

The Weight of Reputation

by Harrison R Howard



FEW are they, leading active lives, who have not learned the great truth that difficulties and dangers appear far more forbidding in the advancing future than in the immediate present. Paradoxically, distance exerts a magnifying influence. Men look ahead to untoward events with fear or misgiving, only to find when the events take place that they can be met gracefully and with equanimity. Fore-fear is the very madness of fear; the leaven of imagination raises it out of all just proportion.

Ranger Elmer Randolph of the old Forest Service had not learned this truth—simply because he had never permitted danger to get out of the distance and close to him. He had viewed it at a distance times without number, but there his relation with it ceased; and he had never had opportunity of comparing its appearance afar with its appearance at close hand—the only method by which one may discover the great truth.

From which it must not be assumed that Ranger Randolph was a coward. Indeed, he did not possess so much as the fundamentals of cowardice. Simply he was cautious. He gracefully sidestepped difficulties; dangers he rode around; diligently he pursued the lines of least resistance. In the popular phrase, he very carefully observed his footing.

Now in a more modern day, in the quiet functioning of an established and efficient—if not wholly effective—Service, Ranger Randolph would doubtless have achieved modest success and in the fullness of time would have been promoted to District Ranger or perhaps to the soft cushions of a luxurious office in San Francisco or Portland. But in the riotous old days when the Service was still in the very hell of birthpangs and opposition to it was various and lusty, the pioneers who bore its idealistic though tattered banners had to be men

of pertinacity rather than tact, eager to carry out its principles to the last syllable no matter at what personal hazard.

Therefore like all those born before their time, Ranger Elmer Randolph was a square peg in a round hole; and when, at the fag end of a beautiful August day, he tracked his quarry to a homestead in a pine clearing he did not attempt to carry the stronghold by heroic measures, but seated himself in safe thicket at the clearing's edge and calmly waited for darkness.

When the dim, last-quarter moon slipped above the tips of the encircling pines, Randolph unstrapped his hand ax from the saddle of his mount and cut several light hazel boughs which he bound securely together. The foliage of the completed whole was intended to furnish a screen behind which he could not be seen, and which was light enough to be easily pushed forward along the ground from a prone position behind it.

He circled the cabin thrice before deciding upon the most effective and protective sector of attack. He determined finally upon the north wall, from which approach he could command a view of the front doorway which would prove of tactical benefit in the event that the miscreant attempted a dash for the open.

He dragged the screen to a position opposite the north wall of the structure, pushed it cautiously out into the open, and dropped on hands and knees behind it. He crawled slowly forward, pushing the boughs ahead of him.

The northern approach to the dwelling possessed other virtues as well as that of commanding the front entrance. For one thing the ground was broken here and there by detached growths of small shrubs, and his mobile bough-screen should not be so readily detected among them as upon the bare earth of the other points of

approach. He crawled on with extreme caution, keen to the fact that the success of his expedition depended upon intriguing the watcher within the house into considering the screen as one of the stationary growths about him.

Ranger Randolph knew the house well. During the preceding Winter he had been a constant caller at the White homestead, sitting through the stormy evenings before the big fireplace pursuing a courtship of Florence White, the daughter of the house.

He felt a positive sense of satisfaction at the knowledge that the Whites were not at home. The Homestead Law permitted settlers to absent themselves from their holdings for a portion of each year, and the White family had gone to the distant city where Florence was attending a school of stenography.

He was quite content that his pursuit of the present task was unobserved by any of his acquaintances. Disrepute had already attached itself to his name in the district. He was far from approving his method; he knew that the limited traditions of the Service which tolerated his membership demanded more rigorous treatment; he should have taken his chance at storming the stronghold without waiting for the protection of darkness. He was thoroughly glad that Florence White was far away from home.

Halfway to the northern wall of the building the shrubs ended, and with added caution he pushed out beyond. Inch by inch the screen advanced before him. He thought he detected movement in the window and quickly ceased his progress. After a time he gave the screen a tentative push; then with the suddenness of a thunderclap flame spurted from a rifle barrel at the window.

Randolph halted and crouched low. Another flash illuminated the clearing and another ball tore with a whine through the hazel boughs. Fifty yards separated him from the near wall of the house. He realized that by all that was sacred to the Service he should make a dash for it.

Had he acted upon impulse the task would probably have been easily performed; but he hesitated, considering the prospect. His ready imagination conjured up a lurid and forbidding picture of flame and shot; he was appalled by the possibilities of the situation for dire results. He accepted this imagined estimate of the possible danger as accurate—he had never learned the great truth.

His habit of caution asserted itself at once, and he sprang to the nearest clump of shrubs, thence to another and so on until he gained once more the protecting shelter of the pines. He paused a moment for breath and to consider how very grateful he was for Florence White's absence.

He made his way to his waiting horse and led the animal over soft ground so that the quarry might not detect his retreat. When he had gone a safe distance he

swung to the saddle and urged the mount at top speed toward town.

As he swayed through the sharp night air to the stride of the animal he repeated to himself that there were other more effective, methods of accomplishing his end; he could obtain help in town. The quarry would not dare leave the cabin for fear of ambush. With assistance he would be comparatively easy to take; he could not well sustain a defense of the house when attacked from two or more sides. Why risk his neck, the ranger considered, when it could be done with positive ease and safety?

He found his superior, the district ranger, in the little room behind his office, preparing for bed. As he listened to Elmer's report he swore beneath his breath and said not a word, though an expression of disgust, not unmingled with pity for the young ranger, came upon his face. He saddled his horse at once and the two plunged back along the dark trail through the timber.

A light shone in the open space as they approached the White clearing, and when they had reached the edge of the pines they discerned an illuminated lamp through the window of the White's living room. The district ranger dashed his horse across the clearing to the door, Randolph perforce following, tense with the expectation of a fusillade.

The superior sprang from his horse and revolver in hand flung open the heavy door. From his saddle Randolph caught a swift, familiar glimpse of the Whites' living room with the big table in the center surmounted by a green-shaded reading-lamp. About the table sat the White family.

Elmer swung weakly to the ground. The Whites rose and came to the door.

"He made a break for it half an hour ago," the head of the house explained in answer to the district ranger's question. "He'd never have got in, only he took me by surprise. When he left he got away with one of my horses. I thought sure your ranger would nab him."

The flood of light from the reading lamp sweeping through the open doorway revealed the district ranger's flushed countenance.

"The ranger came on into town after me," he replied quietly; then after an awkward silence swung back to his saddle.

Elmer stood by his animal watching the face of Florence White. She was regarding him from sad eyes that bore the same quality of pity as that which he had discerned in the district ranger's expression when he had made his report. Randolph winced. He knew with complete certainty that he could never again hope to make her believe that what almost everyone else in the district was saying of him was untrue.

He swung disconsolately to the saddle. White and the district ranger were conversing in lowered tones. The girl emerged from the doorway and slowly approached.

"I finished my course and graduated, Elmer," she

said by way of greeting.

Randolph nodded.

"I didn't know you'd returned. Can I—may I call out some evening?"

She regarded him a moment in silence; then shook her head.

"I think not, Elmer. I—I'm afraid I've been wrong in my estimate of you. You see, when that man left the house dad wanted to interfere, but I wouldn't let him. I was sure you wanted no help. I—I guess other folks knew you better than I did, but I wouldn't believe them—before. I'm sorry, Elmer!"

The two Service men rode back to town in silence. Randolph went directly to his quarters; the district ranger lingered in the office to write a letter to headquarters requesting Elmer's transfer to another district. He mentioned no reasons for the request; he bore no animosity. The young fellow would probably prove up all right in a quieter, more established district.

Two weeks later Elmer's transfer came; the district ranger read the missive—and quickly reread it. Then he began to laugh. For a quarter of an hour, at short intervals, laughter welled up in his throat. Elmer had been ordered to the wildest, most outlaw district in the department.

The district ranger's sense of humor was inordinately stimulated. After long reflection he wrote a letter to an influential and gossipy acquaintance at Elmer's new post. He laughed and smiled alternately as he penned the screed. He knew that the letter would be shown all about. It should prove a rare joke.

The new ranger, he explained in the letter, was a hard-bitten individual. He advised any lawless elements operating counter to the forest laws to mend their ways with dispatch.

Ranger Elmer Randolph was decidedly a bad egg, a fighter before the hat had a chance to drop, a proper gunman, a sensational go-getter. He couldn't commence to count the notches on this remarkable young ranger's gun. It was his earnest opinion that the famous Black Creek district was sure due for a gosh-awful clean-up!

When Ranger Elmer Randolph arrived at his new post he was more than a little disconcerted to find a welcome awaiting him. He discovered to his dismay that he was somehow a celebrated character, distinctly a personage, quite somebody. He was justly bewildered at the awkward man-homage immediately lavished upon him by the sturdy denizens of the Black Creek country.

At every hand, in strange contrast with the post he had just left, he found men eager to greet him. With veiled insistence inquiry was pressed upon him as to his previous career and deeds of distinction. Confused, Elmer's habit of caution asserted itself and he flatly refused to talk about himself.

Nothing could have been more adverse to his purpose . . . In the eyes of his questioners this added

virtue to his viciousness; modesty in a bad man is surely a gift of the gods.

For the first time in his life Ranger Randolph found himself possessed of an enviable reputation; his fellow men no longer shunned him; his acquaintance was cultivated by one and all. He became a figure in the community; his august opinion was eagerly sought on all and sundry topics of the day.

Small wonder indeed that the erstwhile lonely ranger found himself enjoying the situation immensely. His immediate caution restrained him from actively questioning how it had all come about; his curiosity was submerged in a tide of contentment. Unconsciously a pardonable bit of swagger came into his bearing; he carried himself among his fellow men as befitted one of imposing position.

But Ranger Randolph was not without misgivings. He nursed a cold dread that someone might appear who had known him in the old days, or that some situation might arise that would reveal him to his new friends for what he really was.

Now at the Black Creek post were two rival sawmills cutting on contract from government timber. A feud of long standing existed between the two companies and open warfare was indulged in at every opportunity. Fistic frays and gunning were practiced on the slightest provocation.

Such matters, however, were quite beyond the ranger's jurisdiction; they were solely the sheriff's grief. Randolph's duty, so far as the mills were concerned, was to see that the timber-cuttings were accomplished with due observance to the forest laws. Nevertheless, keen with his newly realized responsibility, Randolph made formal calls upon the rival managers to bear upon them that times had somewhat changed.

For two months life went smoothly for Ranger Randolph. Such a space of time free from trouble was unprecedented in the history of the Black Creek, and the solid citizenry exchanged the conviction that it was due to the iron hand of the new ranger. Elmer's swagger increased.

He returned to town late one afternoon from a week's absence on the fire trails; and as he strolled carelessly along the main street in the full consciousness of pride he glanced in at the window of the Black Creek Mill office. Old Brant, the manager, was pacing the floor as he dictated a letter to a young woman bent over a stenographer's notebook.

Randolph's face was colorless as he passed on. He turned after a time and strolled back. The young woman was now seated before a typewriter industriously transcribing from the notebook. Randolph had not been mistaken; the Black Creek Mill's new stenographer was Florence White. Nemesis had overtaken him.

The end of the day found him impatiently waiting not a hundred yards from the office door. She emerged

presently very crisp and trim in a well-fitting tailored skirt and jacket and a surprisingly small hat. She did not appear surprised at seeing him, and seemed reluctant to grant him permission to walk with her.

"Well, Elmer, I've been hearing wonderfully strange things about you!"

Randolph's struggling hope abruptly quitted him, and he responded with an unmusical grunt.

"Let me see, how many men have you killed, Elmer—five, or was it nine?"

Although her face was masked with an expression of simulated interest, he knew that she was laughing at him.

"And, Elmer, wasn't it splendid the way you captured those incendiaries who set fire to the reserve last year!"

"I hope you are enjoying yourself!" Elmer muttered.

Florence White looked up sternly, but as he was staring straight out before him he did not see the glistening mistiness of her blue eyes.

"I am not enjoying myself, Elmer Randolph! I—I never was more miserable in my life. To think that you came here and told all those things!"

He turned sharply upon her.

"I told them? Who said I did?"

His sudden belligerence disconcerted her, and she asked with some meekness—

"Well, you did, didn't you?"

"I did not" he returned emphatically. "Somebody joshed this town before I even got here! Why, the day I arrived they began asking me about it. I kept still and made it worse; then it was too late to deny it all!"

"Of course, you'd want to deny it!" she observed coolly.

"I'd just like to get hold of the fellow who started it!"

Miss White smiled sweetly.

"What would you do if you found him, Elmer? Chase him into a cabin and leave him until you ran to get help?"

The ranger winced.

"That's it, Flo; rub it in! I suppose you've had a fine time telling folks they're all wrong, and I'm just an o'n'ry piker!" She halted, looked angrily up at him.

"You know me better than that, Elmer Randolph! If you've developed a reputation it is of no interest to me. My boardinghouse is just beyond, and you may leave me here. I'll never tell about you! Folks will find out the same way I did!"

Elmer experienced a quick feeling of relief that his day of reckoning was thus removed further into the future. His jauntiness of bearing reasserted itself.

"May I call around some evening, Flo?" She shook her head.

"No, I think not. I'm sorry, Elmer, but you realize I'm not like the other folks hereabout. I really know you!"

Whereupon she left him, and it is indicative of how

great a value he placed upon his new position in the world to record that he was far more relieved at knowing that his secret was safe than he was chagrined at being thus summarily dismissed.

THE feud between the rival lumber mills was fast riding to a climax and so long as their differences and the manifold expressions of their bad blood did not affect the Service, Ranger Randolph maintained himself aloof from their quarrel. But when the manager of the Short Line Lumber Company complained to him that logs from the government tract were coming to his mill with steel spikes buried in them, he was forced to take a hand.

He investigated the matter and held a long conference with Old Brant, the manager of the other mill. Across a wide desktop he told that gentleman that while he had been unable to obtain any direct indicatory evidence as yet, he was not going to rest well until he had found out a few things. Then somebody was going up on the carpet before the big chief. The Black Creek manager protested the intimation that he knew anything of the spiking of the logs.

A week passed with no further development. Four strangers arrived in town; on several evenings Randolph saw them at the Lone Star bar. One of them, who appeared to be the leader of the group and who advertised himself as Red Cullum, approached the ranger on the subject of patents, explaining that he and his friends were searching for homesteads.

Then late one afternoon fire was reported on the government tract. Six distinct blazes started simultaneously, and on the breast of a rising wind rapidly consolidated and swept into the heart of a rich valley.

Ranger Randolph, exercising the power of his office, impressed a crew to fight the fire. It was a grim battle. Numb with the fatigue of countless hours, they threw a fire trail across the path of the flames and fought it to a standstill on the line. But before the conflagration was under control, the timber-stand designated for the Short Line Timber outfit, together with their logging equipment, was very effectively wiped out.

When it was over the weary ranger returned to town and slept the clock around. He awoke to find a telegram from the district ranger bearing the advice that he was coming to make a personal investigation of the affair.

As it would be several days before his superior arrived, Randolph rode back to the site of the fire to make preliminary survey. All forenoon he spent in the vicinity of the fires' origins, going from point to point where the initial blazes had been reported.

There was no gainsaying the fact that the fires appeared to have been laid with an eye to the prevailing wind. It was improbable that a series of blazes so cunningly aimed could have been natural. A triangle

drawn upon a map of the timber, using the line of the six fires for its base, would lay its apex in the very heart of the Short Line Timber Company's operations. Randolph could deduce but one conclusion from his investigation—the fires had been of incendiary origin. This recalled to his mind the feud between the Black Creek Mill and the unfortunate Short Line outfit.

It remained, he considered, only to apprehend the firebrand who had been paid to set the blazes, wring confession from him, and confront the Black Creek management with the evidence.

Early in the afternoon he turned his horse back toward town. He had ridden perhaps a mile when a figure abruptly stepped from the hazel thicket at the side of the way. Randolph recognized him as Old Dave, a hermit, who inhabited the shake cabin a mile back from the trail.

"Howdy, ranger," the ancient greeted, running his fingers through his matted gray beard.

From ragged holes in his felt hat wisps of hair stuck out in all directions, giving him the appearance of a wandering scarecrow.

"Been up seeing the fire?"

Randolph drew rein.

"She was wicked while she lasted, Dave. More luck than good judgment that we got her out when we did!

Old Dave regarded him with an air of mystery.

"How do you think she started, ranger?"

The Service man shook his head. "Haven't given it a thought, Dave. Pretty dry in the woods just now; lots of pitch out."

"'Twasn't pitch started her, I reckon, ranger."

Randolph appeared surprised, to the old fellow's evident satisfaction.

"Think not? How so?"

"Lots of reasons, ranger," the oldster returned, shaking his grizzled head. "Don't look right at all—too sort of mechanical."

He stroked his beard reflectively; then as if launching a new subject.

"Seen any strangers in the woods lately, ranger?"

"Haven't seen any, Dave. Don't think there are any new folks about."

He recalled quickly the presence of Red Cullum and his three followers.

"No, I don't think we've had any newcomers in quite some time."

"Don't be too sure, ranger. That's just the trouble with you Service youngsters. Think you know a heap more than the old woods-hogs. Forget it, son. I seen strangers right here on this trail the very day of the fire!"

"Do tell, Dave!" the ranger replied, justly giving expression to his surprise for the other's benefit. "What did they look like?"

"Saw them come down the trail about an hour before the fire got to racing big. Three of them were just

common run; but the fourth could be described some. Big fellow with red hair and a wide hat pinned up on one side."

The ranger chirruped to his horse.

"Much obliged, Dave. I'll have Carter send you up a side of bacon. I've got to be hurrying along."

He urged the horse down the trail toward town, satisfied that Red Cullum was the man he wanted. He recalled that he had not seen any of the gang since the day of the fire; doubtless they had long since taken to the trail.

It might require weeks to apprehend them, and Randolph had very special reasons for wanting the job finished up in short order. He knew that his new friends would expect summary methods of him. He determined to reverse his initial plan and go after the Black Creek manager first.

He swept down the main street at a smart canter and drew up before Brant's office. Through the wide window he saw Florence White at her typewriter; the bookkeeper and his assistant stood beyond bending over their ledgers; in the room's center, seated at his flat-top desk, was the manager.

Randolph strode through the door with a pronounced swagger that befitted one of riotous and high-handed ways. He disregarded the look of cool amusement in Florence White's eyes and passed on to the flat-top desk.

"Brant, I've a little matter to talk over with you," Elmer pronounced imposingly. "Can I see you in private?"

Brant's grizzled brows contracted, and he answered after the manner of his ancient kind who held the Service in bold contempt: "I don't have private dealings with rangers. What do you want now?"

"Have it your own way, Brant; it's your funeral," Randolph replied loftily.

He paused an impressive moment, surveying the manager from head to foot. Then he said quickly:

"I've got the goods on Red Cullum, Brant. Want to hear his confession?"

Old Brant leaped to his feet forthwith, a red tide surging to his face. "Red Cullum lies!" he bellowed.

Randolph laughed.

"Then you know what Red has to say?"

"I—I don't know or care what he says!"

"Then how do you know he lies?" the ranger asked with huge politeness.

The grizzled timberman raged in silence. The bookkeeper whispered to his assistant, who slipped quietly out of the office. Florence White was typing erratically.

Randolph leaned across the counter which separated him from the manager's desk.

"Brant, you bit like a hungry trout. I couldn't get it on you when you spiked those logs, but this time you're sewed up so tight you can't move. If the sheriff wasn't

out of town I'd swear out a warrant right now. But as he's away I'm warning you not to leave town. I may want you any minute."

He left the office and strode down the unpaved street toward the Lone Star saloon, thoroughly satisfied with himself and his handling of Old Brant.

As he halted before the swinging doors of the saloon, the Black Creek Mill's assistant bookkeeper stepped out. He was pale and glanced startledly at the ranger as he hurried past in the direction of the office.

Randolph wondered at the strange actions of the young fellow as he pushed open the doors. Then he understood. Perhaps twenty men occupied the barroom; but instantly his eyes fell upon Red Cullum and his three companions, who faced him from in front of the bar.

A silence, electric with expectancy, pervaded the place. All eyes were turned upon the ranger. The doors swung closed behind him; with almost military precision the four strangers drew revolvers. Three of the weapons covered the men at the bar; Red Cullum directed his toward the ranger.

"Hands up, everybody!" the red giant bellowed.

He motioned with his revolver to the ranger.

"Over there with the rest of them."

Randolph slowly raised his hands and followed the direction of the barrel. He felt keenly the eyes of his friends upon him; he knew that the moment he had feared was at hand.

The four strangers, still covering the occupants of the room, backed quickly to the door.

"If anybody comes out of this door in ten minutes he's a suicide," Red Cullum shouted. "Goodbye, Mr. Bad-Man Ranger; You're a laugh, you are!"

The doors swung closed behind the retreating figures. A fusillade of shots sounded; the swinging doors trembled and were splintered as the strangers fired upon them to impress the veracity of their warning.

Instantly there was a stir among the men at the bar. Several of them loudly expelled the air from their lungs; somebody snickered; the bartender said—

"There's going to be—popping around here!"

The ranger was whipped to action by the implication of the words. He ran swiftly across the room, flung up the sash of the side window and leaped to the ground outside. The others in the room rushed to the window and peered circumspectly around the frame. They beheld Randolph running swiftly across the street. A block below the strangers' horses were tied to a hitching post where they had first dismounted. It was plain to the watchers that the ranger was attempting to cut them off from reaching their animals.

Halfway across the street they saw Randolph raise his revolver and fire twice. As he had drawn the fire from the swinging doors some of the men ventured to peer out above them. Two of the strangers lay in the middle of the street; Red Cullum and his remaining

companion dodged swiftly behind a pile of boxes standing near the general store across the street.

Randolph had won the first point; he had cut them off from their horses.

"Ain't that ranger a heller!" the barkeep exulted. "And he's got to do it alone—sheriff's out of town!"

"He ain't done anything marvelous yet," someone objected. "Let's see how close he comes to taking Red Cullum!"

Randolph reached the opposite side of the street amid a hail of bullets and sank gratefully behind a horse trough at the curb. The trough was constructed of stout two-inch pine and was filled with water. It formed an adequate barrier to Red Cullum's bullets.

He glanced cautiously around the end of the trough. The pile of boxes behind which the two incendiaries had flung themselves stood in plain view. Behind the pile and extending above it was a high board fence. The quarry could not escape unseen. If they attempted a dash for the corner beyond or tried scaling the fence they would make excellent targets.

Randolph glanced back the way he had come. A tremor seized him at the sight of the two figures lying motionless in the street. He had never before shot a man; his nerves jumped perilously at the thought.

Beyond the two figures he caught a glimpse of the Lone Star saloon. A score of faces appeared above and below the swinging doors. Farther up the street, where his horse stood, he saw Old Brant and Florence White watching from the door of the Black Creek Mill office.

He addressed his attention to the problem at hand. Perhaps eighty yards separated him from the barricade of Red Cullum and his companion. From moment to moment shots were exchanged, but without apparent result. The affair had achieved a deadlock.

Randolph was disturbingly conscious of the scores of eyes across the street expectantly directed upon him. He roused himself sharply and peered around the end of the trough. Instantly a hail of lead greeted his appearance. He dropped flat on the ground, permitting one hand to extend past the trough's end.

He lay thus as if struck for a minute or more; then cautiously glanced out. Red Cullum's remaining companion had left the hiding place and was quickly approaching. As he reached a point opposite the door of the general store Randolph opened fire. The revolver clattered to the ground from the man's hand as with an oath he sprang into the doorway. Through the glass show window Randolph caught a fleeting glimpse of the proprietor and his clerk as they pounced upon the wounded man and drew him struggling to the rear of the store.

Randolph was disappointed. He had hoped that the trick would net him both of them, or at least Red Cullum himself. That individual's bullets in a futile access of rage were splintering the pine face of the trough.

He surveyed with dismay the open space which lay between him and his quarry. He realized that the taking of Red Cullum meant now just one thing—he would have to cross that space. Trickery had lost its effectiveness; the other would be thoroughly on guard for further ruse. It was the showdown.

His duty was plain enough; the Service demanded summary methods of its men. But he stayed crouched behind the protecting trough, his nerves twisting and writhing like so many agitated vipers. He envisioned himself dashing toward the quarry's barricade, the space whining with lead that was hot and stinging and that cut and rent the flesh of him. His imagination was fully at work; the madness of fore-fear was upon him.

He glanced again over his shoulder to the faces in the doorway of the Lone Star. Those new and loyal friends were watching him eagerly, expecting some deed of valiance or mad boldness of him.

Farther up the street he saw Florence White, her dress whipping in the breeze. At that distance he could not discern the expression of her face, yet he knew that she was expecting of him just the opposite of those friends across the street. As she had said, she really knew him.

Abruptly his attention was attracted by a moving cloud of dust that descended the trail across Cedar Hill, two miles away. After a moment he made out the progress of three horses, and as they raced upon a rocky stretch of trail and the dust-cloud momentarily swept behind he was able to identify the plunging white animal in the lead.

A quick sense of relief seized him. There could be no doubt that the cavalcade on Cedar Hill was the returning sheriff and his deputies.

But this feeling of relief was short-lived. He realized that he didn't want help. The Service by all its limited traditions was zealously individualistic, sufficient unto itself. He felt keenly the eyes upon him; what would be the weight of their scorn if he should solicit the approaching help!

Only for a moment did he sway perilously with indecision. Then fore-fear was lost in the immediate fear that he would not measure up to the ideal mirrored in the eyes behind him. The weight of reputation smothered all else; the burden of greatness was to be upheld. He sprang at once into the open.

A bullet whined close by. He ran on, crouching low, and felt a jarring impact against his right shoulder. He was rudely swung about, but righted himself; and, laughing, he plunged on, conscious of a flowing warmth at his shoulder.

He was amazed to find how easy it was. He discovered that he was relishing the situation. The tide of adventure flooded his being, submerging all save the thrill of Chance.

He fired twice in rapid succession, splintering the

corner boxes. The quarry replied with alacrity. Randolph ran in a zigzag course to confuse the other's aim. He counted Cullum's shots carefully. The fifth struck his leg and a pronounced limp came into his gait. The sixth went high.

Then he ceased zigzagging and charged directly forward. He knew that Cullum was reloading. He gained the end of the barricade in full career, swung drunkenly about the corner, and flung himself upon the kneeling figure.

In a crashing fall the outlaw went over backward to the ground. With a thump Red Cullum's flaming head struck the rocky surface of the unpaved street. Randolph was overwhelmed by a wave of dizziness; in panic lest he faint and the quarry escape he reached for the other's throat. His thumbs were pressing the jugular when the realization smote him that Red Cullum lay quite still. A trickle of blood crept from beneath his head.

Fighting off the encroaching dizziness, Randolph laboriously got to his feet. He had a blurred vision of three horsemen drawing up their plunging mounts nearby. He heard many feet running swiftly from the direction of the Lone Star. He grasped the edge of the boxes for support.

The sheriff and his deputies flung themselves from their animals and ran toward him. Randolph struggled to grin at the blurred faces.

"I want this fellow, sheriff, and what's left of his three friends. I'll swear out a warrant as soon as I feel better. Just now I'm goin' sleep!"

He was surrounded by a score of familiar, excited faces. They formed a circle about him which presently began to spin. He nodded pleasantly with just a hint of swagger and slipped quietly to the ground.

He wakened to a pained and uncomfortable world. He was unable to identify his surroundings. He saw vaguely many familiar faces; he caught the sound of hushed whispering. Someone was twisting a bandage about his leg; Florence White was bathing the wound at his shoulder.

He closed his eyes and lay resting, flooded with a warming sense of contentment. He had read the high enthusiasm upon the faces of his new friends clustered about. A peaceful drowsiness overcame him.

He became swiftly alert when above the sibilant whispering the words of one of the watchers reached him.

"Ain't he gosh-awful game! Why, sheriff, he ain't got no fear of firearms in him!"

Randolph felt the form of Florence White, kneeling beside him, move impatiently. Her hand ceased the work of bathing his wound. He cautiously opened one eye and saw the mistiness in her eyes as she glanced with quick spirit at the speaker.

"Of, course he is!" she exclaimed in a voice that was delightfully unsteady. "What do you expect of a man

with all those n-n-notches on his gun?"

Quite unashamed, she raised a bit of handkerchief to her eyes.

Elmer's blood pounded riotously through his veins.

"But this was nothing at all!" Florence White continued with pride. "This was only play for him! Just you wait until next time!"

Elmer started precipitously. On the instant his ready imagination proceeded to conjure up a lurid prospect of days and years ahead stirring with perplexities,

difficulties and dangers. But he was undismayed. To his surprise, when the imposing picture was completed he found himself surveying it with decided relish. The great truth was his.

Sometime later he fell asleep after propounding mentally the conviction that after all there was one fly in his ointment. He rather regretted his lurid reputation. It might exert a dampening influence upon whatever rebellious spirits still remained in the Black Creek district.