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Bruce offered a clear target. And at that instant Bruce had drawn the leather wallet from the tree.

Curiously alone stayed Simon's finger as Bruce had opened it. He saw the gleam of the white paper in the dim light; and then he understood.

Simon was a man of rigid, unswerving self-control; and his usual way was to look a long time between the sights before he fired. Yet the sight of that document—the missing Folger-Ross agreement on which had hung victory or defeat—sent a violent impulse through all his nervous system. For the first time in his memory his reflexes got away from him.

It had meant too much; and his finger pressed back involuntarily against the trigger. He had not taken his usual deliberate aim, although he had seen Bruce's figure clearly between the sights the instant before he fired. Simon was a rifleman, bred in the bone, and he had no reason to think that the hasty aim meant a complete miss. He did realize, however, the difficulties of night shooting—a realization that all men who have listened after dusk in the duck blind experience sooner or later—and he looked up over his sights to see the result of his shot. His self-control had completely returned to him; and he was perfectly cold about the whole matter.

From the first second he knew he had not completely missed. He raised his rifle to shoot again.

But Bruce's body was no longer revealed. Linda stood in the way. It looked as if she had deliberately thrown her own body as a shield between.

Simon spoke then—a single, terrible oath of hatred and jealousy. But in a second more he saw his triumph. Bruce swayed, reeled and fell in Linda's arms, and he saw her half-drag him into the house.

He stood shivering, but not from the cold that the storm had brought. "Come on," he ordered Young Bill. "I think we've downed him for good, but we've got to get that paper."

But Simon did not see all things clearly. He had little real knowledge of the little drama that had followed his shot from ambush.

Human nature is full of odd quirks and twists, and among other things, symptoms are misleading. There is an accepted way for men to act when they are struck with a rifle bullet. They are expected to reel, to throw their arms wide, and usually to cry out. The only trouble with these actions, as men who have been in battlefields know very well, is that they do not usually happen in real life.

Bruce, with Linda's eyes upon him, took one rather long, troubled breath. And he did look somewhat puzzled. Then he looked down at his shoulder.

"I'm hit, Linda," he said in a quiet way. "I think just a scratch."

The tremendous shock of any kind of wound from a thirty-four caliber bullet had not seemingly affected him outwardly at all. Some hours were to pass before he completely understood. The truth was that the shock of that rifle bullet, ordinarily striking a blow of a half-ton, had cost him for the moment an ability to make any logical interpretation of events. The girl moved swiftly, yet without giving an impression of leaping, and stood very close and in front of him. In one lightning movement she had made of her own body a shield for him, in case the assassin in the covert should shoot again.

Her arms went about and seized his shoulders. "Stagger," she whispered quickly. "Pretend to fall. It's the one chance to save you."

He dispelled the mists in his own brain and obeyed her. He swayed, and her arms went about him. Then he fell forward.

Her strong arms encircled his waist and with all her magnificent young strength she dragged him to the door. It was noticeable, however—to all eyes except Bruce's—that she kept her own body as much as she could between him and the ambush. In an instant they were in the darkened room. Bruce stood up, once more wholly master of himself.

"You're not hurt bad?" she asked quickly.

"No. Just a deep scratch in the arm muscle near the shoulder. Bullet just must have grazed me. But it's bleeding pretty bad."

"Then there's no time to be lost." Her hands in her eagerness went again to his shoulder. "Don't you see—he'll be here in a minute. You'll stand on the back door and try to ride down to the courts before they can overtake us—"

"Don't you see?" he demanded. "You can make it out without me. I'm wounded and bleeding, and can't tell how long I can keep up. We're only got one horse, and without me to weigh him down you can get down to the courts—"

"And leave you here to be murdered? Oh, don't waste the precious seconds any more. I won't go without you. I mean it. If you stay here, I do, too. Believe me if you ever believed anything."

Once more the lightning revealed her face, and on it the determination of a zealot. He knew that she spoke the truth. He climaxed with some difficulty into the saddle. A moment more and she swung up behind him.

The entire operation had taken an astonishingly short period of time. Bruce had worked like mad, wholly disregarding his injured arm. Just beyond, Simon with ready rifle was creeping toward the house.

"Which way?" Bruce asked.

"The out-trail—around the mountain," she whispered. "Simon will overtake us on the other—he's got a magnificent horse. O the mountain trail we'll have a better chance to keep out of his sight."

She spoke hurriedly, yet conveyed her message with entire clearness. They knew what they had to face, these two. Simon and whoever of the clan was with him would lose no time in springing in pursuit. They each had a strong horse, they knew the trails, they carried long-range rifles and would open fire at the first glimpse of the fugitives. Bruce was wounded; slight as the injury was, it would seriously handicap them in such a test as this. Their one chance was to keep to the remote trails, to lurk unseen in the thickets, and try to break through to safety. And they knew that only by the doubtful mercy of the forest gods could they ever succeed.

Linda took the reins and pulled out of the trail, then encircled a heavy wall of brush. She did not wish to take the risk of Simon seeing their forms in the dimming lightning and opening fire so soon. Then she turned back into the trail and headed into the storm.

Simon had clear enough memory of the rifle fire that Linda had opened upon the clan to wish to approach the house with care. It would be wholly typical of the girl to lay her lover on his bed, then go back to the window to wait for a sight of his assassin. She could look straight along a rifle barrel! A few moments were lost as Young Bill and himself encircled the thickets, keeping out of the gleam of the smoldering tree. Its light was almost gone; it hissed and glowed in the wet snow.

They crept up from the shadow, and holding their rifles ready, opened the door. They were somewhat sur-



It Was Old Elmira, Cold and Sinister as a Rattler in Its Lair.

prised to find it unlocked. The truth was it had been left thus by design; Linda did not wish them to encircle the house to the rear door and discover Bruce and herself in the act of departure. The room was in darkness, and the two intruders rather expected to find Bruce's body on the threshold.

These were mountain men; and they had been in rifle duels before. They had the sure instincts of the beasts of prey in the hills without, and among other things they knew it wasn't wise to stand long in an open doorway with the freight of the ruined pine behind them.

They slipped quickly into the darkness. Then they stopped and listened. The room was deeply silent. They couldn't hear the sound that both of them had so confidently expected—the faint breathing of a dying man. Simon struck a match. The room was quite deserted.

"What's up?" Bill demanded.

Simon turned toward him with a scowl, and the match flickered and burned out in his fingers. "Keep your rifle ready. He may be hiding somewhere—still able to shoot."

They stole to the door of Linda's room and listened. Then they threw it wide.

One of their toes was in this room—an implacable foe whose eyes were glittering and strange in the match-light. But it was neither Bruce nor Linda. It was old Elmira, cold and sinister as a rattler in its lair. Simon cursed her and hurried on.

Holding his rifle like a club, he swung through into Bruce's room, lighted another match, then darted

into the kitchen. In the dim match-light the truth went home to him.

He turned, eyes glittering. "They've gone—on Dave's horse," he said. "Thank God, they've only got one horse between 'em and can't go fast. You ride like h—l up the trail toward the store—they might have gone that way. Keep close watch and shoot when you can make 'em out."

"You mean—" Bill's eyes widened. "Mean! I mean do as I say. Shoot by sound, if you can't see 'em, and don't lose another second or I'll shoot you, too. Aim for the man if a chance offers—but shoot, anyway. Don't stop hunting till you find them—they'll duck off in the brush, sure. If they get through, everything is lost. I'll take the trail around the mountain."

They reined to their horses, untied them, and mounted swiftly. The darkness swallowed them at once.

CHAPTER XXIX

In the depth of gloom even the wild folk—usually keeping so close a watch on those that move on the shadowed trails—did not see Linda and Bruce ride past.

The darkness is usually their ally of dominance, but tonight most of them had yielded to the storm and the snow. They hovered in their covets. What movement there was among them was mostly toward the foothills; for the message had gone forth over the wilderness that the cold had come to stay. The little gnawing folk, emerging for another night's work at filling their larders with food, crept down into the scarcely less impenetrable darkness of their underground burrows. Even the bears, whose furry coats were impervious to any ordinary cold, felt the beginnings of the cold-trance creeping over them. They were remembering the security and warmth of their last winter's dens, and they began to long for them again.

The horse walked slowly, head near the ground. The girl made no effort to guide him. The lightning had all but ceased; and in an instant it had become apparent that only by trusting to the animal's instinct could the trail be kept at all; almost at once all sense of direction was lost to them. The snow and the darkness obscured the outline of the ridges against the sky; the trail was wholly invisible beneath them.

After the first hundred yards they had no way of knowing that the horse was actually on the trail. White animals in the light of day cannot see nearly so far or interpret nearly so clearly as human beings, they usually seem to make their way much better at night. Many a frontiersman has been saved from death by realization of this fact; and bewildered by the ridges, has permitted his dog to lead him into camp. But nature has never devised a creature that can see in the utter darkness, and the gloom that enfolded them now seemed simply un-fathomable. Bruce found it increasingly hard to believe that the horse's eyes could make out any kind of dim pathway in the pine needles. The feeling grew on him and on Linda as well, that they were lost and aimlessly wandering in the storm.

Of all the sensations that the wilderness can afford, there are few more dreadful to the spirit than this. It is never pleasant to lose one's bearings—and in the night and the cold and miles from any friendly habitation it is particularly hard to bear. Bruce felt the agonized menace of the wilderness as never before. It always seemed to be crouching, waiting to take a man at a disadvantage; and like the gods that first made mad those whom they would destroy, it doesn't quite play fair. He understood now certain wilderness tragedies of which he had heard; how tenderest—lost among the ridges—had broken into a wild run that had ended nowhere except in exhaustion and death.

Bruce himself felt a wild desire to lash his horse into a gallop, but he forced it back with all his powers of will. His calmer, saner self explained that folly with entire clearness. It would mean panic for the horse, and then a quick and certain death, either at the foot of a precipice or from a blow from a low-hanging limb. The horse seemed to be feeling its way, rather than seeing.

They were strange, lonely figures in the darkness; and for a long time they rode almost in silence. Then Bruce felt the girl's breath as she whispered.

"Bruce," she said. "Let's be brave and look this matter in the face. Do you think we've got a chance?"

He rode a long time before he answered. He groped desperately for a word that might bring her cheer, but it was hard to find. The cold seemed to deepen about them, the remorseless snow beat into his face.

"Linda," he replied. "It is one of the mercies of this world for men always to think that they've got a chance. Maybe it's only a cruelty in our case."

"I think I ought to tell you something else. I haven't the least way of knowing whether we are on the right trail."

"I knew that long ago. Whether we are on any trail at all."

"I've just been thinking. I don't know how many tracks it has. We might have already got on a wrong one. Perhaps the horse is turned about and is heading back home—toward Simon's stables."

She spoke dully, and he thrust his arm back to her. "Linda, try to be brave," he urged. "We can only take a chance."

The horse plodded a few more steps. "Beave! To think that it is not that has to encourage me—in stead of my trying to keep up you!"

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