

Flames of Forbidden Love
BY NELLIE M. HENRY.

CHAPTER I

Van was not so despondent after he had taken the Redford children to Dallas and entered them in school. He had talked a long time with Mr. Redford and Drue. He liked Drue very much. He recognized that even though she had not had any education, she was a wise and good woman, with a lot of common sense. She wanted the best she could obtain for her children. She objected at first to Van's taking over their education on the grounds that it was taking advantage of him; that it was charity. "As much as I want this for my children," she had said, there isn't anything we can do for you in return. "On the other hand," Van assured her, "there is a great deal you can do for me. I need reliable help in several enterprises. It isn't easy to get honest, capable people one can depend upon to do the necessary things in business. You have taught your sons to be honest and conscientious. The girls can become teachers, or learn to do other things of great value to the community. When the community benefits, we all do. They can pay me back. He knew that he would be paid simply by the fact that his mind would be occupied by something other than Laura, but he could hardly tell Drue that. There wasn't much problem about the two older boys, Casey and Rob, and it wasn't difficult to get Roxanne and Carol into a girl's school, but it was a little harder to know just where to place the younger ones. Ned, Phyllis, Amelia, Patricia and Mary Drue. Drue, the youngest, was only seven. Would she be too homesick? Would she do all right away from the home she had always known? What would Ned be apt to feel taken away from all that was familiar? Drue believed that the children would all do all right. She had a very close relationship with all of them, and she believed that when they talked things out; when the children understood what a great advantage they were being offered, they would all be ready to accept the new situation and look forward to making things better for themselves and the world. She and Van had discussed the possibility of her and Joe moving to Dallas, so that they could be with the children, but Drue decided they would try getting them established otherwise first.

It was nearing Christmas time. Delia and Tom were excited that Vincent's family would be arriving soon. Van too, looked forward to seeing that family. Also, the Redford children would all be home. Van would have the opportunity to discover for himself just how they were faring.

"We would like all of you to come to be with us for Christmas," Van told Drue. She was gracious about that invitation, but she told Van that she would be very uncomfortable in such a mansion with educated and refined people, and that she thought it would be much better if they had a big Christmas dinner at their own cabin as they always had, and then came to the Walling's home afterward. "Redford has two big turkeys all ready for the pot," she said, "and I've made cinnamon rolls and pies. It will be great to go to your home after they have had their usual Christmas dinner though, if that is satisfactory."

Van had wanted to discuss also, the possibility of having the extra fingers surgically removed from Mary Lou's, Ned's and Annie's hands. He was hesitant because Drue herself also had those extra fingers. However, when Van finally managed to ask her, she was enthusiastic about it. She made it easy for him. "I've heard tell of that being possible," she said, looking rather longingly, Van thought, at her own little extra appendage. "It didn't bother me too much, but one of my sisters used to cry. It really spoiled her life, I think. I was very sorry for her. She never married, and now she never goes anywhere. Just sits and broods. Wont even come out here to be with us."

"If you would like for me to see what can be done, I will be glad to," Van said. She merely nodded her head. The operations proved to be quite simple, and the hands showed very little scars from the surgeries. Drue kept picking up each of the children's hands, smoothing over the places where the fingers had been removed. Her eyes glistened. "It bothered her a lot more than she ever let on," Van decided. "Would you like to have the same surgery?" he asked. She looked at him for a long time. "I guess not," she finally said. "I don't know how it could make much difference to me. My life is pretty well settled..."

"Let's try it," Van said. "Wouldn't it be an interesting experiment? You might even let your sister know. Maybe she would consent to having the same work done. Maybe it would make a great deal of difference in her life."

Drue consented and Van could see the happiness in her eyes. Even Mr. Redford didn't make a fuss. "I'm kind of attached to them little extra fingers," he said, roaring with laughter--"but if Drue wants it, I won't object."

Christmas turned out to be a quite good time for everyone. The Redfords spent their Christmas together, as Drue had suggested. The next day they arrived at the Walling home. The children were all eager to show off and tell about what they had learned. They had a willing audience. Drue fit into the kitchen where she wanted to help with everything, without being intrusive. Delia loved her. She knew

Drue didn't feel quite at ease, and she did not try to push her into anything she thought might make her feel uncomfortable. "In time, if we just take it easy, she will come to feel at home with us," she said. Van was more cheerful than he had been in a very long time. He felt as if he could breathe more easily. Had he been holding his breath for three years? He felt as if he had. His heart was certainly still heavy, but it was good to feel a so much lighter load. However, it seemed that when he forgot about Laura for a little while, the thought of her came back with an added force of pain, so he wasn't sure whether he had gained anything or not. The children were still intrigued with the fact that they were going to school. They were eager to talk to everyone, play with Alice Lynn, ride, tell about their new experiences, their new friends and what they had learned. They were all clambering for attention, excited, happy. "We are learning to sew," Carol said. "We have some of those new...what are they, Casey?"

"Machines, Mary. Sewing machines."

"Oh, yes, sewing machines. They are new. They are such fun. You don't have to take stitches all day. They just fly along. All you have to do is learn to use the treadle--with your foot. Isn't that amusing. Sewing with one's foot? Of course you have to guide the material and thread the needle and..."

"Carol never did like to sew before," Roxanne said. "It is more fun to sew on a machine, though, and it's a whole lot faster." "And we are learning all about electricity!" Rob said. "That's what I enjoy most. It is like magic! It is magic."

"I agree with you," Tom said, "It is magic, and you should learn everything about it you possibly can. It is going to be used more and more. Anyone who knows something about its properties and potentials will have a good start in life."

"I like studying about bacteria and germs," Roxanne said. "If I didn't have other plans, I would want to be a doctor."

"Girls can't be doctors," Casey said. "I like to read about all the wonderful men who discovered things about the human body, though, and how the blood circulates, that was Harvey and then a Mr. Laennec invented the stethoscope. The first one was made of just a piece of

paper rolled up. Then there is Pasteur and a lot of others, who are making new discoveries every day. Pasteur was reviled and persecuted and denied for a long time--still is by a lot of fools. It is maddening to read about all the men who should have helped to promote knowledge, but wouldn't accept any new discoveries, and went right on killing people with their ignorance, defending it throughout their lifetimes. Of course, Leeuwenhoek is important. He invented the microscope. You can see things that you wouldn't ever have dreamed existed. He was the first one I believe, to show what bacteria are, among a lot of other things. He was despised, like so many other good men in history, because he proved that the generally accepted notions, that so many kinds of life were generated spontaneously, was all wrong. He showed that all living things are generated from their own kind. People didn't like to give up their ingrained ideas of how things were." "They still don't," Tom said. "Girls can so be doctors, can't they Van?"

"They sure can!" Van agreed.

"It is a shame though," Delia said, "that it is so much harder for a girl to become a doctor or a lawyer. It isn't right. Many girls would be better at the professions than some of the men who get into them so easily, and as Casey says, some of the men do more harm than good."

"I think that is a flaw of society," Tom said, but the more girls who become doctors and lawyers and go into other professions that are considered just for men, the easier it will become. Have you read anything yet about the Claflin sisters?"

"And Florence Nightingale," Delia said, "and Dorthea Dix and the other women who helped to change deplorable conditions into good ones; helped to wipe out the ignorance?"

"There is nothing more important in my mind," Tom said, "than the work people do to help to wipe out ignorance. In my opinion ignorance causes more of the world's suffering than any other one thing. For some reason, it seems that people worship their ignorance, and cling to it as if their souls depended on it."

"Well, isn't that what many of the religions teach?" Van said, "That your very soul does depend on accepting the teachings they advocate--which are always full of superstition and ignorance?"

"Well, that is the way we have always believed. It is a conviction with me," Tom said, "but some people seem to need that superstition and ignorance in order to survive. You have a point Casey," Tom added, "when you say that the doctors who refused to face facts were not very noble. Sad as it is, you will discover that there are a lot of people who are not very noble, acting on the part of the public. They are in the Government, the professions, in business and just about anywhere you care to look for them."

"Tell us about them, Van!" the children chorused. "Tell you what," Van said, taking joy in the fact that these children had already learned so much. Their English alone, and their articulation were proof of their interest in learning and of their intelligence, "When we have finished with dinner we will go into the library and have a long talk about interesting people who have done things to improve the world, and about those too, like you were talking about, Casey, who did so much to hold back progress, and are still . doing so. There have always been the wise, intelligent ones, and there have always been those who fought against progress, even when these changes were necessary in order to save lives. I think it always will be that way."

"But every one of you who learns all you can about any subject," Tom said, "the more people there will be to fight on the side of the intelligent, progressive ones: The faster the world

will improve; the more lives will be saved; the more suffering will be eliminated. All knowledge and information is noble; very worth striving very hard to achieve. There is a lot of misinformation in the world, and as Van says, there probably always will be, but the less there is, the better."

"That's why the world needs good teachers, good writers, good orators," Vincent added. "You know I have always believed that these do the world much more good than most preachers do. I haven't found preachers to be very wise or very informed, as a general rule. They could do a lot more to improve the world if they weren't so inclined to think they had all the answers without having gained any information." Phyllis, Amelia, Patricia and Drue talked about the stories the teachers read to them every day. "They are called Fairy Stories," Phyllis said. "Some of them are scary! Of course they are about things that never really happened."

"I always enjoyed fairy stories, too," Vincent said, "but when I got older, I learned that the things that could never have happened were not nearly as magical as those things that are true. For instance, the subjects the boys have been talking about, and Roxanne--microbes, the human mind, the human body, even, and electricity; these are all things that are more fascinating than any fairy story--more miraculous than anything one can imagine. Not that fairy stories aren't fine, too. They are necessary to a good education, but it is important to recognize how much more magical real things are."

"I like the writing and reading," Amelia said. "We have learned all our letters, all our numbers, and even how some letters go together to make words. I think that is like magic--like a fairy story, fascin..."

"Fascinating," Greyson supplied. "Fascinating," Amelia said, and walked over and made herself comfortable on Greyson's lap. Greyson blushed. He looked over at Roxanne, and seeing that she was smiling approvingly, he relaxed and smiled back. These kids are so used to being loved by everyone they have ever been around, that it never occurred to Amelia that she might not be welcome to go sit on anyone's lap, Van was thinking. Of course, nothing like that has ever happened before in Greyson's life. He was embarrassed at first, but Roxanne's smile was all he needed to set things right. "You're being very quiet," Dorinda said to Gerald."

"I'm learning," Gerald grinned. "My teachers always told me I had better learn to listen, if I ever wanted to benefit by teaching."

"Good idea," Vincent laughed. "I always learned more by listening, too."

"It is all very interesting. I want to hear every word of it," Delia said, "but let's go eat some food or we may have to call on Dr. Roxanne or Dr. Casey to revive us. I hope you won't advocate bleeding. I don't believe those doctors who insisted on that were the best informed."

"Oh, no, I don't either!" Casey said. "Dr. Wesselman got so mad at some of the other doctors for bleeding, that he almost got into fist fights with them. He kept proving that bleeding was harmful, but the ignorant men kept using it, killing people, and never awakened to what was causing all the deaths. They say it is widely used even now. Some doctors still don't see the folly of it."

"It is indeed," Tom said, "Hundreds of fine young men died from battle wounds because doctors insisted that bleeding was the way to cure blood-poison and other maladies."

"One of the most important things anyone discovered, though," Casey said, "is what it is that causes childbed fever, puerperal fever. It is nothing at all other than lack of cleanliness. Hundreds of woman died because doctors didn't wash their hands, or their instruments. Dr. Ignaz

Semmelweis (The Cry And The Covenant, by Morton Thompson), kept insisting that all the doctors he had any authority over, washed their hands in chloride of lime. He cut the incidence of childbed deaths way down. But even after he had proven that it worked to save lives, most doctors refused to use it--and they still do. It dries out the hands, and takes extra time, so they make the excuse that it doesn't help. That isn't very intelligent..."

CHAPTER II

There was a lot of talk about how beautiful the Redford girls were. They all had delicate features like Drue's, and the delicate bone structure. They were all small, dainty, gracious. Roxanne was the only one of the girls Drue and Delia felt was old enough to attend the New Year's ball. The others would have entertainments of their own. They were still awed by the huge mansion: its furnishings and its occupants. They loved to ride. Luke and Maib had saddled selected horses for them and watched over them to see that their horsemanship was properly executed. Little Alice Lynn was being taken up into the saddle with each of them when the weather was right. The girls were still delighted too, with the clothes they had to wear. They had never before worn such beautiful things. They seemed extraordinarily elegant and rich to them. The boys were already good hunters. They knew how to handle weapons properly. They were strong, quick, alert. Maib began teaching them all he knew about the Japanese methods of fighting. They had never even wrestled with each

other as most boys did, but they took to the self-defense methods as the proverbial ducks to water. The Redford boys and Vincent's sons, Greyson and Gerald, were wary of each other. Van worried about how each would react to the others. At first they all seemed to be unwilling to take any initiative in getting acquainted. They appeared to be taking measure of each other. Casey and Greyson were about the same age. No one knew how the ice was broken between them, but before a day was over, Van and his uncle Vincent saw the two boys looking over Casey's weapons, and discussing how they should be handled and what could be done with them. The other children then began to take an interest in these two big boys who knew nothing of the ways the Redfords took for granted, but who had a great deal of experience the Redford children had never imagined happened in real life. Van, and undoubtedly his uncle Vincent, too, noticed the intense interest Greyson was taking in Roxanne. He gazed at her as if she were a master painting. He hardly said a word to her, but Van saw the longing in his face. "He would like to be able to talk with her and to come to feel at ease with her", he said. "He hasn't shown much interest in girls up until this time," Vincent told Van. "He is shy. It is certainly understandable how he could suddenly awaken to the...well, 'what a young man's fancy turns to in spring,' I believe some poet put it. Roxanne is beautiful. Seems like a nice girl."

"She is nice." Van assured his uncle, "and intelligent, and dependable."

Van related the story of how he had become acquainted with the Redfords. He told Vincent that the children were all attending school in Dallas. "However," he grinned, "They have lived in a very unusual way, compared to that which your sons have been inured to. They are very poor. They have lived without many comforts. They never saw anything like this home, the luxuries, the beautiful furniture, the servants. They didn't even have tables and chairs, silverware, cups. We would call the way they lived, camping-- and not very comfortable camping, at that. I was afraid that after we brought them here, and they were made to feel that they were welcome any time, they might not want ever to go home, to the hardships, but that was not the case at all. They are all intrigued with what they see here, but they all love their home, too. They have always been happy there. Their home has always been filled with love."

"Sounds great, interesting, unusual." Vincent said. Greyson managed to get close enough to Roxanne to start a conversation. Van kept watching that sweet, unusual smile of

hers being directed at Greyson with, Van knew, not the least consciousness of its effect, or even that there was anything exceptional about it. That handsome Greyson is being mesmerized," Van thought. "Well, he probably couldn't find a finer girl."

"Roxanne," Greyson said, "I want you to know that I am...I am falling in love with you. I am like everyone else. I might as well warn you, that I am going to pursue you relentlessly. I have never been interested in any other girl. I have never been drawn--even slightly, to any other girl...so I am sure that this is a lasting thing. I have never seen any girl with half the charm you have. You are entrancing. I can see, of course, that every other man here, young or old, is enchanted with you. As far as I can tell, you aren't too impressed with any of them. I've taken hope from that. I believe I have as good a chance as anyone else. I will promise you that none of them are going to be more determined and persistent than I. I intend to make you love me. Is that fair warning."

"You are the handsomest man in the room. Every girl here has her eyes on you. In fact, they all admit that they hold their breath, waiting for you to ask them for a dance. How could any girl keep from being flattered to have you speak in the way you have? It does make me happy. But, Greyson..."

"What? What is it, Roxanne? Have you given your heart to someone else?"

"Let's just say that I am not ready to commit myself to anyone. I have a lot of...things to decide, before I make any real commitment. In the meantime, I certainly enjoy dancing with you, talking to you. I am selfish enough to enjoy the envy of all the other girls when they see your attentions to me. Do you think that is terribly petty?"

"If it is, it suits me fine. I am not sure any of them feel any desire for my attentions, but if they do, that gives me added hope that I have enough...whatever it takes, to be attractive to you. That is all I want."

At the ball Van noticed that Roxanne watched him through those thick, dark lashes, from lovely eyes blue as her mother's. He wondered what she was thinking. He believed it was that same awe they all seemed to have, of all the Wallings- -and the unusual things they represented in this new world. Van often had to go into another room to be alone with his thoughts and his heartache. As much as he liked these people, he could not remain cheerful for long. He was standing alone looking out the window, dreaming of his days with Laura. Roxanne came into the room. He turned and she gave him that devastating smile. He had spent some time trying to describe in his mind that special smile. It was sincere, sweet, quick, but it always seemed that she had to decide first whether she was going to frown or smile. I suppose that is why no one can keep from watching for it; why it is so fascinating," he decided. That questioning look came first, and then the quick, enchanting smile, as he stood watching her. She walked over to him. She stood very close and looked up at him. "My god, she is beautiful." He was thinking. "Is anything wrong, Van?" she asked. Even her voice was sweet, concerned, caring.

"Yes," he said, "I'm afraid there is."

"Will you talk to me about it?"

"No," he said, "It isn't a proper subject to talk about."

"Please," she insisted. "If anything is bothering you, I would like for you to talk to me about it. I know you are unhappy. I know about the girl you loved. I can't stand to see you unhappy," she said. She grasped his arm. "I wish you would kiss me, Van," she said. He was so surprised he could hardly get his breathe. He took her arm and turned her toward the door. She resisted.

"I am not going to kiss you," he said, almost angrily, "now or ever. Come on. We are going back out into the other room."

"Why wont you kiss me, Van?" she was still resisting. She seemed to be waiting for his answer. "Come with me back out where the others are," he heard himself saying, "or I will carry you out."

"All right, Van," she said casually, "but sometime I'm going to persuade you to kiss me."

"Why in hell would you want me to kiss you?" he asked, anger in his voice.. "Why not?" she said. "Because it is a dangerous way to act with a man. It would be dangerous for any girl, but you are altogether too enticing. You're beautiful. You should never tempt a man..."

"I wouldn't say a thing like that to any man but you, Van. I know you would never harm me. You could never do any girl wrong. You could never do anything dishonorable," she said. "Roxanne, don't believe that! It isn't true. I have done a lot of dishonorable things; things I am not proud of, but you are right, I would not harm you. I would not kiss you because that would be a dishonorable thing to do." "All right, I'll go for now." She walked to the door. Van took her arm and led her back to the house. He felt angry

. with Roxanne but he could understand her youthful misconceptions of life. He could not stay angry with her for long. He had a tender feeling for her that would not allow him to remain critical of her. "She doesn't know what she does to men, of course. She couldn't. She is an innocent little thing. She has to learn, though, right now, that she can't behave that way around a man. Most men wouldn't understand that kind of attitude. Most men would interpret it as an invitation to a great deal more than she intends. I have to make her understand that. She is too lovely to be mauled and maybe ravaged. "I'd kill any man who would harm her--but if I don't watch her, it may be too late before I find out. "She said that something was bothering me. She wanted to help. She is a compassionate little thing and she thinks all the Wallings are a little more than mortal. Well, without knowing just how, she has helped me. I have a sort of mission now. I will have to concentrate on protecting Roxanne and all her sisters from their own innocent trust. I will go to sleep tonight more eased in my mind than I have been in a long time. When I begin to think of my days, and nights, with Laura, I will bring up the image of Roxanne--and her sisters. It will give me something else to think about; what I must do for them, what I must teach them--without destroying their faith in mankind. "Drue surely had to have been a beautiful girl," Van thought. "The girls all look like her and every one of them is beautiful. I wonder if Old Joe has any idea how lucky he is. If it hadn't been for that tiny extra finger, I am sure Drue would have had no end of suiters. Probably that drove most of them away. I don't believe she has ever felt in the least victimized or cheated though. She behaves toward her husband as if he were just another of her children; is kind, attentive, affectionate. Well, he isn't such a bad sort, but she certainly is the backbone of that family. She is the

. brains, the courage, the counsellor, the helmsman, the strength of them all. She is a great woman."

He knew that his parents had not given up hope that he would choose some other woman for his wife; that he would marry and forget about Laura. They had continued to arrange for him to meet the most lovely women in the community. These woman had no effect whatsoever on him. Oh, he could be aroused in a sensual way. He had been eroticized a thousand times merely by the thought of Laura and the remembrance of that wonderful night when he had made love to her with sweet abandon; when she had admitted openly that she loved him and always had. That night that had seemed to be the culmination of years of waiting. That night he had thought was to be the beginning of a new life for them, of love, fulfillment, a family. "Without the memories of that night, I wonder how I would ever have lived--but oh god, it

is very little! I need her so much. I will never love another woman. Will I live my life alone and lonely? I wanted Laura. I wanted children. I wanted to do so much to make her life happy..."

He liked these people, the Redford family and his uncle's family, very much, and enjoyed their company, but his painful thoughts would not subside enough for him to enjoy anything for very long at a time.

CHAPTER III

"Please come back at Easter time, if you cannot come before that," Delia asked Vincent and Dorinda. "We miss you. One of our greatest pleasures is to have you here, to visit and hear all the things you have been doing."

"Well, if Greyson has anything to do with it, we will be back next week," Vincent said. "He is enamored with that beautiful little Roxanne."

"It will break his heart," Dorinda said to Delia quietly, "If he discovers that she is repelled by the notion that he has...that he is black. We have always taught the boys to be proud of their heritage--and I believe we have succeeded quite well--but this is the first time he has run across any situation where it could have a real impact on his life. It frightens me."

"I really don't believe that concerns Roxanne--or her parents. They have always been so sensible and fair about everything--but of course I can't speak for them. I would be very disappointed in them if that proved to be the case."

Van and Delia and Tom were sitting over their morning coffee. The little Indian woman, Eunice, who had become their maid, came into the room. She was very quiet, shy, reserved, deferent. "There is someone to see you," she announced. "A Mr. Hawk as far as I can make out and a woman with him. I believe he cannot speak much English."

"Show him in," Van said, rising. The Indian, walked in with a pretty little squaw on his arm. They both wore buckskin garments and buckskin moccasins. On the way out from Kentucky, where the group had had to fight off the Indians and had finally made friends with this one, they had often tried to find out what his name was. They could not make out what he said. It sounded like a guttural Hawk, so they had wound up by merely calling him "The Indian." When they made introductions, as at the Redfords, they had called him Hawk, and he had made no objections. The Indian bowed, and the woman followed his lead. Delia and Tom and Van set in immediately to try to make them feel at ease. "Please sit down," Delia invited and Tom held a chair for the girl. Slowly, they sat at the table. Each of the three hosts were trying to think of some way to begin a conversation. They all knew that the Indian did not speak much English. "Want..." he stopped, evidently searching for words.

"Want...he made a motion to include himself and the woman. Want...make one," he finally managed. "You want to get married!" Van said triumphantly. "Yes," the Indian man said. He arose in an attempt, it seemed, to make himself better understood. Want...married. .

Make good. Make my woman."

"Good!" Van said. "That's great! Make her your wife."

"Make wife!" the Indian smiled. Van had stuck out his hand and the Indian took it happily. Delia and Tom shook his hand and then hugged the woman. She made no objection, but laughed lightly, and returned their hugs. With words and signs, Van made them understand that they were wanted to remain the night and that they would have the preacher in tomorrow to make them one. Delia rang for Eunice. She was asked to show Hawk and the woman to rooms. "Show them the baths, how to find things, and how to use them." Eunice did not speak this man's language any better than the others did, but she led the two guests to their rooms. She smiled and made them understand that if they needed anything, they were to ring, to pull the cord. "Call Luke and Maib and Lenna and everyone," Delia said. "Let's make this memorable. We will have a big feast. I want the living-room decorated. Van, I want one of those buckskin

outfits. Do you think we could arrange for me to have it by tomorrow afternoon, for the wedding? I wonder where one would begin on something like that."

"I will go talk to Hawk about it. We have to get names for these people. I don't want to go around calling him just Hawk. He has to have some kind of first name."

"Well, go talk to them. You communicate with them better than any of the others of us do. Give them names if you have to christen them yourself. This is wonderful!" she said. She was excited, but her main concern was that it seemed to be taking Van's mind off Laura for a little while.

Van had by some means arranged for the buckskin outfit for Delia and one for himself. They were beautiful. The buckskin had been tanned in the most expert manner. It was almost white. The fringes were fine and even. Glossy, fine.

beads decorated the belts, the moccasins, and most every part of the woman's outfit, where the intricate pattern could be worked in. "They're beautiful!" Delia said. "I wish Van could have got one for you too, Tom," Delia said. "He tried, but to tell the truth, I will feel just a bit more comfortable in my old suit. I like them, but to be truthful the way that little breech-cloth concentrates attention would embarrass me no end. I will enjoy watching you in your wedding raiment, though. And Van looks like a young brave in his." He sounded amused. "They'll make excellent heirlooms, Delia. We will have to save them for posterity."

"If we ever have any grandchildren," Delia said. "Marion doesn't seem to be interested in having children and Van says he will never marry any other woman than Laura--so maybe we will never..."

"Van will come 'round," Tom said. Delia looked at him, wondering if he could possibly know something about Van that she did not. The wedding was beautiful. Van had either discovered the names of the bride and groom, or as Delia had suggested, Christianed them, "Hawk Hill and Fuline Pepyous. That seemed to suit everyone. Those were the names that went on the marriage certificate. The wedding had no more than been celebrated than the Indian had another request. "Want...want..." He looked around and picked up a book. He opened it and peered into the open pages. "You want to learn to read!" Van said. "Great! We will begin lessons right away! He looked at Fuline. She was watching him with questioning, bright eyes. "Yes," Hawk said, nodding vigorously. "Woman want read, too."

The next thing the Indian demanded was that they be given work to pay for all they had received. Van finally promised that they would be given work. "Hunt," Hawk suggested. "All right," Van laughed. Bring us deer, turkey. Can woman make..." he pointed to his outfit and that of Delia. When the Indians understood what he meant, they both nodded, with big smiles. "Then it wont take you two long to pay us well," Van said. Although they didn't understand all the words Van said, they understood the meaning. Van talked with Maib and determined that that natural teacher would be glad to take the newlyweds to instruct. They had to learn first to speak English, and then learn to read. While teaching them, Maib managed to learn enough of the Indian language to converse quite well with them.

CHAPTER IV

"I will be going out to Kentucky," Van announced at breakfast time. I want to see some of my old friends out there. Would you like for me to try to see Orville while I am there, Mom? And how about Connie? I want to see Maggie, and Sylvia. I am looking forward to getting acquainted with "that wonderful doctor," as Maggie describes her husband. I am eager to meet that young man who went to see you and Laura before you left. Sylvia gave a glowing description of him."

Delia had to smile. She had liked the young man who gave his name to Marybelle, only as "Butch," and then had added the name "McCall", when Laura asked. She had recognized that he was intelligent, and strongly suspected that he was a man of integrity and high standards. In spite of the fact that he had not had a great deal of education, she had thought he had a plentiful measure of charm. Not a little of that charm was the manner in which he spoke. Somehow, he had a way which

made everything he said seem more important than just the words he said. When he had said "I kindie like...or "I kindie thought...", one was made to feel that what he thought, or what he liked in those instances, was of more weight than a mere liking or thinking. It was the essential core of a man's conscience. It revealed what he had discovered to be one of the most important ingredients of integrity. "No wonder Sylvia fell in love with him. I believe he is as fine a man as was ever born," Delia said."

"I hope so," Van said. "Sylvia is a good woman. She deserves the best. She deserves some happiness. I was afraid she would never find that happiness after we heard what happened to Daniel. She loved him with all the depth of her being. It was a terrible blow. But as she wrote, she and Maggie found, out of the ashes of their lives, new life, 'like the Phoenix.' I think that was a pretty apt application of that phrase."

"She described her love for Butch as 'unorthodox.' Not of the usual run. She said that she loved him more for the fact that he was not one of the 'stuffed shirts' she would have preferred in her younger life: those years when she felt that wealth and prestige were of all importance."

"Yes, that's true, and Butch worships her more because he sees her as one of those inimitable paragons of womanhood he had thought peopled only the heavens. The fact that he idolizes her, I think, makes her all the happier. It is intoxicating to have someone think you are the most absolute perfection imaginable."

Tom and Delia felt the pangs of sorrow about Van's enduring heartache. "Someone felt that way about him, but now

he has no one to share life with. Will his loneliness go on forever?"

"When I think what he has suffered, it is almost more than I can bear," Tom said for the thousandth time. "Delia, if you had been torn away from me in that manner, just by a little quirk of coincidence, or any other way, for that matter, I don't believe I could have survived. There is no expressing how empty my life would have been. I am not the type that could have ever taken my own life, but I would have been as dead as if I had. The wonder of it is not that Van has suffered so much, but that he has been able to go on at all--that he has kept his sanity."

"Yet you and I did almost lose each other that one time," Delia said. Tom looked at her, startled. "When, Delia? When did I come near to losing you?"

"Yes, I'm sure you remember. When I found out you had gone to...be with Connie, I would have killed you if I could have."

"Delia! you knew about that! Probably you should have killed me!" He had taken her in his arms, buried his face in her shoulder. "Delia, how did you ever forgive me? I know you have--or things couldn't have been so wonderful between us all these years. My God, that was...what? Over thirty years ago! Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" she laughed. "I wanted to, sweetheart. I wanted to--but I was too big a coward. I was too afraid of losing you. Like I said, I couldn't ever have faced another day if I had lost you."

"I couldn't have lived without you, either, Tom. I'm sure you know that. I couldn't believe you really had gone to that whorehouse to be with someone else. I had ordered the woman who came to tell me about it out of our house; told her she was lying. But I couldn't rest until I had gone to find out for sure. I didn't care about my life any longer, when I found out you had been there... I wanted to kill her--but I was so sure it wasn't true I hadn't taken my pistol. I've often wondered if I might really have killed her if I had had a gun in my hand at the right moment."

"God, Delia, what happened when you saw Connie?" He could hardly speak. "Well, like I said, I really considered killing Connie, if it turned out to be true that you had gone there. I wanted to kill you, too--but after we had talked a while, I realized that she had saved our marriage. That it was because of her you began to make love to me so gently, so wonderfully, the way I had dreamed you would when I married you. She explained everything to me."

"My God! And you understood?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't I? She had given me...given us the most precious thing anyone could have hoped for at that time."

"Yes, that's true," Tom managed to say. "What I couldn't understand was why you never did give her something in return. I think we owed her a lot."

"We certainly did...I certainly did.. I don't see how I could have been so selfish. Like I said, I was so scared you would hate me and I would lose you, that I couldn't think of anything else. How did you find out?"

"Well, you might have known the neighbors would talk. The wife of one of the men you went with came to the house and told me about it. I ordered her out of the house. I didn't believe her. But the more I thought about it the more I knew I had to find out for sure. I went there and told the matron I was Connie's sister. She let me go up to Connie's room. At first I couldn't believe how casual and courteous Connie was. It made me all the more angry--but she knew what she was doing. "After she had explained the whole thing to me, I took matters into my own hands. The madam came knocking at the door. When Connie opened it, there was the most filthy, vile looking man I had ever seen. He was leering at Connie and waiting for her to go with him. I couldn't stand it. I ordered Connie not to go. She told me she had to go; that that was the way she made her living. I told her that if she didn't refuse to go, I would go in her place. That was one

threat I made in my life that I could never have carried out," she laughed. "I should hope so!" he said, still so shaken he could hardly talk. "Anyway, I told the madam that Connie wasn't going, and I closed the door in her face. Connie still insisted that she had to go. I asked her to leave with me, but she said that as much as she hated the life she was leading, she couldn't accept charity. That was why she had taken up this kind of life in the first place. We had quite a long conversation. I asked her what she could do. She ended by telling me that she was a good seamstress. That settled it. I set her up in a shop in Central City. She did well right from

the start. We got sewing machines when those things were hardly out of the hands of the inventors. She had three girls working for her before we left there. I hear from her, of course. She is one of my best friends. She has married a Yankee and is happy. I was disappointed to hear that she was going to marry a Yankee--but then our own Marion is married to one, too, so..."

"My God," was all Tom could say.

CHAPTR V

Van enjoyed the long miles across the country to Kentucky. He rode hard, dreamed of Laura almost every waking moment. Went over in his memory the days they had ridden together, the nights they had slept apart, but so close to each other, out on the trails. He thought a thousand times of the night they had shared in the little cabin when they had come so nearly to freezing to death. He knew now that Laura had loved him then, and that she would have given herself to him freely if he had shown her how much he wanted her. What a fool I was! he told himself over and over. So many times

. she showed me that she wanted us to stay together, that she wanted us to come together as lovers. How could I have been such a fool? I had to be 'honorable.' What a wretched irony. I hurt her and myself. There was never any honor in it at all. Maggie and Sylvia were delighted to see Van. They showered him with their attentions, questions, statements. Van liked Dr. Gaylord. This was that fine man who had loved the young Maggie so much. He had helped her to get rid of the unwanted child without making her feel guilty. He had offered to give up everything and marry her in order to keep her with him. He had walked away from his practice and come to help when Maggie needed him. He was in large part responsible for Maggie's regained eyesight, and her ability to walk again after the paralysis. It was easy to see that he loved Maggie, and would have done anything for her happiness. Van was amazed and happy to learn that Maggie was pregnant. Maggie had sworn to him that she could never feel decent to marry a good man, to associate with decent woman, to ever be a mother. All that had been erased and Dr. Gaylord had been largely responsible for that, too. Van was filled with gladness that this had been accomplished. He remembered the time when she had asked him if he could believe that the life she and Dr. Gaylord had terminated was still in existence, waiting for the right time, and he had assured her that it made more sense to him than most of the religions of the world. He wondered if she had thought of this. Her radiant happiness indicated that she probably had. "How is your mother and that Major she married?" Van asked, remembering the amusing incident of Selma having made the beast her slave, rendering him helpless; at her mercy, after all the harm he had done to her and her children. "She is doing wonderfully. She is happy. Major is uxorious. He seems to love to spoil her. The two children they adopted from the shelter have given them a lot of

. happiness, too." Maggie laughed. "She would have gone on and adopted all the children if I hadn't outfoxed her. She is so full of love that she couldn't bare to know of any one of them being without a loving home. I knew that two was all she could handle properly and still have any life left for herself and Major . So I kept manipulating things so that the other children got into good homes, or were treated so well in the orphanage we established, that they didn't want to go anywhere else. It has been very gratifying, Van, to see the miracles worked by love and attention to these children. It looks like almost all of them will turn out to be good, solid citizens, working to better themselves and the world. They are all learning to love knowledge. I believe they will continue to seek more and more education and use it with the best of results."

"Of course that has to be rewarding," Van said. "As I always told you, Maggie, there is no better woman on earth than you are. I am sorry it took you so long to find that out."

She laughed happily again. "I wouldn't say that, Van-- but your constant denial that I was dirty and foul did do a whole lot to make me feel like a woman, instead of only a whore. I will always be thankful to you for that. And imagine, if you can, my wonderful Dr. Gaylord looking over all that I had done, and loving me anyway."

"He is a wise man," Van said. "You know Laura couldn't forgive herself for allowing Jennie--Carrie--to die. She felt responsible for her death."

"Yes, you wrote about that. Of course we grieved for Carrie--but maybe she would never have found any happiness. I will never understand what happened to her. I don't believe it was all because of her unrequited love for Brad. Mother and I decided to concentrate our memories more on the years she had at the Bradley home, as the daughter of Mrs. Bradley. I used to think that I wished she had never left there--but

. probably she would have been killed as the others were. I never did tell mother, of course, how she behaved, and what she did out on the trail to Texas to cause so much turmoil. Mother doesn't even know about Alice Lynn. I've thought a lot about whether or not that is fair. I don't know how to tell her without making it more hurtful. I think she should know her grandchild some time."

"I think that would be a difficult problem," Van agreed. "I believe you will know, though, when the time is right."

"I hope so," Maggie sighed. "I have discussed it with my husband, and he says it is right to wait a while about it...He is very wise, Van."

The North had finally come to terms with the responsibilities concerning the rehabilitation of the South. They had taken over Stopover House, and had staffed it with Government people. Van knew it was not as efficiently run, nor as unbiased in the choice of those it helped, but he was glad that Maggie and Sylvia and the others had had some relief from their demanding duties. It was time for them to enjoy life a little, he believed. "Maggie, I want to talk to you," Van said, when he found the opportunity. "Of course. Sit here," Maggie said. "I will get some tea."

Van was eager to see what Maggie would say about his problems. She had always been able to shed a different light on whatever was bothering him; to uplift his spirits. He still found it a little embarrassing to begin. "What's bothering you, Van?" she said softly. "I know you have had more heartache than any man should have to bear. I thought you would never get over Sylvia, and then I was so happy when you discovered that you and Laura were in love. You wrote about her thinking you were married and running away. It broke my heart, Van. I cried for days. It seemed so unfair. It was such an accident that she didn't find out . the truth in time."

"That is what I came to talk to you about, of course." It seemed that he could not bring himself to go any further. "Well, shoot, Van. What do you want to say about it. Let's hear it. Let's see what we can work out."

"Well," he sighed deeply, "You know how jealous I am...I'm sure you do. I would not have been jealous if something had happened to Laura as it had to you--I would probably have killed someone, but it wouldn't have been from jealousy. But Maggie, Laura left with another man. She has been married to that man for over three years. I had just found her. We had a beautiful night together. She told me she loved me and always had loved me--just as you had told me she did. I had always loved her, too, of course. Just as you had said, again. And then to have just that one night together. It was more than I could stand. I couldn't think of anything else. I was useless as a man. I couldn't accomplish anything. "As you know, I spent months and hundreds of thousands of dollars looking for her. I felt certain I would locate her and she would come back to me. I refused to face the fact that she was married to another man. He simply didn't exist for me. I felt that when I found her, she would be all mine,

completely mine, again. But gradually, surely, I had to come to my senses. She is married to another man. Mother says he is a fine man; that he loves Laura and showed all the respect and concern for her that any man could: for all of the others of them, too, as far as that goes. She doesn't think anyone could treat Laura any better; try any harder to make her happy. How do I know he hasn't succeeded? I know she loved me once, but it is hard to stay in love with someone who you feel has betrayed you. When Laura believed I was married what could she possibly think but that my love was not very loyal; that I had betrayed her?"

"You think she may have transferred her love to a man who . she thinks of as loyal and true?" Maggie said. "Yes, she may have. She wrote in the note that she loved me enough that she wished she could remain and be my mistress-- thinking I was married--but that she couldn't do that."

"Van, this is so hard for you to talk about. Are you sure you are not only opening up old wounds? God, I hate to see you so hurt..."

"I shouldn't have come," Van said. "I don't want to cause you any unnecessary pain. It is just so hard to talk to anyone out there. My parents are too vulnerable. I don't have anyone else--but it is wrong to put such a burden on you. Especially now that you are carrying a baby. It must not be good for you. I'm sorry Maggie. I won't talk about it any more."

Oh Van! Please don't think it is going to harm me. I couldn't stand it if you didn't talk to me about it. I was just afraid that you were making it harder on yourself. I can see you find it very difficult to talk about."

"Yes, that's true--but I want to talk about it to someone, anyway."

"Then please let it be me."

"Well, as I said, I had to awaken to the fact that if I ever should see Laura again, she is married to another man. I cannot have her. I don't know why I kept feeling like I could for all those months. I just wouldn't accept facts, I guess. I even built a house for her and me--almost finished it. But to fanaticize a little--Supposing Laura did come back, without Darryl. What I am wondering is if I could ever have a moment's happiness with her, anyway. I will always love her, but you know how jealous I am. I am thinking now that I would never be able to hold her in my arms, never be able to kiss her, never be able to make love to her, never even be able to look at her--her so unique, intriguing personality--without thinking of the times she had to have lain in that other man's arms. I don't think I ever could, Maggie."

Maggie sat thinking. "Van, dear," she finally said. "You told me that you could have forgotten about it, felt no jealousy, if something had happened to Laura like what happened to me. I believe that. Well, I think the reason you could have overlooked what happened to me, and felt no jealousy about it, is that you know that that sort of thing happens without touching the spirit, the being--it only violated the body. That is enough, but it is different when the spirit, the being, is involved. You don't know whether or not Laura ever gave herself to this other man willingly--that is, with her soul, her being, her love. It is very possible that she has not. It is very possible that in order to live, to survive, to stand her own pain, she accepted his love and did the best she could to make him happy--you say he is a good man, so being a good woman she would want to do that: but she may not have ever for one moment, have given him her love."

"Yes, I think you are right. That is something that never occurred to me. Like I told you before, Maggie, you are a real oracle. I think that is exactly the thought I was striving for. You know that night Laura and I had together, I remember I told her that I had never made love to another woman. I wasn't trying to deceive her. I knew that she knew I had had dozens of

women--but that is what I meant, too; just what you are saying--that I had never been touched by any other woman. I believe she understood. I feel sure that must be the way it has been with her. I know she loved me and she knows I love her, so...I think that is the way it has to have been."

"Van," Maggie broke into his thoughts. I answered your question as given. You said it was just a fantasy. Something that might have been."

"Yes,"

"But we both know," she seemed unable to go on. "We both know that that is hardly probable...It is only a remote possibility. Not likely at all."

Van didn't answer. "Is it?" he finally said. "It is far more likely that if you ever find her, she may well still be in love with you, and she may very well have never been touched by the intimacies she has had with another man--but you said he is a good man. Laura is a woman of character. She would never give herself to you as long as he is alive. She would never betray him. Van, I don't believe there is much hope. It breaks my heart, but that is the truth you have to face."

"Maybe I can never face the truth," Van sighed. Van finished his visit with his friends at Ashland. He had thought Butch was a fine man when he had selected him to go take Maggie out of Madam Doyne's to come to the cabin to talk with him. He had thought he was a loyal and sincere friend when he had gone out to the battlefields to gather information for him. He had thought it was extraordinarily considerate that he would go to his mother and Laura to make them aware of the dangers they were facing, after he saw that the "Carpetbaggers" were taking the law into their own hands. He felt that Sylvia had been wise and even courageous to take him for her husband. "You could never have found anyone any more worthy of you," he told Sylvia. "I think it is one of the wisest decisions you ever made."

"I think so, too, Van," she said, "but you may have been downright ashamed of me if you had known how I pursued him. He wouldn't have anything to do with me at first. He kept telling me that he would never marry someone like me. He put me on a pedestal. He still does."

"I know he does, and I admire him for knowing that is where you belong. I am happy for both of you."

Sylvia, too, had known about Van's heartbreak over the loss of Laura, and no one could have been more grieved than she to see her dear old friend suffering so much. Van went next to the prison to see Orville. He dreaded it, but he wanted to go, too. Not only for his mother's sake,

but he wanted to see for himself how Orville was faring. Arrangements had been made with acquaintances near the prison to take fresh food, clean clothing, cigarettes, and other items of comfort to him, but being caged could not, in any case, be anything other than horrible. Orville greeted Van as if he had seen him yesterday. He smiled and began his old repulsive talk. He didn't appear to be in the least disturbed about his confinement, or even about the atrocities he had committed. He didn't ask about Delia, or any of the others. After the first greetings he said, "How ye doin' Van? You been gettin' any good tail lately?" He laughed as raucously as he always had. It turned Van's stomach as it had when he was young. He felt nauseated. He left as soon as he could. It doesn't seem fair that someone like him can have the good food, the extra comforts, when there are people here a thousand times more deserving, who will die of mistreatment, malnutrition, poisonous food...Well, that is the way the world is... He went to see Connie. Connie was happy. She still had her shop. She didn't spend as much time in it as she

used to. She wanted time to spend with her husband. "Oh how I would love to see dear Delia!" she said. "I love that woman more than any other being on earth--other than my husband, of course," she said. "I don't believe God ever created a finer woman."

"I'll go along with that," Van said. "Life does take some strange twists," she said. "You know, I guess the luckiest day of my life was when your dad came to see me..." She stopped and looked at him aghast. "It's all right," Van said, "I knew all about it years ago. My dad said then that you were a fine woman; one of the best. I've always believed him. Look, why don't you and Derrick make plans to come out to Texas. We could show you a good time. Delia would be tickled pink. She would be delighted to meet your husband. She wants to see for herself

. whether or not he is good enough for you."

"That would be wonderful, Van. I will talk to Derrick about it. The only thing that worries me is...does your father know that Delia and I are friends?"

"Well, if he didn't know it, he sure as hell does now. I may have spilled the beans when I asked her at the breakfast table if she wanted me to stop by to see you."

Connie laughed. "In that case he can't be too shocked. We'll let you know. I wish you could stay to meet Derrick. He is a busy man. He is a State Senator, you know. He talks about almost nothing other than the things he wants to accomplish in the Senate. You wouldn't believe the corruption, the deceit, the wasted tax dollars, the arrogance, while people go in need of legislation to help children, widows, old people. It's sad. It's killing Derrick, but he will never give it up. He is a dedicated man. Dedicated to his work and dedicated to me. It makes me want to do everything I possibly can to make him happy. I have succeeded to a certain extent."

Van looked forward to seeing Marybelle, Belle, Denver, and Denver's mother, whom none of his family had met. He knew that Denver and Belle had opened a school. They had begun the school in what was left of the old Walling mansion, after Tom had frightened Mr. Daschiel from taking any further possession of it. It had filled up rapidly, and overflowed. Even Marybelle had learned to read, and so had . They all worked long hours. They had fought for funds to expand and hire more teachers, but they made no headway until Derrick had taken over their cause. He was angry most of the time with his fellow senators, but he seemed to be able to sway them. "Probably a lot of his influence is his knowledge of their mischief, and he uses it to blackmail them," Van said. "It's a hell of a world when a man has to use blackmail to obtain justice for the people, It's a good thing we get an . honest man in there once in a while. It doesn't seem to be very often."

Marybelle cried in Van's arms. "It so good to see yo."
she kept repeating. "I miss yo an' Delia an Tom an' all de res'. I keep adreamin' ob de ole times befoe de woah, when things wuz good--befoe po Mose had a die."

"I think of them, too," Van said, "but Marybelle, you probably never did realize half the danger you were in. All of you were very brave. I miss Old Mose like hell, but we know he died a hero. He did a whole lot to save my mother's life and that of all the others. That isn't much comfort, but knowing Mose, it is the way he would have chosen to die..."

"Yes," Marybelle said, "Dat sho be de troof.. He love Delia lak no one else befoe. He would a' been proud to give hes life fo huh..."

"We want to make arrangements for all of you to come out to Texas," Van said. "Have a long visit. It would mean so much to mother--and all of us. I know you are busy, but one can't work without ever taking any time out. How about when school closes in the Spring?"

Marybelle sighed. "Dat wud be a God's blessing," she said. "I will speak to the othehs 'bout it."

"I'll depend on you to swing it," Van said. "There were a few more old friends Van wanted to see. His mother had had to leave without bidding goodbye to any of her friends. There were some of the others who had worked closely with the Wallings on the Underground Railroad. He saw all of them he could locate and headed back for Texas.

CHAPTER VI

It was spring. The Redfords had arrived back from school. They had spent several days with their parents and then come to be with the Wallings. They knew that the Wallings expected them. The Wallings were responsible for their schooling, and all the unprecedented changes in their lives. A ball had been planned for the Easter holidays.. Vincent's family was expected on the next train into Dallas. Van dreaded the ball, but he decided to make the best of it. He was startled anew at how beautiful Roxanne looked. He enjoyed just looking at her. "Who wouldn't?" he said. "Most everyone enjoys looking at a work of art. No artist could ever catch that little questioning smile of hers, though. The way she tips her head as if that had something to

do with her decision to smile."

Her dress was low over her shoulders. It seemed to Van it was all ribbons, lace, rosettes, fluff, ruffles, but it was very becoming. "She is going to get into a lot of trouble if someone doesn't watch out for her," he said to Tom. "She is uncommonly pretty. She is gracious and sweet. She is altogether too trusting. I will have to watch out for her. I would be ready to kill any man who tried to do her wrong."

He noticed that the young William Kress was approaching her. William Kress was handsome, charming, and a reprobate. Van didn't like him. He knew too much about him. He bragged about the women he had had, and how easily they submitted to his charms. He was smiling at Roxanne, claiming her for a dance. Van's muscles tensed. She was smiling up at William in that inimitable way. William took her in his arms and Van didn't approve of the way he held her. It was not appropriate on the dance floor. It was too possessive, too sensual. He strode across the room and unclasping the younger man's hands without explanation, he took Roxanne's hand and led her unceremoniously from the room. "Roxanne," he said, "You can't do that sort of thing. You can leave yourself open for a lot of danger."

"What sort of thing?" she asked looking up at him with innocent eyes. "I don't want to spoil your fun. But you have to be aware of how some men are. You are too damn pretty for your

own good. Men want you as soon as they see you. Most men aren't worthy of you. I'm not going to allow you to be taken in by some cad like William Kress. He is no good. I am sorry if you are attracted to him--but even if you are, you are not going to enjoy his attentions. I won't allow it."

"Are you going to pick all the men I dance with or talk to, or..."

"That's right. It is true that there aren't very many men who are worthy of you. That does limit your choice of partners even to dance with. I am sorry for that. I know girls enjoy being popular, sought out, and I am going to eliminate a lot of your admirers from your company. It will limit your choices, but that is the way it is going to be. I am not going to allow any libertine to take advantage of your innocence--your trust. Roxanne, you have to learn that everyone isn't as fine as you think they are. You can't trust people--men--so much. Van noticed Roxanne watching him from across the room. He couldn't read that look, but he didn't believe it contained any resentment. He decided that she was just a bit embarrassed. He was sorry he had detracted from her enjoyment. He decided he would dance with her and try again to explain that his concern for her was the only reason he was putting a damper on her fun.

She danced beautifully. The children are learning a lot of things in that school, he thought. I don't expect she ever danced before she went there. It is a real joy to see all their

progress and their enthusiasm about learning. When the dance was over, Roxanne clung to Van's hand, looking up at him as if expecting something further. "Just remember what I've told you," he said. "I don't want to make a scene, but I will throttle that William Kress if he ever asks you for another dance." He thought she looked disappointed, but he didn't know anything to do about that. He was going to see that she didn't unknowingly encourage any . advances from unscrupulous men. Greyson danced with her as often as he could without appearing to be possessive. Van could see that he was eager to be with her at every opportunity. Roxanne was pleasant to him, but she showed no special interest. The ball finally was ended. Van was glad. He would be glad when all the festivities were over. He liked the children, and he enjoyed hearing about their accomplishments at school. He also liked to watch their progress with the riding. He liked to talk with them about their dreams and hopes. He couldn't resist even doing a little teaching. He asked them questions about geography, history, and even philosophy. They were interested and surprisingly well informed about everything, Van thought. He was proud of them.

Van was chopping wood, as he so often did to work off his energies, so that he could sleep. Roxanne came out and stood watching him. He smiled and sunk the axe into the log. "What's on your mind, little girl?" he asked. "You," she said.

"Oh. Something you want to talk about?"

"Yes,"

"He sat down on the log and made room for her to sit beside him. "All right, what is it?"

"Like I already said..." she looked down and blushed. Van was sorry she had to be embarrassed. He wanted all the children to feel free to talk to him about anything. He took her hand. She looked up, her eyes brilliant with emotion. "I hate to see you hurting, Van. Especially, when it is for someone you can never have. I know the circumstances. I know it is quite forward of me--it must sound impertinent, but I can't go back home--be away from you for so long--without letting you know that I think I can make you forget about that other girl."

Van was surprised. He had supposed that when she went . back to school after Christmas, she would forget all about the things she had said to him at that time. He didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure what she meant. Did she really think there was, or could be anything between them other than that respect and admiration he had for all of the Redfords? He hoped not. But of course, she had asked him to kiss her and had indicated that she did feel differently about him than that he had expected and taken for granted. Was this going to turn into a problem? If so, he would immediately let her know that any kind of relationship between them that was not strictly platonic, would be out of the question. He wanted her to know that she could always depend on his support and protection and concern, but that there could be nothing between them, other than that. "I want to make you forget about her. I want to make you happy, Van. I...want you to love me."

"I do love you, Roxanne. We all do. You have helped me a whole lot to forget about my heartache. All of you have. I feel very fortunate to have had the privilege of getting acquainted with your family. You are every one, especially dear to me."

"I don't want to just be dear to you in that way, Van. I want you to love me. I want you to forget about that other woman and love me in the way you loved her."

"Roxanne! I can never do that. What ever gave you the notion that I might. Did I do or say anything that made you think of me in this way...?"

"Yes, Van, you did."

"For god's sake what was it? I am sorry and ashamed if I ever gave you that impression. I don't feel that way about you at all. What in hell did I do, Roxanne?"

"You hardly ever took your eyes off me at the New Year's dance. You were jealous of William and a lot of the other boys who danced with me. You dragged me away from William and said that he had better not dance with me any more. A man . doesn't do things like that unless he is at least a little in love with a girl. You keep telling me how beautiful I am, how irresistible to men. I must be a little irresistible to you for you to say that..."

Van wiped his forehead. "God, Roxanne, I wouldn't have given you this impression for anything! I was only concerned about your safety. You are too young and far too trusting to allow just any man to get interested in you. I thought you understood that."

"Well, I think you are the one who does not understand. I think you will come to see that I could be very good for you- -that you can love me in the way you loved Laura, and that you don't need to go on suffering for the rest of your life."

"You are sweet, Roxanne, but please get all notions of anything like that out of your head. Come on. I will walk in with you. Think of me from now on as a very concerned and dominating big brother. All right?"

"No, Van, I can never do that--but I will not talk about it any more. I will go in and pack my things to go."

Van didn't give what Roxanne said much further thought. She will be busy, be making new friends, have new experiences, have unlimited suitors her own age. She will forget all about this misconception of her feelings, he thought. The group was gathered for dinner. The children would be leaving tomorrow to go back to school. As usual, the adults were encouraging the young ones to express their opinions about every subject they could think of, and to interest them in researching further into anything they didn't fully understand.

"We are very fortunate people," Tom said. "We have a lot of blessings that most other people do not have. Having money is a big help in acquiring the things that make life good. Not that there aren't a lot of poor people who have good lives. There are. Nevertheless, it is true that poor people do not have nearly as much choice about things in their lives, . even their company, as wealthy people do. "For instance, we are surrounded by good-looking people. The way people look has been a subject that has interested me for a long time. Looks make more difference in a person's life than most any other one thing, I believe. Do ugly people have as much chance for happiness as handsome people do?"

The children were considering this. It was something that had never entered their minds. The fact that they had never known very many people at all, until they had become acquainted with the Wallings, made them unprepared for any opinion on this question. "Well," Casey finally ventured, "I have met a few people I could consider as not being handsome. Girls--and boys, too, who don't have pretty features. Some are too fat to be attractive and some are too skinny and some have other characteristics that would probably classify them as...maybe even ugly."

"What have you discovered about them?" Tom asked. "Are they as popular, as sought after as friends, as fully appreciated as those who are lucky enough to have nice features, nice bodies?"

"You are right," Casey said. "Most of them are not very popular. Some of them are more intelligent and more interesting after you get acquainted with them, than those who are

considered good-looking, but not many of the children take the trouble to get acquainted--so they never know that."

"And have you found, in general, about an equal number of the ugly ones, who are not any more interesting, any better informed, have any more to offer in any way, than the average good looking ones?"

"Yes, that's true," Casey said. "A lot of the children have absolutely nothing going for them, it seems."

"I don't expect that you have ever given it much thought, but I would like all of you to think about it now. You are all handsome, have fine, strong bodies, you are intelligent, interesting. You have had the good fortune to have parents who taught you good manners, honor, respect. How do you suppose you would feel if you had been born with ugly bodies, ugly facial features, to parents who were not interested in honor, integrity, good manners? What do you suppose your lives would have been like?"

The children were all quiet. "It is a real blessing to be born good-looking. It is a real blessing to be born rich. It is a real blessing to be born intelligent. It is a real blessing to be born to intelligent and caring parents. We cannot lose sight of the fact that some, probably an average number of people who are born ugly, poor, and even not very intelligent, do have, maybe as much happiness out of life as is average. But in times of trouble, or need, it certainly cannot be denied that good-looking and rich people get first consideration. When it comes to suffering, dying, a good-looking person, whether intelligent, or rich or not, will in most cases, get more help than one that is ugly. An intelligent person will probably be more apt to get good care. A rich person will be most apt of all to get good care. "This has all been a concern of mine for a long time. I think it is very interesting. What I would like to know, is who is going to champion those poor, not very intelligent, ugly people who are not interesting?"

"They aren't apt to have many champions, I suppose," Roxanne said. "It is quite sad, isn't it?"

"Very sad," Tom said. "And that is why I brought this question up. We have discussed people like Florence Nightingale, and Dorothea Dix, and before they are admired wherever they are known. They were all born into rich families, but they had a compassion not usually seen in the rich--or anyone else. They all sacrificed their comforts and dedicated their lives to helping the helpless, ignorant, poor, and ugly people. Of course, I don't mean exclusively--

but they made no difference between the ugly ones and the pretty ones, the intelligent ones and the ignorant ones, those with integrity and those with no moral standards, those even who were criminals. To me that is nobility. "It is sad to me, that even though these people are given credit, they are not given as much credit as thousands of people who were nothing but thieves and robbers, with no concern for any person other than themselves. I am talking about the people, politicians, and others who had any power. The poor people, and the rich ones, too, as far as that goes, too often almost worship these unscrupulous men who continue to rob them. Seems a little strange, doesn't it?"

"Disgusting!" the children agreed. "That is why the world so much needs good writers, good orators. All through history men who had the power of words to convince other people, have done as much good--maybe more-- than those who dedicated their lives to helping others individually. Both have my admiration. I could never be noble enough to give up all my luxuries, all my time, all my loved ones, and go out into the world to fight the wrongs as so many of these people did. I can't even write, or speak well. Men who could, and women,

when they were allowed to, have changed the direction of the whole world--just with words. I suppose that is why someone said, "The pen is mightier than the sword." The pen can be mighty. It can work miracles."Now, all this was said for the purpose of helping you to decide what you want to do with your lives. Some of you have already stated what you would like to give your lives to, and every one was fine--but there are other things that you haven't considered. Things like writing. I believe it could be very rewarding. Maybe some of you will want to write."

"Now don't all come home next time and say that you have decided you want to be writers," Delia laughed. "It is a very worthwhile goal, but as Tom said, the things you have already

. set your sights on, are also worthy and fine."

CHAPTER VII

"We will have the Redford's up for Easter Sunday," Delia said. "I am hoping they will all come and stay a week. Again Delia planned a ball for their welcoming. Delia and Drue had talked about it and decided that Carol was old enough to attend this ball. It seemed to Delia that she should have the opportunity to meet people, become more inured to the social amenities. Most girls her age had "coming out," parties or balls. She would have the same thing, excepting it would be merely called a ball. "You look like a prince in your dress-up clothes, Van," Roxanne told him. "Everyone thinks so. You are the handsomest man I ever saw. You don't just look like a prince, you act like one, too. It is always a pleasure to watch you. And then, when you get dressed in your every day clothes and go out swinging that axe like Atlas removing the world from his shoulders, you look like you could conquer that world. You have such broad shoulders, such a look of...mastery."

"Will you stop saying these things? I am only an average human being."

"I don't think so, Van. I will never think so. Nobody else thinks you are just average, either. Everyone recognizes you are special. All the girls are in love with you. There is no one anywhere that can compare with you. There isn't another man like you."

He stopped and looked at her. He had been hoping that she had got all notions of being in love with him out of her head. He had thought it just a childish whim. He didn't want her to be unhappy because he didn't feel about her as she wanted him to. He wanted her to enjoy her youth, her beauty, her popularity. He wanted her to love him--like he loved her,

as a family member. "I am beginning to wonder what I am going to do with you," Van said. "Do you want me to tell you?" Roxanne smiled, you are going to come to admit that you love me--just as I love you."

This girl has to come to realize that she is living an illusion," Van thought. "She is a sincere little thing, and she has no idea how all this could be interpreted. Most men certainly would interpret it as being too aggressive, even, as she said, brazen. I know her well enough to know that there is nothing unchaste about her. She just doesn't know anything about the nature of men. She has always been loved and protected, so it has never entered her head that men can be perfidious. She has grown up thinking everyone is as honest and straightforward as she is.

It was a happy time for all of them. Van enjoyed it but he was too restless to remain with the others and make conversation. He went to Maib's cabin. Maib and his wife always welcomed Van like the old friend he was. The two men liked to talk about their old times on the trails, their experiences, their close calls. Junie enjoyed listening to the exciting stories. She laughed and sometimes questioned their authenticity. Van and Maib laughed too, and admitted that they were inclined to exaggerate. Junie could never be sure just which stories were meant to be believed--but she knew that some of the most bazaar ones were actually true.

Maib spent most of his time reading now, when he wasn't teaching. He was still fascinated with history and especially political history. He had demanded when they were riding out on the trail, and when they stopped at night, when they had time to rest beside their campfires, that Van tell him all about the history of nations, the wars, the laws, the victories for the oppressed peoples. Van had always appreciated Maib's determination to learn to read, and then to read everything he could, pertaining to the state of man.

Van spent time visiting with Luke too, and Rowdy. Luke was usually at the stables. He liked caring for the horses. He spent a lot of time currying, brushing, training them. He kept their stables clean and was inclined to overfeed them. He could saddle a horse faster than any

man in the state, he said. Van had timed him on several occasions, and found that he could take down the saddle, bridle the horse, put on the blankets, and have the cinch tightened and ready to go in less than ten seconds. Rowdy went to study with Maib as often as he could. Maib liked teaching, and had a lot of respect for anyone who wanted to learn. All three of the black men had dispensed with the humble manner in which they used to speak. They could speak the dialect characteristic of almost all the negroes, or they could speak as the white people did. Van had noticed that Luke was showing a great deal of attention to their pretty Indian maid. He wondered if Eunice returned his evident affection. He hoped she did. He had been glad when Maib had picked a wife. He would like to see Luke take a good woman, too. "Van went to the stables. Luke looked up with that happy grin he always had when he saw Van. "When are you going to get married, Luke. I just came from the Winston's--Maib's. It is a real pleasure to see how happy Maib is, and that good woman, Junie. You goin'a just stay single all your life?"

Luke put his shovel down. He looked serious. "Well, Van, I been thinkin' of askin' you...how do you go about courtin' a girl?"

Van laughed. "I expect you couldn't find anyone any worse equipped to advise you on that," he said. "I certainly haven't had any luck. Do you have anyone in mind to begin courting?"

Van could see that Luke was embarrassed. "Come on. I believe you do have someone in mind--you sly rascal. Who is she?"

"Well," Luke was still hesitant. "I would like to court Eunice--but I don't know how to start."

"I always thought those things kind of came naturally," Van said. "Well," Luke repeated, "you know I loved poor little Jennie--but there was no problem. She was the one that always came to me to talk, to kiss, to..."

"I understand," Van said, "remembering what Laura and his mother, had said about the attitude Jennie had taken toward Luke, and how angry they had been because they thought Luke was taken in by her. "Eunice certainly is a different type from...Jennie," Van said. "She will never take the initiative. It will be up to you if you ever get close to her. Let's see, why don't you go into the kitchen when dinner is over tonight, and begin talking to her there?"

"I wouldn't know what to say," Luke said. "Get the carriage readied, and ask her to go for a ride with you. Maybe then, things will come a little more naturally."

"Delia might not..."

"I'll see that Delia is out of the kitchen at that time. Go ahead. Try it. I'd bet a dollar it will work."

"I'm kinda scared." Luke said. "There's an old saying, 'faint heart never won fair lady,'" Van said. "Give it a try."

"What should I say first?" Luke asked seriously. "Let's see. Why not ask her if she has a cup of coffee and a biscuit for a hungry man."

Luke looked skeptical. "I think it will make it easier if you put it on a sort of humorous level. She will know, of course, that you aren't really hungry, so she will be waiting to hear what you did come for. She will be thinking about that, so she won't be apt to say anything to scare you."

Luke grinned. Van believed that grin indicated that he was planning to try it. "I'll get Mother out," Van said. Luke went to the kitchen door and knocked. Eunice opened it with a show of surprise. "Luke," she said. "Come on in."

She was looking a little questioningly at Luke. He had forgotten what he meant to say. "Come on in," she repeated. "Would you like to have a cup of coffee and a hot roll? I was just ready to take a few minutes out and have one myself."

"Yeah," Luke said. "I'm hungry."

"Eunice smiled. "That's good," she said. "This is the place to come when you're hungry."

"I'm hungry most of the time," Luke said. He flushed and looked entirely serious.

Eunice laughed. "Sit here," she said. "We'll see what we can do about that."

"Thank you, Eunice," Luke said. "Can I come back tomorrow night?"

"Well, since you are hungry most of the time, it might be a good idea," Eunice smiled. "I have the hosses hooked up. Would you go for a ride with me?" Luke asked. "Right now? Don't you want to finish your coffee?"

"I'd rather not," Luke said. "I want to go for a ride."

"All right," Eunice was removing her apron. "It surprises me a little though that a hungry man would rather go for a ride than to eat first." She turned her face away to hide her smile. She was not unaware of Luke's interest in her. "Delia went out somewhere. I guess she wont fire me if I go for a while."

Next evening, Van visited Luke again. "Well Luke," he asked. "How did it go?"

Luke shook his head. "I guess it went all right," he said. "Eunice is going down to invite her people all up to the wedding."

"A wedding!" Van was genuinely shocked. "My god, Luke, either you are or I am one hell of a good authority on courtship. Isn't that a little fast for things to happen?"

"I guess so," Luke seemed a bit shocked himself. "It was all my doing, though. Like you said, she ain't the kind ever to take any lead in courting. To tell you the truth, Van, I asked her if I could kiss her and she said yes, and I got so carried away I asked her if she would consent to marry me and she said yes, and then she told me she would ride down today to invite her people."

"Van shook his head and laughed. "Like I said, you could give lessons in courting. Couldn't have gone better, could it?"

"I said I would go with her to invite her people, but she said no, she wanted to go by herself, so I didn't."

"I think that was good judgment," Van laughed. "Luke still looked ill at ease. "She said somethin' else," he said. "What was that?"

"She said she would bring a wife for Rowdy, too. I started to tell her I didn't think Rowdy wanted a wife and she just said 'I'll bring a pretty little wife for Rowdy. What will I do if Rowdy doesn't want a wife, Van?"

Rowdy walked in the door. "What about a wife for me?" he asked. "Luke explained all that had happened. "I'll marry her," Rowdy said. "Van was so astonished he couldn't speak. Luke was no less surprised."

"I thought I would feel Luke out to see how he felt about a romance, and then encouraged him half as a joke, to go see Eunice and here I've started a damn landslide!" Van said. "Learn to mind my own business...!"

"How do you know iffin or not you want to marry a girl you haven't ever even seen?" Luke asked, sliding back into his old chair, his face grim, worried.

"What does it matter if I see her before or not?" Rowdy said, following Luke's lead in the matter of speech. "This ain't funny. Nothin' to make jokes about," Luke said. "I ain't jokin'. Said I'd marry her didn' I?"

"How do you know you will like her?" Van asked. He knew, as Luke did, that if Luke's intended wife brought back her sister intending for her to be married to Rowdy, and Rowdy refused, it would probably ruin Luke's courtship forever. Her family would most surely take offense and maybe there would be trouble all around. Van doubted very much if Rowdy had thought of this. His insistence that he would marry the girl, was not based on any thought of helping his Uncle Luke. Rowdy went on about his business as if the matter had been settled. He picked up a book and began to study the lesson Maib had suggested. Suddenly he looked up as if a new thought had just hit him. "Guess I'd better start buildin' a cabin if I'm goin' to take wife."

"Rowdy, you can't do this!" Van said. "You don't just up and marry any girl that comes along...without knowing her. What about love. Don't you consider love as the motivating factor in courtship and marriage?"

"Sure. Of course I think love is the base of a good marriage. I'll love her." He seemed to have dismissed the subject again. Van was puzzled and beginning to wonder how he would ever extricate himself, to say nothing of Luke and Rowdy, from this untenable situation.

"You have to know a girl. Know all about her. You have to...choose her...from all the girls you know. You have to have a special feeling for her, and want to be with her alone, to want to get married," Van said. "If I marry a girl I will never want another woman. If I marry this girl, I will love her."

Van shook his head. Luke sat looking disconsolate. "Look, you two," Rowdy said, "if I marry this woman, I

will be good to her. I will cleave to her alone. I will protect her and try to make her happy. I will see that she has as many comforts as I can provide. I will love our children. That's love."

"I can't argue with that," Van said--"but how are you going to know until you meet her whether you will want to do all these things for her or not."

Rowdy looked as if he thought Van and Luke were a bit thick-headed. "I will want to do them because I will be married to her," he explained. Van tried again. "What if she is a shrew?" he asked. "I would rather she is not a shrew," Rowdy said, unconcerned, "but if she is, she will still be my wife. I'll take care of her."

The next day Rowdy began his cabin. When the others all saw that he was determined to build it, they pitched in and helped. "It has to be big and light now, and comfortable," Rowdy said. "I want my family to have the very best."

"I suppose," Van thought, "if Luke and Eunice do go ahead with their wedding, Luke will need a place of his own, anyway." He was still uneasy. Eunice came back with her "family"--some twenty men, women and children, all dressed in their best finery, all smiling broadly, all leading horses or cattle or carrying blankets and buffalo hides, beaded buckskins, guns, and dried camus for wedding gifts. Delia had arranged for a wedding. Luke had pleaded that they didn't want a big wedding--he and Eunice had talked about that. They wanted just the "immediate" family and close friends. When counted, the Redfords, all the people who lived on the Walling ranch, and all of Eunice's family, was quite a wedding procession after all. Everyone was eager to see what Rowdy's promised bride looked like. They had all been informed of the circumstances. Eunice's sister was pretty, as Eunice had

. promised. She wore a beautiful white buckskin dress, beaded expertly, and fringed. When she was introduced to Rowdy, she lowered her head in a shy manner and said something in her own language. She smiled. Rowdy took her arm and led her to the side. He had dressed in his best clothes, too, and trimmed his hair. He looked quite as a bridegroom should look. He also looked very happy. The wedding went off well. The Indians distributed their gifts evenly between Luke and Rowdy. When the wedding and the festivities were over, Rowdy led his new bride proudly to his new cabin--unfinished, but comfortable enough to live in until the rest of the work could be done. "Good god!" Van breathed a sigh of relief. "It looks as if it is all going to work out just fine! But what if she had been ugly, and discourteous, and...Well, of course Eunice wouldn't have brought her as a wife for Rowdy if she had been. She told Luke her little sister was pretty. I suppose

she knew, too, that she was not a shrew. Like Rowdy said, if he married any woman he was going to treat her well--and to him that was love. All the other sentiments would come naturally. Van thought Rowdy was going to be very happy, and he was certainly going to make that little Indian girl happy if he could. "We'd probably all be better off if we could choose our spouses in that manner," he thought. "Instead of searing our souls away wanting someone we can't have."

"I liked all of Eunice's family all right, excepting for her father," Delia said. "He seems arrogant to me."

"Yes, he is a sonofabitch, if you ask me," Tom said. He treated his wife and daughters as if they were his slaves more than his family."

Luke and Eunice came into the room. "We just wanted to thank you for a beautiful wedding," Eunice said.

"It was our pleasure," Delia said. Eunice hesitated. It was obvious she wanted to say something more. Delia wondered how she could put her at ease. "We were glad to have the opportunity to meet your family," she said. "Eunice flushed. "Thank you," she said. "I...I want to apologize for my father. He is...well, we don't like him very much."

"I am sorry to hear that," Delia said. "Do you want to tell us why?"

"He is a hateful man," Eunice said. "He has never treated our mother right. She has suffered."

"I thought that might be the case," Delia said, "and I am sorry. Is there anything we can do?"

"No," Eunice said, "that isn't why I am telling you this. I just wanted you to know that none of the others of us want anyone to think that we approve of his ways."

Delia didn't know how to continue without risking saying something that might offend Eunice and make her feel worse. "My father is French," Eunice said. "He married my mother when she was very young. She is half Indian and half Swedish. My father never thought of calling her anything but a squaw. Why must she be thought of as an Indian when she is half Swedish. I am as proud of my Indian blood as of my Swedish blood. I am much more proud of my Indian blood, and my Swedish blood than I am of my French blood. I am, you see, half French, one quarter Swedish and one quarter Indian, but no one ever thinks of anything but to call me an Indian. Being Indian is not offensive to me. But it irks me that people are called Indian if they have the least Indian blood, they are called black if they have the least black blood. It just doesn't seem fair. Those people who call us Indians, usually mean it as a stigma. Luke

is more English than he is Negro, but to the world he is black. My father thinks his French heritage makes him more important, more in favor than . his wife and daughters. My mother is far more intelligent, more civilized, more decent than my father, but that escapes him. Clarice and I do not like him. I feel so sorry for my mother. I am sorry, too, for my other little sister. She is treated very badly as Clarice and I and our mother and all my brothers always were. He wouldn't allow my mother to speak her language in our home. He insisted that we all learn French. We learned English and we learned our mother's language in secret in spite of our father's stern demands that we not do so." Eunice sighed. This was a very long speech for her. She had said no more than was necessary before, since she had been a maid in the Walling's home. "There is something else we wanted to talk to you about," Luke said. "Eunice and I would like to keep working for you if you want us. We don't want you to feel any obligation."

We would be very happy if you would stay with us," Delia said and Tom agreed heartily.

"Of course..." Luke hesitated, looking from Delia to Tom."

"What is it?" Tom asked. "We have been friends too long for you to be reluctant to talk to us about anything."

"Well," Luke said, still obviously embarrassed. "When we start to have a family..."

"Oh," Delia said. "Of course when Eunice gets...when you know a child is on the way, we will take that into consideration. We wouldn't want her to work. We will get someone else at that time. Just let us know."

Eunice and Luke smiled happily and walked out together. The Redfords would be leaving in the morning. They all gathered around the table for a farewell dinner. Delia, Roxanne and Drue were helping with the serving. "It was a fine wedding," Rob said. "Delia will you give a big wedding like this when I get married"

Delia laughed. "It will be my pleasure," she said. "Are you planning to get married right soon?" Tom said.

"Not too soon, but I am going to marry that little sister of Eunice's when we are old enough; Robin."

Everyone in the room was surprised, but they tried not to embarrass Rob by showing that."

"Well, well, you are a decisive young man, aren't you, now?" Tom said. "If that means am I serious, yes I am decisive. Of course she hasn't agreed yet, but I believe she will. Isn't she pretty? Isn't she sweet?"

"She is very pretty and yes, sweet, too, if she is anything like her sisters," Van said. "Probably as good a choice as you could make. But Rob, you have a lot of years ahead of you before you are ready to get married. You may change your mind a dozen times before your education is finished and you are ready to take a wife."

"I wont," Rob said. "The Redfords always know what they want," Roxanne smiled, glancing at Van. "You know, Rob, I think Robin is a very nice little girl, and certainly I would have no scruples about your marrying her, but you will be a well-educated man. She is intelligent, but uneducated. It happens, right or wrong, that educated people hardly ever marry successfully with uneducated people. It isn't that one is any better than the other, or necessarily any smarter, or anything like that. It is because educated people have different viewpoints, different goals. Their friends are of a different caliber. When an educated man marries an uneducated girl, quite often she is embarrassed by the fact that she is not as informed as his friends and associates are. She cannot converse about the things they talk about...She doesn't

know how to dress as the wives who are as educated as their husbands. So, she winds up by being very unhappy."

"This is important to think about," Tom said. "I know you wouldn't want to make that sweet little girl unhappy. It

is true that she may wind up to be awfully unhappy if you marry her. You have to know that neither Van nor I are saying that she is not as good as anybody. We are aware that she is more than likely a finer person, a more sensible girl, a more virtuous girl, a more interesting person than ninety percent of the girls the world considers her superiors, but facts have to be considered; the ways of society and life. Sometimes they are not very pleasant."

"Then I will send her to school," Rob said. "Of course I don't want her to be unhappy. I would never care whether she learned anything other than what she already knows or not--but if it would make a difference in her life, I will send her to school."

"Well, that settles that!" Delia laughed. "We will plan a wedding when you are ready. Come to think about it," she said, "Robin has a good start already. How many girls in the schools can speak three languages fluently?"

CHAPTER VIII

Van was catapulted back into his own despair. He put on a warm jacket and walked out the door. He headed over to the mansion he had begun for Laura. He had almost lost interest in it. But sometimes he liked to go there and dream about what might have been. He stood in one of the almost finished rooms, trying to put his thoughts, or even his feelings together. He heard footsteps. He looked around and saw Roxanne. "Maggie is elegantly beautiful," he thought, "Laura was excitingly, provocatively beautiful, but Roxanne is exquisitely, innocently beautiful. She hadn't worn a coat. "Roxanne!" Van said. "You can't go around this kind of weather without a wrap! Come on, let's go back to the house. What are you doing here anyway?"

"I knew you would scold me," she said with that devastating smile he had already come to watch for, "but I didn't care. I wanted to see you alone. I wanted to talk to you. He walked over to her and put his arms around her with no thought but to warm her. He started to turn her around and go back toward the house, but she refused to move. He glanced at her, surprised. She was in his arms. She was looking up at him with adoration in her eyes. Her lips were parted. She was beautiful. He only stood looking at her. "Why don't you like me?" she asked. "Don't be silly," he said. "You know I like you." "Can I trust you, Van?" she asked. "What kind of question is that? Of course you can trust me. I am not above lechery, but I would never do a little girl like you that kind of wrong. Like I told you before most of these young blades cannot be trusted with a beautiful young girl. They are not worthy of you."

"William was over before the wedding and he asked me if he could kiss me," Roxanne said. "I suspected as much," Van's voice was angry. "He had better never kiss you, or I'll take him apart!"

She put her head down and Van thought she was crying. He remembered the time he had hurt Laura so much, by rejecting her offer of love. He didn't want to hurt Roxanne. He had been devastated by the fact that he had hurt Laura. He was at a loss as to just how to handle this. He wanted to get Roxanne's mind off that way of thinking. He wanted to get her back into the house. "Roxanne, please remember that I care very much for you. I think of you as a precious little sister. I would do anything to make you happy, but the things you have said to me are all a mistake. Even if I could feel that way, which I assure you I do not--I could not make you happy. Marriage is...based on entirely different emotions, different feelings, a different kind of love."

"I usually believe everything you say. Why is it I do not believe you now? Can you deny that you are physically attracted to me? I'm young...and inexperienced...but I certainly know when a man is aroused by my presence." "That is ridiculous!" Van said. "You are imagining things. I can realize how enticing you are to men, and how attractive, without being effected in that way myself! I can know how you are in danger of misleading a man unintentionally..."

"I'm sorry, Van. I am not a hussy. I am not brazen, but the kind of love I have for you is the kind that wants kissing and loving, and holding and being together, forever."

Van was startled all over again. His senses were reeling. "I don't want you to feel that way about me, Roxanne. I certainly never meant to give you the idea that I even might think of you in a way that would make kissing and holding proper. The idea disgusts me. I want you to forget this childish notion, and see things as they are."

"You held me so tenderly when you danced with me. I knew you were feeling something for me that you think it is wrong to admit. You are too noble to admit that you are attracted to me?" I love you more for that, but it would be foolish to allow it to ruin our lives."

"I am not trying to be noble. I explained to you why I wouldn't allow you to dance with some of the young men. I don't want you to take any chances with those that I know don't have your best interests at heart. I did not hold you any differently than I held--my mother. If you thought so, it is just...wishful thinking. You are imagining things. You are altogether too young and innocent and trusting. I danced with you at times, simply to keep someone I didn't trust from dancing with you. You don't have the right judgment yet, as to whom you can trust, and what their intentions are. You know nothing about life."

"The only reason I got enough nerve to follow you out here and say these things to you is that I know you think I do

. not know what I want. You think I am too young. So, you would never tell me you love me. I know you have some feelings for me--that are not exactly that a man has for a sister. I thought you were beginning to forget about that other girl and coming to see me as a woman. I want that to.

happen. I want it more than anything in the world." "Oh, God, Roxanne, I do love you. You will never know how important you are to me--but I could never love you in the place of the girl I have loved for so long. I may never have her back. I probably wont, but I will not marry you--and that is the only way I would ever go so far even as to kiss you. So you see, it is out of the question."

"I don't see why," she persisted. "I think that would be the way to erase all that futile love you feel for someone you admit you can never have. Are you going to spend the rest of your life alone, lonely, hurting, for something that can never happen? And because you are so fine that you wont admit you love me--because you wont take the chance on my being unhappy married to you? It doesn't make sense."

Van's thoughts and emotions had been set in such a turmoil that he couldn't think of a proper answer. All right," she said. "I will never love any man but you- -but I wouldn't want to marry you if it didn't make you happy. I know you will never think of me now other than as a little hussy. I didn't want that, but I did want you to know that I love you. I wanted you to know how my heart aches when I know you are thinking of someone you can't have. You shouldn't have to suffer. You are too fine for such suffering. I think about you all the time. I think it is only right that you should know that you can have me if you want me--only if you loved me enough to marry me, of course. Neither of us would consider...intimate relations until we were married. I really thought you might be able to love me that much. I can only say that I am awfully sorry. I will always feel ashamed of having been so...brazen. My mother . would think I am terrible. I guess she would be right."

"Roxanne, there is a lot I want to say to you. Please try to understand how much this means to me. All my life, when I think I can't stand being alone, and lonely, I will think of this night, think of the sweet things you have said to me. Think of your confidence and trust in me. I will remember that the sweetest little girl in the world told me she loved me. I know that you are not in the least wanton. I would never think of you as a little hussy, as you said. You are chaste, good, innocent, sincere. You are a wonderful little girl...Can you understand how this could mean so much to me, and I still not have any desire to marry you?"

"No," she said. "Well, I would never make you happy. I would always be thinking of another woman. I don't love you in the way a man should love a woman he marries. I can love only Laura in that way. I can and do love you in every other way there is. You are adorable. You are sweet. You are beautiful."

"You keep telling me I am adorable, sweet, and beautiful, and yet you don't want to kiss me."

"That's what I have been telling you, Roxanne." He had ceased to be annoyed with her. He knew that a lot of her misinterpretation of his love--and that of her own, too, was that she was so tender-hearted. She thought of all the Wallings as being a little above mortality. That was only natural. The Redfords had all been introduced into an entirely new world by the things the Wallings had done for them. They were in awe of this new world and the characters who peopled it. They had never had such beautiful clothes. They had never seen such luxuries. They had never had so much attention. They had never had the opportunity to meet so many educated, well-dressed, interesting people. Why wouldn't they be a bit overwhelmed?

She had mentioned his pain, his heartache, on several occasions. She couldn't bear to see someone she thought of as . a bit more than human--as "princely," as "able to conquer the world," feeling emotions like heartache, that were only human emotions. Then, too, Van reminded himself, she had interpreted his interest in protecting her, his determination to keep unsavory men away from her, as jealousy. It wasn't surprising that she had got the notion that he was interested in her romantically. "Roxanne, I have to take you back to the house, before you catch cold," he said. "If you don't turn around and come with me I am going to pick you up and carry you back," he said. "I think that would be wonderful," she smiled, "but I'm going. If that is what you want I will go--but I will keep trying to make you love me; I mean make you admit that you love me. I will keep trying to get you to kiss me. I still think you believe I want you to kiss me because of some wantonness in me. You think I am not able to control my feelings. You think it is to tempt you, to fulfill a desire--but that isn't true. The only reason I have tried to get you to kiss me, is that when you kiss me, you will know that you love me. That's why I want you to kiss me. There isn't anything wanton about it. I am a good girl. But there is nothing wrong with loving a fine man, and nothing wrong with trying to get that wonderful man to realize, and to admit that he really does return your love."

"Roxanne," he said, "you are a child. I don't want to harm you."

"Does it harm a girl to be kissed by a man she loves?"

"Roxanne, what you feel for me is not love--not that kind of love. I feel very close to you, too, but it isn't love-- not the kind a man and woman feel for each other when they want to get married. I don't believe in kissing a woman, a good woman anyway, that I do not love. I have kissed a lot of women I didn't care much about who wanted to be kissed just for a pastime. I am not proud of that, but it is true. But I

. have too much regard for you for that sort of thing, even if I didn't feel like a brother to you. Can you understand, little girl?"

"Not exactly, but I will try to come to understand. I don't know how I am going to ever forget about you."

"I assure you that will not be difficult. You will probably have a lot of interesting romances, proposals, courtships, men asking for your hand, maybe even infatuations, before you find the man that is really right for you. Those are the things a young girl is entitled to, the things I want you to enjoy, within the boundaries of safety."

"Those aren't the things that are important to me. I happen to know what I want out of life. But I will wait. You will feel differently about me some time--or come to know that you feel differently about me. I'll wait." Van had to be satisfied with that. The waiting would prove he was right. She would soon meet someone with whom she could enjoy companionship, share a romance, a courtship-- if that someone was a gentleman, a man who cherished her as she should be cherished. He wanted her happiness.. Eunice came running into the house screaming hysterically. Delia and all the others jumped up and ran to her. Luke came in carrying the limp body of Robin. She was bruised, bloody and they all wondered if she were alive. "Here, put her down here," Tom said, making a place on the couch. "Run and get the Indian!" Delia said. Run and get Hawk. Tell him Robin has been badly hurt! Tell him to bring his medications!"

Robert was the first to arrive at Hawks cabin. He pounded on the door and yelled at the top of his voice. Fuline opened the door. "Bring Hawk, quick, Robin is dying. She is hurt!"

Hawk was out the door. "Stay here, Fuline," he said.

. "You must not come."

The Indian gave orders, and mixed medications, applying them or directing their application. He had learned that these strange white people did not like the sticky mixture applied directly to the wounds. They preferred to use some of that odd stuff called cloth so many of the Indians were using to make their dress, instead of buckskins and other skins. "Maybe we should send to Dallas for a doctor," Tom suggested. "No!" Casey said. "Don't do it. The Indian can do better. The doctor will want to bleed her, or will infect her with his germs, or..."

"You may be right," Tom said. "We will let Luke and Fuline decide."

Fuline had been so frightened she hadn't said anything. Now she looked up, her eyes filled with tears. "We will all have to get guns. They will be here in a few minutes! They will be on their way now. He will take Robin. He beat her and he will beat her again. He may kill her. They are coming after her!"

"Go get Van! Tell him to bring an arsenal. Get Rowdy, Maib. Tell all the women to stay home!" Tom said, running to the gun cabinet and taking down a couple of rifles. Delia took one and Tom checked some of the other guns. A couple of pistols were readied and laid on the table. Casey took one and Robert took another. Tom started to object, but he knew the Redford boys would not listen. They knew how to handle weapons and would be as good as any other man at defending this little girl and the place from the angry family of Robin. The battle was short. The Frenchman had a dozen armed men with him. They were half drunk, but determined and efficient. When the battle was over, one of them lay dead, and two more badly injured. The Frenchman and the remaining men had

. turned and ridden out at top speed. Delia and Tom asked the Indian to bring more medicine. They and the other men cleaned the wounds of the injured men, and bound them. The men were put to bed in one room and Luke kept guard over them. Delia wondered briefly if it was safe to leave Luke alone with them. Was he angry enough to finish them off? She decided Luke could be trusted, even though he was enraged. Robin was barely alive. She was put to bed. Eunice and Clarice were determined to remain with her, even though Delia and Tom had tried to persuade Eunice especially not to come. They were afraid the shock and stress of all that was going on, would cause her to miscarry.

Robert sat by the door of Robin's room. "I'll kill him!," he said. "You should have let me kill him." Eunice and Clarice agreed. Delia stayed close. The Indian clan the Frenchman claimed as his family, did not know of herbs and barks to use for medications. They had been allowed to use only what the Frenchman decided was right; those items that could be purchased at the pharmacy. Delia wanted to be sure that the poultices were applied as often as the Indian recommended, and wrapped properly again.

All the children were playing in the yard. It was sunny. They decided it would be fun to make something to eat and have a picnic on the grass. Drue and Delia and Eunice packed sandwiches, cake, fresh grapes, and lemonade in baskets and had the children take it out. They played games and then decided to sit down to eat. Robert took Robin's arm and led her to a grassy spot beside the food. She sat down. Before Robert had seated himself, Gerald had seated himself on her other side. Robin turned and smiled at him. "Here," Gerald said, "This looks like a sandwich just made for you. I see right there, it has your name on it." Robin looked as if she were looking for the name. She laughed. Everyone was giggling and making a game out of everything they did. Robert

was dismayed. This kind of clever teasing, and getting attention was not his forte. He was sincere about everything. He couldn't think of anything to do that would help him to compete with a boy as clever and handsome as Gerald was.

He picked up a glass and poured some lemonade. He handed it to Robin and for a moment he had her attention. Gerald had her attention most of the rest of the time. When they had all finished eating, Gerald took Robin's arm. "Let's go for a walk and look at the flowers," he said. They walked away. Robert heard them laughing and talking. He was consumed with jealousy. "She's my girl," he said.

"How did this happen?"

That night he consulted his mother. "Robin is my girl," he said. "I told everyone a long time ago that I was going to marry her when we grow up. Now she likes Gerald more than she likes me. How can I win her away from someone like Gerald? He is more clever than I am. He is more fun than I am. He is handsome. He is bigger than I am. He is rich and I am poor..."

"Whoever said raising children was easy," Drue sighed. Her heart ached for her son. She thought he was the better man of the two, even though it was true that Gerald was handsome, clever, rich, big. "Well, I don't know what to say," she told Robert. "There must be a way. Let me think about it for a while, and we will see what we can come up with."

CHAPTER XIX

A telegram was delivered that Vincent and his family would be arriving within the next few days. Delia and Tom were delighted. Van couldn't help being excited about seeing his Uncle Vincent and Dorinda and the boys. He admired his

Uncle Vincent in the way he admired his parents. "He is one of the most outstanding men I have ever known," Van thought. He was dazzled by the number of attractive women who had arrived. Some of them, with their chaperones, were to stay in the Walling home for several days, as was almost always the case when people travelled from long distances. Lola Lynn was beautiful, quiet, elegant. The type Van had always admired before he met Laura. She was everything any man could want in a wife, he thought. Tom and Delia had decided that quite a long time before. They had spent long hours getting acquainted with the most desirable and attractive women in the community. Van was amused. His parents were wonderful. They loved him and wanted him to be happy. He was respectful and courteous to Lola Lynn, and to all the others of his parent's guests, but he was not in the least attracted to any of them. The family all enjoyed visiting with Vincent and Dorinda and the two big, handsome boys. Van dressed for the ball. "If I have to romance anyone," he decided, "I will make it Lola Lynn. That will make my parents happy...and if Roxanne still has any of those silly ideas, it will help to vanquish them." It seemed that Roxanne was more beautiful than ever. Her hair was piled high on her head. Her shoulders were bare, her dress cut very low. It was of some bright material bedecked with ribbons, bows, rosettes, ruffles; fluff and lace of all kinds. She was a picture. Van noticed that William Kress was approaching her. He didn't like the attitude that man took toward Roxanne. He didn't like anything about William Kress. "Too bad we don't go by the old rules and invite only those we want around," he was thinking--"but of course out here, this is the best way. His parents are friends and it would be almost impossible to exclude him--or the others I don't trust; Benjamin Krouse, Lorin Brown, Keith McCarthy...".

Van stood watching Roxanne and William, preoccupied. Suddenly she saw him. That startling smile appeared. She turned her head a little in a questioning way. He had meant to dance with the girl he knew his parents had chosen for him. But William's possessive attitude as he took Roxanne's arm for a dance, made him angry. He was striding across the floor with nothing in mind but to take Roxanne out of contact with the man he had decided was not worthy of her company--even long enough to dance with her. "What's wrong, Van?" Roxanne asked. "I don't want you to dance with that low-life William Kress. I've warned you about him before. He is not a gentleman. I don't want to spoil your fun, but there are certain people I will not permit to associate with you."

The dance ended and Van walked away from her and asked Lola for the next dance. She accepted gracefully. Van tried to make sensible conversation. Lola was nice. She didn't behave in that coy way Van so much disliked in a woman. He looked up to see Roxanne dancing with Greyson. Greyson was big, broad shouldered, dark, as handsome a man as Van had ever seen. He had dark eyes, long, black curly hair, tied back with a string. Roxanne was looking up at him with that inimitable smile. He seemed to be oblivious of everything in the room other than the beautiful girl he held in his arms. He is a charming devil, Van thought. He had a moment of satisfaction; a feeling of having solved a most vexing problem. They are about the same age. They are both outstanding people. They are right for each other. All the young ones were outside. They visited with Maib and Junie as often as they could. Maib told them interesting stories about his days on the trail with Van. They all enjoyed visiting the stables,

too, where Luke kept vigil over the horses. They demanded that Luke tell them over and over about the trip out from Kentucky. He believed he had told them in detail almost every incident, but they seemed never to

be completely satisfied. They liked to hear the same stories over and over again. They all liked to visit the Indian, too, and his bride. The Indian and his wife were learning to speak English under Maib's tutelage, but all the children encouraged them to speak in their own tongue. They learned as many words as they could from this strange language. The Indian often took off his shirt and turned his shoulders to show the children the scars of the burns Laura had inflicted. He always laughed and speaking half in his own native language and half in this new English he was learning, he let them know how proud he was of Laura. "Brave!" he repeated over and over. "Woman brave!"

When the children were alone again, Gerald suddenly turned to Robert. "Did you know that my mother was once a slave?" he asked. "She and her mother were slaves of Van's grandfather--Tom's own father. So we--Vincent and I have the blood of black slaves running in our veins."

The children were astonished. This was something beyond their imaginations. "Has it ever caused you any problems?" Casey asked. "Have other children ever tried to make you feel..."

"Inferior? Oh yes. Mostly it has been just fun to test them for their level of prejudice. We have a large circle of friends, but some of the children in school would have nothing to do with us because of our 'inferior blood.'" He laughed. "Mostly it was the parents. A lot of them didn't want their young ones contaminated by associating with savages."

"How awful!" Carol said. "Well, it wasn't really awful. You see our parents had talked to us a lot. They made us proud of our heritage. They were proud and we are proud. We have never felt inferior. So, any indication that others felt we should feel beneath their level, was always more amusing to us than hurtful. Of course we could never find it amusing that so many people think in such shallow and narrow ways--but even that is interesting and helpful information. My parents always say that knowing how things really are--what things people make their judgments on, is useful information."

"Yes, that is what Tom always says, too," Casey said. Greyson had been disturbed by Gerald's words. He had watched Roxanne's face to try to see there any sign of her being repelled by the truth of his heritage. "How awful!" Roxanne was saying. "I think it would be a terrible burden to bear! I don't think I could face it-- without a great deal of resentment."

Greyson turned and walked away. He wondered if his heart were breaking. Surely he couldn't be in love with this little beauty so soon. "I am though," he admitted. I have never been interested in any girl before this. I was hit as if with lightning when I saw her. Well, it is going to be very difficult, but I will have to try to face up to it like a man-- as my father always said. I will do my damndest--but I wish it had been different. "Van noticed that Greyson was not as attentive to Roxanne as he had been. He couldn't account for it. Well, he told himself, he is very young, and so is she. Maybe they had a little misunderstanding. Or maybe I just thought I saw an interest in him. Maybe he already has a girl back home. In any case, Roxanne hasn't shown much interest in him. Greyson danced with Carol now more than he did with Roxanne. Carol showed no special interest in him. That is probably because her interest is all in Gerald. Gerald shows absolutely no interest in any girl. Well, I am not a matchmaker, but I just hate to see anyone hurt, Van concluded. Dorinda and her husband knew what their son was feeling and suspected the reason why. Greyson did not try to get them to extend their

visit this time as he had before. He was more than ready to go home. Van was sorry that Roxanne hadn't been more interested in

Greyson. That would have been an answer to this problem, he said, Of her thinking she is in love with me. The next time Van and Roxanne were alone, she brought up that subject again. "I'm sorry, Van," she said, "but as I told you before, I will never belong to any man unless he loves me enough to want to marry me, and until we are married. I am not a cheap woman. I don't mean that I would...try to use...any man's natural desires, to get him to marry me. I don't want any man to marry me unless he loves me enough to want me and me alone. I trust you. I know you want me--but you have said that it is not love. I accept that--for now. You want me to believe that you do not love me, and that you don't want me to be alone with you, but I know you would never harm me."

"Roxanne! I wish you wouldn't trust men that way! If some men could possibly persuade you--or even force you to allow them to make love to you, they would!"

"But you never would. You are not capable of forcing a woman, Van."

"That's true, of course. I would certainly never force a woman to accept my advances." He was thinking of the night he had gone looking for Laura, down by the cabin, with every intention of possessing her, and believing after their night of love, that he had actually taken advantage of her. But she had assured him that she, too, knew that he could never force any woman under any circumstances, and that she had encouraged him to make love to her. That had been one of the most joyful moments of his life. "Someone like Greyson is more right for you. You are beautiful together. He is a wonderful boy. He will make a fine husband. He could make you happy."

"Greyson is a fine man. I like him very much. I think, too, that he will make a very fine husband. I think he has a lot of integrity. But I don't love him. I love you."

"Roxanne! You have to stop telling me you love me. It isn't love! It is dangerous."

They found themselves back in the ballroom. Someone claimed Roxanne for a dance. Van stood and watched them. Greyson was looking at Roxanne with what Van believed was adoration, but he did not ask her for another dance. He was falling in love with her, Van said. I wonder what happened. I wish to god she had never decided that she loves me. I know it isn't love, but it is as hard on her as if it were love. In any case, it is not going to be solved by my allowing her to go on talking like she does. She has to change her ways. Roxanne looked radiant. Again, he saw that indescribable smile given to some young dance-partner. He went to his room and changed his clothes. He walked out into the cold, starlit night. Without the thought registering first, Van was shocked to hear his mind saying, What the hell? If it makes this little girl happy, why not marry her? I could be good to her, give her everything she wants. She probably would be happy. Maybe I would, too. I have always wanted someone to love, to love me, to make a home with... Roxanne's words repeated themselves in his mind..."Van, I want to marry you. I really think you do love me. I think I can make you happy. But if you are offering to marry me just in order to possess my body, I won't do it. I want to be loved. I want you to love me. I want you to know that you love me, and only me."

Van had been forced to think about Roxanne in a way he hadn't dreamed he was capable of. He realized with a jolting shock that he was thinking about what it would be like to be married to her; to have her for his wife, to make love to her. The thought had aroused him physically, as she had insisted he was aroused by her nearness. It is merely, he thought, by the

repeated mention of that being the case. What is it they say about the power of suggestion? Yet, maybe she was right all along. What I considered honor, integrity, strength was often nothing more than self-righteousness.

Why should I think I am so much more able to judge what is good for this little girl, than she is?

She is beginning to appear to me a woman beyond her years, who knows what she wants and is damn well going to fight for it. Maybe I have just been deluding myself that I can live a monastic life. I will never see Laura again. And if, by any chance I ever did, I could not have her. She is married to a good man. The only chance I have to forget her, is to marry this little girl who made up her mind beyond any doubt that she wants us to be married. Surely I couldn't go on dreaming of something that cannot be, married to a sweet girl, establishing a home. I would be a mean man if I did not come to love her exclusively. I would certainly be mean if I went on denying her that which she wants more than anything, just to try to keep my own misguided ideals. There is no way I could ever mistreat her. I could make her happy. I could make a good life for her--and no doubt, as she says, she could make me happy. I have just been a fool to believe I am so much wiser than she is...that I can speak for her, or for myself either, as far as that goes. His convictions were still not fully satisfied. I have never been even slightly tempted to kiss any other woman than Laura, since I met her. Here I am thinking of how delightful it would be to make love to Roxanne. She is only about as old as Laura was when I first fell in love with her. I suffered enough, deriding myself for being a lecher at that time. I was so sure that it was wrong to love her and want her, that I forced myself to believe that my feeling was only animal lust. Then Maggie showed me that it was love, the purest kind of love there is between a man and a woman. And I have loved her that way ever since. There was nothing crude about that love--but what is this feeling I have for Roxanne? Is it, or can it be just as sweet and pure as that love I felt so long for Laura? Or can it be merely animal lust--inherent lust aroused by her repeated invitations to kiss her; her insistence that she loves me--wants to marry me? Her invitation to love her twisted my whole thinking one hundred sixty degrees away from my first intentions--my decent inclinations."

"What has it ever gained me to try to be so god-damned much better than I really am? Wally was right about one thing. I was a self-righteous bastard. I wanted to live up to the standards of my parents. I guess there was nothing wrong with that--but I didn't have the wisdom to deal with all the circumstances that came up in my life--losing Sylvia, falling in love with Laura when she was so young. I certainly can't blame my weakness on Roxanne. She is perfectly sincere. But the thought she had finally implanted so deeply in his mind, of kissing her, possessing her, making her his own, was not to be dismissed. He didn't want to fight his own idealism all his life. Could it be that it really is not a weakness, but a coming to face the truth? How on earth do I expect her to understand, when I don't understand myself, he thought. He was not fully convinced that he had made the right decision. I had better find her, and have a talk with her, he decided. He found her sitting alone, in the unfinished mansion. She wore no wrap. She was shivering. She looked up at him. "Hello, Van," she said. "I was just dreading going to pack. We have to leave for school again, you know." She sounded unhappy and Van's heart ached for her. He was tempted again to simply take her in his arms and tell her that he loved her and her alone--but he couldn't bring himself to that irrevocable decision just yet. He took her in his arms to try to comfort her. She buried her head in his coat and he thought she was crying. It is folly to hurt this little girl with my god-

damned self-righteousness! he thought. If she wants to marry me, I am going to promise her that I will love her, and take care of her and cherish her as a wife should be . cherished. That seems to me the most decent thing I can do- even though it has taken some re-constructing of my complete being. As Wally said I have always been too sure my ideals were the right ones. Who am I to say that her needs are not more important than mine? especially since those needs I have felt for so long can never be fulfilled in any case. This little girl needs me now in a way I hadn't thought of, but that doesn't make it wrong. I will not be happy going on alone, wanting Laura. I may be happy trying to make this precious little girl happy. I expect the best, most mature, most decent thing I can do with my life, is to marry her. His arms were tightening around her without his volition. She looked up at him with surprise. She was about to speak. He knew that she could not miss the fact of his physical arousal. He could not deny it. I would like to forget about everything on earth right now, other than possessing this lovely little girl, he was thinking. He was still undecided. He was still holding her close, trying to enclose her in his heavy coat to warm her. He discovered that his heart was racing. The outline of her body against his was tantalizing. Van was thinking that she had said he had 'that way of being able to solve everything.' I can't even solve my own problems, he thought. But it was balm to have this little mite, this little innocent creature, who needed warming, to think he was masterful, in command...able to solve everything. He recognized vaguely that he was feeling emotions about Roxanne that he would have thought impossible. He recognized that these new emotions, aroused by her determination that they were right for each other as man and wife, had begun a new sensation of physical desire, which shocked him, but was unutterable pleasing, too. "All right, we'll go back," she said, but she shivered and dug closer against his body. "Oh, God, little girl, how I would love to kiss you. How I would love to...never stop." Her arms enclosed his neck. He was kissing her. His lips . were bruising hers. She returned his kisses as ardently as he was bestowing them. He groaned. The taste of her lips remained, rendered him more culpable, more defenseless. I didn't think I could ever have any feelings of this kind for any woman on earth other than Laura. It makes me feel guilty as hell. It makes me feel as if I had betrayed Laura. Actually, I suppose the greatest betrayal was toward Roxanne. Laura is married to another man. She has belonged to another man for nearly four years. She has undoubtedly found some happiness with him. Mother said he was a fine man. My God, I don't know whether I'm happier for having Roxanne's sweet kisses, her love--or more dejected than ever. But the feeling of elation and delight would not go away. I could do something that would ruin Roxanne's life. I don't want that. She said I was a strong man. I am not strong and I no longer even know what is right. I wish it had never happened--yet there has been nothing on earth that ever gave me so much joy, so much reason for being able to face the future. I can't even sort it out. In a way it makes me ashamed, in another way it makes me so proud I can hardly believe it. Van was trembling. He had made a decision. He felt now that that decision was a good one. "All right, Roxanne," Van said, "Let's plan a wedding. I think we should make it soon." His conscience came to the fore again. He wanted her to realize the full truth. He wanted to be honest with her-- if he could decide what was the truth. "Like I told you, Roxanne, I want to marry you--but it may be a selfish thing I want. For the past few days my mind has insisted on concentrating on what it would mean to me to have you in my arms every night, to have a home where someone cared about me and wanted my love--but when I think about what is really best for you, I have a lot of doubts. I am just trying to be honest with you. I'd rather lie to you and tell you that it is right, because you have become so attractive to me in this

. new way. I want you very much. But I can't be that dishonest. I am not exactly sure what is the truth. So, even trying to be completely frank, I am not sure I am succeeding. Maybe that is because I don't understand myself any more. I guess I haven't for a long time."

"I am very sure about my love for you, Van--but it does frighten me to think that you might sometimes dream of Laura. I truly believe that after a while, after we have a baby or two..."

"Roxanne! I would never allow you to have a baby!"

"What are you talking about? If we get married, we certainly shall have babies! Children are one of the most important things in life. I want six. We certainly shall have children, Van.!" He had to smile at her emphatic attitude. "You are the most adamant little thing I have ever encountered," he laughed. "You are your mother's daughter. How could I ever have thought that you might not know what you wanted--and that you would ever give up until you won?"

"Why wouldn't you want children?" she demanded. "Because you are such a fragile, delicate, dainty little thing, I would be afraid for you. I could never take that chance. I have always wanted children, but I will over-rule you on that. I will never allow you to have any. It is too.

dangerous. You are too delicate, too small. I would never take a chance on your having a baby..."

"But I want children. I am not a hot house pansy, Van. Just because I am small doesn't mean I can't have children safely. My mother is very small, too. She had nine of us successfully. She had them out there all alone with only my father to help deliver them. Only the first two were very difficult. The others were quite easy. Life isn't complete without children. I would never consent to living without children--besides," she gave him that devastating smile, "Mother and dad and Delia and Tom would never be happy without . grandchildren. We couldn't cheat them."

"It would scare the hell out of me. I would not be able to sleep if you got pregnant, but it would be wonderful to have children. You are right, it is a big part of life, but I can't think of you suffering. I would always be thinking of your safety."

"Well, I'm glad of that. Even though my mother got along so well, and never lost a child, I would feel much better to have a good doctor. I am glad you are concerned, but I wouldn't want you staying awake at night worrying about me. I am a healthy girl. I won't have any trouble."

"Come to think of it," Van grinned, "I'm not sure I could ever make love to you, even after the preacher had made it permissible."

"What are you talking about now?" for the first time, too, he saw that she could be indignant. "Well, I think I would be afraid you would break into bits. I would always be afraid of hurting you. You are, like I said, just too dainty. I would always feel like it was a sacrilege to make love to you."

"You're crazy!" she said really nettled now. "You will make love to me. I will see to that!"

Van had to smile again. "And you are the girl I thought might not know what she wanted. You are just like your mother. You are a very strong and wise little lady, and you are going to get most of what you want out of life. You aren't apt to make very many foolish decisions. I expect more all the time, that our decision is a good one. It was a real jolt to have to turn all my former conceptions of myself completely upside down, shred all my former

philosophy into bits, dispose of all my former ideals, and see you as a sweetheart, a desirable wife instead of the vulnerable little sister I always have thought of you as, but you were probably right all along. You are wiser than I am. "I was always ashamed of loving Laura--because she was so

young. I refused to admit that I did love her for a long time. I feel that same kind of shame for wanting a girl like you. It is too much like...like."

"You mean you think it may be only lust you feel for me. Not love."

"Well, for a long time I had myself convinced that that was all I felt for Laura. I couldn't allow myself to believe that loving a girl as young as she was could be honorable. It is possible, like you said, that after a while, being with you, and especially if we have children, I will never think of...the past. I know I would always love you as I do now, love your honesty, your intelligence, your compassion, and I would delight in making love to you." He took her in his arms again. "There is nothing on earth I want more right now than to forget about everything I believe in and kiss you until I'm dizzy--drunk on your kisses. I want to make plans to marry you right away. Roxanne, you are the loveliest little thing I have ever known. You were right that I no longer have the will power to resist you. I wouldn't allow myself to think of being married to you. It is a most delightful thought. My god, I love you. I want to make you my wife. I wonder what your mother and father will think. They may not consider letting you marry a man almost sixteen years older than you are."

"I bet they'll think it is wonderful," she said. "I do. "I knew all the time that what you feel for me is love. I knew you would come to realize it. I've known for a long time that you were falling in love with me. It made me so happy that I got the nerve to talk in a way I wouldn't have thought...nice, before. "That must surely be the sweetest smile in the world," Van said. He was so shaken he could hardly function. "She said, only if I wanted to marry her--and only after I had married her. Thank god for that! After those ardent kisses she responded with, I am not sure I could have kept my own

resolutions. I have been so lonely for so long that I am no longer in control of my own senses. It will always be so important to me to have that sweet confidence, that sweet, innocent love."

"Why did I have to fall in love with another child? I don't have any preference for very young girls. I would much rather have fallen in love with someone my own age. It just happened to me. I don't know why."

"It wasn't because we were young, of course," Roxanne said. "It was because we were who we are. I will never be sorry that you are older. It is you I want. You just happen to be older. I'm not sorry."

Van's jaws tightened. "I'm not sure I will ever have a day of peace if I marry her, he said to himself. I know I will never have another day of peace if I don't!

CHAPTER XI

Next day Van and Roxanne found a time to talk together. "What would you do, Roxanne said, "if sometime in the future, Laura would come back into your life?"

"I always felt sure she would." Van said. "I don't know why. She is married to another man. She is not the type that would ever betray her husband, however much... we loved each other. For a long time, I wouldn't face the fact that she was married to another man. My mind kept insisting on ignoring it. I am a very jealous man, Roxanne. More and more I have had to face the fact that Laura has lain in the arms of another man. That she has belonged to him completely. They may have children. So, what I am saying is that if she ever should come back, there would be nothing either of us could do about it. I am not sure I could ignore her. Our love was a very strong thing. I am capable of loving only with all my being. That is the way I loved her."

Roxanne sighed deeply. "I think I knew all this, Van. and I am very jealous, too. I don't like to think of how much you loved her. My mother and father came to love Laura after just that one time they met her. They recognized she was an outstanding woman. Of course I remember her, too, but at the time, we kids were all more interested in the baby, Alice Lynn. "I couldn't bear to know that you were thinking of Laura when you were with me--or much of any other time, I guess. I don't want the past to get in the way of our happiness. It is the future I want with you. It is true, that I could never be as strong and wise as Laura is. Everyone marvelled that she could have led the group out all the way from Kentucky. I could never compare with her. I am an entirely different type of person. There really isn't much to recommend me--after your knowing her."

Van was thinking of all the other things Roxanne didn't know about Laura. How she had saved his life. How she had worked out a plan and carried it through, to take the rifle from the guard, and make him open the doors of the jail. How she had tricked Daniel and got him to relax his vigilance long enough to take his pistol away from him and tie him up, so that she could ride after Van, against all the odds. I am afraid I will never stop dreaming about her, he thought, and as much as I want Roxanne now, I will not allow myself to subject her to something so base as this is going to be if my mind persists in dreaming about Laura. "And another thing that is important, Darling, is that your sweet confidence in my strength, my ability to handle situations, to control events, simply isn't true. I would give my life to protect you if it ever became necessary, but other than that, I am quite ineffective."

Roxanne smiled. "That is only your opinion," she said. "And I am still not sure what your family would think about your marrying a man so much older. I don't think it is right, so why should they?"

"My mother will think that I should not marry you because she thinks that you should marry someone on your own social level. Maybe she is right. You are very rich, and I am poor. That doesn't really seem fair, but she will not object on any other grounds. My family all love you and they would know that I am very fortunate to marry you, in spite of all your wealth," she smiled. "Roxanne, I want you to have a gorgeous wedding. You deserve that. I don't know how soon that can be arranged, but I sometimes think maybe we should make it as soon as possible."

"I want it as soon as possible, too, but what are your parents going to think. They may not think I am at all suitable as a wife for you. They may want you to marry someone on your own level, someone more experienced in your ways, someone more educated..."

"My parents have always left my decisions up to me. There is nothing they want more than my happiness. They will be delighted to see that I am happy...but, it is unfair to cut off your education. You could do a great deal with your life, if you continued with your education--and maybe then, be much happier than you would be married to me..."

"I will convince you sometime, my love, that my happiness all depends upon being your wife--and your loving me, nothing else."

Van rushed the finishing of the mansion. "It does frighten me to think of living in such a castle," Roxanne said. "I wouldn't know how to behave. I am used to living in a little cabin, crowded in with nine other people,--outside, a lot of the time, cooking over a fireplace built for that purpose, sleeping on the ground six months out of the year, eating from planks laid across two hobby-horses, with hollowed out wood for dishes and silverware, baking bread in coffee cans, using cans for glasses and cups, using a needle and thread to make all of our clothing. Wearing moccasins in summer, homemade shoes in winter. Living as you do would take some getting used to."

"You would grace any man's home, Roxanne, but I expect you will miss your manner of living--the way you have lived all your life. Casey said when he first came to me for a job, that he thought your family had been happier than most. We will travel, Roxanne. We will get on our horses and travel everywhere. We will sleep out under the stars, cook over a campfire, build a canvas leanto, when it rains. I will hold you in my arms and listen to the rain pounding on our tent. We will listen to the wind in the trees, the gurgle of the streams..." He found himself thinking of the days he and Laura had spent together living this way, and the plans they had made to travel over the Lewis and Clark trail and all the other places Laura had wanted to see. He shook his head. He wondered again if this could possibly be fair to Roxanne. Could he ever really be free of the ghosts of the past?

"We never saw running water in our lives until we came here. We carried it all in from the spring. We heated all our bath water in the tub over the campfire. In winter it was sometimes quite a problem. No one ever went without a bath, though, in mama's house. She insisted on everyone being clean at all times. With ten people in that little cabin, sometimes it seemed there was always someone taking a bath. Mama said that rainwater was good for the hair, so we were always catching rainwater in all the coffee cans, the tub and the boiler and everything we could find."

Van laughed. "Well, I would bet a pretty good bit that if your mother said rainwater is good for the hair, then rainwater is good for the hair. I have a lot of admiration for your mother. She is a wonderful woman," Van said. "Yes, she is a wonderful woman. She cried when she discovered that Laura had gone away thinking that you were married. That is the first time I ever knew of my mother and

father quarreling. She scolded him for being so insistent that it was true. Daddy felt terrible about it. That is the only time in my life I ever saw him cry. They quarreled and then mama wound up by comforting daddy because he was so miserable about it. He hasn't ever forgiven himself, you know. That is the reason he will never come when the others of us do. He can't face you, Van. I feel sorry for him."

"I will have to go have a talk with the old boy," Van said. "It was a terrible blow and I was angry with almost everyone alive about it--but it wasn't your father's fault any more than anyone else's. All the villagers verified it. They saw Maggie and me together and of course they assumed that she had to be my wife. People are like that. My own mother knew it, and she didn't bother to set Laura straight. She said it never occurred to her that Laura believed it. So, you

see, no one is to blame any more than my mother is, and I certainly don't blame her for one minute...It is just one of those things-just one of those unfortunate coincidences."

Van went immediately to talk to Joe. Joe was embarrassed and reticent. Van told him what he had said to Roxanne. He went away with Joe's promise that he would not blame himself any longer for Laura's misunderstanding. "You come on up and join the rest of us the next time the children are home. You will enjoy watching their fun, their new experiences, hear their enthusiasm about all they are learning. You should be there."

Joe laughed and promised that he would accompany his wife and children the next time they visited the Walling home. As usual, the Redford family was exuberant about this new world into which they had been catapulted. They couldn't get around to doing all the things they wanted to do. The visits with Maib and his wife, the visits with the Indian and his wife, the visits with Luke and his new wife, and Rowdy and Clarice. When they had time, the younger children went to the stables and the carriage house. They climbed up into the seats of the luxurious carriage and pretended that they were "rich people,"

driving to some renowned place. They twisted, put on airs, talked in a manner they thought would be specific to the haughty rich. They clucked at the imaginary horses, and then they would have to stop and laugh at themselves. They all enjoyed going to the Wallings more than anything they had ever dreamed of.

CHAPTER XII

All of the guests and employees were invited, urged, to come into the ballroom after dinner. We have decided it is time for you to learn to dance, Drue, and you too, Joe," Delia said.

"Oh, no!" I have no reason to need to know how to dance," Drue said, and Joe was slinking as far back in the corner as he could get. "Oh, yes you do need to know how to dance," Tom said. "You need to participate in whatever your children are doing. They are going to be doing a lot of dancing. Besides I won't sit still for your refusing to dance with me."

"Oh, I am so clumsy! I will never learn," Drue said. Tom had taken her in his arms and showed her patiently what stance a couple should assume on the dance floor. Delia played the piano. It was a slow waltz. "Now do just as I do," Tom said. "If you will put your hand right here, you can feel what way I am going to step and be prepared to step that way in unison." Drue was embarrassed, but she was enjoying the new experience, too. Tom was a good teacher. She was soon following his lead. When Delia had finished the tune, Van claimed Drue. "It's my turn," he said. "Next time mother throws a ball, I will be coming over for my share of dances," Delia began another tune. "It's your time to play the piano," Delia told Roxanne, who had been taking lessons at school. "I want to dance with

. your father. Joe was reluctant, but he finally went out on the floor. Delia taught him as patiently and efficiently as Tom had been with Drue. "We want to see you out on the floor with everyone else next time there is a ball," she said. Joe began to smile. He looked forward, if a little shyly, to taking his wife out on a dance floor for the first time in his life. The children all thought it was great fun. They applauded, laughed and urged their parents on. "Luke, Eunice, Rowdy, Clarice, Maib and Junie were all urged out on the floor. It wasn't long until they had got caught up in the gaiety and began to feel at ease. They soon were exchanging partners, and laughing about any blunders any of them made--each claiming the distinction of being the one that made the most blunders. Hawk and his wife had not been on the floor. When Van urged them to join the others, Hawk finally told him that he would do an Indian dance if they would all agree to that. Everyone was eager to see it. He got out in the middle of the floor. He stood up very straight. He put his hand over his mouth drumming it against his lips, so that the sound would be alliterate. He began to step in unison to the sing-song sound. He turned around, bobbing his head up and down. He bent over, bringing his knee up to meet his chin, to four beats of his song; hu-u-u-u. His long hair swept the floor. He stepped, and bent and straightened, dancing in a circle, in perfect harmony with the sound of his song. He stopped. "War dance," he said. "Come on." His wife joined him and then all the others. It was easy to follow his movements and to do the steps they had seen him do. The stooping and straightening, and turning, was to be done at one's own discretion, so there was really very little to learn about the dance. Soon the whole room was echoing the Indian War Dance from the walls. Everyone was singing the song, or making the symmetrical droning, repetitious, almost hypnotic sound that accompanied the dance. It was a strident, raucous, yet harmonious, even

. melodious, synchronization of barbaric sounds. It built up emotions. The war dances of all tribes were designed to heighten the emotions. The incitement to violence, however, was not an ingredient of the war-dance. That came later by the artifices of the leaders in battle. All the participants were laughing and rushing to sit down and get their breath. "We'll never have another ball without the Indian War Dance. I'm sure of that," Tom said, looking at Delia.

"We can't be dismissed without a quadrille." Van said. "Play a fast tune on the piano, Roxanne. I will need mom to help guide everyone through this the first time. "All you have to do," Van said, "is listen to the directions. I will call them in sync with the music. All of you know

what I mean when I say 'form a ring, and when I say "alman left,' and when I say 'swing your partners,' and when I say 'swing on the corner'--so let's go."

Roxanne played the fast tune. When she missed a note, no one bothered to correct her--or no one noticed.

CHAPTER XIII

"I think I am ready to go back to the United States," Laura said. "I think too, that it would be more fair to your parents. They want Lillian near, and she has a right to know them."

"I am so glad, darling. I would never ask you to go unless it was what you wanted to do. I don't feel that that man who mistreated you so much, will still be searching for us. I am delighted to be going home."

Darryl found a beautiful mansion for Laura and Lillian. He had done everything in his power to make Laura happy and to give her everything she wanted. He couldn't bear for her to want the slightest thing, and not be able to provide it for her immediately. Darryl had been so good, that Laura kept thinking that she would eventually be able to say truthfully that she loved him. She knew he deserved the love he wanted from her. "You are the best man in the whole wide world," she often told him. That was not hard to say. She believed it. But it was almost impossible for her to say that she loved him. She didn't. She often wondered how he felt about it. He had to notice that she seldom told him that she loved him. He surely had to know that she was still in love with Van--"that man who had mistreated her."

At first she had told Darryl that the baby was not his. He refused to accept that. "You couldn't possibly know, Laura," he said. Finally, she decided that it was just as well for him to believe it was his. After the child was born, though, it was quite obvious that she had no resemblance to the Davenports. Her coloring and bone structure were more like Delia's. Darryl was always kind to the baby. Laura wondered, however, if he really still believed the little girl might be his. She knew that if he did think the baby was Van's, it would require a great deal of nobility not to show resentment and enmity. "Like I have always said, he is the finest man in the world," she repeated. "Laura liked the Davenports. They were very courteous and considerate of her, and delighted with the baby. "They are kind people, like Darryl," she thought, "fine people."

Darryl hardly ever went anywhere without her and baby Lillian with him. He didn't enjoy the things most men enjoyed. He wanted nothing more than to be with Laura. He never tired of talking to her, watching her, holding her, riding with her, reading to her and listening while she read to him. She had been a little surprised when he had announced today that he was going out to play polo. She was glad. He had often told her how he used to play polo, and how he used to love to ride to the hounds. She had often encouraged him to go and take up these hobbies again, but he refused, saying they had lost all interest for him. Laura was sitting in the living-room of the mansion Darryl had bought for them, when there was a knock at the door. Laura answered the door as she usually did. She had consented to have one maid, at Darryl's insistence, and then later, a nannie for the baby, but she never had liked being coddled about things she was perfectly capable of doing herself. Darryl would have me sitting on a pink cushion all day, with someone to serve my every little need, if he had his way, she smiled. "Mrs. Davenport?" a man asked. He was breathless. "Yes,"

"Please come quickly!" the man said. "Your husband is badly hurt! His horse stumbled and fell. Darryl is badly hurt. He may not live. He is asking for you."

Laura didn't stop for a wrap. She ran to the carriage waiting at the gate. She was up into the seat and ready to go by the time the stranger had got in and taken up the reins, "Hurry!" she said. "Oh god, please hurry!"

She took Darryl's head carefully on her knee. Tears streamed down her face. Oh, Darling. My dear, I am so sorry," she said. She realized she was apologizing for never having

been able to give him what he wanted most out of life-- her love. "My darling," Darryl gasped. "I love you, Laura."

"I know," Laura said. "I love you, too, my sweet husband. I love you!"

"I'm so sorry..." he said. "You have nothing to be sorry for. I am the one that is sorry. Please don't try to talk. I will sit here and hold you and tell you how much I love you," she said.

"I have to tell you," he whispered. "I knew all the time...that Van wasn't married."

Oh, my god! Laura didn't say the words. Her mind just . screamed them. She had to use all her will power to keep holding Darryl close. She couldn't let him know how it suddenly repelled her to know that he had caused her so much heartache. The tears of outrage were streaming down her face. Everyone felt sympathy for the beautiful girl that was to be left a widow in just a few minutes. "It was Maggie he was with. She was blind..."

Laura was able to keep her composure through the long ordeal of the funeral and burial. She couldn't hurt the bereaved parents any more than they were already hurting. Their compassion for her was genuine. "She loved him so much," they told each other. "Poor girl. She will be so lonely." They begged Laura to go to live with them. Laura thanked them with all the genuine feeling she was capable of. "I appreciate your kindness so much," she said. "But I cannot stay here. This place has too many memories for me. I have to decide what I am going to do. I don't have any family--but I do have a lot of old friends. I want to see them." The Davenport's were sensitive people. They did not attempt to push Laura into anything. "We understand," they said. Laura couldn't sort out her feelings. She cried more tears than she had ever cried before in her life. She was more nearly filled with hatred than she had ever been before. All this wasted time for nothing. All the heartache for nothing. He loved me and me alone. If only I had known. I don't think I can stand it, she said over and over. After all this time, Van may really be married. I can't take a chance on going back there without knowing. Oh, my god, my god...what shall I do? Can I really hate a man who died in my arms? A man who loved me with all his heart?

CHAPTER XIV

Breakfast was finished. Delia and Tom were surprised that Van scooted his chair back from the table and began to

stamp tobacco into his pipe. He had discarded his cigarettes for a pipe recently. Usually, he rushed from the breakfast table out to some arduous physical labor. He seemed to need to keep himself worn to the breaking point all the time. They understood that this was an attempt to try to keep his mind off his heartache, and wear himself down to the point where he could sleep at night. Their hearts never ceased to ache for him. They were pleased that he was able to relax in this way. Delia filled the coffee cups. "Is there anything special on your mind?" Tom asked.

"Well, yes, I guess there is," Van said. He didn't say anything more. Finally Delia asked, "Anything we might be able to help with, Van?"

"Well, maybe. I am trying to make a decision. Your good judgment might shed some light on what I really should do." It was still a long time before Van continued. He seemed very undecided. He sighed. "It's this way," he said. "I'm thinking seriously about marrying Roxanne."

Tom and Delia were stunned. Van had expected them to be. He was still stunned himself. Neither could speak for quite a long time. "Well, go ahead and tell us the pros and cons," Tom finally said. As far as I can tell, it happened this way. I took responsibility for her safety. I took over control of her decisions about who she could dance with, who she could see, who she could allow near her. I was worried about her, because she is so young and so damned trusting--and so damned beautiful."

"She is certainly beautiful," Delia said, "and of course she is young and innocent and trusting. All the girls are."

"Yes, I feel just as responsible for all the other Redford girls. I will always want to watch very closely what they do, who they trust, how they behave. They are all fine little girls. None of them would purposely entice any man to get the wrong notion about her. None of them would want to seduce any man. Drue has taught them the highest moral standards. They wouldn't violate her trust and their own principles. But they are all beautiful, young, innocent. I doubt if any one of them has any idea how treacherous most men are and how untrustworthy when it comes to a beautiful, charming, young girl. It's too bad, but it's true."

"You are right about that, Van. It is hard to teach a girl not to trust any man, when we would all like our fellow beings to be trustworthy. Do you mean, then, that you are going to marry Roxanne just to protect her from...harm?"

"No. I'm afraid it is much more selfish than that. I have come to feel very much as if it is just what I want." Tom and Delia sensed Van's embarrassment. They had all been very close and able to discuss almost anything important to any one of them, but this was the most intimate thing Van had ever mentioned. Tom and Delia were both happy that they could share this delicate decision with him, but they were sorry for his embarrassment. "I refused to consider it for a long time. She got this notion..." He again seemed unable to continue. "She got the notion that I was in love with her. She was justified, really. It didn't occur to me that I was giving her that idea. I didn't mean to. I was keeping very close watch about what she did and what she was subjected to. That young whelp, William Kress, began to make overtures toward her and I wouldn't allow it. I told her that I would not allow her to associate--even dance with certain men. She took it that I was jealous. I could never make her understand that she was leaving herself open to treachery--because she was so trusting. "She came to think that because I was

near her so often, watching out for her, and the fact that I wouldn't allow her to dance with so many of her suiters, that it was because I . was falling in love with her. It was a perfectly legitimate assumption, but it hadn't occurred to me."

"She decided that she was in love with me. At first I tried to discourage the notion, but she persisted and...the idea repelled me at first. She was too much like one of my family. She seemed too young. I wasn't sure I could forget about Laura. The idea of marrying her didn't appeal to me at all." For the first time in their lives Tom and Delia saw Van blush. "Well, sometimes it is hard to be honest--even with yourself, much less with someone you are trying to tell something that you are ashamed of."

"Are you ashamed of your feeling for her, Van?" Delia's wish to show him that she felt he had nothing to be ashamed of, was in her voice. "No, I am not ashamed of having come to think it might be a good idea to marry her, but I am ashamed of the way I lost all my discipline, lost my desire to keep our relationship on the basis it had been on. I am ashamed of my lack of discipline where it came to... wanting her, while I was still in love with Laura. That is an outrage."

"I don't see that as lack of discipline at all, Van," Tom said. "I don't think it is an outrage. It was being honest. You have been alone and lonely for a long time. Being vulnerable to the advances of a beautiful and adoring girl is certainly not a weakness."

"Well, maybe it wouldn't be--wouldn't have been, if I could have truthfully told her that I thought I would ever forget all about Laura, but I couldn't. I don't admire a man who loves one woman and craves another. I didn't think it would ever happen to me. But that is the position I find myself in. I will never stop loving and wanting Laura. That isn't fair to Roxanne. She loves me--or thinks she does, exclusively--and she wants to be loved in that way. She has a right to be loved in that way." Van shook his head, scooted

his chair back farther, picked up his coffee cup, set it back down without tasting it. Pushed it back on the table, shook his head again, as if trying to clear his mind. "Did you tell her that?" Delia asked. "Did you tell her that you weren't sure you could ever forget Laura?"

"Yes, mother, I tried to be completely honest with her-- but I don't know the truth myself any more. I told her that I was quite sure that I would never forget about Laura. I told her that I may never be able to kiss her, or...make love to her, without thinking of Laura."

"What did she say?"

"She said that she wouldn't want that; that she wanted me to love her exclusively, and she has a right to be loved in that way--every right. She has the notion though that more than likely if we are married, if I have a home and a wife and...she mentioned children--I would be able to uproot all thoughts of Laura out of my mind and heart. We all know that I can never have Laura--that it is futile to go on basing any decision on any hopes that I will ever see her again."

"Well, sometimes I think that it would be so wonderful to have someone to love me, and to love--that long bleak road down life alone looks quite dreary. So much so, that I possibly would be happy enough to forget about Laura and give Roxanne my complete attention. I just don't know. The knowledge that I can never have Laura has a lot to do with it. If there were even the remotest possibility that she would ever come back, I would never have been lured by my own turmoil and loneliness to allow this thing to happen. But there isn't. I am human enough to want some happiness, some surcease from all the longing, the... waiting..."

"I know," Tom said. "You deserve some happiness. You deserve some real, genuine happiness, and if you can find it with this girl, I think you should."

"Yes, so do I," Delia said. "I would never want Roxanne to be hurt, never want you to do anything selfish, but I do believe Roxanne is old enough to know what she wants. I believe that if she says she loves you, she does love you."

"And then there is the matter of my being older. She seems like a child to me. That alone gives me some misgivings."

"Well, we all know of good marriages between older men and young girls, Van. I have known men fifty years and older, who married girls fourteen or so. Many of them were very successful marriages. Not all marriages between older men and young women are good, of course, but I believe on the average, they are as good as any others."

"Well," Van said, "of course Roxanne and the others too; all the Redfords--don't see any of us as mortal. The way they always lived--they had never dreamed they could go to school. They seem to think it was some miracle I wrought personally, when we had the extra fingers removed. They think I can move mountains because we have the money to spend to do things they have never been accustomed to. I think that is only natural. It is certainly an ecstatic feeling to have a beautiful little girl think you are more than human, that you are super-human. But that is just a selfish reaction. I am only human and she will find that out sometime--whether she marries me or not"

"I don't think her opinion of you will ever lessen, Van. You are an extraordinarily forceful, considerate and fair man. She recognizes that, and her recognition of it only shows that she is mature minded and sensitive."

"You said she wanted children?" Tom said. "Yes it is intoxicating too, to have a beautiful little girl tell you that she wants to bear your children." He smiled for the first time. "When she told me that she wanted children, I told her that I would never permit her to have any; that I would be afraid for her; that she is too small and dainty and fragile to have children. She told me in no uncertain terms that if we get married we will have children-- at least six of them."

Delia and Tom laughed at that, too. "She said," Van continued, "that her mother was small, and that she had had nine of them out here in the wilderness without any help, and that she had never lost a child." "I think Roxanne knows what she wants," Delia continued. "I think she truly loves you. I believe, as she said, that if you are married, that if you have children, as time goes by, knowing you can never see Laura again anyway, you will come to love Roxanne exclusively and find real happiness and joy."

"I have always wanted children. That is a very strong motivation to marry her, but that is a very selfish motivation. I could never love anyone any more than I love her--as a person. I could never respect anyone any more, want anyone's happiness more..."

"Then what is stopping you, Van?"

"I'm not sure. I get to thinking it is right. If it is what she really wants, why not make her happy? What right do I have to be so self-righteous? I certainly would be much better off to have a home, a wonderful wife, children, something to live for. One can't live forever on a dream."

"Then what's stopping you, Van?"

"Well, for one thing, appealing as it is, I sometimes feel as if I would be marrying one of my own family. I have thought of her so much in that way, that I am not sure I can change. Then, too, I told her that in that remote possibility that Laura should ever come back--a chance

probably in ten million--I was not sure what I would do. I might not be true to her. I simply don't know what I would do."

"It isn't an easy decision, Van. That is for sure. I hope that you can come to the conclusion that this marriage is what you want--that you can give your whole self to it, and make Roxanne and yourself and all the rest of us happy. But the decision has to be yours. Whatever you decide we will be behind you. We don't want our little Roxanne to be hurt . either way. If you should decide that it is not right for you, we will do all we can to comfort her and to make her see that she has a lot of things to fill up her life, including a future love. It will take some time, but it will eventually work out."

Van rose quickly. "Thanks, mom, dad. I will have to make up my mind before too long. Roxanne wont push me, but I find myself unable to cope with the indecision, the unexpected turn of events, the new emotions. I will have to decide soon." He walked rapidly out the door.

Van went directly to work. The things that had been said were on his mind all day. That night Van stayed awake all night thinking over the things that had occurred through the last few days. He finally came to a decision and went to sleep. Next morning he sought out Roxanne. Her eyes lit up at sight of him. She stood looking questioningly at him, reflections of elation, fear, hope, in her face...he couldn't read all of them. She raised her face for his kiss. "I am not going to kiss you this morning, Roxanne. It is not because I do not love you--it is because I love and respect you too much. I have made a decision. I want you to go back to school for two years. I want you to live a normal life. I will not kiss you nor hold you as a lover, at any time during that two years. I want you to think of me as a member of the family. That is the way I am going to think of you. I cherish you, Roxanne, and I cherish your love for me. That is why I am doing what I am doing. "I will give you my pledge, that if at the end of two years you still want to get married, I will marry you. I will be the happiest man in the world. I promise that after that time, if you haven't changed your mind, and we get married, I will never give Laura another thought. I can and I will--I will want to dedicate my life to you, and our home...and the children we will have." He saw the tears in her eyes.

"Roxanne, dear, two years is not really very long. You are so young. You will still be only eighteen! That is young enough for anyone to get married. In the meantime, you will have a lot of experiences you will always be glad you had. It is the right thing to do."

"All right, Van. I am disappointed, but I know it is a wise decision. I know it is right. I will go back to school and wait for the two years to be over. It is a long time, but I will be patient. I can dream of...marrying the man I love and what we will have from then on. And it will be so wonderful to know that you will be all mine, without any thoughts or dreams or hopes of any other woman."

"It's a deal, then, Roxanne. I would much rather you thought of me during that time only as a...brother who cares very much about you. I am going to think of you as a cherished sister. I will still be very domineering. I will dictate to you what you can and cannot do." He smiled. "I am going to keep you safe in spite of depriving you of a lot of prerogatives, freedoms, fun. You and the other girls too, as far as that goes. I wont see your lives ruined by some unscrupulous, selfish men."

"All right, Van. I want to do just what you advise. I don't want to do anything that would lead to danger, and I would do anything I could to keep my sisters safe, too. I trust your judgment. I know you have our best interests in mind. It makes me very happy. It is going to be very hard for me to think of you as a brother, though. I am not sure I ever can. "Don't

worry about it, Roxanne. Don't try to think of me in any certain way. If it is right, it will come naturally. You will find yourself thinking of me as a brother if...It may be hard for me to think of you as a sister again, too--after the...thoughts of being married to you, the kisses, the...but that is the way it is going to be."

"There is one more thing, Van, I would like. It almost . frightens me to say it--but I think we should make this agreement contingent also, on the condition that you do not have reason within that two years to change your mind."

"Nothing is going to change my mind--but all right--we will include that condition in the agreement." He was thinking that possibly he could never come to feel completely at ease about marrying a girl so young, and one who he felt so strongly should be considered as a part of his family. When Van told Tom and Delia about his decision, they were delighted. "That is a very wise decision," they agreed. When he had left the room, Tom looked at Delia with a smile. "Did

you notice that new spring in his step?" he said. "Yes, I did. I couldn't keep from wondering though, if he is sentencing himself to two more years of hell for nothing."

"I don't believe so," Tom said. "The fact that he is happy about the decision makes that seem improbable to me--and it is true that Roxanne is very young. Another two years will add a lot of maturity and judgment to her already good common sense."

"Yes," Delia said. "I think you are right. I was just so eager for him to find some final end to his suffering. maybe he has. The fact that he can promise Roxanne without any reservations to never give Laura another thought if they get married is very gratifying. Van is not one to give his word on anything that he isn't sure he can keep. Nothing could be better than to know his dreams of Laura are completely over forever."

CHAPTER XV

Roxanne returned to school with the other Redford children. She was cheerful. She believed that Van was wise enough to know what was best. She had no doubts that after

. that two year period, she and Van would be married. She recognized that two years more of education could be nothing but good, that two more years added to her age before getting married, was also a wise decision. Van was almost happy. He had supposed that after those several hours of being entangled in the intricate web of emotions that had decided him that marriage could be a means to an end, he would continue to be haunted by thoughts of Roxanne in his arms, her kisses warm on his lips, the thought of possessing her in love. He had felt that her determination that marriage was right for them, that she would welcome his love-making, and that they would look forward to a family, would be constantly uppermost in his mind. That labyrinth he had unwittingly fallen into, that deep puncture into his spirit, had impaled him on a plunging, swirling lance, which he couldn't decide whether was a pernicious wound that would destroy Roxanne and himself; or a surgeons healing knife. A tornado of emotions had caught him in its vortex and twisted his good intentions away from what he formerly had seen as right. Now that he was impaled forever on that lance, he had supposed he would have thoughts of Roxanne, a home, love, marriage, on his mind much of the time. He was surprised that his mind automatically went back to the feelings he had had of her at first--as a sweet little sister whom he wanted to protect against all sorrows and dangers. Very seldom did he think of the time they had been so close, when his body responded to her as violently as it ever had to the need to make Laura his own. He had begun work on the new mansion again. Tom came into the room where Delia was. "You wont guess what I just heard," he said. "I actually heard Van whistling. Can you believe that?"

"Wonderful!" Delia turned from her work of mixing bread. She hugged Tom and got flour all over his clean shirt. He laughed. "It is wonderful," he said,. "it has been so long . since we have seen him smile, or show any signs of happiness. God, how he has suffered. I hope it is over."

"I hope so, too. He must have decided definitely on marrying Roxanne. The two years are not a detriment to his happiness. He must finally have met the woman who can make him forget about Laura."

"I hope so," Tom said. "I do hope so."

It was spring. The children were home from school. Joe and Drue had come with them this time. Delia was planning the home-coming ball. "I don't want to go to the ball," Drue said. "Of course you are going, Drue. I would be so disappointed. Why don't you want to go?"

"I don't have any idea what to wear--and even if I knew what to wear, I probably couldn't afford it."

"Guess what I'm going to wear," Delia said. "My buckskin Indian, beaded outfit. I don't think that would be right for you, though. Let's go and see what I have in my closet. My dresses wouldn't fit you. You are altogether too small for them--but we can remodel one of them--if we find anything you like. Or we can get materials and make a new one just for you. Of course you could wear one of Roxanne's--they would fit you, but they are probably too youthful for you. You need something a little more mature, but fashionable."

"Delia, you can't keep doing so much for all of us. It isn't right."

"Drue! Don't you know that you give us far more than we give you? You have added so very much to our lives. I don't think Van could have lived through all his sorrows if he hadn't had your family. We all enjoy having you. Drue, I consider you my very best friend. You are important to me."

"But we are so poor. We would never have had all the things you have given us if we hadn't just happened to be...well, it seems like an accident. Sometimes I feel guilty . that we, of all the millions of poor people, were lucky enough to become your friends. Why should we be so lucky?"

"Well, I do wish everyone was rich and had everything they want, but the world isn't like that. As Tom keeps saying, there isn't a lot of justice in the world. I think though, when we can't do any more about that, we should go ahead and enjoy our good fortune."

"I would never have dreamed that rich people could be so informal, and so wiling to be involved with the poor, the Black people, the Indians, the servants. As far as I have ever known, the rich people didn't want anything to do with poor people, or with the other ethnic groups."

"I think you are right. Maybe that's why we enjoy some of the poor people and the other groups," Delia laughed. "They aren't so narrow-minded. I feel very fortunate to know all the people we have here on the ranch. I enjoy every one of them. Here, Drue, how do you like this gown? The colors are right for you. If we had it taken up in the waist, and shortened. That's about all it would need. It is fashionable. Even though I have had it for a while, I have never got around to wearing it. Let's try it on."

"Delia! It's too beautiful! I would be afraid to move in it!"

Oh, come on, Drue, it's just a dress. Try it on. I can't wait to see you in it. And then we will have to do that beautiful hair up in some kind of upsweep--so you will be in style."

Drue got into the dress. Delia was planning how to get some dainty underthings for her to wear, without hurting that pride of hers. I'll have to talk to Roxanne, and get her to casually give her some of hers. She has dozens of lacy, ruffled pantaloons. She can give Drue some and never miss them. "You look beautiful!" Delia said. "I am jealous. All the menfolk will be waiting in line to dance with you."

"If I dance with any man, I will stumble and he will be so embarrassed he will be thinking only of how he can get rid of me."

"You wont stumble," Delia said. "If you did, all you would have to do would be to let the man know that it was his fault for not being a good leader. A man has to lead you so subtly that you know exactly what he is going to do before he does it. Remember how Tom told you to put your hand on his shoulder and the other on his arm? That will tell you just what he is going to do."

Drue was busy dancing. Tom and Van and even Luke and Rowdy and Maib and the Indian danced with her, and then there was Joe. He was proud of his wife. He couldn't believe that this beautiful girl was really his. He had practiced dancing until he was more adept at it than he had ever guessed he might be. Drue was proud of her husband, too. Van had somehow managed to rustle up a proper suit for him to wear and coaxed him into it. As Tom had predicted, there was an Indian dance. Everyone laughed again, and took part without hesitation. Delia's parties were beginning to be the talk of the community. "They are unique," the neighbors said, but none of them would have been willing yet, to try to imitate any of those unique things that were done at Delia's balls. The Wallings had dispensed long ago,

with making their balls exclusive. There were no invitations. That sometimes was a problem, but not . That was why people like William Kress were not excluded. When the ball was ended Van and Roxanne went out to the new mansion together."Before we get married," Roxanne said, "I think I want you to tell me all about Laura. I want you to tell me the things you did, how you felt about her, when you first knew you loved her--everything."No, Roxanne. I can't do that. It would only hurt you.

. In all honesty, though, I have to tell you...she is an outstanding woman." He shook his head as if trying to erase thoughts and memories. I have heard what a strong, decisive, brave woman she is. I could never compete with her in that way. I am not brave and I am not strong. I would never have attempted the things she did. We have all heard the stories about the things she did bringing your mother and the others out here. Everyone says it was a miraculous thing. She used such good judgment about everything. She saved your mother's life. Even the Indian brags about what a powerful woman she is. He thinks she is super-human. He could have believed a man might do the things she did, but not a woman. He laughs and shows everyone the scars on his shoulders where she burned him with the skillet to make him get the plants that took the blood- poison out of your mother's bloodstream. He admires her for that. He thought it was very brave. He wants everyone to know about it. It makes me shiver even to think about it. Your mother has told all of us all the other things she did; the impossible things. How she had to make difficult decisions for everyone and took all that responsibility without a flinch. No wonder you loved her."

"Yes, Roxanne, I certainly did admire her for all the unbelievable things she managed--but that wasn't the main reason I loved her. I loved her before I had any inkling she was such a strong woman. I loved her when I took her out of that...did you know she had been made a captive in a whorehouse? White slavery, they call it."

"And that is where you found her?"

"Yes, that is where I found her. Maggie, the girl that she thought was my wife--you remember, the one that was blind, was an inmate of that hellhouse, too. She told me about Laura. She wanted to rescue her before she had been sold to some lecherous man. We made plans and got her out." Van smiled at the memory. "She was such a little wildcat that I . almost failed to get her out at all, and then after I did manage to get her out, she almost got us caught."

"What did she do?"

"She fought me every step of the way. When I finally had to give up getting her to ride the horse that had been readied for her, and got her up on my horse with me, she cursed me like a ship's captain. I had to tie her hands together to get her up on the horse at all. I was wanting all the time to untie her, but when I did, she grabbed the reins and almost made our horse fall."

"All that doesn't sound as if she were such a heroine to me. It doesn't even sound very smart."

"I know--but she thought I was another of the men who was trying to take her away, to do her wrong. I couldn't convince her otherwise. She was such a determined little spitfire that I had to keep her tied all day. That was all I could do. I wanted to get a lot farther away from the place we had taken her from because I knew they would be out looking for us, and that to keep her safe I had to make a lot of miles. But it was impossible with her fighting me every step. Finally, I had to stop and make camp. I kept her tied up all night. She saw to it that I didn't get any sleep, though. "After I had given up and went and built a fire, and decided to stay awake for the rest of the night, she laid down and went sound asleep. Everything she ever did,

surprised me and delighted me--even when it endangered our lives. I never did come to be able to predict anything she might do. I never did get used to the way she thought and the way she did things. I guess I had to have started loving her even when she was fighting me to keep from being taken out of the window to get her away. I've loved her ever since."

"You didn't mind her making things so difficult for you?"

"No, I thought everything she did was delightful. I wanted to take her in my arms and comfort her. I wanted to make love to her, too--but I never did--even when she asked me to."

Roxanne looked horrified. "She asked you to? It seems that all the things my mother taught me about what is decent and admired in a girl was all wrong." She looked scornful. "I would have died before I would have asked any man to make love to me! Would you have loved me more if I had been...even more brazen and asked you to make love to me? What kind of woman do you want, Van? I wouldn't have believed that you would want someone that had no concern for principles."

"I thought she hated me, because she kept cursing me and calling me every scurrilous name she could think of. Maybe you can imagine how surprised I was then, when she seemed so despondent that my heart was aching for her, and I went over to see if I could comfort her and she scratched my face so deeply that it will leave scars for the rest of my life. See?" He showed her the scar on his cheek. His fingers stroked it almost reverently."

Roxanne turned away, distress in her voice. "I don't understand that kind of love," she said. "It doesn't sound like love to me. I would never curse you, try to hurt you..."

"I know, Roxanne. I thought she hated me until one night I went to try to comfort her once more and she suddenly put her arms around me and told me she loved me. She asked me to make love to her, and I refused. It was one of the hardest things I ever did in my life. I think now it was a mistake. It hurt her deeply. She felt like the proverbial 'woman scorned.' From then on, she cursed me even more. But she adamantly refused to go anywhere where she could be safe. I mean, I tried to talk her into going to a school, into a convent, to my parent's; anywhere where she would be safe. She refused to go. She said she wouldn't go anywhere other than with me. "I don't understand that kind of love, Roxanne repeated."

"I don't either," Van grinned. "What happened?"

Van had said that he did not want to talk about Laura to Roxanne. He had meant it, but when he had got started, he was unable to stop. His memories, verbalized, were more cogent than ever. "Well, I was trying to fight a war. She was kind of a handicap, but I was so much in love with her by that time that I dreaded being anywhere a single day without her. I loved having her with me, but I wanted her to be safe, too. She couldn't read or write and I knew she needed to have some schooling. She didn't seem to care about anything other than travelling around in all the most dangerous places with me."

"Cursing you all the while."

"Cursing me all the while. She had a real sense of fairness, though. She insisted on washing all my clothes. She did all the cooking. She packed everything ready to travel, each morning. Even when she wouldn't speak to me, she did all these things, and still insisted on being with me wherever I went. I never knew how she was going to react to anything. Sometimes when I thought everything was all right between us, I could see that she was hurt about something. That she had taken offense at something I did--but I couldn't tell what it was."

"It doesn't sound like love to me."

"I think now that one time when she turned away from me and I saw tears on her cheeks, it was because I had been telling her about Sylvia--a woman I had loved long before I met her. I believe now that she did love me all along--well, she told me that the night she arrived here, the night she ran away, so I believe that she was jealous of my love for Sylvia. I was sure as hell jealous of her."

"I see now why you thought you could never love me. You don't want a normal woman with a normal feeling for you. You want...a fairy-tale love with aspects society doesn't consider acceptable. I wouldn't know how to behave in that way."

"Im sorry, Roxanne. I said I didn't want to talk about . Laura, because I thought it might hurt you unnecessarily. I just got carried away in memories. They are just memories though. One cannot live on memories. One of the things you have already done for me, is to help me to realize that I don't want to live on memories. I want reality. I want the future. I hope that will be with you, Roxanne."

Her sudden sincere smile returned and Van relaxed again. "This is going to be right," he thought.

CHAPTER XVI

Van laid awake far into the night. His doubts returned. I felt so sure that I could forget about Laura. I wish I could do that. I had better face reality, though, before I hurt Roxanne and all the others. This feeling I have for Roxanne--I don't feel comfortable with it. If I am truthful with myself, I have to admit that I probably never would have allowed my feelings to get out of hand, if that sweet little girl hadn't come to me and persisted in telling me she loved me. I should have known better, but I had been so lonely, so heartsick for so long, and when I found that I knew I could enjoy the thought of possessing someone other than Laura, it was so wonderful that I used very poor judgment. But there was something illicit even about kissing her, even though it was so delightful, so carnally delightful. I certainly cannot blame her for my weaknesses, and mistakes and confusion. She has always been sincere--but I cannot marry her. Even if I never hear of Laura again, I could not feel right about marrying Roxanne. Even if we had children, I wouldn't feel that we were in harmonious rapport. I would always feel more as if I had violated her. I would rather always think of her as I did at first, just a dear, sweet little girl. I will always care about her. I will always

appreciate her beauty. I will always watch to see that no man takes advantage of her. I certainly had a lot of mixed up feelings. I believe I can face up to the truth now, and admit that marriage between us would not ever be right. "She is the type that would always be loyal to me if we got married, but I don't think she would ever really be happy. I gave her my pledge I would love her exclusively, if she waited the two years and we still wanted to get married. I thought there was nothing that would change my mind--but I am glad that she insisted that we make our agreement contingent on my feelings not changing--because they definitely have changed--or I was just fooling myself that I ever could love her in a way a man should love a wife. I think she would always feel violated, too. Well, I don't understand it all, but I do know I am not going to marry her. I don't want her to be hurt. I love her. I would do anything for her, but I will not ruin her life by pretending to think marriage between us could ever be right. "I enjoyed those kisses, but now I feel guilty about enjoying them. I feel almost as if I had taken pleasure in incest. I have no desire to kiss her ever again in that way. If I have to live out the remainder of my days alone, I can do so. I will probably long for someone sweet and loving to hold, but it is not going to be her. I can never feel that way about her again. "Roxanne," Van said. "I have made a decision. I don't want to hurt you, but I do not want to marry you. As I have said several times before, this decision is more because I do not want to hurt you and I keep recognizing more and more that marriage can never be right for us."

Roxanne put her head down and Van knew she was choking back tears. "Roxanne, please. You have to understand that this is best for you. Marriage is not good for us. It just isn't the right thing."

"I wish you wouldn't make it so final, Van. I don't know how I am going to stand it. Please say that just maybe..."

His heart was aching for her--but he knew that he had to keep his resolution and not give in again to her pleas. She would come to know sometime that he was right. In the meantime, he had to do all he could to see that she didn't suffer about this--or about anything. She was sobbing now. "All right, Roxanne. Let's say that it is most improbable, but not absolutely impossible. Does that sound any better?"

"Yes--because I still know that you will come to see the right of it; to feel the right of it, and to know that your happiness as well as mine depends on our being together."

Ever since Van had returned from his search for Laura he had worked at some heavy physical labor most of the time, from fourteen to sixteen hours a day. He had to do this in order to be able to sleep. He had never allowed Luke or Maib or even the Indian when he was there, to chop wood. He wanted to do that himself. He swung the axe with all his strength, breaking the huge blocks of wood into pieces to fit into the new Franklin stove, or into the smaller fireplaces in the bedrooms. He was thus occupied when someone rode into the yard. A young man pulled up his sweating horse. He put the reins down and placed one leg around the saddle horn. He pushed his hat back from his forehead, brought out cigarette papers and a sack of tobacco and proceeded to roll a cigarette. Van had stopped the chopping, and looked at the newcomer questioningly, a little belligerently. "You have an ad in the paper offering a reward for anyone locating a certain Mr. and Mrs. Davenport?"

Van lifted the axe and planted it so deep into the hard, knot of the block, that he knew it would require some extra time to pry it out. He looked up, the belligerence growing. "Yes!" he said. "I can take you to them," the stranger said.

"Van's emotions were swirling. He was angry. He had had so many false leads when he was out on the trail searching for her, that he doubted very much if this lead would result in anything. He couldn't decide whether he even wanted to find her or not. What would be the outcome if he did find her? Would he find a happy woman or one that was not happy, but tied to her vows? Did it make any difference? Either way wouldn't it just be more torture? He couldn't decide. "Where are they?" he asked almost involuntarily. "Looks like they came back to the United States just a couple of months ago. Settled in Virginia. That's where his parents live, I understand. Wanted the old ones to get acquainted with the kid."

Van's heart stood still. So they had a child. The thought of it almost consumed him. He wanted to order the man away. He wanted never to give Laura another thought. He felt hollow. Nothing on earth could ever fill up that hollowness. His thoughts went back to Roxanne. The thought of her and her sisters, and brothers and even Drue and old Joe gave him a little feeling of not being entirely dead. He would always cherish that family. He would always be glad about what they had given him. That was as far as his thoughts went, but Tom and Delia and all the others knew that he was a young, virile man. He needed a companion. He needed a wife. He needed a family. He needed love. He had now counted it out forever.

"Get down," he heard himself saying. "I'll have your horse put up. Our girl, Lenna, will show you to a room. Tomorrow we will talk about it. I am not sure I am still interested--but of course, if these are the right people, you will have the reward." He knew they were the right people, and he would be glad to pay the reward and have all further ads removed from all newspapers. The two men rode to Dallas and boarded the train for Virginia (Virginia is not the right place. Look in first book for where Darryl's parents went) This trip had now become something like the necessary last rites for a loved one, as Drue had suggested. He wanted to get it over and done with and try to make the necessary adjustments to go on with his life.

When they arrived at the door of the beautiful home of the Davenports, Van almost lost his courage. His heart was pounding. He found it difficult to breathe. Laura herself opened the door. They stood staring at each other for a long minute. He was startled at the look in her eyes; those so expressive eyes he had seen in his thoughts so many times. She looked just as he had dreamed all these long months and years. There was no way he could believe this was true. After all the years, the searching, the giving up, the pain, there stood Laura. His heart seemed to be wrenching out of his body. He wished that he hadn't come. Yet, he knew that this was one

of the most important things that had ever happened in his life. It was as inevitable, he felt, as death. He couldn't speak, or move, or breathe. "Van!" she whispered. She stepped over to him and threw herself into his arms. He wondered if he could stand. His arms enfolded her and she raised her lips for his kisses. This can't be true, he kept thinking. I don't want to kiss another man's wife. Even if she rightly belongs to me by every other reckoning there is, her marriage license says she belongs to him. "Come in, Van," she finally said. She led him to a huge,

deep lounge. They sat down. "How did you find me?" she asked. "A man saw my ad in the paper and came to collect the reward. I almost didn't come. I was afraid I couldn't stand to see you and then have to give you up again. Laura, your running away almost killed me. I went a little crazy. I built a mansion for you. I never stopped thinking of you for five minutes since you left."

"I never stopped dreaming of you either, Van. I love you. I was so afraid you had stopped loving me, that you might really be married by now. Have you stopped loving me, Van? I don't think I can stand it if you have."

"I'll never stop loving you!" he said...but I'm afraid there is nothing we can do about it." She turned white. "You are married, then."

"Of course I'm not married. I will never get married. I will never love anyone but you."

She looked happy again. Van thought of the child and his heart almost broke again. "Johnston said you had a child," he said. "Oh, yes, Van, do you want to see your daughter?"

"My daughter?" he thought his heart would stop. He had thought his emotions had run their full gamut a hundred times before, but he discovered that this was not true. "Did you say my daughter, Laura?" He couldn't breathe. "Yes," she said. "Let me get her." She ran into another room. She came out with a girl about three years old. Van started toward them. "Wait, Van. Give her a minute. I will tell her you are her father, but it will take a little while for her to get used to that idea. We never did tell her that Darryl was her father, but we never did tell her he wasn't either. "This is Van," Laura said, smiling through tears. "Lillian, this is your daddie. The little girl turned her head, looked questioningly from eyes that were remarkably like Laura's. She walked over to Van as if she had known him all her life. He took her in his arms and had to restrain himself

from hugging her too tight. "Daddy cry," she said brushing with both hands at his tears. "I'm so happy I have to cry to keep from squeezing you too tight," he said. "Oh," she looked at her mother, as if for explanation. "Mama cry," she said, more curious than worried. "I think we are the happiest two people alive," he said. "I know I am."

"Happy," she said, squirming to get down. "Mama," she said as if explaining something to her mother, "Daddy."

When Van could part with the baby and she was put to bed, Van took Laura in his arms again. "My own darling. I have loved you for so long, have needed you for so long, have dreamed of you for so long. What are we to do now? Can you get your marriage set aside. Surely we are to be together now. Laura, there is a limit to what a man can stand. I cannot go on without you now."

Laura turned her face away. She couldn't speak. He waited. He knew she was extremely disturbed. "Oh, Van, it is so hard to tell you. Darryl is dead. Not long after we arrived back in the United States and bought this house, he went out to play polo. He had loved polo, but he had quit playing...because he wanted to spend all his time with me. I was surprised when he said he was going out to play. I didn't dream it was such a dangerous

game. His horse fell. He was thrown and his neck was broken. He didn't die immediately. They took me to him. I held him while he died." She began to sob. "I'm sorry," was all Van could say. "The sad part, the awful part--is that I had respected Darryl all along. He had been good to me. He had done everything he could to make me happy. He had to know though, that I was not happy. He had to know that I did not love him. I trusted him--but when he knew he was dying, he told me that he had known all along that you weren't married. Oh, Van, It is a terrible thing to feel that you hate someone who

is dying--someone who has done everything possible to make you happy. I hated him. It had been the one most important thing in my life, and he knew all the time. It was a time of absolute horror. I couldn't say anything to him. I couldn't comfort him. I hated him... How could a man who claimed to love me, a man who knew that the most important thing in my life was to know that you weren't really married, deprive me of that one thing I wanted most of all. I feel that I should be able to forgive him. I don't think I can rest until I find some way to forgive him--but I don't think I ever can."

"I mourned at his grave. Everyone thought it was for him. I wasn't trying to deceive anyone, but I was mourning about the lost time with you, Van--the long, lonely days and nights, the times he had...the fear that I probably had lost you forever; that you might really be married by now."

Van was holding her close. "I am so sorry you had to be hurt. No wonder you can't find it in your heart to forgive him."

"It ruined years of your life, too, Van. Do you find it possible to forgive him?"

"I would probably have wanted to kill him, if I had known--but I can understand a man needing a woman so much that he might try to hold her any way he could. He probably knew that you would leave him if you knew the truth, Laura. He loved you so much that he couldn't face life without you--and he knew, probably more and more each day, that he wasn't succeeding in making you love him. That had to be hell for him."

"Yes, he said something like that when he was dying. He begged me to forgive him, and he said that he had been afraid to tell me the truth. He had thought that you were careless of my feelings, which was my fault, because I kept saying all those scurrilous things about you. So, I guess it is understandable that he would feel sure he could make me love him. He certainly did try. He never failed to sense every

nuance of feeling I had and always made every effort to do whatever was necessary to make me forget anything that made me depressed, and to encourage and build on anything that made me happy."

"I can understand his feeling about our baby, too," Van said. "Even as much as I love you, I don't know what I would have done if you had had his child..."

"There was something else that worries me. When I was there with him; when he was dying, his friends were all there. They all liked Darryl. I heard them talking. One of them said that Darryl was an expert at polo. That he would never have been thrown... accidentally."

There was a long silence. "Laura, do you remember the time when we were riding away from the--that place I took you from. I was pushing our horse as fast as I could. When I untied your hands you grabbed the horse's reins and almost caused him to fall..."

"Yes. What a fool I was. Do you think that is what Darryl did? Do you think he killed himself on purpose?"

"I believe that must have been what his friends thought."

"I wondered what that man meant. Poor Darryl! He did love me too much. Why did it have to be. Oh God, that I had never asked him to leave with me. It is all my fault. It was very wrong. I am the one that needs forgiving. I thought I could make him happy--but I only caused him pain. When I told him I was pregnant with your child, he walked out and stayed a week. I didn't think he would come back. I didn't think he should. But he came back. He said that he couldn't live without me. I wish he had never loved me. Why do things like this have to happen? I should have sent him back when he came to tell me that he was going with us from Kentucky. I..."

"Stop blaming yourself, Laura. You couldn't possibly predict all these things. You are not to blame."

"He planned to come back to the United States just so he could do this," Laura said. "He had come to the conclusion . that I did not love him and never would. So he had it all

planned. He had decided when he came back after the time he left for a week, that the baby was his after all. He said that there was no way I could possibly be sure. He said that. if it was yours, he was prepared to give it all the love and protection he would give any child of his own. I thought that. was very noble. It was noble. He was a very good and noble man. I did tell him that I forgave him--but it wasn't true. . I was just too shocked and too dead inside. But now I think I have really forgiven him. I will feel better if I can."

"I feel cheated too, my darling, that we lost these four years we might have had together, but If I can have you now. for the rest of my life, I will not quarrel with fate. I just want to be happy. I had almost forgotten what it was like to be happy."

"Yes, I had, too. You are right, Van. I am just going to thank God, or fate, or whatever powers that be, that we are together now--forever."

CHAPTER XVII

Van suddenly swept Laura up in his arms. "Direct me to the nearest bedroom," he said, grinning.

"Van, I will gladly direct you to the nearest bedroom, but put me down. It is a long way up those stairs and I am a big woman..."

"Light as a feather," Van said. "It is my pleasure to carry you up those stairs. Right now I feel as if I could carry you up Mount Olympus."

"Wait a minute," Laura said when Van had put her down on the bed. She went into another room and brought back the patchwork quilt. Van grinned. "Memories," he said. "Wonderful memories."

"Laura, I have waited so long for you--but I want you to know that if anything makes you uncomfortable about our sharing

our love right now, I am willing to wait. Would you rather wait until the preacher has said those important words over us? Or do you feel that you don't want to make love to someone else, so soon after Darryl's death?"

"I appreciate it, Van. That is very thoughtful of you. . I feel as though it would be a travesty to wait on account of Darryl's death. I wanted you all the time I was married to him and he evidently knew it. What I want right now, is to lie in those strong arms of yours. I may need a little time to come out of the emotional tornado I have been living in lately. What I want most of all is to lie in your arms and allow all the pain, the waiting, the longing, the anger to be washed away by our love. I want to allow the truth of your being here to become a reality.

"I want to lie still and feel the deep contentment, the luxury, the ending of the long weary, months. I want to nourish our souls on the peace of mind, the fulfillment, the rest...as far as the preacher's words I feel that our union has already been consecrated..."

"That is the way I feel too, my sweetheart. I feel as if all the heavy, sharp, tearing rocks that have shredded my heart and being for so long, are being dissolved and I am going to be myself again. I want to bask in that delight for a while--holding you; reminding myself over and over that this is all really true."

"Van," Laura said, "it frightens me even to think about it--but is the fact that I lived with another man for three years going to haunt us for the rest of our lives? I remember how jealous you were. I am afraid you will never forget about...Darryl...my time with him. You have to think about the times we..."

"Laura, that worried me for a long time, too. I even made a special trip clear out to Kentucky to talk to Maggie about it. She is a kind of oracle. She asked me how I would feel if what happened to her had happened to you. I told her--

truthfully--that if something like that had happened to you, it would not effect me in the same way as if you had gone off with Darryl and belonged to him...loved him."

"She said that was because I knew deep in my heart that.

all the things that had happened to her had happened only superficially; that her heart, her mind, her being, her love. had been left completely untouched. Maggie's body had been defiled--but her self had remained as clean and innocent as she had ever been. Can you understand that, my love?"

"Yes darling, I do understand--because that is exactly how it was. I shared Darryl's bed--but I never shared my love. I never was touched by his...Of course that is why he decided to come back and end his life..."

"But we are not going to dwell on the past. Like there was a purpose for our having been separated for so long, there had to be a purpose for his life, too. I am sorry, but we must not dwell on it.

She lay in Van's arms. They talked for a while. "There is so much we have to say to each other," he said. "There is a lot I want to tell you about. I want to talk about our future. I want to talk about our baby. I want to talk about our wedding. Mother will want the biggest wedding this side of Paris; half the people in the United States."

"Anything Delia wants will be all right with me," Laura laughed.

"My sweetheart," he said, "I have to send dozens of telegrams tomorrow. I will tell Mom to start plans for the biggest wedding this side of Paris. There are going to be a lot of very surprised people all over the United States--from my Uncle Vincent's family in Boston, to Maggie and all our friends there in Kentucky, to dozens of friends in Texas. . . Every one of them will be not only surprised, but delighted. . . They every one love you, and they are even generous enough to love me--even if I am a bastard," he laughed.

"Van, I wonder that you could ever have loved me at all, the way I talked to you, the mean things I said to you...just because I was jealous and mad because you turned me down when I wanted you to make love to me."

"You never did say anything or do anything that didn't just make me love you more. The most stupid thing I ever did in my life, though, was not to make love to you when I could have--that time when you asked me to, and that time in the

cabin and all the other times I think you would have submitted."

"It was not stupid, Van. It was one of the things that made me love you so much. There aren't very many men that chivalrous; noble. I knew you wanted me fiercely. I will always cherish the fact that you refused to make love to me when I wasn't responsible for my own behavior."

Van's hands were caressing her. The truth of the fact that he was really holding Laura in his arms and that she had stated that she had no compunction about their desire for each other suddenly registered. He was kissing her with all the fervent longing he had felt for so long.

Late in the night, they lay side by side, revelling in their happiness, talking about everything. "Tell me a tale," Laura said, "I can't go to sleep until you tell me a tale."

Van laughed and held her closer. "I have a million tales to tell you. I want to tell you about all my new sisters and brothers, and about the Indian and his new wife, about the happiness Maggie, Sylvia and the others have found, but I can't wait for that little daughter of ours to wake up, so I can hold her all day. I must surely be the most blessed man in the whole wide world. You and little Lillian will have to go with me to send the telegrams," he said. "I am never going to let either of you out of my sight again."

"Laura," he gasped. Her arms pulled him tighter. Their love was like that of two people who had never participated in love-making before. It was urgent, but new. They explored each other's bodies as if each had never before explored the body of one of the opposite sex. It was new, exciting, urgent, fulfilling.

"As much as I have dreamed of this, I didn't know it could be so wonderful," Van said. Your hands are like magic. . . Your body is a magnet. You know, Laura, the attraction a woman holds for a man is more powerful than any other force on earth. A man could be induced to do almost anything for a

woman he loves..

"I was so afraid that you might have got married again..."

"I almost did get married."

"You did, Van?" Laura was startled. "Tell me about it! What was she like? What changed your mind?"

"I guess I didn't really come near to marrying her. I really considered it far enough, though, to discuss it with my parents. I can hardly believe it now, that I ever seriously considered it."

"What was she like?"

"Well, you remember the Redford's where you stopped. He was the man that insisted that I was married. Their oldest son came walking in one day and asked if I would give him a job. He said he wanted to make some money to go to school. I liked the boy. I got acquainted with all his family. Nine kids! Well, they are a fine family. Intelligent and good-

looking kids. Mannerly, courteous, respectful. I like Drue and Old Joe a lot, too. We've practically adopted the whole family. The best thing we ever did. Good for them and good for us. Anyway, I arranged for the whole kit and kaboodle of them to attend school in Dallas. It gave me the only little bit of surcease I had from my heartbreak over you.

"Crazy as it sounds now, I got tangled up with Roxanne. She is the oldest."

"That doesn't seem like you, Van. How did it happen?"

"It isn't like me--I hope. Well, for different reasons, she got the notion that she was in love with me. I wasn't in the least impressed at first. I kept telling her that there was no feeling of that kind whatsoever in my regard for her. She wouldn't accept that. She insisted that she loved me and that nothing could make her believe that I didn't love her. "She insisted that she knew she could make me happy--make me forget 'that girl who had made me suffer so much.' Each time they came, she talked like that, and each time I felt sure

that by the next time she came she would have forgotten all about it; would have found someone else she could be interested in, would have realized that that kind of alliance was not wholesome.

"Each time she came back, she would renew the whole thing. She insisted that I did love her, but that I wouldn't admit it, because of the notion that it would be more honorable to refuse to admit that love. I am not blaming her. I knew all the reasons why she had come to feel this way. I certainly had never intended to give her the remotest notion that I might have any feelings of that kind, but I had refused to allow some of the more unscrupulous men to dance with her. She interpreted that as jealousy. Other things of that kind. When I flatly refused to consider marrying her, she cried. I felt sorry for her. This same thing happened over and over. Finally, I got to wondering what in hell made me such an authority that I could decide for her what she needed. I decided that maybe the most honorable thing I could do was to marry her. She insisted that that was the only thing on earth that would make her happy. Of course I wanted her happiness.

"She is mature-minded, and I thought that she probably knew more about what would make her happy than I did, and that she well might know what would make me happy, too. She said she did.

"I talked to my parents about it, and they thought it was a good decision. They thought that Roxanne probably really knew what she wanted, and that having someone to love--and to love me, might be the answer to my heartache. Roxanne wanted children and of course that appealed to me."

"Van! Maybe you should have married her! Oh, I feel so sorry for her! She did recognize what an outstanding man you are, and she may never get over you. After you decided to marry her, what changed your mind? Does she still hope to marry you?"

"God, I hope not! I had had my whole being wrenched into a completely different channel than I had ever believed it could be. I had thought that maybe I would marry her to make her happy--since it seemed only arrogance not to--and then I felt that there would certainly be a lot of rewards in it for me. After she had convinced me that it was more honorable to marry her than not to, I...Well, I started dreaming of what it would be like to...make love to her. No other woman had ever even slightly caused me to feel any desire for her. But when I finally kissed Roxanne, I felt a real arousal of need. In a way, it was good. I had felt for so long that nothing other than the thought of you, could do that to me. God, this all sounds crazy to me now."

"It wasn't crazy, Van. I can understand it. I don't know why you didn't go ahead and marry her. It must have been awfully tempting--and maybe it would have been the best thing you could do--for both of you."

"No. I came to the conclusion that I was not going to marry her under any circumstances long before I heard that you were back in the United States."

"Why, Van?"

"Because I couldn't feel good about it. I felt more like I would be marrying my sister. I felt that it was all wrong. I had given up ever seeing you again, but I am sure that the fact that I couldn't give her half the love I felt for you had something to do with my decision."

"I hope she has got over loving you--but I don't see how any woman ever could."

"I hope so too!" Van repeated.

As Van had said, his and Laura's wedding was one of the biggest in the country. All of their friends from Kentucky were invited; the relatives from Boston. Even some of Delia's relatives from North Carolina. Connie and Derrick managed to get away. Marybelle, Denver, Belle and arrived. There was much hugging, tears, reminiscing,

feasting, laughing, dancing. All of the Redfords were present. Everyone was delighted that Van and Laura had finally got back together. Everyone except Roxanne. Everyone was delighted about the baby Lillian. No one seemed to question her parentage. Van knew that he would never allow people to believe that she was not his for very long, but he and Laura and Delia decided that for the present they would let everyone assume what they would about her.

Roxanne tried to be civil. Instead of gaining the ability to be her cheerful, happy self, she seemed less and less able each day to bear the thought that Van was actually going to marry another girl. "How could he?" she said over and over. "We were so right for each other. When he finally allowed himself to kiss me, it was just as I had told him it would be; he knew that he loved me and that it was right to admit it."

The dreams she had had of being his wife, of their home together, of their children, of his constant presence, their intimacy, their sharing all their thoughts, problems, their happiness, was not to be dispelled. He must have felt this way too. How could he change? How could he possibly love a woman who was so wanton as to ask him to make love to her? This was the most painful thought of all. "I was proud, as my mother taught me to be, of my virtue, my chastity. Even Van tried to make me think that was fine; something to cherish. Why did he pretend to be protecting me from my own trust in men, when that kind of decency meant absolutely nothing to him?"

She managed for quite a while to shed her tears while she was alone. Everyone noticed, however, that she was silent, morose, unhappy. Each one tried to comfort her, but she didn't respond to the solicitations of anyone. Delia and Drue discussed it. Delia discussed it with Tom. Delia and Tom and Van discussed it. Laura and Van talked about it. Van was sick at heart. "I made a big mistake by ever allowing myself

to be convinced that it was right to marry her. I never did. take it seriously enough. I kept feeling that she would find someone else: That she would see the folly of any such a relationship between us. I knew she was an intense little thing, but I never dreamed she would take all this so seriously. She wont talk to me. She behaves as if she hates me. I don't blame her, but I wish there were something I could do to relieve her heartache. If anyone ever knew what heartache is, longing for someone you love, I do."

Laura felt guilty. "I would do anything, Van, to help. . It just seems there is nothing that makes the slightest difference. Like you said, she is exceptionally beautiful. . She should be enjoying life to the fullest. Surely, this can't go on. She has any number of suitors. Some of them are nice young men. I know how it was with me, though. I didn't want to be with anyone else. When a woman falls in love with you, Van, it is a pretty irrevocable thing."

"I am to blame," Van persisted. "I should have known better." This attitude made Tom and Delia and Laura unhappy. . Van had suffered enough. They could not see that he had done anything, or neglected to do anything, which could properly be called a fault. They all went on each week, each day, hoping that Roxanne would recognize that she had other things to live for, that she would become interested in one of the young men who showed their interest. Nothing changed.

Roxanne refused to stay at the Walling's as she used to like to do. She stayed at home. Joe and Drue stayed there with her. They tried to get her interested in the things that used to make all of them so happy--their daily lives together, their own private kinds of experiences and learning. She responded to nothing. She stayed alone all she could manage. . Her parents worried, but they, too, felt that this would pass, and Roxanne would find a new interest, a new viewpoint..

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CHAPTER XVIII

A telegram was delivered. The Wallings had long ago hired a man to bring out their telegrams from the office in Dallas. He usually was invited to stay all night, and usually accepted. The telegram was short. "Please meet me in Dallas on the thirteenth" Marion. There was more elation. "It's wonderful!" Delia said, tears starting. It's been so long. She hardly ever even writes. I was beginning to wonder if she had disowned us completely."

"Evidently Loren isn't with her," Van said.

"I expect she is leaving him," Tom said. "I have had my suspicions for a long time that her marriage was not happy. It was never like her to be so uncommunicative. At first we received letters every week. Her letters glowed with her happiness. They stopped abruptly. Has to be a reason."

Van went to meet Marion. She smiled and hugged him. She talked effusively all the way home. Nothing she said was of much importance, nor revealed what she was thinking or why she had suddenly decided to come home. Van tried to tell her some of the things he thought she might be interested in about the ranch, the people she had known back in Kentucky and her parents. She showed no interest. "She certainly doesn't sound or act unhappy," Van said to his parents. "If anything, she is more gay and effusive than ever."

Marion hugged her parents as she had Van, but she didn't seem to be really glad to see any of them. She appeared to have a whole lot more inside her than she wanted to reveal.

She refused to go to the next ball given at the Wallings. She said dancing bored her. She visited the bar in the parlor more often than Van would have liked for her. "She is getting downright tipsy," he said to Laura. "I wouldn't have thought Marion would ever behave in that way. I

would like to know what is wrong in her life."

"You will just have to wait and see, Van," Laura said. .
"I know it is hard for you and Delia and Tom--but she isn't.
going to be induced to tell you anything until--and unless,.
she is ready."

Van had kept his word about not letting Laura and his.
daughter out of his sight. He had to keep reminding himself.
that this was all true. That he had Laura back, forever--and.
that he had a child. He was so happy he could hardly contain.
himself. He neglected everything other than his attentions to.
them.

"Van," Laura said, "it is so comforting to have you near.
every minute--but I think we are neglecting our obligations. .
I think we should spend more time with Delia and Tom, and the.
others..."

"You're right, of course. I don't want you out of my.
sight, but I have to try to be fair. I think I will saddle up.
and ride out into the country today. Maybe it will clear my.
head and I can begin to think clearly again. Oh, Laura,.
what's the use of kidding myself! I wont think of anything.
under the sun but you and Lillian."

"That's gratifying," Laura laughed, "but I think you.
should give a little thought to...well, Roxanne, and all of.
the others." Van liked to ride over the properties, check on.
the cattle, the growing herd of horses, the neighbors.

"You look sad," Delia said when Van came in that.
evening. "Van, is anything special wrong? She was frantic.
that something to ruin his happiness with Laura and the little.
girl had occurred. Van mopped his brow, His jaw tightened. .
"I went to a funeral today," he said. "It was the saddest.
thing I ever saw." He swallowed, trying to overcome his.
emotions. "A man had to bury his wife. She died in.
childbirth. The child, a baby girl, lived. The poor man is.
wild with grief."

"Is there anything we can do?" Delia asked.

"I can't think of anything. I used all my persuasive powers to try to talk him into coming here for a few days. I thought we might help him to get this horror off his mind for a little while, but he refused to come. He thanked me and said that maybe at some later time he would come, but that he couldn't face people right now. I can understand that."

"Ride out again sometime soon," Tom said. "You don't have to be intrusive, but keep trying to get him to let us help in whatever way we can."

"What about the baby?" Laura asked. "I would be glad to take care of the baby. Let him know that the next time you go."

"I will," Van said, "I mentioned that we would see that the baby had the best of care, but he said his sister, who lives not too far away, had taken the baby for now. He said that his sister and her husband had tried to get him to go there for a while, too, but it just wasn't what he wanted to do right now."

CHAPTER XVIV

Van came into the room where Delia and Tom were talking. He had a stranger with him. "This is Mr. Johnston," he said. "He is a neighbor. I have persuaded him to stay for dinner."

"Great!" Delia said. "We are very glad that you will stay," she said to Clyde. "We think our ranch is interesting. Van can show you around before dinner, if you like. We have some of almost everything here," she laughed.

Marion showed up for dinner half drunk, as usual. When she was introduced to Mr. Johnston, she took his hand and for the first time since she had arrived, seemed to come to life. She was overly talkative, and effusive. However, after courteously acknowledging the introduction, Clyde turned his attention to Tom, Delia and Van. "This ranch is interesting."

he said. "I am glad I came already. I would like to see more of it."

"Remain the night, and Van will take you around again in

the morning. It's a huge place, a beautiful place, we think. .
It would take a week to see everything."

In the living-room after dinner, Marion became quieter. .
She looked sad almost to the point of tears. Mr. Johnston was
still courteous, but his attention was given entirely to the
others.

After he had gone the next day, Delia approached Van. .
"Do you think he is doing any better? It has been...almost.
two years now since he lost his wife. Did he say anything
about his daughter...?"

"No, he mentioned nothing of his life, and I thought it
best not to inquire. I tried to get him to consent to come to
our ball next week, but he said he couldn't face up to
anything like that yet. I can understand that."

"Come on over and enjoy the dance for a while," Van urged.
Marion. "You've never seen anything like the antics we put
on. The Indian dance is always hilarious. We have the most
diversified music in the United States. Everyone wants to
attend our balls. Delia has made them unique. Something
surprising and delightful from beginning to daylight. .
Besides, there are dozens of nice young men who would be
delighted to meet you and keep you entertained.

"I don't like nice men," Marion said. "But I'll come
over for a couple of dances...maybe."

Marion wasn't beautiful, but she was attractive. Several
young men turned their heads to survey her when she entered
the room. She danced twice and then started toward the door."
Van followed her. She went directly to the bar and poured
herself a strong drink. "I wish you wouldn't do this," Van
said.

"I know brother, dear. I'm sorry your only sister had to
turn out bad. I was born with a flawed character."

"Come on back to the ballroom," he urged.

"No Van," she yawned. "I am sorry, but those people bore
me. I'm going up to bed. Good night, Van."

First Roxanne and now Marion. Seems there is nothing we can do," he thought.

"I'm going out riding," Marion announced. "I may go in to Dallas. I'm not sure. In any case, I'm grown-up, so don't worry about me if I don't return tonight."

"We will worry," Delia said. "I wish you would let someone go with you."

"Nothing doing! I'll be fine, Mom."

Delia sighed.

Mr. Johnston was surprised to see Marion standing there when he answered the knock. He tried to gather his wits and be courteous. "Come on in," he said. "What brings you out this way?"

"I heard you say that you enjoyed the dinner at my parents home, as you got tired of your own bachelor cooking, so I thought I would come over and cook dinner for you."

"That's mighty thoughtful of you," he said, looking at her for the first time in a way that allowed him to see her. She wasn't pretty. She wasn't the type of woman he would want, even if he did want a woman. "But," he continued, while surveying her critically, "I have eaten already."

"That's all right," she said nonchalantly, removing her riding cape. "I will cook for you tomorrow night, then."

It had begun to thunder and the rain was pelting down. "It's a good thing I got here when I did, or I would have got all wet," she said, smiling.

"Yes, it looks like it might be a good one. These storms come up rather quickly sometimes, and we're in for it for a day or two."

"How nice," she said.

"Come to think about it, I am a little soaked. Mind if I dry out here by the fire?" She had sat down on the floor in front of the fireplace. She shivered.

"I'll put on another log," he said. "Sorry you got so chilled."

"How about bringing out some pillows to put on the floor? We may be here quite a while, and this floor is going to get hard."

He smiled. He went to another room and brought back an armful of pillows. He tossed them down and she began to arrange them. "That's a whole lot better," she said. "Join me?"

He hesitated. "We're both grown-up people. I'm not afraid of you, if you're not afraid of me. I'm really not dangerous."

"I don't think I've ever met a woman like you," he said. He smiled.

"Is that a compliment or a threat?" she asked.

"I'm not sure it's either..." He sat down beside her. He looked more amused than interested.

She lay back on a pillow and half closed her eyes. "I'm not a good woman," she said. "I expect you have figured that out already."

He didn't answer.

"I did think I might cook a meal or two for you, but my real purpose in riding clear out here, was to seduce you, as you would probably guess even if I didn't mention it."

"Either way, it is very interesting," he said "Even rather flattering. I have never been seduced before."

She didn't answer

"Maybe that's why I'm just a little bit shy. I don't know how to go about being seduced."

"That's all right," she said, with that same unconcerned attitude, "I'm bold enough for both of us. It shouldn't be any problem."

He noticed with a shock that tears were brimming in her eyes. "What is it that bothers you so much?" he asked. "You always looked so free from any cares, so completely unconcerned about everything. Something is bothering you."

"It's nothing. I am sorry. I didn't mean to...let it show."

"I feel that since you did let it show, you are obligated to tell me about it," he said.

She smiled. "I guess you're right. I didn't want to bore you, but if you can bear to here the sordid details, I can certainly bear to tell them. I was married when I was quite young," she said. "I was madly in love. I thought I would be the happiest girl in the world. My husband was handsome, in demand wherever he went." She hid her face for a moment and he involuntarily took her in his arms. She buried her face in his shoulder. When she could speak again, she went on: "It was not long before I discovered that my husband was enjoying the intimacies of several other women. I was mortified. I was--at that time--quite modest. I wouldn't have thought of trying to seduce any man--mush less telling him that I had that in mind." He didn't know whether her voice was more indicative of self-reproach, or sorrow.

She took a deep breath. "I was heartbroken. I had no one to talk to. I couldn't worry my parents. I discovered later that I cannot have children. That was another real blow. I had always dreamed of having children. I think a woman feels...less than a woman, if she can't have children, besides the fact that I like kids."

"Marion," he was trembling. "Marion, we are just a couple of heartbroken people trying to comfort each other." He pulled her chin up and sought her lips. Her own lips responded ardently. "I want to make love to you," he said. "I never would have thought that I would ever want to be intimate with another woman, when my wife died. I will never forget her...but..."

"I wouldn't expect you to forget her. I would hate that. I wont ever forget about my...disappointment, either...Do you think it is immoral to make love just to bury your...sorrows?"

"I've never thought about it and I don't want to think about it now. I want to hold you and kiss you and forget that anything on earth exists, excepting us here by the fireplace, the rain beating down, the thunder rolling, the lightning matching our...passion."

"Why did you choose me to seduce? Why was I the lucky man you picked out?"

"Just because you're you," she said. "I tried to get you to look at me, the night you came to dinner, but you were oblivious to my charms. Van insisted that I go to the ball about a week after that. He said there were any number of handsome men who would make me feel attractive and alive again. I went to the dance, but I was bored with those men. I don't know why you were the first man to attract me, after..."

"I am flattered. I want to see you as often as I can. I feel so rested, so contented. That is something I never hoped to feel again. Marion, will you marry me? Don't you think we are good for each other?"

"No, Clyde, I am afraid I would not be good for you. I think this is just an impulsive reaction to a...night of love. I took advantage of you. I don't want to cause you any further pain. I know how you have suffered. I know about your losing your wife."

"I want you to know before you decide," Clyde said, that I do have a two-year old baby girl. I miss her every day. I know it isn't fair to ask another woman to..."

"I told you I love kids. I told you I can't have any. It would be delightful to take your daughter and raise her as my own. But I am afraid of...the things I have become. You are a decent man. I'm not very decent."

"There is nothing indecent about you," Clyde said. "You are just a very hurt girl. You deserve some happiness. If I can help to give you that, I think nothing could make me happier. I don't know whether I will ever be capable of

loving anyone again. I am not ready to say I love you. I...I believe though, that if we get married, we will come to love each other. Do you think you could come to love me?"

"I love you already," she said. "Did you think I rode out here just for a night of wanton love-making?"

"Maybe we should see how good a cook you are," he said, while we are still capable of navigating."

She arose and dressed. "I will cook the best breakfast you ever ate," she said. "I love to cook."

"Marion," Clyde was holding her in his arms so that it was difficult to turn the bacon. "Your family is rich. I am just a farmer with a few acres, and a few cattle. I will probably never be rich. Will you get tired of living this way? I expect that before long you will miss the luxuries and conveniences you are used to."

"I have thought about that," Marion said, "and I can assure you that that way of living doesn't appeal to me. It is as dull and boring as those fine young men Van wanted me to meet. I want to live my life. I want to experience...even struggling, sometimes. Not a lot and not often, but at least enough to know that I am alive, and not a parasite."

"We'd better hurry and eat, before I decide it isn't worth the time. I want to get you back over there on those pillows and...just love you."

"Do you think I am going to let you get by without showing your appreciation for this delicious breakfast. . Nothing doing. Come on. Let's eat--and then let's ride over and pick up your daughter. I want to get acquainted with her. I feel as if she were mine already."

Through breakfast Clyde was contemplating her. "She isn't pretty," he was thinking. "She isn't attractive in the way I thought any woman I might become interested in would have to be. What is this allure she has? It is simply that she is so down to earth, so genuine, so candid. She would never try to deceive anyone. She has a basic honesty that

won't ever be . . . but in spite of having absolutely no
williness, she has that something like a fascinating puzzle you
have almost figured, and keep thinking that the next move will
prove the answer, but it continues to allude you, to keep
compelling you to return to find that final answer. The
interest, the fascination will always remain. That is far
more than so many beautiful girls I have known, had. Having
this girl near will be like a constant stimulating goal
forever goading me to further heights of...living--of
experiencing life. In this very short time she has already
expanded my world, my horizons, my...hopes.

"Are you trying to figure out what makes me tick," she
asked. "I don't think you ever will. Since I have never
been able to figure that out myself, I doubt that anyone else
can."

"I think you are right. I don't think I will ever figure
you out, but it is going to be one hell of a lot of fun
spending my life trying. I can't live constantly with my
sorrows while I am so busy working on such a tantalizing
puzzle as you are."

"You make it sound almost like an asset," she laughed.

"It is an asset. Didn't you know that? Didn't anyone
ever tell you that you are a constant jolt to their senses;
like a reminder, as you said a while ago, that you are alive,
and not a paper replica of others? Nothing has ever made me
feel so alive, so eager for life. I don't ever want to lose
that. No one could have made me believe yesterday that I
would ever be interested in a woman who came, and who admitted
she came for the purpose of seducing me. Now I will treasure
the memory of that all my life. No woman ever offered herself
to me before. It is quite an exhilarating experience. It's
an exciting mental . . ."

"I hope you are prepared for the probability of it
happening pretty often," she grinned.

"I will never take it for granted, if that is what you
mean. It will always be a shocking, unbelievable surprise. .
Don't ever leave me, Marion."

CHAPTER XX

Drue was trying to coax Roxanne to eat. Roxanne looked pale. She was getting too thin. She refused to eat. Drue heard her vomiting. "If I didn't know it couldn't be possible, I would think she was pregnant," she told Joe.

"It couldn't be possible, could it Drue? Maybe we should take her to a doctor and see what they recommend. Whatever is causing her to be so sick at her stomach, needs to be checked in any case."

"I believe I will ride up and talk to Delia," Drue said. "Maybe we should have a doctor see her. I will get someone to bring a carriage, and drive her to Dallas."

As close as Drue and Delia had become, it was embarrassing for Drue to broach the subject. "It sounds so crazy," she said to herself. She hasn't been with anyone alone...other than..."

When Drue managed to tell Delia what was on her mind, Delia turned white. "My god, Drue!" She stared at the other woman. "It can't be possible, can it? Who on earth could she have been with...?"

"That is what Joe and I kept trying to think of. There never was a time we can think of when something like that could have happened. We have always been such a close family. The children have never hesitated to talk about anything that bothered them. I can't believe that Roxanne wouldn't have told me if she was deceived--or if she was overcome by feelings that would allow this to happen--even if there was anyone she could have been with...in that way."

Delia was white and trembling. The thought had not escaped her, that Van was the only man that could possibly have had an opportunity to be alone with Roxanne, in a way that would permit anything like this to happen. She would have bet her life gladly, that Van was not capable of that sort of thing.

"Drue," she said, in a sick voice. "I don't believe there is anything on earth that could make me believe that Van could be the father of her child--if she is pregnant--but we have to consider everything. I will talk to him."

"Drue sighed. "I don't think you can be any more sure of that than I am. I do not believe that Van is capable of anything like that. I don't think you need to talk to him. I know he is not responsible."

Tears sprang into Delia's eyes. "I am so glad that you feel that way, Drue. It means a lot to me. But I am going to talk to Van just the same. We have to take every remotest possibility into consideration until we solve this. I want to hear from Van's own lips that this is not true."

It seemed impossible now that she could even suspect Van enough to talk to him about it. She knew he could not have done anything like this--and yet that morning at breakfast, he had admitted that he had come to think of Roxanne in an entirely different way from what he had ever thought possible. He had admitted that Roxanne almost pleaded with him to love her as a man should love a wife..."

When Van saw her white face, her disturbed countenance, her hesitant manner, he folded her in his arms. "Mother, what is bothering you?" he said.

Delia could hardly speak. "Roxanne is pregnant," was all she could say.

Van turned white then, too. "My god, I don't believe it! I kept trying to be sure she wasn't too trusting with the likes of William and some of the others. I don't see how it could have happened. I was watchful and I know she was never with any of them alone--how on earth could it have happened?"

"That is what we have been trying to find out," Delia said. "I know you are not capable of anything like this, but Van, you are the only one who had the opportunity..."

Van gasped. "I am sure that you know that I did nothing of this kind," Van said, "but I would be sick to think that

Joe and Drue, or anyone else thought that might be the case."

"It seems Joe and Drue are as sure as I am that this is not your doing," Delia said--"but we do need to know the truth. What are we going to do, Van? Drue says that Roxanne is getting thin: that she refuses to talk--or to do anything other than cry and brood. She has never changed her mind about wanting to marry you. She feels rejected and betrayed."

"I was so afraid that she felt that way. I hoped that by the time Laura and I got back, she would have changed her mind, but I could see that that was not so. I wish to god I had never given her any notion that there was the remotest possibility that we would ever be married...that was a real tragic mistake."

"I don't think you are to blame. Roxanne did persist, and you did continue to tell her it was the wrong thing. You did much more than most men would have done."

Delia reported back to Drue about what Van had said. "I don't want Van to think that Joe or I ever suspected him for one instant. We didn't. It is surely a mystery. I wish we could get Roxanne to talk. I thought my children would all always trust us enough to tell us anything like this. I know she feels ashamed--but that is something too, that we have always tried to make them understand--that if they make mistakes for which they feel guilty, they can tell us and expect our help."

Tom had been as disturbed as anyone else over the dilemma concerning Roxanne. He couldn't come up with any answers, so he decided to let Van and Delia work it out in their own way. He wanted to help if he could, but he knew that the close relationship between Drue and the relationship Van had with the black men, would be more apt to bring results than anything he could do.

"It is odd, and a tragedy," Delia said.

It was arranged that Luke would take a carriage in which to take Roxanne to Dallas to the doctor. They might as well.

not have bothered. Roxanne flatly refused to go. "Yes, I am pregnant!" she admitted, "If that is what you want to know."

"We want to help you, Roxanne. We are not going to reprimand you. Surely you know that. We are sorry and puzzled, but we are not ashamed of you. We know that things like this happen to the very best, most conscientious people sometimes. We are not going to censure you. But we want to know who the father is."

Roxanne didn't answer nor show any response whatsoever. "It is true, girl," Joe added, "that we have no intention of lecturing or making things any more difficult for you, but we would all like to know it if someone betrayed you, victimized you. You know that we all love you, and if that is the case, we will make that person pay."

Roxanne said nothing.

Luke decided to leave the carriage and the team there, in case they could convince Roxanne to change her mind. He rode back alone.

Drue, as she had said, had not for one instant thought that Van was to blame for this, but she decided suddenly to see what reaction she would get if she accused Van. She knew that Roxanne was still brooding over Van's marriage to Laura. "Is Van the child's father?" she asked.

Roxanne did respond for the first time. "No!" she said. "I thought he respected virtue. He kept telling me that I had to be very careful of men--all men, so that I would not be mistreated--and then he married a woman who had offered herself to him before they were married!"

Drue and Joe had never seen their daughter so defiant and antagonistic. "He never did have any respect for decency--so why did he want me to be decent. I would have had a better chance with him if I had been the kind to...if I had been like her."

"Then please tell us how this happened. We want to help you. We are not going to stop loving you. We can help."

"Nothing can help!" Roxanne snapped. I'm pregnant. . There is nothing anyone can do about that! After a moment, she continued. "It was a black man..."

Joe and Drue were so stunned all over again, that neither of them could speak.

Drue decided to go talk to Delia again. She took the carriage and drove to the Walling ranch. She told Delia what Roxanne had said. "Delia," she said, "I feel almost as sure that Luke, Rowdy or Maib could not have done this, as I was that Van couldn't have--but they are the only black men we know."

Delia's face was still ashen. She looked ill. "No, Drue, I can't believe that, either, but again, we must talk with them. We have to rule out that possibility. Much as I have always trusted them, and vouched for them, I don't suppose I ever knew them personally as well as I thought I did. God, I wish we could resolve this thing. She didn't give you any intimation which one it might be?"

Delia went to talk to Van first. Van was as astounded as he had been to think that anyone might believe he had been guilty of such a barbaric act. "I will never believe in another human being if any one of them is guilty," he said. . "I don't believe it! Like you say, though, if she said that, who else could it be?" We don't know any other Black men.. "There is no way she could know any that we don't know, is there? Did she know anyone at school?"

"I asked Drue from the first if this could have happened at school, and she said that it was impossible. School has been out for three months. Roxanne got pregnant since then. . Drue knows. A woman..."

Van shook his head. "There has to be some way to solve this," he said. "If she would talk to me, I would ride down there, but Drue said she would not--and I didn't think she might even before Drue said that. I thought we were doing such a fine thing for the Redfords and for ourselves when we

all got together, sort of an extended family. It was. wonderful diversion for me--but it is turning into a. nightmare. That family was always happy. Nothing like this. would have happened if it hadn't been for my interference."

"I talked to Drue about that and she wouldn't hear of it.. She said that meeting us was the best thing that ever happened. to them. She insisted that if something like this was going. to happen to Roxanne, it would have, anyway. I'm not sure I. go along with that. Maybe it wouldn't have. I am sure. though, that Drue is sincere in saying that it was a good. thing for them that we all began to be so close. She knows. that this same particular thing might not have happened, but. she is wise enough to know that life is never free from. problems for long and that something like this--or worse--

might have happened if they had not known us. I agree with. her."

"I feel that I made a crucial mistake," Van persisted,. "in more ways than one."

Van went and talked to the black men separately. Each. one was astounded that Roxanne had said that it was a Black. man who had misused her. None of them took offense. Van. explained that he himself had been the first one questioned. and that no one believed for an instant that he was the. perpetrator of this deed, and no one believed any more than. that, that it was one of them. "We are just looking for. leads. I had to be checked out, just as you did. It is more. imperative than ever that we find who did do this. I wish. Roxanne weren't so damn stubborn. She and the rat who. desecrated her are probably the only two people on earth who. do know who it was. We can't even guess whether she may have. been forced--raped--or whether she participated willingly. If. we do find that she was forced--I will find the man and kill. him!" Van said. "I do believe that if I ever did come to be. angry enough to kill anyone, it would be for this!" His. heart ached for Roxanne, and the fact that he blamed himself

for her plight, made his torment more exquisite.

Delia and Tom received a telegram from Vincent. "Greyson has disappeared. Can you come?" it said.

Van and Tom set out for Dallas immediately, to catch the train for Boston. "It is a wonder something like this hasn't happened before," Tom said. "Vincent is one of the richest men in the United States. Someone can command a huge ransom for Greyson's safety. God, I hope he is safe! Then, too, we have to consider that a lot of people resented the fact that Vincent married Dorinda. Some people would do this, and really endanger young Greyson's life just out of resentment."

"Greyson has been acting strangely lately," Dorinda said. "We have always been able to communicate together about anything--but lately he has had something on his mind that he won't talk about. He hasn't behaved like himself at all. He is angry, even spiteful, depressed to the point of despondency."

"That makes it look less likely to be a kidnapping," Tom said. "You don't have any idea what he is so depressed about?"

"Not the slightest idea." Vincent said. "Like Dorinda said, he suddenly changed. Wouldn't talk to us. Seemed angry all the time. We thought for a long time that it may be just a teen-age rebellion. Tried to give him leeway to get over it in his own good time--but now he has disappeared, we are really worried. We can't imagine..."

"Have you talked to Gerald about it. Would he be apt to know anything?"

"No, not specifically. He knows how worried we are, so we just took it for granted that if he knew anything at all, he would let us know. Minnie, will you call Gerald," Vincent said.

Gerald was reticent. All three of the men knew immediately that he probably did know something about this thing. "Gerald, please tell us anything you know about this,"

Vincent said. Gerald hesitated. "You taught us not to be snitches," he said.

"Yes, and I am proud of you for respecting that--but you have to recognize that your brother may be in danger. We want to help him. If you know anything, I believe it would be more kind and honorable to tell us what it is."

"He asked me to swear that I would not tell, but he borrowed all the money I had. He didn't say what he meant to do."

"Thank you, Gerald. If he borrowed your money, he is not apt to have been kidnapped. He knows that any time he needs more money than his allowance, he can ask me--so for some reason he did not want to discuss it with me. Maybe we have held too close a rein on him. Well, I feel some better about it. He may have just wanted to get out on his own for a while; get out from under parental scrutiny. He will probably take care of himself all right. He isn't stupid."

It is strange that Greyson would take this sudden notion. But then kids his age often get rebellious, suspicious of their parents, want to try their own wings.

CHAPTER XXI

When Greyson got off the train in Dallas, he rented a horse and rode directly to the home of the Redfords. He tied his horse and walked to the door. Drue and Joe met him in the yard. Joe, as usual, had ordered ticker to lie down. He and Drue walked toward Greyson with extended hands. Greyson stopped. His face looked unnatural. "Please don't touch me," he said. "After you hear what I have to say, you will not want to shake my hand." He stood up straight, as if he were trying to

"I have come to tell you that anything you can do to me, I will take without a whimper. I deserve no quarter. You can

put me up against that tree, stick a knife in me. I deserve anything you choose to do. You can turn Ticker loose and let him tear me to bits. I think I would like that. It would probably be the most suitable punishment for me."

Drue and Joe looked puzzled. "What are you talking about?" they asked. Roxanne had come out the door. She sat down near where her parents stood. She was staring at Greyson.

"I raped your daughter," Greyson said. "Now I am ready to pay. Nothing on earth could recompense you, of course, nor her, but I am ready to pay whatever is possible toward...showing how sorry I am for my abject folly."

It was very silent. "When...how did this happen?" Drue asked, her face white.

It was right after the wedding," Vincent said. "I noticed that Roxanne had left--alone. I followed her. She came here. By the time I got here, she had left with...another young man. I followed the tracks of his carriage." Greyson had been determined not to sound as if he were being dramatic. He simply wanted these people to know the truth and then take whatever steps they chose with him. He was ready to die, if that would help any, but he didn't have any intention of making any more fuss about it than was necessary. He simply wanted them to know the truth and then to get the whole thing over with. He wanted no histrionics, no emotional play on his own part.

"When I caught up with them I took her out of the carriage and made her go with me. I raped her."

Roxanne stood up and walked to where the three were standing. "That is not true!" she said, her eyes blazing. "That is not true, at all! I did ride away. I was so sick at heart that Van would marry someone else, that I couldn't take any more. I came here. I wasn't here long until William drove up in his carriage. He was one of the young men Van had repeatedly warned me about. I didn't care. I wanted to do

something--anything that would hurt Van. He had married a girl who had no virtue. He had kept telling me how he wanted to protect me--and my sisters, from unscrupulous men--like William!" Her face twisted in derision. "Well, that deceitful sophistry sickened me. He was so insistent that I remain chaste, and then he married a girl who had no morals. . I decided that I no longer was going to be...chaste...a fool. I went with William not caring what he had in mind. . If Greyson hadn't come along when he did, William would have raped me."

"That is true, but that isn't all of it. I took her away from William and then I raped her."

Drue and Joe looked at Roxanne. "That is not true, either!" Roxanne said, the anger and defiance evident in her face. "He kissed me, and I encouraged him to go on." Her eyes looked wild. "I asked him to make love to me. I wanted to do everything I could to hurt Van back. I didn't care about the things I had always cherished. I wanted to be different. I didn't care much who I made love with. I still don't. It was for revenge. It was so I could stand to live!"

"Even if that were true--even if that is true," Greyson said, "it does not excuse in the slightest what I did. No decent man would take an innocent woman even if she did ask him to, in a moment of despondency. What I did was not the act of a decent man. Men worthy of that name want to protect women. They don't take advantage of any untoward circumstances to excuse themselves for heinous actions."

Neither Joe nor Drue could think of anything they wanted to say. They were too dumbfounded. "Do you want to protect me?" Roxanne asked.

"It is too late for that," Greyson said. "I wish to god I had, but it is too late for that. I have shamed my family and all the others. Now I will do penence gladly. I know that is not going to rectify matters. It will not erase one iota of the pain I have caused everyone--but it is all I know

to do.

Roxanne remembered the day of Van's wedding. She was sick at heart. She stayed out of sight all she could until after the ceremony. She managed to keep her poise through the awful ritual making Laura Van's wife. When that sickening ordeal was over, she escaped without anyone's taking notice. There were so many people, so much milling around, so many different ones going back and forth to visit all the different families on the huge property, that no one thought of missing Roxanne--she had thought.

She rode out of the yard and spurred her horse in the direction of her home. The tears were so profuse that she could hardly see where she was going. "How could he?" she said over and over. "How could he want a girl who asked him to make love to her? How could he prefer a girl who has no virtue? Why did he keep insisting that he had to watch over me to prevent me from doing anything that might put my chastity in jeopardy? Virtue and chastity mean nothing to him! I always valued my mother's teachings, and Van's too, until now. Now I don't care. I won't be a stupid little fool any longer. I thought it was right to keep myself for the man I wanted to marry. That was a mistake. He would have been more interested in me if I had offered to make love with him--asked him to make love to me, instead of telling him that we would have to wait until after we were married."

When she arrived home, she was glad to be alone. Her wrath consumed her. She had been home for just a few minutes when she heard a carriage in the yard. She looked up to see William getting down. He strolled toward her. His smile was uplifting. "Do I see tear-stains on that beautiful face?" he asked. He had an insolent, defiant attitude that attracted Roxanne. It spoke of unconcern with such matters as she had been consumed with. She wished that she could feel as unconcerned about everything as he did. He took her arm, and pulled her up from her bench. "Let's go for a ride. I think

I can make you forget all about your tears. This weather is too nice for a beautiful girl to be unhappy about anything." He was guiding her to his carriage.

He took up the reins and drove into the country. He suddenly reached over and pulled Roxanne close to him. He looked debonair. "I have wanted to kiss you ever since I first saw you. Are you going to say yes today?" He pulled the horses over and held her closer. She raised her lips for his kisses. His kisses were something she had never anticipated. They were moist and probing, determined. She shuddered. Van had never kissed her in this way, even in his most passionate moments. She thought they were too sensual to ever actually be welcome.

She saw that William was very aroused sexually. It pleased her. It made her wonder if she should be frightened. I've proved to be such a little fool that maybe I should go ahead and experience whatever he wants, she was thinking. I certainly am not going to try ever again to be chaste and virtuous--a fool!

Roxanne heard horses hooves behind them. William looked angry. Greyson rode up beside them. His face was a storm of anger. He jumped off his horse, and with one stride was at the door of the carriage. He opened it and dragged William out. He stood William firmly on his feet and then with one resounding blow laid him out on the ground.

He took Roxanne's arm, grasping it painfully. "You are going with me," he grated. The anger in his face frightened her. She had never in her life been subjected to anyone's anger. She had always been around loving, respectful people.

"Why did you do that?" Roxanne asked, in spite of her fear of him. "He didn't do anything wrong."

"Oh no?" Greyson said. "If you weren't such a little fool you would know that it was what he intended to do, that should have worried you."

"He didn't intend to do anything that worried me. He

said he just wanted to go for a ride. I thought it would be fun. It isn't very easy to just sit around and hurt, when you love someone who doesn't love you."

"Oh, I have never experienced that feeling of course." His voice was full of scorn.

"Did he kiss you?" Greyson asked.

"Yes--but he asked me first--like a gentleman should. I told him yes. I am not sorry for that. Van is the only other man who ever kissed me. He didn't want me, so I decided to go with someone who did. If I can't have the man I love, I might as well enjoy the company of someone who does. I don't love William, but he is--someone who is interested in me, and how I feel. He's fun to be with."

"What else did he say to you?"

"He said that he was going to show me how a real man performed. I don't know what he meant by that. Beside Van, I am willing to accept that he is a real man. Van does not respect decency, virtue...He only wanted someone without self-respect. Someone who put sexual intimacies above love and respect and honor. I have been a fool, but I don't intend to be a fool any longer!"

Greyson's anger obviously increased. His grip on Roxanne's arm tightened. He was bruising her.

"What right did you have to come out here and interfere?" she asked. She was struggling to loosen her arm from his steel grasp. He suddenly turned her loose. She started to go to William. Greyson shoved her aside. "Damn you!" she said.

Greyson ignored her. "Get up!" he said to William. "Show us how a real man performs!" William tried to get up, but he either wasn't able to do so, or knew it would not be wise.

Greyson grasped his shoulder and stood him on his feet. "Show us how a real man performs!" he repeated. Greyson's blow knocked William down again with a resounding thud..

Roxanne gasped. "Beast!" she screamed.

William laid where he was. Greyson tied his horse to the back of the carriage, picked Roxanne up from where she had run to William's side. He shoved her into the carriage. He picked up the reins and started the horses back toward Roxanne's home.

"You are a monster!" Roxanne shouted. "You can't leave that poor man lying there way out here with no way to get back."

"Oh, can't I? Watch me!" Greyson said. His voice was scathing. His face was dark.

"I hate you! Your Uncle Van and Tom too, said that you were a man of integrity; that you were a man I would always be safe with. They certainly didn't know what they were talking about. You are unconscionable! You aren't safe for anyone to be with. How could they have been so mistaken?" I can understand now, Van's telling me anything that happened to suit his fancy at the moment, but Tom is honest." Roxanne was still frightened of Greyson's evident rage. She wondered if he might hurt her further, physically. It didn't enter her head that he might harm her by taking advantage of her in the way Van--and her mother too, had warned her about some men doing.

"Stop this carriage! Let me out! I am going back to help William!" she said.

Greyson quietly pulled the horses up. Roxanne opened the door. She started to step down. Greyson had already come to her side of the carriage. As she stepped down he caught her in his arms. She looked at him with abject hatred in her eyes. His arms were crushing her. He was kissing her. His kisses were rough, demanding, but not sensual in that way William's had been.

She drew back her hand as if to slap him, but he caught her arms. She glared at him. "Van told me that no man of honor would kiss a girl unless he...unless she permitted it,"

she said. "At least William asked me first. He has more integrity than you do."

"I won't argue that point!" Greyson said. "Do you have any idea what he meant when he told you that he was going to show you how a real man performed?"

"No, not really. I don't care what he meant."

"That is too bad. It is too bad that you are such a little fool. Do you want me to tell you what he meant? He intended to take you. Completely. He had no notion of stopping with a few kisses--whether or not you had said yes to them. He was telling you that you would enjoy his taking you--

that the way a real man performed left no doubt about your enjoying it." His voice was so full of wrath that each word sounded like a threat of murder.

"I don't believe it!" Roxanne said. "He has always treated me with respect."

"Has he now? That is very interesting. I wonder if you know what respect is when you encounter it." His voice was pure derision.

"I know that a man who kisses a girl without asking her first is not respectful of her."

"You would rather be with a man who is so nice that he asks you if he can kiss you, but who has no intention of stopping at kissing, whether or not he has had permission to do so?"

"Are you trying to make me think that you are more honorable and respectful than William is?"

"No, certainly not! I would be most mortified for you to believe that I am more honorable than that...bastard. I have no desire for you to believe that I am...nearly as honorable. I am only trying to put a little bit of sense into that thick head of yours. You should have learned some of the lessons Van tried to teach you, before you...ever were--alone with me!"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Greyson, I used to be a very virtuous girl. My chastity meant everything to me. I thought it would be important to Van. But I discovered that he has no respect for chastity. He wanted a girl who had tried to get him to make love to her without their being married. He did make love to her with her permission so I don't care any more. Why should I?"

"That's fine with me!" Greyson said, lifting her back into the carriage. "So your unrequited love for one man has caused you not to value chastity any more?"

"That's right!" she said. "I don't care any more. I would probably have consented to have William kiss me and then if you are right that he intended to go further, I would probably have consented to whatever else he asked me to do. Like I said, I simply don't care any more."

Greyson was turning the horses around. "Where are you going!" Roxanne asked, alarmed.

You said you wanted to go back to that animal who intended to take you whether you permitted it or not."

Roxanne was genuinely frightened now. She had come to the conclusion that she no longer cared about what she used to think of as a woman's honor, but she didn't really want to be raped. That evidently was what Greyson was warning her about, and what Van had tried to warn her about, too.

"Please don't," she said.

"All right. I had no intention of taking you back to that scoundrel. You are altogether too enticing to throw away on the likes of him." He pulled the horses over to the side of the road.

He took Roxanne roughly into his arms and began kissing her passionately again. Roxanne wasn't sure whether she wanted to respond or not. Greyson could sense her uncertainty. His kisses increased in urgency. Roxanne gasped. Had she woven a web from which she could not extricate herself. She hadn't believed Greyson could be so profligate. She had believed Van and Tom, even though she had intimated that she didn't think what they had said was true.

Was this man unconscionable; as bad as they had said William was?"

"I don't believe you would do this to me," she said, her voice almost breaking in tears.

"Oh, wouldn't I! Why not?" His voice and the look of his eyes frightened her. "You just told me that you no longer care about your chastity. That suits me just fine. I wouldn't have hesitated in any case, of course, but that should make it easier for you."

She watched as he got out of the carriage, took a lap blanket from the seat and spread it on the ground. "What could be better for a first experience in love, than the star-spangled sky, the breeze in the trees. Much better I think, than the usual mundane bed. Nothing exciting about that. This should be unique."

Roxanne was hypnotised. "Van was always right about everything. He said that Greyson would always be safe for me to be with. What was he trying to do? Did he want me to trust Greyson and be caught up in something like this--to free himself of what he thought of as a problem? She was frightened, but more excited, curious. She didn't believe that Tom and Van would have been wrong about this man. They had been right about William, she now believed.

Greyson came back to the carriage, picked her up lightly and carried her to the blanket. He began to undress her. He stopped. "Undress!" he ordered. Roxanne's state of mind, her anger that Van had deserted her to marry another woman, her determination that she would no longer treasure the tenets she had held to all her life over-ruled her former convictions. She wasn't at all sure whether she wanted Greyson to make love to her or not. She knew she wanted something, anything that would make her into someone other than the trusting little girl who had given her heart to Van. Greyson's kisses had disturbed her deeply. She had found herself enjoying them. They made her feel free of former convictions she now wanted to obliterate forever. She wanted him to kiss her again.

These kisses had been the first thing that had been satisfying to her eagerness to do something to hurt Van back, and to prove that she was no longer interested in his warnings about how she must behave. The way he had insisted that she

behave was not the way the girl he had married had behaved.. She would no longer behave in that way, either.

It was beginning to get dark. Greyson was almost undressed. "Do you want me to undress you, Roxanne?" he said.. "Or did you hope that I did not mean it? Did you hope I would stop?" His words sounded more like a taunting. A certainty that he knew she did not want him to stop, and a promise that he would not in any case.

"No," Roxanne said. "I want you to make love to me." . She put her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. . Greyson was overwhelmed. He was so fulfilled with possessing Roxanne, that he couldn't think of anything other than the pure joy of it. The hell he had lived in through the last months diminished and receded in his possession of her. He didn't want to release her. He held her close.

Roxanne didn't attempt to analyse her feelings. She recognized that she felt she had fulfilled her desire to do something to hurt Van. He would be furious when he knew. She had willingly made love with a scoundrel as treacherous as he was. It was satisfying. He would go into a rage. Maybe he would even kill Greyson. She felt good. "It was a wonderful night," she thought. "I feel redeemed, free. I will be with this man at every opportunity. It is very satisfying to feel his determined arms around me. Now I will look forward to this way of living. Each time Greyson makes love to me, I will feel this exaltation that I have done something that Van forbade me to do. I cannot think of Van in the old way very often if this man makes love to me every night. She felt elated; as if she had won a long raging battle. She moved and put her arms around Greyson's neck. He pushed her away.

Suddenly he sat up, laughing. She was startled. "That was very satisfying," he said. "Now I can go back to Boston and feel quite triumphant. "Thank you, Roxanne, that was more satisfying than I dreamed all these months it might be. For an inexperienced girl, you are quite--good."

"You are going back to Boston tomorrow?" Her astonished

disappointment was in her voice. She was sick with chagrin. . She had supposed that he would want to be with her now as much as she wanted to be with him. How could he leave her? This had meant nothing to him other than a night of reckless love-

making. That part of it was all right. The more dishonorable the better, but she couldn't believe he would not feel drawn to her now, in the same way she was drawn to him. Weren't they two of a kind?

She was wondering how she could induce him to stay. "I have heard of things like this happening," she said. Greyson was nonchalantly pulling on his clothes. He was smiling contentedly. "What if I am pregnant?"

Greyson abruptly stopped and looked at her, startled. He laughed. "That would be delightful! Nothing could please me more than to know you are carrying my seed in your belly! You would have quite a problem wouldn't you? How would you go about solving that, Roxanne?"

Roxanne had never in her life been subject to anyone's mockery before. She had known nothing other than love and respect. This is the sort of thing Van kept warning me about, she thought. "I didn't take it seriously. Like he said, I didn't know there were men like you in the world."

"Would you like a ride back," he asked, "Or shall I leave you out here for the honorable William to sample."

Roxanne was crying. "Why are you doing this to me?" she asked.

"I didn't do anything you didn't ask for. Why are you blaming me?"

"You can go on. I will walk back," she said. "I hope never to see you again. I thought you were honorable--just because Van and Tom told me you were. You have no honor."

"I certainly don't," Greyson agreed happily. "I am most grateful for that. Life would have been intolerable, if I had been born with any self-respect. What did you expect? I take the greatest joy in any kind of atrocious actions. Why would you ever have thought differently?"

CHAPTER XXII

Her mind was wrenched back to the present. "Do you want to protect me now?" Roxanne asked again. Greyson merely looked at her, uncomprehending. "I am going to have a baby," she said. "As much as I hate you, it seems to me the best solution--if you are interested in that protection you mentioned honorable men feel--is for you to marry me. Living with a girl who hates you and loves another man should be enough hell to satisfy your desire for penance. Especially living with a girl who has no decency, no scruples about anything. If you truly are sorry that you were such a reprobate, and want to start trying to climb up out of that mire of filth you fell into with me, it will be all the more hellish. Just what you need--and deserve."

Greyson was staring at Roxanne. His face was still sick. "If I can do this, and make your pain one little iota less, it will be more lenient than anything I could ever have imagined. I will certainly be glad to do that. I don't want to make any more issue of this than I have to," he said. Turning to Drue and Joe, "if there comes a time when Roxanne cannot benefit any longer from a...union with me, you still have the option of punishments. I deserve no thought of...you are entitled to whatever retribution you can name."

"Whatever made you do a thing like that?" Drue asked. "I would never have believed you were capable of that sort of thing. Neither did Van or Tom or any of them...?"

Greyson put his head down. Drue thought he was not going to answer. "It is not easy to explain," he said. "There could not possibly be any reason for anyone claiming decency after behaving as I did. It was because my rage, my resentment, my hatred matched my love for your daughter..

Nothing ever had hurt me so much as her rejection of me. The fact that she loved Van and could not see me for that reason, I could have accepted--but when she despised me because of my heritage I lost all control. It seemed that all the things I had learned to cherish--honor, decency, respect, died, and left me a shell. Whatever life remained in me was all diabolical."

Roxanne was staring at Greyson. Greyson glanced at her and then turned his attention back to Drue and Joe. He drew in his breath as if putting together the words he wanted to say was an effort he was hardly capable of.

"We had always been proud of our heritage. My parents had taught us to respect the fact that we have the blood of a black slave flowing in our veins."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Roxanne's puzzlement was genuine.

"Have you forgotten? When Gerald said that our mother was the daughter of a former slave--that black blood flowed in our veins, you said that you didn't understand how we could face up to it--that you would be filled with shame."

"But Gerald explained that you had been taught to treasure your heritage. Aren't you proud of your mother and your mother's mother?"

"I always was. But when..."

"My god!" Roxanne said, understanding flooding over her, "you thought I meant that I would be ashamed of being descended from slaves! Of course I didn't mean that! I meant that it would be impossible for me to face up to having a grandfather who had been so cruel and insensitive as to keep slaves."

Greyson's face turned ashen. He couldn't speak. He stared at Roxanne. He fell on to a bench and buried his face in his hands. "Oh, my god," he finally said. "What have I done? My father will kill me and he should do just that. He taught me to be honorable, to stand up to any situation like a

man. My god. Why was I such a fool! There is no way I can undo the harm I have done. I wanted to hurt you--because I was so hurt when I thought you felt contemptuous of our heritage. If I hadn't loved you so much, I would never have needed to hurt you. I know there is no use to say I am sorry. There is no way you should accept an apology for something so...vile."

"That is true," Roxanne said. "You are a fool. But I am willing to marry a fool, to resolve this problem for now. Not that I care. I don't--but I suppose I owe Delia and Tom and...my family, something."

Drue and Joe had begun to understand what had happened. They were still stupefied, but they agreed that this solution was the best that could be hoped for under the circumstances. "If that is what you want, Roxanne, we will go ahead and plan for you to get married. It does seem like the best thing to do. I wonder if we should tell everyone that this baby is yours, Greyson--or say that you are marrying Roxanne...because she made a mistake and you are going to help her to rectify that mistake."

"I do not want to take any measures whatsoever to try to lessen the blame for what I did. Everyone has a right to know...My father will kill me and that is exactly what he should do. Van, too, will want to take me to task. He will be very disappointed in me, and so will uncle Tom and Delia and well, all the others. But that is what I deserve. I will not try to hide..."

"Just the same," Roxanne said, "They will have to wait for their revenge. I am not going to have all the fuss and meddling and attempts to defend me and the misguided sympathy. I will tell them all how I feel sometime and let them know that their so-called morals and values are anathema to me--but for now they will have to accept that I have decided to marry Greyson. I have become pretty good at underhanded ways myself, so it will not be difficult to hide

the fact that I hate him. I can vent all my hate on him. later. We will let them think that I was overwhelmed by my innocent love for some other animal and made a mistake by trusting him. They will not ask who. It is none of their business. I do not have to explain anything to anyone. I will want to tell Van what I did and why some time, but that can wait."

"Then do you want us to plan a big wedding, or would you prefer to just get married quietly."

"I will not have a big wedding! The kind of wedding Van and I would have had is out of the question. I wouldn't enjoy walking down the isle, with a snow-white dress, indicating that I was a sweet little innocent bride, when I am a--wanton, loose woman."

Drue and Joe winced but decided to say nothing. They hoped that this sick anger and resentment would eventually wear itself out and Roxanne would revert back to the sweet, sunny girl she had been before. They were angry with Greyson, but they could understand his dilemma. They could not blame him nearly as much as he seemed ready to be blamed, since they knew of Roxanne's part in this fiasco.

"Then shall we plan a small wedding and have the preacher come here," Drue asked.

"I beg your pardon," Vincent said, "maybe I have no right to make any suggestions, but I think that would be a good idea. How would it be if you invited all the...relatives--all those from Tom's place, and we got married here. Let's not have a wedding cake."

"Delia will want to bring all her fine dinnerware, and her silverware and..."

"Let's Tell Delia not to bring any of her fine silver and china and all that. Let's eat from home-made wooden spoons, and use clean hollowed out boards for plates. I want it to be like you have lived all your life...and I want to live like that, too. I never want to go back to Boston--excepting on

visits with my wife and children."

Greyson suddenly remembered the circumstances and realized his enthusiasm was a little out of order. He stopped and looked at them. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just thought..."

"It's a good idea," Joe said, "Don't you think so, Drue?"

"Yes it is," Drue said, "If that is satisfactory with you, Roxanne."

"I don't care one way or the other," Roxanne said, "as long as we get it over with. I suppose I will have to see that swine of a Van--and that whore he married. I dread that, but I can't see any help for it."

"Then we will ride up and discuss all this with the Wallings," Joe said. "We will send for a preacher and try to have him here...tomorrow?"

"My parents would be dreadfully disappointed if they couldn't come. Could we set it up for a time after they could get here?"

"Of course," Drue said before Roxanne could answer.

Joe smiled a wan smile. He walked over to Greyson. "Well, son, if you are going to marry my daughter, I would like to shake your hand now," he said. Greyson slowly extended his hand. "I will be very proud to marry your daughter and to call you my father-in-law, if that will be permitted," he said.

He paced around the yard. "Didn't you know," he finally said, "that my grandfather--Tom's father--freed all his slaves, began work on the Underground Railroad, saved thousands of people from the hell of slavery? Van worked with them, too, and Tom. They took terrible risks. Maib is one of the slaves they saved. Luke and Rowdy and another man, Mose-- and Marybelle, all dedicated their lives to this work."

"I didn't know that," Roxanne said, none of the sarcasm in her voice.

The wedding went off well. Casey had suggested that he and Greyson go and bring in a couple of young bucks. Joe showed them how to dig a barbecue pit. Drue made cinnamon rolls. Delia had agreed not to have a wedding cake made, and to leave all her silver and china and crystal at home. . Everyone feasted from hollowed out plates, set on a half dozen planks placed across new hobby-horses. Plenty of benches were hammered together.

Greyson looked happy. Roxanne looked sick. She had refused to wear a becoming dress or do her hair in the newest fashion. No one questioned the circumstances. Everyone appeared to take it for granted that everything was fine and just as it should be. Roxanne stayed out of Van's way as much as she could. Several times she took her husband's arm and clung to him, in order to avoid having to talk to Van or Laura. Van and Laura knew why she was behaving in this way, and did not attempt to approach her. Vincent shook Greyson's hand. Dorinda hugged him and Roxanne, and smiled. She knew without any doubt now, that there was something very wrong, and suspected that it's cause was Greyson's heritage. "It seems they are going to make the best of it," she said to herself--"but I know that Roxanne is very unhappy. I would like to know why...Maybe sometime we will know. In the meantime, I do hope whatever is making Roxanne so unhappy will be resolved. Of course she is pregnant. Maybe she loved someone else and was betrayed..."

Vincent gave his son a note for \$, . . Greyson tried to refuse it. "Think of it as a part of your inheritance. Your mother and I want you to have it now. If you are going to establish a home, you need money to get started. This is our wedding gift to you and Roxanne. I hope you make her happy,".

Greyson sensed the question in his father's voice. He was sorry, but at this time there was nothing he could talk to him about.

When everyone was gone, Drue and Joe turned to Roxanne.

"Now, youse," Drue said, "do you have anything in mind for a honeymoon?"

Drue had listened carefully to the English her children used now that they were going to school. She learned from them and applied that learning. She had stopped using the "youse" plural for "you," but in her agitation, she reverted back to her old ways.

"Would you like to drive into Dallas; put up at a nice hotel, Roxanne?" Greyson asked.

"No, Sir Galahad!" Roxanne snapped. "I don't care to go anywhere like that. We will go out to the place where we.... learned what life is all about."

Joe and Drue were hurt. It was painful to see their daughter persist in these crude ways; ways she would have abhorred just a few months ago.

Greyson was sad, too. He would have liked to take Roxanne somewhere pleasant so that she might forget about her anger for a while.

"All right," he said. "I will get the carriage ready." Roxanne refused Greyson's help. She climbed into the carriage and he took up the reins. "Roxanne," Greyson began, "whatever I have done, I want you to know that I love you..."

Roxanne laughed raucously. "Love. Love? I don't ever want to hear the word again!. I have no interest in love. I hate the word. Don't ever use it to me again! The idea of love is offensive to me. Now if you told me that you were obsessed with an animal lust for me--I might be impressed. That might interest me."

"Roxanne, don't do this to yourself. You are only making things worse. I don't expect you to forgive me. I have never hoped for that, and I will never ask it--but we will have to live together. I do love you. I want to protect you from now on, forever..."

"Fool!" Roxanne was almost shouting. "You are such a fool! The only reason I am with you is that I happen to be pregnant with your child. I don't want a child--especially.

your child. It makes me shudder to think of it. Van and I planned to have six children. Now if this were his baby, I would look forward to having it. That is the way it should have been."

Greyson felt his eyes stinging. But I agreed to abide by any hell she could create for me. This is a part of it and as much as I would like for her to welcome our baby, I will keep my promise. Ugly as this is, he reminded himself, There is no comparison between her taunting and the hell of remorse I went through--wanting to come back. This, sad as it is, is a thousand times better than that I felt after I thought Roxanne despised me for my being of Black heritage. I cannot expect her to ever stop hating me, but her hating me because I am not. Van, is not nearly as hard to bear as it was thinking she hated me because I am the son of a former slave.

When they arrived at the exact spot where they had spent the night together under the skies, Roxanne ordered Greyson to stop. He pulled over. She took the blanket herself this time, and climbed down from the high seat. She spread the blanket. She began to undress. Greyson sat down on the edge of the blanket. Roxanne was stripped down to her long, dainty bloomers, and a chemise. She stopped and looked at Greyson.

"I do not intend to make love to you, Roxanne. Not this way."

"Oh, am I not...immoral enough for you, either?"

"You are not immoral, Roxanne. You are just being...obstinate; childish. You are not behaving like the mature, sensible girl you are."

"Roxanne flew into a rage. She began sobbing and beating him with her fists. She was panting, moaning, gasping for breath. Greyson took her hands quietly. "Stop it Roxanne! . You will harm the baby. You have to stop this nonsense."

She quieted. "You don't want to make love to me?"

"I want very much to make love to you. But I will not

behave ever again like a beast. I love you. I want to make gentle love to you. I want it to be mutual, beautiful..."

"Well that isn't going to happen, ever! I think you are a fool." Her voice was rising in hysteria again. "You are a weakling. You are a coward. You aren't a man. You don't have the prowess to make love to me in the way you did before. Why not? That is the only way I will ever allow you to touch me. I don't want any gentle love. I don't want anything mutual, beautiful. I knew what I was doing that first night we were here. I asked you to continue to make love to me. You were forceful, demanding. You weren't fool enough to ask me then!"

"I am ashamed of that. I want to forget about it. You should try to forget about it, too. You are going to have a baby. Think of that and try to do the things that are right. I can never hope to redeem myself. I know that. But you are not immoral. You did nothing wrong. You behaved badly because you were hurt--but you can't go on letting the love you felt for Van make you into a..."

"Into a what? Didn't I hear you say that your love for me made you into the animal you became? But I am never supposed to have the same feelings, the same needs that anyone else has. I was not supposed to be as cheap and carnal as Van was. I was not supposed to be as brazen as Laura was. But all of you who cared nothing for decency get the things you want out of life and I don't. Did you think I was going to go on being such a fool? Well, I am not!"

Greyson sat disconsolately. Roxanne pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. She shivered. Greyson got up and pulled the blanket closer around her. She snorted her disgust. "I wonder," she said, "Where I could find William. He would not be such a fool, and he would not expect me to be such a fool."

"Roxanne, stop it!"

Roxanne picked up her dress. "What are you going to do?"

Greyson said.

"I am going to drive up to William's hotel in the village," Roxanne said. "Would you like a ride--or would you like to walk back alone and tell my parents where I have gone?"

"You're insane!" Greyson said.

"Do you think so? I think it is you that is insane."

She was so small beside Greyson, that he hardly had to move a muscle to hold her wrist. He did not want to hurt her. "I will not make animal love to you and I will not let you go. find a sex-mate that means nothing to you."

"So now you think you can tell me what to do? Well, neither you, nor anyone else is going to tell me what to do. I am not your property just because I consented to marry you. If I don't go now, I will go tomorrow, or the first time you go to sleep, or..."

Greyson pulled her to him carefully and began kissing her. She slapped him with all the strength she could bring to bear. He hardly blinked. "I told you that I didn't want any...preliminaries. Animals don't fool around. They..."

Greyson stopped her words with more kisses. They were gentle, but persistent, insistent. She couldn't slap him, nor stop him. She tried to turn her face away, but he held her so that it was impossible. "I love you Roxanne," he said. "I am going to make gentle, passionate love to you. You are not an animal and I will not treat you like one. I am not an animal. either--even though I did behave like one once."

It seemed that he was so strong and she was so small that he didn't need to struggle in the least to keep her from twisting away from him or moving out of his reach. She could not free herself. She quieted. "If I believed that you would rather I not touch you, I would not. But I believe you do not know what you want. You are all twisted up in your mind because Van hurt you so much. I can understand that. I was hurt that much, too, and it caused me to behave in a way I

didn't believe in, in a way I regret very much." She didn't answer. "I don't want to hurt you. If you will tell me that you would prefer that I not make love to you, I will not. I will sit here all night with you, hold you while you cry, listen if you want to talk. What do you really want, Roxanne?"

She didn't answer.

Greyson kissed her lips, her neck, her breasts. She made no objection. He rubbed her shoulders, her back, her hips, her thighs. She didn't move. He let himself into her. "I love you, Roxanne," he said. "I love you." She began to return his kisses and pull his body close.

In the morning, Greyson drove back to Roxanne's home. Drue and Joe looked hopefully at him. He shook his head. "Roxanne needs more time," he said. "Do you have a pencil and a piece of paper? I want to begin building a home. I would like to purchase land adjoining yours. I have been thinking about the house. This is something like what I have in mind." He made a sketch. "This is the one big room. I thought it would serve as the main room as yours does--a living-room, kitchen and a bedroom for the present. Next I will build on a room here, so as not to shut out the light. It can be a bedroom. Then I will build on another here, for a kitchen. Later, as our family increases, I will build other bedrooms. Is this all right with you, Roxanne?"

She snorted. "You said you wanted to live as we always have. You never have the courage of your convictions. Now you are planning all these additions. Before you are through, you will have a mansion just like the Wallings'."

Greyson flushed. "I do want to live like this. I thought though, that...well I thought we could make it a little more comfortable..."

Roxanne laughed scornfully.

"Roxanne," Drue said. "You are behaving in a very unbecoming way." This was the most nearly either of her

parents had ever reprimanded her. "It makes good sense to continue to build things to be more comfortable. We would have if we could have. It was just a matter of...money. We didn't live so crowded and cramped because we chose it!"

Greyson's face showed his appreciation. "When we have finished the one room, Drue, we will come over and make an addition or two for you."

Drue smiled. "That is most kind of you," she said, "but it is getting a little late in life for that. Our children are away in school. They aren't at home very often. When they have finished college, they will probably go elsewhere to practice their professions. And then, they will all be getting married before long," she looked at Roxanne.

"Me and Drue have lived in these three rooms for so long, we wouldn't know what to do with more space," Joe said--"but these young-uns, they do need better things. We always wanted better things for them. You are doing the right thing, young man."

"Are these plans all right?" Greyson asked Roxanne again. She refused to look at the sketch. "Other people seem to be going to live my life for me now," she said. "I don't care what it is like." She laughed. "I am surprised though, that you think you can build a house. Aren't you afraid you might get a little splinter in those soft, white hands? Aren't you afraid you might get some dirt under those fingernails?"

"Roxanne!" her father said, looking at her with disapproval probably for the first time in her life.

"Greyson, " Joe said, "come here. I want to show you somethin'. Greyson followed Joe out to the back of the cabin. See here. I chose this place to build, because when the high winds come, you have to have some help to keep your house from blowing away. As much as we would like to have you right here next to us, you have to find a place up against a good cliff. Then you have to be sure you have enough room for

all your out-buildings. Your barns, your hay-sheds, everythin'. Next, be sure you have everything close to a gully, or real canyon. When the blizzards or the blue northers come, your stock will freeze to death in their tracks, if they don't have shelter. A canyon with some underbrush is the best shelter you can find for them. Don't want to interfere, but thought you should know about these things before you start abuildin'."

"I'm much obliged to you, sir. I will appreciate any guidance you can give me. I am pretty green at this thing, and I would like to do it as right as possible. I will begin looking for the right location."

Well, now, might save ye a little time, iff'n you look right down there. There's a good canyon. You can buy that land for a little of nothin'. Back here just a whistle, is a good cliff. Build your home up against that. That'll save ye a lot of grief.

"Who do I see to find out about buying this land?" Greyson asked.

"See the assessor in Dallas. He'll know all about it, or iff'n he don't, he can tell ye who to contact about it."

"Much obliged, sir," Greyson said again.

"Look, young man. Iff'n we're goin' a be related, you'd better quit callin' me 'sir.' I'm just plain old Joe. Please remember that. It sounds more comfortable."

"I'll try to remember that, sir--oh, excuse me. May take a little gitten' used to. I always spoke to my own father as sir and he always wanted it that way. Not because he was my father, but because he wanted me to address our acquaintances that way--those who were a few years my senior."

"Well I'll excuse it, iff'n you caint remember, but it really ain't comfortable."

Roxanne continued to taunt Greyson at every opportunity. He was almost impervious to it. He always remembered how little his penency was compared to what he thought he deserved, and almost took joy in it.

Greyson had worked sixteen hours. He was tired, but he wanted to be tired. It helped him to keep from thinking about all the problems. He sat down in a deep chair and picked up the paper. The headlines glared at him. "The Dunbar group pull off another bank-robbery." Greyson shook his head. "God, how do they keep getting away with it? They must be the cleverest bunch God ever created. It is heinous. This time they have killed two men. "One teller, having escaped with his life, told this reporter that they are more like animals than human beings. The girl has been described as beautiful in other news items, but I don't see how anyone could find anything attractive about her. She was incredibly dirty.

"The young boy, I would judge about fourteen, looked as if he were reluctant to be behaving in this way. I noticed him looking at his dad with what appeared to be hatred and contempt. However, his dad glanced at him several times with a look of warning. I thought I saw in the boy's face, some sympathy or remorse, when the two men fell. I had the feeling, even, that he would not shoot me if I made some move to defend myself. That was an entirely different feeling I got from that I saw in the girl's face. Her face was hard, callous, looking. She stepped over one of the dead bodies, as if it weren't there. It was easy to see that she and the old man were a well-coordinated team. I think they each knew exactly what to expect of the other. It was like a well-oiled machine. Not a hitch. Of course now, if I met that boy on the street, I wouldn't gamble on his feelings being as I judged them. He may be as perfidious as the others."

"I hope they catch them soon," Greyson said. "They have done enough damage. They surely can't escape the noose much longer. Of course, I do hope that if that young boy has been coerced into cooperating, that will be taken into consideration and he can be given a chance to change his life."

CHAPTER XXIII

Laura snuggled into Van's waiting arms. "I just can't. thank god enough for all my blessings," she said. They are more than I ever dreamed could be possible. I hate to go to sleep because I don't want to waste any time from enjoying my life."

"It is wonderful. I find it difficult to express my appreciation for what I have now. I had given up. I had decided there was not any happiness in life for me--and now look at me! There is no expressing my joy just holding you--

and then to add your words that you like my loving as much as I do; it's indescribable, beyond words."

Greyson heard Roxanne's cries. He bounded to the door to go in to her. "No," he heard Drue's voice behind him. "Don't go in. It will only make her more angry. Greyson looked alarmed. He stood staring at Drue. "She is losing the baby," Drue said. "All we can do is try to make it as easy as possible."

"I'll get a doctor!" Greyson said, turning to run out the door. Joe caught his arm. "You stay son. I'll go. I can ride as fast as you can." Greyson fell into a chair. He put his head down. His sobs were uncontrollable. Drue came and put her arms around him. "I'm sorry," she said.

Greyson's face was ashen. "Did she do something...to..."

"No, Greyson. As much as she cursed you and complained about the baby, she wanted it. She is devastated."

"I want to go in and hold her, comfort her." Greyson arose and started to the door again.

"You can't comfort her," Drue said.

"And I want to be comforted. God, how I looked forward

to this little one. Oh, my god!..."

"I wish you could be comforted," Drue said. "And I wish there were some comfort for Roxanne. It is too bad, what she has done to herself. I am so sorry for the whole thing, Greyson. All we can do now, though, is take every step to insure that Roxanne will be all right. I think she will be all right, but I will be glad to have a doctor's opinion."

Greyson couldn't stop sobbing. "I wanted the baby to be named for you, Drue, if it was a girl--and for Joe, if it was a boy. Do you know, Drue..."

The tears came to Drue's eyes now, too. "Yes, Greyson, your baby was a girl."

Neither offered to speak as the hours wore on. Drue went quietly in to check on Roxanne. She had stopped her cries and was sleeping. "Maybe there will be others," she said.

"No, that will never happen. Roxanne will always hate me. We will never be a family. I am responsible for all this. It is what I deserve--but Roxanne. She is the one that is paying most dearly for it."

CHAPTER X

Roxanne came up to the door. She was surprised to hear Carol's voice talking to Greyson. "Will you dance with me? I wish Roxanne would go but whatever this malady she has had for so long is, it has kept her from doing anything. I've missed her so much. We used to be so happy and spent a lot of time playing games and giggling together. Now she is entirely different. I don't think it is getting married that did it, because she was that way for quite a while before you got married. Anyway, since she wont go, and you have to go, and I want to go, will you take me?"

"Of course, Carol, I will be most honored to escort you to the ball. It will be a pleasure to escort the most beautiful girl in the county. I wont want to let you dance with anyone else."

"I don't know what on earth is the matter with Roxanne. I would be happy if I were married to such a..."

Greyson smiled. "Thank you, Carol. It is reassuring that someone thinks it would be all right to be my wife. I think the man who is lucky enough to make you his wife will be very proud."

"Oh, it'll be fun to go to the dance with you!" Carol said. "I will be with the most handsome man in the county. You are, you know, Greyson. There aren't any that can compare with you. You are a real Prince Charming."

Roxanne heard Greyson's laugh. "See you tonight, princess," he said. Roxanne backed away and went back into her bedroom. She wasn't aware of any change in her. She didn't try to analyse, nor interpret her feelings. She just found herself thinking in a different way from what she had been. She didn't even realize that. She had a mirror now. Greyson had brought one for their new home. The six girls had had only one little hand mirror in their own home. Of course, they had access to any number of big mirrors at the Wallings, so they enjoyed primping and assessing their grooming when they were getting ready to go somewhere.

She raised her hands and pulled her unkempt hair on top of her head. She saw with alarm that her face looked

unpleasant. She recognized for the first time in almost two years that her dress was unbecoming, wrinkled, even soiled. . She walked as if in a dream, out to the wash-room. She began to heat water, and prepare for a bath. She looked in her closet. She still had a few of her former lovely clothes. . She heated an iron and pressed out the one she had worn the last night she had been with Van. She didn't really associate the dress with that night he had kissed her. She chose it because it was the prettiest dress she had.

She washed her hair, bathed, experimented with smiling in the mirror. She was . "I used to always be thought of as the most beautiful girl at the balls," she said. "Now that honor goes to Carol. Carol is beautiful. Certainly more beautiful than I am now," she had to admit.

"I have decided to go to the ball," she announced at dinner. Everyone was astonished. She had been adamant about not going--as she had for the past two years. Joe and Drue noticed with rising hope that she had cleaned up, she looked excited, she was smiling! "That's wonderful," Drue said. . Greyson said, "I'm glad," and Roxanne wondered if he weren't just a little disappointed. Carol said nothing. She would have to take a little time to adjust to this change--if it really proved to be a change. Roxanne wondered too, if Carol were disappointed. It had been very obvious that she was

thrilled to be going to the ball with Greyson. Roxanne felt no pangs of jealousy. She had only a feeling that she had thrown away something dear for the satisfaction of her emotions.

When the three of them had arrived at the ballroom, Roxanne felt nervous. She wished she hadn't been so rash as to come. She felt that her face must be red with embarrassment. What did all these people think of her? They had to think she was an utmost fool. She was. And there was no way they could possibly not be aware of that.

Vincent never danced because of his awkward foot. He enjoyed going in sometimes, though, and watching the young people. He liked the music. The music was more home-made now than professional. The popular band from Dallas was not even summoned. Everyone enjoyed the home-made music more. Laura was the main musician. She played the violin. It always reminded her and Van, too, of the way she had played at that dance where Van had found it necessary to knock Homer down, to appease his jealousy.

At first Laura had refused to play. She was not shy about it, but she simply thought it was not the kind of music these people would like. "I just play some old hoe-downs and old fashioned waltzes and..."

"Oh, but we have to hear it," Delia said, and everyone joined the urging. "You play wonderfully," Van said. "Her music is like she didn't even know she was playing it--like it just has to evolve when she touches that fiddle."

Laura laughed. "All right, I will play--for as long as you can stand it," she said. "I do like to play--but you know. I don't know a note. It is all just by ear."

She played a fast tune first. "Old Zip Coon." Everyone was astonished. They laughed and clambered for more. "Wait," Van said. He went out and returned with Luke and his banjo. Luke grinned. He picked up his banjo and when Laura began the next tune, he accompanied her. "Now all we need is someone to fill in the chords on that piano!" Tom said.

"I'll do it for a while," Delia said. "If I can possibly keep up with them. But you will have to change off with me, Tom. I want to dance to some of this music, too."

Tom agreed. He felt that he was far from as good on the piano as Delia was, but he didn't want to appear to be stubborn. "I'll give it a whirl, now and then, but we will have to put in a call for another volunteer, so I can dance with my wife once in a while."

With the fiddle, the banjo and the piano, the music resounded from the four walls--seemed to rock the building. . Everyone was ebullient, exhilarated, happy.

Vincent noticed that Roxanne was embarrassed. He was sorry for her. He walked over and pulled her back against the wall to stand with him. He put his arm around her and felt her trembling. He wished for something he could say to comfort her.

"You look beautiful, Roxanne. I am so glad you came. . Everyone is."

I am not sure about that," Roxanne said, the tears brimming. "I have been such a fool. They must all feel contemptuous of me. I don't blame them, of course."

"They do not feel contemptuous of you at all!" Vincent said. "They all love you. Not one of them, I promise you, thinks you are a fool."

"But I have been a fool. That can't be changed. I can never change that. Saying I am sorry wouldn't help--because it wouldn't erase nor change the facts..."

"All right, Roxanne, maybe you have been foolish. But I assure you that there is not a person in this room, nor in this county, who has not been foolish at some time or other. . We have all made mistakes. How can one fool judge another?" he said.

Roxanne smiled a wan smile. "I don't believe anyone here has ever been as foolish as I have been," she said.

"Oh yes, they have! Every one of them, and I have, too.. Sometime I will sit down and tell you some of the outrageously foolish things I have done. It may make you blush."

Roxanne smiled a little more naturally. She was clinging.

to Vincent's hand as if she were drowning. "Don't you want to dance?" Vincent asked.

"No, please! I want to leave. Will you take me out?"

"All right, if that is what you want. If that is what you want to do, I will take you out. I would like to put a condition on that, though."

She looked frightened. "What condition?"

"Well, I disagree with you about several things. I can prove to you that every man in the room would like to dance with you."

"I don't think so," Roxanne said softly.

"I said I could prove it," Vincent said. "Hey, everyone, I want the floor for just one minute," he said. Everyone quieted.

"I want all you young men to make a circle," he said, "in the middle of the floor. Now, we are going to play a game. You have all probably played it before." He explained the rules of the game so often played at parties, "spin the pan." Whoever wins this game will have the honor of leading 'The Virginia Reel' with our beautiful guest, Roxanne."

He put his lips close to Roxanne's ear and whispered. "I am going to cheat a little. I know who is the expert at this game. I've seen him win it dozens of times."

Roxanne looked puzzled. "Now," Vincent said. "hand me that tin pan." He took the pan and walked into the middle of the circle. He gave it a forceful spin. When it had almost worn out its energy, Vincent blew the whistle. Each man made a dash to pick up the pan. Greyson stepped gracefully into the circle and caught the pan between his palms.

There was some screaming and shouting. Greyson walked over to where Roxanne stood and offered her his arm. He led her out onto the floor. Eight couples lined up to dance the

Virginia Reel. "Isn't it beautiful? Aren't they all beautiful?" Dorinda said. "Do you think you fooled anyone by that little antic," she laughed.

"Probably a few," he said, his eyes gleaming, "but I told Roxanne I was cheating a little, and I am sure Greyson knows how scheming his dad can be."

"And thanks you wholeheartedly for it," she said.

"I hope so," he said.

The dancers were ducking in and out, in and out. Each time Roxanne wound up with a new partner for the sidestep down the row, that man complimented her and said how happy he was to see her back.

When it was Van's turn, Roxanne looked up at him with some surprise. She had been so engrossed in keeping the step, and trying to gauge how everyone really felt about her, that she hadn't noticed that he would be her next partner. Her heart skipped a beat and she almost missed a step.

"Will you save the next dance for me?" he asked her. She heard his heart racing and wondered if he had been effected by the fact of her presence.

The next dance was a waltz. Van claimed her and took her out onto the floor. His arms involuntarily caressed her. He noticed that she was wearing that dress which he had thought looked like all fluff and ribbons and lace that night two years ago. Her shoulders were bare. They were smooth and gleaming. The firm, round upper breasts were bare. Van heard his own heart racing. "God," he said, "She is absolutely the loveliest little girl that ever walked the face of the earth!" . Laura didn't exist. He was back to that date when he and Roxanne stood in the unfinished room of the new mansion, and he suddenly decided that he loved her. "I love you, Roxanne," he said. "My god, you are lovely! How can any man ever resist you? Roxanne, come with me..."

Roxanne was so stunned that she hadn't had time to make any answer. She couldn't organize her feelings so quickly. She wasn't sure what Van meant. Had he decided that he really loved her? And what if he had? What would they do about it? She didn't have the slightest notion even what she wanted. It seemed too complicated even to think about right now. It had taken her two years to work herself out of the spell he had cast over her. Would she want to dive back into that labyrinth again? She felt no satisfaction in his having.

decided he wanted her.

"My little sweetheart," Van said. "My little Roxanne..." Someone came and claimed her for the next dance, and Van walked out of the room. He was trembling. He felt all the fervency of his desire, all the intensity of his need, all the thrill of her kisses, her sweet, warm lips seeking his, her words that she wanted them to be married and that if they were married he would make love to her..."I'll see to that..."

He felt no infidelity toward Laura. "Am I then a libertine, after all? I can't understand myself. No one could have told me I would ever feel this way. She is the loveliest thing that ever graced a man's heart. I could have married her. She could be mine. All mine! He thought of how he had longed for Laure all the time Roxanne was trying to convince him that she could make him forget "that other girl." "Can a man love two women at the same time," he asked himself. "I believe I do. It certainly isn't unprecedented. Men in India and other countries have had harems since the beginning of history. Right here in the United States, Brigham Young and his followers take several wives. There seems to be almost no resentment on the part of anyone about this. I always thought it was almost a laughing matter--or on the other hand, an outrage.

"Well, that certainly isn't what I want. Not at all. I feel as if I were two men inhabiting the same body. One is intensely, irrevocably in love with Laura, and the other just as intensely and irrevocably loves Roxanne. "Roxanne," he said, "there is no way I can ever forget you, forget our love,

our kisses, my need of you. His arms seemed to enfold her again, as that night two years ago when he had thanked god that she had said they would have to wait until they were married, or, he had thought, he could not have trusted himself not to make love to her with the intensity of his passion."

He decided he would have to go back to the ballroom.. Everyone would think it strange, if he remained away. He wondered if he could possibly resist carrying the little beauty out of the room and away, to be alone with her-- forever.

His emotions were only half under control when he walked back into the room. Automatically his eyes sought Roxanne. She was radiant, that lovely smile seemed to light the room. His heart ached. When he could without its being too obvious he took Roxanne for another dance. He purposely chose a waltz. He knew she could not help realizing his raging need of her, the effect her body against his had on him. "If I were fifteen years younger," he whispered, "I would give that young prince of yours a run for his money. I would do anything in my power to win you away from him."

He looked up to see Greyson watching him. "Well, I don't think anyone would have much of a chance against that young Adonis. I guess he is the handsomest and the most charming man I have ever seen." He sighed. "I am going to go on with my life, Roxanne. I do love Laura and my little girl. I am happy with them. But I want you to know that for as long as I live, there will come times when I will live again those hours. I had your love; your undivided love. It was...beautiful. I didn't know how lucky I was."

Van walked into the room where Laura sat waiting for him. Her heart skipped a beat as it always did, when she saw him. She smiled. She noticed that his brow was furrowed. He looked troubled. "What's wrong, Van?" she asked.

He was trembling. His face looked ghostly. "I have to tell you something before I lose the courage to do so." He sat down heavily beside her. He seemed unable to go on.

"What is it, Van?" she was frightened.

"I have been unfaithful to you," he said.

"Van!" her face turned white. "I don't believe it!
When?"

"Not physically, Laura, but in my mind--which I think is
just as bad."

Laura sighed a sigh of relief

"No one could ever have made me believe I would feel this.
way. I had no such thoughts, whatsoever when I saw Roxanne.
after almost two years. I had just felt sorry for her because.
I knew she was unhappy. Then, when we were dancing the.
Virginia reel, I suddenly found myself...wanting her. No one.
could have been any more surprised than I was. Laura I don't.
want to hurt you. I am telling you this because...whatever.
else I am, and I am beginning to wonder just what kind of man.
I really am--I cannot be deceitful. I feel that I owe you the.
truth."

"Yes," Laura said. "I believe that you are truthful."

"I danced with Roxanne, and I was as stimulated, as eager.
to make love to her as I was that night when all my whole.
being turned around and I decided that I wanted to marry her. .
I was back there, holding her, intoxicated with her kisses,.
wishing there was nothing on earth to stop me from...making.
love to her. I wanted more than anything else in the world.
tonight, to have her alone with me and make love to her. I.
don't know what that makes me. I don't know how to account.
for it. There was never a moment when she was telling me how.
much she wanted us to be married, that I ceased to think of.
you and want you. I don't know how a thing like this could.
have happened. I am sorry. I will do whatever you want me to.
about it."

Laura sat silent for a long time. "I will have to think.
about it. Did you kiss her, Van?"

"No. I would have though, if I had had half a chance. I
cannot deny that. And I would have made love to her, too, if.
that had been possible."

"I'm glad it wasn't possible," she said. "And in spite.

of what you told me, I doubt very much if you would have under any circumstances."

"Good as that sounds to me, Laura, it is not true."

"Remember Daniel?" Laura said, and Van wondered what that irrelevant subject could have to do with what he was telling her.

"Well, he told me that if he didn't consider you unbeatable competition, he would do everything in his power to make me love him."

Van gasped. "When did he tell you that, the bastard."

Laura laughed lightly. "He is dead, Van. He was not a bad man at all. He was a fine man. You know that."

"I certainly shouldn't blame any man for wanting you," he said. "No, you are right, he wasn't a bastard at all. I admired him."

Laura briefly wondered what Van would feel or say if he knew that Daniel had almost raped her once. She didn't intend to mention it. "He was a handsome and charming man," Laura continued. "I was flattered by his admission that he was so attracted to me--even though I loved you beyond endurance. . . But trying to be honest, as you are--I have to admit that many times I have thought of how it might have been to..."

"To have him make love to you? God, Laura, that makes me sick with jealousy--but I realize now that that is not very--

fair, logical."

"I know without any reservations, that if I had had the chance at any one of those times I thought of him, and was--well...thrilled by his wanting me--I would never actually have wanted him to touch me."

"I'm glad of that," Van said.

"I think it is called fantasizing. I believe that if you had had the opportunity to make love to Roxanne, you would have done just as you did before. You would have realized.

that you didn't really want to. Isn't that possible?"

"Yes, of course it is! I do know that I would never have carried out my...desires. I couldn't have. Is that what it was, do you suppose? Just a fantasy?"

"Maybe. What do you think, Van?"

"I think you are right. It didn't occur to me. I still feel guilty, but I know that I don't really want any other woman than you."

"I expect that this is not the last time you will fantasize about her, and probably not the last time I will fantasize about Daniel--but neither of us would want to carry out those fantasies. I expect that if the truth were known, most people, most very loyal people have fantasies that they would never want to fulfill."

"I'm jealous even of your fantasies," Van said.

"And I am jealous of yours--but I can live with it. I could never live with real infidelity. I don't believe you will ever be untrue to me, in reality."

"I know now that I never will--never could," Van said. .
"You are the only woman I ever wanted since I met you, and the only one I ever will want. Of course there was that brief few hours that I did allow myself to dream--fantacize about being married to Roxanne--but even then I didn't feel right about it. Just the next morning I told her that we would have to wait two years--and then told her that it wasn't to be. That we were never going to be married."

"Roxanne is the most lovely girl I have ever seen. She takes my breath away, too. I thought Maggie was the most beautiful woman in the world until I saw Roxanne. It wouldn't be easy for any man to resist her. And if she pursued a man, asked him to kiss her, to marry her, I can understand that it would be a very difficult thing to keep from...at least fantasizing. You are one of the very few men on earth, probably, who would not have made every effort to make those fantasies into reality. That is what is important to me."

CHAPTER XXIV

Roxanne and Carol and Greyson stayed the rest of the night with the Wallings. Roxanne and Greyson were given a room together. No one wanted to reveal the fact that they slept apart in separate rooms. Greyson turned away. He was disconcerted to find himself remembering how every man in the ballroom seemed to be excited by the nearness of his wife. "Everyone excepting me," he said. He wanted that to be true, but he knew it was not. I was as aroused as the next man, when I held her in my arms. She is the most intoxicating woman this side of Heaven. No wonder I was lured into believing I was in love with her; couldn't live without her. She is a Circe. Lures men to their deaths.

He found himself suddenly turning over and taking her in his arms. She didn't object. He didn't bother to ask her permission to kiss her. His kisses were covering her lips, her neck, her breasts. Why the hell do I feel so damn guilty? he asked himself. She is my wife. I didn't force her. She was pliant enough. Even responsive. Why the hell do I feel so guilty?

Next day it was impossible for him to get his mind off the incident of the night before. It was less honorable even than to have gone to a bordello, to take a mistress, to lie with some woman who means nothing to me. Taking her when I no longer love her is deplorable. I don't like myself very much.

CHAPTER X1

Greyson stopped, threw down his hammer. He had been working on the house, animal shelters, the spring, every

moment of daylight. He mopped his forehead. Sat down on a stump. He recognized a need to assess his life again. He had buried this need in his work, since he felt that his first decision that he was damn lucky not to have to pay any higher price than this for his folly.

I thought I would always be so grateful for my lenient sentence that I would not complain whatever was handed to me. . Maybe it's human nature not to appreciate all that we get. . When we get more than we deserve, we begin after a while, to take it for granted and want more. I know I can't go on like this without making some effort to change it. He knew he had made every effort to help Roxanne to change, so that they might make a good life out of the hell they had created. It is hopeless. She is never going to change. It would have been rewarding to see her learn to enjoy life again, even if she had never come to stop hating me--but that isn't going to happen either.

"Now I want some happiness, at least some surcease. I want love and peace of mind. I will never find that now. So, in order to forget it, shall I do as so many men do, find...at least relief--in a bordello? My father never visited a bordello in his life. He never would have under any circumstances. But there are a lot of good men who do. Some take mistresses. His mind went on, trying to work itself out of what had become despair. I was always so proud of my father for not succumbing to the demands of his body, just for gratification of desires. I never doubted that I would be able to maintain that standard. The pain, the sacrifice is more than worth it, if you have cherished the ideal of lofty character.

I can not imagine ever finding a woman that I would want to spend the rest of my life with. I knew a lot of pretty and attractive girls in Boston, but I was never really interested in any of them. There are a lot of charming girls at the balls at Delia's, but none of them interest me much, either..

I could be contented with Carol, find peace of mind, maybe. even a certain amount of happiness, but I would never consider taking her as a mistress, even if she would consent, which I am sure she would not. She is very fond of me--maybe even in love with me, but she is not the type to compromise her own ethics and I am glad of that."

He got on his horse and rode into Dallas. He was undecided what he wanted to do when he got there. He had a couple of drinks. He made his way to the most popular bordello. He asked the madam to look over her wares. Most of the girls looked crude and coarse to him. He couldn't imagine there being any fulfillment in lying with one of them. "What are you prepared to pay?" the madam asked.

"Whatever?" Greyson answered absently.

Another girl was brought into his presence. She was beautiful, young, but she looked as if she had been mauled. Greyson believed he saw bruises on her face. She refused to look at him. "I'll take her," he suddenly said. He was led to a room upstairs. The door was closed. Greyson couldn't decide what he wanted to do next. He wasn't sure he wanted to do anything. The girl began to remove her garments, slowly, her back turned.

"Wait a minute, please," Greyson said. "I am not sure I want this after all." She looked at him for the first time, questioning. He walked over to her. "Is that bruises on your face?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "I am sorry if that disturbs you. My body is worse, so maybe you should ask for someone else. I know it isn't pretty...you shouldn't have to pay for..."

"For what?" he was beginning to be very curious.

"For an ugly prostitute. I will be beaten if I do not please you, but that is not your fault. I am one of their most expensive girls, so I am expected to..."

"To carry on, whatever..."

"Yes," she said.
"But it isn't what you want to do?"

"I can't get used to this. But every time I show my revulsion, I am beaten. I can't seem to stop showing it..."

"I see," Greyson said. "Put your clothes back on."

"She sighed and began to put the clothes she had removed back on."

"Let's go," he said."

"Go where?"

"I would like to take you home with me. I don't think you belong here."

She almost smiled for the first time. "I don't expect anything you wanted me for in your home could be any worse than this, but it is impossible to go with you. They won't let me out."

"They'll let you out!" Greyson said. He took her hand and she followed him down the stairs. No one paid any attention to them until they got to the door. "Where are you going?" the madam asked.

"It's none of your business," Greyson said. The madam blew a whistle and a burly man appeared. He walked over to Greyson and raised a club. Greyson was big, strong, angry, trained by Maib in the art of self-defense. He was as alert as he had ever been in his life. The fight didn't last long. The burly man lay on the floor groaning. The madam was screaming at the top of her voice. The other girls and several of the customers came running to see what was going on. No one seemed inclined to take sides.

Greyson helped the girl into his carriage. "What's your name?" he asked.

"My real name is Mary Rogers," she said. "My name for this place is Roxy Reed. What do you intend to do with me?"

"For right now, I am going to take you to my home. We will talk about what you want to do, and decide what is best later."

She relaxed a bit. "I thought you were a goner when you

attacked that brute," she said. "No one has ever been able to hold their own with him before. It was the surprise of his life, I'd bet, and a real surprise to madam Bodie, too."

"I'd like to go back and beat him until all his bones cracked and then maybe start in on her. Do all the girls hate their work as much as you do--did?"

"No, I don't think so, but there are enough of them who would give anything to get away. But then, most of them who hate it don't have any other way to live, so they would stay there anyway--awful as it is."

Greyson's teeth were grinding, his jaw working in that way Van's always did when he was angry and could not vent that anger. "I wonder what the answer is?" he said. "Maybe there isn't any answer...human nature being what it is."

Roxanne was surprised when Greyson brought the girl into their living-room. She looked stupefied and angry. "What right do you have to bring a strange woman into this house?" she demanded, "Without consulting me?"

"Why should I consult you?" Greyson asked.

"Because I am the mistress of this house," she said. "I am your wife."

"You could have fooled me," Greyson said bitterly.

Roxanne was stunned. Greyson had humored her in most of her shrewishness, but she felt that this time maybe he was going to ignore her. "Is she to be your mistress then?"

"Perhaps," Greyson said. "That will be up to her."

Angry and vindictive as Roxanne had been, she had never failed to realize that Greyson was extremely attractive to women. Even in her estimation, no one had matched his charm and handsome bearing. She remembered with nostalgia, the feel of his hard muscled body against hers, his steel arms, his massive shoulders, his gentle kisses. No!" she said, as if she were answering some request from him. I do not want his love. I don't want him to touch me! This creature will no doubt think she is the luckiest girl in the the world to be

kept by such a man, she thought.

Greyson gave Mary his bedroom and moved his things into the living-room. Another bedroom would be finished within a month or two, if he kept working and the weather held out. He considered talking with Drue and Joe about the best thing to do about Mary's situation, but he decided to put it off. There was a lot more he wanted to talk to Mary about, first.

After talking to Mary alone several times, he discovered that she had no home and not many qualifications for getting or holding a job. "Would you consider working for me," he asked, "and my wife--as a maid? My wife is a harridan. She will make life as difficult for you as possible. But you will be safe. I will try to make things as pleasant for you as I can. I am out of the house most of the time during daylight, however, so you may be subjected to some verbal abuse."

"Nothing could be as bad as the place I was in," she said. "I will be happy to work as a maid. I want to warn you that there is a lot I don't know how to do, but I am willing to try to learn."

"Anything you need to know, my wife's sister will be glad to show you. She is different from my wife. You will like her."

"It scares me to think of meeting her, but I will do my best," Mary said.

Drue and Carol came and showed Mary how to cook, how to clean and prepare a chicken for the pot, how to knead bread and how to judge when it was ready to bake. They taught her how to keep the stove stoked with wood just enough so that the bread would bake properly. "We baked ours outside on a fireplace in a dutch oven for years," Carol laughed, "but Greyson got us a cook stove. It took us a while to learn how to use it."

Roxanne stayed out of sight most of the time. Mary did the work required of her, learned all she could, discovered that she was to put just two plates on the table, as Roxanne would not eat at the table with her.

"I always thought a maid was to serve the employers,"

Roxanne sneered. "Not the other way around. I refuse to sit at the table with her."

"Good," Greyson said. "Then we will not have to listen to your sullen remarks. Mary is much more pleasant to be with."

Drue and Joe knew immediately what the circumstances were. "It makes my heart ache," Drue said, "but I don't think we can blame Greyson as much as Roxanne. She has been impossible to live with for so long. He has put up with more than most people would."

"Yes," Joe said. "Greyson has had no one to talk to, to be close with, to share his bed, for two years. A man cannot be expected to go on like that forever. If he can find a little peace of mind, a little happiness with this girl, I can't blame him. Roxanne has made anything less, impossible."

Greyson was happy. His mind was occupied with Mary most of the time. His happiness was marred by the fact that he knew he had hurt Drue and Joe, and by the fact that he had not been able to live up to those standards his father had set up for him. He thought of these things less and less, however. He had ceased to dream of the time when Roxanne would recover from her malady. He no longer longed for her love.

Mary felt that in spite of the awkward circumstances, which she believed they had a right to resent, Roxanne's people liked her. She spent more and more time with them, and they came to help her in whatever way they could. She was happier than she had ever been in her life. It frightened her sometimes to think that she was not really anything to Greyson, and that he might tire of her at any time. She thought too, that if Roxanne ever came to behave in a way that was acceptable, Greyson would surely return to his former admiration of her. What would she do in that case? I will just have to face that when--if it occurs, she said. In the meantime, she did everything to make Greyson's life happy.

Roxanne did all she could to make Mary miserable. It was not very effective. She could not do anything other than speak in her derisive and ascerbic way. Mary didn't allow it to bother her. When Roxanne saw that she was making no impression and that she could not impress Greyson either, with her invective and complaints, she began to be more bitter than.

ever. It was imperative to her to find some way to get even with Greyson. She cleaned up, dressed in her prettiest dress, put her hair up in style. She asked her father to harness the team for her. He did so without comment. He was beyond trying to guess what she might do next, or trying to influence her.

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CHAPTER XII

Greyson went about his work again. His problem of loneliness, need for sensual gratification, mutual affection. had not been alleviated. He couldn't get his mind off Mary. . He kept being reminded of the gentle voice, the soft look in her eyes, the appreciation she had shown. She is not as pretty as Roxanne once was, nor even as pretty as Carol, but she is lovely just the same. Her dark curls, her hazel eyes, her creamy skin, her little, shy smile, her slender, firm body, were all tantalizing to him. He censored himself, but the thought of possessing her was implanted in his mind. I don't want to live a monastic life. I want someone to hold in my arms. Someone who responds to my loving. Someone who cares about me... He was reminded again, that his punishment had been welcomed at first, and that he had vowed that nothing could ever cause him to feel that his punishment was too severe.

Mary was in the kitchen struggling with the chicken. She had almost succeeded in dressing it for the oven. She took great pains to see that it was done properly and seasoned exactly right. She had baked a cake and felt that it had

turned out to her satisfaction. I will try cinnamon rolls tomorrow, she said proudly. The bread turned out all right. . I will have to ask Greyson to bring in some more cream. We are out of butter. She looked up to see Greyson watching her.. She tried to read what was in his face, but failed. She smiled. She began to ask him about the cream.

Greyson had come in from work early. "I hate to see you working all the time," he said. "Let's take the rest of the day off."

"What would you like to do?" she asked.

"I'd better not answer that," he grinned, and then he was embarrassed, and hurried on. "We could go for a ride...what would you like to do?"

"Well, we used to fish a lot when my father was alive. I love to fish. Are there any fish in these streams?"

Oh, I think so. I hate to admit it, but I have never gone fishing in my life. It would be a good experience. I.

would love to. I don't have any fishing equipment, but I know. I can get some from Joe."

They went to where the two streams met--the one from the Redford's spring and the one from the Greyson Walling's. spring. Not far below, was a deep, still pool. "That will be the best place to try for them," Mary said. Her face was glowing with happiness and excitement.

Greyson watched her. She was hurrying over to the edge of the water, when she caught her shoe on a rock and stumbled. Greyson caught her before she had fallen. He stood holding her in his arms. He remembered the admonition that no gentleman ever kissed a woman without her permission. "I want you to know I have never kissed a girl in my life other than Roxanne, I haven't kissed her for...a long time. I have no desire to kiss her any more. For some reason," he continued, "I want you to know that I never went to a bordello before in my life. I don't know why I am telling you these things," he said. "I want to kiss you. It is wrong of me. I have no

other excuse than that I have longed to kiss you since the madam brought you into my presence." He was trembling.

She raised her arms, her full breasts brushed against him. He put his lips on hers again and she responded fervently. "Mary," he said. "You know I am a married man. I can't offer you much--but I want you! I...want you right now. I'm not sure I can be a gentleman any longer."

"I think you are a gentleman," she said. "I have had...numerous men--but never before one I wanted. Enjoying having a man touch me, want me, is a new experience for me. A wonderful experience."

All I know is that I have wanted very much to kiss you ever since I saw you there in that bordello. I didn't want it there, though. I wanted to be with you and love you in a clean, wholesome way--like this."

They sank down on the grass. Their kisses became more fervent..

"I wanted so much to make Roxanne happy. Nothing ever did. I kept thinking the time would come when we would drive into Dallas and buy beautiful clothes, things for our home. It never came to pass. Now I am going to take you there and

watch while you pick out things you want. It will be a joy I have missed. I like to make someone happy. I got that from my parents. They were always doing things to make each other happy, and us boys, too."

They drove into Dallas next day. He took her to the best stores and persuaded her, over numerous objections, to choose some beautiful daytime and night wear. He then took her to a good hotel and they enjoyed their time together to the fullest.

"I truly was convinced that I would love Roxanne for the rest of my life--whatever she did, Greyson told Mary, "but that seems a far distance in the past. I can truthfully say that as long as you will stay with me, under the deplorable circumstances, I will be true to you. I will be happy."

"I will be happy, too," she said.

Greyson was briefly reminded again, of how he had determined that there would never come a time when he would not be deeply grateful for the good life fate had handed him after he had thought his life was ruined forever. And how

that had proven not to be true, how he had come to want something for himself after all. "Will it be this way with her," he thought. "Will she be happy for a while and then decide that she has to have more? Probably," he decided, but in the meantime, I intend to be happy and not worry about it. . Right now..."

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CHAPTER XIII

Roxanne was thinking of what Van had said that night of the last ball she had attended. She had heard him say that he loved her. She had been very aware of his desire for her. She had waited for the joy, the exaltation, the rapture of these words to register, but it hadn't happen. He seemed to be an old, not very exciting man. Now she was wondering how she could use that desire. She drove to the Walling ranch. She went directly to where Van was occupied with nailing new boards on the haybarn. When he looked up, he gave her a happy greeting. "How are you, Roxanne? I'm glad you came. Is Greyson with you? Have you been in to see Delia and the others yet? They will want you to stay for dinner and tell us all about what's been going on."

"No, Van," Roxanne said, walking up very close to him. "I came to see you. At the last ball, you said that you loved me. You asked me to go out...alone with you. I didn't have a chance to answer that. I have thought of nothing else since." She noticed Van's flush. She didn't know what it meant. She hoped it meant that he still had that desire for her. "I want to go somewhere alone with you now, Van."

"Roxanne, I don't know what struck me that night. You are so...lovely. I was suddenly catapulted back to that afternoon when we decided to get married. Our feelings that day were brought back with a tremendous force. I did want you just as I did on that day I changed my mind for a while about our

being married. The thought of making love to you overwhelmed me that day and again with the same force the night of the ball, when I saw you again after two years. I..."

She had pressed her body against him and chained her arms around his neck. He took her arms in his and meant to pull them away. "Please don't let me die again, Van," she said. "Please at least kiss me just once."

Van was not sure what he should do. Could it really mean that much to her? He knew something of how she had been behaving, and he felt guilty for having hurt her so deeply. His memory of hurting her and of making Laura feel so rejected that time she had said that she loved him were paramount in his decision. He put his arms around her and kissed her.

lightly. Her arms tightened and she began to sob. He was deeply disturbed. The kisses had not effected him at all in that way he had been drawn into that night of the ball, or that reality the day he had decided to marry her. He wished fervently that she had not come, had not felt that she must have his kisses again.

He suddenly felt his body being jerked away from her. He heard her scream. He whirled to face Greyson. Van didn't want to hit Greyson. He found that it was necessary in order to defend himself. Greyson was fighting with a fury that surprised Van. He decided to use his knowledge of ju jitsu. He hadn't had occasion to use it for a very long time. Greyson was an inch taller than Van. He was heavier. His shoulders were more massive. He was fifteen years younger. He was as learned as was Van at ju jitsu. He had learned it more recently. He had been working his muscles fifteen hours a day, and was all brawn. Van hardly stood a chance against him. Maib heard Roxanne's screams and came to see what they were about. He pulled Greyson off Van. It was all that valiant man could do to stop Greyson.

Van was injured. "What the hell is this all about?" Maib asked as he carried Van into the house.

"Go get Laura," Delia said when Maib walked in with Van in his arms.

Greyson had followed Maib into the house. He felt that he ought to go face the people there, for whatever they might want to say to him. "What happened?" Delia asked Roxanne.

"Van asked me to be alone with him...he said he still loved me. He was kissing me," she said.

"I don't give a damn about Roxanne any more," Greyson said with a viciousness none of them had thought him capable of. "But no one could have made me believe Van would..."

Van was moaning, regaining consciousness. Laura had come in and was kneeling by his side. "I wonder if he has any broken bones," Tom said, looking searchingly at Greyson.

"We had better send for a doctor," Delia said. I don't think the Indian can do anything about this."

"I will be all right," Van said.

"What happened?" Laura asked.

"She said Van was kissing her," Maib said. "She said Van told her he loved her." His voice was angry.

"Oh," Laura sounded quite casual. "And did you hit him for that, Greyson? It was she, wasn't it, that rode here? . Why did she come? She didn't go in the house. She sought Van out. Does that sound to you as if Van had told her he wanted to be alone with her, still loved her?"

"I...am guilty as charged," Van said. "Greyson did the right thing. I did kiss Roxanne."

Roxanne tossed her head as if exonerated. Greyson strode across the floor, took her roughly by the arm and walked out of the room. "You have shamed me for the last time. Am I going to have to lock you up to prevent you from embarrassing the whole family? You have hurt your parents, and all of the Wallings. I think you have done enough. If I had only known what kind of fool you are..."

Roxanne sobbed all the way home. Greyson paid no attention to her. His patience and compassion were worn out."

"It seems I am always explaining to you, Laura."

"I don't think this needs any explaining," Laura said, as much to Delia and Tom and Maib as to Van. "We all know. Roxanne rode here. She sought you out. She had to have had some purpose in mind. I think she wanted to do something, anything she could to try to avenge herself on her husband--

and you too, of course. She can't help knowing that maid of theirs is Greyson's mistress. I don't think anyone blames him. He was a paragon of patience and consideration for almost two years. I am very sorry for Roxanne, but I think it is about time she began to face up to the fact that she isn't going to get her own way by behaving in such an irrational manner."

"Yes," Delia said, "It is one of the saddest things I have ever known about."

"And it was all my fault," Van said. "Only I am to blame,"

"Are you to blame that Roxanne would not accept the fact that you did not love her in the way she demanded? I don't think so," Delia said. "It is not your fault. I think we all know that if you did kiss her tonight, it was because you felt so guilty for hurting her. You felt that this whole two years of hell she has kept the fires burning for, is your fault. She made you believe that she had suffered so much at your hands, you owed her a few kisses. Is that not true?"

Van had turned away. They all knew Van. They all knew it was true. "I hate to have her criticized," he said, "for things that were all my fault."

"I am not criticizing her," Laura said. "I am saying that she misunderstood your intentions, and was too perisitant, and that you were both hurt by that. I am saying that you did everything in your power to keep just that from happening. It is not your fault--nor hers, really. You are both victims of the same misinterpretation of your concern for her."

"I wish to god I knew what the answer is," Van finally said.

"I'll hep you upstairs," Maib said. "You'd best stay here tonight."

"Yeah, maybe so," Tom grinned. "Safer, in case that little witch comes back and accosts you again."

Greyson helped Roxanne down from the carriage. She was still sobbing. He drove away to the stables and left her standing alone.

He went to his room and sat down on the side of the bed.. "I think Laura was right," he said, almost sobbing, himself. "I think Van has tried his best to avoid her. It must have been hell for him all this time. I'm sorry for him. He is too much of a man to say it was her. He took all the blame on himself."

He wanted the comfort of Mary's arms. He got up and tapped on her door. She opened it and welcomed him in. Before he could lock it, Roxanne burst in. She had a revolver in her hands. She pointed it at Greyson and then slowly brought it around to Mary. "I will kill you," she said. "I am going to kill you both."

Greyson was quick and alert. He didn't move as long as she had the gun pointed at Mary--but when she turned it again on him he quickly bent to the side and was upon her before she could move. He took the gun. Roxanne fell to the floor, unconscious.

"My god," Greyson breathed. "Will you run and get Drue and Joe?"

"I feel like crying," Drue said, "but I have felt that way for a long time. I never did know crying to solve anything yet, so I guess I won't resort to it now. I feel as if one of my daughters had died; a terrible, painful death. It doesn't help to cry even about death. I hate to say this, but I think we will have to commit Roxanne. I don't know what happened to her mind, but something did. She may harm someone

-or herself. What do you think, Joe?"

"I think you are probably right," Joe said, holding back his own tears.

Roxanne looked panicky. She looked with searching eyes from her parents to Greyson for assurance that this would not be allowed. "No!" she said. "I am not insane. Those places are pigstys! You've read about them! You couldn't think of doing something like that to me!"

"Yes, Roxanne, they are pigstys. We will all do everything we can to see that you have good care. But I am afraid you have made it impossible to keep you here. You threatened Greyson's life and that of this girl. We cannot allow you to go about things in this way. If Greyson hadn't been very quick and alert, you probably would have killed both of them. So you see..."

"No! no! no! I won't go. You can't make me!"

"None of us want to do this, Roxanne. Any one of us.

would give half our lives to prevent it--but there is nothing we can do."

Roxanne looked frightened. She looked from face to face. "I am not insane," she said. "I know it will probably be impossible to convince you of that--after all I have done, but I am not insane." No one said anything for a long time. "It is hard to explain what happened to me. I was very hurt over Van rejecting me. But that hurt all ended a long time ago. When I realized that I no longer wanted him--that I was no longer hurt over what had happened between us, I wanted to tell everyone that, and try to live a normal life. I was falling in love with Greyson. I appreciated his kindness, his concern, all that he was trying to do for me. I wanted to tell him these things. Wanted to have a good marriage with him, but..."

"My god," Greyson said. "If there had been one sign, one instance of compatibility, one word that this was the case, I would have been true to the ends of the earth..." He was

almost in tears. "None of this would ever have happened."

Roxanne's face was white. "I tried to think why it was so impossible for me to tell everyone about this change, and what I wanted. I knew everyone would support me--but...I think I felt like Greyson said he did. I felt that I had to do penance. Had to pay for my sickening mistakes. I couldn't accept forgiveness and love without...paying. I can't express how guilty I felt. How foolish. How indecent."

"We would all have been so glad to help you overcome this," Drue said, "if only we had known. I made the mistake of thinking that any of my children would feel free to tell me anything that was bothering them."

"And I would have done all I could too, to help you see that your penance had been enough," Greyson said, "that you were not as guilty as you believed--not nearly as guilty as I was. I had learned to accept my very light sentence. I know your position was more difficult than mine. No one even knew what I had done, and most of them don't yet--but you were pregnant, so you had to bear the bigger portion of the...guilt. That bothered me a lot--but I was convinced that to let it go as we all had decided, was the best thing I could do for you."

"Yes, it was. It was the way I wanted it. I knew that all the family would forgive me for whatever I had done, but I couldn't forgive myself--for the shame I had brought on everyone. I can't explain it, but there was a feeling that each time I did some further hateful thing, I had paid a further penency, and each time I had paid a further penence, I had made it necessary to do some other hateful thing. Then I needed to pay more...in order to try to erase my guilt. Like I said, even knowing all of you would forgive me, I kept abhorring the fact that what I did could not be erased. Even if I were forgiven, the awful fact of what I had done, what I had proven I was instead of what I had always thought of myself as being and what everyone else had thought I was, would always remain. I couldn't face up to that. I can't yet. I never will be able to."

"You were doing nothing but hurting yourself more and more," Drue said. "It is...sad."

"But even though you were hurting yourself more and more," Greyson said, "you were hurting everyone else all the time. Didn't you see that you were causing everyone else to suffer, and that it wasn't necessary?"

"Incredible as it seems, I was too concentrated on my own misery to think much about how everyone else was feeling. I can't say I didn't know it. I just wouldn't allow it to register."

Again no one spoke for a long time. Emotions were raw. They were all trying to come to some meaningful answer.

"I don't blame you if you do send me away. Maybe being locked up will make me feel I have been punished enough that I don't have to go on punishing myself. I knew a long time ago that there was nothing left in life for me. I knew a long time ago that I had the finest husband in the world, but that I had thrown his love away. I never did deserve him. I will always love you, Greyson I don't expect that to change anything. I had always kept hoping that the time would come when I could behave like a woman, and you would still love me-

-but when you brought Mary home, I knew it was too late... I am ready to go. There is nothing I want out of life."

"You tried to kill us," Greyson said.

"Yes, I had worn out all the gamut of hateful things I could do and say, and to go that step further, which always seemed necessary, I decided to kill you. I probably would have. I was jealous and angry--but the anger was with myself. I hated myself, and I always will, of course. Now that you have forced me to put into words what I have done and how I have felt, I feel...kind of purged. I don't feel clean. I never will--but I know I will never have any need to be hateful again. It won't gain me anything to be...decent. I

won't ask anything. But I am sick of being a fool. I will never do anything like that again."

"I will not allow you to go to an institution, Roxanne," Greyson said. "I believe you. I believe you because I went through the same kind of hell--only mine was much...easier. I don't know yet, how we will work this out, but I will not let you go into an institution."

Roxanne began to cry for the first time. "I know you are the most noble man in the world," she sobbed, "but you shouldn't do this. I've caused you enough pain and anguish. I really don't mind going. I have nothing to live for."

Greyson's voice became angry. "I am not going to let you go, but you will have to stop saying things like that. Don't you know that that is one of the things that breaks your parents' hearts? You have a great deal to live for. You are young. You have a wonderful family who would like to be close to you again, like it used to be. The other children have missed you. They need you. All the people at the ranch will be delighted to know that you are one of the family again."

Roxanne shuddered. "I can't possibly face them," she said.

"Oh yes you can!" Greyson said. "You are going to face them! All the things you felt impelled to do because you felt so guilty, and hated yourself, were detrimental, but this is the sort of thing that can help you to pull up out of your self-made mire. You are going to face them!"

Roxanne knew that he would see to it that she did face them, and knew that her parents agreed

CHAPTER XIV

"I am going to leave," Mary announced.

"No, Mary! Please don't leave. I need you. I don't know how we are going to work this out, but I need you. I will think of something."

"I have come to love you so much that it is hard to defy you in anything you ask," she said, "but it is obvious that I must leave. You can see that, Greyson."

"It is a difficult situation," Greyson said. "Roxanne is to remain in the house. I do not love her any more. I loved her so much once that I thought nothing on earth could ever change it--but...it has. I know this is not fair to you, though. You have a right to a husband, a home, children. I can never give you those things, but it is impossible to give you up without..."

"Greyson, maybe this is a crazy notion, but I do love you and I know you need me--for now. Could we establish a little place for me, where you could come to be with me at times. It would mean a lot to me, and maybe help you to bear the awkward circumstances."

Greyson sighed. "I have grown so used to looking for you when I come in from work, so used to being comforted and cheered, that it will be hard to live without you here, but I expect that is the best solution. It isn't a complete heartbreak, just a stab in the heart. I can bear it. I hope it will not be more than that to you. One thing I will have to admit. I will never try to hide the truth from Roxanne, or her parents. If it is weak, then they have a right to know how weak I am. I couldn't have been more surprised when they supported me...us, when I brought you here. They are the most remarkable people I have ever known--other than my own parents. My own parents would never have approved of any kind of an arrangement such as this. My father always said that he would not lie with any woman he could not marry, and he never did. Of course there are very few men in the world that feel that way. I thought I would never waiver from that standard. I always admired my father so much for it, and was convinced that I would never do anything he could not approve..."

Roxanne kept her word. She was not a happy girl, but she learned to smile again. She began to take care of the house. She talked and laughed and played games with her sisters and brothers. She went to the Walling's and holding back tears, faced each of them. She made no apologies. Drue had advised her not to. "I think it is best to behave just as if there had never been any problem. I think apologies often embarrass people. Everyone will be more comfortable if you say nothing."

Greyson did apologize to Van. "I can't say how sorry I am," he said. "I was wrong. I should have known that you would never betray Laura. That was what made me so angry. I thought you were being untrue to her...it was stupid."

"I don't think it was stupid, Greyson. I think you did the right thing. There were a lot of things you couldn't know-
-couldn't be expected to know."

Van wanted to ask Greyson what was going to take place now. He could see that Roxanne had made a change. He knew, too, that Greyson had taken Mary into his home as a maid, but had made her his mistress. He doubted that Greyson was still enamored with Roxanne. He had endured too much of her for too long, to remain in love with her. Nothing was said about the situation. "I guess I will find out in time," Van thought. "It is none of my business, other than that I would like to help Greyson if he is having a difficult time making a decision. If he wants my advice, I guess he will ask for it."

Roxanne was gratified that everyone was happier, now that the ordeal of meeting the Wallings again had proven to be less of a problem than she had anticipated. Things were back on a more comfortable level for everyone. She was happier than she had ever thought she might be. Her heart ached when she thought of Greyson and what she had lost. Her heart leapt each time she saw him. "Even the way he walks is endearing," she thought. "He doesn't swagger, or look arrogant, but looks so

very confident and in control of life. When he walks toward me, my heart leaps as if for a moment, I didn't realize that he no longer loves me." It was very difficult at these times, for her to keep from going back into that ruthless effort to avenge herself.

Roxanne knew that Greyson saw Mary on every occasion he could. He had told Roxanne of the arrangement. He hadn't wanted to hurt her, but he believed that hiding, and trying to deceive her would have been a worse offense. As difficult as it was for Roxanne to face, she felt that what she had done had been the cause of his decision, and she could not blame him. No other man would have waited for so long before doing something for his own comfort," she thought.

There was to be another ball at the Wallings. They were almost a weekly event now. They were the main entertainment for the community. Everyone enjoyed them, and when there was a weekend without one, people seemed lost, and bewildered about what to do.

"I don't want to go," Roxanne said.

"You are going!" Greyson stated flatly. "I don't want to go either, but we will be there just as everyone expects us to be. Roxanne made no further objection. "Greyson," she said, in a quite humble manner. "I need a new dress if we are going to the ball. Mine are all...kind of out of style and..."

"Sure," he said. "We will drive in to Dallas tomorrow and you can pick out some things."

"I only want a dress," she said. "I don't need anything else."

"You must need other things. You haven't bought anything for over two years,"

"The dress is all I want. I will make the other things do. I don't deserve even the dress, but..."

"Greyson didn't say anything more about it. He was disappointed. He had hoped she would take pleasure in buying new things and it would help her to accept and maintain her new demeanor.

William Kress and Benjamin Krouse stood laughing and talking. William had not come to the dances for several months after Greyson had attacked him on the road. His parents and sister continued to attend the balls, however, and since there was not much exciting to do otherwise, in the

community, he decided to return.

"Van is so charming, so popular," William said, "that I had expected his sister to be more so. It surprises me that she is not very pretty, nor even stylish. She even has an unpleasant attitude, as if she were bored all the time."

"Well," Benjamin replied with a grin, "we both know what she needs."

Neither of them noticed Lois Lynn walk up behind them. She stood listening, uncontrite. "This ten dollar gold piece says that I can give her that, sooner than you can." William said, flipping the gold piece in his hand.

"I'll just take you up on that," Benjamin said. "I assure you I will be the first to partake of whatever satisfactions that little insolent lady has to offer."

"You know I am more charming," William grinned. "Not many women can resist my charms."

"The trouble with you is, boy, you depend too much on that charm you think you have. You don't know what it means to be diplomatic, subtle. You like the idea of force. It wouldn't occur to you to try to make her come across with it, by convincing her that was what she wanted to do. I'm the one that has the right approach; the persuasive way. I will take her before you can, with all your charm, can get her out alone, so that you can use that force."

"We'll see. I think you had just as well hand over that ten piece right now. I'd pay you off in a minute though, to get a chance to catch that soft little kitten, Roxanne, out alone. I almost had it made with her one time, and that big ox of a husband of hers caught me just at the crucial moment.

Of course they weren't married then. Ten to one she was a virgin."

"Oh, boy, how unfortunate!" Benjamin said. "You weren't as lucky as you usually are."

"Don't worry I'll get to her. It is my main objective in life right now. It makes me tingle just to think about possessing that little piece of flesh. What a plaything! If

the truth were known, there isn't a man, young or old, married. or single, in this room, who isn't burning with dreams and desire for that little female cat."

Lois Lynn made her way silently back to where Marion was standing. She repeated the whole conversation to Marion. . "Don't you think we should go tell Van," Lois said.

"No, not yet," Marion said. "I have some plans of my own. I do think we will have to warn Roxanne--or maybe Greyson. That is an entirely different matter."

Lois decided to go along with Marion's plans. She wasn't sure it was the right thing to do, but after all, it was Marion's character and reputation they were maligning.

Marion walked up to where the two men were still standing. She smiled. Each of them began to ask her for the next dance. She laughed. "Wait a minute," she said. "I will be honored to dance with each of you. We'll play eenie meenie minee moe to decide which one is first."

She danced with William. She knew that William was considered attractive, by most girls, and probably by most other people, who did not know him. He was big, loose-limbed, had quite handsome facial features, dressed neatly, but in a more casual manner than most, denoting his nonchalant attitude about life.

"Let's forget about all these other people and get out of here," he said before the dance was over. "I want to be alone with you. I would like to show a beautiful girl like you how a real man performs. I guarantee satisfaction."

Marion tried to look impressed. "Sounds exciting," she said, "Let's go down and have a drink. We can discuss plans." Lois was watching this performance with dismay. Was Marion going to walk into this trap after being warned. Could it be possible that she was the sort of girl the two men were intimating she might be? She couldn't believe it, but the way she was acting..."

"I don't know the grounds as well as you do," William said. "Where would you suggest meeting?"

"There's a little cabin just beyond the stables. The door is unlocked. It is an ideal place. No one else would think of coming there. There is a fireplace, and candles, whatever we need." She noticed with satisfaction that William was trembling. His face was flushed. You go on and I will follow in just a few minutes. That way no one will be so apt to notice.

"Hurry!" he said. She watched while he quickly made his way out the door. She sought out Lois. "Now is the time for his come-uppance, I think. We will have to think of something else for the honorable Mr. Krouse. He is next on our list," she giggled. She told Lois exactly what she had said. Lois laughed too, then. "Now we can go tell Van, and Greyson too, if we want to." "They found Greyson first. "He must surely be one of the dirtiest bastards ever born," Greyson said.. "I'll take care of him. It will be my pleasure."

Greyson went to the cabin. William had found and lit a candle and was starting a fire in the fireplace. Greyson burst in the door. "That bitch!" William said. "I knew she was a bitch..."

Greyson had hit him and he landed headlong on the plank floor. Greyson stepped over to pick him up and start over when he heard his gun flash. Greyson staggered, fell. He tried to cling to consciousness, but everything went black.

William had put the pistol away and was hurrying out the door when Van hit him. Van made short work of it. He had heard the shot and guessed what had happened. Lois and

Marion had arrived. They all saw that Greyson had been hit in the chest. He was bleeding profusely. "Go get the Indian, quickly, and tell Delia," Van ordered. He was trying to staunch the bleeding. He was weak with fear for Greyson.

The Indian arrived and began to minister to the man. He shook his head. "Very bad," he said. "We have to get the bleeding stopped. Then we have to get the bullet out. No good."

Delia and Tom arrived. They were both ashen. "My god, oh, my god," they kept repeating. "Get hot water, bring all the bandages you can find. Bring the sharpest knife we have. . Get the chloride of lime. Hurry," Van said. The Indian was.

working as fast as he could. Marion and Lois and Van were obeying his orders. Delia and Tom brought the hot water, bandages and chloride of lime.

"Shall I get Roxanne," Lois asked as soon as there was time.

"No," Van said. "Don't tell another soul. We don't want everyone swarming around down here in the way and asking questions. Do all you can to keep everyone dancing. Keep the music going. Tell Laura and Luke to play, play, play! We will tell them why later. For now that is the best thing they can do to help. Keep Roxanne on the piano if you can."

"Maybe there is a doctor here," Lois suggested. "Wouldn't it be wise to find out--even at the price of letting the others know?"

"I don't think so," Van said. "I believe the Indian knows more about what is needed than most doctors do. What do you think, mom, dad?"

"It scares me either way. I would hate not to call the doctor and then wish we had. I believe though, like you said, the Indian is better at this than most doctors. I trust him."

The Indian shook his head.

"Oh, my god," Marion said to Lois. "This is all my fault. I shouldn't have tried to take things into my own hands. Poor Greyson."

"It's my fault," Lois said. "I shouldn't have told you what they said."

"And let them get away with it, free! No, you did the right thing. I should have taken your advice, though, and told Van."

"And he would have been dead, or hurt. Greyson had a right to know what they said about Roxanne. He would have been furious if we hadn't told him. He has a right to protect her from such beasts. And to think I used to think William was so attractive. I thought it was an honor to dance with him."

"A lot of girls did," Marion said. "I think that is one reason I wanted to get even with him."

The dance ended somewhat more abruptly than they usually did. No one knew why, but there was nothing to do but to accept it. The guests were departing. Benjamin went in search of William. Lois encountered him. "Oh, he left long ago," she said. "I think Marion was with him." Benjamin mounted his horse and rode away, grinning. "Well, my turn next," he said to himself, even if I do have to pay that scoundrel ten dollars."

When Roxanne found out what had happened, she rushed to the cabin. She was quiet. Her face was a mask of fear. She didn't have to ask to know that Greyson's condition was critical. He was still unconscious. The Indian and Van were still working with him. They had managed to slow the bleeding.

All of them remained with Greyson through the rest of the night and all the next day. Luke and Eunice brought hot coffee, and sandwiches. Laura sent word that she was preparing more bandages. Rowdy and all the others stood by, ready to ride into Dallas if it was decided to bring a doctor. Everyone believed that the Indian was more capable than a doctor would be, but they all knew too, that the

endurance of any man had to come to its limit. When the Indian had to sleep, would it be good to have a doctor there?

After twenty hours Delia and Tom were persuaded to go to bed. After twenty-four, Van and Hawk began to show their weariness. Marion and Lois had found that there was nothing more they could do and went to rest. Maib and Junie came to sit with Greyson. They were instructed carefully by the Indian. Each one had tried unsuccessfully to get Roxanne to go get some rest. She adamantly refused. She very quietly took Greyson's hand and sat holding it. She gently mopped his forehead now and then. She had helped to bathe him in cold water when he felt too hot. Once she leaned and kissed his cheek very gently. She said nothing.

"You have to get some sleep!" Van said almost crossly, in an effort to get her to consent to leave. She said, "I will," but she didn't move away from Greyson's side.

Luke and Junie tried again to get her to go rest, but she quietly refused. Finally, her eyes closed involuntarily and she slept sitting on the floor beside the bed, still clinging to Greyson's hand.

After two days there seemed to be no change. They all took turns sitting with the patient, carrying out Hawk's instructions. They had not attempted to remove the bullet yet. When asked about it, the Indian merely shook his head. "Not time," he said. "Start more bleeding."

It was three days before Hawk decided that they could attempt the operation. He was quick and deft. He had the bullet removed in a few minutes. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. They knew however that Greyson was not out of danger. Delia took Roxanne's hand and led her away. Roxanne walked as if she were sleep-walking. Delia helped her with a bath, and to get into her night-clothes. She laid down on the bed and slept for ten hours. When she awoke, she dressed as quickly as she could and rushed back to Greyson's side. Delia asked Eunice to take her some hot breakfast and coffee.

Greyson groaned. He opened his eyes, groaned again, turned over and went back to sleep. The Indian stepped up and began shaking him gently. "Wake up! Wake up! Greyson!" he said.

"No!" Roxanne said. "He is tired, too sick. Let him sleep!"

The Indian looked at Van. "Not good sleep now," he said.

"Roxanne," Van said, "It isn't good for him to sleep. We have to stimulate his brain to action. He needs this more right now than he needs to sleep. He will get plenty of rest. Hawk is right."

"I'm not sure...." Roxanne began, and then she sat back down and said nothing more. She had taken Greyson's hand again. He looked at her briefly, but had begun flailing around so that his hands were freed.

"Greyson," Van said, "can you talk to me?"

"Yes," Greyson said. "What the hell is it that...stings."

so. Oh, I was shot, wasn't I? Where is that bastard?" He started to raise up.

"He's been taken care of," Van said. "He didn't have Hawk to take care of him, so he may be feeling worse than you do. I know he had a few broken bones when he left here. I expect he will be pretty quiet for a while, wherever he is."

Delia brought water and Greyson managed to drink some. "Now we want you to eat this," Van said, indicating the broth. Delia had heated immediately when Greyson began to awaken. Roxanne took the bowl from Delia's hand and sat down by the bed. "Here, eat this." she said softly.

"You haven't had anything to eat for four days. You must be starved," Delia said. Greyson turned his face away. "Ugh, it makes me sick. I can't eat."

"Must eat," Hawk said.

Greyson turned back and tried to swallow some of the broth. After the first few bites, it became less nauseating and he ate all of it.

"How long have I been out of commission," Greyson asked. "Four days. Too damn long. You had us all guessing for a while. We almost had to carry Roxanne away by force. She wouldn't leave you."

"Oh," Greyson turned and looked at Roxanne briefly. "Thank you," he said.

"Can I get up out of here?"

They all looked at Hawk. "Soon," he said. "Get exercise, get strong again. Not too soon."

"What does that mean?" Greyson asked.

"Long time," Hawk said, turning away.

"A long time? How long?" Greyson asked and everyone was looking at the Indian again.

"See," was all he said.

Two days later Hawk said he thought it was all right to move Greyson into the house. Greyson was disgruntled at how weak he found himself to be. "A long time, huh?" he said.

He laid in the bed, restless and helpless. He tossed and rolled. Roxanne was kept busy straightening his blankets and his pillow. She brought books and began reading to him. He settled down, resigned, it seemed, to the fact that he would be helpless for a "long time."

"Can I talk to you alone, Van," he asked. Roxanne went out of the room. "Sure," Van said. "What can I do for you?" "I want to send a message to Mary--you know the girl..."

"Yes, I know," Van said, "just give me the message and the place to find her and I will deliver it myself."

"Tell her what happened. She will wonder why I haven't been in touch with her. Tell her I miss her. Tell her I will come to her just as soon as I get on my feet again."

"All right," Van said. "I will ride in this afternoon. . . I will get there tonight. Is that all you want to say?"

"I think so," Greyson said.

"If you want me to tell her you love her, I won't be embarrassed. We've all known about her almost from the first. I don't think anyone blamed you."

Greyson had turned away. I am very fond of her. She is a fine girl. I guess it wasn't right to...I guess I took advantage of her. I would have married her if I could have. . . I think I would have been as happy as anyone has a right to be.

"But you don't love her?"

"She made me happy."

"I don't think you took advantage of her--but we will talk about that when you get stronger. I will see you when I get back."

Roxanne came back into the room and took up her station by the side of the bed. "As soon as you can eat again, I will.

bring you something. You need food. You lost a lot of weight."

"Yes, I do want to gain my strength back as fast as I can," he said.

"I will be quiet" Roxanne said. "You need rest, too, to gain strength." Even in his straits, Greyson noticed how tired she looked..

"Roxanne, you don't need to stay here with me all the time. You need rest, too. Go to bed. You look exhausted."

"I will," she said, but she didn't move.

Van returned from his mission and came into Greyson's room. Roxanne excused herself and went out. Van handed Greyson a letter. He opened it eagerly. His face showed disappointment. "What is it?" Van said. "It appeared that she had left--gone away. Is that so?"

Yes," Greyson said, "she decided to leave. I don't blame her. She could never have any happiness with me, of course. . But it leaves a vacant place in me. She brought me up out of a hell I was beginning to feel had engulfed me."

"But you didn't love her. Is there any way to find out where she went?"

"I established a flexible fund for her. She will get a check every month for her living expenses as long as she lives. She will have to give her address at the bank. I can find out from them. I will go and try to get her to come back--as soon as I can get out of this damn bed!"

Greyson demanded to be moved to his own home. "I will hire someone to take care of me for as long as I need it," he said. "I don't expect you to do it, Roxanne."

"I want to do it," Roxanne said quietly. "If we need someone else, I will let you know and you can hire another woman. Would Mary come back?"

"No," Greyson said, surprised, "she has gone away somewhere."

"Oh," Roxanne said. "I'm sorry."

Greyson looked at her but could detect no sarcasm or facetiousness in her attitude. He noticed again how tired she looked. "Roxanne, if you don't take more rest, I am going to hire another woman in any case. You will be sick."

"I will rest more," she said.

Greyson was very tired by the time the carriage had reached his home. He was put to bed and was soon sound asleep. Roxanne laid down and slept several hours. Van stayed over night, to see how Greyson would react to the strain of having been moved so far. "I want to thank every one of you for saving my life," Greyson said. "I didn't show Hawk how much I appreciated his part in it, and Delia and Tom and all the others. Please tell them I am most grateful."

Drue and Carol and Casey and Joe were all at hand for anything they might be needed for. The obvious change in Roxanne made them happy. "She is almost like her old self," Drue said--"Except it is plain to see that she is not as happy as she used to be. But we can thank God that she is behaving like a Redford again. That is enough to be thankful for."

"She will find her happiness back one of these days," Joe said.

"I hope so," Drue didn't sound so sure.

CHAPTER XV

Joe was sitting outside in his chair, puffing on his corn-cob pipe, when he heard a commotion. He looked up to see a man running toward him. "Lie down, Ticker," he said, wondering. The man ran up to him and almost fell at his feet. "They're after me," he panted. "They will take me back..." Joe made a quick decision. "Step inside that door," he said.

Two men rode up. Their uniforms denoted that they were guards from the Dallas-Sherman chain-gang. "Oh," Joe said in his mind, "So this man escaped the chain-gang. They are a dangerous bunch. Have to watch 'em." He turned his attention to the two horsemen. "We are following an escapee," one of them said. "We know he came here. He couldn't have gone much farther. He was tiring out. Have you seen him?"

"Don't b'lieve so," Joe said, lighting his pipe. "Don't get many visitors out this way. "Guess I'da noticed if he'da come in close here?"

"Look," the other man said. "We know he came here. We can see his tracks. Where is he?"

"I wouldn't know," Joe said. "I'm not a sheriff, so I haven't been awatchin' fer any getaways."

"I don't like your goddamn attitude," the man said, getting down from his horse.

"I don't like yourn much, either," Joe said.

The man removed his pistol from its holster. "We're goin' a look around," the man said.

"Sure. Go right ahead," Joe said. The two men walked around checking the outhouses and underbrush,

"Open the door," one man said. "We want to look inside..

"Sorry," Joe said. "I ain't agoin' a do that. Don't like strangers apokin' around in my private property. I think you-all 'd better leave."

"Look," one of the men said in a truculent manner, .
"We're the law. You can't defy the law and get away with it."

"Wouldn't try," Joe said.

One of the men walked toward Joe with his revolver pointing at him. "I said open the door." His voice was threatening.

"All right," Joe said, arising and starting toward the door. "Charge, Ticker, charge!" he said. The two men had no idea what was meant by the outburst, but Joe was still walking toward the door, so they gave it little attention. Ticker arose. He stood for a moment, his ugliness seeming to be enhanced by his stance. He put his head down. His little, red eyes glared at the men. It seemed as if he was going to ignore the order. But suddenly he was off at full speed. He leaped on one of the men and before anyone could decide what was going on, the man's arm was spurting blood. His leg was torn too, from hip to ankle. "Enough!" Joe shouted, and Ticker retreated. He laid down in his accustomed spot, grunted contentedly, closed his eyes and evidently went to sleep.

The second man had run to his horse, mounted and spurred the frightened animal to his best efforts

"Drue," Joe called, "Might as well get the whiskey, give this sonofabitch some. We'll have to put up with him fer a few days seein' as how he won't be able to navigate fer some time." Joe had laid the moaning man on the big, plank table.. They poured whiskey into the wounds, bound them and Joe took the man inside.

"Girls," Drue called, "scrub the table off good with lie-water. Be careful now. Don't let any splatter or drip on you."

"Maybe you had better tell us your story," Joe said to the escapee after he had eaten and cleaned up.

"Of course," the man said. "My name is Carl Darrow. I was convicted of murder and sentenced to life on the chain-gang. I did kill the man I was accused of killing. It was in self-defense, but the jury didn't see it that way. I hated.

the fact that I had had to kill a man. It's a terrible sensation to see someone die at your own hands--even if that man was trying to kill you. I have been on the chain-gang for over two months. Some don't last that long. Most die from starvation, beatings, overwork, exposure--anything. Guess criminals never get much consideration and guess most don't deserve too much. I am certainly not free of wrongdoing. I've done things that were wrong, but I never would have killed anybody if I hadn't been forced to."

"What do you think, Drue?" Joe said.

"I believe he is telling the truth," Drue said, "but then. I seem to have a built-in confidence in my fellow-man."

"That's probably a mistake," Mr. Darrow said. "but I am glad you have it on this occasion. I have a family. A wife and two children. They live across the border, in County. We get by and live pretty well, but there is no way my wife and kids can keep the ranch going. They will starve, besides being exposed to any unscrupulous transients that might happen along. My wife is a competent woman, but..."

"Well, if Drue believes you, I do, too," Joe said. "She is a good judge of character. She is almost always right. You can stay here for as long as you want. We will have to decide just how to handle this. I don't think those guards will chance coming back here--but the first place they will look for you, is at your home. If you go back out there, they will be sure to pick you up again."

It was decided that Casey would ride out to the Darrow ranch, report to Mrs. Darrow what had happened, and see that the family had food. He would take care of the stock, stick around for a few days, to be sure the family was safe. He would report back in about a week.

"I don't know how I am ever going to thank you," Mr. Darrow said. "In the first place, I think almost anybody else would have been scared to death to trust me, and nobody else would have had that amazing animal you call Ticker. I owe him, too."

"That is good news to hear," Carl said, when Casey reported that the animals were all doing fine, and that his

family seemed to be safe. They had been overjoyed to hear that Carl was all right and had got away from the chain-gang, but they were unhappy that there was no way they could see him without jeopardizing that safety; no way he could come home.

"Maybe you should arrange for your family to move to another state, assume another name, even, and start life over again, Joe said.

"I thought of that. I wish it was possible. But I cain't figure out any way we could do it. I cain't sell our place without the authorities aknowin' it, and without money, we couldn't go. There don't seem to be any answer to that."

"Well, maybe there is," Joe said, "come along. We'll talk to Greyson. He's got all the money in the world. I think he would like to recompense you for saving his life."

"No, I wouldn't ask a man to pay me fer doin' somethin' I was obliged to do, just as a man! Greyson don't owe me nothin'. I don't want to make him feel obligated"

"Well, maybe you had better stay here after all," Joe said. "I know how you feel. A man don't want to take pay fer doin' somethin' he would do in any case--but just the same I will tell Greyson he order give you somethin'. It wouldn't be askin' any favors to ask him to buy your ranch. At the rate he is breeding cattle and increasing his herd, he will be needing a lot more land, and he may as well buy yours."

"Sure," Greyson said. "I'll buy the place. I owe that man a lot. He not only saved my life, but saved my wife from being...ravaged by a beast. I want to reward him. Just get the papers written up as soon as possible--any way he wants them."

Mr. Darrow had gone to Greyson's to express his appreciation for the arrangements that had been made so that he could move out of the jurisdiction of the Dallas-Sherman police. He and Greyson and Roxanne sat talking. "You know I have never seen a woman anywhere as beautiful as your wife," Carl said. "I was just thinking how much good she could do if she chose to give her life to the cause of others. You know attractive women always have a lot more influence on society. They can persuade others to give their substance and time and

resources to helping them that needs it. It's amazing. There are so many people, young and old, and especially little young-

uns that need help. The kids especially, cain't do nothin' fer themselves. It makes tears come when I see some of them. that have been saved from horrible lives. It must be one of the biggest satisfactions in life to be able to do somethin' of that kind. Puts you up there next to the gods, wouldn't you say?"

"I think that is exactly what I would like to do with my life," Roxanne said. "I hadn't thought about it. Tom--

Greyson's uncle talked about it. He mentioned Florence. Nightingale and a lot of others she influenced. She dedicated her life to helping others, and made changes in the laws, worked miracles. Yes, it would make you feel like you were up there next to the gods," she said, "or that you could at least compete with human beings again," Mr. Darrow looked puzzled, but didn't question her. Greyson understood only too well.

"Roxanne, I wont let you go!" Greyson said when Carl left. "Roxanne smiled in that way that set Greyson and almost every other man who witnessed her smile, to feel a pull of physical need. "This is one time I am going to defy you," she said. "It is what I want to do. It is the thing that will allow me to feel decent again. It isn't a sacrifice. It is what I want to do. Maybe it is what I was born for. Maybe all that has happened in my life was to show me the way; lead

me to this work. I am going, Greyson."

"No!" Greyson looked frightened. "Roxanne, I wont let you. I...need you."

"You do not need me, Greyson. That time, if ever there was such a time, is past. You need someone. I hope you find someone who can love you as you deserve and who you can love. like any woman should be loved--but that woman isn't me."

"I can't let you go, Roxanne. I don't want any other woman. I want you. I have been a damn fool. Please tell me it isn't too late." He had taken her almost roughly in his arms. "I love you, Roxanne. I don't want to lose you again. . Please don't leave me!"

He didn't stop to ask her permission to kiss her this time. He put his hand under her chin and raised her face to meet his lips. She was captive in his arms. She was thrilled at his touch; the feel of his hard body, his gentle lips, his urgent need of her, his demanding kisses, his words of love. "I love you, Roxanne."

Her flesh under his fingers was as if each stroke were not just a touch, but a flame of fire streaming from the tips of his fingers to every nerve of his body. "My god, I love you, Roxanne! How could I ever for one moment, have convinced myself that I didn't love you?"

"You are hungry for a woman's love," Roxanne said. "That is different from love--but I will settle for that for now, knowing that you can never love me again. Desire--need, is better than nothing, when it comes to a man like you, Greyson."

"Roxanne!" Greyson said crossly, "I know the difference between desire alone, and love. I felt a desire for Mary. I am ashamed of allowing that desire to rule me to the extent that I was willing to appease my desire, without love. My father thought it was execrable to appease desire for just that gratification. I believed that, too, and thought to always live by it."

"I thought you loved Mary," Roxanne said.

"No, I never did love her. I was just weak. I never did tell her I loved her. I was fond of her. She was special in my life. She was the only girl I ever had any desire to make love to, other than you. I never kissed another woman in my life--and now I am sorry that I ever succumbed to my need to gratify my...lust. It wasn't fair to her, either. I wish I had not brought Mary here, I am glad I took her out of that...place, but I am sorry I brought her here. I am so sorry of so many things."

"I guess I am glad you didn't love her," Roxanne said. "I think it was my fault that you decided to bring her here. I made life so miserable for you, you had to do something to...bear it. Something you would never have approved of, otherwise."

"That's ridiculous, Roxanne. It was all my own doing. Like I have told you so many times, my punishment was so much.

less than I had thought it should be, and so much less than yours was. It was all my own poor decision and my own petty desires. But I hope you can forgive me, Roxanne? I want you to stay here with me and make a home together and..."

"Don't you think it is a little selfish of us to think of our own happiness--just two people, instead of that of maybe hundreds of children I might be able to help?"

Greyson sensed her indecision, her irresolution, her weakening determination. "I am a selfish bastard," he said, "but I don't want to think of how selfish I am right now. I want to think about my home and my wife and our love and our happiness."

"Well, I think it is quite selfish and I am not making any promise right now about what I will do--under duress of love."

Roxanne went to Dallas. She talked to everyone she thought might have any influence on the authorities. She began to go out to the slums and personally interview people.

Some families closed the door in her face. She saw places where it was obvious children were suffering, where half empty whiskey bottles were the only items on the table. She heard children crying. There was no way to measure the horrors they must be enduring. She used all of her wit and patience to persuade the parents of these children to allow her to see them. Sometimes, she was allowed to take them to the shelter she had established. Sometimes she took the drunken mothers along. Sometimes she found concerned mothers, frightened of their husbands, who slammed the door in her face. Sometimes she found ways to convince these mothers that she could protect them, and they would come into the shelter, with their children.

It was heartbreaking work, and dangerous. She worked so many hours a day that she almost never even undressed to sleep. She tried to keep herself clean, but at times she suddenly realized that she had not bathed nor changed her clothes, nor even done her hair for three or four days. She was always almost on the verge of tears. She couldn't forget about those she had failed.

Greyson came to see her. He was horrified at how worn.

out she looked. "You can't keep this up!" he said. "Roxanne, I want to take you home with me. Please go home with me!"

"No, Greyson. I can't. I have found my life's work. . This is what I want to do. Help that little boy to get his clothes on. Tell that girl, the volunteer, to give the twins there some food. They are sick from starvation. Bundle up all this wash. We have to get it out to someone to launder. . I wish we could get more help. I wish there were more volunteers. I have to go to a meeting tomorrow to see if I can convince the City Council to grant funds for more rooms. . We need double, triple the space--and more. I have to..."

Greyson obeyed her orders meekly. It got later and later and she was still rushing to get the things done that were necessary for the children, and those adults that had been

persuaded to come. Most of the mothers were good help--but some of them could not give up their alcohol, and their former bad habits. She never reprimanded anyone. "Florence Nightingale loved every one of them," she reminded Greyson. . "She held the drunken whores in her arms when they died. She never turned anyone away."

Greyson was sick with fear for her. "You are killing yourself," he said. "I want my wife to come home." I have no influence over her any more, he thought with an aching heart. . I may never have her for my wife again."

He always stayed overnight when he came. If Roxanne went to bed at all, he held her close, but there was no further intimacy between them. She was always asleep as soon as her head was on the pillow. He never failed to come to see her each week. He always went away sad and disappointed, but he could not stay away. Seeing her, holding her close for a few hours, hearing her voice, trying to help her a little, is better than nothing, he said.

"Greyson," she finally said, "I know this is hell for you. I am sorry. I think you should find another attractive woman, if you can't find Mary again. You need someone to make your home a comfortable place. You don't need to suffer just because I have to do this. I will never change."

"Never again, Roxanne. I would never take any woman, Mary included, into my home again. If I cannot have you, I

will live alone. I guess I deserve exactly this. I deserve to be lonely. I didn't treasure my blessings enough. I didn't use the judgment it would have required to preserve them."

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CHAPTER XVI

It was a very cold day. Roxanne had gathered several children from homes where there were no fires. She had almost frozen her own fingers. She returned with her load of children, and found Greyson there. She was always happy to see him. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and turned to her work. She looks exhausted, Greyson said for the hundredth time. God, I wish she had never got this idea into her head.

She got to bed earlier than usual that night. Greyson held her in his arms as usual. She went to sleep, but it was not long until she awakened. She began to vomit. Greyson got a basin and held her head. "Oh, Greyson, go away! Don't see me like this!" she said.

"I am staying right here!" he said. "You have to get more rest. Roxanne, you are killing yourself. You have to stop this!"

"I know I am going to have to stop for a while," she said. She blushed. She put her head down so that he wouldn't see her face. He put his hand under her chin and pulled her face up. "What are you talking about, Roxanne?..." "Roxanne, are you pregnant?" he asked, his heart doing flip-flops.

"Yes, I will have to take some time off. I don't know how I can stand it, but..."

"Oh, my darling, I am so sorry. What can I say?"

She looked sad. "I am sorry that you don't want a baby, Greyson. I thought you might be happy."

"My god, Roxanne! There is nothing I want more than our baby--but I have ruined your life, your plans so many times. I don't want you to hate me. I...shouldn't have allowed this to happen." He was remembering how she had reiterated that she did not want his baby--that if it had been Van's, she would have welcomed it. He felt that she probably would still resent being pregnant with his child when she so much wanted to go on with her work.

"I think it was as much my doing as yours," she said. "Do you remember the night we went to the ball, and we had to sleep in the same room. You meant to ignore me, but you were."

too overwhelmed by your maleness, your need to take your pleasure in a woman.

"I was too excited by the fact that you were close to me.. I had found myself being jealous of all the others looking at you with such longing. You do something to men that most women don't. I don't know exactly what it is. Everyone knows it. Van knew it. Even that low-life William knew it. He said every man who ever looked at you was filled with desire."

"If that is true it is a scourge," she said. "I hope it isn't true."

"Well, I don't think it is a scourge. It is certainly a joy for a husband. Can you imagine how proud I am to be the husband of the most charming little girl in the country?"

"I will have to see what I can set up for their care until I can get back," Roxanne said. "I will be sick with worry all the time I can't do anything to help them. I am not sorry about the baby, though, if you are not. I think it will be wonderful to have a baby. I used to always say I wanted six," She laughed. "I don't think I am going to have time for that many now."

"I am going to do my damndest to keep you pregnant all the time," Greyson said, "so you can't come back here. I want you at home--and now our baby will need you there, too."

"I would like to be at home, too, but I could never get the children and the others out of my mind. I couldn't be happy."

"Roxanne, you said you had to go see what could be set up for their care while you are gone. I will donate enough to build a new shelter twice as large as this one, and staff it with good people if you will just relax and not worry about them."

She fell into Greyson's arms crying. "I love you," she said.

The weather was cold. Greyson kept a crackling fire in each of the rooms. It was excruciating joy to have Roxanne at home with him. At first she spent long hours sleeping. She

had been almost to the point of real exhaustion. When she was more rested, she and Greyson took turns reading to each other. they spent long hours discussing what they had read. They discussed politics, religion, philosophy, psychology, philanthropy, geography, history, and child rearing. "I think it is going to work," Greyson said. "I am going to have my dear little wife at home with me at least part of the time. It is a good compromise."

"You know, Roxanne," he said. "If nothing unforeseen happens I will inherit a lot of money. My father is one of the richest men in the United States. He seems to have the qualities of Midas. He gets richer all the time. He always hoped that Gerald and I would go to work in his businesses. I think he was disappointed in me when I decided I wanted to live out here. He is talking now of establishing stores and factories and banks and warehouses in Dallas."

"Would you consider taking responsibility for those things?"

"I'd rather not--but as long as I could maintain this as my home, I could handle it all right. I could probably make some of the same kinds of arrangements I was talking to you about. That's the way my dad works, too. Ever since he got married he has refused to spend so much time away from his wife and home. He delegates work and keeps a handle on what is going on. That is the only way I would do it."

"Being rich is a lot of trouble, isn't it?"

"I used to say I didn't care one whit about the money--but I have decided that it is a great blessing. I am glad of every cent now."

"Do you mean you are getting greedy in your old age?"

"Maybe, but the main reason I am glad to have it, is I can see now that the best way to do something for all the needy, helpless, people of the world is to have money. Whoever said money is power sure had it right. I want that power to change the world for as many people as we can. But I am not as selfless as you are, or so many of the great philanthropists. I don't want to give of myself. I want my home, my wife and my kids. I want to be selfish. So, the

money is a great help to allow me to be selfish."

"I guess I am selfish too, if that is selfish. I want to have some time, too, with you and our home and our families and our kids. How many kids are going to have, Greyson."

"Roxanne, I am thrilled to death at the prospects of our baby--but it scares me. I can't forget your cries when you lost the other one. It seemed to cut me into shreds. I thought I wasn't going to be able to stand it. I cursed myself for ever allowing you to get pregnant. Maybe I shouldn't ever have chanced it again."

"I am glad you are concerned, Greyson. But I don't want you to worry. I have a good doctor. I am healthy. I think everything will be fine. I know I will screech. That is just part of the nature of things."

"It isn't a part of the nature of things I like!" I wish to god there were some way I could change it. The nature of things is awfully unfair. All I did was enjoy the favors of my beautiful wife, and you have all the burden and pain. I wonder about a god that set things up that way."

"Greyson! That's sacrilege! You can't talk like that. . It scares me. Take it back."

"Do you think God is going to be fooled by my saying I take it back, when I resent it?" Greyson laughed. "God, can I talk to you for a while? I don't like the way you set things up between men and women. I think you should change it. How about it? And while we're at it, I don't like the way you set it up for millions of little helpless kids. What were you thinking of? And all the other things, the heartache, the sickness, the fears, the loneliness, the injustices."

"Greyson, you're frightening me!"

"I don't want to frighten you, sweetheart. I'm sorry. . You know we used to discuss religions at home a lot. Uncle

Tom and my father agree to a large extent about what God is really like. I sort of soaked up their beliefs. I don't mean that they are someone else's. Now they are completely mine. . I don't believe God takes offense at things like that. I think He is a merciful God and that somehow He is not.

responsible for our pains and sufferings. I can't believe, either, that he agreed to allow the devil to rule and that that causes all the trouble. I don't believe that the devil is stronger than He is. In fact, I don't believe there is a devil at all. I do not believe Adam and Eve are responsible for the world's suffering, or that God uses it to teach us, keep us under control, make us love Him more, make us fear him, or for any other outlandish reason. In other words I believe God is good. I can't believe he is such a Satanic. Being as the preachers make Him out to be.

Each week Roxanne insisted on driving into Dallas to check on the progress of the building and the locating of help she thought she could trust. She insisted on interviewing every woman and picking each one carefully.

When she could no longer make the long trip, Greyson volunteered to go in and do what he could to keep the project on course. By the time the baby was born, the house was finished and filled with children saved from a variety of horrors. "There are always more out there," Roxanne said, "needing care."

"Roxanne, I know you are never going to get the children off your mind. I want to do all I can to help. Like you said, if we could afford to build a new building like the one we just finished, every year, there would still be children needing attention and care. I wonder if it will always be that way, or if by any chance, people will become more civilized and in another hundred years, things might be better. We will never know. Surely mankind is making some progress toward civilization..."

"I know what you mean, Greyson, that if I worked as many hours as I could for all my life, there would still be those out there to worry about--but the fact remains that those I

Heather sat on the couch, a pensive look on her face. Robert walked in and stood in front of her. She looked up. He caught his breath. "You look mighty enticing," that attractive, enigmatic, crooked smile appearing. There was a look of questioning in her eyes. "I'm not sure you're being fair," he said. "Sitting there, looking so beautiful...your lips clean and fresh looking. With your soft lips parted like that, you...destroy something in a man."

She looked disgusted. He sat down beside her. "I'm glad I decided to go see if I could save the notorious daughter of the honorable Drake Dunbar. As I said, that makes you my prisoner. It's quite an intoxicating sensation to know that you belong to me."

Her eyes blazed. "Like I said, Mr. Redford, if you want anything from me, please take it, and let me go. As much as I hate you, I am willing to pay my debts. If it is my body you want--so be it."

"It certainly is your body I want--and intend to have. I have been dreaming about it ever since you told me that our pact was ended. . . could would not be out there suffering. Just that is enough to send me back."

"Now, let's be practical, Darling. You know as well as I do that there are all kinds of people capable of feeding children, bathing and dressing them, washing their clothes, changing their beds, doing the necessary cooking, housecleaning, shopping and so on. You are wasting yourself to do these things. You would be very efficient at delegating all these things to others. You are capable of making good decisions about what is most needed to help the most people. So, you should concentrate on that. Isn't that right?"

"Maybe so, but the children need love. They need to be shown that they are loved. They have to feel wanted. "That is true, and that is one area where you excel. You do have that love they need. But there are other people who have a lot of love, too. Many of the mothers can be persuaded to take other children under their wings and make them feel wanted. I know good ones are few, but you could spend a lot more time sifting them out, finding the right ones, if you weren't involved in so much basic work that anyone can do."

"Yes, Greyson, you are right, as usual. What are you recommending, then?"

"I think you should create an organization, give it a name, use your unusual power of persuasion to get people to support this organization, financially and otherwise. A lot of people will respond, get fascinated with it. It makes people feel good...important--to do philanthropic work. You can make them feel even more important with your silver tongue. You will be putting your talents where they can do the most good that way."

"Do you think that is really true?"

"Yes, it is true. Just as so many have said, people like to look at you. They will go to your meetings simply to hear you speak. You are a sorcerer, Roxanne. Instead of allowing it to be a scourge, like you said, make it work for you--for . the little children who need it."

"I can't believe I really have any attraction any other half-way pretty young girl doesn't have. I think it is just an illusion of a husband in love."

"You can believe it. You can make use of it. It is up to you."

"Of course I will give it a try. I will get an organization begun, give it a name, begin soliciting donations and gifts and volunteer work. We will see if I have any talent for it."

"You have talent for it. You will discover that that intoxicating smile of yours can do more than set men on edge with desire. It can fulfill your dreams."

"Will you help me, Greyson. I am scared to death."

"Of course I'll help you. I will be right by your side whenever you need me. Not on the podium, though," he laughed. "That would spoil the illusion every man likes to keep that that smile is for him alone. Men are lechers. I don't consider it underhanded to keep in the background when it is for a good purpose. Of course none of them had better try to put their secret thoughts of you into effect! They can dream, but never touch."

"Oh, Greyson, I don't know whether you are being serious or not, half the time."

"I am being serious more than half the time," he said. "It will all work out fine. You will find yourself so busy and interested that you will forget all about being scared."

"It sounds great."

"I will make arrangements to drive you in to town once a week. We will stay overnight. You can make all your engagements for those two days. That way you can be home with our baby enough so that it will recognize you. I think Mary and Ned and your mother, and even Joe will be glad to take care of the baby while we are away. We will get them something nice each week, for a little surprise. They are so . touchy about taking money for anything, we will have to be a little clever about rewarding them."

Roxanne laughed. "Mama and Mary and Ned and my father will be fighting over which one is going to take the most care of the baby, so I don't think we need to worry. Even dad will rock it and talk baby talk to it. It will have good care."

"Oh, Roxanne, if so will you hate me again. Will you hate our baby?" I never did hate our baby before. It was just another of the hateful things I could think of to hurt you. I always wanted my baby. I really had come to love you long before I lost the baby. I was so happy to have your baby, our baby. I always said I wanted at least six." She remembered of telling Van that one time. "I was such a little fool," she thought. "He was so right to tell me that marriage between us was not a good thing. Thank god, he recognized it and stuck by it. It would have been a great mistake.

"Be sure to let us know how things go," Joe said, when Mr. Darrow set out to meet his wife in Kansas. "Get a good place. One that will make you a living."

"If we don't find what we want there, we will look elsewhere. I will write. I would like to keep in touch with such a fine family as yours. I owe a lot to that fine son of yours, too, that Casey, and of course to that Croeses, Greyson. Please tell them how much we appreciate what they have done fer me and the family."

"Like I said," William told Ben, "I intend to have that little piece of flesh. I haven't thought of much else since the night that perfidious brother attacked me for defending my life out there where that bitch lured me. That was treachery. I will have the pleasure of revenge too, while I enjoy the favors of the little beauty all the men go.

around ahungerin' for. They don't know what to do about that gnawing hunger, but I do. I have a plan. If you want to help me, you can have her after I have finished with her. That should be good enough, since she is second-hand anyway. I almost got to her first, like I said, but that was a little bit of unfortunate miscalculation. Usually I have better luck. Anyhow, this will be very satisfying. I will always enjoy thinking about that big brute lying there helpless, while I take his wife. That ought to even things up a little."

"Just what is this plan?" Benjamin said. ""Well, as we know, her so-called husband is laid up. He can't get out of bed. He wont be expecting any trouble, I feel sure. We'll march in there, take what we want, and march out again. No problem. They would never take it to the authorities in the first place, and expose something they wouldn't want known. Even if they did, it would be their word against ours. Nothing to worry about."

"Sounds all right. I can sure be warmed to a frenzy with the idea of spending a few hours with that sugar-plum. I have a little score to settle, too. That bitch of a girl told me that you had left with Marion. It was a damned lie. When do we go?"

"Right now! I can't wait any longer to make real that vision I have had for so long of that little pussy curling up to me, beggin' for more. That thought arouses more excitement in my blood to enhance my performance, than actually sliding into any other woman would."

The two men were gleefully making their way to the Redford ranch. William had a lot to revenge himself for. As he had said, he was aroused by the thought of possessing the acknowledged most beautiful and unapproachable girl in the county. His revenge against Greyson and Van would be sweet, too,

They tied their horses out far enough that they felt they would not be discovered. They made their way by foot to where they thought the Greyson ranch might be located. They found the path and followed it. "I think you should stay right here," William said. "You can stand watch. When I have finished, I will come back this way. I will stand watch then, while you take your pleasure with the luscious little kitten."

"Sounds fine," Benjamin said. "I'll be right here, contemplating...add zest to the actual show, I think."

William followed the path quietly up to the door. He opened the door and entered. He went about the house looking for the people he wanted to see. He came to the bedroom where Greyson was recuperating. He heard voices. He opened the

door quietly, his revolver drawn. Greyson and Roxanne looked up at the same time, gasping in surprise. William grinned. "Now we will see who has the last laugh. "I have taken all I am going to off the likes of you," he said to Greyson. "I have come to collect my reward." He looked at Roxanne and there was no mistaking his meaning. Greyson struggled, but he could not get up. His mind was frantically seeking for some answer to this threat. He couldn't let this animal ravage Roxanne. He was wild with anger, hatred, fear. "You will pay for this if it is the last act of my life," he grated. William laughed. "I don't think so. You are the one that is going to pay," he said. "When I have taken my time with enjoying the favors of your wife, there is another man waiting to take my place. You will enjoy watching him, too, I expect. You will never be able to take any kind of action to stop us, nor to make yourself a nuisance to us afterward.

. You may as well reconcile yourself to that. It is my time now, for satisfaction on all counts. I don't expect it to be the last time, either. I am clever enough to work things out for further encounters."

He had given his attention to taunting Greyson. That was half the pleasure he had been anticipating. He heard a shot. He grabbed his shoulder. He fell to the floor. Roxanne stood with the gun shaking in her hand, evidently frozen with the enormity of what she had done.

"Roxanne!" Greyson said. "How did you...?"

Roxanne didn't answer. She went and stooped over William. "I He is not dead " she said., but he will be incapacitated for a while. "I hope so," Greyson said. "He isn't fit to live. If I had been able, I would have taken care of him, and allowed him to go on living--but under the circumstances, I am glad if he is dead. Roxanne," he said "there is someone waiting outside. My god, I wish I were able to get up. You can't be expected to defend yourself again..."

They heard a shout from outside. Roxanne took the gun and pointed it toward the door. "It's all right," someone said. "I have the sonofabitch, What do you want me to do with him?" "Be careful, Roxanne, it may be a trap," Greyson warned, "I don't recognize the voice."

Roxanne opened the door carefully. She saw a big, ugly man holding Benjamin by the scruff of the neck. "Can I deliver this insignificant piece of garbage into your hands?" the

stranger asked. "My god, who are you?" Greyson asked. "How come you to be out there? Thank you--but who are you?"

The man sat down in a chair, keeping his eye on Benjamin. "My name is Carl Darrow," he said. "I escaped from a chain-gang. Your father--and that animal he calls Ticker," the man laughed with evident satisfaction, "saved my life, and then your mother decided that I was not a real criminal and they

. have been taking care of me ever since. Glad if I can help a little to pay back the favor."

"Glad too. You will never know how glad!" Greyson said. "Roxanne, will you go get Joe. We will need to send someone in to Dallas to take this body away and have this other animal put into prison--maybe on the chain-gang," Greyson said. Benjamin whimpered and began to plead with Greyson. "I didn't do anything," he said. "What is this all about? You haven't got one thing on me. I haven't done anything. Greyson ignored him as if he were not there.

Joe and Drue returned with Roxanne. "We'll take over," Joe told Carl. "See you two have met. Roxanne, sit down. You are as white as a ghost."

"Yes, sit down, Roxanne. It's over now. You needn't worry about what you did. Killing a man is a terrible experience, we know, but in cases like this, it is heroic. You did the right thing. We've sent Casey for the sheriff. The sheriff came and took the body of William away, along with the shackled, whimpering Benjamin. Greyson felt one instant of remorse for the parents of William. "It is too bad that good people always have to suffer for the treachery of others," he thought. "It seems to be the nature of things."

Roxanne went on ministering to Greyson as best she could. She was quiet and unobtrusive about it. If he thanked her, it seemed to embarrass her. She usually said nothing. After three months Greyson could move his limbs and get out of bed. He was weak. He exercised, fumed, exercised some more and after two weeks was able to ride a horse.

Roxanne and all the others tried to persuade him not to ride into Dallas, but he would not listen. He went directly to the bank and inquired about the checks that would have gone to Mary Rogers. "She has not taken the last three," the teller reported. "We are awaiting an address to send them to."

"I wonder what she is doing?" Greyson said. "I hope to . god she hasn't gone back into the...business I took her out of. I wish I could find out where she went. If she ever does send for the checks," Greyson said, "Please let me know immediately." He rode back home, unable to analyse his emotions. I didn't love her, he said, but she was an important part of my life. I needed her. I still need her. Slowly Greyson gained enough strength to take over his chores and his building again. He worked as he had before, long, strenuous hours. Roxanne kept the house clean, cooked good meals. She remained quiet. She did what she could to make Greyson comfortable, but remained out of his way otherwise. Delia's parties continued to be the center of the community entertainment. "We will have to start going again," Greyson said. "I am not fond of the idea, but it is necessary for several reasons." Roxanne sighed. He knew she dreaded the appearances more than he did, but he believed she recognized the necessity of going. As usual, Roxanne was the most glamorous and sought after girl in the room. Every man wanted a dance with her. They all wanted to be seen dancing with the acknowledged most popular girl in the county. Greyson danced with her only often enough not to arouse any comment. He watched her and thought that he must be the only man in the room that was not aroused by her nearness. It is exactly as William said, he mused. Every man here would give an arm to have her for his own

for a while. Of course there are those--most of them, in fact--who would not take her, because they would not compromise their own standards, but that doesn't lessen the fact that they probably dream of the ecstasy of holding this little girl in their arms, and being able to have their way with her. I am the only man in the house, Greyson was thinking, that could, without any resistance or guilt, possess her, and I am the only one that doesn't want her. He found himself looking around at the other most

attractive girls. I would never take another mistress, he said to himself, so why am I looking to see what girl might attract me most? He had actually tried to feel some sexual arousal as he danced with the most attractive girls, but found himself completely unaffected. He noticed Roxanne dancing with a handsome man about his own age. She was smiling up at him in her ineffable way. He was looking at her with that adoration so many of the men showed toward her. His excitement was evident. Greyson felt a twinge of jealousy. No, he said, I want her to have all the fun she can. If she finds someone she can be interested enough in, I will give her her freedom so that she can find some happiness. I have deprived her of enough. It was arranged that Greyson and Roxanne should lead the Virginia reel again. Greyson took Roxanne's hand and with his princely demeanor led her out on the floor. Everyone was impressed with this lovely couple. "Right for each other," almost everyone agreed. The dance went beautifully. It was as much a spectator dance as it was one for participation. It was a joy to watch. When it was over, as usual, the band swung into a waltz. Most of the couples danced this waltz with the partners they had chosen for the reel. Greyson took Roxanne in his arms. She smiled up at him. His heart bounded. Am I too, the slave of this sorcerer? I would not have believed she could effect me in this way, ever again! He didn't know whether he was pleased or disappointed. All the hateful things she had done to make him hate her, came rushing back. I am not being fair, he told himself. I was the one that made her life unbearable to the point that she had to behave in a way that was not natural for her."

If this is still needed, it should come long before this.

Eunice came running into the house screaming hysterically. Delia and all the others jumped up and ran to her. Luke came in carrying the limp body of Robin. She was bruised, bloody and they all wondered if she were alive. "Here, put her down here," Tom said, making a place on the couch. "Run and get the Indian!" Delia said. Run and get Hawk. Tell him Robin has been badly hurt! Tell him to bring his medications!"

Robert was the first to arrive at Hawk's cabin. He pounded on the door and yelled at the top of his voice. Fuline opened the door. "Bring Hawk, quick, Robin is dying. She is hurt!"

Hawk was out the door. "Stay here, Fuline," he said. "You must not come."

The Indian gave orders, and mixed medications, applying them or directing their application. He had learned that these strange white people did not like the sticky mixture applied directly to the wounds. They preferred to use some of that odd stuff called cloth so many of the Indians were using to make their dress, instead of buckskins and other skins.

"Maybe we should send to Dallas for a doctor," Tom suggested. "No!" Casey said. "Don't do it. The Indian can do better. The doctor will want to bleed her, or will infect her with his germs, or..."

"You may be right," Tom said. "We will let Luke and Fuline decide."

Fuline had been so frightened she hadn't said anything. Now she looked up, her eyes filled with tears. "We will all have to get guns. They will be here in a few minutes! They will

be on their way now. He will take Robin. He beat her and he will beat her again. He may kill her. They are coming after her!"

"Go get Van! Tell him to bring an arsenal. Get Rowdy, Maib. Tell all the women to stay home!" Tom said, running to the gun cabinet and taking down a couple of rifles. Delia took one and Tom checked some of the other guns. A couple of pistols were readied and laid on the table. Casey took one and Robert took another. Tom started to object, but he knew the Redford boys would not listen. They knew how to handle weapons and would be as good as any other man at defending this little girl and the place from the angry family of and Robin. The battle was short. The Frenchman had a half dozen armed men with him. They were half drunk, but determined and efficient. When the battle was over, one of them lay dead, and two more badly injured. The Frenchman and the remaining men had turned and rode out at . Delia and Tom asked the Indian to bring more medicine. They and the other men cleaned the wounds of the injured men, and bound them. The men were put to bed in one room and Luke kept guard over them. Delia wondered briefly if it was safe to leave Luke alone with them. Was he angry enough to finish them off? She decided Luke could be trusted, even though he was enraged.

Robin was barely alive. She was put to bed. Eunice and Clarice were determined to remain with her, even though Delia

and Tom had tried to persuade Clarice especially not to come. They were afraid the shock and stress of all that was going on, would cause her to miscarry. Robert sat by the door of Robin's room. "I'll kill him!" he said. "You should have let me kill him. Eunice and Clarice agreed." Delia stayed close. The Indian clan the Frenchman claimed as his family, did not know of herbs and barks to use for medications. They had been allowed to use only what the Frenchman decided was right; those items that could be purchased at the pharmacy. Delia wanted to be sure that the poultices were applied as often as the Indian recommended, and wrapped properly again.

All the children were playing in the yard. It was sunny. They decided it would be fun to make something to eat and have a picnic on the grass. Drue and Delia and Eunice packed sandwiches, cake, fresh grapes, and lemonade in baskets and had the children take it out. They played games and then decided to sit down to eat. Robert took Robin's arm and led her to a grassy spot beside the food. She sat down. Before Robert had seated himself, Gerald had seated himself on her other side. Robin turned and smiled at him. "Here," Gerald said, "This looks like a sandwich just made for you. I see right there, it has your name on it." Robin looked as if she were looking for the name. She laughed. Everyone was giggling and making a game out of everything they did. Robert was dismayed. This kind of clever teasing, and getting attention was not his forte. He was sincere about everything. He couldn't think of anything to do that would help him to compete with a boy as clever and handsome as Gerald was. He picked up a glass and poured some lemonade. He handed it to Robin and for a moment he had her attention. Gerald had her attention most of the rest of the time. When they had all finished eating, Gerald took Robin's arm. "Let's go for a walk and look at the flowers," he said. They

walked away. Robert heard them laughing and talking. He was consumed with jealousy. "She's my girl," he said. "How did this happen?"

That night he consulted his mother. "Robin is my girl," he said. "I told everyone a long time ago that I was going to marry her when we grow up. Now she likes Gerald more than she likes me. How can I win her away from someone like Gerald?. He is more clever than I am. He is more fun than I am. He is handsome. He is bigger than I am. He is rich and I am poor..."

"Whoever said raising children was easy," Drue sighed. Her heart ached for her son. She thought he was the better man of the two, even though it was true that Gerald was handsome, clever, rich, big. "Well, I don't know what to say," she told Robin. "There must be a way. Let me think about it for a while, and we will see what we can come up with."

"Mr. Crawford was over fifty when he married Jennifer Craig. He had a couple of children older than she was. When you look at it superficially, it looks like a real misalliance, but in his case, it was not. Jennifer was not a pretty girl. She had no young suitors. This crazy society of ours is set up so that a woman has very little chance for any happiness unless she gets married and has children. That is what most girls want. There isn't much else open to them. Maybe some day it will be different, if Victoria Woodhull, and some of the others like her have their way. I hope so, but if it happens, it will still be a long time before women have any freedom to speak of." Tom was very aware of Van's turbulent state of mind, and was purposely continuing to talk to give him a chance to recover his thoughts and sense of stability.

"It is true that good looking people, pretty girls, and handsome men, have a much better chance at happiness than the ugly ones do. Sad as it is, some people are not at all attractive their looks. I have seen downright ugly

people that were loved deeply by almost everyone they met, but it is not always true. Jennifer is big, raw-boned. She has coarse skin, too red. Her hair is always oily. She doesn't even have a nice voice. Her eyes are weak, and quite red all the time. She squints. Well, Mr. Crawford married her. His affections for her were sincere. He is good to her. He would not allow anyone to insult nor offend her. He even demanded the utmost respect from his own children. He told them that they were welcome to come into his home at any time if they acknowledged that Jennifer was the mistress of that home. If they ever caused her the slightest embarrassment intentionally, they would have him to settle with. As far as I know, the children bring their families there, and they all get along quite well. Jennifer has a heart of gold, and the families--the grandchildren, have come to love her. Now she has two children of her own. She is happy. "Roxanne, when we have children, do you think there will be any problem in your mind--or your parents'--about the fact that black blood flows in those children's veins?"

"Roxanne looked astonished. "No, but you, and your family may be alarmed if we have a child who has an extra finger..."

Greyson had heard about the removal of the extra little fingers from the sides of the hands of three of Roxanne's family. He smiled. "I may be so attached to that little extra appendage, that I will refuse to allow it to be removed-- just because it is a part of my child--and every little thing about any child of mine will be precious to me."

"Would that throw too much of the work on you, Drue?" he asked. "Oh, we can work all that out. Delia and Eunice and Lenna and all the others will be vying for the honor of doing the most, you know. And there will be all my girls, who always like to help with things of that kind. I want our children to experience the wholesome things that you have experienced. I

want a home like yours. Roxanne, you have lived that way, and now you have experienced the ways of the rich. I certainly do not want to impose my wishes on you. Will you be truthful and tell me--which way do you want to live? We can live in a mansion, with servants if you wish. It does have its rewards. I don't want to deprive you of any comforts. Maybe it is a crazy notion."

"Well, if we couldn't have the mansion, the servants, the luxuries, I probably would look at it differently. I would probably always wish we could have them--but when we have an option,

a choice, and can always change at any time, I would like to begin our lives out here, too. I do love my home. I would miss the way we live. We were always happy. There was always so much love and respect in our home. I would want our children to be educated, and to have all the advantages money can provide--but I want them to have the advantages of the things we learned out here, too, that aren't taught in schools."

Carol had gone in to talk to her parents and the others of her family. "We had a wonderful time," she said. "It is always so much fun to go to the Walling's. You won't believe how Roxanne behaved. She was almost like her old self. She didn't say anything hateful. She didn't talk much at all on the way up or on the way back, but she did seem different. She danced every dance, and everyone was delighted to see her. Vincent started a game called "spin the pan," and announced that whoever caught the pan would lead the Virginia Reel with Roxanne. And guess who caught the pan! It was Greyson--so she had to dance with him. She didn't make any fuss about it. Not when we were at the dance anyway. She looked like she was having a wonderful time. She looked happy."

Drue and Joe were listening to Carol's with interest. "Did...Van dance with her?" Drue asked. "Oh yes, he danced with her several times. He looked as if she were his wife or something. Mama when can begin

going to the dances? I can't wait to have her there with me. Oh, look it is storming good. We will all cuddle up and listen to the rain and the thunder. I love a storm!"

The storm increased in violence. Greyson had gone to bed earlier than usual. He was exhausted. He was almost grateful for the storm. It made it impossible for him to work the rest of the day, after they had returned. He was sound asleep when he heard Roxanne crying. He got up quickly and made his way to her room. He started to light a candle, but decided it was not needed. "Roxanne, what is it? What is the matter. Are you ill?"

"The storm," she said. "It frightens me. The thunder is so loud.. The lightning..."

He went to her bed and took her hand. "I'm sorry, Roxanne. I hadn't thought you might be frightened. I will stay with you. He sat by her bed for the remainder of the night, holding her hand. "How did you like the storm?" Joe said. "Wasn't that a good one? Guess it's over. May come up again tonight. One never can outguess the weather in Texas."

"I hope not," Greyson said. "Roxanne was frightened to death of it. I don't think she slept much."

"Roxanne was frightened of the storm?" Drue asked, puzzlement in her voice. "She always loved storms. We all did. We felt so cozy and secure in our little cottage..." "She stopped and stared at Greyson as if she might have revealed something she shouldn't have."

Greyson turned away. No one saw his smile. "Guess she was just nervous," he said. "I'll see you later." He strode out of the room and toward his own building. "Well, well, so she has always loved storms. I wonder if my little wife could have had another purpose in calling me in..."

"I wonder if the storm is coming back tonight?" Roxanne said when Greyson entered.

"Probably," Greyson said. "Sure puts a crimp in the work, but makes it nice for the enforced rest. I enjoy it."

"It scares me," Roxanne said. "I'm sorry, Roxanne," Greyson said casually, "Would you like to come into my room tonight?"

"I think I would, if you don't mind."

"Don't mind at all," he said. "I can sleep right through it."

Roxanne entered timidly. She wore one of the new pignoirs that had hung in her closet for two years. "It isn't booming right now," she said, but it may before morning."

"Sure. Just as well feel safe. Here, I'll get another blanket, I know how you like to be extra warm." While Greyson was getting the blanket from the closet, Roxanne slipped her pignoir off and crawled into bed. Greyson spread the blanket over her. He got into bed. "God, I'm tired," he said. "I think I'm going right to sleep. He turned his back and settled his head on the pillow."

He heard Roxanne crying. "What is it? Roxanne, what ever is the matter. It isn't storming."

"I wasn't crying about the storm last night. I never was afraid of any storm. It was just another of my lies. I am just frightened."

"If you are not frightened of the storm, then what frightens you."

I have been such a fool that no one will ever like me again. I can't ask my own family to forgive me."

Greyson took her in his arms. "Roxanne. I wish I knew what to say."

"There is nothing to say. Greyson are you falling in love with Carol?"

He didn't answer.

"I don't blame you if you are. She is a human being. She is beautiful. I can never feel human again."

"You certainly could have fooled me," Greyson said. "I thought you looked very much like a human being at the ball last night. Every man there was leering at you. Everyone wanted to be close to you. You were the envy of every girl there. Even Uncle Van couldn't keep his hands off you. If I hadn't thought you were enjoying his favors--after yearning for him for two years, I would have challenged him. I figured you had a right to his attention after suffering all you did for him."

"I don't care about Van," she said. "You don't? What happened? How many times have you told me that you could never love anyone else, and that..."

"I was a fool," she said. "I wish I could undo all that I did--but of course that is impossible. It will always be there. No matter what I do, what I have done will remain unchanged."

"Yes, that's true," he said. "I know exactly how you feel. I was in that exactly same position two years ago. Life has been benevolent to me. I don't feel yet that I deserve so many good things. I know how you feel, Roxanne."

"But it didn't take you so long to see your errors and begin correcting them. It took me two years."

"Circumstances were better to me. Circumstances all seemed to be in my favor. That was not so with you. You had a great deal more to contend with. You didn't have the relief of being accepted back without anyone's knowing the facts. You bore the burden of pregnancy, the burden of my guilt as well as your own."

She snuggled closer in his arms. He didn't want her to know yet how delighted he was. He didn't want to hurt her, nor take revenge, or gloat. He wanted to find out for himself if this was just loneliness, or if she had come to feel some respect for him. "I threw away a lot, when I tossed your love

aside, Greyson. I couldn't look at you at the ball without feeling a dreadful loss. The girls are all wild about you. Any one of them would give anything to be in my place. None of them would have been such a fool."

"What are you saying, Roxanne?"

"I am saying that I know you can never love me again--but that I would give anything if you could. I know there were several of the boys at the ball that would...love me if I wanted them. If I weren't married, some of them would marry me, but I don't want any of them. None of them can compare with you. You are, like Carol said, the most charming man in the country. Van said that if he were fifteen years younger and thought he could compete with you, he would give you a real run for your money--but even he admitted that--well, he called you a young Adonis. He said he could never have competed with you."

"Nice compliment coming from Van."

Roxanne laughed. "Did you know your father cheated. He told me he was going to. He said that he knew you would be the one to catch the spinning pan. I was afraid you wouldn't try--and I would be mortified. He would know then that...how you have come to feel about me."

"How have I come to feel about you, Roxanne?"

"I think you hate me. You have been terribly patient with me. You have been kind and gentle and generous. You have done everything anyone could possibly do to make me happy. How did you stand me? You should have walked out long ago. I didn't deserve so much kindness."

"I love you, Roxanne,"

Roxanne jumped. She was astonished. "I would never have stopped telling you that I loved you if you hadn't got so furious and so upset every time I said it. I didn't want to antagonize you for nothing. You said you hated me. I felt very fortunate to have you for my wife even if you did hate me. I had thought that nothing could be

penance enough for the terrible things I did and said. But I lost sight of how fortunate I was, and took the easy way out. My parents would be ashamed of me. They will be ashamed of me when they know. My father had to have felt that same loneliness I felt, that same need to be loved and to have someone to share life with. But nothing on earth would have convinced him that his own needs were worth sacrificing his moral creeds for. He never went to a whorehouse in his life. He would never have taken a mistress. I revered those same

tenets too, and would not have believed anything could cause me to violate them. But I did. I used the excuse at first that it was because I was so hurt, when I thought you had rejected me on account of my antecedents. I have been such a weakling; such a fool."

"But I did worse things, said worse things. I told you I didn't care about decency any more, didn't value virtue any more, didn't want my baby--so many other vile things. I hated William, but I had to try to hurt you all I could by..."

"He was one man I never was jealous of. Roxanne, when you taunted me, stung me with your poison barbs, I sometimes did shudder with the pain for an instant--but there was never a time when I did not weigh the fortunate circumstances that were thrust upon me against what I had thought would be my destiny. You had said that the hell you would put me through was to be my penance. Like you said, I wanted to do penance. What you put me through was so very little compared to what I thought I deserved, that it was almost a joy. I always shoved the sharp daggers side with glee; joy that I did not have to face Tom and Delia and my parents and all the others with the facts of my perfidy. That would have been a million times

harder to bear--so all I ever felt was how very fortunate I was--and am. My main concern was for you. I hated to see you so unhappy. You didn't deserve to suffer--for my indiscretions. I have prayed, Roxanne, that you would be happy again. Sometimes I despaired of that ever happening.

CHAPTER XVII

Robert was an imposing figure on his big, sorrel stallion. He rode with that same air of nobility with which he moved on his feet. He led a glowing brown mare, with sweeping white mane and tail. His eyes were alert, even though his air would have caused anyone to believe that he was not aware of anything around him. He rode into , a village just across the county border from Dallas. He got down from his horse, tossing the reins over the railing. Better get something to eat, he said to himself. Might be quite a spell before I ride into another town. A slovenly man appeared to take his horses. "Give them a good bait of oats, some hay, and fill up their feed-bags. He tossed the man a coin. The man caught it and without looking at it, slipped it into his pocket. He grinned a macabre grin. He had several dark-stained, broken teeth. "Sure now you're agoin' to the hangin'", he said. "wouldn't want to miss that. It's gonna be the best hangin' in ten years. Everybody's agoin'. Probably aswarmin' around up there right now, like bees around a honey-tree. People sure do like a hangin'. Even love an ordinary one, but this one'll be special."

"Who's gettin' hanged?" Robert asked without interest. "Who's gettin' hanged?! Why haven't you heard? It's them three bank robbers from Kansas Country. They're notorious. Ever'body knows about 'em. They's an old man, and his fifteen year old kid. It's said that the boy got away. Of course they'll lose no time tryin' to catch him--and then the girl! That's what they're all so excited about. It's said about, that that girl is a beauty. Most haven't seen a girl hang. Sure stimulates a man to see a girl hang. I've known men to have a orgasm jest watchin' a girl swing. Mighty stimulin'. Gives them somethin' to dream about for months."

"Does it affect you that way?" Robert asked, a little nauseated. "Well now, I have to admit it did when I wuz younger. Or I thought it would. I went to a hangin' expectin' to be mighty aroused, to enjoy that feelin' of sexual satisfaction I had heard so much about--but you know what. I found myself out of the crowd vomitin' my guts up. Guess I'm a queasy sonofabitch; a weakling."

"Guess so," Robert said. Robert finished his meal and his coffee. He arose and went to a trading post. He purchased cheese, eggs, and an extra wool blanket. He saw some fresh-baked bread on the counter. It reminded him of his home and his mother's delicious light-bread, always baked in coffee cans, until the advent of the Walling family. They had managed to get dozens of things for the Redfords, always insisting that what they did was somehow more helpful to them than it was to his family. He smiled. "Clever people," he said. "Sent us all to school. Did everything in their power to make our lives good. Succeeded in almost everything."

He took some time to re-pack everything. He had plenty of coffee. His canteens were full. His coffee-pot and one cup and small skillet and the small hatchet were packed as they always were. "I'll have to put almost everything on my horse, and leave the pack-horse as free as possible. He bought a new saddle, and cinched it down on the mare. "Guess I have enough rope," he decided. His mind went drifting back to the night they were all gathered at the Walling's and Tom was telling them to take note of the difference between the opportunities good looking people, or rich people, got in this world and those opportunities the ugly, unattractive, or poor got. "I have thought about that a lot since, and have been quite fascinated with it's implications. It is true that if this girl had been written about, talked about as an ugly woman, without anything unusual about her, I probably never

would have been motivated to do this; to try to rescue her. "Kind of strange, like Tom said. It certainly wont make any difference to me in the long-run, whether she is pretty, or not.

Even if she turned out to be the beauty she is said to be, it wouldn't really make any difference. I will never be attracted to any woman other than the one I lost. I don't want to be attracted to any other one. I've known plenty of beautiful women--some nice ones, and their beauty and sincerity held no attraction for me whatsoever. I am resigned to living my life alone. No other woman could ever match the little Indian girl I thought for so long I was going to make my wife. I wouldn't even want that ever to happen. I would feel disloyal to little Robin--even though she is happily married to another man. So, why am I about to do this silly thing? This girl is a bank-robber, a murderer, a seasoned criminal. She probably has no conscience. She should be punished. I don't believe in hanging as a means of punishment, but I sure as hell don't go around trying to prevent all those sentenced to hang, from suffering that ignomy. Just crazy, I guess. Just doing it for the hell of it. I really don't care whether she hangs or not. Let the damn fools have their paroxysms of delight watching it. What is it to me? I do this, then I am a criminal, too. So what? I know I am going to do it. Just for the hell of it. Just for the challenge. Just to see if I can get away with it. If I am a criminal too, then, so what's the difference? I don't much give a damn. I don't claim to have many virtues left, anyway. I've hurt my family, the Wallings, and everyone that knows me. Well, maybe I was always the black sheep of the family, and we just didn't recognize it until I lost my little Robin."

Yes, they succeeded in almost everything, his mind repeated. Everything except preventing Robin from marrying Gerald. That almost destroyed me. And then, of course, there was the problem with Roxanne. They did everything they could

to help her, but for a long time their efforts seemed futile. I don't think I will ever recover from the pain of Robin's marrying Gerald. Van, and everyone was hurt when I quit my training. I would have been a full-fledged attorney by now. I only had another year. I couldn't get interested in that goal any more. I owe the Wallings a great deal of money for my education. Even as low as I have sunk I still believe in paying my debts. I will do it somehow. I don't want to think about it now. I will probably wear my life away, riding the hills, living as a wandering, bitter hermit."

As he rode away, his mind began to make plans. I will have to act at exactly the right moment. I can't make any move, or draw any attention to myself until they are ready to drop the noose around her neck. One second too early and it will give everything away and I will wind up right up there with her. One second too late and I might as well ride away, as her neck will be broken. Neither of these prospects worried him. The fact that he would have only one chance to shoot the rope in two did not worry him, either. His rifle was loaded and ready. His confidence in his superior skill at shooting, was justified. All of the Redford boys had been excellent rifleman. They had been trained by their father from the time they could carry a gun. As it turned out, Robert had been the best of all. He never missed his mark. That was due in part to his early and constant training, and also due to the generosity again, of the Wallings. They had made it possible for the Redfords to buy all the ammunition they wanted for practice, and Robert never tired of practicing. The one thing that worried Robert, was that this girl might not be quick enough, alert enough, to grasp what was happening in the few seconds she would have to do so. She most certainly would not be looking for anything of this kind to happen, and might be so surprised, even if she were quite alert, that she would hesitate a moment too long, and all

would be lost. Robert knew the danger if this happened. Even this eventuality didn't worry him too much, however. He liked adventure, and danger never quelled him. "I have to be in the right place. The people will be milling around everywhere. No one will attempt to

shoot me, as it is a respected tacit rule that no one shoots. Any shots could hit men, women, children, or even their horses. If she makes it into the

saddle at the proper time, no one will shoot at us as we dash for the thicket. It is customary for people to refrain from firing into the thicket. They all know that others go there to relieve the call of nature, and sometimes children are playing there. The only question is, will she be quick enough to see the opportunity and take advantage of it. He was a little sickened by the raucous crowds. Uncivilized! he said. Animals!. I cannot hope to rescue more than one of them," he told himself. "Why have I chosen the girl? He probably deserves rescue as much as she does. If anyone deserves hanging, it is these two. Not that I believe in hanging in any case. It is barbarous. They may not have caught the boy yet. I hope not...but then maybe that would mean further robberies and murder in the future."

No one paid much attention as he rode into the crowd. Just another spectator. Most had left their horses and wagons back out of the way, but a few remained mounted, milling with the crowd. It was reported that Mr. Dunbar had contracted pneumonia. His hanging party would be postponed. No one would enjoy seeing a man hanged if he was too weak to stand. Of course if that weakness was from fear and despair, it would be just as exciting, but if the man was sick, they would all prefer that the hanging was postponed until he was well and strong again. Robert was one of the most calm people present as the hangman stepped up to drop the noose over the girl's neck. Evidently they haven't caught the boy yet," he was thinking.

"My god, she surely isn't a beauty!" he said aloud. She looks like a witch. She looks as if she hadn't had a bath in six months! I never saw such knotted, twisted, stringy hair. Well, maybe being a bank-robber, she feels bathing is superfluous."

He waited to lift his rifle until the last second. He didn't want to draw any attention to himself. As the noose dropped, his shot rang out. He dashed up to the platform, leading the mare in as close as he could. He had a moment's alarm that she was not going to notice what had happened. Then, miraculously, she was in the saddle, and they were prodding their horses relentlessly toward the thicket. They heard angry voices shouting and threatening. They heard shots, but Robert believed they might have been fired into the air. Anyone firing toward them, and the thicket where other people might be, would be immediately apprehended and punished for that rash act. Robert didn't stop until they had reached the place he had in mind to go. It was another thicket, near a stream. He stopped and the girl pulled her horse up, too. "Get down," he said, not looking at her. He proceeded to start a fire. "You can begin gathering wood," he said. "Why should I gather wood,?" she asked truculently. "We will have to go on as soon as we can. You surely know that they will have the biggest posse out after me, they can get together, just as soon as possible. They are probably very near now. "I don't have time to argue with a silly woman right now," he said. "Get the wood. Lots of it, and as quickly as you can."

She sat down. "I'm tired. I am going to save my strength for the getaway. I am a bank robber. I know what to do. My father taught me everything. It would be the utmost folly to stay here for any length of time."

She felt herself being pulled roughly to her feet. "You will do as I say!" Robert told her. "Get wood! A lot of it. Be quick about it. As soon as you can, get back here, take the food from the saddle-bags. Make coffee. Scramble some eggs." She looked at him defiantly. "You aren't going to ride away on one of my horses," he warned. She glared at him. "You are a fool!" she said. "We'll see who is the fool!" she heard him say, as she turned to begin

gathering the wood. "I want you to come and have something to eat," Robert said. "I am starving, and I am sure you haven't had anything today. It isn't that I care a lot how hungry you are, but a body can withstand a lot more cold if it is well-nourished. I wouldn't want you dying before I decide what to do with you."

She was hungry. She wouldn't have let that stop her from getting the best start on the posse that she could, if she could have got away--but if she couldn't take one of his horses, she knew she didn't have a chance. I'll find a way pretty soon, that I can get one of the horses and go, she thought. She sat down. He handed her a cleaned piece of wood with scrambled eggs, a piece of cheese and a torn hunk of light-bread. "We'll have to drink from the same cup," he said. She downed her meal with relish. "I have never laid with a man," she said abruptly. "I know that men are extremely conscious all the time of their need to lie with a woman. My father taught me that. He and my brother always protected me from any lecherous men. My father said that a woman's virtue is more precious than gold."

"Yet, he would encourage you to help him rob banks. Didn't he consider it a lack of virtue to rob banks?"

"Of course not! You're only taking money from people who are too rich to miss it, anyway. I have cherished my virtue as my father taught me to--but I will lie with you--if you will let me take one of the horses and go...before the posse arrives."

Robert laughed. "Why would I pay for something that is already mine?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, her voice angry. "I mean that you are my prisoner now. You cannot do otherwise than what I want in any case."

She flew at him. She beat with her fists, scratched his face, kicked, screamed, bit his arm. He laughed. He held her arms. Her legs were pinned down with one of his twisted over them. "You are a regular little spit-fire, aren't you? If I had any desire for you, it would be rewarding to take my pleasure with you now, but we don't have time. We have to hurry." His face was bleeding from the deep scratches of her fingernails. It gave her a little satisfaction, but he didn't seem to notice the driplets of blood falling on his fine, fawn-colored shirt.

He arose and untied his ropes from the saddles. "Now, I want you to come with me," he said. "Here, see that tree. Tie this rope securely around it and bring it back to this bigger one." He had picked his site carefully, spying out the trees that would best serve his purpose. In this thicket, that was not hard to do. "Now, I am going to cut all the branches I can reach with my hatchet. Wish I had an axe, but it was too much to try to carry. I will shoot branches down, too, and pull all I can down with the horses. I want you to take them like this, cut small pieces of the rope, and tie each branch to the rope."

He cut off a longer piece of the rope with his knife and flung a loop over the top of the smallest tree, where they had attached the end of the first rope. He took one of the horses over and pulled the tree down as far as it could be bent. He then tied the end of the rope to another small tree. "Now tie the branches over the bent trunk of this tree, too. Make them just as close as you can. We don't have time to cut as many as I would like, but we will have a pretty good

shelter, just the same."

"You're crazy!" she said. "Why make a shelter. It won't protect us from the posse. She was beginning to sound a little bit frantic. They will be here any minute!"

"No posse will come," Robert assured her. "But of course they will!" the girl said. "You don't seem to know who I am! They will never let me go so easily. They have been trying to catch me for years. They'll come."

"I am well aware of who you are. They would like to catch you all right. I'm not denying that--and maybe I'll let them. It depends on how you behave. If you behave; do as I say, they will not get a chance to take you. Since I took you, I am an outlaw, too, you know. They want me as much as they want you. Do you think I am fool enough to let them catch up with me?"

"Well, it certainly looks like it!" she said, hugging her shoulders to ward off the cold. She shivered. "You have noticed how rapidly the temperature is falling," he said. "We are in for a blue norther. Have you ever experienced one? I assure you they are far more dangerous than any posse right now. No posse would be stupid enough to start out with a norther comin' up. Animals have frozen to death in their tracks. We will be very lucky if we can survive this one. That's why we need all the shelter we can get, and all the wood we can gather. We don't have much time. Every second counts. He stooped and threw a log onto the fire. He lead one of the horses out and drug in every log that was not too heavy to be dragged.

"Unsaddle the horses. Bring the saddle blankets over here. Bring the saddles, too. I wish I could leave the blankets on the horses--but I think we will have to have them to survive. Of course, it will do us no good to survive, if the horses don't. I think, though, that with the shelter we have made for them, they will make it."

He lead the horses over and snubbed them up close, their heads inward. He laid the blankets down between the horses and the blazing fire. He brought out the oats and hung the nose-bags on the horses. They began to chomp contentedly. "Lie down here," he told Heather. "Put the blankets over you as best you can. Put one saddle over your feet. It may prevent frost-bite. I'll use the other over mine. "We're as ready as we can get," he said. He laid down beside her and pulled the blankets down as tight as possible. He put his arms around her and held her as close as he could. She seemed to be going to object. "Don't be a fool," he said, "I am not doing this out of any need for your...favours. It is probably more objectionable to me than it is to you. It is merely another precaution we can take to keep from freezing to death. Our bodies warm each other. It helps. We'll both have to put our aversion aside and do whatever we can to survive."

"We are uncommonly lucky," Robert said next morning. "It usually takes longer for the northers to ease out. We lived. It is warming up as fast as it turned to freezing. The sun is coming out."

"Wonderful," Heather said. "Then we can get going, before the posse gets here."

"The posse isn't coming," Robert said. She looked at him with disgust, "Last night you said they wouldn't come because they would be aware of the norther blowing in. It's over for them as well as us. What would prevent their coming on out now?"

"They don't have the faintest notion where to look for us. The storm covered our tracks. They may ride out in search of us, but if they do, it will not enter their heads to come in this direction. They would head directly the opposite--the direction we started out. Of course we will not linger too long. I have some important things to do. Right now I am going to the stream to catch some fish for our breakfast. Make some strong coffee while I am gone."

He took the mare but left the sorrel stallion. Heather wondered about this. There would be no need for either horse, for such a short distance. If he meant to take the one to water, he

would surely have taken both. She watched him out of sight, and rushed to the sorrel. She picked up the bridle and tried to get the bit into his mouth. He snorted and reared away from her. She snubbed him up tight again, threw a half-hitch around his nose and almost smothering him, she tried to get the saddle-blanket on. He twisted around away from her. Try as she may, she could not get the horse to cooperate. "If I had a gun I'd shoot you!" she said. "I may as well make the damn coffee."

She heard Robert approaching. She refused to turn around. "I could see you were quite a good horse-woman when we rode away from the hanging," he said, "but it would take a better horseman than you to get a saddle on old Ginger's back. He has been trained not to allow anyone but me to ride him."

She felt like flying at him again, but even in her rage, she knew he would overcome her, just as he had done yesterday. After they had eaten the fish, chunks of bread, and drunk the hot coffee, Robert arose. "Come with me," he said. He could see her hesitation, her anger that she could not disobey him. He took her arm, picked up the wool blanket and almost dragged her to the creek. "Wash your hair, he commanded. She looked at him, shrinking back from the water. "In that ice water?" She said. "Nothing doing!"

He kicked off his boots, rolled up his pants legs and dragged her into the water. Now she did renew her scratching, screeching, biting and kicking. It was all in vain. He only laughed again. He took her out far enough to duck her under and did so. He took a piece of soap from his pocket and rubbed it into her hair. "How a lady can value her virginity and not care about cleanliness is more than I can understand,"

he said. "You are the dirtiest woman I ever saw! How can you stand it?"

"My father always said there are more kinds of dirt than one," she flared. "The way you are dirty is more degrading than the way I am. I think you are the dirtiest man I ever saw. How can you stand it?"

"Indeed there are more ways than one to be dirty," Robert laughed. "I'm not convinced that you don't have all of them." He wrapped the blanket around her wet, shivering body and led her back to the camp. He threw on another log. "You can dry out here by the fire, while I saddle up and get ready to leave," he said. Heather was more nearly to tears than she had been in a very long time. Heather's mind was busy, as they rode along an almost non-existent trail. She would have to plan how to outwit this man, how to get another horse and get back at the right time to rescue her father. She had no doubt that she could accomplish this, but she had to watch for opportunities, gauge the alertness of this man. She still hoped that she might seduce him. Her father had taught her that men were all the same when it came to what they wanted from women. She valued her virtue highly, as her father had taught her to, but she thought that if it could serve her purpose in getting away and saving her father's life, it would be worth the price. Robert stopped at a crude cabin. He dismounted and ordered her to do the same. "Unsaddle," he said. "Put the horses in that gate, then come in and I'll see what's next." Heather took note of everything. She could only ride the mare. She would have to think of some way to get another horse. She would have to have a gun. Maybe when she got a gun, she would shoot the sorrel. That would put this wily man on foot. She had always been willing to pit her wits against that of any man, but this man was unusually sagacious. He was dangerous. She wouldn't dare let him get a chance to divert her plans. Well, things are really looking

pretty good, she said to herself. At least I am not hanging there in the wind, for all those savages to glare at. I've always been lucky. God has been good to me. Robert had a fire

going. "I wish I had a toothbrush," Heather said. Robert turned and looked at her. "What in hell for? Don't tell me you could care about cleaning your teeth. Look at you! Your hair is knotted and stringy. Those clothes you have on are an outrage. They're disgraceful. That washing didn't do them much good after all. They're as dirty as ever, and so is your hair. Big, old, dirty, ill-fitting men's clothes; Must not have washed them in six months. They're stained with grease--from the cooking-fire, I suppose; splattered with mud, god knows what else, maybe the blood of your victims. How can a woman call herself a woman and not care any more about herself that that?"

"I think you're stupid," she said. "Any decent man would know that the girls who dress so pretty, and keep their hair so tidy, are doing it for the attentions of men. Girls who want the attentions of men are...whores. They know that all men want of them, is to lie with them. They know that the reason men want them to make themselves so...attractive, is to titillate them to further lechery. It is all just motivated by lust. My father would never let me wear clothes to attract men. He knew what men are and what they want, and why they want women to look so...attractive. I like for my teeth to be clean...and I wear clean underthings, because they are more comfortable--but cleanliness in general is a vice. I am too smart to go around primping myself all up, to attract the lusts of men. These dirty clothes are a badge of my honor. A badge of my virtue. They show that I am not interested in being attractive to men; directing their lecherous attention to me. It is a protection from their...lusts."

Robert glared at her with disgust. "Well, I'll tell you something that may be a surprise to you, little virgin. If

you dressed decently, brushed your hair out so that you looked human, behaved in a manner suitable to a young woman, had some manners, I still would not be in the least attracted to you. I've known dozens of beautiful women, decent women, women with some respect for themselves, gracious woman, women with real virtue; women who would not allow any man to even kiss them, without a wedding ring. None of them appealed to me in the least. I loved a woman once, and I will never love another one. I don't ever want another one. So, even if I didn't already own you, you wouldn't have a chance to sell yourself to me for favors you want."

Heather was quiet. "I'll tell you something, though," Robert continued, "I don't like looking at you in that filthy garb. I will bring you a decent outfit tomorrow. You will clean yourself up and behave like a woman. I don't intend to be near you any more than I can help, but when I do have to see you, I don't want to retch. Now get that other cup from the shelf, pour some coffee. Put the pans on the table for the stew. There's some good bread left, and even some cheese. Get that out of the saddle-bag."

"Are you a pansy?" Heather asked. "If I were living out here like this, I wouldn't need to go into town and buy food like this. I would kill my own food--grouse, ducks, geese, pheasant, deer. There are all kinds of other foods in the countryside, too. Wild onions, asparagus, herbs, sage, camus in some places; berries in season."

"You can begin gathering all of them tomorrow. Tonight we eat this. I think you will survive it."

They had eaten. Heather had gone out and searched for a twig that could be frayed at the end. She had carefully cleaned her teeth with it. She still wore the stained, ugly, much too large, men's clothing. Her hair was still in knots and strings. She was sitting in a home-made chair. It was deep and almost comfortable. Robert had stuffed a deerskin pouch with for a cushion. "Maybe I am a pansy," he

laughed. "I like comforts."

Robert turned to say something to her. She was looking up at him in anticipation of what he would say. Her lips were parted. They looked clean and inviting. Robert was disgusted with himself. He had not been aroused by a woman since he had lost Robin. He had never wanted to be. It not only made him angry with himself, but made him feel more contemptuous than ever toward Heather.

"Why is this happening to me?" he asked himself. "It is because I have absolutely no respect for her, of course. All the other women I met were deserving of some respect. Even those who would have laid with me willingly, were clean, had some respect for themselves. One had to have some respect for them. I could take this woman without compunction--without guilt. She has no respect for herself and I have no respect for her. She is as low as they come--as low as I have become. She is a bank-robber, a thief, a criminal, a murderer, dirty. She has no redeeming qualities, as far as I can see. She is all bad. I am ashamed that I can want her-- but I do. I don't have to justify it. I can't justify most of the things I have done in the last two years. He had to admit that it was refreshing to want a woman again--even under the circumstances. He felt an ache of delight, through the disgust. He pulled her roughly up from the chair and laid his lips on hers. He was not gentle. There was a demand, a promise, a threat. She tried to twist away, but he was so much stronger that her struggles were as nothing. Of course she isn't a virgin, he said. I'm not sure it would make any difference if she were. I am going to have her. He picked her up and carried her to the bed. I was taught to be a gentleman. I was taught to value my own integrity, if not that of another. I was taught what principles are. Well, I have betrayed all those values long ago. I am no longer the man I was taught to be."

"Take off those dirty clothes," he ordered. "I won't do it!" she flared back. "Then I'll do it for you!" he said, taking her shirt by the collar. She shrank back. "Please. I know I have to do what you want. I owe you something for saving my life. I pay my debts, so I will not object--but please just let me get under the covers first. I...still have some modesty left. I can't let you see me...naked."

He couldn't have been more astounded. He was angry with himself and with her. He asked himself again, how he could have sunk so low as to want to do something like this. There was no answer. She had got under the covers and removed her men's clothes. "This is the most delightful thing, and the most restful that has ever happened to me, he thought, as he removed his own clothes. I never thought I could feel like this. That kiss wasn't just a kiss. It reverberated through every nerve in my body, making me a person I couldn't recognize. It wasn't the disgust, the revulsion, but the pure joy of it, that engulfed me. I used to dream of possessing my Robin. I never once imagined it to be like this. It possesses me as surely as . My whole body, every cell delights. I am not ashamed, nor guilty, nor . All I feel is perfection. I don't deserve perfection. Every fear, every regret, every longing, every dread, every loathing of myself, has been dispelled and I feel nothing other than contentment, joy--perfection.

Heather had quieted. Robert's kisses continued, growing in passion. There was no longer any questioning about why he felt as he did. There was only the perfection. Pure joy. Suddenly, Heather's arms crept up around Robert's neck. He moaned. He cried out as if in pain. When he discovered that she really was a virgin, he almost relented. He hesitated. Her arms pulled him closer and he forgot everything else on earth, other than that perfection, that complete freedom from all that had been questionable, irritating, trying, unpleasant, insecure, painful in life. There was nothing but perfection. The perfection had disappeared.

Robert still felt a joy he had not felt in years, but the questions had come back. What was this going to lead to? Why had she been willing to accept his love-making? She had indicated that she had believed that making love was only the catering to the lust of a man. She had become not only willing, but as ardent for love as he himself had been. Wonderful as that was, it worried him. What could it lead to? "How do you feel...about all this?" he said. "I was determined not to ever allow any man to...violate me. I knew that I never wanted to get married. But now, since I have had this experience, I am glad. My father always taught me that this experience was ugly, that it denoted weakness, that it was sinful. I think it is sinful. I have always tried to be a good girl. I always did believe, though, that when we sin, it is not pleasing to god to whimper about it. I think we might as well admit it and live our lives as best we can. I think God will forgive me, since I did owe you a debt. I am sure no other man on earth could have caused me to want this experience. As much as I hate you--and I do, it cannot be denied that you are a very impressive man. You are impressive just to look at. You are the handsomest man I ever saw. You have a body like Adonis, Arms like steel, muscles like a grizzly bear. On top of that, you have a face that would hypnotize . You have a...thrilling voice. Just your clothes and the way you wear them, would be entrancing. The creases ripple with your muscles, seeming to have to enhance the litheness and strength of your body. They seem to be a part of you. I guess that what I am saying is that even though I was taught to hate the idea of allowing lust to dominate our lives at any time, I think you and I have fallen into the same vortex. We have enjoyed each other in a simply sensual way. It means absolutely nothing to either of us, excepting the satisfaction of animal lust. I don't feel guilty about that, as I thought I would, because, as I said, I don't think any woman could resist you..."

Robert was astounded. He believed that Heather was being honest in a way most women could not have been honest. She seemed not to be the least embarrassed to have been drawn into a whirlpool of pure lust. Since it had happened, she saw no reason to deny it. Since she had enjoyed it she saw no benefit in denying that, either. As much pleasure as he had found in the fact that she had enjoyed their mutual indulgence of their lust, it worried him. Would she be difficult to get out of his life when he wanted to be rid of her? He believed that he would be tired of her in a very short time, and he didn't want to have to find any problems in the way of her wanting to continue their unorthodox relationship. "Would you be willing to make a pact with me?" he asked. "Supposing that we agree that when either of us is finished with this relationship, the other will give absolutely no objection. If you are tired of this before I am, I promise not to make the least problem for you. I will go along with it. If I tire of it before you do, you promise not to give me any trouble."

"I'll go along with that," Heather said. "When either of us is finished with this , based on nothing other than lust--which I believe never does last for too long, the other will go along with that decision without any demands, or Hesitation. Robert had believed that this pact would erase any he had about this indiscretion. However, it had no more than been made than he came to an abrupt . "What if she tires of me first? My god! I never wanted anything so much in my life as I wanted her. If she suddenly rejects me, according to the pact that I suggested, what will I do? I am not sure I have the discipline to keep my part of the pact! He walked around all day, unable to dispel the feeling that he was caught in a web of his own making. He was angry, resentful, cross. Why in god's name did I have to go rescue her? I am a fool. Well, I've been a fool since I lost Robin. Maybe even before that. Will she reject me before night?

He could not detect any answer to his question. She behaved as if she were completely unaware of anything unusual having occurred in her life. She paid no attention to Robert other than to obey his orders. She will certainly reject me

tonight, he said again. She was eager for his kisses and his embrace and his love as she had been the night before. He was relieved. He held her and made love to her with that same satisfaction, that same abandon, that same joyful feeling of everything in life being suddenly perfect, as it had the night before. My morals have come to be those of a cave-man, he said, where she is concerned, nonexistent. He awoke in the morning with that same returning guilt and fear that she would tire of him before he tired of her. Maybe I will never tire of her, he said. I can't imagine life without her in my arms every night. Maybe the wisest thing I could do is to turn her in and myself along with her. We probably both deserve hanging. I never did believe copulation for the mere satisfaction of animal lust was... even decent. Again, he was cross, unpleasant, all day. I have some chores to do in town, he said. I will be back before dark. I will ride the mare, just for insurance. "Would you please buy me a toothbrush?" she asked. "Consider it," he said. "And..." she blushed. "What the hell's the matter with you now?" he asked, truly irritated. "Why should a girl with no morals whatsoever blush about anything."

"I'll pay you back...when we get the gold, but I need some underthings."

He didn't answer, but strode out the door. She watched him go. As she had said, the way his clothes creased and over his hard broad shoulders was . It is strange, what he does to me. Guess it's that way with all women. This is what my pa always warned me about. I don't feel dirtied, though, like he told me I would. I feel...kind of happy, kind of fulfilled. I will never regret this experience. My pa will kill me if he ever finds out, but...well I have never disobeyed or defied him before. He will just have to...never know...

"I wonder if she will be gone. If she is I will hunt her down like a wild animal. I may kill her. I wish I had never met her. She is anathema to me. She has made me into a worse person than I already was. I didn't think I could get any worse. I don't understand what has happened to me. The feeling of perfection he had had with her in his arms,

returned, causing that inimitable feeling again. Absolutely the most wonderful thing under the sun--and absolutely the hatefulest. His heart was pounding as he approached the door. Would she be there? He had bought another horse. He was loaded down with parcels, including a huge galvanized washtub. He had to go inside before he unloaded, to see if she was there. He thought his heart would stop when he saw her, in those ugly, dirty men's clothes, standing before his Franklin cook-stove, turning some kind of meat. He stood watching her for a moment, and then heaving a sigh of utmost relief, he went to unload, and pasture the horses. "I went out and killed a pheasant today," she said. I thought you might be hungry when you got back. He's all ready to eat, along with wild onions, and some raspberries."

He was so relieved that she had not gone, that he couldn't feel too cross with her. "It's obscene for a woman to shoot too well," he said. None of his sisters had ever learned more than how to load a gun. He knew that Laura had saved lives by being able to shoot well. He knew that Delia had been a good shot in her day. While he had the deepest respect and admiration for these women, he felt that in most cases, a woman who shot a gun was...less ladylike; less respectable. "Oh, yeah? I don't think so. My pa was always proud of my shooting. I could hit a knot in a tree three hundred yards away when I was twelve years old--and I've improved ever since. You think you are such an exception at shooting. I will go up

against you any day. We'll have a contest. I will wager a half my share of the gold that I can outshoot you."

"You mentioned this gold before. What gold are you talking about? You were caught. How did you get away with any gold?"

"Oh, from before. We've robbed a lot of banks, you know. We got gold every time. This is the first time we were ever caught."

"Where is this gold?" Robert knew that it was logical that they would have gold stowed away somewhere, but it was hard to believe just the same. "Do you think I would tell you? I don't trust you. We are all sworn never to divulge the secret of where it is hidden. We will leave it there until we get ready to go back east somewhere, and then we will get it and take it with us-- and just have a good time for a while. The three of us." She looked excited, glowing.

"You will take me to the gold," he said. "Never!" she said. "I would never betray my pa and my brother. It is several year's work." She looked thoughtful. "I would pay you half of my share of it, though, if you would agree to go help me to rescue my pa. It is a lot of money. You could live well for the rest of your life! Will you, Robert? You would be a fool not to."

"Then I am a fool. I will not help you rescue that old reprobate. I am sorry I ever took a notion to rescue you. If I had it to do over again, I would ride in the other direction just as fast as old Ginger could go!"

"I can get him out all alone. I know I can. But it is just that I need horses. You will help me wont you? My pa is the only human being in this whole world that I love, and who loves me. That is why I am going to rescue him. He has some plans for the next robbery, too. We will have to find Forest before we can do that. I know where to find him, but I wont go get him until I get my pa out. My brother is a good shot, and smart as they come, but he wouldn't be too good at helping

with the rescue." She didn't offer to explain why. "You will take me to the gold," Robert repeated. She stared at him, anger spreading over her countenance. "Never!" she repeated. "Not unless you will agree to take half of my share and help me."

"Like I told you, Heather, I will not agree to any such thing. You are not in any position to make any demands. You are my prisoner. You will have to do as I say. I say you are going to take me to the gold."

"I will not do it. You could man-handle me and make me do what you said before, but there is no way you can make me take you to the gold."

"Would you rather I took you back to the authorities to swing along with that nefarious father of yours? I have had half a notion to do just that a few times anyway, you know. If that happens," he continued, still detecting defiance in her face, "Neither you nor your pa will ever enjoy the gold, or the robbing of any more banks--or for that matter anything else. You will be left hanging up there side by side for the crows to pick."

She shuddered. "I knew you were a swine, but I never dreamed you could talk in such a disgusting way without compunction. You would see a good man and a good woman hang just to satisfy your own greed. Just because you want all the gold."

"Why not?" Robert asked. "It isn't as if you and your pa really were good people. You are robbers, killers. I think you are the ones that have no compunction, no heart."

"I never did kill anyone! I am not a killer. And like I told you we took money from banks, because the rich people who have it there, have so much that they wont even miss it. We've helped a lot of people who were poor and needed money. We are not evil people--like you are."

"I doubt very much that it is true that you have never killed anyone. Bank-robbers almost always do have to.

Certainly, in any case, you have seen your pa kill good men. You are condoning that as long as you condone what he does. I know he has killed several men--bank tellers, and even civilians if they got in his way. Do you think a good person could do that?"

"You're playing stupid! You know better than that. My pa has killed people. I always felt sick at heart when he had to, but it was necessary. It was self-defense, to save his own life--or mine or Forest's."

"Self-defense, hell! It isn't self-defense when people are robbing a bank and people who have been depended on to keep that money safe for them, are trying to keep that from happening. When they have seen the robbers, by no fault of their own, and can identify them, in your creed, they have to be killed so that they won't identify you. You are the one that's playing stupid! You always felt sick when your pa had to kill a man--but you didn't have guts enough to put a stop to it!. You should have done that even if you had had to kill him!"

Heather had turned white. She seemed to be close to tears. "You think I should have killed my own father for doing what he had to do. He had to kill those men. They had no right to try to keep money safe for vulgar, callous, rich people, who couldn't care less if people were starving. Most of these rich people, you know, were carpet-baggers, who actually stole everything they had--from the poor Southerners, who they had robbed of their homes already, and sent them out with nothing with which to feed or clothe their families. Babies, old people and helpless women, who had never learned anything other than to please a man, were suffering. They are the ones that are evil--not my pa!"

"Boy, your old man used every persuasion in the book, didn't he, to justify his murdering and thieving? I wouldn't have thought you were so gullible. Well, I did say all along that you were a fool. Robbery, killing, murder is criminal at

any time. The people who have money in those banks are most often just hard-working people who have spent their lives to build up a little nest-egg for their old age, or to send their kids to school, or to pay for the next baby. Every one of those men your pa killed was a good man, trying to make a living for his family. A teller's salary is not a lot. Neither is a guard's. Their families are now alone with no income; trying to keep body and soul together with no man to earn a living. There is where all those great sympathies you pretend to have, should be. Not with the killer, even if that killer is your pa."

"Whatever else I do, I don't ever pretend," Heather said, almost quietly. "Then you sure as hell have some twisted up ideas about virtue, honor, right and wrong--justice. It's hard to believe that you could have been made to believe there was really any virtue in being dirty. You seem to have believed it. It is harder to believe that you think there was honor in killing people. You actually were a virgin--because you thought that was virtuous--but then you could turn around and condone killing as easily as a cat killing a mouse. You thought it was essential to keep your teeth...and your...underthings clean, but you thought it was virtuous to wear ugly, dirty clothes, and your hair looking like a witch's. You know, it is really funny. You were depending on the fact that you were so slovenly and unattractive in every way, to protect you from the lustful desires of men. Well, you sure as hell got.

caught up in that one, because the only reason that I decided to take you, was that you were so dirty, such a demonic person, such trash. I had come to consider myself trash, so I could not be attracted by a decent woman. I wanted someone as low as I was, and I sure as hell found

her in you. That sounds reprehensible even in my own ears, but that is the bare, irrefutable, ugly, honest truth. I am a sonofabitch. I was brought up to be honest, decent, but when I lost Robin to

another man, I turned around and became as low as a snake's belly."

She stared at him, but said nothing for a full minute. "You see stealing from a woman and an old man as virtuous. You want the gold. You think nothing of taking a woman who only wants not to be indebted to anyone. You think nothing of making a woman enjoy your touch, when she knows you are the epitome of evil. I don't think my pa is wicked and I don't think I am. I think you are. You are the one that is wicked."

"I couldn't agree more. I am wicked. But so are you. You are as wicked as they come. Worse than I ever thought any woman could ever be. That water on the stove is boiling. You had better add some cold water to it if you don't want to come out looking like a crab. I want you to take that special soap I brought for your hair, and get it clean! I probably should come in and wash it for you, but you have some weird idea that you don't want me to see your body. If you don't get it thoroughly clean, though, mark my word I will wash it for you."

Heather came out wrapped in a big towel that had been in the parcels Robert brought. Her hair was still in strings and knots. Robert jumped up and grabbed the new hairbrush. He shoved Heather down into a chair and began to work on her hair. He was as rough as he knew how to be. She screamed and kicked and cursed and tried to bite him. He laughed and cursed her intermittently. He found himself wondering again if she would tell him before night that she was all through with him. I thought that if she was clean and neat, like a woman should be, maybe it would lessen this crazy desire for her; since that lust was initiated by the fact that she was a sloven--trash. It hasn't helped. It hasn't increased my need for her, but it certainly hasn't lessened it, either. His anger mounted as it always did when he realized how enslaved he was to his lust for her.

He hadn't come to be able to admit that inside him was a deep longing to be that man he had been taught to be, instead of what he had allowed himself to become. He heard himself saying, it seemed without his volition, that he would help Heather to rescue her father. He didn't know why, but he suspected it was to try to allay the fear that she would utilize the pact, turn away from him and end the wicked bond that existed between them. She jumped up and would have flung her arms around his neck, but he prevented that, shoving her roughly away from him with a frown. Robert was walking the floor. "I will take your father out."

"It is very dangerous," Heather said. "I thought you were the woman that told me she knew I could do it. You seemed to have no doubt about it at that time."

"I don't doubt it, but I do want it to succeed."

"Well, my dear, I want you to rest easy. There will be very little danger in what I am going to do. I will have your father back here within--ten hours."

"Robert! Is that wise? If they follow you here, they will take all of us! I am surprised that they haven't come for me already..."

"They haven't come for you because no one recognized me. They probably would have, excepting that no one was paying much attention to anything other than the pretty little girl they hoped to see hang. The time will come, though, when we will have to take some precautions. We will have to protect ourselves against the lawmen who are determined to hang us. I am an outlaw since I rescued you." He seemed to think that was amusing. His smile was "What will you do?" Heather asked. "Will you wait until they bring him out and shoot the rope as you did with me?"

"No. I don't think that would be wise. Even though no one paid any attention to me before, certainly the horses, and the man who took them in so close to the platform would be noticed and there would be precautions taken to see that the same thing didn't happen again. They still wouldn't shoot, but if enough of them gathered around the horses, and held their reins, and made a circle, they could stop us. No, I have an entirely different plan. All I need is a preacher's robe. I will find someone I can bribe then, to wear it and go into the jail. The guards will let a preacher in almost any

time. Of course they will watch him, but he can deliver the message I want delivered in about five words. It will be something like this 'rescue. About one hour, through window.' The preacher can tell me then which cell he is in, and I will expect him to be there, under that window when I tear out the bars."

"Heather's eyes were filled with hope and anticipation. "Robert, you know the windows are higher than a man can reach. He can't climb out, even if you tear away the bars."

"Yes, I know. I will have a short rope ready to drop to him. He will put grab it, and I will pull him up. That is, he can walk right up the wall, with my holding the rope."

"Even if this all works," Heather said, "how will you make it to the thicket to the horses. They will catch you!"

"That is why it is planned for the time the guards will be changing. This preacher of mine will have to be paid enough, so that he will hold a gun on the guard long enough for us to get away. He will have strict orders not to kill the guard. He will be prepared to tie him up, gag him and get away. I think it will all work out fine."

"Don't trust your preacher too far, Robert. That part scares me. It is so hard to find anyone clever enough to carry out your plans. I think I should be the preacher."

"You could do it," Robert admitted, "but I won't let you."

Heather had made up her mind now. She knew that if Robert's life were endangered, it would mean that her father

would never be apt to be rescued. The guards would be alerted and would take extra pains to see that no one had an opportunity again. It would be much safer if she acted the part of the preacher."

"Robert almost decided not to carry out his promise. He berated himself for making such a wild promise. He decided that it would be wiser to allow Heather to play the part of the preacher. She had proven to be able to handle a horse and a gun. She would not cross him since she so desperately wanted the plan to succeed. Of course, he grinned, If she found an opportunity to take her father and leave me for the crows, she would not hesitate to do that."

CHAPTER XVIII

Robert noticed that as soon as Mr. Dunbar was free, and they were in the clear, she came up to where her father was riding and handed him her pistol. Robert didn't like that, but he wasn't worried about it. Robert felt a sense of victory as they rode back into the yard. There hadn't been a hitch in their plans. Heather looked radiant. He had hardly got a glimpse of Mr. Dunbar. His general impression of him was that he was a small man, wiry, hard-faced, and incredibly dirty. Heather dismounted and rushed to her father. She looked disappointed when he did not take her into his arms. "Good job," he said. "I knowed you'd come. You showed again that you're your old man's daughter. I learned you right."

"Come in," Robert invited. "We will all have something to eat. Must be hungry, Mr. Dunbar. If you'd like to clean up, there's a wash-room. He went into the kitchen and laid out food. Mr. Dunbar had no use for the soap and water. He flopped down into a chair at the table, unwashed. Heather didn't seem

to notice. When he had downed his food and hot coffee, Mr. Dunbar arose. "Now, go get those clothes changed," he said in a voice of ultimatum. "We will be off within the next five minutes."

Heather hesitated. "Get those things off!" he repeated. "You look like a fancy girl. You look like a whore! That kind of clothes is only for the fools that cater to the lusts of men. I taught you to respect your decency. I hope you haven't begun to cater to the lusts of men already. Has this man talked you into doing wrong?. Has he violated you? If he has, I'll kill him."

"Father!" Heather was horrified. "This man just saved your life! He saved my life, too. How can you talk like that? You should be thanking him."

"Thank him, hell. He saved you for the purpose all men have of women. I know it was you that come to save me. I know how my family works together. I expected you. How much of the gold did you promise this sonofabitch to come with you? No matter. He isn't going to get one cent of it. Come on, girl, get a move on. Get those shameful things off your back. I want to go take care of the gold. Then, we have some other plans. The bank in is a bustin' with gold. After that little trick, we'll go out of the territory and just enjoy life for a while. Lay low. Move, girl!"

"I did try to get Mr. Redford to go get you out with promises of some of the gold--but he said he wanted all of it. I told him that there was no way I would ever tell him where to find it, but he said that was fine--he would find Forest and make him take him to the gold. Pa, this man is capable of anything. He is the wiliest fox you ever met. He can do whatever he says he can do. He will locate Forest and make him take him to the gold."

Mr. Dunbar's face turned dark with fury. "You what! You allowed this man to deceive you into betraying your father and

your brother? You should never have mentioned the gold. You could have got me free by yourself. I thought better of you, girl. I never thought you would become putty in the hands of a treacherous boar--let anyone make a fool of you like that. I can see that this man has violated you, even if he hasn't managed to get you to surrender your virginity. The damn stud knows that if he can persuade you to do such things as you have done, betray your loyalty to your family, there will be no problem convincing you to surrender your chastity."

"He cocked his gun and pointed it at Robert's heart. Heather jumped to Robert's side and got in front of him. "No, father, if you kill Robert, you will have to kill me first. I know that this man is dangerous, treacherous, but I won't go along with murder. "Don't think I won't! You have been ruined, anyway. It is easy to see that this young stallion has been riding you! He's

ruined you...made a fool of you. I no longer claim you as my daughter. Get out of my way--or you will be facing old Saint Peter yourself in a second or two. You can be sure your brother would disown you, too. He would be ashamed of you; to betray your family like this."

Robert's mind had been busy. He was calm, but he realized that Heather's life was in jeopardy. He had gauged the time it would take for the old man to pull the trigger. He had gauged the time it would take for him to pull his own revolver and shoot him. He knew that he could do so during the fraction of a second it would take for the old scoundrel to shoot him. He had to be extremely alert to make that split-second move at exactly the right time. He was watching the muscles in the old man's arm. When they tightened, Robert shoved with all his strength, pushing Heather over and falling on top of her. His gun had barked at almost exactly the same instant her father's had. His arm spurting blood. The old man had jerked convulsively. He had tried desperately to raise his gun again, but his muscles would not cooperate. He fell on the floor. Robert rushed to him. He knew he was dead. Heather sat rocking back and forth, sobbing. She couldn't stop sobbing. Robert went to her and smoothed her forehead, "I am sorry," he said, half meaning it. "I tried to figure some way on earth to keep from killing him. There was no way, other than to let him kill you."

Suddenly Heather felt the blood flowing down on her neck. She looked at Robert, realizing that he was badly injured. He picked up a piece of cord and wrapped it around his arm, cutting off the blood-flow. Heather was shocked back into reality. "Where will I find bandages? I have to bind that. We need some carbolic acid. It has to be washed!"

"It's all right, Heather. We'll bandage it later..."

"No! Now! Please?"

"Robert picked up a clean cloth and tore it into strips. "Bandages," he said, smiling. "Do they suit your fancy, my lady?"

She didn't answer. "Where is the carbolic acid?" she said. "I'll get some, if you insist," he said, going to the medicine cabinet. When Heather had finished she seemed to return to her former stupor. "It is so impossible to believe all this. I always thought my father was wonderful, brave, wise. I always thought he loved me. Now I know he never did. He wasn't capable of love. He was selfish, mean, stupid. I was so enthralled with the idea that he loved me. No other person has ever loved me. I know my mother loved me--but she died when I was young. My father always said she was no good. I believed him. Now I think she was probably... a good woman."

"I would bet she was," Robert said. "I hate him!" Heather said. "He must have hurt my mother terribly. He didn't have any notion what love is--or respect, or devotion, or loyalty. He kept repeating that we were

family. I thought that that meant we all loved and respected each other and that we would back each other up in everything. He never meant anything of the kind. He only meant that we were obligated to do as he said; my brother and I. We were to be loyal to his wishes."

"Your whole being has had a terrible jar. Your emotions have been wrenched so that it has to tear you apart. I only hope that you have learned something from this. I have to go dispose of..."

"Oh, yes. My father's body. Of course."

"I think it would be much wiser for me to bury him here. If we have a proper burial--a funeral, it will draw attention to us. I don't want to run from the law for the rest of my life. That

is what it would amount to. I am an outlaw just as surely as you are, but I don't intend to hang for it."

Heather was quiet for the next two days. She was white and Robert noticed that she was trembling. She continued to do the cooking and other chores that had been relegated to her, but she said almost nothing. Robert laid on the long couch and slept fitfully. He felt ill at ease. He felt certain that Heather would tell him now that their demonic pact had come to an end and that she didn't want anything further to do with him. He wasn't sure how he would handle that. It would be the best thing that could happen--yet I am not ready for it. This crazy need to possess her body is beyond my ability to analyse. It is something primitive, bizarre, that I didn't know was a part of my character. "I have to go to let Forest know about our pa," Heather said, "He should know that pa is dead...and how he died."

"Where is your brother?" Robert asked. "I promised never to reveal that. I have to keep my word. I will go...and he and I can make plans for what we want to do next. It will be different, just the two of us, but we know all the tricks. We will be able to work alone together."

"You're planning to go back out to robbing, stealing, killing? Will you ever stop being a fool, Heather? I thought that...the death of your pa would make you see the folly of your ways--change you, make you into a decent woman. I guess I should have known nothing would ever change you. Criminal behavior is in your blood. You'll never have any concern for life, property ownership, justice."

"You saved my life...twice, and I thank you for that. Like I said, I like to pay my debts. If you will take some of the gold, I will be satisfied. I think half of it would be fair."

"Maybe I will take you up on that." Robert said. "We'll start tomorrow morning. I want to meet your brother, anyway."

"No! I told you I had made a promise. I never break promises--to anyone. I am an honorable woman."

"You are the most dishonorable, and stupidest woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. It won't be breaking your promise, though, since there is no way you can prevent my going. Remember I hold all the cards. You are still my prisoner."

He expected Heather to go into another tantrum and try to dissuade him by any means, but surprised him. She looked thoughtful. "Will you agree then, to join us? We could use another member. You are a good shot, clever, quick. We could be a wonderful team. We could all work together effectively."

Robert laughed. "Maybe criminal behavior is in my blood, too. Sounds exciting. I just might take you up on that." As they mounted to ride away, Robert burst out laughing again. Heather looked at him with disgust. "This is going to be one hell of a trip," he said, "quarrelling all day and making love all night."

"I wonder which you enjoy most," she said scathingly. "Well, I could give you an answer to that--but I suspect you already know the answer. Besides, you are the one that instigates all the quarrels," he said.

"And you're the one that instigates the..." He had spurred away, laughing, and she was following.

CHAPTER XIX

Robert looked at the thin, pale-faced, angry countenanced Forest and decided he had the face of a killer, "Just like his father," he decided. "Heather is a killer, too, but for some reason it isn't so pronounced in her features." He noticed that Forest was clean. His clothes were threadbare, but as neat as they could be under the circumstances. "Our pa is dead," Heather told Forest, after their first emotional greetings. Forest's face changed. Robert could not read the feelings his changing features denoted. Heather went on to tell him the whole story in full detail. "I am sorry, Forest. I know you loved him. I thought I did, too, until I discovered he was so willing to kill me--just because I had not pleased him in all that I had done. I thought I was using pretty good judgment to get his life saved and...even if I did have to promise this man some of the gold to do it. But he said I had betrayed his trust--and yours, and that I wasn't fit to live."

The boy sat down and buried his face in his hands. His sobs were racking. He seemed not to be embarrassed by them. Finally, he wiped his tears away and looked up. He sighed deeply, as if he were starving for air. "I hated him!" he said. "He was a murderer, a scoundrel, a weak-minded, selfish rat!" Both Heather and Robert showed their surprise. "This is why he wore the face of a killer. It was just his hatred for his pa."

"I used to wonder how you could stand him," Forest continued. "His making you go around looking like a slattern. There was no need for that." What looked like the shadow of a smile crossed his face. "You look beautiful now, Heather. That is the way you should have looked all the time. Robert looked at Heather and saw her as a woman for the first time, something other than a mating companion. She is pretty! he decided. She's damn near beautiful! I can't believe it. "There was no need for any of the things he did," Forest continued. "He had no conscience. That talk about it being self-defense when he killed people in cold blood! It sickened me. I often thought of killing him. I was just too much of a coward."

"I never knew," Heather said. "I was wrong about him. Well, we don't have to put up with him any more. We can do things our own way. Mr. Redford is going to join us. He is quick thinking, a good shot. He rescued me from the gallows at the last second and he also devised the plan to rescue pa. I am glad that it worked, since I would never have known what he was really like if we hadn't got him out."

"Excuse me," Robert said. "I will leave you two to talk alone for a while. I would like to get started back before too long."

"This would help to clear me of any crime," Robert was thinking. "If this boy would testify that his dad was a tyrant; made him and Heather do as he ordered, against their wishes, and Heather's testimony would verify that, I would have a good chance of being completely cleared. Heather will tell them that I had to kill him to save her life, and the boy's testimony will show that he was the kind of man who could easily have threatened her life. I will have to persuade him to go back with us. That shouldn't be hard to do, as he will be cleared too, of all charges--his pa having forced him, and Heather too, at very young ages, to accompany him on his forays. No one ever need know that I rescued Heather, or her father from the prison. That would be a little harder to justify. I don't think they have any idea who it was."

"Do you want to pick up your share of the gold now, or leave it where it is until we get ready to beat it for some place where we won't be recognized and plagued with people wanting to hang us?" Heather asked. Robert decided in an instant that the gold was probably hidden as well as was possible already. "I'll wait." he said.

CHAPTER XX

"If it's all right with you two, I would like to ride out and look around a bit. I won't go too far. I can bring back a bird or two for the frying pan."

"That's fine," Robert said. "Do you good."

Robert turned and looked at Heather. That ever-present question was still on his mind. Would she tire of their agreement and tell him that she wanted no more encounters with him? He still couldn't face life without the thought of holding her body in his arms, feeling that complete forgetfulness of all trials, and basking in that perfection, which, for some unfathomable reason, her body offered. Now that she was clean and Forest had drawn his attention to the fact she was beautiful, he felt more anger than ever. How was he ever going to get her out of his system. He wanted to get on with his life. He had to make arrangements to see an attorney about getting set free from the stigma of having murdered a man. He had to find some way to begin paying his debts to Van and Tom. He didn't like to be indebted to anyone. He was toying with the idea of getting back into the university. That way he would have a guarantee of an income with which to pay them back. But he had to rid himself of this unwholesome necessity to possess this woman. That was the only problem he had that he could see no way of solving. Was he perverted? Certainly this was aberrant behavior.

These feelings macabre. Heather seemed to be altogether absorbed in her thoughts. He could read nothing in her attitude. "Well, if my plans work out," he said, "and they will, you and Forest will be exonerated completely and you can go on with your life as if you had never been convicted of being an egregious criminal."

She looked at him with surprise. "I suppose it would be nice to be exonerated," she said. That would give us free rein to pursue our work without so much interference from those that think of themselves as the guardians of the public good. I meant to tell you though, that I am sorry I can't go back to work for at least a year, in any case. I hope that you and Forest will agree to lay off for that long, too. We have plenty of gold to keep us going for that long, and then we can have good plans made and..."

"Why in hell can't you go back for a year? That's ridiculous. If we are going to plan to go ahead with...your plans, why in god's name would you want to wait a whole damn year?"

She knew he was an impatient man, and adamant when he made up his mind. Being prevented from going out and making himself much richer for a whole year would naturally enrage him. There was no help for it. He would have to wait. "I am sorry if it makes a problem for you," she said, not looking sorry at all, but most radiant. "I'm pregnant."

Robert caught his breath. His face turned black with anger. "You're lying!" he said. "I don't believe you are pregnant!" "It isn't safe for a woman to ride too much when she is pregnant. I don't want to take any chance on harming my baby, so I won't ride."

"I don't believe you're pregnant," he said again. "If you were, I think you would want to ride--or do anything to cause it to be terminated. You couldn't want a child--except to try to trap me into..."

She laughed. "Trap you. Why would I want to do that? I have no use for you--any man. I am very relieved if you have no interest in the baby. I was really afraid you might want to interfere. "Interfere! of course I'll interfere! I abhor the idea of a woman like you having a child of mine! I won't allow it. You will find a way to rid yourself of this...child. That is, if you really are pregnant. I don't believe you are."

She laughed scornfully. "Don't you know what causes it, Robert?"

"Causes what? What are you gabbling about?"

"Don't you know where babies come from?"

She thought he was going to strike her. She drew back. "I see now why you weren't worried about making the pact with me. You planned to set this trap, with no bait in it, and try to make me believe you were pregnant. That way if I said I was tired of the deal first, you would have a way in which to hold me as long as you wanted me."

"Don't flatter yourself. Why would I want to hold you? Nothing could suit me better than having this child and rearing it by myself, without any interference from you--or anyone else. I have absolutely no use for you in any way. The sooner I am rid of you the happier I will be."

It was as if a mule had kicked him in the solar plexus. He was so stunned he could hardly speak. "Then the pact is over? You don't want to feel that--what you called complete severance from all worldly things, and left only with complete rapture?"

"That's right. I don't want you to touch me--ever again. I certainly don't need you. I can't understand why I was so vulnerable to you. Well, I do understand why I was, too, but..."

He still believed it was a ploy. Every woman who was pregnant wanted a husband. Life was too difficult without a

father for her child. A woman was ostracized if she had a child out of wedlock. And then most women had no way to support a child, if they didn't have a man to work and bring home a paycheck. Of course Heather was depending on the gold to support herself and her child, and she was the type that would never worry about what people thought of her. As scurrilous as she was, she had that certain type of honesty that would prevent her from saying that she wanted this child alone, without his interference, if that were not true. His mind whirled back to the words she had said, "I can't understand why I was so vulnerable to you. Well, I do understand why I was, too, but..."

"What caused you to be vulnerable to me?" he asked. "I think you already know that. A man as arrogant as you are has to know he is especially attractive to women. My training against the vices and snares of men wasn't strong enough to combat that terrible force of compulsion you generated in me."

"If you feel attracted to me, why do you want to cut off that most terrible force of compulsion, that inimitable rapture that ever came into your life? Did that vulnerability, that terrible marvelous compulsion, you called inimitable, suddenly evaporate into thin air?"

Her honesty still predominated. "No, I can't say that you aren't still so attractive that I quell at the sight of you. You have some magnetism that is difficult to ignore. Besides looking like a prince, dressing like royalty, speaking and behaving like a god, an evil god, of course--you carry yourself like you thought you were wearing a halo. You are so ungodly attractive that I can never feel guilty about having been drawn into this kind of relationship with you. And then, of course, I wanted a baby, and I couldn't have chosen a man more suitable for it's father. You are a perfect specimen of manhood. You are beautiful. I couldn't have found a better father for my child anywhere on earth. So I consider myself

pretty lucky. As I said before, God has been very good to me. "I assure you that God had nothing to do with it! Only the Devil was present when we met. God would not approve of your machinations and twisted thinking. Only the Devil could have instilled me with such scurrilousness, too. Excepting that I don't believe in any devil."

"I don't believe that a man's unconscionable heart is handed down to his children, so I don't think your wickedness will have any effect on my baby. I am perfectly happy with the whole arrangement."

"Suit yourself" he said. Just so you know that I will never marry you."

"Marry me?" She sounded even more scornful. "I told you I wouldn't marry any man on earth! I wouldn't marry you for the world. I don't like men. This...baby, doesn't cause a problem for me. It solves one. I will never get married. I will never have any reason to have to sell myself again, to pay a debt, so I will never have another occasion to become pregnant. I always mourned when I thought I would never have a child. I wanted a child to love and to love me, but I would never have consented to lie with a man for the purpose of conceiving a child. Now all those problems are solved. I will have my child and I will never have to worry about marriage or other means of accomplishing it."

Robert stared at her. He couldn't believe she was pregnant, and he didn't believe if she was, she would accept it without making a problem for him.

The pain still persisted in his stomach. How was he going to cope with the fact that she would not permit him to make love to her tonight--or tomorrow night, or any other night. He saw her in a new light now. She was clean. She was beautiful. She was still the nefarious daughter of Drake Dunbar, of course, but he had known that when he made this pact. He couldn't account for the fact that he still wanted her. Well, he never had been able to account for the

deplorable fact that he had ever wanted her. I believe she still has some feeling for our abnormal undercurrent of sexual bondage, he thought. The way she described how she feels about me...she has to have some feeling for our compulsion, this inimitable bond, whatever it is, of need for each other."I will be gone for several hours," Robert announced. "Don't do anything foolish. He mounted his sorrel stallion and rode to his old home. Carol was there alone. She was in the kitchen, her face covered with flour. She was baking cinnamon rolls. She took a panfull out of the oven just as Robert walked in. She dumped them over onto a clean board. "Boy, those smell good," Robert said. He picked one up. "Ouch! They're hot!"

"Of course they're hot. They just came out of the oven. He was flipping the hot cinnamon roll from one hand to the other, to try to cool it enough to eat it. Carol found it difficult to give him a hug. "What brings you here good brother," she asked, brushing the flour from her apron and smoothing back her hair. "It's been a long time."

"Yes," Robert said between bites of the roll. "It has been a long time. I have missed all of you. How are mother and father? Where is everyone?"

"They are all up at the Wallings, of course. I wanted to stay here today and do some thinking of my own."

Robert finished peeling off the last curl of the roll and plunked it into his mouth. "Good as Mama's," he said, picking up another. "When are you going to get married, and make some good man happy?"

He had expected Carol to laugh and make some facetious answer, but she looked sad. "I don't know that I ever will," she said. "I am a good nurse, you know. I love my work--but I have been thinking of going in with Casey. He is so involved in his work, searching out new facets of the medical world, that he has no time for love or romance. His work is his mistress."

"I wish I had been that wise. I wonder if I could ever get that involved in something...mental? I doubt it. I don't have the depth Casey has."

"He and his attractive little associate work together hour after hour, day after day, month after month and never even see each other. I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it every time

I go there. Neither of them knows the other exists as one of the opposite sex. They see each other only as machines, helping them to decipher the secrets of chemicals, medicines. "I wonder if that's good or bad," Robert said, pouring himself a cup of steaming coffee from the pot on the stove. "I haven't decided," Carol said. "I expect it is good for some people and bad for others. I think it might be good for me."

"Carol, don't do it. You are beautiful, young, intelligent. Surely you want a home, children. You just haven't met the right man yet--I presume."

Carol looked away, blushed. "That may be the reason I will do it," she said. Robert took her by the shoulders and turned her around. He thought he saw the trace of tears in her eyes. He hugged her so tight that she had to struggle for breath. "Oh, sis, God help any man that has hurt you. I'll kill him. Tell me about it. What happened?"

She hesitated. "Tell me who it is!" Robert said again. "I'll kill the bastard. It won't be the first snake I've killed. Any man that hurt you deserves nothing but...killing."

"It wasn't his fault. He never did know I loved him. He did absolutely nothing to make me love him--other than just being who he is...the most wonderful, most handsome, most chivalrous, most charming man on earth."

"About two hours ago I was told that I was all those things," Robert said, "and the woman who told me that, said she hated me, and would never marry me under any circumstances, and that she thinks I am "

Carol stopped her crying and looked at Robert with alarm. "Oh, Robert, I am sorry. I was afraid you would never get over Robin. Have you found someone now? And doesn't she return your love?"

"No, don't worry about me. I no longer think about Robin in the way I did--and I will have to admit this girl had something to do with that change--but I don't love her any more than she loves me. We are anathema to each other...excepting that we have a...we are shackled to each other by some cohesive , some locked chain, that neither of us can combat. That is...I can't get out of it. She may have. That's what I came to talk to you about, Carol. You are wise and sensitive, like mother always was. I need your help."

"I'll do my best," Carol said. "I am so sorry if you have any problems. I always wanted so much for you to find happiness, and forget about Robin. Sit here and tell me all about it."

"I want to. I came here for that purpose. But I am not going to say anything else, until you tell me about this man you were talking about. The one that hurt you."

"Well, good brother, that is all in the past. There is nothing under the sun that can be done about it. It was just my own folly."

"Who is he? What happened?"

"He is married. He was married when I fell in love with him. He never knew that I loved him. He is a wonderful man. He is happy. I will never let him know that I was fool enough to fall in love with him. Not that he would laugh at me. He would do everything in his power to help me--but there is absolutely nothing he could do."

"It's Greyson, isn't it?"

"Yes, Robert, it's Greyson. It happened when he and Roxanne were estranged. I was so sorry for him. That's all it was at first. But the more I saw of him, the more I was with him and the more I felt sorry for him, the worse it got. I longed to comfort him--in any way I could." She turned her face away. "Maybe I am brazen to admit this, but I would gladly have become

his mistress, if he had shown any interest in me in that way. He never did. When he went and brought Mary home, I was sick. She was a nice girl--but I actually wished I had offered myself to him." She brushed away a tear. "God, Carol, I'm sorry. I never dreamed. I guess you are right. There is nothing anyone can do. But Carol, I still hope you won't bury yourself in mental pursuits, shutting out all the beauty of romance, love, children, a home. I truly believe you can get over this. I didn't think I would ever get over Robin, you know, but I hardly ever think of her any more. "You said this girl--this girl for whom you have no respect, helped you to get over her. That needs a little explaining."

Robert sighed. "There may be no answer for my dilemma either. I brought it all on myself. I deserve every bit of it. I got a crazy, mad impulse for no sensible reason whatsoever--just for the hell of it, to go rescue the notorious daughter of Drake Dunbar."

Carol gasped. "My god, Robert, you could have been killed! Why did you want to do that? She's guilty isn't she? I know none of us believe that hanging is the right punishment for even such terrible crimes, but why did you want to rescue her of all those scheduled to be hanged?"

"I be damned if I know. Like I said, there was no reasoning to it. I just wanted to do it for the hell of it. I just wanted to see if I could do it. Oh, she's guilty all right. Guilty as hell. She's just as guilty as any of the others that I could have taken a notion to rescue. It beats the hell out of me, why I did it. It certainly has created one hell of a mess."

"Now you are considered an outlaw, too! Robert, what are you going to do?"

"Carol, it isn't the problem of saving myself from the gallows that has me worried. I don't intend to hang for it, however wrong it was. It is another problem I want you to solve for me--if there is any solution."

"All right, explain it all to me."

"Well, I had always heard that the notorious daughter of the worst killer in the business of robbing bands, was beautiful. The papers all stressed that she was. I certainly was not swayed in the least by the fact that she might be beautiful. I wanted nothing less than to get involved with any woman--beautiful or otherwise. When I shot the noose in.

two, that was dropping to enclose her neck, we rode away into the thicket. I didn't look at her until we got to the place where I had already picked to take her. I did have time to notice that she looked more like a witch than a woman. She was dirty. You can't imagine how dirty. She wore big, ugly, stained, men's clothing. Her hair was in knots and strings. Never saw such an unhygienic specimen of humanity in my life."

"Surely you couldn't have come to enjoy a relationship with a woman like that," Carol said. You were always meticulous about your person."

"Well," Robert continued, "That was the night of the norther. She was determined to steal one of my horses and ride on, so that the posse wouldn't catch up with her. She was not very appreciative of having had her life saved. I didn't care about her thanks, or appreciation, but I was a bit surprised that I had to practically force her to help erect a shelter. I threatened to let the posse take her back to be hanged if she didn't gather wood, help tie up the branches, and make some coffee and scrambled eggs. She finally cooperated. It was the only thing she could do. I was too

damn stubborn at first to tell her that the norther was coming. Well, it wasn't all stubbornness, either. I didn't have time to explain it all to her, and then there was some vague

notion that I wanted to see what she would do...wanted to learn a little about her. I didn't learn much."

"This is the strangest story I've ever heard--even from you. If she is giving you problems, and you don't have the heart to turn her back in to the authorities, why don't you just send her away. Let her go free. She can't do too much damage can she, until her father gets out, and by that time, I would think none of the responsibility for what happens after than would be yours."

"I can't do that?"

"Why can't you, Robert? Is there something you haven't told me?"

"Yes. I can't live without her."

"What are you saying? The more you tell me, the less I understand. Robert what are you saying?"

"I'm trying to explain. Like I said, I don't understand it myself, or maybe I could do a better job of explaining it to you. Maybe neither of us, or anybody else can make heads or tails of it. It doesn't seem real to me."

"Tell me more."

"That first night, when we had eaten and I'd built up the fire all I dared, and we'd got under all the blankets, I put my arms around her."

"That must have been irksome--dirty as she was."

"It was the most delightful thing that ever happened to me."

Carol was beyond asking why. "You know how I felt about Robin. I had come to abhor the thought of making love to any other woman. I had tried a couple of times, completely without success. I felt sick afterward. Not in the least fulfilled, or refreshed. Well, it was a surprise to me that has no explanation, that when I

held her close to me--for the warmth our bodies would generate for each other, I found myself filled with such desire as I had never felt before in my life--not even for Robin. I was dumbfounded. I was disgusted with myself--but I was filled with joy, too, to think that I could be aroused by any other woman than Robin. I had been certain for so long that it was impossible."

"So you unaccountably fell into a relationship with a woman who has no respect for herself, who is slovenly, and has no sense of morality in any way."

"That's about the size of it. Is there any use to try to understand it? She told me she was a virgin. I didn't put any more stock in that than in the thought of any other virtues a girl like her might possess. The reason she told me was that she wanted to trade her virginity for her freedom. She wanted me to furnish her a horse and let her go."

"Seems as though if you wanted her so much and she was eager to make the deal, it might have been a fair thing to do." "Well, I don't know why I didn't. Things might have been better. One reason, was that I knew she wouldn't get far before she was picked up again, and that I probably would be picked up too, then, and then I would have to take steps to insure that I wasn't hanged with her. After a few days, I was suddenly struck with my demanding need for her again. I kissed her and that kiss was such a jolt, such a revelation of what I could feel, that I was dumbfounded all over again. I made love to her. Carol, I have sunk awfully low. I admit that, but I cannot bear to think that I would have raped...any woman, whether she had any respect for herself, or not."

"Of course you would never rape any woman. That is preposterous."

"But I think I would have. I will never know. I was never so determined in my life that I had to have something,

as I was that I had to have that woman. I believe I would have raped her."

"What saved you from it, then?"

"When I kissed her, I expected her to fight me. I had told her that I would trade her nothing for her body, since she was my prisoner and I could take whatever I wanted, anyway. I didn't mean that. I didn't expect to be pulled into this vortex of . . . I thought I was sure a girl like her could not be a virgin. I don't know how much difference that would have made, if any. I think rape is the lowest a man can commit, and to rape a virgin is worse.

"So you stopped?"

"No. I didn't stop, and only god knows whether I would have raped her, or not. She put her arms around my neck and returned my kisses with a passion equal to my own. I couldn't have been more surprised. But I used that as an excuse. I made love to her. She was a virgin. I have never decided how I feel about that. Her response was as urgent as my own desire for her."

"I told you how dirty she was, and indifferent to it. Well, after a day or two I went to town and brought back a big wash tub--like the one we have. I picked up a few articles of clothing, too. I made her take a bath and wash her hair and change her clothes. She didn't object to taking the bath, but she refused to undress in front of me. It amused me. I can't understand yet, why she would mind my seeing her body. We had made love. I knew every curve by heart. But I didn't object to what she called her modesty. When she came out of the room where she had taken a bath, she was wrapped in a towel. Her hair was still in knots, and strings. I honestly don't think she had washed it before or combed it in five years!"

"Did she ever give you any reason why she cared so little for her personal appearance?"

"Oh yes, she explained that, and expected me to believe it. She said that her father had taught her that any attempt

to appear attractive, was the worst of sins. She said that he taught her that all any man ever wanted of a woman was to satisfy his lust. She said that the reason men wanted women to be neat and clean, was that it titillated them more, to enjoy that ever-present lust. On that grounds it would be the most indecent thing a woman could do, to keep herself neat. She was fulfilling her idea of the highest moral code a woman could have."

"Her father must have been insane! How did he make her believe such nonsense?"

He had complete control over her, and her brother. She hardly ever saw anyone else. If you think about it, it makes a kind of twisted sense, doesn't it?"

"I guess so, crazy as that seems."

"I took the new brush, which I had seen to it had the stiffest bristles, and set her down in a chair and combed and brushed her hair. It was a terrible tangle. I made no effort to be easy. I was rough. She kicked and screamed and even cried. She isn't the crying kind. It hurt. Carol, you know me. I never did want to hurt anything, even a spider. Why did I take such joy in hurting her."

"Maybe you were trying to make her pay for not being Robin."

"Maybe."

"What does she look like now that she is clean, has a decent dress, and her hair is combed out?"

"She is beautiful. The reporters didn't exaggerate. I don't know how they could tell through all that ugly garb she wore, and her hair in tangles, but she is as beautiful as they said."

"Did that change your feelings about her?"

"No. That is, it didn't make me any more attracted to her. I don't like her any better. I've known a lot of beautiful women, Carol. You know that. I never was impressed with any of them; those I respected or those I didn't. I didn't want any of them--any but Robin."

After that first night of love, I was afraid that I would be encumbered with this woman. I knew she had an affiliation for me, too, as I said. I thought a need as mine was for her would wear off in a day or two, and I would loathe the idea of touching her. I thought I was being very clever when I asked her to make a pact with me that whichever one of us got tired of the other first, the other would agree to accept that without further fuss. She didn't hesitate. We had no more than made the pact than I began to be scared to death that she would tire of it first, and I didn't know what I would do. I couldn't visualize not holding her and feeling that her body belonged to me."

"Has she shown any signs of being less interested than she was?"

"Yes. She told me before I left to come here, that she never wanted me to touch her again. Carol, my need for her has not lessened in the least. I don't want to give her up-- yet. Maybe I never will. I am caught in a web of my own making. What do you think I should do?"

Did she give any reason for abruptly deciding that your alliance was no longer desirable to her?"

Robert hesitated. "Carol, I wasn't going to tell you this--but yes, she got angry because I accused her of trying to entrap me."

"Entrap you. What do you mean?"

"She is pregnant, Carol. I told her that I didn't believe her when she first told me. I told her that she was just trying to entrap me. I told her I would never marry her under any circumstances. I told her I would never allow a woman like her to have a child of mine."

"What did she say to that?"

"She laughed at me. She said that she wouldn't marry any man on earth. She said that she had been drawn into our unholy alliance at first, by feeling that she owed me something for having saved her life. She said that she was not sorry though, because it allowed her to have a child. She said she was glad it had been me that she had come to owe this debt, because she couldn't have picked a better specimen for her child's father. She said that she would never have allowed any man to touch her for the purpose of getting pregnant, but now that it had happened, it solved a problem for her. She would have the baby and she would have no interference from me."

"How do you feel about her having your child?"

Robert smoothed back his hair from his forehead, his face showing consternation. "I wish to god I had never let it happen, but now that it has, I feel some obligation. I don't mean to interfere in the way she was talking about--but she still insists that she is going back to her 'work,' of robbing banks after the baby is old enough. Actually, she thinks I am going to go in cahoots with her, and that we will make a fine team, working together--with her brother."

"Why have you allowed her to believe that?"

"Well, it was the easiest way I could think of to get her to show me where all the gold they have stashed away is buried. She has agreed to do that. Of course it has to go back to the banks from which it was taken."

"But she has no idea that is your plan?"

"That's right. She thinks I will be a very good accomplice."

"you've certainly got good at subterfuge."

"It is the only way I know how to deal with someone like her."

"Yes, it may be the only way. What do you intend to do next?"

"That is what I came to ask you. I wish to god I knew some way to make her want me again--like I want her. If I can't...you told me I wasn't capable of rape. I sure hope you're right, Carol. I hate a rapist more than any other kind of rat."

"You will never take her against her will," Carol repeated without emphasis. She spoke as if it were a foregone conclusion that was not questioned. "She will want you again, Robert."

Robert jumped as if he had been hit. "What in god's name makes you say that? I hope you are right, but I don't see why you would think so."

"Because she is in love with you, good brother."

"Carol! Don't say that. I don't want her to love me. I couldn't stand that. It would be intolerable, just like I said. She would want to get married. I would not marry her-- even to keep her body available...what the hell's the matter with me, Carol?"

"You're in love," Carol said it as she had spoken.

before, with no emphases. "Carol, You're crazy! I am not in love with her and she is not in love with me. That is what I have been telling you ever since I came. That there is nothing decent about this need I have for her. No, this time you are wrong, Carol. Dead wrong. Thanks for listening, though. It was sweet of you to hear me out."

"I loved it," Carol said. "Please come more often. Mother and father and the kids would love seeing you. They worry about you, Robert. I know our talk was all confidential, but may I tell them just that you no longer mourn for Robin?"

"Sure. I'll be back one day. I love you, sis." He swung lithely into his saddle and spurred away."

He approached the cabin with misgivings as he had always done when he had had to be gone for a while. Would she still be there? She was working around the stove, getting things ready for supper. She hardly paid him any attention when he walked in the door. He handed her the cinnamon rolls. "I brought you a gift," he said. "My sister made these."

"Thank you," she said, laying them on the table without unwrapping them. "Where is Forest?" Robert asked. "He is out in the barn. He insists that he is going to sleep out there in the hayloft. I don't believe in interfering in that sort of thing. If he is more comfortable out there, then let him live out there. You could go tell him we are ready to eat, though."

Heather sat on the couch, a pensive look on her face. Robert walked up and stood in front of her. She looked up. He caught his breath. "You look mighty enticing," that attractive, enigmatic, crooked smile appeared. There was a look of questioning in her eyes. "I'm not sure you're being fair," he said. "Sitting there, looking so beautiful...with your soft lips parted like that, you...destroy something in a man."

She looked disgusted. He sat down beside her. "I'm glad I decided to go see if I could save the notorious daughter of the honorable Drake Dunbar. As I said, that makes you my prisoner. It's quite an intoxicating sensation to know that you belong to me."

Her eyes blazed. "Like I said, Mr. Redford, if you want anything from me, please take it, and let me go. As much as I hate you, I am willing to pay my debts. If it is my body you want--so be it."

"It certainly is your body I want--and intend to have. I have been dreaming about it ever since you told me that our pact was ended. I want you, Heather. You don't owe me anything. I saved your life because I wanted to. It isn't that you owe me anything. It is just that I can't get enough of you. He wasn't sure he was effected by the words Carol had said, which he had denied so vehemently, that she would want him again. He took her in his arms and kissed her with all of that joyful fulfillment he had felt each time he felt her lips under his. Just as she had done that first night, she

struggled, and then abruptly clung to him again. He wondered if he could breathe. "Thank you, sis," he said, as he carried Heather to the bed once more. "How can anything so downright diabolical be so damned sweet, so heavenly, so...satisfying?"

"What would you say if I told you I love you?" he heard himself saying. They had spent themselves in love-making and she lay close in his possessive arms. "I would say you are crazy!" she said. "There is absolutely no iota of love in what we feel for each other, and you know it."

"No, I really did believe that," he said, pulling her closer, nestling her head on his shoulder, but now I know that I love you. I love you, Heather. I love you more than I ever thought it possible to love a woman. I need you. I want you forever. Will you marry me?"

"Certainly not! You're a fool, Robert Redford. I think you have lost your mind. You don't love me and I don't love you. You said you didn't want to be burdened with a wife and baby. Well, I don't want to be burdened with a husband. It would make nothing but trouble for me. I don't love you and I will never marry you."

"I think you love me," Robert said. "I think that is why this bond between us is so persistent. It isn't diabolical at all. It isn't deplorable in any way. It is so damn sweet and heavenly because we love each other. I hope you come to know you love me, Heather--but if you don't, you are stuck with me anyway. You are going to have my baby. I will never let you take any chances with my child. I am thrilled to death to think that the woman I love is having my baby. I will make you happy, Heather. I will help you to get your life straightened out. You will never want to go back to that nefarious game of robbery and killing."

"I never killed anyone!"

"I know you didn't, Heather, but if I let you go back to that crazy work, you would have to kill someone, sooner or later, or be killed. Just as your pa did. It couldn't be avoided. Since I know it would be hard for you to kill anyone, you would be killed. I can't let that happen to the woman I love...to the mother of my baby."

"You betrayed me," she said sadly. "I should have listened to my pa. He said no man would ever be truthful with me. You told me you would go out with us, be a team with us. Now you are talking as if you never meant to. You lied. That's what he warned me about."

"I didn't lie to you, Heather. I said I just might take you up on it. I did mean to mislead you, though, because I had to find out where the gold is, so we can return it and make a clean start. I'm going to get a good attorney and get us all cleared. We will be a family. You and me and our baby.

and his uncle Forest. We'll be happy, Heather."

"I said I picked the right man for my baby's father. I couldn't have been more mistaken. I thought I was going to get away and have no interference from anyone. You betrayed me--in every way."

"You did pick the right man for your baby's father. Heather, I love you, and I love our baby. If I allowed you to go and live like you think you want to live, what could you offer our baby? A mother who was a criminal? Do you believe your baby would grow up to admire and respect you if he knew you were a robber; a criminal?"

"If I would be a criminal for going back, I am a criminal now--so I had just as well give up, give you the baby, if you really want it, and just...wilt away."

"Heather, don't talk like that. You are going to be completely exonerated. You will never be thought of again as a criminal. You will be free from all the past. You will have a home, your baby to love you, and your brother to love you and me to love you. Your life will be so full of love you can't help being happy. On top of all that, you will meet our very extended family, my parents and sisters and brothers, and the Wallings, and all the people who work on their huge ranch. They will all love you."

"Nobody will ever love me. Not even my baby. I have been robbed of everything that was dear to me. Those people you are talking about couldn't love me, just as you can't really love me. They would hate me."

CHAPTER XXI

"This man," Forest asked Heather when Robert had saddled his horses and rode out of the yard. "He seems like a decent sort. Do you trust him?"

"He'll bear watching," Heather said, "He is a scoundrel. He has certain codes of honor he won't break, though, and I know now what most of them are. He can be handled. He is as wily as they come."

"Do you love him?" Forest asked. "Heather blushed. "Of course not!" she said. "I will never love any man. I can't lie to you though. I have...submitted to him. I didn't mean to. I know you realize how much I am against that sort of thing. I was a virgin for a reason--because I valued my chastity. But I thought I owed him for saving my life, and...that's what my father was going to kill me for. He couldn't see that it was the only thing I could do."

"I understand," Forest said. "I never did agree with him about anything. I think love is a perfectly legitimate emotion. I think people should be a little...discriminating, of course--but I don't think you should go through life believing that making love with someone you admire and respect, is evil. I know papa had his sexual satisfactions. Did you know that the woman hired to tutor us when we were lying low, as he called it, between raids, was his mistress?"

He didn't go without his satisfactions in that way. He didn't even have the excuse of love for her."

"No," Heather said. "It didn't enter my head that he was living that way, counter to what he was teaching us."

"He killed our mother," Forest said. "He killed her just as surely as if he had put a gun to her head. Only it was a much longer, dreadful death, she suffered. Always hoping he would reform. Always having to obey his orders. Always hoping she could keep us out of his raptorial clutches. She loved us, Heather. She wanted a decent life for us."

"You and she are the only two people on earth that ever loved me--and I hardly ever got to enjoy that."

"Wait here," Robert ordered, "I have to make a few purchases." He went into "Bailey's. It was one of the best stores in Dallas. It was where Delia bought all of her clothes, and where she had bought those for his sisters too, since she had taken that chore onto herself. He had never bought women's garments before. "I want a complete outfit for a girl--oh, about one hundred, fifteen pounds. "Underthings, too," the woman asked. "I said everything. Of course, underthings. Silk stockings, night wear.

"She is the notorious daughter of the ignoble murderer and bank-robber, Drake Dunbar."

Greyson was more stunned. "How did you get her? Did she manage to escape from that criminal old fox--or did you help her to escape from him?"

"Nothing of the kind," Robert said. "She is very proud of her father. Defends him. Emulates him. I caught her at a vulnerable time--just as the noose was settling around her neck, shot the rope in two and rode off with her. The only reason she was willing to go, was that she realized that if she didn't, she would be dancing over the trap-door within

another few seconds. Greyson laughed. "You are probably the only man in the world that could have pulled that off. You were taking one hell of a gamble when you shot at that rope. Guess you knew you'd hit it, though, the way you shoot."

"Wasn't so worried about that as I was about whether or not she would catch on to what was taking place and get into that saddle quickly enough. She surprised me, by doing just what she should have. Of course, as she explained to me, her father has taught her all her life always to watch for opportunities; to be aware of all that is going on, and never fail to take

advantage of the circumstances. He has taught her to be as crafty as he is--a she fox. Actually, more like a wild-cat," he said, smiling his crooked smile, and raising his hand to the deep fingernail marks on his cheek. "Aha," Greyson laughed. "Looks like you might wear that little souvenir for the rest of your life. What are you going to do with her?"

"I'm going to marry her."

Greyson laughed. "I can visualize that!" he said. He knew that Robert was the most sought after young man in the county. He had a special charisma that caused girls, the nice ones and those not so nice, to become enthralled with his charms. He could marry any girl he wanted. He certainly would not pick a dirty, criminal, an unappreciative little wild-cat, even if she were as beautiful as she was renowned to be. Beauty didn't have any effect on Robert as far as Greyson could see. He had never looked twice at any girl, beautiful or otherwise since Robin had married Gerald. "Her beauty is as well-known as her murdering father is for his occupation," Greyson said. "Is she really beautiful?"

"Well, I hardly had time to notice. She may be quite pretty if she ever gets all the grime scrubbed off. She is the most slovenly woman I've ever encountered."

"Couldn't be too attractive then. Why do you suppose she doesn't care any more about herself than that?"

"Well, she doesn't lack pride, if that's what you are talking about. She just thinks cleanliness has no value. She values only what her father taught her to value."

"What might that be? It doesn't sound to me as if she has many values at all."

She said her father had taught her to value her chastity. "Well, she told me because she was trying to trade her body for my pack-mare. She thought she had to get away. Thought the posse would be coming."

"Were you tempted to take her up on it?" Greyson laughed. "Well, I might have been." Robert's crooked smile belied his words. "But I was too busy getting prepared to fight that norther. Didn't have time for...frivolities."

Greyson knew about Robert's heartbreak over Robin. Everyone had known that he had planned to marry her from the time he was a child. He had first seen her when Luke and Eunice and Rowdy and Clarice got married. He had asked Delia if she would give a big wedding like that for him and Robin. Delia had promised that when they were old enough she would give the wedding. He had never for a moment swerved from that intention. He insisted that she had to get an education so that she would not ever be embarrassed to be with his educated friends and associates. After a short time Delia had seen to it that she was registered in a good girl's school. She had become even more gracious and lovely. Robert was inordinately proud of her. Greyson had grieved for Robert when Robin had married Greyson's brother, Gerald. "I doubt that that was the reason you didn't take her up on that offer, Rob. I think you and I were lucky. We have a little different values from most young men. That is because our parents had different values from most parents, and they instilled us with those same values."

"Maybe it was lucky. I sometimes wonder."

"Heather came out from the bathroom and sat on the couch. "She is beautiful!" Greyson said. "I thought maybe it was just a myth."

"Too bad she doesn't have any morals," Robert said. "That is, other than her contention that she believes a girl should value chastity. In my mind that is not nearly as important as valuing the property--and lives, of other people. She has no consideration whatsoever, evidently for the rights of people to their own savings, and property." He walked up to where Heather was sitting. "All the other women I know want to look clean and neat for their

own sakes," Robert said. "None of my sisters have any desire to be able to stimulate men. They have respect for themselves and associate only with men who respect them."

"How sweet!" Heather expostulated. "Did you ever have respect for a woman?"

"Certainly. I respect most women. All women who respect themselves. It's hard to respect a woman who has no respect for herself." Greyson has given you this bedroom. You can take all your things in there. I will let you know what the next move is. Greyson's wife is my sister. She is a wonderful girl. She will be home tomorrow."

"How long do you intend to keep me here?" Heather asked. I have to go back to my plans."

"What plans?"

"Well, I have some things to do. I have to go get the gold and take it to a safer place. Then I have to find a good place for me and my baby..."

"You might as well forget it. You are not going anywhere. What are you going to tell your children. 'Oh, sweetheart I was a bank-robber. I was a criminal. I was a murderer.'"

"I've never killed anyone!"

"Yes, but your father has killed a number of good men.

Do you think that is right?"

"He only killed when he had to in self-defense. He always felt bad about having to kill anyone."

...I always felt bad when I had to kill someone," Robert continued his scornful mimicry. "I only did it when it was necessary to defend myself in a crime. I only killed a few people..." His voice changed. It was only scornful now. "Do you think your children are going to sanction that kind of thinking? Murder is murder. You were lucky not to have to kill anyone so far--but you will. You certainly will, if you go back to that nefarious game."

Heather seemed to be contemplating something he said for the first time. "When are you going to take it back to the bank?"

"What are you talking about? I have no intention of taking it back to the bank! It's mine! It's my father's and my brother's and mine. I certainly am not going to take it back!"

"Either you take it back, or I take you back to the jail. Is it worth having that rope around your pretty little neck again. This time, the executioner will give the signal, and the trap-door will open and you will swing out over it and the waiting crowds will watch and scream and laugh, and dance, and even have sexual climaxes. That will be the end of the foolish little bank-robber, Heather. You can be happy though, that your hair will not be in knots and tangles. You will look more beautiful than ever."

"You wouldn't do that," she said. "Either you take the money back or I will show you what I am capable of."

"You know I couldn't do that! You know that if I took it back, they would take me and hang me anyway. That would be foolish...I..."

"All right, I agree. Take me to the gold and I will take it back for you."

"No! That would be treachery. It isn't all mine. It belongs to my brother, too."

"It belongs to the bank," Robert said--"and no one else. You know that."

"It wasn't taken from this bank," Heather hedged. "I'm sure of that. The last bank the notorious murderer Mr. Drake Dunbar robbed was...let's see, in Moran County. That is where your father killed a young man who had a wife and three little children. Does that bother you?--"

or do you maintain that your father had to do it? You had better take me to that gold, before I lose my temper. I can be quite...unpleasant when I lose my temper."

"I'd rather die," she said. "You had better be very sure about that--because that is exactly what will happen. I will take you back to that jail and you will entertain the crowds as I told you a while ago. That's all right with me. But if that is your choice, I promise you I will get your brother to take me to the gold and I will return it in any case."

Heather's face went white. She didn't doubt that this man was capable of doing exactly what he had said he would. It was uncanny, what he could do. "All right, bastard. I will show you where the gold is. You can take it back--but you will have to release me from your prison. I will have to be free."

"Never," he said. "Go to bed. At dawn we will ride to Carson Springs. If I don't miss my guess, it will take about five good days to get to where the gold is hidden. I know you wouldn't have tried to take it too far before unloading it, so it is not far from Carson Creek."

Her face was still white. She said nothing, but went into the bedroom Greyson had shown her to, and went to bed. Why is he so stubborn? What does he want of me? Why does he say he will never release me from his prison? He can have any woman he wants. Why does he want to torture me? He dug up the gold and loaded it on the horses. "My god, there must be a million dollars here!" he said. "I told you it was a lot," she said. "If you would use your head you could be rich for the rest of your life." She looked hopefully at him. "On money that belongs to other people? Good people who have worked hard to earn their money? No thanks. That kind of living doesn't exactly appeal to my sense of fairness."

"As if you had a sense of fairness!" she scoffed.

CHAPTER XXII

Robert decided that his family had gone to be with the Wallings. They weren't at home. They knew that Greyson and Roxanne were not expected back for a week.

Her astonishment caused her to jump as if she had been slapped. "Jack-ass!" she said. "Why do you want to say a thing like that?"

"Because I am going to marry you."

"You couldn't be such a fool! Of course I'll never marry you. Take me back to the jail. I'd rather be..."

"Am I so repulsive that you would hang before you would consent to marry me? Isn't there anything at all about me that you could...consider favorable?"

She gazed at him with contempt. Her face went through several contortions of changing emotions. "I'm sure you know," she finally said, "that you could have most any girl you want. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that you are the handsomest man I ever saw. Any girl would be attracted to you. You're like a warm, powerful, pulsing human magnet."

"But not to you?"

"I wouldn't be honest if I said that. You are nice to look at..."

"That's all? Just nice to look at. Why am I even nice to look at?"

"You are too damn conceited! You know why you are attractive. You are...well...it's hard to describe."

"Try."

"I'm sure you have heard it all before. But I know too, that arrogant men like you never tire of hearing of their attraction for women. I think there's nothing you want more. I guess that's natural, since you are all animals and have nothing in mind other than to find women you can use for your pleasure."

He was still smiling. "I wish I knew some way to wipe that arrogant smirk off your face!" she said. "It's been there ever since you rescued me. I expect it's a natural result of your arrogance."

"Guess I was born with it, along with all my other attributes that disturb you," he laughed.

She still sat looking at him with all the changing emotions reflecting in her face. "Those lips. I am not going to be able to resist them much longer," he said. "Is that all you require in a wife--beautiful lips, clean hair and..."

He laughed. "Certainly not. Those things are important, but I want my wife to be a good woman, loyal, intelligent, sensitive. I want my woman to be a good mother to our children--and most of all, I want her to love me."

"You are a fool!" she said. "You know perfectly well I have not one of these qualities, yet you talk about marrying me."

"I think you have every one of them. You are a good woman. You just didn't have the chance to learn that about yourself, the way you lived--with a father who didn't value goodness. You are loyal. You proved that by your defense of a man who is not worthy of your defense. You are intelligent. That is made quite obvious in most everything you do or say. You are sensitive. That too, shows in a number of ways. You will be a wonderful mother. The only thing left, is can you love me?"

"Has any woman ever been able to keep from loving you?"

Now he was surprised. "I don't think any girl ever loved me. I never did love one, other than the little Indian girl I meant for so long to marry. She married another man."

"Bully for her! I'm glad she did, even though she must have been a fool."

"I never thought of her as a fool. The man she married, Greyson's brother, is a fine man."

"I still think she was a fool." She didn't say anything for a long time. Robert was curious about what she was thinking. "You asked me how you affected women. Well, it is as if there were thousands of invisible threads emanating from your body. They all find their way inside the flesh of any woman who is near you--and she probably doesn't even have to be near after she has seen you. Each of these invisible threads has a hook--like a fish-hook on the end of it. That hook embeds itself irrevocably into the flesh of a woman."

Robert shuddered. "That would be an untenable position. Women would avoid me like the plague."

"Well, yes, excepting that these little hooks do not tear the flesh nor cause any pain. It is as if they all carried some...thrilling nectar, some sweet treasure of enchantment, some delectable ingredient of happiness not available anywhere else. Each one brings it's own unique kind of balm and joy."

"Now you're laughing at me. Quite poetic though. Very interesting."

She continued as if he had not interrupted. "One thread carries the aura your body exudes. The smell of rich leather, horse-flesh, and some man-smell, masculine and authoritative, along with the clean, washed smell of self-respect and confidence. Another brings the sensation of being drawn into a vortex of pure joy. How a certain stance can have that effect is beyond me; that slouch, seeming that you have no joints, but are put together with rubber, so that however you move it is reminiscent of a prince--with the impetus of a prince. Another brings the . . . The manner in which you wear your clothes. Your clothes are a part of you. They follow the outline of your body, moving with it, as if enslaved and happily so. Your clothes alone, would make any girl look at you twice. Even the creases, convoluting by your movements, seeming to be . . . of your self--of Robert Redford alone in all the world. This is a few examples of the hundreds of invisible threads that capture a girl's heart, irrevocably."

"I never dreamed I was so fortunate," Robert laughed. "I don't think I ever effected any woman in that way--but as I said, it's kind of nice to hear. As a matter of fact, I don't give a damn, one way or the other what any other woman ever thought of me. I just want you to love me."

"You're insane! I'm a bank-robber! I am a criminal. I might even have been a murderer, if..."

"You are none of those. That is all in the past. You were a bank-robber. Now you are my woman."

"You just want me, because you feel that since you saved my life, you can keep me your prisoner for the rest of my life and I will have to do everything you want of me. I suppose every man wants to own a woman, wants to control her, body and soul."

"That doesn't happen to be what I want. You are free from this moment on, to do exactly as you want to do. But I will admit that I desperately hope that what you want to do is to marry me--and love me."

Heather sighed. "I still think you are completely insane. I can't understand why you would pick me, out of all the women you could have. But supposing we did get married. How would we live? You don't have a job. We couldn't stay here and impose on these people. You

refuse to go back on the trail with me. I know you think I have no pride, no honor, but I won't be a parasite."

Robert caught her in his arms. He kissed her soft lips. He was more than gratified when she slipped her arms around his neck and returned his kisses. "I don't believe in taking charity, either. I am a strong, healthy man. I can work. I can do most anything. As far as that goes, I could work right here for Greyson. He has dozens of people working, clearing land, planting, harvesting, building, putting up fences. I could work for him."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"I am willing to do anything if you will promise to marry me. I told you that I have a year to finish my education-- to become an attorney. I intend to finish now. I could work and go back to the university, too."

"It costs a fortune to go to college, doesn't it?"

"That's true, but my education is all paid for. The

Wallings paid for that a long time ago. I expect to pay them back, of course. I am like you, I believe in paying my debts, even when that debtor doesn't want paid."

"When did you decide you were in love with me? I can't believe yet, that you really are. It frightens me..."

"I know what I want when I see it, Heather. I want you. I fell in love with you the first time I looked at you after we had made our way into the thicket."

She looked skeptical again. "My knotted, stringy hair, soiled clothes and all?"

"Yes, knotted, stringy hair, dirt and all."

"You certainly didn't betray any of that feeling. You had to know that you could have me at almost any time. Those first days, and nights we spent together. You didn't betray any desire for me."

"I didn't? I thought you were very much aware of my 'lust,' as you called it. Preventing myself from ravaging you was the hardest thing I ever did in my life. That first night, when I told you holding you was just another against the cold. What a joke! I was tortured with wanting you. Then the nights we spent together. Each night was the most delicious torture I ever experienced. "Maybe it is not nice to admit it," Heather said, looking at the floor, "But I felt the same way. If you had made the slightest suggestion of what you were feeling, I would have done everything in my power to seduce you."

"Has anyone ever heard a sweeter confession? Heather, if Delia gets wind of this, she will plan a big wedding. She will invite half of Texas and several other states. Do you want a big, elaborate wedding? I think every girl has a right to that. Believe me, it will be one of the most memorable events in your life."

"It sounds exciting. It would be crazy not to do something that would be one of the most memorable days of our lives. But a big wedding like that is very expensive.

Wouldn't it be an imposition to let her give us a wedding?"

"It probably is, but I will guarantee you, that being Delia, nothing will make her feel more deprived than our not letting her give us a wedding. She loves weddings. You know we have all come to feel like family. The Wallings were the ones that kept promoting that. They were very rich and we were very poor, but they never made us feel like poor relations. In fact, all the people who work for them on their huge ranch, are like part of an extended family. There are Indians, Black people, white people, all loving and loyal to each other. They all enjoy each other and respect each other. Nothing makes Delia any more angry than for anyone

to act as if he or she were not on the same level as everyone else. She certainly doesn't believe in class distinction."

"I am awfully afraid I wouldn't fit in. They all sound so wonderful. They wouldn't want a bank-robber trying to break into their circle."

"Don't be ridiculous! That's just what I have been trying to tell you. They will all love you and they will know what a lucky sonofagun I am to bring home such a wife as you. None of them will judge you. They don't judge each other--or me. We have all made mistakes. I could tell you things my sister did that would make your hair stand on end. Then Greyson lost his respect for himself and did things that he regrets--almost lost his wife and all that he cherishes. Van, Delia's and Tom's son, almost married a girl he...well, we'll have forever to discuss all that. No one will judge you."

"All right, I will trust your judgment. I would like the lovely wedding--but I don't want to wait that long. I don't even want to wait until tomorrow for that preacher. I want you to hold me in your arms, like you did out in the hills, and make love to me."

Robert gasped. He picked her up and carried her into her bedroom. "Your arms are like a sweet haven--not just the sex, but

it makes me feel as if I were protected from all the fears, hurts, cares of the world. I almost hate you for making me love you so much, Mr. Redford."

"I felt a little the same way. I was angry with you for making me into a different man. I had thought no woman on earth could ever make me forget Robin. Most of the mean things I did, I did for your own sake. I refused to let you take the mare that first night, because I knew you would freeze to death. The second time, I knew that you would be caught before you got ten miles."

"Why did you find it necessary to duck me in that freezing water? You knew you couldn't get me clean without hot water and..."

"That was just damned cussedness. I was trying to take revenge on you for the fact that I couldn't deny that I wanted you. I hadn't expected to fall in love ever again. I didn't want to love you."

All of Robert's family were surprised that Robert was planning to be married. They all knew of his heartbreak when Robin had married Gerald. They were happy that he had found someone who could make him forget her. They were eager to meet this woman who had evidently outshone somehow, all the gracious and beautiful women who had let it be known that they were available if Robert wanted them. When they discovered that she was the notorious outlaw, Heather Dunbar, they were as astonished as Greyson and Roxanne had been.

Heather still stared at him. "There is no gold," she said. "Mr. Redford and I went and got it and returned it to the bank...to the rightful owners."

CHAPTER. XXIII

Greyson was surprised to find Heather still there, when he returned from Dallas with Roxanne and Baby Dorinda. Introductions were made. Greyson had told Roxanne all about Robert's rescue of the outlaw, Heather Dunbar. Roxanne had been as amused as Greyson had been at the notion Robert might be serious when he said he was going to marry Heather. "Would you let me hold the baby?" Heather asked. "I wouldn't hurt her. I am not dangerous any more..."

"Of course you can hold her," Roxanne said. "Why would we think you might be dangerous--might hurt her?"

Heather began to cry again. "I am an outlaw. I mean I was an outlaw. My father made me believe it was necessary to kill men. He said it was in self-defense. I believed him. But I know now that I was sanctioning the murder of the fathers of little children. That is unforgiveable."

"I think it was very foolish of your father," Roxanne said, "but I don't think your being taken in by what he taught you, is unforgiveable. The important thing, I think, is that you know better now. That is really all that counts. Nobody knows better than Grayson and I do, that you cannot erase the past."

Robert told Greyson all that had taken place. I buried the body up in that ravine, about a mile from my cabin. "Probably the best thing you could have done. Too bad he had to be such a bastard. Looks as if you have Heather pretty well tamed down. She hasn't scratched you any more has she? Have you decided what you are going to do with her?"

Greyson expected Robert's hearty laugh. Instead he looked serious. "I'm going to marry her. Delia is planning our wedding right now. I told you I was going to marry her. I love her, Greyson. She has given me a completely new outlook on life. Life is good again. She loves me. In spite of all the things she did--as a result of living with a mad-man for a father, she is a sensitive, good woman. You'll see."

"Well, if you say so, I know it is true," Greyson said.

"I just can't get over the surprise of it. She is a beauty-- and she looks as clean as a new marble. What does she say about your insisting that she has to keep herself clean. Does she still think that is beneath her dignity?"

"She was taught that cleanliness is a mark of iniquity; that it shows that a woman wants to be the slave of some man. She believed her father when he told her that the only reason any woman wanted to be attractive, was that she hoped to be made the of a man."

"God, such twisted thinking! Poor girl. It must have been very hard on her. So, we're to have another big wedding! Does Roxanne know? She will be astonished, too. She laughed at the idea, just as I did, that you could possibly be serious about marrying the daughter of Drake Dunbar. I hope she is as changed as you think she is."

"You'll see," Robert repeated.

CHAPTER XXIV

"I can't believe that Robert has decided to marry the daughter of that murdering bank-robber!" Van said. "Yes, everyone was surprised." Laura still held the newspaper with the details of the rescue of Mr. Dunbar. "We may never know who rescued him," Laura read aloud. "It was a cleverly planned and deftly executed rescue. About all that is known for sure is that there was a preacher involved. Of course it is well-known that preachers sometimes take it upon themselves to prevent what they think of as barbarism. Many of them do not believe in hanging. They say it is 'cruel and unusual punishment.'" They usually believe that if they can get the culprit in their hands, they can 'convert' him."

"That seldom happens, according to authorities, but the ministers of the church persist in behaving as if were true. The authorities believe that Mr. Dunbar's daughter, Heather, might well have been involved in his rescue. It will be

remembered that she herself was rescued only about three weeks ago. Poses and individual parties have looked for her, and a reward of \$, . has been offered for her return, but no trace of her whereabouts has been found. It is admitted that this family of three are one of the most crafty, since the days of . "There has been no notice yet, of a reward for the return of Mr. Dunbar. It is believed that that reward may be bigger than that for his daughter, since it is well-known that he is the leader of the pack. The other member of the gang, is his fifteen-year-old son, Forest. He got away when the three were arrested. They were arrested late in the evening. They were just preparing their sleeping blankets. Their fire was low. The sheriff and his men walked in with their revolvers drawn. Two of the men began to put the handcuffs on Heather and Mr. Dunbar. The third man turned to tie Forest. Forest kicked coals up into the man's face and dove over the bank. He got to the horses and rode away. "It has been reiterated in most news items that the daughter is a beauty. That is often questioned. Many think that the reporters who have seen her have exaggerated her good looks just to enhance the interest of their stories.

"Beauty or not she will surely hang when she is caught again. The lawmen say there is no question that the notorious three will be apprehended. We may well hope so, before more good men are killed. However, they have an uncanny way of escaping detection. They have operated successfully for over three years. Of course one of the tactics they use to good advantage, is that they work over such a very large territory. "They have never been in this area before. It is known that the last robbery they and got away, was in almost three hundred miles away, in Moran county. Two bank tellers were killed in that . A very large amount of money was taken. No trace of it has ever been found." She put the paper down. "I can't believe he will

really marry her," Laura said. "Well, mother is getting ready for a big wedding. She thinks the wedding will come off. I don't know how it can be accomplished without the authorities knowing she is here, and certainly they will come and take her away if they do know it. I've never known Robert to make a poor decision, other than his quitting his education, but this seems like one time he is doing so. Unless, of course, he has something in mind we don't know about. I don't know what it could be."

"Do you suppose he is just trying to punish himself for not being able to forget about Robin? Maybe he feels guilty for quitting his education, wandering around over the country, doing nothing. Isn't that something like what Roxanne did? She kept doing things to hurt herself just to try to ease her guilt"

"Could be--but that doesn't seem like the Robert I know. Maybe the whole episode with Robin did change him. Who knows? I know it tore the heart out of him. Maybe he is just doing

this because he has never found anything else that would ease the pain. Maybe he feels that doing something completely unprecedented, completely unorthodox and even dangerous, will help to uproot his old love."

"Well, whatever else, I hope the law doesn't walk in and cause a big disturbance in the middle of the wedding. That would spoil Delia's fun."

"And probably Robert's, too--and maybe that of some of the rest of us, if the shooting starts."

"Hope it doesn't come to that." Van laughed. "I don't know now whether to go prepared to back Robert up, if he refuses to let them take his bride, or whether to take sides with the law, and help to apprehend a dangerous criminal."

Phyllis came running into the room. She was out of breath. "Come to the house!" she shouted. "Robert's here-- with his girl!"

Van and Laura arose, looking at each other with questions and astonishment. They followed Phyllis back to the house. They were surprised to see that Heather was as beautiful as some of the reporters had said she was. She was quiet and gracious, too. It was easy to see immediately that this was no game with Robert. He was completely enchanted with her. Van sighed. "What can be the outcome of this? Another heartbreak?" he whispered to Laura. "It looks that way," she said. "I don't see how it can be anything else."

Robert was smiling. Everyone was talking at once. Heather was smiling, too. She was obviously very much in love with Robert. She was trying to acknowledge all of the people, and answer all of the questions. The questions were all impersonal, and inoffensive. When Van was introduced to her, she offered him her hand. "My god," he was thinking, "I don't blame Robert. She certainly is a lovely creature. Not the kind one would associate with such heinous activities as robbing banks. I wonder if this could be some kind of hoax. Maybe this isn't really Heather Dunbar at all. Robert was talking to Delia and Tom. Everyone stopped to listen. "All of you know," he said then, to the group, "the things that the Dunbar's have done. Mr. Dunbar was one of the most ignoble of men. He forced his daughter, and his young son, to go along with his nefarious occupation. He had no appreciation for having been snatched away on the day before he was scheduled to hang. He ordered Heather to get ready to go with him. When Heather refused, he tried to kill her. I had to kill him. I'm sure you know that he is the first man I ever killed. It was a hard thing to do. I could bring myself to do it, only to save Heather's life."

"All this is the prelude to telling you that I intend to find the best attorney in the country and have him clear me. If I am cleared, of course, Heather and her brother will be, too. Now, of course, I have to begin the search for the right attorney. I hope to god I can make him see the truth--and then I hope to god he can make a jury see the truth. I want my wife cleared of any guilt..."

Everyone was milling around, visiting and getting acquainted with the new member of the "family." Robert approached Tom. He looked embarrassed. "Tom," Robert said, "You probably know that I own absolutely nothing other than two horses, saddles, and a couple of changes of clothes. It's nobody's fault but my own. I should have been doing something, rather than riding around the country stirring up all kinds of hell. The fact that I was trying to keep my mind off...painful memories, is not any excuse." He stopped, embarrassed, sighed. "I owe you and Van a hell of a lot of money. Right now I am not sure how I am going

pay it back--but I will. Well, I've got myself into one hell of a mess. I need money for an attorney; a good one."

"Mr. Donovan is, of course, the best attorney in the State of Texas. The sonofabitch charges a fortune, but if you need the best, he is undoubtedly it. Kind of hurts me that people have to be so good at what they do... be so necessary to the cause of justice, and be such rats at the same time. Mr. Donovan is a womanizer, a skirt chaser, a libertine."

"I wish to god I could be sure he could win this case, even with his exorbitant charge, and his unsavory reputation. How much do you suppose he will charge."

"Ten thousand dollars!"

Robert blanched. "That much! I already owe you a fortune. How can I ever pay that much more?" He smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "I intend to go back to college just as soon as I can get these other things taken care of. It will take me a year to finish. Mr. Donovan is running for District attorney. He will get that position, since he is without question the best criminal attorney in Texas. I will

be taking my cases up against him. I am not forgetting that he is the best attorney around, and that he has years of experience. He is subtle and crafty. In spite of all that, two years from now, I will be known as the best criminal attorney in Texas, and I will be known to win most of my cases against the State--represented by Mr. Donovan. I can charge just about whatever I damned please. It wont be too long before I can pay all I owe you."

"I'm glad you are planning to get back into the university. I wouldn't be surprised if you can win a lot of cases, even up against Mr. Donovan--but I hope you always remember that justice is more important than money--even to pay your debts." "Yes sir, I will try to remember that."

I am glad you feel obligated about paying the debt. I wouldn't be so glad to loan it to you if you weren't. In the meantime, I don't expect to starve to death, so don't worry too much about the money until you can pay it without pressure."

CHAPTER XXV

"Well, I'll be damned!" Van said to Laura as they walked back to their own house. "Will wonders never cease? I hope this all works out. I'm not sure it will. Robert is a sensible man, but he is in love. The jury may see things a little differently from the way he does."

"Yes, I know. I will be glad when it's over. I hope it works. Robert is entitled to some happiness. It is hard to remember in view of all the publicity through the years, that she was not a willing accomplice. I am afraid it will be as hard for the jury to see."

"He has to have a good attorney, that's for sure. Mrs. Walling, let's make some plans. I have been thinking a lot about making that long trip up the coast to Washington, and then on over the Lewis and Clark route to Montana. We talked about it when we were out on the trail. I think it's time we went. You know Lillian has become a great little horseman. She is old enough to enjoy the trip. We can gauge our miles to her strength each day. We will stop early each night and make camp and rest and talk. I think she will love every bit of it."

Laura looked at him. He wondered that she didn't give him a prompt answer. He had thought that she would be thrilled with the notion, and would be ready to make plans. "Don't you think it's a good idea, sweetheart? When our little girl is asleep, we will lie in each other's arms and talk and look up at the stars, and..."

"And make love..." she said. "Why Mrs. Walling. I do believe you are becoming downright wanton," he grinned. "I sure hope so."

"I am thinking of all those nights we were so close together and denied the wonder of our love. I thought of nothing other than how it would be if we were married and had nothing to stop us from loving each other. I think I am wanton--maybe always was. It sounds wonderful Van. I have been thinking about it for a long time. I do want to go sometime...but now isn't a good time."

"Why, sweet? We can wait until after this trial is over, of course. I would like to know the outcome of that first, and do all we can to help Robert, but that shouldn't take too long. By the time we are ready, I think that will be answered, one way or the other. If the verdict should go wrong, I imagine Robert will have planned to spirit his little girl away somewhere where they can't be found. Maybe a trip like this would be the best answer for them, too. Maybe we could be of some assistance in keeping any lawmen bent of hanging them from discovering where they went."

"I would like that," Laura said,

Van got to his feet and took her in his arms. "I will never know how to appreciate what a lucky man I am. Nothing could have made me believe a few months ago, that I would ever be so happy again. "Sad as it is, Mr. Donovan is the best attorney in the country," Tom was saying. "He is quick and has a personality that in itself has an impact on a jury. I think you can't do better than to go see him immediately and try to retain him."

Mr. Donovan listened attentively. He looked at Heather several times, as if evaluating what Robert was saying. "What evidence do you have that this man was coercive?" he asked.

Robert sighed. "I know," he said, "that our statements to that effect are not going to impress a jury too much. The fact that it is human nature for children to be influenced greatly by their parents is not either, for that matter." He hesitated, smoothing his hair back from his forehead, in his wonted way. He looked at Mr. Donovan, wondering just how far he dare go with his admissions. He decided he would have to reveal at least some of the truth. "Heather's father

tried to kill her," he said. He rolled back his sleeve and showed the scars of the bullet wound he had sustained when the old man had shot him."

"Just what did you do to save Heather's life," Mr.

Donavan asked. It seemed to Robert that he could see wheels spinning in that man's head. He certainly had something in mind. He hadn't decided against taking the case, then. Robert was glad about that. He was reluctant to tell the attorney that he and Heather had rescued Mr. Dunbar, and that he had had to kill him, even though he knew that anything he told the attorney was supposed to be kept confidential. "I killed him," Robert admitted. Was that a flickering smile that had appeared on Donavan's lips? If so, it was immediately erased by a more

serious look. "I didn't read anything about his having been killed," he said. "No, the disappearance was in the papers, but it has been

assumed that he just got away once more. No one knows that Mr. Dunbar is dead, other than Heather and I and..."

"How do you intend to prove that you had to kill Mr. Dunbar to save Heather's life, if everyone believes he is still at large?" Robert thought about that. He felt certain Mr. Donavan had already made up his mind what that answer should be. "We will present it this way," Mr. Donavan said. "You hid the body, with every intention of revealing the fact that you rescued him, and then had to kill him in defense of his own daughter. You could not, of course, allow a public burial or any of the facts to be known until your case had come to trial. If you had, the law would have taken you and Mrs. Redford in, and you both would have been hanged before you had a chance to prove her innocence. There is no need to reveal to the jury that this was not all planned from the move on-- namely, the rescue of Mr. Donavan. It sounds like a plan thought out and carried out step by step. That is the impression we will give. The jury will buy that."

Robert believed that this approach would probably be the most apt to convince any jury of their innocence. He decided that accepting that defense would be in the best interests of justice, even if they were not exactly true. Mr. Donavan stood up. He walked around to where Heather was sitting. "Let's have a drink," he said, taking three glasses from the shelf. "This is good wine. We'll drink to our success." When they had finished their drinks, Mr. Donavan took Heather's glass. He turned and put his hand on her shoulder. He allowed it to slide down toward her breast. He suddenly found himself trying to regain his balance. He hit the desk with a bounce that would leave bruises for quite some time. He tried to stand. Robert held him in a relentless grip. "Oh, for god's sake, Robert, I didn't know you were so touchy. A little possessive, aren't you?..."

"You will discover how touchy I am if you ever touch my wife again." Robert's face was mask of fury. "I can't understand you men who are so silly over one woman. There's always another one in the next room."

"Just give the money back!" Robert grated. "I'll find another attorney. I can live without you."

"Oh, I am not going to return the money," Mr. Donavan said, straightening his coat and smoothing his hair. "I have the money, so I will represent you. I will win this case for you. You do know, however, that I can sue you for everything you own, for assault and battery?" His smile was

ingratiating. All Robert's muscles were still taut. His anger had not subsided. "Yes, Mr. Donavan. You go right ahead and sue me for assault and battery. I happen to know enough

about the law to insure that you will be the one that is the laughing-stock of the State of Texas. Everyone far and wide, knows what a libertine you are, as well as what an effective attorney. They all know that you have a fine wife at home, and two children, and that you pay them absolutely no respect. You are a barracuda through and through. Go ahead and sue me, and see who comes out ahead."

"All right, we will forget all about my little...indiscretion. You do see though, surely, that your wife can make a great deal of difference in the outcome of the trial. Men are all influenced by a pretty woman. I advise you to dress in a...well, a manner to draw their attention to your...very provocative figure..." He looked at Robert to see whether or not he was taking offense at his words. "Any good attorney will always take everything that can make a difference into consideration. Wear a...well, a sensual dress; one low-cut to reveal as much as possible of your..."

Robert was looking very threatening again. "My wife cannot help being beautiful," he said. "And certainly that will have an effect on the jurymen--men being what they are.

But she is not being put on exhibition. As a matter of fact, clever as you are at , you should know that even though men are influenced by pulchritude, they are far more apt to consider a woman who is modest and refined, innocent of any crime, than one that tries to show herself off--like a...streetwalker."

"All right! All right. Do as you please about the dress-- but if you try to interfere in the defense any further than that I will withdraw my support. I cannot win a case, going along with every whim my client happens to come up with."

CHAPTER XXVI

Robert knew as well as did Mr. Donovan, that the beautiful and gracious little girl on the witness stand was as great an influence on the jury as any evidence that was given. This proud, neat, evidently intelligent girl, could not have been the vicious bank-robber she was said to be. It was emphatically reiterated that even under the coercive power of her father, she had never killed anyone. Forest testified sincerely that he had always hated his father. He said that he had never wanted to go along with the raids on the banks, but that he had been forced to do so. He said that he knew his sister had felt the same way. He said, even though it had been stricken as irrelevant to this case, that his father had killed his mother just as surely as if he had held a gun to her head. Mr. Donovan knew how to encourage, and use this sort of statement to the best advantage, even though no one knew any better than he, that it was not "admissible" evidence.

Robert had rented a place for him, his wife and Forest. They all had relaxed their vigilance. They were beginning to feel safe. Robert was studying for his bar exams. The phone that had been recently installed, rang. Robert answered it. "Some men came here looking for Forest. They insist that he is..." Robert had hung up the phone. "Here," Robert said, hurrying Forest to the bedroom. Put on this long dress, this sunbonnet. Hurry out to the field. Take a hoe. Get busy. Keep your back turned and your head down. Work slowly, like an old woman and..." Forest was out the door. Robert took up his books. "Go into the kitchen and be busy at something--anything. Keep your head. They heard horses booves and shouts. Robert answered the knock at the door, his book in his hand. Four men were milling around on their foaming horses. "We've come for that young criminal, Forest Dunbar," one of them said. "He is going to hang for his murdering acts."

"We will eventually catch his sneaky sister, too. She isn't going to get away, just because that lying attorney got the judge to pronounce her innocent. We know too much about her to let her get away with that."

Robert was seething with anger, but he had learned to keep his feelings under control. He was worried about Heather. He didn't dare show any concern, but his revolver was loaded and ready under his cushion. Two of the men had wondered into the kitchen. Heather turned and looked at them with questioning eyes. "What is it you want?" she asked, her voice low and cultured. The men repeated what they had said to Robert. "Oh, I hope you catch him," Heather said. "That sneaky, young bastard has got away with enough. I really don't imagine he would be in this vicinity, though. Do you? I should think as wily as all of them were, he would have put as much distance as possible between himself and the law. They had to have had a hideout--or more than likely several of them. That is probably where he is keeping out of sight."

Robert had come into the room. "My wife is pregnant," he said. "She hasn't been very well. The doctor has advised her to be very quiet. Under the circumstances, I think you should go. We have no information about any of the Dunbars."

The men looked their truculence, but they could not imagine this little cultured woman being Heather Dunbar. It was obvious that she was "a lady."

"Now do you believe that you need my protection?" Robert asked. "If you had been out there in one of your hideouts, and they had found you--which they would sooner or later, they would have recognized you immediately, with your dirty clothes and knotted hair. You would be on your way back to prison...you and your brother, too."

Heather looked
turned back to her work.

. "Maybe you are giving yourself too much credit," she said, and