CHAPTER VII.

Harrigan, That's Me!

NEVER before had the air of that long, panelled room been so surcharged with half suppressed hilarity. At first her father merely scowled at Barbara's intermittent little gurgles, which refused to stay entirely pent up. He frowned at her seemingly inane interruptions of the technical discussion into which he had immediately plunged with the East Coast company's engineer until he could no longer ignore the smile which pulled at the lips of the latter, too, at every fresh attempt of the girl to swing the conversation into an utterly irrelevant channel. He looked around the table then, and caught the gleam in Caleb's eyes. He took note of Miss Sarah's illuminated face and gave way to a burst of queerlousness not all simulation.

"What is the joke?" he demanded in a voice that set them all to rocking in their chairs. "Let me in on it, let me laugh, too, if there is anything worth laughing at. Cal, you're growing old—old and feeble-witted."

Barbara labelled her laugh meekly. Her giggle, however, was shameless. Allison had had experience with his daughter's seeming meekness. Moreover, the working of Caleb's and Sarah's faces baffled him. He waited, fuming.

"Just before you and Uncle Cal came in, we were talking about the weather," the girl gurgled. "Mr. O'Mara predicted it would rain soon, and I just wanted to ask him what made him think so."

It was very quiet for a moment. Steve sat, a little red of face, himself, gazing across into the girl's starry eyes.

"Go ahead," she prompted him, with a gasp.

Then his lips began to curl until a smile overspread his face, and half closed his eyes. He leaned back and raised obediently a quantity, solemn, quaintly boyish treble.

"I wasn't guessin', he averred soberly. "Jer I wasn't thinkin' it will. It'll jest be rainin' come sun up, and it'll be good fer till Wednesday fer sure."

At the beginning of that quavering statement Dexter Allison's lips fell apart. They remained open long after Steve had finished. Once he started to rise, and then dropped back into his chair, dumfounded. There was no doubt convincing the success of his daughter's query. At last he got to his feet and pacified around the table. With a hand on either of the boy's shoulders he turned that browned face up to his own.

"You," he murmured weakly. "You! And Elliott said that you could not guess dear old Mother Nature herself! Well, I—I'm blanked!"

They talked no more business at table that morning, and Allison found scant opportunity to make himself heard at all. Even the reticence which seemed a part of Steve's grave face and big body was swept aside before the tumult of questions that tumbled from Barbara's lips, promptly to be supplemented by Caleb whenever her breath gave out.

It was minutes before Allison could wedge in a single remark, longer than that before he stopped frowning to himself in a fashion which made Caleb remember that moment of inexplicable vehemence outside on the veranda. They had retrogressed as far as the "injine"—the "steam injine"—when Allison finally made himself heard.

"What I can't remember is just why you left us so suddenly. I know it was some sort of a rumpus, with Barbara in it—there's always a woman, of course—but I can't recall"—

He paused to ponder—paused and became aware immediately of Barbara's swift silence and Steve's hint of self consciousness. Then it all returned to him with a rush. He had his turn.

"Oh, but I do remember," he drawled. "Why, of course—of course! it was a matter of knight errantry and ladies fair! But who was it, whose choice conflicted with your own?"

He cocked his head on one side, mock thoughtful; then he fell to pounding his knee and roared with laughter.

"Archie Wickersham!" he shouted. "Archie Wickersham—oh, Lord! I never really appreciated that melee until this minute. And you promised that you'd be back, didn't you, and—well b'gad, here you are! Shake hands again, Steve. And, if I may be pardoned the idiom, allow me to assure you that it was some battle!"

If it did nothing else, Allison's ponderous raillery served one end. It removed any sentimental awkwardness which might have attached to the episode, and yet the girl rather resented its being so completely reduced to terms of farce comedy. When the men rose, after breakfast, to go down into the town, she, too, declared her intention of accompanying them, as though it were the expected thing. She crossed the lawn at Steve's side, ahead of her father and Caleb, with Miss Sarah watching from the door. Both men walked for a short time in silence, their eyes upon the slender figure in short skirt and wooly sweater beside the taller one in blue flannel before them. And, as usual, Allison was the first to speak.

"Now I know what you meant when you referred to that trip up the west branch, Cal," he said. "And you were right. It does take stuff to make that sort of gentleman. Isn't there anything more to tell me? I am truly interested, Cal."

So Caleb told him then of "Old Tom's" tin lady. And while he was explaining the man and girl ahead, all in one breath, skipped back to that day before yesterday, now many years gone. There was a quality of camaraderie in the girl's half parted lips and eager impulsiveness of tongue that morning that was entirely boyish. But when Steve finally asked for Devereau—Garry Devereau, who had followed him to the hedge gap that day and laid one hand upon his bowed, shamed shoulder—the light went from Barbara's eyes. And Stephen O'Mara, who did not understand at first the quick hurt which entered them, stopped smiling too.

"I liked him," Steve said simply. "I've always remembered and liked him. Thinking of him and—and—has often kept me from being too lonely nights, when I was lonely enough."

"Do you remember a little girl who was at our place the summer you were here?" Barbara then asked. "A pale, red lipped, very shy little thing named Mary Graves?"

Stephen nodded.

"And do you remember how even then Garry seemed to care for her? He was always superstitious with the rest of us—he tormented us or ignored us entirely, but never her."

Again the nodination of the head.

"Well, he grew up just that way," Barbara went on, thoughtfully. "One never could tell what was behind his indifference—or—or flippancies. He mocked at things, customs and courses of action, which we have come to accept and—and recognize. But he was always gentle with her, and kind, and—oh, I think reverend is the right word! Now, knowing Garry as I do—as you will when you see him again—the phrase may seem a strange one to apply to him. And yet it describes best his bearing toward Mary Graves two years ago."

She was walking more slowly now, without knowing it.

"He loved her with his whole soul, Mr. O'Mara, and she married another man, almost without a word of explanation to him. Nobody ever cited Garry as a shining example, but he—that man whom Mary Graves married—had an unbreakable record. Her family made the match—the newspapers call it a union of America's fairest youth and powerful millions, don't they? Well, he had them, and she married him. And Garry Devereau dropped out of the world for a long time."

"It wasn't year after that he came back. People had already begun to talk about the way his father had gone before him—he shot himself, Mr. O'Mara, when he became tired of waiting for Garry's mother to return—and when Garry reappeared they talked more. I never knew before that a change so terrible could take place in any one so much a man as I know Garry to be. It's not just his face and his rather dreadful silence. It's not the fact alone that he drinks too much and shoots it pitifully. It's—oh, it's the pity that a brain so keen could so deliberately commit suicide.

"They've begun to drop him, Mr. O'Mara—and you know what that means. But I'll always care for him deeply. That's why I have asked him up this fall. Don't you think you could come down again Friday if you have to go back into the woods before then? I'm going to have a party for some week-end guests, a masque dance. Garry needs his friends now more than he ever did, and—and when you meet him will you—will you, please, not let him see that you notice how much he has changed?"

They found the conversation somehow less easy after that. Morrison had grown inconceivably in those elapsed years. It was no longer a river village. Morrison was a city now.

Once when a squatly huge, red headed, red shirted riverman with a week's red stubble upon his cheeks lurched

The Girl Shrank Against Her Companion and Clutched His Arm.

out of a doorway ahead of them and stood snarling malevolently at O'Mara the girl shrank against her companion and clutched his arm. The red shirted one fell to singing after they had passed. A maudlin rendition of "Harrigan, That's Me," followed them long after they had rounded a corner. Steve looked down and smiled casually into Barbara's wide and startled eyes.

"That's a river boss," he explained "enjoying what he considers a roaring good time. His name is Harrigan. He works on the Reserve company's cut, which we are to move in the spring, and whenever he has had a trifle more than enough he always sings that song. He's willing to fight, too, to prove that it was written especially for him!"

"He's not exactly a friend of yours, is he?" she said.

"Well, not exactly," Steve admitted. "Not when he is in that frame of mind."

"Or in any other," the girl persisted, and she glanced down at her hand, still lying upon the blue flannel sleeve. "Did you know that your arm grew as hard as iron for an instant? I never knew that any one's arm could grow as hard as that. And is that the way you always prepare to receive your—friends?"

Steve colored a little.

"Perhaps I'm overcautious," he replied. "But it has to be hard. It constitutes what one of my men, Joe Morgan, calls 'accident insurance.'"

Then her face lighted up again. The delighted bob of her head with which she greeted that name astonished the man.

"Do you—why, you must have heard of Joe!" he exclaimed.

"Joe Morgan," she laughed. "Fat Joe, isn't it? And of course I have heard of him. You don't realize it, but I know more about this East Coast work and—and the men who are doing it than I had any idea myself. Why, I'll wager that you never knew yourself that he once wrote in to the officials insisting that the entry of his name on the files be changed from Joe Morgan, cook, to 'Joseph Morgan, assistant to Chief O'Mara.'"

Steve's chuckle of appreciation was answer enough.

"I want to know Joe, please. Can't I meet him, Mr. O'Mara?"

But the question was unnecessary. Joe Morgan—Fat Joe to the river front and the construction squad—was already hustling in their direction, even before Steve, with that slow smile tugging at his lips, had finished assuring her that it was never necessary to summon Joe into the presence of an attractive member of the opposite sex. He came without being called.

"Morning, chief." Fat Joe saluted, in that thin and reedy tenor which none but fat men have.

Steve managed the presentation with extreme punctility and left them. When he returned, almost an hour later, he heard them both laughing long before he came into view, and on the way back up the hill the girl detailed for him much of her conversation with Fat Joe.

"Why should there be any—any element of personal danger in this work you are doing, Mr. O'Mara?" she finally asked. "And did I do wrong in mentioning to Mr. Morgan how that man came out of that—place and glared so at you?"

His rejoinder should have been very reassuring.

"So Joe has been hinting at that mystery stuff again, has he? After listening to him one is compelled to believe that I run daily a veritable gauntlet of nameless perils."

Barbara stood, small fists buried in her sweater pockets, studying his smile of immoderate.

"I shouldn't like to believe so," her voice was faintly diffident. "And you—you haven't accepted my invitation for Friday. May I expect you? I didn't tell you, but Archie—Archibald Wickersham—will be there, as well as Garry. So—so you won't be entirely unacquainted."

And then at those words his face changed. All in one fleet second, in spite of the whole morning's quick intimacy of mood and the spirit of comradeship which to her had seemed a delightfully new yet time tried thing, Barbara found that she could not read an inch behind those grave gray eyes. She found his quiet countenance as unreadable as that of the utmost stranger might have been. And while she waited, not entirely certain how displeased she was at his deliberation, a blackest of black horses soared splendidly over a fence to the north and came cantering down the road. The rider, a tall, tarbreaded girl, lifted her crop in salute as she caught sight of them.

"My friend, Miriam Burrell," the girl murmured in explanation to Steve, and something had gone from her voice and left it conventionally impersonal. "She's riding Ragtime, and isn't he a beauty—almost as much a beauty as she is herself?"

The horse came on, to be reined up at last directly in front of the two at the roadside. Stephen O'Mara met for a moment the level, measuring glance of its rider before Miriam Burrell turned to Barbara.

"I've enjoyed exceedingly our morning canter, Bobs," her alto voice drawled.

Then, before Barbara could reply, she threw one booted leg from the stirrup and dismounted. With the reins looped over her elbow she faced the man in blue flannel and corduroy, a tall, lithe figure with coppery red hair and whitest skin and doubly vivid lips.

"You're Stephen O'Mara," she said. "You're Stephen O'Mara, for a thousand!"

"I've just asked Mr. O'Mara to come to my dance, Miriam," Barbara said, "and how did you know him, pray? I've asked him, but he is undatteringly long in accepting."

"Know him?" Miriam echoed. "Know him! Oh, Mr. O'Mara and I have met before. I think before the fall of the Roman empire, wasn't it, Mr. O'Mara? Weren't they dragging me in at the wheel of a chariot one afternoon when you were dealing out a gold piece to each of your legionaries?"

She laughed dryly, and Barbara felt smaller and more forlorn and lonelier still.

"No doubt Mr. O'Mara hasn't time to be flattering, Bobs," she commented. "But you will have time to come Friday for a little while, won't you?" she asked.

Steve glanced down at the hand which still felt the pressure of her buckskin clad fingers.

"I have to work day and night some weeks when things break badly," Steve told her simply. "If I can," and he turned to Barbara—"if I can I want to come."

Miriam nodded her head with brisk quality.

"If you can," she agreed. "Barbara no doubt has been telling you about Garret Devereau, hasn't she? Yes, come if you can. I have heard Mr. O'Mara, that you have once or twice fought your way out of the dark when everybody else had lost hope. I want an opportunity to talk with a specialist in such campaigns."

Stephen O'Mara had read a meaning in the words of that contained, often abrupt, straightly frank girl of which Barbara Allison had not even dreamed. He stood watching them when they turned up the driveway, the horse Ragtime nuzzling the woolly white sweater and following like a dog. But he wasn't thinking of Miriam Burrell or of Garry Devereau. He was wondering about Archie Wickersham—the Hon. Archie—thinking about that funny brawl of years before, which had not been so funny after all, wondering if—

Late that night, before she slept, Barbara asked Miriam this question. "Should I have told Mr. O'Mara that my engagement to Archibald Wickersham was to be announced at the party?"

"Why should you have?" Miriam crisply replied.

CHAPTER VIII.

"I Mean to Marry Him."

GRIM turned much colder with nightfall on the day of the party. A sharp wind with the tang of autumn was blowing in off the river when Barbara, muffled from throat to ankle in a sapphire far edged wrap, slipped in at the door of the Hunter home, having stolen away ostensibly to display to the in-

"So you are—you," he murmured.

mates her costume. It was after the hour of 10, but the girl lingered a little after she had executed that mission.

"We are very sorry that Mr. O'Mara could not come," she hesitated. "I had promised both Garry and Archie Wickersham that he would be down."

"We haven't heard from him since he went back into camp," Sarah answered. "He, no doubt, has been unable to get away."

Barbara Allison recrossed the lawn very slowly that night. She retraced her steps with dead beat, the fall of her slippered feet muffled by the carpet of thick, unfrosted grass. Vaguely troubled, vaguely disturbed at herself, she was within arm's length of a dark figure in the hedge gap through which she had just come before she was aware of its presence. Stephen O'Mara, weather beaten hat in hand, was standing there in her path, peering steadily at the stucco and timber lodge slight from end to end like a huge and sprawling glow-worm.

An instant desire again to meet the Honorable Archibald Wickersham had led him to request Fat Joe to hook up the team that day at noon for the long drive down the river. With Steve himself handling the reins they had rolled the thirty miles at a speed which might have mildly surprised Fat Joe had he not been accustomed to putting two and two together to make six or eight or more. And Fat Joe's thin tenor was just drifting faintly off down the hill a mournful rendition of "Home, Sweet Home"—when the girl stepped noiselessly forward and put a hand, feather light, upon the man's arm.

Again she felt the swift tensing of the flesh beneath, she fell back a step before the startling abruptness with which Steve whirled. She even threw up one small hand, as if to shield her face. And then, the cloak falling open at her throat, a slender, swaying figure in blue and shimmering white, she stood and flung a little laugh at him—a laugh a little unsteady, a bit tinged with mockery and as untroubled as the spirit of youth itself.

"Is that the way you always prepare to greet your friends?" she asked.

The man just stood and stared at her—stared much as if he mistrusted his own ears and eyes.

"Not all my friends," his slow voice drawled at last, but even the words were tinged with doubt. "Not all my friends," he said. Silently the man reached out and found the hand which had lain for a moment upon his arm.

"So you are—you," he murmured, when his fingers touched hers. "I wasn't—just sure."

Suddenly unable to think quite clearly, Barbara wondered at the new pulse in her throat, which beat and beat until it seemed not easy even to speak.

"Then it must be you too," she faltered. "I wasn't sure, either, even when I knew it must be. I'd begun to believe that you hadn't forgotten—that you didn't care to * * * Will you please say that you forgive me—please—for something over which I have been sorrier than you can know?"

His eyes clung to the velvety face of that slim girl decked as Cinderella in bits of transparent slippers and shimmering, star edged white, until even in spite of the gloom the girl recognized the change which had come creeping over his face. She saw it surge up in his eyes—the old undisguised wonder of the boy of ten years before, for which, until that instant, she had looked in vain—but it was a man's wonder of woman now, utter and absolute and all enveloping. She caught her breath then. She touched her lips with a dainty tongue as though they had gone dry of a sudden. Involuntarily she stepped toward him, that single pace which she had fallen away. And above the tumult of her own senses she heard herself trying to laugh and realized how unsteady the effort was.

"Then you do forgive me?" she breathed. "Do I—pass inspection? Do you like me—in my masquerade?"

"There was never need of a fairy godmother for you," he told her, his voice grave. "There was never need of a transforming miracle. You have been that always yourself. And you are not permitted to ask forgiveness from me nor pardon. Men do not admit that there can be need of that where they have worshiped as long as I have worshiped you. You knew I was coming. I've been coming ten years now. But you can never know either how long ten years can be."

The words were blurred as a far off echo in her ears. She started to speak, but all that she would have said caught in her throat and hurt her, and only her unsteady breath came from parted lips. But when at her inarticulate effort at speech he bent his head to her swiftly mutiny face her whole slender body tightened at the rough contact of blue flannel against her cheek. Almost before they held her she struggled madly from the circle of his arms. White of face, white of lip, she broke away from him and darted through the gap in the hedge—on—to shrink back again at him in panic the next instant before the black shape upon a blacker horse between her and the lights.

He was gazing in their direction—the man upon the horse. He was laughing softly. And when he thrust back the black cowl that hid his face and began to speak Stephen O'Mara recognized that terribly pale, terribly drawn face. Garry Devereau rocked a little in the saddle and waved a gracefully unsteady hand.

"Blessings, my children," he called to the two in the shadow, and his tongue was not thick, but only wavering. "My felicitations. And, even though I know not your identity, still I pray scheme your fond confusion. And yet, why blush, dear co-ownes? This is the night, tonight. Even I myself have yielded to spirit of frivolity. Two hours ago I appeared mucked in these dingy vestments as Lotte's Young Dream, but with me the mood has passed. Before romancers you have witnessed a metamorphosis. You are now gazing upon the Wrath of God about to thunder forth upon a coal black charger. I merely paused to bid you hoots, lassie and you miss the crux of the evening. When I withdrew the Hon. Archie was already searching with bravery concealed distracting for the fair daughter of the house. The hour has struck. It's masks off—masks off from eyes and hearts."

He laughed again. White face whiter still against the background of his sombre coat, cape, debonair and drunkenly insolent in the saddle, Garret Devereau rode out into the main road and thundered off into the night.

"Is that true?" Steve asked quietly.

She made no move to answer.

"Is that true?" his low and gentle voice commanded this time. "You still mean to—marry—him?"

"What I have done tonight I can never hope to explain," she answered, recovering herself. "I can only hope that some day I may cease to despise myself as utterly as you have tonight me to at this minute. And since you choose to regard it now as your right to ask that question I'll answer it for you. I mean to marry him. I shall be proud to be his wife."

The light that streamed over his shoulder fell full upon his face. She saw the blood pour up, staining throat and cheek and brow, and then ebb away. She gave him time to answer but he did not speak, and suddenly she knew what scene of another day he was remembering. Her eyes dropped to his—imprisoned hand.

"You are detaining me," she said.

He released her immediately, and yet she did not move. And while she waited he turned and stooped and turned to her again. She drew the stole, while he wrapped her fur edged sapphire cloak about her and fastened it close beneath her outlifted chin. He waited here of head in the hedge gap until she had crossed the lawn to the house that lay a sprawling glow-worm in the darkness. A babble of voices leaped out to him when he opened the door—a lilting crash of syncopated melody. And then it was quiet again.

After a glimpse of his chief's eyes that night Fat Joe essayed not so much as one facetious protest against turning the fagged team homeward with scarcely any rest at all. He remained as quiet as that too quiet man beside him.

He fell to whistling later and almost immediately his thin tenor was rolling ahead of them through the black alley between the pines, to continue in soulful reiteration until the construction camp clearing loomed up ahead. Suddenly Fat Joe tightened the reins above the fagged team, then he shot forward and laid the whip across their tired flanks as they cleared the breastwork of trees.

Steve's head was jerked backward by the abruptness of their first plunge, and then he saw what Fat Joe had seen a second before. High up on the hillside there was a light glowing from the windows of the shack which served the chief engineer of the East Coast job as office and domicile too. While Fat Joe laid on the whip a man came hurtling past the outflung door, sprang to his feet and, running low to the ground, disappeared into the blackness of the brush. Joe swung the horses up in a galloping curve and with one catlike leap, incredibly light for a man of his clunky build, was down from the seat and crashing through the bushes on the trail of that fugitive whose noisy flight had already become a faint crackle in the distance.

Flame poured from Fat Joe's revolver. Two whiplike reports shattered the night quiet before Stephen O'Mara moved. Then he lifted himself heavily from the seat. Something nuzzled his shoulder while he stood listening to the diminishing tumult of the pursuit, and even before he turned he knew what it was. He paused a moment to stroke the soft nose of the black horse standing there with reins a-trail. It was Ragtime, wet with lather and caked with dust. But even then he was not prepared for the sight which met him when he entered the shack. Seconds must have passed while he stood staring from the threshold, for Fat Joe came puffing back from his fruitless chase in time to see him bend and lift a blank, robed, lifelessly limp body from the floor and stagger with it toward a bunk. Fat Joe's steady flow of profanity, oddly, double vicious in his thin, complaining voice, was checked short. He, too, stood and stared from the doorway, stood and lifted his nose and sniffed.

"Seems to be our night for callers," he remarked, with bad mildness, "and, say, this one's got a peach of a load."

Then Garry Devereau's head rolled over, ghastly loose and slack, and the plump one caught sight of a ragged gash in the senseless man's temple.

"So-o, that's it?" he drawled, and his complaining voice was deadly again. "So that's it! But he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't put up a tidy little battle, was he? Funny about that, too, but I could always do my best little jobs of man handling when I was about half over myself."

His pale eyes swept the floor. He pounced forward and recovered a sheaf of blue prints from a corner.

"This, I take it," he muttered, "was what they was arguing about when we busted in. Steve, them's our bridge estimates and there wa'n't no copies of 'em either. It wouldn't take us more'n two weeks to replace 'em neither—not more'n two precious, priceless weeks. I'm only hopin' now that when our other caller, who seems to want them more than we do, calls again, I'll be here myself to entertain him with tea or somethin'. I'd plumb hate to seem so inhospitable as not to be home, twice hand runnin', to visitors."

"Maybe that was a tidy little battle while it lasted," Fat Joe continued, "but it ain't deuce high alongside the fight we've got on our hands right now. For he's just as near over as I care to see a man, unless it was some one I'd a little prefer dead! It ain't that scratch on the head that's got him stumpin', either." Joe paused and turned to address Garry Devereau's

"Blessings, my children," he called to the two in the shadow.

still white face itself. "You sat in an backed my game like a gentleman born," he said, "and now I'm a goin' to play yourn, blue chips and white and yello'."

And while he talked he worked, for it was Fat Joe who gave the orders that night. He called for ammonia, for brandy, for a half dozen drugs from the camp hospital chest, and each of them Steve brought in an automatic fashion that finally penetrated even Fat Joe's professional pleasure in the struggle.

"Friend of yours?" he asked in an interval while they rested.

"A friend," Steve repeated with a tightening of his jaws, and Joe knew what that tone meant.

Before daybreak there came an hour when Garry Devereau lifted himself upon one elbow and opened his eyes to stare half wildly, but very sanely, about the room. His gaze flitted wonderingly from wall to wall before it rested, fearfully fixed, upon Steve's brown face. Instantly he looked away flinchingly, and met Fat Joe's voluminous grin—and looked back again, cunningly cautious. Finally he reached out a timid, blue veined, pitifully unsteady hand and plucked at Steve's blue flannel sleeve. And his words were an echo of those which Stephen O'Mara had heard before that night from other lips.

"Then you—are you," he framed the words laboriously. "I wasn't sure—even when I knew it must be."

And Garry Devereau tried to smile his slow smile of sophistry.

"Greetings, Sir Galahad!" he faltered. "And how are you, Steve—and who might your—fat friend be?"

CHAPTER IX.

Doctor and Patient.

FAT JOE leaned over and drew a blanket a little higher across the sleeping man's shoulder, while Steve continued silently to study Garry's face. Even in unconsciousness a faintly crooked smile of skepticism still clung to the lips.

"It was like him," Steve remarked at last very soberly. "Somehow the minute he began to speak I knew it was exactly the sort of thing I expected him to say. The probability of death is a much more amusing prospect to some men, Joe, than the perplexity of living."

Fat Joe flashed a swift, half puzzled glance at his chief's face. He started to ask a question, then scowled and checked himself and turned instead to kindle a fire in the stove of the lean-to kitchen of the cabin. But a half hour later he was still murmuring the last phrase over to himself perplexedly when Steve came leading the horse Ragtime up to the open door. Saddled and with reins a-trail, the animal had been wandering throughout the night about the upper end of the construction camp clearing. At the sound of hoofbeats outside Fat Joe left the stove and the half cooked breakfast he had set himself to prepare.

"So that's the way one of 'em come," he murmured. "I was wondering some. Last night I didn't notice the horse, being a mite too hurried to give ample attention to details, as it were. But ain't—ain't this one of Allison's horses?"

"No, Joe," Steve answered heavily. "He is from Allison's stables, but we have him to thank, just the same, along with Garry, for our blue prints and estimates. It was Mr. Devereau whom he brought up here last night and in fairly good time, I should judge, too, from the pace at which they set out. Garry turned him into the hill road, and he must have stuck to it blindly until he struck our fork. And, after a longer pause, "The horse is Miss Allison's own property," he added quietly.

Joe pursed his lips. Instantly at the mention of the girl's name he felt himself better equipped to understand both the lack of immediate action and the seeming preoccupied indifference of his superior which, in the face of the night's developments, would have been otherwise utterly unaccountable that morning.

The probable nearness of him who had gone bounding away empty handed from the lighted shack was of far less moment than the possible identity of the one who had furnished the inspiration of that night raid. And to Steve the need of assuring that taff girl with the vivid lips and coppery hair of Garry Devereau's safety bulked quite as important as did the advisability of seeking immediately an informal interview with Dexter Allison, such as the latter himself had so genially suggested.

"I happened to run into Harrigan this morning," Fat Joe said in an unconcerned manner.

As disinterestedly as had Joe, Steve now drained his coffee cup and waited.

"He was down to the cook shanty," Fat Joe rambled on. "It's an hour since he'd ought to have been out there with the powder squad in the north cut, and when I asks him if he was feelin' indisposed this morning he says no, but the supply teams was going out and one of the drivers had told him that I was sending him along to help with the loadin'. He had such a nice, frank, open faced way of lying that I couldn't bring myself to correct him. I just let it stand that way and told him such was the arrangement." Joe saw swift satisfaction play across Steve's face. "He had a bandage around his head not much different from this one our friend here is wearing. But he said he was scratched by a twig."

The room was very quiet for a breath. That thin note had crept into Fat Joe's tenor voice—thin and chill and menacing. And there as abruptly as he had assumed it he flung aside his mask of disingenuous irrelevance. Fat Joe wheeled, put both elbows upon the table edge and leaned forward heavily. It was much as though he were settling himself to shoulder the sheer weight through the discouraging wall of indifference behind which the other was apparently withdrawing once more.

"But as for me"—his high voice rang a little—"but as for me, well, I always did pride myself that I could shoot some, whether it was by daylight or dark."

And the only result which that statement achieved was an answering, meditative nod. Fat Joe subsided. All that he would say had been said, and they finished breakfast as they had begun it, in absolute silence.

Stephen O'Mara touched a match to the dry grains of tobacco which he had been tamping into the bowl of his pipe. He swung slowly around toward the inert figure on the bunk.

"He'll sleep the day through, I think," he said, "and the night perhaps. But I'd advise you to look in on him now and then, just the same. He did us a good turn last night. It's the second good turn he's done for me, Joe. And now, perhaps, the chance has come to even up the score a little. You would know, wouldn't you, Joe, just how many drinks to prescribe for a man who has been as—as ill as Garry has?"

Fat Joe's face commenced to shine, and at that he was only beginning to understand.

"Ain't I the doctor?" he demanded aggrievedly. "You don't have to go no deeper into technicalities with me. And I told you last night anyway, didn't I, that it would have to be his last little celebration unless he was figurin' on a longer journey than he's ever took before. Well, I've handled so many cases just like his that there ain't even a little enjoyable novelty to 'em any more for me."

Steve received the statement with another nod.

"That's it," he mused. "That's it exactly. It would have to be his last unless he is figuring on a longer journey than he has ever taken before."

He crossed and leaned over the thin and motionless form of his friend. He laid one hand gently upon the sleeping man's shoulder.

"He did that for me once, Joe," he spoke quietly. "He dropped his hand on my shoulder like that, and I never forgot the weight of it. You watch him, Joe—watch him closely for awhile, because—because, you see, a man does stray along once in so often who's so badly bewildered and tired weary, so tired of trying and—and hurt in soul that the thought of such a journey as you speak of begins to seem the shortest route after all to an end of thoughts which even alcohol can't wipe out. You take care of him, and if he wakes before I get back explain to him a little just how he came here and thank him a lot for what he did. Ask him to wait until I come back from Morrison, will you?"

For a moment Joe just stood and blinked, dumfounded.

"Huh!" he blurted at last. "Huh! So that's what you been hintin' at all the time, is it? I didn't just get you right until now. But do you know it did seem to me once or twice while we were working over him—once or twice when the goin' was pretty bad—that his spirit wasn't heaving real hearty into the traces. And, say, ain't that a poor idea for a guy to get into his head? Now, ain't it?" And then, as the purport of the rest of Steve's words struck home, "Do you mean you are going to Morrison to have a"—

(To be continued.)

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