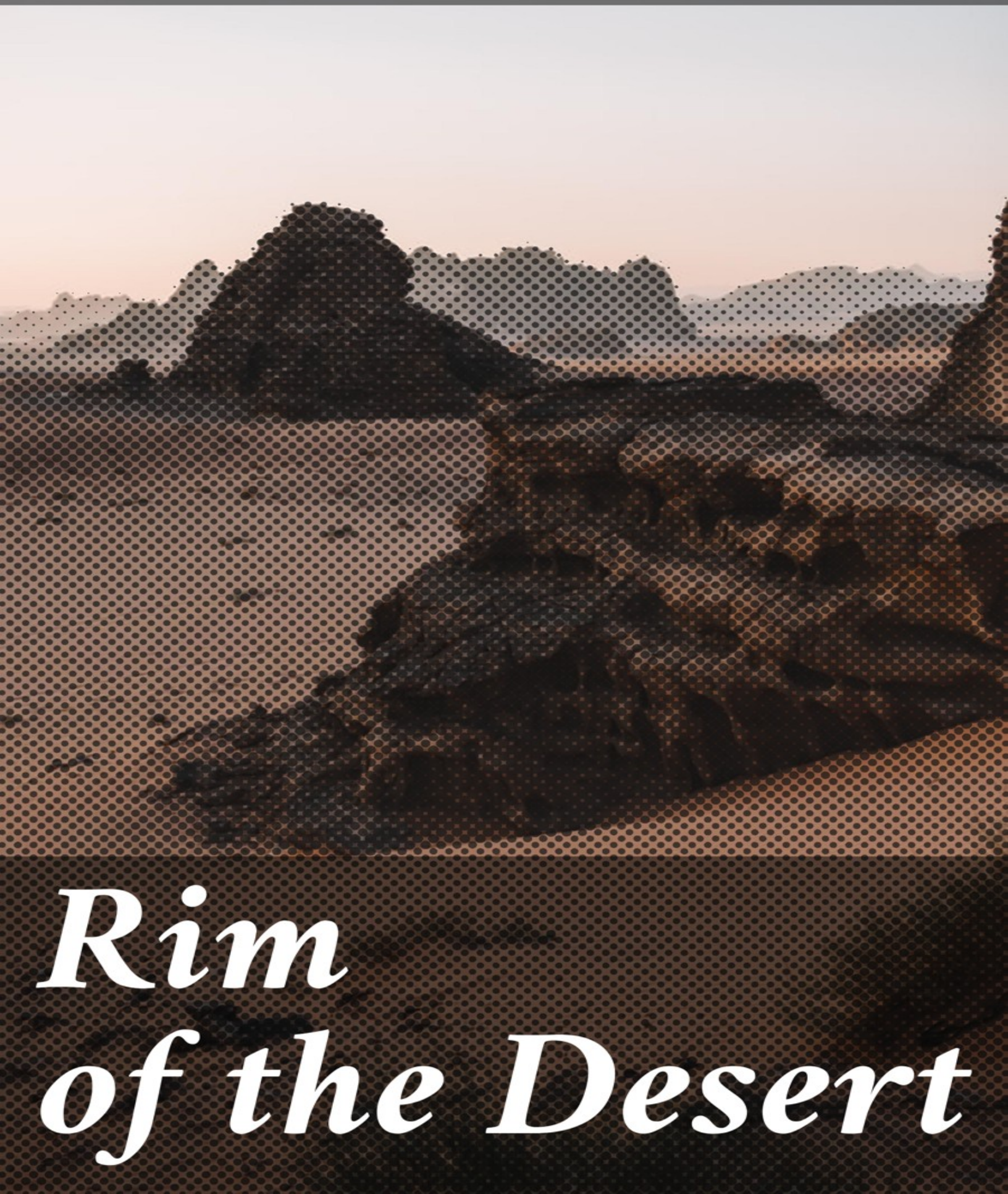
Ernest Haycox



Rim of the Desert

Ernest Haycox

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I. — OLD SIGNALS RISE AGAIN

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HE entered town late in the day, stabled his horse at Connoyer's and crossed to the hotel: and when he came to register he held the pen motionless awhile, as though the recollection of his full name were an unfamiliar act. On his features, brown-burned by all the years of outdoor life, lay that grave and attentive sereneness of a man long accustomed to his own company, to his own resources and solitary whimsies. He signed, "James T. Keene, Dalhart, Texas," in a broad angular hand and waited for the key.

The clerk said hopefully, "Long way to come."

Keene's bland "yes" closed the clerk out. He took the key and turned to the stairs. Dust silvered his clothes, weather had faded them. His hair lay thick and black and ragged against his temples, there was no mark or scar or shadow of any worry on his face. His mouth was broad below a heavy nose, his eyes were of that shade of gray which is almost blue. Riding had trimmed him, had limbered all his muscles so that his boots made almost no noise on the stairs. At the upper landing he looked back with a sudden flip of his head and caught the clerk's following glance, and at that moment his eyes were nearer black than gray, with glass-sharp splinters of interest in them. Thus catching the clerk's off-guard curiosity, he was a man hard and fine-drawn by the habits of his life: the next moment he erased that impression with a smile and entered his room.

In this room's stale warmth every ancient odor of a frontier hotel lay as a musty remembrance. Once there had been crimson roses in the pattern of the shabby carpet. A pine bureau held its pitcher and bowl; there was an iron bedstead whose enamel was chipped by the roweling of countless spurred boots, a rocking chair, and on the wall a lithograph of an old Indian scout belly-flat beside a desert waterhole. Day's last clear light came through the single grimed window and through a bullet hole in the wall, autographed by the maker as follows: "Ventilated by Smoky Jules from Medora, 1882. Forty-four barrel on a forty-five frame. Never bet aces in another man's game." Some other weary-wise traveler, incited to public comment, had added: "Plenty of livestock in this bed. If I was a rustler I'd get rich."

It was one more hotel room in one more prairie town, but for Jim Keene it was the first night beneath a roof in sixty days. He stripped to the waist, scrubbed away the dust of long travel, and shaved in a growing twilight. Standing by the window later he had a better view of the town.

The main street was a crooked river of silver dust running from a yellow depot at one end of Prairie City to the out-scatter of sheds and corrals at the other. Keene looked down upon single-story buildings sitting shoulder to shoulder, on board awnings shadowing the street walks, on alleys leading to rear compounds. A wagonload of barbwire rolled past, driven by an obvious homesteader with a square-cut beard. In front of a saloon which advertised itself as the Cattleman's Palace cow ponies stood heads down and half asleep.

There was something wrong with the town; he had caught the smell of that at first entry. He considered the street the saddle shop, the Cattleman's Palace, the grain-and-feed store, the sign which said, "Worsham and Ross, Gen'l Mchdse," the flimsy bank building, the courthouse. He made a picture in his head of it, for to Jim Keene the real world was made up of stray words overheard and the odd change on people's faces, of prints in the sand and houses sitting empty in the middle of sagebrush, of bullet holes in a hotel wall, of a man enormous in every physical detail standing now in the doorway of the Cattleman's Palace watching the homesteader and his load of barbwire.

The wagon stopped, the homesteader got down and started for the hotel. As he did so the man at the saloon—a man nearly as tall and as broad as the saloon door—moved into the street. When he passed the homesteader he swerved aside deliberately and his elbow caught the homesteader and knocked him off balance to the dust. The big man walked on, never looking back, but immediately a small crowd of cowhands appeared in front of the saloon, watching this scene with a narrow amusement. The homesteader got up from the dust and stood still, staring at his feet; in a moment he continued on to the hotel, slightly limping.

Jim Keene rolled a cigarette, watching the big man turn back to the punchers gathered at the saloon door. The big man had made his play for the entertainment of the punchers; now he grinned and waggled a hand and the whole group passed into the saloon. Keene lighted the cigarette. He took one deep drag of smoke into his lungs. To

his face came the wry tightness of distaste and a feeling, the old feeling over which he had never had any control, ripped through him. He murmured to himself: "Always something like that," and went downstairs.

In the dining room he saw the homesteader again. The homesteader was at a corner table with his wife and a grown son and two small children. It appeared to be a holiday for them, a break in the hard work and loneliness of some sagebrush quarter-section a long way from town. They were all cheerful except the man himself, who sat at the head of the table without appetite or interest. Keene thought, "He didn't tell them about the knock-down."

Rising from his finished meal. Keene left the dining zoom. He was fed and at ease, his muscles were idle after the long ride and every sound and sensation of this town pleased his hungry senses; yet a cool wind was blowing from his errant past, that wind which governed his life no matter what wisdom his mind might hold. He felt it and regretted it, but nevertheless it pressed softly against him and it made him smile as he crossed to the doorway. In the smile was some regret. In it also, though he never knew this, was a hopeful anticipation.

He stood on the street to watch the crowd flow by. Ranch outfits came in and sent the street dust high as they wheeled before the Cattleman's Palace. They moved along the street with a salty arrogance; the razor-sharp appetites of rough living propelled them into the saloon. Their voices came back to Keene, high and quick and cheerful. Homesteaders entered town and wagons and buggies were banked wheel to wheel against the walks. Along these walks

families cruised and grouped up with other families and moved idly on. Lamplights turned the steady street dust to a film of gold.

He heard a man say: "You see Jesse Morspeare knock Spackman down?"

Keene crossed the street and was caught in the slow-drifting stream of the crowd. On a wall of the saddle shop he saw a sign which read: "Re-elect Sheriff Ben Holders," and beside it a second sign said, "For Sheriff—Jesse Morspeare. The Cattlemen's Choice." He paused by these notices, bracing himself against the steady push of people, and remembering what he had heard only a moment ago. Morspeare was the big one who had rammed his elbow into the homesteader. The homesteader was Spackman. At that moment the story of this town and the surrounding prairie was as clear to Jim Keene as though he had lived his life in it.

A wave of homesteaders broke against him and stirred him out of his tracks and rolled on. A girl drove her rig against the walk and jumped to the street. She made a complete turn in the dust, saw Keene, and spoke. "Have you seen Dr. Ellenburg?" Her hand touched his arm to stop him, bringing his attention down to the steady, gray alarm in her eyes; strain pushed the edges of her lips together. Keene removed his hat before he answered, and still delayed his answer. She was a tall girl whose hair had been whipped loose from fast riding. The touch of her arm was a weight and the tilt of her head was a picture in this noise and shadow and confusion. He said: "Sorry, but—" and saw her thrown backward by the collision of a man's blunt shoulder.

The man had put his head down to make a way through this crowd, He was drunk and saw nothing, and he was laughing to himself as he shoved forward.

Keene caught the drunk by the coat collar and hauled him back. He whirled the man around and put both arms against his chest and slammed him against the saddle-shop wall.

The drunk cried: "Hey—Broken Bit!"

The girl straightened and tried to break away, but the crowd quit moving; it made a tight ring around Keene and the girl and the drunk. Men pushed down the street and somebody called out: "That you, Snap? Hey, Broken Bit! Hey, Red!"

"No," said Keene to the girl, "I haven't seen the doctor. I'm a stranger here."

The drunk planted himself firmly on his feet, bowed his head and butted Keene in the chest. Cowhands slid through the crowd and stood still, carefully watching. The drunk pushed against Keene, making no headway. He got rougher and angrier, he stamped his feet on Keene's boots, he swung his arms. Suddenly Keene slapped the drunk's face and straightened him up. Keene looked across the narrow circle, observing that one red-headed puncher looked at all this with narrow interest. Keene said: "You Broken Bit?"

"That's my outfit," admitted the redhead.

Keene caught the drunk under the arms. He called, "Here's your baby," and threw him at the redhead.

The redhead didn't care for that. He batted the drunk aside. "You're a little tough, friend."

The cool wind blew stronger and every piece of this scene was something Keene could repeat from memory.

Regret and pleased anticipation ran through him in equal strength, side by side. "Tell your partner to pull in his elbows, Red." Then he forgot about the redhead and he forgot about the drunk. "This lady is looking for a Dr. Ellenburg."

Somebody in the crowd called: "Up at the courthouse."

The girl said: "Thanks." She had no reason for smiling, he thought, but still she smiled and murmured to him, "I'm sorry," and turned away. The crowd moved on. The drunk, having forgotten the last few minutes, rose from the walk and vanished, butting his way through the crowd.

The redhead remained, pushing his glance at Keene in a rough, half-aroused way. He was a long, freckle-faced man, never doubting himself. His red hair lay tight and short-curled against his head. He was bold enough for anything, but sufficiently smart to take his good time to read what he saw.

"You don't look like a homesteader."

"Don't let it worry you."

"Maybe I will."

"Suit yourself," agreed Keene. He was smiling, he was thinking back and remembering how this always went. It never changed. A man rode a thousand miles but the pattern caught up with him and now it was hard to know whether to be glad or sorry. He stood there, appraising the man in front of him. The redhead was a handsome rascal, and knew it. He was hard as iron and he knew that too. If he belonged to Broken Bit he would no doubt be the riding

boss, for that air of bold assurance was on him. The homesteader, Spackman, came from the hotel with his family and stood in the street's lamp-stained shadows; and immediately a second family joined the Spackmans. A girl stood in front of Spackman's grown son and touched his chest with her hand and laughed at him. Her lips were red and her brown-dusted face was stirred by that laughter and by the excitement of the night. Spackman's son looked at her with a solemn, disturbed interest. Keene noticed all this; and now he saw the redhead's glance strike across the street to that girl. His face changed, a flare of strong interest showed in his eyes. The two homestead families, now in one group, quartered across the street's dust. The girl's eyes lifted and saw the redhead and the smile left her lips; after she had gone by she looked quickly over one shoulder with a knowing darkness in her eyes, and by that obscure coquette's glance she raked up every hungry impulse in the redhead, leaving him with his tantalized hope. Keene saw all this.

Keene moved on to the saloon and walked into its full blast of noise, into its rolling haze of tobacco smoke. Piano music clanked steadily from the deep back end. Along the bar, which ran the whole distance from front door to rear door, men stood elbow against elbow and a back bar mirror flashed out its prisms of light and four barkeeps slowly sweated as they worked. Heads of deer and antelope and bear were mounted on the walls; two lamps bracketed a painting of a fleshy beauty lying on a couch, her heavy-lidded smile fixed on the poker tables below.

After the silence and long loneliness of the trail this noise and warmth and glitter, this odor of tobacco and whisky and clothes saturated with horse smell, comforted Keene. He found an empty place at a table and bought a stack. Somebody called through the saloon. "Where you been, John?" Looking toward the door, Keene saw the redhead enter the saloon with the giant Jesse Morspeare behind him. More outfits raced into Prairie City, the sound of their arrival trembling through the flimsy walls of the saloon. A shot flattened along the night and the saloon doors swung ceaselessly back and forth to the inbound passage of the steady-flowing crowd.

Keene sat low in the chair, hat pulled down over his eyes. He ordered a drink and a cigar and he got the cigar evenly drawing between his lips, observing the deliberate manner in which Red John moved across the floor to take a seat at his table. Red John said: "A stack," and seemed to be amused at some joke in his head.

The old streaky feeling traveled through Jim Keene. All the ancient signals of trouble were rising in him and about him while he watched Red John's hard, rope-burned hands shuffle and deal the cards. They were fast hands; the fingers were supple. It was something to remember. He lifted his glance and caught the straight blow of the redhead's green-flecked eyes.

"You're no nester," murmured Red John.

"Maybe—"

Red John's voice cut in quickly. "Now, Snap was a little drunk. But that don't matter. If a Broken Bit man wants to use his elbows it's all right."

Keene said, "I pass," and laid his fingers on the table. He rubbed them along the felt table top, making short slow circles. Nothing ever changed. The quarrels of men rose from the same old reasons and moved through the same old pattern.

"I said it was all right," said Red John in softest voice.

That long wind had been blowing against Keene all evening; it strengthened now, it grew colder and stronger, coming up a thousand-mile trail. The player to his left took up the cards to shuffle them, but he laid them down again and said, "I'm cashing in," and left the table. Keene collected the cards and roped them between his hands.

"No haymow shuffles," said Red John. "You're a little queer on a lot of things, friend." He was talking in the same edged, amused voice, yet the ring of it flattened, it went out of key and his lids made a narrower frame around his eyes. Keene dealt and drew a long breath and felt the old current of wildness crowd him. This was what he had traveled so far and so long to escape. But the distance meant nothing; for a man carried his passport to hell in his heart wherever he traveled.

"It occurs to me—" he said.

Red John cut straight across the rest of it. "You're tough with drunks, friend. Which is an easy stunt."

Keene put down his cards and placed his hands at the edge of the table. He came out of his chair and flung the table in Red John's lap and watched Red John fall backward. Chips clacked along the floor. Red John's body made a squashing echo in the saloon and within the space of a breath there was no talk in the place and no sound except

Red John's grunt as he wrenched himself to his feet. He took three backward steps and paused. The other players at the table moved away at once and an open space appeared behind Red John, made by the withdrawing of men from the bar.

"When I'm talking," said Keene, "I don't like to be cut in."

Heat flared in Red John's eyes, the quick shadow of cruelty came to them; the man's lips drew down at the corners, they thinned in the center. Keene, waiting for what he knew would come, remembered how many other times he had watched this scene take shape before him. The memory made him smile and the smile was a rash signal on his face. He stood with his feet apart; he stood still, and though he had ridden a thousand miles to escape this kind of scene there was no regret in him now. This saloon was the Cattleman's Palace but it might have been the Drover's in Abilene or the Belle in San Antonio; it might have been a lot of other towns. If a man had pride and temper and if these were the things he cherished and would defend it made no difference how far he ran.

"Friend," said Red John, "I like to meet a tough man and try my luck."

That was it. That was the core and the meaning of the old story. A man had pride and pride took him into a fight. If he survived that fight his reputation grew and other men came along to say, as Red John was now saying, "I like to meet a tough man and try my luck." The time came when a man got weary of it and saw somewhere his own death in a last showdown and ran from it as he was now running. But there was no hope in running. For it was in the man, always.

So he stood there, still smiling, and said as he had said many times before: "All right, Red. Take a try."

Into the sibilant stillness of the room crashed the high scream of a woman, followed by the running scuff of heavy boots and the bubbling echo of a man's voice in pain. A puncher put his head through the door. He yelled, "Broken Bit!" and disappeared. The saloon crowd rushed at the door, pushing Red John aside, throwing him off his careful balance. Red John made a gesture with his hands, turned from Keene, and went out into the street. A floor man moved stolidly forward to pick up the capsized table and chairs. Then somebody said, "All right, Tonk," and the floor man moved away. Keene turned about, finding a man behind him whose eyes were brilliant green against an Irishman's crimson complexion. This man's eyes held a dancing light. They were approving Keene.

"My boy," he said, "be careful of that fellow. He's a Broken Bit man."

Keene said: "He's the boss?"

"He's the foreman. Grat DePard's the boss." Then the green-eyed man grinned. "Ah now, it would be a lovely fight between you. I think you're the one that might do it. You've got the mark. I'm Tim Sullivan and this is my place. Be careful of that crowd."

Keene crossed the saloon and pushed open the doors and was stopped by the solid crowd on the walk. In the middle of the street a ring of men, homesteaders and cowhands, stood around the Spackman wagon with its load of barbwire. Spackman's grown son and the two children were on the wagon seat. Mrs. Spackman stood by the

wagon with an ax in her hand. Spackman was in the dust, now slowly rising; blood dripped from his mouth and dropped along his beard. He got to his feet and put up his hands in uncertain defense against Jesse Morspeare, who was a black and towering hulk in the stained lamplight and shadow of this night.

"Don't get in my way again," said Morspeare.

Mrs. Spackman screamed: "If you hit him again I'll use this ax."

Morspeare said: "Red, grab that old fool's ax."

Red John moved out of the circle, slow and careful; as he did so the Spackman boy jumped down from the wagon and stood beside his mother, and then Jim Keene saw homesteaders come slowly together, their faces black and stubborn yet half afraid. Red John was laughing. "You'll cut yourself with that ax, ma'am. Just put it down."

"Let her alone," said Spackman's boy.

Spackman spoke through his cut mouth: "No doubt you can do what you want with me, Jesse. But we'll still be out there on the Silver Bow flats when you're dead and gone. Now let me go home."

"Old man," said Morspeare, "don't ever get in my way."

"Then," said Spackman stubbornly, "stay out of mine."

"Go on back to Ioway and grub your land," called Morspeare. "Don't come here and spoil range grass."

"We'll be here," said Spackman, slow and weary and firm.

"Not long," retorted Morspeare, moving forward. Mrs. Spackman raised the ax, Broken Bit men edged forward, the homesteaders were a tighter, darker knot in the street. Red John laughed again, not moving. The homestead girl, having

come to the wagon, put her hand on the shoulder of Spackman's boy. Now Red John watched her and Keene saw her stare back at Red John with a half-interested, half-repelled attention. Her red lips softened as she looked at the foreman.

Keene came against the crowd on the walk. He put his hands between the touching shoulders of two men and shoved them away. He hit them with a roll of his body and went through. He was in the street dust, pulling a Broken Bit man aside. The Broken Bit man flung himself around, resenting that roughness with a lifted arm. He looked at Keene, saying irritably, "Stop that!" Keene passed him and got behind Red John. The Broken Bit foreman stirred in his tracks, hearing trouble. He swayed and swung his head and found Keene, and he took a rapid step to the left and made a half turn. In the rounds of his eyes Keene saw the quick-roused flicker of cruelty again.

A voice quietly called: "Make way here." A gray and straight and severe old man walked inside the circle, saying: "Stop that, Jesse."

Morspeare let out a rumbling answer. "You won't be wearin' that star long, Borders."

"Long enough. You can go home, Spackman, or you can stay. It makes no difference. You Broken Bit boys just ease along."

A rider came up the street on a trotting horse, calling, "What's this—what's this?"

The crowd broke instantly to let him into the circle. He reined up before Morspeare and Borders. He sat heavy and square on a big horse, the burned darkness of his face

shining like polished saddle leather in the saloon's outthrown light. He wore a cotton shirt unbuttoned at the collar and the muscles of his neck snapped straight and tight when he moved his head. He was big-chested, with a long flat nose and heavy lips loosely rolled together. He had a thick voice, the sound of it dropping like an ax stroke into the silence.

He looked at Morspeare, at Red John. He said: "When I want trouble I'll tell you. Get the hell out of town."

The huge Morspeare shifted on his feet. He lost his spirit immediately. "Ah, Grat—"

This, then, was Grat DePard. Keene considered the man with a widening attention, forming his own judgments. DePard sat like a soldier on the big horse, obviously accustomed to having his own way; on him was the air of a dry, aloof scheming. Jesse Morspeare dropped his head. Turning, he moved out of the circle, never thinking to question the order tossed so bluntly at him. DePard looked around at his crew. "Go on," he said. "Go on."

Mrs. Spackman spoke up. "Tell them to leave us alone."

Grat DePard dipped his head at her, giving her no comfort with his voice. "Take care of yourself. I didn't ask you homesteaders to come into this country and break up my range."

The Broken Bit men moved away in reluctance. Red John looked at the homestead girl, his desire sharp-calling over the dust. DePard stared at the old and serene sheriff. "Ben," he said, "these are my men. Don't order them around so quick."

"Hold them in hand then," said the sheriff.

"I'll do as it pleases me to do, Ben," announced DePard. He turned his horse. His glance touched Keene and remained steadfast a brief moment, the completely unrevealing glance of a player studying his hand. A moment later he followed his forming outfit down the street and soon left town.

Keene watched the crowd dissolve. The homestead girl rose to the seat with the Spackman boy, smiling up at him and speaking some soft, provocative word to him. The Spackman boy nodded slowly and put the team in motion. The outfits were running out and the homesteaders were departing, and presently Prairie City settled to its quiet hour and lights began to die and the street's silver dust glowed darkly through the settled shadows. Building corners made gaunt angles against the black sky.

Keene went into the saloon and stood up to the bar. The trade had dropped to a single steady game at one poker table; half a dozen men, other punchers from other outfits, remained at the bar. Pouring himself a drink, he watched the gray straight sheriff enter the saloon and walk toward him. This, he remembered, would be Ben Borders, who was running for re-election against the giant Jesse Morspeare.

Borders said: "Son, you make a wide splash."

"A drink?" offered Keene.

"One," said Borders, "one for an old man," and poured his drink. He had a slow and courteous voice, he had age's faded eyes. Behind the austerity of that long, disciplined face gentleness lay. "You're ridin'?"

"Just riding."

"It sounds natural," reflected the sheriff. "Just fancy-dancin' along the trail, admirin' the shape of your shadow. That's a nice time of life. Better than most times. Always something over the next hill."

"What's over it?" asked Jim Keene.

"Now that I remember back," said Ben Borders quietly, "it was the looking that was good, never the finding. But of course," and he added this with a perceptible regret, "I was a little headstrong and wanted too much. A man like that makes pictures in his head. The pictures are hard to fill."

"Why," said Jim Keene, "that's true. But a man's got to find the picture. If he took less, what would he have?"

"I thought that once," said the sheriff, and let his glance go far back into time. "But I was a young man then. Here's to the next hill, son."

"How," said Keene, and drank his whisky and left the saloon.

He crossed to the hotel and went to his room, but now he knew he couldn't stay. The walls were closing in on him and the night was flat and restlessness had its way with him. He went down to pay his bill. In fifteen minutes he had left the town behind.

It was then ten o'clock, with a coolness coming to the night. Somewhere he heard the sigh of wind through a lonesome juniper and somewhere the howl of a coyote floated along the stillness. To the rear and to either side lay the flat of the desert, and here and there he made out the distant wink of a homestead shanty; before him he saw the shapeless bulk of mountains. That was north, and toward

the north he pointed, toward the hills he proposed to cross, one upon another, until the restlessness was gone.

Near midnight he made camp and built up a small sagebrush fire and cooked coffee; rolled in his blankets, he watched the fire die. Once he heard the distant drum of several horsemen. Starlight lay pale on the desert. This night, in Prairie City, his past had caught up with him and once more the old story had been played out in the saloon. A thousand miles wasn't enough to escape it; somewhere in the northern distance maybe he'd find a reason to put his pride away and be a humble man without a gun. Before he fell asleep he remembered the girl who had asked him about the doctor. Her face was oval and white and composed in his memory; around her eyes, he remembered, had been the hint of an iron resolution, but in her lips he had seen a contradictory thing.

II. — AURORA BRANT

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AURORA BRANT returned to the homestead shack with Dr. Ellenburg at midnight. When he left half an hour later he told her the worst of it in his bluntest words. "Your father," he said, "can't last out another day." She had known he would say that. The rest of the long, black night she sat by the bed, watching her father move through his fitful intervals of sleep, half dreaming of death and half-awake and aware of its coming.

Now it was day and he had fallen into a real sleep. Aurora stood at the shanty door to watch strong light move across a sea of sage and yellow grass. Prairie City was a blur twenty-five miles southward. Here and there at lonely intervals small square shanties, no different than the one in which she lived, stood against the sun; far away she saw a rider and his ribbon of dust. This was the Silver Bow flats, on which the homesteaders were settling. Only last year it had been free government land used by the cattle outfits to graze their beef; the hatred of the cattlemen at that intrusion was the one real fear in the heart of every homesteader.

She saddled her pony in the shed, took a bucket with a long rope, and rode toward the river a few hundred yards away. The Silver Bow crossed the flats by means of a deep lava-rock gorge and made a bend here and came out of its canyon to provide the only suitable land within twelve miles.

At the river she rode the horse into the current and dropped the bucket to the full length of the rope, therein

filling it. This was a device her father—a clever man who could do anything with his mind and nothing with his hands—had invented to save the labor of dismounting. While the horse had its long morning drink she looked across the river at the small, gray log cabin on the north side.

Beyond the ford two ridges formed the walls of a narrow valley—Cloud Valley—whose grass lay rich yellow in the sunlight; gradually as the valley ran northward the ridges pinched in and became the rough-tumbled chain of the Thunderhead Range, here and there touched by snow patches. All that valley was cattle graze, with the ranch houses of the big outfits—Broken Bit, Rafter T, and Cleve Stewart's Chain and Ball—hidden in small box canyons playing off from the valley. Every foot of that golden fifteen-mile meadow was free land, open to any homesteader who wished to file upon it. Only one homesteader had ever tried. He had built the log cabin across the ford. One night he had been shot dead and now the cabin stood as a stark warning to all other homesteaders.

She turned back. When she reached the yard of the shanty she heard her father calling with more strength than he had to spend. Dropping from the horse, she hurried in and saw the fear frozen in his eyes. He reached for her hand. "A man sees the sorry side of himself at a time like this. At this stage of the game you don't make excuses for yourself any more. I have never really been happy when alone. I can't even die alone."

"Don't regret anything, Dad. We've seen the world. We've had fun."

"If that were only all—"

He was very thin and in the last few years his hair had turned white at the edges, and he had hated that because he hated age. He was sixty but still kept the blue eyes of a young man; his face was without a line of worry. He had never worried, never worked very hard, never bound himself to any one place. Wherever they had moved he had always begun by saying: "This is our home at last. Here's where we make our fortune." But in a little while depression always came upon him and the orthodox pattern of life would bore him and then he would say: "It is not as I'd hoped it would be, Aurora. Let's try New Orleans. It is a lovely place." And so they would move. All her first memories were of trains and boats and coffee at midnight on ferries and stages rocking across lonely places. For him change was the breath of his life and regularity was death.

He held her hand and this too was as it had always been, for even as a child it had been her voice comforting him, her steadiness cheering him. It was her strength he fed on. He said: "One thing I regret. We never should have come here."

"It has been a lovely year, Dad."

She had the power to take his doubts away; now he was pleased to see that she believed in him. "Yes, it has been. And it was the cheapest health cure we could find." Then another thought turned him still and dreary and a pale shadow moved over his face and he spoke from the farther corridors of his strength: "How much money do we have left?"

Money was another responsibility he had never faced. She had been the banker. Now, as before, she lied to him to

save him from one more gray fact he could never face. "About two hundred dollars."

"Enough to get you out of here. You can't keep this homestead. You wouldn't want to." He paused to struggle with his own conscience. "I have never cared for your mother's people. They disliked me when I married your mother and hated me when she died. But they're well off and they'll be good to you. I can think of no other way."

"All right, Dad."

It eased him to hear her approval. It took the last responsibility from his shoulders, he who could not bear responsibility. He smiled out of those blue eyes which held her love so securely. A little of the old gay boyishness came back to him and then, in accordance with his changeable mind and heart, it went away. He lay quietly on the bed and she knew he would be thinking of a poem out of Wordsworth or the glitter and laughter of some great party in his younger years, or perhaps he was thinking of tomorrow and the great day to come in another place.

"I leave you so little," he said. "Not even friends. We have never stayed anywhere long enough to make friends."

"Everything," she said, "has been lovely. Always."

"You must not be too serious, Aurora. Let the solemn ones grind out their souls by trying to shake the roots of the world. Life will break you if you let it. Don't let it. Be gay. There is never enough laughter, never enough laziness and dreaming. Remember one thing when people speak those dismal words about duty and usefulness and the necessity of making something great of your life. Remember that the heart of a rose contains all the meaning this world has for

any of us. Its fragrance is yours for nothing. Go to your mother's people, take a year in a finishing school. Marry well and have a great house and bring people to it who are wise and witty and full of pleasant nonsense."

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

But, watching her, he had his moment of insight. "I think I have made you old too soon. One of us had to do the worrying and you did it. You do not know yourself. You have the capacity for loving some man with your whole heart. If you find that man permit yourself to love him. Ask no questions and have no doubts. That is the one great adventure." And then, deeper and deeper along the black tunnel into which he steadily receded, he said in a changed and terrible voice: "Aurora—my life has been a failure." When she touched his cheek she knew he was dead.

There was no shock. This event had been long foreshadowed and her first thought as she bent to kiss him was that his face had turned young and a little eager, as though, having stayed in one place too long, the old excitement returned once more for his final journey. She sat down in the doorway, her shoulder against its edge, her arms idle in her lap. Her shoulder bent a little, her head dropped.

Coming along the road, Jim Keene saw her in this attitude and recognized her as the girl who had the previous night asked him about the doctor. When he rode before the shanty she looked up and he observed that the fear and strain of that occasion had been replaced by an expression as near bottomless despair as he had ever seen. As much as it was against his manners to dismount before being invited,

he stepped from the saddle and moved to the door and saw the dead man inside.

"Your father?"

"Yes."

It was a tone of heartbreak, of a world fallen forever. She wasn't crying. It looked to him as though her feelings were deadlocked, leaving her wholly powerless; once in his own career he had known something distantly similar when, struck in the pit of the stomach, he could not breathe, speak or move. He sat down beside her. "Maybe," he said, in the most sympathetic of voices, "I can help," and took her shoulders and pulled her against his chest.

He felt the quick loosening of her body and then he was listening to the sudden onset of her crying.

He said nothing. He sat still, watching color come back to her cheeks. Her hair was a solid black, lustrous in the sunlight; the smell of it was sweet. She was tall for a woman and her shoulders were square and strong, and there was a substance to her body; it was warm and firm in his arms. Her skin was lightly browned by the sun and her lips were broad and on the edge of being full—the lips of a giving woman, but not of a pliant one. He had seen her only once before, but even then she had left an impression with him. The impression had remained.

The weight went suddenly from his arms; she straightened and gave him a full, quick look in which he witnessed a self-willed pride now deliberately shutting out the softer things he had seen.

He stood up with his hat in his hand. A rider showed on the desert, slowly jogging forward on a big horse—a nester

riding all arms and feet. The sun was half up in the east, red from late fall's dust. Sagebrush carpeted the desert as far as sight ran. On the southern horizon a blue haze beautifully shimmered. He said: "What can I do for you?"

She had never really noticed him before. Now it was his voice that drew her attention, a voice soft as summer's wind. He was young, his face long and thoughtful and thick-tanned from wind and sun and from health. When he looked out upon the desert his lids came together and she caught the poised and thorough alertness of his attention, as though he lived on small margins of safety and watched those margins with care. But when he turned to her she saw the kindness of his eyes—and the approval in them.

Her deep beliefs were secret and lonely ones, seldom shared. It surprised her to find she was explaining herself to him. "It was always a bright and wonderful world for my father, with nothing unkind in it. But at the last the color of it died out and that was the greatest hurt he ever had. I think that is why I cried—because he had to see anything dark."

"Maybe," said Jim Keene, "it was kind of a desert dark, with the stars all shining and the wind blowing cool from the west. When I take the trail I'd like to start in shadows like that. You can't see heaven when the sun's shining."

He had a voice with idle melody in it; he was thinking about her and trying to be kind. Then she remembered the way he laughed when he had shoved the drunk into Red John's arms. Behind that laughter had been a full knowledge of his act and all that it might mean. He was a strange man.