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CHAPTER XVII.
In the Shadow of the Hills.

THE afternoon of the third day out from the Moonstone ranch Colie picked the roan pony Yuma near a water hole in the desert. After he had eaten he studied the rough map that Overland had given him. There to the south was the desert town. He had passed that, as directed, skirting it widely. There to the east were the hills. Somewhere behind them were the hidden canyon and Overland Red.

Stiff and tired from his long ride, he stretched himself for a short rest. He dozed. Something touched his foot. It was the rita with which he had picketed the pony. He meant to travel again that night. He would sleep a little while. The horse, circling the picket, would be sure to awaken him again.

He slept heavily. The Yuma colt stood with rounded nostrils sniffing the night air. The pony faced in the direction of the distant town. She knew that another horse and rider were coming toward her through the darkness. They were far off, but coming.

For a long time she stood, stamping impatiently at intervals. Finally she grew restive. The oncoming horse had stopped. The other animal, the man, had dismounted and was coming toward her on foot. She could not see through the starlit blanket of night, but she knew.

The man-thing drew a little nearer.

The pony swerved as if about to run, but hesitated, ears flattened, curious, half belligerent.

That afternoon Silent Saunders, riding along the border of the desert town, had seen a strange horse and rider far out, away from the road and evidently heading for the water hole. Saunders rode into town, borrowed a pair of fieldglasses and rode out again. He at once recognized the roan pony as the Oro outlaw. But the rider? He was not so sure. He would investigate.

The fact that he saw no glimmer of fire as he now approached the water hole made him doubly cautious. Near, he crouched behind a bush. He threw a pebble at the pony. She circled the picket, awakening Colie, who spoke to her steadily. Saunders crept back toward his horse. He knew that voice. He would track the young rider to the range and beyond—to the gold. He rode back to town through the night, entered the saloon and beckoned to a belated lounge.

Shivering in the morning starlight, Colie arose and saddled the pony. He rode in the general direction of the range.

Suddenly the shadows of the hills pushed back. Almost instantly he faced the quick rise of the range. Out of the silence came the slithering step of some one walking in the sand. The darkness seemed to expand.

Overland Red stood before him, silent, alert, anxious. "You, Chico?" he asked.

"Sure. Hello, Red."

"Anybody see you come across yesterday?"

"Not that I know of. I kept away from the town."

"Your boss shod?"

"Yes; all around. Why?"

"Nothin'. I'm sufferin' glad to see you again. When we get on top of the hills you take the left trail and keep on down. You can't miss the canyon. I'll leave you here. I got to stay here a spell to see that nothin' else comes up but the sun this mornin'."

"All right, Red. Your pardner down there?"

"Yep. Whistle when you get up to the meadow in the canyon. Billy'll be lookin' for you."

"Any trouble lately?"

"Nope. But Billy's got a hunch, though. He says he feels it in the air."

When Colie arrived at the camp Overland was there waiting. Winthrop and he greeted Colie cordially. "Short cut," explained Overland, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "No hoss trail, though. Too steep."

Faint dawn lights were shifting along the canyon walls as they had breakfast. As the morning sunlight spread to their camp Colie's natural curiosity in regard to Overland's partner was satisfied. He saw a straight, slender figure in flannel shirt and khaki. The gray eyes were peculiarly keen and humorous. Winthrop was not a little like his sister Anne in poise and coloring. The hands were nervously slender and aristocratic, albeit roughened and scarred by toil. There was a suggestion of dash and go about Winthrop that appealed to Colie.

"There's spare blankets in the tent. Roll in for a snooze, Colie. Billy and me'll pack your saddle and stuff up here later."

"I guess I will. You might sponge

Yuma's back a little, Red. She's brought me close to 200 miles in the last three days."

"Sure, Bo! I'll brush her teeth and manure her toe nails if you say the word. I guess that hoss has kind of made a hit with you."

Colie yawned. "Mebby. But it isn't in it with the hit she'll make with you if you try to take up her feet. She's half sister to a shot of dynamite. I'm only telling you so she won't kick your fool head off."

"You talk like most a full size man," said Overland.

Down at the meadow Overland looked at the colt and shook his head. "He is correct," he said succinctly. "That hoss don't welcome handlin' worth a bean."

Winthrop's silence rather stirred Overland's sensitive pride in his horsemanship. "Course I broke and rode hundreds like her down in Mex. But then I was paid for doin' it. It was my business then. Now mine and educatin' Colie is my business, and a busted neck wouldn't help any."

Winthrop realized for the first time that Overland's supreme interest in life was Colie's welfare. Heretofore the paternal note had not been evident. Winthrop had imagined them chums, friends, tramps together. They were more than that. Overland considered Colie an adopted son.

That afternoon, toward evening, Colie arose, refreshed and eager to inspect the claim. He could hear the faint click of pick and shovel up the canyon. He stretched himself, drank from the stream and sauntered toward the meadow. He would see to his pony first.

He found the horse had been picketed afresh by Overland when he had come for the saddle. He was returning toward camp when he heard a slight noise behind him—the noise a man's boot makes stepping on a pebble that turns beneath his weight.

Colie wheeled quickly, saw nothing unusual and turned again toward the camp. Then he hesitated. He would look down the canyon. He realized that he was unarmed. Then he grew ashamed of his hesitancy. He picked his way down the stream. A buzzard circled far above the cliffs. The air hummed with invisible bees in the rank wild clover. He peered past the next bend. A short distance below stood a riderless horse. The bridle was trailing. For an instant Colie did not realize the significance of the animal waiting patiently for its rider. Then, like the flash of a speeding flin, he saw it all—his pony's tracks up the

canyon, the rider who had undoubtedly seen him crossing to the water hole and who had waited until daylight to follow the tracks, who had dismounted and was probably in ambush watching him. He summoned all his reserve courage. Turning away, he remarked, distinctly, naturally, casually: "Thought I heard something. Must have been the water."

He walked slowly back to the notch in the canyon wall. Stepping through it, he continued on up the stream. A few paces beyond the notch and a face appeared in the cleft rock, watching him. The watcher seemed in doubt. Colie's action had been natural enough. Had he seen the horse? The hidden face grew crafty. The eyes grew cold. The watcher tapped the side of the cliff with his revolver butt. The noise was slight, but in that place of sensitive echoes loud enough to be heard a long way up the canyon. Then it was that Colie made a courageous but terrible mistake. He heard the sound and seemed to realize that it was made intentionally—to attract his attention. Yet he was not sure. He kept on, ignoring the sound. Had he not suspected some one was in the canyon to have glanced back would have been the most natural thing in the world. The watcher realized this. He knew that the other had heard him—suspected his presence and was making a daring bluff.

"Got to stop that," muttered the watcher, and he raised his hand.

The imprisoned report rolled and echoed like mountain thunder. Colie threw up his arms and lurched forward.

Below in the canyon clattered the hoofs of the speeding horse. The rider, still holding his six gun, muzzle up, glanced back. "I didn't care particular about gettin' him, but gettin' the kid hits the red head between the eyes. I guess I'm about even now." And Silent Saunders holstered his gun, swung out of the canyon and spurred down the mountain, not toward the desert town, but toward Gophertown, some thirty miles to the north. He had found the claim. The desert town folk he had used to good advantage. They had paid his expenses while he trailed Overland and Colie. They had even guaranteed him protection from the

(Continued on page 27.)

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