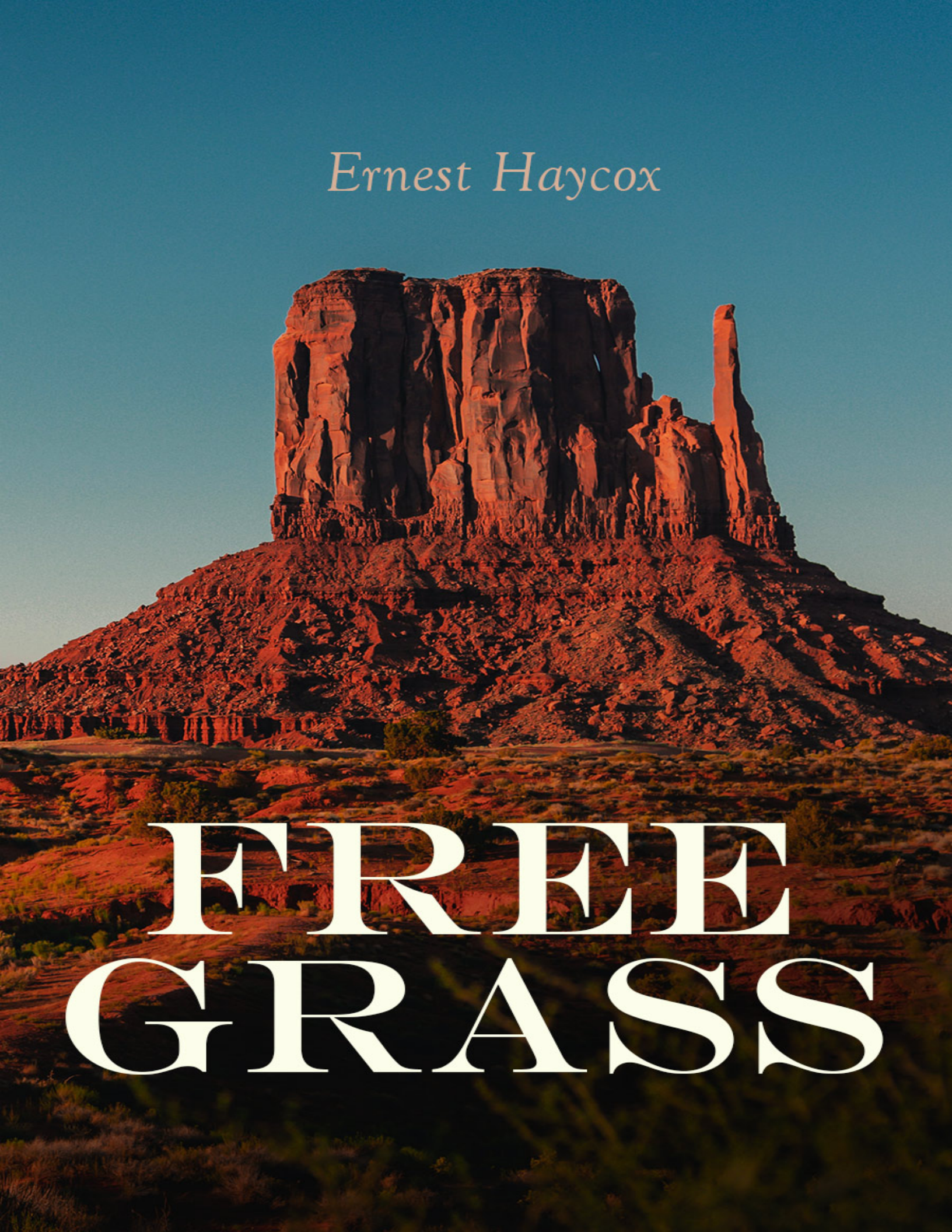
Ernest Haycox



FREE GRASS

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I. THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

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The Circle G herd, twenty-five hundred long- horned cattle out of Menard County, Texas, had passed the Arkansas and were bedded down off the trail two miles from Dodge City. The chuck-wagon fire traced an orange spiral in the night, at occasions fitfully illumining a puncher's face. There were eighteen in the outfit, counting the colored cook whose giant figure slid to and from the circle of light with the supper dishes. From the near distance floated the night rider's lament:

"Sam Bass was borned in Injianna, it wus his native home,
And at the age uh seventeen, young Sam began to roam—"

Cigarette tips gleamed; a dry voice broke the spell of silence.

"Had music wings that song would fall an' bust its neck."

The remark stirred the fluid of speech; a lazy rejoinder passed over the flame tips. "Yo' ain't no Jenny Lind yo'se'f, Quagmire. Fella can't tell they is a tune when yo' soothe the bulls."

Quagmire rose on an elbow and brought himself into the light; a skinny man, the colour of butternut, with drawn features and a spray of crowfoot wrinkles around each eye; a sadly sober man whose words seemed to escape from some deep pit of despair. "Who, me? I sing bass."

"It's God's mercy then they ain't more bass singers in this outfit."

Quagmire elevated his thin shoulders and turned his palms upward, Indian fashion. "I was borned durin' the War

o' Secession when corn pone got all-fired skase. Not havin' any provender to support my voice it fell into the pit o' my stummick and it ain't come back sence. Go 'way 'long, yo' East Texas oat munchers. It takes starvation to make a genius."

"Well, by—"

Horse and rider moved into the light. Astride the horse, a stocking-legged bay with a shad belly, was Major Bob Gillette, owner of the herd. The firelight played on his face, strongly outlining the granitic ruggedness of chin and brow. He wore no beard, nor so much as a goatee—itself a sign of unconformity in a land where nearly every adult male went whiskered. In his fifties, this stormy petrel was indelibly stamped with the effects of a rough border career. Beneath the brim of his felt hat his hair showed an iron-gray in keeping with the uneven transverse lines of his face and the bold modeling of his cheek bones. His eyes were set far apart and considerably back in the sockets; thus hidden they deprived his features of the ordinary light and mobility and made them appear both harsh and uncompromising. It was a legend back in Menard County that a Gillette rider was the best in he state, not only excelling with horse and rope, but also with the gun. He worked his men hard, kept almost military discipline, and played no favourites. It was quite significant that talk ceased when he rode among the group.

"San Saba."

A brittle, slow answer came from the rear of the circle, "Yes, suh."

"I'm going to town. Keep about while I'm away."

"Yes, suh."

Major Gillette rode off. For some time the silence held, then Quagmire's rumbling, drear tones broke it "Well, I'm perishin' for a little fluid. They say Dodge is a wicked, sinful city. Who am I to deprive it o' lawful trade? If they's anybody else wants to liquefy, le's go swell the population."

San Saba was still immersed in the shadows—a place he always liked to be. But he challenged Quagmire with just two words, these seeming to crack over the fire like a lash. "Stay put."

Quagmire stared at the fire a long while, features coming to a point. Replying, he threw his words over one shoulder. "Now, who said so?"

"Orders," droned San Saba. "Trouble on the trail. They's others drivin' north asides us."

"Man—few o' years and full o' trouble," murmured Quagmire. "A wise hombre issued that remark."

Conversation lagged. The early to bed rolled in their blankets and slept Quagmire edged nearer the fire and began poking at it with a stem of sage. Once, when his eyes met those of another across the blaze, there was a point of flame in them. Just for a moment it was so; his chin dropped, and he traced an endless pattern in the glowing ashes.

The moon, full and bright, swung down from the sky as a silver pendulum. Major Bob Gillette trotted across the swelling prairie with the carriage of a cavalryman on patrol. To his right hand the river lay against the shadows like a shining ribbon. Ahead winked the lights of Dodge; ahead was the stench of Dodge and its buffalo hides. Major Bob passed a scattering of corrals, followed a trail into the dim clutter of buildings on the south side of town, and crossed the tracks. Turning, he rode down a dusty street a-swirl with life, a street across which fell yellow patterns of light from the building windows. These buildings marched beside the street sagging and rising with it as it took its ungraded course through the town; they were, for the most part, bolstered up with a peaked or square false front as if conscious that their rickety substance needed some prop of dignity. A board sidewalk, treacherous to the high boot heel, undulated between street and buildings. Hitching racks were crowded with drooping ponies. A freighter lumbered by the

Major, bull whip snapping; saloon lights were bright and alluring, pianos jingled. A woman screamed, a gun cracked, yet the men passing and repassing on the walk paid no attention. Life flowed here in a narrow and boisterous stream.

Major Bob Gillette wheeled, nosed the pony to a hitching rack, and for a moment studied his surroundings with a kind of grim- lipped pleasure. Then, dropping to the ground, he threw over the reins and marched into the Dodge House, confronting the clerk there with a short and clipped question.

"Is my son, Tom Gillette, here?"

The clerk's thumb pointed upward. "Room two. Been here a week."

Major Bob climbed the stairs and walked down the bleak hall to where he saw a crack of light seeping through a keyhole. And here he stopped, for the moment seeming to hesitate. It was quite a queer proceeding for one who was so forward and abrupt of manner, yet he actually appeared to dislike his mission, and he stood in the darkness and scowled, breath coming a little hard. In the end he turned the knob without warning, walked into the room and faced his son.

Tom Gillette had been reading, feet hooked on the table top. The unannounced entry of his father caused him to look up swiftly—and thus they met each other after five years of separation, two men of the same flesh and blood who over so long a time had been nearly a continent apart. Obviously, they were cut in the same pattern, for upon Tom Gillette there was the tribal stamp—the same big-boned frame, the same wide, deeply set eyes, the same cast of gravity. Still, there was a difference: the difference of thirty years' rough and tumble against the difference of five years' Eastern training. To Major Bob there was a certain softness in his son. His sharp eyes saw it immediately, before a word had

been passed, and the fear that had been in him through the day grew more oppressive.

He was a man short of speech, he had no way of expressing what rose in him. So he spoke crisply and casually, as if his son had been away but a week. "Got in ahead of me, I see."

Tom laid away the book, marking the page. And the old man's heart lightened a little when he recognized that methodical Gillette trait. "Yes," said Tom, "I've been here since last Sunday. Didn't want to hold up the herd."

"We travel slow," replied Major Bob. "Don't wish to run off any more tallow than I can help."

Tom stood up, and the Major inspected him top and bottom as he would have inspected a horse. Good heavy muscles, fine shoulders, and a neck that coupled short. The boy had a broad barrel on him too, and he planted his feet on the floor as if he meant to take root. All these points showed through the ridiculous worsted suit that passed as fashion in the East: that suit with its short lapels, its white collar, and four-in-hand tie. Nor did the Major's eyes miss the low, flat-heeled shoes. Impractical dam' things.

There was a trace of humour in Tom Gillette's eyes as he stood there. "Pass muster?"

"How do I know?" answered Major Bob. "Turn to the light. You've lost your accent."

"It will come back. A month with the boys and I'll have it again."

"Glad to hear it," grunted Major Bob, studying Tom's face by the lamplight. The boy had left him immature, unformed. Well, he was a man now. He had been shaken down, he had filled out. He had a bearing, an element men would recognize and obey. That was his birthright. But what was in his head? How sound was his wind, how clear his eye? What did he think? The Major was almost afraid to ask, and he felt relieved when Tom, seeming to catch these unspoken queries, broke the pause.

"What's up?"

"Moving north," replied Major Bob. "Dakota Territory's been opened farther west. Free grass. Indians put on the reservation. We can't flesh up a cow in Texas, and the fever's been bothering us. Better grazing north and a better access to the market. So we are going, the Circle G, lock, stock, and barrel."

"The old home no more, eh? Kind of hate to think what's being left behind."

Major Bob heard the slight accent of wistfulness, and his fears rose afresh. There was no place for softness in a Gillette. He said so, abruptly.

"Dam' sentiment. You will get no place with that in this land, my boy. I was afraid the East would soften you. I told your mother as much. But she would have you go. Might as well be honest with you—I'd have yanked you back as quick as a flash when she died, but she took my promise to let you finish. Understand it—you have nothing to thank me for. Your freedom was her doing."

Tom sombrely studied the floor. "That I know. I'll give her credit for whatever I have learned."

"And what have you learned?" challenged the elder Gillette.

Again a flicker of humour. "Among other things that the West will do for me as long as I live."

Major Bob was too old a poker player to reveal the pleasure that remark gave him. He only nodded, and pressed his questioning. "What else?"

"Well, sir, I think I can say Eastern whisky is better than Western, and that the no-horn saddle makes a poor rocking-chair."

Trivialities. There was more than this, but the boy had not developed into a loose-jointed talker. He buried his thoughts, for which the Major was exceedingly thankful. Then and there a part of his doubt vanished. And yet, being a shrewd judge, he also understood the younger man had

something on his mind. Something lay cloudy behind the eyes. And thereupon he came directly to the issue.

"You've had your woman affairs? Got your fingers burnt? Made the usual fool of yourself—like all men must?"

Tom squared his shoulders at this and spoke with laconic definiteness. "Reckon that's gospel."

"Over with now?"

"As much as anything on earth can be over with."

Still vague. Major Bob bristled. "You have left no broken promises behind you, my boy?"

Silence. Silence in which Major Bob's breathing could be heard plainly. Tom swung, one hand lying open. "I think not."

Major Bob came forward. "My son," said he, very solemn, "if I thought you had dishonoured any pledge of yours I would break you into bits and send you back."

"I made a promise," explained Tom, a kind of sudden fire in his eyes. "It was accepted. Later it was rejected. I'll say no more. Wouldn't have said this much except to satisfy you. Judge for yourself."

"Then your obligation is cancelled," decided the Major with something like eagerness. He turned half away, sighing like one whose breath had been held over-long. And to cover what was perilously close to sentiment he relapsed into casualness. "Expected I might have had to hunt through town for you."

"Thought maybe I'd be down with my paint bucket?"

The Major raised and lowered his broad shoulders. Unconsciously he exposed the main beam of his career—a career marked by turbulence. "You will never find life up in a hotel room, my boy. It's out there," and he pointed his fist toward the street.

"Shoulder to shoulder, fist to fist," mused Tom. "Play your own hand, ask no favours, ride straight, shoot fast. Keep all obligations."

The Major nodded; a stray beam of light caught his eyes and kindled. "You have learned to express yourself well.

Glad to know that. What you have said is all I ever tried to teach you. That you still abide by the code is my greatest pleasure. I had feared you would forget—that you would absorb ideas less worthy of a Southern gentleman. I will not preach—God hates a smooth tongue—but you must see the distinction between sections. The East is settled, it is orderly, it is governed by women's ideas. This is still a man's country. Make no mistake about that."

Tom bent his head. His father had struck to the core of the whole matter; had touched, unwittingly, the fear and the uncertainty within him. For he had departed from Texas with one set of ideas; in a quieter and more staid Eastern land he had discovered another. They set a value on human life there, they guarded it with jealous laws. Softness, his father called it—and softness it might be. This country to which he returned was a prodigal land, and five years had almost made an alien of him. What would he do when the time came for him to choose between codes?

His father's summary phrases recalled him. "We roll out in the morning. This will be your last night on a bed."

He shook his head. "Might as well sleep on the ground tonight." He moved to his Gladstone and took out a roll of clothes. Stripping off his suit he got into an ancient wool shirt, faded trousers, boots, vest, and a battered felt hat. It was the apparel he had worn out of Texas five years before. The Major, recognizing this, blew a great blast of air from his nose.

"Saved 'em, I see. Small for you now." Then he moved forward and unbuckled his revolver belt, holding it out to his son with an ill-concealed pride. "You'll be needing this again. It is your old gun. Brought it up for you."

Tom strapped the harness around him; his fingers touched the cold butt, and again he had the fleeting and unpleasant sensation of being alien. It seemed impossible he once had cherished the weapon with a fiery affection and shot pecan nuts off the trees in practice. He wondered

suddenly whether he had lost the trick of swinging low and making a moving shield of his pony while firing under the animal's neck. Once he had been like an Indian.

He laid his new suit on the bed, smiling a little. "The next man may need it. I never will. Now, when I round up a maverick we'll be ready to travel."

The hallway resounded with some kind of a cry, the door flew open, and a burly young giant, larger than either of the Gillettes, rolled into the room shaking a shining yellow head. He was a pink and roly-poly Hercules, irrepressible and drunk. The love of life shone on his round, bold face, and exuberance babbled off his tongue. "Ha—wassis, Deerslayer? Dam' awful liquor ever I drank! What a night! Tom, my rebel, now I know what made you such a screamin' savage. Whooey! Drop that gun, Jack Cade, or I'll pierce you with a needle! What was that song you taught me?

"But the dirty little coward that shot Mister Howard
Laid poor Jesse in his grave."

"Sad—awful sad." Then, seeing Major Bob standing immovable in his path he drew up and regained a measure of gravity. "Let's see. I haven't got to the double-sight stage yet, so you must be the old man. Pater, in other words. Well, you certainly sired a tough piece of beefsteak for a son. I'm delighted. Maybe you don't know it yet, but you've hired another cow hand. Love cows. Lord, yes! Love 'em still more if I could get another drink down without fryin' the linin' of my stomach. How, Pontiac, announce me!"

Tom Gillette nodded. "It's the Blond Giant," he explained to the elder Gillette. "True name is Claude Lispenard. Blondy, this is my father, Major Robert Gillette."

"Don't hold the first name against me," adjured the Blond Giant. His big hand struck the Major across one shoulder. It was fraternally meant, but Major Bob straightened like a ramrod. It was not the custom of the country to be over

friendly at first, and the Major had all the Western dislike for loose-tongued liberties. His steely silence further sobered the Blond Giant. He stood his place, hands dangling helplessly.

"A friend of yours, Tom?" inquired Major Bob.

"One of my best," replied Tom. "But in certain respects he is as weak as water. I have brought him west to buck him up." And with the bluntness of long acquaintance he added, "He's made God's own fool of himself. Three months on the trail is the cure."

The Major extended his hand. "A friend of my son is a friend of mine. You are welcome to a place with us."

The Blond Giant took the hand somewhat sheepishly. Tom broke the silence. "Get your possibles. We are going to camp."

Lispenard found his bag, the meanwhile looking to his friend. "Not taking yours?"

Tom Gillette shook his head. "I'll never need it again. We pack our stuff inside the blanket roll."

"Well," grumbled the Blond Giant, "I'll stick to my Gladstone. Be some time before I can go without soap and water or part my hair with thumb and forefinger."

The Major thrust a single glance at his son—a somewhat grim glance—and he led the way out. Passing into the street, Tom pointed toward a saloon. "We'll christen the occasion, sir." Lispenard muttered a small oath and followed the Gillettes into the place. Together they elbowed to the bar and ordered drinks.

The place roared. Smoke eddied up from the crowd and hung like a storm signal against the ceiling. The gaming tables were crowded, chips rattled; a piano strove to carry its thin melody above the racket, and lights flashed brilliantly on the tinselled costumes of the girls. One of them was singing, and toward her the crowd restlessly eddied—cowboy and buffalo hunter, railroad hand, desperado and trapper. Lispenard's animation revived at the sight of it, and

he lifted his glass with the Gillettes. "I give you Westerners credit. You do it well—dam' well."

Tom spoke across the rim of his pony. "The prodigal returns, sir."

Major Bob studied the red fluid. And it could only have been his relief that caused him to speak as he did.

"My boy, I didn't know whether I would find a son this night or not. I think I have. We will drink to the Circle G."

The screaming of a woman cut through the turmoil like a knife. Men swayed and backed against the walls. Tables went down, and across the smoky lane thus formed another tragedy of Dodge marched to its swift climax. Lispenard dropped his glass and gripped the bar. "My God!"

Two men faced each other, each bent, each weaving; their features seemed out of proportion. White teeth gleamed against an olive skin, sweat beaded across a narrow forehead, glistening like crystals. Somebody's breath rose and fell asthmatically. There was a grunted word and another swift and slashing word—and in the light the opposing duellists seemed to blur and merge. Again a scream shrilled throughout the house, striking Tom Gillette's heart cold. It rose to an unearthly pitch, then was drowned by the echo of a gun thundering and crashing against the four walls. Nobody moved, nobody seemed to breathe. But presently the man of the olive skin hiccoughed and fell. The lane began to close; through it the victor fought his way, hatless, wild of eye, waving his gun. In a moment he had passed out of the place, and the drumming of his pony's hoofs beat down the street and grew faint. Bedlam rose, like air rushing into a vacuum.

"Good God!" muttered Lispenard. He turned to the Gillettes, the ruddy colour quite drained from his cheeks. "That turns my stomach. Why don't they do something? Why don't they go after the fellow? Everybody standing around like a lot of stone images!"

Major Bob ignored him completely. He raised his unfinished glass, speaking to his son in the same grave and courteous manner. "To the Circle G." And while Lispenard stared, shaken to his depths, they drank. At that moment father and son never looked so much alike, both with a hard granite impassivity printed from cheek bone to cheek bone; the kind of an expression made with muscles tightly set. Meeting Tom's eyes, Lispenard was shocked to see the bleakness therein. It was as if he faced a complete stranger.

"We had better be going," said Major Bob.

The trio marched out and back to the Major's horse. He swung up and turned into the street. "I will go ahead. The camp is a mile beyond the corrals. Doubtless you will want to explain a few things to your friend."

This last sentence had no meaning to Lispenard, but Tom nodded soberly. "I will do it."

The two of them walked away from Dodge, past the corrals, and along the rolling prairie. To their left lay the river; above them swung the full disk of silver. Lispenard breathed heavily, and the scene in the saloon oppressed him until he could no longer hold his peace. "And you all took it so cursed cold! I begin to see the meaning of that flint and ice look you sometimes wear. The whole set of you put it on like a mask."

"Blondy, let me give you a single piece of advice. In this country, never give yourself away. Play poker with a blank face. Never tell a man anything about yourself, never ask him about himself. And no matter how you are hurt, never reveal it to a living creature."

"By the Lord, I'm not made of stone!" cried Lispenard.

"No," agreed Tom. "None of us are. But hereabouts men must carry themselves as if they were. Once a fellow started crying about his hurts he would never quit. This is a rough country. Nobody wants to hear about your feelings."

"Do you mean to tell me that that murder left you cold?" demanded the Blond Giant.

Tom travelled fifty yards without replying. Of course it hadn't left him cold. It had cut him to the very marrow and again made him seem an alien. And not long ago he would have confessed it to Lispenard. But somehow he no longer felt inclined to the old exchange of confidences. He was going back to the old ways already, beginning to judge once more by the standards of the country. And according to those standards the Blond Giant had ill conducted himself.

"It makes no difference at all," said he, seeing the chuck-wagon fire ahead, "what a man feels. Somehow, when you get under the stars, it isn't important."

Lispenard fell to silence as they approached the light. Major Bob stood by the fire, around which the punchers were assembled. He had summoned them, and as his son came into view he spoke briefly, abruptly.

"This is Tom Gillette, my son. He rides with us. He asks no favours, he will receive none. If anybody wishes to challenge his mettle, that's not my affair. The other gentleman's name is Lispenard, a pilgrim and a guest of the outfit. San Saba!"

Tom swept the circle with a curious eye. None of these men had been with the Circle G in his time. It was a hard brand to work for, and the riders came and disappeared in quick succession. But he instantly recognized the calibre of the crew. His father picked only the best. Tall and short, lean and heavy—they were of all descriptions, yet they all fell into one type.

The Major's voice plunged into the darkness. "San Saba!"

"Comin', suh."

The Major meanwhile pointed to Lispenard. "I will tolerate no hazing with this gentleman. He is a guest. Remember that."

San Saba crawled reluctantly from the shadows, and Tom Gillette, seeing him for the first time, felt his muscles draw up. The man was as tall as any in the outfit and distinctly rawboned. His arms were gangling and hung to his sides as if useless to him; he slouched toward the group with his

head tilted forward. It was a head too small for his body and indeed all his features seemed shrunken, from his narrow chin up to his sloping forehead which in turn slid back into sandy red hair. Tom Gillette thought he never had seen a more cruel mouth or such gimlet eyes. The colour of them he could not tell, but a reddish pall seemed to hang over the surface, and the lids were likewise rimmed with the same colour.

"This," said Major Bob, "is my foreman, San Saba."

San Saba met Tom Gillette with a hurried, expressionless glance and dropped his head in scant recognition. Nor did he offer his hand until Tom first extended his own. Then there was only a slight pressure and a quick withdrawal.

"Han'somely pleased," drawled San Saba in flat, monotonous syllables. That was all; he backed away and was lost in the shadows. Major Bob disappeared from view and then most of the crew returned to their blankets. The introduction was over. Tom and Lispenard squatted before the flames, hearing Quagmire's rumbling voice take up some yarn he had been spinning.

"So them greasers staked me out on the ant hill an' let the bugs get a good feed. I was there twelve hours when the Rangers come up. We caught them renegades later, an' I skelped me the cuss what tied me down."

Lispenard was sober and morose. He stared at Quagmire, then spoke to Tom in a tone meant to carry across the fire.

"I suppose I'll be hearing all sorts of fool fish stories from now on. Do I look green?"

Quagmire appeared not to hear. But presently he swung his head a little, and the light played upon the left side of his face; it was nothing but a great pocket where some injury had scored him. Lispenard sprang to his feet, swearing. "Where do we sleep? My nerves certainly must be in a hell of a state."

The colored cook met them on the edge of the shadows, throwing two bedding rolls from his massive shoulders. He

had no attention for Lispenard, but one fist gripped the younger Gillette's arm. "Marse Tom, yo' don' know me no mo'?"

Tom's voice sang upward. "Why, Old Mose! You ornery rascal—I've been wondering about you! Mose, remember the time we trapped the bear in the caves?"

The Negro's head bobbed like a cork in water. "Ya-as, ya-as. I been waitin' fo' yo', Marse Tom. Sho' seemed like a mighty long spell. I'll sho' see yo' coffee cup am allus full. Sho'!"

Quagmire watched and listened. And when the two newcomers had faded into the darkness he spoke cryptically, announcing his conviction as to them. "One range hoss come back to the old stampin' grounds. Once a man gets the smell o' fire smoke in his nose it's hard to stay away. But as fo' sugar-fed pets, half broke, half wild, I nev' had any likin'. Man, short o' days an' full o' trouble."

The fire died to a golden glow. The camp settled to rest save for Quagmire, who was a notorious nighthawk. His thin and brooding face peered into the ashes as if seeking the mystery of creation there. Overhead the moon swung on its vast arc. Tom, once more sleeping under the stars, felt again the throb of the universe. It came to him out of the fathomless vault, it bore up on the night wind. He felt the presence of the herd, he made out the mutter and the snuffle of the animals on their bedding ground. The tuneless drone of the punchers on circle wavered up from the distance. A match flared, and he saw a face illumined for one moment. Again the drone:

"He was only a cowboy, gone on befo',
He was only a cowboy we'll see no mo'..."

Lispenard turned on his blankets and muttered an irritable question. Tom never heard it. Five years he had been away from all this. Now he was back home. Back

home! Why had he expected to be a stranger in his own land? The old life, the old sounds and smells, the old mystery of it returned to him as if he never had been away. The current picked him up and carried him on. Near the border of sleep he seemed to see San Saba's little red eyes staring at him out of the shadows.

II. ON THE TRAIL

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It was yet starlight when Old Mose, drumming his knuckles against a wash pan, sang out reveille. "Arise, yo' sons o' sin! Mo'nin' comes, the sun will shine, an' the little dogies am ready fo' to go! Rise to beans an' biscuits!"

One by one the Circle G riders shook out their blankets, rolled bedding, and helped themselves to breakfast. Fog hung low over the ground; the damp sage rendered up its pungent smell. Already the cattle were stirring and the nighthawk was in with the cavvy. It was no time for lagging, no time for talk. Men drank their coffee in morose silence and went to the improvised rope corral for their ponies. Sharp profanity crackled in the cold air, loops whistled, dust rose; saddle gear jingled and squeaked, the horses crowhopped under their riders—and the day's work began.

Tom found his old saddle in the supply wagon and lugged it to the corral, shaking out his rope. Major Bob, already mounted, came up. "I brought an extra string for you, Tom. Catfish, there—Slit Ears—the Lawyer—the buckskin with the straight belly—that leggy roan. We had no time to do more than to break 'em rough. They'll carry you if you haven't forgotten how to ride."

Tom picked the buckskin with the straight belly, roped him and led him aside. The crew had scattered, but Tom, tightening his cinches, saw them covertly watching, and he grinned wryly. He stepped a foot in one stirrup, flipped over the reins, and was in the saddle. The buckskin's muscles quivered, snapped together. Tom felt the pony's back hump; and as the animal's head dropped forward he was swept by the old emotion of wild, half-savage joy. "Pitch, you crowbait, pitch, or I'll rake hide!"

He was carried fifty yards in a series of weaving, necksnapping jumps. Dust obscured him, the earth disappeared, leaving him high and lonesome in his seat. He weaved like a drunken man, hearing himself yell. That yell came back to him—it was Quagmire's bullfrog croak. The buckskin wound itself into a last wicked bundle of knots, lurching sidewise, always sidewise to loosen and throw the rider off balance. Trip hammers pounded on Tom's skull, the pit of his stomach was a ball of fire. Then it was over and the buckskin swept across the prairie like the wind. Tom shook himself together and assembled his grin. "What a man learns, he never forgets. You old sidewinder, you're going to be a spunky horse. Swing around now."

When he got back to the chuck wagon Major Bob had only a silent nod for him. Tom spoke laconically, unconsciously falling into the old way of speech with its slurring softness. "Reckon he'll be tole'ble."

Lispenard had switched into more appropriate clothes—bought in Dodge—and stood watching Quagmire saddling another horse. The aftermath of his celebration in town was a fretful humour. He shook his shoulders, grumbling, "Here I am, dressed like Simon Legree. Now I suppose I'll have to board that vicious rack of bones and get my neck shook off."

Major Bob looked sharply at Lispenard, yet spoke with unusual courtesy—always a sign that he struggled with his temper. "You are a guest of the outfit, sir. Be assured. Quagmire is saddling the gentlest beast. If you were a rider, like my son, you would have to take your chances. In this country we don't break horses for other men. I will permit no hazing with you."

Lispenard walked slowly toward Quagmire. "I'd feel better about it if I had a drink. It's a hell of an animal to be called gentle."

The pony was an undersized brute, coloured like grandmother's blanket. It turned a scrawny neck and looked at Lispenard from two expressionless glass-green eyes,

dropping one ear. The man rubbed his hands along his pants. "Never think a horse has no brain. That creature is openly sneering at me."

Quagmire cast a glance back at the Gillettes. As he gave over the reins he whispered sibilantly, "Don't like the way he holds his ears. Plumb bad sign. If he starts groanin' like a los' soul, you pile off hell bent fo' election. It means he's des'prit."

Lispenard scanned Quagmire's face. Nothing but solicitude and benevolence appeared on the puncher's warped features. The Blond Giant said, "Oh, well, here goes," and stepped gingerly into the saddle, holding the reins with one hand and clutching the horn with the other. Quagmire backed hurriedly off as if expecting trouble. The glass-eyed calico stood with his eyes to the earth like a bemused philosopher for a moment, then gave vent to a long, dreary sigh. His rider clawed at the saddle horn and struck the ground on all fours. The horse turned a puzzled face, moving not an inch.

Quagmire's countenance was as bland as a summer sky. In the distance one of the crew bent over, seemingly having trouble with his stomach. Major Bob spoke in a silken voice. "Quagmire, get out of here! Mister Lispenard, that horse stopped pitching twelve years back."

Lispenard muttered something and mounted again. Riding past Quagmire he gave the man a cold look. "Dam' funny, wasn't it?"

But Quagmire only shook his head. "Nev' trust a hoss—nev' trust a stranger's word," was his answer. And he rode away.

Tom galloped toward the herd with the Blond Giant in pursuit. The Circle G riders had spread out, making a long line on either side of the herd; the wagons were moving on. Major Bob, far to one flank, raised his hat and dipped it. Swing and drag riders pressed against the fringes of the herd. It moved, imperceptibly at first but with gaining

momentum, stretching into a long, irregular, formless mass. The drive was on.

Tom stood aside until the tail end of the procession passed, then fell in with the drag—those riders who ranged to the rear and kept the slower or more stubborn animals from straying. The sun rose out of the east all in splendour, the prairie stood forth in the clear morning's light, rolling league after league to the horizons. Dust curled against the sky, dust choked the drag. Bandanas were raised over faces; the day grew warm.

"Now watch, Blondy," said Tom. "Watch all this. It's a sight you never saw the like of before. By Godfrey, it's a picture."

"I wish I had a drink," replied Lispenard fretfully.

It was a picture—a picture flung prodigally across a sweeping canvas. Twenty-five hundred Texas cattle stretched in a long, sinuous line, dipping and rising with the ground, flowing onward at a steady yet apparently aimless pace; gaunt kine with big eyes and enormous horns that clacked tip to tip as they collided; here and there pausing to find a clump of grass; now and then bunching up and widening until the swing men closed in and pinched the line narrow again. Moving thus onward across a Kansas prairie green with grass newly born of the warm April rains and the warm April sun, across a prairie seemingly as boundless, as vast as the sea.

Quagmire sidled up, nothing showing above the bandana but his shrewd eyes. "They was spooky brutes when we lef Menard. Tell a man. We walked 'em plum' hard till they got out o' the idee. Now ain't they trail-broke?"

Tom pointed to a brick-red steer that travelled as far out on the flank as it could get, tossing enormous horns into the air at every step. "There's a trouble maker."

"It's Jedge Lynch," said Quagmire. "He ain't got but one eye, so he keeps out where he can see the rest o' the herd. Shore he's a trouble maker. Spooky to boot. He'll raise hell

sometime. Ort to be shot." Then, spacing his words farther apart and looking directly into Tom's eyes, he added, "You'll find more'n one trouble maker on this drive." He swung about and dropped to the rear, leaving Tom thoughtful. Quagmire was an old head, a wise head. And after the custom of the country he often cloaked shrewd sentiments in seemingly guileless words.

"Funny face," grunted Lispenard. "He's certainly got a stale sense of humour."

Tom pointed his pony out of the dust and motioned to the Blond Giant. Together they rode past the swing men and galloped toward the head of the column which was now dipping from view. In the remote distance squatted a sod shanty; elsewhere the land seemed tenantless, left to the wild creatures that crawled or ran. The smiling sun struck the earth with the first hot rays of the season, the sky was azure, and afar to the left a string of hills stood clearly silhouetted.

"So this is the country you've bragged about for five years," muttered Lispenard. "Well, if I had to live in it I'd go crazy."

"Not unless you were crazy to begin with," said Tom. "Buck up, amigo. You'll feel better when the headache wears away. Didn't I tell you Western whiskey was poison for the uninitiated?"

"Mean to tell me," demanded Lispenard, "you actually like this desolation?"

Tom turned, vehement phrases forming on his tongue. But he could not express them. This man, once his bosom friend, was becoming strange to him. The barriers were up. So he contented himself with saying, "I'm just beginning to live," and put his horse to a faster pace. A jack shot out of their path as they fell over a roll of land and came upon Major Bob and San Saba riding side by side. Point men were ahead, not directly in front of the herd, but flanking it. Thus being unknowingly guided, the bovine vanguard ambled