CLASSICS TO GO

THE LONE TRAIL

LUKE ALLAN

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CHAPTER I

THE MURDER AT THE T-INVERTED R

Inspector Barker, of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, raised his frowning eyes from the weekly report he was scrawling, to watch absent-mindedly the arrival of the Calgary express as it roared out from the arches of the South Saskatchewan bridge and pulled up at the station.

It was a morning ritual of the Inspector's. Three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, relatively at the same hour—if Rocky Mountain slides, foothill floods, and prairie snowstorms permitted—the same train broke in on the mid-forenoon dullness of the "cow-town" of Medicine Hat; and the same pair of official eyes followed it dully but with the determination of established convention, clinging to it off and on during its twenty minutes' stop for a fresh engine and supplies to carry it on its four days' run eastward.

But on Mondays the transcontinental was favoured with a more concentrated attention. On that morning Inspector Barker prepared his weekly report. A pile of letters and staff reports scattered his desk; a smaller pile, the morning's mail, was within reach of his left hand. His right clumsily clutched a fountain pen. Thirty years of strenuous Mounted Police duties, from Constable to Inspector, during a period when Indians, rustlers, cattle-thieves, and the scum of Europe and Eastern Canada, were held to a semblance of order only by the stern hand of the "red-coats," had robbed his chirography of any legibility it ever possessed.

His iron-grey hair was rumpled by frequent delvings of his left hand, and the left needle of his waxed moustache

was sadly out of line. His tunic was open—he never removed it when on duty—more in capitulation to mental than to physical discomfort, though Medicine Hat can startle more records in July than in the depth of winter, cold-blooded official reports to the contrary notwithstanding. His pipe lay cold beside the half-spilled tobacco pouch that always adorned the corner of his blotting pad.

Over on the station platform before his window the crowd thinned. A man ran along the top of the cars with a hose, thrusting it into a tiny trap-door, flicking up a slide in the nozzle, holding it a moment till the tanks below filled, flicking the slide down again, and then on to the next-trap door. A butcher's boy with a heavy basket on his arm scrambled down Main Street, crossed the track, and galloped with shuffling feet along the platform to the diner. The conductor drew his watch, examined it critically, raised his hand, and the fresh engine started noisily for its relief at the next divisional point, Swift Current.

Any morning that the Inspector was on duty the arrival of the Calgary express produced a similar scene in and out of the Police barracks—except a few of the trimmings indicative of mental irritation; any *Monday* morning you would find trimmings and all.

Yet throughout the tangle of that summer's special Police task Inspector Barker's mind reverted in his moments of leisure to the passing of an innocent daily train.

He was lowering his eyes reluctantly to the completion of his weekly irritation, when the desk telephone rang sharply, peremptorily. He jerked it to him.

"Yes, yes!"

"I'm sorry, sir, to have to report——"

"Drop the palaver, Faircloth!" snapped the Inspector. "I take that for granted."

"A murder was——"

"Hold on, hold on! Hold the line a minute!"

The Inspector dropped the receiver, scrawled an illegible but well-known "Barker, Inspector," at the bottom of the sheet before him, jammed it into an envelope and sealed it. At least he would have a week of freedom for the task implied by Corporal Faircloth's interrupted disclosure.

"Now!" he shouted into the telephone, one hand instinctively buttoning his tunic to more official formality.

Faircloth restarted:

"Last night, shortly after midnight, at the T-Inverted R ——"

"Bite it off, for Heaven's sake!" broke in the Inspector. "Who, and how, and by whom?"

"Billy Windover—shot—cattle-thieves!" the Corporal chipped off.

For just the fraction of a second Inspector Barker waited. Then:

"Well? Nothing more?"

The Division knew that tone.

"Two hours before we were informed," apologised the Corporal. "Trouble on the telephone line. Followed the trail

—they got the cattle as well—till lost it in fresh tracks of the round-ups."

The Inspector laughed shortly.

"Did you expect a paper-chase trail?"

The Corporal made no reply. Usually it took him a sentence or two to remember the Inspector's impatience, but for the particular interview concerned he observed the training well when he did recall it.

"Why didn't you telephone right away? Why did you give the trail up? Oh, damn it, wait!"

For a moment or two the only sound in the barracks office was the buzzing of the flits on the dirty window glass. Thereafter he was himself.

"Any strangers seen out there in the last couple of days? Any cowboys off their beats?"

"No time yet to enquire, sir."

"Get Aspee and Hughes out immediately. Did the tracks lead toward the Cypress Hills?"

"No, sir."

"Hm-m-m!"

"A bit north-east—far as we could follow."

The Inspector paused. "What's your plan?"

"Going to scurry round—to look for the cattle."

It came with just a suggestion of defiance, as if the speaker were a little ashamed of the sound of it but was prepared to defend it. The Inspector laughed.

"God bless you!" he mocked. "How did you think of it?"

"The very cattle themselves," Faircloth persisted. "It happens——"

The Inspector's laugh became less pleasant. "And you think——"

"Pardon, sir; but it isn't quite as silly as it sounds. I know this particular herd almost as well as their own punchers—and I think I know something of brands."

"Lad, your optimism is contagious—but this dairy-maid tracking is such a new stunt in the Force. When you come across Co-Bossie and Spot give them my compliments and ask them to drop in some afternoon——"

He sickened of his own banter.

"Get Aspee and Hughes out immediately," he rasped. "Remain yourself within reach of the phone for fifteen minutes. I'll have a campaign then.... Do you happen to recall that this is the third case of cattle-stealing in your district in a month? ... By the way, know anything about dogs—tracking dogs? I expect a couple of rippers from down East in a day or two. I'll get them out to you. See what you've let the Force sink to! Now hustle!"

He slammed the receiver into its place and sank back in his chair, chin resting on breast. A constable, receiving no reply to his knock, opened the back door softly—and closed it again more softly. He knew that attitude of his chief.

CHAPTER II

MORTON STAMFORD: TENDERFOOT

Corporal Faircloth hung up the telephone receiver and strolled to the door, still bridling at the Inspector's ridicule. For several minutes he stood looking thoughtfully out on the familiar prairie scene, where not another spot of human life or habitation was visible as far as the dark line of hills to the south-east. But an incongruous telephone line, stretching a zigzag course of rough poles away into the south-eastern distance, told of isolated ranch-houses cuddled in far-away valleys.

A dark spot moved into view over a southern rise and crept along the top. Faircloth instinctively seized a pair of field-glasses from a case hanging beside the door and focused them on the distant rider, then, content, dropped them dreamily back. Away off there lay Dead Dogie Coulee, just now, he knew, full of cattle.

The telephone behind him rang, and he hastened to it, trying to compose himself for the Inspector's orders. But it was not Inspector Barker.

"Hello, Faircloth!" called a laughing voice. "How's the Cypress Hills hermitage?"

"Oh, Stamford!" Faircloth was thinking rapidly. "What's the little editor got on his mind now? Make it brief: I'm expecting the Inspector to call up."

"Why has who been murdered by whom?"

Faircloth laughed. "The brevity of it deserves more than I can tell you. Who told you—anything?"

"The Inspector."

"Then why not get it all from him?"

Stamford chuckled into the telephone at the other end.

"I got the impression that my arrival at the barracks was inopportune. The extent of the particulars I got was a particular request to betake myself elsewhere. I betook. I came to a friend."

"And the friend must fail you. You're too hopeful for the West, Stamford. I'd tell you all I dare—you know that. No, not a bit of use pleading."

"Then," said Stamford, "permit me to tell you to your face that when next I see you I'll——"

Faircloth cut him short with a laugh. "No threats to the Police, little man. I'll tell you what I'll do. On Thursday I'm coming to town for the Dunmore Junction cattle shipping. By the way, as a tenderfoot you should see it. Drive along out and hear the latest. Bye-bye! I'm busy."

* * * * *

Dunmore Junction, bald, bleak and barren, four miles from Medicine Hat, consisted of nothing more than a railway station, a freight shed, and a commodious freight yard, marking the connecting point of the Crow's Nest branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway with the main line. It could not well be more and remain the principal shipping station for the vast herds that roamed the prairies for eighty miles from Medicine Hat. The open spaces about the

Junction were necessary for the herding of the steers awaiting their call to the shipping stockades. Even the station staff lived in Medicine Hat, the shifts changing with the arrival and passage of the trains to town.

Thither Morton Stamford, editor of the *Journal*, directed the only trustworthy horse in town and a good-enough buggy. As a new experience he could not afford to miss the cattle shipping, though the following day was publication day.

Morton Stamford was a tenderfoot. What was more deplorable from his point of view, he looked it. He was small, fair-haired, mild and inoffensive of manner, and from stiff hat to cloth-topped boots was stamped as a fresh arrival from "the cent-belt," as Western Canada termed the petty East where the five-cent piece was not the minimum of exchange.

Two months ago he had dropped from the train at the town of the funny name, attracted as much by the name as by the advertisement in *The Toronto Globe*. When he had succeeded in steeling himself to the general atmosphere of disdain and suspicion, as well as to the rival occupancy of his room at the hotel, he discovered sufficient enthusiasm left to inspect the newspaper he had come to look over. And, having decided that the introduction of modified Eastern methods would be profitable, he had come to terms with the disgusted English proprietor whose stubborn adherence to the best traditions of *The Times* and *The Telegraph* "back home" had, at the end of his resources, convinced him that Huddersfield or Heaven was his home, not the riotous, undignified, unappreciative Canadian West.

Already Stamford had seen more of the real life of the West than many an old-timer citizen of Medicine Hat. Such

portions of a spring round-up as were within range of a buckboard, a bucking contest, and limited visits to four ranches had almost made him an authority on Stetsons, chaps, and cowboy slang. He simply doted on cowboys, without discrimination. He loved the Mounted Police, too, who had quickly discovered in him a soul above steers and bronchos; and at his fingertips was a motley assortment of stories of doubtful and certain unauthenticity that painted the future in rosy colours of excited hope just round the corner.

He was small of stature, but imagination and a capacity for thrills are not corporally circumscribed.

When he arrived, Dunmore Junction was no longer lonely. Within two miles of the station platform was more life than Medicine Hat had seen since the buffalo drifted drearily to other hunting-grounds before the civilisation of the rancher and the barbarism of gory hunters. Out there in the rolling folds of the prairie two thousand head were looking for the last time on their limitless pastures, kept under control by a cloud of cowboys, in herds as distinct as possible according to ownership. Scarcely a steer was visible, but at intervals a wildly riding cowboy dashed from a coulee in pursuit of protest against the extended restraint.

Back of the station, where his livery horse was tied with the care and insecurity of a tenderfoot, a dozen bronchos dozed, a few tied to the rail, most merely with reins thrown to the ground. About Stamford the platform was alive with lounging cowboys in every style of cowboy dress; and among them the station-master and his staff, a couple of brakesmen from the shunting-engine crew, and three or four ranchers—scarcely distinguishable from their own

punchers to-day—were more alertly eyeing the preparations for the coming task.

For two days it would continue. During that time several score of cowboys would sleep and eat on the prairie, fed from their own mess-wagons, with here and there a bed-wagon, though in the semi-arid belt about Medicine Hat there was little danger of rain from June to September.

It was a Red Deer River shipment. The thin line of ranchers along the Red Deer, sixty miles to the north of Medicine Hat, had combined, but most of the herd belonged to "Cockney" Aikens, of the H-Lazy Z ranch.

Stamford recognised Aikens immediately. Only a blind man would fail at least to see him.

Cockney Aikens, his nickname derived from an aggressive English origin he did his best to flaunt, stood well over six feet without his riding boots, his big frame wrapped in a wealth of muscle no amount of careless indolence could conceal. Handsome, graceful in spite of his lazy movements, he seemed to have gone to brawn. Laughs came easily to his lips, and the noise of them made other sounds pause to listen. "Cockney" was to him a compliment; if anyone implied otherwise he was careful—and wise—to conceal it.

"Hello, you little tenderfoot!" he called, as Stamford wound humbly and unseen through the indifferent wall of Stetson hats, flannel shirts, and leather or hairy chaps that blocked the end of the platform. "Where's that girl I advertised for?"

Stamford grinned.

"You're an optimist, Cockney. Just as I get some innocent female rounded up to clean your boots, grill a coyote steak, and wield a branding iron between times, she finds out the semi-lunar location of that unearthly ranch of yours. I warned you that the *Journal* might find the missing link, a mother-in-law, or the street address of a Cypress Hills wolf, but a 'general' for the Red Deer—impossible!"

"About all I see for it," growled Cockney, "is to kidnap one—unless you open your eyes to the only possible use for a man of your dimensions and come out to wash my dishes yourself. I'll pay you as much as you can hope to make from that mangy sheet of yours—a more honourable living than robbing a struggling rancher of two shillings for a hopeless ad."

Stamford solemnly produced a large leather purse and extracted a coin from the cash department.

"Here, you overgrown sponge! I figure that ad cost me a quarter in setting, make-up, run, and paper—a shilling, if you can understand no other values. Here's the other quarter. But bear in mind this—if you take it I'll show you up. I'll camp on your trail, rout out your past crimes, and publish them to the last drop of blood. I feel sure you've committed burglary, murder, or arson somewhere in your dark career; and, besides, you're an arrant bully."

Though Stamford knew as much—or as little—of Cockney Aikens' past as the rest of Medicine Hat, and the big rancher's merry and spendthrift ways belied suspicion of irritation at the loss of "two shillings," the blatant exaggeration of the editor failed somehow to carry off the banter lightly. Cockney's face went grim, and a strange silence fell along the platform.

Then Cockney himself smothered it by a physical retort. Reaching over, he seized Stamford's shoulders and lifted him by the coat at arm's length until their faces were on a level.

"If I had this much added to my stature," blustered the editor, in affected fury, vainly striking out his short arms at the face opposite, "I'd punch you on the nose."

"If you were this size," grinned Aikens, "I mightn't take liberties. Just the same," he added, with a ring of boyish disappointment in his voice, "it would be one h—l of a fight. You've got the white matter, I guess, but I'm just spoiling for a rough-and-tumble. I haven't had what you might call exercise since—" he flushed through his tan, "—oh, for a long time."

It so happened that everyone, including Cockney, was thinking of the "exercise" he had once, largely at the expense of the police, town and Mounted; and the memory of it to the one most concerned was not sweet.

A long line of cattle cars rolled quietly down the track before the corrals, a brakesman on the top keeping up a steady signalling to the engine. When the first two cars were opposite the gangways from the two loading stockades, his hand shot out and the train came to a violent halt. Almost instantly the gates at the bottom of the gangways opened and two lines of steers from the crowded, white-fenced pens rushed up the slope to the open doors of the cars.

The lounging cowboys sprang to life. Throwing themselves in excited abandon on their bronchos behind the station, they tore across the tracks and disappeared in the folds of the prairie, shouting, cracking their quirts,

laughing taunts at each other, to reappear a few minutes later, little less noisy, behind a small herd of galloping cattle headed for the emptying outer stockades.

It was a scene of blazing life and colour, clamorous, swift, kaleidoscopic. Stamford's eyes blazed. The East seemed such a dull spot in his past. He thought with a cynical smile of how unfitted he was, by nature and acquirement, for a life so deliciously thrilling.

Cockney struck his hands together explosively.

"There's good old beef for good old England, my boy!"

"If you don't mind, Cockney," Stamford grimaced, "would you give me warning when you have those thunder-claps in mind? You jar me out of focus, mentally and optically.... I wish we had some of that 'good old beef' down at my hotel. I often wonder where the West gets the beef it eats."

"Get a herd of your own, man. I didn't know as much about ranching when I started as you do. There's a million miles of grazing land out about the Red Deer yet."

Stamford made a wry smile. He drew out the large purse and counted three dollar bills and sixty cents in silver.

"Would that start me?" he asked. "Guess I'd have to steal the herd."

"Lots have done that before you," said Cockney, staring over the prairie.

A loose-limbed cowboy, whose chaps seemed to be about to slip over his hips, had drifted over from the stockades as they talked.

"Yes," he exclaimed, slapping Cockney on the back, "good old beef for England, and good old gold for you!"

The jeer in the tone might have passed, Stamford felt sure, but the slap on the back was another matter. He understood Englishmen rather well, Aikens in particular, and he knew that even the King would require a winning smile to gild such familiarity.

Aikens stiffened.

"Once or twice, Dakota," he warned quietly. "I've *looked* what I thought of this particular form of playfulness; now I've *told* you. The natural progression is the laying on of hands—and that'll come next." He turned his back.

Dakota Fraley, foreman of the H-Lazy Z and part owner, tried to laugh it away, but he did not move.

Stamford was apparently absorbed in the procession of steers up the gangways.

"Aren't they a bit thin, Cockney? A month or two more on the ranges would have rounded them out a bit, eh?"

"There are thousands more out there getting the extra month or two," returned Cockney, with an expansive gesture.

Dakota laughed.

"Somebody musta told him," he said to Stamford. "He don't see the herds twice a year."

"Why should I?" demanded Aikens lightly. "You know all about them. Why do you think I gave you a share in the H-Lazy Z?"

Stamford was unnecessarily embarrassed at the scene. He knew about both men what was generally known. Cockney Aikens was a good-natured, irresponsible fellow, completely ignorant of ranching and as little concerned to learn, quick of temper as of smile, with an unfortunate passion for gambling and a reckless thirst that was sullying his reputation. Dakota Fraley was a cowboy, by instincts and training, with the untypical addition of a reputation as a "bad actor." Though there was nothing more definitely disreputable known about him than unconcealed disregard for law and order, a few instances of cynical brutality made even ranchers sometimes forget what a profitable enterprise he had made of the H-Lazy Z.

The association of the two men was inexplicable, except for the fact that Aikens, arriving four years earlier from none knew where, with no qualifications for a rancher but the money to start a herd, was just the sort of tenderfoot to swallow Dakota holus-bolus as part of the operation—and then to sit back with the conviction that he had done his share.

A few, including the Mounted Police, knew something of Dakota's past, but in a country where a man's present is all that matters, the story that might have been told died from lack of interest. In a general way it was common knowledge that Dakota had drifted over from the States, a born cow-puncher, broncho-buster, and prairie-man; and at his heels had come a motley assortment of kindred spirits whom Dakota had rounded up as his outfit at the H-Lazy Z. No one could say that the results in cold cash had not justified him.

Dakota stood flipping his quirt against his chaps, a slight frown on his forehead but a forced smirk on his lips.

"It *is* early," he explained to Stamford, "but the prices is good now—good enough to pay to ship. They'll come down, shore thing—and it saves in outfit, thinning out the herds."

"If that gang of toughs we keep about the H-Lazy Z aren't enough to handle twice our herds," observed Cockney, "then I know nothing about ranching."

"You've shore said it right that time, boss," jeered Dakota. "You don't."

"We've the biggest outfit on the Red Deer."

Dakota faced him squarely with angry eyes.

"Say, who's running that end of the H-Lazy Z?"

Cockney's head turned slowly, and Dakota decided to modify tone and language.

"Ain't I getting result? That's all that counts, ain't it?"

All Stamford's experience warned him that they would be at each other's throats in a moment, but his Western life had been too limited to allow for the greater licence where emotions crowd so close to the surface.

He was relieved when both men turned toward the dusty black trail down the grade to Medicine Hat, from which came the soft pad of a cantering horse.

A stodgy little broncho was loping easily along, a woman seated astride its broad back. At such a distance Stamford's only impression was of a perfect equestrienne, mingled with some surprise that a woman should appear in such a scene. Then he became aware of her perfect physique, an overflowing vitality, and an intense pleasure in the very act

of riding. It attracted him strangely, for modesty of stature had all his life imposed an undue modesty of manner in his relationship with the other sex. The uncouth shouts of the cowboys, the rumbling trample of the cattle up the gangways and in the sand-strewn cars, the threatened explosion of the past minute, sank into the background of his mind as he watched.

The longer the silence in his little group, the more the approaching woman looked to him like a studio arrangement that must utterly fail, in the incongruity of its essential parts, to melt into a natural picture. It was impossible to fit her into that background of untilled hills, dead grass, barren waste, though there could never be awkwardness where she was concerned.

Cockney Aikens raised his head with a jerk and stared, frowning in a puzzled way.

Dakota merely glanced at the supple rider and transferred his eyes to Cockney's lace.

"Here's your Yankee, Mr. Aikens," he grinned, and lounged across the tracks to the loading pens, laughing as he went.

The look on Cockney's face warned Stamford to silence, but he trotted to the end of the platform and offered his hand to assist the woman to alight. With a quick flick of her body she stood beside him, rewarding him with a gentle smile as she rearranged her skirts.

"Thank you. Matana will stand by herself."

Her eyes had scarcely paused on Stamford before passing on to the big rancher. Aikens had not moved. With lowered head he was staring at her. She stooped in some

confusion and brushed her skirt to smoother lines about her limbs. Then her head went up, and with a nervous laugh she moved swiftly along the platform.

"Mary, what are you doing here?"

"I got tired waiting out there, Jim," she pouted. "It's so lonesome."

Her voice was appealing, yet charged with a nervous independence. Cockney's reply was to stare down on her for a few moments, and turn his back without another word and follow Dakota to the loading cars.

Never had Stamford longed so intensely for the physique to squeeze an apology from a bully's throat, but the greater desire to hide from the hurt wife what he was thinking made him turn to her with a smile.

"These must be trying days to the shippers—ah—Mrs. Aikens, isn't it? I suppose you've had breakfast? I have, I believe, a bit of chewing gum in my pocket."

"I stopped in town for breakfast," she replied dully, her eyes on the big man climbing lazily to the roof of one of the cars before the gangways. "When I need more I'll go out to our mess-wagon. It'll be out there somewhere with the cattle."

"They've just commenced loading," Stamford went on eagerly. "This is my first experience. You see, I'm the sample tenderfoot in this district. I believe," he added, with a whimsical smile, "I've been that ever since I came."

Her eyes were on him now, and Stamford saw a gleaming smile, behind which lay an ever-gnawing worry.

"You seem to enjoy the distinction so well as to be jealous already of your successor," she said.

"It has its advantages, especially to an editor. It gives me access to the sources of news——"

"Thrusts them at you, in fact," she smiled.

"I trust my news sense culls out the wheat."

"I read the *Journal*," she told him slyly.

"That's the first encouragement I've had since my arrival. Might I give such commendation a fitting place on the front page?"

"Since your arrival," she returned lightly, "the *Journal* has surely added a new zest to local existence."

He extracted an enormous notebook from a capacious pocket.

"I must make a note of that," he said. "My friends will probably be seeking an epitaph for me shortly. You see, this week I start to collect two months' bills. If I survive that I've announced my intention of learning to ride—rather *starting* to learn. If an indulgent Providence still leaves me on earth, there remains the fare at the Provincial Hotel to seal my fate. Any one of the three, I'm told, is enough to make a man wonder what his friends may select for his tombstone."

Her laugh tinkled spontaneously, so that Cockney rolled over on his elbow to look at her, and a couple of cowboys peeped shyly round the end of the cars and ducked to cover when they realised they were seen.

"A course in ranch-life is what you need, Mr. Stamford. It's only a case of nerves. At the H-Lazy Z, for instance, we have air that can't be beaten, food that will certainly sustain—even salads now and then—and there are a million square miles of soft grass to fall on. Let the collecting out to someone who totes a gun."

"The suggestion is so good," he replied solemnly, "that I take it as an invitation. When the worst threatens, I'll remember the H-Lazy Z—and its—ah—charming mistress."

"Right-o!" she laughed.

"That's your husband speaking," he said. "I suppose living with even an Englishman is contagious."

Her face suddenly went wistful.

"Yes," she agreed absent-mindedly.

Stamford thought he had never before heard so much in a single innocent word.

CHAPTER III

CORPORAL FAIRCLOTH ARRIVES

As the loading fell to a routine it quickened its pace. Every seven or eight minutes the two loaded cars were replaced by empty ones whose floors had already been strewn with sand. When the outer yards emptied their live freight into the loading pens, the cowboys whose duty it was galloped off into the low hills for more. Sometimes Dakota Fraley rode with them, but for the most part he busied himself hastening the loading operations.

Brand-Inspector West, small, wiry-haired, nervous, with worry in his eyes and a semi-apologetic manner he tried in vain to conceal, had much to struggle against in the performance of his duty. Wherever he got he was in the way, principally Dakota's. From the edge of the gangways near the car doors Dakota brushed him unceremoniously; on the stockade fence near the gangways he was a nuisance to the prodders. Here and there he darted, peering through the bars, reaching over the railing of the gangways, snatching hasty glances at the jumbled herds in the outer pens, as inefficient as he was conscientious.

Cockney Aikens lounged on the roof of the loading cars, where he overlooked everything, moving lazily from car to car as they filled and were shunted back. He saw the bewildered efforts of the brand-inspector, and his eyes followed Dakota from place to place, altering their focus sometimes to the pens and gangways below him. As the largest shipper, his foreman, Dakota Fraley, had charge of the operations, and all but a couple of the cowboys about the yards were from the H-Lazy Z outfit.

Mrs. Aikens and Stamford crossed the tracks and stationed themselves near the gangways.

Many of the cattle were of Texan breed, their long white horns swaying awkwardly up the gangways to catch now and then in car door or fence, momentarily holding up the line. The faster the loading moved, the more disturbing these breaks in the swing of the work. A tremendous steer, its horns projecting over the gangway railing, lumbered up the slope and paused at the car door, doubting the width of the opening. At a vicious prod from Dakota it dashed forward, jammed the point of one horn in the side of the car, withdrew it, and in a panic drove the other horn in the other side.

The line behind, a solid mass, jammed tighter and tighter. Two cowboys leaped to Dakota's assistance, but the steer only closed its eyes to their blows and stood braced.

Cockney, looking down at first with some amusement, saw what was happening back in the gangway and heaved himself upright. Dropping to the side of the gangway, he tossed Dakota and another cowboy to the ground and reached a hand across to either horn. Without apparent effort he forced the steer's head sideways so that its horns ran diagonally with the opening, and, swinging a leg over the railing, kicked the brute forward into the car.

Catching Stamford's admiring gaze he paused only long enough to thrust an unlit cigarette between his lips, before sidling down the outside of the railing to the stockade. There the brand-inspector had stubbornly installed himself, refusing to make way for the prodders and protesting at the speed of the loading. Cockney, holding to the railing with one hand, reached across the backs of the cattle and

lifted the little man clear over the gangway, depositing him laughingly on the ground.

"Such a little fellow," he bantered, "yet so much in the way!"

He winked at Stamford and his wife.

West exploded in a typical volley of Western oaths. Cockney waved a finger at him.

"Oh, fie, West! And before ladies! Mary, that's not part of his duties. It's only an accomplishment that has gained him more notoriety than his official capacity. He wants to give the impression of guarding the Great West from cattle-thieving and rustling." He pointed to West's flaming face. "That's not anger. West never gets mad. It's shame at losing control before ladies."

West's hat came off with a sweeping bow to Mrs. Aikens.

"We don't expect ladies at these little affairs," he apologised. "At the same time"—turning to Cockney—"I must insist on being permitted to do my duty—else I'll order the loading to stop."

Dakota came blustering under the gangway.

"West's got his job to do, Mr. Aikens. Let him alone."

Cockney lolled against the railing, looking with twisted lips down into Dakota's sullen eyes.

"Shall I lift him up where he can see everything, Dakota, and protect him from your bullying?"

Something about it made Dakota's eyes drop.

"Don't mind him, West," soothed the foreman. "You come over here and stand on the fence. As long as you don't get in the way about the gangways you're all right."

Stamford failed to see how any one on the fence, except at the gangways, could see more of the cattle than their backs.

Cockney Aikens watched Dakota thoughtfully as the latter pulled himself to the other gangway. Then he climbed to his old perch on the roof and lay on his elbow without lighting his cigarette. And Mary Aikens watched her husband.

"Poor West!" sympathised Stamford. "He leads a dog's life. I can feel for small men."

He saw she was not listening. "I was saying——"

"I'm afraid I wasn't listening, Mr. Stamford," she said apologetically. "What were you saying?"

"I don't believe I remember. I never say much worth while."

"It wasn't—that," she explained uncomfortably.

Stamford yielded to her embarrassment. "West and your husband should change jobs."

A gust of laughter broke from her lips. It startled him, but he went on:

"I don't think Dakota Fraley would stop Cockney Aikens ——"

"Do you think Dakota was doing it purposely?"