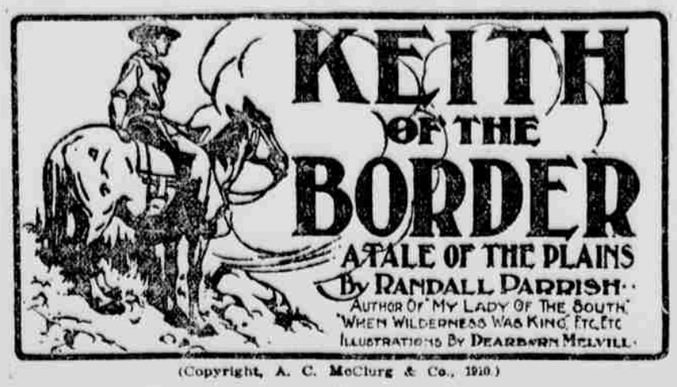

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CHAPTER XXXI.

The Search for the Missing.

The note of unrestrained joy of relief in the woman's voice rang through the room, stilling all else, and causing those who heard to forget for an instant the sterner purpose of their gathering. Fairbain bent over her, like a fat guardian angel, patting her shoulder, her eyes so blurred with tears as to be practically sightless, yet still turned questioningly upon Waite. The sheriff was first to recover speech, and a sense of duty.

"Then this lets Miss Maclaire out of the conspiracy charge," he said, gravely, "but it doesn't make it any brighter for Hawley so far as I can see—there's a robbery charge against him if nothing else. Any one here know where the fellow is?"

For a moment no one answered, although Keith took a step forward, reminded instantly of Hope's predicament. Before he could speak, however, Christie looked up, with swift gesture pushing back her loosened hair.

"He was to have met me at the theater to-night," she said, her voice trembling, "but was not there when I came out; he—he said he had important news for me."

"And failed to show up—did he send no message?"

Doctor Fairbain was waiting for me instead. He said that Mr. Hawley was called suddenly out of town."

The eyes of the sheriff turned to Fairbain, whose face grew redder than usual, as he shifted his gaze toward Keith.

"That was a lie," he confessed, lamely. "I—I was told to say that."

"Just a moment, Sheriff," and Keith stood before them, his voice clear and convincing. "My name is Keith, and I have unavoidably been mixed up in this affair from the beginning. Just now I can relieve the doctor of his embarrassment. Miss Hope Waite and I have been associated together in an effort to solve this mystery. This evening, taking advantage of the remarkable resemblance existing between herself and Miss Maclaire, Miss Hope decided upon a mask—"

"What's that," Waite broke in excitedly. "Is Hope here?"

"Yes, has been for a week; we've had all the police force of Sheridan hunting you."

The old man stared at the speaker, open-mouthed, and muttered something about Fort Hays, but Keith, paying little attention to him, hurried on with his story.

"As I say, she decided upon impersonating Christie here, hoping in this way to learn more regarding Hawley's plans. We had discovered that the two were to meet after the evening performance at the stage door of the Trocadero. I escorted Hope there, dressed as near like Miss Maclaire as possible, and left her inside the vestibule waiting for 'Black Bart' to appear. At the head of the alley I ran into Fairbain, told him something of the circumstances, and persuaded him to escort Miss Christie back to the hotel. He was not very hard to persuade. Well, Hawley came, and Hope met him; they went out of the alleyway together arm in arm, talking pleasantly, and turned this way toward the hotel. The doctor and I both saw and heard them. I was delayed not to exceed two minutes, speaking a final word to Fairbain, and when I reached the street they had disappeared. I have hunted them everywhere without finding a trace—I have even been through the resorts. She has not returned to the hotel, and I burst in upon you here hoping that Miss Maclaire might have some information."

She shook her head, and Waite, glaring impotently at the two of them, swore sharply.

"Good God, man! my girl! Hope, alone with that damn villain. Come on, Sheriff; we've got to find her. Wait, though!" and he strode almost menacingly across the room. "First, I want to know who the devil you are?"

Keith straightened up, looking directly into the fierce questioning eyes.

"I have told you my name—Jack Keith," he replied, quietly. "Doctor Fairbain knows something of me, but for your further information I will add that when we met before I was Captain Keith, Third Virginia Cavalry, and bearing dispatches from Longstreet to Stonewall Jackson."

The gruff old soldier, half-crazed by the news of his daughter's peril, the gleam of his eyes still revealing uncontrolled temper, stared at the younger face fronting him; then slowly he held out his hand.

"Keith—Keith," he repeated, as though bringing back the name with an effort. "By God, that's so—old Jefferson Keith's boy—killed at Antietam. And you know Hope?"

"Yes, General."

He looked about as though dazed, and the sheriff broke in not unkindly.

"Well, Waite, if we are going to search for your daughter we better be at it. Come on, all of you; Miss Maclaire will be safe enough here alone."

He took hold of Keith's arm, questioning him briefly as they passed down the hall. On the stairs the latter took his turn, still confused by what he had just heard.

"Who is Miss Maclaire?" he asked.

"Phyllis Gale."

"Of course, but who is Phyllis Gale? What has she to do with General Waite? His daughter has told me she never heard of any one by that name."

"Well, Keith, the old man has never told me very much; he's pretty close-mouthed, except for swearing, but I've read his papers, and picked up a point or two. I reckon the daughter, Miss Hope, maybe never heard a word about it, but the boy—the one that was shot—must have stumbled onto the story and repeated it to Hawley. That's what set that fellow going. It seems Mrs. Waite's maiden name was Pierpont, and when she was seventeen years old she was married to the son of a rich North Carolina planter. The fellow was a drunken, dissolute, good-for-nothing. They had a daughter born—this Phyllis—and when the child was three years old her father, in a fit of drunken rage, ran away, and to spite his wife took the little girl with him. All efforts to trace them failed, and the mother finally secured a divorce and, two years later, married Willis Waite. Waite, of course, knew these facts, but probably they were never told the children. When the father of Mrs. Waite's first husband died, he left all his large property to his grandchild, providing she could be found and identified within a certain time, failing which the property was to be distributed among certain designated charities. Waite was named sole administrator. Well, the old man took as much interest in it as though it was his own girl, but made mighty little progress. He did discover that the father had taken the child to St. Louis and left here there with a woman named Raymond, but after the woman died the girl completely disappeared."

"Then Miss Maclaire is Hope Waite's half-sister?"

"That's the way it looks now."

"And Hawley merely happened to stumble on to the right party?"

"Sure; it's clear enough how that came about. The boy told him about the lost heiress his father was searching after, and showed him his sister's picture. 'Black Bart' instantly recognized her resemblance to Christie Maclaire, and thought he saw a good chance for some easy money. He needed the papers, however, to ascertain exactly the terms of the will, and what would be necessary for the identification. He never intended to go into court, but hoped to either get Waite out of the way, or else convince him that Christie was the girl, relying on her gratitude for his profits. When Waite played into his hands by coming to Carson City the chance was too good to be lost. I'm not sure he meant to kill him, but he did mean to have those papers at any cost. Probably you know the rest—the girl was easy, because she was so ignorant of her parentage, and nothing prevented Hawley from winning except that Waite got mad and decided to fight. That knocked over the whole thing."

They were outside now, and the first touch of the cool night air, the first glance up and down the noisy street, brought Keith to himself, his mind ready to grapple with the problem of Hope's disappearance. It seemed to him he had already looked everywhere, yet there was nothing to do except to continue the search, only more systematically. The sheriff assumed control—clear headed, and accustomed to that sort of thing—calling in Hickock and his deputies to assist, and fairly combing the town from one end to the other. Not a rat could have slipped unobserved through the net he dragged down that long street, or its intersecting alleys—but it was without result; nowhere was there found a trace of either the gambler or his companion.

They dug into saloons, bagnios, dance-halls, searching back rooms and questioning inmates; they routed out every occupant of the hotel, invaded boarding houses, and explored shacks and tents, indifferent to the protests of those disturbed—but without result. They found several who knew Hawley, others who had seen the two together passing by the lighted windows of the Trocadero, but beyond that—nothing. Convinced, at last, that the parties sought were not alive in Sheridan, and beginning to fear the worst, the searchers separated, and began spreading forth over the black surrounding prairie, and by the light of lanterns seeking any semblance of trail. There was no lack of volunteers for this work, but it was daylight before the slightest clue presented itself. Keith, with the sheriff and two or three others, had groped their way outward until, with the first flush of dawn, they found themselves at the opening of a small rocky ravine, near the foot of "Boots Hill." Peering down into its still shadowed depths, they discerned what appeared like a body lying there motionless. Keith sprang down beside it, and turned the rigid form over until the dead face was revealed in the wan light—it was that of the red moustached Scott. He staggered back at the recognition, barely able to ejaculate.

"Here, Sheriff! This is one of Hawley's men!"

The sheriff was bending instantly above the corpse, searching for the truth.

"You know the fellow?"

"Yes, his name was Scott."

"Well, he's been dead some hours, at least six I should say; shot just above the eye, and good Heavens! look here, Keith, at the size of this bullet wound; that's no man's gun in this country—no more than a '32' I'd say."

"Miss Waite had a small revolver. She must have shot the fellow. But why did they leave the body here to be discovered?"

The sheriff arose to his feet, prowling about in the brightening glow of the dawn.

"They were in a hurry to get away, and knew he wouldn't be found before morning. A six hours' start means a good deal. They did drag him back out of sight—look here. This was where the struggle took place, and here is where the man fell," tracing it out upon the ground. "The girl put up a stiff fight, too—see where they dragged her up the path. From the footprints there must have been half a dozen in the party. Get back out of the way, Sims, while I follow their trail."

It was plain enough, now they had daylight to assist them, and led around the edge of the hill. A hundred feet away they came to where horses had been standing, the trampled sod evidencing they must have been there for some considerable time. Keith and the sheriff circled out until they finally struck the trail of the party, which led forth southwest across the prairie.

"Seven horses, one being led light," said the former. "That was Scott's, probably."

"That's the whole story," replied the sheriff, staring off toward the bare horizon, "and the cusses have at least six hours the start with fresh horses." He turned around. "Well, boys, that takes 'em out of my bailiwick, I reckon. Some of the rest of you will have to run that gang down."

CHAPTER XXXII.

Fairbain and Christie.

Dr. Fairbain had originally joined the searching party, fully as eager as Keith himself to run down the renegade Hawley, but after an hour of resultless effort, his entire thought shifted to the woman they had left alone at the hotel. He could not, as yet, fully grasp the situation, but he remained loyal to the one overpowering truth that he loved Christie Maclaire. Fairbain's nature was rough, original, yet loyal to the core. He had lived all his life long in army camps, and upon the frontier, and his code of honor was extremely simple. It never once occurred to him that Christie's profession was not of the highest, or that her life and associations in any way unfitted her for the future. To his mind she was the one and only woman. His last memory of her, as the little party of men filed out of that room, haunted him until he finally dropped out of the search and drifted back toward the hotel.

It was a late hour, yet it was hardly likely the woman had retired. Her excitement, her interest in the pursuit, would surely prevent that; moreover, he was certain he saw a light still burning in her room, as he looked up from the black street below. Nevertheless he hesitated, uncertain of his reception. Bluff, emphatic, never afraid to face a man in his life, his heart now beat fiercely as he endeavored to muster the necessary courage. Far down the dark street some roysterer fired a shot, and sudden fearlest he might be sought after professionally sent the doctor hurriedly within, and up the stairs. He stood, just outside her door, quaking like a child, the perspiration beading his forehead, but a light streamed through the transom, and he could plainly hear movements within. At last, in a sudden spasm of courage, he knocked softly. Even in that noisy spot she heard instantly, opening the door without hesitation, and standing fully dressed within. She was no longer a discouraged, sobbing girl, but an aroused, intent woman, into whose pathetic, lonely life there had come a new hope. She appeared younger, fairer, with the light shimmering in her hair and her eyes smiling welcome.

"Oh, Doctor," and her hands were thrust out towards him. "I am glad you have come. Somehow, I thought you would, and I have wanted so to talk to some one—to you."

"To me! Do you really mean that, Miss Christie?"

"Yes, I really mean that, you great bear of a man," and the girl laughed lightly, dragging him into the room and closing the door. "Why, who else could I expect to come to-night? You were the only one really good to me. You—you acted as if you believed in me all the time—"

"I did, Christie; you bet I did," broke in the delighted doctor, every nerve tingling. "I'd 'a' cleaned out that whole gang if you'd only said so, but I reckon now it was better to let them tell all they knew. It was like a thunder storm clearing the atmosphere."

"Oh, it was, indeed! Now I know who I am—who I am! Isn't that simply glorious? Sit down, Doctor Fairbain, there in the big chair where I can see your face. I want to talk, talk, talk; I want to ask questions, a thousand questions; but it wouldn't do any good to ask them of you, would it? You don't know anything about my family, do you?"

"Not very much, I am afraid, only that you have got an almighty pretty half-sister," admitted the man, emphatically, "and old Waite possesses the vilest temper ever given a human being. He's no blood kin to you, though."

"No, but he is awfully good underneath, isn't he?"

"Got a heart of pure gold, old Waite. Why, I've seen him cry like a baby over one of his men that got hurt."

"Have you known him, then, for a long while?"

"Ever since the Spring of '61. I was brigaded with him all through the war, and had to cut a bullet or so out of his hide before it ended. If there was ever a fight, Willis Waite was sure to get his share. He could swear some then, but he's improved since, and I reckon now he could likely claim the championship."

"Did—did you know my mother also?" and Christie leaned forward, her eyes suddenly grown misty. "I haven't even the slightest memory of her."

The doctor's heart was tender, and he was swift to respond, reaching forth and grasping the hand nearest him. He had made love before, yet somehow this was different; he felt half afraid of this woman, and it was a new sensation altogether, and not unpleasant.

"I saw her often enough in those days, but not since. She was frequently in camp, a very sweet-faced woman; you have her eyes and hair, as I remember. Waite ought to have recognized you at first sight. By Heavens! that was what made me so infernally mad, the mulish obstinacy of the old fool. Your mother used to come to the hospital tent, too; one of the best nurses I ever saw. I thought she was a beauty then, but she's some older by this time," he paused regretfully. "You see, I'm no spring chicken, myself."

Her eyes were upon his face, a slight flush showing in either cheek, and she made no effort to withdraw

"You Know What I Mean—That I Love You."

her imprisoned hand.

"You are just a nice age," with firm conviction. "Boys are tiresome, and I think a little gray in the hair is an improvement. Oh, you mustn't imagine I say this just to please you—I have always thought so, since—well, since I grew up. Besides, fleshy men generally look young, because they are so good natured, perhaps. How old are you, Doctor?"

"It isn't the gray hairs I mind, either," he admitted hesitatingly, "but I'm too darned bald-headed. Oh, I ain't so old, for I was only thirty-five when the war broke out. I was so thin then I could hardly cast a shadow. I've changed some since," casting his eyes admiringly downward, "and got quite a figure. I was forty-three last month."

"That isn't old; that's just right."

"I've been afraid you looked on me as being an old fogy."

"I should say not," indignantly. "Why should you ever think that?"

"Well, there were so many young fellows hanging about."

"Who?"

"Oh, Keith, and Hawley, and that bunch of officers from the fort; you never had any time to give me."

She laughed again, her fingers tightening in their clasp on his hand.

"Why, how foolish. Hawley is older than you are, and I was only playing with Keith. Surely you must know that now. And as to the officers, they were just fun. You see in my profession, one has to be awfully nice to everybody."

"But didn't you really care for Hawley?" he insisted, bluntly probing for facts.

"He—he interested me," admitted the girl, hesitatingly, her eyes darkening with sudden anger. "He lied and I believed him—I would have believed any one who came with such a story. Oh, Dr. Fairbain," and she clung to him now eagerly, "you cannot realize how hungry I have been for what he brought me. I wanted so to know the truth of my birth. Oh, I hated this life!" She flung her disengaged hand into the air, with a gesture expressive of disgust. "I was crazy to get away from it. That was what made the man look good to me—he—he promised so much. You will believe me, won't you? Oh, you must; I am going to make you. I am a singer in music halls; I was brought up to that life from a little girl, and of course, I know what you Western men think of us as a class. Hawley showed it in his whole manner toward me, and I resented it; just for that, deep down in my heart, I hated him. I know it now, now that I really understand his purpose; but somehow, when I was with him he seemed to fascinate me, to make me do just as he willed. But you have never been that way; you—you have acted as though I was somebody—somebody nice, and not just a music-hall singer. Perhaps it's just your way, and maybe deep down you don't think I'm any better than the other do, but—but I want you to think I am, and I am going to tell you the truth, and you must believe me—I am a good girl."

"Great God! of course you are," he blurted out. "Don't you suppose I know? That isn't what has been bothering me, lassie. Why, I'd 'a' fought any buck who'd 'a' sneered at you. What I wanted to know was, whether or not you really cared for any of those duffers. Can you tell me that, Christie?"

She lifted her eyes to his face, her lips parted.

"I can answer anything you ask."

"And you do not care for them?"

"No."

He drew his breath sharply, his round face rosy.

"Then you have got to listen to me, for I'm deadly in earnest. I'm an old, rough, bald-headed fool that don't know much about women—I never thought before I'd ever want to—but you can bet on one thing, I'm square. Anybody in this town will tell you I'm square. They'll tell you that whatever I says goes. I've never run around much with women; somehow I never exactly liked the kind I've come up against, and maybe they didn't feel any particular interest in me. I didn't cut much shine as a ladies' man, but, I reckon now, it's only because the right one hadn't happened along. She is here now, though, all right, and I knew it the very first time I set eyes on her. Oh, you roped and tied me all right the first throw. Maybe I did get you and that half sister mixed up a bit, but just the same you were the one I really wanted. Hope's all right; she's a mighty fine girl, but you are the one for me, Christie. Could you—could you care for such a duffer as I am?"

Her lips were smiling and so were her eyes, but it was a pleading smile.

"I—I don't think it would be very hard," she admitted, "not if you really wanted me to."

"You know what I mean—that I love you—wish you to be my wife?"

"I supposed that was it—that—that you wanted me."

"Yes, and—and you will love?"

Her head dropped slowly, so slowly he did not realize the significance of the action until her lips touched his hand.

"I do," she said; "you are the best man in the world."

Fairbain could not move, could not seem to realize what it all meant. The outcome had been so sudden, so surprising, that all power of expression deserted him. In bewilderment he lifted her face and looked into her eyes. Perhaps she realized—with the swift intuition of a clever woman—the man's perplexity, for instantly she led his mind to other things.

"But let us not talk of ourselves any more, tonight. There is so much I wish to know; so much that ought to be done." She sprang to her feet. "Why, it is almost shameful for us to stay here, selfishly happy, while others are in such trouble. Have they discovered Hope?"

"No; we scoured the whole town and found no trace. Now they are outside on the prairie, but there can be little chance of their picking up a trail before daylight."

"And Hawley?"

"He has vanished also; without doubt they are together. What do you suppose he can want of her? How do you imagine he ever got her to go with him? She isn't that sort of a girl."

She shook her head, shivering a little.

"He must have mistaken her for me—perhaps has not even yet discovered his mistake. But what it all means, or how he gained her consent to go with him, I cannot conceive."

She stood with hands clasped, staring out of the window.

"There is a little light showing already," she exclaimed, pointing. "See, yonder. Oh, I trust they will find her alive, and unhurt. That man, I believe, is capable of any crime. But couldn't you be of some help? Why should you remain here with me? I am in no danger."

"You really wish me to go, Christie?"

"Not that way—not that way," and she turned impulsively, with hands outstretched. "Of course I want you here with me, but I want you to help bring Hope back."

He drew her to him, supremely happy now, every feeling of embarrassment lost in complete certainty of possession.

"And I will," he said solemnly. "Wherever they may have gone I shall follow. I am going now, dear, and when I come back you'll be glad to see me?"

"Shall I?" her eyes uplifted to his own, and swimming in tears. "I will be the happiest girl in all the world, I reckon. Oh, what a night this has been! What a wonderful night! It has given me a name, a mother, and the man I love."

He kissed her, not in passion, but in simple tenderness, and as he turned away she sank upon her knees at the window, with head bowed upon the sill. At the door he paused and looked back, and she turned and smiled at him. Then he went out, and she knelt there silently, gazing forth into the dawn, her eyes blurred with tears—facing a new day, and a new life.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Following the Trail.

The withdrawal of the sheriff merely stimulated Keith to greater activity. It was clearly evident the fugitives were endeavoring with all rapidity possible to get beyond where the hand of law could reach them—their trail striking directly across the plains into the barren southwest was proof of this purpose. Yet it was scarcely likely they would proceed very far in that direction, as such a course would bring them straight into the heart of the Indian country, into greater danger than that from which they fled. Keith felt no doubt that Hawley intended making for Carson City, where he could securely hide the girl, and where he possessed friends to rally to his defence, even an influence over the officers of the law. The one thing which puzzled him most was the man's object in attempting so desperate a venture. Did he know his prisoner was Hope Waite? or did he still suppose he was running off with Christie Maclaire? Could some rumor of Waite's appeal to the courts have reached the gambler, frightened him, and caused him to attempt this desperate effort at escape? and did he bear Miss Maclaire with him, hoping to keep her safely concealed until he was better prepared to come out in open fight? If this was the actual state of affairs then it would account for much otherwise hard to explain. The actress would probably not have been missed, or, at least, seriously sought after, until she failed to appear at the theater the following evening. This delay would give the fugitives a start of twenty hours, or even more, and practically assure their safety. Besides, in the light of Waite's application to the sheriff for assistance, it was comparatively easy to conceive of a valid reason why Hawley should vanish, and desire, likewise, to take Miss Maclaire with him. But there was no apparent occasion for his forcible abduction of Hope. Of course, he might have done so from a suddenly aroused fit of anger at some discovery the girl had made, yet everything pointed rather to a deliberate plan. Both horses and men were certainly waiting there under orders, Hawley's adherents in charge, and every arrangement perfected in advance. Clearly enough the gambler had planned it all out before he ever went to the Trocadero—no doubt the completion of these final arrangements was what delayed his appearance at the hotel. If this was all true, then it must have been Christie, and not Hope, he purposed bearing away with him, and the latter was merely a victim of her masquerade.

What would result when the man discovered his mistake? Such a discovery could not be delayed long, although the girl was quick-witted, and would surely realize that her personal safety depended upon keeping up the deception to the last possible moment. Yet the discovery must finally occur, and there was no guessing what form Hawley's rage would assume when he found himself baffled, and all his plans for a fortune overturned. Keith fully realized Hope's peril, and his own helplessness to serve her in this emergency was agony. As they hurried back to the town, he briefly reviewed these conclusions with Waite and Fairbain, all alike agreeing there was nothing remaining for them to do except to take up the trail. The fugitives had already gained too great an advantage to be overhauled, but they might be traced to whatever point they were heading for. In spite of the start being so far to the west, Keith was firmly convinced that their destination would prove to be Carson City.

Procuring horses at the corral, their forces augmented by two volunteers—both men of experience—Keith, Waite, Fairbain and Neb departed without delay, not even pausing to eat but taking the necessary food with them. The sun had barely risen when they took up the trail, Keith, and a man named Bristoe, slightly in advance, their keen eyes marking every slight sign left for guidance across the bare plain. It was a comparatively easy trail to follow, leading directly into the southwest, the pony tracks cutting into the sod as though the reckless riders had bunched together, their horses trotting rapidly. Evidently no attempt had been made at concealment, and this served to convince the pursuers that Hawley still believed his captive to be Miss Maclaire, and that her disappearance would not be suspected until after nightfall. In that case the trail could not be discovered before the following morning, and with such a start, pursuit would be useless. Tireless, steadily, scarcely speaking except upon the business in hand, the pursuers pressed forward at an easy trot, Keith, in spite of intense anxiety, with the remembrance of old cavalry days to guide

Keith Bent Over to Study the Tracks.

him, insisting upon sparing the horses as much as possible. This was to be a stern chase and a long one, and it was impossible to tell when they could procure remounts. The constant swerving of the trail westward seemed to shatter his earlier theory, and brought him greater uneasiness. Finally he spoke of it to the old plainsman beside him.

"What do you suppose those fellows are heading so far west for, Ben? They are taking a big risk of running into hostiles."

"Oh, I don't know," returned the other gravely, lifting his eyes to the far-off sky line. "I reckon from the news thet come in last night from Hays, thar ain't no Injuns a rangin' thet way jist now. They're too blame busy out on the Arickaree. Maybe them fellers heerd the same story, an' thet's what makes 'em so bold."

"What story? I've heard nothing."

"Why, it's like this, Cap," drawling out the words, "leastways, thet's how it come inter Sheridan; 'Sandy' Forsythe an' his outfit, mostly plainsmen, started a while ago across Solomon River an' down Beaver Crick, headin' fer Fort Wallace. Over on the Arickaree, the whole damned Injun outfit jumped 'em. From all I heerd, thar must a bin nigh onto three thousan' o' the varmints, droppin' on 'em all at oncet, hell-bent-fer-election, with ol' Roman Nose a leadin' 'em. It was shore a good fight, fer the scouts got onto an island an' stopped the bucks. Two of the fellers got through to Wallace yist'day, an' a courier brought the news in ter Hays. The Injuns had them boys cooped up thar fer eight days before them fellers got out, an' I reckon it'll be two or three days more 'fore the nigger sogers they sent out ter help ever git thar. So thar won't be no Injuns 'long this route we're travelin', fer the whole kit an' kaboodle are up thar yit after 'Sandy.'"

"And you suppose Hawley knew about this?"

"Why not, Cap? He was hangin' 'round till after ten o'clock las' night, an' it was all over town by then. 'Tain't likely he's got an outfit 'long with him thet's lost any Injuns. I don't know whar they're bound, no mor'n you do, but I reckon they're reasonably sure they've got a clar road."

They pulled up on the banks of a small stream to water their horses, and ate hastily. The trail led directly across, and with only the slightest possible delay they forded the shallow water, and mounted the opposite bank. A hundred yards farther on Bristoe reined up suddenly, pointing down at the trail.

"One hoss left the bunch here," he declared positively. Keith swung himself out of the saddle, and bent over to study the tracks. There was no doubting the evidence—a single horse—the only one shod in the bunch—with a rider on its back, judging from the deep imprint of the hoofs, had swerved sharply to the left of the main body, heading directly into the southeast. The plainsman ran forward for a hundred yards to assure himself the man had not circled back; at that point the animal had been spurred into a lope. Keith rejoined the others.

"Must have been about daylight they reached here," he said, picking up his dangling rein, and looking into the questioning faces about him. "The fellow that rode out yonder alone was heading straight toward Carson City. He is going for fresh horses, I figure it, and will rejoin the bunch some place down on the Arkansas. The others intend to keep farther west, where they won't be seen. What do you say, Ben?"

"Thet's the way it looms up ter me, Cap; most likely 'twas the boss himself."

"Well, whoever it was, the girl is still with the others, and their trail is the easiest to follow. We'll keep after them."

They pushed on hour after hour, as long as daylight lasted or they could perceive the faintest trace to follow. Already half-convinced that he knew the ultimate destination of the fugitives, Keith yet dare not venture on pressing forward during the night, thus possibly losing the trail and being compelled to retrace their steps. It was better to proceed slow and sure. Besides, judging from the condition of their own horses, the pursued would be compelled to halt somewhere to rest their stock also. Their trail even revealed the fact that they were traveling far less rapidly than at first, although evidently making every effort to cover the greatest possible distance before stopping. Just as the dusk shut in close about them they rode down into the valley of Shawbee Fork, and discovered signs of a recent camp at the edge of the stream. Here, apparently, judging from the campfire ashes, and the trampled grass along the Fork, the party must have halted for several hours. By lighting matches Keith and Bristoe discerned where some among them had laid down to sleep, and, through various signs, decided they must have again departed some five or six hours previous, one of their horses limping as if lame. The tired pursuers went into camp at the same spot, but without venturing to light any fire, merely snatching a cold bite, and dropping off to sleep with heads pillowed upon their saddles.

They were upon the trail again with the first glimmers of the gray dawn, wading the waters of the Fork, and striking forth across the dull level of brown prairie, and white alkali toward the Arkansas. They saw nothing all day moving in that wide vista about them, but rode steadily, scarcely exchanging a word, determined, grim, never swerving a yard from the faint trail. The pursued were moving slower, hampered, no doubt, by their lame horse, but were still well in advance. Moreover, the strain of the saddle was already beginning to tell severely on Waite, weakened somewhat by years, and the pursuers were compelled to halt oftener on his account. The end of the second day found them approaching the broken land bordering the Arkansas valley, and just before nightfall they picked up a lame horse, evidently discarded by the party ahead.

By this time Keith had reached a definite decision as to his course. If the fugitives received a fresh relay of horses down there somewhere, and crossed the Arkansas, he felt positively sure as to their destination. But it would be useless pushing on after them in the present shape of his party—their horses worn out, and Waite reeling mildly in the saddle. If Hawley's outfit crossed the upper ford, toward which they were evidently heading, and struck through the sand hills, thus they were making for the refuge of that lone cabin on Salt Fork. Should this prove true, then it was probable the gambler had not even yet discovered the identity of Hope, for it he had, he would scarcely venture upon taking her there, knowing that Keith would naturally suspect the spot. Her Keith would not be likely to personally take up the trail in search for Christie Maclaire. It must have been Hawley then who had met the party and ridden east, and up to that time he had not found out his mistake. Yet if he brought out the fresh animals the chances were that Hope's identity would be revealed. Bristoe, who had turned aside to examine the straying horse, came trotting up.

"Belonged to their outfit all right, Cap," he reported; "carries the double cross brand and that shebang is upon the Smokey; saddle galls still bleeding."

Waite was now suffering so acutely they were obliged to halt before gaining sight of the river, finding, fortunately, a waterhole fed by a spring. As soon as the sick man could be made comfortable, Keith gave to the others his conclusions, and listened to what they had to say. Bristoe favored clinging to the trail, even though they must travel slowly, but Fairbain insisted that Waite must be taken to some town where he could be given necessary care. Keith finally decided the matter.

"None can be more anxious to reach those fellows that I am," he declared, "but I know that country out south, and we'll never get through to the Salt Fork without fresh horses. Besides, as the doctor says, we've got to take care of Waite. If we find things as I expect we'll ride for Carson City, and re-outfit there. What's more, we won't lost much time—it's a shorter ride from there to the cabin than from here."

By morning the General was able to sit his saddle again, and leaving him with Neb to follow slowly, the others spurred forward, discovered an outlet through the bluff into the valley, and crossed the Santa Fe Trail. It was not easy to discover where those in advance had passed this point, but they found evidence of a late camp in a little grove of cottonwoods beside the river. There were traces of two trails leading to the spot, one being that of the same five horses they had been following so long, the other not so easily read, as it had been traversed in both directions, the different hoof marks obliterating each other. Bristoe, creeping about on hands and knees, studied the signs with the eyes of an Indian.

"You kin see the difference yere whar the ground is soft, Cap," he said, pointing to some tracks plainer than the others. "This yere hoss had a