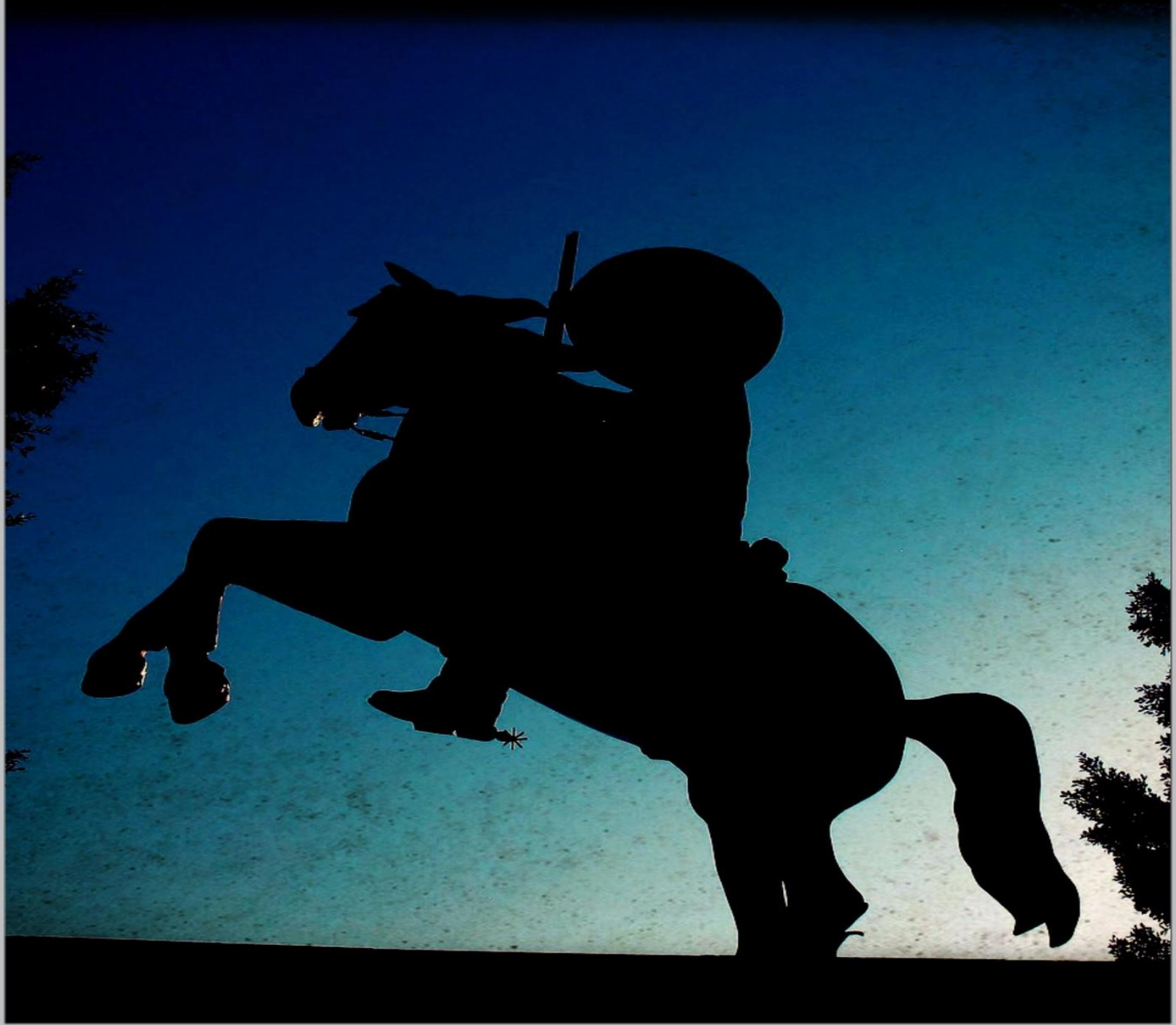
The Night Horseman

Max Brand



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1. THE SCHOLAR

At the age of six Randall Byrne could name and bound every state in the Union and give the date of its admission; at nine he was conversant with Homeric Greek and Caesar; at twelve he read Aristophanes with perfect understanding of the allusions of the day and divided his leisure between Ovid and Horace; at fifteen, wearied by the simplicity of Old English and Thirteenth Century Italian, he dipped into the history of Philosophy and passed from that, naturally, into calculus and the higher mathematics; at eighteen he took an A.B. from Harvard and while idling away a pleasant summer with Hebrew and Sanskrit, he delved lightly into biology and its kindred sciences, having reached the conclusion that Truth is greater than Goodness or Beauty, because it comprises both, and the whole is greater than any of its parts; at twenty-one he pocketed his Ph.D. and was touched with the fever of his first practical enthusiasm —surgery. At twenty-four he was an M.D. and a distinguished diagnostician, though he preferred work in his laboratory in his endeavor to resolve the elements into simpler forms; also he published at this time a work on anthropology whose circulation was limited to two hundred copies, and he received in return two hundred letters of congratulation from great men who had tried to read his book; at twenty-seven he collapsed one fine spring day on the floor of his laboratory. That afternoon he was carried into the presence of a great physician who was also a very vulgar man. The great physician felt his pulse and looked into his dim eyes.

"You have a hundred and twenty horsepower brain and a runabout body," said the great physician.

"I have come," answered Randall Byrne faintly, "for the solution of a problem, not for the statement thereof."

"I'm not through," said the great physician. "Among other things you are a damned fool."
Randall Byrne here rubbed his eyes.
"What steps do you suggest that I consider?" he queried.
The great physician spat noisily.
"Marry a farmer's daughter," he said brutally.
"But," said Randall Byrne vaguely.
"I am a busy man and you've wasted ten minutes of my time," said the great physician, turning back to his plate glass window. "My secretary will send you a bill for one thousand dollars. Good-day."
And therefore, ten days later, Randall Byrne sat in his room in the hotel at Elkhead.
He had just written (to his friend Swinnerton Loughburne, M.A., Ph.D., L.L.D.):
"Incontrovertibly the introduction of the personal equation leads to lamentable inversions, and the perceptive faculties when contemplating phenomena through the lens of ego too often conceive an accidental connotation or manifest distortion to be actuality, for the physical (or personal) too often beclouds that power of inner vision which so unerringly penetrates to the inherent truths of incorporeity and the extramundane. Yet this problem, to your eyes, I fear, not essentially novel or peculiarly involute, holds for my contemplative faculties an extraordinary fascination, to wit: wherein does the mind, in itself a muscle, escape from the laws of the physical, and wherein and wherefore do the laws of the physical exercise so inexorable a jurisdiction over the processes of the mind, so that a disorder of the visual nerve actually distorts the asomatous and veils the pneumatoscopic?

"Your pardon, dear Loughburne, for these lapses from the general to the particular, but in a lighter moment of idleness, I pray you give some careless thought to a problem now painfully my own, though rooted inevitably so

deeply in the dirt of the commonplace.

"But you have asked me in letter of recent date for the particular physical aspects of my present environment, and though (as you so well know) it is my conviction that the physical fact is not and only the immaterial is, yet I shall gladly look about me—a thing I have not yet seen occasion to do—and describe to you the details of my present condition."

Accordingly, at this point Randall Byrne removed from his nose his thick glasses and holding them poised he stared through the window at the view without. He had quite changed his appearance by removing the spectacles, for the owlish touch was gone and he seemed at a stroke ten years younger. It was such a face as one is glad to examine in detail, lean, pale, the transparent skin stretched tightly over cheekbones, nose, and chin. That chin was built on good fighting lines, though somewhat over-delicate in substance and the mouth quite colourless, but oddly enough the upper lip had that habitual appearance of stiff compression which is characteristic of highly strung temperaments; it is a noticeable feature of nearly every great actor, for instance. The nose was straight and very thin and in a strong sidelight a tracery of the red blood showed through at the nostrils. The eyes were deeply buried and the lower lids bruised with purple—weak eyes that blinked at a change of light or a sudden thought—distant eyes which missed the design of wall paper and saw the trees growing on the mountains. The forehead was Byrne's most noticeable feature, pyramidal, swelling largely towards the top and divided in the centre into two distinct lobes by a single marked furrow which gave his expression a hint of the wistful. Looking at that forehead one was strangely conscious of the brain beneath. There seemed no bony structure; the mind, undefended, was growing and pushing the confining walls further out.

And the fragility which the head suggested the body confirmed, for he was not framed to labor. The burden of the noble head had bowed the slender throat and crooked the shoulders, and when he moved his arm it seemed the arm of a skeleton too loosely clad. There was a differing connotation in the hands, to be sure. They were thin—bones and sinews chiefly, with the violet of the veins showing along the backs; but they were active hands without tremor—hands ideal for the accurate scalpel, where a fractional error means death to the helpless.
After a moment of staring through the window the scholar wrote again: "The major portion of Elkhead lies within plain sight of my window. I see a general merchandise store, twenty-seven buildings of a comparatively major and eleven of a minor significance, and five saloons. The streets—"
The streets, however, were not described at that sitting, for at this juncture a heavy hand knocked and the door of Randall Byrne's room was flung open by Hank Dwight, proprietor of Elkhead's saloon—a versatile man, expert behind the bar or in a blacksmith shop.
"Doc," said Hank Dwight, "you're wanted." Randall Byrne placed his spectacles more firmly on his nose to consider his host.
"What—" he began, but Hank Dwight had already turned on his heel.
"Her name is Kate Cumberland. A little speed, doc. She's in a hurry."
"If no other physician is available," protested Byrne, following slowly down the stairs, "I suppose I must see her."
"If they was another within ten miles, d'you s'pose I'd call on you?" asked Hank Dwight.
So saying, he led the way out onto the veranda, where the doctor was aware of a girl in a short riding skirt who stood with one gloved hand on her hip while the other slapped a quirt idly against her riding boots.

2. WORDS AND BULLETS

"Here's a gent that calls himself a doc," said Hank Dwight by way of an introduction. "If you can use him, Miss Cumberland, fly to it!"
And he left them alone.
Now the sun lay directly behind Kate Cumberland and in order to look at her closely the doctor had to shade his weak eyes and pucker his brows; for from beneath her wide sombrero there rolled a cloud of golden hair as bright as the sunshine itself—a sad strain upon the visual nerve of Doctor Randall Byrne. He repeated her name, bowed, and when he straightened, blinked again. As if she appreciated that strain upon his eyes she stepped closer, and entered the shadow.
"Doctor Hardin is not in town," she said, "and I have to bring a physician out to the ranch at once; my father is critically ill."
Randall Byrne rubbed his lean chin.
"I am not practicing at present," he said reluctantly. Then he saw that she was watching him closely, weighing him with her eyes, and it came to the mind of Randall Byrne that he was not a large man and might not incline the scale far from the horizontal.
"I am hardly equipped—" began Byrne.
"You will not need equipment," she interrupted. "His trouble lies in his nerves and the state of his mind."
A slight gleam lighted the eyes of the doctor.
"Ah," he murmured. "The mind?"
"Yes."
He rubbed his bloodless hands slowly together, and when he spoke his voice was sharp and quick and wholly impersonal. "Tell me the symptoms!"
"Can't we talk those over on the way to the ranch? Even if

we start now it will be dark before we arrive."
"But," protested the doctor, "I have not yet decided—this precipitancy—"
"Oh," she said, and flushed. He perceived that she was on the verge of turning away, but something withheld her.
"There is no other physician within reach; my father is very ill. I only ask that you come as a diagnostician, doctor!"
"But a ride to your ranch," he said miserably. "I presume you refer to riding a horse?"
"Naturally."
"I am unfamiliar with that means of locomotion," said the doctor with serious eyes, "and in fact have not carried my acquaintance with the equine species beyond a purely experimental stage. Anatomically I have a superficial knowledge, but on the one occasion on which I sat in a saddle I observed that the docility of the horse is probably a poetic fallacy."
He rubbed his left shoulder thoughtfully and saw a slight tremor at the corners of the girl's mouth. It caused his vision to clear and concentrate; he found that the lips were, in fact, in the very act of smiling. The face of the doctor brightened.
"You shall ride my own horse," said the girl. "She is perfectly gentle and has a very easy gait. I'm sure you'll have not the slightest trouble with her."
"And you?"
"I'll find something about town; it doesn't matter what."
"This," said the doctor, "is most remarkable. You choose your mounts at random?"
"But you will go?" she insisted.
"Ah, yes, the trip to the ranch!" groaned the doctor. "Let me see: the physical obstacles to such a trip while many are not altogether insuperable, I may say; in the meantime the moral urge which compels me towards the ranch seems to be of the first order." He sighed. "Is it not strange, Miss Cumberland, that man, though distinguished from the

lower orders by mind, so often is controlled in his actions by ethical impulses which override the considerations of reason? An observation which leads us towards the conclusion that the passion for goodness is a principle hardly secondary to the passion for truth. Understand that I build the hypothesis only tentatively, with many reservations, among which—"

He broke off short. The smile was growing upon her lips.

"I will put together a few of my things," said the doctor, "and come down to you at once."

"Good!" said the girl, "I'll be waiting for you with two horses before you are ready."

He turned away, but had taken hardly a step before he turned, saying: "But why are you so sure that you will be ready before I—" but she was already down the steps from the veranda and stepping briskly down the street.

"There is an element of the unexplainable in woman," said the doctor, and resumed his way to his room. Once there, something prompted him to act with the greatest possible speed. He tossed his toilet articles and a few changes of linen into a small, flexible valise and ran down the stairs. He reached the veranda again, panting, and the girl was not in sight; a smile of triumph appeared on the grave, colourless lips of the doctor. "Feminine instinct, however, is not infallible," he observed to himself, and to one of the cowboys, lounging loosely in a chair nearby, he continued his train of thoughts aloud: "Though the verity of the feminine intuition has already been thrown in a shade of doubt by many thinkers, as you will undoubtedly agree."

The man thus addressed allowed his lower jaw to drop but after a moment he ejaculated: "Now what in hell d'you mean by that?"

The doctor already turned away, intent upon his thoughts, but he now paused and again faced the cowboy. He said, frowning: "There is unnecessary violence in your remark, sir."

"Duck your glasses," said the worthy in question. "You ain't talkin' to a book, you're talking to a man."
"And in your attitude," went on the doctor, "there is an element of offense which if carried farther might be corrected by physical violence."
"I don't foller your words," said the cattleman, "but from the drift of your tune I gather you're a bit peeved; and if you are—"
His voice had risen to a ringing note as he proceeded and he now slipped from his chair and faced Randall Byrne, a big man, brown, hard-handed. The doctor crimsoned.
"Well?" he echoed, but in place of a deep ring his words were pitched in a high squeak of defiance.
He saw a large hand contract to a fist, but almost instantly the big man grinned, and his eyes went past Byrne.
"Oh, hell!" he grunted, and turned his back with a chuckle.
For an instant there was a mad impulse in the doctor to spring at this fellow but a wave of impotence overwhelmed him. He knew that he was white around the mouth, and there was a dryness in his throat.
"The excitement of imminent physical contest and personal danger," he diagnosed swiftly, "causing acceleration of the pulse and attendant weakness of the body—a state unworthy of the balanced intellect."
Having brought back his poise by this quick interposition of reason, he went his way down the long veranda. Against a pillar leaned another tall cattleman, also brown and lean and hard.
"May I inquire," he said, "if you have any information direct or casual concerning a family named Cumberland which possesses ranch property in this vicinity?"
"You may," said the cowpuncher, and continued to roll his cigarette.
"Well," said the doctor, "do you know anything about them?"
"Sure," said the other, and having finished his cigarette he

introduced it between his lips. It seemed to occur to him instantly, however, that he was committing an inhospitable breach, for he produced his Durham and brown papers with a start and extended them towards the doctor.
"Smoke?" he asked.
"I use tobacco in no form," said the doctor.
The cowboy stared with such fixity that the match burned down to his fingertips and singed them before he had lighted his cigarette.
"'S that a fact?" he queried when his astonishment found utterance. "What d'you do to kill time? Well, I been thinking about knocking off the stuff for a while. Mame gets sore at me for having my fingers all stained up with nicotine like this."
He extended his hand, the first and second fingers of which were painted a bright yellow.
"Soap won't take it off," he remarked.
"A popular but inexcusable error," said the doctor. "It is the tarry by-products of tobacco which cause that stain. Nicotine itself, of course, is a volatile alkaloid base of which there is only the merest trace in tobacco. It is one of the deadliest of nerve poisons and is quite colourless. There is enough of that stain upon your fingers—if it were nicotine—to kill a dozen men."
"The hell you say!"
"Nevertheless, it is an indubitable fact. A lump of nicotine the size of the head of a pin placed on the tongue of a horse will kill the beast instantly."
The cowpuncher pushed back his hat and scratched his head.
"This is worth knowin'," he said, "but I'm some glad that Mame ain't heard it."
"Concerning the Cumberlands," said the doctor, "I—"
"Concerning the Cumberlands," repeated the cattleman, "it's best to leave 'em to their own concerns." And he started to turn away, but the thirst for knowledge was dry

in the throat of the doctor.
"Do I understand," he insisted, "that there is some mystery connected with them?"
"From me," replied the other, "you understand nothin'."
And he lumbered down the steps and away.
Be it understood that there was nothing of the gossip in Randall Byrne, but now he was pardonably excited and perceiving the tall form of Hank Dwight in the doorway he approached his host.
"Mr. Dwight," he said, "I am about to go to the Cumberland ranch. I gather that there is something of an unusual nature concerning them."
"There is," admitted Hank Dwight.
"Can you tell me what it is?"
"I can."
"Good!" said the doctor, and he almost smiled. "It is always well to know the background of a case which has to do with mental states. Now, just what do you know?"
"I know—" began the proprietor, and then paused and eyed his guest dubiously. "I know," he continued, "a story."
"Yes?"
"Yes, about a man and a hoss and a dog."
"The approach seems not quite obvious, but I shall be glad to hear it."
There was a pause.
"Words," said the host, at length, "is worse'n bullets. You never know what they'll hit."
"But the story?" persisted Randall Byrne.
"That story," said Hank Dwight, "I may tell to my son before I die."
"This sounds quite promising."
"But I'll tell nobody else."
"Really!"
"It's about a man and a hoss and a dog. The man ain't possible, the hoss ain't possible, the dog is a wolf."
He paused again and glowered on the doctor. He seemed to

be drawn two ways, by his eagerness to tell a yarn and his dread of consequences.
"I know," he muttered, "because I've seen 'em all. I've seen"—he looked far, as though striking a silent bargain with himself concerning the sum of the story which might safely be told—"I've seen a hoss that understood a man's talk like you and me does—or better. I've heard a man whistle like a singing bird. Yep, that ain't no lie. You jest imagine a bald eagle that could lick anything between the earth and the sky and was able to sing—that's what that whistlin' was like. It made you glad to hear it, and it made you look to see if your gun was in good workin' shape. It wasn't very loud, but it travelled pretty far, like it was comin' from up above you."
"That's the way this strange man of the story whistles?" asked Byrne, leaning closer.
"Man of the story?" echoed the proprietor, with some warmth. "Friend, if he ain't real, then I'm a ghost. And they's them in Elkhead that's got the scars of his comin' and goin'."
"Ah, an outlaw? A gunfighter?" queried the doctor.
"Listen to me, son," observed the host, and to make his point he tapped the hollow chest of Byrne with a rigid forefinger, "around these parts you know jest as much as you see, and lots of times you don't even know that much. What you see is sometimes your business, but mostly it ain't." He concluded impressively: "Words is worse'n bullets!"
"Well," mused Byrne, "I can ask the girl these questions. It will be medically necessary."
"Ask the girl? Ask her?" echoed the host with a sort of horror. But he ended with a forced restraint:
"That's your business."

3. THE DOCTOR RIDES

Hank Dwight disappeared from the doorway and the doctor was called from his pondering by the voice of the girl. There was something about that voice which worried Byrne, for it was low and controlled and musical and it did not fit with the nasal harshness of the cattlemen. When she began to speak it was like the beginning of a song. He turned now and found her sitting a tall bay horse, and she led a red-roan mare beside her. When he went out she tossed her reins over the head of her horse and strapped his valise behind her saddle.

"You won't have any trouble with that mare," she assured him, when the time came for mounting. Yet when he approached gingerly he was received with flattened ears and a snort of anger. "Wait," she cried, "the left side, not the right!"

He felt the laughter in her voice, but when he looked he could see no trace of it in her face. He approached from the left side, setting his teeth.

"You observe," he said, "that I take your word at its full value," and placing his foot in the stirrup, he dragged himself gingerly up to the saddle. The mare stood like a rock. Adjusting himself, he wiped a sudden perspiration from his forehead.

"I quite believe," he remarked, "that the animal is of unusual intelligence. All may yet be well!"

"I'm sure of it." said the girl gravely. "Now we're off."

And the horses broke into a dog trot. Now the gait of the red roan mare was a dream of softness, and her flexible ankles gave a play of whole inches to break the jar of every step, the sure sign of the good saddle-horse; but the horse has never been saddled whose trot is really a smooth pace. The hat of Doctor Byrne began to incline towards his right

eye and his spectacles towards his left ear. He felt a peculiar lightness in the stomach and heaviness in the heart.
"The t-t-t-trot," he ventured to his companion, "is a d-d-d-dam—"
"Dr. Byrne!" she cried.
"Whoa!" called Doctor Byrne, and drew mightily in upon the reins. The red mare stopped as a ball stops when it meets a stout wall; the doctor sprawled along her neck, clinging with arms and legs. He managed to clamber back into the saddle.
"There are vicious elements in the nature of this brute," he observed to the girl.
"I'm very sorry," she murmured. He cast a sidelong glance but found not the trace of a smile.
"The word upon which I—"
"Stopped?" she suggested.
"Stopped," he agreed, "was not, as you evidently assumed, an oath. On the contrary, I was merely remarking that the trot is a damaging gait, but through an interrupted—er—articulation—"
His eye dared her, but she was utterly grave. He perceived that there was, after all, a certain kinship between this woman of the mountain-desert and the man thereof. Their silences were filled with eloquence.
"We'll try a canter," she suggested, "and I think you'll find that easier."
So she gave the word, and her bay sprang into a lope from a standing start. The red mare did likewise, nearly flinging the doctor over the back of the saddle, but by the grace of God he clutched the pommel in time and was saved. The air caught at his face, they swept out of the town and onto a limitless level stretch.
"Sp-p-p-peed," gasped the doctor, "has never been a p-p-passion with me!"

He noted that she was not moving in the saddle. The horse was like the bottom of a wave swinging violently back and forth. She was the calm crest, swaying slightly and graciously with a motion as smooth as the flowing of water. And she spoke as evenly as if she were sitting in a rocking chair.

"You'll be used to it in a moment," she assured him.

He learned, indeed, that if one pressed the stirrups as the shoulders of the horse swung down and leaned a trifle forward when the shoulders rose again, the motion ceased to be jarring; for she was truly a matchless creature and gaited like one of those fabulous horses of old, sired by the swift western wind. In a little time a certain pride went beating through the veins of the doctor, the air blew more deeply into his lungs, there was a different tang to the wind and a different feel to the sun—a peculiar richness of yellow warmth. And the small head of the horse and the short, sharp, pricking ears tossed continually; and now and then the mare threw her head a bit to one side and glanced back at him with what he felt to be a reassuring air. Life and strength and speed were gripped between his knees—he flashed a glance at the girl.

But she rode with face straightforward and there was that about her which made him turn his eyes suddenly away and look far off. It was a jagged country, for in the brief rainy season there came sudden and terrific downpours which lashed away the soil and scoured the face of the underlying rock, and in a single day might cut a deep arroyo where before had been smooth plain. This was the season of grass, but not the dark, rank green of rich soil and mild air—it was a yellowish green, a colour at once tender and glowing. It spread everywhere across the plains about Elkhead, broken here and there by the projecting boulders which flashed in the sun. So a great battlefield might appear, pockmarked with shell-holes, and all the scars of war freshly cut upon its face. And in truth the mountain

desert was like an arena ready to stage a conflict—a titanic arena with space for earth-giants to struggle—and there in the distance were the spectator mountains. High, lean-flanked mountains they were, not clad in forests, but rather bristling with a stubby growth of the few trees which might endure in precarious soil and bitter weather, but now they gathered the dignity of distance about them. The grass of the foothills was a faint green mist about their feet, cloaks of exquisite blue hung around the upper masses, but their heads were naked to the pale skies. And all day long, with deliberate alteration, the garb of the mountains changed. When the sudden morning came they leaped naked upon the eye, and then withdrew, muffling themselves in browns and blues until at nightfall they covered themselves to the eyes in thickly sheeted purple—Tyrian purple—and prepared for sleep with their heads among the stars.

Something of all this came to Doctor Randall Byrne as he rode, for it seemed to him that there was a similarity between these mountains and the girl beside him. She held that keen purity of the upper slopes under the sun, and though she had no artifice or careful wiles to make her strange, there was about her a natural dignity like the mystery of distance. There was a rhythm, too, about that line of peaks against the sky, and the girl had caught it; he watched her sway with the gallop of her horse and felt that though she was so close at hand she was a thousand miles from him. She concealed nothing, and yet he could no more see her naked soul than he could tear the veils of shadow from the mountains. Not that the doctor phrased his emotions in words. He was only conscious of a sense of awe and the necessity of silence.

A strange feeling for the doctor! He came from the region of the mind where that which is not spoken does not exist, and now this girl was carrying him swiftly away from hypotheses, doubts, and polysyllabic speech into the world —of what? The spirit? The doctor did not know. He only felt

that he was about to step into the unknown, and it held for him the fascination of the suspended action of a statue. Let it not be thought that he calmly accepted the sheer necessity for silence. He fought against it, but no words came.

It was evening: the rolling hills about them were already dark; only the heads of the mountains took the day; and now they paused at the top of a rise and the girl pointed across the hollow. "There we are," she said. It was a tall clump of trees through which broke the outlines of a two-storied house larger than any the doctor had seen in the mountain-desert; and outside the trees lay long sheds, a great barn, and a wide-spread wilderness of corrals. It struck the doctor with its apparently limitless capacity for housing man and beast. Coming in contrast with the rock-strewn desolation of the plains, this was a great establishment; the doctor had ridden out with a waif of the desert and she had turned into a princess at a stroke. Then, for the first time since they left Elkhead, he remembered with a start that he was to care for a sick man in that house.

"You were to tell me," he said, "something about the sickness of your father—the background behind his condition. But we've both forgotten about it."

"I have been thinking how I could describe it, every moment of the ride," she answered. Then, as the gloom fell more thickly around them every moment, she swerved her horse over to the mare, as if it were necessary that she read the face of the doctor while she spoke.

"Six months ago," she said, "my father was robust and active in spite of his age. He was cheerful, busy, and optimistic. But he fell into a decline. It has not been a sudden sapping of his strength. If it were that I should not worry so much; I'd attribute it to disease. But every day something of vitality goes from him. He is fading almost from hour to hour, as slowly as the hour hand of a clock.

You can't notice the change, but every twelve hours the hand makes a complete revolution. It's as if his blood were evaporating and nothing we can do will supply him with fresh strength."
"Is this attended by irritability?"
"He is perfectly calm and seems to have no care for what becomes of him."
"Has he lost interest in the things which formerly attracted and occupied him?"
"Yes, he minds nothing now. He has no care for the condition of the cattle, or for profit or loss in the sales. He has simply stepped out of every employment."
"Ah, a gradual diminution of the faculties of attention."
"In a way, yes. But also he is more alive than he has ever been. He seems to hear with uncanny distinctness, for instance."
The doctor frowned.
"I was inclined to attribute his decline to the operation of old age," he remarked, "but this is unusual. This—er—inner acuteness is accompanied by no particular interest in any one thing?"
As she did not reply for the moment he was about to accept the silence for acquiescence, but then through the dimness he was arrested by the lustre of her eyes, fixed, apparently, far beyond him.
"One thing," she said at length. "Yes, there is one thing in which he retains an interest."
The doctor nodded brightly.
"Good!" he said. "And that—?"
The silence fell again, but this time he was more roused and he fixed his eyes keenly upon her through the gloom. She was deeply troubled; one hand gripped the horn of her saddle strongly; her lips had parted; she was like one who endures inescapable pain. He could not tell whether it was the slight breeze which disturbed her blouse or the rapid panting of her breath.

"Of that," she said, "it is hard to speak—it is useless to speak!"
"Surely not!" protested the doctor. "The cause, my dear madame, though perhaps apparently remote from the immediate issue, is of the utmost significance in diagnosis."
She broke in rapidly: "This is all I can tell you: he is waiting for something which will never come. He has missed something from his life which will never come back into it.
Then why should we discuss what it is that he has missed."
"To the critical mind," replied the doctor calmly, and he automatically adjusted his glasses closer to his eyes, "nothing is without significance."
"It is nearly dark!" she exclaimed hurriedly. "Let us ride on."
"First," he suggested, "I must tell you that before I left Elkhead I heard a hint of some remarkable story concerning a man and a horse and a dog. Is there anything —"
But it seemed that she did not hear. He heard a sharp, low exclamation which might have been addressed to her horse, and the next instant she was galloping swiftly down the slope. The doctor followed as fast as he could, jouncing in the saddle until he was quite out of breath.

4. THE CHAIN

They had hardly passed the front door of the house when they were met by a tall man with dark hair and dark, deep-set eyes. He was tanned to the bronze of an Indian, and he might have been termed handsome had not his features been so deeply cut and roughly finished. His black hair was quite long, and as the wind from the opened door stirred it, there was a touch of wildness about the fellow that made the heart of Randall Byrne jump. When this man saw the girl his face lighted, briefly; when his glance fell on Byrne the light went out.

"Couldn't get the doc, Kate?" he asked.

"Not Doctor Hardin," she answered, "and I've brought Doctor Byrne instead."

The tall man allowed his gaze to drift leisurely from head to foot of Randall Byrne.

Then: "H'ware you, doc?" he said, and extended a big hand.

It occurred to Byrne that all these men of the mountain-desert were big; there was something intensely irritating about their mere physical size; they threw him continually on the defensive and he found himself making apologies to himself and summing up personal merits. In this case there was more direct reason for his anger. It was patent that the man did not weight the strange doctor against any serious thoughts.

"And this," she was saying, "is Mr. Daniels. Buck, is there any change?"

"Nothin' much," answered Buck Daniels. "Come along towards evening and he said he was feeling kind of cold. So I wrapped him up in a rug. Then he sat some as usual, one hand inside of the other, looking steady at nothing. But a while ago he began getting sort of nervous."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. I just felt he was getting excited. The way you know when your hoss is going to shy."
"Do you want to go to your room first, doctor, or will you go in to see him now?"
"Now," decided the doctor, and followed her down the hall and through a door.
The room reminded the doctor more of a New England interior than of the mountain-desert. There was a round rag rug on the floor with every imaginable colour woven into its texture, but blended with a rude design, reds towards the centre and blue-greys towards the edges. There were chairs upholstered in green which looked mouse-coloured where the high lights struck along the backs and the arms —shallow-seated chairs that made one's knees project foolishly high and far. Byrne saw a cabinet at one end of the room, filled with sea-shells and knicknacks, and above it was a memorial cross surrounded by a wreath inside a glass case. Most of the wall space thronged with engravings whose subjects ranged from Niagara Falls to Lady Hamilton. One entire end of the room was occupied by a painting of a neck and neck finish in a race, and the artist had conceived the blooded racers as creatures with tremendous round hips and mighty-muscled shoulders, while the legs tapered to a faun-like delicacy. These animals were spread-eagled in the most amazing fashion, their fore-hoofs reaching beyond their noses and their rear hoofs striking out beyond the tips of the tails. The jockey in the lead sat quite still, but he who was losing had his whip drawn and looked like an automatic doll—so pink were his cheeks. Beside the course, in attitudes of graceful ease, stood men in very tight trousers and very high stocks and ladies in dresses which pinched in at the waist and flowed out at the shoulders. They leaned upon canes or twirled parasols and they had their backs turned upon the racetrack as if they found their own negligent conversation far more exciting than the breathless, driving finish.

Under the terrific action and still more terrific quiescence of this picture lay the sick man, propped high on a couch and wrapped to the chest in a Navajo blanket.

"Dad," said Kate Cumberland, "Doctor Hardin was not in town. I've brought out Doctor Byrne, a newcomer."

The invalid turned his white head slowly towards them, and his shaggy brows lifted and fell slightly—a passing shadow of annoyance. It was a very stern face, and framed in the long, white hair it seemed surrounded by an atmosphere of Arctic chill. He was thin, terribly thin—not the leanness of Byrne, but a grim emaciation which exaggerated the size of a tall forehead and made his eyes supernally bright. It was in the first glance of those eyes that Byrne recognized the restlessness of which Kate had spoken; and he felt almost as if it were an inner fire which had burned and still was wasting the body of Joseph Cumberland. To the attentions of the doctor the old man submitted with patient self-control, and Byrne found a pulse feeble, rapid, but steady. There was no temperature. In fact, the heat of the body was a trifle sub-normal, considering that the heart was beating so rapidly.

Doctor Byrne started. Most of his work had been in laboratories, and the horror of death was not yet familiar, but old Joseph Cumberland was dying. It was not a matter of moment. Death might be a week or a month away, but die soon he inevitably must; for the doctor saw that the fire was still raging in the hollow breast of the cattleman, but there was no longer fuel to feed it.

He stared again, and more closely. Fire without fuel to feed it!

Doctor Byrne gave what seemed to be an infinitely muffled cry of exultation, so faint that it was hardly a whisper; then he leaned closer and pored over Joe Cumberland with a lighted eye. One might have thought that the doctor was gloating over the sick man.

Suddenly he straightened and began to pace up and down the room, muttering to himself. Kate Cumberland listened intently and she thought that what the man muttered so rapidly, over and over to himself, was: "Eureka! Eureka! I have found it!"

Found what? The triumph of mind over matter!

On that couch was a dead body. The flutter of that heart was not the strong beating of the normal organ; the hands were cold; even the body was chilled; yet the man lived.

Or, rather, his brain lived, and compelled the shattered and outworn body to comply with its will. Doctor Byrne turned and stared again at the face of Cumberland. He felt as if he understood, now, the look which was concentrated so brightly on the vacant air. It was illumined by a steady and desperate defiance, for the old man was denying his body to the grave.

The scene changed for Randall Byrne. The girl disappeared. The walls of the room were broken away. The eyes of the world looked in upon him and the wise men of the world kept pace with him up and down the room, shaking their heads and saying: "It is not possible!"

But the fact lay there to contradict them.

Prometheus stole fire from heaven and paid it back to an eternal death. The old cattleman was refusing his payment. It was no state of coma in which he lay; it was no prolonged trance. He was vitally, vividly alive; he was concentrating with a bitter and exhausting vigour day and night, and fighting a battle the more terrible because it was fought in silence, a battle in which he could receive no aid, no reinforcement, a battle in which he could not win, but in which he might delay defeat.

Ay, the wise men would smile and shake their heads when he presented this case to their consideration, but he would make his account so accurate and particular and so well witnessed that they would have to admit the truth of all he said. And science, which proclaimed that matter was

indestructible and that the mind was matter and that the brain needed nourishment like any other muscle—science would have to hang the head and wonder!

The eyes of the girl brought him to halt in his pacing, and he stopped, confronting her. His excitement had transformed him. His nostrils were quivering, his eyes were pointed with light, his head was high, and he breathed fast. He was flushed as the Roman Conqueror. And his excitement tinged the girl, also, with colour.

She offered to take him to his room as soon as he wished to go. He was quite willing. He wanted to be alone, to think. But when he followed her she stopped him in the hall. Buck Daniels lumbered slowly after them in a clumsy attempt at sauntering.

"Well?" asked Kate Cumberland.

She had thrown a blue mantle over her shoulders when she entered the house, and the touch of boyish self-confidence which had been hers on the ride was gone. In its place there was something even more difficult for Randall Byrne to face. If there had been a garish brightness about her when he had first seen her, the brilliancy of a mirror playing in the sun against his feeble eyes, there was now a blending of pastel shades, for the hall was dimly illumined and the shadow tarnished her hair and her pallor was like cold stone; even her eyes were misted by fear. Yet a vital sense of her nearness swept upon Byrne, and he felt as if he were surrounded—by a danger.

"Opinions," said the doctor, "based on so summary an examination are necessarily inexact, yet the value of a first impression is not negligible. The best I can say is that there is probably no immediate danger, but Mr. Cumberland is seriously ill. Furthermore, it is not old age."

He would not say all he thought; it was not yet time.

She winced and clasped her hands tightly together. She was like a child about to be punished for a crime it has not

committed, and it came vaguely to the doctor that he might have broached his ill tidings more gently.
He added: "I must have further opportunities for observance before I give a detailed opinion and suggest a treatment."
Her glance wandered past him and at once the heavy step of Buck Daniels approached.
"At least," she murmured, "I am glad that you are frank. I don't want to have anything kept from me, please. Buck, will you take the doctor up to his room?" She managed a faint smile. "This is an old-fashioned house, Doctor Byrne, but I hope we can make you fairly comfortable. You'll ask for whatever you need?"
The doctor bowed, and was told that they would dine in half an hour, then the girl went back towards the room in which Joe Cumberland lay. She walked slowly, with her head bent, and her posture seemed to Byrne the very picture of a burden-bearer. Then he followed Daniels up the stairs, led by the jingling of the spurs, great-rowelled spurs that might grip the side of a refractory horse like teeth.
A hall-light guided them, and from the hall Buck Daniels entered a room and fumbled above him until he had lighted a lamp which was suspended by two chains from the ceiling, a circular burner which cast a glow as keen as an electric globe. It brought out every detail of the old-fashioned room—the bare, painted floor; the bed, in itself a separate and important piece of architecture with its four tall posts, a relic of the times when beds were built, not simply made; and there was a chest of drawers with swelling, hospitable front, and a rectangular mirror above with its date in gilt paint on the upper edge. A rising wind shook the window and through some crack stirred the lace curtains; it was a very comfortable retreat, and the doctor became aware of aching muscles and a heavy brain when he glanced at the bed.