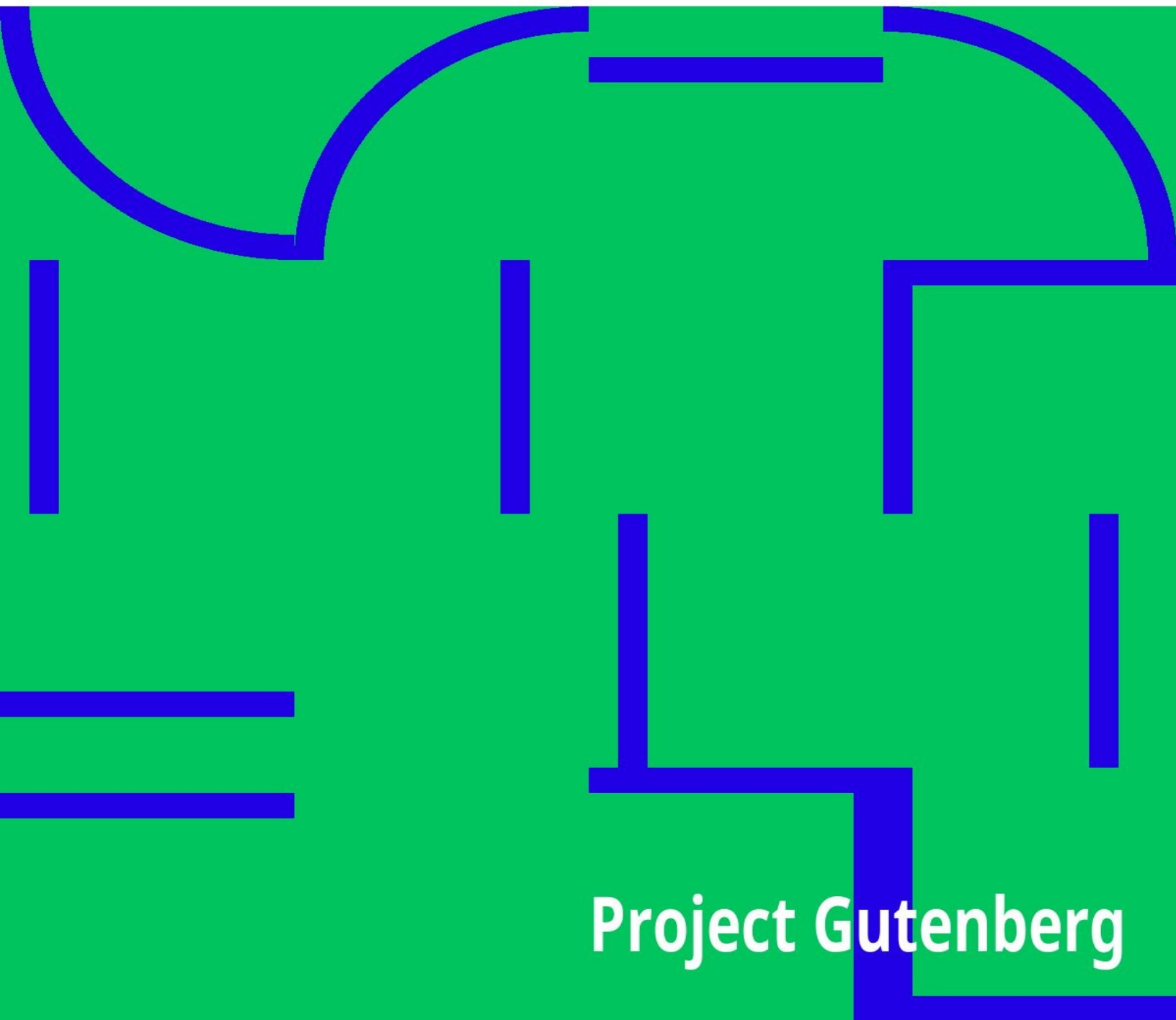


Judith of the Plains

Marie Manning



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Judith Of The Plains

By Marie Manning

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Image #1

Peter's Hand Sought Hers, And All Her Woman's Fear Of The Vague Terrors Of
The Dreadful Night Spoke In Her Answering Pressure—See p. [154](#).

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Judith Of The Plains

[pg 001]

"Town"

It was June, and a little past sunrise, but there was no hint of early summer freshness in the noxious air of the sleeping-car as it toiled like a snail over the infinity of prairie. From behind the green-striped curtains of the berths, now the sound of restless turning and now a long-drawn sigh signified the uneasy slumber due to stifling air and discomfort.

The only passenger stirring was a girl whose youth drooped under the unfavorable influences of foul air, fatigue, and a strained anxiety to come to the end of this fateful journey. She had been up while it was yet dark, and her hand—luggage, locked, strapped, and as pitifully new at the art of travelling as the girl herself, clustered about the hem of her blue serge skirt like chicks about a hen. The engine shrieked, but its voice sounded weak and far off in that still ocean of space; the girl tightened her grasp on the largest of the satchels and looked at the approaching porter tentatively.

[pg 002]

"We're late twenty-fi'e minutes," he reassured her, with the hopeless patience of one who has lost heart in curbing travellers' enthusiasms.

She turned towards the window a pair of shoulders plainly significant of the burdensome last straw.

"Four days and nights in this train"—they were slower in those days—"and now this extra twenty-five minutes!"

Miss Carmichael's famous dimple hid itself in disgust. The demure lines of mouth and chin, that could always be relied upon for special pleading when sentence was about to be passed on the dimple by those who disapproved of dimples, drooped with disappointment. But the light-brown hair continued to curl facetiously—it was the sort of hair whose spontaneous rippling conveys to

the seeing eye a sense of humor.

The train plodded across the spacious vacancy that unrolled itself farther and farther in quest of the fugitive horizon. The scrap of view that came within a closer range of vision spun past the car windows like a bit of stage mechanism, a gigantic panorama rotating to simulate a race at breakneck speed. But Miss Carmichael looked with unseeing eyes; the whirling prairie with its golden flecks of cactus bloom was but part of the universal strangeness, and the dull ache of homesickness was in it all.

"My dear! my dear!"—a head in crimpers was thrust from between the curtains of the section opposite—"I've been awake half the night. I was so afraid I wouldn't see you before you got off."

[pg 003]

The head was followed, almost instinctively, by a hand travelling furtively to the crimpers that gripped the lady's brow like barnacles clinging to a keel.

Mary expressed a grieved appreciation at the loss of rest in behalf of her early departure, and conspicuously forbore to glance in the direction of the barnacles, that being a first principle as between woman and woman.

"And, oh, my dear, it gets worse and worse. I've looked at it this morning, and it's worse in Wyoming than it was in Colorado. What it 'll be before I reach California, I shudder to think."

"It's bound to improve," suggested Mary, with the easy optimism of one who was leaving it. "It couldn't be any worse than this, could it?"

The neuter pronoun, it might be well to state, signified the prairie; its melancholy personality having penetrated the very marrow of their train existence, they had come to refer to it by the monosyllable, as in certain nether circles the head of the house receives his superlative distinction in "He."

Again the locomotive shrieked, again the girl mechanically clutched the suitcase, as presenting the most difficult item in the problem of transportation, and this time the shriek was not an idle formality. The train slowed down; the uneasy sleepers behind the green-striped curtains stirred restlessly with the lessening motion of their uncouth cradle. The porter came to help her, with the chastened mien of one whose hopes of largess are small, the lady with the barnacles called

after her [pg 004] redundant farewells, and a moment later Miss Carmichael was standing on the station platform looking helplessly after the train that toiled and puffed, yet seemed, in that crystalline atmosphere, still within arm's-reach. She watched it till its floating pennant of smoke was nothing but a gray feather blowing farther and farther out of sight on the flat prairie.

The town—it would be unkind to mention its name—had made merry the night before at the comprehensive invitation of a sheepman who had just disposed of his wool-clip, and who said, by way of general summons, "What's the use of temptin' the bank?" "Town," therefore, when Mary Carmichael first made its acquaintance, was still sleeping the sleep of the unjust. Those among last night's roisterers who had had to make an early start for their camps were well into the foot-hills by this time, and would remember with exhilaration the cracked tinkle of the dance-hall piano as inspiring music when the lonesomeness of the desert menaced and the young blood again clamored for its own.

"Town"—it contained in all some two dozen buildings—was very unlovely in slumber. It sprawled in the lap of the prairies, a grimy-faced urchin, with the lines of dismal sophistication writ deep. Yet where in all the "health resorts" of the East did air sweep from the clean hill-country with such revivifying power? It seemed a glad world of abiding youth. Surely "Town" was but a dreary illusion, a mirage that hung in the unmapped [pg 005] spaces of this new world that God had made and called good; an omen of the abominations that men would make when they grew blind to the beauty of God's world.

Mary Carmichael, with much the feelings of a cat in a strange garret, wandered about the sluggard town; and presently the blue-and-white sign of a telegraph office, with the mythological figure of a hastening messenger, suggested to her that a reassuring telegram was only Aunt Adelaide's due. Whereupon she began to rap on the door of the office, a scared pianissimo which naturally had little effect on the operator, who was at home and asleep some three blocks distant. But the West is the place for woman if she would be waited upon. No seven-to-one ratio of the sexes has tempered the chivalry of her sons of the saddle. A loitering something in a sombrero saw rather than heard the rapping, and, at the sight, went in quest of the dreaming operator without so much as embarrassing Miss Carmichael with an offer of his services. And presently the operator, whose official day did not begin for some two hours yet, appeared, much dishevelled from running and the cursory nature of his toilet, prepared to receive a message of life and death.

The wire to Aunt Adelaide ran:

"Practically at end of journey. Take stage to Lost Trail this morning. Am well. Don't worry about me.

"MARY."

And the telegraph operator, dimly remembering that he had heard Lost Trail was a "pizen mean [pg 006] country," and that it was tucked some two hundred miles back in the foot-hills, did not find it very hard to forgive the girl, who was "practically at end of journey," particularly as the dimple had come out of hiding, and he had never been called upon to telegraph the word "practically" before. He was a progressive man and liked to extend his experiences.

After sending the telegram, Miss Carmichael, quite herself by reason of the hill air, felt that she was getting along famously as a traveller, but that it was an expensive business, and she was glad to be "practically" at the end of her journey. And, drawing from her pocket a square envelope of heavy Irish linen, a little worn from much reading, but primarily an envelope that bespoke elegance of taste on the part of her correspondent, she read:

"LOST TRAIL, WYOMING.

"My Dear Miss Carmichael,—Pray let me assure you of my gratification that the preliminaries have been so satisfactorily arranged, and that we are to have you with us by the end of June. The children are profiting from the very anticipation of it, and it will be most refreshing to all us isolated ones to be able to welcome an Eastern girl as a member of our family.

"Although the long journey across the continent is trying, particularly to one who has not made it before, I hope you may not find it utterly fatiguing. Please remember that after leaving the train, it will be necessary to take a stage to Lost Trail. If it is possible, I shall meet you with the buckboard at one of the stage stations; otherwise, keep to the stage route, being careful to change at Dax's Ranch.

"Unfortunately, the children vary so in their accomplishments [pg 007] that I fear I can make no suggestions as to what you may need to bring with you in the way of text-books. But I think you will find them fairly well grounded.

"I had a charming letter from Mrs. Kirkland, who said the pleasantest things possible of you. I am glad the wife of our Senator was able conscientiously to commend us.

"With our most cordial good wishes for a safe journey, believe me, dear Miss

Carmichael,

"Sincerely yours,

"SARAH YELLETT."

In the mean time, "Town" came yawning to breakfast. It was not so prankish as it had been the night before, when it accepted the sheepman's broad-gauge hospitality and made merry till the sun winked from behind the mountains. It made its way to the low, shedlike eating-house with a pre-breakfast solemnity bordering on sulkiness. Not a petticoat was in sight to offset the spurs and sombreros that filed into breakfast from every point in the compass, prepared to eat primitively, joke broadly, and quarrel speedily if that sensitive and often inconsistent something they called honor should be brushed however lightly.

But the eternal feminine was within, and, discovering it, the temper of "Town" was changed; it ate self-consciously, made jokes meet for the ears of ladies, and was more interested in the girl in the sailor-hat than it was in remembering old feuds or laying the foundations of new.

In its interior aspect, the eating-house conveyed no subtle invitation to eat, drink, and be merry. On the contrary, its mission seemed to be that of confounding appetite at every turn. A long, shedlike [pg 008] room it was, with walls of unpainted pine, still sweating from the axe. Festoons of scalloped paper, in conflicting shades, hung from the ceiling, a menace to the taller of the guests. On the rough walls some one, either prompted by a latent spirit of æstheticism or with an idea of abetting the town towards merrymaking—an encouragement it hardly required—had tacked posters of shows, mainly representing the tank-and-sawmill school of drama.

Miss Carmichael sat at the extreme end of the long, oilcloth-covered table, on which a straggling army of salt and pepper shakers, catsup bottles, and divers commercial condiments seemed to pause in a discouraged march. A plague of flies was on everything, and the food was a threat to the hardiest appetite. One man summed up the steak with, "You got to work your jaw so hard to eat it that it ain't fair to the next meal."

His neighbor heaved a sigh. "This here formation, whatever it be"—and he turned the meat over for better inspection—"do shore remind me of an indestructible doll that an old maid aunt of mine giv' my sister when we was

kids. That doll sort of challenged me, settin' round oncapable o' bein' destroyed, and one day I ups an' has a chaw at her. She war ondestructible, all right; 'fore that I concluded my speriments I had left a couple o' teeth in her."

"Well, I discyards the steak and draw to a pair of aces," and the first man helped himself to a couple of biscuits.

Miss Carmichael knew, by the continual scraping [pg 009] of chairs across the gritty floor, that the places at the table must be nearly all taken; and while she anticipated, with an utterly unreasonable terror, any further invasion of her seclusion at the end of the table, still she could not persuade herself to raise her eyes to detect the progress of the enemy, even in the interest of the diary she had kept so conscientiously for the past three days; which was something of a loss to the diary, as those untamed, manly faces were well worth looking at. Reckless they were in many instances, and sometimes the lines of hardship were cruelly writ across young faces that had not yet lost the down of adolescence, but there were humor and endurance and the courage that knows how to make a crony of death and get right good sport from the comradeship. Their faults were the faults of lusty, red-blooded youth, and their virtues the open-handed generosity, the ready sympathy of those uncertain tilters at life who ride or fall in the tourney of a new country.

At present, "the yearling," drinking her execrable coffee in an agony of embarrassment, weighed heavily on their minds. They would have liked to rise as a man and ask if there was anything they could do for her. But as a glance towards the end of the table seemed to increase her discomfiture tenfold, they did the kindest and for them the most difficult thing and looked in every direction but Miss Carmichael's. With a delicacy of perception that the casual observer might not have given them credit for, they had refrained from taking seats directly opposite her, or those immediately on her [pg 010] right, which, as she occupied the last seat at the table, gave her at least a small degree of seclusion.

As one after another of them came filing in, bronzed, rugged, radiating a beauty of youth and health that no sketchy exigence of apparel could obscure, some one already seated at the table would put a foot on a chair opposite him and send it spinning out into the middle of the floor as a hint to the new-comer that that was his reserved seat. And the cow-puncher, sheep-herder, prospector, or man about "Town," as the case might be, would take the hint and the chair, leaving the

petticoat separated from the sombreros by a table-land of oilcloth and a range of four chairs.

But now entered a man who failed to take the hint of the spinning chair. In fact, he entered the eating-house with the air of one who has dropped in casually to look for a friend and, incidentally, to eat his breakfast. He stopped in the doorway, scanned the table with deliberation, and started to make his way towards Mary Carmichael with something of a swagger. Some one kicked a chair towards him at the head of the table. Some one else nearly upset him with one before he reached the middle, and the Texan remarked, quite audibly, as he passed:

"The damned razor-back!"

But the man made his way to the end of the table and drew out the chair opposite Miss Carmichael with a degree of assurance that precipitated the rest of the table into a pretty pothor.

Suppose she should countenance his audacity? [pg 011] The fair have been known to succumb to the headlong force of a charge, when the persistence of a long siege has failed signally. What figures they would cut if she did!—and Simpson, of all men! A growing tension had crept into the atmosphere of the eating-house; knives and forks played but intermittently, and Mary, sitting at the end of the oilcloth-covered table, felt intuitively that she was the centre of the brewing storm. Oh, why hadn't she been contented to stay at home and make over her clothes and share the dwindling fortunes of her aunts, instead of coming to this savage place?

"From the look of the yearling's chin, I think he'll get all that's coming to him," whispered the man who had nearly upset him with the second chair.

"You're right, pard. If I'm any good at reading brands, she is as self-protective as the McKinley bill."

The man Simpson was not a pleasant vis-à-vis. He wore the same picturesque ruffianliness of apparel as his fellows, but the resemblance stopped there. He lacked their dusky bloom, their clearness of eye, the suppleness and easy flow of muscle that is the hall-mark of these frontiersmen. He was fat and squat and had not the rich bronzing of wind, sun, and rain. His small, black eyes twinkled from his puffy, white face, like raisins in a dough-pudding.

He was ogling Mary amiably when the woman who kept the eating-house brought him his breakfast. Mrs. Clark was a potent antidote for the prevailing spirit of romance, even in this woman-forsaken [pg 012] country. A good creature, all limp calico, Roman nose, and sharp elbows, she brought him his breakfast with an ill grace that she had not shown to the others. The men about the table gave him scant greeting, but the absence of enthusiasm didn't embarrass Simpson.

He lounged expansively on the table, regarding Miss Carmichael attentively meanwhile; then favored her with the result of his observations, "From the East, I take it." And the dumpling face screwed into a smile whose mission was pacific.

Every knife and fork in the room suspended action in anxiety to know how the "yearling" would take it. Would their chivalry, which strained at a gnat, be compelled to swallow such a conspicuous camel as the success of Simpson? With the attitude he had taken towards the girl, there had crept into the company an imperceptible change; deep-buried impulses sprang to the surface. If a scoundrel like Simpson was going to try his luck, why shouldn't they? They didn't see a pretty girl once in a blue moon. With the advent of the green-eyed monster at the board, each man unconsciously became the rival of his neighbor.

But Miss Carmichael merely continued her breakfast, and if she heard the amiable deductions of Simpson regarding her, she gave no sign. But a rebuff to him was in the nature of an appetizer, a fillip to press the acquaintance. He encroached a bit farther on the narrow limits of the table and continued, "Nice weather we're having."

Miss Carmichael gave her undivided attention to [pg 013] her coffee. The spurs and sombreros, that had not relaxed a muscle in their strained observation of the little drama, breathed reflectively. Perhaps it was just as well that they had not emulated Simpson in his brazen charge; the "yearling" was not to be surprised into talking, that was certain.

"He shore is showing hisself to be a friendly native," commented the man who had sacrificed milk-teeth investigating the indestructible doll.

"Seems to me that the system he's playing lacks a heap of science. My money's on the yearling." And the man who had "discarded the steak and drawn to the

biscuits" leaned a little forward that he might better watch developments.

Simpson by this time fully realized his error, but failure before all these bantering youngsters was a contingency not to be accepted lightly. As he phrased it to himself, it was worth "another throw." "Seems kind o' lonesome not having any one to talk to while you're eatin', don't it?"

Miss Carmichael's air of perfect composure seemed a trifle out of tune with her surroundings; the nice elevation of eyebrow, the slightly questioning curl of the lip as she, for the first time apparently, became aware of the man opposite, seemed to demand a prim drawing-room rather than the atmosphere of the slouching eating-house.

"Well, really, I've hardly had a chance of finding out." And her eyes were again on her coffee-cup. And there was joy among the men at table that they had not rushed in after the manner of those who have a greater courage than the angels.

[pg 014]

"No offence meant," deprecated Simpson, with an uneasy glance towards the other end of the table, where the men sat with necks craned forward in an attitude uncomfortably suggestive of hounds straining at the leash. Simpson felt rather than saw that something was afoot among the sombreros. There was a crowding together in whispered colloquy, and in a flash some half-dozen of them were on their feet as a man. Descending upon Simpson, they lifted him, chair and all, to the other end of the table, as far removed as possible from Miss Carmichael.

The man who thought Simpson's system lacked science rubbed his hands in delight. "She took the trick all right; swept his hand clean off the board!"

[pg 015]

II

The Encounter

Simpson, from the seat to which he had been so rapidly transplanted, looked about him with blinking anxiety. It was more than probable that the boys intended "to have fun with him," though his talking, or rather trying to talk, to a girl that sat opposite him at an eating-house table was, according to his ethics, plainly none of their business. He knew he wasn't popular since he had done for Jim Rodney's sheep, though the crime had never been laid at his door, officially. He had his way to make, the same as the next one; and, all said and done, the cattle-men were glad to get Jim Rodney's sheep off the range, even if they treated him as a felon for the part he had played in their extermination.

Thus reasoned Simpson, while he marked with an uneasy eye that the temper of the company had grown decidedly prankish with the exit of the girl, who, after having caused all the trouble, had, with an irritating quality peculiar to her sex, vanished through the kitchen door.

Some three or four of the boys now ran to Simpson's former seat at the table and rushed towards [pg 016] him with his half-eaten breakfast, as if the errand had been one of life and death. They showered him with mock attentions, waiting on him with an exaggerated deference, and the pale, fat man, remembering the hideousness of some of their manifestations of a sense of humor, breathed hard and felt a falling-off of appetite.

Costigan, the cattle-man, a strapping Irish giant, was clearing his throat with ominous sounds that suggested the tuning-up of a bass fiddle.

"Sure, Simpson, me lad, if ye happen to have a matther av fifty dollars, 'tis mesilf that can tell ye av an illegint invistmint."

Simpson looked up warily, but Costigan's broad countenance did not harbor the wraith of a smile. "What kin I git for fifty chips? 'Tain't much," mused the

pariah, with the prompt inclination to spend that stamps the comparative stranger to ready money.

"Ye can git a parrut, man—a grane parrut—to kape ye coompany while ye're aiting—"

Simpson interrupted with an oath.

"Don't be hard on old Simmy; remember he's studied for the ministry! How did I savey that Simpson aimed to be a sharp on doctrine?" A cow-puncher with a squint addressed the table in general. "I scents the aroma of dogma about Simpson in the way he throwed his conversational lariat at the yearling. He urbanes at her, and then comes his 'firstly,' it being a speculation as to her late grazing-ground, which he concludes to be the East. His 'secondly' ain't nothing startling, words familiar to [pg 017] us all from our mother's knee—'nice weather'—the congregation ain't visibly moved. His 'thirdly' is insinuating. In it he hints that it ain't good for man to be alone at meals—"

"'Twas the congregation that added the 'foinely,' though, before hastily leaving be the back door!" and Costigan slapped his thigh.

"The gentleman in question don't seem to be makin' much use of his present conversational opportunities. I'm feelin' kinder turned down myself"; and the Texan began to look over his six-shooter.

The man with the squint looked up and down the board.

"Gentlemen, I believe the foregoing expresses the sentiment of this company, which, while it inclodes many foreign and frequent-warring elements, is at present held together by the natchral tie of eating."

Thumping with knife and fork handles, stamping of feet, cries of "Hear! hear!" with at least three cow-boy yells, argued well for a resumption of last night's festivities. Simpson glowered, but said nothing.

"Seems to me you-all goin' the wrong way 'bout drawin' Mistu' Simpson out. He is shy an' has to be played fo' like a trout, an' heah you-all come at him like a cattle stampede." The big Texan leaned towards Simpson. "Now you-all watch my methods. Mistu' Simpson, seh, what du think of the prospects of rain?"

There was a general recommendation from Simpson [pg 018] that the entire company go to a locality below the rain-belt.

A boy, plainly "from the East," and looking as if the ink on his graduating thesis had scarce had time to dry, was on his feet, swaggering; he would not have swapped his newly acquired *camaraderie* with these bronzed Westerners for the Presidency.

"Gentlemen, you have all heard Simpson say it is lonesome having no one to talk to during meals. We sympathized with him and offered him a choice of subjects. He greets our remarks by a conspicuous silence, varied by profanity. This, gentlemen, reflects on us, and is a matter demanding public satisfaction. All who feel that their powers as conversationalists have been impugned by the silence of Simpson, please say 'Ay.'"

"Ay" was howled, sung, and roared in every note of the gamut.

"If me yoong frind here an me roight"—and Costigan jerked a shoulder towards the boy—"will be afther closin' that silf-feeding automatic dictionary av his for a moment, I shud be glad to call the attintion av the coomp'ny to somethin' in the nature av an ixtinuatint' circoomsthance in the case av Simpson."

"Hear! hear!" they shouted. The broad countenance of Costigan beamed with joy at what he was about to say. "Gintlemin, the silence av Mr. Simpson is jew in all probabilittee to a certain ivint recalled by many here prisint, an' more that's absent, an' amicablee settled out av coort—"

Up to this time the unhappy Simpson had shown [pg 019] an almost superhuman endurance. Now he bristled—and after looking up and down the board for a sympathetic face, and not finding one, he declared, loudly and generally, "'Tain't so!"

"Ye may have noticed that frind Simpson do be t'reatened wid lockjaw in the societee av min, but in the prisince av a female ye can't count on him. Now, talk wid a female is an agreeable, if not a profitable, way av passin' the toime, but sure ye niver know where it will ind—as witness Simpson. This lady I'm recallin'—'tis a matther av two years ago—followed the ancient and honorable profission av biscuit shootin' not far from Caspar. Siz Simpson to the lady some such passin' civilitee as, 'Good-marnin'; plisent weather we're havin'.' Whereupon the lady filt a damage to her afflictions an' sued him for breach av

promise."

"'Twan't that way, at all!" screamed Simpson. "'Sall a lie!"

"Yu ought er said 'Good-evenin" to the lady, Mistu Simpson; hit make a diffunce," drawled the man from Texas, pleasantly.

"But 'twas 'Good-marnin" Simpson made chyce av," resumed Costigan. "An' the lady replied, 'You've broke my heart.' Whereupon Simpson, havin' a matther av t'ree thousand dollars to pay for his passin' civilitee, learned thot silince was goolden."

They all remembered the incident in question, and thundered applause at the reappearance of an old favorite. Without warning, a shadow fell across the sunlight-flooded room, and, as one after another [pg 020] of the men glanced up from the table, they saw standing in the doorway a man of such malignant aspect that his look fell across the company like a menace. The swing of their banter slowed suddenly; it was as if the cold of a new-turned grave had struck across the June sunshine checking their roughshod fun. None of them had the hardihood to joke with a man that stood in the shadow of death; and hate and murder looked from the eyes of the man in the doorway and looked towards Simpson. One by one they perceived the man of the shadow, all but Simpson, eating steak drowned in Worcestershire.

The man in the doorway was tall and lean, and the prison blench upon his face was in unpleasant contrast to the ruddy tan of the faces about the table. His sombrero was tipped back and the hair hung dank about the pale, sweating forehead, suggestive of sickness. But weak health did not imply weak purpose; every feature in that hawk-like face was sharp with hatred, and in the narrowing eye was vengeance that is sweet.

He stood still; there was in his hatred a something hypnotic that grew imperceptibly and imperceptibly communicated itself to the men at table. He gloated over the eating fat man as if he had dwelt much in imagination on the sight and was in no hurry to curtail his joy at the reality. The men began to get restless, shuffle their feet, moisten their lips; only the college boy spoke, and then from a wealth of ignorance, knowing nothing of the rugged, give-and-take justice of the plains—an eye for an [pg 021] eye, a tooth for a tooth, and the law and the courts go hang while a man's got a right arm to pull a trigger. Not one in

all that company, even the cattle-men whose interests were opposed to Rodney's, but felt the justice of his errand.

"When did they let him out?" whispered the college boy; and then, "Oughtn't we to do something?"

"Yis, me son," whispered Costigan. "We ought to sit still and learn a thing or two."

The fat man cleaned his plate with a crust of bread stuck on the point of a knife. There was nothing more to eat in the way of substantials, and he debated pouring a little more of the sauce on his plate and mopping it with a bit of bread still uneaten. Considering the pro and con of this extra tid-bit, he glanced up and saw the gaunt man standing in the doorway.

Simpson dropped the knife from his shaking hand and started up with a cry that died away in a gurgle, an inhuman, nightmare croak. He looked about wildly, like a rat in a trap, then backed towards the wall. The men about the table got up, then cleared away in a circle, leaving the fat man. It was all like a dream to the college boy, who had never seen a thing of the kind before and could not realize now that it was happening. Rodney advanced, never once relaxing the look in which he seemed to hold his enemy as in a vise. Simpson was like a man bewitched. Once, twice, he made a grab for his revolver, but his right hand seemed to have lost power to heed the bidding of his will. Rodney, [pg 022] now well towards the centre of the room, waited, with a suggestion of ceremony, for Simpson to get his six-shooter.

It was one of those moments in which time seems to have become petrified. The limp-clad proprietress of the eating-house, made curious by the sudden silence, looked in from the kitchen. Simpson, his eyes wandering like a trapped rat, saw, and called, through teeth that chattered in an ague of fear, "Ree—memm—her thth—there's la—dies p—present! For Gawd's sake, remember t—there's ladies p—present!"

The pale man looked towards the kitchen, and, seeing the woman, he gave Simpson a look in which there was only contempt. "You've hid behind the law once, and this time it's petticoats. The open don't seem to have no charm for you. But—" He didn't finish, there was no need to. Every one knew and understood. He put up his revolver and walked into the street.

The men broke into shouts of laughter, loud and ringing, then doubled up and had it out all over again. And their noisy merriment was as clear an indication of the suddenly lifted strain, at the averted shooting, as it was of their enjoyment of the farce. Simpson, relieved of the fear of sudden death, now sought to put a better face on his cowardice. Now that his enemy was well out of sight, Simpson handled his revolver with easy assurance.

"Put ut up," shouted Costigan, above the general uproar. "'Tis toime to fear a revolver in [pg 023] the hands av Simpson whin he's no intinsions av shootin'."

Simpson still attempted to harangue the crowd, but his voice was lost in the general thigh-slapping and the shouts and roars that showed no signs of abating. But when he caught a man by the coat lapel in his efforts to secure a hearing, that was another matter, and the man shook him off as if his touch were contagion. Simpson, craving mercy on account of petticoats, evading a meeting that was "up to him," they were willing to stand as a laughing-stock, but Simpson as an equal, grasping the lapels of their coats, they would have none of.

He slunk away from them to a corner of the eating-house, feeling the stigma of their contempt, yet afraid to go out into the street where his enemy might be waiting for him. Much of death and blood and recklessness "Town" had seen and condoned, but cowardice was the unforgivable sin. It balked the rude justice of these frontiersmen and tampered with their code, and Simpson knew that the game had gone against him.

"What was it all about? Were they in earnest, or was it only their way of amusing themselves?" inquired Mary Carmichael, who had slipped into Mrs. Clark's kitchen after the men at the table had taken things in hand.

"Jim Rodney was in earnest, an' he had reason to be. That man Simpson was paid by a cattle outfit—now, mind, I ain't sayin' which—to get Jim Rodney's sheep off the range. They had threatened him and cut the throats of two hundred of his herd [pg 024] as a warning, but Jim went right on grazin' 'em, same as he had always been in the habit of doing. Well, I'm told they up and makes Simpson an offer to get rid of the sheep. Jim has over five thousand, an' it's just before lambing, and them pore ewes, all heavy, is being druv' down to Watson's shearing-pens, that Jim always shears at. Jim an' two herders and a couple of dawgs—least, this is the way I heard it—is drivin' 'em easy, 'cause, as I said before, it's just before lambing. It does now seem awful cruel to me to shear just

before lambing, but that's their way out here.

"Well, nothing happens, and Jim ain't more'n two hours from the pens an' he comes to that place on the road that branches out over the top of a cañon, and there some one springs out of a clump of willows an' dashes into the herd and drives the wether that's leading right over the cliff. The leaders begin to follow that wether, and they go right over the cliff like the pore fools they are. The herder fired and tried to drive 'em back, they tell me, an' he an' the dawg were shot at from the clump of willows by some one else who was there. Three hundred sheep had gone over the cliff before Jim knew what was happening. He rode like mad right through the herd to try and head 'em off; but you know what sheep is like—they're like lost souls headin' for damnation. Nothing can stop 'em when they're once started. And Jim lost every head—started for the shearing-pens a rich man—rich for Jim—an' seen everything he had swept away before his eyes, his wife an' children made paupers. My [pg 025] son he come by and found him. He said that Jim was sittin' huddled up in a heap, his knees drawn up under his chin, starin' straight up into the noonday sky, same as if he was askin' God how He could be so cruel. His dead dawg, that they had shot, was by the side of him. The herder that was with Jim had taken the one that was shot into Watson's, so when my son found Jim he was alone, sittin' on the edge of the cliff with his dead dawg, an' the sky about was black with buzzards; an' Jim he just sat an' stared up at 'em, and when my son spoke to him he never answered any more than a dead man. He shuck him by the arm, but Jim just sat there, watchin' the sun, the buzzards, and the dead sheep."

"Was nothing done to this man Simpson?"

"The cattle outfit that he done the dirty work for swore an alibi for him. Jim has been in hard luck ever since. He's been rustlin' cattle right along; but Lord, who can blame him? He got into some trouble down to Rawlins—shot a man he thought was with Simpson, but who wasn't—and he's been in jail ever since. Course now that he's out Simpson's bound to get peppered. Glad it didn't happen here, though. 'Twould be a kind of unpleasant thing to have connected with a eating-house, don't you think so?" she inquired, with the grim philosophy of the country.

The eating-house patrons had gone their several ways, and the quiet of the dining-room was oppressive by contrast with its late boisterousness. Mrs. Clark, her hands imprisoned in bread-dough, begged Mary to look over the screen door

and see if anything [pg 026] was happening. "I'm always suspicious when it's quiet. I know they're in deviltry of some sort."

Mary tiptoed to the door and peeped over, but the room was deserted, save for Simpson, huddled in a corner, biting his finger-nails. "The nasty thing!" exploded Mrs. Clark, when she had received the bulletin. "I'd turn him out if it wasn't for the notoriety he might bring my place in gettin' killed in front of it."

"I dare say I'd better go and see after my trunk; it's still on the station platform." Mary wondered what her prim aunts would think of her for sitting in Mrs. Clark's kitchen, but it had seemed so much more of a refuge than the sordid streets of the hideous little town, with its droves of men and never a glimpse of a woman that she had been only too glad to avail herself of the invitation of the proprietress to "make herself at home till the stage left."

"Well, good luck to you," said Mrs. Clark, wiping her hand only partially free from dough and presenting it to Miss Carmichael. She had not inquired where the girl was going, nor even hinted to discover where she came from, but she gave her the godspeed that the West knows how to give, and the girl felt better for it.

At the station, where Mary shortly presented herself, in the interest of that old man of the sea of all travellers, luggage, she learned that the stage did not leave town for some three-quarters of an hour yet. A young man, manipulating many sheets of flimsy, yellow paper covered with large, flourishing [pg 027] handwriting, looked up in answer to her inquiries about Lost Trail. This young man, whose accent, clothes, and manner proclaimed him "from the East," whither, in all probability, he would shortly return if he did not mend his ways, disclaimed all knowledge of the place as if it were an undesirable acquaintance. But before he could deny it thrice, a man who had heard the cabalistic name was making his way towards the desk, the pride of the traveller radiating from every feature.

The cosmopolite who knew Lost Trail was the type of man who is born to be a Kentucky colonel, and perhaps may have achieved his destiny before coming to this "No Man's Land," for reasons into which no one inquired, and which were obviously no one's business. They knew him here by the name of "Lone Tooth Hank," and he wore what had been, in the days of his colonelcy—or its equivalent—a frock-coat, restrained by the lower button, and thus establishing a

waist-line long after nature had had the last word to say on the subject. With this he wore the sombrero of the country, and the combination carried a rakish effect that was positively sinister.

The scornful clerk introduced Mary as a young lady inquiring about some place in the bad-lands. Off came the sombrero with a sweep, and Lone Tooth smiled in a way that accented the dental solitaire to which he owed his name. Miss Carmichael, concealing her terror of this casual cavalier, inquired if he could tell her the distance to Lost Trail.

[pg 028]

"I sho'ly can, and with, consid'able pleasure." The sombrero completed a semicircular sweep and arrived in the neighborhood of Mr. Hank's heart in significance of his vassalage to the fair sex. He proceeded:

"Lost Trail sutney is right lonesome. A friend of mine gets a little too playful fo' the evah-increasin' meetropolitan spirit of this yere camp, and tries a little tahget practice on the main bullyvard, an' finds the atmospheah onhealthful in consequence. Hearin' that the quiet solitude of Lost Trail is what he needs, he lit out with the following circumstance thereof happenin'. One day something in his harness giv' way—and he recollects seein' a boot sunnin' itself back in the road 'bout a quartah of a mile. An' he figgahs he'll borry a strip of leather off the boot to mend his harness. Back he goes and finds it has a kind of loaded feelin'. So my friend investigates—and I be blanked if there wasn't a foot and leg inside of it."

Miss Carmichael had always exercised a super-feminine self-restraint in the case of casual mice, and it served her in the present instance. Instead of screaming, she said, after the suppression of a gasp or two:

"Thank you so much, but I won't detain you any longer. Your information makes Lost Trail even more interesting than I had expected."

Besides, Miss Carmichael had a faint suspicion that this might be a preconcerted plan to terrify the "lady tenderfoot," and she prided herself on being equal to the situation. The time at her [pg 029] disposal before the stage would embark on that unknown sea of prairies she spent in the delectable pastime of shopping. The financial and social interests of the town seemed to converge in Hugous & Co.'s "trading store," where Miss Carmichael invested in an extra package of needles

for the mere excitement of being one of the shoppers, though her aunt Adelaide had stocked the little plaid-silk work-bag to repletion with every variety of needle known to woman. She pricked up her ears, meanwhile, at some of the purchases made by the cow-boys for their camp-larders—devilled ham, sardines, canned tomatoes heading the list as prime favorites. Did these strapping border lads live by the fruit of the tin alone? Apparently yes, with the sophisticated accompaniment of soda biscuit, to judge by the quantity of baking-powder they invested in—literally pounds of it. Men in any other condition of life would have died of slow poisoning as the result of it.

There were other customers at Hugous' that morning besides the spurred and booted cow-puncher and his despised compeer, the sheep-herder. That restless emigrant class, whose origin, as a class, lay in the community of its own uncertain schemes of fortune; the West, with her splendid, lavish promises, called them from their thriftless farms in the South and their gray cabins in New England. They began their journeying towards the land of promise long before the Indians had ever seen the shrieking "fire-wagon." All day they would toil over the infinitude of prairie, the sun that [pg 030] hid nightly behind that maddeningly elusive vanishing-point, the horizon, their only guide. But the makeshifts of the wagon life were not without charm. They began to wander in quest of they knew not precisely what, and from these vague beginnings there had sprung into existence that nomadic population that was once such a feature of the far West, but is now going the way of the Indians and the cow-boys.

This breathing-space in the long journey had for them the stimulus of a holiday-making. They bought their sides of bacon and their pounds of coffee as merrily as if they were playing a game of forfeits, the women fingering the calico they did not want for the joy of pricing and making shoppers' talk.

The scene had a scriptural flavor that not even the blue overalls of the men nor the calico gowns of the women could altogether eliminate. Their wagons, bulging with household goods and trailing with kitchen utensils secured by bits of rope, were drawn up in front of the trading-store. From a pump, at some little distance, the pilgrims filled their stone water-bottles, for the wise traveller does not trust to the chance springs of the desert. Baskets of chickens were strapped to many of the wagons, but whether the unhappy fowls were designed to supply fresh eggs and an occasional fricassée, or were taken for the pleasure of their company, there was no means of determining short of impertinent cross-questioning. Sometimes a cow, and invariably a dog, formed one of the family

[pg 031] party, and an edifying *esprit de corps* seemed to dwell among them all.

Lone Tooth Hank, in his capacity of man about town, stood on the steps of Hugous' watching the preparations; and, seeing Miss Carmichael, approached with the air of an old and tried family friend.

"Do I obsehve yu regyarding oweh 'settleahs,' called settleahs 'cause they nevah settle?" Hank laughed gently, as one who has made a joke meet for ladies. "I've known whole famblies to bohn an' raise right in one of them wagons; and tuhn out a mighty fine, endurin' lot, too, this hyeh prospectin' round afteh somethin' they wouldn't reco'nize if they met. Gits to be a habit same as drink. They couldn't live in a house same as humans, not if yu filled their gyarden with nuggets an' their well with apple-jack."

Miss Carmichael looked attentive but said nothing. In truth, she was more afraid of Hank, his obvious gallantry, and his grewsome tales of boots with legs in them than she was of the unknown terrors of Lost Trail.

"I believe that is my stage," she said, as a red conveyance not unlike a circus wagon halted at some little distance from the trading-store. And as she spoke she saw four of her companions of the breakfast-table heading towards the stage, each with a piece of her precious luggage. Mary Carmichael was precipitated in a sudden panic; she had heard tales of the pranks of these playful Western squires—a little gun-play to induce the terrified tenderfoot to put a little more spirit into his Highland fling, [pg 032] "by request." She remembered their merrymaking with Simpson at breakfast. What did they intend to do with her belongings? And as she remembered the little plaid sewing-bag that Aunt Adelaide had made for her—surreptitiously drying her tears in the mean time—when she remembered that bag and the possibility of its being submitted to ignominy, she could have cried or done murder, she wasn't sure which.

"Well, 'pon my wohd, heah ah the boys with yo' baggage. How time du fly!"

"Oh!" she gasped, "what are they going to do with it?"

"Place it on the stage, awaitin' yo' ohdahs." And to her expression of infinite relief—"Yo' didn't think any disrepec' would be shown the baggage of a lady honorin' this hyeh metropolis with her presence?"

She thanked the knights of the lariat the more warmly for her unjust suspicions.

They stowed away the luggage with the deft capacity of men who have returned to the primitive art of using their hands. She climbed beside the driver on the box of the stage. Lone Tooth Hank and the cow-punchers chivalrously raised their sombreros with a simultaneous spontaneity that suggested a flight of rockets. The driver cracked his whip and turned the horses' heads towards the billowing sea of foot-hills, and the last cable that bound Mary Carmichael to civilization was cut.

[pg 033]



III

Leander And His Lady

The only stage passenger besides Miss Carmichael was a fat lady, whose entire luggage seemed to consist of luncheon—pasteboard boxes of sandwiches, baskets of fruit, napkins of cake. These she began to dispose of, before the stage had fairly started, with an industry almost automatic, continuing faithful to her post as long as the supplies lasted. Then she dozed, sleeping the sleep of the just and those who keep their mouths open. From time to time the stage-driver invoked his team in cabalistic words, and each time the horses toiled forward with fresh energy; but progress became a mockery in that ocean of space, their driving seemed as futile as the sport of children who crack a whip and play at stage-coach with a couple of chairs; the mountains still mocked in the distance.

A flat, unbroken sweep of country, a tangle of straggling sage-brush, a glimpse of foot-hills in the distance, was the outlook mile after mile. The day grew pitilessly hot. Clouds of alkaline dust swept aimlessly over the desert or whirled into spirals till lost in space. From horizon to horizon the sky was one cloudless span of blue that paled as it [pg 034] dipped earthward. Mary Carmichael dozed and wakened, but the prospect was always the same—the red stage crawling over the wilderness, making no evident progress, and always the sun, the sage-brush, and the silence.

It was all so overwhelmingly different from the peaceful atmosphere of things at home. The mellow Virginia country, with its winding, red roads, wealth of woodland, and its grave old houses that were the more haughtily aloof for the poverty that gnawed at their vitals. This wilderness was so gaunt, so parched; she closed her eyes and thought of a bit of landscape at home. A young forest of silver beeches growing straight and fine as the threads on a loom; and through the gray perspective of their satin-smooth trunks you caught the white gleam of a fairy cascade as it tumbled over the moss-grown stones to the brook below. It was like a bit from a Japanese garden in its delicate artificiality.

And harder to leave than these cherished bits of landscape had been the old house Runnymede, that always seemed dozing in the peaceful comatose of senility. It was beyond the worry of debt; the succession of mortgages that sapped its vitality and wrote anxious lines on the faces of Aunt Adelaide and Aunt Martha was nothing to the old house. Had it not sheltered Carmichaels for over a century?—it had faith in the name. But Mary could never remember when the need of money to pay the mortgage had not invaded the gentle routine of their home-life, robbing the sangaree of its delicate flavor in the long, sleepy summer afternoons, invading [pg 035] the very dining-room, an unwelcome guest at the old mahogany table, prompting Aunt Adelaide to cast anxious glances at the worn silver—would it go to pay that blood-sucking mortgage next?

But hardest of all to leave had been Archie, best and most promising of young brothers—Archie, who had come out ahead of his class in the high-school, all ready to go to The University—the University of Virginia is always "The University"; but who, it had seemed at a certain dark season, must give up this long-cherished hope for lack of the wherewithal. Mary, being four years older than her brother and quite twenty, had long felt a maternal obligation to administer his affairs. If he did not go to the university, like his father and grandfather before him, it would be because she had failed in her duty. At this particular phase of the domestic problem there had appeared, in a certain churchly periodical, a carefully worded advertisement for a governess, and the subsequent business of references, salary, and information to be imparted and received proving eminently satisfactory, Mary had finally received a tearful permission from her aunts to depart for some place in Wyoming, the name of which was not even to be found on the map. She was to consider herself quite one of the family, and the compensation was to be fifty dollars a month. Archie would now be able to go to "The University."

As the day wore on the sage-brush became scarcer and grayer, there were fewer flowering cacti, and the great white patches of alkali grew more and more frequent. In the distance there was a riot [pg 036] of rainbow tints—violet, pink, and pale orange. It seemed inconceivable that such barrenness could produce such wealth of color; nothing could have been more beautiful—not even the changing colors on a pigeon's neck—than the coppery iridescence, shading to cobalt and blue on some of the buttes.

Night had fallen before they made the first break in their journey. The low,

beetle-browed cabin that faced them in the wilderness carried in its rude completeness a hint of the prestidigitateur's art—a world of desolation, and behold a log cabin with smoke issuing from the chimney and curtains at the windows! The interior was unplastered, but this shortcoming was surmounted by tacking cheesecloth neatly over the logs, a device at once simple and strategic, as in the lamplight the effect was that of plaster. Miss Carmichael, suddenly released from the actual rumbling of the stage, felt its confused motion the more strongly in imagination, and hardly knew whether she was eating canned tomatoes, served uncooked directly from the tin, fried steak, black coffee, and soda biscuit, in company with the fat lady, the stage-driver, and the woman who kept the road ranch, or if it was all some Alice in Wonderland delusion.

The fat lady had brought her own bedding—an apoplectic roll of bedquilts—and these she insisted on making a bed of, despite the protests of the ranch-woman, who seemed to detect a covert insinuation against her accommodations in the precedent. Miss Carmichael profited by the controversy. The landlady, touched no doubt by the simple faith [pg 037] of a traveller who trusted to the beds of a road-ranch, or because she was young or a girl, led the way in triumph to her own bedroom, and indicating an imposing affair with pillow-shams, she defied Miss Carmichael to find a more comfortable bed "in the East."

In the unaccountable manner of these desert conveyances, that creak and groan across the arid wastes with an apparently lumbering inconsequence, the stage that brought the travellers to the Dax ranch left at sunrise to pursue a seemingly erratic career along the North Platte, while Miss Carmichael and the fat lady were to continue their journey with one Lemuel Chugg, who drove a stage northward towards the Red Desert, when he was sober enough to handle the ribbons.

Breakfast was largely devoted to speculation regarding the approximate condition of Mr. Chugg—would he be wholly or partially incapacitated for his job? Mrs. Dax, flirting a feather-duster in the neighborhood of Miss Carmichael in a futile effort to beguile her into giving a reason for her solitary journey across the desert, took a gloomy view of the situation.

But Miss Carmichael kept her own counsel. Not so the fat lady. Falling into the snare ingenuously set for another, she divulged her name, place of residence, and the object of her travels, which was to visit a son on Sweetwater. Furthermore, she stated the probable cause of every death in her family for the past thirty-five

years. Miss Carmichael felt an especial interest in an Uncle Henry who "died [pg 038] of a Friday along of eating clams." He stood out with such refreshing vividness against a background of neutralities who succumbed to consumption, bile colic, and other more familiar ailments of the patent-medicine litany. But loquacity, apparently, like virtue, is its own reward, for the landlady scarce vouchsafed a comment on this dismal recitative, while Miss Carmichael remained the object of her persistent attentions.

But there seemed to be no topic of universal interest but Chugg's condition, Mrs. Dax finally asserting, "Before I'd trust my precious neck to him, I'd get Mr. Dax to shoot me."

Meditating on this Spartan statement, Mary and the fat lady became aware for the first time of a subtle, silent force in the domestic economy. But so unobtrusive was this influence that one had to scrutinize very closely, indeed, to detect the evanescent personality of Mrs. Dax's husband. Leander was his name, but it is safe to say that he swam no Hellespontos for the masterful wife of his bosom. Otherwise he was slender, willowy, bald; if he ever stood straight enough to get the habitually apologetic crooks out of his knees, he would be tall; but so in the habit was he of repressing himself in the marital presence that Leander passed for middle height. He waited on the table at breakfast with the dumb submissiveness of a trained dog that has been taught to give pathetic imitations of human servility. But no sooner had his lady left the room than Leander began quite brazenly to call attention to himself as a man and an individual, [pg 039] coughing, rattling his dishes, and clearing his throat. Mary and the fat lady, out of very pity, responded to these crude signals with overtures equally frank, and Leander ventured finally to inquire if they aimed to spend the night at his brother's ranch, it being the next mess-box between here and nowhere. They admitted that his brother's ranch was their next stopping-place, and Leander went through perfect contortions of apology and self-effacement before he could bring himself to ask them to do him a favor. It would have taken a very stern order of womankind to refuse anything so abject, and they blindly committed themselves to the pledge.

"Tell him I send my compliments," he whispered, and, looking about him furtively, he repeated the blood-curdling request.

"Is that all?" sniffed the fat lady, at no pains to conceal her disappointment.

"It's enough, if it was known, to raise a war-whoop and stampede this yere family." His glance at the door through which his wife had disappeared was pregnant with meaning.

"Family troubles?" asked the fat lady, as a gourmet might say "Truffles."

"Looks like it," said Leander, dismally. "Me and Johnnie don't ask for nothin' better than to bask in each other's company; but our wives insists on keepin' up the manoeuvres of a war-dance the whole endoorin' time."

"So," said the fat lady, as a gourmet might tell of a favorite way of preparing truffles, "it's a case of wives?"

[pg 040]

"Yes, marm, an' teeth an' nails an' husbands thrown in, when they get a sight of each other's petticoats."

"I've known sisters-in-law not to agree," helped on the fat lady, by way of an encouraging parallel.

"While I deplores usin' such a comparison to the refinin' and softenin' infloance of wimmen, the meetin' of the Dax ladies by chanst anywheres has all the elements of danger and excitement that accompanies an Injun uprisin'."

The travellers looked all manner of encouragement.

"You see, my wife's a great housekeeper; her talent lies"—and here Leander winked knowingly—"in managin' the help."

"Land's sake!" interrupted the fat lady. "Why don't you kick?"

Leander sighed softly. "I tried to once. As an experiment it partook of the trustfulness of a mule kickin' against the stony walls of Badger Cañon. But to resoom about the difficulties that split the Dax family. Before Johnnie got mislaid in that matrimonial landslide o' his, he herds with us. Me an' him does the work of this yere shack, and my wife just roominates and gives her accomplishments as manager full play. She never put her hand in dirty water any more than Mrs. Cleveland sittin' up in the White House parlor. Johnnie done the fancy cookin'; he could make a pie like any one's maw, and while you was lost to the world in the delights of masticatin' it, he'd have all his greasy dishes washed

up and put away—"

[pg 041]

"No wonder she hated to lose a man like that," interrupted the fat lady, feelingly.

"But he took to pinin' and proclaimin' that he shore was a lone maverick, and he just stampeded round lookin' for trouble and bleatin' a song that went:

"No one to love,
None to caress.'

"Well, the lady that answers his signal of distress don't bear none of the brands of this yere range. She lives back East, and him and her took up their claims in each other's affections through a matrimonial paper known as *The Heart and Hand*. So they takes their pens in hand and gets through a hard spell of courtin' on paper. Love plumb locoes Johnnie. His spellin' don't suit him, his handwritin' don't suit him, his natchral letters don't suit him. So off he sends to Denver for all the letter-writin' books he can buy—*Handbook of Correspondence*, *The Epistolary Guide*, *The Ready Letter-Writer*, and a stack more. There's no denyin' it, Johnnie certainly did sweat hissself over them letters."

"Land's sakes!" said the fat lady.

"Yes, marm; he used to read 'em to me, beginnin' how he had just seized five minutes to write to her, when he'd worked the whole day like a mule over it. She seemed to like the brand, an' when he sent her the money to come out here an' get married, she come as straight as if she had been mailed with a postage-stamp."

[pg 042]

"The brazen thing!" said the fat lady.

"They stopped here, goin' home to their place. My Lord! warn't she a high-flyer! She done her hair like a tied-up horse-tail—my wife called it a Sikey knot—and it stood out a foot from her head. Some of the boys, kinder playful, wanted to throw a hat at it and see if it wouldn't hang, but they refrained, out of respect to the feelin's of the groom.

"From the start," continued Leander, "the two Mrs. Daxes just hankered to get at each other; an' while I, as a slave to the fair sex"—here he bowed to the fat lady

and to Miss Carmichael—"hesitates to use such langwidge in their presence, the attitood of them two female wimmin shorely reminds me of a couple of unfriendly dawgs just hankerin' to chaw each other.

"At first, Johnnie waited on her hand an' foot, and she just read novels and played stylish all the time and danced. She was the hardest dancer that ever struck this yere trail, and she could give lessons to any old war-dancin' chief up to the reservation. No dance she ever heard of was too far for her to go to. She just went and danced till broad daylight. Many a man would have took to dissipation, in his circumstances, but Johnnie just lost heart and grew slatterly. Why, he'd leave his dishes go from one day till the next—"

"There's more as would leave their dishes from one day till the next if they wasn't looked after." And the wife of his bosom stood in the door like a vengeful household goddess. Mr. Dax made a grab for the nearest plates.

[pg 043]

IV

Judith, The Postmistress

The arrival of Chugg's stage with the mail should have been coincident with the departure of the stage that brought the travellers from "Town," but Chugg was late—a tardiness ascribed to indulgence in local lethe waters, for Lemuel Chugg had survived a romance and drank to forget that woman is a variable and a changeable thing. In consequence of which the sober stage-driver departed without the mails, leaving Mary Carmichael and the fat lady to scan the horizon for the delinquent Chugg, and incidentally to hear a chapter of prairie romance.

Some sort of revolution seemed to be in progress in the room in which the travellers had breakfasted. Mrs. Dax had assumed the office of dictator, with absolute sway. Leander, as aide-de-camp, courier, and staff, executed marvellous feats of domestic engineering. The late breakfast-table, swept and garnished with pigeon-holes, became a United States post-office, prepared to transact postal business, and for the time being to become the social centre of the surrounding country.

Down the yellow road that climbed and dipped [pg 044] and climbed and dipped again over foot-hills and sprawling space till it was lost in a world without end, Mary Carmichael, standing in the doorway, watched an atom, so small that it might have been a leaf blowing along in the wind, turn into a horseman.

There was inspiration for a hundred pictures in the way that horse was ridden. No flashes of daylight between saddle and rider in the jolting, Eastern fashion, but the long, easy sweep that covers ground imperceptibly and is a delight to the eye. It needed but the solitary figure to signify the infinitude of space in the background. In all that great, wide world the only hint of life was the galloping horseman, the only sound the rhythmical ring of the nearing hoofs. The rider, now close enough for Miss Carmichael to distinguish the features, was a thorough dandy of the saddle. No slouching garb of exigence and comfort this, but a pretty display of doeskin gaiter, varnished boot, and smart riding-breeches.

The lad—he could not have been, Miss Carmichael thought, more than twenty—was tanned a splendid color not unlike the bloomy shading on a nasturtium. And when the doughty horseman made out the girl standing in the doorway, he smiled with a lack of formality not suggested by the town-cut of his trappings. Throwing the reins over the neck of the horse with the real Western fling, he slid from the saddle in a trice, and—Mary Carmichael experienced something of the gasping horror of a shocked old lady as she made out two splendid braids of thick, black hair. Her doughty cavalier was no cavalier at all, but a surprisingly handsome young woman.

[pg 045]

Miss Carmichael gasped a little even as she extended her hand, for the masquerader had pulled off her gauntlet and held out hers as if she was conferring the freedom of the wilderness. It was impossible for a homesick girl not to respond to such heartiness, though it was with difficulty at first that Mary kept her eyes on the girl's face. Curiosity, agreeably piqued, urged her to take another glimpse of the riding clothes that this young woman wore with such supreme unconcern.

Now, "in the East" Mary Carmichael had not been in the habit of meeting black-haired goddesses who rode astride and whose assurance of the pleasure of meeting her made her as self-conscious as on her first day at dancing-school; and though she tried to prove her cosmopolitanism by not betraying this, the attempt was rather a failure.

"Are you surprised that I did not wait for an introduction?" the girl in the riding clothes asked, noticing Mary's evident uneasiness; "but you don't know how good it is to see a girl. I'm so tired of spurs and sombreros and cattle and dust and distance, and there's nothing else here."

"Where I come from it's just the other way—too many petticoats and hat-pins."

The horseman who was no horseman dropped Miss Carmichael's hand and went into the house. Mary wondered if she ought to have been more cordial.

From the back door came Leander, with dishcloths, which he began to hang on the line in a dumb, driven sort of way.

[pg 046]

"Who is she?" asked Mary.

"Her?" he interrogated, jerking his head in the direction of the house. "The postmistress, Judith Rodney; yes, that's her name." He dropped his voice in the manner of one imparting momentous things. "She never wears a skirt ridin', any more than a man."

Mary felt that she was tempting Leander into the paths of gossip, undoubtedly his besetting sin, but she could not resist the temptation to linger. He had disposed of his last dish-cloth, and he withdrew the remaining clothes-pin from his mouth in a way that was pathetically feminine.

"She keeps the post-office here, since Mrs. Dax lost the job, and boards with us; p'r'aps it's because she is my wife's successor in office, or p'a'ps it's jest the natural grudge that wimmin seem to harbor agin each other, I dunno, but they don't sandwich none."

Leander having disposed of his last dish-towel, squinted at it through his half-closed eyes, like an artist "sighting" a landscape, saw apparently that it was in drawing, and next brought his vision to bear on the back premises of his own dwelling, where he saw there was no wifely figure in evidence.

"Sh-sh-h!" he said, creeping towards Mary, his dull face transfigured with the consciousness that he had news to tell. "Sh-sh—her brother's a rustler. If 'twan't for her"—Leander went through the grewsome pantomime of tying an imaginary rope round his neck and throwing it over the limb of an imaginary tree. "They're goin' to get him for shore [pg 047] this time, soon as he comes out of jail; but would you guess it from her bluff?"

There was no mistaking the fate of a rustler after Mr. Dax's grisly demonstration, but of the quality of his calling Mary was as ignorant as before.

"And why should they do that?" she inquired, with tenderfoot simplicity.

"Stealin' cattle ain't good for the health hereabouts," said Leander, as one who spoke with authority. "It's apt to bring on throat trouble."

But Mary did not find Leander's joke amusing. She had suddenly remembered the pale, gaunt man who had walked into the eating-house the previous morning and walked out again, his errand turned into farce-comedy by the cowardice of an unworthy antagonist. The pale man's grievance had had to do with sheep and cattle. His name had been Rodney, too. She understood now. He was Judith

Rodney's brother, and he was in danger of being hanged. Mary Carmichael felt first the admiration of a girl, then the pity of a woman, for the brave young creature who so stoutly carried so unspeakable a burden. But she could not speak of her new knowledge to Leander.

She glanced towards this childlike person and saw from his stealthy manner that he had more to impart. He walked towards the kitchen door, saw no one, and came back to Mary.

"There ain't a man in this Gawd-forsaken country wouldn't lope at the chance to die for her—but the women!" Leander's pantomimic indication of absolute feminine antagonism was conclusive.

[pg 048]

"The wimmin treats her scabby—just scabby. Don't you go to thinkin' she ain't a good girl on that account"; and something like an attitude of chivalrous protection straightened the apologetic crook in his craven outline.

"She's good, just good, and when a woman's that there's no use in sayin' it any more fanciful. As I says to my wife, every time she give me a chance, 'If Judy wasn't a good girl these boys about here would just natchrally become extinct shootin' each other upon account of her.' But she don't favor none enough to cause trouble."

"Are the women jealous of her?"

"It's her independence that riles 'em. They take on awful about her ridin' in pants, an' it certainly is a heap more modest than ridin' straddle in a hitched up caliker skirt, same as some of them do."

"And do all the women out here ride astride?" Mary gasped.

"A good many does, when you ain't watchin'; horses in these parts ain't broke for no such lopsided foolishness as side-saddles. But you see she does it becomin', and that's where the grudge comes in. You can't stir about these foot-hills without coming across a woman, like as not, holdin' on to a posse of kids, and ridin' clothes-pin fashion in a looped-up skirt; when she sees you comin' she'll p'r'aps upset a kid or two assoomin' a decorous attitood. That's *feeminine*, and as such is approved by the ladies, but"—and here Leander put his head on one side and gave a grotesque impression of outraged decorum—"pants is considered

unwomanly."

[pg 049]

"Leander! Leander!" came in accusing accents from the kitchen.

"Run!" gasped Mrs. Dax's handmaiden; "don't let her catch us chinnin'."

Mary Carmichael ran round one side of the house as she was bidden, but, like Lot's wife, could not resist the temptation of looking back. Leander, with incredible rapidity, grabbed two clothes-pins off the line, clutched a dish-towel, shook it. "Comin'! comin'!" he called, as he went through the farce of rehangng it.

The lonesomeness of plain and foot-hill, the utter lack of the human element that gives to this country its character of penetrating desolation, had been changed while Mary Carmichael forgathered with Leander by the clothes-line. From the four quarters of the compass, men in sombreros, flannel shirts, and all manner of strange habiliments came galloping over the roads as if their horses were as keen on reaching Dax's as their riders. They came towards the house at full tilt, their horses stretching flat with ears laid back viciously, and Mary, who was unused to the tricks of cow-ponies, expected to see them ride through the front door, merely by way of demonstrating their sense of humor. Not so; the little pintos, buckskins, bays, and chestnuts dashed to the door and stopped short in a full gallop; as a bit of staccato equestrianism it was superb.

And then the wherefore of all this dashing horsemanship, this curveting, prancing, galloping revival of knightly tourney effects was apparent—Judith Rodney had opened post-office. She had changed [pg 050] her riding clothes; or, rather, that portion of them to which the ladies took exception was now concealed by a long, black skirt. Her wonderful braids of black hair had been twisted high on her head. She was well worth a trip across the alkali wastes to see. The room was packed with men. One unconsciously got the impression that a fire, a fight, or some crowd-collecting casualty had happened. Above the continual clinking of spurs there arose every idiom and peculiarity of speech of which these United States are capable. There is no Western dialect, properly speaking. Men bring their modes of expression with them from Maine or Minnesota, as the case may be, but their figures of speech, which give an essential picturesqueness to their language, are almost entirely local—the cattle and sheep industries, prospecting, the Indians, poker, faro, the dance-halls, all

contribute their printable or unprintable embellishment.

Judith managed them all—cow-punchers, sheep-herders, prospectors, freighters—with an impersonal skill that suggested a little solitary exercise in the bowling-alley. The ten-pins took their tumbles in good part—no one could congratulate himself on escaping the levelling ball—and where there's a universal lack of luck, doubtless also there will be found a sort of grim fellowship.

That they were all more or less in love with her there could be no doubt. As a matter of fact, Judith Rodney did not depend on the scarcity of women in the desert for her pre-eminence in the interests of this hot-headed group. Her personality—and [pg 051] through no conscious effort of hers—would have been pre-eminent anywhere. As it was, in this woman-forsaken wilderness she might have stirred up a modern edition of the Trojan war at any moment. That she did not, despite the lurking suggestion of temptation written all over her, brought back the words of Leander: "If Judy wasn't a good girl, these boys would just nacherally become extinct shooting each other upon account of her."

And yet what a woman she was! It struck Miss Carmichael, as she watched Judith hold these warring elements in the hollow of her hand, that her interest might be due to a certain temperamental fusion; that there might lie, at the essence of her being, a subtle combination of saint and devil. One could fancy her leading an army on a crusade or provoking a bar-room brawl. The challenging quality of her beauty, the vividness of color, the suggestion of endurance and radiating health in every line, were comparable to the great primeval forces about her. She was cast to be the mother of men of brawn and muscle, who would make this vast, unclaimed wilderness subject to them.

At present neither pole of her character, as it had been hastily estimated, was even remotely suggested. The atmosphere in the post-office was, considering the potential violence of its visitors, singularly calm. And Judith, feeding these wild border lads on scraps of chaff and banter, and retaining their absolute loyalty, was a sight worth seeing. She had the alertness of a lion-tamer [pg 052] locked in a cage with the lords of the jungle; the rashly confident she humbled, the meek she exalted, and all with such genuine good-fellowship, such an absence of coquetry in the genial game of give and take, that one ceased to wonder at even the devotion of Leander. And since they were to her, on her own confession, but "spurs and sombreros," one wondered at the elaboration of the comedy, the endless wire-pulling in the manipulation of these most picturesque marionettes

—until one remembered the outlaw brother and felt that what she did she did for him.

"You right shore there ain't a letter for me, Miss Judith. My creditors are pretty faithful 'bout bearing me in mind." It was the third time that the big, shambling Texan who had been one of the company at Mrs. Clark's eating-house had inquired for mail, and seemed so embarrassed by his own bulk that he moved cautiously, as if he might step on a fellow-creature and maim him. Each time he had asked for a letter he took his place at the end of the waiting-line and patiently bided his time for the chance of an extra word with the postmistress.

"They've begun to lose hope, Texas."

She shuffled the letters impartially, as a goddess dispensing fate, and barely glanced at the man who had ridden a hundred and fifty miles across sand and cactus to see her.

"That's the difference between them and me." There was a grim finality in his tone.

"What, you're going to take your place at the end of that line again! I'll try and find you a circular."

[pg 053]

He tried to look at her angrily, but she smiled at him with such good-fellowship that he went off singing significantly that universal anthem of the cow-puncher the West over:

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie,
In a narrow grave just six by three,
Where the wild coyotes will howl o'er me.
Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie."

"Ain't there a love letter for me?" The young man who inquired seemed to belong to a different race from these bronzed squires of the saddle. He suggested over-crowded excursion boats on Sunday afternoons in swarming Eastern cities. He buttonholed every one and explained his presence in the West on the score of his health, as though leaving his native asphalt were a thing that demanded apology.

"Yes," answered the postmistress, with a real motherly note, "here is one from Hugous & Co."

A roar went up at this, and the blushing tenderfoot pocketed his third bill for the most theatrical style of Mexican sombrero; it had a brass snake coiled round the crown for a hat-band, and a cow-puncher in good and regular standing would have preferred going bareheaded to wearing it.

"She seems to be pressing her suit, son; you better name the day," one of the loungers suggested.

"The blamed thing ain't worth twenty-five dollars," the young man from the East declared. A conspicuous silence followed. It seemed to [pg 054] irritate the owner of the hat that no one would defend it. "It ain't worth it," he repeated.

"I think you allowed you was out here for your health?" the big Texan, who had returned from the corral, inquired.

"Betcher life," swaggered the man with the hat, "N'York's good enough for me."

"But"—and the Texan smiled sweetly—"the man who sold you the hat ain't out here for his."

Judith hid her head and stamped letters. The boys were suspiciously quiet, then some one began to chant:

"The devil examined the desert well,
And made up his mind 'twas too dry for hell;
He put up the prices his pockets to swell,
And called it a—heal-th resort."

The postmistress waited for the last note of the chorus to die away, and read from a package she held in her hand—"Mrs. Henry Lee, Deer Lodge, Wyoming.' Well, Henry, here's a wedding-present, I guess. And my congratulations, though you've hardly treated us well in never saying a word."

The unfortunate Henry, who hadn't even a sweetheart, and who was noted as the shyest man in the "Goose Creek Outfit," had to submit to the mock congratulations of every man in the room and promise to set up the drinks later.

"I never felt we'd keep you long, son; them golden curls seldom gets a chance to ripen singly."

"Shoshone squaw, did you say she was, Henry? [pg 055] They ain't much for looks, but there's a heap of wear to 'em."

"Oh, go on, now; you fellows know I ain't married." And the boy handled the package with a sort of dumb wonder, as if the superscription were indisputable evidence of a wife's existence.

"Open it, Henry; you shore don't harbor sentiments of curiosity regarding the post-office dealings of your lady."

"Now, old man, this here may be grounds for divorce."

"See what the other fellow's sending your wife."

Henry, badgered, jostled, the target of many a homely witticism, finally opened the package, which proved to be a sample bottle of baby food. At sight of it they howled like Apaches, and Henry was again forced to receive their congratulations. Judith, who had been an interested on-looker without joining in the merriment, now detected in the tenor of their humor a tendency towards breadth. In an instant her manner was official; rapping the table with her mailing-stamp, she announced:

"Boys, this post-office closes in ten minutes, if you want to buy any stamps."

The silence following this statement on the part of the postmistress was instantaneous. Henry took his mirth-provoking package and went his way; some of the more hilariously inclined followed him. The remainder confined themselves absolutely to business, scrawling postal-cards or reading their mail. The pounce of the official stamp on the letters, as [pg 056] the postmistress checked them off for the mail-bag, was the only sound in the hot stillness.

A heavily built man, older than those who had been keeping the post-office lively, now took advantage of the lull to approach Judith. He had a twinkling face, all circles and pouches, but it grew graver as he spoke to the postmistress. He was Major Atkins, formerly a famous cavalry officer, but since his retirement a cattle-man whose herds grazed to the pan-handle of Texas. As he took his mail, talking meantime of politics, of the heat, of the lack of water, in the loud voice

for which he was famous, he managed, with clumsy diplomacy, to interject a word or two for her own ear alone.

"Jim's out," he conveyed to her, in a successfully muffled tone. "He's out, and they're after him, hot. Get him out of the State, Judy—get him out, *quick*. He tried to kill Simpson at Mrs. Clark's, in town, yesterday. The little Eastern girl that's here will tell you." Then the major was gone before Judith could perfectly realize the significance of what he had told her.

She threw back her head and the pulse in her throat beat. Like a wild forest thing, at the first warning sound, she considered: Was it time for flight?—or was the warning but the crackling of a twig? Major Atkins was a cattle-man: her brother hated all cattle-men. How disinterested had been the major's warning! He had always been her friend. Mrs. Atkins had been one of the ladies at the post who had helped to send her to school to the nuns at Santa Fé. She despised herself for [pg 057] doubting; yet these were troublous times, and all was fair between sheep and cattle-men. Major Atkins had spoken of the Eastern girl; then that pretty, little, curly-haired creature, whom Judith had found standing in the sunshine, had seen Jim—had heard him threaten to kill. Should she ask her about it—consult her? Judith's training was not one to impel her to give her confidence to strangers, still she had liked the little Eastern girl.

These were the perplexities that beset her, sweeping her thoughts hither and thither, as sea-weed is swept by the wash of the waves. She strove to collect her faculties. How should she rid the house of her cavaliers? She had regularly to refuse some half-dozen of them each day that she kept post-office.

In a few minutes more the group in the post-office began to disperse under the skilful manipulation of the postmistress. To some she sold stamps with an air of "God speed you," and they were soon but dwindling specks on the horizon. To others she implied such friendly farewells that there was nothing to do but betake themselves to their saddles. Others had compromised with the saloon opposite, and their roaring mirth came in snatches of song and shouts of laughter. She fastened up the little pile of letters that had remained uncalled for with what seemed a deliberate slowness. Each time any one entered the room she looked up—then the hope died hard in her face. Leander came in with catlike tread and removed the pigeon-holes from the table. The post-office was closed. Family life had been resumed at the Daxes'.

[pg 058]

Judith left the room and stood in the blinding sunlight, basking in it as if she were cold. The mercury must have stood close to a hundred, and she was hatless. There was no trace of her ebullient spirits of the morning. Her head was sunk on her breast and she held her hands with locked fingers behind her. It was hot, hot as the breaths of a thousand belching furnaces. A white, burning glare had spread itself from horizon to horizon, and the earth wrinkled and cracked beneath it. From every corner of this parched wilderness came an ominous whirring, like the last wheezing gasp of an alarm-clock before striking the hour. This menacing orchestration was nothing more or less than millions of grasshoppers rasping legs and wings together in hoarse appreciation of the heat and glare; but it had a sound that boded evil. Again and again she turned towards the yellow road as it dipped over the hills; but there was never a glimpse of a horseman from that direction.

[pg 059]

The Trail Of Sentiment

Within the house the travellers had disposed themselves in a repressed and melancholy circle that suggested the suspended animation of a funeral gathering. The fat lady had turned back her skirt to save her travelling dress. The stage was late, and there was no good and sufficient reason for wearing it out. A similar consideration of economy led her to flirt off flies with her second best pocket-handkerchief. Mrs. Dax presided over the gathering with awful severity. Every one truckled to her shamefully, receiving her lightest remarks as if they were to be inscribed on tablets of bronze. Leander, his eyes bright with excitement at being received in the family circle on an equal footing, balanced perilously on the edge of his chair, anticipating dismissal.

"Chugg's never ben so late as this," said Mrs. Dax, rocking herself furiously. She strongly resembled one of those mottled chargers of the nursery whose flaunting nostrils seem forever on the point of sending forth flame. Leander, the fat lady, and Miss Carmichael meekly murmured assent and condemnation.

[pg 060]

"And there ain't a sign of him," said Mrs. Dax, returning to the house after straining the landscape through her all-observant eye, and not detecting him in any of the remote pin-pricks on the horizon, in which these plainsfolk invariably decipher a herd of antelope, an elk or two, or a horseman.

"Bet he had a woman in the stage and upset it with her," said Leander, in the animated manner of a poor relation currying favor with a bit of news.

Mrs. Dax regarded him severely for a moment, then conspicuously addressed her next remark to the ladies. "Bet he had a woman in the stage, the old scoundrel!"

"Wonder who she was?" said Leander, with the sparkling triumph of a poor relation whose surmise had been accepted. But Mrs. Dax had evidently decided

that Leander had gone far enough.

"Was you expectin' any of your lady friends by Chugg's stage that you are so frettin' anxious?" she inquired, and the poor relation collapsed miserably.

"You've heard about Chugg's goin' on since 'Mountain Pink' jilted him?" inquired Mrs. Dax of the fat lady, as the only one of the party who might have kept abreast with the social chronicles of the neighborhood.

"My land, yes," responded the fat lady, proud to be regarded as socially cognizant. "M' son says he's plumb locoed about it—didn't want me to travel by his stage. But I said he dassent upset a woman of my age—he just nacherally dassent!"

Miss Carmichael, by dint of patient inquiry, finally got the story which was popularly supposed to [pg 061] account for the misdemeanors of the stage-driver, including his present delinquency that was delaying them on their journey.

It appeared that Lemuel Chugg, then writhing in the coils of perverse romance, was among the last of those famous old stage-drivers whose talents combined skill at handling the ribbons with the diplomacy necessary to treat with a masked envoy on the road. His luck in these encounters was proverbial, and many were the hair-breadth escapes due to Chugg's ready wit and quick aim; and, to quote Leander, "while he had been shot as full of holes as a salt-shaker, there was a lot of fight in the old man yet."

Chugg had had no loves, no hates, no virtues, no genial vices after the manner of these frontiersmen. Avarice had warmed the cockles of his heart, and the fetish he prayed to was an old gray woollen stocking, stuffed so full of twenty-dollar gold pieces that it presented the bulbous appearance of the "before treatment" view of a chiropodist's sign. This darling of his old age had been waxing fat since Chugg's earliest manhood. It had been his only love—till he met Mountain Pink.

Mountain Pink's husband kept a road-ranch somewhere on Chugg's stage-route. She was of a buxom type whose red-and-white complexion had not yet surrendered to the winds, the biting dust, and the alkali water. Furthermore, she could "bring about a dried-apple pie" to make a man forget the cooking of his mother. Great was the havoc wrought by Mountain Pink's pies and complexion,

but she [pg 062] followed the decorous precedent of Cæsar's wife, and, like her pastry, remained above suspicion.

Her husband, whose name was Jim Bosky, seemed, to the self-impanelled jury that spent its time sitting on the case, singularly insensible to his own advantages. Not only did he fail to take a proper pride in her beauty, but there were dark hints abroad that he had never tasted one of her pies. When delicately questioned on this point, at that stage of liquid refreshment that makes these little personalities not impossible, Bosky had grimly quoted the dearth of shoes among shoe-makers' children.

Whatever were the facts of the case, Mountain Pink got the sympathy that might have been expected in a section of the country where the ratio of the sexes is fifty to one. Chugg, eating her pies regularly once a week on his stage-route, said nothing, but he presented her with a red plush photograph album with oxidized silver clasps, and by this first reckless expenditure of money in the life of Chugg, Natrona, Johnson, Converse, and Sweetwater counties knew that Cupid had at last found a vulnerable spot in the tough and weather-tanned hide of the old stage-driver.

Nor did Cupid stop here with his pranks. Having inoculated the stage-driver with the virus of romance, madness began to work in the veins of Chugg. He presented Mountain Pink with the gray woollen stocking—not extracting a single coin—and urged her to get a divorce from the clodlike man who had never appreciated her and marry him.

[pg 063]

Mountain Pink coyly took the stocking so generously given for the divorce and subsequent trousseau, and Chugg continued to drive his stage with an Apollo-like abandon, whistling love-songs the while.

Coincident with Mountain Pink's disappearance Dakotaward, in the interests of freedom, went also one Bob Catlin, a mule-wrangler. Bosky, with conspicuous pessimism, hoped for the worst from the beginning, and as time went on and nothing was heard of either of the wanderers, some of Mountain Pink's most loyal adherents confessed it looked "romancy." But crusty old Chugg remained true to his ideal. "She'll write when she gets good and ready," and then concluded, loyally, "Maybe she can't write, nohow," and nothing could shake his faith.

When Mountain Pink and the mule-wrangler returned as bride and groom and set up housekeeping on the remainder of Chugg's stocking, and on his stage-route, too, so that he had to drive right past the honeymoon cottage every time he completed the circuit, they lost caste in Carbon County. Chugg never spoke of the faithlessness of Mountain Pink. His bitterness found vent in tipping over the stage when his passengers were confined to members of the former Mrs. Bosky's sex, and, as Leander said, "the flask in his innerds held more." And these were the only traces of tragedy in the life of Lemuel Chugg, stage-driver.

Judith had continued her unquiet pacing in the blinding glare while the group within doors, somnolent [pg 064] from the heat and the incessant shrilling of the locusts, droningly discussed the faithlessness of Mountain Pink, dozed, and took up the thread of the romance. Each time she turned Judith would stop and scan the yellow road, shading her eyes with her hand, and each time she had turned away and resumed her walk. Mary, who gave the postmistress no unstinted share of admiration for the courage with which she faced her difficulties, and who had been seeking an opportunity to signify her friendship, and now that she saw the last of the gallants depart, inquired of Judith if she might join her.

They walked without speaking for several minutes, enjoying a sense of comradeship hardly in keeping with the brevity of their acquaintance; a freedom from restraint spared them the necessity of exchanging small-talk, that frequently irritating toll exacted as tribute to possible friendship.

The desert lay white and palpitating beneath the noonday glare, and from the outermost rim of desolation came dancing "dust-devils" whirling and gliding through the mazes of their eerie dance. "I think sometimes," said Judith, "that they are the ghosts of those who have died of thirst in the desert."

Mary shuddered imperceptibly. "How do you stand it with never a glimpse of the sea?"

"You'll love it, or hate it; the desert is too jealous for half measures. As for the sea"—Judith shrugged her fine shoulders—"from all I've heard of it, it must be very wet."

[pg 065]

Each felt a reticence about broaching the subject uppermost in her thoughts—Judith from the instinctive tendency towards secretiveness that was part of the

heritage of her Indian blood; Mary because the subject so closely concerned this girl for whom she felt such genuine admiration.

Judith finally brought up the matter with an abruptness that scarce concealed her anxiety.

"You saw my brother yesterday at Mrs. Clark's eating-house; will you be good enough to tell me just what happened?"

Mary related the incident in detail, Judith cross-examining her minutely as to the temper of the men at table towards Jim. Did she know if any cattle-men were present? Did she hear where her brother had gone?

Mary had heard nothing further after he had left the eating-house; the only one she had talked to had been Mrs. Clark, whose sympathy had been entirely with Jim. Judith thanked her, but in reality she knew no more now than she had heard from Major Atkins.

Judith now stopped in their walk and stood facing the road as it rolled over the foot-hills—a skein of yellow silk glimmering in the sun. Then Mary saw that the object spinning across it in the distance, hardly bigger than a doll's carriage, was the long-delayed stage. She spoke to the postmistress, but apparently she did not hear—Judith was watching the nearing stage as if it might bring some message of life and death. She stood still, and the drooping lines of her figure straightened, [pg 066] every fibre of her beauty kindled. She was like a flame, paling the sunlight.

And presently was heard the uncouth music of sixteen iron-shod hoofs beating hard from the earth rhythmic notes which presently grew hollow and sonorous as they came rattling over the wooden bridge that spanned the creek.

"Chugg!" exclaimed Leander, rushing to the door in a tumult. There was something crucial in the arrival of the delayed stage-driver. His delinquencies had deflected the course of the travellers, left them stranded in a remote corner of the wilderness; but now they should again resume the thread of things; Chugg's coming was an event.

"'Tain't Chugg, by God!" said Leander, impelled to violent language by the unexpected.

"It's Peter Hamilton!" exclaimed Mrs. Dax.

"Land's sakes, the New-Yorker!" said the fat lady. Only Judith said nothing.

Mr. Hamilton held the ribbons of that battered prairie-stage as if he had been driving past the judges' bench at the Horse Show. Furthermore, he wore blue overalls, a flannel shirt, and a sombrero, which sartorial inventory, while it highly became the slim young giant, added an extra comedy touch to his rôle of whip. He was as dusty as a miller; close-cropped, curly head, features, and clothes were covered with a fine alkali powdering; but he carried his youth as a banner streaming in the blue. And he swung from the stage with the easy flow of muscle that is the reward of those who live in the saddle and make a fine art of throwing the lariat.

[pg 067]

They greeted him heartily, all but Judith, who did not trust herself to speak to him before the prying eyes of Mrs. Dax, and escaped to the house. Chugg's latest excursion into oblivion had resulted in a fall from the box. He was not badly hurt, and recuperation was largely a matter of "sleeping it off," concluded Peter Hamilton's bulletin of the condition of the stage-driver. So the travellers were still marooned at Dax's, and the prospect of continuing their journey was as vague as ever.

"Last I heard of you," said Mrs. Dax to Hamilton, with a sort of stone-age playfulness, "you was punching cows over to the Bitter Root."

"That's true, Mrs. Dax"—he gave her his most winning smile—"but I could not stay away from you long."

Leander grimaced and rubbed his hands in an ecstasy of delight at finding a man who had the temerity to bandy words with Mrs. Dax.

"Hum-m-m-ph!" she whinnied, with equine coquetry. "Guess it was rustlers brought you back as much as me."

Judith, who had entered the room in time to hear Mrs. Dax's last remark, greeted him casually, but her eyes, as they met his, were full of questioning fear. Had he come from the Bitter Root range to hunt down her brother? The thought was intolerable. Yet, when he had bade her good-bye some three weeks ago, he had told her that he did not expect to return much before the fall "round-up." She had

heard, a day or two before, that he was again in the Wind River country, and her morning [pg 068] vigil beneath the glare of the desert sun had been for him.

Mrs. Dax regarded them with the mercilessness of a death-watch; she remembered the time when Hamilton's excuses for his frequent presence at the post-office had been more voluble than logical. But now he no longer came, and Judith, for all her deliberate flow of spirits, did not quite convince the watchful eyes of Leander's lady—the postmistress was a trifle too cheerful.

"Mrs. Dax," pleaded Peter, boyishly, "I'm perishing for a cup of coffee, and I've got to get back to my outfit before dark."

"Oh, go on with you," whinnied the gorgon; but she left the room to make the coffee.

Judith's eyes sought his. "Why don't you and Leander form a coalition for the overthrow of the enemy?" His voice had dropped a tone lower than in his parley with Mrs. Dax; it might have implied special devotion, or it might have implied but the passing tribute to a beautiful woman in a country where women were few—the generic admiration of all men for all women, ephemeraly specialized by place and circumstance.

But Judith, harassed at every turn, heart-sick with anxiety, had anticipated in Peter's coming, if not a solution of her troubles, at least some evidence of sustaining sympathy, and was in no mood for resuscitating the perennial pleasantries anent Leander and his masterful lady.

The shrilling of the locusts emphasized their silence. She spoke to him casually of his change of [pg 069] plan, but he turned the subject, and Judith let the matter drop. She was too simple a woman to stoop to oblique measures for the gaining of her own ends. If he was here to hunt down her brother, if he was here to see the Eastern woman at the Wetmore ranch—well, "life was life," to be taken or left. Thus spoke the fatalism that was the heritage of her Indian blood.

The thought of Miss Colebrooke at Wetmore's reminded her of a letter for Peter that had been brought that morning by one of the Wetmore cow-boys.

"I forgot—there's a letter for you." She went to the pigeon-holes on the wall that held the flotsam and jetsam of unclaimed mail, and brought him a square, blue linen envelope—distinctly a lady's letter.

Peter took it with rather a forced air of magnanimity, as if in neglecting to present it to him sooner she drew heavily on his reserve of patience. Tearing open the envelope, he read it voraciously, read it to the exclusion of his surroundings, the world at large, and—Judith. He strode up and down the floor two or three times, and called to Leander, who was passing:

"Dax, I must have that gray mare of yours right away." He went in the direction of the stable, without a second glance at the postmistress, and presently they saw him galloping off in the opposite direction from which he had come. Mrs. Dax came in with a tray on which were a pot of coffee and sundry substantial delicacies.

[pg 070]

"Where's he gone?" she demanded, putting the tray down so hard that the coffee slopped.

"I dunno," said Leander. "He said he'd got to have the gray mare, saddled her hisself, and rode off like hell."

Mrs. Dax looked at them all savagely for the explanation that they could not give. In sending her out to make coffee she felt that Peter, whom she regarded in the light of a weakness, had taken advantage of her affections to dupe her in regard to his plans.

"Take them things back to the kitchen," she commanded Leander.

Mary Carmichael involuntarily glanced at Judith; the fall of the leaf was in her cheek.

Peter Hamilton, bowed in his saddle and flogging forward inhumanely, bred rife speculation as to his destination among the group that watched him from the Daxes' front door. Mrs. Dax, who entertained so profound a respect for her own omniscience that she disdained to arrive at a conclusion by a logical process of deduction, was "plumb certain that he had gone after 'rustlers!'" Leander, who had held no opinions since his marriage except that first and all-comprehensive tenet of his creed—that his wife was a person to be loved, honored, and obeyed instantly—agreed with his lady by a process of reflex action. The fat lady, who had a commonplace for every occasion, didn't "know what we were all coming to." Miss Carmichael, who was beginning to find her capacity for amazement overstrained, alone accepted this last incident with apathy. Mr. [pg 071]

Hamilton might have gone in swift pursuit of cattle thieves or he might be riding the mare to death for pure whimsy. Only Judith Rodney, who said nothing, felt that he was spurring across the wilderness at breakneck speed to see a girl at Wetmore's. But her lack of comment caused no ripple of surprise in the flow of loose-lipped speculation that served, for the time being, to inject a casual interest into the talk of these folk, bored to the verge of demoralization by long waiting for Chugg.

Judith preferred to confirm her apprehensions regarding Hamilton's ride, alone. She knew—had not all her woman's intuitions risen in clamorous warning—and yet she hoped, hoped despairingly, even though the dread alternative to the girl at the Wetmore ranch threatened lynch law for her brother. Her very gait changed as she withdrew from the group about the door, covertly gaining her vantage-ground inch by inch. The heels of her riding-boots made no sound as she stole across the kitchen floor, toeing in like an Indian tracking an enemy through the forest. The small window at the back of the kitchen commanded a view of the road in all its sprawling circumlocution. Seen from this prospect, it had no more design than the idle scrawlings of a child on a bit of paper; but the choice of roads to Good and Evil was not fraught with more momentous consequences than was each prong of that fork towards which Hamilton was galloping.

The right arm swung towards the Wetmore ranch, where at certain times during the course of the year a hundred cow-punchers reported on the stock that [pg 072] grazed in four States. At certain seasons, likewise, despite the fact that the ranch was well into the foot-hill country, there might be found a New York family playing at life primeval with the co-operation of porcelain bath-tubs, a French *chef*, and electric light.

The left fork of the road had a meaner destiny. It dipped straight into desolation, penetrating a naked wilderness where bad men skulked till the evil they had done was forgotten in deeds that called afresh to Heaven for vengeance. It was well away on this west fork of the road that they lynched Kate Watson—"Cattle Kate"—for the crime of loyalty. It was she, intrepid and reckless, who threatened the horde of masked scoundrels when they came to lynch her man for the iniquity of raising a few vegetables on a strip of ground that cut into their grazing country. And when she, recognizing them, masked though they were, threatened them with the vengeance of the law, they hanged her with her man high as Haman.

Judith watched Hamilton with narrowing eyes. And now she was all Indian, the white woman in her dead. Only the Sioux watched, and, in the patient, Indian style, bided its time. "Cattle thieves," "the girl at Wetmore's"—the words sang themselves in her head like an incantation. "Cattle thieves" meant her brother, their recognized leader—her brother, who was dearer to her than the heart in her breast, the eye in her head, the right hand that held together the shambling, uncertain destiny of her people. Would he turn to the left, Justice, [pg 073] on a pale horse, hunting her brother gallowward? Would he turn towards the right, the impetuous lover spurring his steed that he might come swiftly to the woman. A pulse in her bosom rose slowly until her breath was suspended, then fell again; she was still watching, without an outward quiver, long after he had turned to the right—and the woman.

[pg 074]

VI

A Daughter Of The Desert

Judith knew that the name of the girl whose letter sent Peter Hamilton vaulting to the saddle was Katherine Colebrooke. There had been a deal of letter-writing between her and the young cow-puncher of late, of which perforce, by a singular irony of fate, the postmistress had been the involuntary instrument. The correspondence had followed a recent hasty journey to New York, undertaken somewhat unwillingly by Hamilton in the interest of certain affairs connected with the settlement of an estate.

The precipitancy of this latest turn of events bewildered Judith; but yet a little while—a matter of weeks and days—and her friendship with Hamilton had been of that pleasantly indefinite estate situated somewhere on the borderland of romance, a kingdom where there is no law but the mutual interest of the wayfarers. Judith and Peter had been pitifully new at the game of life when the gods vouchsafed them the equivocal blessing of propinquity. Judith was but lately come from the convent at Santa Fé, and Hamilton from the [pg 075] university whose honors availed him little in the trailing of cattle over the range or in the sweat and tumult of the branding-pen. It was a strange election of opportunity for a man who had been class poet and had rather conspicuously avoided athletics during his entire college course. In pursuing fortune westward Hamilton did not lack for chroniclers who would not have missed a good story for the want of an authentic dramatic interpretation of his plans. His uncle, said they, who had put him through college, was disposed to let him sink or swim by his own efforts; or, again, he had quarrelled with this same omnipotent uncle and walked from his presence with no prospects but those within grasp of his own hand. Again, he had taken the negative of a fair lady more to heart than two-and-twenty is in the habit of taking negatives. Peter made no confidences. He went West to punch cows for the Wetmore outfit; he was a distant connection of the Wetmores through his mother's side of the family.

In those days Peter wore his rue—whether for lady fair or for towering prospects

stricken down—with a tinge of wan melancholy not unbecoming to a gentle aquilinity of profile, softened by the grace of adolescence. His instinctive aristocracy of manners and taste would have availed him little with his new associates had he been a whit less manly. But as he shirked no part of the universal hardship, they left him his reticence. He even came to enjoy a sort of remote popularity as one who was conversant with the best—a nonchalant [pg 076] social connoisseur—yet who realized the stern primitive beauties of the range life.

Judith's convent upbringing had conferred on her the doubtful advantage of a gentlewoman's tastes and bearing, making of her, therefore, an alien in her father's house. When Mrs. Atkins, who was responsible for her education, realized the equivocal good of these things, and saw moreover that the girl had grown to be a beauty, she offered to adopt her; but Judith, with the pitiful heroism of youth that understands little of what it is renouncing, thought herself strong enough to hold together a family, uncertain of purpose as quicksilver.

In those tragic days of readjustment came Peter Hamilton, as strange to the bald conditions of frontier life as the girl herself. From the beginning there had been between them the barrier of circumstance. Hamilton was poor, Judith the mainstay of a household whose thriftlessness had become a proverb. He came of a family that numbered a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a famous chief-justice, and the dean of a great university; Judith was uncertain of her right to the very name she bore. And yet they were young, he a man, she a woman—eternal fountain of interest. A precocious sense of the fitness of things was the compass that enabled Peter to steer through the deep waters in the years that followed. But the girl paid the penalty of her great heart; in that troublous sea of friendship, she was soon adrift without rudder, sail, or compass.

[pg 077]

Judith was now eight-and-twenty, and a sculptor would have found a hundred statues in her. Long of limb, deep-bosomed, youth and health radiated from her as sparks fly upward. In sunlight, her black hair had the bluish iridescence of a ripe plum. The eyes were deep and questioning—the eyes of a young seraph whose wings had not yet brushed the far distant heights of paradise. Again, in her pagan gladness of living, she might have been a Valkyr come down from Valhalla on a shooting-star. And yet, in this wilderness that was famishing for woman's love and tears and laughter, by a very perversity of fate she walked alone.

She was a true daughter of the desert, the child of stark, unlovely circumstance. No well-bred romance of book and bells and churchly benediction had ushered her into being. Her maternal grandfather had been the famous Sioux chief, Flying Hawk; her grandmother, a white woman, who knew no word of her people's tongue, nor yet her name or race. The Indians found the white baby sleeping by her dead mother after the massacre of an emigrant train. They took her with them and she grew up, in the Black Hill country, a white-skinned Sioux, marrying a chief of the people that had slain her people. She accepted her squaw's portion uncomplainingly; slaved cheerfully at squaw's work while her brave made war on the whites, hunted, and smoked. She reared her half-breed children in the legends of their father's people, and died, a withered crone, cursing the pale-faces who had robbed the Sioux of the buffalo and their hunting-ground.

[pg 078]

Her daughter, Singing Stream, who knew no word of English, but who could do better bead-work than any squaw in the tribe, went to live with Warren Rodney when he finished his cabin on Elder Creek. That was before the gold fever reached the Black Hills, and Rodney built the cabin that he might fish and hunt and forget the East and why he left it. There were reasons why he wanted to forget his identity as a white man in his play at being an Indian. In the first flare of youth and the joy of having come into her woman's kingdom, the half-breed squaw was pretty; she was proud, too, of her white man, the house he had built her, and the girl pappoose with blue eyes. Furthermore, she had been taught to serve man meekly, for he was the lord of creation.

Rodney talked Sioux to her. He had all but forgotten he was a white man. The girl pappoose ran about the cabin, brown and bare, but for the bead jacket Singing Stream had made for her in the pride of her maternity. Rodney called the little girl "Judith." Her Indian mother never guessed the significance of the strange name that she could not say, but made at least ten soft singing syllables of, in the Indian way. The little Judith greeted her father in strange lispings; Warren Rodney was far from unhappy in playing at primitive man. This recessional into conditions primeval endured for "seven snows," as the Indian tongue hath it. Then the squaw began to break, after the manner of the women of her father's people. She had begun her race with time a decade after Warren [pg 079] Rodney, and she had outdistanced him by a decade.

And then the Tumblins came from Tennessee to the Black Hills. They came in an

ox-cart, and the days of their journey were more than two years. They had stopped in Ohio, and again in Illinois; and, behold! neither was the promised land, the land that their excited imaginations had painted from the large talk of returning travellers, and that was further glorified through their own thriftless discontent with conditions at home. They had travelled on and on across half a continent in the wake of a vanishing sky-line. The vague westward impulse was luring them to California, but they waited in Dakota that their starved stock might fatten, and while they rested themselves from the long journey, Warren Rodney made the acquaintance of Sally Tumlin, who rallied him on being a "squaw man."

Warren Rodney had almost forgotten the sorceries of the women of his people; he had lived so long with a brown woman, who spread no silken snares. Sally's blushes stirred a multitude of dead things—the wiles of pale women, all strength in weakness, fragile flowers for tender handling—the squaw had grown as withered as a raisin.

Now, Sally Tumlin had no convictions about life but that the world owed her "a home of her own." Her mother had forged the bolt of this particular maxim at an early date. And Sally saw from precocious observation that the business of women was home-getting, to which end they must be neat [pg 080] and sweet and sparing of speech. After the home was forthcoming, then, indeed, might a woman take ease in slippers and wrapper, and it is surely a wife's privilege to speak her mind. Sally knew that she hated travelling westward after the crawling oxen; each day the sun pursued them, caught up with them, outdistanced them, and at night left them stranded in the wilderness, and rose again and mocked them on the morrow. Her father and oafish brother loved the makeshifts of the wagon life, with its chance shots at fleeing antelope, scurrying sage-hens, and bounding cotton-tails; a chance parley with a stray Indian but added zest to the game of chance. But Sally hated it all. The cabin on Elder Creek had a tight roof; Warren Rodney had money in the bank. He had had uncommon luck at trapping. His talk to Sally was largely of his prospects.

Sally knew that the world owed her "a home of her own"; and why should she let a squaw keep her from it? Sally's mother giggled when consulted. She plainly regarded the squaw as a rival of her daughter. The ethics of the case, as far as Mrs. Tumlin was concerned, was merely a question of white skin against brown, and which should carry the day. Singing Stream knew not one word of the talk, much of which occurred in her very presence, that threatened to pull her home

about her ears, but she knew that Sally was taking her man from her. The white-skinned woman wore white ruffles about her neck and calico dresses that were the color of the wild roses that grew among [pg 081] the willows at the creek. Sally Tumlin's pink calico gowns sowed a crop of nettles in the mind of the squaw. It was the rainbow things, she felt, that were robbing her of her man. All her barbaric craving for glowing colors asserted itself as a means towards the one great end of keeping him. Singing Stream began to scheme schemes. One day Rodney was splitting wood at the Tumlin camp—though why he should split wood where there were two women puzzled the squaw. But the ways of the pale-faces were beyond her ken. She only knew that she must make herself beautiful in the eyes of Warren Rodney, like this devil woman, and then perhaps the pappoose that she expected with the first snowfall would be a man-child; and she hoped great things of this happening.

With such primitive reasoning did Singing Stream put the horses to the light wagon, and, taking the little Judith with her, drove to Deadwood, a matter of two hundred miles, to buy the bright calicoes that were to make her like a white woman. It never occurred to the half-breed woman to make known her plans to Warren Rodney. In circumventing Sally Tumlin the man became the spoils of war, and it is not the Indian way to tell plans on the war-trail. So the squaw left her kingdom in the hands of the enemy, without a word.

Sally Tumlin and Warren Rodney looked upon the disappearance of the squaw in the light of a providential solution of the difficulties attending their romance. They admitted it was square of her to "hit the trail," and they decided to lose no [pg 082] time in going to the army post, where a chaplain, an Indian missionary, happened to be staying at the time, and have a real wedding, with a ring and a fee to the parson. The wedding party started for the post, old mother Tumlin fluttering about the bride as complacently as if the ceremony had been the culmination of the most decorous courtship. The oafish brother drove the bridal party, making crude jests by-the-way, to the frank delight of the prospective groom and the giggling protestations of the bride. The chaplain at the post was disposed to ask few questions. Parsons made queer marriages in those tumultuous days, and it was regarded as a patent of worthy motives that the pair should call in the man of the gospel at all. To the question whether or not he had been married before, Rodney answered:

"Well, parson, this is the first time I have ever stood up for a life sentence." And the ceremony proceeded.

Some of the ladies at the post, hearing that there was to be a wedding, dropped in and added their smiles and flutterings to the rather grim party; among them, Mrs. Atkins, who had just come to the post as a bride. They even added a trifle or two from their own store of pretty things, as presents to Sally. And Miss Tumlin left the post Mrs. Warren Rodney, with "a home of her own" to go to.

Singing Stream did not hasten in her quest for bright fabrics with which to stay the hand of fate. To the half-breed woman the journey to town was not without a certain revivifying pleasure. The Indian [pg 083] in her stirred to the call of the open country. The tight roof to the cabin on Elder Creek had not the attractions for her that it had for Sally Tumlin. She had chafed sometimes at a house with four walls. But now the dead and gone braves rose in her as she followed the old trail where they had so often crept to battle against their old enemies, the Crows, before the white man's army had scattered them. And as she drove through the foot-hill country, she told the solemn-eyed little Judith the story of the Sioux, and what a great fighting people they had been before Rodney's people drove them from their land. Judith was holding a doll dressed exactly like herself, in soft buckskin shirt, little trousers, and moccasins, all beautifully beaded. In her turn she told the story to the doll.

Singing Stream told her daughter of the making of the world, as the Sioux believe the story of creation; of the "Four who Never Die"—Sharper, or Bladder, Rabbit, Turtle, and Monster; likewise of the coming of a mighty flood on which swam the Turtle and a water-fowl in whose bill was the earth atom, from which presently the world began to grow, Turtle supporting the bird on his great back, which was hard like rock. The rest of the myth, that deals with the rising and setting of the sun, Singing Stream could not tell her daughter, as the old Sioux chiefs did not think it wise to let their women folk know too much about matters of theology. Nor did they relate to squaws the sun myth, with its account of much cutting-off of heads—thinking, perhaps, with wisdom, that these good [pg 084] ladies saw enough of carnage in their every-day life without introducing it into their catechism.

But Singing Stream knew the story of "Sharper," or "Bladder," as he is called by some of the people, because he is round and his grotesquely fat figure resembles a bladder blown to bursting. Bladder's province it is to make a fool of himself, diving into water after plums he sees reflected there from the branches of the trees. He dives again and again in his pursuit of folly, even tying stones to his wrists and ankles to keep himself down while he gathers the reflected fruit. After

his rescue, which he fights against valiantly, as he lies gasping on the bank of the stream, he sees the fruit on the branches above his head. It is this same Bladder who is one of the *dramatis personæ* in the moon myth, and that is told to women as safely without the limits of that little learning that is a dangerous thing. Bladder met Rabbit hunting; and Bladder kept throwing his eye up into the tree-tops to look for game. The Rabbit watched him enviously, thinking what a saving of effort it would be if he could do the same thing. Wherefore Bladder promised to instruct him, telling him to change eyes after using one four times, but Rabbit did not think that the first time counted, as that was but a trial. So he lost his eye after throwing it up the fifth time. And the eye of the rabbit is the moon, and the face seen in the full moon is the reflection of the rabbit seen in his own eye as we see ourselves reflected in the eye of a friend if we look closely. The little girl was wonderfully impressed. [pg 085] She put her hand to her own eyes, but they were in tight, too tight to throw up to the tree-tops.

Singing Stream also told little Judith that the Great Mystery had shown truths, hid to man, to the trees, the streams, the hills; and the clouds that shaped themselves, drifting hither and yon, were the Great Mystery's passing thoughts. But he had deprived all these things of speech, as he did not trust them fully, and they could only speak to man in dreams, or in some passing mood, when they could communicate to him the feeling of one of the Great Spirits, and warn man of what was about to befall him. Judith was not quite four when she took this memorable drive with her mother, but the impression of these things abided through all her years. It was to the measureless spaces of desert loneliness that she learned to bring her sorrows in the days of her arid youth, and to feel a kinship with all its moods and to hear in the voice of its silence a never-failing consolation.

And when they had come within a mile of Warren Rodney's cabin on Elder Creek, Singing Stream halted and prepared for the great event of reinstatement. First she made a splendid toilet of purple calico torn into strips and tied about the waist to simulate the skirts of the devil woman. Over these she wore a shirt of buckskin, brodered with beads of many colors, and a necklace of elk teeth, wound twice about the throat. On her feet she wore new moccasins of tanned elk-hide, and these, too, were beaded in many colors. Her hair, now braided with strips of scarlet flannel, hung below the waist. And [pg 086] she walked to Rodney's cabin, not as an outgrown mistress, but as the daughter of a chief. The little Judith held up her head and clung tight to the doll. She knew that something of moment was about to happen.

The gala trio, Singing Stream, Judith, and Judith's doll, presented themselves at Rodney's house, before which the bride was washing clothes, the day being fine. Sally, as usual, wore one of the rose-colored calicoes with the collar turned well in and the sleeves rolled above the elbows. She washed vigorously, with a steady splashing of suds. Sally enjoyed this home of her own and all the household duties appertaining to it. She was singing, and a strand of pale-brown hair, crinkly as sea-weed, had blown across the rose of her cheek, when she felt rather than saw a shadow fall across her path, and, glancing up, she saw facing her the woman whom she had supplanted, and the solemn-eyed little girl holding tight to her doll. Now, neither woman knew a word of the other's speech, but Sally was proficient in the language of femininity, and she was not at a loss to grasp the significance of the purple calico, the beaded buckskin shirt, and the necklace of elk teeth. The half-breed walked as a chief's daughter to the woman at the tub, and Sally grew sick and chill despite her white skin and the gold ring that made Warren Rodney her man in the face of the law. The dark woman held Judith proudly by the hand, as a sovereign might carry a sceptre. Judith was her staff of office, her emblem of authority in the house of Warren Rodney.

[pg 087]

Singing Stream held out her hands to Sally in a gesture of appeal—and blundered. Of the chief's daughter, walking proudly, Sally was afraid; but a supplicating half-breed in strips of purple calico, not even hemmed, was a matter for merriment. Sally put her hands on her hips, arms akimbo, and laughed a dry cackle. The light in the brown woman's eyes, as she looked at the white, was like prairie-fires rolling forward through darkness. There was no need of a common speech between them. The whole destiny of woman was in the laugh and the look that answered it.

And the man they could have murdered for came from the house, an unheroic figure with suspenders dangling and a corn-cob pipe in his mouth, sullen, angry, and withal abjectly frightened, as mere man inevitably is when he sniffs a woman's battle in the air. The bride, at sight of her husband, took to hysterics. She wept, she laughed, and down tumbled her hair. She felt the situation demanded a scene. Rodney, with a marital brevity hardly to be expected so soon, commanded Sally to go into the house and to "shut up."

Then he faced Singing Stream and said to her in her own language: "You must go away from here. The pale-faced woman is my wife by the white man's law—ring and Bible. No Indian marriage about this."

But the brown woman only pointed to Judith. She asked Rodney had she not been a good squaw to him.

And Rodney, who at best was but a poltroon, [pg 088] could only repeat: "You got to keep away from here. It's the white man's law—one squaw for one man."

From within came the sound of Sally's lamentation as she called for her father and brother to take her from the squaw and contamination. Warren Rodney was a man of few words. It had become his unpleasant duty to act, and to act quickly. He snatched Judith from her mother and took her into the house, and he returned with his Winchester, which was not loaded, to Singing Stream.

"You got to go," he said, and levelling the Winchester, he repeated the command. Singing Stream looked at him with the dumb wonder of a forest thing. "I was a good squaw to you," she said; and did not even curse him. And turning, she ran towards the foot-hills, with all the length of purple calico trailing.

Now Mrs. Rodney, *née* Tumlin, was but human, and her cup of happiness as the wife of a "squaw man" was not the brimming beaker she had anticipated. The expulsion of her predecessor, at such a time, to make room for her own homecoming, was, it seemed, open to criticism. "The neighborhood"—it included perhaps five families living in a radius of as many hundred miles—felt that the Tumlins had established a bad precedent. A "squaw man" driving out a brown wife to make room for a white is not a heroic figure. It had been done before, but it would not hand down well in the traditions of the settling of this great country. Trespass of law and order, with their swift, red-handed reckoning, [pg 089] were but moves of the great game of colonization. But to shove out a brown woman for a white was a mean move. Few stopped at the Rodneys' ranch, though it marked the first break in the journey from town to the gold-mining country. Rodney had fallen from his estate as a pioneer; his political opinions were unsought in the conclaves that sat and spat at the stove, when business brought them to the joint saloon and post-office. The women dealt with the question more openly, scorning feminine subtlety at this pass as inadequate ammunition. When they met Mrs. Rodney they pulled aside their skirts and glared. This outrage against woman it was woman's work to settle.

Mrs. Rodney, who had no more moral sense than a rabbit, felt that she was the victim of persecution. She knew she was a good woman. Hadn't she a husband? Had there ever been a word against her character? What was the use of making

all that fuss over a squaw? It was not as if she was a white woman. The injustice of it preyed on the former Miss Tumlin. She took to the consolations of snuff-dipping and fell from her pink-and-white estate.

The Tumlin family did not remain long enough in the Black Hill country to witness Sally's failure as the wife of a pioneer. The restlessness of the "settler," if the paradox be permissible, was in the marrow of their bones. The makeshifts of the wagon, the adventures of the road, were the only home they craved. The spring after Sally's marriage they set forth for California, the year following for New Mexico, and still sighed for new worlds to visit. [pg 090] They were happier now that Sally, the one element of discontent, had been removed from their perennial journeying by the merciful dispensation of marriage. Old Tumlin, his wife, and the son gave themselves up more than ever to the day-dreams of the road, the freedom of the open country, and the spirit of adventure.

Rodney's squaw wife was taken in by some neighbors, good folk who were conversant with all phases of the romance. They stood by her in her hour of trial, and afterwards continued to keep her as a servant. Her son Jim grew up with their own children. When he was four years of age his mother, Singing Stream, died, and Sally persuaded her husband to take young Jim into their own home, partly as a sop to neighborly criticism, partly as a salve to her own conscience. Sally had children of her own, and looked at things differently now from the time when she fought the squaw for Rodney's favor.

Jim's foster-parents were, in truth, glad to part with him. From his earliest babyhood he had been known as a "limb of Satan." He was an Ishmael by every instinct of his being. And Mrs. Warren Rodney, *née* Tumlin, felt that in dealing with him, in her capacity of step-mother, she daily expiated any offence that she might have done to his mother.

Sally grew slatternly with increasing maternity. She spent her time in a rocking-chair, dipping snuff—a consolation imported from her former home—and lamenting the bad marriage she had made. Rodney ascribed his ill-fortune to unjust neighborly [pg 091] criticism. He farmed a little, he raised a little stock, and he drank a great deal of whiskey. Sally hated the Black Hill country. She felt that it knew too much about her. The neighborly inquisition had fallen like a blight on the family fortunes. A vague migratory impulse was on her. She wanted to go somewhere and begin all over again. By dint of persistent nagging she persuaded her husband to move to Wyoming, then in the golden age of the

cattle industry. Those were days when steers, to speak in the cow language, had "jumped to seventy-five." The wilderness grew light-headed with prosperity. Wonderful are the tales still told about those fat years in cattle-land. It was in those halcyon days of the Cheyenne Club that the members rode from the range, white with the dust of the desert, to enjoy greater luxuries than those procurable at their clubs in New York.

Nor was it all feasting and merrymaking. A heroic band it was that battled with the wilderness, riding the range with heat and cold, starvation and death, and making small pin-pricks in that empty blotch of the United States map that is marked "Great Alkali Desert" blossom into settlements. When the last word has been said about the pioneers of these United States, let the cow-boy be remembered in the universal toast, that bronzed son of the saddle who lived his little day bravely and merrily, and whose real heroism is too often forgotten in the glamour of his own picturesqueness.

Judith was ten years old when her father, his wife, and their children moved from Dakota—they [pg 092] were not so particular about North and South Dakota, in those days—to take up a claim on Sweetwater, Wyoming. Judith gave scant promise of the beauty that in later life became at once her dower and her misfortune, that which was as likely to bring wretchedness as happiness. In Wyoming she was destined to find an old friend, Mrs. Atkins, who, as the bride of the young lieutenant, had been present at the marriage of Sally Tumlin and Warren Rodney, and who had always felt a wholly unreasonable sense of guilt at witnessing the ceremony and contributing a lace handkerchief to the bride. Her husband, now Major Atkins, was stationed at Fort Washakie, Wyoming. Mrs. Atkins happening again on the Rodney family, and her husband having increased and multiplied his army pay many times over by a successful venture in cattle, the scheme of Judith's convent education was put through by the major's wife, who had kept her New England conscience, the discomforts of frontier posts notwithstanding.

So Judith went to the nuns to school, and stayed with them till she was eighteen. Mrs. Atkins would have adopted her then; but Judith by this time knew her family history in all its sordid ramifications, and felt that duty called her to her brother, who had not improved his unfortunate start in life, though his step-mother did not spoil him for the staying of the rod.

[pg 093]



VII

Chugg Takes The Ribbons

Chugg, comforted with liquids and stayed with a head-plaster, presented himself at the Dax ranch just twenty-four hours after he was due. His mien combined vagueness with hostility, and he harnessed up the stage that Peter Hamilton had driven over the day before, when his prospective passengers were looking, with a graphic pantomimic representation of "take it or leave it." Under the circumstances, Miss Carmichael and the fat lady consented to be passengers with much the same feeling of finality that one might have on embarking for the planet Mars in an air-ship.

There was, furthermore, a suggestion of last rites in the farewells of the Daxes, each according to their respective personalities, that was far from reassuring.

"Here's some bread and meat and a bottle of cold coffee, if you live to need it," was Mrs. Dax's grim prognostication of accident. Leander, being of an emotional nature, could scarce restrain his tears—the advent of the travellers had created a welcome variation in the monotony of his dutiful routine—he felt all the agitation of parting with life-long [pg 094] friends. Mary Carmichael and Judith promised to write—they had found a great deal to say to each other the preceding evening.

Chugg cracked his whip ominously, the travellers got inside, not daring to trust themselves to the box.

The journey with the misanthrope was but a repetition of that first day's staging—the sage-brush was scarcer, the mountains seemed as far off as ever, and the outlook was, if possible, more desolate. The entry in Miss Carmichael's diary, inscribed in malformed characters as the stage jolted over ruts and gullies, reads: "I do not mind telling you, in strictest confidence, 'Dere Diary'—as the little boy called you—that when I so lightly severed my connection with civilization, I had no idea to what an extent I was going in for the prairie primeval. How on earth

does a woman who can write a letter like Mrs. Yellett stand it? And where on the map of North America is Lost Trail?"

"Land sakes!" regretted the fat lady, "but I do wish I had a piece of that 'boy's favorite' cake that I had for my lunch the day we left town. I just ate and ate it 'cause I hadn't another thing to do. If I hadn't been so greedy I could offer him a piece, just to show him that some women folk have kind hearts, and that the whole sect ain't like that Pink."

"Boy's favorite," as adequate compensation for shattered ideals, a broken heart, and the savings of a lifetime, seemed to Mary Carmichael inadequate compensation, but she forbore to express her sentiments.

[pg 095]

The fat lady had never relaxed her gaze from Chugg's back since the stage had started. She peered at that broad expanse of flannel shirt through the tiny round window, like a careful sailing-master sweeping the horizon for possible storm-clouds. At every portion of the road presenting a steep decline she would prod Chugg in the back with the handle of her ample umbrella, and demand that he let her out, as she preferred walking. The stage-driver at first complied with these requests, but when he saw they threatened to become chronic, he would send his team galloping down grade at a rate to justify her liveliest fears.

"Do you think you are a-picnicking, that you crave roominating round these yere solitoodes?" And the misanthrope cracked his whip and adjured his team with cabalistic imprecations.

"Did you notice if Mrs. Dax giv' him any cold coffee, same as she did us?" anxiously inquired the fat lady from her lookout.

Mary hadn't noticed.

"He's drinking something out of a brown bottle—seems to relish it a heep more'n he would cold coffee," reported the watch. "Hi there! Hi! Mr. Chugg!" The stage-driver, thinking it was merely a request to be allowed to walk, continued to drive with one hand and hold the brown bottle with the other. But even his too solid flesh was not proof against the continued bombardment of the umbrella handle.

"Um-m-m," he grunted savagely, applying a watery eye to the round window.

[pg 096]

"Nothing," answered the fat lady, quite satisfied at having her worst fears confirmed.

Chugg returned to his driving, as one not above the weakness of seeing and hearing things.

"'Tain't coffee."

"Could you smell it?" questioned Mary, anxiously.

"You never can tell that way, when they are plumb pickled in it, like him."

"Then how did you know it wasn't coffee?"

"His eyes had fresh watered."

Mary collapsed under this expert testimony. "What are we going to do about it?"

"Appeal to him as a gentleman," said the fat lady, not without dramatic intonation.

"You appeal," counselled Mary; "I saw him look at you admiringly when you were walking down that steep grade."

"Is that so?" said the fat lady, with a conspicuous lack of incredulity; and she put her hand involuntarily to her frizzes.

This time she did not trust to the umbrella-handle as a medium of communication between the stage-driver and herself. Putting her hand through the port-hole she grasped Chugg's arm—the bottle arm—with no uncertain grip.

"Why, Mr. Chugg, this yere place is getting to be a regular summer resort; think of two ladies trusting themselves to your protection and travelling out over this great lonesome desert."

Chugg's mind, still submerged in local Lethe waters, grappled in silence with the problem of the feminine invasion, and then he muttered to himself [pg 097] rather than to the fat lady, "Nowhere's safe from 'em; women and house-flies is universally prevailing."

The fat lady dropped his arm as if it had been a brand. "He's no gentleman. As for Mountain Pink, she was drove to it."

All that day they toiled over sand and sage-brush; the sun hung like a molten disk, paling the blue of the sky; the grasshoppers kept up their shrill chirping—and the loneliness of that sun-scorched waste became a tangible thing.

Chugg sipped and sipped, and sometimes swore and sometimes muttered, and as the day wore on his driving not only became a challenge to the endurance of the horses, but to the laws of gravitation. He lashed them up and down grade, he drove perilously close to shelving declivities, and sometimes he sang, with maudlin mournfulness:

"'Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie.'
The words came low and mournfully
From the cold, pale lips of a youth who lay
On his dying couch at the close of day."

The fat lady reminded him that he was a gentleman and that he was driving ladies; she threatened him with her son on Sweetwater, who began, in the maternal chronicles, by being six feet in his stockings, and who steadily grew, as the scale of threats increased, till he reached the altitude of six feet four, growing hourly in height and fierceness.

But Chugg gave no heed, and once he sang the [pg 098] "Ballad of the Mule-Skinner," with what seemed to both terrified passengers an awful warning of their overthrow:

"As I was going down the road,
With a tired team and a heavy load,
I cracked my whip and the leaders sprung—
The fifth chain broke, and the wheelers hung,
The off-horse stepped on the wagon tongue—"

This harrowing ballad was repeated with accompanying Delsarte at intervals during the afternoon, but as Mary and the fat lady managed to escape without accident, they began to feel that they bore charmed lives.

At sundown they came to the road-ranch of Johnnie Dax, bearing Leander's compliments as a secret despatch. The outward aspect of the place was certainly

an awful warning to trustful bachelors who make acquaintances through the columns of *The Heart and Hand*. The house stood solitary in that scourge of desolation. The windows and doors gaped wide like the unclosed eyes of a dead man on a battle-field. Chugg halloed, and an old white horse put his head out of the door, shook it upward as if in assent, then trotted off.

"That's Jerry, and he's the intelligentest animal I ever see," remarked the stage-driver, sobering up to Jerry's good qualities, and presently Johnnie Dax and the white horse appeared together from around the corner of the house.

This Mr. Dax was almost an exact replica of the other, even to the apologetic crook in the knees [pg 099] and a certain furtive way of glancing over the shoulder as if anticipating missiles.

"Pshaw now, ladies! why didn't you let me know that you was coming? and I'd have tidied up the place and organized a few dried-apple pies."

"Good house-keepers don't wait for company to come before they get to their work," rebukefully commented the fat lady.

Mr. Dax, recognizing the voice of authority, seized a towel and began to beat out flies, chickens, and dogs, who left the premises with the ill grace of old residents. Two hogs, dormant, guarded either side of the door-step and refused so absolutely to be disturbed by the flicking of the towel that one was tempted to look twice to assure himself that they were not the fruits of the sculptor's chisel.

"Where's your wife?" sternly demanded the fat lady.

"Oh, my Lord! I presume she's dancin' a whole lot over to Ervay. She packed her ball-gown in a gripsack and lit out of here two days ago, p'inting that way. A locomotive couldn't stop her none if she got a chance to go cycloning round a dance."

In the mean time, the two hogs having failed to grasp the fact that they were *de trop*, continued to doze.

"Come, girls, get up," coaxed Johnnie, persuasively. "Maude, I don't know when I see you so lazy. Run on, honey—run on with Ethel." For Ethel, the piebald hog, finally did as she was bid.

Mary Carmichael could not resist the temptation [pg 100] of asking how the hogs happened to have such unusual names.

"To tell the truth, I done it to aggravate my wife. When I finds myself a discard in the matrimonial shuffle, I figgers on a new deal that's going to inclood one or two anxieties for my lady partner—to which end—viz., namely, I calls one hawg Ethel and the other hawg Maude, allowing to my wife that they're named after lady friends in the East. Them lady friends might be the daughters of Ananias and Sapphira, for all they ever happened, but they answers the purpose of riling her same as if they were eating their three squares daily. I have hopes, everything else failing, that she may yet quit dancing and settle down to the sanctity of the home out of pure jealousy of them two proxy hawgs."

"I can just tell you this," interrupted the fat lady: "I don't enjoy occupying premises after hawgs, no matter how fashionable you name 'em. A hawg's a hawg, with manners according, if it's named after the President of the United States or the King of England."

"That's just what I used to think, marm, of all critters before I enjoyed that degree of friendliness that I'm now proud to own. Take Jerry now, that old white horse—why, me and him is just like brothers. When I have to leave the kid to his lonesome infant reflections and go off to chop wood, I just call Jerry in, and he assoomes the responsibility of nurse like he was going to draw wages for it."

"I reckon there's faults on both sides," said the fat lady, impartially. "No natural woman [pg 101] would leave her baby to a horse to mind while she went off dancing. And no natural man would fill his house full of critters, and them with highfalutin names. Take my advice, turn 'em out."

Mary did not wait to hear the continuation of the fat lady's advice. She went out on the desert to have one last look at the west. The sun had taken his plunge for the night, leaving his royal raiment of crimson and gold strewn above the mountain-tops.

Her sunset reflections were presently interrupted by the fat lady, who proposed that they should walk till Mr. Dax had tidied up his house, observing, with logic, that it did not devolve on them to clean the place, since they were paying for supper and lodging. They had gone but a little way when sudden apprehension caused the fat lady to grasp Mary's arm. Miss Carmichael turned, expecting

mountain-lions, rattlesnakes, or stage-robbers, but none of these casualties had come to pass.

"Land sakes! Here we be parading round the prairie, and I never found out how that man cooked his coffee."

"What difference does it make, if we can drink it?"

"The ways of men cooks is a sealed book to you, I reckon, or you wouldn't be so unconcerned—'specially in the matter of coffee. All men has got the notion that coffee must be b'iled in a bag, and if they 'ain't got a regular bag real handy, they take what they can get. Oh, I've caught 'em," went on the fat lady, darkly, "b'iling coffee in improvisations that'd turn your stomach."

[pg 102]

"Yes, yes," Mary hastily agreed, hoping against hope that she wasn't going to be more explicit.

"And they are so cute about it, too; it's next to impossible to catch 'em. You ask a man if he b'iles his coffee loose or tight, and he'll declare he b'iles it loose, knowing well how suspicious and prone to investigate is the female mind. But you watch your chance and take a look in the coffee-pot, and maybe you'll find —"

"Yes, yes, I've heard—"

"I've seen—"

"Let's hurry," implored Mary.

"Have you made your coffee yet?" inquired the fat lady.

"Yes, marm," promptly responded Johnnie.

"I hope you b'iled it in a bag—it clears it beautiful, a bag does."

Johnnie shifted uneasily. "No, marm, I b'iles it loose. You see, bags ain't always handy."

The fat lady plied her eye as a weapon. No Dax could stand up before an

accusing feminine eye. He quailed, made a grab for the coffee-pot, and rushed with it out into the night.

"What did I tell you?" she asked, with an air of triumph.

Johnnie returned with the empty coffee-pot. "To tell the truth, marm, I made a mistake. I 'ain't made the coffee. I plumb forgot it. P'raps you could be prevailed on to assist this yere outfit to coffee while I organizes a few sody-biscuits."

After supper, when the fat lady was so busy talking "goo-goo" language to the baby as to be oblivious [pg 103] of everything else, Mary Carmichael took the opportunity to ask Johnnie if he knew anything about Lost Trail. The name of her destination had come to sound unpleasantly ominous in the ears of the tired young traveller, and she feared that her inquiry did not sound as casual as she tried to have it. Nor was Johnnie's candid reply reassuring.

"It's a pizen-mean country, from all I ever heard tell. The citizens tharof consists mainly of coyotes and mountain-lions, with a few rattlers thrown in just to make things neighborly. This yere place"—waving his hand towards the arid wastes which night was making more desolate—"is a summer resort, with modern improvements, compared to it."

Mary screwed her courage to a still more desperate point, and inquired if Mr. Dax knew a family named Yellett living in Lost Trail.

"Never heard of no family living there, excepting the bluff at family life maintained by the wild beasts before referred to. See here, miss, I ain't makin' no play to inquire into your affairs, but you ain't thinkin' o' visitin' Lost Trail, be you?"

"Perhaps," said Mary, faintly; and then she, too, talked "goo-goo" to the baby.

[pg 104]

VIII

The Rodneys At Home

All that long and never-to-be-forgotten night the stage lurched through the darkness with Mary Carmichael the solitary passenger. The fat lady had warned Johnnie Dax that he was on no account to replenish Chugg's flask, if he had the wherewithal for replenishment on the premises. Moreover, she threatened Dax with the fury of her son should he fail in this particular; and Johnnie, hurt to the quick by the unjust suspicion that he could fail so signally in his duty to a lady, not only refused to replenish the flask, but threatened Chugg with a conditional vengeance in the event of accident befalling the stage. It was with a partially sobered and much-threatened stage-driver, therefore, that Mary continued her journey after the supper at Johnnie Dax's, but the knowledge of it brought scant reassurance, and it is doubtful if the red stage ever harbored any one more wakeful than the pale, tired girl who watched all the changes from dark to dawn at the stage window.

Once or twice she caught a glimpse of distant camp-fires burning and knew that some cattle outfit [pg 105] was camped there for the night; and once they drove so close that she could hear the cow-boys' voices, enriched and mellowed by distance, borne to them on the cool, evening wind. It gave a sense of security to know that these big-hearted, manly lads were within call, and she watched the dwindling spark of their camp-fires and strained her ears to catch the last note of their singing, with something of the feeling of severed comradeship. Range cattle, startled from sleep by the stage, scrambled to their feet and bolted headlong in the blind impulse of panic, their horns and the confused massing of their bodies showing in sharp silhouette against the horizon for a moment, then all would settle into quiet again. There was no moon that night, but the stars were sown broadcast—softly yellow stars, lighting the darkness with a shaded luster, like lamps veiled in pale-yellow gauze. The chill electric glitter of the stars, as we know it from between the roofs of high houses, this world of far-flung distance knows not. There the stars are big and still, like the eyes of a contented woman.

The hoofs of the horses beat the night away as regularly as the ticking of a clock. It grew darker as the night wore on, and sometimes a coyote would yelp from the fringe of willows that bordered a creek in a way that made Mary recall tales of banshees. And once, when the first pale streak of dawn trembled in the east and the mountains looked like jagged rocks heaved against the sky and in danger of toppling, the whole dread picture brought [pg 106] before her one of Vedder's pictures that hung in the shabby old library at home.

They breakfasted somewhere, and Chugg put fresh horses to the stage. She knew this from their difference of color; the horses that they had left the second Dax ranch with had been white, and these that now toiled over the sand and desolation were apparently brown. She could not be certain that they were brown, or that they were toiling over the sand and desolation, or that her name was Mary Carmichael, or indeed of anything. Four days in the train, and what seemed like four centuries in the stage, eliminated any certainty as to anything. She could only sit huddled into a heap and wait for things to become adjusted by time.

Chugg was behaving in a most exemplary manner. He drove rigidly as an automaton, and apparently he looked no longer on the "lightning" when it was bottled. Once or twice he had applied his eye to the pane that separated him from his passenger, and asked questions relative to her comfort, but Mary was too utterly dejected to reply in more than monosyllables. As they crept along, the sun-dried timbers of the stage creaked and groaned in seeming protest at wearing its life away in endless journeyings over this desert waste, then settled down into one of those maddeningly monotonous reiterations to which certain inanimate things are given in seasons of nervous tension. This time it was: "All the world's—a stage—creak—screech—all—the world's a stage—creak—screech!" over and over till Mary found herself fast succumbing to the [pg 107] hypnotic effect of the constant repetition, listening for it, even, with the tyrannous eagerness of overwrought nerves, when the stage-driver broke the spell with, "This here stage gets to naggin' me along about here. She's hungry for her axle-grease—that's what ails her."

"I suppose," Mary roused herself to say, "you have quite a feeling of comradeship for the stage."

"Me and Clara"—the stage had this name painted on the side—"have been travelling together nigh onto four year. And while there's times that I would

prefer a greater degree of reciprocity, these yere silent companions has their advantages. Why, compare Clara to them female blizzards—the two Mrs. Daxes—and you see Clara's good p'int's immejit. Yes, miss, the thirst-quenchers are on me if either one of the Dax boys wouldn't be glad to swap, but I'd have to be a heap more locoed than I am now to consent to the transaction."

At sunset the interminable monotony of the wilderness was broken by a house of curious architecture, the like of which the tired young traveller had never seen before, and whose singular candor of design made her doubt the evidence of her own thoroughly exhausted faculties. The house seemed to consist of a series of rooms thrown, or rather blown, together by some force of nature rather than by formal design of builder or carpenter. The original log-cabin of this composite dwelling looked better built, more finished, neater of aspect than those they had previously stopped at in crossing the Desert. Springing from the main building, like [pg 108] claws from a crustacean, were a series of rooms minus either side walls or flooring. Indeed, they might easily have passed for porches of more than usually commodious size had it not been for the beds, bureaus, chairs, stove with attendant pots, kettles, and supper in the course of preparation. Seen from any vantage-point in the surrounding country, the effect was that of an interior on the stage—the background of some homely drama where pioneer life was being realistically depicted. The *dramatis persona* who occupied the centre of the stage when Mary Carmichael drove up was an elderly woman in a rocking-chair. She was dressed in a faded pink calico gown, limp and bedraggled, whose color brought out the parchment-like hue and texture of her skin in merciless contrast. Perhaps because she still harbored illusions about the perishable quality of her complexion, which gave every evidence of having borne the brunt of merciless desert suns, snows, blizzards, and the ubiquitous alkali dust of all seasons, she wore a pink sun-bonnet, though the hour was one past sundown, and though she sat beneath her own roof-tree, even if lacking the protection of four walls. From the corner of her mouth protruded a snuff-brush, so constantly in this accustomed place that it had come to be regarded by members of her family as part and parcel of her attire—the first thing assumed in the morning, the last thing laid aside at night. Mary Carmichael had little difficulty in recognizing Judith Rodney's step-mother, *née* Tumlin—she who had been the heroine of the romance lately recorded.

[pg 109]

Mrs. Rodney's interest in the girl alighting from the stage was evinced in the palsied motion of the chair as it quivered slightly back and forth in place of the

swinging seesaw with which she was wont to wear the hours away. The snuff-brush was brought into more fiercely active commission, but she said nothing till Mary Carmichael was within a few inches of her. Then, shifting the snuff-brush to a position more favorable to enunciation, she said: "Howdy? Ye be Miz Yellett's gov'ment, ain't ye?" There was something threatening in her aspect, as if the office of governess to the Yelletts carried some challenging quality.

"Government?" repeated Mary, vaguely, her head still rumbling with the noise and motion of the stage; "I'm afraid I hardly understand."

"Ain't you-uns goin' to teach the Yellett outfit ther spellin', writin', and about George Washington, an' how the Yankees kem along arter he was in his grave an' fit us and broke up the kentry so we had ter leave our home in Tennessee an' kem to this yere outdacious place, where nobody knows the diffunce between aig-bread an' corn-dodger? I war a Miss Tumlin from Tennessee."

The rocking-chair now began to recover its accustomed momentum. This much-heralded educational expert was far from terrifying. Indeed, to Mrs. Rodney's hawklike gaze, that devoured every visible item of Mary's extremely modest travelling-dress, there was nothing so very wonderful about "the gov'ment from the East." With a deftness compatible only with long practice, Mrs. Rodney [pg 110] now put a foot on the round of an adjoining chair and shoved it towards Mary Carmichael in hospitable pantomime, never once relaxing her continual rocking the meantime. Mary took the chair, and Mrs. Rodney, after freshening up the snuff-brush from a small, tin box in her lap, put spurs to her rocking-chair, so to speak, and started off at a brisk canter.

"I 'low it's mighty queer you-uns don't recognize the job you-uns kem out yere to take, when I call it by name." From the sheltering flap of the pink sun-bonnet she turned a pair of black eyes full of ill-concealed suspicion. "Miz Yellett givin' herself as many airs 'bout hirin' a gov'ment 's if she wuz goin' to Congress. Queer you don't know whether you be one or not!" She withdrew into the sun-bonnet, muttering to herself. She could not be more than fifty, Mary thought, but her habit of muttering and exhibiting her depopulated gums while she was in the act of revivifying the snuff-brush gave her a cronish aspect.

A babel of voices came from the open-faced room on the opposite side of the house corresponding to the one in which Mary and Mrs. Rodney were sitting. Apparently supper was being prepared by some half-dozen young people, each

of whom thought he or she was being imposed upon by the others. "Hand me that knife." "Git it yourself." "I'll tell maw how you air wolfing down the potatoes as fast as I can fry 'em." "Go on, tattle-tale." This was the repartee, mingled with the hiss of frying meat, the grinding of coffee, the thumping sound made by [pg 111] bread being hastily mixed in a wooden bowl standing on a wooden table. The babel grew in volume. Dogs added to it by yelping emotionally when the smell of the newly fried meat tempted them too near the platter and some one with a disengaged foot at his disposal would kick them out of doors. Personalities were exchanged more freely by members of the family, and the meat hissed harder as it was newly turned. "Laws-a-massy!" muttered Mrs. Rodney; and then, shoving back the sun-bonnet, she lifted her voice in a shrill, feminine shriek:

"Eudory! Eu-dory! You-do-ry!"

A Hebe-like creature, blond and pink-cheeked, in a blue-checked apron besmeared with grease and flour, came sulkily into her mother's presence. Seeing Mary Carmichael, she grasped the skirt of the greasy apron with the sleight of hand of a prestidigitateur and pleated it into a single handful. Her manner, too, was no slower of transformation. The family sulks were instantly replaced by a company bridle, aided and abetted by a company simper. "I didn't know the stage was in yet, maw. I been talking to Iry."

"This here be Miz Yellett's gov'ment. Maybe she'd like to pearten up some before she eats." She started the rocking-chair at a gallop, to signify to her daughter that she washed her hands of further responsibility. Being proficient in the sign language of Mrs. Rodney's second self, as indeed was every member of the family, Eudora led Mary to a bench placed in one of the rooms enjoying the distinction of a side wall, and indicated a family toilet service, [pg 112] which displayed every indication of having lately seen active service. A roll-towel, more frankly significant of the multitude of the Rodneys than had been the babel of voices, a discouraged fragment of comb, a tin basin, a slippery atom of soap, these Eudora proffered with an unction worthy of better things. "I declare Mist' Chugg have scarce left any soap, an' I don't believe thar's 'nother bit in the house." Eudora's accent was but faintly reminiscent of her mother's strong Smoky Mountain dialect, as a crude feature is sometimes softened in the second generation. It was not displeasing on her full, rosy mouth. The girl had the seductiveness of her half-sister, Judith, without a hint of Judith's spiritual quality.

Mary told her not to mind about the soap, and went to fetch her hand-bag, which, consistent with the democratic spirit of its surroundings, was resting against a clump of sage-brush, whither it had been lifted by Chugg. Miss Carmichael's individual toilet service, which was neither handsome nor elaborate, impressed Eudora far more potently in ranking Mary as a personage than did her dignity of office as "gov'ment."

"I reckon you-uns must have seen Sist' Judy up to Miz Dax's. I hope she war lookin' right well." There was in the inquiry an unmistakable note of pride. The connection was plainly one to be flaunted. Judith, with her gentle bearing and her simple, convent accomplishments, was plainly the *grande dame* of the family. Eudora had now divested herself of the greasy, flour-smear'd apron, flinging it [pg 113] under the wash-bench with a single all-sufficient movement, while Mary's look was directed towards her dressing-bag. In glancing up to make some remark about Judith, Mary was confronted by a radiant apparition whose lilac calico skirts looked fresh from the iron.

At the side of the house languished a wretched, abortive garden, running over with weeds and sage-brush, and here a man potted with the purposeless energy of old age, working with an ear cocked in the direction of the house, as he turned a spade of earth again and again in hopeless, pusillanimous industry. But when his strained attention was presently rewarded by a shouted summons to supper, and he stood erect but for the slouching droop of shoulders that was more a matter of temperament than of age, one saw a tall man of massive build, whose keen glance and slightly grizzled hair belied his groping, ineffectual labor. The head, and face were finely modelled. Unless nature had fashioned them in some vagrant, prankish mood, such elegance of line betokened prior generations in which gentlemen and scholars had played some part—the vagabond scion of a good family, perhaps. A multitude of such had grafted on the pioneer stock of the West, under names that carried no significance in the places whence they came.

Weakness and self-indulgence there were, and those writ large and deep, on the face of Warren Rodney; and, in default of an expression of deeper significance, the wavering lines of instability produced a curiously ambiguous effect of a fine head [pg 114] modelled by a 'prentice hand; a lady's copy of the Belvidere, attempted in the ardors of the first lessons, might approximate it.

A smoking kerosene lamp revealed a supper-table of almost institutional

proportions. There were four sons and two daughters of the Tumlin union, strapping lads and lasses all of them, with more than a common dower of lusty health and a beauty that was something deeper than the perishable iridescence of youth. There was Fremont, named for the explorer-soldier; there was Orlando, named from his mother's vague, idle musings over paper-backed literature at certain "unchancy" seasons; there was Richards, named from pure policy, for a local great man of whom Warren Rodney had anticipated a helping hand at the time; there was Eudora, whose nominal origin was uncertain, unless it bore affiliation to that of Orlando; there was Sadie, thus termed to avoid the painful distinctions of "old Sally" and "young Sally"; and, lastly, like a postscript, came Dan—with him, fancy, in the matter of names, seemed to have failed. Dan was now six, a plump little caricature of a man in blue overalls, which, as they had descended to him from Richards in the nature of an heirloom, reached high under his armpits and shortened the function of his suspenders to the vanishing point.

Eudora was now sixteen, and the woman-famine in all the land had gifted her with a surprising precocity. Eudora knew her value and meant to make the most of it. Unlike her mother in the old Black Hill days, she expected more than a "home [pg 115] of her own." To-night four suitors sat at table with Eudora, and she might have had forty had she desired it. Any one of the four would have cheerfully murdered the remaining three had opportunity presented itself. Supper was a mockery to them, a Barmecide feast. Each watched his rivals—and Eudora. This was a matter of life and death. There was no time for food. The girl revelled in the situation to the full of her untaught, unthinking, primitive nature. She gave the incident a tighter twist by languishing at them in turns. She smiled, she sighed, she drove them mad by taking crescent bites out of a slice of bread and exhibiting the havoc of her little, white teeth with a delectably dainty gluttony.

Her mother, mumbling her supper with toothless impotency, renewed her youth vicariously, and, while she quarrelled with her daughter from the rising of the sun to the setting of the same, she added the last straw to the burden of the distracted suitors by announcing what a comfort Eudora was to her and how handy she was about the house.

Warren Rodney supported the air of an exile at his own table. Beyond a preliminary greeting to his daughter's guests, he said nothing. His family, in their dealings with him, seemed to accord him the exemptions of extreme age. He ate

with the enthusiasm of a man to whom meals have become the main business in life.

"How's your mine up to Bad Water comin' along, Iry?" Orlando inquired, not from any hospitable interest in Ira's claim, but because he had [pg 116] sundry romantic interests in that neighborhood and hoped to make use of the young prospector's interest in his sister by securing an invitation to return with him. Ira regarded the inquiry in the light of a special providence. Here was his chance to impress Eudora with the splendor of his prospects and at the same time smite the claims of his rivals, and behold! a brother of his lady had led the way.

Ira cleared his throat. "They tell me she air like to yield a million any day." At this Eudora gave him the wealth of her eyes, and her mother reached across two of the glowering suitors and dropped a hot flapjack on his plate.

"Who sez that she air likely to yield a million any day?" inquired Ben Swift, openly flouting such prophecy. "Yes, who sez it?" inquired Hawks and Taylor, joining forces for the overthrow of the common enemy.

"'They sez' is easy talkin', shore 'nuff," mumbled Mrs. Rodney, as she helped herself to butter with her own knife.

"A sharp from the Smithsonian Institute at Washington, he said it, and he has taken back specimens with him."

"Ye can't keep lackings from freightin' round specimens—naw, sir, ye can't, not till the fool-killer has finished his job." Ben Swift charged the table with the statement as the prosecution subtly appeals to the high grade of intelligence on the part of the jury. The point told. Eudora, wavering in her donation of hot flapjacks, gave them to Ben Swift.

[pg 117]

Hawks now leaned across the table with a sinuous, beguiling motion, and, extending his long neck towards the prospector, with the air of a turkey-gobbler about to peck, he crooned, softly: "Ira, it's a heap risky puttin' your faith in maverick sharps that trail around the country, God-a'mightying it, renaming little, old rocks into precious stones, seein' gold mines in every gopher-hole they come to. They names your backyard and the rocks appertainin' thereunto a heap fashionable, and like as not some sucker gives him good money to float the trash back East."

Mrs. Rodney, whose partisanship in any discussion was analogous to the position of a hen perching on a fence unable to decide on which side to flutter, was visibly impressed by Hawks's presentation of the case. Looking towards her daughter from under the eaves of her sun-bonnet, she "'lowed she had hearn that Bad Water was hard on the skin, an' that it warn't much of a place arter all. Folks over thar war mostly half-livers."

Ira, now losing all semblance of policy at being thus grievously put down by his possible mother-in-law, "reckoned that herdin' sheep over to the Basin was a heap easier on the skin than livin' in a comf'table house over to Bad Water"—this as a fling at Hawks, who herded a small bunch of sheep "over in the Basin."

"Ai-yi," openly scoffed the former Miss Tumlin; "talk's cheap before—" She would have considered it indelicate to supply the word "marriage," but by breaking off her sentence before she came [pg 118] to the pith of it she continued to maintain the proprieties, and at the same time conveyed to her audience that she was too old and experienced to permit any fledgling from her nest to be caught, for want of a warning, by such obvious ante-matrimonial chaff as fair promises.

"Laws a massy!" she continued, reminiscently, working her toothless jaw to free it from an escaped splinter from the snuff-brush. "When me an' paw war keepin' comp'ny, satin warn't good enough for me. He lowed I wuz to have half creation. Sence we wuz married he 'ain't never found time, endurin' all these years, to build me a bird-house."

The unbuilt bird-house was the Banquo's ghost at the Rodney board, Mrs. Rodney hearkening back to it in and out of season. If the family made merry over a chance windfall of game or fresh vegetables, a prospect of possible employment for one of the boys, a donation of money from Judith, Mrs. Rodney remembered the unbuilt bird-house and indulged herself to the full of melancholy. It is not improbable that, if she had been asked to name the chiefest disappointment of her wretched married life, she would have mentioned the bird-house that was never built.

At mention of it Warren Rodney murmured broken, deprecatory excuses. His dull eyes nervously travelled about the table for some one to make excuses for him. The family broke into hearty peals of laughter; the tragedy of the first generation had grown to be the unflinching source of merriment for the second.

[pg 119]

"Maw," began Orlando, "the reason you don't get no bird-house built out hyear is that they ain't no birds. We have offered time and time again to build you a house fo' buzzuds, they bein' the only birds hyearabouts, but you 'low that you ain't fav'ble to tamin' 'em."

"I wuz raised in Tennessee, an' we-uns had a house for martins made out'n gourds, an' it was pearty." The pride with which she repeated this particular claim to honor in an alien land never diminished with repetition. As she advanced further through the dim perspective of years, the little mountain town in Tennessee became more and more the centre of cultivation and civic importance. The desolate cabin that she had left for the interminable journey westward was recalled flatteringly through the hallowing mists of time. The children, by reason of these chronicles, had grown to regard their mother as a sort of princess in exile.

"Mrs. Rodney"—Swift leaned towards her and whispered something in her ear. She regarded him tentatively, then grinned. At her time of life, why should she put faith in the promises of men? "You fix it up, an' you get your bird-house," was the conclusion of his sentence.

While this discussion had been in progress the viands had not been neglected except by such members of the company as had been bereft of appetite by loftier emotions—in consequence of which the table appeared to have sustained a visitation of seventeen-year locusts. Eudora, ever economic in the value she placed not only upon herself but her [pg 120] environment, proposed to her guests that they should wash the dishes, an art in which they were by no means deficient, being no exception to the majority of range bachelors in their skill in homely pursuits. And thus it came to pass that Eudora's suitors, swathed in aprons, meekly washed dishes shoulder to shoulder, while their souls craved the performance of valorous deeds.

As this was the last stage station on the way to Lost Trail, Mary Carmichael was perforce obliged to content herself till Mrs. Yellett should call or send for her. After supper, Chugg, with fresh horses to the stage, left Rodney's, apparently for some port in that seemingly pathless sea of foot-hills. That there should be trails and defined routes over this vast, unvaried stretch of space seemed more wonderful to Mary than the charted high-roads of the Atlantic. The foot-hills seemed to have grown during the long journey till they were foot-hills no longer;

they had come to be the smaller peaks of the towering range that had formed the spine of the desert. The air, that seemed to have lost some of its crystalline quality on the flat stretches of the plains, was again sparkling and heady in the clean hill country. It stirred the pulses like some rare vintage, some subtle distillation of sun-warmed fruit that had been mellowing for centuries.

Very lonely seemed the Rodney home among the great company of mountains. A brooding desolation had settled on it at close of day, and all the laughter and light footsteps and gayly ringing voices of the young folk could not dispel the feeling [pg 121] of being adrift in a tiny shell on the black waters of some unknown sea; or thus it seemed to the stranger within their gate.

Mrs. Rodney retired within the flap of her sun-bonnet after the evening meal, settling herself in the rocking-chair as if it were some sort of conveyance. Her family, who might have told the hour of day or her passing mood by the action of the chair, knew by her pacific gait that she would lament the unbuilt bird-house no more that night. The snuff-brush, newly replenished from the tin box, kept perfect time to the motion of the chair. With the lady of the house it was one of the brief seasons of passing content vouchsafed by an ample meal and a good digestion.

Warren Rodney took down a gun from the wall and began to clean it. His hands had the fumbling, indefinite movements, the obscure action, directed by a brain already begun to crumble. His industry with the gun was of a part with the impotent dawdling in the garden. His eyes would seek for the rag or the bottle of oil in a dull, glazed way, and, having found them, he would forget the reason of his quest. Not once that evening had they rested on his wife or any member of his family. He had shown no interest in any of the small happenings of home, the frank rivalry of Eudora's suitors, the bickerings of the girls and boys over the division of household labor. The one thing that had momentarily aroused his somnolent intelligence was a revival of his wife's plaint anent the unbuilt bird-house. That, and a certain furtive anxiety during [pg 122] supper lest his daughter Eudora should forget to keep his plate piled high, were the only signs of a participation in the life about him.

From one of the rooms that opened to the world like a stage to the audience, Mrs. Rodney kept her evening vigil. The last faint amethystine haze on the mountains was deepening. They towered about the valley where the house lay, with a challenging immensity, mocking the pitiful grasp of these pygmies on the

thousand hills. The snow on the taller of the peaks still held the high lights. But all the valleys and the spaces between the mountains were wrapped in sombre shadows; the crazy house invading the great company of mountains, penetrating brazenly to the very threshold of their silent councils, seemed but a pitiful ant-hill at the mercy of some possible giant tread. The ill-adjusted family, disputing every inch of ground with the wilderness, became invested with a dignity quite out of keeping with its achievements. Their very weaknesses and vanities, old Sally still clinging to her sun-bonnet and her limp rose-colored skirts, an eternal requiem for the dead and gone complexion, lost the picturesqueness of the pioneer and ranked as universal qualities, admissible in the austerest setting. Perhaps in some far distant council of the Daughters of the Pioneers a prospective member of the house of Rodney would unctuously announce: "My great-great-grandmother was a Miss Tumlin of Tennessee; great-great-grandfather's first wife had been a Sioux squaw. Isn't it interesting and romantic?"

[pg 123]

Eudora now came to her mother with great news. Hawks had taken the first opportunity of being alone with her to tell her of Jim's release from jail and of his abortive encounter with Simpson in the eating-house. He had not deferred the telling from any feeling of reticence regarding the disclosure of family affairs before strangers. News travels in the desert by some unknown agency. Twenty-four hours after a thing happened it would be safe to assume that every cow and sheep outfit in a radius of three hundred miles would be discussing it over their camp-fires; and this long before there was an inch of telegraph wire or a railroad tire in the country. Hawks had merely reserved the news for Eudora's private ear because he hoped thus to gain an advantage over his three rivals.

"Ai-yi!" said old Sally, sharply, and the chair came to an abrupt stand-still. "In the name o' Heaven, how kem they to let him out?" Mrs. Rodney's knowledge of the law was of the vaguest; and if incarceration would keep a prisoner out of more grievous trouble, she could not understand giving him his freedom. To her the case was analogous to releasing a child from the duress of a corner and turning him loose to play with matches. "How kem they to let him out?" she repeated, the still rocking-chair conveying the impersonal dignity of the pulpit or the justice-seat. "I 'ain't hearn tell of so pearty a couple as the jail an' Jim in years."

The meaning that she put into her words belied their harsh face-value. With Jim

in jail, her mind [pg 124] was comparatively at rest about him. She knew he had been branding other men's cattle since the destruction of his sheep, and she knew the fate of cattle-thieves, and that Jim would be no exception to the rule. With her purely instinctive maternity, she had been fond of Jim. He had been one more boy to mother. She harbored no ill-feeling towards him that he was not her own. Moreover, she wanted no gallows-tree intermingled with the annals of her family. It suited her convenience at this particular time that Jim should stay in jail. That he had been given his freedom loosed the phials of her condemnation on the incompetents that released him.

"I 'low they wuz grudgin' him the mouthful they fed to him, that they ack so outdiciously plumb locoed as to tu'n a man out to get hisself hanged. An' Jim never wuz a hearty eater. He never seemed to relish his food, even when he wuz a growin' kid."

A pale, twinkling point of light, faintly glimmering in the vast solitudes above the billowing peaks, suddenly burst into a dazzling constellation before the girl and her mother. "It's a warning!" shivered the old woman. "Some'um's bound to happen." She began to rock herself slowly. The thing she dreaded had already come to pass in her imagination. Jim a free man was Jim a dead man. He was so dead that already his step-mother was going on with a full acceptance of the idea. She reviewed her relationship to him. No, she had nothing to blame herself for. He had been more troublesome than any of her own children and for that reason she had [pg 125] been more liberal with the rod. And yet—the face of the squaw rose before her, wraithlike, accusing! "Ai-yi!" she said; but this time her favorite expletive was hardly more than a sigh.

"I mind Jim when he first kem to us," she said, more to herself than to Eudora, who sat at her feet. The impending tragedy in the family had robbed her of all the joy in her suitors. They sat on a bench on the opposite side of the house, divided by the very nature of their interests yet companions in misery.

"He wuz scarce four, an' yet he had never been broke of the habit of sucking his thumb. Ef he'd ben my child, I'd a lammed it out'n him before he'd a seen two, but seem' he was aged for an infant havin' such practices, I tried to shame him out'n it. But, Lord a massy, men folks is hard to shame even at four. I hissed at him like a gyander every time I seen him do it. Now I'd a knowed better—I'd a sewed it up in a pepper rag."

"What's suckin' his thumb as an infant got to do with his gettin' lynched now?" demanded Eudora, with the scepticism of the second generation.

"Wait till you-uns has children of your own," sniffed her mother, from the assured position of maternal experience, "an' see the infant that's allowed to suck its thumb has the makin's in him of a felon or a unfortunite." She rocked a slow accompaniment to her dismal, prophecy.

Eudora's eyes, big with wonder, were fixed on the crouching flank of a distant mountain. Her mother broke the silence. Not often did they speak thus [pg 126] intimately. Old Sally belonged to that class of mothers who feel a pride in their reticent dealings with their daughters, and who consider the management of all affairs of the heart peculiarly the province of youth and inexperience.

But to-night she was prompted by a force beyond her ken to speak to the girl. "Eudory, in pickin' out one of them men," she jerked her thumb towards the opposite side of the house, "git one tha's clar o' the trick o' stampedin' round other wimming. It's bound to kem back to ye, same as counterfeit money."

Eudora giggled. She was of an age when the fascinations of curiosity as to the unknown male animal prompt lavish conjecture. "I 'lowed they all stampeded."

"Yes," leered the old woman—and she grinned the whole horrid length of her empty gums—"the most of 'em does. But you must shet your eyes to it. The moment they know you swallow it, they's wuthless, like horses that has run away once."

"Hark!" said Eudora. "Ain't that wheels?"

"It be," answered her mother. "It be that old Ma'am Yellett after her gov'ment."

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IX

Mrs. Yellett And Her "Gov'ment"

The buckboard drew up to the back or open-faced entrance of the Rodney house with a splendid sweep, terminating in a brilliantly staccato halt, as if to convey to the residents the flattering implication that their house was reached via a gravelled driveway, rather than across lumpish inequalities of prairie overgrown with cactus stumps and clumps of sage-brush. From the buckboard stepped a figure whose agility was compatible with her driving.

No sketchy outline can do justice to Mrs. Yellett or her costume. Like the bee, the ant, and other wonders of the economy of nature, she was not to be disposed of with a glance. And yet there was no attempt at subtlety on her part; on the contrary, no one could have an appearance of greater candor than the lady whose children Mary Carmichael had come West to teach. Her costume was a thing apart, suggesting neither sex, epoch, nor personal vanity, but what it lacked of these more usual sartorial characteristics, it more than made up in a passionate individualism; an excessively short skirt, so innocent of "fit" or "hang" in its wavering, indeterminate [pg 128] outline as to suggest the possible workmanship of teeth rather than of scissors; and riding-boots coming well to the knee, displaying a well-shaped, ample foot, perched aloft on the usual high heel that cow-punchers affect as the expression of their chiefest vanity. But Mrs. Yellett was not wholly mannish in her tastes, and to offset the boots she wore a bodice of the type that a generation ago used to be known as a "basque." It fitted her ample form as a cover fits a pin-cushion, the row of jet buttons down the front looking as if a deep breath might cause them to shoot into space at any moment with the force of Mauser bullets.

Such a garb was not, after all, incongruous with this original lady's weather-beaten face. Her skin was tanned to a fine russet, showing tiny, radiating lines about the eyes when they twinkled with laughter, which was often. No individual feature was especially striking, but the general impression of her countenance was of animation and activity, mingled with geniality and with native

shrewdness.

"Howdy, Miz Yellett," called out old Sally, hitching her rocker forward, in an excitement she could ill conceal. "You-uns' gov'ment come, an' she ain't much bigger'n a liddle green gourd. Don't seem to have drawed all the growth comin' to her yit."

"In roundin' up the p'int of my gov'ment, Mis' Rodney, you don't want to forget that green gourds and green grapes is mighty apt to belong to the sour fambly, when they hangs beyant your reach."

[pg 129]

"Ai-yi!" grimaced old Sally. "It's tol'able far to send East for green fruit. We can take our own pep'mint."

The prospective advent of a governess in the Yellett family, moreover, one from that mysterious centre of culture, the East, had not only rent the neighborhood with bitter factions, but had submitted the Yelletts to the reproach of ostentation. In those days there were no schools in that portion of the Wind River country where the Yelletts grazed their flocks and herds. Parents anxious to obtain "educational advantages"—that was the term, irrespective of the age of the student or the school he attended—sent them, often, with parental blindness as to the equivocal nature of the blessing thus conferred, to visit friends in the neighboring towns while they "got their education." Or they went uneducated, or they picked up such crumbs of knowledge as fell from the scant parental board. But never, up to the present moment, had any one flown into the face of neighborly precedent except sturdy Sarah Yellett.

Old Sally, in her eagerness to convey that she was in no degree impressed with the pedagogical importation, like many another belligerent lost the first round of the battle through an excess of personal feeling. But though down, Sally was by no means out, and after a brief session with the snuff-brush she returned to the field prepared to maintain that the Yellett children, for all their pampering in the matter of having a governess imported for their benefit, were no better off than [pg 130] her own brood, who had taken the learning the gods provided.

"Too bad, Miz Yellett, that you-uns had to hire that gov'ment without lookin' over her p'int. I've ben takin' her in durin' supper, and she'll never be able to thrash 'em past Clem. She mought be able to thrash Clem if she got plumb mad,

these yere slim wimmin is tarrible wiry 'n' active at such times, but she'll never be able to thrash beyant her." And having injected the vitriolic drop in her neighbor's cup of happiness, Old Sally struck a gait on her chair which was the equivalent of a gallop.

But Mrs. Yellett was not the sort of antagonist to be left gaping on the road, awed to silence by the action of a rocking-chair, no matter how brilliant.

"I reckon I can thrash my own children when it's needed, without gettin' in help from the East, or hereabouts either, for that matter. If other folks would only take out their public-spirited reformin' tendencies on their own famblies, there'd be a heap less lynchin' likely to happen round the country in the course of the next ten years."

Old Sally let the home-thrust pass. "Who ever hearn tell of a good teacher that wasn't a fine thrasher in the bargain?" She swung the chair about with a pivotal motion, as if she were addressing an assemblage instead of a single listener, and then, bethinking herself of a clinching illustration, she called aloud to her daughter to bear witness. "Eudory! Eu-do-ry! You-do-ry!"

"Ye-'s ma'am," drawled the daughter, coming most unwillingly from the open-faced room opposite, [pg 131] where she had been inciting all four of the suitors to battle.

"What was it they called that teacher down to Caspar that larruped the hide off'n the boys?"

"A fine dis-a-*ply*-narian, maw."

"Yes, that's it—a dis-a-*ply*-narian. What kin a lettle green gourd like her know 'bout dis-apply-in?"

"Your remarks shore remind me of a sayin' that 'the discomfort of havin' to swallow other folks' dust causes a heap of anxiety over their reckless driving.'"

Mrs. Yellett flicked her riding-boot with her whip. Her voice dropped a couple of tones, her accent became one of honeyed sweetness.

"Your consumin' anxiety regardin' my gov'ment and my children shore reminds me of a narrative appertainin' to two dawgs. Them dawgs was neighbors, livin' in

adj'inin' yards separated by a fence, and one day one of them got a good meaty bone and settled hisself down to the enjyment thereof. And his intimate friend and neighbor on the other side of the fence, who had no bone to engage his faculties, he began to fret hisself 'bout the business of his friend. S'pose he was to choke hisself over that bone. S'pose the meat disagreed with him. And he begins to bark warnin's, but the dawg with the bone he keeps right on. But the other dawg he dashes hisself again the fence and he scratches with his claws. He whines pitiful, he's that anxious about his friend. But the dawg with the bone he went right on till he gnawed it down to the last morsel, and, goin' to the hole in the fence whar his [pg 132] friend had kep' that anxious vigil, he says: 'Friend, the only thing that consoled me while having to endure the anguish of eatin' that bone was the thought of your watchful sympathy!' Which bein' the case, I'd thank you to tell me whar I can find my gov'ment."

"Ai-yi!" said old Sally. "I ain't seein' no bone this deal. Just a litle green gourd 's all I see with my strongest specs."

Mary Carmichael, in one of the inner rooms, was writing a home letter, which was chiefly remarkable for what it failed to relate. It gave long accounts of the scenery, it waxed didactic over the future of the country; but the adventures of the trip, with her incidental acquaintance with the Daxes and Chugg, were not recorded. Eudora announced the arrival of Mrs. Yellett, and Mary, at the news, dropped the contents of her portfolio and started up with much the feeling a marooned sailor might have on hearing a sail has been sighted. At this particular stage of her career Miss Carmichael had not developed the philosophy that later in life was destined to become her most valuable asset. Her sense of humor no longer responded to the vagaries of pioneer life. The comedy element was coming a little too thick and fast. She was getting a bit heart-sick for a glimpse of her own kind, a word with some one who spoke her language. And here, at last, was the woman who had written such a charming letter, who had so graciously intimated that there was room for her at the hearth-stone. Mary was, indeed, eager to make the acquaintance of Mrs. Yellett.

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To the end of her life she never forgot that first meeting—the perfect confidence with which she followed Eudora to the open room, the ensuing blank amazement, the utter inability to reconcile the Mrs. Yellett of the letter with the Mrs. Yellett of fact. The lamp on the table, burning feebly, seemed to burst into a thousand shooting-stars as the girl struggled with her tears. Home was so far, and

Mrs. Yellett was so different from what she had expected! And yet, as she felt her fingers crush in the grip of that hard but not unkindly hand, there was in the woman's rugged personality a sustaining quality; and, thinking again of Archie's prospects, Mary was not altogether sorry that she had come.

"You be a right smart young maverick not to get lost none on this long trail, and no one to p'int you right if you strayed," commented Mary's patroness, affably. "But we won't roominate here no longer than we can help. It's too hard on old Ma'am Rodney. She's just 'bout the color of withered cabbage now, 'long of me havin' you."

While she talked, Mrs. Yellett picked up Mary's trunk and bags and stowed them in the back of the buckboard with the ease with which another woman might handle pasteboard boxes. One or two of the male Rodneys offered to help, but she waved them aside and lashed the luggage to the buckboard, handling the ropes with the skill of an old sailor. The entire Rodney family and the suitors of Eudora assembled to witness the departure. "It's a heap friendly of you to fret so," was the parting [pg 134] stab of Sarah Yellett to Sally Rodney; and she swung the backboard about, cleared the cactus stumps in the Rodney door-yard, and gained the mountain-road.

"Ai-yi!" said old Sally. "What's this country comin' to?"

"A few more women, thank God!" remarked Ira. Eudora had just snubbed him, and he put a wealth of meaning into his look after the vanishing buckboard.

The night was magnificent. From horizon to horizon the sky was sown with quivering points of light. Each straggling clump of sage-brush, rocky ledge, and boulder borrowed a beauty not its own from the yellow radiance of the stars.

They had gone a good two miles before Mary's patroness broke the silence with, "Nothing plumb stampedes my temper like that Rodney outfit—old Sally buckin' an' pitchin' in her rockin'-chair same as if she was breakin' a bronco, an' that Eudory always corallin', deceivin', and jiltin' one outfit of men after another. If she was a daughter of mine, I'd medjure her length across my knee, full growed and courted though she is. The only one of the outfit that's wuth while is Judith, an' she ain't old woman Rodney's girl, neither. You hyeard that already, did you? Well, this yere country may be lackin' in population, but it's handy as a sewin'-circle in distributin' news."

Mary mentioned Leander. "Yes," answered Mrs. Yellett, reflectively, "Leander's mouth do run about eight and a half octaves. Sometimes I don't blame his wife for bangin' down the lid."

[pg 135]

They talked of Jim Rodney's troubles, and the growing hatred between sheep and cattle men, because of range rights.

"Now that pore Jim had a heap of good citizen in him, before that pestiferous cattle outfit druv' his sheep over the cliff. Relations 'twixt sheep and cattle men in this yere country is strained beyant the goin'-back place, I can tell you. My pistol-eye 'ain't had a wink of sleep for nigh on eighteen months, an' is broke to wakefulness same as a teethin' babe.

"Jim was wild as a coyote 'fore he marries that girl. She come all the way from Topeka, Kansas, thinking she was goin' to find a respectable home, and when she come out hyear and found the place was a dance-hall, she cried all the time. She didn't add none to the hilarity of the place. An' one day Jim he strolled in, an' seem' the girl a-cryin' like a freshet and wishin' she was dead, he inquired the cause. She told him how that old harpy wrote her, an', bein' an orphan, she come out thinkin' she was goin' to a respectable place as waitress, an' Jim he 'lowed it was a case for the law. He was a little shy of twenty at the time, just a young cockerel 'bout br'ilin' size. Some of the old hangers-on 'bout the place they see a heap of fun in Jim's takin' on 'bout the girl, he bein' that young that he had scarce growed a pair of spurs yet. An' one of 'em says to him,' Sonny, if you're afeerd that this yere corral is onjurious to the young lady's morals, we'll call in the gospel sharp, if you'll stand for the brand.' Now Jim hadn't a cent, nor no callin', nor a prospect to his back, but he struts up to the man that was doin' [pg 136] the talkin', game as a bantam, an' he says, 'The lady ain't rakin' in anythin' but a lettle white chip, in takin' me, but if she's willin', here's my hand.'

"At which that pore young thing cried harder than ever. Well, Jim he up an' marries the girl an' it turns out fine. He gets a job herdin' sheep on shares, an' she stays with the Rodney outfit till he saves enough to build a cabin. Things is goin' with Jim like a prairie afire. In a few years he acquires a herd of his own, a fine herd, not a scabby sheep in the bunch. Alida she makes him the best kind of a wife, them kids is the pride of his life, and then, them cursed cattle-men do for him. Of course, he takes to rustlin'; I'd do more'n rustle if they'd touch mine."

The pair of broncos that Mrs. Yellett was driving humped their backs like cats as they climbed the steep mountain-road. With her, driving was an exact science. It was a treat to see her handle the ribbons. Mary asked some trifling question about the children and it elicited the information that one of the girls was named Cacta. "Yes," she said, "I like new names for children, not old ones that is all frazzled out and folks has suffered an' died to. It seems to start 'em fair, like playin' cards with a new deck. Cacta's my oldest daughter, and I named her after the flowers that blooms all over the desert spite of everything, heat, cold, an' rain an' alkali dust—the cactus blooms right through it all. Even its own thorns don't seem to fret it none. I called her plain Cactus till she was three, and along came a sharp studyin' the flowers an' weeds out here, and [pg 137] he 'lowed that Cactus was a boy's name an' Cacta was for girls—called it a *feeminin* tarnation, or somethin' like that, so we changed it. My second daughter 'ain't got quite so much of a name. She's called Clematis. That holds its own out here pretty well, 'long by the willows on the creek. Paw 'lowed he was terrible afraid that I'd name the youngest girl Sage-brush, so he spoke to call her Lessie Viola, an' I giv' in. The boys is all plain named, Ben, Jack, and Ned. Paw wouldn't hear of a fancy brand bein' run onto 'em."

The temperature fell perceptibly as they climbed the heights, and the air had the heady quality of wine. It was awesome, this entering into the great company of the mountains. Presently Mary caught the glimmer of something white against the dark background of the hills. It gleamed like a snow-bank, though they were far below the snow-line on the mountain-side they were climbing.

"Well, here be camp," announced Mrs. Yellett. What Mary had taken for a bank of snow was a huge, canvas-covered wagon. Several dogs ran down to greet the buckboard, barking a welcome. In the background was a shadowy group, huge of stature, making its way down the mountain-path. "And here's all the children come to meet teacher." Mrs. Yellett's tone was tenderly maternal, as if it was something of a feat for the children to walk down the mountain-path to meet their teacher. But Mary, straining her eyes to catch a glimpse of her little pupils, could discover nothing but a group of persons that seemed to be the sole survivors of some [pg 138] titanic race. Not one among them but seemed to have reached the high-water mark of six feet. Was it an optical illusion, a hallucination born of the wonderful starlight? Or were they as huge as they seemed? The young men looked giants, the girls as if they had wandered out of the first chapters of Genesis. Their mother introduced them. They all had huge, warm, perspiring hands, with grips like bears. Mary looked about for a house

into which she could escape to gather her scattered faculties, but the starlight, yellow and luminous, revealed none. There was the huge covered wagon that she had taken for a snow-bank, there was a small tent, there were two light wagons, there were dogs innumerable, but there was no sign of a house.

"What do you think of it?" inquired Mrs. Yellett, smilingly, anticipating a favorable answer.

"It's almost too beautiful to leave." Mary innocently supposed that Mrs. Yellett referred to the starlit landscape. "But I'm so tired, Mrs. Yellett, and so glad to get to a real home at last, that I'm going to ask if you will not show me the way to the house so that I may go to bed right away."

This apparently reasonable request was greeted by a fine chorus of titanic laughter from Mary's pupils. Mrs. Yellett waved her hand over the surrounding landscape in comprehensive gesture.

"Ain't all this large enough for you?" she asked, gayly.

"You mean the mountains? They're wonderful. But—I really think I'd like to go in the house."

"I shore hope you ain't figgerin' on goin' into no [pg 139] house, 'cause there ain't no house to go into." She laughed merrily, as if the idea of such an effete luxury as a house were amusing. "This yere family 'ain't ever had a house—it camps."

Mary gasped. The real meaning of words no longer had the power of making an impression on her. If Mrs. Yellett had announced that they were in the habit of sleeping in the moon, it would not have surprised her.

"If you are tired, an' want to go to bed, you can shuck off and lie down any time. Ben, Jack, Ned, go an' set with paw in the tent while the gov'ment gets ready for bed. Cacta and Clem, you help me with them quilts."

Mary stood helpless in the wilderness while quilts and pillows were fetched somewhere from the adjacent scenery, and Mrs. Yellett asked her, with the gravity of a Pullman porter interrogating a passenger as to the location of head and foot, if she liked to sleep "light or dark." She chose "dark" at random, hating to display her ignorance of the alternatives, with the happy result that her bed was made up to leeward of the great sheep-wagon, in a nice little corner of the

State of Wyoming. Mary was grateful that she had chosen dark.

As she dozed off, she was reminded of a certain magazine illustration that Archie had pinned over his bed after the aunts had given a grudging consent to this westward journey. There was a line beneath the pictorial decoy which read: "Ranch Life in the New West." And there were piazzas with fringed Mexican hammocks, wild-grass cushions, [pg 140] a tea-table with a samovar, and, last, a lady in white muslin pouring tea. The stern reality apparently consisted in scorching alkali plains, with houses of the packing-box school of architecture at a distance of seventy or eighty miles apart. No ladies in white muslin poured tea; they garbed themselves in simple gunny-sacking, and their repartee had an acrid, personal note. But Mary was glad to know that Archie had that picture, and that he thought of her in such ideal surroundings.

[pg 141]

On Horse-thief Trail

Judith, on her black mare, Dolly, left the Dax ranch after the mid-day meal to go in quest of her brother. He had left his comfortable cabin on the Bear Creek, when he had turned rustler, and moved into the "bad man's country," one of those remote mountain fastnesses that abound in Wyoming and furnish a natural protection to the fugitive from justice. Judith took the left fork of the road even as Peter Hamilton had chosen the right, the day she had watched him gallop towards Kitty Colebrooke with never a glance backward. Judith strove now to put him and the memory of that day from her mind by turning towards the open country without a glance in the direction he had taken. But her thoughts were weary of journeying over that trail that she would not look towards; in imagination she had travelled it with Peter a hundred times, saw each dip and turn of the yellow road, each feature of the landscape as he rode exultant to Kitty, to be turned, tried, taken or left as her mood should prompt. But Judith was more woman than saint, and in her heart there was a blending of joy and pain. For she knew—such [pg 142] skill has love in inference from detail—that the mysterious far-away girl, who was so powerful that she could have whatever she wanted, even to Peter, loved her own ambitions better than she did Peter or Peter's happiness, and that she would not marry him except as a makeshift. For Miss Colebrooke wrote verses; Peter had a white-and-gold volume of them that Judith fancied he said his prayers to.

As for Peter himself, he had never been able to explain the magic Kitty had brewed for him. There was a heady quality in the very ring of her name. His first glimpse of her, on Class Day, in a white gown and a hat that to his manly indiscrimination looked as guileless as a sheaf of poppies nodding above the pale-yellow hair that had the sheen of corn-silk, had been a vision that stirred in him heroic promptings. He had no difficulty in securing an introduction. She was a connection of the Wetmores, as was he, though through opposite sides of the house. In the few minutes' talk that followed, he had the disconcerting sensation of being "talked down to." There was the indulgent tolerance of the woman of

the world to the "nice boy" about this amazing young woman, who might have been eighteen. Hamilton had repudiated the very suggestion of being a "nice boy." But he felt himself blushing, groping for words, saying stupid things, supplying every requisite of the "nice boy" as if he were acting the part. Her chaperon bore her away presently, and he was left with a radiant impression of corn-silk hair and a complexion that justified Bouguereau's mother-of-pearl [pg 143] flesh tints. And when she had tilted the ruffled lace parasol over her shoulder, so that it framed her head like a fleecy halo, he had seen that her eyes were green as jade. Withal he had a sense of having acquitted himself stupidly.

Later, when he ran the gamut of some friends, they had chaffed him on his hardihood. By Jove! He had nerve to look at her! Didn't he know she was "the" Miss Colebrooke? Now Hamilton was absolutely ignorant of Miss Colebrooke's right of way to the definite article, but it was characteristic of him to make no inquiries. On the whole, he found the situation meeting with a greater number of the artistic requirements than such situations usually presented. He was still dallying with this pleasant vagueness of sensation when he picked up a copy of a magazine, and the name Katherine Colebrooke caught his eye and held it like the flight of a comet. Her contribution was a sonnet entitled "The Miracle." As a naïve emotional confession, "The Miracle" interested him; as a sonnet, he rent it unmercifully.

Peter was to learn, however, that this sonnet was but a solitary flake in a poetic fall of more or less magnitude. He rather conspicuously avoided a reference to her poetry when they met again. To him it was the very least of her gifts. Her hair, that had the tender yellow of ripening corn, was worthy a cycle of sonnets, but pray leave the making of them to some one else! By daylight the jade-colored eyes seemed to shut out the world. The pupils shrank to pin-points. The green looked [pg 144] deep—as many fathoms as the sea. She was all Diana by daylight, a huntress, if you will, of the elusive epithet, but essentially a maiden goddess, who would add no sprightly romance to the chronicles of Olympus. By lamp-light she suggested quite another divinity. The pin-points expanded; they burned black, like coals newly breaking into flame.

When Hamilton knew her better, he did not like to think that he had thought her eighteen at their first meeting. It impugned his judgment as a man of the world. Young ladies of eighteen could not possibly be contributors of several years' standing to the various magazines. Disconcerting scraps of gossip floated to him. He heard of her as bridesmaid at a famous wedding of six years back, when she

had deflected the admiration from the bride and remained the central figure of the picture. Her portrait by Sargent had been the sensation of the Salon when he had been a grubby-faced boy with his nose in a Latin grammar. An unusual situation was abhorrent to him. That he should marry an older woman, one, moreover, who had gained her public in a field to which he had not gained admission, was doubly distasteful by reason of his deference to the conventional. If she had flirted with him, his midsummer madness would have evaporated into thin air; but she kept him at arm's-length, ostensibly took him seriously, and the boy proposed.

Her rejection of him was a matter of such consummate skill that Hamilton did not realize the [pg 145] keenness of his disappointment till he was swinging westward over the prairies. She had confided to him that her work claimed her and that she must renounce those sweet responsibilities that made the happiness of other women. It was with the protective mien of one who sought to shield him from an adverse destiny that she declined his suit.

This had all happened seven years ago. In the mean time he had adjusted his disappointment to the new life of the West. To say that he had fallen in love with the situation would be to misrepresent him. But the rôle of lonely cow-puncher loyally wedded to the thought of his first love was not without charm to Peter. How long his constancy would have survived the test of propinquity to a woman of Judith Rodney's compelling personality, other things being equal, it would be difficult to hazard a guess. The coming of Judith from the convent increased the perspective into which Kitty was retreating. With the vivid plainswoman in the foreground, the pale-haired writer of verse dwindled almost to reminiscence. But the reverence for the usual, that made up the underlying motive for so much of Hamilton's conduct, presented barriers alongside of which his previous quandary regarding Miss Colebrooke's seniority shrank to insignificance. He might marry a woman older than himself and swallow the grimace of it, but by no conceivable system of argument could he persuade himself to marry into a family like that of the Rodneys—the girl herself, for all her beauty and rare womanliness, a quarter Indian, her father the [pg 146] synonyme for obloquy, her brother a cattle thief. Hamilton preferred that other men should make the heroic marriages of a new country. He was prepared to applaud their hardihood of temperament, but in his own case such a thing was inconceivable. Similar arguments have ensnared multitudes in the web of caution and provided a rich feast for the arch-spider, convention, the shrivelled flies dangling in the web conveying no significance, apparently, beyond that of advertising the system.

When Peter went East, he had expected to find Kitty worn by the pursuit of epithets, haunted by the phantom of a career, resigned to the slings and arrows of remorseful spinsterhood. An obvious regret, or, at least, resignation tempered with remembrance, was the unguent he anticipated at the hands of Kitty. But alas for sanctuaries built to refuge wounded pride! He found Kitty the pivot of an adoring coterie, the magazines flowing with the milk and honey of her verse and she looking younger, if possible, than when he had first known her. Time, experience, even the pangs of literary parturition had not writ a single character on that alabaster brow. The very atrophy of the forces of time which she had accomplished by unknown necromancy seemed to endow her with an elfin youth, making her seem smaller, more childlike, more radiantly elusive than when she had worn the poppy hat at Cambridge.

The tan and hardship of the prairie had adjusted the blunder of their ages. Stark conditions had overdrawn his account perhaps a decade; she retained [pg 147] a surplus it would be rude to estimate. Her greeting of him was radiant, her welcome panoplied in words that verged close to inspiration. A woman would have scented warning instantly, deep feeling and the curled and perfumed phrase being suspicious cronies and sure to rouse those lightly slumbering watch-dogs, the feminine wits. But Peter only turned the other cheek. More than once, in the days that followed, he devoutly thanked his patron saint, caution, that his relations with Judith had been governed by characteristic prudence. Kitty admitted him to her coterie, but he had lost nothing of his attitude of grand Turk towards her verses. The sin be upon the heads of whomever took such things seriously! The irony of fate that compelled a class poet to punch cows may have tintured his judgment.

A telegram recalled him to the ranch and prevented a final leave-taking with Miss Colebrooke. He made his adieux by letter, and they were frankly regretful. Miss Colebrooke's reply mingled sorrow in parting from her old friend with joy in having found him. Her letter, a masterpiece of phrase-spinning, presented to Peter the one significant fact that she would not be averse to the renewal of his suit. In reading her letter he made no allowance for the fact that the lady had made a fine art of saying things, and that her joy and regret at their meeting and parting might have been reminiscent of the printed passion that was so prominent a feature of magazinedom. Her letters—the like of them he had never seen outside printed volumes of [pg 148] letters that had achieved the distinction of classics—culminated in the one that Judith had given him that morning, announcing that unexpectedly she had decided to join the Wetmore girls and

would be glad to see him at the ranch.

That he had flown at her bidding, Judith knew. What she would least have suspected was that Miss Colebrooke had received her visitor as if his breakneck ride across the desert had been in the nature of an afternoon call. If Judith, knowing what she did of this long-drawn-out romance, could have known likewise of her knight's chagrin, would she have pitied him?

Ignorant of the recent anticlimax, and with a burden of many heavy thoughts, Judith was penetrating a world of unleavened desolation. Beneath the scourge of the noon-day sun the desert lay, stripped of every illusion. Vegetation had almost ceased, nothing but sun-scorched, dust-choked sage-brush could spring from such sterility. The fruit of desolation, it gave back to desolation a quality more melancholy than utter barrenness. Glittering in the sunlight, the beds of alkali gleamed leper white; above them the agitated air was like the hot waves that dance and quiver about iron at white heat. From horizon to horizon the curse of God seemed to have fallen on the land; it was as if, cursing it, He had forgotten it, and left it as the abomination of desolation. Judith scarce heeded, her thoughts straying after first one then another of the group that made up her little world—Peter Hamilton, Kitty Colebrooke, Jim, his family—thoughts [pg 149] inconsequent as the dancing dust-devils that whirled over that infinity of space, and, whirling, disappeared and reappeared at some new corner of the compass.

The trail that she must take to Jim's camp in the mountain was known to but few honest men. Fugitives from justice—the grave, impersonal justice of the law, or the swift justice of the plains—found there an asylum. And while they sometimes suffered, in death by thirst or hunger, a sentence more dreadful than the law of the land or the law of the rope would have given them, the desert, like the sea, seldom gave up her own. It was more than probable that no woman except Alida Rodney had ever taken that trail before, and reasonably certain that no woman had ever taken it alone. Dolly, when she saw the beds of alkali grow more frequent, and that the trails of the range cattle turned back, sniffed the lack of water in the air, slackened her pace, and turned an interrogatory ear towards her mistress.

"It's all right, old girl"; the gauntleted hand patted the satin neck. "We're in for"—Judith flung her head up and confronted the infinite desolation yawning to the sky-line—"God knows what."

Dolly broke into a light canter; this evidently was not an occasion for dawdling. There was a touch of business about the way the reins were held that made the mare settle down to work. But her flying hoofs made little apparent progress against the space and silence of the desert. Five, ten, fifteen miles and the curving shoulder of the mountain, [pg 150] that she must cross, still mocked in the distance. Only the sun moved in that vast world of seemingly immutable forces.

There was no stoic Sioux in Judith now. The girl that breasted the crests of the foot-hills shrank in terror from the loneliness and the suggestion of foes lurking in ambush. The sun dropped behind the mountain, leaving a blood-red pool in his wake, like fugitive Cain. Already night was sweeping over the earth from mountain shadows that flowed imperceptibly together like blackened pools. To the girl following the trail the silence was more dreadful than a chorus of threatening voices. She listened till the stillness beat at her ears like the stamping of ten thousand hoofs, then pulled up her horse, and the desert was as still as the chamber of death.

"Ah, Dolly, my dear, a house is the place for women folk when the night comes—a house, the fire burning clear, the kettle singing, and—" Dolly whinnied an affirmative without waiting for the picture to be completed. The wilderness was being gradually swallowed by the shadows, as deliberately as a snake swallows its victim. They were nearing the mountains. The hot blasts of air from the desert blew more and more intermittently. The breeze swept keen from the hills, towering higher and higher, and Judith breathed deep of the piny fragrance and felt the tension of things loosen a little.

Whitening cattle bones gleamed from the darkness, tragic reminders of hard winters and scant pasturage, [pg 151] and Judith, with the Indian superstition that was in the marrow of her bones, read ghostly warnings in the empty eye-sockets of the grinning skulls that stared up at her. She dared not think of the dangers that the looming darkness might conceal, or of what she might find at her journey's end, or—"Whoa, Dolly! softly, girl. Is it my foolish, white-blood nerves, or is some one following?"

The mare had been trained to respond to the slightest touch on her mouth, and stopped instantly. Judith swayed slightly in the saddle with the heaving of the sweating horse. The blood beat at her temples, confusing what she actually heard with what her imagination pictured. She was half-way up a towering spur of the

Wind River when she slid from the saddle, and putting her ear to the ground listened, Indian fashion. Above the throbbing stillness of the desert night, that came to her murmurously, like the imprisoned roar of the sea from a shell, she could hear the regular beat of horse's hoofs following up the steep mountain grade. She scrambled up with the desperate nimbleness of a hunted thing, but when she attempted to vault to the saddle her limbs failed and she sank clinging to the pommel. Twice she tried and twice the trembling of her limbs held her captive. With the loss of each moment the beat of the hoofs on the trail below became more distinct. The very desperation of her plight kept her clinging to the pommel, incapable of thought, so that when she finally flung herself to the saddle she was surprised to find herself [pg 152] there. To the left the trail dropped sharply to a precipice, choked by the close crowding of many scrub pines. To the right the snow-clad spires of the Wind River kept their eternal vigil. If she should call aloud for help, these white, still mountains would echo the anguish of her woman's cry and give no further heed to her plight.

The trail had begun to widen. The horse behind her again stumbled, loosening a stone that rolled with crashes and echoings down to the precipice below. She took advantage of the widening of the trail to urge Dolly forward. Her impulse was to put spurs to the mare and run, to take chances with loose stones, a narrowing trail, and the possibility of Dolly's stumbling and breaking a leg; but discretion prompted the showing of a brave front, the pleasantries of the road, with flight as the last resource of desperation.

Suddenly gaining what seemed to be a plateau, she wheeled and waited the coming of this possible friend or foe. The thudding of hoofs through the inferno of darkness stopped, as the rider below considered the latest move of the horseman above. They were so near that Judith could hear the labored breathing of the sweating horse. The blackness of the night had become a tangible thing. The towering mountains were one piece with the gaping precipice, the trail, the scrub pines, the gauntlet on her hand. The horse below resumed its stumbling gait. Judith crowded Dolly close to the rocky wall. If the chance comrade of the wilderness [pg 153] should pass her by in the darkness—God speed him!

"What the devil are you blocking the trail for?" sung out a voice from the darkness. At sound of it Judith's heart stopped beating. The voice was Peter Hamilton's.

[pg 154]



XI

The Cabin In The Valley

And Judith, taken unawares by the unexpected turn of things, comforted as a lost child that is found, told all her feeling for him in the way she called his name. The easy tenderness of the man awoke; his senses swayed to the magic of her voice, the mystery of the night, the shadow world in which they two, 'twixt earth and sky, were alone. They rode without speaking. Peter's hand sought hers, and all her woman's terror of the desolation, her fear of the vague terrors of the dreadful night, spoke in her answering pressure. It was as if the desert had given them to each other as they groped through the silent darkness. In the great company of earth, sky, silence, and this great-hearted woman, Peter grew conscious of a real thrill. There were depths to life—vast, still depths; this woman's unselfish love for him made him realize them. He felt his soul sweeping out on the great tide of things. Farther and farther it swept; his patron saint, caution, beckoning frantically from the receding shore, was miles behind. "Judith!" he said, and he scarce recognized his own voice. "Judith!" he struggled as a swimmer in a drowning clutch. [pg 155] Then his patron saint threw him a life-line and he saved the situation.

"Judith!" he said, a third time, and now he knew his voice. It was the voice of the man who tilted at life picturesquely in a broad-brimmed hat, who loved his darling griefs and fitted them as a Rembrandt fits its background. And still, in the same voice, the voice he knew, he said: "I feel as if we had died and our souls were meeting. You know Aldrich's exquisite lines:

"Somewhere in desolate, wind-swept space,
 In twilight land—no man's land—
Two hurrying shapes met face to face
 And bade each other stand.

"'And who are you?' cried one, agape,
 Shuddering in the gloaming light.

I know not,' said the other shape,
'I only died last night.'"

"I only died last night!" she repeated the line, slowly, significantly. In her questioning she forgot the night, the desolation, the presence of the man. Had she died last night? Had youth, the joy of living, her infinite capacity for love, had they died when Peter, with the ugly haste of the man without a nice sense of the time that should elapse between the old and the new love, had spurred away cheerfully at the beck of another woman? And now the desert, this earth-mother as she called it, in the Indian way, had given him back to her, thrown them together as driftwood in the still ocean of space. She drew a long breath, the breath [pg 156] of one waking from an anguished dream. A wild, unreasoning gladness woke in her heart, the joy of living swept her back again to life. She had not died last night, she was riding through the wilderness with Peter.

"Look!" she whispered. The sky had lost its forbidding blackness. The sharp notches of the mountains, faintly outlined in white, undulated through an eternity of space. Venus hung in the west, burning softly as a shaded lamp. The trail they climbed seemed to end in her pale yellow light.

Peter had saved the situation, but the wild beauty of the night stirred in him that gift of silvery speech that was ever his tribute to the sex, rather than the woman. He bent towards Judith. A loosened strand of her hair blew across his cheek. The breakneck ride to Kitty was already the madness of a dead and gone incarnation. He pointed to the pale star, and told her it was the omen of their destiny; the formless blackness through which they had groped was the way of life, but for such as were not condemned to eternal darkness Venus held high her lamp and they scaled the heights.

And Judith, listening, found her heart a battle-field of love and hate. "Were women dogs, that men should play with them in idle moods, caress them, and fling them out for other toys?" she demanded of herself, even while the tones of his voice melted her innermost being to thankfulness for this hour that he was wholly hers.

Gayly, with ready turns of speech and snatches of song, trolled in his musical barytone, Peter rode [pg 157] through the night, even as he rode through life, a Sir Knight of the Joyous Heart, unbrushed by the wing of sorrow, loving his pale griefs for the values they gave the picture. And Judith understood by reason of

that exquisite perception that was hers in all matters pertaining to him, and, knowing, only loved the more.

Down the valley came the sharp yelp of a coyote, and in a moment the towering crags had taken it up, the echo repeating it and giving it back to the valley, where the coyote barked again at the shadow of his voice. The night was full of the eerie laughter. Peter put a restraining hand on Dolly's bridle, and, waiting for the coyote to stop, called Judith's name, and all the mountains made music of it. The echo sang the old Hebrew name as if it had been a psalm. Peter's voice gave it to the mountains joyously, but the mountains gave it back in the minor. And Judith was reminded of the soft, singing syllables that her mother, in the Indian way, had made of her daughter's Indian name. The remembrance tugged at her heart. In her joy at seeing Peter she had forgotten that the errand that had brought her was an errand of life and death—life and death for her brother!

But Peter's ready enthusiasms pressed him hard. Surely love-making was the business of such a night. "Ah, Judith, goddess of the heights, if I could sing your name like the mountains, would you love me a little?"

For his pains he had a flash of white teeth in a smile that recalled his first acquaintance with Kitty, [pg 158] the sort of smile one would give to a "nice boy" when his manoeuvres were a trifle obvious. "Not if you sang my name as the chorus of all the Himalayas and the Rockies and Andes, and with the fire of all their volcanoes and the beauty of their snows and the strength of all their hills, for it's not my way to love a little!"

He bent towards her; to brush her cheek lightly as they rode was but to imply his appreciation of the scene as a bit of chiaroscuro, the panorama of the desert night, eternal romance typified by the man and woman scaling the heights, the goddess of love lighting them on their way by her flaming torch. But Judith, who said little because she felt much, was in no mood to brook such dalliance, and, urging the mare sharply, she cantered down the divide at peril of life and limb. Peter, cursing the heavy-footed beast he rode, came stumbling after.

Judith rode wildly through the night, leaving Peter laps behind, to beseech, to prophesy dire happening if she should slip, and to scramble after, as best he might, on the heavy-footed beast he repudiated, with all his ancestors, as oxen, to the fourth generation. But the woman kept her pace. She had stern questions to put to herself, and they were likely to have truer answers if Peter were

elsewhere than riding beside her. Whither was he going? They had met casually on a trail known to few honest men. It led over a spur of the Wind River to a sort of no man's land, the hiding-place of horse and cattle thieves. She had gone to warn [pg 159] her brother. Could he be going there—She could not bring herself to finish.

Her heart was divided against itself. Within it were fought again the red and the white man's battles, bitterly, and to the finish. And now the white man, with his open warfare, won, and all her love rose up and scourged her little faith. She would wait on the trail for Peter, penitent and ashamed. And while she waited suspicions bred of her Indian blood stirred distrustfully, and she told herself that her mother's daughter made a worthy champion of the ways of white men. Did Hamilton hunt her brother gallowsward, making merry with her the meantime? He had not even been courteously concerned as to where she was going when they met on the divide. They had met and ridden together as casually as if it had been the most natural thing for them both to be taking the horse-thief trail as a summer evening's ride. And she had not thought to wonder at his possible destination, when the man from whom she rode in terror through the night proved to be Peter, because the lesser question of his errand had been swallowed up in the greater miracle of his presence.

She was by this time well down the divide. The temperature had risen perceptibly on the down grade. The heat of the plains had already mingled with the cool hill air; the heights, where Venus kept her love vigil, were already past. Judith gave Dolly a breathing spell, herself lounging easily meanwhile. She knew how to take her ease in the saddle as well as any cow-puncher on the range.

[pg 160]

"The Hayoka has dominion over me," she mused, with Indian fatalism. "As well resign myself to sorrow with dignity. Hayoka, Hayo—ka!" and she began to croon softly a hymn of propitiation to the Hayoka, the Sioux god of contrariety. According to the legends, he sat naked and fanned himself in a Dakota blizzard and huddled, shivering, over a fire in the heat of summer. Likewise the Hayoka cried for joy and laughed for sorrow.

She remembered how the nuns at Santa Fé had been shocked at her for praying to Indian gods, and how once she had built a little mound of stones, which was the Sioux way of making petition, in the shadow of the statue of the Virgin Mary,

and how Sister Angela had scattered the stones and told her to pray instead to the Blessed Lady. She still prayed to the Blessed Lady every day; but sometimes, too, she reared little mounds of stones in the desert when she was very sad and the kinship between her and the dead gods of her mother's people seemed the closer for their common sorrow.

Peter, coming up with a much-blown horse, found her still chanting the Indian song.

"Sing him a verse for me, Judith. Heaven knows I need something to straighten out my infernal luck. Tell the Hayoka that I'm a good fellow and need only half a chance. Tell him to prosper my present venture."

She had begun to chant the invocation, then stopped suddenly. "I must not; you know I am a Catholic." Suspicion that had been scotched, not killed, raised its head. "What was his present [pg 161] venture?" Her eye had not changed in expression, nor a tone of her voice, but in her heart was a sickening distrust for all things.

A belated moon had come up. The level plain, on which their horses threw grotesque, elongated shadows, was flooded with honey-colored light. Each straggling clump of sage-brush, whitening bone and boulder, gleamed mysterious, ghostly in the radiant flood-tide. They seemed to be riding through a world that had no kinship with that black, formless void through which they had groped but yet a little while. Then darkness had been upon the face of the deep. Now there was a miracle of light such as only the desert, in its desolation, knows. To Judith, with a soul attuned to every passing expression of nature, there was significance in this transition from darkness to light. The sudden radiance was emblematic of her belated perception, coming as it did after a blindness so dense as to appear almost wilful. Her mind was busy with a multitude of schemes. Fool though she had been, she would not be the instrument of her brother's undoing.

"I've come too far," she cried, in sudden dismay. "I should have stopped at the foot of the divide. I've never been over the trail before."

"You foolish child, why should you stop in the middle of the wilderness?"

She wheeled the mare about and faced him, a figure of graven resolution.

"I promised to meet Tom Lorimer there—now you know."

With which she cracked Dolly sharply with her [pg 162] heel and began to retrace her way over the trail. Peter turned his horse and followed, with the feeling of utter helplessness that a man has when confronted with the granite obstinacy of women. Judith had meanwhile expected that the announcement of her mythical appointment with Tom Lorimer would be received differently. Tom Lorimer's reputation was of the worst. An Eastern man formerly, an absconder from justice, rumor was busy with tales of ungodly merrymaking that went on at his ranch, where no woman went except painted wisps from the dance-halls. But Peter was too loyal a friend, despite his shortcomings as a lover, to see in Judith's statement anything more than a sisterly devotion so deeply unselfish that it failed to take into account the danger to which she subjected herself.

However, it was plainly his duty to prevent an unprotected rendezvous with Lorimer, to reason, to plead, and, if he should fail to bring her to a reasonable frame of mind, to go with her, come what would of the result. There were reasons innumerable why he, a cattle-man, should avoid the appearance of dealing with the sheep faction, he reflected, grimly. Lorimer owned sheep, many thousand head. His herds had been allowed to graze unmolested, while smaller owners, like Jim Rodney, had been crowded out because his influence, politically, was a thing to be reckoned with. So Peter followed Judith, pleading Judith's cause; she did not understand, he told her, what she was doing; and while perhaps there was not another man in the country who would not honor her unselfishness in coming to [pg 163] him, Lorimer's chivalry was not a thing to be reckoned with, drunken beast that he was. And Judith, worn with the struggle, tried beyond measure, made reckless by the daily infusion of ill-fortune, pulled up the mare and laughed unpleasantly.

"You think I'm going to see Lorimer about Jim? I'm going with him to a merrymaking. We're old pals, Lorimer and I."

"Judith, dear, has it come to this, that you not only distrust an old friend, but that you try to degrade yourself to hide from him the fact that you are going to your brother's? You've never spoken to Lorimer. I heard him say, not a week ago, that he had never succeeded in making you recognize him. You deceived me at first when you spoke of meeting him—I thought you had a message from Jim—but this talk of merrymaking is beneath you." He shrugged his shoulders in disgust. He felt the torrent of grief that rent her. No sob escaped her lips; there was no

convulsive movement of shoulder. She rode beside him, still as the desert before the sand-storm breaks, her soul seared with white-hot iron that knows no saving grace of sob or tear. She rode as Boadicea might have ridden to battle; there was not a yielding line in her body. But over and over in her woman's heart there rang the cry: "I am so tired! If the long night would but come!"

Peter drew out his watch. "It's a quarter to eleven. We'll have a hard bit of riding to reach Blind Creek before midnight."

Then he knew as well as she, perhaps better, the route to Jim's hiding-place; she had never been [pg 164] there as yet. And if Peter knew, doubtless every cattleman in the country knew. What a fool she had been with her talk of meeting Tom Lorimer! A sense of utter defeat seemed to paralyze her energies. She felt like a trapped thing that after eluding its pursuers again and again finds that it has been but running about a corral. Physical weariness was telling on her. She had been in the saddle since a little past noon and it was now not far from midnight. And still there was the unanswered question of Peter's errand. It was long since either had broken the silence. A delicious coolness had crept into the air with the approach of midnight. Judith, breathing deep draughts of it, reminded herself of the stoicism that was hers by birthright.

"Peter"—her voice lost some of its old ring, but it had a deeper note—"Peter, we make strange comrades, you and I, in a stranger world. We meet on Horse-Thief Trail, and there is reason to suppose that our errands are inimical. You've pierced all my little pretences; you know that I am going to my brother, who is an outlaw—my brother, the rope for whose hanging is already cut. And yet we have been friends these many years, and we meet in this world of desolation and weigh each other's words, and there is no trust in our hearts. Our little faith is more pitiful than the cruel errands that bring us. I take it you, too, are going to my brother's?"

"I'm going there to see that you arrive safe and sound, but I had no intention of going when I left camp. You've brought me a good twenty miles out [pg 165] of my way, not to mention accusing me of ulterior motives. Now, aren't you penitent?" He smiled at her, boyish and irresistible. To Judith it was more reassuring than an oath. "It's like dogs fighting over a picked bone; the meat's all gone. The range is overworked; it needs a good, long rest." He turned towards Judith, speaking slowly. "What you have said is true. We're friends before we're partisans of either faction. I'm on my way to a round-up. There's been an

unexpected order to fill a beef contract—a thousand steers. We're going to furnish five hundred, the XXX two hundred and fifty, and the "Circle-Star" two hundred and fifty. Men have been scouring the enemy's country for days rounding up stragglers. It will go hard with the rustlers after this round-up, Judith."

She felt a great wave of penitence and shame sweep over her. She had not trusted him; in her heart she had nourished hideous suspicions of him, and he was telling her, quite simply, of the plans of his own faction, trusting her, as, indeed, he might, but as she never expected to be trusted.

"Peter, do you know that sometimes I think Jim has gone quite mad with these range troubles. He's acted strangely ever since his sheep were driven over the cliff. He's not been home to Alida and the children since he has been out of jail, and you know how devoted to them he has always been! He spends all his time tracking Simpson. Alida wrote me that she expects him to-night, and I'm going there on the chance."

[pg 166]

"It's the devil's own hole for desolation that he's come to." Peter looked about the cup-shaped valley that was but a *cul-de-sac* in the mountains. Its approach was between the high rock walls of a cañon. Passing between them, the rise of temperature was almost incredible. The great barrier of mountain-range, that cut it off from the rest of the world, seemed also to cut it off from light and air. The atmosphere hung lifeless, the occasional bellow of range-cattle sounded far-off and muffled. Vegetation was scant, the sage-brush grew close and scrubby, even the brilliant cactus flowers seemed to have abandoned the valley to its fate. A lone group of dead cotton-woods grew like sentinels close to the rocky walls. Their twisted branches, gaunt and bare, writhed upward as if in dumb supplication. There was about them a something that made Judith come closer to Peter as they passed them by. The night wind sang in their leafless branches with a long-drawn, shuddering sigh. The despair of a barren, deserted thing seemed to have settled on them.

"Those frightful trees, how can Alida stand them?" She looked back. "Oh, I wish they were cut down!"

Before them was the cabin, its ruined condition pitifully apparent even by night. It had been deserted ten years before Jim brought his family to it. Rumor said it

was haunted. Grim stories were told of the death of a woman who had come there with a man, and had not lived to go away with him. The roof of the adjoining stable had [pg 167] fallen in, the bars of the corral were missing. The house was dark but for a feeble light that glimmered in one window, the beacon that had been lighted, night after night, against Jim's coming. It added a further note of apprehension, peering through the dark, still valley like a wakeful, anxious eye, keeping a long and unrewarded vigil. Judith felt the consummation of the threatening tragedy after her first glimpse of the sentinel trees. She could not explain, but her heart cried, even as the wind in them had sung of death. Perhaps her mother's spirit spoke to her, just as she had said, on that memorable drive, that the Great Mystery spoke to his people in the earth, the sky, and the frowning mountains.

"Peter"—she had slid from her horse and was clinging to his arm—"when it happens, Peter, you will have no part in it?"

"It won't happen, Judith, if I can help it."

She kissed his hand as it held the loose reins.

"Lord, I am not worthy!" was the thought in his heart. He sat graven in the saddle. Sir Knight of the Joyous Heart though he was, the unsought kiss of trust gifted him with a self-reverence that would not soon forsake him.

Judith was rapping on the door and calling to Alida not to be frightened. And presently it was opened. Peter wanted to leave Judith, now that she was safely at the end of her journey, but she would not hear of it till he had eaten.

"You would have had your comfortable supper five hours ago had you not been playing cavalier [pg 168] to me all over the wilderness." And Peter yielded.

Judith busied herself about the kitchen. Her mood of racking apprehension had disappeared. Indian stoicism had again the guiding hand. She waved Peter from the fire that she was kindling, as if he were a blundering incompetent. But she let him slice the bacon and grind the coffee as one lets a child help. Alida came in, white-faced and anxious over the long absence of her husband, but conscientiously hospitable nevertheless. Peter noticed that Judith made a gallant pretence of eating, crumbling her bread and talking the meanwhile. The pale wife, who had little to say at the best of times, was put to the test to say anything at all. But, withal, their intent was so genuinely hospitable that Peter himself

could not speak with the pity of it. Accustomed as he was to the roughness of these frontier cabins, never had he seen a human habitation so desolate as this. The mud plaster had fallen away from between the logs, showing cross sections of the melancholy prospect. An atmosphere of tragedy brooded over the place. Whether from its long period of emptiness, or from the vaguely hinted murder of the woman who had died there, or whether it took its character from the prevailing desolation, the cabin in the valley was an unlovely thing. Nor did the cleanliness, the conscientious making the best of things, soften the woful aspect of the place. Rather was the appeal the more poignant to the seeing eye, as the brave makeshift of the self-respecting poor strikes deeper [pg 169] than the beggar's whine. The house was bare but for the few things that Alida could take in the wagon in which they made their flight. And all through the pinch of poverty and grinning emptiness there was visible the woman-touch, the brave making the best of nothing, the pitiful preparation for the coming of the man. Wild roses from the creek bloomed against the gnarled and weather-warped logs of the walls. Sprays of clematis trailed their white bridal beauty from cans rescued from the ashes of a camp-fire. But Alida was a strategist when it came to adorning her home, and the rusty receptacle was hid beneath trailing green leaves. There was at the window a muslin curtain that in its starched and ruffled estate was strongly suggestive of a child's frock hastily converted into a window drapery. The curtain was drawn aside that the lamp might shed its beam farther on the way of the traveller who came not. There was but one other light in the place, a bit of candle. Alida apologized for the poor light by which they must eat, but she did not offer to take the lamp from the window.

Peter was no longer Sir Knight of the Joyous Heart as he watched the little, white-faced woman, who went so often to the door to look towards the road that entered the valley that she was no longer aware of what she did. He saw her wide eyes full of fear, the bow of the mouth strained taut with anxiety, her unconscious fear of him as one of the alien faction, and withal her concern for his comfort. Judith's control was far greater, but though she [pg 170] hid it skilfully, he knew the sorrow that consumed her.

There was a cry from the room beyond, and Judith, snatching up the candle, went in to the children. All three of them were sleeping cross-ways in one bed, their small, round arms and legs striking out through the land of dreams as swimmers breasting the waves. She gave a little cry of delight and appreciation, and called Peter to look. Little Jim, who had cried in some passing fear, sat up sleepily. He stretched out his small arms to Peter, whom he had never seen

before. Peter took him, and again he settled to sleep, apparently assured that he was in friendly hands.

The warm, small body, giving itself with perfect confidence, strongly affected Peter's heightened susceptibilities. In the very nature of the situation he could be no friend to Jim Rodney, yet here in his arms lay Jim Rodney's son, loving, trusting him instinctively. Judith noticed that his face paled beneath its many coats of tan. He was afraid of the little sleeping boy, afraid that his unaccustomed touch might hurt him, and yet loath to part with the small burden. Judith took the boy from Peter and placed him between the two little girls on the bed.

Through the window they could see Alida's dress glimmering, like a phantom in the darkness, as she strained her eyes towards the path. Peter hated to leave the women and children in this desolate place. The night was far spent. To reach the round-up in season, he could at best snatch a couple of hours' sleep and be again in the saddle while the [pg 171] stars still shone. His saddle and saddle blanket were enough for him. The broad canopy of heaven, the bosom of mother earth, had given him sound, dreamless sleep these many years. He bade the women good-night, and made his bed where the cañon gave entrance to the valley. But sleep was slow to come. Now, in that vague, uncertain world where we fall through oceans of space, and the waking is the dream, the dream the waking, Peter caught pale flashes of Kitty's gold head as she ran and ran, ever in the pursuit of something, she knew not what. And as she ran hither and thither, she would turn her head and beckon to Peter, and as he followed he felt the burden of years come upon him. And then he saw Judith's eyes, still and grave. He turned and wakened. No, it was not Judith's eyes, but the stars above the mountain-tops.

[pg 172]

XII

The Round-up

The stars were still shining when Peter Hamilton looked at his watch next morning, but he sternly fought the temptation to lie another two minutes by remembering the day's work before him, and went in search of the horse that he had not picketed overnight, as the beast required a full belly after the hard night's ride he had given him. Peter had rolled out of his blankets with a keen anticipatory relish for the day ahead. It was well, he knew, that there was ample work of a definite nature for Peter the cow-puncher; as for Peter the man, he was singularly at sea. Had Judith Rodney been his desert comrade all these cheerful years for him to get his first belated insight into the real Judith only a few little hours back? Or was it, he wondered, her seeming unconsciousness of him, as she rode brave and sorrowful through the night, to avert, if might be, her brother's death—at all events, to comfort and inspirit the frightened woman and her little children—that had freshly tinged the friendship he had so long felt for her? Many were the questions that Peter vaguely put to himself as he started out for his long day in the saddle; and [pg 173] none of them he answered. Indeed, he could not satisfactorily explain to himself why he should think of Judith at all in this way—Judith, whom he had known so long, and upon whom he counted so securely—Judith, who understood things, and was as good a comrade as a man. Surely it was a strange thing that he should discover himself in a sentimental dream of Judith!

For it was in such dreams that Katherine Colebrooke had figured ever since Peter could remember. For years, indeed—and Judith knew it!—he had stood, tame and tractable, waiting for Chloe to throw her dainty lariat. But Chloe had intimated that her graceful fingers were engaged with the inkpot and her head with schemes for further sonneting. Chloe was becoming famous. To Peter, who was unmodern, there was little to be gained in arguing against a state of affairs so crassly absurd as career-getting for women. At such seasons it behooved sane men to pray for patience rather than the gift of tongues. When the disheartened fair should weary of the phantom pursuit, then might the man of patience have

his little day. Peter winced at the picture. To the world he knew that his long waiting on the brink of the bog, while his ambitious lady floundered after false lights, was, in truth, no more impressive a spectacle than the anguished squawking of a hen who watches a brood of ducklings, of her own hatching, try their luck in the pond.

And there was Judith the great-hearted, Judith who was as inspiring as a breath of hill air, Judith [pg 174] with no thought of careers beyond the loyal doing of her woman's part, Judith, trusty and loyal—and Judith with that accursed family connection!

Peter tightened his cinch and turned his horse westward. The stars had grown dim in the sky. The world that the night before had seemed to float in a silvery effulgence looked gray and old. The cabin in the valley flaunted its wretched squalor, like a beggar seeking alms on the highway. Riding by, Peter lifted his sombrero. "Sweet dreams, gentle lady!" He dug the rowel into his horse's side and began his day at no laggard pace. Nor did he spare his horse in the miles that lay between him and breakfast. The beast would have no more work to do that day, when once he reached camp, and Peter was not in his tenderest mood as he spurred through the gray of the morning. The pale, chastened world was all his own at this hour. Not a creature was stirring. The mountains, the valleys, the softly huddled hills slept in the deep hush that is just before the dawn. He looked about with questioning eyes. Last night this very road had been a pale silver thread winding from the mountain crests into a world of dreams. To-day it was but a trail across the range. "Where are the snows of yester year?" he quoted, with a certain early-morning grimness. At heart he was half inclined to believe Judith responsible for the vanished world; Judith, Judith—he was riding away from her as fast as his horse could gallop, and yet his thoughts perversely lingered about the cabin in the valley.

[pg 175]

After a couple of hours' hard riding he could dimly make out specks moving on that huge background of space, and presently his horse neighed and put fresh spirit into his gait, recognizing his fellows in moving dots on the vast perspective. And being a beast of some intelligence, for all his heavy-footed failings, he reasoned that food and rest would soon be his portion. Peter had no further use for the rowel.

Breakfast was already well under way when he reached camp. The outfit, seated

on saddles in a semicircle about the chuck wagon, ate with that peculiar combination of haste and skill that doubtless the life of the saddle counteracts, as digestive troubles are apparently unknown among plainsmen. The cook, in handing Peter his tin plate, cup, spoon, and black-handled fork, asked him if "he would take overland trout or Cincinnati chicken, this morning?" The cook never omitted these jocular inquiries regarding the various camp names for bacon. He seemed to think that a choice of alias was as good as a change of menu. There was little talk at breakfast, and that bearing chiefly on the day's work. Every one was impatient for an early start. The horse wrangler had his string waiting, the cook was scouring his iron pots, saddles were thrown over horses fresh from a long night's good grazing, cinches were tightened, slickers and blankets were adjusted, and camp melted away in a troupe of horsemen winding away through the gray of early morning.

The scene of the beef round-up was a mighty [pg 176] plain, affording limitless scope for handling the cattle of a thousand hills. In the distance rose the first undulations of the mountains, that might be likened to the surplusage of space that rolled the length of the sweeping levels, then heaped high to the blue. The specks in the far distance began to grow as if the screw of a field-glass were bringing them nearer, turning them into horsemen, bunches of cattle, "chuck-wagons" of the different outfits, reserves of horses restrained by temporary rope-corrals, all the equipment of a great round-up. Dozens of men, multitudes of horses, hordes of cattle—the mighty plain swallowed all the little, prancing, galloping, bellowing things, and still looked mighty in its loneliness. Fling a handful of toys from a Noah's Ark—if they make such simple toys now—in an ordinary field, and the little, wooden men, horses and cows, will suggest the round-up in relation to its background. Men darted hither and thither, yelling shrilly; cows—born apparently to be leaders—broke from the bunches to which they had been assigned and started at a clumsy run, followed by kindred susceptible to example. Cow-punchers, waiting for just such manifestations of individuality, whirled after them like comets, and soon they were again in the pawing, heaving, sweltering bunch to which they belonged.

Peter Hamilton, whose particular skill as a cow-puncher lay in that branch of the profession known as "cutting out," found that the work of the rustlers had been carried on with no unsparing hand since the early spring round-up. Calves bearing the "H [pg 177] L" brand—that claimed by a company known to be made up of cattle-thieves—followed mothers bearing almost every brand that grazed herds in that part of the State. The Wetmore outfit, that used a "W"

enclosed in a square, were apparently the heaviest losers. The cows and calves were herded at the right of the plain, convenient to the branding-pen, the steers well away to the opposite side. As Peter drove a "W-square" cow, followed by a little, white-faced calf, whose brand had plainly been tampered with, he heard one of his associates say:

"There's nothing small about the 'H L' except their methods."

"What's 'H L' stand for, anyway?" the other cow-puncher asked.

"Why, Hell, or, How Long; depends whether you're with 'em or again 'em."

Peter wheeled from the men and headed for the bunch he was cutting out. He fancied that the man had looked at him strangely as he offered a choice of meanings for the "H L"—and yet he could not have known that Peter had gone to Rodney's cabin last night. He flung himself heart and soul into his work, dashing full tilt at the snorting, stamping bedlam, enveloped in clouds of dust that dimmed the very daylight. Calves bleated piteously as they were jammed in the thickening pack. Peter shouted, swung the rope right and left, thinning the bunch about him, and a second later emerged, driving before him a cow, followed by a calf. These were turned over to cow-boys waiting for them. Time after time Hamilton returned [pg 178] to that mass of unconscious power, that with a single rush could have annihilated the little band of horsemen that handled them with the skill of a dealer shuffling, cutting, dealing a pack of cards.

To the left were the steers, pawing and tearing up the earth in a very ecstasy of impotent fury. Picture the giant propeller of an ocean liner thrashing about in the sands of the desert and you will have an approximate knowledge of the dust raised by a thousand steers. Their long-drawn, shrieking bellow had a sinister note. Horns, hoofs, tails beat the air, their bloodshot eyes looked menacingly in every direction; but a handful of cow-boys kept them in check, circling round and round them on ponies who did their work without waiting for quirt or rowel.

The noonday sun looked down upon a scene that to the eye unskilled in these things was as confusion worse confounded. Cow-boys dashed from nowhere in particular and did amazing things with a bit of rope, sending it through the air with snaky undulations after flying cattle. The rope, taking on lifelike coils, would pursue the flying beast like an aerial reptile, then the noose would fall true, and the thing was done. A second later a couple of cow-boys would be

examining the disputed brand on the prone animal.

The smell of burning flesh and hair rose from the branding-pen and mingled with the stench of the herds in one noisome compound. The yells of the cow-punchers, each having its different bearing on the work in hand, were all but lost in the dull, steady roar of the cattle, bellowing in a chorus of [pg 179] fear, rage, and pain. And still the work of sorting, branding, cutting-out, went steadily on. Though an outsider would not have perceived it, the work was as crisp-cut and exact in its methods as the work in a counting-house. One of the cow-boys, in hot pursuit of a fractious heifer, encountered a gopher-hole, and horse and rider were down in a heap. In a second a dozen helping hands were dragging him from under the horse. He limped painfully, but stooped to examine his horse. The beast had broken a leg, and turned on the man eyes almost human in their pain.

"Bob, Bob!" The cow-puncher went down on his knees and put his arms about the neck of his pet. "My God!" he said, "me and Bob was just like brothers. Everybody knowed that." He uncinched the saddle with clumsy tenderness; not a man thought a whit less of him because he could not see well at the moment. He turned his head away, that he might not see the well-aimed shot that would release his pet from pain. Then he limped away after another horse—it was all in the day's work.

The beef contract called for a thousand steers, four and five years old, and these having been well and duly counted, and some dozen extra head added in case of accident, they were immediately started on the trail, as they could accomplish some seven or eight miles before being bedded down for the night. Hamilton, who had crossed to the beef side of the round-up to have a necessary word with the "Circle-Star" foreman, was amazed to find Simpson making ready to start with the trail herd. Peter inquired, [pg 180] with a few expletives, "how long he had been a cow-man, in good and regular standing?"

"As far as the regularity is concerned, that would be a pretty hard thing to answer, but he's had an interest in the 'XXX' since—since—"

"He drove Rodney's sheep over the cliff?"

"Ain't you a little hard on the beginning of his cattle career? It usually goes by a more business-like name, but—" he shrugged his shoulders—"it's up to the 'XXX.' We wouldn't have him help to pull bogged cattle out of a creek."

The beeves, hidden in a simoom of their own stamping, were gradually being pressed forward on the trail, a huge pawn, ignorant of its own strength, manipulated by a handful of men and horses. Its bellowing, like the tuning of a thousand bass-fiddles, shook the stillness like the long, sullen roar of the sea, as out of the plain they thundered, to feed the multitude.

"Well, there goes as pretty a bunch of porterhouses as I'd want to put tooth to. If I get away from here within the next two months, as I'm expecting, doubtless I'll meet some of you again with your personality somewhat obscured by reason of fried onions."

The foreman of the "Circle-Star" waved his hand after the slowly moving herd that gradually pressed forward like an army in loose marching order. Outriders galloped ahead, like darting insects, and pointing the lumbering mass that trailed its half-mile length at a snail's-pace. The great column steadily advanced, checked, turned, led as easily as a child [pg 181] trails his little steam-cars after him on the nursery floor, and always by the little force of a handful of men and a few horses.

After supper came general relaxation around the camp-fire. The men, who had all day been strung to a keen pitch of nervous energy, lounged in loose, picturesque uncouthness, while each began to unravel his own lively miscellany of information or invention. There was jest, laughter, spinning of yarns, singing of songs. As Peter lay in the fire-light, smoking his brier-wood, he noticed that the man next him spent a great deal of time poring over a letter, holding it close to the blaze, now at arm's-length, which was hardly surprising, considering the penmanship of the more common variety of *billet-doux*. The man was plainly disappointed that Peter would not notice or comment. Finally he folded it up, and with sentimental significance returned it to the left side pocket of his flannel shirt, and remarked to Peter, "It's from her."

"Indeed," said Peter, who had not the faintest notion who "her" could be. "Let me congratulate you."

"Yes, sir," and there was conviction in the cow-puncher's tone; "it's from old man Kinson's girl, up to the Basin, and the parson's goin' to give us the life sentence soon. A man gets sick o' helling it all over creation." He rolled a cigarette, lit it, took a puff or two, then turned to Peter, as one whose acquaintance with the broader side of life entitled him to speak with a certain authority. "Is it that, [pg

182] or is it that we're getting on, a little long in the tooth, logy in our movements?"

"I think we're just sick of helling it." Peter looked towards the star that last night had been the beacon towards which he and Judith had scaled the heights. "Yes, we get sick of helling it after we've turned thirty."

"Then I can't be making a mistake. If I thought it was because I was getting on, I'd stampede this here range. It don't seem fair to a girl to allow that you're broke, tamed, and know the way to the corral, when it's just that you're needin' to go to an old man's home."

"Now this is really love," said Peter to himself, with interest. "This is humility." A sympathetic liking for the self-distrustful lover surged hot and generous into Peter's heart, and he continued to himself: "Now that's what Judith would appreciate in a man, some directness, some humility!" Poor Judith! Poor burden-bearer! Who was to love her as she deserved to be loved, even as old man Kinson's girl, of the Basin, was loved? Yet suppose some one did love her in such fashion and she returned it? It was a picture Peter had never conjured up before. Nonsense! he was accustomed to think of Judith a great deal, and that was not the way to think of her. "Dear Judith!" said Peter, half unconsciously to himself, and looked again at the fellow, who had gone back to his dingy letter and continued to reread it in the fire-light as if he hoped to extract some further meaning from the now familiar words. Nature had fitted him out with a [pg 183] rag-bag assortment of features—the nose of a clown, the eyes of a ferret, the mouth that hangs agape like a badly hinged door, the mouth of the incessant talker. And withal, as he lounged in the fire-light, dreamily turning his love-letter, he had a sort of superphysical beauty, reflected of the glow that many waters cannot quench.

Costigan, who had led the merriment against Simpson at Mrs. Clark's eating-house, was playing "mumbly-peg" with Texas Tyler. They had been working like Trojans all day at the round-up, but they pitched their pocket-knives with as keen a zest as school-boys, bickering over points in the game, accusing each other of cheating, calling on the rest of the company to umpire some disputed point.

But presently, from the opposite side of the fire, some one began to sing, in a rich barytone, a dirgelike thing that caught the attention of first one then another of the men, making them stop their yarning and knife-throwing to listen. The

tune, in its homely power to evoke the image of the ceremonial of death, was more or less familiar to most of them. There was a conscious funeral pageantry in the ring of its measured phrases that recalled to many burials of the dead that had taken place in their widely scattered homes. Mrs. Barbauld's hymn, "Flee as a Bird to the Mountain," are the words usually sung to the air.

Costigan presently cut across the dirgelike refrain with: "Phwat th' divil is ut about that chune that Oi'm thinkin' of?"

[pg 184]

"This," said the man with the barytone voice, "is the tune that Nick Steele saved his neck to."

"Begorra, that's ut. I wasn't there mesilf, but Oi've heard th' story told more times than Oi've years to me credit."

"My father was in that necktie party," spoke up a young cow-puncher, "and I've heard him tell the story scores of times, and he always wondered why the devil they let Steele off. Never could understand it after the thing was done. He was talking of it once to a man who was a sharp on things like mesmerism, and the man called it hypnotic suggestion. Said that Steele got control of the whole outfit and mesmerized 'em so they couldn't do a thing to him."

Several of the men asked for the story, echoes of which had come down through all the forty years since its happening. And the cow-puncher, lighting a cigarette, began:

"It was in the good old forty-nine days in California, when gold was sometimes more plentiful than bread, and women were so scarce that one day when they found a girl's shoe on the trail they fitted a gold heel to it and put it up in camp to worship. But sentiment wasn't exactly their long suit, and any little difficulties that cropped up were straightened out by the vigilance committee—and a rope. One day a saddle, or maybe it was a gun, that didn't belong to him, was found among this man Steele's traps, and though he swore that some one had put it there for a grudge, the committee thought that a hemp necktie was the easiest way [pg 185] out of the argument. And this here Steele party finds himself, at the age of twenty-four, with something like thirty minutes of life to his credit. He don't take on none, nor make a play for mercy, nor try any fancy speech-making. He just waits round, kinder pale, but seemin' indifferent, considerin' it was his

funeral that was impendin'. I've heard my father say that he was a tall, slim boy, with a kind of girlish prettiness, and the committee looked some for hysterics and they didn't get none. The noose was made ready and they told Steele he could have five minutes to pray, if he wanted to, or he could take it out in cursing, just as he chose. The boy said he felt that he hadn't quite all that was coming to him in the way of enjoyment, and that while he was far from criticising the vigilance committee, he was not altogether partial to the nature of his demise, and if it was just the same to them, instead of praying or cursing, he'd take that five minutes for a song.

"They was agreeable, and he up and steps on the scaffold, what they was mighty proud of, it bein' about the only substantial structure the town could boast. He began to sing that thing you've all been listening to, and he had a voice like water falling light and fine in a pool below. They crowded up close about the scaffold and listened. The words he put to it were his own story, just like those old minstrels that you read about, and at the end of each verse came the chorus, slow and solemn as the moment after something great has happened. There wasn't a hangin'-face in the crowd after he [pg 186] was started. At some time or other every man had heard somebody he thought a heap of, buried to that tune, and his voice got to workin' on their imaginations and turned their hearts to water. I don't remember anything but the chorus—that went like this:

"Who'll weep for me, on the gallows tree,
As I sway in the wind and swing?
Is there never a tear to be shed for me,
As I swing by a hempen string?
Who'll weep, who'll keep
Watch, as I'm rocked to sleep,
Rocked by a hempen string?"

There was a long silence, broken only by the crackle of the logs in the camp-fire and the night sounds of the lonely plain. The leaping flames showed a group of thoughtful faces. Finally, Costigan broke the silence with:

"Begorra, 'tis some av thim 'ud be doin' well to be lukin' to their music-lessons about here, Oi'm thinkin', afther th' day's wurruk."

The Irishman, with his instinctive loquacity, had expressed what none of the rest would have considered politic to hint. It was like the giving way of the pebble

that starts the avalanche. Soon they were deep in tales of lynchings. Peter knew only too well the trend of their talk, the "XXX" men were feeling the public pulse, as it were. Now, according to the unwritten code of the plains, lynching was "meet, right, just, and available" for the cattle-thief. And Peter felt himself false to his creed, false [pg 187] to his employer, false to himself, in seeking to evade the question. And yet that pitiful cabin, the white-faced woman running to the door so often that she knew not what she did, and the little rosy boy, who had put out his arms so trustfully! Peter broke into their grewsome yarning. "Lord, but you're like a lot of old women just come from a funeral!"

"Whin the carpse died hard, and th' wake was a success." Costigan turned over. "Werra, werra, but we'll be seein' fairies the night!"

A "XXX" man turned his head with a deliberate slowness and regarded Peter with narrowing eyes: "If the subject of cattle-thieves and their punishment is unpleasant to the gentleman from New York, perhaps he will favor us with something more cheerful." It was the same man who had given the two definitions of the "H L" brand that morning at the round-up.

"Delighted," said Peter, affecting not to notice the significance of the man's remark. "Did you ever hear of the time that Tony Neville was burned with snow?"

The "XXX" man yawned long and audibly. No one seemed especially interested in Tony Neville's having been burned with snow, but Peter struck out manfully, just in time to head off a man who said that he had seen Jim Rodney or some one who looked like him, following the trail-herd.

"Once on a time, when it paid to be a cattle-man," began Peter, "there was an outfit near Laramie that hailed from the United Kingdom, every mother's [pg 188] son of them. A fine, manly lot of fellows, but wedded to calamity along of their cooks—not the revered range article," and Peter waved his hand towards the "W-square" cook, who was one of the party, "but the pampered ranch article that boasts a real stove, planted in a real kitchen, the spoiled darling that never has to light a fire out of wet wood in the rain.

"These unhappy Britons had every species of ill luck that could befall an outfit, in the way of cooks; they were of every nationality, age, and sex, and they stole, drank, quarrelled, till the outfit determined to sweep the house clear of them and

do its own cooking. Every man was to have a turn at it for a week. There was a Scotchman, who gave them something called 'pease bannocks,' three times a day; followed by an Irishman, who breakfasted them on potatoes and whiskey. There was an Englishman, who had a beef slaughtered every time he fancied a tenderloin. There was a Welshman, who sang as he cooked. There were as many different kinds of indigestion as there were men in the outfit. They would beg to do night-herding, anything to get them away from that ranch. Finally, when their little tummies got so bad that their overcoats thickened, or wore through, or whatever happens to stomachs' overcoats that are treated unkindly, some one's maiden aunt sent him a tract saying that rice was the salvation of the human race, as witness the Chinese. Whosever turn it was to cook that week determined to try the old lady's prescription. Rice was procured, about a peck, I think; and the man [pg 189] who was cooking, pro tem, put the entire quantity on to boil in a huge ham-boiler, over a slow fire, as per the directions of the maiden aunt. The rice seemed to be doing nicely, when some one came in and said that a bunch of antelope was over on the hills and there was a good chance to get a couple. Every man got his gun, all but the cook, and he looked at the rice, that hadn't done a thing over the slow fire, in a way that would melt your heart. 'Just my luck that it should be my week to pot-wrestle when there's good hunting right at one's front door.'

"'Oh, come on,' some one said. 'Didn't Kellett's aunt say the rice ought to be cooked over a slow fire? Kellett, get your aunt's letter and read the directions for cooking that rice again.'

"The cook didn't need a second invitation, and they got into their saddles, cook and all, and went for the antelope.

"Now antelope are not like stationary wash-tubs; they move about. And when that particular outfit arrived at the spot where those antelope were last seen, they had moved, but the boys found traces of them, and continued on their trail. They went in the foot-hills and they searched for those antelope all day. They caught up with old man Hall's outfit at dinner-time and were invited to take a bite. Coming home by way of the 'Circle-Star' ranch, Colonel Semmes asked them in to have a mint-julep; the colonel was a South Carolinian, and he had just succeeded in raising some mint. They had several—I fear more than several—drinks before [pg 190] leaving for home, with never a trace of antelope nor a thought of the rice cooking over the slow fire. The colonel remembered some hard cider that he had, and topping off on that, they set out. The weather was

pretty warm, and on their way home they experienced some remorse over the hard cider. Now hard cider is an accumulative drink; it piles up interest like debt or unpaid taxes. And by the time those Englishmen had turned the little lane leading into their home corral, they saw a sight that made their sombreros rise. As I have said before, it was hot, being somewhere in the month of August. Gentlemen, I hardly expect you to believe me when I say it was snowing on their house, and not on another God blessed thing in the landscape.

"The blame thing about it was, that every man took the phenomenon to be his own private view of snakes, or their bibulous equivalent, manifested in another and more terrifying form. Here was the August sun pouring down on the plain where their ranch-house was situated; everything in sight hot and dry as a lime-kiln, grasshoppers chirping in a hot-wave prophecy, and snow covering the house and the ground, about to what seemed a depth of four inches. Every one of them felt sensitive about mentioning what he saw to the others. You see, gentlemen, being unfamiliar with American drinks, and especially old Massachusetts cider, they merely looked to keep their saddles and no questions asked.

"But when they got a bit closer the horror increased. [pg 191] Flying right out of their windows were perfect drifts of snow, banks of it, gentlemen, and the thermometer up past a hundred. One of the men looked about him and noticed the pallor on the faces of the rest:

"Do you notice anything strange, old chap? These cursed American drinks!"

"Strange!"—the boy he had spoken to was about eighteen, a nice, red-cheeked English lad out with his uncle learning the cattle business. 'Good God!' the boy said. 'I've always tried to lead a good life, and here I am a parietic before I've come of age.'

"They halted their horses and held a consultation. The boss came to the conclusion that since they had all seen it, there was nothing to do but continue the investigation and send the details to the 'Society for Psychological Research,' when he got down from his horse and walked towards the door of the house. At his approach, as if to rebuke his wanton curiosity, a great blast of snow blew out of the window and got him full in the face. He howled—the snow was scalding hot.

"Then they remembered the rice."

"Is that all?" demanded the man who had wanted to talk about rustling.

"Isn't it enough?" said Peter, who could afford to be magnanimous, now that he had accomplished his point.

"When I first heard that story, 'bout ten years ago, it ended with the Britishers riding like hell over to the Wolcott ranch to borrow umbrellas to [pg 192] keep off the hot rice while they got into the house," said the man, still sulky.

"That's the way they tell it to tenderfeet," and Peter turned on his heel. The story-telling for the evening was over, the boys got their blankets and set about making their beds for the night.

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XIII

Mary's First Day In Camp

The first day spent as governess to the family of Yellett reminded Mary Carmichael of those days mentioned in the opening chapter of Genesis, days wherein whole geological ages developed and decayed. Any era, geological or otherwise, she felt might have had its rise, decline, and fall during that first day spent in a sheep camp.

She awoke to the sound of faint tinklings, and accepted the towering peaks of the Wind River mountains, with their snowy mantles all shadowy in the whitening dawn, and the warmer grays of huddling foot-hills, as one receives, without question, the fantastic visions of sleep. The faint tinkling grew nearer, mingled with a light pitter patter and a far off baa-ing and bleating; then, as shadowy as the sheep in dreams, a great flock came winding round the hill; in and out through the sage-brush they went and came, elusive as the early morning shadows they moved among. The air was crystalline and sparkling; creation's first morning could not have promised more. It would have been inconsistent in such a place to waken in a house; the desert, that seemed a lifeless sea, the sheep moving [pg 194] like gray shadows, were all parts of a big, new world that had no need of houses built by hands.

Ben, oldest of the Brobdingnag tribe, who had greeted Mary's request to be directed to "the house" as a bit of dry Eastern humor, led the herd to pasture. Ben's right-hand man was "Stump," the collie, so named because he had no tail worth mentioning, but otherwise in full possession of his faculties. Stump was newly broken to his official duties and authority sat heavily on him. Keenly alert, he flew hither and thither, first after one straying member of the herd, then another, barking an early morning roll-call as he went. Two other male Brobdingnags came from some sequestered spot in the landscape and joined Ben—Mary recognized two more pupils.

Mrs. Yellett then unrolled the pillow constructed the night previous of such

garments as she had been willing to dispense with, and put them on. The vastness of her surroundings did not prevent her from locating the minutest article, and Mary gave her the respectful admiration of a woman who has spent a great deal of time searching for things in an infinitely smaller space. The matriarch then called the remaining members of her household officially—the Misses Yellett accomplished their early morning toilets with the simplicity of young robins. Only the new governess hung back, but finally mustered up enough courage to say that if such a thing was possible she would like to have a bath.

Mrs. Yellett greeted her request with the amused [pg 195] tolerance of one who has never given such a trifle a thought.

"The habit of bathing," she commented, "is shore like religion: them that observes it wonders how them that neglects it gets along." She beckoned Mary to follow, and led the way to a bunch of willows that grew about a stone's-throw from the camp. "Here be a whole creek full of water, if you don't lack the fortitood. It's cold enough to sell for ten cents a glass down to Texas."

Somewhat dismayed, Mary stepped gingerly into the creek. Its intense cold numbed her at first, but a second later awoke all her young lustiness, and she returned to camp in a fine glow of courage to encounter whatever else there might be of novelty. Mrs. Yellett was preparing breakfast at a sheet-iron stove, assisted by Cacta and Clematis.

"Your hankering after a bath like this"—she added another handful of flour to the biscuit dough—"do shore remind me of an Englishman who come to visit near Laramie in the days of plenty, when steers had jumped to forty-five. This yere Britisher was exhibit stock, shore enough, being what's called a peer of the realm, which means, in his own country, that he is just nacherally entitled from the start to h'ist his nose high.

"The outfit he was goin' to visit wasn't in the habit of havin' peers drop in on them casual, but they aimed to make him feel that he wasn't the first of the herd that headed that way by a quart"—she cut four biscuits with a tin cup, and resumed—"to which end they rounded up every [pg 196] specimen of canned food that's ever come across the Rockies.

"Let him ask for "salmon esplinade," let him ask for "chicken marine-go," let

him ask for plum-pudding, let him ask for hair-oil or throat lozengers, this yere outfit calls his bluff,' says Billy Ames, who owns the 'twin star' outfit and is anticipatin' this peer as a guest.

"Well, just as everything is ready, the can-opener, sharp as a razor, waitin' to open up such effete luxuries as the peer may demand, Bill Ames gets called to California by the sickness of his wife. He feels mean about abandonin' the peer, but he don't seem to have no choice, his wife bein' one of them women who shares her bad health pretty impartially round the family. So Billy he departs. But before he goes he expounds to Joplin Joe, his foreman, the nature of a peer and how his wants is apt to be a heap fashionable, and that when he asks for anything to grasp the can-opener and run to the store-house—Cacta, you put on the coffee!

"That peer arrives in the afternoon, and he never makes a request any more than a corpse. Beyond a marked disposition to herd by himself and to maintain the greatest possible distance between his own person and a six-shooter, he don't vary none from the bulk of tenderfeet. At night, when all parties retires, and Joplin Joe ponders on them untouched, effete luxuries in the store-room, and how the can-opener 'ain't once been dimmed in the cause of hospitality, it frets him considerable, and he feels he ain't doin' his duty to the absent Billy Ames.

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"At sunrise he can stand it no longer. He thunders on the Britisher's door with the butt of his six-shooter, calling out:

"Peer, peer, be you awake?"

"The peer allowed he was, though his teeth was rattling like broken crockery.

"Peer, would you relish some "salmon esplanade"?"

"The peer allowed he wouldn't.

"Peer, would you relish some "chicken marine-go"?"

"The peer allowed he shore wouldn't, and the crockery rattled harder than ever. Joplin Joe then tried him on the hair-oil and the throat lozengers, the peer declining each with thanks.

"'Peer,' said Joplin Joe, fair busting with hospitality, 'is there anything in this Gawd's world that you do want?'

"The crockery rattled an interlood, then Joplin Joe made out:

"'Thanks, very much. I should like a ba-ath'—Clematis, you see if them biscuits is brownin'.

"Joe he ran to the store-room, and his eye encountered a barrel of corned-beef. He calls to a couple of cow-punchers, and the first thing you know that late corned steer is piled onto the prairie and them cow-punchers is hustling the empty barrel in to the peer. Next they detaches the steps from the kitchen door, ropes 'em to the barrel and introduces the peer to his bath. He's good people all right, and when he sees they calls his bluff he steps in all right and lets 'em soak him a couple of [pg 198] buckets. This here move restores all parties to a mutual understanding, and the peer he bathes in the corned-beef barrel regular durin' his stay—you see the habit had cinched him."

Ned had shot an antelope a day or two previous, and antelope steak, broiled over a glowing bed of wood coals, with black coffee, stewed dried apples, and soda biscuit made up what Mary found to be an unexpectedly palatable breakfast. As camp did not include a cow, no milk or butter was served with meals. Nevertheless, the hungry tenderfoot was quite content, and missed none of the appurtenances she had been brought up to believe essential to a civilized meal, not even the little silver jug that Aunt Martha always insisted came over with William the Conqueror—Aunt Martha scorned the *May-flower* contingent as parvenus.

The family sat on the grass, tailor fashion, and every one helped himself to what appetite prompted, in a fashion that suggested brilliant gymnastic powers. To pass a dish to any one, the governess discovered, was construed as an evidence of mental weakness and eccentricity. The family satisfied its appetite without assistance or amenities, but with the skill of a troupe of jugglers.

Breakfast was half over when Mrs. Yellett laid down her knife, which she had handled throughout the meal with masterly efficiency. Mary watched her in hopeless embarrassment, and wondered if her own timid use of a tin fork could be construed as an unfriendly comment upon the Yelletts' more simple and direct code of table etiquette.

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"Land's sakes! I just felt, all the time we've been eating, we was forgettin' something. You children ought to remember, I got so much on my mind."

All eyes turned anxiously to the cooking-stove, while an expression of frank regret began to settle over the different faces. The backbone of their appetites had been broken, and there was something else, perhaps something even more appetizing, to come.

Interpreting the trend of their glance and expression, up flared Mrs. Yellett, with as great a show of indignation as if some one had set a match to her petticoats.

"I declare, I never see such children; no more nacheral feelin's than a herd of coyotes; never thinks of a plumb thing but grub. No, make no mistake about the character of the objec' we've forgot. 'Tain't sweet pertaters, 'tain't molasses, 'tain't corn-bread—it's paw! It's your pore old paw—him settin' in the tent, forsook and neglected by his own children."

All started up to remedy their filial neglect without loss of time, but Mrs. Yellett waved them back to their places.

"Don't the whole posse of you go after him, like he'd done something and was to be apprehended. Ben, you go after your father."

Ben strode over to the little white tent that Mary had noticed glimmering in the moonlight the preceding evening, and presently emerged, supporting on his arm a partially paralyzed old man, who might have been Rip Van Winkle in the worst [pg 200] of tempers. His white hair and beard encircled a shrivelled, hawklike face, the mouth was sucked back in a toothless eddy that brought tip of nose and tip of chin into whispering distance, the eyes glittered from behind the overhanging, ragged brows like those of a hungry animal searching through the brush for its prey.

"If you've done eatin'," whispered Mrs. Yellett to Miss Carmichael, "you'd better run on. Paw's langwidge is simply awful when we forget to bring him to meals." Mary ran on.

When, after the lapse of some thirty minutes or so, the stentorian voice of Mrs. Yellett recalled Mary to camp, she found that the tin breakfast service had been washed and returned to the mess-box, the beds had been neatly folded and piled

in one of the wagons—in fact, the extremely simple tent-hold, to coin a word, was in absolute order. It was just 6 A.M., and Mrs. Yellett thought it high time to begin school. Mary tried to convey to her that the hour was somewhat unusual, but she seemed to think that for pupils who were beginning their tasks comparatively late in life it would be impossible to start sufficiently early in the morning. So at this young and tender hour, with many misgivings, Mary set about preparing her *al fresco* class-room.

She chose a nice, flat little piece of the United States, situated in the shade of the clump of willows that bordered a trickling creek not far from her sylvan bathroom of the early morning. How she was to sit on the ground all day and yet preserve a properly pedagogical demeanor was the first question [pg 201] to be settled. That there was nothing even remotely resembling a chair in camp she felt reasonably assured, as "paw" was sitting on an inverted soap-box under a pine-tree, and "paw," by reason of age and infirmity, appropriated all luxuries. Mrs. Yellett, with her usual acumen, grasped the situation.

"I'm figgerin'," she commented, "that there must be easier ways of governin' than sittin' up like a prairie-dog while you're at it."

Mrs. Yellett took a hurried survey of the camp, lessening the distance between herself and one of the light wagons with a gait in which grace was entirely subservient to speed; then, with one capacious wrench of the arms, she loosened the spring seat from the wagon and bore it to the governess with an artless air of triumph. It was difficult, under these circumstances, to explain to Mrs. Yellett that without that symbol of scholastic authority, a desk, the wagon seat was useless. Nevertheless, Mary set forth, with all her eloquence, the mission of a desk. Mrs. Yellett was genuinely depressed. Had she imported the magician without his wand—Aladdin without his lamp? She proposed a bewildering choice—an inverted wash-tub, two buckets sustaining the relation of caryatides to a board, the sheet-iron cooking-stove. In an excess of solicitude she even suggested robbing "paw" of his soap-box.

Mary chose the wash-tub on condition that Mrs. Yellett consented to sacrifice the handles in the cause of lower education. She felt that an inverted tub that was likely to see-saw during class hours [pg 202] would tend rather to develop a sense of humor in her pupils than to contribute to her pedagogical dignity.

The camp, as may already have been inferred, enjoyed a matriarchal form of

government. Its feminine dictator was no exception to the race of autocrats in that she was not an absolute stranger to the rosy byways of self-indulgence. There was a strenuous quality in her pleasuring perhaps not inconsistent in one whose daily tasks included sheep-herding, ditch-digging, varied by irrigating and shearing in their proper seasons. Under the circumstances, it was not surprising that her wash-tub bore about the same relationship to her real duties as does the crochet needle or embroidery hoop to the lives of less arduously engaged women. It was at once her fad and her relaxation, the dainty feminine accomplishment with which she whiled away the hours after a busy day spent with pick and shovel. Of all this Mary was ignorant when she proposed that Mrs. Yellett saw off the tub-handles in the cause of culture. However, Mrs. Yellett procured a saw, yet the hand that held it lingered in its descent on the handles. She contemplated the tub as affectionately as Hamlet regarding the skull of "Alas, poor Yorick!"

"This," she observed, "is the only thing about camp that reminds me I'm a woman. I'd plumb forget it many a time if it warn't for this little tub. The identity of a woman is mighty apt to get mislaid when dooty compels her to assoome the pants cast aside by the nacheral head of the house in sickness or death. It's ben six years now since [pg 203] paw's done a thing but set 'round and wait for meals." Mrs. Yellett sighed laboriously. "Not that I'm holdin' it agin him none. When a man sees eighty, it's time he bedded himself down comfortable and waited for the nacheral course of events to weed him out. But when the boys get old enough to tend to herdin', irrigatin', and the work that God A'mighty provided that man might get the chance to sweat hissself for bread, accordin' to the Scriptures, I aim to indulge myself by doin' a wash of clothes every day, even if I have to take clean clothes and do 'em over again."

The poor "gov'ment's" tender heart could not resist this presentation of the case.

"We won't touch the handles, Mrs. Yellett," she laughed. "I'm glad you told me you had a personal sentiment for the tub. There are some things I should feel the same way about—my hoe and rake, for instance, that I care for my garden with, at home. And that suggests to me, why not dig two little trenches for the handles and plant the tub? Then I shall have an even firmer foundation on which to arrange the—the—the educational miscellany."

The suggestion of this harmless expedient was gratefully received, and the "desk" duly implanted, whereupon Mary pathetically sought to embellish her

"class-room" from such scanty materials as happened to be at hand. A hemstitched bureau scarf that she had tucked in her trunk, in unquestioning faith in the bureau that was to be part of the ranch equipment, took the "raw edge," as it were, [pg 204] off the desk. A bunch of prairie flowers, flaming cactus blossoms in scarlet and yellow, ox-eyed daisies, white clematis from the creek, seemed none the less decorative for the tin cup that held them. Mary grimly told herself that her school was to have refining influences, even if it had no furniture.

The books, pencils, and paper arranged in decorous little piles, Miss Carmichael announced to her patroness that school was ready to open. Mrs. Yellett, who had never heard that "a soft voice is an excellent thing in woman," and whose chest-notes were not unlike those of a Durham in sustained volume of sound, made the valley of the Wind River echo with the summons of the pupils to school, upon which the teacher herself was overcome by the absurdity of the situation and had barely time to escape back of the willows, where she laughed till she cried.

As the pupils trooped obediently to school, Mary noted that they carried no flowers to their dear teacher, but that Ben, the oldest pupil, twenty-one years old, six feet four inches in height and deeply saturnine in manner, carried a six-shooter in his cartridge-belt. The teacher felt that she was the last to deny a pupil any reasonable palliative of the tedium of class-hours—the nearness of her own school-days inclined her to leniency in this particular—but she was hardly prepared to condone a six-shooter, and confided her fears to Mrs. Yellett, who received them with the indulgent tolerance a strong-minded woman might extend to the feminine flutter aroused by a mouse. She explained that Ben did [pg 205] not shoot for "glory," but to defend the herd from the casual calls of mountain-lions, bears, and coyotes. Jack and Ned, who were very nearly as tall as their older brother, carried similar weapons. Mary prayed that a fraternal spirit might dwell among her pupils.

The Misses Yellett were hardly less terrifying than their brothers. They had their father's fierce, hawklike profile, softened by youth, and the appalling height and robustness due to the freedom and fresh air of a nomadic existence. Their costumes might, Mary thought, have been fashioned out of gunny-sacks by the simple expedient of cutting holes for the head and arms. The description of the dress worn by the charcoal-burner's daughter in any mediaeval novel of modern construction would approximate fairly well the school toilets of these young lady pupils. The boys wore overalls and flannel shirts, which, in contrast to the

sketchy effects of their sisters' costumes, seemed almost modish. Mrs. Yellett then left the "class-room," saying she must take Ben's place with the sheep.

The Brobdingnags, huge of stature, sinister of aspect, deeply distrustful of the rites in which they were about to participate, closed in about their teacher. From the pigeon-holes of memory Mary drew forth the academic smile with which a certain teacher of hers had invariably opened school. The pupils greeted the academic smile with obvious suspicion. No one smiled in camp. When anything according with their conception of the humorous happened, they laughed uproariously. Thus, [pg 206] early in the morning, on his way to breakfast, Ned had stumbled over an ax and severely cut his head. Every one but Ned saw the point of this joke immediately, and hearty guffaws testified to their appreciation.

Miss Carmichael took her place behind the upturned tub.

"Will you please be seated?" she said.

The class complied with the instantaneous precision of automata newly greased and in excellent working order. Their abrupt obedience was disconcerting. Some one must have been drilling them, thought their anxious teacher, in the art of simultaneous squatting. The temper of the class respecting scholastic deportment leaned towards rigidity bordering on self-torture.

Mary made out a roll-call, and by unanimous consent it was agreed to arrange the class as it then stood, or rather squatted, with the Herculean Ben at the top, and gradually diminishing in size till it reached the vanishing point with Cacta, who was ten and the least terrifying of all.

"And now," ventured the teacher, with the courage of a white rabbit, "what have you been in the habit of studying?"

Absolute silence on the part of the class, which confronted its questioner straight as a row of bottles, presenting faces imperturbable as so many sphinxes.

Other questions met with an equally disheartening response. Miss Carmichael sat up straight, pushed back the persistent curls from her face, and bent [pg 207] every energy towards the achievement of a "firm" demeanor.

"Clematis," said she, wisely selecting perhaps the least formidable of the class, "I want you to give me some idea of the kind of work you have been doing, so

that we may all be able to understand each other. Now, in your mathematics, for instance, which of you have finished with your arithmetic, and which—"

"What do you mean?" begged Clematis, somewhat tearful.

"Where are you in your arithmetic?"

"Nowhere, ma'am."

"Do you mean you have never learned any?" Mary Carmichael shuddered as she icily put the question.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is that the case with all of you?"

Emphatic nods left no room for doubt.

"Then we'll leave that for the present. If you will tell me, Clematis, what kind of work you have been doing in your history and English, we will get to work on those to-day. What books have you been using?"

Not unnaturally, Clematis, who was emotional and easily impressed, began to feel as though she were a criminal. She sobbed in a helpless, feminine way. Ben spoke up, fearsomely, from the top of the class.

"We 'ain't got no books," said he, in grim rebuke, as though to put an end to a profitless discussion.

"Do you wish me to understand," quavered Mary, [pg 208] "that you have had no studies—that you—can't read?—that you—don't know—anything?"

"That's it," said Ben, with the nearest approach to cheerfulness he had yet manifested.

Meanwhile there lay on the teacher's "desk" copies of Clodd's *Childhood of the World*, two of that excellent series of *History Primers*, and *The Young Geologist*, all carefully selected, in the fulness of Mary's ignorance, for the little pupils of her imagination. She had brought no primer, as Mrs. Yellett's letter had distinctly said that the youngest child was ten and that all were comparatively advanced in

their studies. More than ever Mary longed to penetrate the mystery of that Irish linen decoy, for without doubt it was to be her melancholy fate to conduct this giant band through the alphabet!

Accordingly she wrote out the letters of the alphabet with large simplicity and a sublime renunciation of flourish. The class received it tepidly. Mary grew eloquent over its unswerving verities. The class remained lukewarm. The difference between a and b was a matter of indifference to the house of Yellett. They regarded their teacher's strenuous efforts to furnish a key to the acquirement of the alphabet with the amused superiority of "grown-ups" watching infant antics with pencil and paper. Meanwhile her fear of the class increased in proportion as her ability to hold its attention diminished. The backbone of the school was plainly wilting. The little scholars, armed to the teeth, no longer sat up straight as tenpins. After twenty-five minutes of educational experience, satiety bowled them over.

[pg 209]

A single glance had convinced Ben that the alphabet was beneath contempt. He yawned automatically at regular intervals—long, dismal yawns that threatened to terminate in a howl, the unchecked, primitive type of yawn that one hears in the cages of the zoological gardens on a dull day. Miss Carmichael raised interrogatory eyebrows, but she might as well have looked reproof at a Bengal tiger.

The class was rapidly promoted to c-a-t, cat; but these dizzy intellectual heights left them cold and dull. Ben began to clean his revolver, and on being asked why he did not pay attention to his lessons, answered, briefly:

"It's all d——d foolishness."

Cacta and Clem were pulling each other's hair. Mary affected not to see this sisterly exchange of torture. Ned whittled a stick; and, in chorus, when their teacher told them that d-o-g spelled dog, they shouted derision, and affirmed that they had no difficulty in compelling the obedience of Stump even without this particular bit of erudition. Though Mary had always abhorred corporal punishment, she began to see arguments in its favor.

With the handleless tub as an elbow-rest the teacher took counsel with herself. Strategy must be employed with the intellectual conquest of the Brobdingnags.

Summoning all the pedagogical dignity of which she was capable, she asked:

"Boys, don't you want to know how to read?"

"Noap," responded the head of the class.

"Don't you want to know how to write?"

[pg 210]

"Noap."

"But, my dear boy, what would you do if you left here and went out into the world, where every one knows these things and your ignorance would be evident at every turn. What would you do?"

"Slug the whole blamed outfit!"

Mary looked at her watch. School had lasted just forty-five minutes. Had time become petrified?

[pg 211]

XIV

Judith Adjusts The Situation

Mary had been a member of the Yellett household for something over a week, and the intellectual conquest of her Brobdingnag pupils seemed as hopeless as on that first day. School seemed to be regarded by them as a sort of neutral territory, admirably adapted for the settlement of long-standing grudges, the pleasant exchange of practical jokes, peace and war conferences; also as a mart of trade, where fire-arms, knives, bear and elk teeth might be swapped with a greater expenditure of time and conversation than under the maternal eye. "Teacher," as she was understood and accepted by the house of Yellett, undoubtedly filled a long-felt want. Presiding over a school of six-imp power for a week, however, had humbled Mary to the point of seriously considering a letter to the home government, meekly asking for return transportation. But this was before feminine wile had struggled with feminine vanity, and feminine wile won the day. School still continued to open at six, from which early and unusual hour it continued, without recess or interruption, till noon, when dinner pleasantly [pg 212] invaded the scholastic monotony, to the infinite relief of all parties concerned.

Mary had dismissed her pupils a few minutes before the usual hour, on a particularly bad day, that she might rally her scattered faculties and present something of a countenance to the watchful eye of Mrs. Yellett. Every element of humor had vanished from the situation. The inverted tub was no longer a theme for merriment in her diary; home-life without a house was no longer a diverting epigram; she had closed her eyes that she might not see the mountains in all their grandeur. In her present mood of abject homesickness the white-capped peaks were part and parcel of the affront. With head sunk in the palms of her hands, and elbows resting on the inverted tub, Mary presented a picture of woe, in which the wicked element of comedy was not wholly lacking. Looking up suddenly, she saw Judith Rodney advancing. The first glimpse of her put Mary in a more rational mood.

"I'm so glad to see you! Behold my class-room appointments! They may seem a trifle novel, but, for that matter, so are my pupils," began Mary, determining to present the same front to Judith that she had to Mrs. Yellett. But Judith was not to be put off. She looked into Mary's eyes and did not relax her gaze until she was rewarded with an answering twinkle. Then Mary laughed long and merrily, the first good, hearty laugh since the beginning of her teaching.

"Tell me," Mary broke out, suddenly, "or the [pg 213] suspense will kill me, who wrote that lovely letter—on such good quality Irish linen, too? Snob that I was, it was the letter that did it."

"So you have your suspicions that it was not a home product?"

"You didn't do it, did you?"

"Oh no; though I was asked, and so was Miss Wetmore, I believe. Of course poor Mrs. Yellett had no other recourse, as I suppose you know. I chose to be disobliging that time, and was sorry for it afterwards—sorry when I heard about the letter that really went! Do you find the sheep-wagon so very dreadful?"

"I thought," laughed Mary, "that it was going to be like a picture I saw in a magazine, Mexican hammocks, grass cushions, and a lady pouring tea from a samovar; instead it was the sheep-wagon and 'Do you sleep light or dark?' There is Mrs. Yellett calling us to dinner. Shall I have a chance to talk to you alone afterwards?"

"I've come all the way from Dax's to see you," explained Judith, with characteristic directness. "We have all the afternoon."

"Really!" Mary displayed a flash of school-girl enthusiasm. "I feel as if I could almost bear the scenery."

Presumably Judith was a favorite guest of the Yellett household, and not without reason. She took her place in the circle about the homely, steaming fare, with an ease and grace that suggested that dining off the ground was an every-day affair with her, and chairs and tables undreamed-of [pg 214] luxuries. Mary envied her ready tact. Why could she not meet these people with Judith's poise—bring out the best of them, as she did? The boys talked readily and naturally—there was even a flavor to what they said. As for herself, try never so conscientiously and she would be confronted by frank amusement or shy distrust. Even "paw"

beamed at Judith appreciatively as he consumed his meal with infinite, toothless labor. The Spartan family became almost sprightly under the pleasantly stimulating influence of its guest.

"What kind of basques are they wearing this summer, Judy?" inquired Mrs. Yellett, regarding her guest's trim shirt-waist judicially. "I reckon them loose, meal-sack things must be all the go since you and Miss Mary both have 'em; but give me a good, tight-fittin' basque, every time. How's any one to know whether you got a figure or not, in a thing that never hits you anywhere?" questioned the matriarch, not without a touch of pride anent her own fine proportions.

"You really ought to have a shirt-waist, Mrs. Yellett. You've no idea of the comfort of them, till you've worn them."

"I don't see but I'll have to come to it." Her tone was frankly regretful, as one who feels obliged to follow the behests of fashion, yet, in so doing, sacrifices a cherished ideal. Mary Carmichael choked over her coffee in an abortive attempt to restrain her audible hilarity. Judith, without a trace of amusement, was discussing materials, cut, and [pg 215] buttons; the plainswoman had proved herself the better gentlewoman of the two.

"Get me a spotty calico, white, with a red dot, will you, the next time you're over to Ervay? Buttons accordin' to your judgment; but if you could get some white chiny with a red ring, I think they'd match it handsome." She frowned reflectively. "You're sure one of them loose, hangy things 'd become me? Then you can bring it over Tuesday, when you come to the hunt."

"What hunt?" asked Judith, in all simplicity.

"Why, the wolf-hunt. Peter Hamilton come here three days ago and made arrangements for 'em all to have supper here after it was done. 'Lowed there was a young Eastern lady in the party, Miss Colebrooke, who couldn't wait to meet me. Course you're goin', Judy? You've plumb forgot it, or somethin' happened to the messenger. Who ever hyeard tell of anythin' happenin' in this yere county 'thout you bein' the very axle of it?"

Judith had not betrayed her chagrin by the least change of countenance. To the most searching glance every faculty was intent on the shirt-waist with the ringed buttons. Yet both women felt—by a species of telepathy wholly feminine—that Judith was deeply wounded. Loyal Sarah Yellett decided that Hamilton's guests

would get but a scant supper from her if her friend Judith was to be unfavored with an invitation, while Judith, in her own warm heart, resented as deeply as Peter's slight of herself, his tale of Miss Colebrooke's impatience to meet Mrs. Yellett. The matriarch's [pg 216] dominant personality evoked many a smile even from those most deeply conscious of her worth; but it wasn't like Peter to make a spectacle of his ruggedly honest neighbor. Nevertheless she remarked, coolly:

"I sha'n't be able to bring your shirt-waist things up Tuesday, I'm afraid, Mrs. Yellett, but I'll try to bring them towards the end of the week." Then, with a swift change of subject, "How are the boys getting on with their education, Miss Carmichael?"

The boys looked at Mary out of the corners of their eyes. Their prowess in the field of letters had not been publicly discussed before. Mary Carmichael, emboldened by Judith's presence, looked at her tormentors with a judicious glance.

"The girls are doing fairly well," she replied, suppressing the mischief in her eyes, "but the boys, poor fellows, I think something must be the matter with them. Did they ever fall on their heads when they were babies, Mrs. Yellett?"

"Not more than common. All babies fall on their heads; it's as common as colic."

"Poor boys!" said Mary, with a manner that suggested they were miles away, rather than within a few feet of her. "Poor boys! I've never seen anything like it. They try so hard, too, yet they can make nothing of work that would be play for a child of three. They must have fallen on their heads harder than you supposed, Mrs. Yellett."

"Perhaps their skulls were a heap frailer than I allowed for at the time," said Mrs. Yellett, with [pg 217] similar remoteness, yet with a twinkle that showed Mary she understood the situation.

"An infant's skull doesn't stand much knocking about, I suppose, Mrs. Yellett?"

"Not a great deal, if there ain't plenty of vinegar and brown paper handy, and I seldom had such fancy fixings in camp. It's too bad my boys should be dumb 'n account of a little thing like vinegar and brown paper."

"Maw, they be dumb as Injuns," declared Cacta, preening herself, while the Messrs. Yellett reapplied themselves to their dinner with ostentatious interest.

"Well, well!" said Mrs. Yellett; "it be a hard blow to me to know that my sons are lackings; there's mothers I know as would give vent to their disapp'inted ambition in ways I'd consider crool to the absent-minded. Now hearken, the whole outfit of you! Any offspring of mine now present and forever after holding his peace, who proves feeble-minded by the end of the coming week, takes over all the work, labor, and chores of such offspring as demonstrates himself in full possession of his faculties, the matter to be reported on by the gov'ment."

No sovereign, issuing a proclamation of war, could have assumed a more formidable mien than Mrs. Yellett, squatting erect on the prairie, crowned by her rabbit-skin cap. Mary and Judith, with bland, impassive expressions, noted the effect of the mandate. There was not the faintest symptom of rebellion; each Brobdingnag accepted the matriarch's edict without a murmur.

[pg 218]

With an air of further meditation on the efficacy of brown paper and vinegar at the crucial moment, Mrs. Yellett suddenly observed:

"The lacking, like the dog, may be taught to fetch and carry a book; but to learn it he is unable."

"Maw, does it say that in the Book of Hiram?" asked Clematis.

"It says that, an' more, too. It says, 'The words of the wise are an expense, but the lovin' parent don't grudge 'em.'"

Mary Carmichael had noticed, as her alien presence came to be less of a check on Mrs. Yellett's natural medium of expression, that she was much addicted to a species of quotation with which she impartially adorned her conversation, pointed family morals, or administered an occasional reproof. These family aphorisms were sometimes semi-legal, sometimes semi-scriptural in turn of phrase, and built on a foundation of homely philosophy. They were ascribed to the "Book of Hiram" and never failed of salutary effect in the family circle. But the apt quotations that she had just heard piqued Mary's curiosity more than before.

"Do you happen to have a copy of the Book of Hiram, Mrs. Yellett?" she asked, in all innocence, supposing that the 'homely apothegms were to be found at the back of some patent-medicine almanac. Judith Rodney listened in wonder. The question had never before been asked in her hearing.

"I lost mine." Mrs. Yellett folded her arms and looked at her questioner with something of a challenging mien.

[pg 219]

"What a pity! I've been so interested in the quotations I've heard you make from it."

"What's the matter with 'em?" she demanded, pride and apprehension equally commingled.

Judith Rodney rushed to the rescue:

"Nothing is the matter with them, Mrs. Yellett," she said, with her disarming smile, "except that there is not quite enough to go around."

The matriarch had the air of gathering herself together for something really worth while. Then she tossed off:

""Tain't always the quality of the grub that confers the flavor, but sometimes the scarcity thereof.""

Perhaps it has been the good-fortune of some of us to say a word of praise to an author, while unconscious of his relationship to the book praised. Mark the genial glow radiating from every feature of our auditor! How we feel ourselves anointed with his approval, our good taste and critical faculty how commended! It is a luxury that goes a long way towards mitigating the discomfitures caused by the reverse of this unctuous blunder.

"The Book of Hiram," said Mrs. Yellett, angling for time, "is a book—it do surprise me that it escapes your notice back East. You ever heard tell of the Book of Mormon?"

Mary assented.

"Well, the Book of Hiram is like the Book of Mormon, only a heap more

undefiled. The youngest child can read it without asking a single embarrassing question of its elder, and the oldest sinner [pg 220] can read it without having any fleshly meditations intrudin' on his piety."

The Yellett family had by this time dispersed itself for the afternoon, and the matriarch and the two girls started in to clear away the meal and wash the dishes.

"That's the kind of book for me," continued Mrs. Yellett, vigorously swishing about in the soapy water. "Story-books don't count none with me these days. It's my opinion that things are snarled up a whole lot too much in real life without pestering over the anguish of print folks. Flesh and blood suffering goes without a groan of sympathy from the on-lookers, while novel characters wade to the neck in compassion. I've pondered on that a whole lot, seem' a heap of indifference to every-day calamity, and the way I assay it is like this: print folks has terrible fanciful layouts given to their griefs and worriments by the authors of their being. The trimmings to their troubles is mighty attractive. Don't you reckon I'd be willin' to have a spell of trouble if I had a sweeping black velvet dress to do it in? Yes, indeed, I'd be willin' to turn a few of them shades of anguish, 'gray's ashes,' 'pale as death,' and so on, if they'd give me the dress novel ladies seems to have for them special occasions."

"But you used to like novels, you know you did, Mrs. Yellett," observed Judith Rodney.

"Yes, I didn't always entertain these views concernin' romance. You wouldn't believe it, but there was a time when I just nacherally went careerin' round enveloped in fantasies. I was young then—just [pg 221] about the time I married paw. Every novel that was read to me, I mean that I read"—Mrs. Yellett blushed a deep copper color through her many coats of tan—"convinced me that I was the heroine thereof. And, nacherally, I turned over to paw the feachers and characteristics of the hero in said book I happened to be enjoyin' at the time. Paw never knew it, but sometimes he was a dook, and it was plumb hard work. Just about as hard as ropin' a mountain-lion an' sayin', 'remember, you are a sheep from this time henceforth, and trim your action accordin'.' I'd say to paw, 'Let's walk together in the gloaming, here in this deserted garden'; and paw would say, 'Name o' Gawd, woman, have you lost your mind? It's plumb three hundred and fifty miles to the Tivoli beer-garden in Cheyenne, and it ain't deserted, either!'

"Then I'd wring my hands in anguish, same as the Lady Mary, an' paw would

declare I was locoed. He seemed a heap more nacheral when I pretended he was 'Black Ranger, the Pirate King.' His language came in handy, and his cartridge-belt and pistol all came in Black Ranger's outfit. Yes, it was a heap easier playing he was a pirate than a dook. All this happened back to Salt Lake, where me an' paw was married."

Mrs. Yellett looked towards the mountain-range that separated her from the Mormon country, and her listeners realized that she was verging perilously close to confidences. Mary Carmichael, who dreaded missing any detail of the chronicle that dealt with paw in the rôle of apocryphal duke, hastened to say:

[pg 222]

"And you lost your taste for romance, finally?"

"In Salt Lake I was left to myself a whole lot—there was reasons why I didn't mingle with the Mormon herd. Paw was mighty attentive to me, but them was troublous times for paw. I pastures myself with the fleetin' figures of romance the endoorin' time and enjoys myself a heap. When paw wasn't a dook or a pirate king, unbeknownst to himself, like as not he was Sir Marmaduke Trevelyan, or somebody entitled to the same amount of dog.

"'Bout this time a little stranger was due in our midst, and the woman who came to take care of me was plumb locoed over novels, same as me, only worse. She just hungered for 'em, same as if she had a longin' for something out of season. She brought a batch of them with her in her trunk, we borrowed her a lot more, some I don't know how she come by. But they didn't have no effect; it was like feedin' an' Injun—you couldn't strike bottom. She read out of 'em to me with disastrous results happenin', an' that cured me. The brand on this here book that effected my change of heart was *The Bride of the Tomb*. I forget the name of the girl in that romance, but she was in hard luck from the start. She couldn't head off the man pursuin' her, any way she turned. She'd wheel out of his way cl'ar across country, but he'd land thar fust an' wait for her, a smile on his satanine feachers.

"I got so wrought up along o' that book, an' worried as to the outcome, 'most as bad as the girl. Think of it! An' me with only three baby-shirts an' a flannel [pg 223] petticoat made at the time! Seemed 's if I couldn't hustle my meals fast enough, I just hankered so to know what was goin' to happen next! I plumb detested the man with the handsome feachers, same as the girl. Me an' her felt

precisely alike about him. And when he shut her up in the family vault I just giv' up an' was took then an' there, an' me without so much as finishin' the flannel petticoat! I never could endure the sight of a novel since. Perhaps that's why Ben is so dumb about his books—just holds a nacheral grudge against 'em along of my havin' to borrow slips for him."

"Has the Book of Hiram anything to say against the habit of novel reading, Mrs. Yellett?" inquired Judith, demurely.

She paused for a moment. "It's mighty inconvenient that I should have mislaid that book, but rounding up my recollections of it, I recall something like this: 'Romance is the loco-weed of humanity.'"

"So you don't approve of the Mormon Bible?" ventured Mary.

"I jest nacherally execrates Mormonism, spoken, printed, or in action," she said, with an emphasis that suggested the subject had a strong personal bearing. "I recall a text from the Book of Hiram touching on Mormon deportment in particklar an' human nature at large. It says, 'Where several women and one man are gathered together for the purpose of serving the Lord, the man gets the bulk of the service.'"

She broke off suddenly, as if she feared she had [pg 224] said too much. "Judy," she demanded, "is Mis' Dax busy with Leander now?"

"Not more than usual," smiled Judith.

"Jest tell her for me, will you, that I want to hire her husband to do some herdin'; Leander's handy, 'n' can work good an' sharp, if he is an infidel. An' I like to have him over now an' then, as you know, Judy. As the Book of Hiram says, 'It's neighborly to ease the check-rein of a gentled husband.' But you tell him I don't want to hear any of his ever-lastin' fool argufyin' 'bout religion. Leander 'd stop in the middle of shearin' a sheep to argue that Jonah never came out o' the whale's belly. I ain't no use for infidels, 'less they're muzzled, which Leander mos' generally is."

With the feeling that there was an excellent though unspoken understanding between them, the two girls walked together to the top of the path that wandered away from camp towards a bluff overlooking wave after wave of foot-hills, lying blue and still like a petrified sea.

"I'm still dying to know who wrote that letter," begged Mary.

"It was written by a lady who is very anxious to return to Washington, and she took that means of getting one more vote. Her husband is going to run for the Senate next term. We hear a good deal of that side of politics, you know."

"It was certainly convincing," remarked the victim of the letter. "My aunts detected many virtues in the handwriting."

"But now that you are really here, isn't it splendid? [pg 225] Mountains are such good neighbors. They give you their great company and yet leave you your own little reservations."

"But I fear I can never feel at home out-of-doors," Mary announced, with such a rueful expression that they both smiled.

"Perhaps, then, it depends on the frame of mind. I've had longer than you to cultivate it."

Mary looked towards the mountains, serene in their strength. "Awesome as they are," she laughed, "they don't frighten me nearly as much as Ben and Ned. They are really very difficle, my pupils, and I feel so ridiculous sitting up back of that tub, teaching them letters and the spelling of foolish words, when they know things I've never dreamed of. The other day, out of a few scratches in the dust that I should never have given a second glance, one of them made out that some one's horses had broken the corral and one was trailing a rope. Whereupon my pupil got on a horse, went in search of the strays, and returned them to men going to a round-up. After that, the spelling of cat didn't seem quite so much of an achievement as it had before."

"But they need the spelling of cat so much more than you need to understand trail-marks. Why don't you try a little strategy with them? Perhaps a bribe, even? It seems to me I remember something in history about the part played in colonization by the bright-colored bead."

Sundry wood-cuts from a long-forgotten primer history of the United States came back to Mary. [pg 226] In that tear-stained, dog-eared volume, all explorers, from Columbus down to Lewis and Clarke, were unfailingly depicted in the attitude of salesmen displaying squares of cloth to savages apparently in urgent need of them.

"How stupid of me not to remember Father Marquette concluding negotiations with a necklace!"

"Frankly plagiarize the terms of your treaty from Père Marquette, and there you are!"

"You are so splendid!" said Mary, impulsively, remembering Judith's own sorrows and the smiling fortitude with which she kept them hidden. "You make me feel like a horrid little girl that has been whining."

Judith looked towards the mountains a long time without speaking.

"When you know them well, they whisper great things that little folk can't take away."

She turned back towards camp, walking lightly, with head thrown back. Mary watched her. Yes, the mountains might have admitted her to their company.

[pg 227]

The Wolf-hunt

Judith awakened with all the starry infinitude of sky for a canopy. In the distance loomed the foot-hills, watchful sentinels of her slumbers; and, sloping gently away from them, rolled the plain, like some smooth, dark sea flowing deep and silently. Judith, a solitary figure adrift in that still ocean of space, sat up and watched the stars fade and saw the young day peer timorously at the world that lay before it. Her mind, refreshed by long hours of dreamless sleep, turned to the problem of impending things, serenely contemplative. The passing of many mornings and many peoples had the mountains seen as the wreathed mists came and went about their brows, and to all who knew the value of the gift they gave their great company, and to such as could hear, they told their great secrets. Judith's prayer was an outflowing of soul to the great forces about her, a wish to be in harmony with them, to remember her kinship, to keep some measure of their serenity in the press of burdens. The way of the Indian was ever her way when circumstance raised no barriers; the four walls of a house were a prison to her after the days lengthened and the [pg 228] summer nights grew warm. To the infinite disapproval of that custodian of propriety, Mrs. Dax, she would make her bed beneath the stars, night after night, and bathe in the cold, clear waters of the stream that purred from the white-capped crest of the mountains.

"Nasty Injun ways!" scoffed Leander's masterful lady, consciously superior from the intrenchment of her stuffy bedroom, that boasted crochet-work on the backs of the chairs and a scant lace curtain at its solitary window.

Judith, going to her favorite pool to bathe, saw that it had shrunk till it seemed but a fairy well hid among the willows. A quarter of a mile above was another pool, hidden like a jewel in its case of green, broidered with scarlet roseberries and white clematis; and towards this she bent her steps, as time was a-plenty that morning. She kept to the stones of the creek for a pathway, jumping lightly from those that were moss-grown to those that hid their nakedness in the dark, velvet shadows of early morning, her white feet touching the shallow stream like pale

gulls that dipped and skimmed. "Diana's Pool," as she called it, was always clear. It lay half hid beneath a shelving rock, a fount for the tiny, white fall that crooned and sang as it fell. And here she bathed, as the east flamed where the mountains blackened against it. Gold halos tipped the clouds, that melted presently into fiery waves, then burst into one great aureole through which the sun rode triumphant, and it was day.

She had kept post-office the day before, and it [pg 229] would not be till day after to-morrow that the squires of the lariat would come again to offer their hearts, their worldly goods, their complete reformation, if she would only change her mind. It was all such an old story that she had grown to regard them with a tenderness almost maternal. But to-day was all her own, and the spirit of adventure swelled high in her bosom as she thought of what she had planned. It was warm and close and still in the Dax house as Judith made her way softly to her own room and began her preparations for the long journey she was to take afoot. To walk in the abominations devised by the white man for the purpose of cramping his feet would have been a serious handicap to Judith. The twenty miles that she would walk before nightfall was no very great undertaking to her, but it was part of her primitive directness to accomplish it with as little expenditure of fatigue and comfort as possible. Moreover, who could steal through the forest in those heeled things without announcing his coming and frightening the forest folk, and sending them skurrying? And Judith loved to surprise them and see them busy with their affairs—to creep along in her soft, elk-hide moccasins and catch their watchful eyes and see the things that were not for the heavy-booted white man.

She might have inspired Kitty Colebrooke to a sonnet as she stepped out into the glad morning light, in short skirt and jacket, green-clad as the pines that girdled the mountains, with a knapsack with rations of bread and meat and the wherewithal [pg 230] to build a fire should she wander belated. She softly closed the door, not to awaken Leander and his slumbering lady, and broke into the running gait that the Indians use on their all-day journeys, the elk-hide moccasins falling soft as snow-flakes on the trail. Dolly she missed chiefly for her companionship, for Judith had not the white man's utter helplessness without a horse in this country of high altitudes. When she walked she breathed, carried herself, covered ground like her mother's people, and loved the inspiration of it.

The eerie shadows of the desert drew back and hid themselves in the mountains. The day began with splendid promise—the day of the wolf-hunt, of which no

word had been spoken to her by Peter. She, too, was going hunting, but silently and unbidden she would steal through the forest and see this mysterious woman who played fast and loose with Peter, who loved her apparently all the better for the game she played. What manner of woman could do these things? What manner of woman could be indifferent to Peter? Judith was consumingly curious to see. And, apart from this naked and unashamed curiosity, there was the possibility that at sight of Miss Colebrooke there might come a relaxation of Peter's tyrannous hold upon her thoughts, her life, her very heart's blood. Would her loyalty bear the test of seeing Peter made a fool of by a woman she could dismiss with a shrug—a softly speaking shrew, perhaps, who played a waiting game with her finger on the pulse of Peter's prospects? For there was talk of a partnership [pg 231] with the Wetmores. Or a fool, perhaps, for all her sonneting, for there are men who relish a weak headpiece as the chiefest ornament of women, especially when its indeterminate vagaries boast an escape-valve remotely connected with the fine arts. Or a devil-woman, perhaps—an upright wanton who could think no wrong from very poverty of temperament, yet kept him dangling. The possibility of Kitty's honesty, Judith in her jealousy would not admit. Had she gone to the devil for him, stood and faced the drift of opinion for his sake, that Judith could have understood. But what was the spinning of verses to a woman's portion of loving and being loved? Even Alida, through all her distracting anxieties, had in her heart the thrice-blessed leaven, reasoned the woman of the plains, who might, according to modern standards, be reckoned a trifle primitive in her psychological deductions. And, withal, Judith was forced to admit that there was something simple and true about a man who would let a woman make a fool of him, whoever the woman was.

Perhaps with this hunting would end the long reign of Peter as a divinity. Judith was tired, not in her vigorous young body, because that was strong and healthful as the hill wind, but tired in heart and mind and life. Her destiny had not been beautiful or happy before he invaded it, but it had been calm, and now serenity seemed the worthiest gift of the gods. It was not that she loved him less, but that she had so long reflected upon him that her imagination was numb; her thoughts, arid, unfruitful [pg 232] as the desert, turned from him to the problems that beset her, and from them back to him again, in dull, subconscious yearning. She could no longer project an anguished consciousness to those scenes wherein he walked and talked with Kitty. Her Indian fatalism had intervened. "Life was life," to be lived or left. And yet she felt herself a poor creature, one who had lived long on illusion, who had bent her neck to the yoke of arid unrealities. The pale-haired woman who kept him with her miserliness of self, who intruded no sombre

tragedy of loving, was well worth a trip across the foot-hills to see. And yet, Judith reflected, it was the portion of her mother's daughter to make of loving the whole business of life, even if she rebelled and fought against it as an accursed destiny. It was in her inheritance to know and live for the wild thrill of ecstasy in her pulses, to feel trembling joy and despair and frantic hope, that exacted its tribute hardly less poignant; as it was, also, to feel a shivering sensitiveness in regard to the loneliness and bitterness of her life, to have the same measureless capacity for sorrow that she had for loving, to have a soul attuned to the tragedy of things, to love the mighty forces about her, to feel the reflection of all their moods in her heart, and, lastly, it was her destiny to be the daughter of a half-Sioux and a border adventurer, and to feel the counter influences of the two races make forever of her heart a battleground.

Her light feet scarcely touched the ground as she sped swiftly through all the network of the hills; [pg 233] and more than once her woman's heart asked the question, "And, prithee, Judith, if from henceforth you are only to hold fellowship with the stars and have no part in the ways of men, why do you walk a day's journey to catch a glimpse of a pale-haired woman?"

She knew the probable course of the wolf-hunt. She had been on scores of them, galloped with Peter after the fleeing gray thing that swept along the ground like the nucleus of a whirling dust-devil. At least she was sure of the place of their nooning—a limpid stream that ran close to many young pine-trees. Here was a pause in the rugged ascent, a level space of open green, thick with buffalo grass. Many times had she been here with Peter, sometimes with many other people on the chase—sometimes, and these occasions were enshrined in her memory, each with its own particular halo, with Peter alone; and they had fished for trout and cooked their supper on the grassy levels. It was in Judith's planning to arrive before the hunting-party, to hide among the thickets of scrub pine that grew along the steep cliffs and overlooked the grassy level, to take her fill of looking at the pale-haired girl and the hunters at their merrymaking, and, when she had seen, to steal back across the trail to the Daxes'. They would not penetrate the thickets where she meant to hide, and, should they, she was prepared for that contingency, too. She had brought with her a bright-colored shawl that she would throw over her head, and with the start of them she could outrun them all, even Peter. [pg 234] Had she not outdistanced him easily, many times, in fun? Through the tangle of tree-trunks that grew not far from the thicket, they would think she was but a poor Shoshone squaw lying in wait for the broken meat of the revellers.

By crossing and recrossing the tiny creeks that trickled slow and obstructed through the gaunt levels of plain and foot-hill, she had come by a direct route to the fringes of the pine country. And here she found a world dim, green, and mysterious. It was wellnigh inconceivable that the land of sage-brush and silence could, within walking distance of desolation, show such wealth of young timber, such shade and beauty. Her noiseless footfalls scarce startled a sage-hen that, realizing too late her presence, froze to the dead stump—a ruffled gray excrescence with glittering bead eyes that stared at her furtively, the one live thing in the tense body.

The sun wanted an hour of noon when Judith rested by the stream, bathed her face and hands, flushed from the long walk, ate the bread and meat, then lay on the bed of pine-needles, brown and soft from the weathering of many suns and snows. She had been all day in the company she loved best—the earth, the sky, the sun and wind—and in her heart at last was a deep tranquillity. Thus she could face life and ask nothing but to watch the cloud fleeces as they are spun and heaped high in the long days of summer; in soberer moods to watch the thoughts of the Great Mystery as He reveals them in the shifting cloud shapes; to penetrate further and further into the councils of the great forces. [pg 235] Thus did she dream the moments away till the sun was high in the blue and threw long, yellow splashes of light on her still body, on the soft pine-needles, beneath the boughs. But there was no time for further day-dreams if she intended to forestall the hunters at the place of nooning. She followed a game trail that lay along the stream, ascending through the dense growths till she reached the top of the jutting rocks. Her hair was loosened, her skirt awry, and the pine-needles stood out from it as from a cushion. Much of the way she gained by creeping beneath the low branches on her hands and knees. No white woman would be likely to follow her reasoned the daughter of the plains. It would be a little too hard on her appearance. And here, by lying flat and hanging over the jutting knob of rock, with a pine branch in her hand, she could see this mysterious woman and Peter and the hunters.

She broke a branch to shade her face, she looked down on the grassy level. She waited, but there was no sound of hoofs falling muffled on the soft ground. The shadows of the pines contended with the splashes of sunlight for the little world beneath the trees. They trembled in mimic battle, then the shadows stole the sunlight, bit by bit, till all was pale-green twilight, and there was no sound of the hunters.

The hunters, meanwhile, had not been altogether successful in the chase. The necessary wolf had been coy, and they, perforce, had to compromise with his poor relation, the coyote—a poor relation, [pg 236] indeed, whose shabby coat, thinned by the process of summer shedding, made it an unworthy souvenir to Miss Colebrooke. But it was not the lack of a wolf that robbed the hunting-party of its zest for Kitty. She could not tell what it was, but something seemed to have gone wrong with the day from the beginning. She rode beside her cavalier in a habit the like of which the country had never before seen, and Peter, usually the most observant of men, had no word for its multitude of perfections. In the first realization of disappointment with the day, the hunt, the hardships of the long ride, her perturbed consciousness took up the problem of this missing element and tried to adjust itself to the irritating absence. Kitty wondered if it were something she had forgotten. No, there were her two little cambric pocket-handkerchiefs, remotely suggestive of orris, and bearing her monogram delicately wrought and characteristic. It was not her watch, the ribbon fob of which fluttered now and then in the breeze. It was not veil nor scarf-pin nor any of the paraphernalia of the properly garbed horsewoman. And yet there was something missing, something she should have had with her, something the absence of which was taking the savor from the day's hunting.

It must be the very bigness of this great, splendid world that gave her the sense of being alone at sea. Intuitively she turned and looked at Peter riding beside her. There was something in his face that made her look again before accepting the realization at first incredulously, then with frank amusement. Peter had scarcely spoken since they left the ranch. [pg 237] She had come down to breakfast so sure of her new riding-habit. The Wetmore girls had been moved to hyperboles about its cut and fit and the trim shortness of the skirt—short riding-skirts were something of a novelty then. The fine gold hair, twisted tight at the back of the shapely head, was like a coiled mass of burnished metal, some safe-keeping device of mint or gold-worker till the season of coining or fashioning should come round. The translucent flesh-tints, pearl-white flushing into pink—"Bouguereau realized at last," as Nannie Wetmore was in the habit of summing up her cousin's complexion—was as marvellous as ever. The delicate firmness of profile gave to the face the artificial perfection of an old miniature, rather than of a flesh-and-blood countenance, and all these were there as of yore, but the marvel of them failed of the customary tribute. Kitty, on scanty reflection, was at no loss to translate Peter's reserve into a language at once flattering and retributive. In her scheme of life he was always to be her devoted

cavalier, as indeed he had been from the beginning. She loved her own small eminence too well to imperil her tenure of it by sharing its pretty view of men and things with any one. In country house parties she loved the mild wonder that the successful *littérateuse* could fight and play and win her social triumphs so well. She loved the star part, and next to playing it she enjoyed wresting it from other women or eclipsing them completely in some conspicuously minor rôle, while, in the matter of dress, Miss Colebrooke went beyond the point decreed by the [pg 238] most exigent mandates of fashion. When hats were worn over the face, her admirers had to content themselves with a glimpse of her charming mouth and chin. When they flared, hers fairly challenged the laws of equilibrium. She danced with the same facility with which she rode, swam, and played tennis. In doing these things supremely well she felt that she vindicated the position of the woman of letters. Why should one be a frump because one wrote?

Her friendship with Peter was to endure to greenest old age, more platonic, perhaps, than that of Madame Récamier and Chateaubriand. It was to be fruitful in letters that would compare favorably with the best of the seventeenth century series. Even now her own letters to Peter were no sprightly scrawl of passing events, but efforts whose seriousness suggested, at least in their carefully elaborated stages of structure, the letters of the ladies of Cranford.

But in the course of these Western wanderings, undertaken not wholly without consideration of Peter, there had appeared in the maplike exactness of her plans an indefinite territory that threatened undreamed-of proportions. It menaced the scheme of the letters, it shook the foundations of the Chateaubriand-Récamier friendship. The unknown quantity was none other than the frequent and irritating mention of one Judith Rodney, who, from all accounts, appeared a half-breed. Her name, her beauty, some intrinsic charm of personality made her an all too frequent topic, except in the case of [pg 239] Peter. He had been singularly keen in scenting any interrogatory venue that led to the mysterious half-breed; when questioned he persistently refused to exhibit her as a type.

Kitty knew that she had treated her long-suffering cavalier with scant consideration the day he had spurred across the desert to see her. True, she had written him on her arrival, but, with feminine perversity of logic, thought it a trifle inconsiderate of him to come so soon after that trying railroad journey. An ardent resumption of his suit—and Peter could be depended on for renewing it early and often—was farthest from her inclination at that particular time. She

intended to salve her conscience at the wolf-hunt for her casual reception of his impetuous visit. But apparently Peter did not intend to be prodigal of opportunity.

"How garrulous you people are this morning!" Nannie Wetmore challenged them. Peter came out of his brown study with the look of one who has again returned to earth.

"You don't find it like the drop-curtain of a theatre, now that you've seen it?" he questioned Kitty. For she had doubted her pleasure in the mountains, in the conviction that they would be too dramatic for her simple taste.

Kitty closed her eyes and sighted the peaks as if she were getting the color scheme for an afternoon toilet.

"Mass, bulk, rather than line—no, it's not like a drop-curtain, but it's distinctly 'hand-painted.' All it needs is a stag surveying the prospect from that [pg 240] great cliff. It's the kind of thing that would sound well in a description. Oh, I assure you I intend to make lavish use of it, but it leaves nothing to one's poor imagination!"

Peter had a distinct feeling of being annoyed. No, she could not appreciate the mountains any more than they could appreciate her. They were incongruous, antipathetic, antipodal. Kitty, in her pink and white and flaxen prettiness and her trim habit, was in harmony with the bridle-path of a city park; in this great, lonely country she was an alien. He thought of Judith and the night they had climbed Horse-Thief Trail, of her quiet endurance, her keen pleasure in the wild beauty of the night, her quality of companionship, her loyalty, her silent bearing of many burdens. Yet until he had seen them both against the same relentless background, he had never been conscious of comparing the two women.

Nannie Wetmore had fallen behind. She was riding with a bronzed young lieutenant from Fort Washakie. The two ahead rode long without speaking. Then Peter broke the silence impatiently:

"You did not really mean that, did you?" He was boyishly hurt at her flippant summing up of his beloved blue country. And Kitty, tired with the long, hard ride, and missing that something in Peter that had always been hers, turned on him a pair of blue eyes in which the tears were brimming suspiciously. They were well out of sight of the others, and had come to the heavy fringes of a pine

wood. Was it the psychological moment at last? Then suddenly their horses, that had been sniffing the [pg 241] air suspiciously, stopped. Kitty's horse, which was in advance of Peter's, rushed towards the thicker growth of pines as if all Bedlam were in pursuit. Peter's horse, swerving from the cause of alarm, bolted back across the trail over which they had just made their way. A large brown bear, feeding with her cub, and hidden by the trees till they were directly in front of her, had caused the alarm.

And presently the hush of the shadowy green world in which Judith lay was broken by a light, sobbing sound. It had been so still that, lying on her bed of pine-needles, she had likened it to great waves of silence, rolling up from the valley, breaking over her and sweeping back again, noiseless, green from the billowing ocean of pine branches, and sunlit. Judith bent over the rocky ledge and saw a girl making her way down the game trail, dishevelled and tearful. Her hat was gone, her pale-yellow hair, that in shadow had the greenish tinge of corn-silk, blew about her shoulders, her trim skirt was torn and dusty, and she looked about, bewildered, hardly realizing that through the unexpected course of things she had been stranded in this great world of sunlit splendor and loneliness. She closed her eyes. The awful vastness and solitude oppressed her with a deepening sense of calamity. Suppose they never found her? How could she find her way in this endless wilderness, afoot? She sank to the turf and began to cry hysterically.

Judith knew in a flash of instant cognition that this was Miss Colebrooke. Amazement seemed to [pg 242] have dulled her powers of action—amazement that she, who had stolen to this place and crouched close to earth that she might see the triumph of this preferred woman, and, having seen and paid her grievous dole, steal away and take up the thread of endless little things that spun for her the web of life, was forced instead to be an unwilling witness of the other's distress. Judith had risen with her first impulse, which had been to go to Kitty, but half-way through the thicket she hesitated and reconsidered. Undoubtedly Peter would come soon, and Peter's consolation would be more potent than any she could offer. She shrank in shuddering self-consciousness at the thought of her presence at their meeting, the uninvited guest, the outgrown friend and confidante, blundering in at such a time, pitifully full of good intentions. She recoiled from the picture as from a precipice that all unwittingly she had escaped. What madness had induced her to come on this expedition? A sudden panic at the possibility of discovery possessed her; suppose Peter should find her skulking like a beggar, waiting for broken meats? She looked at the image of

herself that she carried in her heart. It was that of a proud woman who made no moan at the scourge of the inevitable. Many burdens had she carried in her proud, lonely heart, but of them her lips gave no sign. In her contemplative stoicism she felt with pride that she was no unworthy daughter of her mother's people, and catching a glimpse through the trees of the abjectly waiting woman who, though safe and sound, could but wait, wretched and dispirited, [pg 243] for some one to come and adjust her to the situation, Judith felt for her a wondering pity at her helplessness. She waited, expectant, for the sound of Peter's horse. Surely he must come at any moment, overcome with apologies, and she—Judith hid her face in her hands at the thought—she would steal away through the thicket at the first sound of hoofs. But as the minutes slipped by and still no sign of Peter, a sickening anxiety began to gnaw at her heart. Had something happened to him?

She did not wait to ask herself the question twice. She crawled the length of the thicket with incredible rapidity, gained the pine forest, and made her way beneath the low-hanging boughs; without stopping to protect herself from them she gained the open space and ran quickly to Kitty.

"Are you hurt? What has happened?"

Kitty looked up, startled at the voice. She had not heard the sound of the moccasined feet. Her wandering, forlorn thoughts crystallized at sight of the woman before her. A new lightning leaped into her eyes as she recognized Judith. There was between them a thrilling consciousness that gave to their mutual perception a something sharp and fine, that grasped the drama of the moment with the precision and fidelity of a camera. And through all the wonder of the meeting there was in the heart of each an outflowing that met and mingled and understood the potential tragedy element of the situation.

"You are Miss Rodney, I believe?"

[pg 244]

Kitty was conscious of something strange in her voice as she looked into the dark eyes, wide with questioning fear. Ah, but she had amazing beauty, and a something that seemed of the very essence of deep-souled womanliness! The two women presented a fine bit of antithesis, Kitty, flower-like, small, delicately wrought, the finished product of the town, exotic as some rare transplanted orchid growth. And in Judith there was a gemlike quality: it was in the bloom of

her skin, the iridescent radiance of her hair, that was bluish, like a plum in sunlight; it was in the warm, red life in her lips, in the pulsing vitality of the slim, brown throat; in every line was sensuous force restrained by spiritual passion.

Kitty told of the accident in which her horse had thrown her and disappeared in the pine fringes, leaving her stunned for a moment or two; and how she had finally pulled herself together and followed what appeared to be a trail, in the hope of finding some one. She dwelt long on the details of the accident.

"Yes, but Peter, what has happened him?" Judith chose her words impatiently. She was racked with anxiety at his long delay, and now she hung over Kitty, waiting for her answer, without the semblance of a cloak for her alarm.

There was reproof in Kitty's amendment. "I don't know which way Mr. Hamilton's horse went. It started back over the trail, I think."

Judith clasped her hands. "Let us go and look for him. Why do we waste time?" But Kitty [pg 245] hung back. She was shaken from her fall, and upset by the events of the morning. Besides, her faith in Peter's ability to cope with all the exigencies of this country was supreme. And chiefest reason of all for her not going was a something within her that winced at the thought of this fellowship that had for its object the quest of Peter.

"Oh, don't you see," pleaded Judith, "that if something had not happened to him he would have been here long ago?"

Judith's anxiety awoke in Kitty a new consciousness. What was she to him, that at the possibility of harm, a fear not shared by Kitty, she should throw off a reserve that every line of her face pronounced habitual? In her very energy of attitude, an energy that all unconsciously communicated itself to Kitty, there was the power that belongs to all elemental human emotion—the power that compels. Kitty rose to follow Judith, then hesitated.

"I'm sure nothing has happened him. No, I'm really too unstrung by my fall to walk." She sank again to the boulder on which she had been sitting.

To the woman of the world, Judith's ingenuous display of feeling had in its very sincerity a something pitiable. How could she strip from her soul every fold of reserve and stand unloved and unashamed, sanctified, as it were, by the very

hopelessness of her passion? How could women make of their whole existence a thing to be rejected, reflected Kitty, who, giving nothing, could not understand. She looked again at the bronzed face [pg 246] beside her, so bold in outline, so expressive in detail. Yes, she was beautiful, and yet, what had her beauty availed her? The thought that she herself was the preferred woman throbbed through her for a moment with a sense of exaltation. The next moment a haunting doubt laid hold of her heart, held up mockingly the little that she and Peter had lived through together, the lofty plane of friendship along which she had tried to lead his unwilling feet sedately, his protests, his frank amusement at her serious pretensions to a career. How much fuller might not have been the intercourse between him and this woman, who, in all probability, had been his comrade for years? And she had been idealizing him, and his love for her, and his loneliness! Kitty stood with eyes cast down, while images crowded upon her, leaving her cold and smiling.

"But think," pleaded Judith; "if you don't come it will take me longer to search the trail-marks. You could show me just where the horses ran—"

Kitty's eyes were still on the ground. She did not lift them, and Judith, realizing that further appeal was but a waste of time, turned and ran swiftly down the trail.

"He is her lover," said Kitty; and all the wilderness before her was no lonelier than her heart.

Swift, intent, Judith traced Kitty's footprints. They followed the game trail, the one she herself had taken earlier in the day. She traced them back through the pine wood about a hundred rods, and then the trail-marks grew confused. This was unquestionably the place where the horses had taken [pg 247] fright, circled, reared, then dashed in different directions. She traced the other horse, whose tracks led under low-hanging boughs. It would have been a difficult matter for a horse with a rider to clear; and now the impression of the horse's shoes grew fainter, from the lighter footfalls of a horse at full gallop.

"Ah!" A cry broke from her as she saw the marks had become almost eliminated by something that had dragged, something heavy. Those long-drawn lines were finger-prints, where a hand had dragged in its vain endeavor to grasp at something. A sickening image came persistently before her eyes—Peter's upturned face, blood-smearred and disfigured.

"Sh-sh-sh!" She put her hand to her breast to still the beating of her heart. She could hear the sound of hoofs falling muffled on the soft ground, and a man's voice speaking in a soothing sing-song. She listened. It was Peter's voice, reassuring the horse, asking him what kind of a bag of nerves he was for a cow pony, to get frightened at a bear? Judith stood tall and straight among the pines. Surely he could not blindly pass her by. He must feel the joy in her heart that all was well with him. The hoofs came nearer, the man's voice sounded but intermittently, as he got his horse under better control. She felt as if he must come to her, as if some overpowering consciousness of her presence would speak from her heart to his; but his eyes scanned the distant trail for a glimpse of Kitty or Kitty's horse. Judith saw that his head was bound [pg 248] in something white and that it bore a red stain, but he held himself well in the saddle. He was not the man to heed a tumble. He urged the horse forward, never looking towards the tree-trunks, his face white and strained with anxiety as he scoured the trail for evidences of Kitty. The horse, with a keener sense than his master, shied slightly as he passed the group of pines where Judith stood; but Peter's glance was for the open trail, and as she heard him canter by, so close that she could have touched his stirrup with her hand, it seemed as if he must hear the beating of her heart.

"Oh, blind eyes, and ears that will not hear, and heart that has forgotten how to beat! Yes, go to that pale, cold girl! You speak one language, and life for you is the way of little things!"

She waited till the last sound of the horse's hoofs had died away and all was still in the tremulous green of the forest. Judith's mind was busy with the image of their meeting, the man bringing the joy of his youth to the calm divinity who could feel no thrill of fear in his absence. She broke into the running gait and hurried through the forest to the Daxes'.

[pg 249]

XVI

In The Land Of The Red Silence

The beef-herd, that had been the pivotal point of the round-up and had made the mighty plain echo to its stampings and bellowings, beating up simooms that choked it with thirst, blinded it with dust, confounding itself on every side by the very fury of its blind force, had trailed for a week, tractable as toys in the hands of children. Little had happened to vary the monotony for the cow-punchers that handled the herd—they grazed, guarded, watered, night-herded the cattle day after day, night after night. Pasturage had been sufficient, if not abundant. The creeks were running low and slimy with the advance of summer, but there had been sufficient water to let the herd drink its fill at least once a day.

The outfit ate its "sow-belly," soda-biscuit, and coffee three times a day, and smoked its pipes, but was a little shy on yarns round the camp-fire.

"This yere outfit don't lather none," commented the cook to the horse-wrangler, over the smoke of an early morning fire.

"Don't lather no more than a chunk of wood," agreed the horse-wrangler. "That's the trouble [pg 250] with a picked-up outfit like this. Catch 'W-square' men kowtowing to a 'XXX' boss, even if he is only acting foreman."

Simpson, the origin of whose connection with the "XXX" was rather a sensitive subject with that outfit, had begun to take his duties as a cattle-man with grim seriousness; he was untiring in his labors; he spent long hours in the saddle, he took his turn at night herding, though he was old for this kind of work. He condemned the sheep-men with foul-mouthed denunciations, scoffed at their range-rights, said the sheep question should be dealt with in the business-like manner in which the Indian question had been settled. He was an advocate of violence—in short, a swaggering, bombastic wind-bag. He talked much of "his outfit" and "his men." "What was good enough for them was good enough for him," he would announce at meal-time, in a snivelling tone, when the food

happened to be particularly bad. He split the temporary outfit, brought together for the purpose of handling the beef-herd, into factions. He put the "XXX" in worse repute than it already enjoyed—he was, in fact, the discordant spirit of the expedition. The men attended to their work sullenly. Discord was rife. The one thought they shared in common was that of the wages that would come to them at the end of the drive; of the feverish joy of "blowing in," in a single night; perchance, of forgetting, in one long, riotous evening, the monotony, the hardship, the lack of comradery that made this particular drive one long to be remembered [pg 251] in the mind of every man who had taken part in it.

Meanwhile the herd trailed its half-mile length to the slaughtering pens day after day, all unconscious of its power. When the steers had trailed for about a fortnight, the question of finding sufficient water for them began to be a serious one. The preceding winter had been unusually mild, the snow-fall on the mountains averaging less than in the recollection of the oldest plains-man. Summer had begun early and waxed hot and dry. The earth began to wrinkle, and cracked into trenches, like gaping mouths, thirsty for the water that came not. Such streams as had not dried shrank and crawled among the willows like slimy things, that the herd, thirsty though it was from the long drives, had to be coaxed to drink from.

Discontent grew. The acting foreman, who was a "XXX" man, and a comparative stranger to that part of the country, refused to consult with the "W-square" men in the outfit, who knew every inch of the ground. The acting foreman thought the Wetmore men looked down on him, "put on dog"; and, to flaunt his authority, he ordered the herd driven due west instead of skirting to the north by the longer route, where they would have had the advantage of drinking at several creeks before crossing Green River. Moreover, the acting foreman was drinking hard, and he insisted upon his order in spite of the Wetmore men's protestations.

The character of the country began to change, the soil took on the color of blood, even the omnipresent [pg 252] sage-brush began to fail the landscape; sun-bleached bones glistened on the red soil, white as ulcers. All the animal trails led back from the country into which they were proceeding. The sky, a vivid, cloudless blue, paled as it dipped earthward. The sun looked down, a flaming copper shield. There was no sign of life in all the land. Even the grasshoppers had left it to the sun, the silence, and the desolation. To ears accustomed to the incessant shrilling of the insects, the cessation was ominous, like the sudden

stopping of a clock in a chamber of death. Above the angry bellow of the thirsty herd the men strained their ears again and again for this familiar sound of life, but there was nothing but the bellowing of the cattle, the trampling of their hoofs, and sometimes the long, squealing whinny of a horse as he threw back his head in seeming demand to know the justice of this thing.

Across the red plain snailed the herd, like a many-jointed, prehistoric reptile wandering over the limitless spaces of some primeval world. A cloud of red dust hung over them in a dense haze, trailed after them a weary length, then all was featureless monotony as before. What were a thousand steers, a handful of men and horses, in the land of the red silence? It had seen the comings and goings of many peoples, and once it had flowed with streams; but that was before the curse of God came upon it, and in its harsh, dry barrenness it grew to be a menace to living things.

The saddle-stock had been watered at some fetid alkali holes that had scarce given enough to [pg 253] slake their thirst. The effect of the water had weakened them, and the steers that had been without water for thirty-six hours were being pushed on a course slightly northwest as rapidly as the enfeebled condition of the saddle-horses would permit. Creek after creek that they had made for proved to be but a dry bed.

The glare of the red earth, under the scourge of the flaming sun, tormented the eyes of the men into strange illusions. The naked red plain stretched flat like the colossal background of a screen, over which writhed a huge dragon, spined with many horns, headless, trailing its tortuous way over the red world. Sometimes it was as unreal as a fever-haunted dream, a drug-inspired nightmare, when a Chinese screen, perchance, has stood at the foot of the sleeper's bed. Sometimes the dragon curled itself into a ball, and the foreman sung out that they were milling, and the men turned and rode away from it, then dashed back at it, after getting the necessary momentum, entered like a flying wedge, fought their way into the rocking sea of surging bodies, shouted from their thirst-parched throats imprecations that were lost in the dull, sullen roar. Then the dragon would uncoil and again trail its way over the red waste-lands.

A red sun had begun to set over a red earth, and the men who had been out since noon-scouring the country for water, returned to say that none had been found, and they began to look into each other's faces for the answer that none could give. At sunset they made a dry camp; there was but [pg 254] enough water left

to cook with. Each man received, as a thirst-quenching ration, a can of tomatoes. After supper they consulted, and it was agreed to trail the herd till midnight, taking advantage of the coolness to hurry them on as fast as possible to Green River. The grave nature of their plight was indicated by the fact that no one smoked after supper. Silent, sullen, they sat round, waiting for the foreman to give the order to advance. He waited for the moon to come up. Slowly it rose over the Bad Land Hills and hung round and full like a gigantic lantern. The watches were arranged for the night with a double guard. Every man in the outfit was beginning to have a feeling of panic that communicated itself to every other man, and as they looked at the herd, tractable now no longer, but a blind force that they must take chances with through the long watches of the night, while the thirst grew in the beasts' parched throats, they foresaw what would in all probability happen; they thought of their women, of all that most strongly bound them to life, and they sat and waited dumbly.

The moon that night was too brilliant for benisons; the gaunt, red world lay naked and unshriven for the sin that long ago had brought upon it the wrath of God. The picture was still that of the grotesque Chinese screen, with the headless dragon crawling endlessly; but the dream was long, centuries long, it seemed to the men listening to the bellowing of the herd. And while they waited, the red grew dull and the dragon dingy, and its fury made its [pg 255] contortions the more horrible; and that was all the difference between day and night in the land of the red silence. Sometimes the dragon split, and joints of it tried to turn back to the last water it had drunk; for cattle, though blinded with thirst, never forget the last stream at which they have quenched thirst, and will turn back to it, though they drop on the way. But the men pressed them farther and farther, and for yet a little while the cattle yielded.

At midnight the saddle-stock was incapable of moving farther. One horse had fallen and lay too weak to rise. The others, limping and foot-sore, no longer responded to quirt and rowel. The foreman ordered the herd thrown on the bed ground for the night. The herders for the first watch began to circle. The rest of the outfit took to its blankets to snatch a little rest for the double duty that awaited every man that night. Now it is a time-honored belief among cow-men that the herd must be sung to, particularly when it is restless, and to-night they tried all the old favorites, the "Cow-boy's Lament" being chief among them. But the herd refused to be soothed, and round and round it circled; not once would it lie down.

The moon gleamed almost brazen, showing the cruel scars, the trenches torn by cloud-bursts, the lines wrought by the long, patient waiting of the earth for the lifting of the wrath of God. Imperishable grief was writ on the land as on a human face. The night wore on, the watches changed, the herd continued restless; not more than a third of it had [pg 256] bedded down. The third watch was from one o'clock to half-past three in the morning. Simpson and another "XXX" man, with two of the Wetmore outfit, made up a double watch, and rode, singing, about the herd, as the long, dreary watch wore away. The cattle's lowing had taken on a gasping, cracked sound that was more frightful than the maddened bellow of the early evening. Simpson, who was past the age when men live the life of the saddle, felt the hardship keenly. He had ridden since sunrise, but for the respite at noon and the scant time at the dry camp while the evening meal was being eaten. He was more than half asleep now, as he lurched heavily in the saddle, crossing and recrossing his partner in the half-circle they completed about the herd. Suddenly the sharp yelp of a coyote rang out; it seemed to come from no farther than twenty yards away. The cattle heard it, too, and a wave of panic swept through them. Simpson stiffened in his saddle. The sound, which was repeated, was an exact reproduction of a coyote's yelp, yet he knew that it was not a coyote.

The herd rose to its feet as a single steer, and for a second stood undetermined. From a clump of sage-brush not more than two feet high fluttered something long and white like a sheet. It waved in the wind as the cry was repeated. The herd crashed forward in a stampede, Simpson in the lead on a tired horse, but a scant length ahead of a thousand maddened steers bolting in a panic of thirst and fear.

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"Hell's loose!" yelled the men in their blankets, making for the temporary rope corral to secure horses. Simpson, tallow-colored with fear, clung like a cat to his horse, and dug the rowels in the beast's flanks till they were bloody and dripping. He had seen Jim Rodney's face above the white cloth as it fluttered in the face of the herd that came pounding behind him with the rumble of nearing thunder. He was too close to them to attempt to fire his revolver in the air in the hope of turning them, but the boys had evidently got into their saddles, to judge by the volley of shots that rang out and were answered. Simpson alone rode ahead of the herd that tore after him, ripping up the earth as it came, bellowing in its blind fury. His horse, a thoroughly seasoned cow-pony, sniffed the bedlam and responded to the goading spur. She had been in cattle stampedes before, and,

though every fibre ached with fatigue, she flattened out her lean body and covered ground to the length of her stride at each gallop. The herd was so close that Simpson could smell the stench of their sweating bodies, taste their dust, and feel the scorch of their breath. The sound of their hoofs was like the pounding of a thousand propellers. From above looked the moon, round and serene; she had watched the passing of many peoples in the land of the red silence. The horse seemed to be gaining. A few more lengths ahead and Simpson could turn her to one side and let the maddened cattle race to their own destruction. All he asked of God was to escape their trampling hoofs, and though he gained he dug the rowel [pg 258] and plied the quirt, unmindful of what he did. On they came; the chorus of their fear swelled like the voice of a mighty cataract, the pound, pound, pound of their hoofs ringing like mighty sledge-hammers.

Suddenly he felt himself sinking, horribly, irresistibly. "God! What is it?" as his horse went down with her foreleg in a gopher-hole. "Up, up, you damned brute!" but the mare's leg had cracked like a pipe-stem. In his fury at the beast Simpson began kicking her, then started to run as the cattle swept forward like a black storm-cloud.

The next second the great sea of cattle had broken over horse and rider. When it had passed there was not enough left of either to warrant burial or to furnish a feast for the buzzards. A few shreds of clothes, that had once been a man, lay scattered there; a something that had been a horse.

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XVII

Mrs. Yellett Contends With A Cloudburst

The matriarch had delayed longer in moving camp than was consistent with her habitual watchfulness where the interests of the sheep were involved. Mary Carmichael, who had already become inured to the experience of moving, was even conscious of a certain impatience at the delay, and could only explain the apathy with which Mrs. Yellett received reports of the dearth of pasturage on the ground that she wished each fresh educational germ to take as deep root as possible before transplantation. So that when Mrs. Yellett, shortly after Leander Dax's arrival at camp in the capacity of herder, announced that she and Leander were to make a trip to the dipping-vat that had kept Ben from his classes for the past ten days, and invited the "gov'ment" to join the expedition, Mary accepted with fervor.

The Yelletts' "bunch" of sheep did not exceed three thousand head, and the matriarch had wisely decreed that it should be restricted to that number, as she wished always to give the flock her personal supervision.

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"The hen that's the surest of her chicks is the one that does her own settin'," was the adage from the Book of Hiram with which Mrs. Yellett succinctly summed up the case.

Each autumn, therefore, the wethers and the dry-bag ewes were sent to the market, and as the result of continual weeding of the stock the matriarch had as promising a herd of its size as could be found in Wyoming. Often she had explained to Mary, who was learning of the wonders of this new world with remarkable aptness, that she had constantly to fight against the inclination to increase her business of sheep-raising, but that as soon as she should begin to hire herders or depend on strangers things would go wrong. With the assistance of her sons, she therefore managed the entire details of the herd, with the exception of those occasions on which Leander lent his semi-professional co-

operation.

As a workman Leander was, considering his size and apparent weakness, surprisingly efficient. It was as a dispenser of anti-theological doctrine that Mrs. Dax's husband annoyed his temporary employer. Freed from his wife's masterful presence, Leander dared to be an "agnostic," as he called himself, of an unprecedentedly violent order. His iconoclasm was not of a pattern with paw's gusty protests against life in general, but it was Leander's way of asserting himself, on the rare occasions when he got a chance, to deny clamorously every tenet advanced by every religion. The mere use of certain familiar expletives drove him, ordinarily mild and submissive though he was, to frantic gesticulation [pg 261] and diatribe. Mary Carmichael could not make out, as she watched the comedy with growing amusement, whether poor Leander really believed that he was the first of doubting Thomases, or whether he took an unfair advantage of the lack of general information in his casual audiences to set forth well-known opinions as his own. Whatever its basis may have been, Leander sustained the rôle of doubter with passionate zeal, wearing himself to tatters of rage and hoarseness over arguments maliciously contrived beforehand by cow-punchers and sheep-herders in need of amusement; and yet he never saw the traps, going out of his way, apparently, to fall into them, tumbling headlong into the identical pits time after time. Jonah and the whale constituted one bait by means of which Leander could be lured from food, sleep, or work of the most pressing nature.

"The poor fool would stop in the middle of shearing a sheep to argue that Jonah never come out of the whale's belly," the matriarch had told Mary Carmichael, in summing up Leander's disadvantages as a herder. And the first remark she had addressed to him on his arrival was: "Leander Dax, you'd have to be made over, and made different, to keep you from bein' a infidel, but there's one p'int on which you are particularly locoed, and that's Jonah and the whale. Now at this particular time in the hist'ry of the United States, nobody in his faculties has got no call to fret hisself over Jonah and his whereabouts—none whatever. There's a lot of business round this here camp that's a heap more pressin'. [pg 262] Now, Leander Dax, if I do hereby undertake to hire, engage, and employ you to herd sheep, do you agree to renounce discussions, arguments, and debates on the late Jonah and his whereabouts durin' them three days? God A'mighty, man, any one would think you was Jonah's wife, the interest you have in his absence!"

"I come here to herd sheep," Leander had brazenly retaliated. "I 'ain't come to try

to make you think."

Nevertheless, he appeared docile enough as the time came for the journey to the dipping-vat, and did his part in making ready. The wagon was the rudest of structures; it consisted merely of one long, stout pole. Though she saw the horses being harnessed to this pole, Mary Carmichael, discreetly exercising her newly acquired wisdom, forbore to ask where she was going to sit, and listened with interest to a discussion between Mrs. Yellett and Leander as to the number of horses it would take to get the dip up the mountain. Leander, who loved pomp and splendor, was for taking six, but Mrs. Yellett, who carried simplicity to a fault, was in favor of only two. They finally compromised on four, and Leander went to fetch the extra two.

Mrs. Yellett, ever economical of the flitting moment, took advantage of the delay to give Mr. Yellett a dose of "Brainard's Beneficial Blackthorn."

"Paw's as hard to manage as a bent pin," she remarked, in an aside to Mary, while he protested and fought her off with his stick. But she, with the agility of an acrobat, got directly back of him, took [pg 263] his head under her arm, pried open his mouth, and poured down the unwelcome, if beneficial, dose.

"There, there, paw," she said, wiping his mouth as if he had been a baby, "don't take on so! It's all gone, and I can't have you sick on my hands."

But Mr. Yellett continued to splutter and flare and use violent language, whereupon the matriarch went into the tent and returned with a drink of condensed-milk and water, "to wash down the nasty taste," she told him, soothingly.

A moment afterwards she and Leander were engaged in rolling the barrels of sheep-dip to the wagon, Mary Carmichael helplessly looking on while Mrs. Yellett looked doubtfully at a "gov'ment" who could not handle barrels. Finally, under the skilful manipulation of Mrs. Yellett and Leander, the long pole took on the aspect of a colossal vertebral column, from which huge barrel-ribs projected horizontally, leaving at the rear a foot or so of bare pole as a smart caudal appendage, bearing about the same proportion to the wagon as the neatly bitten tail of a fox-terrier does to the dog.

Mrs. Yellett kissed "paw" good-bye, explaining to Mary, in extenuation of her weakness, that she would never forgive herself if she neglected it and anything

happened to him during her absence. She then climbed to the front barrel and secured the ribbons. Leander had brought out three rolls of bedding of the inevitable bed-quilt variety, but Mrs. Yellett scorned such luxury while driving, and accordingly gave hers to the "gov'ment" for a back-rest. Mary sat on the lower row of barrels, [pg 264] with her feet dangling, using one roll of bedding for a seat and the other comfortably arranged at her back as a cushion.

Madam called sharply to the horses, "Hi-hi-hi-kerat! hi-kerat-kerat!" and they started off at a rattling pace, the barrels of dip creaking and squeaking as they swayed under their rope lashings. Mary bounced about like a bean in a bag, working loose from between the bed-quilt rolls at each gully, clinging frantically to barrel ends, shaken back and forth like a shuttle. Indeed, the drive seemed to combine every known form of physical exercise. Mrs. Yellett herself was in fine fettle; she drove sitting for a while, then rose, standing on a narrow ledge while she held the four ribbons lightly in one hand and tickled the leaders with a long whip carried in the other. She drove her four horses over the rough road with the skill of a circus equestrienne, balancing easily on the crazy ledge, shifting her weight from side to side as the wagon rattled down gullies and up ridges, the horses responding gallantly to the shrill "Hi-hi-kerat! hi-kerat! hi-kerat!" Her costume on this occasion represented joint concessions to her sex and the work that was before her, as the head of a family at the dipping-vat. She still wore the drum-shaped rabbit-skin cap pulled well down over her forehead for driving. The great, cable-like braids of hair stood out well below the cap, giving her head an appearance of denseness and solidity, but the rambling curls were still blowing about her face, perhaps adding to the sum total of grotesqueness. She wore a man's shirt of gray [pg 265] flannel, well open at the neck, from which the bronzed column of the throat rose in austere dignity. A pair of Mr. Yellett's trousers, stuffed into high, cow-puncher's boots, that met the hem of a skirt coming barely to the knees, contributed to the originality of her dress.

The wagon had been pitching like a ship at sea through the desert dreariness for about an hour, when Mary Carmichael suddenly became conscious that the prods she had been receiving from time to time in her back were not due either to their manner of locomotion or to the freight carried. Clinging to two barrels, she waited for the next lurch of the wagon to shake her free from the rolls of bedding, and, at the peril of life and limb, looked round. Leander hung over the top row of barrels, gesticulating wildly. The change in the man, since leaving camp some two hours previous, was appalling. He seemed to have shrivelled away to a wraith of his former self. His cheeks, his chin, had waned to the

vanishing point. He opened his lips and mouthed horribly, yet his frightful grimacings conveyed no meaning. Mary called to Mrs. Yellett, but her voice was drowned in the rattle of the wagon, the clatter of four horses' hoofs, and the continual "Hi-hi-hi-kerat! hi-kerat!" of the driver. In the mean time Leander pointed to his mouth and back to the road in indescribably pathetic pantomime. "Perhaps the poor creature wants to turn back and die in his bed, like a Christian, even if he isn't one," thought Mary, as she called and called, Leander still emitting the most inhuman of cries, like the sounds [pg 266] made by deaf mutes in distress. Presently Mrs. Yellett drew up, and asked in the name of many profane things what was the matter with her companions.

Leander resumed his mouthings and his dumb show, but Mrs. Yellett proved a better interpreter than Mary Carmichael.

"God A'mighty!" she said, "he's lost his false teeth!" And without another word she turned the four horses and the wagon with a skill that fell little short of sleight-of-hand.

The dialogue that followed between Mrs. Yellett and Leander as to how far back he had dropped his teeth, cannot be given, owing to the inadequacy of the English language to reproduce his toothless enunciation. Catching, as Mary did, the meaning of Mrs. Yellett's remarks only, she received something of the one-sided impression given by overhearing a telephone conversation:

"What did you have 'em out for?... You didn't have 'em out?... I just shook 'em out? Then what made you have your mouth open? Ef your mouth had been shut, you couldn't have lost 'em.... You was a-yawnin', eh? Well, you are a plumb fool to yawn on this kind of a waggin, with your mouth full o' china teeth. Your yawnin' 'll put us back a good hour an' we won't reach camp before sundown."

At this point of the diatribe the Infidel left the wagon and began to search along the road. He said he had noticed a buffalo skull near the place where he had dropped the teeth, and thought he could [pg 267] trace them by this landmark. Mrs. Yellett held the ribbons and suggested that Mary get down "and help to prospect for them teeth." As Mary clambered down she heard a fragment of the matriarch's monologue, which, being duly expurgated for polite ears, was to the effect that she would rather take ten babies anywhere than one grown man, and that as for getting in the way, hindering, obstructing, and being a nuisance, generally speaking, man had not his counterpart in the scheme of creation.

"Talk about a woman bein' at the bottom of everything!" sniffed Mrs. Yellett; "I be so sick of always hearin' about 'the woman in the case!' Half the time the case would be a blame sight worse if it was left exclusive to the men. The Book of Hiram says: 'A skunk may have his good p'int, but few folks is takin' the risk of waitin' round to get acquainted with 'em.'"

While Mary was still "prospecting," a glad cry roused her attention, and Leander came up smiling, with his dental treasures nicely adjusted.

"Quit smilin' like a rattlesnake, you plumb fool!" called out Mrs. Yellett. "Do you want to lose 'em again?"

So, curtailing the muscular contraction indicative of his pleasure, the Infidel again took his place among the bed-quilts and the journey was resumed.

It was now about five in the afternoon. The heat, which had been oppressive all day, suddenly relaxed its blistering grip, and a keenly penetrating dampness, not unlike that of a sea-fog, came from [pg 268] some unknown quarter of the arid wastes and chilled the three travellers to the marrow. The horses flung up their heads and sniffed it, rearing and plunging as if they had scent of something menacing. Across the horizon a dark cloud scudded, no bigger than your hand.

"Cloud-burst!" announced Mrs. Yellett.

"Cloud-burst, all right enough," agreed Leander, and he turned up his coat-collar in simple preparation for the deluge.

There flashed into Mary Carmichael's mind a sentence from her physical geography that she had been obliged to commit to heart in her school-days: "A cloud-burst is a sudden, capricious rainfall, as if the whole cloud had been precipitated at once." She wanted to question her companions as to the accuracy of this definition, but before she had time to frame a sentence the real cloud-burst came, with a splitting crack of thunder; then the lightning flashed out its message in the short-hand of the storm, across the inky blackness, and the water fell as if the ocean had been inverted. In the fraction of a second all three were drenched to the skin, the water pouring from them in sheets, as if they had been some slight obstruction in the path of a waterfall. The wagon was soon in a deep gully, with frothing, foaming, yellow water up to the hubs of the wheels. Mrs. Yellett, like some goddess of the storm, lashed her horses forward to keep them from foundering in the mud, and the wagon creaked and groaned in all its

timbers as it lurched and jolted through the angry torrents.

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Each moment Mary expected to be flung from the barrels, and clung till her finger-tips were white and aching. From the drenched red bedquilts a sticky crimson trail ran over the barrel heads, as well as over Mary's hands, face, and dress. Still they forged on through the deluge, Mrs. Yellett shouting and lashing the horses, holding them erect and safe with the skill she never lost. The fur on her rabbit-skin cap was beaten flat. The great, wet braids had fallen from the force of the water and hung straight and black, like huge snakes uncoiled. She was far from losing her grip on either the horses or the situation, and from the inspiring ring of her voice as she urged them forward it was plain that she took a fierce joy in this conflict of the elements.

It was bitterly cold, and Mary reflected that if Leander's teeth chattered half as hard as hers did, without breaking, they must, indeed, be of excellent quality. The storm began to abate, and the sky became lighter, though the water still poured in torrents. As soon as her responsibility as driver left her time to speak, Mrs. Yellett lost no time in fastening the cloud-burst to Leander.

"This here is what comes of settin' up your back against God A'mighty and encouragin' the heathen and the infidel in his idolatry. I might 'a' knowed somethin' would happen, takin' you along! 'And the heathen and the infidel went out, and the Lord God sent a cloud-burst to wet him,'" quoted Mrs. Yellett from the apocryphal Scriptures that never yet failed to furnish her with verse and text.

The infidel, from his side of the wagon, began to [pg 270] display agitation. His jaws worked, but he said nothing.

"You 'ain't lost them teeth again, have you?"

He nodded his head wretchedly.

"'And the Lord took away the teeth of his enemy, so that he could neither bite nor talk,'" quoted Mrs. Yellett to the miserable man, who could make no reply.

"Wonder you wouldn't see the foolishness o' being a heathen and a infidel, and turn to the Lord! You 'ain't got no teeth, and it takes your wife to herd you. 'And the Lord multiplied the tribulations of his enemy.' You got no more show standin' up agin the Lord than an insect would have standin' up agin me."

She had Leander, at last, just where she wanted him. He was forced to listen, and he could make no reply. She alternately abused him for his lack of faith and urged him to repentance. Leander raged, gesticulated, turned his back on her, mouthed, and finally put his fingers in his ears. But nothing stemmed the tide of Mrs. Yellett's eloquence; it was as inexhaustible and as remorseless as the cloudburst.

It continued bitterly cold, even after the rain had stopped falling, and the heap of sodden bedclothes furnished no protection against the chilling dampness. It was growing dark; there was no red in the sunset, only a streak of vivid orange along the horizon, chill and clear as the empty, soulless flame of burning paper. There were no deep, glowing coals, no amethystine opalescence, fading into gold [pg 271] and violet. All was cold and subdued, and the scrub pines on the mountaintops stood out sharply against this cold background like an etching on yellow paper.

Mrs. Yellett's self-inspired scriptural maxims were discontinued after a while, either because she could think of no more, or because the rain-soaked, shivering, chattering object towards which they were directed was too abject to inspire further efforts. Leander huddled on the barrel that was farthest from Mrs. Yellett, and wrapped himself in the soaked red bedquilt. The dye smeared his face till he looked like an Indian brave ready for battle, but there was no further suggestion of the fighting red man in the utter desolation of his attitude. Mary Carmichael, on her barrel, shivered with grim patience and longed for a cup of tea. Only Mrs. Yellett gave no sign of anxiety or discomfort; she drove along, sometimes whistling, sometimes swearing, erect as an Indian, and to all appearances as oblivious of cold and wet as if she were in her own home.

The gathering darkness into which the horses were plunging was mysterious and appalling. Objects stood out enormously magnified, or distorted grotesquely, in the uncertain light. It was like penetrating into the real Inferno, like stumbling across the inspiration of Dante in all its sinister splendor. It was the Inferno of his dream rather than the Inferno of his poem; it had the ghastly reality of the unreal.

"It wouldn't surprise me if we had a smash-up in [pg 272] Clear Creek," said Mrs. Yellett, just by way of adding her quota of cheerful speculation. She ducked her head and whispered in Mary's ear:

"It's all along of me hirin' *him*! I wouldn't be surprised if paw died. I'm thinkin' of shakin' him out after his teeth. 'Take not up with the enemy of the Lord, lest he make of you also an enemy.'"

But there was no accent of apprehension in Mrs. Yellett's dismal prognostications of the evil that might befall her for employing Leander. She spoke more with the air of one who produces incidents to prove an argument than of one who anticipates a calamity.

Leander, toothless and wretched, sitting on the side of the wagon, began to show symptoms of joy comparable to that of the vanguard of the Israelites, catching their first glimpse of the Promised Land. Touching Mary Carmichael on the shoulder, he pointed to a white tent and the remains of a camp-fire. Already Mrs. Yellett had begun to "Hallo, Ben!" But Ben was at work at the vat, which was still a quarter of a mile further up the mountain; so Mrs. Yellett, throwing the reins to Leander and bidding him turn out the horses, lost no time in building a fire, putting on coffee, and making her little party comfortable. So various was her efficiency that she seemed no less at home in these simple domestic tasks than when guiding her horses, goddess-like, through the cloud-burst. And Mary Carmichael, succumbing gradually to the revivifying influence of the fire and the hot coffee, acknowledged honestly to herself a warmth of affection for her [pg 273] hostess and for the atmosphere Mrs. Yellett created about her that made even Virginia and her aunts seem less the only pivot of rational existence. She felt that she had come West with but one eye, as it were, and countless prejudices, whereas her powers of vision were fast becoming increased a hundredfold. How very tame life must be, she reflected, as she sat smiling to herself, to those who did not know Mrs. Yellett, how over-serious to those who did not know Leander! Yet, after all, she knew that the real basis of her readjusted vision was her brief but illuminating acquaintance with Judith Rodney. To Mary, freed for the first time in her life from the most elegantly provincial of surroundings, Judith seemed the incarnation of all the splendor and heroism of the West. And in the glow of her enthusiasm she decided then and there not to abandon the Yellett educational problem till she should have solved it successfully. She might not be born to valiant achievement, like these sturdy folk about her, but she might as well prove to them that an Eastern tenderfoot was not all feebleness and inefficiency.

"Leander!" called Mrs. Yellett. "Just act as if you was to home and wash up these dishes."

[pg 274]



XVIII

Foreshadowed

Alida awoke, knowing what was to happen. She had dreamed of it, just before daylight, and lay in bed stupefied by the horror of it, living, again and again, through each frightful detail. It had happened—there, in the very room, and before the children; the noise of it had startled them; and then she woke and knew she had been dreaming. In the dream the noise had wakened the children—when it really happened they must never know. It wouldn't be fair to them; they needed a "clean start."

What had she done to keep them quiet? There had been a thunderous knocking at the door. She had expected it and was prepared; because the lock was feeble, she had shoved the old brown bureau against the door.

Nothing had happened. What a fool she was to lie there and think of it! There was the brown bureau against the wall; she could hear the deep breathing of Jim in the room beyond. Jim had been unequal to the task of conventionally going to bed the night before, and she had put a pillow under his head and a quilt over him. She was the [pg 275] last woman in the world to worry about Jim, drunk, or to nag him for it when sober. But she didn't like the children to see him that way.

What was it that she had done to quiet the children when "they" rode up? She had done something and they had gone to sleep again, and she—and she—oh no, it hadn't happened. What a fool she was to lie there thinking! There were the children to rouse and dress, and breakfast to cook, and Jim—Jim would be feeling pretty mean this morning; he'd like a good cup of coffee. She was glad he was alive to make coffee for.

She got up and, in the uncertainty bred of the dream, felt the brown bureau, felt it hungrily, almost incredulously. The brown bureau had been pushed against the door when they had come, and knocked and knocked. Then they had thundered with the butts of their six-shooters, and the children had wakened, and she had

called out to them:

"Sh-sh! It's only a bad dream. Mammy will give you some dough to bake tomorrow."

And she had gone to press her face flat to the thin wall, and call, "For God's sake, don't wake the children!"

And they had called out, "Let him come out quiet, then."

And then she could feel that they put their shoulders to the door—the weather-beaten door—with its crazy lock that didn't half catch. The brown bureau had spun across the floor like a top, and they had crowded in. Then she had done something to quiet the children—it was queer that [pg 276] she could not remember what it was, when everything else in the dream still lived within her, horribly distinct and real.

What a fool she was, with Jim asleep in the next room; she would not think about it another minute. She began to dress, but her fingers were heavy, and the vague oppression of nightmare blocked her efficiency. Repeatedly she would detect herself subconsciously brooding over some one of the links in that pitiless memory—what they had said to Jim; his undaunted replies; how she had left him and gone into the next room because Jim had told her to.

She called the children, but the sight of them, happy and flushed with sleep, did not reassure her.

"Mammy," said Topeka, eldest of the family, and lately on the invalid list, the victim of a cactus thorn, "my toe's all well; can I go barefoot?"

"Topeka Rodney, what kind of feet do you expect to have when you are a young lady, if you run barefoot now?"

Topeka, sitting on the side of the bed, with tousled hair, put her small feet together and contemplated them. The toe was still suspiciously inflamed for perfect convalescence, although Topeka, with a Spartan courage that won her a place in the annals of household valor, had the day before allowed her mother to pick out with a needle the torturing cactus thorn, scorning to shed a tear during the operation, though afterwards she had taken the piece of dried apple that was offered her and devoured it to the last bite, as only just compensation for her

sufferings.

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"Dimmy dot a tore toe, too." But Jimmy showed a strange reticence about offering proofs of his affliction. At the peril of his equilibrium, he clasped the allegedly injured member in his chubby hand and rolled over on the bed in apparent anguish.

"Less see, Jimmy," asked his mother, anxiously.

"Don't bleeve him, mammy. He 'ain't ever cried. He'd a cried, for sure, if his toe was sore." At the age of five, little Judith, namesake of her aunt, was something of a doubting Thomas.

"Let mammy see, Jimmy," and Alida bent over her son and heir.

"Doth Dimmy det any apple?" The wee man sometimes succeeded in making terms with his mother, when the other children were not present. Though feeling himself a trifle over-confident, he held the disputed toe with the air of one keeping back a trump card, and looked his mother squarely in the eyes.

She struggled with the temptation to give him the apple. He had lifted the horrors of her dream as nothing else could have done, but she answered him with quiet firmness.

"Jimmy must not tell stories."

"Less see," insisted Topeka.

"He dassent," affirmed Judith, junior, of little faith.

"It hurths me," and Jimmy tried to squeeze out a tear. "It hurths me, my tore toe!"

His mother tipped him over on his fat little back and opened the chubby hand that held the trump [pg 278] toe. It was white from the pressure applied by the infant dissembler, but there was no trace of the treacherous cactus thorn. She gave him an affectionate spank and went into the kitchen to make coffee.

"I with I had a tore toe," he crooned, quite unabashed at the discovery of his

deception. "I with I toud det a tore toe 'thout the hurt."

But the horror of the dream gripped her when she found herself alone in the kitchen; and she remembered she had not told the children not to go into the room where their father was sleeping. She went back and found that Jimmy had not left his post on the side of the bed, where he still regretted that his perfectly well toe did not entitle him to gastronomic consideration. Topeka, who had arrived at an age where little girls, in the first subconscious attempt at adornment, know no keener delight than plastering their heads with a wet hairbrush, till they present an appearance of slippery rotundity equalled only by a peeled onion, put down the brush with guilty haste at sight of her mother.

"I'm goin' to dress him soon as I've done my hair."

"Any one think you was goin' to be married, the time you've took to it."

"It's gettin' so long," urged Topeka.

"I wouldn't give it a chance to grow no longer while Jimmy was waitin' to get dressed. And don't go into the front room. Your father's gettin' his sleep out."

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Topeka opened her round eyes. There was always something suspicious about that sleep her father had to get out, but she felt it was something she must not ask questions about. Her mother lingered; she dreaded to be alone in the kitchen. The little, familiar intimacies between herself and her children scattered the horrors of the dream which would come back to her when she was again at the mercy of her thoughts.

"Judy, s'pose you dress Jimmy this morning! I want Topeka to help me get breakfast."

"Yessum," said Judith, dutifully. "Is he to have his face washed?"

"He certainly is, Judy. I's ashamed to have you ask such a question. 'Ain't you all been brought up to have your faces washed?"

But young Judith seemed disinclined to take up this phase of family superiority. She merely inquired further:

"Is he to have it washed with soap, maw?"

"He shore is. Any one would think you had been born and raised in Arizony or Nebrasky, to hear you talk. I'm plumb ashamed of you, Judy."

"But, 'deed, maw, I ain't big enough to wash his face with soap. It takes Topeka to hold his head."

The subject of the discussion still sat on the edge of the bed, a small lord of creation, letting his women folk arrange among themselves who should minister to his wants. As an instrument of torture the washcloth, in the hands of his sister Judy, was no ignoble rival of the cactus thorn. The question of making [pg 280] terms for his sufferings again appealed to him in the light of a feasible business proposition.

"Muvvy, tan't I have the apple? Judy hurts me a lot when she wathes my face wis soap."

"Yes, you can have the apple, honey; and, Judy, you be gentle with him. Don't rub his features up, and be careful and don't get soap in his eyes."

"No'm." And Judy heroically stifled the longing to slick her hair, like Topeka's, with the wet hairbrush. There were easier tasks than washing the face of her younger brother.

When Topeka and her mother were alone in the kitchen, Topeka grinding the coffee and all unconsciously working her jaw in an accompaniment to the coffee-mill, her mother bent over her and said:

"Did you dream of anything last night?"

Topeka simultaneously stopped working the coffee-mill and her jaw, and regarded her mother solemnly. She did not remember having been thus questioned about her dreams before.

"No'm," she answered, after laborious consideration. But something in her mother's face held her.

"You're sure you didn't dream nothing?"

"Yes, maw."

"Did Judy or Jim say that they dreamed anything?"

"Jim said he dreamed he had a pup."

"Was that all? Think hard, Topeka!"

Topeka held the handle of the coffee-mill in her hand; her jaw continued to work with the labor of her mental process. "I've thought hard, maw, and all he told was about the pup."

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Alida went back to her bedroom and again felt the brown bureau. "What's the matter with me, anyhow? It's the lonesomeness, and they bein' agin Jim the way they are. God, this country's hard on women and horses!"

When breakfast was over, and young Jim had received the reward of his valor in presenting a brave face to his ablution, and Judith the reward of her skill, the evidence of which almost prevented the young martyr from smiling while he enjoyed his treat, their mother sent them all to play in the cañon. She told them not to come home till she should come for them, and if any one should ask about their father, to say that he was away from home. And this, as well as the mystery of her father's "getting his sleep out," roused some slight apprehension in Topeka, who was old for her age. They were seldom sent to the cañon to play. Topeka looked at her mother as she had when questioned about the dream, but there was no further confidence between them.

"You do as your sister Topeka tells you, and remember what I said about your papa," Alida said to the younger children. Jim and Judy clasped each other's hands in mute compact at the edict. Their sister Topeka had a real genius for authority; they were minded all too well when she swayed the maternal sceptre vicariously.

Alida made fresh coffee for Jim when the children had gone. She made it carefully; there was this morning, unconsciously, about each little thing that [pg 282] she did for him, the solemnity of a funeral rite. Struggle as she would, she could not divest her mind of the conviction that what she did this day she did for the dead. She would go to the door and listen to his breathing, and tell herself that she was a fool, then wring her hands at the remembrance of the dream.

As he tossed, half waking, she heard him groan and curse the cattle-men with oaths that made her glad she had sent the children from home. Then she bent over him and woke him from his uneasy slumber.

"Jim, don't you want me to bathe your head? And here's some nice, hot coffee all ready for you."

Jim woke slowly to a realization of his troubles and his blessings. His wife was bathing his head with hands that trembled. Not always had she greeted his indiscretions with such loving forbearance. He noticed, though his waking faculties were not over-keen, that her face was pale and frightened, and that her eyes, meeting his, held a dumb, measureless affection.

"What th' hell are you babying me for?" But his roughness did not deceive her woman's wits. He was not getting the lecture he anticipated, and this was his way of showing that he was not embarrassed by her kindness. The morning sunlight was pitilessly frank in its exposure of the grim pinch of poverty in the mean little room, but the woman was unconscious of these things; what she saw was that Jim, the reckless, Jim, the dare-devil terror of the country, Jim, who had married and settled with [pg 283] her into home-keeping respectability, Jim, who had struggled with misfortune and fallen, had, young as he was, lost every look of youth; that hope had gone from his dull eyes, and that his face had become drawn until the death's-head grinned beneath the scant padding of flesh. But he was to-day, as always, the one man in the world for her. In making a world of their own and reducing their parents to supplementary consideration, their children, whom she had sent away that she might be alone with him, had given a different quality to the love of this pair that had known so many curious vicissitudes. The responsibilities of parenthood had placed them on a tenderer, as well as a securer footing; and as she saw his age and weariness, he recognized hers, and both felt a self-accusing twinge.

"That's a blamed good cup of coffee," he said, by way of relieving the tension that had crept into the situation. "Any one would think you was settin' your cap for me 'stead of us being married for years."

Alida sighed. "It's better to end than to begin like this," she said, in the far-away voice of one who thinks aloud. The word "end" had slipped out before she realized what she was saying, and the knowledge haunted her as an omen. She glanced at him quickly, to see if he had noticed it.

"Why did you say end?" He saw that her eyes were full of tears and chafed her. "You ain't thinking of divorcing me, like Mountain Pink done Bosky?"

[pg 284]

"Oh, Jim," she said, and her face was all aquiver, "I never could divorce you, no matter what you done." And then the grim philosophy of the plains-woman asserted itself. "I never can understand why women feed their pride on their heart's blood; it never was my way."

He did not like to remember that he had given her cause for a way. "There's a lot of women as wouldn't exactly regard me as a Merino, or a Southdown, either;" he gulped the coffee to ease the tightness in his throat.

"They'd be women of no judgment, then," she said, with conviction.

Jim's head was tilted back, resting in the palm of his hand. His profile, sharpened by anxiety, more than suggested his quarter-strain of Sioux blood. He might almost have been old Chief Flying Hawk himself, as he looked steadily at the woman who had been a young girl and reckless, when he had been a boy and reckless; who had paid her woman's penalty and come into her woman's kingdom; who had made a man of him by the mystery of her motherhood, and who had uncomplainingly gone with him into the wilderness and become an alien and an outcast.

These things unmanned him as the sight of the gallows and the rope for his hanging could not have done. Shielding himself with an affected roughness, he asked:

"What the hell's the matter with you? I've been drinking like a beast of an Indian, and you give me coffee instead of a tongue-lashing."

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The color had all gone out of her face. She gasped the words:

"Jim, I dreamed it last night—they came for you!"

She cowered at the recollection.

"Did they get me?" he asked. There was no surprise in his tone. He spoke as one who knew the answer.

"Yes, the children saw. The noise woke them."

"You mustn't let 'em see, when—they come. They've a right to a fair start; we didn't get it, old girl."

"The children gave it to us," and she faced him.

"Yes, yes, but we want them to have it from the start, like good folks."

They looked into each other's eyes. The memory of dead and gone madness twinkled there a moment, then each remembered:

"You must hurry, Jim. You haven't a moment to lose. I dreamed it was to be to-night—they'll come to-night!"

"The game's all up, old girl! If I had a month I couldn't get away. Morrison's been looking for me over to the Owl Creek Range; he's back—Stevens told me yesterday. He'll be heading here soon. The price on my head is a strain on friendship."

"Have the sheep-men gone back on you?"

"Yes, damn them! A thousand dollars is big money, and they've had hard luck!"

"They deserve it; I hope every herd in the State dies of scab."

"There wasn't a scabby sheep in our bunch. [pg 286] What a sight they were, loaded with tallow! There wasn't one of them that couldn't have weathered a blizzard; they could have lived on their own tallow for a month."

She tried to divert his attention from his lost flock. When he began to talk about them the despair of his loss drove him to drink. She was ground between the millstones of his going or staying. If he stayed they would come for him; if he went, they would apprehend him before he was ten miles from the house.

"Jim, we got to think. If there's a chance in a thousand that you can get away, you got to take it; if there ain't, the children mustn't know. We got to think it out!"

"There ain't a chance in a thousand, old girl. There ain't one in a million. They're

circling round in the hills out here now, waitin' for me, like buzzards waitin' for the eyes of a dyin' horse."

She rocked herself, and the clutching fingers left white marks on her face, but the eyes that met his glittered tearless:

"Then there ain't nothing left but to face it like a man?"

"That's all there be." He might have been giving an opinion on a matter in which he had no interest.

"Then there ain't no use in our having any more talk about it?"

"'Tain't just what you'd call an agreeable subject," he answered, with the sinister humor of the frontiersman who has learned to make a crony of death.

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She was tempted to kiss him—they were not given to demonstrations, this pair—then decided it were kinder to him, less suggestive of what they anticipated, not to deviate from their undemonstrative marital routine.

"Do you want your breakfast now?"

"I guess you might bring it along."

And for the same reason that she refrained from kissing him, she repressed a desire to wring the neck of a young broiler and cook it for his breakfast, remembering that she had heard they gave folks pretty much what they wanted when they wouldn't want it long. So Jim got his usual breakfast of bacon, uncooked canned tomatoes, soda-biscuit, and coffee. She sat with him while he ate, but they spoke no more of "them" or of how soon "they" might be expected. She told him that young Jim had pretended that morning that he had a cactus thorn in his foot, so that he might have a piece of dried apple. And old Jim, in an excess of parental fondness and pride, said: "The damned little liar, he'll get to Congress yet!"

But the children were a dangerous topic for overstrained nerves at this particular time, so Alida told Jim that she had put the black hen to set and she thought they'd have some chickens at last. Jim smoked while Alida washed the dishes, and when Jim's back was turned she examined the lock on the door—a good

push would open it. Then she looked at the brown bureau, and the recklessness of despair came into her eyes. In the room beyond, Jim was reading a two weeks' old newspaper and smoking. [pg 288] He looked like a lazy ranchman taking his ease.

As she went about her household tasks that morning, Alida noticed things as she had never noticed them before. A sunbeam came through the shutterless window of the house and writhed and quivered on the wall as if it were a live thing. She read a warning in this, and in the color of the sun, that was red, like blood, and in the whirr of the grasshoppers, that was sinister and threatening. The creeks had dried, and their slimy beds crept along the willows like sluggish snakes. Gaunt range-cattle bellowed in their thirst, and the parched earth crackled beneath the sun that hung above the house like a flaming disk. Sometimes she sank beneath the burden of it; then she would wring her hands and call on God to help them; they were beyond human power. She and Jim were alone all the morning; they did not again refer to what they knew would happen. He read his old paper and she put her house in order. She did it with especial care. It was meet to have things seemly in the house of the dead. And every time she glanced at Jim she repressed the desire to fling herself on his breast and cry out the anguish that consumed her.

At noon she brought the children home to dinner, and afterwards Jim taught them to throw the lasso and played buffalo with them. Alida did not trust herself to watch them; she stayed in the kitchen and saw the sunbeam grow pale with the waning of the day, the day whose minutes dragged like lead, yet had rushed from her, leaving her the night [pg 289] to face. At sundown she cooked supper, but she no longer knew what she did. A crazy agility had taken possession of her and she spun about the kitchen, doing the same errand many times, finding herself doing always something different from that she had set about doing. The molten day was burning itself out like a fever; hot gusts of air beat up from the earth, but the woman who waited felt chilled to the marrow, and took a cloak down from a peg and wrapped it about her while she waited for the biscuit to bake. At supper they sat down together, the man and his wife and their three children. The children were in fine spirits from the fun they had had that afternoon. Never had daddy been so nice to them. He had taught Topeka to throw the lasso so well that she had caught the cat once and little Jim twice; and daddy had played he was a buffalo and had charged them all with his head down, till they screamed in terror. But daddy seemed more quiet through the meal, and once mother started up and cried:

"What's that?"

She ran to the door with her hand pressed to her side, but daddy called after her:

"Don't you know the cowards better than that? They'll wait for nightfall."

But these things had not worried the children, with their heads full of playing buffalo and throwing the lariat.

"Jim," said his father, before they went to bed, "remember you are the man of the family." But young Jim was already nodding with sleep. Topeka [pg 290] and Judith were sleepy, too; they kissed their father and were glad to go to bed.

The night began menacingly to close over the wilderness. Where the sun had hung above the mountain a moment before there glowed a great pool of red that dripped across the blackness in faint tricklings. The outlines of the foot-hills loomed huge, formless, uncouth. In the half-light it seemed a world struggling in the birth-throes. All day the dry, burning heat had quivered over the desert, like hot-air waves flickering over a bed of live coals, and now the very earth seemed to palpitate with the intensity of its fever. The bellowing of the thirst-maddened cattle had not stopped with the twilight that brought no dew to slake their parched throats. In the hills the coyotes wailed like lost souls. It was night bereft of benisons, day made frightful by darkness. All the heat of a cycle of desert summers seemed concentrated in that house in the valley where the man and his wife waited. Each sound of the desert night Alida translated into the trampling of horses' feet; then, as the sound would die away, or prove to be but some night noise of the wilderness, the pallor would lose its pinch on her features, and she would stare into her husband's face with eyes that did not see. Jim smoked his pipe and refilled it, smoked and filled again, but gave no sign of the object of his waiting.

"Jim," she said, when the clock had struck ten, then eleven, "I am going to fasten up the house."

"Do you hear them?" he asked, without emotion, but as one who deferred to the finer senses of women.

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She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

He looked at the door that was shrunken and warped from the heat till it barely held together, and there was no measure to the tenderness he put into:

"Oh, you poor little fool, do you think you could keep them out by fastening that?"

"Jim, I must," and her voice broke. "They may think you are not here, that it's only me and the children, and that's why the house is fastened." She got up and began to move about as though her thoughts scourged her to action, even if futile. He shook the ashes from his pipe.

"Do anything you blame please," he said, more by way of humoring her than from faith in her stratagem. He felt strong enough to face his destiny, to meet it in a way worthy of his mother's people.

Alida seemed under a spell in her preparations for the night. Each thing she did as she had done it in her dream the night before; it was as if she were constrained by a power greater than her will to fulfil a sinister prophecy. Yet now and then she would stop and wonder if she might not break the spell by doing things differently from the way she had dreamed them. Her hand grasped the knob of the door uncertainly, and she swung it to and fro on its creaking hinges, while her mind seemed likewise to sway hither and thither. Should she fasten the door and push the bureau against it, as it had been in the dream, or should she leave door and windows gaping wide for them? And then, as one who walks and does familiar things in sleep, [pg 292] she shut the door and turned the key. Jim smiled at her, but she could no longer look at him. One of the children wailed fretfully from the room beyond. Sleep had become a scourge in the stifling heat. One by one she lowered the windows and nailed them down; then she dragged the brown bureau against the door, took the brace of six-shooters from the wall, and sat down with Jim to wait.

"What are you going to do with them toys?" he asked, as he saw her examine the chambers of one of the six-shooters.

"You ain't going to let yourself be caught like a rat in a hole, are you?" she reproached him.

"Ain't we agreed that it's best to keep onpleasant family matters from the kids?" He smiled at her bravely. "The remembrance of what we're anticipatin' ain't going to help young Jim to get to Congress when his time comes, nor it ain't

going to help the girls get good husbands, either. This here country ain't what it was in the way of liberality since it's got to be a State."

"Sh-sh-sh!" she said. "Is that the range-cattle stampedin' after water, or is it—" They listened. The furniture in the room crackled; there was not a fibre of it to which the resistless heat had not penetrated. On the range the cattle bellowed in their thirst-torture; in the intervals of their cries sounded something far off, but regular as the thumping of a ship's screw. The woman did not need an answer to her question. The steady trampling of hoofs came muffled through the dead air, but the sound was unmistakable. She put her arms about [pg 293] the man's neck and crushed him to her with all her woman strength. "Oh, Jim, you've been a good man to me!"

"Steady—steady." He strained her close to him. "They'd be, by the sound of them, on the straight bit of road now, before the turn. Soon we'll hear their hoofs ring hollow as they cross the plank bridge."

His plainsman's faculty was as keen as ever; his calculation of the horsemen's distance was made as though he were the least concerned. All Alida's courage had gone, with the dread thing at hand. She clung to him, dazed.

"They're sober, all right enough."

"How do you know?"

"They'd be cursing and bellowing if they were drunk."

The hoofs rang hollow on the little plank bridge that crossed the ditch about a stone's-throw from the door. Not a word was said either within or without. The lynchers seemed to have drilled for their part; there was no whispering, no deferring to a leader. On they came, so close that Jim and Alida could hear the creaking of their saddles. There was the clank of spurs and the straining of leather as they dismounted, then some one knocked at the door till the warped boards rattled.

Jim could feel the thudding of Alida's heart as she clung to him, but when the knock was repeated a new courage came to her, and she left Jim and went on her knees close to the outer wall.

"Jim, is that you?" she called, and now every [pg 294] sense was trained to

battle; her voice had even a sleepy cadence, as if she had been suddenly roused.

"That won't do at all, Miz Rodney. We know you got Jim in there, just as certain as we're out here, and we want him to come out and we'll do the thing square, otherwise he can take the consequences."

Jim opened his mouth to speak, but she, still on her knees beside the wall, gained his silence by one supplicating gesture. There was a sleepy, fretful cry from the room beyond—the noise had roused one of the children.

"Sh-sh, dear," she called. "It's only a bad dream. Go to sleep again; mother is here."

Through the warped door came sounds of the whispering voices without, drowned by the shrieking bellow of the cattle. There was not a breath of air in the suffocating room. Jim bent towards Alida:

"I'm goin out to 'em. They'll do it square, over on the cotton-woods; this rumpus'll only wake the kids."

But she shook her head imploringly, putting her finger to her lips as a sign that he was not to speak, and he had not the heart to refuse, though knowing that she made a desperate situation worse.

"Gentlemen"—she spoke in a low, distinct voice—"Jim ain't here. He's been away from home five days. There's no one here but me and the children; you've woke them up and frightened them by pounding on the door. I ask you to go away."

"If he ain't in there, will you let us search the [pg 295] house?" It was Henderson that spoke, Henderson, foreman of the "XXX" outfit.

"I can't have them frightened; please take my word and go away."

"Whas er matter, muvvy?" called Judith, sleepily. Young Jim was by this time crying lustily. Only Topeka said nothing. With the precocity of a frontier child, she half realized the truth. She tried to comfort little Jim, though her teeth chattered in fear and she felt cold in the hot, still room. Then Judith called out, "Make papa send them away."

"Your papa ain't here, Judith." But the fight had all gone out of Alida's voice; it was the groan of an animal in a trap.

"Where's papa gone to?"

"Sh-sh, Judith! Topeka, keep your sister quiet."

It was absolutely still, within and without, for a full minute. Then Alida heard the shoving of shoulders against the door. Once, twice, thrice the lock resisted them. The brown bureau spun across the room like a child's toy. The lynchers, bursting in, saw Alida with her arms around Jim. When the last hope had gone it was instinct with her to protect him with her own body.

"Go into the kids, old girl, this is no place for you." And there was that in his voice that made her obey.

Something of the glory of old Chief Flying Hawk, riding to battle, was in the face of his grandson.

"Remember, the children ain't to know," he said to his wife; and to the lynchers, "Gentlemen, I'm ready."

[pg 296]

XIX

"Rocked By A Hempen String"

Alida heard the mingled sounds of footsteps and hoofs grow fainter on the trail. The children looked at her to tell them why this night was different from all others—what was happening. But she could only cower among them, more terrified than they. She seemed to be shrunken from the happenings of that day. They hardly knew the little, shrivelled, gray woman who looked at them with unfamiliar eyes. Alida gazed at the little Judith, and there was something in her mother's glance that made the little one hide her face in her sister's shoulder. Young Judith it was who all unwittingly had told the lynchers that her father was at home, and in Alida's heart there was towards this child a blind, unreasoning hate. Better had she never been born than live to do this thing!

It was the wee man, Jim, who first began to reflect resentfully on this intrusion on his slumbers. He had been sleeping well and comfortably when some grown-ups came with a lot of noise, and his father had gone away with them. It had frightened him, but his mother was here, and why should she not put him to sleep again?

[pg 297]

"Muvvy, sing 'Dway Wolf.'" And as she paid no heed, but looked at him, white-faced and strange, he again repeated, with his most insinuating and beguiling tricks of eye and smile:

"Muvvy, sing 'Dway Wolf' for Dimmy."

The child put his head in his mother's lap, and Alida began, scarce knowing what she did:

"The gray wolves are coming fast over the hill,
Run fast, little lamb, do not baa, do not bleat,
For the gray wolves are hungry, they come here to kill,

And the lambs shall be scattered—'

"No, no, Jimmy, muvvy cannot sing. Oh, can't you feel, child? Judith, Judith, why were you ever born?"

It was still in the valley. Had they come to the dead cotton-woods yet? Had they begun it? The children shrank from this gray-faced woman whom they did not know and but yet a little while had been their mother. An awful silence had fallen on the night. The range-cattle no longer bellowed in their thirst; the hot wind no longer blew from the desert. A hush not of earth nor air nor the things that were of her ken seemed to have fallen about them, muffing the dark loneliness as by invisible flakes. The children had crouched close together for comfort. They feared the little, gray-faced woman who seemed to have stolen into their mother's place and looked at them with strange eyes.

Jimmy looked at the woman who held him, hoping his mother would come, and he could see them both. And while he waited he dropped off to sleep; and little Judith, hiding her head on Topeka's shoulder, [pg 298] that she might not see the look in those accusing eyes, presently dreamed that all was well with her again; and Topeka reflected that if her mother should ask her in the morning whether she had dreamed last night, she would have a fine tale to tell of men riding up, and loud voices, and trying of the door, and father going away with them. Her mother had questioned her this morning when nothing had happened to warrant it. Surely she would ask again to-morrow, and Topeka could tell—she could tell—all.

Alida looked at her three sleeping children—his children, and yet they could sleep. Into her mind came that cry of utter desolation, "Could ye not watch with me one hour?" And God had been deaf to Him, His son, even as He was deaf to her.

The children were sleeping easily. The hush that had hung like a pall over the valley had not lifted. Had they done it? Was it over yet? She went to the door and listened. Surely the silence that wrapped the valley was a thing apart. It was as no other silence that she could remember. It was still, still, and yet there was vibration to it, like the muffled roar within a shell. She strained her ears—was that the sound of horsemen going down the trail? No, no, it was only the beating of her foolish heart that would not be still, but beat and fluttered and would not let her hear. Yes, surely, that was the sound of hoofs. It was over then—they

were going.

She would go and look for him. Perhaps it would not be too late—she had heard of such things. [pg 299] A dynamic force consumed her. She had no consciousness of her body. Her feet and hands did things with incredible swiftness—lighted a lantern, selected a knife, ran to the corral for an old ladder that had been there when they took possession of the deserted house; and through all her frantic haste she could feel this new force, as it were, lick up the red blood in her veins, burn her body to ashes as it gave her new power. She felt that never again would she have need of meat and drink and sleep. This force would abide with her till all was over, then leave her, like the whitened bones of the desert.

It was dark in the valley, but the menacing stillness seemed to be lifting. The range-cattle had again taken up their plaint, the sounds of the desert night swept across the stony walls of the cañon. Alida knew that it must have happened at the dead cotton-woods. There were no other high trees about for miles. Again she listened before advancing. There was no sound of hoof or champing bit or men moving quickly. They had gone their way into the valley. She ran swiftly, her lantern throwing its beam across the scrubby inequalities of ground, but for her there was no need of its beacon. To-night she was beyond the halting, stumbling uncertainties of tread to which man is subject. There was magic in her feet and in her hands and brain. Like the wind she ran, the wind on the great plain where there are no foot-hills to hinder its course. The black, dead trees stood out distinctly against the starry sky, and from a cross-limb [pg 300] of one of them dangled something with head awry, like a broken jumping-jack, something that had once been a man—and her husband. She could touch the feet of this frightful thing and feel its human warmth. A wind came up from the desert and blew across the cañon's rocky walls into the valley, and the parody of a man swayed to it.

She had been expecting this thing. For weeks the image of it had been graven on her heart. Sleeping or waking, she had seen nothing but his dangling body from the cross-limb. Yet with the actual consummation before her, she felt its hideous novelty as though it were unexpected. At sight of it the force that had borne her up through the happenings of that day went out of her, and as she stood with the knife and the rope, that she had brought in the hope of cheating the lynchers, dangling from her nerveless hand her helplessness overcame her. Again and again she called to the dead man for help, called to him as she had been

accustomed to call when her woman's strength had been unequal to some heavy household task.

Far down the trail she could hear the gallop of a horse coming closer, and mingled with the sounds of its flying feet was a voice urging the horse to greater speed in the shrill cabalistic "Hi-hi-hi-ki!" of the plains-man. What was it—one of them returning to see that she did not cheat the rope of its due?—to hang her beside him, as an after-thought, as they hanged Kate Watson beside her man? Let them. She was standing near the swaying thing when horse and rider gained the ground beside her, and what [pg 301] was left to her of consciousness made out that the rider was Judith. She pointed to it, and stood helpless with the dangling rope in her hand.

"Are we too late?" Judith almost whispered, as she caught Alida's cold, inert hands. "I dreamed it all and came. If I could have dreamed it sooner!"

Alida did not seem to hear, neither could she speak. She only pointed again to the thing beside her.

Judith understood. The women had a task to share, and in silence they began it. The lynchers had done their work all too well. Again and again the women strove with all their strength to take down the dangling parody of a man, which in its dead-weight resistance seemed in league with the forces against them. At last the thing was done. Down to a pale world, that in the haggard gray of morning seemed to bear in its countenance something of the pinch of death, Judith lowered the thing that had so lately been a man. She cut the rope away from the neck, she straightened the wry neck that seemed to wag in pantomimic representation of the last word to the lynchers. They'd have to reckon with him on dark nights, and when the wind wailed like a famished wolf and when things not to be explained lurked in the shadows of the desert.

The morning stillness came flooding into the cup-shaped valley like a soft, resistless wave. Something had come to the gray, old earth—another day, with all its human gift of joy and woe, and the earth welcomed it though it had known so many. [pg 302] The sun burst through the gold-tipped aureole of cloud, scattering far and wide lavish promises of a perfect day. The earth seemed to respond with a thrill. No longer was the pinch of death in her countenance. The valley, the mountains, the invisible wind, even the dead cotton-woods, seemed endowed with throbbing life that contrasted fearsomely with the terrible nullity

of this thing that once had been Jim Rodney.

Alida had ceased to take any part in the hideous drama. She sat on the ground, a crouching thing with glittering eyes. It was past comprehension that the sun could shine and the world go on with her man dead before her. Judith had become the force that planned and did to save the family pride. While her hands were busy with preparations for the dead, she rehearsed what she would say to this and that one to account for Jim's absence. The silence of the men who had done this thing would be as steadfast as their own.

And there were the children. Through all her frantic search for things in the house, Judith remembered that she must step softly and not waken the children. With each turn of the screw, as her numbed consciousness rallied and responded afresh to the hideous realization of this thing, there came no release from the tyrannous hold of petty detail. She remembered that she must be back at noon to hold post-office, and there would be the endless comedy to be played once more with her cavaliers. They must never suspect from word or look of hers. And there was the dance to-night at the Benton [pg 303] ranch—she hid her face in her hands. Ah, no, she could not do this thing! And yet they must not suspect. She must contrive to give the impression that Jim had cheated the rope. Yes, she must go and dance, and, if need be, dance with his very murderers. Jim's children were to have the "clean start" that he intended, and they would have to get it here. There was no money for an exodus and a beginning elsewhere.

Alida still crouched beside the long, even tarpaulin roll that Judith had prepared with hands that knew not what they did. But now Judith gently roused her and put in her hand a spade; already she herself had begun. But Alida stared at it dully, as if she did not understand. Then Judith pointed to something black that had begun to wheel in the sky, wheel, and with each circular swoop come closer to the roll of tarpaulin. Then Alida knew, and, taking the spade, she and Judith began to dig the grave.

[pg 304]

XX

The Ball

The dance in the Benton ranch was the great social event of the midsummer season. The Bentons had begun to give dances in the days of plenty, when the cattle industry had been at its dizziest height; and they had continued to give dances through all the depressing fluctuations of the trade, perhaps in much the same spirit as one whistles in the dark to keep up his courage. Thus, though cattle fell and continued to fall in the scale of prices till the end no man dared surmise, the Benton "boys"—they were two brothers, aged respectively forty-five and fifty years—continued to hold out facilities to dance and be merry.

All day strange wagons—ludicrous, makeshift things—had been discharging loads of women and children at the Benton ranch, tired mothers and their insistent offspring. To the women this strenuous relaxation came as manna in the wilderness. What was the dreary round of washing, ironing, baking, and the chain of household tasks that must be done as primitively as in Genesis, if only they might dance and forget? So the mothers came early and stayed late, and the primary sessions of [pg 305] the dances fulfilled all the functions of the latter-day mothers' congresses—there were infant ailments to be discussed, there were the questions of food and of teething, of paregoric and of flannel bands, which, strange heresy, seemed to be "going out," according to the latest advices from those compendiums of all domestic information, the "Woman's Pages" of the daily papers.

Inasmuch as these more than punctual debaters must be cooked for, there was, to speak plainly, "feeling" on the part of the housekeeper at the Bentons'. Wasn't it enough for folks to come to a dance and get a good supper, and go away like Christians when the thing was over, instead of coming a day before it began and lingering on as if they had no home to go to? This, at least, was the housekeeper's point of view, a crochety one, be it said, not shared by the brothers Benton, whose hospitality was as genuine as it was primitive. To this same difficult lady the infants, who were too tender in years to be separated from their

mothers, were as productive of anxiety as their elders. A room had been set apart for their especial accommodation, the floor of which, carefully spread with bed-quilts and pillows, prevented any great damage from happening to the more tender of the guests; and they rolled and crooned and dug their small fists into each other's faces while their mothers danced in the room beyond.

By nightfall the Benton ranch gleamed on the dark prairie like a constellation. Lights burned at every window; a broad beam issued from the door [pg 306] and threw a welcoming beacon across the darkness and silence of the night. The scraping of fiddles mingled with the rhythmic scuffle of feet and the singsong of the words that the dancers sung as they whirled through the figures of the quadrille and lancers. About the walls of the room where the dancing was in progress stood a fringe of gallants, their heads newly oiled, and proclaiming the fact in a bewildering variety of strong perfumes. Red silk neckerchiefs knotted with elaborate carelessness displayed to advantage bronzed throats; new overalls, and of the shaggiest species, amply testified to the social importance of the Benton dance.

As yet the dancing was but intermittent and was engaged in chiefly by the mothers with large progeny, who felt that after the arrival of a greater number of guests, and among them the unmarried girls, their opportunities might not be as plentiful as at present. One or two cow-punchers, in an excess of civility at the presence of the fair, had insisted on giving up their six-shooters, mumbling something about "there being ladies present and a man being hasty at times." In the "bunk-room," which did duty as a gentleman's cloak-room, things were really warming up. There was much drinking of healths, as the brothers Benton had thoughtfully provided the wherewithal, and that in excellent quality.

Costigan was there, and Texas Tyler, who had ridden sixty miles to "swing a petticoat," or, if there were not enough to go round, to dance with a handkerchief tied to some fellow's sleeve. By "swinging a petticoat" it was perfectly understood [pg 307] among all his friends that he meant a chance to dance with Judith Rodney. Year in and year out Texas never failed to present himself at the post-office on mail-days, if his work took him within a radius of fifty miles of the Daxes. No dance where the possibility of seeing Judith was even remote was too long a ride for him to undertake, even when it took him across the dreariest wastes of the desert. Texas had been devoted to Judith since she had left the convent, and sometimes, perhaps twice a year, she told him that she valued his friendship. On all other occasions she rejected his suit as if his continual pressing

of it were something in the nature of an affront. Yet Texas persevered.

"Well, here's lukin' at you, since in the way of a frind there's nothing better to look at!" and Costigan drained a tin cup at Texas Tyler.

"Your very good health," said Texas, who was somewhat embarrassed by what was regarded as Costigan's "floweriness."

"Begorra, is that Hinderson or the ghost av the b'y?" Costigan's roving eye was arrested by the foreman of the "XXX," who stood drinking with two or three men of his outfit. He was pale and ill-looking. He drank several times in succession, as if he needed the stimulant, and without the formality of drinking to any one. The two or three "XXX" men who were with him seemed to be equally in need of restoratives.

They talked of the cattle stampede in which several of the outfits had been heavy losers. Some nine hundred head of cattle had been recovered, and [pg 308] members of the different outfits were still scouring the Red Desert for strays.

Something in the nature of a sensation was created by the arrival of the Wetmore party. The women were frankly interested in the clothes, bearing, and general deportment of the New-Yorkers. Rumors of Miss Colebrooke's beauty were rife, and there was a general inclination to compare her with local belles. Such exotic types—they had seen these city beauties before—were as a rule too colorless for their appreciation. They liked faces that had "more go to them," was the verdict passed upon one famous beauty who had visited the Wetmores the year before. In arrangement of the hair, perhaps, in matters of dress, the judges were willing to concede the laurels to city damsels, but there concession stopped. But evidently Kitty, to judge from the elaboration of her toilet, did not intend to be dismissed thus cursorily. She herself was delicately, palely pretty, as always, but her hair was tortured to a fashionable fluffiness, and the simplicity of her green muslin gown was only in the name. It was muslin disguised, elaborated, beribboned, lace-trimmed till its identity was all but lost in the multitude of pretty complications.

"Did you know that old Ma'am Yellett had a school-marm up to her place?" asked one of the men, apropos of Eastern prettiness.

"Well, well," Costigan reminisced, "'tis some av thim Yillitt lambs thot's six fut in their shtockings, if Oi be rimimbering right. Sure, the tacher ought to be

something av a pugilist, Oi'm thinkin'."

[pg 309]

"I seen her the other day, and a neater little heifer never turned out to pasture. Lord, I'd like to be gnawing the corners of the primer right now, if she was there to whale the ruler."

"Arrah," bayed Costigan, "but the women question is gittin' complicated ontoirely, wid Miss Rodney—an' herself lukin' loike a saint in a church window—dalin' the mails an' th' other wan tachin' in the mountains. Sure, this place is gittin' to be but a sorry shpot for bachelors loike mesilf."

"I ain't mentionin' no names, but there's a man here ain't treatin' a mighty fine woman square and accordin' to the way she ought to be treated."

The information ran through the circle like an electric shock. Men stopped in the act of pledging each other's healths to listen. Loungers straightened up; every topic was dropped. The man who had made the statement was the loose-lipped busybody who had suggested to his host that he give up his six-shooter since there were "ladies present."

"What the hell are you waiting for?" queried Texas Tyler, savagely. "You've cracked your whip, made your bow, and got our attention; why the hell don't you go on?"

The man looked about nervously. He was rather alarmed at the interest he had excited. The next moment Peter Hamilton had walked into the room. There was something crucial in his entrance at this particular time; it crystallized suspicion. The gossip took advantage of the greetings to Hamilton to make his escape. Texas Tyler left the bunk-room immediately and looked for him in the room with the [pg 310] dancers. The fiddles, in the hands of a couple of Mexicans, had set the whole room whirling as if by magic. As they danced they sang, joining with the "caller-out," who held his vociferous post between the rooms, till the room was full of singing, dancing men and women, who spun and pirouetted as if they had not a care in the world. But Texas Tyler was not of these, as he looked through the dancers for his man. There was a red flash in the pupils of his eyes, and he told himself that he was going to do things the way they did them in Texas, for, of course, he knew that the loose-lipped idiot had meant Judith Rodney and Peter Hamilton. Never before had such an idea occurred to him, and

now that it had been presented to his mind's eye, he wondered why he had been such a blind fool. Never had the singing to these dances seemed so absurd.

"Hawk hop out and the crow hop in,
Three hands round and go it ag'in.
Allemane left, back to the missus,
Grande right and left and sneak a few kisses."

He rushed from the room and down to the stable. At sight of him some one leaped on a horse and rode out into the darkness.

"Who was that?" asked Texas of a man lounging by the corral.

"That was—" and he gave the name of the loose-lipped man.

Texas cursed long and picturesquely. Then he went back to the bunk-room and tried to pick a [pg 311] quarrel with Peter Hamilton, who good-naturedly assumed that his old friend had been drinking and refused to take offence.

Peter went in to ask Kitty to dance with him. All that evening he had been waiting anxiously for Judith. Meanwhile he had used all his influence as a newly appointed member of the Wetmore outfit to soothe the ruffled feelings of the cattle-men. Of the tragedy in the valley he had heard no rumor.

Kitty had come to the point where she was willing to waive the Récamier-Chateaubriand friendship in favor of one more personal and ordinary. In fact, as Peter showed a disposition to regard as final her answer to him on the day he had spurred across the desert, Kitty, with true feminine perversity, inclined to permit him to resume his suit. His acquiescence in her refusal she had at first regarded as the turning of the worm; after the wolf-hunt, however, her meditations were more disturbing. She had never told Peter of that strange woodland meeting with Judith, yet Judith's beauty, her probable hold over Peter, the degree of his affection for her were rankling questions in Kitty's consciousness. In the stress of these considerations Kitty lost her head completely for so old a campaigner. She drew the apron-string tight—attempted force instead of strategy.

Kitty and Peter finished their waltz, one of the few round dances of the evening.

"How perfectly you dance, Kitty! It's a long time since we've had a waltz together."

[pg 312]

The cow-punchers looked at Kitty as if she were not quite flesh and blood. Such flaxen daintiness, femininty etherealized to angelic perfection, was new to them, but their admiration was like that given to a delicate exotic which, wonderful as it is, one is well pleased to view through the glass of the florist's window.

Peter was deferentially attentive and zealous to make the Wetmore party have a thoroughly good time, yet he did all these things, as it were, with his eye on the door. He was not obviously distraight; he was the man of the world, talking, making himself agreeable, "doing his duty," while his subconsciousness was busy with other matters. It was rather through telepathy than through any lack of attention paid to her that Kitty realized the state of things, and in proportion to her realization came a feeling of helplessness; it was so new, so unexpected, so cruel. He seemed drifting away from her on some tide of affairs of the very existence of which she had been unconscious. Further and further he had drifted, till intelligible speech no longer seemed possible between them. They said the foolish, empty things that people call out as the boat glides away from the shore, the things that all the world may hear, and in his eyes there was only that smiling kindness. How had it come about after all these years? What was it that had first cut the cable that sent him drifting? What was it? She must think. Oh, who could think with that noise! How silly was their singing as they danced, how uncouth!

[pg 313]

"All dance as pretty as you can,
Turn your toes and left alleman;
 First gent sashay to the right,
Now swing the girl you last swung about,
And now the one that's cut her out,
 And now the one that's dressed in white,
And now the belle of the ball."

The dancers seemed bitten to the quick with the tarantula of an ecstatic hilarity; their bodies swayed in perfect harmony to the swing of the fiddles and the swell of the chorus. The most uncouth of them came under the spell of that mad magic. Their movements, that in the beginning of the dance had been shy and awkward, became almost beautiful; they forgot arms, hands, feet; their bodies had become like the strings of some skilfully played instrument, obediently responsive to rhythm, and in that composite blending of races each in his

dancing brought some of the poetry of his own far land. The scene was amazing in its beauty and simplicity, like the strong, inspirational power and rugged rhythm of some old border minstrel. One by one the dancers glowed with better understanding; discordant elements, alien nations were fused to harmony in this vivid picture.

Peter turned to Kitty, expecting to see her face aglow with the warmth of it. She stood beside him, the one unresponsive soul in the room, on her lips a pale, tolerant smile.

"Aren't they splendid, Kitty, these women? More than half of them work like beavers all day, and they have young children and dozens of worries, [pg 314] but would you suspect it? They're just the women for this country."

Now in the present state of affairs almost any other subject would have been better calculated to promote good feeling than the one on which Peter had alighted. Kitty's thoughts had perversely lingered about one who, though not one with these women, had yet their sturdy self-reliance, their acquiescence in grim conditions, their pleasure in simple things. Kitty's apprehension, slow to kindle, had taken fire like a forest, and by its blaze she saw things in a distorted light; her present vision magnified the relations of Peter and Judith to a degree that a month ago she would have regarded as impossible. "He is her lover!" was the accusation that suddenly flashed through her mind, and with the thought an overwhelming desire to say something unkind, something that should hurt him, supplanted all judgment and reason.

"Oh, it's a decidedly remarkable scene, pictorially, I agree with you. And an artist, of course—but isn't it a trifle quixotic, Peter, to idealize them because they are having a good time? There's no virtue in it. It is conceivable that they might have to work just as hard and have just as many little children to look after, and yet not have these dances you praise them for coming to."

"I'm afraid you find us and our amusements a little crude. Evidently the spirit of our dances does not appeal to you; but I did not suppose it necessary to remind you that they should not be judged by the standard of conventional evening [pg 315] parties," said Peter, hurt and angry in his turn.

"Us, our amusements, our dances? So you are quite identified with these people, my dear Peter, and I had thought you an ornament of cotillions and country

clubs. I can only infer that it is somebody in particular who has brought about your change of heart."

Peter flushed a little, and Kitty kept on: "Some of the native belles are quite wonderful, I believe. Nannie Wetmore tells of a half-breed who is very handsome."

Peter set his lips. "At the expense of spoiling Nannie's pretty romance, I must tell you that the lady she refers to is not only the most beautiful of women, but she would be at ease in any drawing-room. It would be as ridiculous to apply the petty standards of ladyhood to her as it would to—well, imagine some foolish girl bringing up the question at a woman's club—'Was Joan of Arc a lady?'" Peter spoke without calculating the conviction that his words carried. He was angry, and his manner, voice, intonation showed it.

Kitty, now that her most unworthy suspicions had been confirmed by Peter's ardent championing of Judith, lost her discretion in the pang that gnawed her little soul: "I beg your pardon, Peter. When I spoke I did not, of course, know that this young woman was anything to you."

"Anything to me? My dear Kitty, I've never had a better friend than Judith Rodney."

The dance was at its flood-tide. The exhilaration [pg 316] had grown with each sweep of the fiddle-bow, with the sorcery of sinuous, swaying bodies, with the song of the dancers as they joined in the calling out of the figures, with the rhythmic shuffle of feet, with the hum of the pulses, with the leaping of blood to cheek and heart till the dancers whirled as leaves circling towards the eddies of a whirlpool. The dancing Mrs. Dax split her favors into infinitesimal fragments, for each measure of which her long list of waiting gallants stood ready to pick a quarrel if need be. Her dancing, in the splendor of its spontaneity, had something of the surge of the west wind sweeping over a field of grain. Sometimes she waved back her partner and alone danced a figure, putting to the music her own interpretation—barbaric, passionate, rude, but magnificently vivid. And the dancers would stop and crowd about her, clapping hands and stamping feet to the rhyming movement of her body, while against the wall her hostile sister-in-law, Mrs. Leander, stood and glared in a fury of disapproval, Leander himself smiling broadly meanwhile and exercising the utmost restraint to keep from joining Mrs. Johnnie's train.

The "XXX" men, who had remained aloof from the dancers and the merriment, keeping a faithful vigil in the bunk-room, where the hospitable bottles were to be found, seemed to awaken from the spell that had bound them all day. Henderson, the foreman, whose face had not lost its tallow paleness despite the number of his potatoes, put his head through the door to have a look at the dancing Mrs. Dax, was caught in the outermost eddy of the [pg 317] whirling throng, and was soon dancing as madly as the others. The rest of the "XXX" party still hugged the bunk-room, where the bottles gleamed hospitable. They were still dusty from their long ride of the early morning, and more than once their fear-quickenened imaginations had been haunted by the spectre of the dead cotton-woods, from which something heavy and limp and warm had been swaying when they left it. Henderson had secured the dancing Mrs. Dax for a partner. The "caller-out," stationed between the two rooms, warmed to his genial task. He improvised, he put a wealth of imagination and personality into his work, he showered compliments on the nimbleness of Mrs. Dax's feet, he joked Henderson on his pallor, he attempted a florid venture at Kitty. Miguel put fresh magic into his bowing, José's fiddle rioted with the madness of it.

Judith stood for a moment in the kindly enveloping darkness, and her heart cried out in protest at the thing she must do. It was the utmost cruelty of fate that forced her here to dance on the evening of the day that they had killed him. But she must do it, that his children might evade the stigma of "cattle-thief," that the shadow of the gallows-tree might not fall across their young lives, that the neighbors might give credence to the tale of Jim's escape from his enemies, that Alida and she might earn the pittance that would give the children the "clean start" that Jim had set his heart on so confidently. And she must dance and be the merriest of them all that these things might happen, [pg 318] but again and again she deferred the dread moment. The light, the music, the voices, the shuffle of the feet came to her as she stood forlorn in the grateful darkness. On the wall the shadows of the dancers, magnified and grotesque, parodied their movements, as they contended there, monstrous, uncouth shapes, like prehistoric monsters gripping, clinching in some mighty struggle; and above it all sang out the wild rhythm of Miguel's fiddle, and young José's bow capered madly.

Judith drew close to the window, and the merriment struck chill at her heart like the tolling of a knell. She saw the pale face of Henderson gleam yellow-white among the dancers, and, watching him, the blood-lust of the Indian woke in her heart. The rest of the room was but a blur; the dancers faded into swaying shadows; she saw nothing but Henderson as he danced that he might forget the

gray of morning, the black, dead trees, and the grotesque thing with head awry that swayed in the breeze like a pendulum. He dreaded the long, black ride that would bring him to his camp, for he alone of the lynchers remained. Something was drawing his gaze out into the blackness of the night. He struggled against the temptation to look towards the window. He whirled the Dax woman till her twinkling feet cleared the floor. He sang to the accompaniment of Miguel's fiddle. He was outwitting the thing that dangled before his eyes, having the incontrovertible last word with a vengeance. And as he danced and swayed, all unwittingly his glance fell on the window opposite, [pg 319] and Jim Rodney's face looked in at him, beautiful in its ecstasy of hate—Rodney's face, refined, sharpened, tried in some bitter crucible, but Rodney's face! Henderson could not withdraw his fascinated gaze. He stood in the midst of the dancers like a man turned to stone. He put up his hand to his eyes as if to brush away a cloud of swarming gnats, then threw up his arms and rushed from the room. The dancers paused in their mad whirl. Miguel's bow stopped with a wailing shriek. Every eye turned towards the window for an explanation of Henderson's sudden panic, but all was dark without on the prairie. The magic had gone from the dance, the whirlwind of drapery that had swung like flags in a breeze dropped in dead air. "What was it?" the dancers asked one another in whispers.

And for answer Judith entered, but a Judith that was strange to them. There was about her a white radiance that kept the dancers back, and in her eyes something of Mary's look, as she turned from Calvary. The dancers still kept the position of the figures, the men with their arms about their partners' waists, the women stepping forward; they were like the painted figures of dancers in a fresco. And among them stood Judith, waiting to play her part, waiting to show her world that she could dance and be merry because all was well with her and hers. But the bronzed sons of the saddle hung back, they who a day before would have quarrelled for the honor of a dance. They were afraid of her; it would be like dancing with the death angel. [pg 320] She looked from face to face. Surely some one would ask her to dance, and her eyes fell on Henderson, returning from the bottled courage in the bunk-room. Some word was due from him to explain his terror of a moment ago.

"Oh, Miss Judith, I thought you was a ghost when I seen you at the window."

"A ghost that's ready to dance." She held out her hand to him. In her gesture there was something of royal command, and Henderson, reading the meaning in her eyes, stepped forward. Her face, almost a perfect replica of the dead man's,

looked at him.

"I bring you greeting from my brother," she said. "He has gone on a long journey."

Henderson started. Through the still room ran the murmur, "Rodney's outwitted them; he's played a joke on the rope!" And Judith, his dare-devil sister, had come with his greetings to Henderson, leader of the faction against him! The tide had turned. The applause that is ever the meed of the winner was hers to command. The cattle faction were ready to sing the praises of her splendid audacity. In their hearts they were glad in the thought that Jim had outwitted them.

Miguel's bow dashed across the strings, and he drew from the little brown fiddle music that again made them merry and glowing. The magic came back to the dance, the blood leaped again with the merry madness, and they swept to the bowing like leaves when the first faint wail of winter cries in the trees.

[pg 321]

Hamilton, standing apart with Kitty Colebrooke, had been a dazed witness of the scene. With the rest he had watched the entrance of Judith, had been stunned by the change in her appearance, had seen her triumph and heard the rumor of Jim's escape, and his heart had warmed with the good word. She had probably managed the plan, and had come to-night, in the joy of her triumph, to hurl in their faces that she had outwitted them. And she had paid the penalty of her courage—her face told that. What a woman she was! Her heart would pay the penalty to the last throb, and yet she could dance with the merriest of them. And as she danced she seemed to Peter Hamilton, in her white draperies, like a cloud of whirling snow-flakes drifting across the silence of the desert night. She was the one woman in all the world for him, though his blind eyes had faced the light for years and had not known it. He had squandered the strength of his youth in the pursuit of a little wax light, and had not marked the serene shining of the moon.

"And a man there was and he made his prayer—" he quoted to himself. Well, thank God that it had not been answered. He would take her away from here. She could take her place in his family and reflect credit on his choice. His family, his friends—he winced at the thought of their possible reception of the news. But Judith's presence would adjust these difficulties. He would present her to Kitty now, that his old friend might see what manner of woman she was.

Kitty, he felt, would be kind in memory of the old days. She would [pg 322] give to them both in friendship what she had denied him in love. And as he warmed to the thought he turned to the woman of his youth. And she read a look in his face that had not been there in a long time. Had he, then, come back to her? Was the distance from bark to shore lessening as the sea of misunderstanding diminished?

"Kitty, we were speaking a moment ago of Miss Rodney. You would like to know her, I'm sure. We've been such good friends all these years while you were deciding that what I wanted was not good for us—and deciding wisely, as I know now. Look at her! You'll understand how she has helped me keep the balance of things. When she's finished dancing you'll let me bring her to you, won't you?"

And Kitty, who had expected much different words, struggled with the meaning of these unexpected ones. The strangeness of the pain bewildered her. Her dazed consciousness refused to accept that Peter was asking permission to present to her a woman whom she thought should not have been permitted to enter her presence. There was about her a white flame of anger that seemed to lick up the red blood in her veins as she turned to answer:

"She is undeniably handsome, Peter, but I do not care to meet your mistress."

He bowed low to her as Lieutenant Swift, of Fort Washakie, who was of the Wetmore party, came to claim Kitty's hand for the next dance. Judith and Henderson were leading the last figure, their hands clasped high in an arch through which the dancers trooped in couples. Again and again he tried to [pg 323] catch Judith's eye, but her glance never once met his. Her great, wide eyes had a far-away look as if they saw some tragedy, the shadow of which would never fall from her. She was, indeed, the tragic muse in her floating white drapery, the tragic muse whose grief is too deep for tears. He watched her as she swept towards him in the figure of the dance, the head thrown back, slightly foreshortened, the mouth smiling with the smile that knows all things, the eyes holy wells of truth. He saw in her something of the tenderness of Eve, for all the blending of the calm modern woman, capable in affairs, equal to emergency. It was like her to contrive her brother's escape and then to dance with the very men who had knotted the noose for his hanging. Henderson was bowing to her, the dance was over, and the next moment she was alone.

"Is it you, Peter?" She thrust a strand of hair back from her temple. Her eyes rested on him for a moment, then wandered, till in their absent look was the rapt expression of the sleep-walker. The dark-rimmed eyes had in their depths the quiet of a conflagration, and Peter, seeing these things, and knowing the gamut of all her moods, saw that he had been mistaken. She had not come, to dance in triumph, in the face of her brother's enemies. There was no triumph in her face, but white, consuming despair.

"Did you ask me to dance?" Again she put back the strand of hair. "Forgive me for being so stupid, but I've kept post-office to-day, and had a long ride, and I danced with Henderson."

[pg 324]

He drew her arm within his and led the way out through the crowd of dancers to the star-strewn night. She did not speak again, nor did she seem to notice that they had left the room with the dancers. She turned her face towards the lonely valley, where the drama of her brother's passing had been consummated, and something there was in her look as it turned towards the hills that told Peter.

"Tell me, Judith, 'what has happened?'"

For answer she pointed towards the valley. "They did it last night at the dead cotton-woods. Henderson led them. I could not stay with Alida. I had to come here to dance that no one might suspect."

Her voice was steady, but low and thrilling. In its deep resonance was the echo of all human sorrow. There was no hint of accusation, yet Peter felt accused. He felt, now when it was too late, that his position had been one of almost pusillanimous negligence. From the beginning he had taken a firm stand against violent measures. He had talked, argued, reasoned, inveighed against violence; no later than a week ago he had ridden across the desert to tell Henderson that the Wetmore outfit would take no part in violence of any sort, and that the cattle outfit that did resort to extreme measures would miss the support of the "W-Square" in any future range business. But it had not been enough. He should have made plain his position in regard to Judith. With her as his future wife the tragedy of the valley would not have been possible.

From the ranch-house came the swell of the [pg 325] fiddles, the rhythmic shuffle of feet, the song of the dancers, dulled by distance. Beside him was

Judith, a white spirit, the woman in her dead of grief. And yet, through all the grim horror of the tragedy she remembered the part that had been allotted to her, threw all the weight of her personality on the side of the game she was playing.

"You must be on our side, Peter, and when there is talk of Jim's absence you must imply that he is East somewhere. You will know how to meet such inquiries better than we women. Henderson will be only too glad. You should have seen the wretch when I held out my hand to him and told him to dance with me. He came, white and shambling; we have nothing to fear from Henderson. Alida has no money to go away with. She and I must stay here and make a beginning for the children, and, Peter, we want you to help us."

He had no voice to answer her brave words for a minute, and then his sentences came uncertain and halting.

"You must think me a poor sort of friend, Judith, one who has been blind till the eleventh hour and is then found wanting. I feel so guilty to you, to your brother's wife, to that little child who put out his arms so trustfully to me that night, but I never imagined that things would come to such a pass as this. The smaller cattle outfits have been doing a good deal of blustering, but the more conservative element supposed that they had them in check, and did not for a moment think that they would take the law into their own hands. Believe me, this lawlessness [pg 326] has been in the face of every influence that could be brought to bear, and it shall not go unpunished."

She spoke to him from the darkness, as the spirit of grief might speak. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, that is the justice of the plains. But, Peter, it is but poor justice. What's done is done, and fresh violence will not give back Alida her husband nor the little ones their father. What we need is friends, one or two loyal souls who, though knowing the hideous truth of this thing, will stand by us in our pitiful falsehood. I have told no one, nor shall I, but you and—Peter, you must not laugh at your fellow-conspirator—Leander."

He took her hands in his and pressed them; big hands they were, and hardened by many a homely task, but withal tender and with the healing quality of womanliness in the touch of their warm, supple fingers. But to-night she did not seem to know that he held them, nor to be conscious of his presence. The woman in her was dead of grief. The white spirit in her place, that plotted and planned that Jim's children and Jim's wife might not from henceforth walk in the shadow

of the gallows, was beyond the prompting of the flesh. And again she spoke to him in the same far-away voice, with the same far-away look in her eyes.

"You must know, Peter, that Leander is at heart of the salt of the earth. I told him about it all, and he asked to be given the commission to deal with the men. He has risen to his post magnificently. I heard him swear the wretches to secrecy, hint to [pg 327] them that he had a great story to tell them. They were frightened, and listened. And the poor little man that we have so despised told them convincingly how Jim had made good his escape—even Henderson half believes we saved him."

Peter hoped that she would accuse him of his half-heartedness indirectly, if not openly. It would have made his conscience more comfortable, and his conscience troubled him sorely to-night. It was that fatal habit of procrastination that had brought this thing about. He had hesitated all these weeks about Judith, and while he had threshed out the pro and con of her disadvantageous family connection, this hideous tragedy had happened.

"Peter"—and now her eyes seemed to come back to earth again, to lose something of the far-away look of the sleep-walker—"Peter, I'm cruel to speak to you of these things now. When your heart is full of your own happiness, I come to you like a dark shadow with this tragedy. But I am glad for the good that has come to you, Peter. Perhaps Miss Colebrooke told you of the day I met her in the wood, the day of the wolf-hunt. She was so beautiful, I understood—"

"Judith, I hardly know how to say what I am going to, I feel that I have been such a bad friend to you, but you must hear me patiently. Together, if you are willing, after knowing all of me that you do, we must look after your brother's children. That night in the little house in the valley, when the little chap came to me, don't you remember, there was something fine and fearless in the way [pg 328] he did it. 'You may belong to the cattle side of the argument,' he seemed to say, 'but I trust you.' Now, Judith dear, that boy's faith in me is not going to be shaken. We must look after them together. It is a very little thing you have asked of me, my dearest, but a very big one that I am asking of you. Do you understand, my Judith, it is *you* that I want? Don't think of me as I have been, Judith, but as you are going to make me. I want you to give me the right now, this evening, to share all this trouble with you. Do we understand each other, Judith? Is it to be? And will you come back with me now, into the room where they are dancing, and let me present you to them, to the Wetmores, as *my* Judith,

my betrothed?"

"But, Peter, I don't understand. I—I thought you and Miss Colebrooke were—"

"That's all over, Judith. I did love her once. Oh, you dear, brave woman, I'm not a hero from any point of view, and you know it. It's but a sorry lover that's making his prayer to you, my dearest; but you won't judge, I know, beloved, you will love me instead?"

Judith turned towards the valley. Her whole being throbbed with a passionate response to the man who stood so humbly before her, but there were duties that came first. Her mind was full of Alida and her children, and her eyes still sought Peter's imploringly.

"You will be a good friend to them, Peter—to Jim's people? I cannot talk to you of anything [pg 329] else to-night. Your heart is big, Peter, but you cannot feel, perhaps—"

"Listen, Judith. Whatever friendship and protection I can give your family you may count upon from now till the end of time. I will be theirs as I am yours. I feel your grief, but I want to soothe it, too. And if you love me, and I feel, Judith, that you do, you must let them all see to-night, these people who know us both, that we stand together before all the world for better or worse. Think, Judith, and you will see that you owe it to yourself, to me, to all these men, who reverence you as the one woman, the one ideal in their lonely lives."

She could not speak. The moment was too full, the strain had been too great; but she smiled surrender, and Peter caught her tenderly in his arms and kissed her once—his Judith she was now, his heroine. Then, without another word, he drew her arm through his and led her back to the lights, where the dancers still held high carnival.

Judith's half-sister, Eudora, was making a pretty quarrel by perversely forgetting the order in which she had given her dances. The girl was so undeniably happy that Judith dreaded the grim news she must tell her. Eudora blushed as she encountered Judith's eye. Her half-sister ever offered a check on Eudora's exuberant coquetry, with its precipitation of discussions that often ended in bullets. Leander stood on the outermost fringe of Eudora's potential partners. He would not have dared to [pg 330] maintain it openly, yet he was sure the pretty minx had promised that dance to him.

"Dance with Leander, dear, and don't let those men begin quarrelling. I've something to tell you, presently," said Judith.

Texas Tyler stood glowering at them from the doorway. He would not catch Judith's eye as she tried to speak to him. Kitty sat alone for the moment. She had sent the young lieutenant to fetch her a cup of coffee, but as Peter approached with Judith she averted her eyes.

"Kitty, may I present to you my fiancée, Miss Rodney?"

Kitty rose superbly to the situation. She might, indeed, have made the match she was so overjoyed in the good-fortune of her old friend Peter. She made no reference to the woodland meeting—she hoped for the happiness of seeing them in town. And she bade Peter tell the good news to Nannie Wetmore, they would be so glad. Nannie swallowed a grimace and proffered a cousinly hand. She had suspected some such news as this when she saw that things were not going well with Kitty and Peter.

"Better one dance with a good partner that can swing ye than several with a feeble partner that leaves ye to swing your own corners!"

Judith looked up, smiling. She recognized the characteristic utterance of her old friend Mrs. Yellett. The matriarch had sustained a breakdown, and arrived, in consequence, when the dance was half over, but she was philosophical, as always, in [pg 331] the face of misfortune, and loudly attested her pleasure in the renowned pedal feats of her partner, Costigan.

Behind came Mary Carmichael, looking brown and happy. From the attitude of the group around Judith and Peter Mary divined what had happened, and came to add her congratulations. Even Mrs. Yellett forgot to choose an axiom as her medium of expression, and kissed Judith publicly, with affectionate unction. Henderson had effaced himself, and Leander, proud of his triumph and Judith's commendation, sat in a corner and smiled contentedly. Ignorant of the drama to which they had played chorus, the dancers still riotously swung one another up and down the length of the room, and from the little brown fiddles came the gay music of Judith's betrothal.

THE END

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