

THE SEVENTH MAN

BY

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THE SEVENTH MAN

CHAPTER I

SPRING

A man under thirty needs neighbors and to stop up the current of his life with a long silence is like obstructing a river—eventually the water either sweeps away the dam or rises over it, and the stronger the dam the more destructive is that final rush to freedom. Vic Gregg was on the danger side of thirty and he lived alone in the mountains all that winter. He wanted to marry Betty Neal, but marriage means money, therefore Vic contracted fifteen hundred dollars' worth of mining for the Duncans, and instead of taking a partner he went after that stake single-handed. He is a very rare man who can turn out that amount of labor in a single season, but Gregg furnished that exception which establishes the rule: he did the assessment work on fourteen claims and almost finished the fifteenth, yet he paid the price. Week after week his set of drills was wife and child to him, and for conversation he had only the clangor of the four-pound single-jack on the drill heads, with the crashing of the "shots" now and then as periods to the chatter of iron on iron. He kept at it, and in the end he almost finished the allotted work, but for all of it he paid in full.

The acid loneliness ate into him. To be sure, from boyhood he knew the mountain quiet, the still heights and the solemn echoes, but towards the close of the long isolation the end of each day found him oppressed by a weightier sense of burden; in a few days he would begin to talk to himself. From the first the evening pause after supper hurt him most, for a man needs a talk as well as tobacco, and after a time he dreaded these evenings so bitterly that he purposely spent himself every day, so as to pass from supper into sleep at a stride. It needed a long day to burn out his strength thoroughly, so he set his rusted alarm-clock, and before dawn it brought him groaning out of the blankets to cook a hasty breakfast and go slowly up to the tunnel. In short, he wedded himself to his work; he stepped into a routine which took the place of thought, and the change in him was so gradual that he did not see the danger.

A mirror might have shown it to him as he stood this morning at the door of his lean-to, for the wind fluttered the shirt around his labor-dried body, and his forehead puckered in a frown, grown habitual. It was a narrow face, with rather close-set eyes and a slanted forehead which gave token of a single-track mind, a single-purposed nature with one hundred and eighty pounds of strong sinews and iron-hard muscle to give it significance. Such was Vic Gregg as he stood at the door waiting for the coffee he had drunk to brush away the cobwebs of sleep, and then he heard the eagle scream.

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body, he shot across and left the highest strand of the wire quivering and humming.

The farmer hurled his best shotgun a dozen yards away and threw up his hat.

“Go it, lad! God bless ye; and good luck!”

The hand of the rider lifted in mute acknowledgment, and as he shot past, the farmer caught a glimpse of a delicately handsome face that smiled down at him.

“The left gate! The left gate!” he shouted through his cupped hands, and as the fugitive rushed through the upper gate he turned to face the posse which was already pulling up at the fence and drawing their wire-cutters.

As Barry shot out onto the higher ground on the other side of the farmhouse he could see them severing the wires and the interruption of the chase would be only a matter of seconds. But seconds counted triply now, and the halt and the time they would spend getting up impetus all told in favor of the fugitive.

Thirty-five miles, or thereabouts, since they left Rickett that morning, and still the black ran smoothly, with a lilt to his gallop. Dan Barry lifted his head and his whistling soared and pulsed and filled the air. It made Bart come back to him; it made Satan toss his head and glance at the master from the corner of his bright eye, for this was an assurance that the battle was over and the rest not far away.

On they drove, straight as a bird flies for Caswell City, and Black Bart, ranging ahead among the hills, was picking the way once more. If the stallion were tired, he gave no sign of it. The sweep of his stride brushed him past rocks and shrubs, and he literally flowed uphill and down, far different from the horses which scampered in his rear, for they pounded the earth with their efforts, grunting under the weight of fifty pound saddles and heavy riders. Another handicap checked them, for while Satan ran on alone, freely, the bunched pursuers kept a continual friction back and forth. The leaders reined in to keep back with the mass of the posse, and those in the rear by dint of hard spurring would rush up to the front in turn until some spirited nag challenged for the lead, so that there was a steady interplay among the fifteen. Their gait at the best could not be more than the pace of their slowest member, but even that pace was diminished by the difficulties of group riding. Yet Mark Retherton refused to allow his men to scatter and stretch out. He kept them in hand steadily, a bunched unit ready to strike together, for he had seen the dead body of Pete Glass and he kept in mind a picture of what might happen if this fellow should whirl and pick off the posse man by man. Better prolong the run, for in the end no single horse could stand up against so many relays. Yet it was maddening to watch the stallion float over hill and dale with that same unbroken stride.

Once and again he sent the fresh horses from Wago after the fugitive in a sprinting burst, but each time the black drifted farther away,

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and mile after mile Mark Retherton pulled his field glasses to his eyes and strained his vision to make out some sign of labor in the gait of Satan. There was no change. His head was still high, the rhythm of his lope unfaltering.

But here the Wago Mountains—not more than ragged hills, to be sure—cut across the path of the outlaw and in those hills, unless the message which waited for him at Wago had been false, should be the men of Caswell City, two score or more besides the fifteen fresh horses for the posse. Two score of men, at least, Caswell could send out, and from the heights they could surely detect the coming of Barry and plant themselves in his way. An ambush, a volley, would end this famous ride.

The hills came up on them swiftly, now, and if the men of Caswell failed in their duty it meant safety for the fugitive, because two miles beyond were the willows of the marshes and the fords across the Asper River. There could only be two alternatives, since not a man showed on the hills. Either they waited in ambush, or else they had mistaken the route along which Barry would come, and the latter was hardly possible. With his glasses Mark Retherton scanned the hills anxiously and it was then that he saw the dark form of the wolf-dog skulking on before the outlaw. He had watched Black Bart before this, of course, but never with suspicion until he noted the peculiar manner in which the animal skirted here and there through the rough ground, pausing on high places, weaving back and forth across the course of his master.

“Like a scout,” thought Retherton. “And by God, there he comes to report!”

For Black Bart had whirled and raced straight back for Dan. There was no need of howl or whine to give the reason of his coming; the speed of his running meant business, and Barry shortened the pace of Satan while he looked over the hills, incredulous, despairing.

It could not be that men lurked there to cut him off. No living thing could have raced from Rickett to Caswell City to warn them of his coming. Nevertheless, there came Bart with the ill tidings, and it only remained to skirt swiftly east, round the dangerous ground, and strike the marshes first. He swung Satan around on the new course with a pressure of his knees and loosed him into a freer gallop.

They must have sensed the meaning of this maneuver at once, for hardly had he stretched out east when voices shouted out of the hills, and around and over several low knolls came forty horsemen, racing. Half a dozen were already due east—no escape that way; and the long line of the others came straight at him with the slope of the ground to give them velocity.

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THE WARNING

All in a grim instant he saw the trap. It closed upon his consciousness with a click, and as he doubled Satan around he knew that the only escape was in running southeast along the banks of the Asper. Even that was a desperate, a forlorn chance, for if that omnipotent voice could reach from Rickett to Caswell City, fifty miles away, certainly it must have warned the river towns of Ganton and Wilsonville and Bly Falls where Tucker Creek ran into the Asper. But this was no time for thinking. Already, looking back, he saw the posse changing their saddles to fifteen fresh mounts, and he headed Satan across the Wago Hills, West and South.

It was hot work. Even the steel-wire muscles of Black Bart were weakening under the tremendous labors of that day, and as he scouted ahead his head was low and his red tongue lolled, and surest sign of all, the bushy tail drooped; yet it was time to make a new call upon both wolf-dog and horse, for the posse was racing after him as before, giving even the fresh, willing mounts the urge of spurs and quirts. He ran his hand down the dripping neck and shoulder of Satan; he called to him; and with a snort the stallion responded. He felt the quiver as the muscles tightened for the work; he felt the settling as Satan lengthened to racing speed.

Through the Wago Hills, then, with Bart picking the way as before, and never a falter in the sweep of Satan's running. If his head was a little lower, if his ears lay flat, only the master knew the meaning, and still, when he spoke, the glistening ears pricked up, and they bounded on to a greater speed than before. The flight of a gull on unstirring wings when the wind buoys it, the glide of water over the descent of smooth rock, with never a ripple, like all things effortless, swift, and free, such was the gait of Satan as he fled. Let them spur the fresh horses from Caswell City till their flanks dripped red, they would never gain on him.

On through the hills, and now the heave of his great breaths told of the strain, down like an arrow into the rolling ground, and now they galloped beside the Asper banks. The master looked darkly upon that water.

Ten days before, when the snows had not yet reached the climax of melting, ten days later when that climax was overpassed, the Asper would have been fordable, but now a brown flood stormed along the gully, ate away the banks, undermined the willows here and there, and rolled stones larger than a man could lift. It went with an angry shouting as if it defied the fugitive. It was narrow, maddeningly narrow, almost small enough to tempt a leap across to the safety of the thickets on the farther side, but the force of the water alone was enough to warn the bravest swimmer away, and here and there, like teeth in the

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mouth of the shark, jagged stones cut the surface with white foam streaking out below them; as if to prove its power, even while Dan turned South along the bank a dead trunk shot down the stream and split on one of the Asper's teeth.

Even then he felt the temptation. There lay the forest on the farther side, a forest which would shelter him, and above the forest, hardly a mile back, began the Grizzly Peaks. They lunged straight up to snowy summits, and all along their sides blue shadows of the afternoon drifted through a network of ravines—a promise of peace, a surety of safety if he could reach that labyrinth.

He was almost glad when he left the mockery of the river's noise to turn aside for Ganton. There it lay in a bend of the Asper in the low-lands, and every town where men lived was an enemy. He could see them now gathered just outside the village, twenty men, perhaps and fifteen spare horses, the best they had, for the posse.

On past Ganton, and again a call upon Satan to meet the first spurt of the posse on its new horses. There was something in the stallion to answer, some incredible reserve of nerve strength and courage. There was a slight labor, now, and something of the same heave and pitch which comes in the gait of a common horse; also, when he put Satan up the first slope beyond Ganton he noted a faltering, a deeper lowering of the head. When his hoofs struck a loose rock he no longer had the easy recoil of the morning. He staggered like a graceful yacht chopped by a cross-current. Now down the slope, now back to the roar of the Asper once more, for there the going was most level, but always the strides were shortening, shortening, and the head of the stallion nodded at his work.

All that was seen by Mark Retherton through his glasses, though they were almost close enough now to see details through the naked eye. He turned in the saddle to the posse, grim faces, sweat and dust clotted in their moustaches, their faces drawn and gray with streaks over the nose and under the eyes where perspiration ran. They rode crookedly, now, for seventy miles at full speed had racked them, twisted them, cramped their muscles. Scotty kept his head tilted far back, for his spinal column seemed about to snap. Walsh leaned to his right side which a tormenting pain drew at every stride, and Hendricks cursed in gasps through a wry mouth.

It had been an hour since Mark Retherton last spoke, and when he attempted it now his voice was as hoarse as a croaking frog.

"Boys, buck up! He's done! D'ye see the black laborin'. D'ye see it? Hey, Lew, Garry, we've got the best hosses among us three. Now's the time for a spurt, and by God, we'll run him down. I'm startin'!"

He made his word good with an Indian yell and a wave of his hat that sent his buckskin leaping straight into the air, to land with stiff legs, "swallowing its head," but then it straightened out in earnest. That buckskin had a name from Bly Falls to Caswell City for speed and courage, and it lived up to the record in this time of need. Close

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behind it came Lew and Garry on ponies scarcely slower than the buckskin, and they closed rapidly on Satan. The plan of Retherton was plain. Now that the black was running on its nerve a spurt might bring them within striking distance and if they could check the flight for an instant by opening advance guard fire, they might drive the fugitive into a corner by the river and hold him there until the main body of the posse came up. The three of them running alone in the lead could do five yards for every four of the slower horses, and the effect showed at once.

Going up a slope the trot of the stallion maintained or even increased his lead, but when they reached the easier ground beyond they drew rapidly upon him. They saw Barry bend low; they saw the stallion increase its pace.

"By God," shouted Retherton in involuntary admiration, "I'd rather have that hoss than the ten thousand. But feed 'em the spurs, boys, and he'll come back to us inside a mile."

And Retherton was right. Before that mile was out the black slipped back inch by inch, until at length Retherton called: "Now grab your guns, partners, and see if you can salt him down with lead. Give your hosses their heads and turn loose!"

They pulled their guns to their shoulders and sent a volley at the outlaw. One bullet clipped a spark from the rocks just behind the stallion's feet; the other two must have gone wide. Once more Barry flinched closer over the neck of Satan and once again the horse answered with a fresh burst of speed, but in a few moments he came back to them. Flesh could not stand that pace after seventy-five miles of running.

They saw the rider straighten and look back; then the sun flashed on his rifle.

"Feed 'em the spur!" shouted Retherton. "If we can't hit him shooting ahead, he ain't got a chance to hit us shootin' backwards." For it is notoriously hard to turn in the saddle and accomplish anything with a rifle. One is moving away from the target instead of toward it, and every condition of ordinary shooting is reversed; above all, the moment a man turns his head he is completely out of touch with his horse. Apparently the fugitive knew this and made no attempt to place his shots. He merely jerked his gun to the shoulder and blazed away as soon as it was in place; half a dozen yards in front of Retherton the bullet kicked up the dust.

"I told you," he shouted. "He can't do nothin' that way. Close in, boys. Close in for God's sake!"

He himself was flailing with his quirt, and the buckskin grunted at every strike. Once more the rifle pitched to the outlaw's shoulder, and this time the bullet clicked on a rock not ten feet from Retherton, and again on a straight line for him.

"Dammed if that ain't shootin'!" called Garry, and Retherton, alarmed, swung the buckskin out to one side to throw the marksman

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out of line. He had turned again in the saddle, and as though the episode were at an end, restored his rifle to its case, but when they poured in another volley about him, he swung sharply roundabout again, gun in hand. Once more the rifle went to his shoulder, and this time the bullet knocked a puff of dust into the very nostrils of the buckskin. Retherton reined in with an oath.

"He's been warnin' me, boys," he called. "That devil has the range like he was sitting in a rockin' chair shooting at a tin-can. He's warnin' us back to the rest of the gang. And damned if we ain't goin'!"

It was quite patent that he was right, for three bullets sent on a line for one horse, and each of them closer, could mean only one thing. They checked their horses, and in a moment the rest of the posse was clattering around them.

"It don't make no difference," called Retherton, "savin' in time. Maybe he'll last to Wilsonville, but he can't stay in three miles when we hang onto him with fresh hosses. The black is runnin' on nothin' but guts right now."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE ASPER

Ninety miles of ground, at least, had been covered by the black stallion, since he left Rickett that morning, yet when he galloped across the plain in full sight of Wilsonville there were plenty of witnesses who vowed that Satan ran like a colt frolicking over a pasture. Mark Retherton knew better, and the posse to a man felt the end was near. They changed saddles in a savage silence and went down the street out of town with a roar of racing hoofs.

And Barry too, as he watched them whip around the corner of the last house and streak across the fields, knew that the end of the ride was near. Strength, wind and nerve were gone from Satan; his hoofs pounded the ground with the stamp of a plow-horse; his breath came in wheezes with a rattle toward the end; the tail no longer fluttered out straight behind. Yet when the master leaned and called he found something in his great heart with which to answer. A ghost of his old buoyancy came in his stride, the drooping head rose, one ear quivered up, and he ran against the challenge of those fresh ponies from Wilsonville. There were men who doubted it when the tale was told, but Mark Retherton swore to the truth of it.

Even then that desperate effort was failing. Not all the generous will in the heart of the stallion could give his legs the speed they needed; and he fell back by inches, by feet, by yards, toward the posse. They disdained their guns now, and kept them in the cases; for the game was theirs.

And then they noted an odd activity in the fugitive, who had

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slipped to one side and was fumbling at his cinches. They could not understand for a time, but presently the saddle came loose, the cinches flipped out, and the whole apparatus crashed to the ground. Nor was this all. The rider leaned forward and his hands worked on the head of his mount until the hackamore also came free and was tossed aside. To that thing fifteen good men and true swore the next day with strange oaths, and told how a man rode for his life on a horse that wore neither saddle nor bridle but ran obediently to voice and hand.

Every ounce counted, and there were other ounces to be spared. He was leaning again, to this side and then to that, and presently the posse rushed past the discarded riding-boots.

There lay the rifle in its case on the saddle far behind. And with the rifle remained all the fugitive's chances of fighting at long range. Now, following, came the heavy cartridge belt and the revolver with it. The very sombrero was torn from his head and thrown away.

His horse was failing visibly—not even this lightening could keep it away from the posse long; and yet the man threw away his sole chance of safety. And the fifteen pursuers cursed solemnly as they saw the truth. He would run his horse to death and then die with it empty handed rather than let either of them fall a captive.

Unburdened by saddle or gun or trapping, the stallion gave himself in the last effort. There ahead lay safety, if they could shake off this last relay of the posse, and for a time he pulled away until Rether-ton grew anxious, and once more the bullets went questing around the fugitive. But it was a dying effort. They gained; they drew away; and then they were only holding the posse even; and then once more, they fell back gradually toward the pursuit. It was the end, and Barry sat bolt erect and looked around him; that would be the last of him and the last scene he should see.

There came the posse, distant but running closer. With every stride Satan staggered; with every stride his head drooped, and all the lilt of his running was gone. Ten minutes, five minutes more and the fifteen would be around him. He looked to the river which thundered there at his side.

It was the very swiftest portion of all the Asper between Tucker Creek and Caswell City. Even at that moment, a few hundred yards away, a tall tree which had been undermined, fell into the stream and dashed the spray high; yet even that fall was silent in the general roar of the river. Checked by the body and the branches of the tree for an instant before it should be torn away from the bank and shot down stream, the waters boiled and left a comparatively smooth, swift sliding current beyond the obstruction; and it gave to Barry a chance or a ghost of a chance:

The central portion of the river bed was chopped with sharp rocks which tore the stream into white rags of foam; but beyond these rocks, a little past the middle, the tree like a dam smoothed out the current;

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it was still swift but not torn with swirls or cross-currents, and in that triangle of comparatively still water of which the base was the fallen tree, the apex lay on a sand bar, jutting a few yards from the bank. And the forlorn hope of Barry was to swing the stallion a little distance away from the banks, run him with the last of his ebbing strength straight for the bank, and try to clear the rocky portion of the river bed with a long leap that might, by the grace of God, shoot him into the comparatively protected current. Even then it would be a game only a tithe won, for the chances were ten to one that before they could struggle close to the shore, the currents would suck them out toward the center. They would never reach that shelving bit of sand, but the sharp rocks of the stream would tear them a moment later like teeth. Yet the dimmest chance was a good chance now.

He called Satan away from his course, and at the change of direction the stallion staggered, but went on, turned at another call, and headed straight for the stream. He was blind with running; he was numbed by the long horror of that effort, no doubt, but there was enough strength left in him to understand the master's mind. He tossed his head high, he flaunted out his tail, and sped with a ghost of his old sweeping gallop toward the bank.

"Bart!" shouted the master, and waved his arm.

And the wolf saw too. He seemed to cringe for a moment, and then, like some old leader of a pack who knows he is about to die and defies his death, he darted for the river and flung himself through the air.

An instant later Satan reared on the bank and shot into the air. Below him the teeth of the rocks seemed to lift up in hunger, and the white foam jumped to take him. The crest of the arc of his jump was passed; he shot lower, and grazing the last of the stones he plunged out of sight in the swift water beyond. There were two falls, not one, for even while the black was in the air Barry slipped from his back and struck the water clear of Satan.

They came up again struggling in the last effort toward the shore. The impetus of their leap had washed them well in toward the bank, but the currents dragged them out again toward the center of the stream where the rocks waited. Down river they went, and Black Bart alone had a ghost of a chance for success. His leap had been farther and he skimmed the surface when he struck so that by dint of fierce swimming he hugged close to the shore, and then his claws bedded in the sand-bank.

As for Barry, the waters caught him and sent him spinning over and over, like a log, whipping down stream, while the heavier body of Satan was struggling whole yards above. There was no chance for the master to reach the sand-bank, and even if he reached it he could not cling; but the wolf-dog knew many things about water. In the times of famine long years before the days of the master there had been ways of catching fish.

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He edged forward until the water foamed about his shoulders. Down came Dan, his arms tumbling as he whirled, and on the sleeve of one of those arms the teeth of Bart closed. The cloth was stout, and yet it ripped as if it were rotten veiling, and the tug nearly swept Bart from his place. Still, he clung; his teeth shifted their hold with the speed of light and closed over the arm of the master itself, slipped, sank deeper, drew blood, and held. Barry swung around and a moment later stood with his feet buried firmly in the bank.

He had not a moment to spare, for Satan, only his eyes and his nose showing, rushed down the current, making his last fight. Barry thrust his feet deeper in the sand, leaned, buried both hands in the mane of the stallion. It was a far fiercer tug-of-war this time, for the ample body of the horse gave the water a greater surface to grapple on, yet the strength of the man sufficed. His back bowed; his shoulders ached with the strain; and then the forefeet of Satan pawed the sand, and all three staggered up the shelving bank, reeled among the trees, and collapsed in safety.

So great was the roar of the water that they heard neither shouts nor the reports of the guns, but for several minutes the bullets of the posse combed the shrubbery as high as the breast of a man.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE EMPTY CAVE

Through ten months of the year a child of ten could wade the Asper but now its deep roaring that set the ground quivering under Barry gave him perfect assurance of safety. Not one of that posse would attempt the crossing, he felt, but he slipped back through the shrubbery close to the bank to make sure. He was in time to see Mark Retherton give a command with gestures that sent reluctant guns into the holsters. Fists were brandished toward the green covert on the farther side of the river, so close, such an unreachable distance. One or two rode their horses down to the very edge of the water, but they gave up the thought and the whole troop turned back toward Wilsonville; even the horses were down-headed.

Back in the covert he found Bart lying with his head on his paws, his eyes closed, his sides swelling and closing till every rib seemed broken; yet now and then he opened one red eye to look at Satan. The stallion lay in almost exactly the same position, and the rush and rattle of his breathing was audible even in the noise of the Asper; Barry dropped prone and pressed his ear against the left side of the horse, just behind the shoulder. The fierce vibration fairly shook his head; he could hear the rush of the blood except when that deadly rattling of the breath came. When he rose to his knees the face of the master was serious, thoughtful.

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“Satan!” he called, but the river must have drowned his voice. Only when he passed his fingers down the wet neck, one of Satan’s ears pricked, and fell instantly back. It would not do to let him lie there in the cool mold by the water, for he knew that the greatest danger in overheating a horse is that it may cool too quickly afterward.

He stooped directly in front of Satan and swept up an arm in command; it brought only a flicker of the eyelid, the eyelid which drooped over a glazing eye.

“Up!” he commanded.

One ear again pricked; the head lifted barely clear of the ground; the forelegs stiffened with effort, trembled, and were still again.

“Bart!” shouted the master, “wake him up!”

The voice could not have carried to the wolf through the uproar of the waters, but the gesture, the expression brought home the order, and Black Bart came to his feet, staggering. Right against the nose of Satan he bared his great teeth and his snarl rattled. No living creature could hear that sound without starting, and the head of Satan raised high. Still before him Bart growled and under his elbow and his chest the hands of the master strained up. He swayed with a snort very like a human groan, struggled, the forelegs secured their purchase, and he came slowly to his feet. There he stood, braced and head low; a child might have caught him by the mane and toppled him upon his side, and already his hind legs were buckling.

“Get on!” cried Barry.

There was a lift of the head, a quivering of the tensed nostrils, but that was all. He seemed to be dying on his feet, when the master whistled. The sound cut through the rushing of the Asper as a ray of light probes a dark room, shrill, harsh, like the hissing of some incredible snake, and Satan went an uncertain step forward, reeled, almost fell; but the shoulder of the master was at his side lifting up, and the arm of the master was under his chest, raising. He tried another step; he went on among the trees with his forelegs sprawling and his head drooped as though he were trying to crop grass. Black Bart did his part to recall that flagging spirit. Sometimes it was his snarl that startled the black; sometimes he leaped, and his teeth clashed a hair’s breadth from Satan’s nose.

By degrees the congealing blood flowed freely again through Satan’s body; he no longer staggered; and now he lifted a forepaw and struck vaguely at Bart as the wolf-dog leaped. Barry stepped away.

“Bart!” he called, and the shouting of the Asper was now so far away that he could be heard. “Come round here, old boy, and stop botherin’ him. He’s goin’ to pull through.”

He leaned against a willow, his face suddenly old and white with something more than exhaustion, and laughed in such an oddly pitched, cracked tone that the wolf-dog slunk to him on his belly and licked the dangling hand. He caught the scarred head of Bart and looked steadily down into the eyes of the wolf.

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"It was a close call, Bart. There wasn't more than half an inch between Satan and—"

The black turned his head and whinnied feebly.

"Listen to him callin' for help like a new-foaled colt," said the master, and went to Satan.

The head of the stallion rested on his shoulder as they went slowly on.

"To-night," said the master, "you get two pieces of pone without askin'." The cold nose of the jealous wolf-dog thrust against his left hind. "You too, Bart. You showed us the way."

The rattle had left the breathing of Satan, the stagger was gone from his walk; with each instant he grew perceptibly larger as they approached the border of the wood. It fell off to a scattering thicket with the Grizzly Peaks stepping swiftly up to the sky. This was their magic instant in all the day, when the sun, grown low in the west, with bulging sides, gave the mountains a yellow light. They swelled up larger with warm tints of gold rolling off into the blue of the canyons; at the foot of the nearest slope a thicket of quaking aspens was struck by a breeze and flashed all silver. Not many moments more, and all the peaks would be falling back into the evening.

It seemed that Satan saw this, for he raised his head from the shoulder of the master and stopped to look.

"Step on," commanded Barry.

The stallion shook himself violently as a dog that knocks the water from his pelt, but he took no pace forward.

"Satan!"

The order made him sway forward, but he checked the movement.

"I ask you man to man, Bart," said the master in sudden anger, "was there ever a worse fool hoss than him? He won't budge till I get on his back."

The wolf-dog shoved his nose again into Barry's hand and growled. He seemed quite willing to go on alone with the master and leave Satan forgotten.

"All right," said Barry. "Satan, are you comin'?"

The horse whinnied, but would not move.

"Then stay here."

He turned his back and walked resolutely across the meadow, but slowly, and more slowly, until a ringing neigh made him stop and turn. Satan had not stirred from his first halting place, but now his head was high and his ears pricked anxiously. He pawed the ground in his impatience.

"Look there, Bart," observed the master gloomily. "There's pride for you. He won't let on that he's too weak to carry me. Now I'd ought to let him stay there till he drops."

He whistled suddenly, the call sliding up, breaking, and rising again with a sharp appeal. Satan neighed again as it died away.

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“If that won’t bring him, nothin’ will. Back we got to go. Bart, you jest take this to heart: It ain’t any use tryin’ to bring them to reason that ain’t got any sense.”

He went back and sprang lightly to the back of the horse and Satan staggered a little tunder the weight but once, as if to prove that his strength was more than equal to the task, he broke into a trot. A harsh order called him back to a walk, and so they started up into the Grizzly Peaks.

By dark, however, a few halts, a chance to crop grass for a moment here and there, a roll by the next creek and a short draught of water, restored a great part of the black’s strength, and before the night was an hour old he was heading up through the hills at a long, swift trot.

Even then it was that dark, cold time just before dawn when they wound up the difficult pass toward the cave. The moon had gone down; a thin, high mist painted out the stars; and there were only varying degrees of blackness to show them the way, with peaks and ridges starting here and there out of the night, very suddenly. It was so dark, indeed, that sometimes Dan could not see where Bart skulked a little ahead, weaving among the boulders and picking the easiest way. But all three of them knew the course by instinct, and when they came to a more or less commanding rise of ground in the valley Dan checked the stallion and whistled.

Then he sat canting his head to one side to listen more intently. A rising wind brought about him something like an echo of the sound, but otherwise there was no answer.

“She ain’t heard,” muttered Dan to Bart, who came running back at the call, so familiar to him and to the horse. He whistled again, prolonging the call until it soared and trembled down the gulch, and this time when he stopped he sat for a long moment, waiting, until Black Bart whined at his side.

“She ain’t learned to sleep light, yet,” muttered Barry. “An’ I s’pose she’s plumb tired out waitin’ for me. But if something’s happened—Satan!”

That word sent the stallion leaping ahead at a racing gait, swerving among rocks which he could not see.

“They’s nothin’ wrong with her,” whispered Barry to himself. “They can’t be nothin’ happened to her!”

He was in the cave, a moment later, standing in the center of the place with the torch high above his head ; it flared and glimmered in the great eyes of Satan and the narrow eyes of Bart. At length he slipped down to a rock beside him while the torch, fallen from his hand, sputtered and whispered where it lay on the gravel.

“She’s gone,” he said to emptiness. “She’s lef’ me!”

Black Bart licked his limp hand but dared not even whine.

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CHAPTER XXXVII

BEN SWANN

Since the night when old Joe Cumberland died and Kate Cumberland rode off after her wild man, Ben Swann, the foreman of the Cumberland ranch, had lived in the big house. He would have been vastly more comfortable in the bunkhouse playing cards with the other hands, but Ben Swann felt vaguely that it was a shame for so much space in the ranch house to go to waste, and besides, Ben's natural dignity was at home in the place even if his mind grew lonely. It was Ben Swann, therefore, who ran down and flung open the door, on which a heavy hand was beating. Outside stood two men, very tall, taller than himself, and one of them a giant. They had about them a strong scent of horses.

"Get a light" said one of these. "Run for it. Get a light. Start a fire, and be damned quick about it!"

"And who the hell might you gents be?" queried Ben Swann, leaning against the side of the doorway to dicker.

"Throw that fool on his head," said one of the strangers, "and go on in, Lee!"

"Stand aside," said the other, and swept the doorknob out of Ben's grip, flattening Ben himself against the wall. While he struggled there, gasping, a man and a woman slipped past him.

"Tell him who we are," said the woman's voice. "We'll go to the living-room, Buck, and start a fire."

The strangers apparently knew their way even in the dark, for presently he heard the scraping of wood on the hearth in the living-room. It bewildered Ben Swann. It was dream-like, this sudden invasion.

"Now, who the devil are you?"

A match was scratched and held under his very nose, until Ben shrank back for fear that his splendid mustaches might ignite. He found himself confronted by one of the largest men he had ever seen, a leonine face, vaguely familiar.

"You Lee Haines!" he gasped. "What are you doin' here?"

"You're Swann, the foreman, aren't you?" said Haines. "Well, come out of your dream, man. The owner of the ranch is in the living-room."

"Joe Cumberland's dead," stammered Ben Swann.

"Kate Cumberland."

"Her! And—Barry—the Killing at Alder—"

"Shut up!" ordered Haines, and his face grew ugly. "Don't let that chatter get to Kate's ears. Barry ain't with her. Only his kid. Now stir about."

After the first surprise was over, Ben Swann did very well. He found the fire already started in the living-room and on the rug before

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the hearth a yellow-haired little girl wrapped in a tawny hide. She was sound asleep, worn out by the long ride, and she seemed to Ben Swann a very pretty picture. Surely there could be in her little of the father of whom he had heard so much—of whom that story of the Killing at Alder was lately told. He took in that picture at a glance and then went to rustle food; afterward he went down to sleep in the bunkhouse and at breakfast he recounted the events of the night with a relish. Not one of the men had been more than three years on the place, and therefore their minds were clean slates on which Swann could write his own impressions.

“Appearances is deceivin’,” concluded the foreman. “Look at Mrs. Dan Barry. They tell you around these parts that she’s pretty, but they don’t tell you how damned fine lookin’ she is. She’s got a soft look and you’d never pick her for the sort that would run clean off with a gent like Barry. Barry himself wasn’t so bad for looks, but they’ll tell you in Elkhead how bad he is in action, and maybe they’s some widders in Alder that could put in a word. Take even the kid. She looks no more’n a baby, but what d’you know is inside of her?”

“Speakin’ personal, gents, I don’t put no kind of trust in that houseful yonder. Here they come in the middle of the night like there was a posse after ’em. They climb that house and sit down and eat like they’d ridden all day. Maybe they had. Even while they was eatin’ they didn’t seem none too happy.

“That loose shutter upstairs come around in the wind with a bang and Buck Daniels comes out of his chair as fast as powder could blow him. He didn’t say nothin’. Just sat down lookin’ kind of sick, and the other two was the same way. When they talked, they’d bust off in the middle of a word and let their eyes go trailin’ into some corner of the room that was plumb full of shadow. Then Lee Haines gets up and walks up and down.

“‘Swann,’ says he, ‘how many good men have you got on the place?’

“‘Why,’ says I, ‘they’re all good!’

“‘Huh,’ says Haines, and he puts a hand on my shoulder, ‘just how good are they, Swann?’”

“I seen what he wanted. He wanted to know how many scrappy gents was punchin’ cows here; maybe them three up there figures that they might need help. From what? What was they runnin’ away from?”

“Hey!” broke in one of the cowpunchers, pointing with a dramatic fork through the window.

It was a bright spot of gold that disappeared over the top of the nearest hill; then it came into view again, the whole body of a yellow-haired child, clothed in a wisp of white, and running steadily toward the north.

“The kid!” gasped the foreman. “Boys, grab her. No, you’d bust her; I know how to handle her!”

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He was gone through the door with gigantic leaps and shot over the crest of the low hill. Then those in the cookhouse heard a small, tingling scream; after it, came silence, and the tall foreman striding across the hill with the child high in his arms. He came panting through the door and stood her up on the end of the table, a small and fearless creature. She wore on her feet the little moccasins which Dan himself had fashioned for her, but the tawny hide was not on her—perhaps her mother had thrown the garment away. The moccasins and the white nightgown were the sum and substance of her apparel, and the cowpunchers stood up around the table to admire her spunk.

“Darned near spat pizen,” observed Ben Swann, “when I hung into her—tried to bite me, but the minute I got her in my hands she quit strugglin’ as reasonable as a grown-up, by God!”

“Shut up, Ben. Don’t you know no better’n to cuss in front of a kid?”

The great, dark eyes of Joan went somberly from face to face. If she was afraid, she disguised it well, but now and then, like a wild thing which sees that escape is impossible, she looked through the window and out over the open country beyond.

“Where was you headed for, honey?” queried Ben Swann.

The child considered him bravely for a time before she replied.

“Over there.”

“Over there? Now what might she mean by that? Headed for Elk-head—in a nightgown? Any place I could take you, kid?”

If she did not altogether trust Ben Swann, at least she preferred him to the other unshaven, work-thinned faces which leered at her around the table.

“Daddy Dan,” she said softly. “Joan wants to go to Daddy Dan.”

“Daddy Dan—Dan Barry,” translated Ben Swann, and he drew a bit away from her. “Boys, that man-killin’ devil must be around here; and that’s what them up to the house was runnin’ from—Barry!”

It scattered the others to the windows, to the door.

“What d’you see?”

“Nothin’.”

“Swann, if Barry is comin’ to these parts, I’m goin’ to pack my war-bag.”

“Me too, Ben. Them that get ten thousand’ll earn it. I heard about the Killin’ at Alder.”

“Listen to me, gents,” observed Ben Swann. “If Barry is comin’ here we ain’t none of us goin’ to stay; but don’t start jumpin’ out from under till I get the straight of it. I’m goin’ to take the kid up to the house right now and find out.”

So he wrapped up Joan in an old blanket, for she was shivering in the cold of the early morning, and carried her up to the ranch house. The alarm had already been given. He saw Buck Daniels gallop toward the front of the place leading two saddled horses; he saw Haines

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and Kate run down the steps to meet them, and then they caught sight of the foreman coming with Joan on his shoulder.

The joy of that meeting, it seemed to Ben Swann, was decidedly one-sided. Kate ran to Joan with a little wailing cry of happiness and gathered her close, but neither big Lee Haines nor ugly Buck Daniels seemed overcome with happiness at the regaining of Joan, and the child herself merely endured the caresses of her mother. Ben Swann made them a speech.

He told them that anybody with half an eye could tell they were bothered by something, that they acted as if they were running away. Now, running in itself was perfectly all right and quite in order when it was impossible to out face or out bluff a danger. He himself, Ben Swann, believed in such tactics. He wasn't a soldier; he was a cow-puncher. So were the rest of the boys out yonder, and though they'd stay by their work in ordinary times, and they'd face ordinary trouble, they were not minded to abide the coming of Dan Barry.

"So," concluded Swann, "I want to ask you straight. Is him they call Whistlin' Dan comin' this way? Are you runnin' from him? And did you steal the kid from him?"

Lee Haines took upon his competent shoulders the duty of answering.

"You look like a sensible man, Swann," he said severely. "I'm surprised at you. In the first place, two men don't run away from one."

A fleeting smile appeared and disappeared on the lips of Ben Swann. Haines hastily went on: "As for stealing the baby from Dan Barry, good heavens, man, don't you think a mother has a right to her own child? Now go back to that scared bunch and tell them that Dan Barry is back in the Grizzly Peaks."

For several reasons this did not completely satisfy the foreman, but he postponed his decision. Lee Haines spoke like one in the habit of giving orders, and Swann walked slowly back to the cookhouse.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE NEW ALLIANCE

"And so," said Lee Haines, when he joined Buck Daniels in the living-room, "there goes our reinforcements. That whole crew will scatter like dead leaves when Barry breezes in. It looks to me—"

"Shut up!" cut in Daniels. "Shut up!"

His dark, homely face turned to the larger man with a singular expression of awe. He whispered: "D'you hear? She's in the next room whippin' Joan for runnin' away, and never a yap out of the kid!"

He held up a lean finger for caution and then Haines heard the sound of the willow switch. It stopped.

"If you run away again," warned Kate, her voice pitched high and

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trembling, "munner will whip harder, and put you in a dark place for a long, long time."

Still there was not a sound of the child's voice, not even the pulse of stifled weeping. Presently the door opened and Kate stood there.

"Go out in the kitchen and tell Li to give you breakfast. Naughty girls can't eat with munner."

Through the door came Joan, her little round face perfectly white, perfectly expressionless. She did not cringe, passing her mother; she walked steadily across the room, rose on tip-toe to open the kitchen door, and disappeared through it. Kate dropped into a chair, shaking.

"Out!" whispered Buck to Lee Haines. "Beat it. I got to talk alone." And as soon as Haines obeyed, Buck sat down close to the girl. She was twisting and untangling her fingers in a dumb agony.

"What has he done to her, Buck? What has he done?"

It was a maxim with Buck that talk is to woman what swearing is to man; it is a safety valve, and therefore he waited in silence until the first rush of her grief had passed.

"She only looked at me when I whipped her. My heart turned in me. She didn't cry; she wasn't even angry. She just stood there—my baby!—and looked at me!"

She threw herself back in the chair with her eyes closed, and he saw where the trouble had marked her face. He wanted to lean over and take her in his arms.

"I'm going mad, Buck. I can't stand it. How could he have changed her to this?"

"Listen to me, Kate. Joan ain't been changed. She's only showin' what she is."

The mother stared wildly at him.

"Don't look like I was a murderer. God knows I'm sorry, Kate, but if they's Dan's blood in your little girl it ain't my fault. It ain't anything he's taught her. It's just that bein' alone with him has brought out what she really is."

"I won't believe you, Buck. I don't dare listen to you!"

"You got to listen, Kate, because you know I'm right. D'you think that any kind of teachin' could make her learn how to stand and keep from cryin' when she was whipped?"

"I know."

She spoke softly, as if some terrible power might overhear them talk, and Buck lowered his voice in turn.

"She's wild, Kate, I knew it when I seen the way she handled Bart. She's wild!"

"Then I'll have her tame again."

"You tried that once and failed."

"Dan was a man when I tried, and his nature was formed. Joan is only a baby—my baby. She's half mine. She has my hair and my eyes."

"I don't care what the color of her eyes is, I know what's behind them. Look at 'em, and then tell me who she takes after."

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"Buck, why do you talk like this? What do you want me to do?"

"A hard thing. Send Joan back to Dan."

"Never!"

"He'll never give her up, I tell you."

"Oh, God help me. What shall I do? I'll keep her! I'll make her tame."

"But you'll never keep her that way. Think of Dan. Think of the yaller in his eyes, Kate."

"Until I die," she said with sudden quiet, "I'll fight to keep her."

And he answered with equal solemnity: "Until Dan dies he'll fight to have her. And he's never been beat yet."

Through a breathing space he stared at her and she at him, and the eyes of Buck Daniels were the first to turn. Everything that was womanly and gentle had died from her face, and in its stead was something which made Buck rise and wander from the room.

He found Lee Haines and told him briefly all that had passed. The great battle, they decided, had begun between Kate and Barry for the sake of the child, and that battle would go on until one of them was dead or the prize for which they struggled lost. Barry would come on the trail and find them at the ranch, and then he would strike for Joan. And they had no help for the struggle against him. The cow-punchers would scatter at the first sign of Barry, at the first shrill of his ill-omened whistling. They might ride for Elkhead and raise a posse from among the citizens, but it would take two days to do that and gather a number of effective fighters for the crisis, and in the meantime the chances were large that Barry would strike the ranch while the messenger was away. There was really nothing to do but sit patiently and wait. They were both brave men, very; and they were both not unpracticed fighters; but they began to wait for the coming of Barry as the prisoner waits for the day of his execution.

It spoke well for the quality of their nerves that they would not speak to Kate of the time to come; they sat back like spectators at a play and watched the maneuvers of the mother to win back Joan.

There was not an idle moment from breakfast to dark. They went out to gather wildflowers on the western hill from the house; they sat on the veranda where Kate told Joan stories of the ranch and pointed out the distant mountains which were its boundaries, and explained that all between them would one day be her own land; that the men who rode yonder were doing her work; that the cattle who ranged the hills were marked with her brand. She said it all in small words so that Joan could understand, but as far as Buck and Lee could make out, there was never a flicker of intelligence or interest in the eyes of the child.

It was a hard battle every hour, and after supper Kate sat in a big chair by the fire with her eyes half closed, admitting defeat, perhaps. For Joan was curled up on the couch at the farthest, dimmest end of the room, and with her chin propped in both small hands she stared

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in silence through the window and over the darkening hills. Buck and Lee were there, never speaking, but now and then their eyes sought each other with a vague hope. For Kate might see that her task was impossible, send Joan back, and that would free them of the danger.

But where Kate left off, chance took up the battle and turned the scales. Old Li, the Chinese cook, had not seen Kate for six long years, and now he celebrated the return by hanging about her on a thousand pretexts. It was just after he had brought in some delicacy from the kitchen, leaving the door a little ajar, when a small ball of gray fur nosed its way through the aperture and came straight for the glare of the fire on the hearth. It was a small shepherd puppy, and having observed the faces of the men with bright, unafraid eyes, it went wobbling on to the very hearth, sniffing. Even at that age it knew enough to keep away from the bright coals of wood, but how could it know that the dark, cold-looking andirons had been heated to the danger point by the fire? It thrust out a tentative nose, touched the iron, and then its shrill yelp of pain went startlingly through the room. It pulled the three grown-ups out of their thoughts; it brought Joan scampering across the room with a little happy cry.

The puppy would have escaped if it could, for it had in mind the dark, warm, familiar corner in Li's kitchen where no harm ever came near, but the agile hands of Joan caught him; he was swept into her arms. That little wail of helpless pain, the soft fluff of fur against her cheek, wiped all other things from Joan's mind. Out the window and across the gloomy hills she had been staring at the picture of the cave, and bright-eyed Satan, and the shadowy form of Bart, and the swift, gentle hand of Daddy Dan; but the cry of the puppy blotted the picture out. She was no longer lonely, having this small, soft body to protect. There sat her mother, leaning a little toward her with a glance at once misted and bright, and she forgot forthwith all the agency of Kate in carrying her away from that cave of delight.

"Look, mummer! He's burned his nose!"

The puppy was licking the injured nose industriously and whimpering the while. And Joan heard no answer from her mother except an inarticulate little sound somewhere deep in Kate's throat. Over her child mind, vaguely, like all baby memories, moved a recollection of the same sound, coming deeply from the throat of the mother and marvelously soothing, reassuring. It moved a fiber of trust and sympathy in Joan, an emotion as real as the sound of music, and with the puppy held idly in her arms for a moment, she looked curiously into Kate's face. On her own, a faint smile began in the eyes and spread to the lips.

"Poor little puppy, mummer," said Joan.

The hands of Kate trembled with desire to bring Joan closer to her, but very wisely she merely stroked the cringing head of the dog.

"Poor little puppy," she echoed.

CHAPTER XXXIX

VICTORY

The entrance of the puppy, to liken small things to great, was the coming of Blucher in Kate's life, for the battle turned, and all in five minutes she had gone from defeat to victory. She sat by the fire with Joan sleeping in her arms, and the puppy in turn in the arms of Joan. It was such a foolish trick of chance that had given her all this, she was almost inclined to laugh, but something of tragedy in the faces of Buck and Lee Haines made her thoroughly serious. And she readily saw the truth. For after all a child's brain is a small affair; it holds so much and no more. One instant the longing for Dan was all that Joan could think of; the next she had no room for anything more than the burned nose of the puppy. If there were other phases to this matter—such as Buck Daniels had pointed out—fear that in some future crisis the blood of the father might show in the child, Kate pushed such thoughts away. She was too full of the present happiness.

Now, while she sat there in the firelight, she sang softly into the dreams of Joan, and watched the smile of sleep grow and wane faintly on the lips of the child as the rhythm of her singing lifted and fell. One half of her mind was empty, that part where Dan should have been, and a dozen times she checked an impulse to turn to him in the place where he should be sitting and invite him with a smile to share her happiness. When her eyes moved they only fell on the gaunt, intent face of Buck or the leonine head of Haines. Whistling Dan was gone and if he ever came again her fear of him, her fear for Joan, would be greater than her love. Yet Dan being gone so finally, she knew that she would never be truly happy again. Her spring of life was ended, but even now she was grateful for the full richness of those six years with Dan; and if she turned from him now it was only because a mighty instinct commanded her and a voice without words drove her: Joan must go on to a normal, womanly happiness. Dan Barry lived from day to day, glutting himself with a ride in the wind, or the whistle of a far-off bird, or the wail of a mountain-lion through the night. Each instant was to him complete, but the eye of Kate looked far away and saw the night when this daughter of hers should sit holding an infant by such a fire, and her heart was both empty and full.

It was no wonder, then, that she heard the first sound long before either Haines or Buck Daniels, for her mind was on guard against dangers which might threaten her baby. It was a faint slipping, scratching noise on the veranda; then a breathing at the front door. Kate turned, and the men followed the terror of her eyes in time to see the door fall open, and a broad paw appear in the interval. The snaky head of Black Bart thrust into the room.

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Without a word, Daniels drew his gun.

“Wait!” commanded Kate. Joan awoke with a start at the sharpness of this voice. “Don’t shoot, Buck. See that bit of paper under his throat. He’s bringing a message.”

“Bart!” cried Joan, slipping to the floor from her mother’s lap, but when she ran toward the wolf-dog, that tremendous snarl of warning stopped her short. Bart slunk toward Kate.

“Look out, Kate!” cried Haines. “The black devil means murder.”

“Don’t move, or he’ll go at your throat,” she answered. “There’s no danger to me. He’s been ordered to go to me and he won’t let even Joan touch him. See!”

He had glided past the amazed, outstretched arms of Joan and went straight to Kate and stopped beside her, obviously expectant. She reached for the slip of folded paper, and as her hand approached he crouched a little, growling; but it was only to caution her, apparently, and though he distrusted the hand, he allowed it to unfasten the missive.

She untwisted the note, she read aloud: “Kate, send Joan back to me or I come for her. Send her with Bart.”

It seemed as though the wolf-dog understood the written words, for now he moved toward Joan and she, with a cry, dropped the squealing puppy and caught the great head of Bart in her arms. The puppy wailed, sitting down on his haunches, and quivering with grief.

“Daddy Dan wants me,” explained Joan with bright eyes. “He’s sent for me. Go quick, Bart!”

The big animal lay down to facilitate her mounting.

“Joan!” called Kate. The child hesitated and turned toward her. Her mother had taken up that light revolver which Dan had taught her to use so well, and now, as she leveled it at the wolf-dog, Bart laid his fangs bare in silent hate. The weapons of Buck and Lee Haines were ready, and now Bart raised himself a little and commenced to drag gradually forward to leaping distance.

“Drop your gun, Kate,” cautioned Buck. “For God’s sake drop your gun. Even if you hit him with a bullet, he’ll be at your throat. Unless you kill him with the first shot he’ll have you. Drop your gun, and then he’ll go at us.”

But Joan knew perfectly well what those gleaming bits of steel meant. She had seen Daddy Dan shoot and kill, and now she ran screaming between Bart and danger.

“Munner!” she cried. “You bad, bad men. I won’t let you hurt Bart.”

“They won’t hurt you, Bart,” explained Joan, turning much mollified to the great wolf-dog. “They’re just playin’. Now we’ll go.”

And she started toward the door, with Bart slinking in front and keeping a watchful lookout from a corner of his eye.

“Are you going to leave the poor little puppy, Joan?” said the

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mother, keeping her voice steady, for all the force of the two men could not help her now. It rested with her wit.

"I'll take him with me," answered Joan, and caught up the howling puppy from the floor. His wails died out against her breast.

"But you mustn't do that, honey. He'd die in this cold night wind long before you got there."

"Oh!" sighed Joan, and considered her mother with great eyes. Black Bart turned and uneasily tugged at her dress.

"Will you take good care of him, munner? Till I come back?"

"But I don't know how to take care of him, dear. If you go he'll cry and cry and cry until he dies."

Joan sighed.

"See how quiet he is when you hold him, Joan!"

"Oh," muttered Joan again. The distress of the problem made her wrinkle her forehead. She turned to Kate for help.

"Munner, what'll I do?"

"You'd best stay here until the puppy is strong enough to go with you."

She kept her voice well under control; it would not do to show the slightest emotion, and now she sat down and half turned away from the child. With her eyes she flashed a signal at the two troubled men and they followed her lead. Their center of vision was now upon the fire. It left Joan, to all appearances, quite out of notice.

"Oh, that'll be a long, long time, munner."

"Only a little while, Joan."

"But Daddy Dan'll be lonesome up there."

"He has Satan and Bart to keep him company."

"Don't you think he wants Joan, munner?"

"Not as much as the poor little puppy wants you, Joan."

She added, with just the slightest tremor: "You decide for yourself, Joan. Go if you think it is best."

"Bart, what'll Joan do?" queried the child, turning in dismay toward the wolf-dog, but as soon as he saw the puppy in her arms, he greeted her with a murderous snarl.

"You see," suggested her mother, "that Black Bart would eat up the poor little puppy if you went now with him."

At this alarming thought, Joan shrank away from Bart and when he followed her, anxiously, she cried: "Go away! Bad dog! Bad Bart!"

He caught the edge of her dress and drew back toward the door, and this threw Joan into a sudden panic. She struck Bart across his wrinkled forehead.

"Go away!" he slunk back, snarling at the puppy.

"Go back to Daddy Dan." Then, as he pricked his ears, still growling like distant thunder: "Go tell Daddy Dan that Joan has to stay here a while. Munner, how long?"

"Maybe a week, dear."

"A whole week?" she cried, dismayed.

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“Perhaps only one or two or three days,” said Kate.

Some of her tenseness was leaving as she saw victory once more inclining to her standards.

“One, two, five days,” counted Joan, “and then come for me again. Tell Daddy Dan that, Bart.”

His eyes left her and wandered around the room, lingering for a vicious instant on the face of each, then he backed toward the door.

“He’s clear of Joan now, Kate,” whispered Buck. “Let me shoot!”

“No, no! Don’t even look at him.”

Then, with a scratching of sudden claws, Bart whirled at the door and was gone like a bolt down the hall. Afterwards for a time there was no sound in the room except the murmurings of Joan to her puppy, and then they heard that most mournful of sounds on the mountain-desert, the long howl of a wolf which has missed its kill, and hunts hungry on a new trail

CHAPTER XL

THE FAILURE

When Black Bart returned without Joan, without even a note of answer about his neck, the master made ready to take by force. First he went over his new outfit of saddle and guns, looking to every strap of the former, and the latter, revolvers and rifle, he weighed and balanced with a meditative look, as if he were memorizing their qualities against a time of need. With Satan saddled and Bart on guard at the mouth of the cave, he gathered up all the accumulation of odds and ends, provisions, skins, and made a stirring bonfire in the middle of the gravel floor. It was like burning his bridges before starting out to the battle; he turned his back to the cave and started on his journey.

He had to travel in a loose semicircle, for there were two points which he must reach on the ride, the town of Alder, where lived the seventh man who must die for Grey Molly, and the Cumberland ranch, last of all, where he would take Joan. Very early after his start he reached the plateau where he had lived all those years with Kate, and he found it already sinking back to ruin, with nothing in the corals, and the front door swinging to and fro idly in the wind, just as Joan had often played with it. Inside, he knew, the rooms were empty; a current of air down the chimney had scattered the ashes from the hearth all about the living room. Here must be a chair overturned, and there the sand had drifted through the open door. All this he saw clearly enough with his mind’s eye, and urged Satan forward. For a chill like the falling of sudden night had swept over him, and he shrugged his shoulders with relief when he swept past the house. Yet when he came to the long down-slope which pitched into the valley so far below him, he called Satan to a halt again, and swung to look at

THE SEVENTH MAN

came an answer—the very same refrain. Joan was calling to him.

At that he stepped forward, but the thing which stirred him, had hardened the mind of Kate. The weakness passed in a flash. It was Joan, and for Joan!

“Not a step!” she whispered, and jerked out her gun. “Not a step!”

He stood with one hand trailing carelessly from his hip, and at the gleam of her steel his other hand dropped to a holster, fumbled there, and came away empty; he could not touch her, not with the weight of a finger. That thoughtful whistle came again: once more the answering whistle drifted out from the house; and he moved forward another pace.

She had chosen her mark carefully, the upper corner of the seam of the pocket upon his shirt, and before his foot struck the ground she fired. For an instant she felt that she missed the mark, for he stood perfectly upright, but when she saw that the yellow was gone from his eyes. They were empty of everything except a great wonder. He wavered to his knees, and then sank down with his arms around Black Bart. He seemed, indeed, to crumple away into the night. Then she heard a shouting and trampling in the house, and a breaking open of doors, and she knew that she had killed Whistling Dan. She would have gone to him, but the snarl of Bart drove her back. Then she saw Satan galloping up the path and come to a sliding halt where he stood with his delicate nose close to the face of the master. There was no struggle with death, only a sigh like a motion of wind in far off trees, and then, softly, easily Black Bart extricated himself from the master, and moved away down the path, all wolf, all wild. Behind him, Satan whirled with a snort, and they rushed away into the night each in an opposite direction. The long companionship of the three was ended, and the seventh man was dead for Grey Molly.

Lee Haines and Buck Daniels were around her now. She heard nothing distinctly, only a great, vague clamor of voices while she kneeled and turned the body of Barry on its back. It was marvelously light; she could almost have picked it up in her arms, she felt. She folded the hands across his breast, and the limp fingers were delicate as the fingers of a sick child. Buck Daniels lay prone by the dead man weeping aloud; and Lee Haines stood with his face buried in his hands; but there was no tear on the face of Kate.

As she closed the eyes, the empty, hollow eyes, she heard a distant calling, a hoarse and dissonant chiming. She looked up and saw a wedge of wild geese flying low across the moon.

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