

Square Deal Sanderson

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WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED.

ON his way to work for the Double A Ranch, run by Mary Bransford after her father's death, "Square Deal" Sanderson killed the murderers of a man who proved to be Will Bransford, Mary's brother; correspondence taken from whose pockets revealed that he had been absent fifteen years. Approaching the Double A, which was fertile by contrast with the surrounding dryness, Sanderson checkmated Alva Dale, covetous of the ranch, in his attempted hanging of Ben Nyland, nester, for alleged cattle rustling from the Double A. Nyland's sister, Peggy, accused Dale of "planting" the steers in their corral, and when Dale questioned Sanderson's interference, the latter stated that he was Will Bransford.

Dale asked for proof, and Sanderson produced the Bransford letters, as also the money which Mary had forwarded her brother, and which the gunmen had taken. Dale, convinced against his will, released Nyland and left, with rage in his heart.

The die was cast—on an impulse Sanderson had impersonated another. Mary accepted him unquestioningly, and he found it impossible to disclose his identity even had he wished. The facts were these: Dale, utterly unscrupulous, desired the Double A; a part of his scheme to acquire it had been her father's negligence in recording her birth. This Sanderson attempted to obviate by having the title transferred to him, but he dared not sign the affidavit as Will Bransford, nor could he practise a forgery, since the letter containing the signature had mysteriously vanished. He learned further from Barney Owen, whom Mary had befriended, and who had penetrated his secret, of a plot between Dale and one Dave Silverthorn to possess the ranch by producing a man to impersonate the actual Bransford, the two murderers of the latter having been employed by Dale.

Time passed with Sanderson finding himself in love with Mary, nor was evidence lacking of reciprocation on her part. Then one day Dale appeared at the ranch with a request that Sanderson register his brand with him as deputy sheriff—thinking to trap him. Sanderson saw through the trick, Owen, unseen by Dale, cleverly imitated the signature, and at a whisper from the latter, Sanderson, giving Dale the paper, asked him abruptly for a letter dropped by the elder Bransford which Dale had picked up. "Fork it over," he grated, "or I'll bore you an' take it from your clothes."

CHAPTER XI.

THE ULTIMATUM.

DALE'S face whitened; for a moment he sat rigid, staring, his eyes boring into Sanderson's. Then he reached into a pocket, drew out a dirty envelope, and threw it at Sanderson's feet.

"You're a damned smart boy, ain't you, Bransford?" he sneered. "But I'm out to get you—remember that!"

"And you remember this, Dale!"

Sanderson was at the head of the horse Dale rode. His eyes were blazing with suppressed fury, brought on by the other's threat. "There's goin' to be a new deal in the basin. From now on I'm runnin' things—an' they're runnin' square! I ain't got any use for any law but this!" He tapped the butt of his six-shooter significantly. "An' if you go to gettin' mixed up with the Double A or the Nyland ranch you'll get it—plenty!"

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Dale grinned, hideously. Then he kicked his horse in the ribs and rode away.

Mary Bransford had not moved from her position on the porch. Sanderson watched Dale ride away, then he smiled at Mary and entered the house. Mary followed him. She saw Owen standing in the sitting-room, and her face showed her surprise.

Sanderson explained. "Owen an' me framed up on Dale," he said. "You saw it work."

"You'll be careful, won't you, Will?" she said.

"Deal," smilingly insisted Sanderson.

"Deal," she repeated, giving him a look that made him blush. Then she went into one of the other rooms, and Sanderson and Owen went outside. At the corner of the stable Sanderson halted and faced Owen.

"You've got some explainin' to do," he said. "How did you know Dale had a letter from Will Bransford to his father; an' how did you know that Dale wanted me to write my name on that brand-registering blank so he could compare it with Will Bransford's name on the letter?"

"Will Bransford told me he wrote such a letter; he showed me a letter from his dad which told how he had dropped Will's letter and how Dale had picked it up. Dale thought old Bransford hadn't seen him pick up the letter—but Bransford did see him. And last night I was snooping around over at the Bar D and I overheard Dale and Silverthorn cooking up this deal."

Sanderson grinned with relief. "Well," he said, "that name-signing deal sure had me considerable fussed up." He told Owen of his mental torture following the discovery of the letter that had disappeared from the dresser drawer. "We've got to run together from now on," he told Owen. "I'll be Bransford an' you'll be Bransford's name. Mebbe between us we'll make a whole man."

Over at the Bar D Dale was scowling at Silverthorn.

"He ain't Will Bransford," Dale declared. "He signed his name all O. K. an' regular, just the same as it was on the letter. But just the same he ain't a Bransford. There ain't no Bransford ever had

an eye in him like he's got. He's a damned iceberg for nerve, an' there's more fight in him than there is in a bunch of wildcats—if you get him started!"

"Just the same," smiled Silverthorn, silkily, "we'll get the Double A. Look here—" And the two bent their heads together over Dale's desk.

CHAPTER XII.

DALE MOVES.

A PASSIONATE hatred of Alva Dale was slowly gripping Sanderson. It had been aroused on that first day of his meeting with the man, when he had seen Dale standing in front of the stable, bullying Mary Bransford and Peggy Nyland and her brother. At that time, however, the emotion Sanderson felt had been merely dislike—as Sanderson had always disliked men who attempted to bully others.

Sanderson's hatred of Dale was beginning to dominate him; it was overwhelming all other emotions. It dulled his sense of guilt for the part he was playing in deceiving Mary Bransford; it made him feel in a measure justified in continuing to deceive her.

For he divined that without his help Mary would lose the Double A.

Sanderson had always loved a fight, and the prospect of bringing defeat and confusion upon Dale was one that made his pulses leap with delight.

He got up on the morning following Dale's visit, tingling with eagerness. And yet there was no sign of emotion in his face when he sat with Mary Bransford at breakfast, and he did not even look at her when he left the house, mounted his horse, and rode up the gorge that split the butte at the southern end of the range.

All morning he prowled over the table land, paying a great deal of attention to the depth of the gorge, estimating its capacity for holding water, scanning the far reaches of the big basin carefully, and noting the location of the buildings that dotted it.

Shortly after noon he rode back to the house and came upon Mary in the kitchen.

"I've put off askin' until now," he said while eating the food that Mary placed before him. "How much money did dad leave?"

"Not much," she said. "He was never very prosperous. It took a great deal to send me to school, and the thousand I sent you I saved myself out of the allowance he gave me. I think there are three thousand dollars to father's credit at the bank in Okar."

"Where's Okar?"

She looked quickly at him. "Don't you remember Okar? That little town just beyond the mouth of the basin? Why, you've been there a good many times, Will, on errands for father. There wasn't much to Okar when you were here—just a few shanties and a store. Surely you remember!"

Sanderson flushed. "I reckon I do remember, now that you speak of it," he lied. "But I don't think Okar has grown much."

"Okar has grown to be an important town—for this locality," Mary smiled. "You see, the railroad has made it grow. It is now quite large, and has a bank and a dozen or more stores. It is a depot for supplies for a big section, and the railroad company has built large corrals there. A man named Silverthorn—and Alva Dale—are the rulers of Okar, now."

"Who is Silverthorn?"

"He is connected with the railroad company—a promoter, or something of that character. He is trying to make a boom town of Okar. He has bought a great deal of land in the basin."

"You know what he wants the land for?" Sanderson smiled at her.

"For speculation purposes, I suppose. If he could get water—"

"You've figured it out," said Sanderson. "But he won't get water. The water belongs to the Double A—to me an' to you. An' we're goin' to sell it, ourselves."

"You mean—" began Mary.

"That we're going to build an irrigation dam—with all the fixin's. You and me."

The girl sat erect, her eyes luminous and eager. "Do you think we can do it?" she whispered.

"Do you think you could trust me with the three thousand you said dad left? An' would you be willin' to mortgage the Double A—if we needed more money?"

"Why," she declared, breathlessly, "the Double A is yours—to do with as you see fit. If you want to try—and you think there is a chance to win—why, why—go to it!"

"You're a brick!" grinned Sanderson. "We'll start the ball to rollin' right away."

Sanderson could not escape the vigorous hug she gave him, but he did manage to evade her lips, and he went out of the house blushing and grinning.

It was late in the afternoon when he got to Okar. Barney Owen was with him. The two rode into town, dismounted at a hitching rail in front of a building across the front of which was a sign:

THE OKAR HOTEL.

Okar was flourishing—as Mary Bransford said. At its northwestern corner the basin widened, spreading between the shoulders of two mountains and meeting a vast stretch of level land that seemed to be endless.

Okar sat at the foot of the mountain that lifted its bald knob at the eastern side of the basin's mouth. Two glittering lines of steel that came from out of the obscurity of distance eastward skirted Okar's buildings and passed westward into an obscurity equally distant.

The country around Okar was devoted to cattle. Sanderson's practised eye told him that. The rich grass land that spread from Okar's confines was the force that had brought the town into being, and the railroad would make Okar permanent.

Okar did not look permanent, however. It was of the type of the average cow-town of the Western plains—artificial and crude. Its buildings were of frame, hurriedly knocked together, representing the haste of a people in whom the pioneer instinct was strong and compelling—who cared nothing for appearances, but who fought mightily for wealth and progress.

Upon Okar was the stamp of newness, and in its atmosphere was the eagerness and the fervor of commercialism. Okar

was the trade mart of a section of country larger than some of the old-world states.

Fringing the hitching rails in front of its buildings were various vehicles—the heavy wagons of Mexican freighters, the light buckboard of the cattleman, and the prairie-schooner of the homesteader. Mingling with the vehicles were the cow-ponies of horsemen who had ridden into town on various errands; and in the company corals were many cattle awaiting shipment.

Sanderson stood beside his horse at the hitching-rail for a look at Okar.

There was one street—wide and dust-windrowed, with two narrow board walks skirting it. The buildings—mostly of one story—did not interest Sanderson, for he had seen their kind many times, and his interest centered upon the people.

"Different from Tombstone," he told Owen as the two entered the hotel. "Tombstone is cattle—Okar is cattle *and* business. I sort of like cattle better."

Owen grinned. "Cattle are too slow for some of Okar's men," he said. "There's men here that figure on making a killing every day—financially. Gamblers winning big stakes, supply dealers charging twenty times the value of their stuff; a banker wanting enormous interest on his money; the railroad company gobbling everything in sight—and Silverthorn and Dale framing up to take all the land and the water rights. See that short, fat man playing cards with the little one at that table?"

He indicated a table near the rear of the barroom, visible through an archway that opened from the room in which a clerk with a thin, narrow face and an alert eye presided at a rough desk.

"That's Maison—Tom Maison, Okar's banker. They tell me he'd skin his grandmother if he thought he could make a dollar out of the deal." Owen grinned. "He's the man you're figuring to borrow money from—to build your dam."

"I'll talk with him to-morrow," said Sanderson.

In their room Sanderson removed some of the stains of travel from his face and clothing. Then, telling Owen he would see him at dusk, he went out into the street.

Okar was buzzing with life and humming

with activity when Sanderson started down the board-walk. In Okar was typified the spirit of the West that was to be—the intense hustle and movement that were to make the town as large and as powerful as many of its sister cities.

Threading his way through the crowd on the board walk, Sanderson collided with a man. He grinned, not looking at the other, apologized, and was proceeding on his way, when he chanced to look toward the doorway of the building he was passing.

Alva Dale was standing just inside the doorway, watching him, and as Sanderson's gaze met his Dale grinned sneeringly.

Sanderson's lips twitched with contempt. His own smile matched Dale's in the quality of its hostility.

Sanderson was about to pass on when some one struck him heavily between the shoulders. He staggered and lurched against the rough board front of the building, going almost to his knees.

When he could steady himself he wheeled, his hand at his hip. Standing near him, grinning maliciously, was the man with whom he had collided.

In the man's right hand was a pistol.

"Bump into me, will you—you locoed shorthorn!" sneered the man as Sanderson turned. He cursed profanely, incoherently. But he did not shoot.

The weapon in his hand began to sag curiously, the fingers holding it slowly slipping from the stock. And the man's face—thin and seamed—became chalklike beneath the tan upon it. His eyes, furtive and wolfish, bulged with astonishment and recognition, and his mouth opened vacuously.

"Deal Sanderson!" he said, weakly. "Good Lord! I didn't git a good look at you! I'm in the wrong pew, Deal, an' I sure don't want none of your game!"

"Dal Colton," said Sanderson. His voice was cold and even as he watched the other sheathe his gun. "Didn't know me, eh? But you was figurin' on pluggin' me."

He walked close to the man and stuck his face close to the other, his lips in a straight line. He knew Colton to be one of the most conscienceless "killers" in the section of the country near Tombstone.

"Who was you lookin' for, then?" demanded Sanderson.

"Not you—that's a cinch!" grinned the other, figeting nervously under Sanderson's gaze. He whispered to Sanderson, for in the latter's eyes he saw signs of a cold resolve to sift the matter to the bottom:

"Look here, Square; I sure don't want none of your game. Things has been goin' sorta offish for me for a while, an' so when I meets a guy a while ago who tells me to 'git' a guy named Will Bransford—pointin' you out to me when your back was turned—I takes him up. I wasn't figerin'—"

"Who told you to get Bransford?" demanded Sanderson.

"A guy named Dale," whispered Colton.

Sanderson turned swiftly. He saw Dale still standing in the doorway. Dale was grinning coldly, and Sanderson knew he suspected what had been whispered by Colton. But before Sanderson could move, Dale's voice was raised loudly and authoritatively:

"Arrest that man—quick!"

A man behind Sanderson lunged forward, twisting Sanderson around with the impetus of the movement. Off his balance, Sanderson saw three or four other men dive toward Colton. He saw Colton reach for the weapon he had previously sheathed; saw the weapon knocked from his hand.

Four men seized Colton, and he struggled helplessly in their grasp as he was dragged away, his face working malignantly as he looked back at Dale.

"Double-crossed!" he yelled; "you damned, grinnin' coyote!"

A crowd had gathered; Sanderson shouldered his way toward Dale and faced him. Sanderson's face was white with rage, but his voice was cold and steady as he stood before Dale.

"So that's the way you work, is it, Dale? I'll give you what you was goin' to pay Colton, if you'll pull your gun right now!"

Dale's smile was maddeningly insolent.

"Bah!" he said; "I'm an officer of the law. There are a dozen of my men right behind you! Pull your gun! I'd like nothing better than to have an excuse

to perforate you! Sanderson, eh?" he laughed. "Well, I've heard of you. Square Deal, eh? And here you are, masqueradin' as Will Bransford! That's goin' to be quite an interestin' situation at the Double A when things get to goin' right, eh?"

He laughed again, raucously, and turned his back to Sanderson, disappearing into the store.

Sanderson glanced behind him. Several men were watching him, their faces set and determined. Sanderson grinned at them and continued his interrupted walk down the street.

But something had been added to his hatred of Alva Dale—the knowledge that Dale would not scruple to murder him on any pretext. Sanderson's grin grew wider as he walked, for he knew of several men who had harbored such evil intentions against him, and they—

But Dale was a stronger antagonist, and he had power and authority behind him. Still, his spirit undaunted, Sanderson's grin grew wider, though perhaps more grim. It was entirely worth while, now, the deceiving of the woman he had hoped to protect; it wasn't her fight, but his. And he would make the fight a good one.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PLOT THAT WORKED.

SANDERSON left the board walk and cut through a yard to the railroad. He followed the rails until he reached the station. To his question the station-agent informed him that Dave Silverthorn might be found in his office on the second floor of the building.

Sanderson went up. A sign on a glass door bore Silverthorn's name. Sanderson entered without knocking.

Silverthorn was seated at a desk in a far corner of the room. He looked up as Sanderson opened the door, and said shortly:

"Well—what is it?"

Sanderson crossed the room and halted beside the desk. For an instant neither man spoke. Sanderson saw a man of

medium height with a rather well-rounded stomach, sloping shoulders, and a sleek, well-fed appearance. His cheeks were full and florid, his lips large and loose; his eyes cold, calculating, and hard.

Silverthorn saw a lean-faced, broad-shouldered young man with a strong chin, a firm mouth, and an eye that fixed him with a steady, unwavering interest.

By the gleam in Sanderson's eyes Silverthorn divined that he was in the presence of a strong, opposing force, and he drew a slow, deep breath.

"Well?" he said, again.

"You're Dave Silverthorn?"

The other nodded. "What can I do for you?" he questioned.

"You can listen while I talk," said Sanderson.

"I'm Will Bransford, of the Double A. I have heard from several sources that you an' Alva Dale are after the title to the Double A. You want the water rights. You can't have them. An' the title to the Double A stays with me. Understand that? I am goin' to hold on to the property.

"I've heard you can juggle the law—that's your business. But you can't juggle the law enough to horn in on the Double A. If you do, I'm comin' for you with a law of my own!" He tapped his gunholster significantly.

"That's all," he concluded. "Are you sure you understand?"

"Perfectly," answered Silverthorn. He was smiling mirthlessly, his face blotched and bloated with mingled fear and rage. "But I'll have you understand this: I am not afraid of your threats. You can't bully me. The S. and M. Railroad has dealt with your kind on more than one occasion. There is an opportunity here to develop a large section of land, and my company means to do it. We mean to be fair, however. We'll buy your title to the Double A. How much do you want for it?"

Sanderson grinned. "The Double A is not for sale. I wouldn't sell it to *you* for a million! You cheap crooks think that all you have to do is take anything you want. I just stopped in to tell you that I'm wise to your game, an' that the kind of law I represent ain't cluttered up with angles an'

technical processes. She runs straight to a square deal all around. That's all, Mr. Silverthorn."

He turned and went out, closing the door behind him.

He had not intended to have his talk with Tom Maison, Okar's banker, until the following morning. But upon returning to Okar's street he saw Maison ahead of him on the sidewalk. He followed the banker, saw him enter the front door of the bank building, and a few minutes later he was sitting opposite Maison at a table in the banker's private room.

Maison was short and pudgy, short of breath, with a pasty complexion.

"Will Bransford, eh?" he said, looking sharply at Sanderson over the table.

"H-m. You don't look much like your father."

"Nor I don't act like him, either," smiled Sanderson. "For instance," he went on at the banker's quick look, "dad was slow; he wasn't alive to his opportunities. How long has it been since the railroad came to Okar?"

"Five years."

"Then dad was five years slower than he ought to have been. He ought to have seen what water would do to the basin. He didn't. He left that for me."

"Meaning what?" asked Maison, as Sanderson paused.

"Meanin' that I want to turn the Double A water into the basin. That's what I came here to see you for. I want to mortgage the Double A. to the limit; I want to build a dam, irrigation canals, locks, an' everything that goes with it. It will take a heap of money."

Maison reflected. "And you want me to supply it," he said. "Yes, that project will require a large sum. H-m! It is—er—do you purpose to try to handle the project yourself, Mr. Bransford?"

"Me an' Mary Bransford. I'll hire an engineer."

Maison's cheeks reddened a trifle. He seemed to lose interest slightly.

"Don't you think it is rather too big a thing for one man to handle—aided by a woman?" He smiled blandly at Sanderson. "I have thought of the water situa-

tion in the basin. It is my opinion that it might be worked out successfully.

"Why not organize a company—say a company composed of influential and powerful men like Silverthorn and Dale and—er—myself. We could issue stock, you know. Each would take a certain number of shares—paying you for them, of course, and leaving you in possession of a large block of it—say—forty per cent. We could organize, elect officers—"

"An' freeze me out," smiled Sanderson.

Maison sat erect and gazed haughtily at his visitor.

"No one has ever questioned my honesty," he declared.

Sanderson smiled at him. "Nor I don't. But I want to play her a lone hand."

"I am afraid I wouldn't be interested in that sort of project," said Maison.

The thought that Maison *would* be interested—not publicly, but privately—made Sanderson grin. The grin angered Maison; he got up and smiled coldly.

"I am sorry to have taken your time, Mr. Bransford," he said, dismissing his visitor.

Sanderson did not give up. "My father left some money in your bank," he said; "I'll take it."

"Certainly," said the banker. He got a withdrawal blank and laid it before Sanderson.

"The amount is three thousand two hundred," he said. "Just fill that out and sign your name and you can have the money."

Sanderson did not sign; he sat, looking at the blank, suddenly afflicted with the knowledge that once more the troublesome "Bransford" signature had placed him in a dilemma.

Undoubtedly Maison, Silverthorn, and Dale were confederates in this matter, and Dale's insistence that he sign the register claim was a mere subterfuge to obtain a copy of the Bransford signature in order to make trouble for him. It occurred to Sanderson that the men suspected him, and he grinned coldly as he raised his eyes to Maison.

Maison was watching him, keenly; and his flush when he saw Sanderson looking at

him convinced the latter that his suspicions were not without foundation.

If Sanderson could have known that he had hardly left the hotel when a man whispered to Maison; and that Maison had said to the man: "All right, I'll go down and wait for him," Sanderson could not have more accurately interpreted Maison's flush.

Sanderson's grin grew grim. "It's a frame-up," he told himself. His grin grew saturnine. He got up, folded the withdrawal blank and stuck it in a pocket.

"I'm leavin' the money here to-night," he said. "For a man that ain't been to town in a long while, there'd be too many temptations yankin' at me."

He went out, leaving Maison to watch him from a window, a flush of chagrin on his face.

Sanderson walked down the street toward the hotel. He would have Owen sign the withdrawal blank before morning—that would defeat Maison's plan to gain evidence of the impersonation.

Sanderson had not been gone from Silverthorn's office more than five minutes when Dale entered. Silverthorn was sitting at his desk scowling, his face pale with big, heavy lines in it showing the strain of his interview with Sanderson.

"Bransford's been here!" guessed Dale, looking at Silverthorn.

Silverthorn nodded, cursing.

"You don't need to feel conceited," laughed Dale; "he's been to see me, too."

Dale related what had happened on the street some time before, and Silverthorn's scowl deepened.

"There are times when you don't seem to be able to think at all, Dale!" he declared. "After this, when you decide to do a thing, see me first—or Maison. The last thing we want to happen right now is to have this fake Bransford killed."

"Why?"

"I've just got word from Las Vegas that he's submitted his affidavit establishing his identity, and that the court has accepted it. That settles the matter until—or unless—we can get evidence to the contrary. And if he dies without us getting that evidence we are through."

"Him dyin' would make things sure for us," contended Dale. "Mary Bransford wouldn't have any claim—us havin' proof that she ain't a Bransford."

"This fellow is no fool," declared Silverthorn. "Suppose he's wise to us, which he might be, and he has willed the property to the girl. Where would we be, not being able to prove that he isn't Will Bransford?"

Dale meditated. Then he made a wry face. "That's right," he finally admitted. He made a gesture of futility. "I reckon I'll let you do the plannin' after this."

"All right," said Silverthorn, mollified. "Have you set Morley on Barney Owen?"

"Owen was goin' right strong a few minutes after this Bransford guy left him," grinned Dale.

"All right," said Silverthorn; "go ahead the way we planned it. But don't have our friend killed."

When Sanderson entered the hotel there was no one in the office but the clerk, who was pondering over the register.

Dusk had fallen, and the light in the office was rather dim. Through the archway connecting the office with the saloon came a broad beam of light from a number of kerosene lamps. From beyond the archway issued the buzz of voices and the clink of glasses; peering through the opening Sanderson could see that the barroom was crowded.

Sanderson mounted the stairs leading from the office. When he had left Owen the latter had told Sanderson that it was his intention to spend the time until the return of his friend in reading.

Owen, however, was not in the room. Sanderson descended the stairs, walked to the archway that led into the saloon, and looked inside. In a rear corner of the barroom he saw Owen, seated at a table with several other men. Owen's face was flushed; he was talking loudly and extravagantly.

Sanderson remembered what Owen had told him concerning his appetite for strong liquor; he remembered, too, that Owen was in possession of a secret which, if divulged, would deliver Mary Bransford into the hands of her enemies.

Sanderson's blood rioted with rage and disgust. He crossed the barroom and stood behind Owen. The latter did not see him. One of the men with Owen did see Sanderson, though, and he looked up impudently, and smilingly pushed a filled glass of amber-colored liquor toward Owen.

"You ain't half drinkin' Owen," he said.

Sanderson reached over, took the glass, threw its contents on the floor and grasped Owen by the shoulder. His gaze met the tempter's, coldly.

"My friend ain't drinkin' no more to-night," he declared.

The tempter sneered, his body stiffening.

"He ain't, eh?" he grinned, insolently.

"I reckon you don't know him; he likes whisky as a fish likes water."

Several men in the vicinity guffawed loudly.

Owen was drunk. His hair was rumpled, his face was flushed, and his eyes were bleared and wide with an unreasoning, belligerent light as he got up, swaying unsteadily, and looked at Sanderson.

"Not drink any more?" he demanded loudly. "Who says I can't? I've got lots of money, and there's lots of booze here. Who says I can't drink any more?"

And now, for the first time, he seemed to realize that Sanderson stood before him. But the knowledge appeared merely to increase his belligerence to an insane fury. He broke from Sanderson's restraining grasp and stood off, reeling, looking at Sanderson with the grin of a satyr.

"Look who's telling me I can't drink any more!" he taunted, so that nearly every man in the room turned to look at him. "It's my guardian angel, gentlemen—Will Bransford, of the Double A! Will Bransford—ha, ha, ha! Will Bransford! Come an' look at him, gentlemen! Says I can't drink any more booze. He's running the Double A, Bransford is. There's a lot I could tell you about Bransford—a whole lot! He ain't—"

His maudlin talk broke off short, for Sanderson had stepped to his side and placed a hand over his mouth. Owen struggled, broke away, and shouted:

"Damn you, let me alone! I'm going to tell these people who you are. You're—"

Again his talk was stilled. This time the method was swift and certain. Sanderson took another step toward him and struck. His fist landed on Owen's jaw, resounding with a vicious *smack!* in the sudden silence that had fallen, and Owen crumpled and sank to the floor in an inert heap.

Sanderson was bending over him, preparing to carry him to his room, when there came an interruption. A big man, with a drawn six-shooter, stepped to Sanderson's side. A dozen more shoved forward and stood near him, the crowd moving back.

Sanderson sensed the movement and stood erect, leaving Owen still on the floor. One look at the hostile faces around him convinced Sanderson that the men were there by design.

He grinned mirthlessly into the face of the man with the drawn pistol.

"Frame-up, eh?" he said. "What's the game?"

"You're wanted for drawin' a gun on Dave Silverthorn—in his office. I'm a deputy sheriff, an' I've got a warrant for you. Want to see it?"

Sanderson did not answer. Here was a manifestation of Dale's power and cupidity.

The charge was a mere subterfuge, designed to deprive him of his liberty. Sanderson had no intention of submitting.

The deputy saw resistance in the gleam of Sanderson's eyes, and he spoke sharply, warningly:

"Don't try any funny business; I've a dozen men here!"

Sanderson laughed in his face. He lunged forward, striking bitterly with the movement. The deputy's body doubled forward—Sanderson's fist had been driven into his stomach. His gun clattered to the floor; he reached out blindly with his hands, trying to grasp Sanderson, who evaded him and struck upward viciously.

The deputy slid to the floor, and Sanderson stood beside the table, his gun menacing the deputy's followers.

Sanderson had worked fast. Possibly the deputy's men had anticipated no resistance from Sanderson, or they had been stunned with the rapidity with which he had placed their leader out of action.

Not one of them had drawn a weapon. They watched Sanderson silently as he began to back away from them, still covering them with his pistol.

Sanderson had decided to desert Owen; the man had proved a traitor, and could not expect any consideration. Owen might talk—Sanderson expected he would talk; but he did not intend to jeopardize his liberty by staying to find out.

He stepped backward cautiously, for he saw certain of the men begin to move restlessly. He cautioned them, swinging the muzzle of his pistol back and forth, the crowd behind him splitting apart as he retreated.

He had gone a dozen steps when some one tripped him. He fell backward, landing on his shoulders, his right elbow striking hard on the board floor and knocking the pistol out of his hand.

He saw the men surge forward, and he made a desperate effort to get to his feet. But he did not succeed. He was on his knees when several men, throwing themselves at him, landed on top of him. Their combined weight crushed him to the floor, but he squirmed out of the mass and got to his feet, striking at the faces he saw around him, worrying the men hither and yon, dragging them with him as he reeled under savage blows that were rained on him.

He had torn himself almost free; one man still clung to him, and he was trying to shake the fellow off, that he might hit him effectively, when a great weight seemed to fall on his head, blackness surrounded him, and he pitched face down on the floor.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VOICE OF THE COYOTE.

WHEN Sanderson regained consciousness he was lying on his back on a board floor. His head seemed to have been smashed, he was dizzy and weak, but he sat up and looked around him.

Then he grinned wanly.

He was in jail. A heavy, barred door was in front of him; turning his head he saw an iron-grated window behind him. Door and window were set in heavy stone

walls; two other stone walls, with a narrow iron cot sat against one of them, rose blankly on either side.

Sanderson got up, reeling, and went to the window. Darkness had come; he could see Okar's lights flickering and winking at him from the buildings that skirted the street. Various sounds reached his ears—Okar's citizens were enjoying themselves.

Sanderson did not watch the lights long. He walked to the cot, seated himself on its edge, rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in the upturned palms of his hands and reflected on what had occurred to him.

Remembering the four thousand dollars in bills of large denomination that Burroughs had paid him when leaving the Pig-Pen, his hand went to the money-belt around his waist.

Belt and money were gone!

Sanderson got up again, walked to the door and called.

A heavy-featured man slouched down the corridor and halted near the door.

"Awake, eh?" he grinned. "Dale sure did hand it to you—now, didn't he? Well," he added as Sanderson's lips straightened at his words, "what's eatin' you?"

"I had a belt with some money in it—four thousand. What's become of it?"

"Four thousand!" the man jeered. "That bump on the head is still affectin' you, I reckon. Four thousand—shucks!" He laughed. "Well, I ain't seen it—if that's any consolation to you. If you'd had it when you come here I'd sure seen it."

"Who brought me here?"

"Dale an' his first deputy—the guy you poked in the stummick, over in the Okar Hotel. They tell me you fi't like hell! What's Dale got ag'in' you? He sure was some het up about you."

Sanderson did not answer. He turned his back to the jailer and walked to the cot, again sitting on its edge. He heard the jailer sniff contemptuously, but he paid no attention to him.

Prominent in Sanderson's thoughts was the realization that Dale had taken his money. He knew that was the last of it—

Dale would not admit taking it. Sanderson had intended to use the four thousand on the Double A irrigation project. The sum, together with the three thousand he meant to draw from the Okar bank, would have been enough to make a decent start.

Sanderson had some bitter thoughts as he sat on the edge of the cot, all of them centering around Dale, Silverthorn, Maisson, Owen, Mary Bransford, and himself. He realized that he had been defeated in the first clash with the forces opposed to him, that Owen had turned traitor, that Mary Bransford's position now was more precarious than it had been before his coming, and that he had to deal with resourceful, desperate, and unscrupulous men.

And yet, sitting there at the edge of the cot, Sanderson grinned. The grin did not make his face attractive, for it reflected something of the cold, bitter humor and savage passion that had gripped his soul.

At noon the next day Sanderson, looking out of the window of his cell, heard a sound at the door. He turned, to see Silverthorn standing in the corridor.

Silverthorn smiled blandly at him.

"Over it, I see," he said. "They used you rather roughly, eh? Well, they tell me you made them step some."

Sanderson deliberately turned his back and continued to look out of the window.

"On your dignity, eh?" sneered Silverthorn. "Well, let me tell you something. We've heard a lot about you—from Dal Colton and Barney Owen. Morley—one of our men—got Owen soused last night, as per orders, and Owen spilled his knowledge of you all over the town. It's pretty well known, now, that you are Deal Sanderson, from down Tombstone way.

"I don't know what your game was, but I think it's pretty well queered by now. I suppose you had some idea of impersonating Bransford, hoping to get a slice of the property. I don't blame you for trying. It was up to us to see that you didn't get away with it.

"But we don't want to play hog. If you'll admit before a notary that you are not Will Bransford we'll hand you back the

four thousand Dale took from you, give you ten thousand in addition and safe conduct out of the county. That strike you?"

Sanderson did not answer.

Silverthorn's face reddened. "You're a damned fool!" he sneered, venomously. "We'll keep you in jail here for a thousand years, if necessary. We'll do worse!"

"Look here!" he suddenly said. But Sanderson did not turn. Silverthorn rattled a paper.

"Here's a withdrawal slip on the Okar Bank, calling for three thousand two hundred dollars, signed by Will Bransford. Barney Owen drew the money last night and blew it in, gambling and drinking. He says he's been signing Bransford's name—forging it—at your orders. The signature he put on this paper is a dead ringer for the one on the registry blank you gave Dale.

"Dale saw Owen sign that. That's why he knew you are not Will Bransford. Understand? Maison will swear you signed the withdrawal slip and got the money. We'll prove that you are not Bransford, and you'll go to the Las Vegas pen for twenty years! Now, let's talk business!"

Sanderson turned. There was a mirthless grin on his face. He spoke loudly, calling the jailer.

When the latter appeared in the corridor beside Silverthorn, Sanderson addressed him without looking at the other:

"You ain't on your job a heap, are you? There's a locoed coyote barkin' at me through the door, there. Run him out, will you—he's disturbin' me plenty."

He turned from the door, stretched himself on the cot and with his face to the wall listened while Silverthorn cursed.

CHAPTER XV.

DALE PAYS A VISIT.

SHORTLY after midnight Sanderson was sound asleep on the cot in the cell when a strange, scraping noise awakened him. He lay still for a long time, listening, until he discovered that the sound came from the window. Then he sat up stealthily and looked around to see, framed in the star-

lit gloom of the night, the face of Barney Owen, staring in through the window at him.

The sight of Owen enraged Sanderson, but his curiosity drove him to the window.

The little man was hanging to the iron bars; his neck muscles were straining, his face was red and his eyes bright.

"Don't talk, now!" he warned. "The boss of the dump is awake and he'll hear. He's in his room; there's nobody else around. I wanted to tell you that I'm going to knock him silly and get you out of this!"

"Why?" mocked Sanderson, lowly.

Owen's face grew redder. "Oh, I know I've got something coming, but I'm going to get you out all the same. I've got our horses and guns. Be ready!"

He slipped down. Sanderson could hear his feet thud faintly on the sand outside.

Sanderson got into his clothes and stood at the cell door, waiting. For a long time he heard no sound, but presently he caught the clank of a door, followed by a swift step, and Owen stood in the corridor before the cell door, a bunch of keys in his hand.

There was no word spoken. Owen unlocked the door, Sanderson slipped out, Owen passed him the six-shooter he had lost in the barroom of the Okar Hotel, and the two slipped noiselessly down the corridor.

A minute later they were mounting the horses that Owen had brought, and shortly afterward they were moving like shadows away from the outskirts of Okar.

Not until they were well out in the big basin did either of them speak. And then Sanderson said, shortly:

"Silverthorn was tellin' me you gassed everything. Are you feelin' better over it?"

Owen's head bent over his horse's mane; his chin was on his chest when he answered:

"Come and kill me."

"Hell!" exploded Sanderson, disgustedly. "If there was anything comin' to you killin' would be too good for you. You ain't done anything to me, you sufferin' fool—not a thing! What you've done you've done to Mary Bransford. When you see Dale an' Silverthorn grabbin' the Double

A, an' Mary Bransford ridin' away, homeless—you'll have feelin's of remorse, mebbe—if you've got any *man* in you at all!"

Owen writhed and groaned.

"It was the whisky—the cursed whisky!" he whispered. "I can't let it alone—I love it! And once I get a taste of it, I'm gone—I'm a stark, staring lunatic!"

"I'd swear to that," grimly agreed Sanderson.

"I didn't mean to say a word to anybody," wailed the little man. "Do you think I'd do anything to harm Mary Bransford—after what she did for me? But I did—I must have done it. Dale said I did, Silverthorn said I did, and you say I did. But I don't remember. Silverthorn said I signed a receipt for some money from the Okar Bank—three thousand, odd. I don't remember. Oh, but I'm—"

"Callin' yourself names won't get you back to where you was before you made a fool of yourself," Sanderson told him, pityingly. "An' me tellin' you what I think of you won't relieve my feelin's a whole lot, for there ain't words enough layin' around loose.

"What I want to know is this: did you go clean loco, or do you remember *anything* that happened to you? Do you know who got the money you drew from the bank?"

"Dale," answered Owen. "He had that, for I remember him counting it in the back room of the hotel. There was more, too; I heard him telling Silverthorn there was about seven thousand in all. Silverthorn wanted him to put it all back in the bank, but Dale said there was just enough for him to meet his pay-roll—that he owed his men a lot of back pay. He took it with him."

"My four thousand," said Sanderson, shortly.

"Yours?" Owen paled.

"Dale lifted my money-belt," Sanderson returned. "I was wonderin' what he did with it. So that's what."

He relapsed into a grim silence, and Owen did not speak again.

They rode several miles in that fashion—Owen keeping his horse slightly behind Sanderson's, his gaze on the other's face, his own white with remorse and anxiety.

At last he heard Sanderson laugh, and the sound of it made him grit his teeth in impotent agony.

"Sanderson," he said, gulping, "I'm sorry."

"Sure," returned the other. "If I hadn't wised up to that quite a spell ago, you'd be back on the trail, waitin' for some coyote to come along an' get his supper."

They rode in silence for a long time. They came to the gentle slope of the basin and began to climb it.

A dozen times Owen rode close to Sanderson, his lips trembling over unuttered words, but each time he dropped back without speaking. His eyes, fixed worshipfully on the back of the big, silent man ahead of him, were glowing with anxiety and wonder.

In the ghostly darkness of the time before the gray forerunner of the dawn appears on the horizon they came in sight of the Double A ranch-house.

Sanderson was still leading. The ranch-house burst upon his vision as his horse topped a rise that had obscured his view of the ranch-house, and he saw it, clearly outlined.

Riding down the slope of the rise he smiled. For there was a light in one of the ranch-house windows. Mary had left it burn on his account, he divined.

He halted and allowed Owen to come near him.

"Mary ain't to hear about this deal to-night," he told the little man. "Not a peep—understand?"

Without waiting for an answer he rode onward.

Thinking that, perhaps, in spite of the burning lamp Mary might be sleeping, Sanderson cautiously dismounted at the corral gates, and, leaving Owen to put his own horse away, he walked toward the house, stealthily, for he did not wish to awaken the girl.

Half-way across the ranch-house yard, Sanderson saw a shadow cross the light in the window. Again he grinned, thinking Mary had not gone to bed after all.

But, going forward more unconcernedly, Sanderson's smile faded and was succeeded by a savage frown. For in the shadow formed by the little "L" at the junction

of the house and porch, he saw a horse, saddled and bridled.

Suddenly alert, and yielding to the savage rage that gripped him, Sanderson stole softly forward and looked closely at the animal. He recognized it instantly as Dale's, and in the instant, his face pale, his eyes blazing with passion, he was on the porch, peering through one of the darkened windows.

Inside he saw Dale and Mary Bransford. They were in the sitting-room. Dale was sitting in a big chair, smoking a cigar, one arm carelessly thrown over the back of the chair, his legs crossed, his attitude that of the master.

Standing perhaps a dozen feet from him was Mary Bransford.

The girl's eyes were wide with fright and astonishment, disbelief, incredulity—and several other emotions that Sanderson could not analyze. He did not try. One look at her sufficed to tell him that Dale was baiting her, tantalizing her, mocking her, and Sanderson's hatred for the man grew in intensity until it threatened to overwhelm him.

There was in his mind an impulse to burst into the house and kill Dale where he sat. It was the primitive lust to destroy an unprincipled rival that had seized Sanderson, for he saw in Dale's eyes the bold passion of the woman-hunter.

However, Sanderson conquered the impulse. He fought it with the marvelous self-control and implacable determination that had made him feared and respected wherever men knew him, and in the end the faint, stiff grin on his face indicated that whatever he did would be done with deliberation.

This was an instance where the eaves-dropper had some justification for his work, and Sanderson listened.

He heard Dale laugh—the sound of it made Sanderson's lips twitch queerly. He saw Mary cringe from Dale and press her hands over her breast. Dale's voice carried clearly to Sanderson.

"Ha, ha!" he said. "So *that* hurts, eh? Well, here's more of the same kind. We got Barney Owen drunk last night, and he admitted that he'd signed all of Sanderson's

papers—the papers that were supposed to have been signed by your brother. Why didn't Sanderson sign them? Why? Because Sanderson couldn't do it.

"Owen, who knew your brother in Arizona, signed them, because he knew how to imitate your brother's writing. Get that! Owen signed a bank-receipt for the money old Bransford had in the bank. Owen got it and gave it to me. He was so drunk he didn't know what he was doing, but he could imitate your brother's writing, all right."

"You've got the money!" gasped the girl.

Again Dale laughed, mockingly. "Yep," he said; "I've got it. Three thousand two hundred. And I've got four thousand that belongs to that four-flusher, Square Deal. Seven thousand." He laughed again.

"Where is Sanderson?" questioned the girl.

"In jail, over in Okar." Dale paused long enough to enjoy the girl's distress. Then he continued: "Owen is in jail, too, by this time. Silverthorn and Maison are not taking any chances on letting him go around loose."

"Sanderson in jail!" gasped Mary. She seemed to droop; she staggered to a chair and sank into it, still looking at Dale, a despairing expression in her eyes.

Dale got up and walked to a point directly in front of her, looking down at her, triumphantly.

"That's what," he said. "In jail. Moreover, that's where they'll stay until this thing is settled. We mean to have the Double A. The sooner you realize that, the easier it will be for you.

"I'm offering you a way out of it—an easy way. That guy, Sanderson, ain't on the level. He's been working you, making a monkey of you—fooling you. He wants the Double A for himself. He's been hanging around here, passing himself off as your brother, aiming to get on the good side of you—getting you to love him good and hard. Then mebbe he'd tell you, thinking that you'd forgive him. But mebbe that wasn't his game at all. Mebbe he'd figured to grab the ranch and turn you out.

"Now, I'm offering you a whole lot. Mebbe you've thought I was sweet on that

Nyland girl. Get that out of your mind. I was only fooling with her—like any man fools with a girl. I want her ranch—that's all. But I don't care a damn about the Double A, I want you. I've had my eye on you right along. Mebbe it won't be marriage right away, but—"

"Alva Dale!"

The girl was on her feet again, facing the man, her eyes blazing.

Dale did not retreat from her; he stood smiling at her, his face wreathed in a huge grin. He was enjoying the girl.

Sanderson slipped along the wall of the house and opened the door. It creaked loudly on its hinges with the movement, causing both Dale and the girl to turn and face it.

Mary Bransford stood rigid as she saw Sanderson standing in the doorway, a flush sweeping swiftly over her face. There was relief in her eyes.

Astonishment and stark, naked fear were in Dale's eyes. He shrank back a step, and looked swiftly at Sanderson's right hand, and when he saw that it held a six-shooter he raised both his own hands, shoulder-high, the palms toward Sanderson.

"So you know it means shootin', eh?" said Sanderson grimly as he stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him, slamming it shut with his left hand.

"Well, shootin' goes." There was the cold calm of decision in his manner; his eyes were ablaze with the accumulated hate and rage that had been aroused over what he had heard. The grin that he showed to Dale drew his lips into two straight, stiff lines.

"I reckon you think you've earned your red shirt, Dale," he said, "for tellin' tales out of school. Well, you'll get it. There's just one thing will save your miserable hide. You got that seven thousand on you?"

Dale hesitated, then nodded.

Sanderson spoke to Mary Bransford without removing his gaze from Dale:

"Get pen, ink, an' paper."

The girl moved quickly into another room, returning almost instantly with the articles requested.

"Sit down an' write what I tell you to," directed Sanderson.

Dale dropped into a chair beside a center table, took up the pen, poised it over the paper, and looked at Sanderson.

"I am hereby returning to Deal Sanderson the seven thousand two hundred dollars I stole from him," directed Sanderson. "I am doing this of my own accord—no one is forcin' me," went on Sanderson. "I want to add that I hereby swear that the charge of drawin' a gun on Silverthorn was a frame-up, me an' Silverthorn an' Maison bein' the guilty parties," finished Sanderson.

"Now," he added, when Dale had written as directed, "sign it."

Dale signed and stood up, his face aflame with rage.

"I'll take the money—now," said Sanderson.

Dale produced it from various pockets, laying it on the table. He said nothing. Mary Bransford stood a little distance away, watching silently.

"Count it, Miss Bransford," said Sanderson when Dale had disgorged the money.

The two men stood silent as the girl fingered the bills. At last she looked at Sanderson and nodded.

The latter grinned. "Everything's regular, now," he said. He looked at Mary. "Do you want him killed, ma'am? He'd be a lot better off dead. You'd be better off, too. This kind of a skunk is always around, botherin' women—when there ain't no men around."

Mary shook her head with a decisive negative.

"Then he won't die, right now," said Sanderson. "He'll pull his freight away from the Double A, though, ma'am. An' he'll never come back."

He was talking to Dale through the girl, and Dale watched him, scowling.

"If he does come back, you'll tell me, won't you, ma'am? An' then there'll never be an Alva Dale to bother you again—or to go around robbin' honest men, an' tryin' to get them mixed up with the law."

And now he turned from the girl and spoke to Dale:

"You go right back to Okar an' tell Maison an' Silverthorn what has happened here to-night. Show them how the fear of

God has got into your heart an' made you yearn to practise the principles of a square deal. Tell them that they'd better get to goin' straight, too, for if they don't there's a guy which was named after a square deal that is goin' to snuff them off this hemisphere middlin' rapid. That's all. You'd better hit the breeze right back to Okar an' spread the good news."

He stood, a grim smile on his face, watching Dale as the latter walked to the door. When Dale stepped out on the porch Sanderson followed him, still regarding the movements of the other coldly and alertly.

Mary heard them—their steps on the boards of the porch; she heard the saddle leather creak as Dale climbed on his horse; she heard the sound of the hoof-beats as the horse clattered out of the ranch-house yard.

And then for several minutes she stood near the little table in the room, listening vainly for some sound that would tell her of the presence of Sanderson on the porch. None came.

At last, when she began to feel certain that he had gone to the bunk-house, she heard a step on the porch and saw Sanderson standing in the doorway.

He grinned at her, meeting her gaze fairly.

"Dale told you a heap of truth, ma'am," he said. "I feel more like a man to-night than I've felt for a good many days—an' nights."

"Then it was true—as Dale said—that you are not my brother?" said the girl. She was trying to make her voice sound severe, but only succeeded in making it quaver.

"I ain't your brother."

"And you came here to try to take the ranch away from me—to steal it?"

He flushed. "You've got four thousand of my money there, ma'am. You're to keep it. Mebbe that will help to show what my intentions were. About the rest—your brother an' all—I'll have to tell you. It's a thing you ought to know, an' I don't know what's been keepin' me from tellin' you all along.

"Mebbe it was because I was scared you'd take it hard. But since these sneaks

have got to waggin' their tongues it 'll have to be told. If you sit down by the table there, I'll tell you why I done what I did."

She took a chair beside the table and faced him, and, standing before her, speaking very gently, but frankly, he related what had occurred to him in the desert. She took it hard, and there were times when he had to halt his recital because of her emotion. But she soon became resigned to the death of her brother and was able to listen to Sanderson's story of his motive in deceiving her.

When he related his emotions during their first meeting—when he had told Dale that he was her brother, after yielding to the appeal in her eyes—she smiled.

"There was some excuse for it, after all," she declared.

"An' you ain't blamin' me—so much?" he asked.

"No," she said. She blushed as she thought of the times she had kissed him. He was thinking of her kisses, too, and as their eyes met, each knew what the other was thinking about. Sanderson smiled at her and her eyes dropped.

"It wasn't a square deal for me to take them, then, ma'am," he told her. "But I'm goin' to stay around here an' fight Dale an' his friends to a finish. That is, if you want me to stay. I'd like a straight answer. I ain't hangin' around where I ain't wanted."

Her eyes glowed as she looked at him. "You'll have to stay, now," she said. "Will is dead, and you will have to stay here and brazen it out. They'd take the Double A from me surely, if you were to desert me. You will have to stay and insist that you are my brother!"

"That's a contract," he agreed. "But"—he looked at her, a flush on his face—"goin' back to them kisses. It wasn't a square deal. But I'm hopin' that a day will come—"

She got up, her face very red. "It is nearly morning," she interrupted.

"Yes," he smiled; "things are only beginnin'."

"You are impudent—and imprudent," she said, looking straight at him.

"An' hopeful," he answered, meeting her eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, stretched out on his bed, Sanderson saw the dawn breaking in the east. It reminded him of the morning he had seen the two riders above him on the edge of the arroyo. As on that other morning, he lay and watched the coming of the dawn. And when later he heard Mary moving about in the kitchen he got up, not having slept a wink, and went out to her.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"How could I," he asked, "with a new day dawning for me?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HAND OF THE ENEMY.

WHEN in the bunk-house the next morning Sanderson informed Barney Owen of what had occurred during the night, the latter looked fixedly at Sanderson.

"So she didn't take it hard," he said.

"Was you expectin' her to? For a brother that she hadn't seen in a dozen years—an' which she knows in her secret heart wasn't any good?" retorted Sanderson. "Shootin' your face off in Okar—or anywhere else—don't go any more," added Sanderson. "She's pretendin', publicly, that I'm her brother."

"I'm through talking," declared Owen.

"Or livin'. It's one or the other," warned Sanderson.

Sanderson took the seven thousand dollars that Mary gave him, rode to Lazette—a town fifty miles eastward from the basin—and deposited the money in a bank there. Then he rode eastward still farther and in another town discovered a young engineer with a grievance against his employers.

The result of this discovery was that on the following morning the young engineer and Sanderson journeyed westward to the basin, arriving at the Double A late in the afternoon of the next day.

On the edge of the plateau after the engineer and Sanderson had spent three or four days prowling through the basin and the gorge, the engineer spoke convincingly:

"It's the easiest thing in the world! A big flume to the point I showed you, a big main ditch and several laterals will do the trick. I'm with you to the finish!"

Sanderson smiled at the engineer's glowing enthusiasm and told him of the opposition he would meet in developing the project.

"There'll be a heap of schemin', an' mebbe shootin', Williams," Sanderson told him. "Puttin' through this deal won't be any pussy-kitten affair."

"So much the better," laughed the engineer; "I'm fed up on soft snaps and long-ing for action."

The engineer was thirty; big, square-shouldered, lithe, and capable. He had a strong face and a level, steady eye.

"If you mean business, let's get acquainted," he said. "My front name is Kent."

"Well, Kent, let's get busy," smiled Sanderson. "You go to work on your estimates, order your material, hire your men. I'll see how bad the people in the basin want the water they've been expectin'."

Kent Williams took up his quarters in the bunk-house and immediately began work, though before he could do much he rode to Okar, telegraphed to Dry Bottom, the town which had been the scene of his previous activity, and awaited the arrival of several capable-looking young men.

In company with the latter he returned to the Double A, and for many days thereafter he and his men ran the transit and drove stakes in the basin and along the gorge.

Sanderson did not spend all his time talking with the cattlemen in the basin. They were all eager to have water brought to their ranches, for it would save them the long trip to the river, which was inaccessible in many places, and they welcomed the new project.

One of the men—a newcomer to the basin—voiced the general sentiment:

"We want water, an' we don't give a damn who brings it here. First come, first served!"

The big problem to Sanderson, however, was the question of money. He was aware that a vast sum would be required. Nearly all the money he possessed would be sunk in the preliminary work, and he knew that if the work was to go on he must borrow money.

He couldn't get money in Okar, he knew that. He rode to Lazette and talked with a banker there. The latter was interested, but unwilling to lend.

"The Okar Basin," he said. "Yes, I've heard about it. Great prospects there. But I've been told that Silverthorn and Maison are going to put it through, and until I hear from them, I shouldn't like to interfere."

"That gang won't touch the Double A water!" declared Sanderson. "I'll see the basin scorched to a cinder before I'll let them in on the deal!"

The banker smiled. "You are entitled to the water, of course; and I admire your grit. But those men are powerful. I have to depend on them a great deal. So you can see that I couldn't do anything without first consulting them."

Sanderson left Lazette in disgust. It was not until after he had tried in Dry Bottom and Las Vegas that he realized how subtle and far-reaching was the power and influence of the financial rulers of Okar.

"We should like to let you have the money," the Las Vegas banker told him. "But, unfortunately, a loan to you would conflict with our interests in Okar. We know the big men in Okar have been considering the water question in the basin, and we should not like to antagonize them."

The trip consumed two weeks, and Sanderson returned to the Double A to discover that during his absence very little work had been done.

"It looks like we're up against it," Williams informed him when pressed for an explanation. "We can't get a pound of material. I went personally to Okar and was told by Silverthorn that the railroad would accept no material consigned to the Double A ranch."

"Pretty raw," was Sanderson's only comment.

"Raw? It's rotten!" declared Williams. "There's plenty of the kind of material we want in Lazette. To get it here would mean a fifty-mile haul. I can get teams and wagons in Lazette," he added, an eager note in his voice.

"Go to it," said Sanderson.

Williams smiled admiringly. "You're

game, Mr. Man," he said; "it's a pleasure to work for you!"

However, it was not courage that impelled Sanderson to accept the hazard and expense of the fifty-mile haul. In his mind during the days he had been trying to borrow money had been a picture of the defeat that was ahead of him if he did not succeed; he could imagine the malicious satisfaction with which his three enemies would discuss his failure.

Inwardly, Sanderson was writhing with impatience and consumed with an eagerness to get into personal contact with his enemies; the passion to triumph had gripped his soul, and a contempt for the sort of law in which Okar dealt had grown upon him until the contemplation of it had aroused in him a savage humor.

Okar's law was not law at all; it was a convenience under which his three enemies could assail the property rights of others.

Outwardly, Sanderson was a smiling optimist. To Mary Bransford he confided that all was going well.

Neither had broached the subject of Sanderson's impersonation since the night of Dale's visit. It was a matter which certain thoughts made embarrassing for Mary, and Sanderson was satisfied to keep silent.

But on the day that Williams left the Double A for Lazette, Mary's curiosity could not be denied. She had conquered that constraint which had resulted from the revelation of Sanderson's identity, and had asked him to ride to the top of the gorge, telling him she wanted him to explain the proposed system of irrigation.

"It is desperately hard to get any information out of Williams," she told Sanderson; "he simply won't talk about the work."

"Meanin' that he'll talk rapid enough about other things, eh?" Sanderson returned. He looked slyly at Mary.

"What other things are there for him to talk about?"

"A man could find a heap of things to talk about—to a woman. He might talk about himself—or the woman," suggested Sanderson, grinning.

She gave him a knowing look. "Oh," she

said, reddening. "Yes," she added, smiling faintly; "now that you speak of it, I remember he did talk quite a little. He is a very interesting man."

"Good-lookin', too," said Sanderson; "an' smart. He saw the prospects of this thing right off."

"Didn't you see them?" she questioned quickly.

"Oh, that," he said, flushing. "If the drifter hadn't told me mebbe I wouldn't have seen."

"You have always been around cattle, I suppose?" she asked.

"Raised with them," smiled Sanderson.

Thus she directed the conversation to the subject about which she had wanted to inquire—his past life. Her questions were clever; they were suggestions to which he could do nothing except to return direct replies. And she got out of him much of his history, discovering that he had sound moral views, and a philosophy of which the salient principle was the scriptural injunction: "Do unto others as ye would that others should do unto you."

Upon that principle he had founded his character. His reputation had grown out of an adamant adherence to it. Looking at him now she felt the strength of him, his intense devotion to his ideals; the earnestness of him.

Curiously, she had not felt those things during the time she had thought of him as her brother, nor had she been conscious of the lure of him. It gave her a queer thrill to stand beside him now, knowing that she had kissed him; that he had had an opportunity to take advantage of the situation, and had not done so.

He had acted the gentleman; he was a gentleman. That was why she was able to talk with him now. If he had not treated her as he had treated her his presence at the Double A would have been intolerable.

There was a deep respect for woman in Sanderson, she knew. Also, despite his bold, frank glances—which was merely the manhood of him challenging her and taking note of her charms—there was a hesitating bashfulness about the man, as though he was not quite certain of the impression he was creating in her mind.

That knowledge pleased Mary; it convinced her of his entire worthiness; it gave her power over him—and that power thrilled her.

As her brother, he had been an interesting figure, though his manner had repelled her. And she had been conscious of a subtle pleasure that was not all sisterly when she had been near him. She knew, now, that the sensation had been instinctive, and she wondered if she could have felt toward her brother as she felt toward this man.

However, this new situation had removed the diffidence that had affected her; their relations were less matter of fact and more romantic, and she felt toward him as any woman feels who knows an admirer pursues her—breathless with the wonder of it, but holding aloof, tantalizing, whimsical and uncertain of herself.

She looked at him challengingly, mockery in her eyes.

"So you came here because the drifter told you there would be trouble—and a woman. How perfectly delightful!"

He sensed her mood and responded to it. He grinned.

"It's sure delightful. But it ain't unusual. I've always heard that trouble will be lurkin' around where there's a woman."

"But you would not say that a woman is not worth the trouble she causes?" she countered.

"A man is willin' to take her—trouble an' all," he responded, looking straight at her.

"Yes—if he can get her!" she shot back at him.

"Mostly every woman gets married to a man. I've got as good a chance as any other man."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're talkin' to me about it," he grinned. "If you wasn't considerin' me you wouldn't argue with me about it; you'd turn me down celd an' forget it."

"I suppose when a man is big and romantic-looking—"

"Oh, shucks, ma'am; you'll be havin' me gettin' a swelled head."

"He thinks that all he has to do is to look his best."

"I expect I've looked my worst since I've been here. I ain't had a chance to do any moonin' at you."

"I don't like men that 'moon,'" she declared.

"That's the reason I didn't do it," he declared.

She laughed. "Now, tell me," she asked, "how you got your name, 'Deal.' It had something to do with cards, I suppose?"

"With weight," he said, looking soberly at her. "When I was born my dad looked at me sort of nonplused. I was that big. 'There's a deal of him,' he told my mother. An' the name stuck. That ain't a lot mysterious."

"It was a convenient name to attach the 'square' to," she said.

"I've earned it," he said earnestly. "An' I've had a mighty hard time provin' my right to wear it. There's men that will tempt you out of pure deviltry, an' others that will try to shoot such a fancy out of your system. But I didn't wear the 'square' because I wanted to—folks hung it onto me without me askin'. That's one reason I left Tombstone; I'd got tired of posin' as an angel."

He saw her face grow thoughtful and a haunting expression come into her eyes.

"You haven't told me how he looked," she said.

Sanderson lied. He couldn't tell her of the dissipation he had seen in her brother's face, nor of the evilness that had been stamped there. He drew a glowing picture of the man he had buried, and told her that had he lived her brother would have done her credit.

But Sanderson suffered no remorse over the lie. For he saw her eyes glow with pride, and he knew that the picture he had drawn would be the ideal of her memory for the future.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRAIL-HERD.

KENT WILLIAMS went to Lazette, and Sanderson spent the interval during his departure and return in visiting the cattlemen and settlers in the basin. The

result of these visits was a sheaf of contracts for water, the charge based on acreage, that reposed in Sanderson's pockets. According to the terms of the contracts signed by the residents of the basin Sanderson was to furnish water within one year.

The length of time, Sanderson decided, would tell the story of his success or failure. If he failed he would lose nothing, because of having the contracts with the settlers, and if he won the contracts would be valid.

Sanderson was determined to win. When after an absence of a week Williams returned, to announce that he had made arrangements for the material necessary to make a "regular" start, and that he had hired men and teams to transport the material, Sanderson's determination became grim. For Williams told him that he had "gone the limit," which meant that every cent to Sanderson's credit in the Lazette bank had been pledged to pay for the material the engineer had ordered.

"We're going to rush things from now on," Williams told Sanderson. "Next week we'll need ten thousand dollars, at least."

Sanderson went into the house and had a long talk with Mary Bransford. Coming out, he went to the corral, saddled Streak, and rode to Okar.

Shortly he was sitting at a desk opposite a little man who was the resident-buyer for an Eastern live-stock company.

"The Double A has three thousand head of cattle," Sanderson told the little man. "They've had good grass and plenty of water. They're fat, an' are good beef cattle. Thirty-three dollars is the market price. What will you give for them, delivered to your corral here?"

The resident-buyer looked uncomfortable. "I've had orders not to buy any more cattle for a time."

"Whose orders?" demanded Sanderson.

The resident-buyer's face flushed and he looked more uncomfortable.

"My firm's orders!" he snapped.

Sanderson laughed grimly; he saw guilt in the resident-buyer's eyes.

"Silverthorn's orders," he said shortly. At the other's emphatic negative Sanderson laughed again. "Maison's, then. Sure

—Maison's," he added, as the other's flush deepened.

Sanderson got up. "Don't take it so hard," he advised the resident-buyer. "I ain't goin' to bite you. What I'm wonderin' is, did Maison give you that order personally, or did you get it from your boss."

The buyer shifted uneasily in his chair, and did not look at Sanderson.

"Well," said the latter, "it don't make a heap of difference. Good-by," he said, as he went out. "If you get to feelin' mighty small an' mean you can remember that you're only one of the pack of coyotes that's makin' this town a disgrace to a dog-kennel."

Sanderson returned to the Double A and found Mary in the house.

"No go," he informed her. "Maison an' Silverthorn an' Dale have anticipated that move. We don't sell any cattle in Okar."

The girl's disappointment was deep.

"I suppose we may as well give up," she said.

Sanderson lifted her face to his.

"If you're goin' to talk that way I ain't goin' to love you like I thought I was," he grinned. "An' I'm sure wantin' to."

"I don't want to give up," she said.

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that I'd like to have you beat those men. Oh, the miserable schemers! They will go to any length to defeat you."

He laughed lowly and vibrantly. "Well, they'll certainly have to travel *some*," he

said. "About as fast as the man will have to travel that takes you away from me."

"Is victory that dear to you?" she asked.

"I won't take one without the other," he told her, his eyes glowing. "If I don't beat Silverthorn and the others, an' keep the Double A for you, why I—"

"You'll win!" she said.

"You are hopin' I will?" he grinned.

"Well," he added, as she averted her eyes, "there'll come a time when we'll talk real serious about that. I'm goin' to tell the range boss to get ready for a drive to Las Vegas."

"That is a hundred and seventy-five miles!" gasped the girl.

"I've followed a trail-herd two thousand," grinned Sanderson.

"You mean that you will go yourself—with the outfit?"

"Sure."

Sanderson went out, mounted Streak, and found the range boss—Eli Carter. Carter and the men were ordered to round up all the Double A cattle and get ready to drive them to Las Vegas. Sanderson told Carter he would accompany the outfit.

Cutting across the basin toward the ranch-house he saw another horseman riding fast to intercept him, and he swerved Streak and headed toward the other.

The rider was Williams, and when Sanderson got close enough to see his face he noted that the engineer was pale and excited.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

WHEN SLEIGH-BELLS CHIMED

JUST you and I sleigh-riding—the snow
A curtain around us flung;
How your curls across my face would blow
When down the curves we swung;


And you were so near, so brightly aglow!
How lips met, and soft arms clung—
Just you and I sleigh-riding—the snow
A curtain around us flung!

Ah me, once more the joy to know
Which of old through my pulses sung!
You are grandma now; but let us go
And play at being young,
Just you and I sleigh-riding—the snow
A curtain around us flung!

Stokely S. Fisher.

Experience is Everything

by Raymond S. Spears



THE son, Jean, was very tired and discouraged; the daughter-in-law, Marie, was tired and thoughtful; the little children, of whom there were four, played many games restlessly and fretfully. In the corner, between the big sheet-iron woodstove and the two walls sat Daddy Jeadreau, tired—not with a day's toil like the young people, but tired because he was old and had done a man's work during a lifetime in the wilderness. The fatigue of sixty years was on his shoulders, and he was patient, observant, silent.

Old Jeadreau's chair was a great rocker which had drifted up on the North Shore, and on the wooden seat was a thick mattress which had moose hide for cover, and was stuffed full of feathers, duck, goose, partridge, and other bird-down till it was as thick and springy as a newly laid balsam bough bed.

In that old chair sat the old man dreaming, and his dreams were memories of toils he had undergone and the jeopardies he had braved; he looked back on his youth and saw its trials in perspective, and so he knew the trials that these young people were undergoing, and he smiled in his heart because they, too, were brave, and they did not know it.

They were fronting just such difficulties as he had faced; they had the impatience of youth, its inexperience, its questionings of the unkind assaults made upon their comfort, and the inexplicable failures of the most ardent efforts.

The old man could remember his own youth, and its precious strength and the joy undying of loving a confident wife, working out destinies together—their own destinies, and setting their young children firmly on the way into prosperity of the soul, if not greatly in material riches. His wife was dead; all the children were grown up, except two or three who were dead; but Jean survived, and old Jeadreau was proud of him, for he was big and strong and impatient, like his father—tearing with ambition, but like his mother, loving little children and loving his father and loving his own wife, whose tongue was sometimes impatient, but what wife ever lived who would not grow impatient with the stolid thick-headedness of men?

"Jean!" she exclaimed. "Don't you see that heater is going out? And why couldn't you put in some dry maple before that cooking fire got so low that the potpie stopped cooking?"

Just so she talked to Jean and to the children, and old Jeadreau leaned back in his comfort, with his eyes quite closed, listening as to an echo of his own youthful days when he did not understand Mammee; the way he would understand her now, if, with his experience, she could be alive with him and he be young again.

Ah—those blessed little children which, if they do not die and become angels, grow up into strong boys and fine young men, so like their fathers, not inheriting much knowledge or instinct about girls and wo-