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BEATING BACK FROM THE GRASS ROOTS

TO THE LAST MAN

By Zane Grey

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK SPRADLING

XI

ELLEN rode Spades back to the ranch. She rode like the wind. When she swung out of the trail into the open meadow in plain sight of the ranch, her appearance created a commotion among the loungers before the cabin. She rode Spades at a full run.

"Who's after yu?" yelled her father as she pulled the black to a halt. Jorth held a rifle. Daggs, Colter and the other Jorths were there, likewise armed and all watchful, strung with expectancy.

"Shore nobody's after me," replied Ellen. "Cain't I run a horse round heah without being chased?"

Jorth appeared both incensed and relieved.

"Hah! What yu mean, girl, runnin' like a streak right down on us? Yu're actin' queer these days, an' yu look queer. I'm not likin' it."

"Reckon these are queer times—for the Jorths," replied Ellen sarcastically.

"Daggs found strange horse tracks crossin' the meadow," said her father. "An' thet worried us. Someone's been snoopin' round the ranch. An' when we seen yu runnin' so wild we shore thought yu was 'bein' chased."

"No. I was only tryin' out Spades to see how fast he could run," returned Ellen. "Reckon when we do get chased it'll take some runnin' to catch me."

"Haw! Haw!" roared Daggs. "It shore will, Ellen."

"Girl, it's not only your runnin' an' your looks thet's queer," declared Jorth in dark perplexity. "Yu talk queer."

"Shore, dad, you're not used to hearin' spades called spades," said Ellen as she dismounted.

"Humph!" ejaculated her father, as if convinced of the uselessness of trying to understand a woman. "Say, did yu see any strange horse tracks?"

"I reckon I did. An' I know who made 'em."

JORTH stiffened. All the men behind him showed a sudden intensity of suspense.

"Who?" demanded Jorth.

"Shore it was Jean Isbel," replied Ellen coolly. "He came up heah trackin' his black horse."

"Jean—Isbel—trackin'—his—black horse!" repeated her father.

"Yes. He's not overrated as a tracker, that's shore."

Blank silence ensued. Ellen cast a slow glance over her father and the others; then she began to loosen the cinches of her saddle. Presently Jorth burst the silence with a curse, and Daggs followed with one of his sardonic laughs.

"Wal, boss, what did I tell yu?" he drawled.

Jorth strode to Ellen and, whirling her round with a strong hand, he held her facing him.

"Did yu see Isbel?"

"Yes," replied Ellen, just as sharply as her father had asked.

"Did yu talk to him?"

"Yes."

"What did he want up heah?"

"I told yu. He was trackin' the black horse yu stole."

Jorth's hand and arm dropped limply. His sallow face turned a livid hue. Amaze merged into discomfiture, and that gave place to rage. He raised a hand as if to strike Ellen. Daggs' long arm shot out to clutch Jorth's wrist. Wrestling to free himself, Jorth cursed under his breath.

"Let go, Daggs," he shouted stridently. "Am I drunk thet yu grab me?"

"Wal, yu ain't drunk, I reckon," replied the rustler with sarcasm. "But yu're shore some things I'll reserve for your private ear."

Jorth gained a semblance of composure. But it was evident that he labored under a shock.



"Hah! What Yu Mean, Girl, Runnin' Like a Streak Right Down on Us? Yu're Actin' Queer These Days, and Yu Look Queer. I'm Not Likin' It"

"Ellen, did Jean Isbel see this black horse?"

"Yes. He asked me how I got Spades, an' I told him."

"Did he say Spades belonged to him?"

"Shore I reckon he proved it. You can always tell a horse that loves its master."

"Did yu offer to give Spades back?"

"Yes. But Isbel wouldn't take him."

"Hah! An' why not?"

"HE SAID he'd rather I kept him. He was about to engage in a dirty, blood-spilling deal, an' he reckoned he'd not be able to care for a fine horse. I didn't want Spades. I tried to make Isbel take him. But he rode off. And that's all there is to that."

"Maybe it's not," replied Jorth, chewing his mustache and eying Ellen with dark, intent gaze. "Yu've met this Isbel twice."

"It wasn't any fault of mine," retorted Ellen.

"I heah he's sweet on yu. How about thet?" Ellen smarted under the blaze of blood that swept to neck and cheek and temple. But it was only memory which fired this shame. What her father and his crowd might think were matters of supreme indifference. Yet she met his suspicious gaze with truthful, blazing eyes.

"I heah talk from Bruce an' Lorenzo," went on her father. "An' Daggs heah —"

"Daggs nothin'!" interrupted that worthy. "Don't fetch me in. I said nothin' an' I think nothin'."

"Yes, Jean Isbel was sweet on me, dad, but he will never be again," returned Ellen in low tones. With that she pulled her saddle off Spades and, throwing it over her shoulder, walked off to her cabin.

Hardly had she gotten indoors when her father entered.

"Ellen, I didn't know thet horse belonged to Isbel," he began in the persuasive voice so familiar to Ellen. "I swear I didn't. I bought him—traded with Slater for him. I never had any idea he was stolen. Why, when yu said 'that horse yu stole' I felt as if yu'd knifed me."

ELLEN sat at the table and listened while her father paced to and fro and by his restless action and passionate speech worked himself into a frenzy. He talked incessantly, as if her silence was condemnatory and as if eloquence alone could convince her of his honesty. It seemed that Ellen saw and heard with keener faculties than ever before. He had a terrible thirst for her respect. Not so much for her love, she divined, but that she would not see how he had fallen.

She pitied him with all her heart. She was all he had, as he was all the world to her. And so, as she gave ear to his long, illogical rigmarole of argument and defense, she slowly found that her pity and her love were making vital decisions for her. As of old, in poignant moments, her father lapsed at last into a denunciation of the Isbels and what they had brought him to. His sufferings were real, at least, in Ellen's presence. She was the only link that bound him to long-past happier times. She was her mother over again, the woman who had betrayed another man for him and gone with him to her ruin and death.

"Dad, don't go on so," said Ellen, breaking in upon her father's rants. "I will be true to you, as my mother was. I am a Jorth. Your place is my place; your fight is my fight. Never speak of the past to me again. If God spares us through this feud, we will go away and begin all over again, far off where no one ever heard of a Jorth. If we're not spared, we'll at least have had our whack at these damned Isbels."

XII

DURING June Jean Isbel did not ride far away from Grass Valley.

Another attempt had been made upon Gaston Isbel's life. Another cowardly shot had been fired from ambush, this time from a pine thicket bordering the trail that led to Blaisdell's ranch. Blaisdell heard this shot, so near his home was it fired. No trace of the hidden foe could be found. The ground all around that vicinity bore a carpet of pine needles which showed no trace of footprints. The supposition was that this cowardly attempt had been perpetrated, or certainly instigated, by the Jorths. But there was no proof. And Gaston Isbel had other enemies in the Tonto Basin besides the sheep clan. The old man raged like a lion about this sneaking attack on him, and his friend Blaisdell urged an immediate gathering of their kin and friends.

"LET'S quit ranchin' till this trouble's settled," he declared. "Let's arm an' ride the trails an' meet these men halfway. It won't help our side any to wait till yu're shot in the back." More than one of Isbel's supporters offered the same advice.

"No, we'll wait till we know for shore," was the stubborn cattleman's reply to all these promptings.

"Know! Wal, didn't Jean find the black hoss up at Jorth's ranch?" demanded Blaisdell. "What more do we want?"

"Jean couldn't swear Jorth stole the black."

"Wal, by thunder, I can swear to it," growled Blaisdell. "An' we're losin' our cattle all the time. Who's stealin' em?"

"We've always lost cattle ever since we started ranchin' heah."

"Gass, I reckon yu want Jorth to start this fight in the open."

"It'll start soon enough," was Isbel's gloomy reply.

Jean had not failed altogether in his tracking of lost or stolen cattle. Circumstances had been against him, and there was something baffling about this rustling. The summer storms set in early, and it had been his luck to have heavy rains wash out fresh tracks that he might have followed. The range was large and cattle were everywhere. Sometimes a loss was not discovered for weeks. Gaston Isbel's sons were now the only men left to ride the range. Two of his riders had quit because of the threatened war, and Isbel had let another go, so that Jean did not often learn that cattle had been stolen until their tracks were old. Added to that was the fact that this Grass Valley country was covered with horse tracks and

cattle tracks. The rustlers, whoever they were, had long been at the game, and now that there was reason for them to show their cunning they did it.

Early in July the hot weather came. Down on the red ridges of the Tonto it was hot desert. The nights were cool, the early mornings were pleasant, but the day was something to endure. When the white cumulus clouds rolled up out of the southwest, growing larger and thicker and darker, here and there coalescing into a black thundercloud, Jean welcomed them. He liked to see the gray streamers of rain hanging down from a canopy of black, and the roar of rain on the trees as it approached like a trampling army was always welcome. The grassy flats, the red ridges, the rocky slopes, the thickets of manzanita and scrub oak and cactus were dusty, glaring, throat-parching places under the hot summer sun. Jean longed for the cool heights of the Rim, the shady pines, the dark, sweet verdure under the silver spruces, the tinkle and murmur of the clear rills. He often had another longing, too, which he bitterly stifled.

JEAN'S ally, the keen-nosed shepherd dog, had disappeared one day and had never returned. Among men at the ranch there was a difference of opinion as to what had happened to Shepp. The old rancher thought he had been poisoned or shot. Bill and Guy Isbel believed he had been stolen by sheep herders, who were always stealing dogs, and Jean inclined to the conviction that Shepp had gone off with the timber wolves. The fact was that Shepp did not return, and Jean missed him.

One morning at dawn Jean heard the cattle bellowing and trampling out in the valley, and upon hurrying to a vantage point he was amazed to see upward of five hundred steers chasing a lone wolf. Jean's father had seen such a spectacle as this, but it was a new one for Jean. The wolf was a big gray and black fellow, rangy and powerful, and until he got the steers all behind him he was rather hard put to it to keep out of their way. Probably he had dogged the herd, trying to sneak in and pull down a yearling, and finally the steers had charged him. Jean kept along the edge of the valley in the hope they would chase him within range of a rifle. But the wary wolf saw Jean and sheered off, gradually drawing away from his pursuers.

Jean returned to the house for his breakfast and then set off across the valley. His father owned one small flock of sheep that had not yet been driven up on the Rim, where all the sheep in that country were run during the hot, dry summer down on the Tonto. Young Evarts and a Mexican boy named Bernardino had charge of this flock. The regular Mexican herder, a man of experience, had given up his job, and these boys were not equal to the task of risking the sheep up in the enemy's stronghold.

THIS flock was known to be grazing in a side draw, well up from Grass Valley, where the brush afforded some protection from the sun and there was good water and a little feed. Before Jean reached his destination he heard a shot. It was not a rifle shot, which fact caused Jean a little concern. Evarts and Bernardino had rifles, but to his knowledge no small arms. Jean rode up on one of the black-brushed conical hills that rose on the south side of Grass Valley, and from there he took a sharp survey of the country. At first he made out only cattle and bare meadowland and the low, encircling ridges and hills. But presently up toward the head of the valley he descried a bunch of horsemen riding toward the village. He could not tell their number. That dark, moving

mass seemed to Jean to be instinct with life, mystery, menace. Who were they? It was too far for him to recognize horses, let alone riders. They were moving fast too.

JEAN watched them out of sight, then turned his horse downhill again and rode on his quest. A number of horsemen like that was a very unusual sight round Grass Valley at any time. What, then, did it portend now? Jean experienced a little shock of dread that was an unusual sensation for him. Brooding over this, he proceeded on his way, at length to turn into the draw where the camp of the sheep herders was located. Upon coming in sight of it he heard a hoarse shout. Young Evarts appeared running frantically out of the brush. Jean urged his horse into a run and soon covered the distance between them. Evarts appeared beside himself with terror.

"Boy, what's the matter?" queried Jean as he dismounted, rifle in hand, peering quickly from Evarts' white face to the camp and all round.

"Bernardino! Bernardino!" gasped the boy, wringing his hands and pointing.

Jean ran the few remaining rods to the sheep camp. He saw the little tepee, a burned-out fire, a half-finished meal, and then the Mexican lad lying prone on the ground, dead, with a bullet hole in his ghastly face. Near him lay an old six-shooter.

"Whose gun is that?" demanded Jean as he picked it up.

"Bernardino's," replied Evarts huskily. "He—he jest got it—the other day."

"Did he shoot himself accidentally?"

"Oh, no! No! He didn't do it—a-tall."

"Who did, then?"

"The men—they rode up—a gang—they did it," panted Evarts.

"Did you know who they were?"

"No. I couldn't tell. I saw 'em comin' an' I was skeered. Bernardino had gone fer water. I run an' hid in the brush. I wanted to yell, but they come too close. Then I heerd 'em talkin'. Bernardino come back. They 'peared friendlylike. That made me raise up to look. An' I couldn't see good. I heerd one of 'em ask Bernardino to let him see his gun. An' Bernardino handed it over. He looked at the gun an' haw-hawed, an' flipped it up in the air, an' when it fell back in his hand it—it went off bang! An' Bernardino dropped. I hid down close. I was skeered stiff. I heerd 'em talk more, but not what they said. Then they rode away. An' I hid there till I seen yu comin'."

"Have you got a horse?" queried Jean sharply.

"No. But I can ride one of Bernardino's burros."

"GET one. Hurry over to Blaisdell. Tell him to send word to Blue and Gordon and Fredericks to ride like the devil to my father's ranch. Hurry now!"

Young Evarts ran off without reply. Jean stood looking down at the limp and pathetic figure of the Mexican boy.

"By heaven," he exclaimed grimly, "the Jorth-Isbel war is on! Deliberate, cold-blooded murder! I'll gamble Daggs did this job. He's been given the leadership. He's started it. Bernardino, greaser or not, you were a faithful lad, and you won't go long unavenged."

Jean had no time to spare. Tearing a tarpaulin out of the tepee he covered the lad with it and then ran, for his horse. Mounting, he galloped down the draw, over the little red ridges, out into the valley, where he put his horse to a run.

Action changed the sickening horror that sight of Bernardino had engendered. Jean even felt a strange, grim relief. The long, dragging days of waiting were over.

JORTH'S gang had taken the initiative. Blood had begun to flow, and it would continue to flow now till the last man of one faction stood over the dead body of the last man of the other. Would it be a Jorth or an Isbel? "My instinct was right," he muttered aloud. "That bunch of horses gave me a queer feelin'." Jean gazed all round the grassy, cattle-dotted valley he was crossing so swiftly and toward the village, but he did not see any sign of the dark group of riders. They had gone on to Greaves' store, there, no doubt, to drink and to add more enemies of the Isbels to their gang. Suddenly across Jean's mind flashed a thought of Ellen Jorth. "What'll become of her? What'll become of all the women—my sister—the little ones?"

No one was in sight round the ranch. Never had it appeared more peaceful and pastoral to Jean. The grazing cattle and horses in the foreground, the haystack half eaten away, the cows in the fenced pasture, the column of blue smoke lazily ascending, the cackle of hens, the solid, well-built cabins—all these seemed to repudiate Jean's haste and his darkness of mind. This place was his father's farm. There was not a cloud in the blue summer sky.

As Jean galloped up the lane someone saw him from the door, and then Bill and Guy and their gray-headed father came out upon the porch. Jean saw how the older man waved the womenfolk back and then strode out into the lane. Bill and Guy reached Jean's side as he pulled his heaving horse to a halt. They all looked at Jean, swiftly and intently, with a hard, fiery gleam strangely identical in the eyes of each. Probably before a word was spoken they knew what to expect.

"Wal, yu shore was in a hurry," remarked the father. "What's up?" queried Bill grimly.

Guy Isbel remained silent, and it was he who turned slightly pale. Jean leaped off his horse.

"BERNARDINO has just been killed—murdered with his own gun."

Gaston Isbel seemed to exhale a long-dammed, bursting breath that let his chest sag. A terrible, deadly glint, pale and cold as sunlight on ice, grew slowly to dominate his clear eyes.

"A-huh!" ejaculated Bill Isbel hoarsely.

Not one of the three men asked who had done the killing. They were silent a moment, motionless, locked in the secret seclusion of their own minds. Then they listened with absorption to Jean's brief story.

"Wal, thet lets us in," said his father. "I wish we had more time. Reckon I'd done better to listen to you boys an' hev my men close at hand. Jacobs happened to ride over. Thet makes five of us besides the women."

"Aw, dad, yu don't reckon they'll round us up heah?" asked Guy Isbel.

"Boys, I always feared they might," replied the old man.



There Were More Quick, Sharp Shots. A Hoarse Cry Came From Him. Then a Single Rifle Shot Pealed Out

"But I never really believed they'd hev the nerve. Shore I ought to hev figgered Daggs better. This heah secret bizness an' shootin' at us from ambush looked aboot Jorth's size to me. But I reckon now we'll hev to fight without our friends."

"Let 'em come," said Jean. "I sent for Blaisdell, Blue, Gordon and Fredericks. Maybe they'll get here in time. But if they don't it needn't worry us much. We can hold out here longer than Jorth's gang can hang around. We'll want plenty of water, wood and meat in the house."

"Wal, I'll see to that," rejoined his father. "Jean, you go out close by, where you can see all round, an' keep watch."

"Who's goin' to tell the women?" asked Guy Isbel.

The silence that momentarily ensued was an eloquent testimony to the hardest and saddest aspect of this strife between men. The inevitableness of it in no wise detracted from its sheer uselessness. Men from time immemorial had hated and killed one another, always to the misery and degradation of their women. Old Gaston Isbel showed this tragic realization in his lined face.

"Wal, boys, I'll tell the women," he said. "Shore you needn't worry none aboot them. They'll be game."

JEAN rode away to an open knoll a short distance from the house, and here he stationed himself to watch all points. The cedared ridge back of the ranch was the one approach by which Jorth's gang might come close without being detected, but even so Jean could see them and ride to the house in time to prevent a surprise. The moments dragged by, and at the end of an hour Jean was in hopes that Blaisdell would soon come. These hopes were well founded. Presently he heard a clatter of hoofs on hard ground to the south, and upon wheeling to look he saw the friendly neighbor coming fast along the road, riding a big white horse. Blaisdell carried a rifle in his hand, and the sight of him gave Jean a glow of warmth. He was one of the Texans who would stand by the Isbels to the last man. Jean watched him ride to the house—watched the meeting between him and his lifelong friend. There floated out to Jean old Blaisdell's roar of rage.

Then out on the green of Grass Valley, where a long, swelling plain swept away toward the village, there appeared a moving dark patch. A bunch of horses! Jean's body gave a slight start—the shock of sudden propulsion of blood through all his veins.

Those horses bore riders. They were coming straight down the open valley, on the wagon road to Isbel's ranch. No subterfuge nor secrecy nor sneaking in that advance! A hot thrill ran over Jean.

"By heaven! They mean business!" he muttered. Up to the last moment he had unconsciously hoped Jorth's gang would not come boldly like that. The verifications of all a Texan's inherited instincts left no doubts, no hopes, no illusions, only a grim certainty that this was not conjecture nor probability but a physical fact. For a moment longer Jean watched the slowly moving dark patch of horsemen against the green background, then he hurried back to the ranch. His father saw him coming—strode out as before.

"DAD, Jorth is comin'," said Jean huskily. How he hated to be forced to tell his father that! The boyish love of old had flashed up.

"Whar?" demanded the old man, his eagle gaze sweeping the horizon.

"Down the road from Grass Valley. You can't see from here."

"Wal, come in an' let's git ready."

Isbel's house had not been constructed with the idea of repelling an attack from a band of Apaches. The long living room of the main cabin was the one selected for defense and protection. This room had two windows and a door facing the lane and a door at each end, one of which opened into the kitchen and the other into an adjoining and later-built cabin. The logs of this main cabin were of large size, and the doors and window coverings were heavy, affording safer protection from bullets than the other cabins.

When Jean went in he seemed to see a host of white faces lifted to him. His sister, Ann, his two sisters-in-law, the children—all mutely watched him with eyes that would haunt him.

"Wal, Blaisdell, Jean says Jorth an' his precious gang of rustlers are on the way heah," announced the rancher.

"Damn me if it's not a bad day fer Lee Jorth!" declared Blaisdell.

"Clear off thet table," ordered Isbel, "an' fetch out all the guns an' shells we got."

Once laid upon the table, these presented a formidable arsenal, which consisted of the three new forty-four rifles that Jean had brought with him from the coast; the enormous buffalo, or so-called needle, gun that Gaston

The women sat apart in the corner toward the kitchen, and there seemed to be a strange fascination for them in the talk and action of the men. The wife of Jacobs was a little woman, with homely face and very bright eyes. Jean thought she would be a help in that household very shortly.

Every moment Jean would go to the window and peer out down the road. His companions evidently relied upon him, for no one else looked out. Now that the suspense of days and weeks was over, these Texans faced the issue with talk and act not noticeably different from those of ordinary moments.

AT LAST Jean espied the dark mass of horsemen out in the valley road. They were close together, walking their mounts, and evidently in earnest conversation. After several ineffectual attempts Jean counted eleven horses, every one of which he was sure bore a rider.

"Dad, look out!" called Jean.

Gaston Isbel strode to the door and stood looking without a word.

The other men crowded to the windows. Blaisdell cursed under his breath. Jacobs said, "By golly! Come to pay us a call!" The women sat motionless, with dark, strained eyes. The children ceased their play and looked fearfully to their mother.

When just out of rifle shot of the cabins, the band of horsemen halted and lined up in a half circle, all facing the ranch. They were close enough for Jean to see their gestures, but he could not recognize any of their faces. It struck him singularly that not one of them wore a mask.

"Jean, do you know any of them?" asked his father.

"No, not yet. They're too far off."

"Dad, I'll get your old telescope," said Guy Isbel, and he ran out toward the adjoining cabin.

Blaisdell shook his big head and rumbled out of his bull-like neck: "Wal, now you're heah, you sheep fellars, what are you goin' to do aboot it?"

Guy Isbel returned with a yard-long telescope, which he passed to his father. The old man took it with shaking hands and leveled it. Suddenly it was

Jean forthwith took the glass and moved it slowly across the faces of that group of horsemen. "Simm Bruce," he said instantly. "I see Colter. And yes, Greaves is there. I've seen the man next to him—face like a ham."

"Shore thet is Craig," interrupted his father.

Jean knew the dark face of Lee Jorth by the resemblance it bore to Ellen's, and the recognition brought a twinge. He thought, too, that he could tell the other Jorths. He asked his father to describe Daggs and then Queen. It was not likely that Jean would fail to know these several men in the future. Then Blaisdell asked for the telescope, and when he got through looking and cursing he passed it on to the others, who, one by one, took a long look until finally it came back to the old rancher.

"Wal, Daggs is wavin' his hand heah an' there, like a gen'ral aboot to send out scouts. Haw! Haw! An' 'pears to me he's not overlookin' our horses. Wal, thet's natural for a rustler. He'd hev to steal a hoss or a steer before goin' into a fight or to dinner or to a funeral."

"It'll be his funeral if he goes to foolin' round them hosses," declared Guy Isbel, peering anxiously out of the door.

"Wal, son, shore it'll be somebody's funeral," replied his father.

JEAN paid little attention to the conversation. With sharp eyes fixed upon the horsemen, he tried to grasp at their intention. Daggs pointed to the horses in the pasture lot that lay between him and the house. These animals were the best on the range and belonged mostly to Guy Isbel, who was the horse fancier and trader of the family. His horses were his passion.

"Looks like they'd do some horse stealin'," said Jean.

"Lend me thet glass," demanded Guy forcefully. He surveyed the band of men for a long moment, then he handed the glass back to Jean.

"I'm goin' out thar after my hosses," he declared.

"No!" exclaimed his father.

"Thet gang come to steal an' not to fight. Can't you see thet? If they meant to fight, they'd do it. They're out thar arguin' aboot my hosses."

Guy picked up his rifle. He looked sullenly determined, and the gleam in his eye was one of fearlessness.

"Son, I know Daggs," said his father. "An' I know Jorth. They've come to kill us. It'll be shore death for you to go out thar."

"I'm goin' anyhow. They can't steal my hosses out from under my eyes. An' they ain't in range."

"Wal, you ain't goin' alone," spoke up Jacobs cheerily as he came forward and joined Guy.

The red-haired young wife of Guy Isbel showed no change of her grave face. She had been reared in a stern school. She knew men in times like these. But Jacobs' wife appealed to him, "Bill, don't risk your life for a hoss or two."

JACOBS laughed and answered, "Not much risk," and went out with Guy. To Jean their action seemed foolhardy. He kept a keen eye on them and saw instantly when the band became aware of Guy's and Jacobs' entrance into the pasture. It took only another second then to realize that Daggs and Jorth had deadly intent. Jean saw Daggs slip out of his saddle, rifle in hand. Others of the gang did likewise, until half of them were dismounted.

"Dad, they're goin' to shoot," called out Jean sharply. "Yell for Guy an' Jacobs. Make 'em come back."

The old man shouted. Bill Isbel yelled. Blaisdell lifted his stentorian voice.

Jean screamed piercingly, "Guy! Run! Run!"

But Guy Isbel and his companion strode on into the pasture as if they had not heard—as if no menacing horse thieves were within miles. They had covered about a quarter of the distance across the pasture and were nearing the horses when Jean saw red flashes and white puffs of smoke burst out from the front of that dark band of rustlers. Then followed the sharp, rattling crack of rifles.

Guy Isbel stopped short and, dropping his gun, he threw up his arms and fell headlong. Jacobs acted as if he had suddenly encountered an invisible blow. He had been hit. Turning, he began to run, and ran fast for a few paces. There were more quick,

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Then Jean, Letting Go With His Right Arm, Swung the Bowie. Greaves' Strength Went Out in an Awful, Hoarse Cry

Isbel had used for years; a Henry rifle which Blaisdell had brought and half a dozen six-shooters. Piles and packages of ammunition littered the table.

"Sort out these heah shells," said Isbel. "Everybody wants to git hold of his own."

Jacobs, the neighbor who was present, was a thick-set, bearded man, rather jovial among those lean-jawed Texans. He carried a forty-four rifle of an old pattern.

"Wal, boys, if I'd knowed we was in fer some fun I'd hev fetched more shells. Only got one magazine full. Mebbe them new forty-fours will fit my gun."

It was discovered that the ammunition Jean had brought in quantity fitted Jacobs' rifle, a fact which afforded peculiar satisfaction to all the men present.

"Wal, shore we're lucky," declared Gaston Isbel.

as if he had been transfixed; then he lowered the glass, shaking violently, and his face grew gray with an exceeding bitter wrath. "Jorth!" he swore harshly.

Jean had only to look at his father to know that recognition had been like a mortal shock. It passed. Again the rancher leveled the glass.

"Wal, Blaisdell, thar's our ole Texas friend Daggs," he drawled dryly. "An' Greaves, our honest storekeeper of Grass Valley. An' thar's Stonewall Jackson Jorth. An' Tad Jorth with the same ole red nose! An' say, damn if one of thet gang isn't Queen, as bad a gun fighter as Texas ever bred. Shore I thought he'd been killed in the Big Bend country. So I heerd. An' thar's Craig, another respectable sheepman of Grass Valley. Haw! Haw! An' wal, I don't recognize any more of 'em."

TO THE LAST MAN

(Continued from Page 14)

sharp shots. He let go of his rifle. His running broke. Walking, reeling, staggering, he kept on. A hoarse cry came from him. Then a single rifle shot pealed out. Jean heard the bullet strike. Jacobs reeled and fell to the ground.

XIII

JEAN ISBEL felt himself turned to marble. The suddenness of this tragedy paralyzed him. His gaze remained riveted on those prostrate forms.

A hand clutched his arm—a shaking woman's hand, slim and hard and tense.

"Bill's—killed!" whispered a broken voice. "I was watchin'. They're both dead!"

The wives of Jacobs and Guy Isbel had slipped up behind Jean, and from behind him they had seen the tragedy.

"I asked Bill—not to—go," faltered the Jacobs woman; and, covering her face with her hands, she groped back to the corner of the cabin, where the other women, shaking and white, received her in their arms. Guy Isbel's wife stood at the window, peering over Jean's shoulder. She had the nerve of a man. She had looked out upon death before.

"Yes, they're dead," she said bitterly. "An' how are we goin' to git their bodies?"

At this Gaston Isbel seemed to arouse from the cold spell that had transfixed him.

"This is hell for our women," he cried out hoarsely. "My son—my son! Murdered by the Jorths!" Then he swore a terrible oath.

Jean saw the remainder of the mounted rustlers get off, and then all of them, leading their horses, began to move round to the left.

"Dad, they're movin' round," said Jean.

"Up to some trick," declared Bill Isbel.

"Bill, you make a hole through the back wall, say about the fifth log up," ordered the father. "Shore we've got to look out."

THE elder son grasped an ax and, scattering the children, who had been playing near the back corner, he began to work at the point designated. The little children backed away with fixed, wondering, grave eyes. The women moved their chairs and huddled together as if waiting and listening.

Jean watched the rustlers until they passed out of his sight. They had moved toward the sloping, brushy ground to the north and west of the cabins.

"Let me know when you get a hole in the back wall," said Jean, and he went through the kitchen and cautiously out another door to slip into a low-roofed, shedlike end of the rambling cabin. This small space was used to store winter firewood. The chinks between the walls had not been filled with adobe clay, and he could see out on three sides. The rustlers were going into the juniper brush. They moved out of sight, and presently reappeared without their horses. It looked to Jean as if they intended to attack the cabins. Then they halted at the edge of the brush and held a

long consultation. Jean could see them distinctly, though they were too far distant for him to recognize any particular man. One of them, however, stood and moved apart from the closely massed group. Evidently, from his strides and gestures, he was exhorting his listeners. Jean concluded this was either Daggs or Jorth. Whoever it was had a loud, coarse voice, and this and his actions impressed Jean with a suspicion that the man was under the influence of the bottle.

Presently Bill Isbel called Jean in a low voice. "Jean, I got the hole made, but we cain't see no one."

"I SEE them," Jean replied. "They're havin' a powwow. Looks to me like either Jorth or Daggs is drunk. He's arguin' to charge us, an' the rest of the gang are holdin' back. Tell dad, an' all of you keep watchin'. I'll let you know when they make a move."

Jorth's gang appeared to be in no hurry to expose their plan of battle. Gradually

Twice Bill Isbel came through the kitchen to whisper to Jean. The strain in the large room, from which the rustlers could not be seen, must have been great. Jean told him all he had seen.

"EATIN' an' drinkin'!" ejaculated Bill. "Thet'll jar the old man. He wants to git the fight over."

"Tell him I said it'll be over too quick—for us—unless we are mighty careful," replied Jean sharply.

Bill went back muttering to himself. Then followed a long wait, fraught with suspense, during which Jean watched the rustlers regale themselves. The day was hot and still, and the unnatural silence of the cabin was broken now and then by the gay laughter of the children. The sound shocked and haunted Jean. Playing children! Then another sound, so faint he had to strain to hear it, disturbed and saddened him—his father's slow tread up and down the cabin floor, to and fro, to and fro. What must be in his father's heart this day!

clumps of brush, from behind which the rustlers could fire into the windows and through the clay chinks without any considerable risk to themselves. As they did not come into sight again, Jean concluded he had discovered their plan. Still he waited a while longer, until he saw faint little clouds of dust rising from behind the far end of the embankment. That discovery made him rush out and through the kitchen to the large cabin, where his sudden appearance startled the men.

"Get back out of sight!" he ordered sharply, and with swift steps he reached the door and closed it. "They're behind the bank out there by the corrals. An' they're goin' to crawl down the ditch closer to us. It looks bad. They'll have grass an' brush to shoot from. We've got to be mighty careful how we peep out."

"A-HUH! All right," replied his father. "You women keep the kids with you in the corner over there. An' you-all better lay down flat on the floor."

Blaisdell, Bill Isbel and the old man crouched at the large window, peeping through cracks in the rough edges of the logs. Jean took his post beside the small window, with his keen eyes vibrating like a compass needle. The movement of a blade of grass, the flight of a grasshopper could not escape his trained sight.

"Look sharp now," he called to the other men. "I see dust. They're workin' along, almost to that bare spot on the bank. I saw the tip of a rifle. A black hat—more dust. They're spreadin' along behind the bank."

Loud voices, and then thick clouds of yellow dust, coming from behind the highest and brushiest line of the embankment attested to the truth of Jean's observation and also to a reckless disregard of danger.

SUDDENLY Jean caught a glint of moving color through the fringe of brush. Instantly he was strung like a whipcord.

Then a tall, hatless and coatless man stepped up in plain sight. The sun shone on his fair, ruffled hair. Daggs!

"Hey, you damned Isbels!" he bawled in magnificent, derisive boldness. "Come out an' fight!"

Quick as lightning Jean threw up his

rifle and fired. He saw tufts of fair hair fly from Daggs' head. He saw the squirt of red blood. Then quick shots from his comrades rang out. They all hit the swaying body of the rustler. But Jean knew with a terrible thrill that his bullet had killed Daggs before the other three struck. Daggs fell forward, his arms and half his body resting over the embankment. Then the rustlers dragged him back out of sight. A chorus of hoarse shouts rose from the ditch. A cloud of yellow dust drifted away from the spot.

"Daggs!" burst out Gaston Isbel. "Jean, you knocked off the top of his haid. I seen thet when I was pullin' trigger. Shore we over heah wasted our shots."

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"I Asked Bill—Not to—Go," Faltered the Jacobs Woman, Covering Her Face With Her Hands

the group disintegrated a little; some of them sat down, others walked to and fro. Presently two of them went into the brush, probably back to the horses. In a few moments they reappeared, carrying a pack. When this was deposited on the ground all the rustlers sat down round it. They had brought food and drink. Jean had to utter a grim laugh at their coolness, and he was reminded of many dare-devil deeds known to have been perpetrated by the Hash Knife Gang. Jean was glad of a reprieve. The longer the rustlers put off an attack the more time the allies of the Isbels would have to get here. Rather hazardous, however, would it be now for anyone to attempt to get to the Isbel cabins in the daytime. Night would be more favorable.

At length the rustlers rose and, with rifles in hand, they moved as one man down the slope. They came several hundred yards closer, until Jean, grimly cocking his rifle, muttered to himself that a few more rods closer would mean the end of several of that gang. They knew the range of a rifle well enough, and once more sheered off at right angles with the cabin. When they got even with the line of corrals they stooped down and were lost to Jean's sight. This fact caused him alarm. They were, of course, crawling up on the cabins. At the end of that line of corrals ran a ditch, the bank of which was high enough to afford cover. Moreover, it ran along in front of the cabins, scarcely a hundred yards away, and it was covered with grass and little

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"He must hev been crazy or drunk to pop up thar an' brace us thet way," said Blaisdell, breathing hard.

"Arizona is bad for Texans," replied Isbel sardonically. "Shore it's been too peaceful heah. Rustlers have no practice at fightin'. An' I reckon Daggs forgot."

"Daggs made as crazy a move as that of Guy an' Jacobs," spoke up Jean. "They were overbold, an' he was drunk. Let 'em be a lesson to us."

Jean had smelled whisky upon his entrance to this cabin. Bill was a hard drinker, and his father was not immune. Blaisdell, too, drank heavily upon occasions. Jean made a mental note that he would not permit their chances to become impaired by liquor.

RIFLES began to crack, and puffs of smoke rose all along the embankment for the space of a hundred feet. Bullets whistled through the rude window casing and splattered on the heavy door, and one split the clay between the logs before Jean, narrowly missing him. Another volley followed, then another. The rustlers had repeating rifles, and they were emptying their magazines. Jean changed his position. The other men profited by his wise move. The volleys had merged into one continuous, rattling roar of rifle shots. Then came a sudden cessation of reports, with silence of relief. The cabin was full of dust, mingled with the smoke from the shots of Jean and his companions. Jean heard the stifled breaths of the children. Evidently they were terror stricken, but they did not cry out. The women uttered no sound.

A loud voice pealed from behind the embankment.

"Come out an' fight! Do yu Isbels want to be killed like sheep?"

This sally gained no reply. Jean returned to his post by his window; his comrades followed his example; and they exercised extreme caution when they peeped out.

"Boys, don't shoot till you see one," said Gaston Isbel. "Mebbe after a while they'll git careless. But Jorth will never show himself."

The rustlers did not again resort to volleys. One by one, from different angles, they began to shoot, and they were not firing at random. A few bullets came straight in at the windows to pat into the walls, a few others ticked and splintered the edges of the windows, and the most of them broke through the clay chinks between the logs. It dawned upon Jean that these dangerous shots were not by accident. They were well aimed, and most of them hit low down. The cunning rustlers had some unerring riflemen, and they were picking out the vulnerable places all along the front of the cabin. If Jean had not been lying flat he would have been hit twice. Presently he conceived the idea of driving pegs between the logs, high up; and, kneeling on these, he managed to peep out from the upper edge of the window. But this position was awkward and difficult to hold for long.

HE HEARD a bullet hit one of his comrades. Whoever had been struck never uttered a sound. Jean turned to look. Bill Isbel was holding his shoulder, where red splotches appeared on his shirt. He shook his head at Jean, evidently to make light of the wound. The women and children were lying face down and could not see what was happening. Plain it was that Bill did not want them to know. Blaisdell bound up the bloody shoulder with a scarf.

Steady firing from the rustlers went on, at the rate of one shot every few minutes. The Isbels did not return these. Jean did not fire again that afternoon. Toward sunset, when the besiegers appeared to grow restless or careless, Blaisdell fired at something moving behind the brush and Gaston Isbel's huge buffalo gun boomed out.

"Wal, what're they goin' to do after dark, an' what're we goin' to do?" grumbled Blaisdell.

"Reckon they'll never charge us," said Gaston.

"They might set fire to the cabins," added Bill Isbel. He appeared to be the gloomiest of the Isbel faction. There was something on his mind.

"Wal, the Jorths are bad, but I reckon they'd not burn us alive," replied Blaisdell.

"Hah!" ejaculated Gaston Isbel. "Much you know about Lee Jorth. He would skin me alive an' throw red-hot coals on my raw flesh."

So they talked during the hour from sunset to dark. Jean Isbel had little to say. He



was revolving possibilities in his mind. Darkness brought a change in the attack of the rustlers. They stationed men at four points round the cabins, and every few minutes one of these outposts would fire. These bullets embedded themselves in the logs, causing but little anxiety to the Isbels.

"Jean, what you make of it?" asked the old rancher.

"Looks to me this way," replied Jean. "They're set for a long fight. They're shootin' just to let us know they're on the watch."

"A-huh! Wal, what're you goin' to do about it?"

"I'm goin' out there presently."

Gaston Isbel granted his satisfaction at this intention of Jean's.

All was pitch dark inside the cabin. The women had water and food at hand. Jean kept a sharp lookout from his window while he ate his supper of meat, bread and milk. At last the children, worn out by the long day, fell asleep. The women whispered a little in their corner.

ABOUT nine o'clock Jean signified his intention of going out to reconnoiter.

"Dad, they've got the best of us in the daytime," he said, "but not after dark."

Jean buckled on a belt that carried shells, a bowie knife and a revolver, and with rifle in hand he went out through the kitchen to the yard. The night was darker than usual, as some of the stars were hidden by clouds. He leaned against the log cabin, waiting for his eyes to become perfectly adjusted to the darkness. Like an Indian, Jean could see well at night. He knew every point round cabins and shed and corrals, every post, log, tree and rock adjacent to the ranch. After perhaps a quarter of an hour of watching, during which time several shots were fired from behind the embankment and one each from the rustlers at the other locations, Jean slipped out on his quest.

He kept in the shadow of the cabin walls, then the line of orchard trees, then a row of currant bushes. Here, crouching low, he halted to look and listen. He was now at the edge of the open ground, with the gently rising slope before him. He could see the dark patches of cedar and juniper trees. On the north side of the cabin a streak of fire flashed in the blackness and a shot rang out. Jean heard the bullet hit the cabin. Then silence enfolded the lonely ranch, and the darkness lay like a black blanket. A low hum of insects pervaded the air. Dull sheets of lightning illuminated the dark horizon to the south. Once Jean heard voices, but could not tell from which direction they came. To the west of him then flared out another rifle shot. The bullet whistled down over Jean to thud into the cabin.

JEAN made a careful study of the obscure gray-black open before him and then the background to his rear. So long as he kept the dense shadows behind him he could not be seen. He slipped from behind his covert and, gliding with absolutely noiseless footsteps, he gained the first clump of junipers. Here he waited patiently and motionlessly for another round of shots from the rustlers. After the second shot from the west side Jean sheered off to the right. Patches of brush, clumps of juniper and isolated cedars covered this slope, affording Jean a perfect means for his purpose, which was to make a detour and come up behind the rustler who was firing from that side. Jean climbed to the top of the ridge, descended the opposite slope, made his turn to the left and slowly worked up behind the point near where he expected to locate the rustler.

Long habit in the open, by day and night, rendered his sense of direction almost as perfect as sight itself. The first flash of fire he saw from this side proved that he had come straight up toward his man. Jean's intention was to crawl up on this one of the Jorth gang and silently kill him with a knife. If the plan worked successfully, Jean meant to work round to the next

rustler. Laying aside his rifle, he crawled forward on hands and knees, making no more sound than a cat. His approach was slow. He had to pick his way—be careful not to break twigs or rattle stones. His buckskin garments made no sound against the brush. Jean located the rustler sitting on the top of the ridge, in the center of an open space. He was alone. Jean saw the dull red end of the cigarette he was smoking. The ground on the ridge top was rocky and not well adapted for Jean's purpose. He had to abandon the idea of crawling up on the rustler. Whereupon Jean turned back patiently and slowly, to get his rifle.

UPON securing it he began to retrace his course, this time more slowly than ever, as he was hampered by the rifle. But he did not make the slightest sound, and at length he reached the edge of the open ridge top, once more to espy the dark form of the rustler silhouetted against the sky. The distance was not more than fifty yards.

As Jean rose to his knee and carefully lifted his rifle round to avoid the twigs of a juniper he suddenly experienced another emotion besides the one of grim, hard wrath at the Jorths. It was an emotion that sickened him, made him weak internally—a cold, shaking, ungovernable sensation. Suppose this man was Ellen Jorth's father! Jean lowered the rifle. He felt it shake over his knee. He was trembling all over. The astounding discovery that he did not want to kill Ellen's father, that he could not do it, awakened Jean to the despairing nature of his love for her.

In this grim moment of indecision, when he knew his Indian subtlety and ability gave him a great advantage over the Jorths, he fully realized his strange, hopeless and irresistible love for the girl. He made no attempt to deny it any longer. Like the night and the lonely wilderness round him, like the inevitableness of this Jorth-Isbel feud, this love of his was a thing, a fact, a reality. He breathed to his own inward ear, to his soul, he could not kill Ellen Jorth's father. Feud or no feud, Isbel or not, he could not deliberately do it. And why not? There was no answer. Was he not faithful to his own father? He had no hope of ever winning Ellen Jorth. He did not want the love of a girl of her character. But he loved her. And his struggle must be against the insidious and mysterious growth of that passion. It swayed him already. It made him a coward.

THROUGH his mind and heart swept the memory of Ellen Jorth, her beauty and charm, her boldness and pathos, her shame and her degradation. The sweetness of her outweighed the boldness, and the mystery of her arrayed itself in unquenchable protest against her acknowledged shame. Jean lifted his face to the heavens, to the pitiless white stars, to the infinite depths of the dark blue sky. He could sense the fact of his being an atom in the universe of Nature. What was he, what was his revengeful father, what were hate and passion and strife in comparison to the nameless something, immense and everlasting, that he sensed in this dark moment?

But the rustlers—Daggs, the Jorths—they had killed his brother, Guy—murdered him brutally and ruthlessly. Guy had been a playmate of Jean's, a favorite brother. Bill had been secretive and selfish. Jean had never loved him as he had Guy. Guy lay dead down there on the meadow. This feud had begun to run its bloody course. Jean steeled his nerve. The hot blood crept back along his veins. The dark and masterful tide of revenge waved over him. The keen edge of his mind then cut out sharp and trenchant thoughts. He must kill when and where he could. This man could hardly be Ellen Jorth's father. Jorth would be with the main crowd, directing hostilities. Jean could shoot this rustler guard, and his shot would be taken by the gang as the regular one from their comrade. Then swiftly Jean leveled his rifle, covered the dark form, grew cold and set and

pressed the trigger. After the report he rose and wheeled away. He did not look or listen for the result of his shot. A clammy sweat wet his face, the hollow of his hands, his breast. A horrible, leaden, thick sensation oppressed his heart. Nature had endowed him with Indian gifts, but the exercise of them to this end caused a revolt in his soul.

Nevertheless, it was the Isbel blood that dominated him. The wind blew cool on his face. The burden upon his shoulders seemed to lift. The clamoring whispers grew fainter in his ears. And by the time he had retraced his cautious steps back to the orchard all his physical being was strung to the task at hand. Something had come between his reflective self and this man of action.

CROSSING the lane, he took to the west line of sheds and passed beyond them into the meadow. In the grass he crawled silently away to the right, using the same precaution that had actuated him on the slope, only here he did not pause so often or move so slowly. Jean aimed to go far enough to the right to pass the end of the embankment behind which the rustlers had found such efficient cover. This ditch had been made to keep water, during spring thaws and summer storms, from pouring off the slope to flood the corrals.

Jean miscalculated and found he had come upon the embankment somewhat to the left of the end, which fact, however, caused him no uneasiness. He lay there awhile to listen. Again he heard voices. After a time a shot pealed out. He did not see the flash, but he calculated that it had come from the north side of the cabins.

The next quarter of an hour discovered to Jean that the nearest guard was firing from the top of the embankment perhaps a hundred yards distant, and a second one was performing the same office from a point apparently only a few yards farther on. Two rustlers close together! Jean had not calculated upon that. For a little while he pondered on what was best to do, and at length decided to crawl round behind them and as close as the situation made advisable.

He found the ditch behind the embankment a favorable path by which to stalk these enemies. It was dry and sandy, with borders of high weeds. The only drawback was that it was almost impossible for him to keep from brushing against the dry, invisible branches of the weeds. To offset this he wormed his way like a snail, inch by inch, taking a long time before he caught sight of the sitting figure of a man, black against the dark blue sky. This rustler had fired his rifle three times during Jean's slow approach. Jean watched and listened a few moments, then wormed himself closer and closer, until the man was within twenty steps of him.

Jean smelled tobacco smoke, but could see no light of pipe or cigarette because the fellow's back was turned.

"Say, Ben," said this man to his companion sitting hunched up a few yards distant, "shore it strikes me queer thet Craig ain't shootin' any over thar."

Jean recognized the dry, drawling voice of Greaves, and the shock of it seemed to contract the muscles of his whole thrilling body, like that of a panther about to spring.

XIV

"I WAS shore thinkin' thet same," said the other man. "An' say, didn't thet last shot sound too sharp fer Craig's forty-five?"

"Come to think of it, I reckon it did," replied Greaves.

"Wal, I'll go round over thar an' see."

The dark form of the rustler slipped out of sight over the embankment.

"Better go slow an' careful," warned Greaves. "An' only go close enough to call Craig. Mebbe thet damn half-breed Isbel is comin' some Injun on us."

Jean heard the soft swish of footsteps through wet grass. Then all was still. He lay flat, with his cheek on the sand, and he had to look ahead and upward to make out the dark figure of Greaves on the bank. One way or another he meant to kill Greaves, and he had the will power to resist the strongest gust of passion that had ever stormed his breast. If he rose and shot the rustler, that act would defeat his plan of slipping on round upon the other outposts who were firing at the cabins. Jean wanted to call softly to Greaves, "You're right about the half-breed!" and then, as he wheeled aghast, to kill him as he moved.

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But it suited Jean to risk leaping upon the man. Jean did not waste time in trying to understand the strange, deadly instinct that gripped him at the moment. But he realized then he had chosen the most perilous plan to get rid of Greaves.

Jean drew a long, deep breath and held it. He let go of his rifle. He rose, silently as a lifting shadow. He drew the bowie knife. Then with light, swift bounds he glided up the bank. Greaves must have heard a rustling, a soft, quick pad of moccasins, for he turned with a start. And that instant Jean's left arm darted like a striking snake round Greaves' neck and closed tight and hard. With his right hand free, holding the knife, Jean might have ended the deadly business in just one move. But when his bared arm felt the hot, bulging neck something terrible burst out of the depths of him. To kill this enemy of his father was not enough! Physical contact had unleashed the savage soul of the Indian. Yet there was more, and as Jean gave the straining body a tremendous jerk backwards he felt the same strange thrill, the dark joy that he had known when his fist had smashed the face of Simm Bruce. Greaves had leered—he had corroborated Bruce's vile insinuation about Ellen Jorth. So it was more than hate that actuated Jean Isabel.

Greaves was heavy and powerful. He whirled himself, feet first, over backwards, in a lunge like that of a lassoed steer. But Jean's hold held. They rolled down the bank into the sandy ditch, and Jean

landed uppermost, with his body at right angles with that of his adversary.

"Greaves, your hunch was right," hissed Jean. "It's the half-breed. An' I'm goin' to cut you, first for Ellen Jorth an' then for Gaston Isabel!"

Jean gazed down into the gleaming eyes. Then his right arm whipped the big blade. It flashed. It fell. Low down, as far as Jean could reach, it entered Greaves' body.

All the heavy, muscular frame of Greaves was that of an animal in terror and agony. It seemed to contract and burst. His spring was so tremendous that it broke Jean's hold. Greaves let out a strangled yell that cleared, swelling wildly, with a hideous, mortal note. He wrestled free. The big knife came out. Supple and swift, he got to his knees. He had his gun out when Jean reached him again. Like a bear Jean enveloped him. Greaves shot, but he could not raise the gun nor twist it far enough. Then Jean, letting go with his right arm, swung the bowie. Greaves' strength went out in an awful, hoarse cry. His gun boomed again, then dropped from his hand. He swayed. Jean let go. And that enemy of the Isbels sank limply in the ditch. Jean's eyes roved for his rifle and caught the starlight gleam of it. Snatching it up, he leaped over the embankment and ran straight for the cabins. From all round yells of the Jorth faction attested to their excitement and fury.

A fence loomed up gray in the obscurity. Jean vaulted it, darted across the lane into the shadow of the corral and soon

gained the first cabin. Here he leaned to regain his breath. His heart pounded high and seemed too large for his breast. The hot blood beat and surged all over his body. Sweat poured off him. His teeth were clenched tight as a vise, and it took effort on his part to open his mouth so he could breathe more freely and deeply. But these physical sensations were as nothing compared to the tumult of his mind. Then the instinct, the spell, let go its grip and he could think. He had avenged Guy, he had depleted the ranks of the Jorths, he had made good the brag of his father, all of which afforded him satisfaction. But these thoughts were not accountable for all that he felt, especially for the bitter-sweet sting of the fact that death to the defiler of Ellen Jorth could not efface the doubt, the regret which seemed to grow with the hours.

Groping his way into the woodshed he entered the kitchen; and, calling low, he went on into the main cabin.

"Jean! Jean!" came his father's shaking voice.

"Yes, I'm back," replied Jean.

"Are you—all right?"

"Yes. I think I've got a bullet crease on my leg. I didn't know I had it till now. It's bleedin' a little. But it's nothin'."

Jean heard soft steps, and someone reached shaking hands for him. They belonged to his sister, Ann. She embraced him. Jean felt the throb of her breast.

"Why, Ann, I'm not hurt," he said, and held her close. "Now you lie down an' try to sleep."

In the black darkness of the cabin Jean led her back to the corner, and his heart was full. Speech was difficult, because the very touch of Ann's hands had made him divine that the success of his venture in no wise changed the plight of the women he must protect.

"Wal, what happened out thar?" demanded Blaisdell.

"I got two of 'em," replied Jean. "That fellow who was shootin' from the ridge west. An' the other was Greaves."

"Hah!" exclaimed his father.

"Shore, then, it was Greaves yellin'," declared Blaisdell. "By heaven, I never heerd such yells! What'd you do, Jean?"

"I knifed him. You see I'd planned to slip up on one after another. An' I didn't want to make noise. But I didn't get any farther than Greaves."

"Wal, I reckon thet'll end their shootin' in the dark," muttered Gaston Isabel. "We've got to be on the lookout for some-thing else. Fire, most likely."

The old rancher's surmise proved to be partly correct. Jorth's faction ceased the shooting. Nothing further was seen or heard from them. But this silence and apparent break in the siege were harder to bear than deliberate hostility. The long, dark hours dragged by. The men took turns watching and resting, but none of them slept. At last the blackness paled and gray dawn stole out of the east. The sky turned rose over the distant range and daylight came.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

BEATING BACK FROM THE GRASS ROOTS

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primarily has been realized throughout the agricultural states in the past year. The Southwestern cotton country was a striking example. During early winter the streets of the wholesale district of St. Louis were congested with boxes and bales of merchandise shipped back to the wholesalers from their inland customers, not because they were damaged—though that was in some instances the claim—but because the merchants saw no chance of selling.

As spring has advanced trade has brightened, because of the need of replenishment of supplies. Banks were thankful if they could maintain the ordinary ratio between deposits and loans and could manage not to increase the borrowings they had themselves found necessary in order to assist their customers. Now they see an increase in the buying power; further, the inherent wealth represented in the farmer's crop return will give him courage.

What is needed now and what is expected to come from the harvest is a melting of the frozen loans that have cumbered the country banks. The banks have tried all winter to liquidate their discounts; the Federal Reserve Bank has urged action; the city correspondents have sent beseeching appeals—with little effect.

The Country Banker's Dilemma

AS HE selected a note from the case, an interior banker explained the situation: "Here's a man who lives out on Marlin Creek, has a good farm, owes \$4000 on it and borrowed \$2000 more of us last summer to pay running expenses and buy some cattle to feed. He held to his wheat too long and the cattle lost him money, so that he has put off paying the note six months since it was due. What can we do? He is good for the loan; he will pay it some day—next fall, probably—for he has a fine wheat crop coming. Suppose we brought suit, attached his stuff and sold him out. It would ruin his chances of ever getting anywhere and perhaps at forced sale we would have to take some loss. Besides that, we would incur the enmity of every farmer in that part of the county. So we have renewed the note and added in the interest.

"We are borrowing the money ourselves from the Federal Reserve Bank to take care of this and many other similar cases. This is what is the matter with the country banker—he realizes that it would be poor judgment in these times of somewhat nervous tendencies to force things. Of course there must be a pay day, and the big problem now is how and when we are to liquidate the debts. For my part I do not expect

to do it fully for many months and perhaps a year yet, but I do think we shall see some progress when this season's crops begin to move to market."

The bankers have tried to place the situation before the producers and have appealed to the sense of duty and community interest. Banker-farmer meetings were held in Iowa, the state where the land boom was fiercest and the deflation struck probably as hard as in any part of the country. "We have done our part; we have loaned to Iowa 245 per cent of its rightful amount—it is time to start repayment," the producers were told in effect by the city bankers.

Their hearers admitted it all; they realized the situation, but they pointed to the high freight rates that prevented selling corn profitably, to the low prices of all products—and sat tight. "We will sell and pay our debts when we feel that we can," was the essence of their reply—and nothing could be done about it.

Despite all the complaints of the situation in the agricultural states, there is great reserve wealth held by the producers themselves. The sellers of Liberty Bonds have not been the farmers who "bought until it hurt." Those bonds are yet in safe-deposit boxes in the country banks. Indeed, the store has been increased, for bankers all winter and spring have been sending away depositors' money to invest in these and other sound securities.

The consumer in the city is likely to look upon the producer as seeking to raise the cost of living beyond all reasonable limits. This is an exaggerated view. The producer has been educated on a broader plane during the past six years. He has read more, studied more and listened to more lectures than in all his previous history. He understands perfectly that unless there is industrial activity in the manufacturing centers there will be nothing with which to buy his products. He

comprehends the meaning of the census reports which show a larger urban population than rural; hence he gives his support to any plan that proposes to lessen the cost of distribution or which promises to open a wider field so that he may expand his operations to the utmost without glutting his home market.

He has indorsed the bankers' plans for establishing a foreign finance corporation, which, by the way, has received generous support from the interior country banks, because it holds forth a prospect of selling our surplus products abroad and assisting the producers' market at home.

Unquestionably this problem of marketing is foremost in the minds of the producers. A questionnaire was sent out in May to 2080 "dirt farmers" of Kansas, a representative list, about twenty to each county, asking them what seven problems they considered of most pressing importance to-day to the producer. The answers rated his difficulties in this order:

Failure of prices, other than those of farm products, to drop in proportion.

Freight rates so high as to prohibit marketing of products.

High cost of farm machinery and other commodities which a farmer must buy.

Farm labor—scarcity of competent hands and high wages.

Farm credits; plan for financing the small farmer with long-time notes especially needed.

Increasing taxes. Seven per cent of the replies mentioned burden of taxation as "depressing."

Tariff. Six per cent mentioned tariff was possible means of relief.

Two elements are struggling for the leadership in handling the problem. One is political and has a vision of an upsetting of state and national government that shall place all power in the hands of the producer. Along with this it seeks to get control of packing plants, grain elevators, flour mills and all the machinery for the transformation of raw food-stuffs into readiness for the consumer's

use. Elaborate financial plans, which include cooperative banks and perhaps government loans on warehouse receipts, are also considered.

The proposition, however, that an agricultural community can so mobilize its resources as to finance all its development is not established. Capital must be supplied from outside if progress is to be continued regularly.

Financing the Farmer

THE new census returns give some illuminating facts on this feature of financing the productivity of the soil. While prosperity was with us for five years and the growth of wealth in the agricultural states has been one of the marvels of national advancement, a great amount of borrowed capital is yet demanded by the producer. For instance, take a Middle West group of food-producing states—Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, North Dakota. The mortgage debt reported in 1910 in those states was \$492,956,110; in 1920, \$1,029,735,584. The statistics are, unfortunately, far from complete, but enough is given to indicate an increasing use of outside capital. Though in this group of states the number of farms reported as mortgaged has decreased from 294,421 to 287,634 in ten years, the average debt is approximately 100 per cent greater than a decade ago.

Another element bases its faith on the systematization of the producer's business, with especial attention to the distribution of the commodities in which he is interested. It points to the cooperative fruit-marketing associations as examples of what can be done and is attempting to apply the same principles to the handling of grain and livestock. This carries with it only incidentally any political movement. Of the two directions this is the one which holds out hope of stability and sound prosperity.

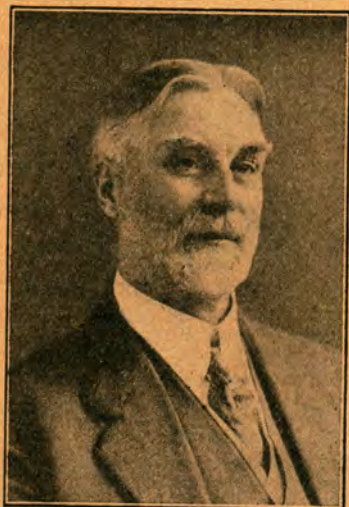
With a new crop and a realization of the necessity of cooperation, it is believed that we shall see during the coming fall an upward turn in business and such readjustment of financial affairs as will give encouragement and accelerate the machinery of trade and industry. I talked it over with a keen-witted farmer.

"It has been a tough pull," said he, "especially after the years of easy going, but I have learned this: So long as the sun shines and the rain falls there is going to be a chance for the man who tills the soil."

That spirit exists in the hearts of the producers of the agricultural states. There—"back at the grass roots," as the Westerner puts it—lies the surest impetus for the financial pendulum's upward swing.



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CHAFF

Not So Mere

"**HUH!**" sarcastically ejaculated young Yancey Yaw.

"You won't never ketch me being bossed round by a mere woman!"

"Young feller," grimly returned Gap Johnson, of Rumpus Ridge, "when you've been married to one of 'em as long as I have you'll sorter get the idy into your fool head that wimmen ain't so durn mere as you might think!"

A Helpful Hint

A GIRL who's kissed against her will Will tremble, start and then keep still. If thus no girl you've ever kissed Migosh, you'don't know what you've missed!

Lower Education

"**FARMER BLUNT**," asked the college student who was working as a hand during his vacation, "do you think I'll ever become a successful agriculturist?"

"We-e-ll, you may," doubtfully replied Farmer Blunt, "but you'll never be a farmer!"

No Doubt of It

"**TEN** poor families could support life on the food one rich family wastes." "Yes, and the clothing one rich woman leaves off would keep twenty poor women warm."

The Reason

"**THE** only thing I ever got out of that skinflint uncle of mine was advice." "Oh, well, I dare say it was good advice." "It was not. If it had been, he wouldn't have given it away."

An Inspiration

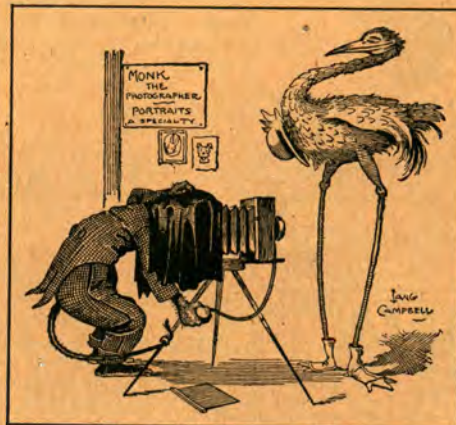
THEY had just been married and were about to start on their wedding trip. He was embarrassed to the point of forgetfulness, but he met the situation expertly.

"Why, Harry, you've bought only one ticket," reproached the bride.

"Just like me, dear," flashed Harry; "always forgetting myself."

An Ominous Outlook

FARMERS are such an ungrateful lot that at any time we may expect the town men to get angry and refuse to give them any more advice.



MONK, the Photographer: Great Guns! What Became of the Bird That Wanted His Photograph Taken?

What Costs

THE colored parson had just concluded a powerful address to the effect that "salvation is free," and was announcing that a collection would be taken for the benefit of himself and his family. Up jumped a brother in a back seat. "Look heah, parson! If salvation is free, what's de use of payin' fo' it? Ah ain't gwine to give nuthin' till Ah finds out. Now —"

"Patience, brudder, patience," said the parson. "Ah'll 'lucidate. S'pose yo' was thirsty an' come to a river. Yo' could kneel right down an' drink yo' fill, couldn't yo'? An' it wouldn't cost yo' nuthin', would it?"

"Of co'se not. Dat's jest what Ah —" "Dat water would be free," continued the parson. "But s'posin' yo' was to have dat water piped to yo' house; yo'd have to pay, wouldn't yo'?"

"Yassuh, but —" "Wal, brudder, salvation is free, but it's de havin' it piped to yo' dat yo' got to pay fo'. Pass de hat, deacon."

When Baby Smiles

THE baby smiles, and all the folks whirl in and start to smiling. In imitation of the kid with chuckles so beguiling. Let him but start to pull a grin and make a dimple visible. And everybody on the place begins to twist a risible. Oh, when there bubbles forth the sound of joyous baby laughter, The house is brighter for his smile for hours and hours thereafter!

—Tennyson J. Daft.

Skeptical

UNCLE ED, whose head towered six and a half feet toward the empyrean, was regarded with envy by his small nephew Bobby. In one of the youngster's admiring moments, he asked: "Uncle Ed, were you made out of just one boy?"

The Probable Version

"**THEY** call this yur bluff Lover's Leap," said Gid Jackson to the vacationist whom he was showing round the mountain. "I sorter forget just why, but 'pears like the story goes that an old maid proposed to a feller on this spot and he gave a yell and jumped off."

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