Wichita Eagle

Guests at Camp Nineteen.

By FRANKLIN FILE.

[Copyright. All rights reserved.]

CHAPTER I.

TWO TATTERDEMALIONS.

"Dad," she said.

A gust of March wind caught up a bushel of the dust from an Arkansas road, threw it into the air, kept it whirling high for a minute, and then let it settle to the ground. As this dense clouding of the highway slowly ceased two pedestrians developed into view, as though materialized on the spot, by some whimsical phenomenon, from that which the Bible says we all are and shall return to. That the dust was a corporal part of these persons was not hard to believe, for the new deposit merely mixed itself with that which had previously whitened their heads, shoulders and other places of chance lodgment. They did not take the trouble to brush any of it off their clothes. They clapped their hands together, and having thus shaken it from those members they rubbed it from their faces.

One of them was a man who strutted so pompously that more of the dust remained on his breast than on his back; but if his over-erect posture came of personal pride it must have been accompanied by abundant mortification, for dilapidation was disclosed wherever the dust did not hide his frayed and discolored suit. But the frock coat was closely buttoned over a figure which it fitted by original design, not by second hand chance, and the trousers, although they had not retained their shapeliness equally well, had been made from a measurement of the same legs which they had too long enclosed. The decay was not careless; it was unavoidable. The prosperity of the man and the endurance of his clothes had evidently passed away together, and only the length of time that had sufficed to bring the wearer and the worn to a state of harmonious ill fortune remained a matter of estimate. In one particular, however, his aspect did not show any unsightliness. Scissors and razor were still his to use. His hair was cropped neatly close, his mustache drooped gracefully at the sides of a smoothly shaven chin, and the gray of both was in an effective contrast with the redly sunburned complexion.

The companion of this unrelaxed effigy of dignity was a contrastingly lissome girl, 16 years old, if judged by her face, but less if measured by her small stature, on which the tatters of a once jaunty jacket and gown were no disfigurement; whose countenance was not a loser of prettiness through tan or freckles; whose hair wrapped her head with brown and was powdered like a court beauty's with the dust, and whose feet stepped as lightly in a pair of shattered shoes as though newly slippered. She was the fairest of tatterdemalions.

"Dad," she said, and then stopped to fleck a grain or two of the small cyclone's deposit from her lips: "dad, this eight mile tramp's just about six miles too long."

"Daughter," he responded, as he shifted the strap of a shabby leather bag from one shoulder to the other, "don't say 'tramp'—please to don't say 'tramp.' Say trudge, if you object to calling it a walk, or mention it as a saunter—a stroll—anything that doesn't make us out vagabonds. We mustn't confess before we're convicted."

"Whatever 'tis, tramp or trudge," the girl retorted, "it's something we've got to do; so jest's jog along."

The father's tone was a little querulous, although he tried to speak jocosely, and the daughter's smile was something like a peevish grimace; but as they walked along the girl took hold of the bag to relieve the man of some of its weight, whereupon he gently removed her hand and held it in his own.

Telegraph poles made hundred yard measurements along the road, with their still sappy surfaces of hemlock from which the bark had lately been removed and the small rounds of freshly pounded earth at their bases outlined sharply by the surrounding turf, showing that the work had not been done long. The evidences of newness increased steadily, and when the pedestrians had gone a mile further they came to the men who were making this line of telegraph from civilization across the boundary into the transitional territory of Oklahoma. There were several canvas top prairie wagons standing in a row, and the horses belonging to them, unhitched but still harnessed, were nibbling the grass near by.

Other vehicles consisted merely of heavy running gear, on which lay loads of the barked trunks of tall, straight trees ready to be set up, and still others were freighted with wire and the appliances for stretching it from pole to pole. Two tents of the army pattern had been pitched where a big, old tree overhung them and close to a brook which seemed to be constantly washing itself, so clean did the water look, with its underlay of white pebbles and its borderings of very green grass. A roof of canvas was over a long table of adjustable boards, on which tin plates and cups were ready for the meal which two men were cooking at a portable stove. Some tethered cows and sheep and a stock of canned eatables in a box wagon showed how little dependence for food was placed on the route. This movable encampment had been located for the night, and the sun had already sunk into the distant edge of rank grass. Not a sign of cultivation or permanent habitation was in sight, and the unfenced road—for was no more than a wide accession in the prairie, where the "boomers" had dragged their way toward the land of vague promise. This was the nineteenth nightly place of stop, and therefore was called Camp Nineteen. The last one had been named Eighteen and the next would be Camp Twenty.

Half a hundred men were erecting poles a short distance further along, but the wire had not been carried beyond the spot where the night camp was fixed, and there the only person besides the busy cooks immediately discernible when the pedestrians arrived was a young man busy at a telegraphic instrument. A tripod made the legs of a small table, and on it was the apparatus for sending and receiving messages over the wire, which was brought down from the last pole to which it had been adjusted. The operator's name was William Brown, and it goes far toward describing him to tell that in the rough and impolite company of telegraph constructors he was called Will Brown and not Bill Brown. No doubt some of this consideration on the part of men given to hard nicknaming was due to young Brown being the electrician of the expedition, and therefore a scientific mystery to most of them; but more than that, his unvarying suavity of manner, modesty of speech and careful retention of eastern deportment characterized him so markedly as to make "Bill" a misnomer and "Will" appropriate.

"Look, dad," the dusty girl whispered to her companion as her eyes fell on Will Brown; "we haven't seen a thing like that since we quit railroad tracks and took to footprints. Isn't he pretty?"

"He glads my eyes, daughter—he glads my very gaze," the man returned, eying the busy operator, who had not yet seen them."

The cause of the weary traveler's gladness was understood by the girl when she saw him advance with an enlivened stride, and heard him say briskly: "Ah, a telegraph station, eh? That is fortunate. Is this a money order office, my young friend? I would like to send a message to Fort Smith at once for a transfer of funds."

Will Brown straightened from his bent posture over the instrument, looked at the exaggerated dignity of the inquirer with a twinkle of merriment in his honest blue eyes, and urbanely replied: "This isn't a money order station; it isn't any sort of station; it's just the temporary end of the line and doesn't take any business."

"Oh, don't say that—pray don't say that," and the disappointment of the applicant looked like genuine anguish. "I shall be distressed—we shall be distressed—daughter and I—if we can't get a remittance by wire." Will Brown's eyes turned to the girl, and saw in her face as woebegone an expression as she could command without hurting her prettiness. After a pause, to let the young man appreciate the comeliness of the maiden in spite of her bad attire, the father continued: "We have walked six miles this afternoon and intended to go as far as Wealth City."

"Wealth City?" came in a guttural voice from the center of a clump of low bushes, and then a red face, fringed with whiskers from one side of a straw hat brim around to the other, and stubbled over with an unshaven week's beard, lifted into view. "What 'n t-h-u-n-der's Wealth City?" the grim voice demanded, spelling out the first syllable phonetically, with heavy emphasis on each letter and an equal stress on the rest of the word.

The rise of this individual was so much like that of a jack-in-a-box caricature that the girl exclaimed, like a surprised child, "Oh, that's funny!" and one of her feet leaped clear of the ground in a little caper of merriment. The object of her glee displayed no resentment. He was amiably drunk and disposed to gratify, with all particulars about himself, the curiosity which he had aroused.

"My name's Old Jugg Brown," he sententiously said, addressing himself directly to the girl, and speaking as a human exhibit in a museum might in lecturing on itself. "I was born Brown, and now they call me Old Jugg because I'm such an almighty hard drinker. Yes; I'm Old Jugg Brown, and this young gentleman is my son. I'm proud of my son, and he ain't proud of me. He's a reformin' me, Will is, but I got hold of a bottle o' whisky, and I've been drinkin' here in the brush."

He told this as something that had casually happened to him, something regrettable, and yet nothing that he could have been expected to prevent. He held up the half emptied bottle and swayed with it to and fro until the son took it from him and smashed it on a stone. He regarded this summary action apathetically until the aroma of the spilled whisky reached his nose, and then he sniffed feebly, his bland smile changed to a grotesque pout, and he sank slowly down into the bushes as though an invisible hand was shutting him down into his box.

"I was saying that we meant to get to Wealth City before night," the strutting stranger resumed. "We understand that Wealth City is a new name for a sudden place—the name about a day old, and the place something like a week. I will not conceal the fact that we are—in a sense—well, call us fortune seekers, and we haven't yet found it. May be it is in Oklahoma, and what we wish is to get there. At this moment," and here he snapped a thumb and finger of each hand airily, "we are tired, we are hungry and we are penniless."

Will Brown was not unaccustomed to wandering adventurers in a similar plight, and he would have repulsed this man, doing it not the less decidedly because politely; but at that instant the girl settled to the ground very lump and prone, but falling into far too graceful a pose to make it possible that she was careless about it. Her fatigue was pitifully genuine, however, and the sight of beauty in distress—although also in rags—was an appeal which Will made no effort to resist.

"You're welcome to a dollar," he said, holding forth a coin instinctively toward the girl, but relinquishing it to the ready hand of her less charming parent. "If you'll give me your name," he added, in a sudden attempt to give to his sentimentality a commercial turn, "I'll make a memorandum of the loan and expect you to pay it sooner or later."

"My name?" was the forcedly glib response; "oh, yes, my name. Well, you see we are traveling incognito. Poverty is ever sensitive, you know—ever sensitive. In the last shuffling of the cards, somehow, we've been dealt clear out of the game. I ought to be a winner, but—heigho! Well, call me by what name you please"——

"Call him Jack High," came drowsily from the rush.

"I'll call you Jack High," assented Will Brown, making an entry in a note book, "and, Jack High, you owe me one dollar."

Jack High twirled the dollar and made it pass deftly in and out between his fingers as no man other than a practiced handler of gambling chips would be likely to. He seemed about to toss it back to the lender, or donor, but slipped it into a vest pocket instead and blithsomely said: "My daughter is a genius, sir—a genius. She sings, she dances—she will go into Oklahoma, my young friend, like a revelation of melody and a disclosure of grace. It may be that her talent must submit to offensive environment for a while, and indeed I may confess that our immediate expectations as to Wealth City are centered in a concert hall said to have just been opened there; but all Oklahoma is ours, and we shall speedily possess it. Jack High, sir, and—and"——

"Call her Deuce Low," was the sleepy suggestion from Old Jugg Brown in the bushes.

"Jack High and Deuce Low," cried the shabby adventurer, exhilarated by the possession of an unearned dollar, and he was about to impulsively declare that the card named couple would win the game, but he checked himself and chose other language. "They will conquer prosperity in Oklahoma—will Jack High and Deuce Low. Oh, yes."

The appetizing fragrance of coffee came from the open kettle on the stove, and the two cooks were seen to be active in putting the meal on the table.

"Will they sell two suppers for a dollar?" Deuce Low asked, raising her eyes to Will Brown; and when he did not answer instantly she eagerly suggested: "Well, then, say one supper and a half?" She rolled partly over and rested her chin in her palms, while her elbows settled into the turf. "I'd rather get half a supper than none."

Will Brown felt like a boyish playfellow of this coaxing little creature, notwithstanding his twenty-two years, and he stood with arms akimbo looking down into her wistful face with a juvenile impulse to share with her whatever he had to eat.

"I don't think you can buy any supper here," he said, "because we don't make a business of selling them. But we'll feed you for nothing." His glance turned to Jack High, and he less hospitably added: "And you, too. But in that case what use is my dollar to you? You might pay it back now, you know, and get it off your mind."

A droll leer prefaced Jack High's reply. "You're right as can be. I'll satisfy the debt and give you, likely's not, your money over again for interest."

Deuce Low rolled over on her back and gazed idly skyward like one for whom the proceedings had taken an uninteresingly usual turn.

"That's generous," and Will Brown laughed.

"I will shift the dollar from one hand to the other—thus," and Jack High slowly transferred the silver coin from palm to palm; "and you can easily follow it with your eyes, as you see. Here it is and there it is, here it is and there it is, and where is it now?" He closed both hands and held them forward. "Choose, and if you're wrong I owe you nothing; if you're right you get $2."

"One now and the other when?"

"One now and my word of honor, sir, for the other."

Will Brown laughed again, and clasped one of the fists in his own. "The dollar's in this one, of course," he confidently declared.

But it was not. The open hand was empty, and from the other the dollar slipped into the deft palmer's pocket.

Will Brown had obtained at the cost of only a dollar the information that Jack High was a professional rogue. The young gentleman's habitual politeness was instantly at a strain under which it was in danger of giving way, and thereupon, if the job of kicking the rascal out of the camp seemed repulsively rude, he might request the less heedful workmen to perform it in his stead. The company of linemen, teamsters and diggers were just then coming from the point where their day's work had ended. Deuce Low arose as she saw them approaching, and the movement drew Will's eyes away from the object of irritation to one of admiration.

"Supper's ready," he quietly said: "step this way."

CHAPTER II.

THINGS THAT THE MOON SHONE ON.

The viands of the supper at Camp Nineteen differed hardly any from those of its eighteen predecessors, and the sameness of the fare had begun to offend those of the party accustomed to any degree of luxurious variety; but this time there was one feminine eater and her presence made the occasion almost a convivial banquet. Deuce Low had a seat on the rough bench at the end of the table with the magnates of the camp. She was at the right hand of Boss Donald, the chief of the party. Next to her on the other side was Will Brown, who treated her as his own guest, and his courtesies kept Donald, who was not a smooth man, from treating her with a flippancy which her worn clothes and battered father would otherwise have incited. Directly across the table was Jack High at elbows with a black whiskered foreman or contractor named Aleck Wiams, whose part in the expedition was to provide workmen and conveyances for transporting and planting the telegraph poles.

Jack was loquacious and Wiams was reticent; so they were paired happily for supper conversation, because nearly all the speech was by one and the listening almost wholly by the other. From further down the long table, even from where the merest manual laborers sat at the other end, came glances of curiosity and the sounds of uncommon vivacity, all caused by the tattered girl, to whom Will Brown could not have been more deferential if her gown had been silk. The eating was unprecedentedly hearty, in consequence of the zest imparted to the general appetite, and it was twilight by the time the table was quitted. Almost immediately a full, unclouded moon began to illumine the camp, and a breeze so faint as to hardly make the long shadows of the foliage waver in the grass carried away the heat which the sun had left behind.

There was no chair in Camp Nineteen. But Will Brown politely conducted Deuce Low to a spot of grassy upholstery at the foot of a tree, where she might sit with her back comfortably against the smooth bark. The moon beautified the face into which it shone. The sunburnt skin became alabaster, the hair showed its brown tints glossy—and the eyes glistened with reflected light. Whatever she thought of these advantages, or of the still more potent one of being the only girl her companion had seen in weeks, the consciousness was not divulged in her resting, careless attitude, nor in her childishly unalert manner. Will stretched himself on the grass before her, and by chance or choice he lay in the shadow of the tree's trunk. He fancied that from his comparative obscurity he could gratify his admiration of the illumined face without breaking etiquette's law against staring. They talked trivially of their immediate surroundings, then about each other a little and at length Will said:

"By what name may I call you?"

"By what name may I call you?"

"Oh, Deuce Low," she lightly replied.

"That's an insulting sort of nickname," he protested.

"I don't think so," she answered. "If my tall dad was to be called Jack High wasn't it well enough to name his short daughter Deuce Low? I haven't always found so much consideration as that since we started from Omaha for Oklahoma."

"And what makes you go to Oklahoma?"

"Well, we're alone in the world—dad and I; and we're rovers—yes, adventurers. Dad thinks we may prosper in the new territory. I've a voice to sing with, and feet to dance with"——

"And a face to bewitch with."

Instantly the glistening in the girl's eyes increased, as there was the sudden moisture of tears to reflect the moonshine, and she was silent. The young man had spoken so honestly that he did not perceive how his blunt compliment had pained her. He went on: "Your father—while you're singing and dancing in some Oklahoma concert hall—what will he be doing for an income?"

She was resentful. Should he not have already found out by her improved language and her decorous manner toward him that she was by education and experience better than the condition of wayfaring in which she had come to Camp Nineteen? Yet he could mention her pretty face as directly as though she had already reached Oklahoma and they were chance acquaintances across a table in a concert hall. Her desire to impress him favorably was gone, and without a waver of gaze or voice she shortly answered: "My dad's a gambler, and he's down on his luck. If he's to play for grubstakes he'll do three-card-monte in the streets till I get an engagement. If he strikes it rich enough he'll deal faro in a den of his own."

"And you?" Will exclaimed, shocked by what she had said and her way of saying it, but with no idea that she had spoken otherwise than heedlessly; "what does he intend to do with you?"

"Didn't you yourself say I had a face to bewitch with" and she held her visage still for him to examine. "Oh, Dad 'll do very well with me in Oklahoma."

Meanwhile that reprehensible father was seated with Aleck Wiams ten rods distant. A flat stone was between them, and on its smooth surface were the cards and cash of a game of poker. The moon made light enough for the players, and they were engaged so earnestly that no other talk than the play required was indulged in. When they spoke it was in very low voices, too, and it was manifest that they did not care to be discovered. Neither man could have told, if he had tried to, exactly how the game had been brought about, nor could either have recalled anything in his own case but eagerness for it.

Jack High had airily remarked at the beginning, as he drew his only dollar from a vest pocket, "There's plenty where that came from," and so there was if he meant the government mint; but Wiams did not demand an insight of the pocket, and so the first bluff in this game of poker was made and won by the professional gambler. Nor did he require other capital than that single dollar. He played to the end of the first hand with only the coin and promissory words, and afterward he had a steadily increasing number of bank notes provided by Wiams' losses. Luck and skill allied themselves on his side of the stone, and his accumulation of one dollar and two dollar bills at length bulged the pockets that had been empty before.

"Oh, here you be, gents!" and the intruding figure of Old Jugg Brown stood before the players. "Yes—here you be."

His inebriety had passed off, and he was not only sober but also pompous with the official duty of being the night watchman of the camp. He was too untrustworthy to be hired for regular work, manual or mental; yet on his son's account, and under the regulating influence of that circumspect young man, he was employed to guard the portable property of the expedition while the rest of the company slept. He was now making his first slow, sauntering round for the evening, and he promptly intermitted his patrol to sit down.

"Playin' for keeps, too," he continued, with wistful eyes on the several bills that lay on the stone.

"Hush!" said Wiams, and Old Jugg obeyed, for Wiams was a man of importance.

"Hush!" said Jack High, but this time Old Jugg was about to flout the command, for who was this frayed vagabond that he should presume to dictate silence?

At that instant Jack High won a stake, and wadded the money into a pocket already full.

"G-r-a-cious g-o-d-ness!" Old Jugg exclaimed, indulging his mannerism of spelling out the first syllable with more convincing emphasis than orthography, yet keeping his voice down to a hoarse whisper; "but you're a winner, sure—sure. You didn't have a dollar when you struck the camp"——

"Pray, don't interrupt us," Jack High hastily interposed.

"Oh, don't let me pester you. What—

"Can't be done without money," said Wiams, who knew that Will Brown's discipline of the erring father permitted no money to him when within a day's walk of a barroom; "so you're barred out."

Old Jugg heaved a deep sigh and walked away only to return five minutes later. He squatted by the stone, covertly disclosed a gold watch in his palm and said, with a flabby attempt at braggadocio, "Does my watch go for ten dollars? Say, does it go?"

With a quick look of inspection, but without touching the watch, Jack High remarked that as for him he never rejected a gentleman's collateral. It was Aleck Wiams who should have declined the offer, because he recognized the watch at a glance as belonging to Boss Donald, and instantly reasoned that Old Jugg, made desperate by a possible chance to get some whisky money, trusting to luck to restore the timepiece, and induced by his ravening appetite for alcohol to lapse in his redeeming quality of honesty, had sneakingly stolen it. But Wiams assented to a third hand at the game, and the watch figured in lieu of money in Old Jugg's bets. But not for long. Its thief, who viewed himself as a boomer, was soon an unperturbed player, with the watch safe in his pocket and a dozen bank notes besides. Something like $300 had been won from Wiams by the two others when the loser remarked that he had lost enough, and the game was stopped.

"I've divided all my ready money between you," he said, "and pay day for my gang is day after next."

"I'd enjoy lending you something," said Jack High.

"Not a bit more'n I would, Mr. Wiams," said Old Jugg Brown.

"No, thank you," was the reply. "You haven't bankrupted me, and I'm not whimpering. Good night to you," and he strode away to his tent.

The two winners were very jocular. They linked arms as they strolled along. Then Brown thought of the watch and got away from his companion long enough to replace it where it belonged, but he was back again in a minute. It was 10 o'clock and the camp was nearly all asleep. Those who were only dozing as yet were first to hear the low, soft commencement of a song.

"That's my daughter's voice," Jack High remarked with proprietary pride.

Other listeners, and especially those whom the melody awakened from slumber, may have drowsily imagined that it was supernal; but as the singing grew louder and stronger, and the words of a familiar sentimental song were enunciated, the hearers recalled Deuce Low and knew that she was the vocalist. It was an agreeable disturbance of the quiet of the night, and when it ceased the unseen audience clapped hands and made a great outcry of delight. Then, afraid that the hubbub would keep the singer silent instead of inciting her to begin again, the men ceased their noise and waited. The two fathers found their boy and girl still at the tree. Deuce sat leaning against the trunk as they had left her, and the moonbeams had not ceased to glorify her face, into which an expression of tranquility had come. An ineffable tenderness had softened the pretty lineaments and all trace of disingenuousness was gone. It was as though the woman, which she had hardly become, had sung a lullaby to the child, which she had barely ceased to be, and so a serenity of repose had settled down upon the poor little adventuress. The shadow of the tree had shifted with the higher rise of the moon, leaving Will Brown out in the light; but he no longer took care to screen his rapt regard of his guest, and this may have been becaused he perceived that he was not a consequential factor in producing her placid contentment.

"You nor me hain't held as pretty a pair ez them," whispered Jugg, his exultation over the game asserting itself in his language.

"They'd be winners, sir; winners," Jack asserted, vivaciously.

"My son's a p-r-ince," and Jugg's paternal vanity easily likened his gracefully posed son to some vaguely remembered hero of lime lit theatricals.

"And my daughter's a p-r-i-n-cess," retorted Jack, adopting the other's spelling out whim of speech rather mockingly and with immense emphasis on that syllable which made the word exclusive to femininity.

The two men were not likely to be harmonious in eulogium of their offspring. They were silenced, however, by the youngsters themselves, who began to sing together. It was a ditty with nonsensical words but a captivating melody, and the night air received it with all acoustic kindness, with discrimination, too, for it carried the tuneful notes far beyond the reach of the doggerel rhymes. At the end of the verse what sounded for an instant like an echo, but which developed into a refrain by a third singer, came from the distance. The voice was high and strong, with a strenuous unction seldom heard elsewhere than at a religious camp meeting, and with the unmistakable twang of an Afro-American. Will and Deuce sang another verse and again the approaching voice repeated the chorus with arrose vim. The campers emerged from their tents and wagons, the sentimental loungers at the tree stood up, their fathers joined the increasing group and all watched the persons who were coming into view on mustang ponies.

One of these was the assertive vocalist, and she looked more like a witch than a siren as she rode into the throng. She was a negress, with the sooty blackness of a native African, but without the usual accompanying ugliness of face. Half a century had not bent her stalwart form, and as she alighted from the horse she stood a physically commanding figure, even in a gathering of men. A bright handkerchief turbaned her head and a gaudy shawl wrapped her shoulders.

"I'se glad to see yo'sels, an' I's hopin' my singin' hasn't 'sturbed yo," she said oratorically. "When I heahs music I caint try to hold my gawp—deed I caint. Dough singin' haint my perfes'n'ble 'ployment. I'se a hoedoo fortin' teller."

Her companion was a man of 30, with shaven yellow face, but with none of the facial characteristics of a mulatto. His garb was that of a cowboy. He still sat astride his horse, in silent scrutiny of the company, and this singular eying of the campers would not have passed unnoticed if the negress had not been engrossing the general attention.

"What's your night riding for?" Boss Donald roughly demanded to know. "Are you sure you haven't stolen these horses? I guess you'd better stay with us till morning, to see if somebody doesn't come chasing you."

"Chasing us?" and the yellow man's first utterance was quizzical. "We ain't chased—we chase." He checked himself abruptly, and added in a docile tone: "Oh, we'll stop the night with you if you want us."

"He's my son," the negress volubly resumed. "Deed, fo'ks, he's my son. We's trabblin' tow'd Oklahoma."

"Fortune seeking?" Will Brown suggested.

"An' fortin' telling, boy," and she chuckled over her own wit. "Who wants Queen Sheeb t' prophecy? Er does yo' ruther buy a hoodoo cha'm?"

The superstitious instinct of a gambler spoke out in Jack High. "What you got, auntie?" he asked.

"Genuwin hoodoo luck cha'ms, sah. Nebber fail, sah," and she brought out a handful of small bags. "Made o' rattler skin, sah, an' filled wid seben luckies—hahd to get, sah, an' cheap at a dollah."

"All alike?" and he examined the charm bags with his eyes, seemingly averse to touching the uncanny things.

"Jes' alike, sah—fr'm crow's tongue t' dead chile's toe nail, dey's ebery one got de right seben ingred'nts into 'em. An' dey was put t'gedder wif de true hoodoo cer'mony at de ta'n ob de moon."

Jack chose one of them, put it into his pocket, and handed a paper dollar to Queen Sheeb. Old Jugg Brown bought one, too, and also paid for it with one of the dollars won from Aleck Wiams. The yellow man slid out of his saddle and eyed the money as it was received by the negress. His eagerness was very demonstrative. He took the two notes from her hand and held them up for a close inspection, searching for some peculiarity of their print. Then he became suddenly domineering in manner and dictatorial in tone.

"I want you, and you," he cried, indicating the two men who had bought the charms. "This is counterfeit money, and I've got a warrant for your arrest."

"For my arrest?" gasped Jack.

Old Jugg was dumb with amazement.

"Here's the document," the stranger said, producing a crumpled but still legal looking paper. "It calls for John Doe and Richard Roe, and the names will do for you, I guess. I'm a deputy sheriff and government detective, and you'll let me search you, if you please."

He went at the searching in such a prompt, professional way that the astounded men offered no objection. He first took all the money from Jack High, examining and marking it piece by piece, and then he seized upon Old Jugg Brown's winnings in the same methodical manner.

"How do we know who and what you are?" Boss Donald interposed. "I don't believe I'll let a pair of fortune telling tramps fool with this camp."

"Old Hannah is in the hoodoo line," was the fellow's calm explanation. "I'm only a sort of traveling partner. Of course I ain't her son, and of course the yellow on my face is butternut stain. I've been sent to do this job neat, and I've done it. Here's my credentials," and he submitted a metal shield and a document to Donald.

"But you've blundered, my capable friend," said Jack, with professional calm. "The money may be bogus; I don't know, for we have only just won it at poker from Mr. Wiams."

"That's a fact," Jugg hoarsely added; "we just won it from Mr. Wiams."

Aleck Wiams walked into the assemblage. "What's that you're saying?" he exclaimed. "You've been playing poker with me? Why, I haven't touched a card in months. Are you, Jugg—where do you get money to start in with? If you two are in a scrape it won't help you out to go to lying. I was fast asleep from 8 o'clock till I heard the singing."

CHAPTER III.

THE CANVAS JAIL.

"Father, this young lady is Miss Wallace."

One of the prairie wagons was made a prison for the two captives. The walls were only canvas, and the entrance had nothing more like bars than the crossings of cord that tied the flaps together. But Deputy Sheriff and Detective Alloway re-enforced the cloth with human safeguards. Boss Donald was convinced of the prisoners' probable guilt, and he felt that it was right to lend four workmen to the duty of patroling around the wagon until morning. He had no sympathy for Jack High, and not much for Old Jugg Brown; and his rude kindliness to Deuce and Will found expression in a brusque command to clear away from the vehicle containing their despised fathers.

"I'm sorry for you, Will," he said, gripping the young man's shoulders with his brawny hands and scowling into his face, "but you can't do anything for the old man to-night. As for you, bile," and he grasped her wrist with scarcely lessened force, "what you want to do is to go to sleep. Now, don't cry."

There was not the faintest suggestion of tears in her frightened eyes, and the suggestion that they would shut themselves in sleep was so absurd that she could almost smile at it.

"Can't I stay with dad?" she pleaded.

Aleck Wiams had been active and insistent in helping Alloway to establish a sure jail, and to Deuce's request he peremptorily said: "No, you can't. We don't propose to give him your sharp wits to help his own in some scheme to escape. You nor Will can't go near them till morning."

"Look here, Mr. Donald," the girl persisted, ignoring Wiams, "you're all making a mistake. My dad is a gambler, and he can't be called a circumspect gentleman; but he isn't a counterfeiter and he wouldn't cheat any man out of a nickel except in the way of cards. Besides, he hadn't any money, good or bad, when we got here. You know that," and she appealed to Will Brown.

"It is so," Will assented earnestly. "He had to get a dollar from me."

Wiams laughed viciously. He had not known before how small an amount it had been possible for him to win in the game, and he angrily exclaimed: "Your worthless parent—he hadn't a cent either, I suppose, but we find his pockets full of counterfeit money just the same. Where did it come from, I'd like to know?"

"He says he won it from you," said Will.

"Tell me how—in this game that never was played—how it was that he could start into it without a cent to play with?" Wiams excitedly argued.

"Better be off to bed, my boy," Boss Donald said; "you can't do anything to-night. Off with you!"

Will Brown obeyed the last emphatic command, so far at least as to slowly quit the spot. Deuce would have followed him, but the hand of Donald was still on her wrist. "Little girl," he said, with abated harshness, "you're going to get right into the hammock in my tent and stay there till daylight. I can't use my quarters to-night, anyhow, and you're welcome to them."

There was force enough in his one arm to conquer her hardest resistance, and so she made none by either word or motion, but let him lead her to a tent, which was high and square, for it served the boss as a daytime office as well as for sleeping quarters. It had no occupant until they entered. From one end pole to the other a hammock was strung. It was as high as the man's breast, and therefore about level with the girl's chin. Without a word he lifted her in his arms and laid her in the suspended couch.

"Now there's no use fretting," he said, with what was gentleness in such a man accustomed to giving gruff orders to gangs of laborers; "you go to sleep, do you hear?" and he set the hammock to swinging like a cradle. "Nothing shall happen to your father before morning—nor to you. Good night."

"Thank you," she responded faintly. "Good night."

She lay alone, gazing wide eyed and sleepless at the canvas roof, with her mind in an absolutely thoughtless condition. The blow had stunned her, and she only slowly regained her accustomed mental activity. The sky became filled with drifting black clouds, and it was at increasingly rare intervals that they let the moon shine through. At one of these times, following a few minutes of darkness, the illumination was so sudden and brilliant that the change roused her from a lethargy which might otherwise have lulled her to sleep. An instant of daze, of confusion as to where she was, and then she saw a man sharply shadowed on the side of the tent. It was a startingly vivid silhouette. The figure's pantomime was that of cautious stealth, and it was her first alarmed belief that it was inside the tent. But it was noiseless and it disappeared as suddenly as it had come. She stared at the blank fabric. Then the clouds shut off the light again and she was left in a gloom that was almost black.

"Sist!" came to her alert ears as she dimly saw that the entrance to the tent was being cautiously opened. "Don't be scared, and don't make any noise," was whispered.

She swung her feet over the edge of the hammock and sat up. Instantly the intruder was close to her, with his hands clasping hers to keep her still, and she saw that he was Will Brown.

"I've come to talk with you, Deuce," he said; "I don't know why, for I don't see that we can do a thing yet."

"I'm glad you've come," and she held hard to his hands, like a child nodfully awakened from a nightmare. "I was lonesome and scared."

"But we can at least come to an understanding about this matter—this arrest. I am sure my father didn't know the money was counterfeit. He is a drunkard—as much of a sot by spells as circumstances permit, but I never knew him to do a dishonest act. Thirst for whisky would tempt him to indiscretions, but to nothing so methodical or calculating as to deal in bogus bills. It isn't in him, Deuce; he wouldn't be equal to it if he tried." He stopped with an indication that politeness prevented him from going on.

"But you're thinking that my father has brains and badness for it. What kind of an oath can I take, Will Brown, to make you take my word for the truth?"

"Whatever you tell me—now—here—I will believe you."

Their hands were yet clasped together, and as he stood before her, while she bent her head in her earnestness to see in the darkness whether he looked serious or mocking, their faces almost touched.

"Then I tell you that my father is innocent about this bad money. We hadn't so much as a dime between us when we got here. He had lost in an unlucky game all the money we had started with from Omaha. That's why we came along here no better than tramps. He surely—surely brought no counterfeit bills. I am not saying he's what he ought to be, and I'm afraid it's likely he's used a bad bill if he had it. But, no—no—don't think he is a criminal. We're very, very intimate—dad and I, and he's an honorable man in his sort of way. We're adventurers, but upon my word we are not reprobates. My mother is watching us from up yonder, you know, and she would see it if dad was to take me to disgrace. He promised her he wouldn't, and he hasn't."

She was weeping now, and when she loosed one hand to wipe away the tears Will's disengaged arm encircled her protectingly. It was wholly a caress of sympathy and faith, as she somehow understood, and in a moment she was sobbing, with her face buried on his shoulder.

"There—there. Don't cry any more," he conjured her, and then went on with a good reason for continued weeping: "You can't help your father in his predicament, and"——

"Don't say that," she interrupted, slipping down from the hammock and standing with every fiber tense for action. "I must help him, whether I can or not."

"Then let us get at the mystery of the case if we can." Will admonished her, "so as to know what is best to attempt. We are convinced that the bogus money was won from Aleck Wiams, are we not? and therefore we must conclude that Wiams is the real criminal. The officer, Alloway, says the government got information of a quantity of counterfeit treasury notes being sent into this region. He was detailed to search them out. He found that they were being circulated along the route of this telegraph expedition, but very sparingly. Then he hit on the ruse of pretending to