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EASY MONEY

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When Charlie Shaw, the carefree cow-puncher, was accused of being a shallow josher, and therefore worthless for rounding up cow thieves, Charlie got angry and proved that even a “kidder” can get down to business.

The cool autumn wind riffled across Lonesome Prairie. It fluttered the manes and tails of a dozen saddled horses standing in a compact group, awaiting the pleasure of their riders, who stood and squatted in various postures, casting occasional glances at a number of flat, wrinkled objects in the grass of a tiny hollow. They had come upon these objects quite unexpectedly and had stopped to examine them. One rider had gone galloping back toward camp. The rest waited.

“Gosh, old Elmer’ll go straight in the air when he sees this,” one remarked.

Two miles distant a herd was stringing south. Heavy-loaded wagons, tooled respectively by a cook and a night herder, with a comet’s tail of saddle stock following behind, bore in the same direction. And from that direction three men were now riding full tilt toward the dismounted cow-punchers.

When they pulled up at the group, Elmer Duffy gave an immediate exhibition of what his rider had termed “going straight in the air.” Elmer was past forty, a sandy-haired Texan, with a capacity for irritable conduct that remained mostly hidden beneath a placid exterior. He had a long, solemn face. He took his position as the active head of a big cow outfit rather more seriously than range bosses usually did. This attitude, together with his slumbering crabbedness, did not make him popular with his men.

“What’s all this?” he demanded.

“Well,” one sunny-faced young fellow explained, “as near as we can see, it’s eight beef hides with the Seventy-seven brand, that’s been skinned off their rightful wearers and laid out to dry in the sun by some kind soul. We happened on ’em an’ sent Mike back to tell you, because we thought maybe you’d be interested.”

Mr. Duffy prowled from one hide to the other. The skulls and shin bones and hoofs of the defunct animals were scattered about for all and sundry to behold, where the coyotes had gnawed them. But they knew very well that neither wolf nor coyote had pulled down a bunch of mature cattle like that. And, as the foreman of the Seventy-seven gathered the import of these remains, he grew red in the face, and his language became eloquent but unprintable.

“Some dirty thieves has been butcherin’ beef an’ gettin’ away with it,” he stormed. “I’d give five hundred dollars cold cash to lay hands on ’em.”

“If you’d advertise that in the *River Press*,” the same youngster laughed, “maybe they’d come in and give themselves up for the reward.”

Elmer glared at him.

“Don’t get fresh,” he growled. “This here’s serious.”

"So it seems," Charlie Shaw replied carelessly. "But there's no law against joshin'."

"This ain't no josh," Duffy declared, embellishing his statement with an earnest oath. "And I suppose all a man can expect when he finds that a bunch of thieves is loose on the range is for featherheads like you to make a joke of it. If it was your cattle that'd been killed, you'd sing a different tune."

Charlie Shaw's laughing mouth shut in a tight line.

"I would, Elmer," he said quietly. "I'd keep my mouth shut and go after 'em. I wouldn't waste my breath cussin'."

"*You* wouldn't waste your breath cussin'!" Elmer exploded. "No! All you c'n waste is the outfit's time an' your money at poker. If I had to depend on boneheads like you to protect the outfit's interests, the Seventy-seven would go to hell in two seasons. Josh—that's all you know how to do."

Charlie took a step toward him. He was tall and slim, older in years and experience than his boyish face told, and his merry blue eyes suddenly ceased to be merry.

"Don't get too personal in your remarks, Elmer," he warned. "I might get serious myself."

"Personal! Personal!" Duffy bellowed. "Say, lemme tell you somethin'."

As an offset to his unfortunate disposition, Elmer Duffy had a reasonable amount of common sense; otherwise, he could not have guided the destiny of the Seventy-seven. He realized that he *had* got too personal. And he couldn't back down without losing face. He had no high opinion of Charlie Shaw's intelligence. No serious-minded man ever has a high opinion of light-minded youth, and Charlie had been the play boy of the Seventy-seven all that summer—a competent enough range rider, with no proper sense of responsibility, according to Elmer. But Shaw had nerve. His record and his actions made even Elmer Duffy concede that. And Elmer didn't hunger for war over a mere matter of levity.

"You go onto the wagon," he said stiffly, refusing to pursue the contention farther. "Catch your horses, pack your bed, and we'll part company. Here's your time."

He disregarded Charlie's palpably belligerent attitude, sat himself on the grass, drew a check book and indelible pencil from his pocket, and proceeded to write out a check.

"You drew most all you had comin' last trip," he said, as he handed over the green slip. "There's the balance."

"So you think I'm a bonehead, do you?" Charlie inquired gravely. "I wonder if I couldn't sort of change your mind about that."

"I don't want to have no fuss with you, Shaw," Elmer said curtly. "I can't have a man in the outfit I don't hitch with. You're young an' careless an' hot-headed an'—"

"An' you're middle-aged an' staggerin' under a tremendous weight of responsibility an' cranky as a bull with the seven-year itch," Shaw retorted. "I don't give a damn about you firin' me, Elmer. But nobody can talk to me—"

A couple of men horned in between them. Everybody in the crew liked Charlie Shaw. They respected Duffy, even if they didn't love him. No one wanted to see a fuss over nothing. And they could see the making of a powder fog in that unexpected clash born of irritation and a loose tongue. They twisted Charlie Shaw about and spoke soothingly to him. While they strove with his outraged dignity, Elmer Duffy, exercising uncommonly good judgment, mounted his horse and issued orders.

Thereafter Charlie could only let it go as it stood, or make himself ridiculous by insisting on a ruction with a man who patently desired to avoid one. Duffy could indicate his distaste without having his nerve questioned.

But when the dozen riders were bobbing away in a row, Charlie sat on his horse, disconsolate, indignant and still resentful.

"Darn his hide," he reflected. "I was just about to tangle with him, I guess. By gosh, I'll make him sing a different tune yet. Bonehead? Huh! Thinks I don't know enough to come in out of the rain. Just because I pushed him over some beefed steers. Gosh darn him, I *will* show him."

Just how, Charlie hadn't the remotest idea. The present occasion did not look particularly auspicious. The drama of an old range song flitted unpleasantly through Charlie's mind:

Heaps of fun in the summertime,
Pockets full of gold.
But when you're broke in the wintertime,
Oh, mister, ain't it cold!

A raw October wind whistled mournfully across Lonesome Prairie. Charlie thought regretfully of the celebrated poker game in which he had recently dropped practically a summer's wages. Round-up was nearly over. The big outfits seldom took on men in the fall. Oh—well. But he would certainly show Elmer Duffy he could do something besides taking life as a perpetual joke.

Even a natural clown has his serious moments.

Darkness on the plains is like darkness on the sea. If the stars are hidden there is no guiding mark—nothing but an immensity of shrouded silence in which a rider is like a ship without a compass. Yet men cast away at sea in open boats win to a landfall by day or night. Men cross the plains when night spreads her ebony wings and do not miss their destination. Each has his own resources of location and direction; the mariner by dead reckoning, based on observation of wind and heaving swells at sundown, the plainsman by his knowledge of the roll of the ground and the directional trend of gently undulating slopes. The rider feels these under the feet of his horse, as the seaman feels the lift and fall of his vessel.

So Charlie, crossing alone a forty-mile stretch of Lonesome Prairie, was as sure of his course as if bright day had shown him the Sweet Grass in the north, the blue summit of the Bear Paws on the eastern sky line, and the dark broken line to the south, where Marias Valley cut the plains. He rode at a jog trot, bearing south, always south, toward a ranch he knew, although the cloud rack in the sky darkened the plains, so that the outstretched fingers of a hand were scarcely visible.

He had fifteen miles yet to go, if he had not miscalculated. Nowhere in the stretch he had covered was there any great difference in elevation. It was all flat, with scarcely perceptible hollows bearing away to the east, toward Lonesome Prairie Lake. But he approached now a terrain of less monotony, and he began to peer ahead for a well-known beacon, something akin to that which guided the Israelites on an historical occasion, a pillar of fire by night.

Scarcely exact to call it a pillar. It was no more than a flickering gleam—an uncanny momentary glow. It came from an exposed surface seam of lignite coal, mysteriously set on fire long ago and burning still in the bowels of the earth. In the dark, flame and ignited gas would regularly flare about the pit, a ghostly incandescence, flashing intermittently above the smoldering embers of the burning seam.

He marked it, at last, well ahead and a little to the right. He let the reins dangle loosely. The black horse he bestrode had been bred and broken in the Marias Valley. He would bear straight south, now, at a steady, smooth trot.

"I expect," he muttered to the beast's dim ears, "you know we're headed for the TL, like the feller who went home when there was no place else to go, eh, Crepe? You wouldn't, bein' a one-ideaed animal, think of headin' back for the Seventy-seven round-up. Well, go to it, old boy."

Out of the dark a strange whispering sound arose. At first, Charlie took it to be the wind springing up again. Yet his ears no more than caught the sound, than he knew it was no wind rustling across the prairie. He pulled up. It sounded plainer, then—not so far ahead of him; it was unaccountable, mysterious, beyond identification. The curious fancy came to Charlie that it was like a giant snake crawling on its belly over the stiff dry grass. And that bit of imagery made him smile. Pythons in the jungle night! And the largest reptile in Montana was a four-foot rattlesnake.

But that whispering sound stirred his curiosity to a great pitch. He had not the remotest idea what caused it, and he was familiar with every legitimate noise a man might expect to hear anywhere on the plains after nightfall—the rush of wind, the sound of running water, the thunder of hoofs, insect voices, the tumult of a herd, or the tiniest stirring.

And, as he sat his horse, wondering what it could possibly be, the sound died away to nothing.

He shook up his horse. The pack animal came up on a slack rope. A hundred yards straight ahead Crepe shied and snorted violently.

"Now, what the dickens!" Charlie exclaimed testily. "You darned fool! What's eatin' you?"

He was tired. These coltish antics from a staid old cow horse annoyed him. He spoke this annoyance aloud. He jabbed Crepe chastisingly with his spurs. Leather creaked. The bit chains and spur rowels clanked. The black horse's hoofs thudded sharply on the hard ground, as he plunged under the prick of the rowels. Charlie swore.

In that still air a man's voice carried a long way. There was nothing he could see to scare the horse. But the last of his harsh, reproving words was still in his mouth when something occurred to justify, in a measure, Crepe's strange behavior, although it explained nothing.

A rose-and-orange flower bloomed suddenly in the blackness on his left. A sharp *pow!* as a gun spoke in the abrupt, staccato manner of guns when they speak. Something whined, *wh-e-e-e!* away off. For a second Charlie hesitated, reins taut, wondering. A signal—somebody lost? Or—

His perceptions were exceedingly rapid and logical. The sluggish-minded did not usually function long in the range country. Nor was he a nervous or timorous man. He did not jump to the conclusion that he had been shot at, because he knew of no reason why any one should shoot at him. Nor was he apt to be nervous under fire, having had that unpleasant experience once or twice. At the same time he wanted to know just what *was* afoot. He felt reasonably safe in the shrouding cover of the dark, if he were intruding on anything or any one.

So he lifted up his voice in a lusty bellow.

"Hey, there! What you shootin' at?"

He got his answer at once. The gaudy flower of the Winchester gardens bloomed its momentary brilliance in the night—once, twice, a third time.

Charlie did not pause to investigate. He gave Crepe his head and departed thence. Two more shots followed upon the hurried beat of the hoofs. The whine of bullets overhead told Charlie that whoever fired back, there in the darkness, was firing at him, sight unseen.

"Visitors ain't popular here," he muttered. "Far be it from me to disturb anybody's privacy. *I* don't need no second hint, you darned fool. Save your powder."

Half a mile at headlong gallop, and he pulled up to listen. No sound of pursuit. No breath of air stirred. Nothing. He might have been a solitary soul in a darkened void. That silence could be felt. He rode on at the same jog trot.

"Now, what was all that about, back there, I wonder?" he said to himself.

He was still wondering when he dropped down the north bank of the Marias, forded a clear shallow river that sang a welcome song in a night that held a touch of frost,

and into which Crepe and the pack pony dipped their muzzles thirstily. And this puzzled wonder still persisted in Charlie's mind half an hour later, when he snuggled down in his unfolded bed beside the TL stable wall, inside which his horses contentedly munched hay. His last conscious thought was of that strange, whispering sound in the night, and the reason for those shots. And it was the first thing in his mind when he opened his eyes to bright sunshine pouring into the valley, and "Rock" Holloway inquiring jovially why in blazes he didn't use the bunk house instead of the open air for sleeping purposes.

"I just got in during the night, myself," Rock told him. "Been riding with the Maltese Cross. Come on and have some breakfast."

Nona Holloway smiled at Charlie. Neither she nor her husband asked questions. Charlie Shaw had ridden for her long before Rock came into the Marias country, when she was a slim, sad wisp of a girl, with a baby sister and a bunch of cattle on her hands and a strange quality of exciting the admiration and respect of every man she came in contact with. Rock had fallen in love with her and married her, and the TL had waxed prosperous under their joint control. And Charlie Shaw had drifted out of their employment for reasons that he could never think about, much less discuss. He didn't know why he drifted in there now, except that these two were his friends, and he knew he was welcome, and it was on his way, because, when he parted with the Seventy-seven, he had decided to head for Fort Benton in search of a job. He would not ask Rock for a job. A foolish pride forbade, although he had never been able to rid himself of a feeling that the TL was home.

So he ate breakfast and merely remarked that he was through with the Seventy-seven and on his way. And after breakfast, as he and Rock stood on the porch, Charlie looked out over the valley with a touch of regret. Four years is a long time, and just that period had elapsed since Rock Holloway came jogging across Lonesome Prairie, to look his first on the silver band of the Marias, to find himself faced at this very ranch with a tragic emergency. And now, Charlie reflected, Rock had a wife and a son and three thousand cattle and a ranch that was a tiny kingdom in itself. They had fought side by side against high-handed thieves. Charlie had drifted, and Rock had taken root. Peace and prosperity and happiness had come to him and the girl to whom Charlie had been a loyal servant before Rock took a hand in the game. Charlie knew all about it. He had watched the drama enacted. Some men were lucky, and some were wise. He himself was neither, he supposed.

He looked out on irrigated meadows which gave their harvest into ranked stacks of hay. The river bank was cluttered with painted buildings. Lines of fence, inclosing choice pastures, spread up and down the valley as far as he could see. He stole a look at Rock—a look that was wistful and wholly without envy. And Charlie was not thinking so much of land and cattle as the most desirable of Rock's possessions. Consequently he was surprised to keen attention by the words that presently Rock uttered.

“I guess things have been coming too easy for us, too long,” Rock said. “We had a wild time here once, Charlie, and it looked like a tough game. Then we got organized, and it has been smooth as silk. I suppose there is always somebody who hasn’t got anything, cooking up a scheme for getting something for nothing.”

“What’s wrong?” Charlie asked him bluntly.

“We’re shy about a hundred head of beef this fall,” Rock told him.

Charlie didn’t need the significance of that explained to him. He was a range rider, born to the business. He recalled those sun-dried hides in the grass. The Seventy-seven was losing cattle—beef cattle, too.

“Gosh!” he murmured. “I wonder if we got another ‘Buck’ Walters among us again.”

“I don’t know.” Rock frowned. “That is to be found out. I know we are out that many because the bulk of the beef is shipped. There will be only a few picked up on the outskirts of the range before the Maltese Cross round-up quits for the season. I have been with them all fall, so I know nothing was overlooked. That’s about forty-five hundred dollars in cold cash, Charlie—more than a small outfit like us can afford to lose.”

“Got any idea?” Charlie asked.

“None worth shouting,” Rock admitted. “It’s so long since we had anything like this to deal with that it seems impossible such a thing could happen. Yet these cattle are gone. I have no reason to suspect anybody. But I am going to scout with my eyes and ears open, you can bet your life on that.”

“There is always some feller ready to bust the Eighth Commandment wide open if he sees a chance,” Charlie observed. “Has it struck you that all this railroad-construction work offers a chance for somebody to butcher beef on the range and sell it to them camps?”

“Sure,” Rock declared. “But nobody has showed signs of that, that I know of.”

“I’m not so sure. The Seventy-seven has lost beef, too.”

He went on to tell Rock of finding those dried and wrinkled hides and Elmer Duffy’s explosion, which had led to Charlie’s parting with the outfit.

“I’m full-handed, or I’d put you to work,” Rock said. “You were a darned fool to quit us, anyhow. I don’t like to fire a man to make room for you, Charlie, but you stick around for a while, and I’ll see.”

“Oh, shucks, it’s easy enough to get a job,” Charlie replied, turning Rock’s remark aside.

“And that hide thing is interesting,” Rock said thoughtfully. “Perhaps those construction camps would bear watching.”

Charlie didn’t tell him about that odd whispering sound in the night, nor the shots that were fired at him. There was no apparent connection between what he heard and cattle stealing—none that Charlie could see. And it seemed an entirely incredible

affair, anyway, viewed from the sun-warmed porch of the ranch house. Nevertheless an idea as fantastic as that experience in the black dark popped into Charlie Shaw's head—an idea that he felt powerfully urged to act upon. But he kept it to himself. If it proved imaginary, he would not have made himself ridiculous by talking. And Elmer Duffy's scornful, angry epithets of "bonehead" and et cetera, had got deeper under Charlie's skin than he cared to admit. He wanted to make Elmer swallow both his words and his opinions. And Charlie Shaw hated a cow thief. He had reasons, both personal and general. He carried scars on his body from the hands of such gentry. So did Rock. They were a unit in that. And they were equally close mouthed in important matters. They stood now silent, looking out across the river.

"The Cross missed any stock?" Charlie asked at last.

"No; nor the Narrow Gauge nor the Circle," Rock replied. "But the trouble is they have so many cattle they would not miss any unless the loss was heavy; whereas we know within a few head how many calves we should brand and how many beef we should ship. We are shy almost one fourth of our beef cattle, and that is too big a whack at us. I don't know what to think."

"It's aggravatin', all right," Charlie said. "By gosh, y'know, I think it would be a good thing to make a round of them gradin' camps on Lonesome Prairie. Let's do it, Rock, you an' me."

"I got to go to Helena," Rock said. "Be gone a week. If you don't get restless and move on, we'll go scouting when I come back."

"I'm restless right now," Charlie said. "If you'll have your cook put up about three days' grub for me, I'm goin' to turn back north on a expedition of my own. Maybe I'll know something when I get back, maybe not. I'll tell you, anyhow."

"All right," Rock said. He asked no questions. A man's business, unless he was on the pay roll of an outfit, was entirely his own. Rock knew that Charlie didn't turn in his tricks without a reason. But he knew better than to inquire that reason if Shaw didn't volunteer it. He watched Charlie ride, leading his pack horse, up the north bank of the Marias, some time later, with a certain amount of unsatisfied curiosity and a feeling that he should perhaps be riding alongside that fair-haired youth. And if Rock had known what worked in Charlie Shaw's mind, he would have mounted and followed him.

As it was, Charlie rode north alone. There had been a time when he never left that ranch in the valley without a rifle under his stirrup leather. When Buck Walters' shadow lay like a menace across that range a man needed to be armed. But for a long time the Winchester carbine had reposed in Charlie's bed, except when he occasionally hunted antelope or wolves. Now it was in its worn scabbard beneath his leg. And Charlie felt a little keyed up, a little expectant. If he were lucky he might have the laugh on Elmer Duffy at last. For things had assumed a different aspect since he learned that the TL was losing beef wholesale. On that was based the idea that had

popped suddenly into Charlie's mind—an idea too far-fetched to divulge to Rock Holloway. Some one had begun to steal cattle again, where none had dared, after the private war that wiped out Buck Walters and his crowd. Here and there in the range country there was always some one who coveted his neighbor's ox, just as in more highly organized communities light-fingered folk always seek to filch goods that other men have accumulated by legitimate enterprise and honest industry.

If a man could not enjoy the fruits of his labor, he would know the reason why. Charlie considered the situation. There had been no known rustling on the Marias for four years, and perhaps it looked like good picking. With that to spur him, Charlie was inordinately curious to know who was so nervous as to smoke up an unseen solitary traveler crossing Lonesome Prairie at night—and why? The way to read a book is to open it and turn the pages. The way to learn what Charlie wanted to know was to look over the ground. There was, besides, a farther field to explore in the light of Rock's lost cattle.

He had the wispy intermittent blue of smoke from the burning coal seam to mark the place where those shots had been fired. By half past one he drew up on the low rise above the swale in which he had heard that peculiar sound.

Nothing in sight. Autumn-bleached grass, miles of it; cattle grazing here and there. Distant saw-toothed mountain summits breaking the sky line. Away off to the north, below the horizon, Charlie knew that gangs of men with plows and scrapers and teams swarmed like an extended column of warrior ants, constructing the grade of a transcontinental railway. Charlie had in his own mind established a possible relation between the vanished cattle and this activity. It had come to him, far-fetched but possible, as he talked to Rock. But first, he wanted to look about here for some sign which might confirm his suspicions.

A casual inspection of the spot revealed nothing. The earth was baked hard. The short grass, dry and stiff, sprung back to erectness when released from underfoot. He was, however, quite sure of his location, having almost an uncanny sense about such things.

He swung in a circle. Dipping into the hollow at a slow walk, he pulled up. In that swale strange marks showed. The grass was pressed flat in swaths less than three feet wide, as if heavy objects had been dragged or rolled across the surface. He got down, bent to examine these peculiarities, and then walked on, leading his two horses, while he conned the ground. So moving, he came to a patch of prickly pear. Stooping, he examined the crushed spiny leaves. A squinting look brought wrinkles between his eyes.

"Huh!" he grunted.

Then he mounted and followed the marks at a trot. As the crow flies, the flattened swaths ran straight for the burning lignite, where the blue vapors drifted, and it was no great distance to the place.

He halted a few yards short of a crevice with ragged edges. Twenty feet on either side the grass had perished long ago. Charlie dismounted and approached with caution. To have the ground break at the lip under his feet meant that he would perish, like a fly cast in a camp fire. The opening, narrow and fairly deep, gave off fumes and smoke, like the breath of some uneasy subterranean monster. Now and then an upward whiff of gas ignited and burned with a wavering flame. Anything dropped in that crevice was utterly beyond rescue.

The marks that Charlie followed ran up to the brink, which proved solid earth when he stamped cautiously. Hoofprints and boot marks appeared, with disturbed places in the powder-dry soil. A few broken places showed where comparatively weighty objects had been pushed over the edge. And that was all he could see.

Charlie stood a few minutes staring thoughtfully. He frowned into the pit. Few signs, but highly significant ones to him. Queer. Then he mounted his horse and back-tracked. He partly guessed what had made that whispering sound in the night. Now he desired to disprove or verify that guess.

That was what he had in mind when he loped back to where he took up this trail. By the bend of the grass blades he knew they had been dragged up that swale. Where there was an end, there must be a beginning. Charlie made a bet with himself that these marks would begin somewhere near the spot from which those shots had been fired at him.

He won his bet. The narrow swaths lay along the draw. The depression narrowed, then deepened. Charlie remembered then that a soak spring seeped out of a bank down there, affording water to a hundred head or so of stock. He recalled something else. Three years earlier a horse outfit had located on that spring and built a small corral there, part sod, part poles. Then they had abandoned the place for a better one, forty miles east.

He came around a low shoulder of hill. The old corral still stood. It was still in fair shape, and it had been in use. That was plain enough. The marks he had followed began at the gate. The loose dust on the floor was trampled. And from just outside the gate the tracks of a wagon led away northward.

“Huh!” He grunted his favorite monosyllable.

He walked about the place, noted every mark in the dust, and poked with his toe, here and there, at certain slightly discolored patches in the corral.

“This,” he muttered to himself, “is a highly interestin’ state of affairs, I wish to remark.”

He sat on his horse for a minute after he mounted again. He looked off toward the Marias, in two minds at the moment. Then he reflected that Rock Holloway was on his way to Helena. And for various reasons Charlie concluded to play a lone hand. So he made a complete circle of the place, carefully scanning the ground; when he came back to the wagon track, he followed that, riding at a steady trot.

If he expected that to lead him to any new place, person or conclusion, he was disappointed. In the few years since Charlie first crossed the Marias River, with all the territory north of it an unpeopled waste, the first waves of the ultimate flood of settlers had begun to seep into the country. Up in the Sweet Grass, where he and Rock Holloway had fought a battle with organized thieves, there were now many ranches, small and large. A wagon trail ran between the Sweet Grass and Fort Benton—a trail which crossed the Marias halfway between the TL and the Seventy-seven. The single wagon track Charlie followed angled off until it merged with the Sweet Grass Trail. It was lost in these twin ruts. Wagons came and went daily on that road. One wheel track is as another. For purposes of identification, the trail was lost.

But Charlie kept riding. Far off the construction camps began to show—dim smudges on the horizon. As he drew nearer, he could see the dark streak of the grade and the moving teams. And when the Sweet Grass Trail crossed the right of way, Charlie turned aside and jogged toward a cluster of buildings, like a small village sitting by a stream, where the buffalo lodges of the Blackfeet had been pitched in years gone by.

Half a mile from this camp he came on a small herd of cattle grazing under the eye of a solitary rider. Perhaps a hundred head of cows, aged, scraggy, culls in fair flesh. He marked three or four different brands from the Judith Basin.

"Camp beef?" he asked the herder.

"Yeah," the fellow drawled. He was a pimply-faced youngster with a visible swagger. "Beef for the bohunks."

"Butchered as needed, I suppose?" Charlie commented.

"Sure. This is a headquarters commissary. Big layout. Feeding two or three camps from here."

Charlie passed on. On a bit of good grass along the creek bottom he staked his horses and cooked his supper. Grading camps offered none of the hospitality the range afforded. No casual wayfarer got anything there unless he paid his way. They were there to build a grade for the Great Northern, for the profit of the contractors, and it was a grubby, driving business.

Charlie ate his supper by the fire, watched the men and teams string in at six o'clock. It was a big camp. He estimated four hundred men. Four hundred men ate a lot of beef. And two other camps drew supplies from there. He looked at the camp and at the grazing herd, and then he did a lot of thinking. He still lay thinking, looking up at the stars, long after he turned in. With the tarpaulin drawn up to his chin, he stared at the Big Dipper, the North Star, and at many a constellation glittering in its appointed place. But his mind was not on the stars in their courses—upon the cosmic wonder of an October night. No. More practical matters engaged his busy brain. And not until the sharp nip of the autumn frost made him draw his head under the canvas did he fall asleep.

In the morning, with his own matutinal coffee bestowed where it would do the most good, and the grading crews stringing out to work in a cold dawn, Charlie walked into the camp and sought the head cook.

"Who does the beef buying for this outfit?" he asked.

The man pointed to a small tent-roofed wooden shack. "Chief's office," he said and turned to his work.

Charlie rapped on the door. Some one said: "Come in!" Charlie entered. A rotund man sat at a rudely constructed desk littered with account sheets. He half turned on the box that served for a chair.

"What can I do for you?" he inquired briskly.

"Buy some beef off me," Charlie answered. "Patronize home industry an' help the country flourish."

The man bit the end of a pencil reflectively.

"Well, I don't know about that," he said.

"I'm telling you so you will know," Charlie returned impudently. "Beef is my business, I raise it, buy it, and sell it, on the hoof or dressed—any old way that seems profitable. You must need a heap to feed this gang."

"Sure. But I don't buy beef as casual as you'd buy a pair of socks," the other declared. "I've got a considerable supply on hand and contracted for."

"I can deliver you prime dressed beef right here in your camp for four cents a pound," Charlie offered crisply.

"I can get it for less'n that." The commissariat manager shook his head. "Don't use prime beef, nohow."

"Still, if you could get first-class beef at third-class prices, you'd make money by buying it," Charlie pointed out. "It goes farther. How about three and a half cents?"

"Don't interest me much."

"Say, now," Charlie drawled, "I got quite a bunch of stuff I can turn over at a pretty low figure. And I know where I can get more. Say three cents a pound."

"Well, that's fair enough," the chubby one admitted. "But I think maybe I could do a mite better still, if I had to. And I've got some stock ahead. No; I guess we can't do business, stranger. Thanks, just the same."

"You're the doctor," Charlie said and stepped out.

As he walked back to his horses, he emitted sundry unbelieving grunts. Three cents a pound was ridiculous; and yet the fat one thought he could get it for still less. There was a screw loose somewhere. Three-year-old beef steers were netting forty dollars in Chicago; cows about thirty. A fair three-year-old would dress six or seven hundred pounds; a cow four or five hundred. At three cents they would bring about eighteen and fifteen dollars respectively. Charlie had named those prices to the contractor as a bait, and if he hadn't caught a fish, he had at least got a nibble that quickened his pulse. No rancher would sell beef for half what it would bring in the open market. If

that railroad camp got beef at anywhere near that price, it was stolen beef. And any man buying supplies on a large scale would be familiar enough with current prices to know that it was stolen. Still, a suspicion was not convicting evidence.

On his way in and out of that camp, Charlie had used a pair of naturally keen eyes. He marked the meat house by its screened windows. He would have liked a look inside, but that was hardly feasible. He considered, however, how he might get such a look and decided upon the only method open to him. There was a risk, to be sure. But a period of uneventful placidity had not wholly atrophied in Charlie Shaw a capacity for discounting risks. There had been plenty during his first years in Montana. He decided to take a chance.

He saddled, packed, mounted and ambled slowly south again. The camp beef herd grazed abroad. Again Charlie met the pimply-faced youth resplendent in Angora-faced chaps, with a long-barreled six-shooter dangling at his hip. He sat sidewise in his saddle, as proud as if he had been riding point on a trail herd from the Panhandle.

"With all that crew to feed," Charlie remarked over a cigarette, "the butcher gang ought to cut your herd down pretty fast."

"Oh, so-so," the herder said. "About a couple a day."

Charlie jogged on. A couple a day. If that camp didn't consume at least fifteen hundred pounds of beef per diem, he was a poor judge of appetites. Beef was the cheapest food in the country. Men who worked ten hours a day behind plow and scraper could eat like the vikings of old. Two scraggy cows a day? Hardly.

Two miles south in a convenient hollow he picketed his horses. The rest of that day he lay low, keeping a more or less casual watch from a grassy rise. Nothing like a wagon arrived or departed. When dusk fell again, he packed his outfit and rode back to the construction camp.

He didn't wait until everybody went to bed. He desired a little private inspection. His chance of going unmolested was better while men still moved about the camp. If he were challenged, he would act as judgment dictated.

He gained a corner of the cook house unseen. From there it was only a step or two to the meat house. Chance favored him. A light burned in the place. Charlie stole up and peered through a screened window. The same brusque cook he had spoken to that morning was slicing steak on a block. Back of him, in rows, hung quarters of beef. At least six head of dressed beef hung from the pointed hooks in the beams above. Charlie knew beef on the hoof, in the round, in the pen. They were prime steer quarters, as good beef as ever went into Chicago. Nothing in that meat house had come out of that herd of scraggy cows. That was certain.

He stole back to his horses. Clear of the camp, he paused to look back, frowning at the scores of lights—yellow dots against the darkened plain.

If he had read the sign right, first at the burning coal seam and now here, some enterprising persons were collecting a lot of easy money. Charlie knew how Rock

Holloway felt about such things. No man likes to have his pocket picked. It is poor satisfaction merely to know how the picking is done. Charlie suspected that Rock felt very much as old Elmer Duffy had felt when he blew up over the hides in the grass, only he sympathized with Rock, and he still held that old Elmer had no business to insult him. Yes, Rock would feel like the Saturday shopper whose purse has been snatched—he would be furiously eager to get his hands on the snatcher. And the burden of Charlie's thought was how this could be done.

Lightning seldom strikes twice in the same place, but thieves frequently do, especially range thieves. It was this conviction that sent Charlie loping away southward in the dark.

Twenty-five miles is no great matter to fresh horses. Charlie swung in on the Benton-Sweet Grass Trail, held it till he was abreast of the burning coal seam, then turned straight east. By midnight the ghostly flicker wavering above that incandescent crevice was a beacon before him.

He skirted it, moving slowly, with a watchful eye, and dropped into the draw. When he judged that he was within a few hundred yards of the old corral, he dismounted, hobbled both horses, and left them. They wouldn't stir after that ride. He could easily find them again. Then he took his carbine in hand and stole toward his destination, as cautiously as if he were stalking a wolf. He had, indeed, the certainty that he stalked not a lone wolf but a pack, and he was well aware that wolves have teeth. The wolves he sought might be hunting, and they might not.

The old corral loomed before him. Keeping close under the southern bank, he was one with the night. A shadow lay where he moved. One stealthy step at a time. He reflected that a hunch is a strange thing. When it worked properly it gave curious results.

A lantern glowed dimly on the floor of the corral. Within the radius of its gleam two men were skinning the carcass of a dead beast. Other bulky carcasses lay in the dust; some were reddish white, where the hide had been flenched out on either side; some were still waiting the knife, where the ax or other killing instrument had felled them, not long before.

Charlie stole nearer, one thumb hooked over the hammer of his carbine. He could see the dim outline of a wagon backed up by the gate and the faint forms of saddled horses. There should be more than two men. Yet the fewer sharing in that nefarious business, the greater the profit. Too many cooks usually spoiled that kind of broth.

In two more steps he could thrust his carbine through the pole and cover them. With their hands in the air, the rest was simple. A really exultant thrill stirred Charlie Shaw. He remembered Elmer Duffy's angry epithets. To-morrow he would make Elmer sing a different tune.

And the next moment he was borne to earth. A sharp rap on the head put a full stop to his pleasant anticipations.

When Charlie revived to consciousness he found himself in a situation unique and dangerous. He lay flat on his back. His head was free. He could twist it about. The pole height of the corral towered over him. Within the inclosure, not two men, but three slashed hurriedly with skinning knives, and they were working at the last carcass.

But, apart from looking on, he was quite helpless. His arms were straight down by his sides. His legs were straight. He was not tied, being more effectually trussed than with a rope. He was wrapped tight in an excellent substitute for a strait-jacket, inasmuch as they had folded him in a raw beef hide, wet and strong with animal smell, and they had laced it tight, from his ankles to his neck, with thongs of the same material. A mummy swathed in its ancient bandages was no more thoroughly bound than he.

Charlie watched them deftly quarter the carcasses. The head, feet and offul of each steer were piled in the middle of the hide, and the edges drawn together. Once one man looked through the pole fence at him and grinned. He couldn't make out their faces in that dim light, but he could see what they did. The quarters of beef were stacked in the deep wagon box. One mounted his horse and dragged the bundles of hide outside. They scratched the dust of the corral back and forth to obliterate bloodstains and telltale signs. Eventually he could hear the jingling of harness, and a four-horse team was hitched to the wagon.

Charlie regretted a little that he had been so sanguine; still— His eyes marked every move. One man mounted the high seat. The wheels rolled away in the dark.

And when the cluck and clack grew fainter, the other two led saddle horses out of the gloom.

"Take him first trip?" one said.

"Better," the other replied. "I'll snake him. You bring one of the hides. We'll have to get a wiggle on, too, or it'll be daylight."

The noose of a rope was slipped over Charlie's feet. He was yanked along over the grass. Once a clump of prickly pear raked his cheek. Otherwise he suffered no bruise. The ground was smooth. The thick hide protected his body. Behind him the second horse plodded, dragging his burden by the saddle horn. Again Charlie heard that mysterious, slithering, whispering sound, like a huge snake scraping over dry grass. Only, now, he himself was helping to make this noise in the night.

His two horses loomed in the draw. The cavalcade stopped.

"Here's his outfit," said one. "What'll we do with 'em?"

"Turn 'em loose when we're through," the other replied. "They'll amble off to their own range, an' whoever finds 'em will have to guess. Simplest."

They moved on. The draw flattened out to the level of the plains, and the flicker of the burning lignite showed ahead. They drew up twenty yards back from the crevice.

A wind blew faintly out of the west. Charlie could smell the gas wafted from that underground furnace. A very neat incinerator. It would not be the first time that thieves, surprised red-handed, had acted on the principle that dead men tell no tales.

Yet in his shroud of green rawhide, Charlie made no protest and lifted no plea for mercy when the riders dismounted and stood over him. A wavering tongue of fire lifted above the crevice, casting a fitful glow on horses and men. They dragged the bundle of hide and offal to the rim and dumped it in. A strong odor of scorching hair and hide wafted up. They came back to Charlie.

"Take his head," one muttered. "I'll get him by the feet."

They stooped.

When the head of one bent over, and his fingers touched the hide, something went *pow!* in his face. He fell backward, as if clouted with a hammer. Simultaneously Charlie's arm thrust straight at the man reaching for his feet, and that outstretched hand held a six-shooter.

"Hands up!" he commanded, and the man obeyed.

Charlie sat up. The rawhide fell away from him, parted at the lacings. He wiggled his legs out of the narrow pocket.

"Keep 'em up, too," he said cheerfully, "unless you'd rather join your partner."

Charlie stretched his legs casually. He glanced at the body behind him. Not much need to look. The muzzle of the gun had been fairly in the man's face when he fired. He stepped behind the other man, disarmed him, and then ordered him to walk over beside his horse and mount. With the fellow's own reata he tied both wrists securely behind his back.

"Next time you sew a man in a cowhide and figure to dump him in a burning coal seam to roast alive," Charlie said, "you'd better search him to make sure he hasn't got a gun in a Texas holster under his armpit. And try to remember that green hide stretches quite a lot if a man has any strength in his arms, and he has an hour or so to work it loose."

He mounted the other horse and hazed his prisoner down the draw until he picked up his own outfit. Then he headed straight for the Marias, riding fast. Riders on fresh horses could beat that wagonload of stolen beef to the railroad camp. The Seventy-seven round-up would just about be camped at the ranch. It was a little closer to the Seventy-seven than to Rock Holloway's, and Charlie felt that it would really be a lot of responsibility off his shoulders if he delivered his prisoner and his information straight to the hands of Elmer Duffy.

Charlie lifted his head from a bunk in one corner of the Seventy-seven ranch house. A wagon was clattering into the yard. Elmer Duffy and half a dozen riders flanked it like a bodyguard.

The box was piled high with beef. A tarpaulin was stretched over the quarters. On top of the tarp lay several fresh hides. Beside the man driving the wagon sat a sullen-looking captive.

Charlie went out to meet them without undue haste. He looked the layout over from the porch and stooped to buckle on his spurs. Elmer Duffy swung down from his sweaty horse.

"Well, kid," he said genially, "we got 'em with the goods. That contractor slid out, but the stock inspectors are after him. Come back by the furnace an' the old corral an' pick up the hides an' the feller you bumped off. Some of them cattle was Seventy-sevens, but mostly TL stuff. These fellers had a lot of the money on 'em they got for this beef. You sure done a nice stroke of business last night."

"Yeah," Charlie agreed, "for a bonehead josher—yes."

He walked on to the stable. His two horses stood in stalls. He had them out, saddled, and his pack part hitched, when Elmer Duffy came striding from the house. He had a green slip in his hand which he held out to Charlie. It was a check for five hundred dollars.

"Say, you ain't pullin' your freight, are you, Charlie?" Elmer inquired.

"Oh, no," Charlie replied ironically, his eyes on the check. "I'm fixin' to make myself at home with the Seventy-seven for all time, naturally. What's this?"

"I made a crack before the whole outfit, didn't I," Elmer stated, "that I'd give five hundred dollars to lay my hands on whoever was killin' beef? Well, I'm makin' good on it. You got it comin'."

Charlie stared at him and the check, but he said nothing.

"Look here," Elmer said hurriedly. "You got a steady job with the Seventy-seven as long as you want. You'll have to be on hand to give your evidence, anyhow, at the trial. An' I guess maybe you're a smarter kid than I reckoned. Maybe I was kinda hasty the other day. I can use fellers like you in this outfit."

"I don't want neither your money nor your job nor your gratitude, Elmer," Charlie said politely.

"You better think that over, Charlie," Elmer said, not quite so politely. "There's a long, hard winter comin', remember."

Charlie tucked in the last hitch on the pack, stuck his foot in the stirrup, and swung up to his saddle on Crepe. The black horse shook his head, jingling the bit, and pawed the hard earth impatiently. Charlie looked down with an expansive grin.

"Listen, Elmer," said he. "I wouldn't work for you ever again, nohow. I told you, when you were fonchin' around the other mornin', that I'd show you. I've done it. I rounded up your thieves, while you were runnin' around in circles, cussin' the luck. If you feel that you're under any obligation to me, forget it. I did that little job for nothin', just to show you I could.

“And,” he concluded, “as far as that hard winter thing is concerned, I was born in El Paso. I come up the trail when it was a tough proposition. I’m twenty-six years old, an’, by Judas priest, I ain’t never died a winter yet!”