriously of Applehead's numerous warnings about the Indians--and yet, there had been no sound of shooting, which is the first sign of trouble in this country. Rifle shots can be heard a long way in this clear air; so Luck presently dismissed that worry and gave his mind to the very real one which assailed them all; which was water for their horses.

The boys were riding along in silence, sitting over to one side with a foot dangling free of its stirrup; except Andy, who had hooked one leg over the saddle-horn and was riding sidewise, smoking a meditative cigarette and staring out between the ears of his horse. They were tired; horses and men, they were tired to the middle of their bones. But they went ahead without making any complaints whatever or rasping oneanother's tempers with ill-chosen remarks; and for that Luck's eyes brightened with appreciation.

Presently, when they had ridden at least a mile down the arroyo, a gray hat-crown came bobbing into sight over a low tongue of rocky ground that cut the channel almost in two. The horses threw up their heads and perked cars forward inquiringly, and in a moment Happy Tack came into view, his gloomy, sunburned face wearing a reluctant grin.

"Well, we got on the trail," he announced as soon as he was close enough. "And we follered it to water. Applehead says fer you to come on and make camp. Tracks are fresher around that' water-hole'n what they have been, an' Applehead, he's all enthused. I betche we land them fellers t'morrow."

Out of the arroyo in a place where the scant grassland lapped down over the edge, Happy Jack led the way and the rest followed eagerly. Too often had they made dry camp not to feel jubilant over the prospect even of a brackish water-hole. Even the horses seemed to know and to step out more briskly. Straight across the mesa with its deceptive lights that concealed distance behind a glamor of intimate nearness, they rode into the deepening dusk that had a glow all through it. After a while they dipped into a grassy draw so shallow that they hardly realized the descent until they dismounted at the bottom, where Applehead was already starting a fire and the others were laying out their beds and doing the hundred little things that make for comfort in camp.

A few bushes and a stunted tree or two marked the spring that seeped down and fed a shallow water-hole where the horses drank thirstily. Applehead grinned and pointed to the now familiar hoofprints which they had followed so far.

"I calc'late Ramon done a heap uh millin' around back there in that rocky arroyo," he observed, "'fore he struck off over here. Er else they was held up

fer some reason, 'cause them tracks is fresher a hull lot than what them was that passed the Injun ranch. Musta laid over here las' night, by the looks. But I figgered that we'd best camp whilst we had water, 'n' take up the trail agin at daybreak. Ain't that about the way you see it, Luck?"

"Why, certainly," Luck assured him with as much heartiness as his utter weariness would permit. "Men and horses, we're about all in. If Ramon was just over the next ridge, I don't know but it would pay to take our rest before we overhaul them."

"They's grass here, yuh notice," Applehead pointed out. "I'll put the bell on Johnny, and if Pink'll bobble that buckskin that's allus wantin' to wander off by hisself, I calc'late we kin settle down an' rest our bones quite awhile b'fore anybody needs to go on guard. Them ponies ain't goin' to stray fur off if they don't have to, after the groun' they covered t'day--now I'm tellin' yuh! They'll save their steps."

There is a superstition about prophesying too boastfully that a certain thing will or will not happen; you will remember that there is also a provision that the rash prophet may avert disaster by knocking wood. Applehead should, if there is any grain of sense in the rite, have knocked wood with his fingers crossed as an extra precaution, against evil fortune.

For after they had eaten and methodically packed away the food, and while they were lying around the cheerful glow of their little campfire, misfortune stole up out of the darkness unaware. They talked desultorily as tired men will, their alertness dulled by the contented tinkle-tinkle of the little bell strapped around the neck of big, bay Johnny, Applehead's companion of many a desert wandering. That brilliant constellation which seems to hang just over one's head in the high altitude of our sagebrush states, held hypnotically the sleepy gaze of Pink, whose duty it was to go on guard when the others turned in for the night. He lay with his locked fingers under his head, staring up at one particularly bright group of stars, and listened to the droning voice of Applehead telling of a trip he had made out into this country five or six years before; and soaking in the peace and the comfort which was all the more precious because he knew that soon he must drag his weary body into the saddle and ride out to stand guard over the horses. Once he half rose, every movement showing his reluctance.

Whereupon Weary, who sprawled next to him, reached out a languid foot and gave him a poke. "Aw, lay down," he advised. "They're all right out there for another hour. Don't yuh hear the bell?"

They all listened for a minute. The intermittent tinkle of the cheap little sheep bell came plainly to them from farther down the draw as though Johnny was eating contentedly with his mates, thankful for the leisure and the short, sweet grass that was better than hay. Pink lay back with a sigh of relief, and Luck told him to sleep a little if he wanted to, because everything was all right and he would call him if the horses got to straying too far off.

Down the draw--where there were no horses feeding--an Indian in dirty overalls and gingham shirt and moccasins, and with his hair bobbed to his collar, stood up and peered toward the vague figures grouped in the fire-glow. He lifted his

hand and moved it slightly, so that the bell he was holding tinkled exactly as it had done when it was strapped around Johnny's neck; Johnny, who was at that moment trailing disgustedly over a ridge half a mile away with his mates, driven by two horsemen who rode very carefully, so as to make no noise.

The figures settled back reassured, and the Indian grinned sourly and tinkled the little bell painstakingly, with the matchless patience of the Indian. It was an hour before he dimly saw Pink get up from the dying coals and mount his horse. Then, still tinkling the bell as a feeding horse would have made it ring, he moved slowly down the draw; slowly, so that Pink did not at first suspect that the bell sounded farther off than before; slowly yet surely, leading Pink farther and farther in the hope of speedily overtaking the horses that he cursed for their wandering.

Pink wondered, after a little, what was the matter with the darned things, wandering off like that by themselves, and with no possible excuse that he could see. For some time he was not uneasy; he expected to overtake them within the next five or ten minutes. They would stop to feed, surely, or to look back and listen--in a strange country like this it was against horse-nature that they should wander far away at night unless they were thirsty and on the scent of water. These horses had drunk their fill at the little pool below the spring. They should be feeding now, or they should lie down and sleep, or stand up and sleep--anything but travel like this, deliberately away from camp.

Pink tried loping, but the ground was too treacherous and his horse too leg-weary to handle its feet properly in the dark. It stumbled several times, so he pulled down again to a fast walk. For a few minutes he did not hear the bell at all, and when he did it was not where he had expected to hear it, but away off to one side. So he had gained nothing save in anger and uneasiness.

There was no use going back to camp and rousing the boys, for he was now a mile or so away; and they would be afoot, since their custom was to keep but one horse saddled. When he went in to call the next guard he would be expected to bring that man's horse back with him, and would turn his own loose before he went to sleep. Certainly there was nothing to be gained by rousing the camp.

He did not suspect the trick being played upon him, though he did wonder if someone was leading the horses away. Still, in that case whoever did it would surely have sense enough to muffle the bell. Besides, it sounded exactly like a horse feeding and moving away at random--which, to those familiar with the sound, can never be mistaken for the tinkle of an animal traveling steadily to some definite point.

It was an extremely puzzled young man who rode and rode that night in pursuit of that evasive, nagging, altogether maddening tinkle. Always just over the next little rise he would hear it, or down in the next little draw; never close enough for him to discover the trick; never far enough away for him to give up the chase. The stars he had been watching in camp swam through the purple immensity above him and slid behind the skyline. Other stars as brilliant appeared and began their slow, swimming journey. Pink rode, and stopped to listen, and rode on again until it seemed to him that he must be

dreaming some terribly realistic nightmare.

He was sitting on his horse on a lava-cruste ridge, straining bloodshot eyes into the mesa that stretched dimly before him, when dawn came streaking the sky with blood orange and purple and crimson. The stars were quenched in that flood of light; and Pink, looking now with clearer vision, saw that there was no living thing in sight save a coyote trotting home from his night's hunting. He turned short around and, getting his bearings from his memory of certain stars and from the sun that was peering at him from the top of a bare peak, and from that sense of direction which becomes second nature to a man who had lived long on the range, started for camp with his ill news.

CHAPTER XIV. ONE PUT OVER ON THE BUNCH

"Sounds to me," volunteered the irrepressible Big Medicine after a heavy silence, "like as if you'd gone to sleep on your hawse, Little One, and dreamed that there tinkle-tinkle stuff. By cripes, I'd like to see the bell-hawse that could walk away from ME 'nless I was asleep an' dreamin' about it. Sounds like--"

"Sounds like Navy work," Applehead put in, eyeing the surrounding rim of sun-gilded mesa, where little brown birds fluttered in short, swift flights and chirped with exasperating cheerfulness.

"If it was anybody, it was Ramon Chavez," Luck declared with the positiveness of his firm conviction. "By the tracks here, we're crowding up on him. And no man that's guilty of a crime, Applehead, is going to ride day after day without wanting to take a look over his shoulder to see if he's followed. He's probably seen us from some of these ridges--yesterday, most likely. And do you think he wouldn't know this bunch as far as he could see us, even without glasses? The chances are he has them, though. He'd be a fool if he didn't stake himself to a pair."

"Say, by gracious," Andy observed somewhat irrelevantly, his eyes going over the group, "this would sure make great picture dope, wouldn't it? Why didn't we bring Pete along, darn it? Us all standing around here, plumb helpless because we're afoot--"

"Aw, shut up!" snapped Pink, upon whom the burden of responsibility lay heavy. "I oughta be hung for laying around the fire here instead of being out there on guard! I oughta--"

"It ain't your fault," Weary championed him warmly. "We all heard the bell--"

"Yes--and damn it, I heard the bell from then on till daylight!" Pink's lips quivered perceptibly with the mortification that burned within him. "If I'd been on guard--"

"Well, I calc'late you'd a been laid out now with a knife-cut in yuh som'ers," Applehead stopped twisting his sunburnt mustache to say bluntly. "'S a dang lucky thing fer you, young man, 't you WASN'T on guard, 'n' the only thing't

looks queer to me is that you wasn't potted las' night when yuh got out away from here. Musta been only one of 'em stayed behind, an' he had t' keep out in front uh yuh t' tinkle that dang bell. Figgered on wearin' out yer hoss, I reckon, 'n' didn't skurcely dare t' take the risk uh killin' you off 'nless they was a bunch around t' handle us." His bright blue eyes with their range squint went from one to another with a certain speculative pride in the glance. "'N' they shore want t' bring a crowd along when they tie into this yere outfit, now I'm tellin' yuh!"

Lite Avery, who had gone prowling down the draw by himself, came back to camp, tilting stiff-leggedly along in his high-heeled boots and betraying, in every step he took, just how handicapped a cowpuncher is when set afoot upon the range and forced to walk where he has always been accustomed to ride. He stopped to give Pink's exhausted horse a sympathetic pat on the shoulder, and came on, grinning a little with the comers of his mouth tipped down.

"Here's what's left of the hobbles the buckskin wore," he said, holding up the cut loops of a figure-eight rope hobble. "Kinda speaks for itself, don't it?"

They crowded around to inspect this plain evidence of stealing. Afterwards they stood hard-eyed and with a flush on their cheek-bones, considering what was the best and wisest way to meet this emergency. As to hunting afoot for their horses, the chance of success was almost too small to be considered at all, Pink's horse was not fit for further travel until he had rested. There was one pair of field glasses -and there were nine irate men to whom inaction was intolerable.

"One thing we can do, if we have to," Luck said at last, with the fighting look in his face which moving-picture people had cause to remember. "We can help ourselves to any horses we run across. Applehead, how's the best way to go about it?"

Applehead, thus pushed into leadership, chewed his mustache and eyed the mesa sourly. "Well, seein' they've set us afoot, I calc'late we're jest about entitled to any dang thing we run across that's ridable," he acceded. "'N' the way I'd do, would be to git on high groun' with them glasses 'n' look fer hosses. 'N' then head fer 'em 'n' round 'em up afoot 'n' rope out what we want. They's enough of us t' mebbly git a mount apiece, but it shore ain't goin' t' be no snap, now I'm tellin' ye. 'N' if yuh do that," he added, "yuh want t' leave a man er two in camp--'n' they want to keep their dang eyes peeled, lemme tell yuh! Ef we was t' find ourselves afoot an' our grub 'n' outfit stole--"

"We won't give them that chance at us." Luck was searching with his eyes for the nearest high point that was yet not too far from camp. "I think I'll just take Andy up on that pinnacle there, and camp down by that pile of boulders. The rest of you stay around camp and rest yourselves while you've got the chance. In a couple of hours, Applehead, you and Lite come up and take our place; then Miguel and Bud, and after that Weary and Happy. Pink, you go and bed down in the shade somewhere and go to sleep--and quit worrying over last night. Nobody could have done any better than you did. It was just one put over on the bunch, and you happened to be the particular goat, that's all.

"Now, if one of us waves his hat over his head, all of you but Happy and Bud and Pink come up with your rifles and your ropes, because we'll have some horses sighted. If we wave from side to side, like this, about even with our belts, you boys want to look out for trouble. So one of you keep an eye on us all the time we're up there. We'll be up outa reach of any trouble ourselves, if I remember that little pinnacle right." He hung the strap that held the leather case of the glasses over one shoulder, picked up his rifle and his rope and started off, with Andy similarly equipped coming close behind him.

The mesa, when they reached the pinnacle and looked down over the wide expanse of it, glimmered like clear, running water with the heat waves that rose from the sand. Away to the southward a scattered band of sheep showed in a mirage that made them look long-legged as camels and half convinced them both that they were seeing the lost horses, until the vision changed and shrunk the moving objects to mere dots upon the mesa.

Often before they had watched the fantastic airpictures of the desert mirage, and they knew well enough that what they saw might be one mile away or twenty. But unless the atmospheric conditions happened to be just right, what was pictured in the air could not be depended upon to portray truthfully what was reflected. They sat there and saw the animals suddenly grow clearly defined and very close, and discovered at last that they were sheep, and that a man was walking beside the flock; and even while they watched it and wondered if the sheep were really as close as they seemed, the vision slowly faded into blank, wavy distance and the mesa lay empty and quivering under the sun.

"Fine chance we've got of locating anything," Andy grumbled, "if it's going to be miragy all day. We could run our fool heads off trying to get up to a bunch that would puff out into nothing. Makes a fellow think of the stories they tell about old prospectors going crazy trying to find mirage water-holes. I'm glad we didn't get hung up at a dry camp, Luck. Yuh realize what that would be like?"

"Oh, I may have some faint idea," Luck drawled whimsically. "Look over there, Andy over toward Albuquerque. Is that a mirage again, or do you see something moving?"

Andy, having the glasses, swung them slowly to the southeast. After a minute or two he shook his head and gave the glasses to Luck. "There was one square look I got, and I'd been willing to swear it was our saddle-bunch," he said. "And then they got to wobbling and I couldn't make out what they are. They might be field mice, or they might be giraffes--I'm darned if I know which."

Luck focussed the glasses, but whatever the objects had been, they were no longer to be seen. So the two hours passed and they saw Applehead and Lite come slowly up the hill from camp bearing their rifles and their ropes and a canteen of fresh water, as the three things they might find most use for.

These two settled themselves to watch for horses--their own range horses. When they were relieved they reported nothing save a continued inclination on the part of the atmosphere to be what Andy called miragy. So, the day passed, chafing their spirits worse than any amount of active trouble would have done. Pink slept and brooded by turns, still blaming himself for the misfortune. The

others moped, or took their turns on the pinnacle to strain their eyes unavailingly into the four corners of the earth--or as much as they could in those directions.

With the going of the sun Applehead and Lite, sitting out their second guard on the pinnacle, discussed seriously the desperate idea of going in the night to the nearest Navajo ranch and helping themselves to what horses they could find about the place. The biggest obstacle was their absolute ignorance of where the nearest ranch lay. Not, surely, that half-day's ride back towards Albuquerque, where they had seen but one pony and that a poor specimen of horseflesh. Another obstacle would be the dogs, which could be quieted only with bullets.

"We might git hold of something to ride," Applehead stated glumly, "an' then agin the chances is we wouldn't git nothin' more'n a scrap on our hands. 'N' I'm tellin' yuh right now, Lite, I ain't hankerin' fer no fuss till I git a hoss under me."

"Me either," Lite testified succinctly. "Say, is that something coming, away up that draw the camp's in? Seems to me I saw something pass that line of lava, about half a mile over."

Applehead stood up and peered into the half darkness. In a couple of minutes he said: "Ye better git down an' tell the boys t' be on the watch, Lite. They can't see no hat-wavin' this time uh day. They's somethin' movin' up to-wards camp, but what er who they be I can't make out in the dark. Tell Luck--"

"What's the matter with us both going?" Lite asked, cupping his hands around his eyes that he might see better. "It's getting too dark to do any good up here--"

"Well, I calc'late mebbe yore right," Applehead admitted, and began to pick his way down over the rocks. "Ef them's Injuns, the bigger we stack up in camp the better. If it's Ramon 'n' his bunch, I want t' git m' hands on 'im."

He must have turned the matter over pretty thoroughly in his mind, for when the two reached camp he had his ideas fixed and his plans all perfected. He told Luck that somebody was working down the draw in the dark, and that it looked like a Navvy trick; and that they had better be ready for them, because they weren't coming just to pass the time of day--"now I'm tellin' ye!"

The nerves of the Happy Family were raw enough by now to welcome anything that promised action; even an Indian fight would not be so much a disaster as a novel way of breaking the monotony. Applehead, with the experience gathered in the old days when he was a young fellow with a freighting outfit and old Geronimo was terrorizing all this country, sent them back in compact half circle just within the shelter of the trees and several rods .away from their campfire and the waterhole. There, lying crouched behind their saddles with their rifles across the seat-sides and with ammunition belts full of cartridges, they waited for whatever might be coming in the dark.

"It's horses," Pink exclaimed under his breath, as faint sounds came down the draw. "Maybe--"

"Horses--and an Injun laying along the back of every one, most likely," Applehead returned grimly. "An old Navvy trick, that is--don't let 'em fool ye, boys! You jest wait, 'n' I'll tell ye 'when t' shoot, er whether t' shoot at all. They can't fool ME--now I'm tellin' yuh!

After that they were silent, listening strainedly to the growing sounds of approach. There was the dull, unmistakable click of a hoof striking against a rock, the softer sound of treading on yielding soil. Then a blur of dark objects became visible, moving slowly and steadily toward the camp.

"Aw, it's just horses," Happy Jack muttered disgustedly.

Applehead stretched a lean leg in his direction and gave Happy Jack a kick. "They're cunnin'," he hissed warningly. "Don't yuh be fooled--"

"That's Johnny in the lead," Pink whispered excitedly. "I'd know the way he walks--"

"'N' you THOUGHT yuh knowed how he jingled his dang bell," Applehead retorted unkindly. "Sh-sh-sh--"

Reminded by the taunt of the clever trick that had been played upon them the night before, the Happy Family stiffened again into strained, waiting silence, their rifles aimed straight at the advancing objects. These, still vague in the first real darkness of early night, moved steadily in a scattered group behind a leader that was undoubtedly Johnny of the erstwhile tinkling bell. He circled the campfire just without its radius of light, so that they could not tell whether an Indian lay along his back, and beaded straight for the water-hole. The others followed him, and not one came into the firelight--a detail which sharpened the suspicions of the men crouched there in the edge of the bushes, and tingled their nerves with the sense of something sinister in the very unconcernedness of the animals.

They splashed into the water-hole and drank thirstily and long. They stood there as though they were luxuriating in the feel of more water than they could drink, and one horse blew the moisture from his nostrils with a sound that made Happy Jack jump.

After a few minutes that seemed an hour to those who waited with fingers crooked upon gun-triggers, the horse that looked vaguely like Johnny turned away from the water-hole and sneezed while he appeared to be wondering what to do next. He moved slowly toward the packs that were thrown down just where they had been taken from the horses, and began nosing tentatively about.

The others loitered still at the water-hole, save one--the buckskin, by his lighter look in the dark--that came over to Johnny. The two horses nosed the packs. A dull sound of clashing metal came to the ears of the Happy Family.

"Hey! Get outa that grain, doggone your fool hide," Pink called out impulsively, crawling over his saddle and catching his foot in the stirrup leather so that he came near going headlong.

Applehead yelled something, but Pink had recovered his balance and was running to save the precious horsefeed from waste, and Johnny from foundering. There might have been two Indiana on every horse in sight, but Pink was not thinking of that possibility just then.

Johnny whirled guiltily away from the grain bag, licking his lips and blowing dust from his nostrils. Pink went up to him and slipped a rope around his neck. "Where's that bell?" he called out in his soft treble. "Or do you think we better tie the old son-of-a-gun up and be sure of him?"

"Aw," said Happy Jack disgustedly a few minutes later, when the Happy Family had crawled out of their ambush and were feeling particularly foolish. "Nex' time old granny Furrman says Injuns t' this bunch, somebody oughta gag him "

"I notice you waited till he'd gone outa hearing before you said that," Luck told him drily. "We're going to put out extra guards tonight, just the same. And I guess you can stand the first shift, Happy, up there on the ridge--you're so sure of things!"

CHAPTER XV. "NOW, DANG IT, RIDE!"

Indians are Indians, though they wear the green sweater and overalls of civilization and set upon their black hair the hat made famous by John B. Stetson. You may meet them in town and think them tamed to stupidity. You may travel out upon their reservations and find them shearing sheep or hoeing corn or plodding along the furrow, plowing their fields; or you may watch them dancing grotesquely in their festivals, and still think that civilization is fast erasing the savage instincts from their natures. You will be partly right --but you will also be partly mistaken. An Indian is always an Indian, and a Navajo Indian carries a thinner crust of civilization than do some others; as I am going to illustrate.

As you have suspected, the Happy Family was not following the trail of Ramon Chavez and his band. Ramon was a good many miles away in another direction; unwittingly the Happy Family was keeping doggedly upon the trail of a party of renegade Navajos who had been out on a thieving expedition among those Mexicans who live upon the Rio Grande bottomland. Having plenty of reasons for hurrying back to their stronghold, and having plenty of lawlessness to account for, when they realized that they were being followed by nine white men who had four packed horses with them to provide for their needs on a long journey, it was no more than natural that the Indians should take it for granted that they were being pursued, and that if they were caught they would be taken back to town and shut up in that evil place which the white men called their jail.

When it was known that the nine men who followed had twice recovered the trail after sheep and cattle had trampled it out, the renegades became sufficiently alarmed to call upon their tribesmen for help. And that was perfectly natural and sensible from their point of view.

Now, the Navajos are peaceable enough if you leave them strictly alone and do

not come snooping upon their reservation trying to arrest somebody. But they don't like jails, and if you persist in trailing their lawbreakers you are going to have trouble on your hands. The Happy Family, with Luck and Applehead, had no intention whatever of molesting the Navajos; but the Navajos did not know that, and they acted according to their lights and their ideas of honorable warfare.

Roused to resistance in behalf of their fellows, they straightway forsook their looms, where they wove rugs for tourists, and the silver which they fashioned into odd bracelets and rings; and the flocks of sheep whose wool they used in the rugs and they went upon a quiet, crafty warpath against these persistent white men.

They stole their horses and started them well on the trail back to Albuquerque--since it is just as well to keep within the white men's law, if it may be done without suffering any great inconvenience. They would have preferred to keep the horses, but they decided to start them home and let them go. You could not call that stealing, and no one need go to jail for it. They failed to realize that these horses might be so thoroughly broken to camp ways that they would prefer the camp of the Happy Family to a long trail that held only a memory of discomfort; they did not know that every night these horses were given grain by the camp-fire, and that they would remember it when feeding time came again. So the horses, led by wise old Johnny, swung in a large circle when their Indian drivers left them, and went back to their men.

Then the Navajos, finding that simple maneuver a failure--and too late to prevent its failing without risk of being discovered and forced into an open fight -got together and tried something else; something more characteristically Indian and therefore more actively hostile. They rode in haste that night to a point well out upon the fresh trail of their fleeing tribesmen, where the tracks came out of a barren, lava-encrusted hollow to softer soil beyond. They summoned their squaws and their half-grown papooses armed with branches that had stiff twigs and answered the purpose of brooms. With great care about leaving any betraying tracks of their own until they were quite ready to leave a trail, a party was formed to represent the six whom the Happy Family had been following. These divided and made off in different directions, leaving a plain trail behind them to lure the white men into the traps which would be prepared for them farther on.

When dawn made it possible to do so effectively, the squaws began to whip out the trail of the six renegade Indians, and the chance footprints of those who had gone ahead to leave the false trail for the white men to follow. Very painstakingly the squaws worked, and the young ones who could be trusted. Brushing the sand smoothly across a hoofprint here, and another one there; walking backward, their bodies bent, their sharp eyes scanning every little depression, every faint trace of the passing of their tribesmen; brushing, replacing pebbles kicked aside by a hoof, wiping out completely that trail which the Happy Family had followed with such persistence, the squaws did their part, while their men went on to prepare the trap.

Years ago--yet not so many after all--the mothers of these squaws, and their grandmothers, had walked backward and stooped with little branches in their hands to wipe out the trail of their warriors and themselves to circumvent the

cunning of the enemy who pursued. So had they brushed out the trail when their men had raided the ranchos of the first daring settlers, and had driven off horses and cattle into the remoter wilderness.

And these, mind you, were the squaws and bucks whom you might meet any day on the streets in Albuquerque, padding along the pavement and staring in at the shop windows, admiring silken gowns with marked-down price tags, and exclaiming over flaxen-haired dolls and bright ribbon streamers; squaws and bucks who brought rugs and blankets to sell, and who would bargain with you in broken English and smile and nod in friendly fashion if you spoke to them in Spanish or paid without bickering the price they asked for a rug. You might see them in the fifteen-cent store, buying cheap candy and staring in mute admiration at all the gay things piled high on the tables. Remember that, when I tell you what more they did out here in the wilderness. Remember that and do not imagine that I am trying to take you back into the untamed days of the pioneers.

Luck and the Happy Family--so well had the squaws done their work--passed unsuspectingly over the wiped-out trail, circled at fault on the far side of the rocky gulch for an hour or so and then found the false trail just as the Indian decoys had intended that they should do. And from a farther flat topped ridge a group of Indians with Dutch hair-cuts and Stetson hats and moccasins (the two hall-marks of two races) watched them take the false trail, and looked at one another and grinned sourly.

The false trail forked, showing that the six had separated into two parties of three riders, each aiming to pass--so the hoofprints would lead one to believe--around the two ends of a lone hill that sat squarely down on the mesa like a stone treasure chest dropped there by the gods when the world was young.

The Happy Family drew rein and eyed the parting of the ways dubiously.

"Wonder what they did that for?" Andy Green grumbled, mopping his red face irritably. "We've got trouble enough without having them split up on us."

"From the looks, I should say we're overhauling the bunch," Luck hazarded. "They maybe met on the other side of this butte somewhere. And the tracks were made early this morning, I should say. How about it, Applehead?"

"Well, they look fresher 'n what we bin follerin' before," Applehead admitted. "But I don't like this here move uh theirn, and I'm tellin' yuh so. The way--"

"I don't like anything about 'em," snapped Luck, standing in his stirrups as though that extra three inches would let him see over the hill. "And I don't like this tagging along behind, either. You take your boys and follow those tracks to the right, Applehead. I and my bunch will go this other way. And RIDE! We can't be so awfully much behind. If they meet, we'll meet where they do. If they scatter, we'll have to scatter too, I reckon. But get'em is the word, boys!"

"And where," asked Applehead with heavy irony, while he pulled at his

mustache, "do yuh calc'late we'll git t'gether agin if we go scatterin' out?"

Luck looked at him and smiled his smile. "We aren't any of us tenderfeet, exactly," he said calmly. "We'll meet at the jail when we bring in our men, if we don't meet anywhere else this side. But if you land your men, come back to that camp where we lost the horses. That's one, place we KNOW has got grass and water both. If you come and don't see any sign of us, wait a day before you start back to town. We'll do the same. And leave a note anchored in the crack of that big bowlder by the spring, telling the news. We'll do the same if we get there first and don't wait for you." He hesitated, betraying that even in his eagerness he too dreaded the parting of the ways. "Well, so long, boys--take care of yourselves."

"Well, now, I ain't so dang shore--" Applehead began querulously.

But Luck only grinned and waved his hand as he led the way to the south on the trail that obviously had skirted the side of the square butte. The four who went with him looked back and waved non-committal adieu; and Big Medicine, once he was fairly away, shouted back to them to look out for Navvies, and then laughed with a mirthless uproar that deceived no one into thinking he was amused. Pink and Weary raised their voices sufficiently to tell him where he could go, and settled themselves dejectedly in their saddles again.

"Well, I ain't so darned sure, either," Lite Avery tardily echoed Applehead's vague statement, in the dry way he had of speaking detached sentiments from the mental activities that went on behind his calm, mask-like face and his quiet eyes. "Something feels snaky around here today."

Applehead looked at him with a glimmer of relief in his eyes, but he did not reply to the foreboding directly. "Boys, git yore rifles where you kin use 'em quick," he advised them grimly. "I kin smell shootin' along this dang trail."

Pink's dimples showed languidly for a moment, and he looked a question at Weary. Weary grinned answer and pulled his rifle from the "boot" where it was slung under his right leg, and jerked the lever forward until a cartridge slid with a click up into the chamber; let the hammer gently down with his thumb and laid the gun across his thighs.

"She's ready for bear," he observed placidly.

"Well, now, you boys show some kinda sense," Applehead told them when Pink had followed Weary's example. "Fellers like Happy and Bud, they shore do show their ign'rance uh this here, dang country, when they up 'n' laff at the idee uh trouble- -now I'm tellin' yuh!"

From the ridge which was no more than a high claw of the square butte, four Indians in greasy, gray Stetsons with flat crowns nodded with grim satisfaction, and then made baste to point the toes of their moccasins down to where their unkempt ponies stood waiting. They were too far away to, see the shifting of rifles to the laps of the riders, or perhaps they would not have felt quite so satisfied with the steady advance of the four who had taken the right-hand fork of the trail. They could not even tell just which four men made up the party. They did not greatly care, so long as the, force of the

white men was divided. They galloped away upon urgent business of their own, elated because their ruse had worked out as they had planned and hoped.

Applehead took a restrained pull at the canteen, cocked his eyes back at the butte they had just passed, squinted ahead over the flat waste that shimmered with heat to the very skyline that was notched and gashed crudely with more barren hills, and then, screwing the top absent-mindedly on the canteen-mouth, leaned and peered long at the hoofprints they were following. Beside him Lite Avery, tall and lean to the point of being skinny, followed his movements with quiet attention and himself took to studying more closely the hoofprints in the sandy soil.

Applehead looked up, gauged the probable direction the trail was taking, and gave a grunt.

"You kin call me a fool," he said with a certain challenge in his tone, "but this yere trail don't look good to me, somehow. These yere tracks, they don't size up the same as they done all the way out here. 'N' another thing, they ain't aimed t' meet up with the bunch that Luck's trailin'. We're headed straight out away from whar Luck's headed. 'N' any way yuh look at it, we're headed into country whar there ain't no more water'n what the rich man got in hell. What would any uh Ramon's outfit want to come away off in here fur? They ain't nothin' up in here to call 'em."

"These, said Lite suddenly, "are different horse-tracks. They're smaller, for one thing. The bunch we followed out from the red machine rode bigger horses."

"And carried honey on one side and fresh meat on the other; and one horse was blind in the right eye," enlarged Pink banteringly, remembering the story of the Careful Observer in an old schoolreader of his childhood days.

"Yes, how do you make that out, Lite? I never noticed any difference in the tracks."

"The stride is a little shorter today for one thing." Lite looked around and grinned at Pink, as though he too remembered the dromedary loaded with honey and meat. "Ain't it, Applehead?"

"It shore is," Applehead testified, his face bent toward the hot ground.

"Ain't ary one uh the three that travels like they bin a travelin'--'n' that shore means something, now I'm tellin' yuh!" He straightened and stared worriedly ahead of them again. "Uh course, they might a picked up fresh horses," he admitted. "I calc'l late they needed 'em bad enough, if they ain't been grainin' their own on the trip."

"We didn't see any signs of their horses being turned loose anywhere along," Lite pointed out with a calm confidence that he was right.

Still, they followed the footprints even though they were beginning to admit with perfect frankness their uneasiness. They were swinging gradually toward one of those isolated bumps of red rockridges which you will find scattered at random through certain parts of the southwest. Perhaps they held some faint hope that what lay on the other side of the ridge would be more promising,

just as we all find ourselves building air-castles upon what lies just over the horizon which divides present facts from future possibilities. Besides, these flat-faced ledges frequently formed a sharp dividing line between barren land and fertile, and the hoofprints led that way; so it was with a tacit understanding that they would see what lay beyond the ridge that they rode forward.

Suddenly Applehead, eyeing the rocks speculatively, turned his head suddenly to look behind and to either side like one who seeks a way of escape from sudden peril.

"Don't make no quick moves, boys," he said, waving one gloved hand nonchalantly toward the flat land from which they were turning, "but foller my lead 'n' angle down into that draw off here. Mebbe it's deep enough to put us outa sight, 'n' mebbe it ain't. But we'll try it."

"What's up? What did yuh see?" Pink and Weary spoke in a duet, urging their horses a little closer.

"You fellers keep back thar 'n' don't act excited!" Applehead eyed them sternly over his shoulder. "I calc'late we're just about t' walk into a trap." He bent--on the side away from the ridge--low over his horse's shoulder and spoke while he appeared to be scanning the ground. "I seen gun-shine up among them rocks, er I'm a goat. 'N' if it's Navvies, you kin bet they got guns as good as ours, and kin shoot mighty nigh as straight as the best of us--except Lite, uh course, that's a expert." He pointed aimlessly at the ground and edged toward the draw.

"Ef they think we're jest follerin' a stray track, they'll likely hold off till we git back in the trail 'n' start comin' on agin," he explained craftily, still pointing at the ground ahead of him and still urging his horse to the draw. "Ef they suspicion 't we're shyin' off from the ridge, they'll draw a fine bead 'n' cut loose. I knowed it," he added with a lugubrious complacency. "I told ye all day that I could smell trouble a-comin'; I knowed dang well 't we'd stir up a mess uh fightin' over here. I never come onto this dang res'vation yit, that I didn't have t' kill off a mess uh Navvies before I got offen it agin.

"Now," he said when they reached the edge of the sandy depression that had been gouged deeper by freshets and offered some shelter in case of attack, "you boys jest fool around here on the aidge 'n' foller me down here like you was jest curiouslike over what I'm locatin'. That'll keep them babies up there guessin' till we're all outa sight MEBBY!" He pulled down the corners of his mouth till his mustache-ends dropped a full inch, and lifted himself off his horse with a bored deliberation that was masterly in its convincingness. He stood looking at the ground for a moment and then began to descend leisurely into the draw, leading his horse behind him.

"You go next, Pink," Weary said shortly, and with his horse began edging him closer to the bank until Pink, unless he made some unwise demonstration of unwillingness, was almost forced to ride down the steep little slope.

"Don't look towards the ridge, boys," Applehead warned from below. "Weary, you

come on down here next. Lite kin might' nigh shoot the dang triggers offen their guns 'fore they kin pull, if they go t' work 'n' start anything."

So Weary, leaving Lite up there grinning sheepishly over the compliment, rode down because he was told to do so by the man in command. "You seem to forget that Lite's got a wife on his hands," he reproved as he went.

"Lite's a-comin' right now," Applehead retorted, peering at the ridge a couple of hundred yards distant. "Git back down the draw 's fur's yuh kin b'fore yuh take out into the open agin. I'll wait a minute 'n' see--"

"Ping-NG-NG!" a bullet, striking a rock on the edge of the draw fifty feet short of the mark, glanced and went humming over the hot waste.

"Well, now, that shows they got a lookout up high, 't seen me watchin' that way. But it's hard t' git the range shootin' down, like that," Applehead remarked, pulling his horse behind a higher part of the bank.

Close beside him Lite's rifle spoke, its little steelshod message flying straight as a homing honeybee for the spitting flash he had glimpsed up there among the rocks. Whether he did any damage or not, a dozen rifles answered venomously and flicked up tiny spurts of sand in the close neighborhood of the four.

"If they keep on trying," Lite commented drily, "they might make a killing, soon as they learn how to shoot straight."

"'S jest like them dang Injuns!" Applehead grumbled, shooin' the three before him down the draw. "Four t' our one--it takes jest about that big a majority 'fore they feel comf table about buildin' up a fight. Lead yore bosses down till we're outa easy shootin' distance, boys, 'n' then we'll head out fer where Luck ought t' be. If they fixed a trap fer us, they've fixed another fer him, chances is, 'n! the sooner us fellers git t'gether the better show we'll all of us have. You kin see, the way they worked it to split the bunch, that they ain't so dang anxious t' tie into us when we're t'gether--'n' that's why we can't git t' Luck a dang bit too soon, now I'm tellin' yuh!"

Weary and Pink were finding things to say, also, but old Applehead went on with his monologue just as though they were listening. Lite showed a disposition to stop and take issue with the shooters who kept up a spiteful firing from the ridge. But Applehead stopped him as he was leveling his rifle.

"If yuh shoot," he pointed out, "they'll know jest where we air and how fast we're gittin' outa here. If yuh don't, unless their lookout kin see us movin' out, they got t' do a heap uh guessin' in the next few minutes. They only got one chancet in three uh guessin' right, 'cause we might be camped in one spot, 'n' then agin we might be crawlin' up closer, fer all they kin tell."

If they were guessing, they must have guessed right; for presently the four heard faint yells from behind them, and Applehead crawled up the bank to where he could look out across the level. What he saw made him slide hastily to the bottom again.

"They've clumb down and straddled their ponies," he announced grimly. "An' about a dozen is comin' down this way, keepin' under cover all they kin. I calc'late mebbly we better crawl our bosses 'n' do some ridin' ourselves, boys." And he added grimly, "They ain't in good shootin' distance yit, 'n' they dassent show theirselves neither. We'll keep in this draw long as we kin. They're bound t' come careful till they git us located."

The footing was none the best, but the horses they rode had been running over untracked mesaland since they were bandy-legged colts. They loped along easily, picking automatically the safest places whereon to set their feet, and leaving their riders free to attend to other important matters which proved their true value as horses that knew their business.

Soon the draw shallowed until they found themselves out in the open, with the square-topped mountain five miles or so ahead and a little to the left; a high, untraversable sandstone ledge to their right, and what looked like plain sailing straight ahead past the mountain.

Applehead twisted his body in the saddle and gave a grunt. "Throw some lead back at them hombres, Lite," he snapped. "And make a killin' if yuh kin. It'll make 'em mad, but it'll hold 'em back fer a spell."

Lite, the crack rifle-shot of Luck's company and the man who had taught Jean Douglas to shoot with such wonderful precision, wheeled his horse short around and pulled him to a stand, lined up his rifle sights and crooked his finger on the trigger. And away back there among the Indians a pony reared, and then pitched forward.

"I sure do bate to shoot down a horse," Lite explained shamefacedly, "but I never did kill a man--"

"We-ell, I calc'late mebbly yuh will, 'fore you're let out from this yere meetin'," Applehead prophesied drily. "Now, dang it, RIDE!"

CHAPTER XVI. ANNIE-MANY-PONIES WAITS

In the magic light of many unnamable soft shades which the sun leaves in New Mexico as a love token for his dark mistress night, Annie-Many-Ponies sat with her back against a high, flat rock at the place where Ramon had said she must wait for him, and stared somber-eyed at what she could see of the new land that had held her future behind the Sandias; waiting for Ramon; and she wondered if Wagalex Conka had come home from his picture-making in Bear Canon and was angry because she had gone; and shrank from the thought, and tried to picture what life with Ramon would be like, and whether his love would last beyond the wide ring of shiny gold that was to make her a wife.

At her feet the little black dog lay licking his sore paws that had padded patiently after her all day. Beside the rock the black horse stood nibbling at some weeds awkwardly, because of the Spanish bit in his mouth. The horse was hungry, and the little black dog was hungry; Annie-Many-Ponies was hungry also, but she did not feel her, hunger so much, because of the heaviness that was in her heart.

When Ramon came he would bring food, or he would tell her where she might buy. The horse, too, would be fed--when Ramon came. And he would take her to the priest who was his friend, and together they would kneel before the priest. But first, if Ramon would wait, she wanted to confess her sins, so that she need not go into the new life bearing the sins of the old. The priest could pray away the ache that was in her heart; and then, with her heart light as air, she would be married with Ramon. It was long since she had confessed--not since the priest came to the agency when she was there, before she ran away to work in pictures for Wagalex Conka.

Before her the glow deepened and darkened. A rabbit hopped out of a thick clump of stunted bushes, sniffed the air that blew the wrong way to warn him, and began feeding. Shunka Chistala gathered his soft paws under him, scratched softly for a firm foothold in the ground, and when the rabbit, his back turned and the evening wind blowing full in his face, fed unsuspectingly upon some young bark that he liked, the little black dog launched himself suddenly across the space that divided them. There was a squeak and a thin, whimpering crying--and the little black dog, at least, was sure of his supper.

Annie-Many-Ponies, roused from her brooding, shivered a little when the rabbit cried. She started forward to save it--she who had taught the little black dog to hunt gophers and prairie-dogs!--and when she was too late she scolded the dog in the language of the Sioux. She tore the rabbit away from him while he eyed her reproachfully; but when she saw that it was quite dead, she flung the warm body back to him and went and sat down again with her back to the rock.

A train whistled for the little station of Bernalillo, and soon she saw its headlight paint the squat houses that had before been hidden behind the creeping dusk. Ramon was late in coming and for one breath she caught herself hoping that he would not come at all. But immediately she remembered the love words he had taught her, and smiled her inscrutable little smile that had now a tinge of sadness. Perhaps, she thought wishfully, Ramon had come on the train from Albuquerque. Perhaps he had a horse in the town, and would ride out and meet her here where he had told her to wait.

The train shrieked and painted swiftly hill and embankment and little adobe huts and a corral full of huddled sheep, and went churning away to the northeast. Annie-Many-Ponies followed its course absently with her eyes until the last winking light from its windows and the last wisp of smoke was hidden behind hills and trees. The little black dog finished the rabbit, nosed its tracks back to where it had hopped out of the brush, and came back and curled up at the feet of his mistress, licking his lips and again his travel-sore paws. In a moment, feeling in his dumb way her loneliness, perhaps, he reached up and laid his pink tongue caressingly upon her brown hand.

Dark came softly and with it a noisy wind that whistled and murmured and at last, growing more boisterous as the night deepened, whooped over her head and tossed wildly the branches of a clump of trees that grew near.

Annie-Many-Ponies listened to the wind and thought it a brother, perhaps, of the night wind that came to the Dakota prairies and caroused there until dawn bade it be still. Too red the blood of her people ran in her veins for her to be afraid of the night, even though she peopled it with dim shapes of her

fancy.

After a long while the wind grew chill. Annie-Many-Ponies shivered, and then rose and went to the horse and, reaching into the bundle which was still bound to the saddle, she worked a plaid shawl loose from the other things and pulled it out and wrapped it close around her and pulled it over her head like a cowl. Then she went back and sat down against the boulder, waiting, with the sublime patience of her kind, for Ramon.

Until the wind hushed, listening for the dawn, she sat there and waited. At her feet the little black dog slept with his nose folded between his front paws over which he whimpered sometimes in his dreams. At every little sound all through--the night Annie-Many-Ponies had listened, thinking that at last here came Ramon to take her to the priest, but for the first time since she had stolen out on the mesa to meet him, Ramon did not keep the tryst--and this was to be their marriage meeting! Annie-Many-Ponies grew very still and voiceless in her heart, as if her very soul waited. She did not even speculate upon what the future would be like if Ramon never came. She was waiting.

Then, just before the sky lightened, someone stepped cautiously along a little path that led through rocks and bushes back into the hills. Annie-Many Ponies turned her face that way and listened. But the steps were not the steps of Ramon; Annie-Many-Ponies had too much of the Indian keenness to be fooled by the hasty footsteps of this man. And since it was not Ramon--her slim fingers closed upon the keen-edged knife she carried always in its sinew-sewed buckskin sheath near her heart.

The little black dog lifted his head suddenly and growled, and the footsteps came to a sudden stop quite near the rock.

"It is you?" asked a cautious voice with the unmistakable Mexican tone and soft, slurring accent. "speak me what yoh name."

"Ramon comes?" Annie asked him quietly, and the footsteps came swiftly nearer until his form was silhouetted by the rock.

"Sh-sh--yoh not spik dat name," he whispered. "Luis Rojas me. I come for breeng yoh. No can come, yoh man. No spik name--som'bodys maybe hears."

Annie-Many-Ponies rose and stood peering at him through the dark. "What's wrong?" she asked abruptly, borrowing the curt phrase from Luck Lindsay. "Why I not speak name? Why--some body--?" she laid ironical stress upon the word--"not come? What business you got, Luis Rojas?"

"No--don' spik names, me!" The figure was seen to throw out an imploring hand. "Moch troubles, yoh bet! Yoh come now--somebodys she wait in dam-hurry!"

Annie-Many-Ponies, with her fingers still closed upon the bone handle of her sharp-edged knife, thought swiftly. Wariness had been born into her blood--therefore she could understand and meet halfway the wariness of another. Perhaps Wagalexa Conka had suspected that she was going with Ramon; Wagalexa Conka was very keen, and his anger blazed hot as pitch-pine flame. Perhaps Ramon feared Wagalexa Conka--as she, too, feared him. She was not afraid--she

would go to Ramon.

She stepped away from the rock and took the black horse by its dropped bridle-reins and followed Luis Rojas up the dim path that wound through trees and rocks until it dropped into a little ravine that was choked with brush, so that Annie-Many-Ponies had to put the stiff branches aside with her hand lest they scratch her face as she passed.

Luis went swiftly along the path, as though his haste was great; but he went stealthily as well, and she knew that he had some unknown cause for secrecy. She wondered a little at this. Had Wagalexá Conka discovered where she and Ramon were to meet? But how could he discover that which had been spoken but once, and then in the quiet loneliness of that place far back on the mesa? Wagalexá Conka had not been within three miles of that place, as Annie-Many-Ponies knew well. How then did he know? For he must have followed, since Ramon dared not come to the place he had named for their meeting.

Dawn came while they were still following the little, brush-choked ravine with its faint pathway up the middle of it, made by cattle or sheep or goats, perhaps all three. Luis hurried along, stopping now and then and holding up a hand for silence so that he might listen. Fast as he went, Annie-Many-Ponies kept within two long steps of his heels, her plaid shawl drawn smoothly over her black head and folded together under her chin. Her mouth was set in a straight line, and her chin had the square firmness of the Indian. Luis, looking back at her curiously, could not even guess at her thoughts, but he thought her too calm and cold for his effervescent nature--though he would have liked to tell her that she was beautiful. He did not, because he was afraid of Ramon.

"Poco tiempo, come to his camp, Ramon," he said when the sun was peering over the high shoulder of a ridge; and he spoke in a hushed tone, as if he feared that someone might overhear him.

"You 'fraid Wagalexá Conka, he come?" Annie-Many-Ponies asked abruptly, looking at him full.

Luis did not understand her, so he lifted his shoulders in the Mexican gesture which may mean much or nothing. "Quien sabe?" he muttered vaguely and went on. Annie-Many-Ponies did not know what he meant, but she guessed that he did not want to be questioned upon the subject; so she readjusted the shawl that had slipped from her head and went on silently, two long steps behind him.

In a little he turned from the ravine, which was becoming more open and not quite so deep. They scrambled over boulders which the horse must negotiate carefully to avoid a broken leg, and then they were in another little ravine, walled round with rocks and high, brushy slopes. Luis went a little way, stopped beside a huge, jutting boulder and gave a little exclamation of dismay.

"No more here, Ramon," he said, staring down at the faintly smoking embers of a little fire. "She's go som' place, I don't know, me."

The slim right hand of Annie-Many-Ponies went instinctively to her bosom and

to what lay hidden there. But she waited, looking from the little campfire that was now almost dead, to Luis whom she suspected of treachery. Luis glanced up at her apologetically, caught something of menace in that unwinking, glittering stare, and began hastily searching here and there for some sign that would enlighten him further.

"She's here when I go, Ramon," he explained deprecatingly. "I don' un'stan', me. She's tell me go breeng yoh thees place. She's say I mus' huree w'ile dark she's las'. I'm sure s'prised, me!" Luis was a slender young man with a thin, patrician face that had certain picture values for Luck, but which greatly belied his lawless nature. Until he stood by the rock where she had waited for Ramon, Annie-Many-Ponies had never spoken to him. She did not know him, therefore she did not trust him--and she looked her distrust.

Luis turned from her after another hasty glance, and began searching for some sign of Ramon. Presently, in a tiny cleft near the top of the boulder, his black eyes spied a folded paper--two folded papers, as he discovered when he reached up eagerly and pulled them out.

"She's write letter, Ramon," he cried with a certain furtive excitement. "Thees for yoh." And he smiled while he gave her a folded note with "Ana" scrawled hastily across the face of it.

Annie-Many-Ponies extended her left hand for it, and backed the few steps away from him which would insure her safety against a sudden attack, before she opened the paper and read:

"Querida mia, you go with Luis. Hes all rite you trus him. He bring you where i am. i lov you. Ramon"

She read it twice and placed the note in her bosom--next the knife--and looked at Luis, the glitter gone from her eyes. She smiled a little. "I awful hongry," she said in her soft voice, and it was the second sentence she had spoken since they left the rock where she had waited.

Luis smiled back, relief showing in the uplift of his lips and the lightening of his eyes. "She's cache grob, Ramon," he said. "She's go som' place and we go also. She's wait for us. Dam-long way--tree days, I thenk me."

"You find that grub," said Annie-Many-Ponies, letting her hand drop away from the knife. "I awful hongry. We eat, then we go."

"No--no go till dark comes! We walk in night--so somebody don' see!"

Annie-Many-Ponies looked at him sharply, saw that he was very much in earnest, and turned away to gather some dry twigs for the fire. Up the canon a horse whinnied inquiringly, and Luis, hastening furtively that way, found the horse he had ridden into this place with Ramon. With the problem of finding provender for the two animals, he had enough to occupy him until Annie-Many-Ponies, from the coarse food he brought her, cooked a crude breakfast.

Truly, this was not what she had dreamed the morning would be like--she who

had been worried over the question of whether Ramon would let her confess to the priest before they were married! Here was no priest and no Ramon, even; but a keen-eyed young Mexican whom she scarcely knew at all; and a mysterious hiding-out in closed-in canons until dark before they might follow Ramon who loved her. Annie-Many-Ponies did not understand why all this stealthiness should be necessary, for she knew that proof of her honorable marriage would end Luck's pursuit--supposing he did pursue--even though his anger might live always for her. She did not understand; and when an Indian confronts a situation which puzzles him, you may be very sure that same Indian is going to be very, very cautious. Annie-Many-Ponies was Indian to the middle of her bone.

CHAPTER XVII. APPLEHEAD SHOWS THE STUFF HE IS MADE OF

Lite Avery, turning to look back as they galloped up a long slope so gradual in its rise that it seemed almost level, counted just fourteen Indians spreading out fanwise in pursuit. He turned to Applehead with the quiet deference in his manner that had won the old man's firm friendship.

"What's this new move signify, boss?" he asked, tilting his head backward.
"What they spreading out like that for, when they're outa easy rifle range?"

Applehead looked behind him, studied the new formation of their enemy, and scowled in puzzlement. He looked ahead, where he knew the land lay practically level before them, all sand and rabbit weed, with a little grass here and there; to the left, where the square butte stood up bold-faced and grim; to the right where a ragged sandstone ledge blocked the way.

"S some dang new trap uh theirn," he decided, his voice signifying disgust for such methods. "Take an Injun 'n' he don't calc'late he's fightin' 'nless he's figgurin' on gittin' yuh cornered. Mebby they got some more cached ahead som'ers. Keep yer eye peeled, boys, 'n' shoot at any dang thing yuh see that yuh ain't dead sure 's a rabbit weed. Don't go bankin' on rocks bein' harmless--'cause every dang one's liable to have an Injun layin' on his belly behind it. Must be another bunch ahead som'ers, 'cause I know it's smooth goin' fer five miles yit. After that they's a drop down into a rocky kinda pocket that's hard t' git out of except the way yuh go in, account of there bein' one uh them dang rim-rocks runnin' clean 'round it. Some calls it the Devil's Fryin'-pan. No water ner grass ner nothin' else 'ceptin' snakes. 'N' Navvies kinda ownin' rattlers as bein' their breed uh cats, they don't kill 'em off, so they's a heap 'n' plenty of 'em in that basin.

"But I ain't aimin' t' git caught down in there, now I'm tellin' yuh! I aim t' keep along clost t' that there butte, 'n' out on the other side where we kin pick up luck's trail. I shore would do some rarin' around if that boy rode off into a mess uh trouble, 'n' I'm tellin' yuh straight!"

"He's got some good boy at his back," Weary reminded him, loyal to his Flying U comrade.

"You're dang right he has! I ain't sayin' he ain't, am I? Throw some more lead

back at them skunks behind us, will ye, Lite? 'N' the rest of yuh save yore shells fer close-ups!" He grinned a little at the incongruity of a motion-picture phrase in such a situation as this. "'N' don't be so dang skeered uh hurtin' somebody!" he adjured Lite, drawing rein a little so as not to forge ahead of the other. "You'll have to kill off a few anyway 'fore you're through with 'em."

Lite aimed at the man riding in the center of the half-circle, and the bullet he sent that way created excitement of some sort; but whether the Indian was badly hit, or only missed by a narrow margin, the four did not wait to discover. They had held their horses down to a pace that merely kept them well ahead of the Indians; and though the horses were sweating, they were holding their own easily enough--with a reserve fund of speed if their riders needed to call upon it.

Applehead, glancing often behind him, scowled over the puzzle of that fanlike formation of riders. They would hardly begin so soon to herd him and his men into that evil little rock basin with the sinister name, and there was no other reason he could think of which would justify those tactics, unless another party waited ahead of them. He squinted ahead uneasily, but the mesa lay parched and empty under the sky--

And then, peering straight into the glare of the sun, he saw, down the slope which they had climbed without realizing that it would have a crest, it was so low--Applehead saw the answer to the puzzle; saw and gave his funny little grunt of astonishment and dismay. Straight as a chalk line from the sandstone ledge on their right to the straight-walled butte on their left stretched that boundary line between the untamed wilderness and the tamed--a barbed wire fence; a four-wire fence at that, with stout cedar posts whereon the wire was stretched taut and true. From the look of the posts, it was not new--four or five years old, perhaps; not six years, certainly, for Applehead had ridden this way six years before and there had been not so much as a post-hole to herald the harnessing of the mesa.

Here, then, was the explanation of the fanlike spreading out of the line of Indians. They knew that the white men would be trapped by the fence, and they were cutting off the retreat--and keeping out of the hottest danger-zone of the white men's guns. Even while the four were grasping the full significance of the trap that they had ridden into unaware, the Indians topped the ridge behind them, yip-yip-yipping gleefully their coyotelike yells of triumph. The sound so stirred the slow wrath of Lite Avery that, without waiting for the word from Applehead he twisted half around in his saddle, glanced at the nearest Indian along his rifle-sights, bent his forefinger with swift deliberation upon the trigger, and emptied the saddle of one yelling renegade, who made haste to crawl behind a clump of rabbit weed.

"They howl like a mess uh coyotes," Lite observed in justification of the shot, "and I'm getting sick of hearing 'em."

"Mama!" Weary, exclaimed annoyedly, "that darn fence is on an up-slope, so it's going to be next to impossible to jump it! I guess here's where we do about an eight-hundred-foot scene of Indian Warfare, or Fighting For Their Lives. How yuh feel, Cadwalloper?"

"Me?" Pink's eyes were purple with sheer, fighting rage. "I feel like cleaning out that bunch back there. They'll have something to howl about when I get through!"

"Stay back uh me, boys!" Applehead's voice had a masterful sharpness that made the three tighten reins involuntarily. "You foller me and don't crowd up on me, neither. Send back a shot or two if them Injuns gits too ambitious."

The three fell in behind him without cavil or question. He was in charge of the outfit, and that settled it. Pink, released from irksome inaction by the permission to shoot, turned and fired back at the first Indian his sights rested upon. He saw a spurt of sand ten jumps in advance of his target, and he swore and fired again without waiting to steady his aim. The sorrel pack-horse, loping along fifty yards or so behind with a rhythmic clump-clump of frying-pan against coffee-pot at every leap he took, swerved sharply, shook his head as though a bee had stung him, and came on with a few stiff-legged "crow hops" to register his violent objection to being shot through the ear.

Pink, with an increased respect for the shooting skill of Lite Avery, glanced guiltily at the others to see if they had observed where his second bullet hit. But the others were eyeing Applehead uneasily and paid no attention to Pink or his attempts to hit an Indian on the run. And presently Pink forgot it also while he watched Applehead, who was apparently determined to commit suicide in a violently original form.

"You fellers keep behind, now---and hold the Injuns back fer a minute er two," Applehead yelled while he set himself squarely in the saddle, gathered up his reins as though he were about to "top a bronk" and jabbed the spurs with a sudden savageness into Johnny's flanks.

"GIT outa here!" he yelled, and Johnny with an astonished lunge, "got."

Straight toward the fence they raced, Johnny with his ears laid back tight against his skull and his nose pointed straight out before him, with old Applehead leaning forward and yelling to Johnny with a cracked hoarseness that alone betrayed how far youth was behind him.

They thought at first that he meant to jump the fence, and they knew he could not make it. When they saw that he meant to ride through it, Weary and Pink groaned involuntarily at the certainty of a fall and sickening entanglement in the wires. Only Lite, cool as though he were rounding up milch cows, rode half-turned in the saddle and sent shot after shot back at the line of Navajos, with such swift precision that the Indians swerved and fell back a little, leaving another pony wallowing in the sand and taking with them one fellow who limped until he had climbed up behind one who waited for him.

"Go it, Johnny--dang yore measly hide, go to it! We'll show 'm we ain't so old 'n' tender we cain't turn a trick t'bug their dang eyes out? Bust into it! WE'LL show 'em!--" And Applehead shrilled a raucous range "HOO-EEE-EE!" as Johnny lunged against the taut wires.

It was a long chance he took--a "dang long chance" as Applehead admitted

afterward. But, as he had hoped, it happened that Johnny's stride brought him with a forward leap against the wires, so that the full impact of his eleven-hundred pounds plus the momentum of his speed, plus the weight of Applehead and the saddle, hit the wires fair and full. They popped like cut wires on a bale of hay--and it was lucky that they were tight strung so that there was no slack to take some of the force away. It was not luck, but plain shrewdness on Applehead's part, that Johnny came straight on, so that there was no tearing see-saw of the strands as they broke. Two inch-long cuts on his chest and a deeper, longer one on his foreleg was the price Johnny paid, and that was all. The lower wire he never touched, since it was a leap that landed him against the fence. He lurched and recovered himself, and went on at a slower gallop while Applehead beckoned the three to come on.

"I kain't say I'd want to git in the habit uh bustin' fences that way," he grinned over his shoulder as the three jumped through the gap he had made and forged up to him. "But I calc'late if they's another one Johnny n' me kin make it, mebby."

"Well, I was brought up in a barbed wire country," Pink exploded, "but I'll be darned if I ever saw a stunt like that pulled off before!"

"We-ell, I hed a bronk go hog-wild 'n' pop three wires on a fence one time," Applehead explained modestly, "'n' he didn't cut hisself a-tall, skurcely. It's all accordin' t' how yuh hit it, I reckon. Anyway, I calc'lated it was wuth tryin', 'cause we shore woulda had our hands full if we'd stopped at that fence, now I'm tellin' yuh! 'N' another thing," he added bodefully, "I figgured we'd better be gittin' to Luck In' his bunch. I calc'late they need us, mebby."

No one made any reply to that statement, but even Lite, who never had been inclined to laugh at him, looked at Applehead with a new respect. The Indians, having scurried back out of range of Lite's uncomfortably close shooting, yelled a bedlam of yips and howls and came on again in a closer group than before, shooting as they rode--at the four men first, and then at the hindmost pack-horse that gave a hop over the wire left across the gap, and came galloping heavily after the others. They succeeded in burying a bullet in the packed bedding, but that was all.

Three hundred yards or so in the lead, the four raced down the long, gentle slope. A mile or two, perhaps three, they could run before their horses gave out. But then, when they could run no longer, they would have to stop and fight; and the question that harped continually through their minds was: Could they run until they reached Luck and the boys with him? Could they? They did not even know where Luck was, or what particular angle of direction would carry them to him quickest. Applehead and Johnny were pointing the way, keeping a length ahead of the others. But even old Applehead was riding, as he would have put it, "by-guess and by-gosh" until they crossed a shallow draw, labored up the hill beyond, and heard, straight away before them, the faint pop-pop of rifle shots. Old Applehead turned and sent them a blazing blue glance over his shoulders.

"RIDE, dang ye!" he barked. "They've got Luck cornered in the Devil's Fryin'-pan!"

CHAPTER XVIII. IN THE DEVIL'S FRYING-PAN

Luck, riding confidently on the trail of the three horsemen who had taken to the south along the front of the square butte, believed that the turn of the trail around the southern end meant simply that the three who came this way would meet their companions on the other side, and that he, following after, would be certain to meet Applehead. He had hopes of the speedy capture of Ramon Chavez and his men, and the hope spread to the four who went with him, so that their spirits rose considerably. Big Medicine and Happy Jack even found a good deal of amusement in their exchange of opinions regarding old granny Applehead and his constant fear of the Navvies. Now and then the Native Son joined in the laugh, though his attention was chiefly given to the discussion Andy and Luck were having about Ramon and his manner of using Luck's work as an opportunity to rob the bank, and the probable effect it would have on the general standing of Luck and his company unless they managed to land the thieves in jail. Being half Mexican himself, the Native Son was sensitive upon the subject of Ramon, and almost as anxious to see Ramon in jail as was Luck himself.

So while Applehead and his boys were scenting danger and then finding themselves in the middle of it, Luck and his party rode along absorbed in themselves and in the ultimate goal, which was Ramon. They saw nothing queer about the trail they followed, and they saw no evidence of treachery anywhere. They rode with the rifles slung under their right thighs and their six-shooters at their hips, and their eyes roving casually over their immediate surroundings while their minds roved elsewhere--not because they were growing careless, but because there was absolutely nothing to rouse their suspicions, now that they no longer had Applehead along to preach danger and keep them keyed up to expect it.

They followed the tracks through a scattered grove of stunted pinons, circled at fault for a few minutes in the rocks beyond, and then picked up the trail. They were then in the narrow neck which was called the handle of the Devil's Frying-pan--and they would have ridden unsuspectingly into the very Pan itself, had not the Native Son's quick eyes caught a movement on the rim-rock across the bare, rock-bottomed basin. He spoke to Luck about it, and Luck levelled his field glasses and glimpsed a skulking form up there.

"Hunt yourselves some shelter, boys!" he cried in the sharp tone of warning. "We'll make sure who's ahead before we go any farther."

They ducked behind rocks or trees and piled off their horses in a burry. And a scattered fusillade from the rim-rock ahead of them proved how urgent was their need.

For the first fifteen minutes or so they thought that they were fighting Ramon and his party, and their keenest emotions were built largely of resentment, which showed in the booming voice of Big Medicine when he said grimly:

"Well, I'd jest about as soon pack Ramon in ,dead, as lead 'im in alive 'n'

kickin', by cripes! Which is him, d'yuh reckon?"

From behind a rock shield Luck was studying the ledge. "They're Injuns--or there are Injuns in the bunch, at least," he told them after a moment. "See that sharp point sticking up straight ahead? I saw an Injun peeking around the edge--to the south. You watch for him, Andy, and let him have it where he lives next time he sticks his head out." He swung the glasses slowly, taking every inch of the rim in his field of vision. As he moved them he named the man he wanted to watch each place where he had reason to suspect that someone was hiding.

The disheartening part of it was that he needed about a dozen more men than he had; for the rock wall which was the rim of the Frying-pan seemed alive with shooters who waited only for a fair target. Then the Native Son, crouched down between a rock and a clump of brush, turned his head to see what his horse was looking at, back whence they had come.

"Look behind you, Luck," he advised with more calmness than one would expect of a man in his straits. "They're back in the pines, too."

"Fight 'em off--and take care that your backs don't show to those babies on the rim-rocks," he ordered instantly, thrusting his glasses into their case and snatching his rifle from its boot on the saddle. "They won't tackle coming across that bare hollow, even if they can get down into it without breaking their necks. Happy, lead your horse in here between these rocks where mine is. Bud, see if you can get the pack-horses over there outa sight among those bushes and rocks. We'll hold 'em off while you fix the horses--can't let ourselves be set afoot out here!"

"I-should-say--NOT!" Andy Green punctuated the sentence with a shot or two. "Say, I wish they'd quit sneaking around in those trees that way, so a fellow could see where to shoot!"

A half hour dragged by. From the rim-rock came occasional shots, to which the besieged could not afford to reply, they were so fully occupied with holding back those who skulked among the trees. The horses, fancying perhaps that this was a motion-picture scene, dozed behind their rock-and-brush shelters and switched apathetically at buzzing flies and whining bullets alike. Their masters crouched behind their boulders and watched catlike for some open demonstration, and fired when they had the slightest reason to believe that they would hit something besides scenery.

"Miguel must have upset their plans a little," Luck deduced after a lull. "They set the stage for us down in that hollow, I guess. You can see what we'd have been up against if we had ridden ten rods farther, out away from these rocks and bushes."

"Aw, they wouldn't dast kill a bunch uh white men!" Happy Jack protested, perhaps for his own comfort.

"You think they wouldn't? Luck's voice was surcharged with sarcasm. What do you think they're trying to do, then?"

"Aw, the gov'ment wouldn't STAND fer no such actions!"

"Well, by cripes, I hain't aimin' to give the gov'ment no job uh setting on my remains, investigatin' why I was killed off!" Big Medicine asserted, and took a shot at a distant grimy Stetson to prove he meant what he said.

"Say, they'd have had a SNAP if we'd gone on, and let these fellows back here in the trees close up behind us!" Andy Green exclaimed suddenly, with a vividness of gesture that made Happy Jack try to swallow his Adam's apple. "By gracious, it would have been a regular rabbit-drive business. They could set in the shade and pick us off just as they darned pleased."

"Aw, is that there the cheerfulest thing you can think of to say?" Happy Jack was sweating, with something more than desert heat.

"Why, no. The cheerfulest thing I can think of right now is that Mig, here, don't ride with his eyes shut." He cast a hasty glance of gratitude toward the Native Son, who flushed under the smooth brown of his cheeks while he fired at a moving bush a hundred yards back in the grove.

For another half hour nothing was gained or lost. The Indians fired desultorily, spitting bit& of lead here and there among the rocks but hitting nobody. The Happy Family took a shot at every symptom of movement in the grove, and toward the, rim-rock they sent a bullet now and then, just to assure the watchers up there that they were not forgotten, and as a hint that caution spelled safety.

For themselves, the boys were amply protected there on the side of the Frying-pan where the handle stretched out into the open land toward the mountain. Perhaps here was once a torrent flowing from the basin-like hollow walled round with rock; at any rate, great boulders were scattered all along the rim as though spewed from the basin by some mighty force of the bygone ages. The soil, as so often happens in the West, was fertile to the very edge of the Frying-pan and young pinons and bushes had taken root there and managed to keep themselves alive with the snow-moisture of winter, in spite of the scanty rainfall the rest of the year.

The boys were amply protected, yes; but there was not a drop of water save what they had in their canteens, and there was no feed for their horses unless they chose to nibble tender twigs off the bushes near them and call that food. There was, of course, the grain in the packs, but there was neither time nor opportunity to get it out. If it came to a siege, luck and his boys were in a bad way, and they knew it. They were penned as well as protected there in that rocky, brushy neck. The most that they could do was to discourage any rush from those back in the grove; as to getting through that grove themselves, and out in the open, there was not one chance in a hundred that they could do it.

From the outside in to where they were entrenched was just a trifle easier. The Indians in the grove were all absorbed in watching the edge of the Frying-pan and had their backs to the open, never thinking that white men would be coming that way; for had not the other party been decoyed around the farther end of the big butte, and did not several miles and a barbed-wire fence lie between?

So when Applehead and his three, coming in from the north, approached the grove, they did it under cover of a draw that hid them from sight. From the shots that were fired, Applehead guessed the truth; that Luck's bunch had sensed danger before they had actually ridden into the Frying-pan itself, and that the Navajos were trying to drive them out of the rocks, and were not making much of a success of it.

"Now," Applehead instructed the three when they were as close as they could get to the grove without being seen, "I calc'late about the best thing we kin do, boys, is t' spur up our hosses and ride in amongst 'em shooting and a-hollerin'. Mebby we kin jest natcherlay stampede 'em--but we've sure got t' git through In' git under cover mighty dang suddent, er they'll come to theirselves an' wipe us clean off'n the map--if they's enough of 'em. These here that's comin' along after us, they'll help t' swell the party, oncet they git here. I calc'late they figger 't we're runnin' head-on into a mess uh trouble, 'n' they don't want t' colleck any stray bullets--'n' that's why they've dropped back in the last half mile er so. Haze them pack bosses up this way, Pink, so'st they won't git caught up 'fore they git t' what the rest air. Best use yore six-guns fer this, boys--that'll leave ye one hand t' guide yore bosses with, and they're handier all around in close--work. Air ye ready? Then come on--foller me 'n' come a-whoopin'!"

A-whooping they came, up out of the draw and in among the trees as though they had a regiment behind them. Certain crouching figures jumped, sent startled glances behind them and ran like partridges for cover farther on. Only one or two paused to send a shot at these charging fiends who seemed bent on riding them down and who yelled like devils turned loose from the pit. And before they had found safe covert on the farther fringes of the grove and were ready to meet the onslaught, the clamor had ceased and the white men had joined those others among the rocks.

So now there were nine men cornered here on the, edge of the Frying-pan, with no water for their horses and not much hope of getting out of there.

"Darn you, Applehead, why didn't you keep out of this mess?" Luck demanded with his mouth drawn down viciously at the corners and his eyes warm with affection and gratitude. "What possessed your fool heart to ride into this trap?"

"We-ell, dang it, we had t' ride som'ers, didn't we?" Applehead, safe behind a boulder, pulled off his greasy, gray Stetson and polished his bald head disconcertedly. "Had a bunch uh Navvies hangin' t' our heels like tumbleweed--'n' we been doin' some RIDIN', now, I'm a tellin' ye! 'F Lite, here, hadn't kep' droppin' one now an' then fur the rest t' devour, I calc'late we'd bin et up, a mile er two back!"

Lite looked up from shoving more cartridges into his rifle-magazine. "If we hadn't had a real, simon-pure go-getter to boss the job," he drawled, "I reckon all the shooting I did wouldn't have cut any ice. Ain't that right, boys?"

Pink, resting his rifle in a niche of the boulder and moving it here and there

trying to fix his sights on a certain green sweater back in the woods that he had glimpsed a minute before, nodded assent. "You're durn tootin' it's right!" he testified.

Weary looked shining-eyed at Applehead's purple face. "Sure, that's right!" he emphasized. "And I don't care how much of a trap you call this, it isn't a patching to the one Applehead busted us out of. He's what I call a Real One, boys."

"Aw, shet yore dang head 'n' git yore rifles workin'!" Applehead blurted. "This yere ain't no time fer kiddin', 'n' I'm tellin' yuh straight. What's them fellers acrost the Fryin'-pan think they're tryin' t' do? luck le's you'n me make a few remarks over that way, 'n' leave the boys t' do some gun-talk with these here babies behind us. Dang it, if I knowed of a better place 'n' what this is fer holdin' 'em off, I'd say make a run fer it. But I don't 'n' that's fact. Yuh musta sprung the trap 'fore yuh got inside, 'cause they shore aimed t' occupy this nest uh rocks theirselves, with you fellers down there in the Fryin'-pan where they could git at yuh.

"Thar's one of 'em up on the rim-rock--see 'im?--standin' thar, by granny, like he was darin' somebody t' cut loose! Here, Lite, you spill some lead up thar. We'll learn 'im t' act up smart--"

"Hey, hold on!" Luck grabbed Lite's arm as he was raising his rifle for a close shot at the fellow. "Don't shoot! Don't you see? That's the peace-sign he's making!"

"Well, now, dang it, he better be makin' peace-signs!" growled Applehead querulously, and sat down heavily on a shelf of the rock. "'Cause Lite, here, shore woulda tuk an ear off'n him in another minnute, now I'm tellin' ye!"

CHAPTER XIX. PEACE TALK

Across the Frying-pan an Indian stood boldly out upon a jutting point of rock and raised a hand in the sweeping upward motion of the peace-sign. The questing bullets that came seeking for bone and flesh among the rocks and bushes came no more when the signal was passed from those who saw to those farther back who could not see the figure silhouetted against the brilliant blue of the sky. A moment he stood, made the sign again, and waited.

"That's peace-sign, sure as you're born!" Luck cried breathlessly, and went scrambling through the bushes to where he might stand in the open, on the very rim of the basin. Applehead yelled to him to come back and not make a dang fool of himself, but luck gave no heed to the warning. He stood out in the blazing sunshine and gave the peace-sign in reply.

On the-rim rock the Indian stood motionless while he might have taken three or four breaths. Then with his hand he gave the sign for "pow-wow" and waited again.

Luck, his pulse thrilling at the once familiar gesture which his tribal

"father," old chief Big Turkey, used to give when he came stalking up for his daily confab with his adopted son, gave back the sign with a hand that trembled noticeably. Whereupon the Indian on the farther rim turned and began dignifiedly to climb through a rift in the ledge down into the Frying-pan.

"He wants a pow-wow," Luck called back to the bunch. "You fellows stay where you're at I'm going out there in the middle and talk to him."

"Now, Luck, don't let 'em make a dang monkey outa ye," Applehead protested anxiously. "Injuns is tricky--"

"That's all right. You can keep a couple of rifles sighted on that old chief--that's what he is, I take it, from his actions and his talking 'sign' and then if they pot me, you can pot him. But they won't. I know Injuns better than you do, Applehead. He just wants to talk things over--and I'm certainly willing that he should!"

"Well, Lite, you keep your sights lined up on that Injun, then. 'N' if they's a crooked move made towards Luck, you cut loose--'n' say! You shoot to kill, this time!" He shook his finger in Lite's face admonishingly. "'S all right t' nip 'em here 'n' take a hunk out there jest t' kinda take their minds off'n us---'s all right enough so fur, 'n' I ain't kickin' none 'cause yuh ain't killed off yuh hit. But if this here's a trick t' git Luck, you KILL that Injun. 'N' if you don't do it I'll go out there m'self 'n' choke the dang skunk t' death!"

"I'll kill him--don't worry about that," Lite promised--and the look in his eyes told them that the Indian was doomed at the first sign of treachery.

"You fellers wanta keep an eye peeled fer them in the grove," Applehead warned. "We ain't goin' t' give 'em no chanst t' sneak up 'n' skulp us whilst we're watchin' Luck 'n' his dang-fool pow-wowin' out there in the middle."

"Aw, gwan! They wouldn't DAST skelp white folks!" There was a wail in the voice of Happy Jack.

"They dast if they git the chanst," Applehead retorted fretfully. "'N' if you don't wanta loose that there red mop uh yourn ye better keep yer eyes open, now I'm tellin' yuh!" He refilled his rifle magazine and took up his station beside Lite Avery where he could watch the Frying-pan through the bushes without exposing himself to a treacherous shot from the rim-rock.

At the foot of the sandstone ledge the Indian stood with his bright red blanket wrapped around him watching Luck. On his own side Luck stood just clear of the rock huddle and watched the Indian. Presently he of the red blanket lifted his hand in the gesture of peace, and started deliberately out across the bare little basin. From his own side, Luck, returning again the gesture, went out to meet him. In the center they met, and eyed each other frankly. Still eyeing Luck, the old Indian put out his hand Indian fashion, and Luck gave it one downward shake and let go.

"How?" he grunted; and in the Indian custom of preparing for a leisurely pow-wow as he had been taught by the Sioux, he squatted upon his boot heels

and reached for his cigarette papers and tobacco.

"How?" replied the Navajo, a flicker of interest in his eyes at these little Indian touches in Luck's manner, and sat himself down cross-legged on the hot sand. Luck rolled a cigarette and passed the "makings" to the other, who received it gravely and proceeded to help himself. Luck scratched a match on a stone that lay beside him, lighted the Indian's cigarette and then his own, took four puffs and blew the smoke upward, watching it spread and drift away, and made the gesture that meant "Our pow-wow will be good," as he had seen the Sioux medicine men do before a council. Afterwards he began placidly to smoke and meditate.

From his manner you would never have guessed that his life and the lives of the Happy Family hung upon the outcome of this meeting. You would not have surmised that his stomach was gnawing at his nerves, sending out insistently the call for food; or that his thirst tormented him; or that the combination of hunger, heat, thirst and mental strain had bred a jumping headache that was knotting the veins in his temples. All these nagging miseries beset him--but he knew the ways of the Indians and he meant to impress this old man first of all with his plains-Indian training; so he schooled himself to patience.

The Indian eyed him furtively from under heavy eyebrows while he smoked. And the sun beat savagely down upon the sand of that basin, and Luck's vision blurred with the pain that throbbed behind his eyes. But the facial discipline of the actor was his to command, and he permitted his face to give no sign of what he felt or thought.

The Indian leaned slowly, lifted a brown hand, made a studied gesture or two and waited, his eyes fixed unwinkingly upon Luck. It was as if he were saying to himself: "We'll see if this white man can speak in the sign-talk of the Indians."

Luck lifted his two hands, drew them slowly apart to say that he had come a long way. Then, using only his hands--sometimes his fingers only--he began to talk; to tell the old Navajo that he and eight other white men were sheriffs and that they were chasing four white men (since he had no sign that meant Mexican) who had stolen money; that they had come from Albuquerque--and there he began to draw in the sand between them a crude but thoroughly understandable sketch of the trail they had taken and the camps they had made, and the distance they believed the four thieves had travelled ahead of them.

He marked the camp where their horses had been stolen from them and told how long they had waited there until the horses of their own accord returned to camp; thirteen horses, he explained to the old Navajo. He drew a rough square to indicate the square butte, sketched the fork of the trail there and told how four men had turned to the north on a false trail, while he and four others had gone around the southern end of the hill. He calmly made plain that at the end of both false trails a trap had been laid, that Indians had fired upon white men and for no just cause. Why was this so? Why had Indians surrounded them back there in the grove and tried to kill them? Why were Indians shooting at them from the ledge of rocks that circled this little basin? They had no quarrel with the Navajos. They were chasing thieves, to take them to jail.

Folded swelteringly in his red blanket the old Indian sat humped forward a little, smoking slowly his cigarette and studying the sketch Luck had drawn for him. With aching head and parched throat and hungry stomach, Luck sat cross-legged on the hot sand and waited, and would not let his face betray any emotion at all. Up on the rim-rock brown faces peered down steadfastly at the pow-wow. And back among the rocks and bushes the Happy Family waited restively with eyes turning in all directions guarding against treachery; and Lite, whose bullets always went straight to the spot where they were aimed, stood and stared fixedly over his rifle sights at the red-blanketed figure squatted in the sand and kept his finger crooked upon the trigger. Beside him Applehead fidgeted and grumbled and called Luck names for being so dang slow, and wondered if those two out there meant to sit and chew the rag all day.

The Indian leaned and traced Luck's trail slowly with his finger. Did the four white men come that way? he asked in sign. And then, had Luck seen them? Was he sure that he was following the four who had stolen money in Albuquerque?

Come to think of it, Luck was not sure to the point of being able to take oath that it was so. He traced again where the hoofprints had been discovered near the stalled automobile, and signed that the six horses they believed to have belonged to the four who had taken two horses packed with food and blankets--and the stolen money.

Then suddenly Luck remembered that, for proof of his story, he had a page of the Evening Herald in his pocket, torn from a copy he had bought on the streets the evening after the robbery. He pulled the folded paper out, spread it before the other and pointed to the article that told of the robbery. "Call some young man of your tribe who can read," he signed. "Let him read and tell you if I have spoken the truth."

The Indian took the paper and looked at it curiously.

Now, unless Applehead or some other hot-head spoiled things, Luck believed that things would smooth down beautifully. There had been some misunderstanding, evidently--else the Indian would never have manifested all this old-fashioned hostility.

The blanketed one showed himself a true diplomat. "Call one of your white men, that there may be two and two," he gestured. And he added, with the first words he had spoken since they met, "Hablo espanol?"

Well, if he spoke Spanish, thought Luck, why the deuce hadn't he done it at first? But there is no fathoming the reticence of an Indian--and Luck, by a sudden impulse, hid his own knowledge of the language. He stood up and turned toward the rocks, cupped his hands around his lips and called for the Native Son. "And leave your rifle at home," he added as an afterthought and in the interests of peace.

The Indian turned to the rim-rock, held up the fragment of newspaper and called for one whom he called Juan. Presently Juan's Stetson appeared above the ledge, and Juan himself scrambled hastily down the rift and came to them, grinning with his lips and showing a row of beautifully even teeth, and asking

suspicious questions with his black eyes that shone through narrowed lids.

Miguel, arriving just then from the opposite direction, sized him up with one heavy-lashed glance and nodded negligently. He had left his rifle behind him as he had been told, but his six-shooter hung inside the waistband of his trousers where he could grip it with a single drop of his hand. The Native Son, lazy as he looked, was not taking any chances.

The old Indian explained in Navajo to the young man who eyed the two white men while, he listened. Of the blanket-vending, depot-haunting type was this young man, with a ready smile and a quick eye for a bargain and a smattering of English learned in his youth at a mission, and a larger vocabulary of Mexican that lent him fluency of speech when the mood to talk was on him. Half of his hair was cut so that it hung even with his ear-lobes. At the back it was long and looped up in the way a horse's tail is looped in muddy weather, and tied with a grimy red ribbon wound round and round it. He wore a green-and-white roughneck sweater broadly striped, and the blue overalls that inevitably follow American civilization into the wild places.

"S hot day," he announced unemotionally, and took the paper which the red-blanketed one held out to him. His air of condescension could not hide the fact that behind his pride at being able to read print he was unhappily aware also of his limitations in the accomplishment. Along the scare-head Luck had indicated, his dirty forefinger moved slowly while he spelled out the words. "A-a-bank rob!" he read triumphantly, and repeated the statement in Spanish. After that he mumbled. a good deal of it, the longer words arresting his finger while he struggled with the syllables. But he got the sense of it nevertheless, as Luck and Miguel knew by the version he gave in Spanish to the old Indian, with now and then a Navajo word to help out.

When he came to the place where Ramon Chavez and Luis Rojas were named as the thieves, he gave a grunt and looked up at Luck and Miguel, read in, their faces that these were the men they sought, and grinned.

"Me, I know them feller," he declared unexpectedly. "Dat day I seen them feller. They go--"

The old Indian touched him on the shoulder, and Juan turned and repeated the statement in Spanish. The old man's eyes went to luck understandingly, while he asked Juan a question in the Navajo tongue, and afterwards gave a command. He turned his eyes upon the Native Son and spoke in Spanish. "The men you want did not come this way," he said gravely. "Juan will tell."

"Yes, I know dat Ramon Chavez. I seen him ,dat day. I'm start for home, an' I seen Ramon Chavez an' dat Luis Rojas an' one white feller I'm don't know dat feller. They don't got red car. They got big, black car. They come outa corral--scare my horse. They go 'cross railroad. I go 'cross rio. One red car pass me. I go along, bimeby I pass red car in sand. Ramon Chavez, he don't go in dat car. I don't know them feller. Ramon Chavez he go 'cross railroad in big black car."

"Then who was it we've been trailing out this way?" Luck asked the question in Spanish and glanced from one brown face to the other.

The older Indian shifted his moccasined feet in the sand and looked away. "Indians," he said in Mexican. "You follow, Indians think you maybe take them away--put 'm in jail. All friends of them Indians pretty mad. They come fight you. I hear, I come to find out what's fighting about."

Luck gazed at him stupidly for a moment until the full meaning of the statement seeped through the ache into his brain. He heaved a great sigh of relief, looked at the Native Son and laughed.

"The joke's on us, I guess," he said. "Go, back and tell that to the boys. I'll be along in a minute."

Juan, grinning broadly at what he considered a very good joke on the nine white men who had traveled all this way for nothing, went back to explain the mistake to his fellows on the ledge. The old Indian took it upon himself to disperse the Navajos in the grove, and just as suddenly as the trouble started it was stopped--and the Happy Family, if they had been at all inclined to belittle the danger of their position, were made to realize it when thirty or more Navajos came flocking in from all quarters. Many of them could--and did--talk English understandably, and most of them seemed inclined to appreciate the joke. All save those whom Lite had "nipped and nicked" in the course of their flight from the rock ridge to the Frying-Pan. These were inclined to be peevish over their hurts and to nurse them in sullen silence while Luck, having a rudimentary knowledge of medicine and surgery, gave them what firstaid treatment was possible.

Applehead, having plenty of reasons for avoiding publicity, had gone into retirement in the shade of a clump of brush, with Lite to keep him company while he smoked a meditative pipe or two and studied the puzzle of Ramon's probable whereabouts.

"Can't trust a Navvy," he muttered in a discreet undertone to Lite. "I've fit 'em b'fore now, 'n' I KNOW. 'N' you kin be dang sure they ain't fergot the times I've fit 'em, neither! There's bucks millin' around here that's jes' achin' fer a chanst at me, t' pay up fer some I've killed off when I was shurf 'n' b'fore. So you keep 'n ,eye peeled, Lite, whilst I think out this yere dang move uh Ramon's. 'N' if you see anybody sneakin' up on me, you GIT him. I cain't watch Navvyies 'n' mill things over in m' haid at the same time."

Lite grinned and wriggled over so that his back was against a rock. He laid his six-shooter Ostentatiously across his lap and got out his tobacco and papers. "Go ahead and think, Applehead," he consented placidly. "I'll guard your scalp-lock."

Speaking literally, Applehead had no scalplock to guard. But he did have a shrewd understanding of the mole-like workings of the criminal mind; and with his own mind free to work on the problem, he presently declared that he would bet he could land Ramon Chavez in jail within a week, and sent Lite after Luck.

"I've got it figgered out," he announced when Luck came over to his retreat. "If Ramon crossed the railroad he was aimin' t' hit out across the mesa to the

mountains 'n' beyond. He wouldn't go south, 'cause he could be traced among the Injun pueblos--they's a thousand eyes down, that way b'fore he'd git t' wild country. He'd keep away from the valley country--er I would, if I was him. I know dang well whar I'D hit fer if I was makin' a gitaway 'n' didn't come off over here--'n' I shore would keep outa Navvy country, now I'm tellin' yuh! No, sir, I'd take out t'other way, through Hell Canon er Tijeras, 'n' I'd make fer the Jemes country. That thar's plenty wild 'n' rough--'n' come t' think of it, the Chavez boys owns quite a big grant, up in there som'ers, 'n' have got men in their pay up thar, runnin' their cattle. Ramon could lay low fer a dang long while up thar 'n' be safer'n what he would be out amongst strangers.

"'N' another thing, I'd plan t' have some hosses stached out in one uh them canons, 'n' I'd mebbey use a autymobile t' git to 'em, 'n' send the car back t' town-- if I could trust the feller that drove it--outa my sight. 'N', Luck, if you'll take my advice, you'll hit out t'wards the Jemes country. I know every foot uh the way, 'n' we kin make it in a coupla days by pushin' the hosses. 'N' I'll bet every dang hoof I own 't we round up that bunch over thar som'ers."

"You lead out, then," Luck told him promptly. "I'm willing to admit you're better qualified to take charge of the outfit than I am. You know the country--and you've fit Indians."

"We-ell, now, you're dang right I have! 'N' if some them bucks don't go off 'n' mind their own business, I'll likely fight a few more! You shoo 'em outa camp, Luck, 'n' start 'em about their own dang business. 'N' we'll eat a bite 'n' git on about our own. If we show up any grub whilst this bunch is hangin' around we'll have t' feed 'em--'n' you know dang well we ain't got enough skurcely fer the Jemes trip as it is."

"I've been handing out money as it is till I'm about broke," Luck confessed, "making presents to those fellows that came in with bullets in their legs and arms. Funny nobody got hit in the body--except one poor devil that got shot in the shoulder."

"We-ell, now, you kin blame Lite's dang tender heart fer that there," Applehead accused, pulling at his sunbrowned mustache. "We was all comin' on the jump, 'n' so was the Injuns; 'n' it was purty long range 'n' nobody but lite could hit 'n Injun t' save his soul. 'N' Lite, he wouldn't shoot t' kill--he jes' kep' on nippin' an' nickin', 'n' shootin' a boss now an' then. I wisht I was the expert shot Lite is--I'd shore a got me a few Navvies back there, now I'm tellin' yuh!"

"Bud's got a bullet in his arm," Luck said, "but the bone wasn't hit, so he'll make out, and one of the pack-horses was shot in the ear. We got off mighty lucky, and I'm certainly glad Lite didn't get careless. Cost me about fifty dollars to square us as it is. You stay where you are, Applehead, till I get rid of the Indians. The old fellow acts like he feels he ought to stick along till we're outa here. He's kind of taken a notion to me because I can talk sign, and he seems to want to make sure we don't mix it again with the tribe. Some of them are kinda peeved, all right. You've got no quarrel with this old fellow, have you? He's a big-league medicine man in the tribe, and his Spanish

name is Mariano Pablo Montoya. Know him?"

"No I don't, 'n' I don't keer to neither," Applehead retorted crossly. "Shoo 'em off, Luck, so's we kin eat. My belly's shore a floppin' agin m' backbone, 'n' I'm tellin' yuh right!"

CHAPTER XX. LUIS ROJAS TALKS

Three days of hiding by day in sequestered little groves or deep, hidden canons, with only Luis Rojas to bear her company--Luis Rojas whom she did not trust and therefore watched always from under her long straight lashes, with oblique glances when she seemed to be gazing straight before her; three nights of tramping through rough places where often the horses must pause and feel carefully for space to set their feet. Roads there were, but Luis avoided roads as though they carried the plague. When he must cross one he invariably turned back and brushed out their footprints--until he discovered that Annie-Many-Ponies was much cleverer at this than he was; often he smoked a cigarette while Annie covered their trail. Three days and three nights, and Ramon was not there where they stopped for the third day.

"We go slow," Luis explained nervously because of the look in the black, unreadable eyes of this straight, slim Indian girl who was so beautiful--and so silent. "They go muy fas', Ramon an' Beel. Poco tiempo--sure, we fin' dem little soon."

Annie-Many-Ponies did not betray by so much as a quiver of an eyelash that Luis had mentioned Bill unwittingly. But she hid the name away in her memory, and all that day she sat and pondered over the meager facts that had come her way, and with the needle of her suspicion she wove them together patiently until the pattern was almost complete.

Ramon and Bill--what Bill, save Bill Holmes, would be with Ramon? Ramon and Bill Holmes--memory pictured them again by the rock in the moonlight, muttering in Spanish mostly, muttering mystery always. Ramon and Bill Holmes she remembered the sly, knowing glances between these two at "location" though they scarcely seemed on speaking terms. Ramon and Bill and this mysterious night-travelling, when there should be no trouble and no mystery at all beyond the house of the priest! So much trouble over the marriage of an Indian girl and a young Mexican cattle king? Annie-Many-Ponies was not so stupid as to believe that; she had seen too much of civilization in her wanderings with the show, and her work in pictures. She had seen man and maid "make marriage," in pictures and in reality. There should be no trouble, no mysterious following of Ramon by night.

Something evil there was, since Bill Holmes was with Ramon. Annie-Many-Ponies knew that it was so. Perhaps--perhaps the evil was against Wagalex Conka! Perhaps--her heart forgot to beat when the thought stabbed her brain--perhaps they had killed Wagalex Conka! It might be so, if he had suspected her flight and had followed Ramon, and they had fought.

In the thick shade of a pinon Luis slept with his face to the ground, his

forehead pressed upon his folded arms. Annie-Many-Ponies got up silently and went and stood beside him, looking down at him as though she meant to wrest the truth from his brain. And Luis, feeling in his sleep the intensity of her gaze, stirred uneasily, yawned and sat up, looking about him bewilderedly. His glance rested on the girl, and he sprang to his feet and faced her.

Annie-Many-Ponies smiled her little, tantalizing, wistfully inviting smile--the smile which luck had whimsically called heart-twisting. "I awful lonesome," she murmured, and sat down with her back nestling comfortably against a grassy bank. "You talk. I not lets you sleep all time. You think I not good for talk to?"

"Me, I not tell w'at I'm theenk," Luis retorted with a crooning note, and sat down facing her. "Ramon be mad me."

Annie-Many-Ponies looked at him, her eyes soft and heavy with that languorous look which will quickest befuddle the sense of a man. "You tell; Ramon not hear," she hinted. "Ramon, he got plenty troubles for thinking about." She smiled again. "Ramon plenty long ways off. He got Bill Holmes for talking to. You talk to me."

How he did it, why he did it, Luis Rojas could never explain afterwards. Something there was in her smile, in her voice, that bewitched him. Something there was that made him think she knew and approved of the thing Ramon had planned. He made swift, Spanish love to Annie-Many-Ponies, who smiled upon him but would not let him touch her hand--and so bewitched him the more. He made love--but also he talked. He told Annie-Many-Ponies all that she wished him to tell; and some things that she had never dreamed and that she shrank from hearing.

For he told her of the gold they had stolen, and how they had made it look as though Luck Lindsay had planned the theft. He told her that he loved her--which did not interest her greatly--and he told her that Ramon would never marry her--which was like a knife thrust to her soul. Ramon had many loves, said Luis, and he was true to none; never would he marry a woman to rule his life and make him trouble--it were easier to make love and then laugh and ride away. Luis was "muy s'prised" that Annie-Many-Ponies had ever believed that Ramon would marry her, beautiful though she was, charming though she was, altogether irresistible though she was--Luis became slightly incoherent here and lapsed into swift rolling Spanish words which she did not understand.

Luis, before the sun went down and it was time to eat supper and go on, became so thoroughly bewitched that he professed himself eager to let his share of the gold go, and to take Annie-Many-Ponies to a priest and marry her--if she wished very much to be married by a priest. In the middle of his exaltation, Annie-Many-Ponies chilled him with the look she gave him.

"You big fool," she told him bluntly. "I not so fool like that. I go to Ramon--and plenty gold! I think you awful fool. You make me tired!"

Luis was furious enough for a minute to do her violence--but Annie-Many-Ponies killed that impulse also with the cold contempt in her eyes. She was not

afraid of him, and like an animal he dared not strike where he could not inspire fear. He muttered a Mexican oath or two and went mortifiedly away to lead the horses down to the little stream where they might drink. The girl was right--he was a fool, he told himself angrily; and sulked for hours.

Fool or not, he had told Annie-Many-Ponies what she wanted to know. He had given food to her brooding thoughts--food that revived swiftly and nourished certain traits lying dormant in her nature, buried alive under the veneer of white man's civilization--as we are proud to call it.

The two ate in silence, and in silence they saddled the horses and fared forth again in their quest of Ramon--who had the gold which Annie-Many-Ponies boldly asserted was an added lure. "The monee--always the man wins that has muchos monee." Luis muttered often to himself as he rode into the dusk. Behind him Annie-Many-Ponies walked and led the black horse that bore all her worldly possessions bound to the saddle. The little black dog padded patiently along at his heels.

CHAPTER XXI. "WAGALEXA CONKA--COLA!"

"So good little girl yoh are to true' Ramon! Now I knows for sure yoh lov' me moch as I lov' yoh! Now we go little ride more to my house high up in the pinons--then we be so happy like two birds in nes'. Firs' we rest ourselves, querida mia. This good place for res', my sweetheart that comes so far to be with Ramon. To-morrow we go to my house--to nes' of my loved one. Thees cabin, she's very good little nes' ontill tomorrow--yoh theenk so?"

Annie-Many-Ponies, sitting beside the doorway of the primitive little log cabin where the night-journeys with Luis had ended, looked up into Ramon's flushed face with her slow smile. But her eyes were two deep, black wells whose depths he could not fathom.

"Where them priest you promise?" she asked, her voice lowered to its softest Indian tone. "Now I think we make plenty marriage; then we go for live in your house."

Ramon turned and caught her unexpectedly in his arms. "Ah, now you spik foolish talk. Yoh not trus' Ramon! Why yoh talk pries', pries' all time? Lov', she's plenty pries' for us. Pries' she don' make us more lov' each other-- pries' don' make us happy--we like birds that make nes' in tree-tops. Yoh think they mus' have pries' for help them be happy? Lov'--that's plenty for me."

Annie-Many-Ponies drew herself away from his embrace, but she did it gently. Bill Holmes, coming up from the spring, furnished excuse enough, and Ramon let her go.

"You promise me priest for making us marriage," she persisted in her soft voice.

Ramon twisted the points of his black mustache and regarded her askance,

smiling crookedly. "Yoh 'fraid for trus' me, that's why I promise," he said at last. "Me, I don' need padre to mumble-mumble foolish words before I can be happy. Yoh 'fraid of Luck Leen'sey, that's why I promise. Now yoh come way up here, so luck don' matter no more. Yoh be happy weeth me."

"You promise," Annie-Many-Ponies repeated, a sullen note creeping into her voice.

Bill Holmes, lounging up to the doorway, glanced from one to the other and laughed. "What's the matter, Ramon?" he bantered. "Can't you square it with your squaw? Go after her with a club, why don't you? That's what they're used to."

Ramon did not make any reply whatever, and Bill gave another chuckling laugh and joined Luis, who was going to take the gaunt horses to a tiny meadow beyond the bill. As he went he said something that made Luis look back over his shoulder and laugh.

Annie-Many-Ponies lifted her head and stared straight at Ramon. He did not meet her eyes, nor did he show any resentment of Bill Holmes' speech; yet he had sworn that he loved her, that he would be proud to have her for his wife. She, the daughter of a chief, had been insulted in his presence, and he had made no protest, shown no indignation.

"You promise priest for making us marriage," she reiterated coldly, as if she meant to force his real self into the open. "You promise you put ring of gold for wedding on my finger, like white woman's got."

Ramon's laugh was not pleasant. "Yoh theenk marry squaw?" he sneered. "Luck Leen'sey, he don't marry yoh. Why yoh theenk I marry yoh? You be good, Ramon lov' yoh. Buy yoh lots pretty theengs, me treat yoh fine. Yoh lucky girl, yoh bet. Yoh don't be foolish no more. Yoh run away, be my womans. W'at yoh theenk? Go back, perhaps? Yoh theenk Luck Leen'sey take yoh back? You gone off with Ramon Chavez, he say; yoh stay weeth Ramon then. Yoh Ramon's woman now. Yoh not be foolish like yoh too good for be kees. luck, be kees yoh many times, I bet! Yoh don' play good girl no more for Ramon--oh-h, no! That joke she's w'at yoh call ches'nut. We don' want no more soch foolish talk, or else maybe I do w'at Bill Holmes says she's good for squaw!"

"You awful big liar," Annie-Many-Ponies stated with a calm, terrific frankness. "You plenty big thief. You fool me plenty--now I don't be fool no more. You so mean yoh think all mens like you. You think all girls bad girls. You awful big fool, you think I stay for you. I go."

Ramon twisted his mustache and laughed at her. "Now yoh so pretty, when yoh mad," he teased. "How yoh go? All yoh theengs in cabin--monee, clothes, grob--how yoh go? Yoh mad now--pretty soon Ramon he makes yoh glad! Shame for soch cross words--soch cross looks! Now I don't talk till yoh be good girl, and says yoh lov' Ramon. I don't let yoh go, neither. Yoh don't get far way--I promise yoh for true. I breeng yoh back, sweetheart, I promise I breeng yoh back I Yoh don't want to go no more w'en I'm through weeth yoh--I promise yoh! Yoh theenk I let yoh go? O-oh-h, no! Ramon not let yoh get far away!"

In her heart she knew that he spoke at last the truth; that this was the real Ramon whom she had never before seen. To every woman must come sometime the bitter awakening from her dreamworld to the real world in all its sordidness and selfishness. Annie-Many-Ponies, standing there looking at Ramon--Ramon who laughed at her goodness--knew now what the future that had lain behind the mountains held in store for her. Not happiness, surely; not the wide ring of gold that would say she was Ramon's wife. Luis was right. He had spoken the truth, though she had believed that he lied when he said Ramon would never marry a woman. He would love and laugh and ride away, Luis had told her. Well, then--

"Shunka Chistala!" she called softly to the little black dog, that came eagerly, wagging his burr-matted tail. She laid her hand on its head when the dog jumped up to greet her. She smiled faintly while she fondled its silky, flapping ears.

"Why you all time pat that dam-dog?" Ramon flashed out jealously. "You don't pet yoh man what lov' yoh!"

"Dogs don't lie," said Annie-Many-Ponies coldly, and walked away. She did not look back, she did not hurry, though she must have known that Ramon in one bound could have stopped her with his man's strength. Her head was high, her shoulders were straight, her eyes were so black the pupils did not show at all, and a film of inscrutability veiled what bitter thoughts were behind them.

As it had been with Luis so it was now with Ramon. Her utter disregard of him held him back from touching her. He stood with wrath in his eyes and let her go--and to hide his weakness from her strength he sent after her a sneering laugh and words that were like a whip.

"All right--jus' for now I let you ron," he jeered. "Bimeby she's different. Bimeby I show yoh who's boss. I make yoh cry for Ramon be good to yoh!"

Annie-Many-Ponies did not betray by so much as a glance that she heard him. But had he seen her face he would have been startled at the look his words brought there. He would have been startled and perhaps he would have been warned. For never had she carried so clearly the fighting look of her forefathers who went out to battle. With the little black dog at her heels she climbed a small, round-topped hill that had a single pine like a cockade growing from the top.

For ten minutes she stood there on the top and stared away to the southeast, whence she had come to keep her promise to Ramon. Never, it seemed to her, had a girl been so alone. In all the world there could not be a soul so bitter. Liar--thief--betrayer of women--and she had left the clean, steadfast friendship of her brother Wagalex Conka for such human vermin as Ramon Chavez! She sat down, and with her face hidden in her shawl and her slim body rocking back and forth in weird rhythm to her wailing, she crooned the mourning song of the Omaha. Death of her past, death of her place among good people, death of her friendship, death of hope--she sat there with her face turned toward the far-away, smiling mesa where she had been happy, and wailed softly to herself as the women of her tribe had wailed when sorrow came to

them in the days that were gone.

All through the afternoon she sat there with her back to the lone pine tree and her face turned toward the southeast, while the little black dog lay at her feet and slept. From the cabin Ramon watched her, stubbornly waiting until she would come down to him of her own accord. She would come--of that he was sure. She would come if he convinced her that he would not go up and coax her to come. Ramon had known many girls who were given to sulking over what he considered their imaginary wrongs, and he was very sure that he knew women better than they knew themselves. She would come, give her time enough, and she could not fling at him then any taunt that he had been over-eager. Certainly she would come--she was a woman!

But the shadow of the pines lengthened until they lay like long fingers across the earth; and still she did not come. Bill Holmes and Luis, secure in the knowledge that Ramon was on guard against any unlooked-for visitors, slept heavily on the crude bunks in the cabin. Birds began twittering animatedly as the heat of the day cooled and they came forth from their shady retreats--and still Annie-Many-Ponies sat on the little billtop, within easy calling distance of the cabin, and never once looked down that way. Still the little black dog curled at her feet and slept. For all the movement these two made, they might have been of stone; the pine above was more unquiet than they.

Ramon, watching her while he smoked many cigarettes, became filled with a vague uneasiness. What was she thinking? What did she mean to do? He began to have faint doubts of her coming down to him. He began to be aware of something in her nature that was unlike those other women; something more inflexible, more silent, something that troubled him even while he told himself that she was like all the rest and he would be her master.

"Bah! She thinks to play with me, Ramon! Then I will go up and I will show her--she will follow weeping at my heels--like that dog of hers that some day I shall kill!"

He got up and threw away his cigarette, glanced within and saw that Bill and Luis still slept, and started up the hill to where that motionless figure sat beneath the pine and kept her face turned from him. It would be better, thought Ramon, to come upon her unawares, and so he went softly and very slowly, placing each foot as carefully as though he were stalking a wild thing of the woods.

Annie-Many-Ponies did not hear him coming. All her heart was yearning toward that far away mesa. "Wagalexá Conká--cola!" she whispered, for "cola" is the Sioux word for friend. Aloud she dared not speak the word, lest some tricky breeze carry it to him and fill him with; anger because she had betrayed his friendship. "Wagalexá Conká--cola! cola!"

Friendship that was dead--but she yearned for it the more. And it seemed to her as she whispered, that Wagalexá Conká was very, very near. Her heart felt his nearness, and her eyes softened. The Indian look--the look of her fighting forefathers--drifted slowly from her face as fog, drifts away before the sun. He was near--perhaps he was dead and his spirit had come to take her spirit by the hand and call her cola--friend. If that were so, then she wished that her

spirit might go with his spirit, up through all that limitless blue, away and away and away, and never stop, and never tire and never feel anything but friendship like warm, bright sunshine!

Down at the cabin a sound--a cry, a shout--startled her. She brushed her hand across her eyes and looked down. There, surrounding the cabin, were the Happy Family, and old Applehead whom she hated because he hated her. And in their midst stood Bill Holmes and Luis, and the setting sun shone on something bright--like great silver rings--that clasped their wrists.

Coming up the hill toward her was Wagalex Conka, climbing swiftly, looking up as he came. Annie-Many-Ponies sprang to her feet, startling the little black dog that gave a yelp of astonishment. Came he in peace? She hesitated, watching him unwinkingly. Something swelled in her chest until she could hardly breathe, and then fluttered there like a prisoned bird. "COLA!" she gasped, just under her breath, and raised her hand in the outward, sweeping gesture that spoke peace.

"You theenk to fix trap, you--!"

She whirled and faced Ramon, whose eyes blazed hate and murder and whose tongue spoke the foulness of his soul. He flung out his arm fiercely and thrust her aside. "Me, I kill that dam--"

He did not say any more, and the six-shooter he had levelled at Luck dropped from his nerveless hand like a coiled adder, Annie-Many-Ponies had struck. Like an avenging spirit she pulled the knife free and held it high over her head, facing Luck who stared up at her from below. He thought the look in her eyes was fear of him and of the law, and he lifted his hand and gave back the peace-sign. It was for him she had killed and she should not be punished if he could save her. But Luck failed to read her look aright; it was not fear he saw, but farewell.

For with her free hand she made the sign of peace and farewell--and then the knife descended straight as a plummet to her heart. But even as she fell she spurned the dead Ramon with her feet, so that he rolled a little way while the black dog growled at him with bared teeth; even in death she would not touch him who had been so foul.

Luck ran the last few, steep steps, and took her in his arms. His eyes were blurred so that he could not see her face, and his voice shook so that he could scarcely form the words that brushed back death from her soul and brought a smile to her eyes.

"Annie--little sister!"

Annie-Many-Ponies raised one creeping hand, groping until her fingers touched his face.

"Wagalex Conka--cola!"

He took her fingers and for an instant, while she yet could feel, he laid them against his lips.

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