

***RIDGWELL  
CULLUM***



***THE FORFEIT***

**Ridgwell Cullum**

# **The Forfeit**

EAN 8596547378587

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: [DigiCat@okpublishing.info](mailto:DigiCat@okpublishing.info)



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIV](#)

[CHAPTER XV](#)

[CHAPTER XVI](#)

[CHAPTER XVII](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIX](#)

[CHAPTER XX](#)

[CHAPTER XXI](#)

[CHAPTER XXII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIV](#)

[CHAPTER XXV](#)

[CHAPTER XXVI](#)

[CHAPTER XXVII](#)

# CHAPTER I

## AT RAINBOW HILL VALLEY

A companionable silence prevailed in the room. At intervals it was broken, but only by the rustle of paper or the striking of a match. The heavy breathing, almost amounting to a snore, of one of the two men, and the inarticulate protests of a laboring "rocker" chair—these things were only a part of it.

The man at the table was deeply immersed in a miniature sea of calculations. His fair brows were drawn in deep concentration. Frequently he was at great pains to relight a pipe which contained nothing but charred remnants of tobacco and a moist, unsmokable mixture which afforded only a somewhat offensive taste and aroma.

The partner in this companionship overflowed an undersized "rocker," which withstood, with supreme heroism, the overwhelming forces of its invader. But its sufferings, under the rhythmic rise and fall imposed upon it, found expression at intervals, although they failed to inspire the least sympathy. The heedless giant's whole attention seemed to be absorbed in the personality and effort of his friend.

Finally the latter raised a pair of deep blue eyes. Following upon a sigh, he thrust his papers aside with a brusque movement of relief. Then he raised a hand to his broad forehead and smoothed his disheveled fair hair, which seemed to have undergone some upheaval as a result of the

mental disturbance his efforts had inspired in the brain beneath. The handsome eyes smiled a reassuring smile into the rugged face of his friend.

"Well?" he enquired, without seeming to desire a reply.

"Wal?" echoed the gruff voice of the man in the rocker.

"It's done."

"So—I guessed."

The patient amusement in the twinkling eyes of the man in the rocker was good to see. There was confidence, too, in his regard of the younger man.

"Can we do it—sure?" he enquired, as the other remained silent.

"Without a worry."

"Then dope it out, boy. The easiest thing in the world is handin' out dollars on a right enterprise. I don't know nothin' better—except it is takin' 'em in on the same sort o' play."

Jeffrey Masters smiled more broadly into his friend's good-humored face.

"Five years back, handing out twenty thousand dollars would have given us a nightmare, even on a right proposition," he said. "It isn't that way now. Guess we'll sleep on this thing like new-born babes with our tanks filled right. Nat Williams is out to sell quick, and if we're bright, it's up to us to buy quick. For twenty thousand dollars," he proceeded, referring to his figures, "we get his house, barns, corrals, and all his rolling stock. His growing crops and machinery. The bunch of old cows and calves he's pleased to call his 'herds.' Also three teams of Shire-bred heavy draft horses, and six hundred and forty acres of first-class wheat land and grazing that only needs capital and hustle to set

right on top. I don't guess it'll worry us any to hand it all it needs that way. This buy will join up my 'O——' territory with your 'T.T.' grazing, and will turn the combination into one of the finest ranching propositions west of Calthorpe, and one which even Montana needs to be proud of."

He leaned back in his chair with a certain air of satisfaction. But there was just a shade of anxiety, too, in the glance with which he favored his friend. However, he need have felt no misgivings. Bud Tristram had none. He understood the keen business brain underlying his friend's tumbled fair hair. Moreover, Jeff, who was only half the older man's age, was regarded with something like parental affection.

They had fought their way up together from obscure beginnings to their present affluence, as the owners of the "T.T." ranch and the "O——" ranch respectively. They had been partners in all but name. Now they contemplated a definite deed of that nature. It was a consummation which the older man had looked forward to ever since he first lent a hand to his new and youthful neighbor. It was a consummation which Jeffrey, with acute foresight and honest purpose, had set himself to achieve. If the older man regarded him with almost parental affection, that regard was fully reciprocated. The business conference between them had for its purpose their mutual advantage, and both men were perfectly aware of the fact.

But the thought that slightly worried the younger man was the ease, the unconcern of his future partner's attitude. It disquieted him because it increased his responsibility. But long ago he had learned the generous nature of the Great

Bud. Long ago he had realized his trusting simplicity. Now he would have preferred a keen cross-examination of his statement. But none was forthcoming, and he was forced to continue in face of the silent acceptance.

"Bud, old friend, I wish I could get you interested in—figures. And I guess they surely are interesting, when you apply them to our own concerns."

But Bud remained unmoved. He stretched himself in an ecstasy of ease, raising his great arms above his grizzled head in profound enjoyment of his bodily comfort.

He shook his head.

"Guess I know a steer. Guess I know grass when I see it. I wouldn't say there's a brand in Montana I ain't familiar with. But figgers—sums—they're hell. An' I don't guess I'm yearning for hell anyway. Figgers is a sort o' paradise to you. You're built that way. Say, I don't calc'late to rob you of a thing—not even paradise. We'll take your figgers as they stand."

Jeffrey Masters shook his head.

"They're right, sure. But it's no sort of way to talk business."

"Business talk always makes me sweat."

It was quite impossible. Jeffrey was growing impatient. A frown settled upon his broad brow, and the man in the rocker watched it with amused eyes.

Quite suddenly the younger man's impatience broke forth into verbal protest.

"Say, you make me mad. Was there ever such a feller looking for sharps to play him? How do you know I'm not out to beat you? Why, I could roll you for every dollar you

possess without lying awake five minutes at night. It's not fair, Bud. It's not fair to me—to you—to your little Nan——"

"What's not fair to Nan?"

Bud's twinkling eyes shot round upon the open French window with an alertness scarcely to be expected in a man of such apparent mental indolence. Jeffrey's eyes cleared of their hot impatience as they sought a similar direction. The gaze of both men encountered the picture of a brown-eyed, brown-haired girl of exquisite proportions, standing framed in the open window. She was clad in a riding suit of light material, with a long-skirted coat which obviously concealed the divided skirt beneath. Her long, brown top boots were white with dust of the trail, and her vicious-looking Mexican spurs hung loosely upon her heels. Her eyes were bright with intelligence and good humor, and her pretty oval face smiled out from under the wide brim of an ample prairie hat.

Jeff began to laugh.

"It's your crazy old father, Nan," he cried. "Say, just look at him. Feast your eyes on him. Can you beat it? Here we are right up to our necks in an epoch-making business proposition and he don't concern himself two whoops. Was there ever such a bunch of simple trusting folly as is rolled up in that six feet three of good-hearted honesty? *That's* what's not fair to—Nan."

The girl came and laid a protecting hand upon the flannel-clad shoulders of her father. Just for a moment her laughing eyes gazed affectionately down upon the recumbent form of the only parent she possessed, and whom she idolized. He was stretched out luxuriously, his great be-chapped legs reaching to the table leg as a support

to hold the rocker at a comfortable poise. His shirt sleeves were rolled up displaying a pair of arms like legs of mutton. The beadwork wristlets were held fixed in their position by the distended muscles beneath them. She was proud of him, this father who went through the world trusting human nature, and handling cattle as only an artist in his profession can handle them.

Then her dancing eyes sought the face of Jeffrey Masters. Her smile remained, but a subtle something crept into their depths as she surveyed it. It was the handsome, clean-cut face of a purposeful man. There was a straight-forward directness in the gaze of his blue eyes. It was the face of a man who has no fear, physical or moral. It was almost too uncompromising in its fearlessness.

Nan knew its every line by heart. She had thought of it, dreamed of it, since the time when she had first realized that a woman's life is wholly incomplete without the care of a man upon her hands. Sometimes she had felt that Jeffrey Masters possessed depths which could never be fathomed. Depths of strength, of resource, and all those qualities which make for success. Sometimes she even went further, when her analytical faculties—which she possessed in an unusual degree—were most active. She felt that the possession of all these firm qualities had rather smothered, to an extent, the gentler emotions of the human nature in him. He was strong, passionate, with a conscience of an almost puritanical order, and somehow she felt that a little softening, a little leavening of human weakness would have been all to the good. But this understanding made no difference to her woman's regard, unless it were to

strengthen it to a sort of gentle worship such as woman is always ready to yield to strength. It required no effort upon her part to picture this man in the heroic mould of a Spartan warrior.

"*That,*" she replied, with a whimsical smile, "is a man, who most generally seems to fancy his own way of doing things." Then she shook her head as her arm slipped protectingly around the big man's bronzed neck. "I don't guess a woman's argument ever made a man see things different yet. What's he done, Jeff?"

Jeff laughed without humor.

"Done?" he exclaimed. Then, with a shake of the head: "It's not what he's done. Guess it's what he hasn't done, and what he don't seem to figure to do. I'd kind of raised a hope when I saw you in the window. But—well, it was only her father's daughter that came in, I guess."

Then he drew his papers toward him again, and glanced seriously at the figures.

"It's Nat's farm," he explained. "And it's the thing we've been waiting on years. We're getting it fixed right, and your Bud's just about as much help as a deaf mute at a talking bee. I hand him figgers, and—and he smiles, just smiles. I hand him facts, and—he keeps on smiling. It's the kind of smile you most generally see on a dog-tired feller's face when you hand him a funny story. He don't care a cuss anyway. He's figuring to hand Nat ten thousand dollars with no more kick than a government spending public money. He don't kick reasonably or unreasonably, and I'd gamble you a new hat he hasn't a notion what he's getting for it. It makes

me feel like a 'hold-up,' and I say it's not fair to me—nor to himself—nor to—you."

Jeff was serious enough. In such affairs it would have been difficult to find him otherwise. Nan understood. These two men had long been her profound study. Her smiling regard remained unchanging while the man was talking. When he ceased she bent over her father in a caressing fashion.

"He'd lose his bet. He surely would, daddy dear, wouldn't he? But we really need to answer, don't we? He'd think we were both fools, else. He wouldn't like it either. Say, daddy, shall—shall I talk?"

Bud chuckled comfortably.

"I'd hate to stop you, Nan."

Nan smiled contentedly, and raised a pair of challenging eyes in the direction of the table.

"My daddy thinks I talk too much," she said. "But I s'pose that's my way—most girls talk when they get the chance—just the same as it's his way talking too little. But neither ways suggest a fool, Jeff. And anyway the only sort of fool you need to worry with is the fool who don't see and act in a way of his own. My daddy's acting in his own way, and I guess it isn't his way, working overtime with the band playing. If you're dead fixed on having a gamble, it's a new hat to a new and less smelly pipe than you're smoking now, that he knows the inside of this deal to the last cent's worth. But what's more, Jeff, he knows you, and knows you couldn't 'hold-up' a Sunday-school kiddie without going and telling its teacher first. And now the mail."

She left her father's side and moved to the table, a very picture of gentle decision and practice.

"Three for you, my daddy," she cried, dropping three letters on his chest, where his shirt gaped just below his neck. Then she turned about. "Only one for you, honest Jeff. Just one, and I've guessed at the writing till I'm sick."

Jeff was smiling up with frank amusement.

"Say, that's great. It's got you beat. Well," he added, as he picked up the letter, "I'll just keep you right on guessing. Where's yours?"

The girl laughed merrily.

"Had mine. I don't guess any right-acting girl would sit easy in the saddle twelve miles without reading her mail. Say——" she paused. The smile had died out of her eyes. Jeff's expression had abruptly changed. He was regarding the address on his envelope with startled seriousness. Then she went on quickly: "Guess I'll wait till you're both through. I'll get right out an' off-saddle. Then for supper."

In the parlor the silence remained unbroken. It became unduly prolonged. Bud finished his mail. Jeff was still reading his. It was not a long letter. He had already read it twice through. Now he again turned back to its beginning.

Bud observed him closely. He saw the knitted brows. The curious set of the man's lips. His absorbed interest. Nor did he interrupt. He contented himself with that patient waiting which betrayed much of the solid strength of his character.

Presently Jeff looked up. But his eyes did not seek his friend. They were turned upon the open window, his gaze wandering out toward the distant hills, which marked the confines of Rainbow Hill Valley.

Still the other refrained from speech. Finally it was Jeff, himself, who broke the silence.

"Bud," he began, without withdrawing his gaze from the scene beyond the window, "it's a letter from Ronald. It's the second word I've had of him in—five years."

Bud nodded.

"The twin."

Jeff's gaze came slowly, thoughtfully back to Bud's face.

"Sure. We're twins."

An unusual softness crept into the eyes of the man at the table.

"I'm kind of wondering, Bud," he went on presently, "wondering if you get all that means—means to me. I don't know." He passed a hand slowly across his brow, as though to brush aside growing perplexities. "I don't seem to get all it means myself. No, I don't. The whole thing's so queer," he went on, with a nervous, restless movement in his chair. "It sort of seems crazy, too." He laughed meaninglessly. Then he suddenly leaned forward with flushed cheeks and hot eyes. "Bud, don't think me crazy, but—well, say, I'm only part of me without Ronny near. Oh, I don't guess that explains. But it's what I feel—and I can't just talk it right. You don't get it? No, of course you don't. I can see it in your eyes. You think I'm right for the foolish-house. Listen. Is it possible—is it ordinary reason that when twins are born, the nature of one normal child can be divided between the two, one having what the other feller lacks? There, that's how I feel about it. It's the way it is with Ronny and me. All that he is not, I am. I haven't one of his better features. Say, Bud, I'm a pretty cold sort of man. I'd have made a fair sort of

Puritan if I'd been on earth a century or so ago. I've little enough humor. I don't care for play. I don't care for half the fun most folks see in life. I'd sooner work than eat. And Ronny—well, Ronny isn't just any of those things. He's just a boy, full of every sort of human notion that's opposite to mine. And I'm crazy for him. Say, Bud, I love him better than anything in life. If anything happened to that boy, why, I guess all that's worth while in me would die plumb out."

He paused. Bud's shrewd eyes remained studying the emotion-lit features of this usually unemotional man. He felt he was being admitted to a peep at a soul that was rarely, if ever, bared, and he wondered at the reason. Was it a calculated display, or was it the outlet for an emotion altogether too strong for the man's restraint? He inclined to the former belief.

"Nothin' *has* happened?" he enquired presently, in his direct fashion.

Jeff laughed without any visible sign of lightness.

"No," he said. Then with a deep sigh. "Thank God nothing has happened. But——"

"Then the trouble——?"

"The trouble? Say, Bud, try to get it all as I see it. It's difficult. The boy's away up trapping and shooting—for a living—somewhere in the Cathills. He's away there living on hard pan, while I'm here steadily traipsing on with you to a big pile. Remember he's my other—half. Do you know how I feel? No, you can't. Say, he's as merry as I am—dour. He's as fond of life, and play, and the good things of the world as I'm indifferent to 'em. He's reckless—he's *weak*." Suddenly Jeff's eyes lit. A great passion seemed to surge through his

whole body. "Bud, I want him here. I want to be always around to help him when he gets bumping into potholes. It's that weakness that sets me crazy when I think. He ain't made for the dreary grind of the life we live. That's why he cut it out when I came here. Well there's no grind for him now, and I want to have him come along and share in with me. That's why I'm talking now. From this moment on we're a great proposition in the ranching world, and I want Ronny to share in with me."

Bud nodded.

"I get it," he said. Then he added: "You're a great feller."

"Great! Cut it out, Bud," Jeff cried sharply. "It's my love for that other half of me that's talking. That merry bit of a—twin."

"An' you're sendin' for him?"

Jeff shrugged, and depression seemed suddenly to descend upon him.

"If I could fix it that way I don't guess I'd have opened my face to hand you all this. But I can't. He's in the Cathills, away a hundred and more miles northwest of us. That's all he says. He don't give a mail address. No, Bud, I'm going to hunt him out. I'm going to find him, and bring him back. I'll find him sure. We're just one mind an' one body, an'," he added thoughtfully, "I don't guess I'll need a detective bureau to locate him. If he was chasin' around the other end of the world I'd find him—sure. You see, he's the other half of me."

Bud nodded in sympathy, but made no verbal reply.

"See, Bud," Jeff went on, a moment later. "The spring round-up's through. We're going to fix this deed right away.

When the attorneys have robbed us all they need, and Nat's handed over, there'll be a good month to haying. That month I'm going to spend in the Cathills. I'll be back for the hay."

The other eased himself in his rocker. Then for some moments no sound broke the silence of the room.

"It's been a heavy spring," Bud said at last.

Jeff nodded. His thoughts were away in the Cathills.

"Seems to me," Bud went on. "Work kind o' worries me some these times." He smiled. "Guess the wheels need the dope of leisure. Mebbe I ain't as young as you."

"No."

Jeff's attention was still wandering.

"Guess the Cathills is an a'mighty big piece o' country gropin' around in," Bud went on.

"Sure. A hell of a piece. But—it don't signify."

"No-o," Bud meditated. Then he added: "I was kind o' thinkin'."

"How?"

"Why, mebbe two folks chasin' up a pin in a bunch o' grass is li'ble to halve most o' the chances agin either of 'em jabbin' their hands on the business end of it."

"Two? You mean you're goin' to come along an' help find—Ronny?"

Jeff's eyes were expressing the thanks his lips withheld.

Bud excused himself.

"Them Cathills is plumb full of fur an' things. Say, I ain't handled a gun in weeks."

"Bud, you're——"

The door of the room was abruptly flung open and Jeff's words remained unspoken.

"Supper, folks!"

Nan's smiling eyes glanced from one to the other. She stood in the doorway compelling them. Besides, the memory of Jeff's letter was still with her, and she was anxious to observe its later effect. That which she now beheld was obviously satisfactory, and her smile deepened contentedly.

## **CHAPTER II**

### [Table of Contents](#)

## **CONFLICTING CURRENTS**

They were busy days in Orrville. But business rarely yielded outward display in its citizens. Men talked more. They perhaps moved about more—in their customary leisurely fashion. But any approach to bustle was as foreign to the rule of the township as it would be to a colony of aged snails in a cyclone.

It was the custom of Orrville to rise early and go to bed late. But this by no means implies any excessive activity. On the contrary. These spells of activity lasted just as long as their accomplishment required. In the interim its citizens returned to a slumber little less profound than that which supervened at night after the last roysterer had been ejected, by force, or persuasion, from the salubrious precincts of Ju Penrose's saloon.

Orrville was a ranching township in the northwestern corner of Montana lying roughly some twenty miles west of the foothills of the Cathill Mountains, which, in turn, formed a projecting spur of the main range of the Rockies.

Orrville was the township and Ju Penrose was the pioneer of its commerce. He was a man of keen instincts for commerce of his own especial brand, and rejoiced in a disreputable past. He possessed a thin, hooked nose of

some dimensions, which never failed to cut a way for its owner into the shady secrets of his neighbors. He possessed a temper as amiable and mild as a spring lamb when the stream of prosperity and profit flowed his way, and as vitriolic as a she-wolf in winter, when that stream chanced to become diverted into a neighbor's direction.

He was considered a man of some importance in the place. But this was probably the result of the nature of his trade, which, in the eyes of the denizens of the neighborhood, certainly possessed an advantage over such stodgy callings as "dry goods." But besides the all-important thirst-quenching purpose of his establishment, it had become a sort of bureau for large and small transactions of a ranching nature, and a resort where every sort of card game could be freely indulged in, without regard for the limit of the stakes, and had thus gained for itself the subsidiary title amongst its clientele of "Ju's Poker Joint."

At the moment Ju's usually busy tongue was taking a well-earned rest, and his hawk-like visage was shrouded in a deep, contemplative repose. His always bloodshot eyes were speculative as he surveyed the smoke-laden scene from behind his shabby bar. The place was full of drinkers and gamblers. The hour was past midnight. And he was estimating silently the further spending possibilities of his customers, and consequently considering the advisability of closing down.

A group of three ranch hands leaned against the centre of the bar. Their glasses were empty and none of them seemed anxious to command their refilling. They were talking earnestly. And their voices were unusually

modulated. Just beyond these a slight, good-looking man in chapps, with a face of particularly refined but somewhat debauched appearance, was obviously interested in their talk, although he took no part in it. On the other side of them, away at the far end of the bar, leaned a solitary, tough-looking drinker, who seemed to take no interest whatever in his surroundings. Every man in the place, the dozen or so occupying the card tables included, was fully armed in the customary fashion prevailing in this distant corner of the ranching world, and it would have needed no second thought to realize that these heavy, loaded weapons were not by any means intended for decorative purposes.

"Wal, anyways they're a long time fixin' things," observed one of the three at the centre of the bar, with a yawn that displayed a double row of gleaming white teeth. "The boss guessed I'd best wait around, so it ain't a heap o' use kickin'. I'll hev to wait till the durned committee's through, if it takes 'em sittin' as long us a hide-bound hen."

"It's allus that-a-way when folks gets on a committee racket, Curly," replied one of his friends with a sympathetic grin.

"That's just how, Dan," agreed the third. "Hot air. That's what it is. This tarnation Vigilance stunt sets folk whisperin' among 'emselves 'bout the hell goin' to be ladled out to all cattle thieves in general. Gives 'em visions of hangin'-bees, an' a sort o' firework display with guns an' things, an' when they hatched out, what's the result? Why, a waste o' hot air, an'—no checkens."

"'T'so, Dan," agreed Curly, with easy decision. "The boss is too near relative of a fancy gentleman for to hand out the

sort o' dope rustlers need. If us boys had the job we'd fix things quick. You'd see this bum gang kicking air at the end of a rope 'fore Ju, here, had time to dope out four fingers of rotgut at the expense of the house."

He leered across at the unsmiling face of the saloon-keeper. Ju permitted himself to be drawn.

"Nothin' doin', Curly." A solemn shake of the head set his walrus moustache flapping. Then he drew a cigar from a top vest pocket and bit the end through, brushing his moustache aside to discover a place in which to deposit it in his mouth. "I'd sure hate to dope out any rotgut on you boys. Y'see, I sure got your health at heart. I kind o' love you fellers to death. I'd hate to see you sufferin' at my hands. Guess I was raised Christian."

"Was you?"

Curly's sarcasm achieved the laugh intended, and, as a result of his satisfaction, he flung his last half-dollar on the dingy bar.

"Make that into three drops of liver souse, an' hand us a smile, Ju.

Your face is sure killin' trade."

Ju rolled his cigar across his mouth under the curtain of moustache, lit it, and proceeded to push an uncorked bottle across to his customers.

"Guess it ain't a bad proposition handin' you boys a smile. Smiles allus happen easy on foolish faces. Seein' I ain't deaf I been listenin' to your talk, an' I ain't made up my mind if you're as bright as you're guessin', or if you're the suckers your talk makes you out. Seein' I don't usual take chances, I'll put my dollars on the sucker business. I've

stood behind this darned old bar fer ten years, an' I guess for five of 'em I've listened to talk like yours—from fellers like you." He removed the bottle from which the three men had helped themselves to liberal "four fingers," and eyed their glasses askance. "Now, you're worritin' over this lousy Lightfoot gang. So was the others. So's everybody bin fer five years. An' fer five years this same lousy Lightfoot gang has just been helpin' 'emselves to the cattle on the ranches around here—liberal. Same as youse fellers have helped yourselves out o' this bottle. An', durin' that time, I ain't heard tell of one o' them boys who's been spoilin' to hang 'em all doin' a thing. Not a thing, 'cep' it's lap up whisky to keep up a supply o' hot air.

"Wal," he proceeded, in his biting fashion, as he thrust the bottle on the shelf and began wiping glasses with a towel that looked to be decomposing for want of soap, "them lousy rustlers is still running their play in the district jest wher', when, an' how they darn please. See? You, Curly, are kickin' because your boss Dug McFarlane is too much of a gentleman. Wal, if I know a man from a seam-squirrel, I'd sure say Dug's got more savee in his whiskers than you got dirt—which is some. If I got things right, this night's sittin's goin' to put paid to the Lightfoot gang's account. I'd be glad to say the same of one or two scores three bums have lately run up right here."

The offensiveness of his manner left the men quite undisturbed. The place would have been strange to them without it. They accepted it as part of the evening's entertainment. But the allusion to the Vigilance Committee's efforts brought them into attitudes of close attention. It

drew the attention, too, of the cattleman with the refined features, and, equally, that of the tough-looking individual at the far end of the bar.

"What are they goin' to do?" demanded Dan urgently.

Ju puffed aggravatingly at his cigar.

"Do?" he echoed at last, gazing distantly at the card players across the room. "Why, what any bunch of savee should ha' done five years ago. Put out a great reward."

Curly snorted in disdain.

"See, I tho't it was to be a big play."

"You allus was bright," sneered Dan. "How's that goin' to fix the Lightfoot crowd?"

"How?" Ju's contempt always found an outlet in the echo of an opponent's interrogation. "Say, Dan, how old are you? Twenty?"

"That ain't nuthin' to you," the cowpuncher retorted, with a gesture of hot impatience.

"Ain't it? Wal, mebbe it ain't," Ju agreed imperturbably. "But y'see it takes years an' years gettin' the value o' dollars right. I allow ther's folks guesses dollars talks. Wal, I'm guessin' they just *holler*. Make the wad big enough and ther' ain't nuthin' you can't buy from a wheat binder to a royal princess with a crown o' jools. The only thing you're li'ble to have trouble over is the things Natur' fancies handin' you fer —nix. That an' hoss sense. That's pretty well the world to-day, no matter what the sky-pilots an' Sunday-school ma'ams dope out in their fancy literature. I know. You offer ten thousand dollars for the hangin' of Lightfoot's gang, an', I say right here, there ain't a feller in it from Lightfoot—if

there is sech a feller—down, who wouldn't make a grab at that wad by givin' the rest of the crowd away. Makes you think, don't it? Sort o' worries them empty think tanks o' yours."

But Ju's satisfaction received an unexpected shaking.

"Some wind," observed the slim, lonely drinker, in the blandest fashion.

Ju was round on him in a flash, his walrus moustache bristling.

"I'm listening," he said, with a calmness which belied his attitude.

The other set his glass down on the counter with a bump.

"If you're listening," he said, "you have probably understood what I said. You're talking through a fog of cynicism which seems to obscure an otherwise fairly competent intellect. You've plundered so many innocents in your time by purveying an excessive quantity of bluestone disguised under the name of alcohol that your overweening conceit has entirely distorted your perspective till you fancy that your own dregs of human nature constitute the human nature of all the rest of the world, who would entirely resent being classed as your fellows. In a word you need physic, Ju."

The speaker laughed amiably, and his smile revealed the weakness which was pointed by the signs of debauchery in his good-looking face. Ju eyed him steadily. The offense of his words was mitigated by his manner, but Ju resented the laugh which went round the entire room at his expense.

"See here, Bob Whitstone," he began, abandoning his glass wiping and supporting himself on his counter, with his

face offensively thrust in his opponent's direction, "I ain't got the langwidge you seem to have lapped up with your mother's milk. I don't guess any sucker paid a thousand dollars a year for my college eddication so I could come out here and grow a couple of old beeves and spend my leisure picklin' my food depot in a low down prairie saloon. Therefor' I'll ask you to excuse me if I talk in a kind o' langwidge the folks about here most gener'ly understan'. Guess you think you know some. Maybe you figger to know it all. Wal, get this. When you get back home jest stand in front of a fi' cent mirror, if you got one in your bum shanty, an' get a peek at your map, an' ask yourself—when you studied it well—if I couldn't buy you, body an' soul, fer two thousand dollars—cash. I'd sure hate slingin' mud at any feller's features, much less yours, who're a good customer to me, but you're comin' the highbrow, an' you got notions of honor still floatin' around in your flabby thinkin' department sech as was handed you by the guys who ran that thousand dollar college. Wal, ef you'll look at yourself honest, an' argue with yourself honest, you'll find them things is sure a shadder of the past which happened somew'eres before you tasted that first dose o' prairie poison which has since become a kind o' habit. It ain't no use in getting riled, Bob, it ain't no use in workin' overtime on that college dictionary o' yours to set me crawlin' around among the spit boxes. Fac's is fac's. Ken you hand me a list o' the things you—you who ain't got two spare cents to push into the mission box, an' who'd willingly sleep in a hog pen if it weren't for a dandy wife who'd got no more sense than to

marry you—wouldn't do if I was to hand you out a roll of ten thousand dollars right now—cash? Tcha! You think. I know."

He turned away in a wave of contemptuous disgust. And as he did so a harsh voice from the other end of the bar held him up.

"What about me, Ju?"

The tough-looking prairie man made his demand with a laugh only a shade less harsh than his speaking voice.

Ju stood. His desperate, keen face was coldly still as he regarded the powerful frame of his challenger. Then his retort came swift and poignant.

"You, Sikkem? You'd allus *give* yourself away. Get me?"

The frigidity of the saloon-keeper's manner was overpowering. The man called Sikkem was unequal in words to such a challenge. A flush slowly dyed his lean cheeks, and an angry depression of the brows suggested something passionate and forceful. Just for a moment many eyes glanced in his direction. The saloon-keeper was steadily regarding him. There was no suggestion of anger in his attitude, merely cat-like watchfulness. Their eyes met. Then the cloud abruptly lifted from Sikkem's brow, and he laughed with unsmiling, black eyes. The saloon-keeper rinsed a glass and unconcernedly began to wipe it.

The incident was allowed to pass. But it was the termination of the discussion, a termination which left Ju victor, not because of the rightness of his views, but because there was no man in Orrville capable of joining issue with him in debate with any hope of success. Action rather than words was the prevailing feature with these people, and, in his way, Ju Penrose was equal, if not

superior, not only in debate, but in the very method these people best understood.

A moment later Sikkem took his departure.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was well past midnight when the last man turned out of Ju's bar. But the crowd had not yet scattered to their various homes. They were gathered in a small, excited cluster gaping up at a big notice pasted on the weather-boarding of the saloon-keeper's shack. Ju himself was standing in their midst, right in front of the notice, which had been indited in ink, evidently executed with a piece of flat wood. He was holding up a lantern, and every eye was carefully, and in many instances laboriously, studying the text inscribed.

It was a notice of reward. A reward of ten thousand dollars for information leading to the capture of the gang of cattle thieves known as the "Lightfoot gang." And it was signed by Dug McFarlane on behalf of the Orrville Rancher's Vigilance Committee.

"Guess Ju knowed after all," somebody observed, in a confidential tone to his neighbor.

But Ju's ears were as long and sharp as his tongue. He flashed round on the instant, his lantern lowered from the level of the notice board. There was a sort of cold triumph in his manner as his eyes fell upon the speaker.

"Know'd?" he cried sharply. "Ain't 'knowin'" my business? Psha!" His contempt was withering. Then his manner changed back to the triumph which the notice had inspired. "Say, it's a great piece of money. It surely is some bunch. Ten thousand dollars! Gee! His game's up. Lightfoot's as

good as kickin' his heels agin the breezes. He's played his hand, an'—lost."

And somehow no one seemed inclined to add to his statement. Nor, which was much more remarkable, contradict it. Now that these men had seen the notice with their own eyes the force of all Ju had so recently contended came home to them. There was not one amongst that little gathering who did not realize the extent of the odds militating against the rustlers. Ten thousand dollars! There was not a man present who did not feel the tremendous power of such a reward.

The gathering melted away slowly, and finally Bob Whitstone was left alone before the gleaming sheet of paper, with Ju standing in his doorway. The lantern was at his feet upon the sill. His hands were thrust in the tops of his shabby trousers. He was regarding the "gentleman" rancher meditatively, and his half burnt cigar glowed under the deep intake of his powerful lungs.

"It's a dandy bunch, Bob, eh?" he demanded presently, in an ironical tone. "Guess I'd come nigh sellin' my own father fer—ten thousand dollars. An' I don't calc'late I'd get nightmare neither." Then he drew a deep breath which suggested regret. "But—it ain't comin' my way. No. Not by a sight." Then, after a watchful pause, he continued: "I'm kind o' figgerin' whose way. Not mine, or—yours. Eh, Bob? We could do with it. Pity, ain't it?"

Bob turned. His eyes sought the face in the shadow of the doorway.

"I'm no descendant of Judas," he said coldly.

"No. But—Judas didn't sell a gang of murdering cattle rustlers. That ain't Judas money."

"Maybe. But it's blood money all the same."

"Mighty bad blood that oughter be spilt."

Bob turned away. His gaze wandered out westward. Then his eyes came slowly back to the man in the door-way.

"You thought I was talking hot air just now—about a man's price. You didn't like it. Well, when I find myself with a price I hope I shan't live to be paid it. That's all."

The man in the doorway shook his head. Then he spoke slowly, deliberately. And somehow much of the sharpness had gone out of his tone, and the hard glitter of his steely eyes had somehow become less pronounced.

"Oh, I guess I got your meanin' right, fer all yer thousand dollar langwidge. Sure, I took you right away. But—it don't signify a cuss anyways. Guess you was born a gentleman, Bob, which I wa'an't. An' because you was born an' raised that-a-way you'd surely like to kep right hold o' the notion that folks ken still act as though they'd been weaned on talk of honor an' sichlike. I sez kep a holt on that notion. Grip it tight, an' don't never let go on it. Grab it same as you would the feller that's yearnin' fer your scalp. If you lose your grip that tow-colored scalp of yours'll be raised sure, an' every penicious breeze that blows 'll get into your think depot and hand you every sort of mental disease ther' ain't physic enough in the world to cure. Guess that's plumb right. It don't cut no ice what I think. A feller like me jest thinks the way life happens to boost him. Y'see, I ain't had no thousand dollar eddication to make me see things any other ways. Life's a mighty tough proposition an' it can't be run on

no schedule, an' each feller's got to travel the way he sees with his own two eyes. If he's got the spectacles of a thousand dollar eddication he's an a'mighty lucky feller, an' I'm guessin' they'll help him dodge a whole heap o' muck holes he'd otherwise bury his silly head in. So hang on, boy. Grip them darn fool notions so they ain't got a chance. If you let go—wal, you'll get a full-sized peek into a pretty fancy sort o' hell wher' ther' ain't any sort o' chance o' dopin' your visions out o' sight with Ju Penrose's belly wash. So long."

Ju picked up his lantern and turned back into his bar, closing and securing his door behind him. Then, with keen anticipation and enjoyment, he approached his till and proceeded to count his day's takings.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bob Whitstone unhitched his horse from Ju's tying post. He swung himself into the saddle and rode away,—away toward his outland home under the starlit roof of the plains. It was an almost nightly journey with him now, for the saloon habit had caught him in its toils, and was already holding him firmly.

His mood was not easy. He resented Ju Penrose. He resented all men of his type. He knew him for a crook. He believed he possessed no more conscience than any other habitual criminal. But his resentment was the weak echo of an upbringing which had never intended him for such association, and, in spite of it, the man's personality held him, and its strength dominated him.

His way took him out across an almost trackless waste of rich grass-land. Somewhere out there, hidden away at the