KEITH OF THE BORDER

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Western Novel

e-artnow, 2022
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EAN 4066338125293

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Chapter I. The Plainsman

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The man was riding just below the summit of the ridge, occasionally uplifting his head so as to gaze across the crest, shading his eyes with one hand to thus better concentrate his vision. Both horse and rider plainly exhibited signs of weariness, but every movement of the latter showed ceaseless vigilance, his glance roaming the barren ridges, a brown Winchester lying cocked across the saddle pommel, his left hand taut on the rein. Yet the horse he bestrode scarcely required restraint, advancing slowly, with head hanging low, and only occasionally breaking into a brief trot under the impetus of the spur.

The rider was a man approaching thirty, somewhat slender and long of limb, but possessing broad, squared shoulders above a deep chest, sitting the saddle easily in plainsman fashion, yet with an erectness of carriage which suggested military training. The face under the wide brim of the weather-worn slouch hat was clean-shaven, browned by sun and wind, and strongly marked, the chin slightly prominent, the mouth firm, the gray eyes full of character and daring. His dress was that of rough service, plain leather “chaps,” showing marks of hard usage, a gray woolen shirt turned low at the neck, with a kerchief knotted loosely about the sinewy bronzed throat. At one hip dangled the holster of a “forty-five,” on the other hung a canvas-covered canteen. His was figure and face to be noted anywhere, a man from whom you would expect both

thought and action, and one who seemed to exactly fit into his wild environment.

Where he rode was the very western extreme of the prairie country, billowed like the sea, and from off the crest of its higher ridges, the wide level sweep of the plains was visible, extending like a vast brown ocean to the foothills of the far-away mountains. Yet the actual commencement of that drear, barren expanse was fully ten miles distant, while all about where he rode the conformation was irregular, comprising narrow valleys and swelling mounds, with here and there a sharp ravine, riven from the rock, and invisible until one drew up startled at its very brink. The general trend of depression was undoubtedly southward, leading toward the valley of the Arkansas, yet irregular ridges occasionally cut across, adding to the confusion. The entire surrounding landscape presented the same aspect, with no special object upon which the eye could rest for guidance—no tree, no upheaval of rock, no peculiarity of summit, no snake-like trail—all about extended the same dull, dead monotony of brown, sun-baked hills, with slightly greener depressions lying between, interspersed by patches of sand or the white gleam of alkali. It was a dreary, deserted land, parched under the hot summer sun, brightened by no vegetation, excepting sparse bunches of buffalo grass or an occasional stunted sage bush, and disclosing nowhere slightest sign of human habitation.

The rising sun reddened the crest of the hills, and the rider, halting his willing horse, sat motionless, gazing steadily into the southwest. Apparently he perceived nothing there unusual, for he slowly turned his body about

in the saddle, sweeping his eyes, inch by inch, along the line of the horizon, until the entire circuit had been completed. Then his compressed lips smiled slightly, his hand unconsciously patting the horse's neck.

“I reckon we're still alone, old girl,” he said quietly, a bit of Southern drawl in the voice. “We'll try for the trail, and take it easy.”

He swung stiffly out of the saddle, and with reins dangling over his shoulder, began the slower advance on foot, the exhausted horse trailing behind. His was not a situation in which one could feel certain of safety, for any ridge might conceal the wary foemen he sought to avoid, yet he proceeded now with renewed confidence. It was the Summer of 1868, and the place the very heart of the Indian country, with every separate tribe ranging between the Yellowstone and the Brazos, either restless or openly on the war-path. Rumors of atrocities were being retold the length and breadth of the border, and every report drifting in to either fort or settlement only added to the alarm. For once at least the Plains Indians had discovered a common cause, tribal differences had been adjusted in war against the white invader, and Kiowas, Comanches, Arapahoes, Cheyennes, and Sioux, had become welded together in savage brotherhood. To oppose them were the scattered and unorganized settlers lining the more eastern streams, guarded by small detachments of regular troops posted here and there amid that broad wilderness, scarcely within touch of each other.

Everywhere beyond these lines of patrol wandered roaming war parties, attacking travellers on the trails,

raiding exposed settlements, and occasionally venturing to try open battle with the small squads of armed men. In this stress of sudden emergency—every available soldier on active duty—civilians had been pressed into service, and hastily despatched to warn exposed settlers, guide wagon trains, or carry despatches between outposts. And thus our rider, Jack Keith, who knew every foot of the plains lying between the Republican and the Canadian Rivers, was one of these thus suddenly requisitioned, merely because he chanced to be discovered unemployed by the harassed commander of a cantonment just without the environs of Carson City. Twenty minutes later he was riding swiftly into the northwest, bearing important news to General Sheridan, commander of the Department, who happened at that moment to be at Fort Cairnes. To Keith this had been merely another page in a career of adventure; for him to take his life in his hands had long ago become an old story. He had quietly performed the special duty allotted him, watched a squadron of troopers trot forth down the valley of the Republican, received the hasty thanks of the peppery little general, and then, having nothing better to do, traded his horse in at the government corral for a fresh mount and started back again for Carson City. For the greater portion of two nights and a day he had been in the saddle, but he was accustomed to this, for he had driven more than one bunch of longhorns up the Texas trail; and as he had slept three hours at Cairnes, and as his nerves were like steel, the thought of danger gave him slight concern. He was thoroughly tired, and it rested him to get out of the saddle,

while the freshness of the morning air was a tonic, the very breath of which made him forgetful of fatigue.

After all, this was indeed the very sort of experience which appealed to him, and always had—this life of peril in the open, under the stars and the sky. He had constantly experienced it for so long now, eight years, as to make it seem merely natural. While he ploughed steadily forward through the shifting sand of the coulee, his thought drifted idly back over those years, and sometimes he smiled, and occasionally frowned, as various incidents returned to memory. It had been a rough life, yet one not unusual to those of his generation. Born of excellent family in tidewater Virginia, his father a successful planter, his mother had died while he was still in early boyhood, and he had grown up cut off from all womanly influence. He had barely attained his majority, a senior at William and Mary's College, when the Civil War came; and one month after Virginia cast in her lot with the South, he became a sergeant in a cavalry regiment commanded by his father. He had enjoyed that life and won his spurs, yet it had cost. There was much not over pleasant to remember, and those strenuous years of almost ceaseless fighting, of long night marches, of swift, merciless raiding, of lonely scouting within the enemy's lines, of severe wounds, hardship, and suffering, had left their marks on both body and soul. His father had fallen on the field at Antietam, and left him utterly alone in the world, but he had fought on grimly to the end, until the last flag of the Confederacy had been furled. By that time, upon the collar of his tattered gray jacket appeared the tarnished insignia of a captain. The quick tears dimmed his eyes even now as he

recalled anew that final parting following Appomattox, the battle-worn faces of his men, and his own painful journey homeward, defeated, wounded, and penniless. It was no home when he got there, only a heap of ashes and a few weed-grown acres. No familiar face greeted him; not even a slave was left.

He had honestly endeavored to remain there, to face the future and work it out alone; he persuaded himself to feel that this was his paramount duty to the State, to the memory of the dead. But those very years of army life made such a task impossible; the dull, dead monotony of routine, the loneliness, the slowness of results, became intolerable. As it came to thousands of his comrades, the call of the West came to him, and at last he yielded, and drifted toward the frontier. The life there fascinated him, drawing him deeper and deeper into its swirling vortex. He became freighter, mail carrier, hunter, government scout, cowboy foreman. Once he had drifted into the mountains, and took a chance in the mines, but the wide plains called him back once more to their desert loneliness. What an utter waste it all seemed, now that he looked back upon it. Eight years of fighting, hardship, and rough living, and what had they brought him? The reputation of a hard rider, a daring player at cards, a quick shot, a scorner of danger, and a bad man to fool with—that was the whole of a record hardly won. The man's eyes hardened, his lips set firmly, as this truth came crushing home. A pretty life story surely, one to be proud of, and with probably no better ending than an Indian bullet, or the flash of a revolver in some barroom fight.

The narrow valley along which he was travelling suddenly changed its direction, compelling him to climb the rise of the ridge. Slightly below the summit he halted. In front extended the wide expanse of the Arkansas valley, a scene of splendor under the golden rays of the sun, with vivid contrast of colors, the gray of rocks, the yellow of sand, the brown of distant hills, the green of vegetation, and the silver sheen of the stream half hidden behind the fringe of cottonwoods lining its banks. This was a sight Keith had often looked upon, but always with appreciation, and for the moment his eyes swept across from bluff to bluff without thought except for its wild beauty. Then he perceived something which instantly startled him into attention—yonder, close beside the river, just beyond that ragged bunch of cottonwoods, slender spirals of blue smoke were visible. That would hardly be a camp of freighters at this hour of the day, and besides, the Santa Fé trail along here ran close in against the bluff, coming down to the river at the ford two miles further west. No party of plainsmen would ever venture to build a fire in so exposed a spot, and no small company would take the chances of the trail. But surely that appeared to be the flap of a canvas wagon top a little to the right of the smoke, yet all was so far away he could not be certain. He stared in that direction a long while, shading his eyes with both hands, unable to decide. There were three or four moving black dots higher up the river, but so far away he could not distinguish whether men or animals. Only as outlined against the yellow sand dunes could he tell they were advancing westward toward the ford.

Decidedly puzzled by all this, yet determined to solve the mystery and unwilling to remain hidden there until night, Keith led his horse along the slant of the ridge, until he attained a sharp break through the bluff leading down into the valley. It was a rugged gash, nearly impassable, but a half hour of toil won them the lower prairie, the winding path preventing the slightest view of what might be meanwhile transpiring below. Once safely out in the valley the river could no longer be seen, while barely a hundred yards away, winding along like a great serpent, ran the deeply rutted trail to Santa Fé. In neither direction appeared any sign of human life. As near as he could determine from those distant cottonwoods outlined against the sky, for the smoke spirals were too thin by then to be observed, the spot sought must be considerably to the right of where he had emerged. With this idea in mind he advanced cautiously, his every sense alert, searching anxiously for fresh signs of passage or evidence of a wagon train having deserted the beaten track, and turned south. The trail itself, dustless and packed hard, revealed nothing, but some five hundred yards beyond the ravine he discovered what he sought—here two wagons had turned sharply to the left, their wheels cutting deeply enough into the prairie sod to show them heavily laden. With the experience of the border he was able to determine that these wagons were drawn by mules, two span to each, their small hoofs clearly defined on the turf, and that they were being driven rapidly, on a sharp trot as they turned, and then, a hundred feet further, at a slashing gallop. Just outside their trail appeared the marks of a galloping horse. A few rods farther along Keith came to a

confused blur of pony tracks sweeping in from the east, and the whole story of the chase was revealed as though he had witnessed it with his own eyes. They must have been crazy, or else impelled by some grave necessity, to venture along this trail in so small a party. And they were travelling west—west! Keith drew a deep breath, and swore to himself, “Of all the blame fools!”

He perceived the picture in all its grewsome details—the two mule-drawn wagons moving slowly along the trail in the early morning; the band of hostile Indians suddenly swooping out from some obscure hiding place in the bluffs; the discovery of their presence; the desperate effort at escape; the swerving from the open trail in vain hope of reaching the river and finding protection underneath its banks; the frightened mules galloping wildly, lashed into frenzy by the man on horseback; the pounding of the ponies' hoofs, punctuated by the exultant yells of the pursuers. Again he swore:

“Of all the blame fools!”

Chapter II. The Scene of Tragedy

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Whatever might be the nature of the tragedy it would be over with long before this, and those moving black spots away yonder to the west, that he had discerned from the bluff, were undoubtedly the departing raiders. There was nothing left for Keith to do except determine the fate of the unfortunates, and give their bodies decent burial. That any had escaped, or yet lived, was altogether unlikely, unless, perchance, women had been in the party, in which case they would have been borne away prisoners.

Confident that no hostiles would be left behind to observe his movements, Keith pressed steadily forward, leading his horse. He had thus traversed fully half a mile before coming upon any evidence of a fight—here the pursuers had apparently come up with the wagons, and circled out upon either side. From their ponies' tracks there must have been a dozen in the band. Perhaps a hundred yards further along lay two dead ponies. Keith examined them closely—both had been ridden with saddles, the marks of the cinches plainly visible. Evidently one of the wagon mules had also dropped in the traces here, and had been dragged along by his mates. Just beyond came a sudden depression in the prairie down which the wagons had plunged so heavily as to break one of the axles; the wheel lay a few yards away, and, somewhat to the right, there lay the wreck of the wagon itself, two dead mules still in the traces, the vehicle stripped of contents and charred by fire.

A hundred feet farther along was the other wagon, its tongue broken, the canvas top ripped open, while between the two were scattered odds and ends of wearing apparel and provisions, with a pile of boxes smoking grimly. The remaining mules were gone, and no semblance of life remained anywhere. Keith dropped his reins over his horse's head, and, with Winchester cocked and ready, advanced cautiously.

Death from violence had long since become almost a commonplace occurrence to Keith, yet now he shrank for an instant as his eyes perceived the figure of a man lying motionless across the broken wagon tongue. The grizzled hair and beard were streaked with blood, the face almost unrecognizable, while the hands yet grasped a bent and shattered rifle. Evidently the man had died fighting, beaten down by overwhelming numbers after expending his last shot. Then those fiends had scalped and left him where he fell. Fifty feet beyond, shot in the back, lay a younger man, doubled up in a heap, also scalped and dead. That was all; Keith scouted over a wide circle, even scanning the stretch of gravel under the river bank, before he could fully satisfy himself there were no others in the party. It seemed impossible that these two travelling alone would have ventured upon such a trip in the face of known Indian hostility. Yet they must have done so, and once again his lips muttered:

“Of all the blame fools!”

Suddenly he halted, staring about over the prairie, obsessed by a new thought, an aroused suspicion. There had appeared merely the hoof-prints of the one horse

alongside of the fleeing wagons when they first turned out from the trail, and that horse had been newly shod. But there were two dead ponies lying back yonder; neither shod, yet both had borne saddles. More than this, they had been spurred, the blood marks still plainly visible, and one of them was branded; he remembered it now, a star and arrow. What could all this portend? Was it possible this attack was no Indian affair after all? Was the disfiguring of bodies, the scalping, merely done to make it appear the act of savages? Driven to investigation by this suspicion, he passed again over the trampled ground, marking this time every separate indentation, every faintest imprint of hoof or foot. There was no impression of a moccasin anywhere; every mark remaining was of booted feet. The inference was sufficiently plain—this had been the deed of white men, not of red; foul murder, and not savage war.

The knowledge seemed to seer Keith's brain with fire, and he sprang to his feet, hands clinched and eyes blazing. He could have believed this of Indians, it was according to their nature, their method of warfare; but the cowardliness of it, the atrocity of the act, as perpetrated by men of his own race, instantly aroused within him a desire for vengeance. He wanted to run the fellows down, to discover their identity. Without thinking of personal danger, he ran forward on their trail, which led directly westward, along the line of cottonwoods. These served to conceal his own movements, yet for the moment, burning with passion, he was utterly without caution, without slightest sense of peril. He must know who was guilty of such a crime; he felt capable of killing them even as he would venomous snakes.

It was a perfectly plain trail to follow, for the fugitives, apparently convinced of safety, and confident their cowardly deed would be charged to Indian raiders, had made no particular effort at concealment, but had ridden away at a gallop, their horses' hoofs digging deeply into the soft turf. On this retreat they had followed closely along the river bank, aiming for the ford, and almost before he realized it Keith was himself at the water's edge where the trail abruptly ended, staring vaguely across toward the opposite shore. Even as he stood there, realizing the futility of further pursuit amid the maze of sand dunes opposite, the sharp reports of two rifles reached him, spurts of smoke rose from the farther bank, and a bullet chugged into the ground at his feet, while another sang shrilly overhead.

These shots, although neither came sufficiently near to be alarming, served to send Keith to cover. Cool-headed and alert now, his first mad rage dissipated, he scanned the opposite bank cautiously, but could nowhere discover any evidence of life. Little by little he comprehended the situation, and decided upon his own action. The fugitives were aware of his presence, and would prevent his crossing the stream, yet they were not at all liable to return to this side and thus reveal their identity. To attempt any further advance would be madness, but he felt perfectly secure from molestation so long as he remained quietly on the north shore. Those shots were merely a warning to keep back; the very fact that the men firing kept concealed was proof positive that they simply wished to be left alone. They were not afraid of what he knew now, only desirous of not being seen. Confident as to this, he retreated openly,

without making the slightest effort to conceal his movements, until he had regained the scene of murder. In evidence of the truth of his theory no further shots were fired, and although he watched that opposite sand bank carefully, not the slightest movement revealed the presence of others. That every motion he made was being observed by keen eyes he had no doubt, but this knowledge did not disconcert him, now that he felt convinced fear of revealment would keep his watchers at a safe distance. Whoever they might be they were evidently more anxious to escape discovery than he was fearful of attack, and possessed no desire to take his life, unless it became necessary to prevent recognition. They still had every reason to believe their attack on the wagons would be credited to hostile Indians, and would consider it far safer to remain concealed, and thus harbor this supposition. They could not suspect that Keith had already stumbled upon the truth, and was determined to verify it.

Secure in this conception of the situation, yet still keeping a wary eye about to guard against any treachery, the plainsman, discovering a spade in the nearest wagon, hastily dug a hole in the sand, wrapped the dead bodies in blankets, and deposited them therein, piling above the mound the charred remains of boxes as some slight protection against prowling wolves. He searched the clothing of the men, but found little to reward the effort, a few letters which were slipped into his pockets to be read later, some ordinary trinkets hardly worth preserving except that they might assist in identifying the victims, and, about the neck of the elder man, a rather peculiar locket,

containing a portrait painted on ivory. Keith was a long time opening this, the spring being very ingeniously concealed, but upon finally succeeding, he looked upon the features of a woman of middle age, a strong mature face of marked refinement, exceedingly attractive still, with smiling dark eyes, and a perfect wealth of reddish brown hair. He held the locket open in his hands for several minutes, wondering who she could be, and what possible connection she could have held with the dead. Something about that face smiling up into his own held peculiar fascination for him, gripping him with a strange feeling of familiarity, touching some dim memory which failed to respond. Surely he had never seen the original, for she was not one to be easily forgotten, and yet eyes, hair, expression, combined to remind him of some one whom he had seen but could not bring definitely to mind. There were no names on the locket, no marks of identification of any kind, yet realizing the sacredness of it, Keith slipped the fragile gold chain about his neck, and securely hid the trinket beneath his shirt.

It was noon by this time, the sun high overhead, and his horse, with dangling rein, still nibbling daintily at the short grass. There was no reason for his lingering longer. He swept his gaze the length and breadth of the desolate valley, and across the river over the sand hills. All alike appeared deserted, not a moving thing being visible between the bluffs and the stream. Still he had the unpleasant feeling of being watched, and it made him restless and eager to be away. The earlier gust of anger, the spirit of revenge, had left him, but it had merely changed into a dogged resolution to discover the perpetrators of this

outrage and bring them to justice for the crime. The face in the locket seemed to ask it of him, and his nature urged response. But he could hope to accomplish nothing more here, and the plainsman swung himself into the saddle. He turned his horse's head eastward, and rode away. From the deeply rutted trail he looked back to where the fire still smoked in the midst of that desolate silence.

Chapter III. An Arrest

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The Santa Fé trail was far too exposed to be safely travelled alone and in broad daylight, but Keith considered it better to put sufficient space between himself and those whom he felt confident were still watching his movements from across the river. How much they might already suspicion his discoveries he possessed no means of knowing, yet, conscious of their own guilt, they might easily feel safer if he were also put out of the way. He had no anticipation of open attack, but must guard against treachery. As he rode, his eyes never left those far-away sand dunes, although he perceived no movement, no black dot even which he could conceive to be a possible enemy. Now that he possessed ample time for thought, the situation became more puzzling. This tragedy which he had accidentally stumbled upon must have had a cause other than blind chance. It was the culmination of a plot, with some reason behind more important than ordinary robbery. Apparently the wagons contained nothing of value, merely the clothing, provisions, and ordinary utensils of an emigrant party. Nor had the victims' pockets been carefully searched. Only the mules had been taken by the raiders, and they would be small booty for such a crime.

The trail, continually skirting the high bluff and bearing farther away from the river, turned sharply into a narrow ravine. There was a considerable break in the rocky barrier here, leading back for perhaps a hundred yards, and the

plainsman turned his horse that way, dismounting when out of sight among the bowlders. He could rest here until night with little danger of discovery. He lay down on the rocks, pillowing his head on the saddle, but his brain was too active to permit sleeping. Finally he drew the letters from out his pocket, and began examining them. They yielded very little information, those taken from the older man having no envelopes to show to whom they had been addressed. The single document found in the pocket of the other was a memorandum of account at the Pioneer Store at Topeka, charged to John Sibley, and marked paid. This then must have been the younger man's name, as the letters to the other began occasionally “Dear Will.” They were missives such as a wife might write to a husband long absent, yet upon a mission of deep interest to both. Keith could not fully determine what this mission might be, as the persons evidently understood each other so thoroughly that mere allusion took the place of detail. Twice the name Phyllis was mentioned, and once a “Fred” was also referred to, but in neither instance clearly enough to reveal the relationship, although the latter appeared to be pleaded for. Certain references caused the belief that these letters had been mailed from some small Missouri town, but no name was mentioned. They were invariably signed “Mary.” The only other paper Keith discovered was a brief itinerary of the Santa Fé trail extending as far west as the Raton Mountains, giving the usual camping spots and places where water was accessible. He slipped the papers back into his pocket with a distinct feeling of disappointment, and lay back staring up

at the little strip of blue sky. The silence was profound, even his horse standing motionless, and finally he fell asleep.

The sun had disappeared, and even the gray of twilight was fading out of the sky, when Keith returned again to consciousness, aroused by his horse rolling on the soft turf. He awoke thoroughly refreshed, and eager to get away on his long night's ride. A cold lunch, hastily eaten, for a fire would have been dangerous, and he saddled up and was off, trotting out of the narrow ravine and into the broad trail, which could be followed without difficulty under the dull gleam of the stars. Horse and rider were soon at their best, the animal swinging unurged into the long, easy lope of prairie travel, the fresh air fanning the man's face as he leaned forward. Once they halted to drink from a narrow stream, and then pushed on, hour after hour, through the deserted night. Keith had little fear of Indian raiders in that darkness, and every stride of his horse brought him closer to the settlements and further removed from danger. Yet eyes and ears were alert to every shadow and sound. Once, it must have been after midnight, he drew his pony sharply back into a rock shadow at the noise of something approaching from the east. The stage to Santa Fé rattled past, the four mules trotting swiftly, a squad of troopers riding hard behind. It was merely a lumping shadow sweeping swiftly past; he could perceive the dim outlines of driver and guard, the soldiers swaying in their saddles, heard the pounding of hoofs, the creak of axles, and then the apparition disappeared into the black void. He had not called out—what was the use? Those people would never pause to hunt down prairie outlaws, and their guard was

sufficient to prevent attack. They acknowledged but one duty—to get the mail through on time.

The dust of their passing still in the air, Keith rode on, the noise dying away in his rear. As the hours passed, his horse wearied and had to be spurred into the swifter stride, but the man seemed tireless. The sun was an hour high when they climbed the long hill, and loped into Carson City. The cantonment was to the right, but Keith, having no report to make, rode directly ahead down the one long street to a livery corral, leaving his horse there, and sought the nearest restaurant.

Exhausted by a night of high play and deep drinking the border town was sleeping off its debauch, saloons and gambling dens silent, the streets almost deserted. To Keith, whose former acquaintance with the place had been entirely after nightfall, the view of it now was almost a shock—the miserable shacks, the gaudy saloon fronts, the littered streets, the dingy, unpainted hotel, the dirty flap of canvas, the unoccupied road, the dull prairie sweeping away to the horizon, all composed a hideous picture beneath the sun glare. He could scarcely find a man to attend his horse, and at the restaurant a drowsy Chinaman had to be shaken awake, and frightened into serving him. He sat down to the miserable meal oppressed with disgust—never before had his life seemed so mean, useless, utterly without excuse.

He possessed the appetite of the open, of the normal man in perfect physical health, and he ate heartily his eyes wandering out of the open window down the long, dismal street. A drunken man lay in front of the “Red Light” Saloon sleeping undisturbed; two cur dogs were snarling at each

other just beyond over a bone; a movers' wagon was slowly coming in across the open through a cloud of yellow dust. That was all within the radius of vision. For the first time in years the East called him—the old life of cleanliness and respectability. He swore to himself as he tossed the Chinaman pay for his breakfast, and strode out onto the steps. Two men were coming up the street together from the opposite direction—one lean, dark-skinned, with black goatee, the other heavily set with closely trimmed gray beard. Keith knew the latter, and waited, leaning against the door, one hand on his hip.

“Hullo, Bob,” he said genially; “they must have routed you out pretty early to-day.”

“They shore did, Jack,” was the response. He came up the steps somewhat heavily, his companion stopping below. “The boys raise hell all night, an' then come ter me ter straighten it out in the mawnin'. When did ye git in?”

“An hour ago; had to wake the 'chink' up to get any chuck. Town looks dead.”

“Tain't over lively at this time o' day,” permitting his blue eyes to wander up the silent street, but instantly bringing them back to Keith's face, “but I reckon it'll wake up later on.”

He stood squarely on both feet, and one hand rested on the butt of a revolver. Keith noticed this, wondering vaguely.

“I reckon yer know, Jack, as how I ginerally git what I goes after,” said the slow, drawling voice, “an' that I draw 'bout as quick as any o' the boys. They tell me yo're a gun-fighter, but it won't do ye no good ter make a play yere, fer one o' us is sure to git yer—do yer sabe?”

“Get me?” Keith's voice and face expressed astonishment, but not a muscle of his body moved. “What do you mean, Bob—are you fellows after me?”

“Sure thing; got the warrant here,” and he tapped the breast of his shirt with his left hand.

The color mounted into the cheeks of the other, his lips grew set and white, and his gray eyes darkened.

“Let it all out, Marshal,” he said sternly, “you've got me roped and tied. Now what's the charge?”

Neither man moved, but the one below swung about so as to face them, one hand thrust out of sight beneath the tail of his long coat.

“Make him throw up his hands, Bob,” he said sharply.

“Oh, I reckon thar ain't goin' ter be no trouble,” returned the marshal genially, yet with no relaxation of attention. “Keith knows me, an' expects a fair deal. Still, maybe I better ask yer to unhitch yer belt, Jack.”

A moment Keith seemed to hesitate, plainly puzzled by the situation and endeavoring to see some way of escape; then his lips smiled, and he silently unhooked the belt, handing it over.

“Sure, I know you're square, Hicks,” he said, coolly. “And now I've unlimbered, kindly inform me what this is all about.”

“I reckon yer don't know.”

“No more than an unborn babe. I have been here but an hour.”

“That's it: if yer had been longer thar wouldn't be no trouble. Yo're wanted for killin' a couple o' men out at Cimmaron Crossin' early yesterday mornin'.”

Keith stared at him too completely astounded for the instant to even speak. Then he gasped.

“For God's sake, Hicks, do you believe that?”

“I'm damned if I know,” returned the marshal, doubtfully. “Don't seem like ye'd do it, but the evidence is straight 'nough, an' thar ain't nothin' fer me ter do but take ye in. I ain't no jedge an' jury.”

“No, but you ought to have ordinary sense, an' you've known me for three years.”

“Sure I have, Jack, but if yer've gone wrong, you won't be the first good man I've seen do it. Anyhow, the evidence is dead agin you, an' I'd arrest my own grand-dad if they give me a warrant agin him.”

“What evidence is there?”

“Five men swear they saw ye haulin' the bodies about, and lootin' the pockets.”

Then Keith understood, his heart beating rapidly, his teeth clenched to keep back an outburst of passion. So that was their game, was it?—some act of his had awakened the cowardly suspicions of those watching him across the river. They were afraid that he knew them as white men. And they had found a way to safely muzzle him. They must have ridden hard over those sand dunes to have reached Carson City and sworn out this warrant. It was a good trick, likely enough to hang him, if the fellows only stuck to their story. All this flashed through his brain, yet somehow he could not clearly comprehend the full meaning, his mind confused and dazed by this sudden realization of danger. His eyes wandered from the steady gaze of the marshal, who had half drawn his gun fearing resistance, to the man at the

bottom of the steps. Suddenly it dawned upon him where he had seen that dark-skinned face, with the black goatee, before—at the faro table of the “Red Light.” He gripped his hands together, instantly connecting that sneering, sinister face with the plot.

“Who swore out that warrant?”

“I did, if you need to know,” a sarcastic smile revealing a gleam of white teeth, “on the affidavit of others, friends of mine.”

“Who are you?”

“I'm mostly called 'Black Bart.'”

That was it; he had the name now—“Black Bart.” He straightened up so quickly, his eyes blazing, that the marshal jerked his gun clear.

“See here, Jack,” shortly, “are yer goin' to raise a row, or come along quiet?”

As though the words had aroused him from a bad dream, Keith turned to front the stern, bearded face.

“There'll be no row, Bob,” he said, quietly. “I'll go with you.”