CLASSICS TO GO

THE SEVENTH MAN

MAX BRAND

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Chapter I.

Spring

A man under thirty needs neighbors and to stop up the current of his life with a long silence is like obstructing a river—eventually the water either sweeps away the dam or rises over it, and the stronger the dam the more destructive is that final rush to freedom. Vic Gregg was on the danger side of thirty and he lived alone in the mountains all that winter. He wanted to marry Betty Neal, but marriage means money, therefore Vic contracted fifteen hundred dollars' worth of mining for the Duncans, and instead of taking a partner he went after that stake single handed. He is a very rare man who can turn out that amount of labor in a single season, but Gregg furnished that exception which establishes the rule: he did the assessment work on fourteen claims and almost finished the fifteenth, yet he paid the price. Week after week his set of drills was wife and child to him, and for conversation he had only the clangor of the four-pound single-jack on the drill heads, with the crashing of the “shots” now and then as periods to the chatter of iron on iron. He kept at it, and in the end he almost finished the allotted work, but for all of it he paid in full.

The acid loneliness ate into him. To be sure, from boyhood he knew the mountain quiet, the still heights and the solemn echoes, but towards the close of the long isolation the end of each day found him oppressed by a weightier sense of burden; in a few days he would begin to talk to himself.

From the first the evening pause after supper hurt him most, for a man needs a talk as well as tobacco, and after a

time he dreaded these evenings so bitterly that he purposely spent himself every day, so as to pass from supper into sleep at a stride. It needed a long day to burn out his strength thoroughly, so he set his rusted alarm-clock, and before dawn it brought him groaning out of the blankets to cook a hasty breakfast and go slowly up to the tunnel. In short, he wedded himself to his work; he stepped into a routine which took the place of thought, and the change in him was so gradual that he did not see the danger.

A mirror might have shown it to him as he stood this morning at the door of his lean-to, for the wind fluttered the shirt around his labor-dried body, and his forehead puckered in a frown, grown habitual. It was a narrow face, with rather close-set eyes and a slanted forehead which gave token of a single-track mind, a single-purposed nature with one hundred and eighty pounds of strong sinews and iron-hard muscle to give it significance. Such was Vic Gregg as he stood at the door waiting for the coffee he had drunk to brush away the cobwebs of sleep, and then he heard the eagle scream.

A great many people have never heard the scream of an eagle. The only voice they connect with the kind of the air is a ludicrously feeble squawk, dim with distance, but in his great moments the eagle has a war-cry like that of the hawk, but harsher, hoarser, tenfold in volume. This sound cut into the night in the gulch, and Vic Gregg started and glanced about for echoes made the sound stand at his side; then he looked up, and saw two eagles fighting in the light of the morning. He knew what it meant—the beginning of the mating season, and these two battling for a prize. They darted away. They flashed together with reaching talons and gaping beaks, and dropped in a tumult of wings, then soared and clashed once more until one of them folded his wings and dropped bulletlike out of the morning into the

night. Close over Gregg's head, the wings flirted out—ten feet from tip to tip—beat down with a great washing sound, and the bird shot across the valley in a level flight. The conqueror screamed a long insult down the hollow. For a while he balanced, craning his bald head as if he sought applause, then, without visible movement of his wings, sailed away over the peaks. A feather fluttered slowly down past Vic Gregg.

He looked down to it, and rubbed the ache out of the back of his neck. All about him the fresh morning was falling; yonder shone a green-mottled face of granite, and there a red iron blow-out streaked with veins of glittering silicate, and in this corner, still misted with the last delicate shades of night, glimmered rhyolite, lavender-pink. The single-jack dropped from the hand of Gregg, and his frown relaxed.

When he stretched his arms, the cramps of labor unkinked and let the warm blood flow, swiftly, and in the pleasure of it he closed his eyes and drew a luxurious breath. He stepped from the door with his, head high and his heart lighter, and when his hobnailed shoe clinked on the fallen hammer he kicked it spinning from his path. That act brought a smile into his eyes, and he sauntered to the edge of the little plateau and looked down into the wide chasm of the Asper Valley.

Blue shadows washed across it, though morning shone around Gregg on the height, and his glance dropped in a two-thousand-foot plunge to a single yellow eye that winked through the darkness, a light in the trapper's cabin. But the dawn was falling swiftly now, and while Gregg lingered the blue grew thin, purple-tinted, and then dark, slender points pricked up, which he knew to be the pines. Last of all, he caught the sheen of grass.

Around him pressed a perfect silence, the quiet of night holding over into the day, yet he cast a glance behind him as he heard a voice. Indeed, he felt that some one

approached him, some one for whom he had been waiting, yet it was a sad expectancy, and more like homesickness than anything he knew.

“Aw, hell,” said Vic Gregg, “it's spring.”

A deep-throated echo boomed back at him, and the sound went down the gulch, three times repeated.

“Spring,” repeated Gregg more softly, as if he feared to rouse that echo, “damned if it ain't!”

He shrugged his shoulders and turned resolutely towards the lean-to, picking up the discarded hammer on the way. By instinct he caught it at exactly the right balance for his strength and arm, and the handle, polished by his grip, played with an oiled, frictionless movement against the callouses of his palm. From the many hours of drilling, fingers crooked, he could only straighten them by a painful effort. A bad hand for cards, he decided gloomily, and still frowning over this he reached the door. There he paused in instant repugnance, for the place was strange to him.

In thought and wish he was even now galloping Grey Molly over the grass along the Asper, and he had to wrench himself into the mood of the patient miner. There lay his blankets, rumpled, brown with dirt, and he shivered at sight of them; the night had been cold. Before he fell asleep, he had flung the magazine into the corner and now the wind rustled its torn, yellowed pages in a whisper that spoke to Gregg of the ten-times repeated stories, tales of adventure, drifts of tobacco smoke in gaming halls, the chant of the croupier behind the wheel, deep voices of men, laughter of pretty girls, tatoo of running horses, shouts which only redeye can inspire. He sniffed the air; odor of burned bacon and coffee permeated the cabin. He turned to the right and saw his discarded overalls with ragged holes at the knees; he turned to the left and looked into the face of the rusted

alarm clock. Its quick, soft ticking sent an ache of weariness through him.

“What's wrong with me,” muttered Gregg. Even that voice seemed ghostly loud in the cabin, and he shivered again. “I must be going nutty.”

As if to escape from his own thoughts, he stepped out into the sun again, and it was so grateful to him after the chill shadow in the lean-to, that he looked up, smiling, into the sky. A west wind urged a scattered herd of clouds over the peaks, tumbled masses of white which puffed into transparent silver at the edges, and behind, long wraiths of vapor marked the path down which they had traveled. Such an old cowhand as Vic Gregg could not fail to see the forms of cows and heavy-necked bulls and running calves in that drift of clouds. About this season the boys would be watching the range for signs of screw worms in the cattle, and the bog-riders must have their hands full dragging out cows which had fled into the mud to escape the heel flies. With a new lonesomeness he drew his eyes down to the mountains.

Ordinarily, strange fancies never entered the hard head of Gregg, but today it seemed to him that the mountains found a solemn companionship in each other.

Out of the horizon, where the snowy forms glimmered in the blue, they marched in loose order down to the valley of the Asper, where some of them halted in place, huge cliffs, and others stumbled out into foothills, but the main range swerved to the east beside the valley, eastward out of his vision, though he knew that they went on to the town of Alder.

Alder was Vic Gregg's Athens and Rome in one, its schoolhouse his Acropolis, and Captain Lorrimer's saloon his Forum. Other people talked of larger cities, but Alder satisfied the imagination of Vic; besides, Grey Molly was

even now in the blacksmith's pasture, and Betty Neal was teaching in the school. Following the march of the mountains and the drift of the clouds, he turned towards Alder. The piled water shook the dam, topped it, burst it into fragments, and rushed into freedom; he must go to Alder, have a drink, shake hands with a friend, kiss Betty Neal, and come back again. Two days going, two days coming, three days for the frolic; a week would cover it all. And two hours later Vic Gregg had cached his heavier equipment, packed his necessaries on the burro, and was on the way.

By noon he had dropped below the snowline and into the foothills, and with every step his heart grew lighter. Behind him the mountains slid up into the heart of the sky with cold, white winter upon them, but here below it was spring indubitably. There was hardly enough fresh grass to temper the winter brown into shining bronze, but a busy, awakening insect life thronged through the roots. Surer sign than this, the flowers were coming. A slope of buttercups flashed suddenly when the wind struck it and wild morning glory spotted a stretch of daisies with purple and dainty lavender. To be sure, the blossoms never grew thickly enough to make strong dashes of color, but they tinted and stained the hillsides. He began to cross noisy little watercourses, empty most of the year, but now the melting snow fed them. From eddies and quiet pools the bright watercress streamed out into the currents, and now and then in moist ground under a sheltering bank he found rich patches of violets.

His eyes went happily among these tokens of the glad time of the year, but while he noted them and the bursting buds of the aspen, reddish-brown, his mind was open to all that middle register of calls which the human ear may notice in wild places. Far above his scale were shrilling murmurs of birds and insects, and beneath it ran those ground noises that the rabbit, for instance, understands so well; but between these overtones and undertones he heard

the scream of the hawk, spiraling down in huge circles, and the rapid call of a grouse, far off, and the drone of insects about his feet, or darting suddenly upon his brain and away again. He heard these things by the grace of the wind, which sometimes blew them about him in a chorus, and again shut off all except that lonely calling of the grouse, and often whisked away every murmur and left Gregg, in the center of a wide hush with only the creak of the pack-saddle and the click of the burro's accurate feet among the rocks.

At such times he gave his full attention to the trail, and he read it as one might turn the pages of a book. He saw how a rabbit had scurried, running hard, for the prints of the hind feet planted far ahead of those on the forepaws. There was reason in her haste, for here the pads of a racing coyote had dug deeply into a bit of soft ground. The sign of both rabbit and coyote veered suddenly, and again the trail told the reason clearly—the big print of a lobo's paw, that gray ghost which haunts the ranges with the wisest brain and the swiftest feet in the West. Vic Gregg grinned with excitement; fifty dollars' bounty if that scalp were his! But the story of the trail called him back with the sign of some small animal which must have traveled very slowly, for in spite of the tiny size of the prints, each was distinct. The man sniffed with instinctive aversion and distrust for this was the trail of the skunk, and if the last of the seven sleepers was out, it was spring indeed. He raised his cudgel and thwacked the burro joyously.

“Get on, Marne,” he cried. “We're overdue in Alder.”

Marne switched her tail impatiently and canted back a long ear to listen, but she did not increase her pace; for Marne had only one gait, and if Vic occasionally thumped her, it was rather by way of conversation than in any hope of hurrying their journey.

Chapter II.

Grey Molly

If her soul had been capable of enthusiasm, Marne could have made the trip on schedule time, but she was a burro good for nothing except to carry a pack well nigh half her own weight, live on forage that might have starved a goat, and smell water fifteen miles in time of drought. Speed was not in her vocabulary, and accordingly it was late afternoon rather than morning when Gregg, pointing his course between the ears of Marne, steered her through Murphy's Pass and came out over Alder. There they paused by mutual consent, and the burro flicked one long ear forward to listen to the rushing of the Doane River. It filled the valley with continual murmur, and just below them, where the brown, white-flecked current twisted around an elbow bend, lay Alder tossed down without plan, here a boulder and there a house. They seemed marvelously flimsy structures, and one felt surprise that the weight the winter snow had not crushed them, or that the Doane River had not sent a strong current licking over bank and tossed the whole village crashing down the ravine. One building was very much like other, but Gregg's familiar eye pierced through the roofs and into Widow Sullivan's staggering shack, into Hezekiah Whittleby's hushed sitting-room, down to the moist, dark floor of the Captain's saloon into that amazing junkshop, the General Merchandise store; but first and last he looked to the little flag which gleamed and snapped above the schoolhouse, and it spelled “my country” to Vic.

Marne consented to break into a neat-footed jog-trot going down the last slope, and so she went up the single winding street of Alder, grunting at every step, with Gregg's whistle

behind her. In town, he lived with his friend, Dug Pym, who kept their attic room reserved for his occupancy, so he headed straight for that place. What human face would he see first?

It was Mrs. Sweeney's little boy, Jack, who raced into the street whooping, and Vic caught him under the armpits and swung him dizzily into the air.

“By God,” muttered Vic, as he strode on, “that's a good kid, that Jack.” And he straightway forgot all about that knife which Jackie had purloined from him the summer before. “Me and Betty,” he thought, “we'll have kids, like Jack; tougher'n leather.”

Old Garrigan saw him next and cackled from his truck garden in the backyard, but Vic went on with a wave of his arm, and on past Gertie Vincent's inviting shout (Gertie had been his particular girl before Betty Neal came to town), and on with the determination of a soldier even past the veranda of Captain Lorrimier's saloon, though Lorrimer himself bellowed a greeting and “Chick” Stewart crooked a significant thumb over his shoulder towards the open door. He only paused at the blacksmith shop and looked in at Dug, who was struggling to make the print of a hot shoe on a hind foot of Simpson's sorrel Glencoe.

“Hey, Dug!”

Pym raised a grimy, sweating forehead.

“You, boy; easy, damn you! Hello, Vic!” and he propped that restless hind foot on his inner thigh and extended a hand.

“Go an workin', Dug, because I can't stop; I just want a rope to catch Grey Molly.”

“You red devil—take that rope over there, Vic. You won't have no work catchin' Molly. Which she's plumb tame. Stand still, damn you. I never seen a Glencoe with any sense!—Where you goin', Vic? Up to the school?”

And his sweaty grin followed Vic as the latter went out with the coil of rope over his shoulder. When Gregg reached the house, Nelly Pym hugged him, which is the privilege of fat and forty, and then she sat at the foot of the stairs and shouted up gossip while he shaved with frantic haste and jumped into his best clothes. He answered her with monosyllables and only half his mind.

“Finish up your work, Vic?”

“Nope.”

“You sure worked yourself all thin. I hope somebody appreciates it.” She chuckled. “Ain't been sick, have you?”

“Say, who d'you think's in town? Sheriff Glass!”

This information sank in on him while he tugged at a boot at least a size and half too small.

“Pete Glass!” he echoed. Then: “Who's he after?”

“I dunno. Vic, he don't look like such a bad one.”

“He's plenty bad enough,” Gregg assured her. “Ah-h-h!”

His foot ground into place, torturing his toes.

'“Well,” considered Mrs. Pym, in a philosophic rumble, “I s'pose them quiet gents is the dangerous ones, mostly; but looking at Glass you wouldn't think he'd ever killed all those men. Know about the dance?”

“Nope.”

“Down to Singer's place. Betty goin' with you?”

He jerked open the door and barked down at her: “Who else would she be goin' with?”

“Don't start pullin' leather before the horse bucks,” said Mrs. Pym. “I don't know who else she'd be goin' with. You sure look fine in that red shirt, Vic!”

He grinned, half mollified, half shame-faced, and ducked back into the room, but a moment later he clumped stiffly

down the stairs, frowning. He wondered if he could dance in those boots.

“Feel kind of strange in these clothes. How do I look, Nelly?” And he turned in review at the foot of the stairs.

“Slick as a whistle, I'll tell a man.” She raised her voice to a shout as he disappeared through the outer door. “Kiss her once for me, Vic.”

In the center of the little pasture he stood shaking out the noose, and the three horses raced in a sweeping gallop around the fence, looking for a place of escape, with Grey Molly in the lead. Nothing up the Doane River, or even down the Asper, for that matter, could head Molly when she was full of running, and the eyes of Gregg gleamed as he watched her. She was not a picture horse, for her color was rather a dirty white than a dapple, and besides, there were some who accused her of “tucked up belly.” But she had the legs for speed in spite of the sloping croup, and plenty of chest at the girth, and a small, bony head that rejoiced the heart of a horseman. He swung the noose, and while the others darted ahead, stupidly straight into the range of danger, Grey Molly whirled like a doubling coyote and leaped away.

“Good girl!” cried Vic, in involuntary approbation. He ran a few steps. The noose slid up and out, opened in a shaky loop, and swooped down. Too late the gray saw the flying danger, for even as she swerved the riata fell over her head, and she came to a snorting halt with all fours planted, skidding through the grass. The first thing a range horse learns is never to pull against a rope.

A few minutes later she was getting the “pitch” out of her system, as any self-respecting cattle horse must do after a session of pasture and no work. She bucked with enthusiasm and intelligence, as she did all things. Sun-fishing, sun-fishing is the most deadly form of bucking, for it

consists of a series of leaps apparently aimed at the sun, and the horse comes down with a sickening jar on stiff front legs. Educated “pitchers” land on only one foot, so that the shock is accompanied by a terrible sidewise, downward wrench that breaks the hearts of the best riders in the world. Grey Molly was educated, and Mrs. Pym stood in the doorway with a broad grin of appreciation on her red face, she knew riding when she saw it. Then, out of the full frenzy, the mare lapsed into high-headed, quivering attention, and Gregg cursed her softly, with deep affection. He understood her from her fetlocks to her teeth. She bucked like a fiend of revolt one instant and cantered like an angel of grace the next; in fact she was more or less of an equine counterpart of her rider.

But now he heard shrill voices passing down the street and he knew that school was out and that he must hurry if he wanted to ride home with Betty, so he waved to Mrs. Pym and cantered away. For over two days he had been rushing towards this meeting; all winter he had hungered for it, but now that the moment loomed before him he weakened; he usually did when he came close to the girl. Not that her beauty overwhelmed him, for though she had a portion of energetic good-health and freckled prettiness, he had chosen her as an Indian chooses flint for his steel; one could strike fire from Betty Neal. When he was far away he loved her without doubt or question and his trust ran towards her like a river setting towards the ocean because he knew that her heart was as big and as true as the heart of Grey Molly herself. Only her ways were fickle, and when she came near, she filled him with uneasiness, suspicion.

Chapter III.

Battle

On the road he passed Miss Brewster—for the Alder school boasted two teachers!—and under her kindly, rather faded smile he felt a great desire to stop and take her into his confidence; ask her what Betty Neal had been doing all these months. Instead, he touched Grey Molly with the spurs, and she answered like a watch-spring uncurling beneath him. The rush of wind against his face raised his spirits to a singing pitch, and when he flung from the saddle before the school he shouted: “Oh, Betty!”

Up the sharply angling steps in a bound, and at the door: “Oh, Betty!”

His voice filled the room with a thick, dull echo, and there was Betty behind her desk looking up at him agape; and beside her stood Blondy Hansen, big, good looking, and equally startled. Fear made the glance of Vic Gregg swerve—to where little Tommy Aiken scribbled an arithmetic problem on the blackboard—afterschool work for whispering in class, or some equally heinous crime. The tingling voices of the other children on their way home, floated in to Tommy, and the corners of his mouth drooped.

To regain his poise, Vic tugged at his belt and felt the weight of the holster slipping into a more convenient place, then he sauntered up the aisle, sweeping off his sombrero. Every feeling in his body, every nerve, disappeared in a crystalline hardness, for it seemed to him that the air was surcharged by a secret something between Betty and young Hansen. Betty was out from behind her desk and she ran to meet him and took his hand in both of hers. The rush of her

coming took his breath, and at her touch something melted in her.

“Oh, Vic, are you all through?”

Gregg stiffened for the benefit of Hansen and Tommy Aiken.

“Pretty near through,” he said carelessly. “Thought I'd drop down to Alder for a day or two and get the kinks out. Hello, Blondy. Hey, Tommy!”

Tommy Aiken flashed a grin at him, but Tommy was not quite sure that the rules permitted speaking, even under such provocation as the return of Vic Gregg, so he maintained a desperate silence. Blondy had picked up his hat as he returned the greeting.

“I guess I'll be going,” he said, and coughed to show that he was perfectly at ease, but it seemed to Vic that it was hard for Blondy to meet his eye when they shook hands. “See you later, Betty.”

“All right.” She smiled at Vic—a flash—and then gathered dignity of both voice and manner. “You may go now, Tommy.”

She lapsed into complete unconsciousness of manner as Tommy swooped on his desk, included hat and book in one grab, and darted towards the door through which Hansen had just disappeared. Here he paused, tilting, and his smile twinkled at them with understanding. “Good-night, Miss Neal. Hope you have a good time, Vic.” His heel clicked twice on the steps outside, and then the patter of his racing feet across the field.

“The little mischief!” said Betty, delightfully flushed. “It beats everything, Vic, how Alder takes things for granted.”

He should have taken her in his arms and kissed her, now that she had cleared the room, he very well knew, but the obvious thing was always last to come in Gregg's repertoire.

“Why not take it for granted? It ain't going to be many days, now.”

He watched her eyes sparkle, but the pleasure of seeing him drowned the gleam almost at once.

“Are you really almost through? Oh, Vic, you've been away so long, and I—” She checked herself. There was no overflow of sentiment in Betty.

“Maybe I was a fool for laying off work this way,” he admitted, “but I sure got terrible lonesome up there.”

Her glance went over him contentedly, from the hard brown hands to the wrinkle which labor had sunk in the exact center of his forehead. He was all man, to Betty.

“Come on along,” he said. He would kiss her by surprise as they reached the door. “Come on along. It's sure enough spring outside. I been eating it up, and—we can do our talking over things at the dance. Let's ride now.”

“Dance?”

“Sure, down to Singer's place.”

“It's going to be kind of hard to get out of going with Blondy. He asked me.”

“And you said you'd go?”

“What are you flarin' up about?”

“Look here, how long have you been traipsin' around with Blondy Hansen?”

She clenched one hand beside her in a way he knew, but it pleased him more than it warned him, just as it pleased him to see the ears of Grey Molly go back.

“What's wrong about Blondy Hansen?”

“What's right about him?” he countered senselessly.

Her voice went a bit shrill. “Blondy is a gentleman, I'll have you know.”

“Is he?”

“Don't you sneer at me, Victor Gregg. I won't have it!”

“You won't, eh?”

He felt that he was pushing her to the danger point, but she was perfectly, satisfyingly beautiful in her anger; he taunted her with the pleasure of an artist painting a picture.

“I won't!” she repeated. Something else came to her lips, but she repressed it, and he could see the pressure from within telling.

“Don't get in a huff over nothing,” he urged, in real alarm. “Only, it made me kind of mad to see Blondy standing there with that calf-look.”

“What calf-look? He's a lot better to look at than you'll ever be.”

A smear of red danced before the vision of Gregg.

“I don't set up for no beauty prize. Tie a pink ribbon in Blondy's hair and take him to a baby show if you want. He's about young enough to enter.”

If she could have found a ready retort her anger might have passed away in words, but no words came, and she turned pale. It was here that Gregg made his crucial mistake, for he thought the pallor came from fear, fear which his sham jealousy had roused in her, perhaps. He should have maintained a discreet silence, but instead, he poured in the gall of complacency upon a raw wound.

“Blondy's all right,” he stated beneficently, “but you just forget about him tonight. You're going to that dance, and you're going with me. If there's any explanations to be made, you leave 'em to me. I'll handle Blondy.”

“You handle Blondy!” she whispered. Her voice came back; it rang: “You couldn't if he had one hand tied behind him.” She measured him for another blow. “I'm going to that dance and I'm going with Mr. Hansen.”

She knew that he would have died for her, and he knew that she would have died for him; accordingly they abandoned themselves to sullen fury.

“You're out of date, Vic,” she ran on. “Men can't drag women around nowadays, and you can't drag me. Not—one—inch.” She put a vicious little interval between each of the last three words.

“I'll be calling for you at seven o'clock.”

“I won't be there.”

“Then I'll call on Blondy.”

“You don't dare to. Don't you try to bluff me. I'm not that kind.”

“Betty, d'you mean that? D'you think that I'm yaller?”

“I don't care what you are.”

“I ask you calm and impersonal, just think that over before you say it.”

“I've already thought it over.”

“Then, by God,” said Gregg, trembling, “I'll never take one step out of my way to see you again.”

He turned, so blind with fury that he shouldered the door on his way out and so, into the saddle, with Grey Molly standing like a figure of rock, as if she sensed his mood. He swung her about on her hind legs with a wrench on the curb and a lift of his spurs, but when she leaped into a gallop he brought her back to the walk with a cruel jerk; she began to sidle across the field with her chin drawn almost back to her breast, prancing. That movement of the horse brought him half way around towards the door and he was tempted mightily to look, for he knew that Betty Neal was standing there, begging him with her eyes. But the great, sullen pain conquered; he straightened out the mare for the gate.

Betty was indeed at the door, leaning against it in a sudden weakness, and even in her pain she felt pride in the

grace and skill of Vic's horsemanship. The hearts of both of them were breaking, with this rather typical difference: that Gregg felt her to be entirely at fault, and that she as fully accepted every scruple of the blame. He had come down tired out and nervous from work he had done for her sake, she remembered, and if he would only glance back once—he must know that she was praying for it—she would cry out and run down to him; but he went on, on, through the gate.

A flash of her passion returned to her. “I shall go with Blondy—if it kills me.” And she flung herself into the nearest seat and wept.

So when he reached the road and looked back at last, the doorway yawned black, empty, and he set his teeth with a groan and spurred down the road for Alder. He drew rein at Captain Lorrimer's and entered with curt nods in exchange for the greetings.

“Red-eye,” he ordered, and seized bottle and glass as Lorrimer spun them deftly towards him.

Captain Lorrimer picked up the bottle and gazed at it mournfully when Vic had poured his drink.

“Son,” he murmured, “you've sure raised an awful thirst.”

Chapter IV.

King Hol

There is a very general and very erroneous impression that alcohol builds the mood of a man; as a matter of fact it merely makes his temper of the moment fast—the man who takes his first drink with a smile ends in uproarious laughter, and he who frowns will often end in fighting. Vic Gregg did not frown as he drank, but the corners of his lips turned up a trifle in a smile of fixed and acid pleasantry and his glance went from face to face in the barroom, steadily, with a trifling pause at each pair of eyes. Beginning with himself, he hated mankind in general; the burn of the cheap whisky within served to set the color of that hatred in a fixed dye. He did not lift his chaser, but his hand closed around it hard. If some one had given him an excuse for a fist-fight or an outburst of cursing it would have washed his mind as clean as a new slate, and five minutes later he might have been with Betty Neal, riotously happy. Instead, everyone overflowed with good nature, gossip, questions about his work, and the danger in him crystallized. He registered cold reasons for his disgust.

Beginning in the first person, he loathed himself as a thick-headed ass for talking to Betty as he had done; as well put a burr under one's saddle and then feel surprise because the horse bucks. He passed on to the others with equal precision. Captain Lorrimer was as dirty as a greaser; and like a greaser, loose-lipped, unshaven. Chick Stewart was a born fool, and a fool by self-culture, as his never changing grin amply proved. Lew Perkins sat in the corner on a shaky old apple barrel and brushed back his long mustaches to spit at the cuspidor—and miss it. If this were

Vic Gregg's saloon he would teach the old loafer more accuracy or break his neck.

“How are you, Gregg?” murmured some one behind him.

He turned and found Sheriff Pete Glass with his right hand already spread on the bar while he ordered a drink for two. That was one of the sheriff's idiosyncrasies; he never shook hands if he could avoid it, and Gregg hated him senselessly, bitterly, for it. No doubt every one in the room noticed, and they would tell afterwards how the sheriff had avoided shaking hands with Vic Gregg. Cheap play for notoriety, thought Gregg; Glass was pushing the bottle towards him.

“Help yourself,” said Gregg.

“This is on me, Vic.”

“I most generally like to buy the first drink.”

Pete Glass turned his head slowly, for indeed all his motions were leisurely and one could not help wondering at the stories of his exploits, the tales of his hair-trigger alertness. Perhaps these half legendary deeds sent the thrill of uneasiness through Vic Gregg; perhaps it was owing to the singular hazel eyes, with little splotches of red in them; very mild eyes, but one could imagine anything about them. Otherwise there was nothing exceptional in Glass, for he stood well under middle height, a starved figure, with a sinewy crooked neck, as if bent on looking up to taller men. His hair was sandy, his face tawny brown, his shirt a gray blue, and every one knew his dusty roan horse; by nature, by temperament and by personal selection he was suited to blend into a landscape of sage-dotted plains or sand. Tireless as a lobo on the trail, swift as a bobcat in fight, hunted men had been known to ride in and give themselves up when they heard that Pete Glass was after them.

“Anyway you want, partner,” he was saying, in his soft, rather husky voice.

He poured his drink, barely enough to cover the bottom of his glass, for that was another of Pete's ways; he could never afford to weaken his hand or deaden his eye with alcohol, and even now he stood sideways at the bar, facing Gregg and also facing the others in the room. But the larger man, with sudden scorn for this caution, brimmed his own glass, and poised it swiftly. “Here's how!” and down it went.

Ordinarily red-eye heated his blood and made his brain dizzy, it loosened his tongue and numbed his lips, but today it left him cool, confident, and sharpened his vision until he felt that he could see through the minds of every one in the room. Captain Lorrimer, for instance, was telling a jocular story to Chick Stewart in the hope that Chick would set them up for every one; and old Lew Perkins was waiting for the treat; and perhaps the sheriff was wondering how he could handle Vic in case of need, or how long it would take to run him down. Not long, decided Gregg, breathing hard; no man in the world could put him on the run. Glass was treating in turn, and again the brimming drink went down Vic's throat and left his brain clear, wonderfully clear. He saw through Betty Neal now; she had purposely played off Blondy against him, to make them both jealous.

“Won't you join us, Dad?” the sheriff was saying to Lew Perkins, and Vic Gregg smiled. He understood. The sheriff wanted an excuse to order another round of drinks because he had it in mind to intoxicate Gregg; perhaps Glass had something on him; perhaps the manhunter thought that Vic had had a part in that Wilsonville affair two years back. That was it, and he wanted to make Vic talk when he was drunk.

“Don't mind if I do,” Lew said, slapping both hands on the bar as if he owned it; and while he waited for his drink: “What are they going to do with Swain?”

The doddering idiot! Swain was the last man Glass had taken, and Lew Perkins should have known that the sheriff

never talked about his work; the old ass was in his green age, his second childhood.

“Swain turned state's evidence,” said Pete, curtly. “He'll go free, I suppose. Fill up your glass, partner. Can see you're thirsty yet.”

This was to Gregg, who had purposely poured out a drink of the sheriff's own chosen dimension to see if the latter would notice; this remark fixed his suspicions. It was certain that the manhunter was after him, but again, in scorn, he accepted the challenge and poured a stiff dram.

“That's right,” nodded the sheriff. “You got nothing on your shoulders. You can let yourself go, Vic. Sometimes I wish”—he sighed—“I wish I could do the same!”

“The sneaky coyote,” thought Gregg, “he's lurin' me on!”

“Turned state's evidence!” maundered Lew Perkins. “Well, they's a lot of 'em that lose their guts when they're caught. I remember way back in the time when Bannack was runnin' full blast—”

Why did not some one shut off the old idiot before he was thoroughly started? He might keep on talking like the clank of a windmill in a steady breeze, endlessly. For Lew was old-seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five—he himself probably did not know just how old—and he had lived through at least two generations of pioneers with a myriad stories about them. He could string out tales of the Long Trail: Abilene, Wichita, Ellsworth, Great Bend, Newton, where eleven men were murdered in one night; he knew the vigilante days in San Francisco, and early times in Alder Gulch.

“Nobody would of thought Plummer was yaller, but he turned out that way,” droned on the narrator. “Grit? He had enough to fit out twenty men. When Crawford shot him and busted his right arm, he went right on and learned to shoot with his left and started huntin' Jack again. Packed that lead with him till he died, and then they found Jack's bullet in his

wrist, all worked smooth by the play of the bones. Afterwards it turned out that Plummer ran a whole gang; but before we learned that we'd been fools enough to make him sheriff. We got to Plummer right after he'd finished hangin' a man, and took him to his own gallows."

"You'd of thought a cool devil like that would of made a good end, but he didn't. He just got down on his knees and cried, and asked God to help him. Then he begged us to give him time to pray, but one of the boys up and told him he could do his prayin' from the cross-beam. And that was Henry Plummer, that killed a hundred men, him an' his gang."

"H-m-m," murmured the sheriff, and looked uneasily about. Now that his eyes were turned away, Vic could study him at leisure, and he wondered at the smallness of the man. Suppose one were able to lay hands on him it would be easy to—

"See you later, boys," drawled Glass, and sauntered from the room.

Lew Perkins sighed as the most important part of his audience disappeared, but having started talking the impetus carried him along, he held Vic Gregg with his hazy eyes.

"But they didn't all finish like Plummer, not all the bad ones. No sirree! There was Boone Helm."

"I've heard about him," growled Vic, but the old man had fixed his glance and his reminiscent smile upon the past and his voice was soft with distance when he spoke again.

"Helm was a sure enough bad one, son. They don't grow like him no more. Wild Bill was a baby compared with Helm, and Slade wasn't no man at all, even leavin' in the lies they tell about him. Why, son, Helm was just a lobo, in the skin of a man—"

"Like Barry?" put in Lorrimer, drifting closer down the bar.

“Who's he?”

“Ain't you heard of Whistlin' Dan? The one that killed Jim Silent and busted up his gang. Why, they say he's got a wolf that he can talk to like it was a man.”

Old Lew chuckled.

“They say a lot of things,” he nodded, “but I'll tell a man that a wolf is a wolf and they ain't nothin' that can tame 'em. Don't you let 'em feed you up on lies like that, Lorrimer. But Helm was sure bad. He killed for the sake of killin', but he died game. When the boys run him down he swore on the bible that he's never killed a man, and they made him swear it over again just to watch his nerve; but he never batted an eye.”

The picture of that wild time grew up for Vic Gregg, and the thought of free men who laughed at the law, strong men, fierce men. What would one of these have done if the girl he intended to marry had treated him like a foil?

“Then they got him ready for the rope,” went on Lew Perkins.

“'I've seen a tolerable lot of death,' says Helm. 'I ain't afraid of it.'”

“There was about six thousand folks had come in to see the end of Boone Helm. Somebody asked him if he wanted anything.

“'Whisky,' says Boone. And he got it.

“Then he shook his hand and held it up. He had a sore finger and it bothered him a lot more than the thought of hangin'.

“'You gents get through with this or else tie up my finger,' he kept sayin'.”

“Helm wasn't the whole show. There was some others bein' hung that day and when one of them dropped off his box, Boone says: 'There's one gone to hell.' Pretty soon