

The Golden Woman

A Story of the Montana Hills

Ridgwell Cullum



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The Golden Woman

A Story of the Montana Hills

By RIDGWELL CULLUM

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“The Way of the Strong,” “The Law Breakers,”
“The Trail of the Axe,” Etc.

With Frontispiece in Colors

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“It’s the same book, dear, only a different chapter.”
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The Golden Woman

CHAPTER I

AUNT MERCY

An elderly woman looked up from the crystal globe before her. The sound of horse's hoofs, clattering up to the veranda, had caught her attention. But the hard, gray eyes had not yet recovered their normal frigidity of expression. There were still traces in them of the groping mind, searching on, amidst the chaos of a world unseen. Nor was Mercy Lascelles posing at the trade which yielded her something more than her daily bread. She had no reason for pose. She was an ardent and proficient student of that remote science which has for its field of research the border-land between earthly life and the ultimate.

For some moments she gazed half-vacantly through the window. Then alertness and interest came back to her eyes, and her look resumed its normal hardness. It was an unlovely face, but its unloveliness lay in its expression. There was something so unyielding in the keen, aquiline nose and pointed chin. The gray eyes were so cold. The pronounced brows were almost threatening in their marking and depression. There was not a feature in her face that was not handsome, and yet, collectively, they gave her a look at once forbidding, and even cruel.

There was no softening, there never was any softening in Mercy Lascelles' attitude toward the world now. Years ago she may have given signs of the gentler emotions of her woman's heart. It is only reasonable to suppose that at some time or other she possessed them. But now no one was ever permitted beyond the harsh exterior. Perhaps she owed the world a grudge. Perhaps she hoped, by closing the doors of her soul, her attitude would be accepted as the rebuff she intended to convey.

"Is that you, Joan?" she demanded in a sharp, masterful tone.

"It certainly is, auntie," came the gentle, girlish response from the veranda.

The next moment the door of the little morning-room opened, and a tall girl stood framed in its white setting.

Joan Stanmore possessed nothing whatever in common with her aunt. She was

of that healthy type of American girl that treats athletics as a large part of her education. She was tall and fair, with a mass of red-gold hair tucked away under the mannish hat which was part of her dark green, tightly-fitting riding habit. Her brow was broad, and her face, a perfect oval, was open and starred with a pair of fearless blue eyes of so deep a hue as to be almost violet. Her nose and mouth were delicately moulded, but her greatest beauty lay in the exquisite peach-bloom of her soft, fair skin.

Joan Stanmore was probably the handsomest girl in St. Ellis City, in a suburb of which she and her aunt lived. She was certainly one of the most popular girls, in spite of the overshadowing threat of an aunt whom everybody disliked and whom most people feared. Her disposition was one of serene gentleness, yet as fearless and open as her beautiful eyes suggested. She was of a strongly independent spirit too, but, even so, the woman in her was never for a moment jeopardized by it; she was never anything but a delightful femininity, rejoicing wholesomely in the companionship of the opposite sex.

She and her aunt had lived for five years in this suburb of St. Ellis. They had left New York for the southwest because the profession of the elder woman had gained unpleasant notoriety in that city of contradictions. The calling of the seer had appealed well enough to the citizens individually, but a wave of moral rectitude, hurling its municipal government spluttering upon a broken shore of repentance, had decided it to expurgate such wickedness from its midst, lest the local canker become a pestilence which might jeopardize the immortal soul of the citizen, and, incidentally, hand the civic control over to the opposition party.

So aunt and orphaned niece had moved westward, seeking immunity in a region where such obscure professions were regarded with a more lenient eye. Joan had little enough sympathy with her relative's studies. She neither believed in them, nor did she disbelieve. She was so young, and so full of that vitality which makes for the wholesome enjoyment of life, as viewed through eyes as yet undimmed by the bitterness of experience, that she had neither time, place, nor serious thought for such matters. Her only interest, if interest it could be called, was an occasional wonderment at the extent of the harvest Aunt Mercy reaped out of the credulity of the merchant and finance-princes of the city. This, and the state of her aunt's health, as pronounced by Dr. Valmer, were the only things which ever brought such matters as "crystal gazing" and scientific astrology into her mind. Otherwise horoscopes, prognostications, warnings, omens, passed her by as mere words to raise a smile of youthful derision at the expense of those who heaped money for such readings into the seer's lap.

Joan was in no way dependent upon her aunt. Living with her was a matter of personal choice. Mercy Lascelles was her only relative for one thing, and the elder woman being a lonely spinster, it seemed only right that Joan should make her home under her scarcely hospitable roof. Then, too, there was another reason which influenced the girl. It was a purely sentimental reason, such as at her age might well appeal to her. A whisper had reached her to the effect that, hard and unsympathetic as her Aunt Mercy was, romance at one time had place in her life—a romance which left her the only sufferer, a romance that had spelt a life's disaster for her. To the adamant fortune-teller was attributed a devotion so strong, so passionate in the days of her youth that her reason had been well-nigh unhinged by the hopelessness of it. The object of it was her own sister's husband, Joan's father. It was said that at the moment of his death Mercy Lascelles' youth died too. All softness, all gentleness passed out of her life and left her the hard, prematurely aged woman she now was.

As a consequence Joan felt that her duty lay beside a woman whom Fate had treated so ill; that duty demanded that an effort must be made to bring a little brightness into so solitary and loveless a life.

So her choice was made. And as she grew accustomed to the stern companionship she often found herself wondering how a woman of such curiously harsh disposition could ever have been the victim of such a passion as was attributed to her. It was almost inconceivable, especially when she tried to picture the father, whom she had never known, but who was reputed to be such an intensely human man, so full of the many frailties of a Wall Street gambler.

Joan now saw the crystal lying in her aunt's lap. She saw, too, the fevered eyes lifted to her face. And with an uncomfortable feeling of disaster pending she moved across to the window-seat and flung herself upon the pile of down cushions.

"I do hope you're not—not seeing things again, auntie," she said in an anxious voice, her eyes fixed resentfully upon the detested crystal. "You know Dr. Valmer forbade you—practicing for at least six months," she added warningly.

"Dr. Valmer's a fool," came the sharp retort.

The girl flushed. It was not the words: it was the manner that could so hurt. But this time she felt it her duty to continue. Her aunt's health was seriously affected, and the doctor had warned her personally about it.

“I dare say he is, auntie,” she protested. “But you pay him good dollars for being one. What is the use of it if you don’t take his advice?”

Just for a second a peculiar look flashed into Mercy’s eyes. Then she allowed them to drop to the crystal in her lap.

“Go and change your habit. It will keep you busy on your own affairs. They need all your attention—just now.”

The rudeness left Joan untouched. She was too seriously concerned.

Mercy Lascelles had only recently recovered from a bad nervous breakdown, the result, so Dr. Valmer, the specialist, assured her, of the enormous strain of her studies. He had warned Joan of the danger to her aunt’s mental balance, and begged her to use every effort to keep her from her practice. But Joan found her task well-nigh impossible, and the weight of her responsibility was heavy upon her.

She turned away to the window and gazed out. She was feeling rather hopeless. There were other things worrying her too, small enough things, no doubt, but sufficiently personal to trouble her youthful heart and shadow all her thought with regret. She was rapidly learning that however bright the outlook of her life might be there were always clouds hovering ready to obscure the smiling of her sun.

She looked at the sky as though the movement were inspired by her thought. There was the early summer sun blazing down upon an already parching earth. And there, too, were the significant clouds, fleecy white clouds for the most part, but all deepening to a heavy, gray density. At any moment they might obscure that ruddy light and pour out their dismal measure of discomfort, turning the world from a smiling day-dream to a nightmare of drab regret.

Her mood lightened as she turned to the picture of the garden city in which they lived. It was called a garden city, but, more properly, it was a beautiful garden village, or hamlet. The place was all hills and dales, wood-clad from their crowns to the deepest hollows in which the sandy, unmade roads wound their ways.

Here and there, amidst the perfect sunlit woodlands, she could see the flashes of white, which indicated homes similar to their own. They were scattered in a cunningly haphazard fashion so as to preserve the rural aspect of the place, and

constructed on lines that could under no circumstances offend the really artistic eye. And yet each house was the last word in modernity; each house represented the abiding-place of considerable wealth.

Yes, there was something very beautiful in all this life with which she was surrounded. The pity of it was that there must be those clouds always hovering. She glanced up at the sky again. And with a shiver she realized that the golden light had vanished, and a great storm-cloud was ominously spreading its purplish pall.

At that moment her aunt's voice, low and significant, reached her from across the room. And its tone told her at once that she was talking to herself.

"You fool—you poor fool. It awaits you as surely as it awaits everybody else. Ride on. Your fate awaits you. And thank your God it is kept hidden from your blinded eyes."

Joan started.

"Auntie!"

A pair of cold, gray eyes lifted to her face. The shaking, bony hands clutched nervously at the crystal. The eyes stared unseeingly into the girl's face for some moments, then slowly the fever crept into them again—the fever which the doctor had warned Joan against.

"Oh, auntie, put—put that away." Joan sprang from her seat and ran to the other's side, where she knelt imploringly. "Don't—don't talk so. You—frighten me." Then she hurried on as though to distract the woman's attention. "Listen to me. I want to tell you about my ride. I want to tell about——"

"You need tell me nothing. I know it all," Mercy broke in, roughly pushing the clinging hands from about her spare waist. "You rode with young Sorley this morning—Dick Sorley. He asked you to marry him. He told you that since he had known you he had made a small fortune on Wall Street. That he had followed you here because you were the only woman in the world for him. He told you that life without you was impossible, and many other foolish things only fitted for the credulity of a young girl. You refused him. You regretted your refusal in conventional words. And he rode away, back to his hotel, and—his fate."

The girl listened breathlessly, wondering at the accuracy of this harsh

recapitulation of the events of her morning ride. But as the final words fell from the seer's lips she cried out in protest—

“Oh, auntie. His fate? How? How? What do you mean? How do you know all this?”

Joan had risen to her feet and stood eyeing her aunt in wonder and amazement. The elder woman fondled her crystal in her thin hands. A look akin to joy suddenly leapt into her burning eyes. Her lips were parted so that they almost smiled.

“It is here, here. All here,” she declared exultingly. “The mandates of Fate are voiced amongst the stars, and the moving hand delineates unerringly the enactments—here—here.” She raised the crystal and gazed upon it with eyes alight with ecstasy. “It is for the eye to see, and for the mind to read. But the brain that comprehends must know no thought of human passions, no human emotions. There is nothing hidden in all the world from those who seek with the power of heart and brain.”

Joan's amazement passed. It was replaced by something like horror and even terror as she listened. To her the words were dreadful, they spoke of the woman's straining brain, and her thoughts flew to the doctor's verdict. Was this the madness he had feared? Was this the final crash of a brain driven to breaking-point? The questions flew through her mind only to be swept aside by the recollection of what her aunt had told her of her morning ride. It was true—true. Every word of it. Where could the insanity lie? No—no. It could not be. But—but—such a power!

Her thoughts were cut short. Again her aunt was speaking. But now her voice had once more resumed its customary harshness. The fire had died out of her eyes. Again the dreaded crystal was lying in her lap, fondled by loving fingers. And something approaching a chuckle of malice was underlying the words which flowed so rapidly from her thin lips.

“Haven't you learned yet? Can't you read what the hand of Fate is trying to point out to your blinded eyes? Did not the man Cahusac ask you to marry him? Did not you refuse him? And did not he die of typhoid within two weeks of committing that foolishness? And Charlie Hemming. He dared to make love to you. What then? Didn't he make a fortune on the Cotton Exchange? Didn't he tell you that it was you who brought him his luck? Luck? Your luck is disaster—disaster disguised. What happened? Hemming plunged into an orgie of riotous

living when you refused him. Didn't he squander his fortune, bolt to Mexico, and in twelve months didn't he get shot as a rebel and a renegade, and thus add himself to the list of the victims of your—so-called 'luck'? Luck! Oh, the madness, the blindness of it!"

The woman's passionate bitterness had lost all sense of proportion. She saw only through her straining nerves. And the injustice of it all brought swift protest to Joan's lips.

"You are wrong. You are cruel—bitterly, wickedly cruel, auntie," she cried. "How am I responsible? What have I done?"

In an instant the gray eyes were turned upon her with something akin to ferocity, and her voice rang with passion.

"Wrong? Cruel? I am stating undeniable facts. I am telling you what has happened. And now I am going to tell you the result of your morning's ride. How are you responsible? What have you done? Dick Sorley has gone to his fate as surely as though you had thrust a knife through his heart."

"Aunt! How—how dare——?"

"How dare I say such things? Because I am telling you the truth—which you cannot bear to face. You must and shall hear it. Who are you to escape the miseries of life such as we all have to suffer? Such as you have helped to make *me* suffer."

"Don't—don't!" Joan covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the sight of that cruel, working face before her—as though to shut out of her mind the ruthless accusation hurled at her.

But the seer was full of the bitterness so long stored up in her heart, and the moment had come when she could no longer contain it beneath the cold mask she had worn for twenty years. The revelation was hers. Her strange mind and senses had witnessed the scenes that now held her in the grip of their horror. They had driven her to the breaking-point, and no longer had she thought for anything but her own sufferings, and the injustice that a pariah should walk at large, unknown to the world, unknown to itself.

"Don't?" The woman laughed mirthlessly. Her thin lips parted, but the light in her eyes was unrelenting. "I tell you it is so. Dick Sorley has gone to his fate. Straight to his doom from your side. You sent him to it. I have witnessed the

whole enactment of it here—in this crystal. You, and you alone, have killed him—killed him as surely as though you had deliberately murdered him! Hark! That is the telephone bell ringing——”

She paused as the shrill peal of the instrument rang through the room. There was a prolonged ringing. Then it broke off. Then again and again it rang, in short, impatient jerks.

“Go to it, girl. Go and listen to the message. You say I am cruel. Hear what that senseless thing has to tell you. Listen to the voice at the other end. It is at the hospital. The doctor is there, and he will speak to you. And in a ward adjacent, your discarded lover lies—dead.”



CHAPTER II

OVER THE TELEPHONE

From the depths of her high-backed chair Mercy Lascelles stared at the white door beyond which Joan had just vanished. Her gaunt figure was no longer huddled over the fateful crystal she still clutched in her two hands. Her brain was busy, and her eyes were hot and feverish.

She was not thinking of the girl. She was not even thinking of the message traveling over the wire at that moment. That she knew. For her it had no greater significance than that it was the corroboration necessary to convince the girl who was receiving it—to convince her of the truth of that which she had charged her with.

Her mind was far away, back in the dim years of her earlier womanhood. Back amidst scenes of disaster through which she had long since passed. All the old pain and suffering was at the surface again. Again was she torn by the bitterness and injustice that had robbed her of all that seemed good to her in life. Again through her mental picture moved the figures of two men and one woman, the characters who went to make up the cast of her wretched drama. Her feelings were once more afire with hatred, hatred for one, and, for the others, a profound, contemptuous bitterness.

But hatred was dominant. The memory of one of those men had always power to drive her to the verge of madness. He was a handsome, brown-haired man of powerful physique. A man whose gentle manner and swift, hot temper she abhorred, and the memory of whose influence upon her life had still power to grind to ashes every gentle feeling she ever possessed.

It was of one of his terrible tempers she was thinking now. He had displayed a fury she could never, would never forget. It was a memory that tripped her even now at every turn, till it had become something akin to an obsession.

Every detail of the scene was as clear cut in her mind as a hideous cameo, every word he had uttered, the accusations, the insinuations he had made. Even the room, with its simple furnishings, its neatness, its air of care—her care—stood out sharply in her memory. She remembered it all so well. She was in the midst

of preparing Charles Stanmore's supper, and Joan, only a couple of weeks old, was fast asleep in an adjoining bedroom. He had chosen this time to call, because he knew that she, Mercy, would be alone.

She remembered his handsome face clouded with sullen anger and jealousy when she let him in at the door of the apartment. And then his first words when he took up his position before the hard-coal stove in the parlor—

“So you've pitched everything to the devil, and taken up your abode with Charlie,” he began, in tones of jealous fury. “And he—he is your brother-in-law.”

There was no mistaking his meaning. He intended that she should make no mistake, for he added a laugh—a hateful laugh—to his words.

This was the man who had asked her to marry him almost numberless times. This was the man whom she had refused time and again, making it plain that, however hopelessly, her love was given to another. This was the man who knew that she had come at her sister's death to care for the little, new-born, motherless, baby girl, and help the man whom she had always loved out of the hopeless dilemma in which he found himself. This was the man who was the lifelong friend of Charles Stanmore, whose mistress he was accusing her of having become.

She remembered the sudden anger which leapt to her brain. She remembered, too, the thought which came in its midst, and formulated her instant retort.

“Yes,” she said coldly. “I have.”

Then she saw the real man as she had now come to regard him. She remembered the sudden blaze of his eyes, the ghastly pallor of his face, the look of almost insane jealousy which he turned upon her. And then came that never-to-be-forgotten insult, those words which had seared themselves upon her woman's heart as though branded thereon with red-hot irons.

“And you are the woman I have loved. Woman?” He laughed. “It's too good for you. Do you know what we men call such creatures as you? All this time you have waited—waited, and the moment your poor sister is in her grave, almost before the blood in her veins is cold, you seize your opportunity to fulfil your mad desire. Taking advantage of Charlie's wretchedness and trouble, you force yourself upon him. You force a position upon him from which there is no escape.

The world will accept the position at the value you intend, and he is powerless to do anything but accept it too. You meant to have him, and I suppose he is yours by now. And all this time I have wasted an honest love on you—you——”

And she had answered him, calmly and deliberately, before he could utter the filthy epithet she knew he intended.

“Please keep your voice down, or—or you’ll wake little Joan.”

Even now she could never quite understand her own attitude at the moment. Something inside her was urging her to fly at his throat and tear the foul words from it. Yet there was something gripping her, something compelling her to a calmness she was powerless to resist.

Then, as swiftly as he had blazed into fury, had come a miraculous change in the man. Perhaps it was the effect of her calm, perhaps it was something in the man himself. Anyway the madness abruptly died out of his eyes and left him shaking. He strove to speak, but no words came. He passed his hand across his forehead as though to remove something that was clouding his brain. He turned from her fixed stare as though he could no longer support it. He moved across the room. He hesitated. He turned to her. She did not see the movement, for her back was now turned, but somehow she felt it.

Then she heard his footsteps again, and, finally, the rattle of the door handle as he clutched it. After that came his voice. All the anger, the jealousy, had gone out of it. It was low, gentle, imploring. But she did not move.

“Mercy, Mercy! For—forgive me. I——”

“Never!”

Oh, the scorn, the hatred she had flung into the word!

The next she remembered was that he passed swiftly and silently from the room. Then, then at last her woman’s weakness, a weakness she now so cordially despised, overcame her, and she fell into a chair and wept.

But her weakness was short-lived. Her spirit rose in rebellion, and her tears ceased to flow as the cruel iron entered her soul. She pondered long and deeply, and presently she went on with her preparations for Charles Stanmore’s supper as though nothing unusual had occurred.

Nor, when he came home, did she tell him, nor did she ever by word or act permit the secret of that interview to pass out of her keeping. But the memory of it was forever with her. Day and night she hugged it to herself, she nursed it, and fostered it for all those twenty years, the bitterness, the cruel injustice of the insult, grinding its way till it became a part of the very essence of her being.

Suddenly a cry broke in upon her reverie. She started, and her eyes lit with a gleam of satisfaction. Her mind had returned to the present, and she called out—

“Joan!”

Without waiting for an answer she left her seat, and, crossing swiftly to the door, flung it wide open.

Joan staggered in, and, dropping into the welcoming arms of a rocking-chair, she buried her face in her hands.

Mercy Lascelles stood silently contemplating the bowed head. There was no sympathy in her attitude. Her heart was cold and hard as steel. But she was interested in the cause rather than the effect.

After a while the storm of grief slackened. The racking sobs came at longer intervals. Then it was that Mercy Lascelles broke the silence.

“Well?” she demanded sharply.

The tear-stained face was slowly lifted, and the sight of the girl’s distress was heart-breaking.

“He is dead,” Joan said in a choking voice. Then, with something like resentment—“Are—are you satisfied?”

Mercy went back to her chair and her beloved crystal. And after a moment she began to speak in a low, even tone, as though reciting a well-learned lesson.

“It was at the crossing of 36th Street and Lisson Avenue, here the street cars cross, here some also turn off. It was the fault of his horse. The creature shied at a heavy truck. Two cars were approaching from east and west. The shying horse slipped on the granite paving, fell, and was caught between the two meeting cars before they could pull up. The horse was killed on the spot, and—the rider was _____”

“Don’t, auntie! Don’t say it! Yes, yes, he was taken to the hospital, and died of

his injuries. But don't speak of his terrible mutilations. I—I can't bear it.”

Again Joan buried her face in her hands as though to shut out the horror of it all. But the elder woman had no such scruples.

“Why harrow yourself with the picture?” she demanded brusquely. “Imagination can add nothing to the fact. Tears will not change one detail. They will only add to your distress. Dick Sorley left your side to go to certain death. Nothing could have averted that. Such was his fate—through you.”



CHAPTER III

THE PARIAH

Joan suddenly threw up her head. There was resentment in the violet depths of her eyes, and her whole expression had hardened. It was as though something of her youth, her softness, had passed from her.

“You must tell me, auntie,” she demanded in a tone as cold as the other’s. “I—I don’t understand. But I mean to. You accuse me with the responsibility of—this. Of responsibility for all that has happened to those others. You tell me I am cursed. It is all too much—or too little. Now I demand to know that which you know—all that there is to know. It is my right. I never knew my father or mother, and you have told me little enough of them. Well, I insist that you shall tell me the right by which you dare to say such things to me. I know you are cruel, that you have no sympathy for any one but—yourself. I know that you grudge the world every moment of happiness that life contains. Well, all this I try to account for by crediting you with having passed through troubles of which I have no knowledge. But it does not give you the right to charge me with the things you do. You shall tell me now the reason of your accusations, or I will leave this home forever, and will never, of my own free will, set eyes on you again.”

Mercy’s thin lips parted into a half-smile.

“And I intend that you shall know these things,” she replied promptly. “You shall know them from my lips. Nor has any one more right to the telling than I.” The smile died abruptly, leaving her burning eyes shining in an icy setting. “I am cruel, eh?” she went on intensely. “Cruel because I have refused to bend beneath the injustice of my fellows and the persecutions of Fate. Cruel because I meet the world in the spirit in which it has received me. Why should I have sympathy? The world has robbed me of the only happiness I ever desired. What obligation, then, is mine? You are right. I have no sympathy for any living creature—none!”

Joan offered no comment. She was waiting—waiting for the explanation she had demanded. She was no longer the young girl just returned flushed with the healthy glow of her morning ride. Life had taken on a fresh tone for her since then. It seemed as if years had suddenly passed over her head and carried her

into the middle of life.

“You shall have your explanation,” Mercy went on after a moment’s pause. “I will give it you from the beginning. I will show you how it comes that you are a pariah, shedding disaster upon all men who come under your influence.”

“A pariah!”

Joan’s eyes suddenly lit with horror at the loathsome epithet.

“Yes. Pariah!” There was no mistaking the satisfaction which the use of the word seemed to give the other woman. In her eyes was a challenge which defied all protest.

As Joan had no further comment she went on—

“But they were all blind—blind to the curse under which you were born—under which you live. You shall have your wish. You shall know the right which I have for charging these things at your door. And the knowledge of it will forever shatter the last castle of your day-dreams.”

Something of awe took hold of the listening girl. Something of terror, too. What was the mystery into which she was blindly delving? Knowing her aunt as she did, she felt, by her manner, that her words were the prelude to disclosures that meant disaster to herself. And as the other proceeded her half-frightened eyes watched her, fascinated by the deliberateness of manner and the passionate sincerity underlying every word of the story she told.

“Listen,” she said, checking her voice to a low, even monotone. “You are the child of disaster if ever woman was. Your father was a poor, weak fool, a big, handsome, good-hearted fool whom Nature had endowed with nothing more than a perfect exterior. He was a Wall Street man, of a sort. One of those gamblers who live on the fringe of the big financial circles, and most of whom gather their livelihood from the crumbs falling from the rich man’s table, but are ready to steal them when the fall is not sufficient to fill their hungry mouths. For three years he and I were engaged to be married.”

She paused, and her hot eyes dropped to the crystal in her lap. Then she went on, with harsh sarcasm breaking the level of her tone—

“For three years we waited for the coming of that trifling luck which would enable us to marry. For three years I worked silently, joyfully, to fill the

wonderful bottom drawer which never failed to inspire me with courage and hope. You see I—loved your father.”

Again she paused, and Joan forgot something of her own trouble as she noted the evident pain these memories gave to her aunt.

“The luck came. It was small enough. But with the little money I had it was just sufficient. The license was procured. The wedding was fixed. And I—well, God was good, the world was good, and life was a joy beyond all dreams. You see I, too, was young then. My only relative was a younger sister. She was a beautiful girl with red-gold hair. And she was in business in California. I sent for her to come to the wedding.”

Joan gave a tense sigh. She knew what was to follow. The red-gold hair told its own story. Mercy Lascelles raised a pair of stony eyes, and her thin lips were smiling.

“I can see you understand,” she said, without emotion. “Yes, she came, and she stole your father from me. Oh, yes! she was handsome enough to steal any man. She was even more beautiful than you are. It was just before we were to be married. Less than a week. A good time to steal him from me—after three years of waiting.” She laughed bitterly. “She stole him, and I—I cursed her. Oh, I didn’t cry out! I simply cursed her, I cursed her offspring, and burned every garment I had made or bought for the wedding in my parlor stove. I sat by and watched the fire as it hungrily devoured each record of my foolish day-dreams. And as each one vanished in cinder and smoke I cursed her from the very bottom of my heart.”

The woman laughed again, and Joan could not repress a shudder at the sound.

“Twelve months she had of him. And during those twelve months both he and she nearly drove me mad in their efforts to make me marry your father’s great friend and fellow gambler. His name doesn’t matter. He was a brown-haired creature, who was, if possible, a greater gambler than your father. But unlike your father his luck was phenomenal. He grew rich whilst Charles Stanmore, with every passing week, grew poorer. And for twelve long months he persecuted me with his attentions. He never left me alone. I sometimes think he was crazy in his desire to marry me. He knew the whole of my wretched story, yet it made no difference. He swore to me in his mildly deliberate way that I should marry him. Perhaps I ought to have read the real character of the man underlying his gentle manner, but, poor fool that I was, I didn’t. It was left to

later events to open my eyes, events which were to teach me that under the guise of friendship he hated Charles Stanmore, because—because, in spite of everything, I still loved him.

“At the end of those twelve months my cup of bitterness was filled to overflowing. You were born. You, with your deep-blue eyes and red-gold hair. You, Charles Stanmore’s child—but not mine.”

Her voice died out, and Joan understood something of the passion in this strange woman’s soul. But the next moment a hard laugh jarred her nerves. It was a laugh that had no mirth. Only was it an audible expression designed to disguise real feelings.

“Oh, I had no grudge against you. You—you with your crumpled face and big blue eyes. You could make no difference to my life as I saw it. And yet you did.” The woman’s fingers suddenly clutched the crystal in her lap with a force that left the thin tips of them white and bloodless. “You did. A difference that in my maddest dreams I could never have hoped for. You brought with you the curse of disaster from which there was no escape for those to whom you belonged.

“I can see it all now,” she went on exultingly. “I can see it as I saw it then, every detail of it. Your father’s gambling had brought him down to something like want. A week before you were born his home was sold up, and he and your mother took shelter in a tiny three-roomed apartment for which they had no money to pay the rent. In desperation he came to *me*—to *me* for help. And I gave it him. The day before you were born I gave him the money for the expenses of your birth and to tide him over for three months. It was almost all I had in the world.” Again came that mirthless laugh. Then she hurried on. “But the temptation was too much for Charles Stanmore, gambler that he was. He suddenly found himself with money in his pocket and hope in his foolish soul. There was a big wheat operation going on at the moment, and every penny of the money, along with all the credit he could procure, he plunged into it.”

“And lost it all?” Joan whispered.

The other shook her head.

“No. The influence of your strange fate was at work. On the day that you saw light Charles Stanmore was a comparatively rich man. And your mother—was dead.”

Joan breathed a deep sigh.

“Yes, wheat went up by leaps and bounds, and your father was delirious with joy. He stood over you—I can see him now—and talked at you in his foolish, extravagant way. ‘You’re the brightest, happiest, luckiest little hoodlum that ever came into the world,’ he cried. ‘And your name is “Golden,” my little Golden Woman, for if ever there was a golden kiddie in the world you are she. Gold? Why, you’ve showered it on me. Luck? Why, I verily believe if you’d been around you’d have brought luck to Jonah when he got mixed up with the whale’s internals.’ And then, just as he finished, the bolt fell. The doctor came in from the next room and took him aside. Your mother was dead.”

A sob broke from the listening girl, a great sob of sympathy for the kindly, weak, irresponsible father she had never known.

“Your father’s disaster looked like my blessing. I had no regrets for the woman,” Mercy went on. “He was mine now by every right. The thief had come by her reckoning. So I seized the opportunity that was thrust in my way. Mine was the right to care for him and help him in his trouble, nor have I shame in saying that I took it.

“But the curse of your life was working full and sure. But for your existence I should never have taken that step. But for that step other matters would never have occurred. When your father’s—friend discovered what I had done his fury knew no bounds. His insults were unforgettable—at least by me. But I persisted. For a great hope was at work within me that now your mother was gone eventually Charles Stanmore might come back to his allegiance, and I might step into her place. It was a foolish hope, but—I loved your father.

“Bah!” she went on impatiently. “It is no use raking amongst those ashes. The details don’t matter to you. Those things are dead. And only is their effect alive to-day. My hopes were never to be fulfilled. How should they be with the curse of your father’s golden girl involving us all in disaster. Let me cut the wretched history as short as I can. At first money was plentiful enough, and luck in that direction seemed to border on the marvelous. To give you an instance your father—imbecile that he was—swore he would test it in your own interests. He hunted round till he found the most hair-brained, wildcat company ever floated for the purpose of robbing moneyed fools, and invested ten thousand dollars in it as a life-dowry for you. It was the joke of all his gambling friends. It was like pitching dollar bills into the Hudson. And then in a month the miraculous

happened. After a struggle the company boomed, and you were left with a competence for life. Yes, at first money was plentiful enough, but your father never got over his shock of your mother's death. Sometimes I used to think his brain was weakening. Anyway, he plunged into a wild vortex of gambling. He drank heavily, and indulged himself in excesses from which he had always kept clear up to that time. He took to cards in a manner that frightened even me, used as I was to his weaknesses. And in all these things his friend encouraged and indulged him.

“The end was not far off. How could it be? Your father's luck waned and his debauches increased. He grew nervous and worried. But he persisted in his mode of life. Then, in a little while, I knew that he was borrowing. He never touched your money. But he was borrowing heavily. This man whom I had come to regard as his evil genius undoubtedly lent him money—much money. Then came a particularly bad time. For two days Charles Stanmore went about like a madman. What the trouble was I never knew—except that it was a question of money. And this terminated in the night of disaster toward which everything had been driving.”

Mercy Lascelles' voice dropped to a low, ominous pitch, and she paused as though to draw all the threads of memory into one firm grasp. Her look, too, changed. But it was a change quite unnoticed by Joan.

“It was one night in the apartment. I had gone to bed. They, your father and his—friend, were in the parlor. They had quarreled during the evening over some money affairs which I did not understand. Your father was headstrong, as he always was, and the other, well, he rarely raised his voice—he was one of those quiet men who disguise their purposes under a calm atmosphere—as a rule. However, on this occasion high words had passed, and I knew that stormy feelings were underlying the calm which finally ensued. At last, when they sat down to a heavy game of baccarat, I crept away to bed.

“I don't know how long I had been in bed when it happened. I know I was asleep, for I wakened suddenly with a great sense of shock, and sat up trying to realize what had happened. It took me some moments. I know my mind ran over a dozen things before I decided what to do. I remembered that we were alone in the place. The servants had been dismissed more than a week before. There was only you, and your father, and me in the place. Then I remembered that his friend was there, and I had left them playing cards. Instantly I got out of bed. I slipped on a dressing-gown and crept out into the passage. I moved silently

toward the door of the sitting-room. It was wide open. I had left it shut. The gas was full on. I reached the door and cautiously peered in. But there was no need for caution. Your father had fallen forward in his chair, and lay with his head, face downward, upon the table. He was dead and—the other had gone. I ran to the dead man's side and raised him up. It was too late. All—all I had or cared for in the world had been taken from me by the hand of the murderer.”

“Murdered?” Joan whispered in horrified tones.

“Yes, murdered!” came the swift, vehement retort. “Shot—shot through the heart, and in the stomach—and his murderer had fled. Oh, God, shall I ever forget that moment!”

The woman fell back in her chair, her whole withered body shaking with emotion. Then with an effort she pulled herself together and went on more calmly—

“I hardly know what I did. All I remember is that I gave the alarm, and presently had the police there. I told them all I could, and gave the name and description of—the man who had done the deed. But it was useless. He had gone—bolted. Nor was he ever seen or heard of again. The curse had worked out. You, your father's golden girl, were left orphaned to the care of the woman to whom your very existence was an ineradicable wrong, and who, through your coming, had been robbed of all that made life possible.”

She raised her crystal and held it poised on the gathered finger-tips of one hand. And when she spoke again her voice had gained strength and tone.

“Since those days I have learnt to read the words that are written by the hand of Fate. And here—here is the open book. It is all here. The storm of disaster that brought you into the world will dog your footsteps. You are cursed with the luck that leads to disaster. Wherever you go men will bless your name, and, almost in the same breath, their blessings shall turn to the direst curses. It is not I who am speaking. My tongue utters the words, but the writing of Fate has been set forth for me to interpret. Wherever you go, wherever you be, you cannot escape the destiny set out for you. I tell you you are a leper, a pariah, whom all men, for their own safeguarding, must shun.”

All through the final pronouncement Joan sat transfixed with horror. A leper! A pariah! Nor, in the light of those things which to her own knowledge had happened, could she doubt the hideous denunciation. She had heard and

understood that ill-luck could and did pursue its victims. But this! Oh, it was too terrible—too cruel! For an instant she thought of the doctor and his words of warning. But one glance at the bowed figure, again intent upon her crystal, and the thought passed. The story she had listened to was too real, too full of those things which had driven her poor aunt to her present unyielding attitude toward the world to be the ravings of an insane mind. And suddenly panic gripped her, that panic which, in a moment of weakness, so easily tends toward self-destruction.

“Is—is there no hope, auntie?” she asked helplessly.

Mercy Lascelles looked up from the crystal. She eyed her niece steadily, as though to read all there was hidden behind the desperate blue eyes.

Slowly she shook her head.

Again came that spasm of panic, and Joan seemed to hurl her whole young strength into denial.

“But there is. There must be,” she cried, with a fierceness that held the other in something like astonishment. “There must be,” she reiterated desperately. “No God could be so cruel—so—so wicked. What have I done to deserve this? The injustice is demoniacal. Far better go and throw myself before a passing train than live to carry such a pestilence with me wherever I go through life. If you can read these things—read on. Read on and tell me, for I swear that I will not live with this curse forever tied about my neck.”

“You will live—you must live. It is written here.” Mercy pointed at the crystal. Then she laughed her cold, mirthless laugh. “There was one power that served me, that helped me to save my reason through all those early days. God knows how it may help you—for I can’t see. I loved your father with a passion nothing, no disaster could destroy. I loved him so that I could crush every other feeling down, subservient to my passion. Go you, child, and find such a love. Go you and find a love so strong that no disaster can kill it. And maybe life may still have some compensations for you, maybe it will lift the curse from your suffering shoulders. It—it is the only thing in the world that is stronger than disaster. It is the only thing in the world that is stronger than—death.”

Joan had no answer. She stared straight ahead of her, focusing some trifling detail of the pattern on the wall paper. Her face was stony—stony as the face of the woman who was watching her. The moments passed rapidly. A minute

passed, and neither spoke.

Then at last the girl abruptly rose from her seat. Almost mechanically she moved over to a mirror, and, removing her hat, deftly patted her beautiful hair till it assumed its wonted appearance. And quite suddenly she turned about.

“I have nearly fifty thousand dollars, auntie. I am going to realize that capital. I am going to leave this house—I am going to leave it forever. I shall change my name, and cover up my tracks, for I intend going where I am not known. I am going where men cannot figure in my life, which I intend to begin all over again. The burden Fate has imposed upon me is too great. I am going to run from it.”

She laughed. And her laugh was as mirthless as her aunt’s had been.



CHAPTER IV

TWO MEN OF THE WILDERNESS

The westering sun was drooping heavily toward its fiery couch. The purple of evening was deepening from the east, meeting and blending softly with the gold of the dying day. A great furnace of ruddy cloud rose above the mountain-tops, lighting the eternal snows of the peaks and ancient glaciers with a wealth of kaleidoscopic color. Viewed from the plains below there might have been a great fire raging among the hill-caps, where only snow and ice could provide the fuel.

The radiant colors of sunset held the quiet eyes of a solitary horseman riding amidst the broken lands of the lesser foot-hills. He was a big man, of powerful shoulders and stout limbs. He was a man of fifty or thereabouts, yet his hair was snow white, a perfect mane that reached low upon his neck, touching the soft collar of his cotton shirt. His face was calm with something of the peace of the world through which he was riding, something of the peace which comes to those who have abandoned forever the strife of the busy life beyond. It only needed the garb of the priest, and his appearance would have matched perfectly his sobriquet, "the Padre."

But Moreton Kenyon was clad in the rough moleskin, the riding boots and general make-up of the western life to which he belonged. Even he carried the protecting firearms by which to administer the personal laws of the wilderness. His whole appearance, the very horse under him, a prairie-bred broncho of excellent blood, suggested a man who knew the life amidst which he lived, and was more than capable of surviving it.

Whatever his appearance, whatever his capacity for the rougher corners of earth, Moreton Kenyon was a man of great kindness, of great sympathy, as the mission from which he was now returning might well have testified. Those who knew him best held him in deep affection. Those who knew him less withheld their judgment, but never failed to treat him with a courtesy not usual amongst the derelicts of an out-world camp.

Just now something of the smallness of human life, of human aims and efforts, of human emotions, was occupying the busy brain behind his reflective eyes.

The scene before him, upon which he had so often looked, never failed to remind him of the greatness of that which lay beyond the ken of man. Somehow it exalted his thoughts to planes to which no association with his kind could ever have exalted them. It never failed to inspire him with a reverence for the infinity of power which crowned the glory of creation, and reduced self to a humble realization of its atomic place in the great scheme of the Creator.

His horse ambled easily over the ribbon-like trail, which seemed to rise out of the eastern horizon from nowhere, and lose itself somewhere ahead, amidst the dark masses of forest-crowned hills. The journey was nearly over. Somewhere ahead lay the stable, which could be reached at leisure in the cool of the evening, and neither master nor beast seemed to feel the need for undue haste.

As the light slowly faded out and left the snow-white hill-crests drab with the gray of twilight, the man's mind reverted to those things which had sent him on his journey. Many doubts had assailed him by the way, doubts which set him debating with himself, but which rarely made him turn from a purpose his mind was once set upon. He knew that his action involved more than his own personal welfare, and herein had lain the source of his doubt. But he had clearly argued every point with himself, and through it all had felt the rightness of his purpose.

Then, too, he had had the support of that other with whom he was concerned. And he smiled as he thought of the night when his decision had been taken. Even now the picture remained in his mind of the eager face of his youthful protégé as they discussed the matter. The younger man had urged vehemently, protesting at every objection, that they two had no right to live in comparative comfort with women and children starving about them.

He remembered young Buck's eager eyes, large dark-brown eyes that could light with sudden, almost volcanic heat, or smile their soft, lazy smile of amusement at the quaintnesses of life about him. The Padre understood the largeness of heart, the courage which urged him, the singleness of purpose which was always his. Then, when their decision had been taken, he remembered the abrupt falling back of the man into the quiet, almost monosyllabic manner which usually belonged to him.

Yes, Buck was a good lad.

The thought carried him back to days long gone by, to a time when a lad of something less than eight years, clad in the stained and worn garb of a prairie juvenile, his feet torn and bleeding, his large brown eyes staring out of gaunt,

hungry sockets, his thin, pinched, sunburnt face drawn by the ravages of starvation, had cheerfully hailed him from beneath the shelter of a trail-side bush.

That was nearly twenty years ago, but every detail of the meeting was still fresh in his memory. His horse had shied at the sudden challenge. He remembered he had thrashed the creature with his spurs. And promptly had come the youthful protest.

“Say, you needn’t to lick him, mister,” the boy piped in his thin treble. “Guess he’ll stand if you talk to him.”

Strangely enough the man had almost unconsciously obeyed the mandate. And the memory of it made him smile now. Then had followed a dialogue, which even now had power to stir every sympathy of his heart. He started by casually questioning the starving apparition.

“Where you from, sonny?” he asked.

And with that unequivocal directness, which, after twenty years, still remained with him, the boy flung out a thin arm in the direction of the eastern horizon.

“Back ther’, mister.”

The natural sequence was to ask him whither he was bound, and his answer came with a similar gesture with his other hand westward.

“Yonder.”

“But—but who’re your folks? Where are they?” the Padre had next hazarded. And a world of desolation was contained in the lad’s half-tearful reply—

“Guess I ain’t got none. Pop an’ ma’s dead. Our farm was burnt right out. Y’ see there was a prairie fire. It was at night, an’ we was abed. Pop got me out, an’ went back for ma. I never see him agin. I never see ma. An’ ther’ wa’an’t no farm left. Guess they’re sure dead.”

He fought the tears back manfully, in a way that set the Padre marveling at his courage.

After a moment he continued his interrogation.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Buck,” came the frank response.

“Buck—what?”

“Buck—jest plain, mister.”

“But your father’s name—what was that?”

“Pop.”

“Yes, yes. That’s what you called him. What did the folks call him?”

“Ther’ wa’an’t no folks. Jest pop, an’ ma, an’ me.”

A great lump had risen in the man’s throat as he looked down into those honest, hungry eyes. And for a moment he was at a loss. But the boy solved his dilemma in a way that proved the man in after-life.

“Say, you ain’t a farmer?” he inquired, with a speculative glance over his general outfit.

“Well, I am—in a small way,” the Padre had replied, with a half-smile.

The boy brightened at once.

“Then mebbe you can give me a job—I’m lookin’ for a job.”

The wonder of it all brought a great smile of sympathy to the man’s eyes now, as he thought of that little starving lad of eight years old, homeless, wandering amidst the vastness of all that world—looking for a “job.” It was stupendous, and he had sat marveling until the lad brought him back to the business in hand.

“Y’ see I kin milk—an’—an’ do chores around. Guess I can’t plough yet. Pop allus said I was too little. But mebbe I kin grow—later. I—I don’t want no wages—on’y food. Guess I’m kind o’ hungry, mister.”

Nor, for a moment, could the man make any reply. The pathos of it all held him in its grip. He leant over and groped in his saddle-bag for the “hardtack” biscuits he always carried, and passed the lad a handful.

He remembered how the boy snatched the rough food from his hands. There was something almost animal in the way he crammed his mouth full, and nearly choked himself in his efforts to appease the craving of his small, empty stomach. In those moments the man’s mind was made up. He watched in silence while the

biscuit vanished. Then he carried out his purpose.

“You can have a job,” he said. “I’ve only a small farm, but you can come and help me with it.”

“Do you mean that, mister?” the boy asked, almost incredulously.

Then, as the Padre had nodded, a sigh of thankfulness escaped the young lips, which were still covered with the crumbs of his recent meal.

“Say, I’m glad. Y’ see I was gettin’ tired. An’ ther’ didn’t seem to be no farms around—nor nuthin’. An’ it’s lonesome, too, at nights, lyin’ around.”

The man’s heart ached. He could stand no more of it.

“How long have you been sleeping—out?”

“Three nights, mister.”

Suddenly the Padre reached out a hand.

“Here, catch hold, and jump.”

The boy caught the strong hand, and was promptly swung up into the saddle behind his benefactor. The next moment they were speeding back over the trail to the lad’s new home. Nor was the new-born hope solely beating in the starving child’s heart. The lonely farmer felt that somehow the day was brighter, and the green earth more beautiful—for that meeting.

Such had been the coming together of these two, and through all the long years of weary toil since then they still remained together, working shoulder to shoulder in a relationship that soon became something like that of father and son. The Padre remained the farmer—in a small way. But the boy—well, as had been prophesied by his dead father, later on he grew big enough to plough the furrows of life with a strong and sure hand.

The man's reflections were broken into abruptly. The time and distance had passed more rapidly than he was aware of. The eager animal under him raised its head, and, pricking its small ears and pulling heavily on the reins, increased its pace to a gallop. Then it was that the Padre became suddenly aware that the home stretch had been reached, and before him lay a long, straight decline in the trail which split a dense pine-wood bluff of considerable extent.



A man was lounging astride of a fallen pine log. His lean shoulders were propped against the parent stump. All about him were other stumps left by those who had made the clearing in the woods. Beyond this the shadowy deep of the woods ranged on every side, except where the red sand of a trail broke the monotony of tone.

Near by two horses stood tethered together by a leading rein. One was a saddle-horse, and the other was equipped with a well-loaded pack-saddle. It was no mean burden of provisions. The carcass of a large, black-tailed deer sprawled across the back of the saddle, while on one side were secured three bags of flour, and on the other several jack-rabbits were strung together. But the powerful beast remained unconcernedly nibbling at the sparse green peeping here and there through the carpet of rotting pine cones and needles which covered the ground.

The man's eyes were half-closed, yet he was by no means drowsing. On the contrary, his mind was essentially busy, and the occasional puckering of his dark brows, and the tightening of his strong jaws, suggested that his thoughts were not always pleasant.

After a while he sat up. But his movement was only the restlessness caused by the worry of his thought. And the gaze he turned upon his foraging horses was quite preoccupied.

A change, however, was not long in coming. Simultaneously both horses threw up their heads, and one of them gave a sharp, comprehensive snort. Instantly the man's large brown eyes lit, and a pleasant expectancy shone in their depths. He was on his feet in an instant, and his tall figure became alert and vibrant with the lithe activity which was so wonderfully displayed in his whole poise. He, too, had become aware of a disturbing element in the silent depths of the woods.

He moved across to the trail, and, glancing down it, from out of the silence reached him the distant, soft plod of hoofs in its heavy covering of sand. His look of satisfaction deepened as he turned back to his horses and tightened the cinchas of the saddles, and replaced the bits in their mouths. Then he picked up the Winchester rifle propped against a tree stump and turned again to the trail.

A moment later another horseman appeared from beyond the fringe of pines and drew up with an exclamation.

“Why, Buck, I didn’t reckon to find you around here!” he cried cordially.

“No.” The young man smiled quietly up into the horseman’s face. The welcome of his look was unmistakable. No words of his could have expressed it better.

The Padre sprang from his saddle with the lightness of a man of half his years, and his eyes rested on the pack-saddle on Buck’s second horse.

“For the—folks?” he inquired.

“Guess so. That’s the last of the flour.”

For a moment a shadow passed across the Padre’s face. Then it as suddenly brightened.

“How’s things?” he demanded, in the stereotyped fashion of men who greet when matters of importance must be discussed between them.

“So,” responded Buck.

The Padre glanced quickly round, and his eyes fell on the log which had provided the other with a seat.

“Guess there’s no hurry. Let’s sit,” he said, indicating the log. “I’m a bit saddle weary.”

Buck nodded.

They left the horses to their own devices, and moved across to the log.

“Quite a piece to Leeson Butte,” observed Buck casually, as he dropped upon the log beside his friend.

“It surely is,” replied the Padre, taking the young man in with a quick, sidelong glance.

Buck was good to look at, so strong, so calmly reliant. Every glance of his big brown eyes suggested latent power. He was not strikingly handsome, but the pronounced nose, the level, wide brows, the firm mouth and clean-shaven chin, lifted him far out of the common. He was clad simply. But his dress was perfectly suitable to the life of the farmer-hunter which was his. His white moleskin trousers were tucked into the tops of his Wellington boots, and a cartridge belt, from which hung a revolver and holster, was slung about his waist. His upper covering was a simple, gray flannel shirt, gaping wide open across his sunburnt chest, and his modest-hued silk handkerchief tied loosely about his neck.

“Leeson Butte’s getting quite a city,” Buck went on presently.

“That’s so,” replied the Padre, still bent upon his own thoughts.

After that it was quite a minute before either spoke. Yet there seemed to be no awkwardness.

Finally it was the Padre who broached the matters that lay between them.

“I got ten thousand dollars for it!” he said.

“The farm?” Buck’s interrogation was purely mechanical. He knew well enough that the other had purposely gone to Leeson Butte to sell the farm on which they had both lived so long.

The Padre nodded.

“A fancy price,” he said. “The lawyers closed quick. It was a woman bought it. I didn’t see her, though she was stopping at the hotel. I figured on getting seven thousand five hundred dollars, and only asked ten thousand dollars as a start. Guess the woman must have wanted it bad. Maybe she’s heard they’re prospecting gold around. Well, anyway she ought to get some luck with it, she’s made it easy for us to help the folks.”

Buck’s eyes were steadily fixed on the horses.

“It makes me feel bad seeing those fellers chasin’ gold, and never a color to show—an’ all the while their womenfolk an’ kiddies that thin for food you can most see their shadows through ’em.”

The eyes of the elder man brightened. The other’s words had helped to hearten

him. He had felt keenly the parting with his farm after all those years of labor and association. Yet, to a mind such as his, it had been impossible to do otherwise. How could he stand by watching a small community, such as he was surrounded with, however misguided in their search for gold, painfully and doggedly starving before his very eyes? For the men perhaps his sympathy might have been less keen, but the poor, long-suffering women and the helpless children—the thought was too painful. No, he and Buck had but their two selves to think of. They had powerful hands with which to help themselves. Those others were helpless—the women and children.

There was compensation in his sacrifice when he remembered the large orders for edible stores he had placed with the merchants of Leeson Butte before leaving that town.

“There’s a heap of food coming along for them presently,” he said after a pause.

Buck nodded.

“I’ve been settin’ that old fur fort to rights, way up in the hills back ther’,” he said, pointing vaguely behind them. “Guess we’d best move up ther’ now the farm’s—sold. We’ll need a few bits of furniture from the farm. That right—now you’ve sold it?”

“Yes. I made that arrangement. She didn’t seem to mind anything I suggested. She must be a bully sort of woman. I’m sorry I didn’t see her. The lawyer says she comes from St. Ellis.”

“Young?” suggested Buck.

The Padre shook his head.

“I wouldn’t say so. A young woman with money wouldn’t be likely to hide herself in these hills.”

“That’s so. Guess it’s the gold fetching her—the gold that isn’t here.”

“Gold’s a cursed thing,” said the Padre reflectively.

“Yet none of ’em seem to shy at the curse.” Buck smiled in his slow way.

“No. Not without experiencing it.” The Padre’s eyes were still serious. Then he went on, “We shan’t farm any up there—at the fur fort?”

Buck shook his head.

“It means clearing every inch of land we need. Guess we best hunt, as we said. We’ll make out with pelts. There’s the whole mountains for traps.”

The other stared over at the horses, and his face was very grave. After a while he turned directly to his companion, and his eyes were mildly anxious.

“See here, Buck,” he said, with what seemed unnecessary emphasis. “I’ve thought a heap on the way back—home. It seems to me I’m not acting square by you. And I’ve made up my mind.” He paused. Buck did not change his position, and his eyes were carefully avoiding those of his companion. Then the Padre went on with a decision that somehow lacked confidence. “You must take half the money, and—and get busy your own way. We’ve done farming, so there’s no reason for you to hang around here. You’re a man now, and you’ve your way to make in the world. You see, when we had the farm I thought it was good for you. It would be yours when I died, and then who knows, in time, how valuable it might become? Now it’s all different. You see the hills are best for me.” He smiled strainedly. “They’ve always been good friends to me. But——”

“Yes, you don’t fancy leavin’ the hills.” Buck’s eyes wore a curious expression. They were half-smiling, half-angry. But the other could not see them. The Padre jumped eagerly at his words.

“Just so. I’ve known them so long now that there doesn’t seem to be any other world for me. Even Leeson Butte makes me feel—er—strange.”

Buck nodded. Then he changed the subject.

“Say, we don’t sleep at the farm to-night,” he said. “The blankets are up at the old fort. That’s why I got around here. When’s she comin’ along?”

“In two or three days.” The Padre had no choice but to follow the younger man’s lead. “She’s sending along a farm woman first. She’s going to run the place herself.”

“Ther’s no man comin’?” Buck half turned to his friend.

“I don’t think so.”

“They can’t do it—hereabouts,” Buck retorted quickly. “That farm needs a man.”

“Yes.”

Buck rose abruptly and went over to the horses.

“Going?” inquired the Padre.

“I’ll get along with the vittles, and hand ’em over to the boys. Guess I’ll git back to the fort in a few hours.”

The Padre sat hesitating. He watched the movements of his companion without observing them.

“Buck!”

The other paused as he was about to put his foot into the stirrup. He glanced over his shoulder.

“Yes?”

“About that money. There’s five thousand of it yours.”

“Not on your life, Padre!”

The elder man sighed as he stood up, and his look changed so that it almost seemed as if a weight had been lifted from his mind. Their eyes met as Buck swung himself into the saddle.

“Then we’re going to the hills—together?” he said smilingly.

“Sure,” responded Buck promptly. Then he added, “But we’re goin’ to hunt—not farm.”

His decisive manner left no room for doubt, and the Padre, moving over to him, held out his hand. They gripped till the elder man winced.

“I’m glad I found you on the trail that time,” he said, looking squarely into the steady brown eyes. “I’ve always been glad, but—I’m gladder still now.”

“Me, too,” said Buck, with a light laugh. “Guess I’d have hated to ha’ fed the coyotes.”

Buck swung round to the trail, leading his packhorse, and the Padre went back to his horse. Just as he was about to mount the younger man’s voice reached him again. He paused.

“Say, what’s the woman’s name?” Buck inquired.

“Eh?” The Padre looked startled. “The woman that bought the farm?”

“Yes—sure.”

The elder man’s face flushed painfully. It was a curious sight. He looked as stupidly guilty as any schoolboy.

“I—I can’t say. I never asked.” He felt absurdly foolish and tried to explain. “You see, I only dealt with the lawyer.”

Buck shook his head, and smiled in his slow fashion.

“Sold the farm, an’ don’t know who to! Gee!”

It was good to hear his laugh as he rode away. The Padre watched him till he was out of sight.



CHAPTER V

THE STEEPS OF LIFE

Buck leant over his horse's withers as the laboring creature clawed tenaciously up the face of the rugged hill. His whole poise was that of sympathetic straining. Nor were his eyes a whit less eager than those of the faithful animal under him.

He was making the last twenty yards of the climb up Devil's Hill from the side on which lay the new home adopted by the Padre and himself. Hitherto this point of approach had been accepted as inaccessible for a horseman, nor, until now, had Buck seen reason to dispute the verdict. But, to-day, a sudden impulse had constrained him to make the attempt, not from any vainglorious reason, or from the recklessness which was so much a part of his nature, but simply that somewhere high up on the great table-land at the summit of the hill he hoped to find an answer to a riddle that was sorely puzzling him.

It had been a great struggle even on the lower and more gradual slopes, for the basaltic rocks were barren, and broken, and slippery. There was no gripping soil, or natural foothold. Just the weather-worn rocks which offered no grip to Cæsar's metal-shod hoofs. Yet the generous-hearted beast had floundered on up to the last stretch, where the hill rose abruptly at a perilous angle.

It was a terrible scramble. As he looked above, at the point where the sky-line was cut by the broken rocks, even the reckless heart of the man quailed. Yet there was no turning back. To do so meant certain disaster. No horse, however sure-footed, could ever hope to make the descent by the way they had come. Buck had looked back just for one brief second, but his eyes had instantly turned again for relief to the heights above. Disaster lay behind him. To go on—well, if he failed to reach the brow of the blackened hill it would mean disaster anyway. And a smile of utter recklessness slowly lit his face.

So, with set jaws and straining body, he urged Cæsar to a last supreme effort, and the great black creature responded gallantly. With head low to the ground, his muscles standing out like ropes upon his shoulders, his forelegs bent like grappling-hooks, his quarters tucked beneath him, he put his giant heart into the work. Step by step, inch by inch he gained, yawing and sliding, stumbling and

floundering, making way where all way seemed impossible. Slowly they crept up, slowly, slowly they neared that coveted line. Buck was breathing hard. Cæsar was blowing and had thrown his mouth agape, a sign that beyond this he could make no further effort. Five yards—two yards. The jagged line seemed to come down to meet them. At last, with a final spring, the great horse trampled it under foot.

Buck heaved a sigh of relief.

“Gee!” he murmured. Then with the wide, black plain stretching before him, its limits lost in a strange mist, he flung out of the saddle.

He stared about him curiously. Devil’s Hill was in no way new to him. Many a time he had visited its mysterious regions, but always had he approached it from the prospecting camp, or his own farm, both of which lay away on the northern side of it.

A wide plateau, nearly two miles in extent, stretched out before him. It was as flat as the proverbial board, with just one isolated rock towering upon its bosom. This was the chief object of interest now. Away in the distance he beheld its ghostly outline, almost lost in the ruddy atmosphere which, just now, seemed to envelop the whole of that Western world.

It was a desolate scene. So desolate as to carry a strange sense of depression to the heart of the horseman. There was not a tree in sight—nor a single blade of grass. There was nothing but the funereal black of basaltic rock, of which the hill seemed to be one solid mass. Such was its desolation that even the horse seemed to be drooping at the sight of it. It was always the same with Buck. There was an influence about the place which always left him feeling rather hopeless. He knew the old Indian stories of superstition. He knew the awe in which the more ignorant among the white folk held this hill. But these things left him unaffected. He only regarded it from his own personal observations, which were not very enlivening.

Apart from the fact that not one atom of vegetation would grow either upon the surface or slopes of Devil’s Hill, no snows in winter had ever been known to settle upon its uninviting bosom. Long before the snow touched its surface, however low the temperature of the atmosphere, however severe a blizzard might be raging—and the Montana blizzards are notorious for their severity—the snow was turned to water, and a deluge of rain hissed upon its surface.

Then, too, there was that mystery rock in the distance of the great plateau. It was one of Nature's little enigmas with which she loves to puzzle the mind of man. How came it there, shot up in the midst of that wide, flat stretch of rock? It stood within a few hundred yards of the eastern brink of the hill which, in its turn, was another mystery. The eastern extremity was not a mere precipice, it was a vast overhang which left Yellow Creek, upon whose banks the mining camps were pitched, flowing beneath the roof of a giant tunnel supported by a single side.

The rock on the plateau reared its misshapen head to the heavens at a height of something over two hundred feet, and its great base formed a vast cavern out of which, fanwise, spread a lake of steaming water, which flowed on to the very brink of the hill where it overshadowed the creek below. Thus it was, more than half the lake was held suspended in mid-air, with no other support than the parent hill from which its bed projected. It was an awesome freak of nature, calculated to astonish even eyes that were accustomed to the sight of it.

But Buck was not thinking of these things now. He was looking at the view. He was looking at the sky. He was looking from this great height for an explanation of the curious, ruddy light in the sunless sky, the teeming haze which weighted down the brain, and, with the slightest movement, opened the pores of the skin and set the perspiration streaming.

In all his years of the Montana hills he had never experienced such a curious atmospheric condition. Less than an hour ago he had left the Padre at the fur fort under a blazing summer sky, with the crisp mountain air whipping in his nostrils. Then, quite of a sudden, had come this change. There were no storm-clouds, and yet storm was in every breath of the superheated air he took. There was no wind, nor anything definite to alarm except this sudden blind heat and the purple hue which seemed to have spread itself over the whole world. Thus it was, as he neared the mysterious mountain, he had made up his mind to its ascent in the hope of finding, there upon the unwholesome plateau, the key to the atmospheric mystery.

But none seemed to be forthcoming, so, turning at last to the patient Cæsar, he once more returned to the saddle and rode on to the barren shores of Devil's Lake.

The lake was a desolate spot. The waters stretched out before him, still, and silent, and black. There was not even a ripple upon its steaming surface. Here the haze hung as it always hung, and the cavern was belching forth deep mists, like

the breathing of some prehistoric monster. He glanced up at the birdless rock above, and into the broken outlines of it he read the distorted features of some baleful, living creature, or some savage idol. But there was no answer here to the questions of his mind, any more than there had been on the rest of the plateau, so he rode on along the edge of the water.

He reached the extreme end of the lake and paused again. He could go no farther, for nothing but a rocky parapet, less than twenty feet wide, barred the waters from tumbling headlong to the depths below.

After a moment Cæsar grew restless, his equine nerves seemed to be on a jangle, and the steadying hand of his master had no effect. His eyes were wistful and dilated, and he glanced distrustfully from side to side, snorting loudly his evident alarm. Buck moved him away from his proximity to the water, and turned to a critical survey of the remoter crests of the Rocky Mountains.

The white snowcaps had gone. The purple of the lesser hills, usually so delicate in their gradings, were lost in one monotony of dull red light. The nearer distance was a mere world of ghostly shadows tinged with the same threatening hue, and only the immediate neighborhood was in any way clean cut and sharp to the eye. His brows drew together in perplexity. Again, down there in the valley, beyond the brink of the plateau, the dull red fog prevailed, and yet through it he could see the dim picture of grass-land, of woods, of river, and the rising slopes of more hills beyond.

No, the secret of the atmospheric phenomenon was not up here, and it was useless to waste more time. So he moved off, much to his impatient horse's relief, in a direction where he knew a gentle slope would lead him from the hilltop to the neighborhood of the old farm and the ford across Yellow Creek.

But even this way the road required negotiation, for the same bald rocks and barrenness offered no sure foothold. However, Cæsar was used to this path, and made no mistakes. His master gave him his head, and, with eyes to the ground, the sure-footed beast moved along with almost cat-like certainty. At last the soft soil of the valley was reached again, and once more the deepening woods swallowed them up.

The end of Buck's journey lay across Yellow Creek, where a few miserable hovels sheltered a small community of starving gold-seekers, and thither he now hastened. On his way he had a distant view of the old farm. He would have preferred to have avoided it, but that was quite impossible. He had not yet got

over the parting from it, which had taken place the previous day. To him had fallen the lot of handing it over to the farm-wife who had been sent on ahead from Leeson Butte to prepare it for her employer's coming. And the full sense of his loss was still upon him. Wrong as he knew himself to be, he resented the newcomer's presence in his old home, and could not help regarding her as something in the nature of a usurper.

The camp to which he was riding was a wretched enough place. Nor could Nature, here in her most luxuriant mood, relieve it from its sordid aspect. A few of the huts were sheltered at the fringe of the dark woods, but most were set out upon the foreground of grass, which fronted the little stream.

As Buck approached he could not help feeling that they were the most deplorable huts ever built. They were like a number of inverted square boxes, with roofs sloping from front to back. They were made out of rough logs cut from the pine woods, roofed in with an ill-laid thatch of mud and grass, supported on the lesser limbs cut from the trees felled to supply the logs. How could such despairing hovels ever be expected to shelter men marked out for success? There was disaster, even tragedy, in every line of them. They were scarcely even shelters from the elements. With their broken mud plaster, their doorless entrances, their ill-laid thatch, they were surely little better than sieves.

Then their surroundings of garbage, their remnants of coarse garments hanging out upon adjacent bushes, their lack of every outward sign of industrial prosperity. No, to Buck's sympathetic eyes, there was tragedy written in every detail of the place.

Were not these people a small band of regular tramp gold-seekers? What was their outlook? What was their perspective? The tramp gold-seeker is a creature apart from the rest of the laboring world. He is not an ordinary worker seeking livelihood in a regular return from his daily effort. He works under the influence of a craze that is little less than disease. He could never content himself with stereotyped employment.

Besides, the rot of degradation soon seizes upon his moral nature. No matter what his origin, what his upbringing, his education, his pursuit of gold seems to have a deadening effect upon all his finer instincts, and reduces him swiftly to little better than the original animal. Civilization is forgotten, buried deep beneath a mire of moral mud, accumulated in long years, and often in months only of association with the derelicts and "hard cases" of the world. Rarely

enough, when Fortune's pendulum swings toward one more favored individual, a flickering desire to return to gentler paths will momentarily stir amidst the mire, but it seldom amounts to more than something in the nature of a drunkard's dream in moments of sobriety, and passes just as swiftly. The lustful animal appetite is too powerful; it demands the sordid pleasures which the possession of gold makes possible. Nor will it be satisfied with anything else. A tramp gold-seeker is irreclaimable. His joy lies in his quest and the dreams of fortune which are all too rarely fulfilled. Every nerve centre is drugged with his lust, and, like all decadents, he must fulfil the destiny which his own original weakness has marked out for him.

Buck understood something of all this without reasoning it out in his simple mind. He understood with a heart as reckless as their own, but with a brain that had long since gathered strength from the gentle wisdom of the man who was a sort of foster-father to him. He did not pity. He felt he had no right to pity, but he had a deep sympathy and love for the strongly human motives which stirred these people. Success or failure, he saw them as men and women whose many contradictory qualities made them intensely lovable and sometimes even objects for respect, if for nothing else, at least for their very hardihood and courage.

He rode up to the largest hut, which stood beyond the shadow of a group of pine-trees, and dropped out of the saddle. With careful forethought he loosened the cinchas of Cæsar's saddle and removed the bit from his mouth. Then, with one last look at the purpling heavens, he pushed aside the tattered blanket which hung across the doorway and strode into the dimly-lit apartment.

It was a silent greeting that welcomed him. His own "Howdy" met with no verbal response. But every eye of the men lying about on blankets outspread upon the dusty floor was turned in his direction.

The scene was strange enough, but for Buck it had nothing new. The gaunt faces and tattered clothing had long since ceased to drive him to despairing protest. He knew, in their own phraseology, they were "up against it"—the "it" in this case meaning the hideous spectre of starvation. He glanced over the faces and counted seven of them. He knew them all. But, drawing forward an upturned soap-box, he sat down and addressed himself to Curly Saunders, who happened to be lying on his elbow nearest the door.

"Say, I just came along to give you word that vittles are on the way from Leeson Butte," he said, as though the fact was of no serious importance.

Curly, a short, thick-set man of enormous strength and round, youngish face, eased himself into a half-sitting position. But before he could answer another man, with iron-gray hair, sat up alertly and eyed their visitor without much friendliness.

“More o’ the Padre’s charity?” he said, in a manner that suggested resentment at the benefit he had no intention of refusing. Curiously enough, too, his careless method of expression in no way disguised the natural refinement of his voice.

Buck shook his head, and his eyes were cold.

“Don’t guess there’s need of charity among friends, Beasley.”

Beasley Melford laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh.

“Guess it makes him feel good dopin’ out stuff to us same as if we was bums,” he said harshly.

“Shut up!” cried a voice from a remote corner. Buck looked over and saw a lean, dark man hugging his knees and smoking a well-burnt briar pipe. The same voice went on: “Guess you’d sicken most anybody, Beasley. You got a mean mind. Guess the Padre’s a hell of a bully feller.”

“He sure is,” said Montana Ike, lolling over on to his side and pushing his canvas kit-bag into a more comfortable position. “You was sayin’ there was vittles comin’ along, Buck? Guess ther’ ain’t no ‘chawin’ now?”

“Tobacco, sure,” responded Buck with a smile.

One by one the men sat up on their frowsy blankets. The thought of provisions seemed to have roused them from their lethargy. Buck’s eyes wandered over the faces peering at him out of the murky shadows. The squalor of the hut was painful, and, with the knowledge that help was at hand, the sight struck him even more forcibly.

“Quit work?” he asked a moment later, in his abrupt fashion.

Somebody laughed.

Buck looked round for an answer. And again his eyes caught the steely, ironical gleam in the man Beasley’s.

“The last o’ Slaney’s kids ‘passed in’ last night. Guess we’re goin’ to bury her.”

Buck nodded. He had no words. But he carefully avoided looking in the direction of Slaney Dick, who sat in a far corner smoking his pipe and hugging his great knees.

Beasley went on in the same half-mocking tone—

“Guess it’s up to me to read the service over her.”

“You!”

Buck could not help the ejaculation. Beasley Melford was an unfrocked Churchman. Nor was it known the reason of his dismissal from his calling. All Buck knew was that Beasley was a man of particularly low morals and detestable nature. The thought that he was to administer the last rites of the Church over the dead body of a pure and innocent infant set his every feeling in active protest. He turned to Slaney.

“The Padre buried the others?” he said questioningly.

It was Dick’s partner, Abe Allinson, who took it upon himself to answer.

“Y’ see the Padre’s done a heap. Slaney’s missis didn’t guess we’d orter worrit him. That’s how she said.”

Buck suddenly swung round on Beasley.

“Fix it for to-morrow, an’ the Padre’ll be right along.”

He looked the ex-Churchman squarely in the eye. He was not making a request. His words were an emphatic refusal to allow the other the office. It was Slaney who answered him.

“I’m glad,” he said. Then, as an afterthought, “an’ the missis’ll be glad, too.”

After that nobody seemed inclined to break the silence. Nor was it until somebody hawked and spat that the spell was broken.

“We bin holdin’ a meetin’,” said Curly Saunders heavily. “Y’ see, it ain’t no good.”

Buck nodded at the doorway.

“You mean——?”

“The prospect,” Beasley broke in and laughed. “Say, we sure been suckers stayin’ around so long. Ther’ ain’t no gold within a hundred miles of us. We’re just lyin’ rottin’ around like—stinkin’ sheep.”

Curly nodded.

“Sure. That’s why we held a meeting. We’re goin’ to up stakes an’ git.”

“Where to?”

Buck’s quick inquiry met with a significant silence, which Montana Ike finally broke.

“See here,” he cried, with sudden force. “What’s the use in astin’ fool questions? Ther’ ain’t no gold, ther’ ain’t nuthin’. We got color fer scratchin’ when we first gathered around like skippin’ lambs, but ther’s nuthin’ under the surface, an’ the surface is played right out. I tell you it’s a cursed hole. Jest look around. Look at yonder Devil’s Hill. Wher’d you ever see the like? That’s it. Devil’s Hill. Say, it’s a devil’s region, an’ everything to it belongs to the devil. Ther’ ain’t nuthin’ fer us—nuthin’, but to die of starvin’. Ah, psha’! It’s a lousy world. Gawd, when I think o’ the wimminfolk it makes my liver heave. Say, some of them pore kiddies ain’t had milk fer weeks, an’ we only ke’p ’em alive thro’ youse two fellers. Say,” he went on, in a sudden burst of passion, “we got a right, same as other folk, to live, an’ our kids has, an’ our wimmin too. Mebbe we ain’t same as other folks, them folks with their kerridges an’ things in cities, mebbe our kiddies ain’t got no names by the Chu’ch, an’ our wimmin ain’t no Chu’ch writin’ fer sharin’ our blankets, but we got a right to live, cos we’re made to live. An’ by Gee! I’m goin’ to live! I tell youse folk right here, ther’s cattle, an’ ther’s horses, an’ ther’s grain in this dogone land, an’ I’m goin’ to git what I need of ’em ef I’m gettin’ it at the end of a gun! That’s me, fellers, an’ them as has the notion had best foller my trail.”

The hungry eyes of the man shone in the dusk of the room. The harsh lines of his weak face were desperate. Every word he said he meant, and his whole protest was the just complaint of a man willing enough to accept the battle as it came, but determined to save life itself by any means to his hand.

It was Beasley who caught at the suggestion.

“You’ve grit, Ike, an’ guess I’m with you at any game like that.”

Buck waited for the others. He had no wish to persuade them to any definite

course. He had come there with definite instructions from the Padre, and in his own time he would carry them out.

A youngster, who had hitherto taken no part in the talk, suddenly lifted a pair of heavy eyes from the torn pages of a five-cent novel.

“Wal!” he cried abruptly. “Wot’s the use o’ gassin’? Let’s light right out. That’s how we sed ’fore you come along, Buck.” He paused, and a sly grin slowly spread over his features. Then, lowering his voice to a persuasive note, he went on, “Here, fellers, mebbe ther’ ain’t more’n cents among us. Wal, I’d sure say we best pool ’em, an’ I’ll set right out over to Bay Creek an’ git whisky. I’ll make it in four hours. Then we’ll hev jest one hell of a time to-night, an’ up stakes in the morning, fer—fer any old place out o’ here. How’s that?”

“Guess our few cents don’t matter, anyways,” agreed Curly, his dull eyes brightening. “I’d say the Kid’s right. I ain’t lapped a sup o’ rye in months.”

“It ain’t bad fer Soapy,” agreed Beasley. “Wot say, boys?”

He glanced round for approval and found it in every eye except Slaney’s. The bereaved father seemed utterly indifferent to anything except his own thoughts, which were of the little waxen face he had watched grow paler and paler in his arms only yesterday morning, until he had laid the poor little dead body in his weeping woman’s lap.

Buck felt the time had come for him to interpose. He turned on Beasley with unmistakable coldness.

“Guess the Padre got the rest of his farm money yesterday—when the woman came along,” he said. “An’ the vittles he ordered are on the trail. I’d say you don’t need to light out—yet.”

Beasley laughed offensively.

“Still on the charity racket?” he sneered.

Buck’s eyes lit with sudden anger.

“You don’t need to touch the vittles,” he cried. “You haven’t any woman, and no kiddies. Guess there’s nothing to keep you from getting right out.”

He eyed the man steadily, and then turned slowly to the others.

“Here, boys, the Padre says the food and canned truck’ll be along to-morrow morning. And you can divide it between you accordin’ to your needs. If you want to get out it’ll help you on the road. And he’ll hand each man a fifty-dollar bill, which’ll make things easier. If you want to stop around, and give the hill another chance, why the fifty each will make a grub stake.”

The proposition was received in absolute silence. Even Beasley had no sneering comment. The Kid’s eyes were widely watching Buck’s dark face. Slaney had removed his pipe, and, for the moment, his own troubles were forgotten under a sudden thrill of hope. Curly Saunders sat up as though about to speak, but no words came. Abe Allinson, Ike, and Blue Grass Pete contented themselves with staring their astonishment at the Padre’s munificence. Finally Slaney hawked and spat.

“Seems to me,” he said, in his quiet, drawling voice, “the Padre sold his farm to help us out.”

“By Gee! that’s so,” exclaimed Curly, thumping a fist into the palm of his other hand.

The brightening eyes lit with hope. The whole atmosphere of the place seemed to have lost something of its depression.

Ike shook his head.

“I’m gettin’ out. But say, the Padre’s a bully feller.”

Abe nodded.

“Ike’s right. Slaney an’ me’s gettin’ out, too. Devil’s Hill’s a cursed blank.”

“Me, too,” broke in the Kid. “But say, wot about poolin’ our cents for whisky?” he went on, his young mind still intent upon the contemplated orgie.

It was Buck who helped the wavering men to their decision. He understood them. He understood their needs. The ethics of the proposition did not trouble him. These men had reached a point where they needed a support such as only the fiery spirits their stomachs craved could give them. The Padre’s help would come afterward. At the moment, after the long weeks of disappointment, they needed something to lift them, even if it was only momentarily. He reached round to his hip-pocket and pulled out two single-dollar bills and laid them on the dusty ground in front of him.

“Ante up, boys,” he said cheerfully. “Empty your dips. The Kid’s right. An’ tomorrow you can sure choose what you’re going to do.” Then he turned to the Kid. “My plug Cæsar’s outside. Guess you best take him. He’ll make the journey in two hours. An’ you’ll need to bustle him some, because ther’s a kind o’ storm gettin’ around right smart. Eh?” He turned and glanced sharply at Beasley. “You got a dollar?”

“It’s fer whisky,” leered the ex-Churchman, as he laid the dirty paper on the top of Buck’s.

In two minutes the pooling was completed and the Kid prepared to set out. Eight dollars was all the meeting could muster—eight dollars collected in small silver, which represented every cent these men possessed in the world. Buck knew this. At least he could answer for everybody except perhaps Beasley Melford. That wily individual he believed was capable of anything. He was sure that he was capable of accepting anything from anybody, while yet being in a position to more than help himself.

Buck went outside to see the Kid off, and some of the men had gathered in the doorway. They watched the boy swing himself into the saddle, and the desperate shadows had lightened on their hungry faces. The buoyancy of their irresponsible natures was reasserting itself. That bridge, which the Padre’s promise had erected between their despair and the realms of hope, however slight its structure, was sufficient to lift them once more to the lighter mood so natural to them.

So their tongues were loosened, and they offered their messenger the jest from which they could seldom long refrain, the coarse, deep-throated jest which sprang from sheer animal spirits rather than any subtlety of wit. They forgot for the time that until Buck’s coming they had contemplated the burial of a comrade’s only remaining offspring. They forgot that the grieving father was still within the hut, his great jaws clenched upon the mouthpiece of his pipe, his hollow eyes still gazing straight in front of him. That was their way. There was a slight ray of hope for them, a brief respite. There was the thought, too, of eight dollars’ worth of whisky, a just portion of which was soon to be in each stomach.

But Buck was not listening to them. He had almost forgotten the messenger riding away on his treasured horse, so occupied was he by the further change that had occurred in the look of the sky and in the atmosphere of the valley. Presently he lifted one strong, brown hand to his forehead and wiped the beads

of perspiration from it.

“Phew! What heat! Here,” he cried, pointing at Devil’s Hill, away to his left, “what d’you make of that?”

For a moment all eyes followed the direction of his outstretched arm. And slowly there grew in them a look of awe such as rarely found place in their feelings.

The crown of the hill, the whole of the vast, black plateau was enveloped in a dense gray fog. Above that hung a mighty, thunderous pall of purple storm-cloud. Back, away into the mountains in billowy rolls it extended, until the whole distance was lost in a blackness as of night.

It was Curly Saunders who broke the awed silence.

“Jumpin’ Mackinaw!” he cried. Then he looked after their departing messenger. “Say, that feller oughtn’t to’ve gone to Bay Creek. He’ll never make it.”

Beasley, whose feelings were less susceptible, and whose mind was set on the promised orgie, sneered at the other’s tone.

“Skeered some, ain’t you? Tcha’! It’s jest wind——”

But he never completed his sentence. At that instant the whole of the heavens seemed to split and gape open. A shaft of light, extending from horizon to horizon, paralyzed their vision. It was accompanied by a crash of thunder that set their ear-drums well-nigh bursting. Both lightning and the thunder lasted for what seemed interminable minutes and left their senses dazed, and the earth rocking beneath their feet. Again came the blinding light, and again the thunder crashed. Then, in a moment, panic had set in, and the tattered blanket had fallen behind the last man as a rush was made for the doubtful shelter of the hut.



CHAPTER VI

OUT OF THE STORM

The challenge had gone forth. In those two vivid shafts of light, in the deafening peals of thunder the war of elements had been proclaimed, and these men of the wilderness understood something of their danger.

Thereafter, for some moments, a threatening silence reigned everywhere. The birds, the insects even, all life seemed to crouch, hushed and expectant. The valley might have been the valley of death, so still, so dark, so threatening was the superheated atmosphere that hung over it.

The men within the shelter of the hut waited, and only Buck and Blue Grass Pete stood near the blanket-covered doorway. There was little enough confidence in the inefficient shelter of the hut, but it was their natural retreat and so they accepted it. Then the moment of tension passed, and Buck, glancing swiftly round the hut, seized a hammer and hastily secured the covering of the doorway.

“She’ll be on us right smart,” he observed to Pete, who assisted him while the others looked on.

“Yes,” replied Pete resignedly. “Guess we’re goin’ to git it good.” There was not only resignation, but indifference in his tone.

Buck glanced up at the roof, and the rest followed his gaze curiously. He shook his head.

“It’s worse than——”

But he did not finish what he had to say. A strange hissing broke from the distance, like the sound of rushing water, and, with each passing moment, it grew in volume until, out of the heart of it, a deep-throated roar boomed over the hilltops.

It was a great wind-storm leaping down from the everlasting snows of the mountains, tearing its way through the lean branches of the forest-tops, the wide-gaping valleys, and rushing up the hillsides with a violence that tore limbs from the parent trunks and rooted out trees that had withstood a thousand storms. It

was the deep breath of the storm fiend launched upon a defenseless earth, carrying wreck and destruction whithersoever its blast was turned.

“By Jing’!”

It was Montana Ike who voiced the awe crowding every heart.

But his exclamation brought the practical mind of Buck to consideration of their needs. His eyes turned again to the roof, and Pete voiced his thoughts.

“She’ll carry away like—like a kite when it hits us,” he declared. Several more pairs of eyes were turned helplessly upward. Suddenly Buck swung round upon the doorway.

“Here she comes,” he cried. “Holy——!”

With a rush and a deafening roar the wind hit the building and set it rocking. Buck and Pete flung themselves with arms outspread against the ballooning blanket, and it held. Again the wind crashed against the sides of the hut. Some one flung himself to the two men’s assistance. Then came a ripping and tearing, and the thatch hissed away on the breath of the storm like straw caught in a whirlwind. The men gazed stupidly up at the blackened heavens, which were now like night. There was nothing to be done. What could they do? They were helpless. And not even a voice could make itself heard in the howling of the wind as it shrieked about the angles of the building.

Then came the rain. It fell in great drops whose sheer weight and size carried them, at the moment of impact, through the ragged shirts to the warm flesh beneath. In a second, it seemed, a waterspout was upon them and was pouring its tide into the roofless hut.

With the deluge, the elemental battle began in desperate earnest. Peal after peal of thunder crashed directly overhead, and with it came such a display of heavenly pyrotechnics that in their wildest moments these men had never dreamed of. Their eyes were blinded, and their ear-drums were bursting with the incessant hammering of the thunder.

But the wind had passed on, shrieking and tearing its way into the dim distance until its voice was utterly drowned in the sterner detonations of the battle.

Drenched to the skin, knee-deep in water, the men stood herded together like sheep in a pen. Their blankets were awash and floated about, tangling their legs

in the miniature lake that could not find rapid enough exit through the doorway. They could only stand there stupidly. To go outside was to find no other shelter, and only the more openly to expose themselves to the savage forks of lightning playing across the heavens in such blinding streaks. Nor could they help the women even if they needed help in the other huts. The roofs and doors would or would not hold, and, in the latter case, until the force of the storm abated no help could serve them.

The storm showed no signs of abatement. The black sky was the sky of an unlit night. There was no lightening in any direction, and the blinding flashes amidst the din of thunder only helped to further intensify the pitchy vault. The splitting of trees amidst the chaos reached the straining ears, and it was plain that every flash of light was finding a billet for its forked tongue in the adjacent forests.

The time dragged on. How long or how short was the period of the storm none of the men wondered or cared. The rapidity of the thunder crashes, the swift successions of lightning entirely held them, and, strong as they were, these things kept their nerves jumping.

Once in the midst of it all a man suddenly cried out. His cry came with a more than usually brilliant flash of purplish, steel-blue fire. The intensity of it carried pain to the now supersensitive nerves of his vision, and he turned and flung himself with his face buried upon his arm against the dripping wall. It was Beasley Melford. He stood there cowering, a dreadful terror shaking his every nerve.

The others turned stupidly in his direction, but none had thought for his suffering. Each was hard pressed to face the terror of it all himself; each was wondering at what moment his own limits would be reached. Buck alone showed no sign of the nervous tension. His deep brown eyes watched the group about him, automatically blinking with every flash of light, and with only the slightest possible start as the thunder crashed into his ears.

He was thinking, too—thinking hard of many things. The Padre was out in the hills with gun and traps. Would he have anticipated the swift rising storm and regained the shelter of the stout old fort? With the boom of falling trees going on about them, with the fiery crackle of the blazing light as it hit the topmost branches of the adjacent forest, he wondered and hoped, and feared for the old man in the same thought.

Then there were those others. The women and children in the other huts. How

were they faring? But he remembered that the married quarters were better built than this hut had been, and he drew comfort from the thought. And what of the Kid, and of Cæsar?

More than two hours passed before any change came. The deafening peals of thunder seemed as though they would never lessen in tone. The night-like heavens seemed as though no sun could ever hope to penetrate them again. And the streaming rain—was there ever such a deluge since the old Biblical days!

Buck understood now the nature of the storm. Probably twenty years would elapse before another cloudburst would occur again, and the thought set him speculating upon the effect this might have upon the lake on Devil's Hill. What might not happen? And then the creek below! He remembered that these huts of the gold-seekers were on the low-lying banks of the creek. What if it flooded? He stirred uneasily, and, turning to the doorway, opened a loose fold in the blanket and peered out.

He saw the creek in a sudden blaze of light, and in that momentary brilliance he saw that the rushing water was rising rapidly. A grave feeling of uneasiness stirred him and he turned back to his companions. For once in his life he felt utterly helpless.

Another hour passed. The atmospheric heat had passed, and the men stood shivering in the water. The chill was biting into their very bones, but still there was no respite. Twice more Buck turned anxious eyes upon the creek. And each time his alarm increased as the blinding light revealed the rapid rise of the water. He dared not voice his fears yet. He understood the condition of mind prevailing. To warn his companions would be to set them rushing to get their womenfolk out of their shelters, and this must not be thought of—yet.

He had just arrived at the conclusion that he would abide by his next observation when the long-looked-for change began. It came as suddenly as the rising of the storm itself. It came in a rapid lightening of the sky overhead. From black to gray it turned almost in a second. A dull, ominous, rolling world of gray rain-clouds. The thunder died away and the blinding flashes came no more. It was as though the storm had been governed by one all-powerful will and the word to "cease fire" had been hurled across the heavens as the last discharge of monstrous artillery had been fired. Then, with the lifting of the darkness, the rain slackened too, and the deluge eased.

Buck sighed his relief, and Curly Saunders, from near by, audibly expressed his.

“She’s lettin’ up,” he growled.

Pete caught at his words.

“It sure is.”

Buck was about to speak, but his lips remained open and he stood listening.

What was that?

Something was moving beyond the doorway. Something touched the blanket as though seeking support. Then it slid down, its movement visible in the bulging of the drenched cloth. This was followed by a heavy, squelching flop. The body, whatever it was, had fallen into the streaming water pouring from within the hut. Then came a long-drawn, piteous moan that held the men gazing silently and stupidly at the sagging blanket.

It was while they stood thus that the rain ceased altogether, and the great storm-clouds broke and began to disperse, and a watery sunbeam lit the wreck of the passing storm. As its light poured in upon the wretched interior a second moan, short and weak but distinctly audible, reached the astounded ears of the men. There was a moment’s pause as it died out, then Buck’s arm shot out, and, seizing the edge of the blanket, he ripped it from its fastenings and let it fall to the ground. Instantly every neck was set craning, and every eye was alight with wonder, for there, half-resting upon the sill of the doorway, and half-lying upon the ground with the water streaming everywhere about her, lay the huddled, half-drowned figure of a young woman.

“It’s—it’s a—woman,” cried Pete stupidly, unable to contain his astonishment longer.

“It sure is,” murmured Curly, with equal brightness.

But while they gave the company the benefit of their keenness of perception Buck had dropped upon his knees and was bending over the wretched victim of the storm. He raised her, and drew her tenderly into his arms.

“’Tain’t one of ours,” announced Ike over his shoulder.

“No.” Buck’s monosyllable displayed no great interest in his remark.

Amidst a dead silence Buck suddenly straightened up, with the dripping figure clasped tightly in his strong arms. A great pity shone in his eyes as he gazed

down into the fair young face. It was the first time in all his life he had held a woman in his arms, and the sensation of it made him forget those others about him.

Suddenly Ike's voice aroused him.

"By Gar!" he cried. "Jest look at that red ha'r. Say, easy, boys, we're treadin' it around in the mud."

It was true. The great masses of the girl's red-gold hair had fallen loose and were trailing in the water as Buck held her. It reached from the man's shoulder, where her head was pillowed, and the heavy-footed men were trampling the ends of it into the mud. Ike stooped and rescued the sodden mass, and laid it gently across Buck's shoulders.

For a moment the sun shone down upon the wondering group. The clouds had broken completely, and were scattering in every direction as though eager to escape observation after their recent shameful display. No one seemed to think of moving out into the rapidly warming open. They were content to gather about Buck's tall figure and gape down at the beautiful face of the girl lying in his arms.

It was Beasley Melford who first became practical.

"She's alive, anyway," he said. "Sort o' stunned. Mebbe it's the lightnin'."

Pete turned, a withering glance upon his foxy face.

"Lightnin' nuthin'," he cried scornfully. "If she'd bin hit she'd ha' bin black an' dead. Why, she—she ain't even brown. She's white as white." His voice became softer, and he was no longer addressing the ex-Churchman. "Did y' ever see sech skin—so soft an' white? An' that ha'r, my word! I'd gamble a dollar her eyes is blue—ef she'd jest open 'em."

He reached out a great dirty hand to touch the beautiful whiteness of the girl's throat with a caressing movement, but instantly Buck's voice, sharp and commanding, stayed his action.

"Quit that!" he cried. "Ke'p your durned hands to yourself," he added, with a strange hoarseness.

Pete's eyes lit angrily.

“Eh? What’s amiss?” he demanded. “Guess I ain’t no disease.”

Beasley chuckled across at him, and the sound of his mirth infuriated Buck. He understood the laugh and the meaning underlying it.

“Buck turned wet nurse,” cried the ex-Churchman, as he beheld the sudden flush on the youngster’s face.

“You can ke’p your durned talk,” Buck cried. “You Beasley—and the lot of you,” he went on recklessly. “She’s no ord’nary gal; she’s—she’s a lady.”

Curly and Ike nodded agreement.

But Beasley, whatever his fears of the storm, understood the men of his world. Nor had he any fear of them, and Buck’s threat only had the effect of rousing the worst side of his nature, at all times very near the surface.

“Lady? Psha’! Write her down a woman, they’re all the same, only dressed different. Seems to me it’s better they’re all just women. An’ Pete’s good enough for any woman, eh, Pete? She’s just a nice, dandy bit o’ soft flesh an’ blood, eh, Pete? Guess you like them sort, eh, Pete?”

The man’s laugh was a hideous thing to listen to, but Pete was not listening. Buck heard, and his dark face went ghastly pale, even though his eyes were fixed on the beautiful face with its closed, heavily-lashed eyes. Pete’s attention was held by the delicate contours of her perfect figure and the gaping, bedraggled white shirt-waist, where the soft flesh of her fair bosom showed through, and the delicate lace and ribbons of her undergarments were left in full view.

No one offered Beasley encouragement and his laugh fell flat. And when Curly spoke it was to express something of the general thought.

“Wonder how she came here?” he said thoughtfully.

“Seems as though the storm had kind o’ dumped her down,” Abe Allinson admitted.

Again Beasley chuckled.

“Say, was ther’ ever such a miracle o’ foolishness as you fellers? You make me laff—or tired, or something. Wher’d she come from? Ain’t the Padre sold his farm?” he demanded, turning on Buck. “Ain’t he sold it to a woman? An’ ain’t he expectin’ her along?”

Buck withdrew his eyes from the beautiful face, and looked up in answer to the challenge.

“Why, yes,” he said, his look suddenly hardening as he confronted Beasley’s face. “I had forgotten. This must surely be Miss—Miss Rest. That’s the name Mrs. Ransford, the old woman at the farm, said. Rest.” He repeated the name as though it were pleasant to his ears.

“Course,” cried Curly cheerfully. “That’s who it is—sure.”

“Rest, eh? Miss—Rest,” murmured the preoccupied Pete. Then he added, half to himself, “My, but she’s a dandy! Ain’t—ain’t she a pictur’, ain’t she——?”

Buck suddenly pushed him aside, and his action was probably rougher than he knew. But for some reason he did not care. For some reason he had no thought for any one but the fair creature lying in his arms. His head was throbbing with a strange excitement, and he moved swiftly toward the door, anxious to leave the inquisitive eyes of his companions behind him.

As he reached the door Beasley’s hateful tones arrested him.

“Say, you ain’t takin’ that pore thing up to the fort, are you?” he jeered.

Buck swung about with the swiftness of a panther. His eyes were ablaze with a cold fire.

“You rotten outlaw parson!” he cried.

He waited for the insult to drive home. Then when he saw the fury in the other’s face, a fury he intended to stir, he went on—

“Another insinuation like that an’ I’ll shoot you like the dog you are,” he cried, and without waiting for an answer he turned to the others. “Say, fellers,” he went on, “I’m takin’ this gal wher’ she belongs—down to the farm. I’m goin’ to hand her over to the old woman there. An’ if I hear another filthy suggestion from this durned skunk Beasley, what I said goes. It’s not a threat. It’s a promise, sure, an’ I don’t ever forgit my promises.”

Beasley’s face was livid, and he drew a sharp breath.

“I don’t know ’bout promises,” he said fiercely. “But you won’t find me fergittin’ much either.”

Buck turned to the door again and threw his retort over his shoulder.

“Then you sure won’t forgit I’ve told you what you are.”

“I sure won’t.”

Nor did Buck fail to appreciate the venom the other flung into his words. But he was reckless—always reckless. And he hurried through the doorway and strode off with his still unconscious burden.



CHAPTER VII

A SIMPLE MANHOOD

All thought of Beasley Melford quickly became lost in feelings of a deeper and stronger nature as Buck passed out into the open. His was not a nature to dwell unnecessarily upon the clashings of every-day life. Such pinpricks were generally superficial, to be brushed aside and treated without undue consideration until such time as some resulting fester might gather and drastic action become necessary. The fester had not yet gathered, therefore he set his quarrel aside for the time when he could give it his undivided attention.

As he strode away the world seemed very wide to Buck. So wide, indeed, that he had no idea of its limits, nor any desire to seek them. He preferred that his eyes should dwell only upon those things which presented themselves before a plain, wholesome vision. He had no desire to peer into the tainted recesses of any other life than that which he had always known. And in his outlook was to be witnessed the careful guidance of his friend, the Padre. Nor was his capacity stunted thereby, nor his strong manhood. On the contrary, it left him with a great reserve of power to fight his little battle of the wilderness.

Yet surely such a nature as his should have been dangerously open to disaster. The guilelessness resulting from such a simplicity of life ought surely to have fitted him for a headlong rush into the pitfalls which are ever awaiting the unwary. This might have been so in a man of less strength, less reckless purpose. Therein lay his greatest safeguard. His was the strength, the courage, the resource of a mind trained in the hard school of the battle for existence in the wilderness, where, without subtlety, without fear, he walked over whatever path life offered him, ready to meet every obstruction, every disaster, with invincible courage.

It was through this very attitude that his threat against Beasley Melford was not to be treated lightly. His comrades understood it. Beasley himself knew it. Buck had assured him that he would shoot him down like a dog if he offended against the unwritten laws of instinctive chivalry as he understood them, and he would do it without any compunction or fear of consequences.

A woman's fame to him was something too sacred to be lightly treated, something quite above the mere consideration of life and death. The latter was an ethical proposition which afforded him, where a high principle was in the balance against it, no qualms whatsoever. It was the inevitable result of his harsh training in the life that was his. The hot, rich blood of strong manhood ran in his veins, but it was the hot blood tempered with honesty and courage, and without one single taint of meanness.

As he passed down the river bank, beyond which the racing waters flowed a veritable torrent, he saw the camp women moving about outside their huts. He saw them wringing out their rain-drenched garments. Thus he knew that the storm had served their miserable homes badly, and he felt sorry for them.

For the most part they were heavy, frowsy creatures, slatternly and uncouth. They came generally from the dregs of frontier cities, or were the sweepings of the open country, gleaned in the debauched moments of the men who protected them. Nor, as his eyes wandered in their direction, was it possible to help a comparison between them and the burden of delicate womanhood he held in his arms, a comparison which found them painfully wanting.

He passed on under the bold scrutiny of those feminine eyes, but they left him quite unconscious. His thoughts had drifted into a wonderful dreamland of his own, a dreamland such as he had never visited before, an unsuspected dreamland whose beauties could never again hold him as they did now.

The sparkling sunlight which had so swiftly followed in the wake of the storm, lapping up the moisture of the drenching earth with its fiery tongue, shed a radiance over the familiar landscape, so that it revealed new and unsuspected beauties to his wondering eyes. How came it that the world, his world, looked so fair? The distant hills, those hills which had always thrilled his heart with the sombre note of their magnificence, those hills which he had known since his earliest childhood, with their black, awe-inspiring forests, they were somehow different, so different.

He traced the purple ridges step by step till they became a blurred, gray monotony of tone fading away until it lost itself in the glittering white of the snowcaps. Everything he beheld in a new light. No longer did those hills represent the battle-ground where he and the Padre fought out their meagre existence. They had suddenly become one vast and beautiful garden where life became idyllic, where existence changed to one long joy. The torrents had

shrunk to gentle streams, babbling their wonderful way through a fairy-land of scented gardens. The old forceful tearing of a course through the granite hearts of the hills was a thought of some long-forgotten age far back in the dim recesses of memory. The gloom of the darkling forests, too, had passed into the sunlit parks of delight. The rugged canyons had given place to verdant valleys of succulent pasture. The very snows themselves, those stupendous, changeless barriers, suggested nothing so much as the white plains of perfect life.

The old harsh lines of life had passed, and the sternness of the endless battle had given way to an unaccountable joy.

Every point that his delighted eyes dwelt upon was tinged with something of the beatitude that stirred his senses. Every step he took was something of an unreality. And every whispering sound in the scented world through which he was passing found an echo of music in his dreaming soul.

Contact with the yielding burden lying so passive in his strong arms filled him with a rapture such as he had never known. The thought of sex was still far from his mind, and only was the manhood in him yielding to the contact, and teaching him through the senses that which his upbringing had sternly denied him.

He gazed down upon the wonderful pale beauty of the girl's face. He saw the rich parted lips between which shone the ivory of her perfect, even teeth. The hair, so rich and flowing, dancing with glittering beams of golden light, as, stirring beneath the breath of the mountains, it caught the reflection of a perfect sun.

How beautiful she was. How delicate. The wonderful, almost transparent skin. He could trace the tangle of small blue veins like a fairy web through which flowed the precious life that was hers. And her eyes—those great, full, round pupils hidden beneath the veil of her deeply-fringed lids! But he turned quickly from them, for he knew that the moment she awoke his dream must pass into a memory.

His gaze wandered to the swanlike roundness of her white throat, to the gaping shirt-waist, where the delicate lace and tiny ribbon peeped out at him. It was all so wonderful, so marvelous. And she was in his arms—she, this beautiful stranger. Yet somehow she did not seem like a stranger. To his inflamed fancy she seemed to have lain in his arms all his life, all her life. No, she was no stranger. He felt that she belonged to him, she was part of himself, his very life.

Still she slept on. He suddenly found himself moving with greater caution, and he knew he was dreading the moment when some foolish stumble of his should bring her back to that life which he feared yet longed to behold. He longed for the delight of watching the play of emotions upon her lovely features, to hear her speak and laugh, and to watch her smile. He feared, for he knew that with her waking those delicious moments would be lost to him forever.

So he dreamed on. In his inmost soul he knew he was dreaming, and, in his reckless fashion, he desired the dream to remain unending. He saw the old fort no longer the uncouth shelter of two lonely lives, but a home made beautiful by a presence such as he had never dreamed of, a presence that shed beauty upon all that came under the spell of its influence. He pictured the warmth of delight which must be the man's who lived in such an atmosphere.

His muscles thrilled at the thought of what a man might do under such an inspiration. To what might he not aspire? To what heights might he not soar? Success must be his. No disaster could come—

The girl stirred in his arms. He distinctly felt the movement, and looked down into her face with sudden apprehension. But his anxiety was swiftly dispelled, and a tender smile at once replaced the look in his dark eyes. No, she had not yet awakened, and so he was content.

But the incident had brought him realization. His arms were stiff and cramped, and he must rest them. Strong man that he was he had been wholly unaware of the distance he had carried her.

He gently laid her upon the grass and looked about him. Then it was that wonder crept into his eyes. He was at the ford of the creek, more than two miles from the camp, and on the hither bank, where the road entered the water, a spring cart lay overturned and broken, with the team of horses lying head down, buried beneath the turbulent waters as they raced on down with the flood.

Now he understood the full meaning of her presence in the camp. His quick eyes took in every detail, and at once her coming was explained. He turned back in the direction whence he had come, and his mind flew to the distance of the ford from the camp. She had bravely faced a struggle over two miles of a trail quite unknown to her when the worst storm he had ever known was at its height. His eyes came back to the face of the unconscious girl in even greater admiration.

“Not only beautiful but——”

He turned away to the wreck, for there were still things he wished to know. And as he glanced about him he became more fully aware of the havoc of the storm. Even in the brilliant sunshine the whole prospect looked woefully jaded. Everywhere the signs told their pitiful tale. All along the river bank the torn and shattered pines drooped dismally. Even as he stood there great tree trunks and limbs of trees were washed down on the flood before his eyes. The banks were still pouring with the drainings of the hills and adding their quota to the swelling torrent.

But the overturned spring cart held most interest just now, and he moved over to it. The vehicle was a complete wreck, so complete, indeed, that he wondered how the girl had escaped without injury. Two trunks lay near by, evidently thrown out by the force of the upset, and it pleased him to think that they had been saved to their owner. He examined them closely. Yes, the contents were probably untouched by the water. But what was this? The initials on the lid were "J. S." The girl's name was Rest. At least so Mrs. Ransford had stated. He wondered. Then his wonder passed. These were very likely trunks borrowed for the journey. He remembered that the Padre had a leather grip with other initials than his own upon it.

Where was the teamster? He looked out at the racing waters, and the question answered itself. Then he turned quickly to the girl. Poor soul, he thought, her coming to the farm had been one series of disasters. So, with an added tenderness, he stooped and lifted her gently in his arms and proceeded on his way.

At last he came to the farm, which only that morning he had so eagerly avoided. And his feelings were not at all unpleasant as he saw again the familiar buildings. The rambling house he had known so long inspired him with a fresh joy at the thought of its new occupant. He remembered how it had grown from a log cabin, just such as the huts of the gold-seekers, and how, with joy and pride, he and the Padre had added to it and reconstructed as the years went by. He remembered the time when he had planted the first wild cucumber, which afterward became an annual function and never failed to cover the deep veranda with each passing year. There, too, was the cabbage patch crowded with a wealth of vegetables. And he remembered how careful he had been to select a southern aspect for it. The small barns, the hog-pens, where he could even now hear the grunting swine grumbling their hours away. The corrals, two, across the creek, reached by a log bridge of their own construction. Then, close by stood the nearly empty hay corrals, waiting for this year's crop. No, the sight of these

things had no regrets for him now. It was a pleasant thought that it was all so orderly and flourishing, since this girl was its future mistress.

He reached the veranda before his approach was realized by the farm-wife within. Then, as his footsteps resounded on the rough surface of the flooring of split logs, Mrs. Ransford came bustling out of the parlor door.

“Sakes on me!” she cried, as she beheld the burden in her visitor’s arms. “If it ain’t Miss Rest all dead an’ done!” Her red hands went up in the air with such a comical tragedy, and her big eyes performed such a wide revolution in their fat, sunburnt setting that Buck half-feared an utter collapse. So he hurriedly sought to reassure her, and offered a smiling encouragement.

“I allow she’s mostly done, but I guess she’s not dead,” he said quickly.

The old woman heaved a tragic sigh.

“My! but you made me turn right over, as the sayin’ is. You should ha’ bin more careful, an’ me with my heart too, an’ all. The doctor told me as I was never to have no shock to speak of. They might set up hem—hemoritch or suthin’ o’ the heart, what might bring on sing—sing—I know it was suthin’ to do with singin’, which means I’d never live to see another storm like we just had, not if it sure come on this minit——”

“I’m real sorry, ma’m,” said Buck, smiling quietly at the old woman’s volubility, but deliberately cutting it short. “I mean about the shock racket. Y’ see she needs fixin’ right, an’ I guess it’s up to you to git busy, while I go an’ haul her trunks up from the creek.”

Again the woman’s eyes opened and rolled.

“What they doin’ in the creek?” she demanded with sudden heat. “Who put ’em ther’? Some scallawag, I’ll gamble. An’ you standin’ by seein’ it done, as you might say. I never did see sech a place, nor sech folk. To think o’ that pore gal a-settin’ watchin’ her trunks bein’ pushed into the creek by a lot o’ loafin’ bums o’ miners, an’ no one honest enough, nor man enough to raise a hand to—to——”

“With respec’, ma’m, you’re talkin’ a heap o’ foolishness,” cried Buck impatiently, his anxiety for the girl overcoming his deference for the other’s sex. “If you’ll show me the lady’s room I’ll carry her right into it an’ set her on her bed, an’——”

“Mercy alive, what’s the world a-comin’ to!” cried the indignant farm-wife. “Me let the likes o’ you into the gal’s bedroom! You? Guess you need seein’ to by the State, as the sayin’ is. I never heard the like of it. Never. An’ she jest a slip of a young gal, too, an’ all.”

But Buck’s patience was quite exhausted, and, without a moment’s hesitation, he brushed the well-meaning but voluble woman aside and carried the girl into the house. He needed no guidance here. He knew which was the best bedroom and walked straight into it. There he laid the girl upon an old chintz-covered settee, so that her wet clothes might be removed before she was placed into the neat white bed waiting for her. And the clacking tongue of Ma Ransford pursued his every movement.

“It’s an insult,” she cried angrily. “An insult to me an’ mine, as you might say. Me, who’s raised two daughters an’ one son, all of ’em dead, more’s the pity. First you drown the gal an’ her baggage, an’ then you git carryin’ her around, an’ walkin’ into her virgin bedroom without no by your leave, nor nuthin’.”

But Buck quite ignored her protests. He felt it was useless to explain. So he turned back and gave his final instructions from the doorway.

“You jest get her right to bed, ma’m, an’ dose her,” he said amiably. “I’d guess you best give her hot flannels an’ poultices an’ things while I go fetch her trunks. After that I’ll send off to Bay Creek fer the doctor. He ain’t much, but he’s better than the hoss doctor fer womenfolk. Guess I’ll git back right away.”

But the irate farm-wife, her round eyes blazing, slammed the door in his face as she flung her final word after him.

“You’ll git back nuthin’,” she cried furiously. “You let me git you back here agin an’ you’ll sure find a sort o’ first-class hell runnin’ around, an’ you won’t need no hot flannels nor poultices to ke’p you from freezin’ stone cold.”

Then, with perfect calmness and astonishing skill, she flung herself to the task of caring for her mistress in that practical, feminine fashion which, though he may appreciate, no man has ever yet quite understood.



CHAPTER VIII

THE SECRET OF THE HILL

It was the morning following the great storm, a perfect day of cloudless sunshine, and the Padre and Buck were on their way from the fur fort to the camp. Their mission was to learn the decision of its inhabitants as to their abandonment of the valley; and in the Padre's pocket was a large amount of money for distribution.

The elder man's spirits were quietly buoyant. Nor did there seem to be much reason why they should be. But the Padre's moods, even to his friends, were difficult to account for. Buck, on the contrary, seemed lost in a reverie which held him closely, and even tended to make his manner brusque.

But his friend, in the midst of his own cheerful feelings, would not allow this to disturb him. Besides, he was a far shrewder man than his simple manner suggested.

"It's well to be doing, lad," he said, after some considerable silence. "Makes you feel good. Makes you feel life's worth a bigger price than we mostly set it at."

His quiet eyes took the other in in a quick, sidelong glance. He saw that Buck was steadily, but unseeingly, contemplating the black slopes of Devil's Hill, which now lay directly ahead.

"Guess you aren't feeling so good, boy?" he went on after a moment's thoughtful pause.

The direct challenge brought a slow smile to Buck's face, and he answered with surprising energy—

"Good? Why, I'm feelin' that good I don't guess even—even Beasley could rile me this mornin'."

The Padre nodded with a responsive smile.

"And Beasley can generally manage to rile you."

“Yes, he’s got that way, surely,” laughed Buck frankly. “Y’ see he’s—he’s pretty mean.”

“I s’pose he is,” admitted the other. Then he turned his snow-white head and glanced down at the lean flanks of Cæsar as the horse walked easily beside his mare.

“And that boy, Kid, was out in all that storm on your Cæsar,” he went on, changing the subject quickly from the man whom he knew bore him an absurd animosity. “A pretty great horse, Cæsar. He’s looking none the worse for fetching that whisky either. Guess the boys’ll be getting over their drunk by now. And it’s probably done ’em a heap of good. You did right to encourage ’em. Maybe there’s folks would think differently. But then they don’t just understand, eh?”

“No.”

Buck had once more returned to his reverie, and the Padre smiled. He thought he understood. He had listened overnight to a full account of the arrival of the new owner of their farm, and had gleaned some details of her attractiveness and youth. He knew well enough how surely the isolated mountain life Buck lived must have left him open to strong impressions.

They set their horses at a canter down the long declining trail which ran straight into the valley above which Devil’s Hill reared its ugly head. And as they went the signs of the storm lay everywhere about them. Their path was strewn with débris. The havoc was stupendous. Tree trunks were lying about like scattered nine-pins. Riven trunks, split like match-wood by the lightning, stood beside the trail, gaunt and hopeless. Partially-severed limbs hung drooping, their weeping foliage appealing to the stricken world about them for a sympathy which none could give. Even the hard, sun-baked trail, hammered and beaten to an iron consistency under a hundred suns of summer, was scored with now dry water-courses nearly a foot deep. With all his knowledge and long experience of the mountains even the Padre was filled with awe at the memory of what he had witnessed.

“Makes you think, Buck, doesn’t it?” he said, pointing at a stately forest giant stretched prone along the edge of the trail, its proud head biting deeply into the earth, and its vast roots lifting twenty and more feet into the air. “I was out in the worst of it, too,” he went on thoughtfully. Then he smiled at the recollection of his puny affairs while the elements had waged their merciless war. “I was taking

a golden fox out of a trap, 'way back there on the side of the third ridge. While I was doing it the first two crashes came. A hundred and more yards away two pines, big fellers, guess they were planted before the flood, were standing out solitary on a big rock overhanging the valley below. They were there when I first bent over the trap. When I stood up they were gone—rock and all. It made me think then. Guess it makes me think more now.”

“It surely was a storm,” agreed Buck absently.

They reached the open valley, and here the signs were less, so, taking advantage of the clearing, they set their horses at a fast gallop. Their way took them skirting the great slope of the hill-base, and every moment was bearing them on toward the old farm, for that way, some distance beyond, lay the ford which they must cross to reach the camp.

Neither seemed inclined for further talk. Buck was looking straight out ahead in the direction of the farm, and his preoccupation had given place to a smile of anticipation. The Padre was intent upon the black slopes of the hill. Farther along, the hill turned away toward the creek, and the trail bore to the left, passing on the hither side of a great bluff of woods which stretched right up to the very corrals of the farm. It was here, too, where the overhang of the suspended lake came into view, where Yellow Creek poured its swift, shallow torrent in the shadowed twilight of the single-walled tunnel and the gold-seekers held their operations in a vain quest of fortune.

They had just come abreast of this point and the Padre was observing the hill with that never-failing interest with which the scene always filled him. He believed there was nothing like it in all the world, and regarded it as a stupendous example of Nature’s engineering. But now, without warning, his interest leapt to a pitch of wonderment that set his nerves thrilling and filled his thoughtful eyes with an unaccustomed light of excitement. One arm shot out mechanically, pointing at the black rocks, and a deep sigh escaped him.

“Mackinaw!” he cried, pulling his horse almost on to its haunches. “Look at that!”

Buck swung round, while Cæsar followed the mare’s example so abruptly that his master was almost flung out of the saddle.

He, too, stared across in the direction indicated. And his whispered exclamation was an echo of the other’s astonishment.

“By the——!”

Then on the instant an almost unconscious movement, simultaneously executed, set their horses racing across the open in the direction of the suspended lake.

The powerful Cæsar, with his lighter burden, was the first to reach the spot. He drew up more than two hundred yards from where the domed roof forming the lake bed hung above the waters of the creek. He could approach no nearer, and his rider sat gazing in wonder at the spectacle of fallen rock and soil, and the shattered magnificence of the acres of crushed and broken pine woods which lay before him.

The whole face of the hill for hundreds and hundreds of feet along this side had been ruthlessly rent from its place and flung broadcast everywhere, and, in the chaos he beheld, Buck calculated that hundreds of thousands of tons of the blackened rock and subsoil had been dislodged by the tremendous fall.

Just for an instant the word “washout” flashed through his mind. But he dismissed it without further consideration. How could a washout sever such rock? Even he doubted the possibility of lightning causing such destruction. No, his thoughts flew to an earth disturbance of some sort. But then, what of the lake? He gazed up at where the rocky arch jutted out from the parent hill, and apprehension made him involuntarily move his horse aside. But his observation had killed the theory of an earth disturbance. Anything of that nature must have brought the lake down. For the dislodgment began under its very shadow, and had even further deepened the yawning cavern beneath its bed.

The Padre’s voice finally broke his reflections, and its tone suggested that he was far less awed, and, in consequence, his thoughts were far more practical.

“Their works are gone,” he said regretfully. “I’d say there’s not a sluice-box nor a conduit left. Maybe even their tools are lost. Poor devils!”

The man’s calm words had their effect. Buck at once responded to the practical suggestion.

“They don’t leave their tools,” he said. Then he pointed up at the lake. “Say, what if that had come down? What if the bowels o’ that hill had opened up an’ the water been turned loose? What o’ the camp? What o’ the women an’—the kiddies?”

His imagination had been stirred again. Again the Padre’s practice brought him

back.

“You don’t need to worry that way, boy. It hasn’t fallen. Guess the earth don’t fancy turning her secrets loose all at once.”

Buck sighed.

“Yet I’d say the luck sure seems rotten enough.”

There was no answer, and presently the Padre pointed at the face of the hill.

“It was a washout,” he said with quiet assurance. “See that face? It’s softish soil. Some sort of gravelly stuff that the water got at. Sort of gravel seam in the heart of the rock.”

Buck followed the direction indicated and sat staring at it. Then slowly a curious look of hope crept into his eyes. It was the fanciful hope of the imaginative.

“Here,” he cried suddenly, “let’s get a peek at it. Maybe—maybe the luck ain’t as bad as we think.” And he laughed.

“What d’you mean?” asked the Padre sharply.

For answer he had to put up with a curt “Come on.” And the next moment he was following in Cæsar’s wake as he picked his way rapidly amongst the trees skirting the side of the wreckage. Their way lay inland from the creek, for Buck intended to reach the cliff face on the western side of the fall. It was difficult going, but, at the distance, safe enough. Not until they drew in toward the broken face of the hill would the danger really begin. There it was obvious enough to anybody. The cliff was dangerously overhanging at many points. Doubtless the saturation which had caused the fall had left many of those great projections sufficiently loose to dislodge at any moment.

Buck sought out what he considered to be the most available spot and drew his horse up. The rest must be done on foot. No horse could hope to struggle over such a chaotic path. At his suggestion both animals were tethered within the shelter of trees. At least the trees would afford some slight protection should any more of the cliff give way.

In less than a quarter of an hour they stood a hundred feet from the actual base of the cliff, and Buck turned to his friend.

“See that patch up there,” he said, pointing at a spread of reddish surface which

seemed to be minutely studded with white specks. “Guess a peek at it won’t hurt. Seems to me it’s about ten or twelve feet up. Guess ther’ ain’t need for two of us climbin’ that way. You best wait right here, an’ I’ll git around again after a while.”

The Padre surveyed the patch, and his eyes twinkled.

“Ten or twelve feet?” he said doubtfully. “Twenty-five.”

“May be.”

“You think it’s——?”

Buck laughed lightly.

“Can’t say what it is—from here.”

The other sat down on an adjacent rock.

“Get right ahead. I’ll wait.”

Buck hurried away, and for some moments the Padre watched his slim figure, as, scrambling, stumbling, clinging, he made his way to where the real climb was to begin. Nor was it until he saw the tall figure halt under an overhanging rock, which seemed to jut right out over his head, and look up for the course he must take in the final climb, that Buck’s actual danger came home to the onlooker. He was very little more given to realizing personal danger than Buck himself, but now a sudden apprehension for the climber gripped him sharply.

He stirred uneasily as he saw the strong hands reach up and clutch the jutting facets. He even opened his mouth to offer a warning as he saw the heavily-booted feet mount to their first foothold. But he refrained. He realized it might be disconcerting. A few breathless moments passed as Buck mounted foot by foot. Then came the thing the Padre dreaded. The youngster’s hold broke, and a rock hurtled by him from under his hand and very nearly dislodged him altogether.

In an instant the Padre was on his feet with the useless intention of going to his aid, but, even as he stood up, his own feet shot from under him, and he fell back heavily upon the rock from which he had just risen.

With an impatient exclamation he looked down to discover the cause of his mishap. There it lay, a loose stone of yellowish hue. He stooped to remove it,

and, in a moment, his irritation was forgotten. In a moment everything else was forgotten. Buck was forgotten. The peril of the hill. The cliff itself. For the moment he was lifted out of himself. Years had passed away, his years of life in those hills. And something of the romantic dreams of his early youth thrilled him once again.

He stood up bearing the cause of his mishap clasped in his two hands and stared down at it. Then, after a long while, he looked up at the climbing man. He stood there quite still, watching his movements with unseeing eyes. His interest was gone. The danger had somehow become nothing now. There was no longer any thought of the active figure moving up the face of the hill with cat-like clinging hands and feet. There was no longer thought for his success or failure.

Buck reached his goal. He examined the auriferous facet with close scrutiny and satisfaction. Then he began the descent, and in two minutes he stood once more beside the Padre.

“It’s high-grade quartz,” he cried jubilantly as he came up.

The Padre nodded, his mind on other things.

“I’d say the luck’s changed,” Buck went on, full of his own discovery and not noticing the other’s abstraction. He was enjoying the thought of the news he had to convey to the starving camp. “I’d say there’s gold in plenty hereabouts and the washout——”

The Padre suddenly thrust out his two hands which were still grasping the cause of his discomfiture. He thrust them out so that Buck could not possibly mistake the movement.

“There surely is—right here,” he said slowly.

Buck gasped. Then, with shining eyes, he took what the other was holding into his own two hands.

“Gold!” he cried as he looked down upon the dull yellow mass.

“And sixty ounces if there’s a pennyweight,” added the Padre exultantly. “You see I—I fell over it,” he explained, his quiet eyes twinkling.



CHAPTER IX

GATHERING FOR THE FEAST

Two hours later saw an extraordinary change at the foot of Devil's Hill. The wonder of the "washout" had passed. Its awe was no longer upon the human mind. The men of the camp regarded it with no more thought than if the destruction had been caused by mere blasting operations. They were not interested in the power causing the wreck, but only in their own motives, their own greedy longings, their own lust for the banquet of gold outspread before their ravening eyes.

The Padre watched these people his news had brought to the hill with tolerant, kindly eye. He saw them scattered like a small swarm of bees in the immensity of the ruin wrought by the storm. They had for the time forgotten him, they had forgotten everything in the wild moment of long-pent passions unloosed—the danger which overhung them, their past trials, their half-starved bodies, their recent sufferings. These things were thrust behind them, they were of the past. Their present was an insatiable hunger for finds such as had been thrust before their yearning eyes less than an hour ago.

He stood by and viewed the spectacle with a mind undisturbed, with a gentle philosophy inspired by an experience which he alone could appreciate. It was a wonderful sight. The effort, the haste, the almost insane intentness of these people seeking the yellow metal, the discovery of which was the whole bounds of their horizon. He felt that it was good to see them. Good that these untamed passions should be allowed full sway. He felt that such as these were the advance guard of all human enterprise. Theirs was the effort, theirs the hardship, the risk; and after them would come the trained mind, perhaps the less honest mind, the mind which must harness the result of their haphazard efforts to the process of civilization's evolution. He even fancied he saw something of the influence of this day's work upon the future of that mountain world.

But there was regret too in his thought. It was regret at the impossibility of these pioneers ever enjoying the full fruits of their labors. They would enjoy them in their own way, at the moment, but such enjoyment was not adequate reward for their daring, their sacrifice, their hardihood. Well enough he knew that they were

but the toilers in a weed-grown vineyard, and that it would fall to the lot of the skilled husbandman to be the man who reaped the harvest.

It was a picture that would remain long enough in his memory. The flaying picks rising and falling amongst the looser débris, the grinding scrape of the shovel, turning again and again the heavy red gravel. The shouts of hoarse voices hailing each other in jubilant tones, voices thrilling with a note of hope such as they had not known for weeks. He saw the hard muscles of sunburnt arms standing out rope-like with the terrific labor they were engaged in. And in the background of it all he saw the grim spectacle of the blackened hill, frowning down like some evil monster, watching the vermin life eating into a sore it was powerless to protect.

It was wonderful, the transformation of these things. And yet it was far less strange than his witness of the spectacle of the beaten, hopeless men he had helped so long up in the camp. He was glad.

He was glad, too, that even Buck had been caught in the fever of the moment. He saw him with the rest, with borrowed tools, working with a vigor and enthusiasm quite unsurpassed by the most ardent of the professional gold-seekers. Yet he knew how little the man was tainted with the disease of these others. He had no understanding whatever of the meaning of wealth. And the greed of gold had left him quite untouched. His was the virile, healthy enthusiasm for a quest for something which was hidden there in the wonderful auriferous soil, a quest that the heart of any live man is ever powerless to resist.

With him it would last till sundown, maybe, and after that the fever would pass from his veins. Then the claims of the life that had always been his would reassert themselves.

After a while the Padre's thoughts drifted to the pressing considerations of the future. Several times he had heard the shouts of men who had turned a nugget up in the gravel. And at each such cry he had seen the rush of others, and the feverish manner in which they took possession of the spot where the lucky individual was working and hustled him out. It was in these rushes that he saw the danger lying ahead.

Hitherto these men had been accustomed to the slow process of washing "pay-dirt." It was not only slow, but unemotional. It had not the power to stir the senses to a pitch of excitement like this veritable Tom Tiddler's ground, pitchforked into their very laps by one of Nature's freakish impulses.

With this thought came something very like regret at the apparent richness of the find. Something must be done, and done without delay, to regulate the situation. The place must be arranged in claims, and definite regulations must be laid down and enforced by a council of the majority. He felt instinctively that this would be the only way to avert a state of anarchy too appalling to contemplate. It would be an easy matter now, but a hopeless task to attempt later on. Yes, a big trouble lay in those rushes, which seemed harmless enough at present. And he knew that his must be the work of straightening out the threatened tangle.

But for the moment the fever must be allowed to run riot. It must work itself out with the physical effort of hard muscles. In the calm of rest after labor counsel might be offered and listened to. But not until then.

So that memorable day wore on to its close. The luck had come not in the petty find such as these men had looked for, but in proportions of prodigal generosity such as Nature sometimes loves to bestow upon those whom she has hit the hardest. She had called to her aid those strange powers of which she is mistress and hurled them headlong to do her bidding. She had bestowed her august consent, and lo, the earth was opened, and its wealth poured out at the very feet of those who had so long and so vainly sought it.



CHAPTER X

SOLVING THE RIDDLE

The new owner of the Padre's farm had quite recovered from the effects of her disastrous journey. Youth and a sound constitution, and the overwhelming ministrations of Mrs. Ransford had done all that was needed to restore her.

She was sitting in an old, much-repaired rocking-chair, in what was obviously the farm's "best" bedroom. Her trunks, faithfully recovered from the wreck of the cart by the only too willing Buck, stood open on the floor amidst a chaotic setting of their contents, while the old farm-wife herself stood over them, much in the attitude of a faithful and determined watch-dog.

The girl looked on indifferent to the confusion and to the damage being perpetrated before her very eyes. She was lost in thoughts of her own which had nothing to do with such fripperies as lawns, and silks, and *suèdes*, or any other such feminine excitements. She was struggling with recollection, and endeavoring to conjure it. There was a blank in her life, a blank of some hours, which, try as she would, she could not fill in. It was a blank, as far as she could make out, which terminated in her arrival at the farm *borne in the arms of some strange man*.

Well might such a thought shut out considerations like the almost certain destruction of a mere wardrobe at the hands of her ignorant but well-meaning helper. It would have been exciting, too, but for her memory of the latter stages of her journey. They were still painful. There was still uncertainty as to what had happened to the teamster and the horses.

At last, however, she abandoned further attempt to solve the riddle unaided, and decided to question her housekeeper.

"Was it the same man who brought those trunks—I mean the same man who—brought me here?" she demanded sharply.

"It surely was," replied Mrs. Ransford, desisting for a moment from her efforts to bestow a pile of dainty shoes into a night-dress case of elaborate drawn thread work. "An' a nice mess he's got things in. Jest look at 'em all tossed about, same

as you might toss slap-jacks, as the sayin' is. It's a mercy of heaven, an' no thanks to him, you've got a rag fit to wear. It surely ain't fer me to say it, but it's real lucky I'm here to put things right for you. Drat them shoes! I don't guess I'll ever git 'em all into this bag, miss—ma'm—I mean miss, mum.”

Something of the tragedy of her wardrobe became evident to the girl and she went to the rescue.

“I'm sorry, but they don't go in there,” she said, feeling that an apology was due for her interference in such well-intended efforts. “That's—you see, that's my sleeping-suit case,” she added gently.

“Sleepin'-soot?” A pair of round, wondering eyes stared out through the old woman's glasses.

The girl pointed at the silk trousers and jacket lying just inside the nearest trunk, and the farm-wife picked them up gingerly, letting them unfold as she did so. Just for one moment she inspected them, then she hurriedly let them drop back into the trunk as though they were some dangerous reptile, and, folding her arms, glared into the girl's smiling face in comical reproach.

“You sure don't wear them pants, miss—at night? Not reely?” she exclaimed in horrified tones.

The girl's smile hardened.

“Why, yes. Lots of girls wear sleeping-suits nowadays.”

“You don't say!”

The old woman pursed up her lips in strong disapproval. Then, with a disdainful sniff, she went on—

“Wot gals ain't comin' to I don't know, I'm sure. Wot with silk next their skin an' them draughty stockin's, as you might say, things is gettin' to a pretty pass. Say, I wouldn't put myself into them pants, no, not if the President o' the United States was to stand over me an' wouldn't let me put on nuthin' else.”

The girl refrained from reply, but the obvious impossibility of the feat appealed to her sense of humor. However, the solution of her riddle was of prevailing interest, so she returned again to her questioning.

“Did he say how he found me?” she demanded. “Did he tell you any—any

particulars of what happened to the cart, and—and the teamster?”

“No, ma’m—miss, beggin’ your pardin,—that he didn’t. I never see sech a fresh feller outside a noospaper office. An’ him the owner of this farm that was, but isn’t, as you might say. You take my word for it he’ll come to a bad end, he sure will. Wot with them wicked eyes of his, an’ that black, Dago-lookin’ hair. I never did see a feller who looked more like a scallawag than him. Makes me shiver to think of him a-carryin’ you in his two arms. Wher’ from sez I—*an’ why?*”

“Because I couldn’t walk, I expect,” the girl replied easily.

The farm-wife shook a fat, warning finger at her.

“Oh, ma’m—miss—that’s wot he says! You jest wait till you’ve got more experience o’ scallawags like him an’ you’ll sure know. Wot I sez is men’s that full o’ tricks wher’ females is to be deceived it ’ud take ’em a summer vacation sortin’ ’emselves out. Men is shockin’ scallawags,” she finished up, flinging the shoes pell-mell into the open trunk.

A further rescue of her property was necessary and the girl protested.

“Please don’t bother any more with those clothes,” she cried hurriedly. “I’ll see to them myself.” Then, as the woman proceeded to mop her perspiring brow with a pair of silk stockings, she sprang up and thrust a hand-towel toward her. “Use this; you’ll find it more absorbent than—er—silk.”

The old woman thanked her profusely, and made the exchange. And when the operation was completed the relieved girl returned to her seat and went on with her examination.

“What did you say his name was?”

“I didn’t say. An’ he didn’t tell me, neither. Fellers like him ain’t never ready with their names. Maybe he calls himself Moreton Kenyon. Y’ see he was the same as handed the farm over, an’ you tol’ me, back ther’ in Leeson Butte, you’d bo’t Moreton Kenyon’s farm. ‘Moreton Kenyon!’ Sort o’ high-soundin’ name for such a scallawag. I don’t never trust high-soundin’ names. They’re most like whitewash. You allus set that sort o’ stuff on hog-pens an’ sech, as you might say.”

“Perhaps he’s not as bad as you suspect,” the girl suggested kindly. “Lots of good people start by making a bad impression.”

“I don’t know what that means,” cried the other promptly. “But I do know what a scallawag is, an’ that’s him.”

It was useless to seek further information from such a source, so the girl abandoned the attempt, and dismissed the pig-headed housekeeper to her work, work which she felt she was far better suited to than such a delicate operation as the straightening out a wardrobe.

When Mrs. Ransford had taken her unwilling departure, not without several well-meaning protests, the girl bent her own energies to restoring order to her wardrobe. Nor was it an easy task. The masculine manner of the bedroom left much to be desired in those little depositories and cupboards, without which no woman can live in comfort. And during the process of disposing her belongings many mental notes were made for future alterations in the furnishings of her new abode.

It was not a bad room, however. The simplicity and cleanliness of it struck wholesomely upon her. Yes, in spite of what her lieutenant had said about him, Mr. Moreton Kenyon was certainly a man of some refinement. She had never heard that such neatness and cleanliness was the habit amongst small bachelor farmers in the outlands of the West. And this was the man who had carried her—where from?

Again she sat down in the rocker and gave herself up to the puzzlement of those hours of her unconsciousness. The last event that was clear in her mind was the struggle of the teamster to keep his horses head-on for the bank of the flooded river. She remembered the surging waters, she remembered that the bottom of the cart was awash, and that she sat with her feet lifted and resting on the side of the vehicle. She remembered that the horses were swimming before the driver’s flogging whip and blasphemous shoutings. All this was plain enough still. Then came the man’s order to herself. He warned her to get ready to jump, and she had been quick to realize the necessity. In spite of the horses’ wildest struggles the cart was being washed down-stream. Then had come his final shout. And she had jumped on the instant.

At this point of her recollections things became confused. She had a hazy memory of floundering in the water, also she remembered a heavy blow on the shoulder. Then some one seemed to seize hold of her. It must have been the teamster, though she did not remember seeing him in the water. How she got out was a mystery to her. Again it must have been the teamster. Then what of him?

Mrs. Ransford had not spoken of him. Had he, too, escaped? or had he—she shuddered. For some moments her thoughts depressed her. The thought of a brave man's life sacrificed for her was too terrible.

But after a while she continued in a lighter strain. It was at this point that the blank began. True, she seemed to have some dim recollection of a rough hut. It seemed to be made of logs. Then, too, she had a dreamy sort of cognizance of a number of men's voices talking. Then—no, there was nothing more after that. Nothing until she awoke and found herself in bed, with a strange doctor standing over her.

It was all very puzzling, but—she turned toward the window as the afternoon sun fell athwart it and lit the plain interior of her new bedroom, searching the corners and the simple furnishings of the carpetless room.

From where she sat she could see the barns and corrals, and beyond them the heavy-hued pine woods. Then, away out far, far in the distance, the endless white snowcaps of the purpling hills. What a scene to her unaccustomed eyes. The breadth of it. The immensity.

She drew a deep breath and sat up.

She was dressed in a simple white shirt-waist and blue serge skirt, and her masses of red-gold hair were loosely coiled about her well-shaped head. The eager light of interest in her violet eyes lit her beautiful young face, lending it an animation which added a wonderful vitality to her natural beauty. The firm, rich lips were parted eagerly. The wide-open eyes, so deeply intelligent, shone with a lustre of delight there was no mistaking. Her rounded bosom rose and fell rapidly as the glad thought flew through her brain that this—this was her new home, where she was to forget the past and shut out all recollection of that evil shadow which had so long pursued her.

Yes, this was the beginning of her new life. Joan Stanmore was dead, and out of the ashes had arisen Joan Rest, ready to face the world in a spirit of well-doing bachelorhood. Here, here in the wild mountain world, where men were few and apart from her old life, she could face the future with perfect confidence.

She breathed a deep sigh of contentment and lolled back in the rocker, dropping her eyes from the snow-crowned hills to the precious little farm that was all hers. Then, in an instant, she sat up again as the tall figure of a young man appeared round the corner of the barn.

For some moments she followed his movements wonderingly. He walked straight over to the hay corral with long, easy strides. There was none of the slouch of a man idling about him. His whole attitude was full of distinct purpose. She saw him enter the corral and mount the half-cut haystack, and proceed to cut deeper into it. A moment later he pitched the loose hay to the ground, and himself slid down on to it. Then, stooping, he gathered it in his arms and left the corral.

Now she saw his face for the first time. It was dark. Nor could she be certain that his coloring was due to sunburn. His eyes were dark, too, and his hair. He was a good-looking man, she decided, and quite young. But how tall. And what shoulders. She wondered who he was, and what he was doing on her farm.

Then, of a sudden, she remembered she had spoken of a hired man to Mrs. Ransford. Had she——?

Her reflections were cut short by the sudden appearance of the farm-wife from the house. The old woman trotted hastily across the yard toward the barn, her fat sides shaking as she waddled, and her short, stout arms violently gesticulating. Joan needed nothing more than the good woman's back view to tell her that the dame was very angry, and that it was the stranger who had inspired her wrath. She waited, smiling, for the *dénouement*.

It came quickly. It came with the reappearance of the stranger round the corner of the barn. What a splendid specimen of a man, she thought, as she watched the expression of unruffled calm on his strong features. His shirt sleeves were rolled well up above his elbows, and even at that distance she could see the deep furrows in his arms where the rope-like muscles stood out beneath the thin, almost delicate skin.

But her attention was quickly diverted by the clacking of the farm-wife's tongue. She could hear it where she sat with the window tight shut. And though she could not hear the words it was plain enough from the violence of her gesticulations that she was rating the patient man soundly. So patent was it, so dreadful, that even in her keenest interest Joan found herself wondering if Mr. Ransford were dead, and hoping that, if he were, his decease had occurred in early youth.

Nor had the man made any attempt at response. She was sure of it, because she had watched his firm lips, and they had not moved. Perhaps he had found retort impossible. It was quite possible, for the other had not paused a moment in her

tirade. What a flow. It was colossal, stupendous. Joan felt sorry for the man.

What a patience he had. Nor had his expression once altered. He merely displayed the thoughtful attention that one might bestow, listening to a brilliant conversationalist or an interesting story. It was too ridiculous, and Joan began to laugh.

Then the end came abruptly and without warning. Mrs. Ransford just swung about and trotted furiously back to the house. Her face was flaming, and her fat arms, flourishing like unlimber flails, were pointing every verbal threat she hurled over her shoulder at the spot where the man had stood. Yes, he had vanished again round the corner of the barn, and the poor woman's best efforts were quite lost upon the warm summer air.

But her purpose was obvious, and Joan prepared herself for a whirlwind visitation. Nor had she long to wait. There was a shuffling of feet out in the passage, and, the next moment, the door of her room was unceremoniously flung open and the indignant woman staggered in.

"Well, of all the impudence, of all the sass, of all the ignorant bums that ever I——!" She exploded, and stood panting under the strain of her furious emotions.

But Joan felt she really must assert herself. This sort of reign of terror must not go on.

"Don't fluster yourself, Mrs. Ransford," she said calmly. "I'll see to the matter myself."

But she might as well have attempted to stem the tide of the river that had wrecked her journey as stay the irate woman's tongue.

"But it's him!" she cried. "Him, that low-down scallawag that carried you in his arms an' walked right into this yere bedroom an' laid you on your own virgin bed without no by your leave nor nuthin'. Him, as saw your trunks drownded an' you all mussed up with water, without raisin' a hand to help, 'less it was to push you further under——"

But Joan was equal to no more. She pushed the well-meaning creature on one side and hurried out of the house, while the echoes of the other's scathing indictment died down behind her.

Joan did not hesitate. It was not her way to hesitate about anything when her

mind was made up. And just now she was determined to find out the real story of what had happened to her. She was interested. This man had carried her. He had brought her trunks up. And—yes, she liked the look of him.

But she felt it necessary to approach the matter with becoming dignity. She was not given much to standing on her dignity, but she felt that in her association with the men of these parts she must harden herself to it. All friendships with men were banned. This she was quite decided upon. And she sighed as she passed round the angle of the barn.

Her sigh died at its birth, however, and she was brought to a short and terrified halt. Two prongs of a hayfork gleamed viciously within three inches of her horrified eyes, and, behind them, with eyes no less horrified, stood the dark-haired stranger.



CHAPTER XI

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

The gleaming prongs of the fork were sharply withdrawn, and a pleasant voice greeted the girl.

“Guess that was a near thing,” it said half-warningly.

Joan had started back, but at the sound of the voice she quickly recovered herself.

“It was,” she agreed. Then as she looked into the smiling eyes of the stranger she began to laugh.

“Another inch an’ more an’ you’d sure have been all mussed up on that pile of barn litter,” he went on, joining in her laugh.

“I s’pose I should,” Joan nodded, her mirth promptly sobering to a broad smile.

She had almost forgotten her purpose so taken up was she in observing this “scallawag,” as Mrs. Ransford had called him. Nor did it take her impressionable nature more than a second to decide that her worthy housekeeper was something in the nature of a thoroughly stupid woman. She liked the look of him. She liked his easy manner. More than all she liked the confident look of his dark eyes and his sunburnt face, so full of strength.

“Hayforks are cussed things anyway,” the man said, flinging the implement aside as though it had offended him.

Joan watched him. She was wondering how best to approach the questions in her mind. Somehow they did not come as easily as she had anticipated. It was one thing to make up her mind beforehand, and another to put her decision into execution. He was certainly not the rough, uncouth man she had expected to find. True, his language was the language of the prairie, and his clothes, yes, they surely belonged to his surroundings, but there was none of the uncleanness about them she had anticipated.

It was his general manner, however, that affected her chiefly. How tall and strong

he was, and the wonderful sunburn on his clean-cut face and massive arms! Then he had such an air of reserve. No, it was not easy.

Finally, she decided to temporize, and wait for an opening. And in that she knew in her heart she was yielding to weakness.

“My housekeeper tells me it was you who handed the farm over to her?” she said interrogatively.

The man’s eyes began to twinkle again.

“Was that your—housekeeper?” he inquired.

“Yes—Mrs. Ransford.”

Joan felt even less at her ease confronted by those twinkling eyes.

“She’s a—bright woman.”

The man casually picked up a straw and began to chew it.

Joan saw that he was smiling broadly, and resented it. So she threw all the dignity she could summon into her next question.

“Then you must be Mr. Moreton Kenyon!” she said.

The man shook his head.

“Wrong. That’s the ‘Padre,’” he announced curtly.

Joan forgot her resentment in her surprise.

“The ‘Padre’! Why, I thought Mr. Kenyon was a farmer!”

The man nodded.

“So he is. You see folks call him Padre because he’s a real good feller,” he explained. Then he added: “He’s got white hair, too. A whole heap of it. That sort o’ clinched it.”

The dark eyes had become quite serious again. There was even a tender light in them as he searched the girl’s fair face. He was wondering what was yet to come. He was wondering how this interview was to bear on the future. In spite of his easy manner he dreaded lest the threats of Mrs. Ransford were about to be put into execution.

Joan accepted his explanation.

“I see,” she said. Then, after a pause: “Then who are you?”

“Me? Oh, I’m ‘Buck,’” he responded, with a short laugh.

“Buck—who?”

“Jest plain ‘Buck.’” Again came that short laugh.

“Mr. Kenyon’s son?”

The man shook his head, and Joan tried again.

“His nephew?”

Again came that definite shake. Joan persisted, but with growing impatience.

“Perhaps you’re—his partner?” she said, feeling that if he again shook his head she must inevitably shake him.

But she was spared a further trial. Buck had been quick to realize her disappointment. Nor had he any desire to inspire her anger. On the contrary, his one thought was to please and help her.

“You see we’re not related. Ther’s nuthin’ between us but that he’s jest my great big friend,” he explained.

His reward came promptly in the girl’s sunny smile. And the sight of it quickened his pulses and set him longing to hold her again in his arms as he had done only yesterday. Somehow she had taken a place in his thoughts which left him feeling very helpless. He never remembered feeling helpless before. It was as though her coming into his life had robbed him of all his confidence. Yesterday he had found a woman almost in rags. Yesterday she was in trouble, and it had seemed the simplest thing in the world for him to take her in his arms and carry her to the home he knew to be hers. Now—now, all that confidence was gone. Now an indefinable barrier, but none the less real, had been raised between them. It was a barrier he felt powerless to break down. This beautiful girl, with her deep violet eyes and wonderful red-gold hair, clad in her trim costume of lawn and serge, seemed to him like a creature from an undreamed-of world, and as remote from him as if thousands of miles separated them. He sighed as Joan went on with her examination—

“I suppose you have come to fetch some of your big friend’s belongings?” she said pleasantly.

For answer Buck suddenly flung out a protecting arm.

“Say, you’re sure getting mussed with that dirty litter,” he said almost reproachfully. “See, your fixin’s are right agin it. Say——”

Joan laughed outright at his look of profound concern.

“That doesn’t matter a bit,” she exclaimed. “I must get used to being ‘mussed-up.’ You see, I’m a farmer—now.”

The other’s concern promptly vanished. He loved to hear her laugh.

“You never farmed any?” he asked.

“Never.” Joan shook her head in mock seriousness. “Isn’t it desperate of me? No, I’m straight from a city.”

Buck withdrew his gaze from her face and glanced out at the hills. But it was only for a moment. His eyes came back as though drawn by a magnet.

“Guess you’ll likely find it dull here—after a city,” he said at last. “Y’ see, it’s a heap quiet. It ain’t quiet to me, but then I’ve never been to a city—unless you call Leeson Butte a city. Some folks feel lonesome among these big hills.”

“I don’t think I shall feel lonesome,” Joan said quickly. “The peace and quiet of this big world is all I ask. I left the city to get away from—oh, from the bustle of it all! Yes, I want the rest and quiet of these hills more than anything else in the world.”

The passionate longing in her words left Buck wondering. But he nodded sympathetically.

“I’d say you’d get it right here,” he declared. Then he turned toward the great hills, and a subtle change seemed to come over his whole manner. His dark eyes wore a deep, far-away look in which shone a wonderfully tender affection. It was the face of a man who, perhaps for the first time, realizes the extent and depth of his love for the homeland which is his.

“It’s big—big,” he went on, half to himself. “It’s so big it sometimes makes me wonder. Look at ’em,” he cried, pointing out at the purpling distance, “rising

step after step till it don't seem they can ever git bigger. An' between each step there's a sort of world different from any other. Each one's hidden all up, so pryin' eyes can't see into 'em. There's life in those worlds, all sorts of life. An' it's jest fightin', lovin', dyin', eatin', sleepin', same as everywhere else. There's a big story in 'em somewhere—a great big story. An' it's all about the game of life goin' on in there, jest the same as it does here, an' anywher'. Yes, it's a big story and hard to read for most of us. Guess we don't ever finish readin' it, anyway—until we die. Don't guess they intended us to. Don't guess it would be good for us to read it easy.”

He turned slowly from the scene that meant so much to him, and smiled into Joan's astonished eyes.

“An' you're goin' to git busy—readin' that story?” he asked.

The startled girl found herself answering almost before she was aware of it.

“I—I hope to,” she said simply.

Then she suddenly realized her own smallness. She felt almost overpowered with the bigness of what the man's words had shown her. It was wonderful to her the thought of this—this “scallawag.” The word flashed through her mind, and with it came an even fuller realization of Mrs. Ransford's stupidity. The man's thought was the poet's insight into Nature's wonderlands. He was speaking of that great mountain world as though it were a religion to him, as if it represented some treasured poetic ideal, or some lifelong, priceless friendship.

She saw his answering nod of sympathy, and sighed her relief. Just for one moment she had been afraid. She had been afraid of some sign of pity, even contempt. She felt her own weakness without that. Now she was glad, and went on with more confidence.

“I'm going to start from the very beginning,” she said, with something akin to enthusiasm. “I'm going to start here—right here, on my very own farm. Surely the rudiments must lie here—the rudiments that must be mastered before the greater task of reading that story is begun.” She turned toward the blue hills, where the summer clouds were wrapped about the glistening snowcaps. “Yes,” she cried, clasping her hands enthusiastically, “I want to learn it all—all.” Suddenly she turned back and looked at him with a wonderful, smiling simplicity. “Will you help me?” she said eagerly. “Perhaps—in odd moments? Will you help me with those—lessons?”

Buck's breath came quickly, and his simple heart was set thumping in his bosom. But his face was serious, and his eyes quite calm as he nodded.

"It'll be dead easy for you to learn," he said, a new deep note sounding in his voice. "You'll learn anything I know, an' much more, in no time. You can't help but learn. You'll be quicker to understand, quicker to feel all those things. Y' see I've got no sort of cleverness—nor nuthin'. I jest look around an' see things— an' then, then I think I know." He laughed quietly at his own conceit. "Oh, yes! sometimes I guess I know it all. An' then I get sorry for folks that don't, an' I jest wonder how it comes everybody don't understand—same as me. Then something happens."

"Yes, yes."

Joan was so eager she felt she could not wait for the pause that followed. Buck laughed.

"Something happens, same as it did yesterday," he went on. "Oh, it's big—it sure is!" he added. And he turned again to his contemplation of the hills.

But Joan promptly recalled his wandering attention.

“You mean—the storm?” she demanded.

Buck nodded.

“That—an’ the other.”

“What—other?”

“The washout,” he said.

Then, as he saw the look of perplexity in the wide violet eyes, he went on to explain—

“You ain’t heard? Why, there was a washout on Devil’s Hill, where for nigh a year they bin lookin’ for gold. Y’ see they knew the gold was there, but couldn’t jest locate it. For months an’ months they ain’t seen a sign o’ color. They bin right down to ‘hard pan.’ They wer’ jest starvin’ their lives clear out. But they’d sank the’r pile in that hill, an’ couldn’t bring ’emselves to quit. Then along comes the storm, an’ right wher’ they’re working it washes a great lump o’ the hill down. Hundreds o’ thousands o’ tons of rock an’ stuff it would have needed a train load of dynamite to shift.”

“Yes, yes.” Joan’s eagerness brought her a step nearer to him. “And they found _____”

“Gold!” Buck laughed. “Lumps of it.”

“Gold—in lumps!” The girl’s eyes widened with an excitement which the discovery of the precious metal ever inspires.

The man watched her thoughtfully.

“Why aren’t you there?” Joan demanded suddenly.

“Can’t jest say.” Buck shrugged. “Maybe it’s because they bin lookin’ fer gold, an’—wal, I haven’t.”

“Gold—in lumps!” Again came the girl’s amazed exclamation, and Buck smiled at her enthusiasm.

“Sure. An’ they kind o’ blame you for it. They sort o’ fancy you brought ’em their luck. Y’ see it came when you got around their hut. They say ther’ wasn’t no luck to the place till you brought it. An’ now——”

Joan's eyes shone.

“Oh, I'm so glad. I'm so glad I've brought them——”

But her expression of joy was never completed. She broke off with a sharp ejaculation, and the color died out of her cheeks, leaving her so ghastly pale that the man thought she was about to faint. She staggered back and leant for support against the wall of the barn, and Buck sprang to her side. In a moment, however, she stood up and imperiously waved him aside.

There was no mistaking the movement. Her whole manner seemed to have frozen up. The frank girliness had died as completely as though it had never been, and the man stood abashed, and at a loss for understanding.

Now he saw before him a woman still beautiful, but a woman whose eyes had lost every vestige of that happy light. Despair was written in every feature, despair and utter hopelessness. Her mouth, that beautiful mouth so rich and delicate, was now tight shut as of one in great suffering, and deep, hard lines had suddenly gathered about the corners of it. The change smote him to the heart, but left him utterly helpless.

Realization had come. Joan had suddenly remembered all that lay behind her—all that had driven her to seek the remoteness of the wild Western world. She had sought to flee from the fate which her Aunt Mercy had told her was hers, and now she knew that she might as well try to flee from her own shadow.

Oh, the horror of it all! These people believed that she had brought them their luck. *She knew that she had.* What was the disaster that must follow? What lives must go down before the sword a terrible Fate had placed in her hand? For the moment panic held her in its grip. For a moment it seemed that death alone could save her from the dread consequences of the curse that was upon her. It was cruel, cruel—the desolation, the hopelessness of it all. And in her sudden anguish she prayed that death might be visited upon her.

But even amidst the horror of her realization the influence of the man's presence was at work. She knew he was there a witness to the terror she could not hide, and so she strove for recovery.

Then she heard him speak, and at the sound of his quiet tone her nerves eased and she grew calmer.

“I don't guess you recovered from the storm. I'd sure say you need rest,” Buck

said in his gentle, solicitous fashion. And in her heart Joan thanked him for the encouragement his words gave her. He had asked no questions. He had expressed no astonishment, and yet she knew he must have realized that her trouble was no physical ailment.

“Yes,” she said, jumping at the opening he had given her, “I’m tired. I’ll—I’ll go back to the house.”

Buck nodded, disguising his anxiety beneath a calm that seemed so natural to him.

“Jest get back an’ rest. You needn’t worry any ’bout the hosses, an’ cows, an’ things. I’m fixin’ them for the night, an’ I’ll be right along in the morning to do the chores. Y’ see I know this farm, an’ all that needs doin’. Guess I was raised on it,” he added, with a smile, “so the work’s sort o’ second nature to me.”

Joan’s chance had come, but she passed it by. She knew she ought to have refused his help. She ought to have, as Mrs. Ransford had said, sent him about his business. But she did nothing of the sort. She accepted. She did more. She held out her hand to him, and let him take it in both of his in a friendly pressure as she thanked him.

“I’m—I’m very grateful,” she said weakly. And the man flushed under his sunburn, while his temples hammered as the hot young blood mounted to his brain.

A moment later Buck stood staring at the angle of the barn round which Joan had just vanished. He was half-dazed, and the only thing that seemed absolutely real to him was the gentle pressure of her hand as it had rested in his. He could feel it still; he could feel every pressure of the soft, warm flesh where it had lain on his hard palms. And all the time he stood there his whole body thrilled with an emotion that was almost painful.

At last he stirred. He stooped and picked up the discarded fork. He had no definite purpose. He was scarcely aware of his action. He held it for a moment poised in the air. Then slowly he let the prongs of it rest on the ground, and, leaning his chin on his hands clasped about the haft, stared out at the hills and gave himself up to such a dream as never before had entered his life.

The sun was dipping behind the snowcaps, and for half an hour the work he had voluntarily undertaken remained untouched.

How much longer he would have remained lost in his wonderful dreaming it would have been impossible to tell. But he was ruthlessly awakened, and all his youthful ardor received a cold douche as the evening quiet was suddenly broken by the harsh voices of the crowd of gold-seekers, whom he suddenly beheld approaching the farm along the trail.



CHAPTER XII

THE GOLDEN WOMAN

Buck wondered as he noted the extraordinary picture of jubilation which the approaching crowd presented. In all his association with these people he had never witnessed anything to equal it or even come near it. He never remembered anything like a real outburst of joy during the long, dreary months since they had first camped on the banks of Yellow Creek.

He watched the faces as they drew near. From the shelter of the barn, whither he had retreated, he had them in full view. He looked for the old, weary signs of their recent privations and sufferings. There were none, not one. They had passed as utterly as though they had never been.

It was a spectacle in which he found the greatest pleasure. The men were clad in their work-stained clothing, their only clothing. Their faces remained unwashed, and still bore the accumulations of dusty sweat from their day's fevered labors. But it was the light in their eyes, their grinning faces, the buoyancy of their gait that held him. He heard their voices lifted in such a tone as would have seemed impossible only a few days ago. The loud, harsh laugh, accompanying inconsequent jests and jibes, it was good to hear. These men were tasting the sweets of a moment of perfect happiness. Buck knew well enough that soon, probably by the morrow, the moment would have passed, and they would have settled again to the stern calling of their lives.

All his sympathy was with them, and their joy was reflected in his own feelings. Their hope was his hope, their buoyancy was his buoyancy. For his happiness was complete at the moment, and thus he was left free to feel with those others. Such was his own wonderful exaltation that the thought of the termination of these people's suffering was the final note that made his joy complete.

He laid his fork aside and waited till they had passed his retreat. The object of their journey was obviously the farmhouse, and he felt that he must learn their further purpose. He remembered Joan's going from him. He had seen the pain and trouble in her beautiful eyes, and so he feared that the sudden rush of animal spirits in these people would drive them to extravagances, well enough meant,

but which might worry and even alarm her.

He moved quickly out of the barn and looked after them. They had reached the house, and stood like a herd of subdued and silly sheep waiting for a sign from their leader. It was a quaint sight. The laugh and jest had died out, and only was the foolish grin left. Yes, they certainly had a definite purpose in their minds, but they equally certainly were in doubt as to how it should be carried out.

Buck drew nearer without attracting their attention. The men were so deeply engaged with the dilemma of the moment that he might almost have joined the group without observation. But he merely desired to be on hand to help should the troubled girl need his help. He had no desire to take active part in the demonstration. As he came near he heard Beasley's voice, and the very sound of it jarred unpleasantly on his ears. The man was talking in that half-cynical fashion which was never without an added venom behind it.

"Well," he heard him exclaim derisively, "wot's doin'?' You're all mighty big talkers back ther' in camp, but I don't seem to hear any bright suggestions goin' around now. You start this gorn-durned racket like a pack o' weak-headed fools, yearnin' to pitch away what's been chucked right into your fool laps jest fer one o' Blue Grass Pete's fat-head notions. Well, wot's doin'?' I ask."

"You ke'p that ugly map o' yours closed," cried Pete hotly. "You ain't bein' robbed any."

"Guess I'll see to that," retorted Beasley, with a grin. "The feller that robs me'll need to chew razors fer a pastime. If it comes to that you're yearnin' fer glory at the Padre's expense—as usual."

Buck's ears tingled, and he drew closer. Beasley always had a knack of so blending truth with his personal venom that it stung far more than downright insult. He wondered what the Padre's generosity had been, and wherein lay its connection with their present purpose. The explanation was not long in coming, for Montana Ike took up the challenge amidst a storm of ominous murmurs from the gathered men.

"Don't take nuthin' from him," cried the youngster scornfully. Then he turned on Beasley fiercely. "You need Buck around to set you right, Mister Lousy Beasley," he cried. "We ain't robbin' anybody, an' sure not the Padre. He found that nugget, an' it's his to give or do wot he likes with. The gal brought us the luck, an' the Padre guessed it was only right she should have the first find. That

nugget was the first find, an' the Padre found it. Wal!" But as no reply was forthcoming he hurried on, turning his tongue loose in the best abuse he could command at the moment. "You're a rotten sort o' skunk anyway, an' you ain't got a decent thought in your diseased head. I'd like to say right here that you hate seein' a sixty-ounce lump o' gold in any other hands than your own dirty paws. That's your trouble, so jest shut right up while better folks handles a matter wot's a sight too delicate fer a rotten mind like yours."

The smile had returned to every face except the foxy features of the ex-Churchman, who for once had no adequate retort ready. Curly Saunders nodded appreciation, and helped to solve the momentary dilemma prevailing.

"That's sure done it fer you, Montana," he cried gleefully. "You make the presentation. I'd say I never heard so elegant a flow of argyment in this yer camp. You'll talk most pretty to the leddy."

"An' it ain't fer me to say I can't do it if need be, neither," said Montana modestly. "Don't guess it's much of a stunt yappin' pretty to a sorrel-topped gal."

Abe Allinson laughed.

"It's sure up to you, Ike," he said. "Guess you best git busy right away."

The rest waited for the youngster's acceptance of the responsibility, which promptly came with perfect good-will.

"Gee! But you're a gritty outfit," he cried, with a wide grin. "Say, I guess you'd need a fence around you shootin' jack-rabbits. Jack-rabbits is ter'ble fierce. Guess you'd most be skeered to death at a skippin' lamb bleatin' fer its mother. Can't say I ever heerd tell as a feller need be skeered of a pair o' gal's eyes, nor a sight o' red ha'r. You said it was red, Pete, didn't you? I'd sure say a bright feller don't need to worry any over talkin' pretty to a gal like that. She's up agin a proposition if she thinks she ken skeer me. Wher' is she? Jest call her out. She's goin' to git her med'cine right here in the open. I ain't doin' no parlor tricks."

The boy stood out from the crowd with a decided show of mild bravado, but he glanced about him, seeking the moral support of his fellows.

"You best knock on the door, Ike," said Curly quietly.

Ike hesitated. Then he turned doubtfully to those behind.

“You—you mean that?” he inquired. “You ain’t foolin’ none?” Then, as though realizing his own weakness, he began to bluster. “Cos I ain’t takin’ no foolin’ in a racket o’ this sort. An’ any feller thinks he ken fool me’ll sure hate hisself when I’m through with him.”

A mild snicker greeted his “big talk,” and the boy flushed hotly. He was half-inclined to add further resentment, but, second thoughts prevailing, he abruptly turned to the door and hammered on it as though anticipating stern resistance from those within.



Inside the house Mrs. Ransford was debating the situation with her mistress. She had witnessed the advance of the besieging party, and, half-frightened and half-resentful, the latter perhaps the more plainly manifested, she was detailing in unmeasured terms her opinions and fears to the still harassed girl.

“Jest git a peek at ’em through the window, miss—‘ma’m’ I should say, on’y I don’t allus remember right, as you might say. Ther’s twenty an’ more o’ the lowest down bums ever I see outside a State penitentiary. They’re sure the most ter’blest lot ever I did see. An’ they got ’emselves fixed up wi’ guns an’ knives, an’ what not an’ sech, till you can’t see the color o’ their clothes fer the dirt on ’em. I’ll swar’ to goodness, as the sayin’ is, they ain’t never see no water sence they was christened, if they ever was christened, which I don’t believe no gospel preacher would ever so demean himself. An’ as fer soap, say, they couldn’t even spell it if you was to hand ’em the whole soap fact’ry literature of a fi’-cent daily noos-sheet. They’re jest ter’ble, an’ it seems to me we sure need a reg’ment o’ United States Cavalry settin’ around on horses an’ field guns to pectect us, ef we’re to farm this one-hossed layout. They’re ‘bad men,’ mum, miss—which I made a mistake ag’in—that’s wot they are. I’ve read about ’em in the fi’-cent comics, so I sure know ’em when I see ’em. You can’t never make no mistake. They’re jest goin’ to shoot us all up to glory, an’ they’ll dance around on our corpses, same as if they was nuthin’, nor no account anyways.”

In spite of her recent shock Joan found herself smiling at the strange mixture of fear and anger in the old woman’s manner. But she felt it necessary to check her flow of wild accusations. She guessed easily enough who the men were that were approaching the house, but their object remained a mystery.

“You’re hasty. You mustn’t judge these people by their appearance. They’re _____”

But the feverish tongue was promptly set clacking again.

“An’ wot, I asks, is they to be judged by if not by wot they are? They jest come along a-yowlin’, an’ a-shootin’ off’n their guns an’ things, same as they allus do when they’s on the war-path. Scalps, that’s wot they’s after. Scalps, no more an’ no less. An’ to think o’ me at my time o’ life a-fallin’ a prey to Injuns, as you might say. Oh, if on’y my pore George D. Ransford was alive! He’d ’a’ give ’em scalps. He was a man, sure, even though he did set around playin’ poker all night when I was in labor with my twins. He was a great fighter was George D.—as the marks on my body ken show to this very day.”

At that instant there was a terrific knocking at the door which opened directly into the parlor in which the waiting women were standing, and the farm-wife jumped and staggered back, and, finally, collapsed into an adjacent chair.

“Sakes on us,” she cried, her fat face turning a sort of pea-green, “if only my pore George D.—”

But Joan’s patience could stand no more.

“For goodness’ sake go back to your kitchen, you absurd creature. I’ll see to the matter. I——”

But the old woman wobbled to her feet almost weeping.

“Now, don’t ’ee, miss,” she cried in her tearful anxiety, getting her form of address right the first time. “Don’t ’ee be rash. Ther’ll be blood spilt, ther’ sure will. Ther’s on’y one way, miss, you must talk ’em nice, an’, an’ if they go fer to take liberties, you—why you,” she edged toward her kitchen, “you jest send for me right away.”

She hurried out, and the moment she was out of sight fled precipitately to the farthest extremity of her own domain and armed herself with the heavy iron shaker of the cook-stove.

In the meantime Joan went to the door and flung it wide open. In spite of the farm-wife’s warnings she had not a shadow of doubt as to the peaceful object of the visitation, and rather felt that in some sort of way it was intended as an expression of good-will and greeting. Had not Buck told her that they held her in

the light of some sort of benefactor? So she stood in the doorway erect and waiting, with a calm face, on which there was not a shadow of a smile.

She took in the gathering at a glance, and her eyes came to rest upon the foremost figure of Montana Ike. She noted his slim, boyish figure, the weak, animal expression shining in his furtive eyes. To her he looked just what he was, a virile specimen of reckless young manhood, of vicious and untamed spirit. She saw at once that he was standing out from his companions, and understood that, for the moment at least, he was their leader.

“Good-evening,” she said, her attitude mechanically unbending.

“Evenin’, miss,” responded Ike bravely, and then relapsed into a violent condition of blushing through his dirt.

He stood there paralyzed at the girl’s beauty. He just gaped foolishly at her, his eyes seeking refuge in dwelling upon the well-cut skirt she wore and the perfect whiteness of the lawn shirt-waist, which permitted the delicate pink tinge of her arms and shoulders to show through it.

All his bravery was gone—all his assurance. If his life had depended on it not one word of an address on behalf of his fellows could he have uttered.

Joan saw his confusion, and mercifully came to his rescue.

“You wish to see me?” she inquired, with a smile which plunged the boy into even more hopeless confusion.

As no answer was forthcoming she looked appealingly at the other faces.

“It’s very kind of you all to come here,” she said gently. “Is—is there anything I can—do for you?”

Suddenly Beasley’s voice made itself heard.

“Git busy, Ike, you’re spokesman,” he cried. “Git on with the presentation—ladle out the ad—dress. You’re kind o’ lookin’ foolish.”

He followed up his words with his unpleasant laugh, and it was the sting the youthful leader needed.

He turned fiercely on the speaker, his momentary paralysis all vanished.

“Ef I’m spokesman,” he cried, “guess we don’t need no buttin’ in from Beasley

Melford.” Then he turned again quickly. “Astin’ your pardon, miss,” he added apologetically.

“That’s all right,” said Joan, smiling amiably. “What are you ‘spokesman’ for?”

The boy grinned foolishly.

“Can’t rightly say, missie.” Then he jerked his head in his comrades’ direction. “Guess if you was to ast *them*, they’d call theirselves *men*.”

“I didn’t say ‘who,’ I said ‘what,’” Joan protested, with a laugh at his desperately serious manner.

“‘What?’” he murmured, smearing his dirty forehead with a horny hand in the effort of his task. Then he brightened. “Why, gener’ly speakin’,” he went on, with sudden enthusiasm, “they ain’t much better’n skippin’ sheep. Y’ see they want to but darsent. So—wal—they jest set me up to sling the hot air.”

The girl looked appealingly at the rough faces for assistance. But instead of help she only beheld an expression of general discontent turned on the unconscious back of the spokesman. And coming back to the boy she pursued the only course possible.

“I—I don’t think I quite understand,” she said.

Ike readily agreed with her.

“I’m durned sure you can’t,” he cried heartily. “They jest think it a rotten kind of a job handin’ a red-ha’r’d gal a few words an’ an a’mighty fine hunk o’ gold. That’s cos they ain’t been dragged up jest right. You can’t expect elegant feedin’ at a hog trough. Now it’s kind o’ diff’rent wi’ me. I——”

“Oh, quit,” cried the sharp voice of the exasperated Abe Allinson. And there was no doubt but he was speaking for the rest of the audience.

Pete followed him in a tone of equal resentment.

“That ain’t no sort o’ way ad—dressin’ a leddy,” he said angrily.

“Course it ain’t,” sneered Beasley. “Ther’s sure bats roostin’ in your belfry, Ike.”

The boy jumped round on the instant. His good-nature could stand the jibes of his comrades generally, but Beasley’s sneers neither he nor any one else could endure.

“Who’s that yappin’?” the youngster cried, glowering into the speaker’s face. “That the feller Buck called an outlaw passon?” he demanded. His right hand slipped to the butt of his gun. “Say you,” he cried threateningly, “if you got anything to say I’m right here yearnin’ to listen.”

Joan saw the half-drawn weapon, and in the same instant became aware of a movement on the part of the man Beasley. She was horrified, expecting one of those fierce collisions she had heard about. But the moment passed, and, though she did not realize it, it was caused by Ike’s gun leaving its holster first.

Her woman’s fear urged her, and she raised a protesting hand.

“Please—please,” she cried, her eyes dilating with apprehension. “What have I done that you should come here to quarrel?”

Buck in the background smiled. He was mentally applauding the girl’s readiness, while he watched the others closely.

Ike turned to her again, and his anger had merged into a comical look of chagrin.

“Y’ see, missie,” he said in a fresh tone of apology, “ther’s fellers around here wi’ no sort o’ manners. They’re scairt to death makin’ a big talk to a red-ha’r’d gal, so I jest got to do it. An’ I sez it, it ain’t easy, folks like me speechin’ to folks like you——”

“Oh, git on!” cried Pete in a tired voice.

“Your hot air’s nigh freezin’,” laughed Soapy Kid.

“Quit it,” cried Ike hotly. “Ain’t they an ignorant lot o’ hogs?” he went on, appealing to the smiling girl. “Y’ see, missie, we’re right glad you come along. We’re prospectin’ this layout fer gold an’——”

“An’ we ain’t had no sort o’ luck till you got around,” added Pete hastily.

“In the storm,” nodded Curly Saunders.

“All mussed-up an’ beat to hell,” cried Ike, feeling that he was being ousted from his rights.

“Yes, an’ Buck carried you to home, an’ rode in fer the doc, an’ had you fixed right,” cried Abe.

Ike looked round indignantly.

“Say, is youse fellers makin’ this big talk or me? ain’t yearnin’, if any feller’s lookin’ fer glory.”

His challenge was received with a chorus of laughter.

“You’re doin’ fine,” cried the Kid.

Ike favored the speaker with a contemptuous stare and returned to his work. He shrugged.

“They ain’t no account anyway, missie,” he assured her, “guess they’re sore. Wal, y’ see you come along in the storm, an’ what should happen but the side o’ Devil’s Hill drops out, an’ sets gold rollin’ around like—like taters fallin’ through a rotten sack. ‘Gold?’ sez we, an’ gold it is. ‘Who bro’t us sech luck?’ we asts. An’ ther’ it is right ther’, so ther’ can’t be no mistake. Jest a pore, sick gal wi’ red ha’r, all beat to hell an’——”

“Gee, ain’t it beautiful!” sneered Curly.

Soapy pretended to weep, and Abe thumped him heavily on the back.

“Cheer up, Kid,” he grinned. “‘Tain’t as bad as it seems. Ike’ll feel better after he’s had his vittles.”

Pete sniggered.

“Ain’t he comic?” he cried. Then, seizing the opportunity, while Ike turned round to retort he hustled him aside and usurped his place.

“Say, missie, it’s jest this, you’re the Golden Woman who bro’t us our luck. Some of us ain’t got your name right, nor nuthin’. Anyway that don’t figger nuthin’. We ain’t had no luck till you come along, so you’re jest our Golden Woman, an’ we’re goin’ to hand you——”

Joan started back as though the man had struck her. Her beautiful cheeks went a ghastly pallor.

“No—no!” she cried half-wildly.

“And why for not?” demanded Pete.

“But my name is Joan,” she cried, a terrible dread almost overpowering her.

“You see ‘Golden’ isn’t my real name,” she explained, without pausing to think. “That’s only a nickname my father ga—gave me. I—I was christened ‘Joan.’”

Pete slapped his thigh heavily, and a great grin spread over his face.

“Say, don’t it beat the band?” he cried in wild delight. “Don’t it?” he repeated, appealing to the world at large. “‘Golden.’ That’s her name, an’ we only hit on it cos she’s got gold ha’r, an’ bro’t us gold. An’ all the time her pa used to call her ‘Golden.’ Can you beat it?” Then he looked into Joan’s face with admiring eyes. “Say, missie, that’s your name for jest as long as you stop around this layout. That’s her name, ain’t it, boys?” He appealed to the crowd. “Here, give it her good an’ plenty, boys. Hooray for the ‘Golden Woman’!”

Instantly the air was filled with a harsh cheering that left the girl almost weeping in her terror and misery. But the men saw nothing of the effect of their good-will. They were only too glad to be able to find such an outlet to their feelings. When the cheering ceased Pete thrust out an arm toward her. His palm was stretched open, and lying on it was the great yellow nugget that the Padre had found—the first find of the “strike.”

“That’s it, missie,” he cried, his wild eyes rolling delightedly. “Look right ther’. That’s fer you. The Padre found it, an’ it’s his to give, an’ he sent it to you. That’s the sort o’ luck you bro’t us.”

The crowd closed in with necks craning to observe the wonderful nugget of gold; to the finding of its kind their lives were devoted. Beasley was at Pete’s elbow, the greediest of them all.

“It wasn’t no scrapin’ an’ scratchin’ luck,” the enthusiastic Pete hurried on. “It was gold in hunks you bro’t us.”

Beasley’s eyes lit, and Buck, watching closely, edged in.

“It’s a present to you, missie,” Pete went on. “That’s wot we come for. Jest to hand you that nugget. Nigh sixty ounces solid gold, an’ the first found at this yer camp.”

Balanced on his hand he thrust it farther out for the girl to take, but she shrank back. Beasley saw the movement and laughed. He pointed at it and leered up into her face.

“You’re sure right,” he cried. “Don’t you touch it. Jest look at it. Say, can’t you

fellers see, or are you blind? She ain't blind. She can see. She's seen wot's ther'. It's a death's head. Gold? Gee, I tell you it's a death's head! Look at them eye-sockets," he cried, pointing at the curious moulding of the nugget. "Ther's the nose bones, an' the jaw. Look at them teeth, too, all gold-filled, same as if a dentist had done 'em." He laughed maliciously. "It's a dandy present fer a lady. A keepsake!"

The men were crowding to see the markings which Beasley pointed out. They were quite plain. They were so obvious that something like horror lit the superstitious faces. Beasley, watching, saw that he had made his point, so he hurried on—

"Don't you touch it, miss," he cried gleefully, as though he thoroughly enjoyed delivering his warning. "It's rotten luck if you do. That gold is Devil's gold. It's come from Devil's Hill, in a Devil's storm. It's a death's head, an' there's all the trouble in the world in it. There's——"

His prophecy remained uncompleted. He was suddenly caught by a powerful hand, and the next instant he found himself swung to the outskirts of the crowd with terrific force.

In a furious rage he pulled himself together just in time to see Buck, pale with anger, seize the nugget from Pete's outstretched palm.

"You don't need to worry with the trouble in that gold," he said with biting coldness, raising it at arm's length above his head.

Then before any one was aware of his intention he flung it with all his force upon the flagstone at Joan's feet. Quickly he stooped and picked it up again, and again flung it down with all his strength. He repeated the process several times, and finally held it out toward the troubled girl.

"You ken take it now," he said, his whole manner softening. "Guess Beasley's 'death's head' has gone—to its grave. Ther' ain't no sort o' trouble can hurt any, if—you only come down on it hard enough. The trouble ain't in that gold now, only in the back of Beasley's head. An' when it gets loose, wal—I allow there's folks around here won't see it come your way. You can sure take it now."

Joan reached out a timid hand, while her troubled violet eyes looked into Buck's face as though fascinated. The man moved a step nearer, and the small hand closed over the battered nugget.

“Take it,” he said encouragingly. “It’s an expression of the good feelings of the boys. An’ I don’t guess you need be scared of *them*.”

Joan took the gold, but there was no smile in her eyes, no thanks on her lips. She stepped back to her doorway and passed within.

“I’m tired,” she said, and her words were solely addressed to Buck. He nodded, while she closed the door. Then he turned about.

“Wal!” he said.

And his manner was a decided dismissal.



CHAPTER XIII

THE CALL OF YOUTH

The fur fort was a relic of ancient days, when the old-time traders of the North sent their legions of pelt hunters from the far limits of the northern ice-world to the sunny western slopes of the great American continent. It was at such a place as this, hemmed in amidst the foot-hills, that they established their factor and his handful of armed men; lonely sentries at the gates of the mountain world, to levy an exorbitant tax upon the harvest of furs within.

Here, within the ponderous stockade, now fallen into sore decay, behind iron-bound doors secured by mighty wooden locks, and barred with balks of timber, sheltered beneath the frowning muzzles of half a dozen futile carronades, they reveled in obscene orgies and committed their barbaric atrocities under the name of Justice and Commerce. Here they amassed wealth for the parent companies in distant lands, and ruthlessly despoiled the wild of its furry denizens.

These were the pioneers, sturdy savages little better than the red man himself, little better in their lives than the creatures upon which they preyed. But they were for the most part men, vigorous, dauntless men who not only made history, but prepared the way for those who were to come after, leaving them a heritage of unsurpassable magnificence.

Now, this old-time relic afforded a shelter for two lonely men, whose only emulation of their predecessors was in the craft that was theirs. In all else there remained nothing in common, unless it were that common asset of all pioneers, a sturdy courage. They certainly lacked nothing of this. But whereas the courage of their predecessors, judging them by all historical records, in quality belonged largely to the more brutal side of life, these men had no such inspiration. Their calling was something in the nature of a passionate craving for the exercise of wits and instincts in a hard field where the creatures of the wild meet the human upon almost equal terms.

Isolation was nothing new to these men. The remotenesses of the back world had been their life for years. They understood its every mood, and met them with nerves in perfect tune. The mountains filled their whole outlook. They desired

nothing better, nothing more.

Yet it seemed strange that this should be. For the Padre had not always lived beyond the fringes of civilization. He was a man of education, a man of thought and even culture. These things must have been obvious to the most casual observer. In Buck's case it was easier to understand. He had known no other life than this. And yet he, too, might well have been expected to look askance at a future lost to all those things which he knew to lay beyond. Was he not at the threshold of life? Were not his veins thrilling with the rich, red tide of youth? Were not all those instincts which go to make up the sum of young human life as much a part of him as of those others who haunted the banks of Yellow Creek? The whole scheme was surely unusual. The Padre's instinct was to roam deeper and deeper into the wild, and Buck, offered his release from its wondrous thrall, had refused it.

Thus they embraced this new home. The vast and often decaying timbers, hewn out of the very forests they loved, cried out with all the old associations they bore and held them. The miniature citadel contained within the trenchant stockade, the old pelt stores, roofless and worm-eaten, the armory which still suggested the clank of half-armored men, who lived only for the joy of defying death. The factor's house, whence, in the days gone by, the orders for battle had been issued, and the sentence of life and death had been handed out with scant regard for justice. Then there were the ruined walls of the common-room, where the fighting men had caroused and slept. The scenes of frightful orgies held in this place were easy to conjure. All these things counted in a manner which perhaps remained unacknowledged by either. But nevertheless they were as surely a part of the lure as the chase itself, with all its elemental attraction.

They had restored just as much of the old factor's house as they needed for their simple wants. Two rooms were all they occupied, two rooms as simple and plain as their own lives. Buck had added a new roof of logs and clay plaster. He had set up two stretchers with straw-stuffed paillasses for beds. He had manufactured a powerful table, and set it upon legs cut from pine saplings. To this he had added the removal of a cook-stove and two chairs, and their own personal wardrobe from the farm, and so the place was complete. Yet not quite. There was an arm rack upon the wall of the living-room, an arm rack that had at one time doubtless supported the old flintlocks of the early fur hunters. This he had restored, and laden it with their own armory and the spare traps of their craft; while their only luxury was the fastening up beside the doorway of a frameless looking-glass for shaving purposes.

They required a place to sleep in, a place in which to store their produce, a place in which to break their fast and eat their meal at dusk. Here it lay, ready to their hand, affording them just these simple necessities, and so they adopted it.

But the new life troubled the Padre in moments when he allowed himself to dwell upon the younger man's future. He had offered him his release, at the time he had parted with the farm, from a sense of simple duty. It would have been a sore blow to him had Buck accepted, yet he would have submitted readily, even gladly, for he felt that with the passing of the farm out of their hands he had far more certainly robbed Buck of all provision for his future than he had deprived himself, who was the actual owner. He felt that in seeking to help the little starving colony he had done it, in reality, at Buck's expense.

Something of this was in his mind as he pushed away from their frugal breakfast-table. He stood in the doorway filling his pipe, while Buck cleared the tin plates and pannikins and plunged them into the boiler of hot water on the stove.

He leant his stalwart shoulders against the door casing, and stared out at the wooded valley which crossed the front of the house. Beyond it, over the opposite rise, he could see the dim outline of the crest of Devil's Hill several miles away.

He felt that by rights Buck should be there—somewhere there beyond the valley. Not because the youngster had any desire for the wealth that was flowing into the greedy hands of the gold-seekers. It was simply the thought of a man who knows far more of the world than he cares to remember. He felt that in all honesty he should point out the duties of a man to himself in these days when advancement alone counts, and manhood, without worldly position, goes for so very little. He was not quite sure that Buck didn't perfectly understand these things for himself. He had such a wonderful understanding and insight. However, his duty was plain, and it was not his way to shrink from it.

Buck was sprinkling the earth floor preparatory to sweeping it when the Padre let his eyes wander back into the room.

"Got things fixed?" he inquired casually.

"Mostly." Buck began to sweep with that practiced hand which never raises a dust on an earthen floor.

The Padre watched his movements thoughtfully.

“Seems queer seeing you sweeping and doing chores like a—a hired girl.” He laughed presently.

Buck looked up and rested on his broom. He smilingly surveyed his early benefactor and friend.

“What’s worryin’?” he inquired in his direct fashion.

The Padre stirred uneasily. He knocked the ashes from his pipe and pressed the glowing tobacco down with the head of a rusty nail.

“Oh, nothing worrying,” he said, turning back to his survey of the valley beyond the decaying stockade. “The sun’ll be over the hilltops in half an hour,” he went on.

But the manner of his answer told Buck all he wanted to know. He too glanced out beyond the valley.

“Yes,” he ejaculated, and went on sweeping. A moment later he paused again. “Guess I can’t be out at the traps till noon. Mebbe you ken do without me—till then?”

“Sure.” The Padre nodded at the valley. Then he added: “I’ve been thinking.”

“’Bout that gold strike? ’Bout me? You bin thinkin’ I ought to quit the traps, an’—make good wi’ them. I know.”

The elder man turned back sharply and looked into the dark eyes with a shrewd smile.

“You generally get what I’m thinking,” he said.

“Guess you’re not much of a riddle—to me,” Buck laughed, drawing the moist dust into a heap preparatory to picking it up.

The Padre laughed too.

“Maybe you know how I’m feeling about things, then? Y’ see there’s nothing for you now but half the farm money. That’s yours anyway. It isn’t a pile. Seems to me you ought to be—out there making a big position for yourself.” He nodded in the direction of Devil’s Hill.

“Out of gold?”

“Why not? It’s an opportunity.”

“What for?” Buck inquired, without a semblance of enthusiasm.

“Why, for going ahead—with other folks.”

Buck nodded.

“I know. Goin’ to a city with a big pile. A big house. Elegant clothes. Hired servants. Congress. Goin’ around with a splash of big type in the noospapers.”

“That’s not quite all, Buck.” The man at the door shook his head. “A man when he rises doesn’t need to go in for—well, for vulgar display. There are a heap of other things besides. What about the intellectual side of civilization? What about the advancement of good causes? What about—well, all those things we reckon worth while out here? Then, too, you’ll be marrying some day.”

Buck picked up the dust and carefully emptied it into the blazing stove. He watched it burn for a moment, and then replaced the round iron top.

“Marryin’ needs—all those things?” he inquired at last.

“Well, I wouldn’t say that,” returned the other quickly. He knew something was lying behind Buck’s quiet manner, and it made him a little uncomfortable. “Most men find a means of marrying when they want to—if they’re men. Look here,” he went on, with a sudden outburst of simple candor, “I want to be fair to you, and I want you to be fair to yourself. There’s an opportunity over there”—he pointed with his pipe in the direction of Devil’s Hill—“an opportunity to make a pile, which will help you to take a position in the world. I don’t want you to stay with me from any mistaken sense of gratitude or duty. It is my lot, and my desire, to remain in these hills. But you—you’ve got your life before you. You can rise to the top if you want to. I know you. I know your capacity. Take your share of the farm money, and—get busy.”

“An’ if I don’t want to—get busy?” Buck’s dark eyes were alight with a curious, intense warmth.

The Padre shrugged and pushed his pipe into the corner of his mouth.

“There’s nothing more to be said,” he replied.

“But ther’ is, Padre. There sure is,” cried Buck, stepping over to him and laying one hand on the great shoulder nearest him. “I get all you say. I’ve got it long

ago. You bin worryin' to say all this since ever you got back from sellin' the farm. An' it's like you. But you an' me don't jest figger alike. You got twenty more years of the world than me, so your eyes look around you different. That's natural. You're guessin' that hill is an opportunity for me. Wal, I'm guessin' it ain't. Mebbe it is for others, but not for me. I got my opportunity twenty years ago, an' you give me that opportunity. I was starvin' to death then, an' you helped me out. You're my opportunity, an' it makes me glad to think of it. Wher' you go I go, an' when we both done, why, I guess it won't be hard to see that what I done an' what you done was meant for us both to do. We're huntin' pelts for a livin' now, an' when the time comes for us to quit it, why, we'll both quit it together, an' so it'll go on. It don't matter wher' it takes us. Say," he went on, turning away abruptly. "Guess I'll jest haul the drinkin' water before I get."

The Padre turned his quiet eyes on the slim back.

"And what about when you think of marrying?" he asked shrewdly.

Buck paused to push the boiler off the stove. He shook his head and pointed at the sky.

"Guess the sun's gettin' up," he said.

The Padre laughed and prepared to depart.

"Where you off to this morning?" he inquired presently.

"That gal ain't got a hired man, yet," Buck explained simply, as he picked up his saddle. Then he added ingenuously, "Y' see I don't guess she ken do the chores, an' the old woman ain't got time to—for talkin'."

The Padre nodded while he bent over the breech of his Winchester. He had no wish for Buck to see the smile his words had conjured.

Buck swung his saddle on to his shoulder and passed out of the hut in the direction of the building he had converted into a barn. And when he had gone the Padre looked after him.

"He says she's handsome, with red-gold hair and blue eyes," he murmured. Then a far-away look stole into his steady eyes, and their stare fixed itself upon the doorway of the barn through which Buck had just vanished. "Curious," he muttered. "They've nicknamed her 'Golden,' which happened to be a nickname—her father gave her."

He stood for some moments lost in thought. Then, suddenly pulling himself together, he shouldered his rifle and disappeared into the woods.



CHAPTER XIV

A WHIRLWIND VISIT

Joan was idling dispiritedly over her breakfast. A long, wakeful night had at last ended in the usual aching head and eyes ringed with shadows. She felt dreary, and looked forward drearily to inspecting her farm—which, in her normal state, would have inspired nothing but perfect delight—with something like apprehension.

Her beginning in the new life had been swamped in a series of disastrous events which left her convinced of the impossibility of escape from the painful shadow of the past. All night her brain had been whirling in a perfect chaos of thought as she reviewed her advent to the farm. There had been nothing, from her point of view, but disaster upon disaster. First her arrival. Then—why, then the “luck” of the gold find. In her eyes, what was that but the threat of disaster to come? Had not her aunt told her that this extraordinary luck that she must ever bring was part of the curse shadowing her life? Then the coincidence of her nickname. It was truly hideous. The very incongruity of it made it seem the most terrible disaster of all. Surely, more than anything else, it pointed the hand of Fate. It was her father’s nickname for her, and he—he had been the worst sufferer at her hands.

The whole thing seemed so hopeless, so useless. What was the use of her struggle against this hateful fate? A spirit of rebellion urged her, and she felt half-inclined to abandon herself to the life that was hers; to harden herself, and, taking the cup life offered her, drain it to the dregs. Why should she waste her life battling with a force which seemed all-powerful? Why should she submit to the terror of it? What were the affairs of these others to her? She was not responsible. Nothing in the whole sane world of ethics could hold her responsible.

The spirit of rebellion, for the moment, obtained the upper hand. She had youth; Fortune had bestowed a face and figure upon her that she need not be ashamed of, and a healthy capacity for enjoyment. Then why should she abandon all these gifts because of a fate for which she was in no way responsible?

She pushed back her chair from the table, and crossed to the open front door.

The sun was not yet up, and the morning air was dewy and fresh with perfumes such as she had never experienced in St. Ellis. It was—yes, it was good to be alive on such a day in spite of everything.

She glanced out over the little farm—her farm. Yes, it was all hers, bought and paid for, and she still had money for all her needs and to do those things she wanted to do. She turned away and looked back into the little parlor with its simple furnishings, its mannish odds and ends upon the wall. She heard the sounds of the old housekeeper busy in her heavy, blundering way with the domestic work of her home. She had so many plans for the future, and every one in its inception had given her the greatest delight. Now—now this hideous skeleton had stepped from its cupboard and robbed her of every joy. No, she would not stand it. She would steel her heart to these stupid, girlish superstitions. She would—

Her gloomy reflections were abruptly cut short. There was a rush and clatter. In a perfect whirlwind of haste a horseman dashed up, dragged his horse back on to its haunches as he pulled up, and flung out of the saddle.

It was the boy, Montana Ike. He grabbed his disreputable hat from his ginger head, and stared agape at the vision of loveliness he had come in search of.

“Good—good-morning,” Joan said, hardly knowing how to greet this strange apparition.

The boy nodded, and moistened his lips as though consumed by a sudden thirst.

For a moment they stared stupidly at each other. Then Joan, feeling the awkwardness of the situation, endeavored to relieve it.

“Daylight?” she exclaimed interrogatively, “and you not yet out at the—where the gold is?”

Ike shook his head and grinned the harder. Then his tongue loosened, and his words came with a sudden rush that left the girl wondering.

“Y’ see the folks is eatin’ breakfast,” he said. “Y’ see I jest cut it right out, an’ come along. I heard Pete—you know Blue Grass Pete—he’s a low-down Kentuckian—he said he tho’t some un orter git around hyar case you was queer after last night. Sed he guessed he would. Guess I’ll git back ’fore they’re busy.

It'll take 'em all hustlin' to git ahead o' me."

"That's very kind," Joan replied mechanically. But the encouragement was scarcely needed. The boy rushed on, like a river in flood time.

"Oh, it ain't zac'ly kind!" he said. "Y' see they're mostly a low-down lot, an' Pete's the low-downest. He's bad, is Pete, an' ain't no bizness around a leddy. Then Beasley Melford. He's jest a durned skunk anyways. Don't guess Curly Saunders ain't much account neither. He makes you sick to death around a whisky bottle. Abe Allinson, he's sort o' mean, too. Y' see Abe's Slaney Dick's pardner, an' they bin workin' gold so long they ain't got a tho't in their gray heads 'cept gold an' rot-gut rye. Still, they're better'n the Kid. The Kid's soft, so we call him Soapy. Guess you orter know 'em all right away. Y' see it's easy a gal misbelievin' the rights o' folks."

Joan smiled. Something of the man's object was becoming plain.

She studied his face while he was proceeding to metaphorically nail up each of these men's coffins, and the curious animal alertness of it held her interest. His eyes were wide and restless, and a hardness marked the corners of his rather loose mouth. She wondered if that hardness were natural, or whether it had been acquired in the precarious life that these people lived.

"It's just as well to know—everybody," she said gently.

"Oh, it sure is, in a country like this," the man went on confidently. "That's why I come along. Fellers chasin' gold is a hell of a bad outfit. Y' see, I ain't bin long chasin' gold, an' I don't figger to keep at it long neither. Y' see, I got a good claim. Guess it's sure the best. We drew lots for 'em last night. It was the Padre fixed that up. He's a great feller, the Padre. An' I got the best one—wher' the Padre found that nugget you got. Oh, I'm lucky—dead lucky! Guess I'll git a pile out o' my claim, sure. A great big pile. Then I'm goin' to live swell in a big city an' have a great big outfit of folks workin' fer me. An' I'll git hooked up with a swell gal. It'll be a bully proposition. Guess the gal'll be lucky, cos I'll have such a big pile."

The youngster's enthusiasm and conceit were astounding. Nor could Joan help the coldness they inspired in her voice.

"She will be lucky—marrying you," she agreed. "But—aren't you afraid you'll miss something if the others get out to the hill before you? I mean, they being

such a bad lot.”

The man became serious for a second before he answered. Then, in a moment, his face brightened into a grin of confidence.

“Course you can’t trust ’em,” he said, quite missing Joan’s desire to be rid of him. “But I don’t guess any of ’em’s likely to try monkey tricks. Guess if any feller robbed me I’d shoot him down in his tracks. They know that, sure. Oh, no, they won’t play no monkey tricks. An’ anyway, I ain’t givin’ ’em a chance.”

He moved toward his horse and replaced the reins over its neck in spite of his brave words. Joan understood. She saw the meanness underlying his pretended solicitation for her well-being. All her sex instincts were aroused, and she quite understood the purpose of the somewhat brutal youth.

“You’re quite right to give them no chances,” she said coldly. “And now, I s’pose, you’re going right out to your claim?”

“I am that,” exclaimed the other, with a gleam of cupidity in his shifty eyes. “I’m goin’ right away to dig lumps of gold fer to buy di’monds fer that gal.”

He laughed uproariously at his pleasantry as he leapt into the saddle. But in a moment his mirth had passed, and his whole expression suddenly hardened as he bent down from the saddle.

“But ef Pete comes around you git busy an’ boot him right out. Pete’s bad—a real bad un. He’s wuss’n Beasley. Wal, I won’t say he’s wuss. But he’s as bad. Git me?”

Joan nodded. She had no alternative. The fellow sickened her. She had been ready to meet him as one of these irresponsible people, ignorant, perhaps dissipated, but at least well-meaning. But here she found the lower, meaner traits of manhood she thought were only to be found amongst the dregs of a city. It was not a pleasant experience, and she was glad to be rid of him.

“I think I understand. Good-bye.”

“You’re a bright gal, you sure are,” the youth vouchsafed cordially. “I guessed you’d understand. I like gals who understand quick. That’s the sort o’ gal I’m goin’ to hitch up with.” He grinned, and crushed his hat well down on his head. “Wal, so long. See you ag’in. Course I can’t git around till after I finish on my claim. Guess you won’t feel lonesome tho’, you got to git your farm fixed right.

Wal, so long.”

Joan nodded as the man rode off, thankful for the termination of his vicious, whirlwind visit. Utterly disgusted, she turned back to the house to find Mrs. Ransford standing in the doorway.

“What’s he want?” the old woman demanded in her most uncompromising manner.

The girl laughed mirthlessly.

“I think he wants a little honesty and kindness knocked into his very warped nature,” she declared, with a sigh.

“Warped? Warped?” The old woman caught at the word, and it seemed to set her groping in search of adequate epithets in which to express her feelings. “I don’t know what that means. But he’s it anyways—they all are.”

And she vanished again into the culinary kingdom over which she presided.



CHAPTER XV

THE CLAIMS OF DUTY

Half an hour later Joan left the house for the barn.

In that brief space she had lived through one of those swiftly-passing epochs in human life when mind, heart and inclination are brought into something approaching actual conflict. But, stern as the fight with weakness had been, she had emerged chastened and victorious. Realization had come to her—realization of whither her troubles had been leading her. She knew she must not abandon herself to the selfishness which her brief rebellion had prompted. She was young, inexperienced, and of a highly-sensitive temperament, but she was not weak. And it was this fact which urged her now. Metaphorically speaking, she had determined to tackle life with shirt sleeves rolled up.

She knew that duty was not only duty, but something which was to yield her a measure of happiness. She knew, too, that duty was not only to be regarded from a point of view of its benefit to others. There was a duty to oneself—which must not be claimed for the sin of selfishness—just as surely as to others; that in its thoroughness of performance lay the secret of all that was worth having in life, and that the disobedience of the laws of such duty, the neglect of them, was to outrage the canons of all life's ethics, and to bring down upon the head of the offender the inevitable punishment.

She must live her life calmly, honestly, whatever the fate hanging over her. That was the first and most important decision she arrived at. She must not weakly yield to panic inspired by superstitious dread. To do so was, she felt, to undermine her whole moral being. She must ignore this shadow, she must live a life that defied its power. And when the cloud grew too black, if that method were not sufficient to dispel it, she must appeal for alleviation and support from that Power which would never deny its weak and helpless creatures. She knew that human endurance of suffering was intended to be limited, and that when that limit was honestly reached support was still waiting for the sufferer.

Thus she left the house in a chastened spirit, and once more full of youthful courage. The work, the new life she had chosen for herself, must fill every

moment of her waking hours. And somehow she felt that with her stern resolve had come a foretaste of that happiness she demanded of life. Her spirits rose as she neared the barn, and a wild excitement filled her as she contemplated a minute inspection of her belongings and her intention to personally minister to their wants.

Something of the instinct of motherhood stirred in her veins at the thought. These were hers to care for—hers to attend and “do” for. She laughed as she thought of the family awaiting her. What a family. Yes, why not? These creatures were for the guardianship of the human race. With all their physical might they were helpless dependents on human aid. Yes, they must be thought for and cared for. They were her family. And she laughed again.

The barn was a sturdy building. Nor was it unpicturesque with its solid, dovetailed lateral logs and heavy thatched roof. She saw that it was built with the same care and finish as the house that was now her home. She could not help wondering at the manner of man who had designed and built it. She saw in it such deliberateness, such skill. There was nothing here of the slap-dash prairie carpenter she had read of—the man who flung up buildings simply for the needs of the moment. These were buildings that might last for ages and still retain all their original weather-proof comfort for the creatures they sheltered. She felt pleased with this man Moreton Kenyon.

She passed round the angle of the building to the doorway, and paused for a moment to admire the scheme of the farm. Every building fronted on a largish open space, which was split by the waters of Yellow Creek, beyond which lay the corrals. Here was forethought. The operative part of the farm was hidden from the house, and every detail of it was adjacent one to another. There was the wagon shed with a wagon in it, and harvesting implements stabled in perfect order. There were the hog-pens, the chicken-houses; the sheds for milch cows. There was the barn and the miniature grain store; then, across the creek, a well, with accompanying drinking-trough, corrals with lowing kine in them; a branding cage. And beyond these she could see a vista of fenced pastures.

As she stood reveling in the survey of her little possession the thought recurred to her that this was hers, all hers. It was the home of her family, and she laughed still more happily as she passed into the barn.

Pushing the door open she found herself greeted in the half-light by a chorus of equine whinnying such as she had never before experienced, and the sound

thrilled her. There stood the team of great Clydesdale horses, their long, fiddle heads turned round staring at her with softly inquiring eyes. She wanted to cry out in her joy, but, restraining herself, walked up beside the nearest of them and patted its glossy sides. Her touch was a caress which more than gave expression to her delight.

Those were precious moments to Joan. They were so precious, indeed, that she quite forgot the purpose which had brought her there. She forgot that it was hers to tend and feed these great, helpless creatures. It was enough for her to sit on the swinging bail between the stalls, and revel in the gentle nuzzling of two velvety noses. In those first moments her sensations were unforgettable. The joy of it all held her in its thrall, and, for the moment at least, there was nothing else in the world.

The moments passed unheeded. Every sound was lost to her. And so it came about that she did not hear the galloping of a horse approaching. She did not hear it come to a halt near by. She did not even notice the figure that presently filled the doorway. And only did her first realization of the intrusion come with the pleasant sound of a man's deep voice.

"Bob an' Kitty's kind o' friendly, Miss Joan," it said.

The girl turned with a jump and found herself confronted by Buck's smiling face. And oddly enough her first flash of thought was that this man had used her own name, and not her nickname, and she was grateful to him.

Then she saw that he had the fork in his hand with which she had first seen him, and she remembered his overnight promise to do those very things for her which she had set out to do, but, alas! had forgotten all about.

His presence became a reproach at once, and a slight pucker of displeasure drew her even brows together.

"You're very kind," she began, "but——"

Buck's smile broadened.

"'But's' a ter'ble word," he said. "It most always goes ahead of something unpleasant." He quietly laid the fork aside, and, gathering an armful of hay, proceeded to fill Kitty's manger. "Now what you wer' going to say was something like that old—I mean your housekeeper—said, only you wouldn't say it so mean. You jest want to say I'm not to git around doing the chores here for

the reason you can't accept favors, an' you don't guess it would be right to offer me pay, same as a 'hired' man."

He hayed Bob's manger, and then loosened both horses' collar chains.

"If you'll sit on the oat-box I'll turn 'em round an' take 'em to water at the trough. That's it."

Joan obeyed him without a word, and the horses were led out. And while they were gone the girl was left to an unpleasant contemplation of the situation. She determined to deal with the matter boldly, however, and began the moment he returned.

"You're quite right, Mr. Buck," she began.

"Buck—jest plain Buck," he interrupted her. "But I hadn't jest finished," he went on deliberately. "I want to show you how you can't do those things the old—your housekeeper was yearnin' to do. Y' see, you can't get a 'hired' man nearer than Leeson Butte. You can't get him in less'n two weeks. You can't do the chores yourself, an' that old—your housekeeper ain't fit to do anything but make hash. Then you can't let the stock go hungry. Besides all of which you're doing me a real kindness letting me help you out. Ther's no favor to you. It's sure to me, an' these creatures which can't do things for themselves. So it would be a sound proposition to cut that 'but' right out of our talk an' send word to your lawyer feller in Leeson Butte for a 'hired' man. An' when he gits around, why—well, you won't be needin' me."

All the time he was speaking his fork was busy clearing the stalls of their litter, and, at the finish, he leant on the haft of it and quizzically smiled into the girl's beautiful, half-troubled face.

Joan contemplated protesting, but somehow his manner was so friendly, so frank and honest, that she felt it would be ungracious of her. Finally he won the day, and she broke into a little laugh of yielding.

"You talk too—too well for me," she cried. "I oughtn't to accept," she added. "I know I oughtn't, but what am I to do? I can't do—these things." Then she added regretfully: "And I thought it would be all so simple."

Buck saw her disappointment, and it troubled him. He felt in a measure responsible, so he hastened to make amends.

“Wal, y’ see, men are rough an’ strong. They can do the things needed around a farm. I don’t guess women wer’ made for—for the rough work of life. It ain’t a thing to feel mean about. It’s jest in the nature of things.”

Joan nodded. All the time he was speaking she had been studying him, watching the play of expression upon his mobile features rather than paying due attention to his words.

She decided that she liked the look of him. It was not that he was particularly handsome. He seemed so strong, and yet so—so unconcerned. She wondered if that were only his manner. She knew that often volcanic natures, reckless, were hidden under a perfect calm. She wondered if it were so in his case. His eyes were so full of a brilliant dark light. Yes, surely this man roused might be an interesting personality. She remembered him last night. She remembered the strange, superheated fire in those same eyes when he had hurled the gold at her feet. Yes, she felt sure a tremendous force lay behind his calmness of manner.

The man's thoughts were far less analytical. His was not the nature to search the psychology of a beautiful girl. To him Joan was the most wonderful thing on earth. She was something to be revered, to be worshipped. His imagination, fired by all his youthful impulse, endowed her with every gift that the mind of simple manhood could conceive, every virtue, every beauty of mind as well as body.

Joan watched him for some moments as he continued his work. It was wonderful how easy he made it seem, how quickly it was done. She even found herself regretting that in a few minutes the morning "chores" would be finished, and this man would be away to—where?

"You must have been up very early to get over here," she said designedly. Her girlish curiosity and interest could no longer be denied. She must find out what he was and what he did for a living.

"I'm mostly up early," he replied simply.

"Yes, of course. But—you have your own—stock to see to?"

She felt quite pleased with her cunning. But her pleasure was short-lived.

"Sure," he returned, with disarming frankness.

"It really doesn't seem fair that you should have the double work," she went on, with another attempt to penetrate his reserve.

Buck's smile was utterly baffling. He walked to the door of the barn and gave a

prolonged, low whistle. Then he came back.

“It sure wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t,” he said simply.

“But you must have heaps to do on your—farm,” Joan went on, feeling that she was on the right track at last “Look at what you’re doing for me. These horses, the cattle, the—the pigs and things. I’ve no doubt you have much more to see to of your own.”

At that moment the head of Cæsar appeared in the doorway. He stared round the familiar stable evidently searching for his master. Finally catching sight of him, he clattered in to the place and rubbed his handsome head against Buck’s shoulder.

“This is my stock,” Buck said, affectionately rubbing the creature’s nose. “An’ I generally manage to see to him while the kettle’s boilin’ for breakfast.”

Just for a moment Joan felt abashed at her deliberate attempt to pump her companion. Then the quick, inquiring survey of the beautiful horse was too much for her, and she left her seat to join in the caresses.

“Isn’t he a beauty?” she cried, smoothing his silken face from the star on his forehead to the tip of his wide muzzle.

Just for a second her hand came into contact with the man’s, and, all unconscious, she let it remain. Then suddenly realizing the position she drew it away rather sharply.

Buck made no move, but had she only looked up she must have noted the sudden pallor of his face. That brief touch, so unconscious, so unmeaning, had again set his pulses hammering through his body. And it had needed all his control to repress the fiery impulse that stirred him. He longed to kiss that soft white hand. He longed to take it in his own strong palms and hold it for his own, to keep it forever. But the moment passed, and when he spoke it was in the same pleasant, easy fashion.

“I kind o’ thought I ought to let him go with the farm,” he said, “only the Padre wouldn’t think of it. He’d have made a dandy feller for you to ride.”

But Joan was up in arms in a moment.

“I’d never have forgiven you if you’d parted with him,” she cried. “He’s—he’s

perfectly beautiful.”

Buck nodded.

“He’s a good feller.” And his tone said far more than his words.

He led the beast to the door, and, giving him an affectionate slap, sent him trotting off.

“I must git busy,” he said, with a laugh. “The hay needs cuttin’. Guess I’ll cut till dinner. After that I’ve got to quit till sundown. I’ll go right on cuttin’ each mornin’ till your ‘hired’ man comes along. Y’ see if it ain’t cut now we’ll be too late. I’ll just throw the harness on Kitty an’ Bob an’ leave ’em to git through with their feed while I see the hogs fed. Guess that old—your housekeeper can milk? I ran the cows into the corral as I came up. Seems to me she could do most things she got fixed on doing.”

Joan laughed.

“She was ‘fixed’ on sending you about what she called ‘your business,’” she said slyly.

Buck raised his brows in mock chagrin.

“Guess she succeeded, too. I sure got busy right away—until you come along, and—and got me quittin’.”

“Oh!” Joan stared at him with round eyes of reproach. Then she burst out laughing. “Well, now you shall hear the truth for that, and you’ll have to answer me too, Mr. Buck.”

“Buck—jest plain Buck.”

The girl made an impatient little movement.

“Well, then, ‘Buck.’ I simply came along to thank you, and to tell you that I couldn’t allow your help—except as a ‘hired’ man. And—I’m afraid you’ll think me very curious—I came to find out who you were, and how you came to find me and bring me home here. And—and I wanted to know—well, everything about my arrival. And you—you’ve made it all very difficult. You—insist on doing all this for me. You’re—you’re not so kind as I thought.”

Joan’s complaint was made half-laughingly and half-seriously. Buck saw the

reality underlying her words, but determined to ignore it and only answer her lighter manner.

“If you’d only asked me these things I’d have told you right away,” he protested, smiling. “Y’ see you never asked me.”

“I—I was trying to,” Joan said feebly.

Buck paused in the act of securing Kitty’s harness.

“That old—your housekeeper wouldn’t ha’ spent a deal of time trying,” he said dryly.

Joan ignored the allusion.

“I don’t believe you intend to tell me now,” she said.

Buck left the stall and stood before the corn-box. His eyes were still smiling though his manner was tremendously serious.

“You’re wantin’ to know who I am,” he said. Then he paused, glancing out of the doorway, and the girl watched the return of that thoughtful expression which she had come to associate with his usual manner. “Wal,” he said at last, in his final way, “I’m Buck, and I was picked up on the trail-side, starving, twenty years ago by the Padre. He’s raised me, an’ we’re big friends. An’ now, since we sold his farm, we’re living at the old fur fort, back ther’ in the hills, and we’re goin’ to get a living pelt hunting. I’ve got no folks, an’ no name except Buck. I was called Buck. All I can remember is that my folks were farmers, but got burnt out in a prairie fire, and—burnt to death. That’s why I was on the trail starving when the Padre found me.”

Joan’s eyes had softened with a gentle sympathy, but she offered no word.

“‘Bout the other,” the man went on, turning back to the girl, and letting his eyes rest on her fair face, “that’s easy, too. I was at the shack of the boys in the storm. You come along an’ wer’ lying right ther’ on the door-sill when I found you. I jest carried you right here. Y’ see, I guessed who you wer’. Your cart was wrecked on the bank o’ the creek——”

“And the teamster?” Joan’s eyes were eagerly appealing.

Buck turned away.

“Oh, guess he was ther’ too.” Then he abruptly moved toward the horses. “Say, I’ll get on an’ cut that hay.”

Joan understood. She knew that the teamster was dead. She sighed deeply, and as the sound reached him Buck looked round. It was on the tip of his tongue to say some word of comfort, for he knew that Joan had understood that the man was dead, but the girl herself, under the influence of her new resolve, made it unnecessary. She rose from her seat, and her manner suggested a forced lightness.

“I’ll go and feed the chickens,” she said. “I—I ought to be capable of doing that.”

Buck smiled as he prepared to go and see to the hogs.

“Guess you won’t have trouble—if you know what to give ’em,” he said.

Nor was he quite sure if the girl were angry or smiling as she hurried out of the barn.



CHAPTER XVI

GOLD AND ALLOY

The seedling of success planted in rank soil generally develops a wild, pernicious growth which, until the summer of its life has passed, is untameable and pollutes all that with which it comes into contact. The husbandman may pluck at its roots, but the seed is flung broadcast, and he finds himself wringing his hands helplessly in the wilderness.

So it was on the banks of Yellow Creek. The seedling was already flinging its tendrils and fastening tightly upon the life of the little camp. The change had come within three weeks of the moment when the Padre had gazed upon that first wonderful find of gold. So rapid was its development that it was almost staggering to the man who stood by watching the result of the news he had first carried to the camp.

The Padre wandered the hills with trap and gun. Nothing could win him from the pursuit which was his. But his eyes were wide open to those things which had somehow become the care of his leisure. Many of his evenings were spent in the camp, and there he saw and heard the things which, in his working moments, gave him food for a disquietude of thought.

He knew that the luck that had come to the camp was no ordinary luck. His first find had suggested something phenomenal, but it was nothing to the reality. A wealth almost incalculable had been yielded by a prodigal Nature. Every claim into which he, with the assistance of the men of the camp, had divided the find, measured carefully and balloted for, was rich beyond all dreams. Two or three were richer than the others, but this was the luck of the ballot, and the natural envy inspired thereby was of a comparatively harmless character.

At first the thought of these things was one of a pleasant satisfaction. These men had waited, and suffered, and starved for their chance, and he was glad their chance had come. How many had waited, and suffered and starved, as they had done, and done all those things in vain? Yes, it was a pleasant thought, and it gave him zest and hope in his own life.

The first days passed in a perfect whirlwind of joy. Where before had sounded

only the moanings of despair, now the banks of Yellow Creek rang with laughter and joyous voices, bragging, hoping, jesting. One and all saw their long-dimmed hopes looming bright in the prospect of fulfilment.

Then came a change. Just at first it was hardly noticeable. But it swiftly developed, and the shrewd mind of the watcher in the hills realized that the days of halcyon were passing all too swiftly. Men were no longer satisfied with hopes. They wanted realities.

To want the realities with their simple, unrestrained passions, and the means of obtaining them at their disposal, was to demand them. To demand them was to have them. They wanted a saloon. They wanted an organized means of gambling, they wanted a town, with all its means of satisfying appetites that had all too long hungered for what they regarded as the necessary pleasures of life. They wanted a means of spending the accumulations gleaned from the ample purse of mother Nature. And, in a moment, they set about the work of possessing these things.

As is always the case the means was not far to seek. It needed but one mind, keener in self-interest than the rest, and that mind was to hand. Beasley Melford, at no time a man who cared for the physical hardships of the life of these people, saw his opportunity and snatched it. He saw in it a far greater gold-mine than his own claim could ever yield him, and he promptly laid his plans.

He set to work without any noise, any fuss. He was too foxy to shout until his purpose was beyond all possibility of failure. He simply disappeared from the camp for a week. His absence was noted, but no one cared. They were too full of their own affairs. The only people who thought on the matter were the Padre and Buck. Nor did they speak of it until he had been missing four days. Then it was, one evening as they were returning from their traps, the Padre gave some inkling of what had been busy in his thoughts all day.

“It’s queer about Beasley,” he said, pausing to look back over a great valley out of which they had just climbed, and beyond which the westering sun was shining upon the distant snow-fields.

Buck turned sharply at the sound of his companion’s voice. They were not given to talking much out on these hills.

“He’s been away nigh four days,” he said, and took the opportunity of shifting his burden of six freshly-taken fox pelts and lighting his pipe.

The Padre nodded.

“I think he’ll be back soon,” he said. Then he added slowly: “It seems a pity.”

“His coming back?” Buck eyed his companion quickly.

“Yes.”

“Wher’ d’you reckon he’s gone?”

The elder man raised a pair of astonished brows.

“Why, to Leeson Butte,” he said decidedly. Then he went on quietly, but with neither doubt nor hesitation: “There’s a real big change coming here—when Beasley gets back. These men want drink, they are getting restless for high play. They are hankering for—for the flesh-pots they think their gold entitles them to. Beasley will give them all those things when he comes back. It’s a pity.”

Buck thought for some moments before he answered. He was viewing the prospect from the standpoint of his years.

“They must sure have had ’em anyway,” he said at last.

“Ye—es.”

The Padre understood what was in the other’s mind.

“You see,” he went on presently, “I wasn’t thinking of that so much. It’s—well, it amounts to this. These poor devils are just working to fill Beasley’s pockets. Beasley’s the man who’ll benefit by this ‘strike.’ In a few months the others will be on the road again, going through all—that they’ve gone through before.”

“I guess they will,” Buck agreed. His point of view had changed. He was seeing through the older eyes. After that they moved on toward their home lost in the thoughts which their brief talk had inspired.

In a few days the Padre’s prophecy was fulfilled. Beasley returned from Leeson Butte at the head of a small convoy. He had contrived his negotiations with a wonderful skill and foresight. His whole object had been secrecy, and this had been difficult. To shout the wealth of the camp in Leeson Butte would have been to bring instantly an avalanche of adventurers and speculators to the banks of Yellow Creek. His capital was limited to the small amount he had secretly hoarded while his comrades were starving, and the gold he had taken from his

claim. The latter was his chief asset not from its amount, but its nature. Therefore he had been forced to take the leading merchant in the little prairie city into his confidence, and to suggest a partnership. This he had done, and a plausible tongue, and the sight of the wonderful raw gold, had had the effect he desired. The partnership was arranged, the immediate finance was forthcoming, and, for the time at least, Leeson Butte was left in utter ignorance of its neighboring Eldorado.

Once he had made his deal with Silas McGinnis, Beasley promptly opened his heart in characteristic fashion.

“They’re all sheep, every one of ’em,” he beamed upon his confederate. “They’ll be so easy fleecin’ it seems hardly worth while. All they need is liquor, and cards, and dice. Yes, an’ a few women hangin’ around. You can leave the rest to themselves. We’ll get the gilt, and to hell with the dough under it. Gee, it’s an elegant proposition!” And he rubbed his hands gleefully. “But ther’ must be no delay. We must get busy right away before folks get wind of the luck. I’ll need marquees an’ things until I can get a reg’lar shanty set up. Have you got a wood spoiler you can trust?”

McGinnis nodded.

“Then weight him down with money so we don’t need to trust him too much, and ship him out with the lumber so he can begin right away. We’re goin’ to make an elegant pile.”

In his final remark lay the key-note of his purpose. But the truth of it would have been infinitely more sure had the pronoun been singular.

Never was so much popularity extended to Beasley in his life as at the moment of his return to camp. When the gold-seekers beheld his convoy, with the wagons loaded with all those things their hearts and stomachs craved, the majority found themselves in a condition almost ready to fling welcoming arms about his neck. Their wishes had been expressed, their demands made, and now, here they were fulfilled.

A rush of trade began almost before the storekeeper’s marquee was erected. It began without regard to cost, at least on the purchasers’ parts. The currency was gold, weighed in scales which Beasley had provided, and his exorbitant charges remained quite unheeded by the reckless creatures he had marked down for his victims.

In twenty-four hours the camp was in high revelry. In forty-eight Beasley's rough organization was nearing completion. And long before half those hours had passed gold was pouring into the storekeeper's coffers at a pace he had never even dreamed of.

But the first rush was far too strenuous to be maintained for long. The strain was too great even for such wild spirits as peopled the camp. It soared to its height with a dazzling rapidity, culminating in a number of quarrels and fights, mixed up with some incipient shooting, after which a slight reaction set in which reduced it to a simmer at a magnificently profitable level for the foxy storekeeper. Still, there remained ample evidence that the Devil was rioting in the camp and would continue to do so just as long as the lure of gold could tempt his victims.

Then came the inevitable. In a few days it became apparent that the news of the "strike" had percolated abroad. Beasley's attempt at secrecy had lasted him just sufficiently long to establish himself as the chief trader. Then came the rush from the outside.

It was almost magical the change that occurred in one day. The place became suddenly alive with strangers from Leeson Butte and Bay Creek, and even farther afield. Legitimate traders came to spy out the land. Loafers came in and sat about waiting for developments. Gamblers, suave, easy, ingratiating, foregathered and started the ball of high stakes rolling. And in their wake came all that class of carrion which is ever seeking something for nothing. But the final brand of lawlessness was set on the camp by the arrival of a number of jaded, painted women, who took up their abode in a disused shack sufficiently adjacent to Beasley's store to suit their purposes. It was all very painful, all very deplorable. Yet it was the perfectly natural evolution of a successful mining camp—a place where, before the firm hand of Morality can obtain its restraining grip, human nature just runs wild.

The seedling had grown. Its rank tendrils were everywhere reaching out and choking all the better life about it. Its seeds were scattered broadcast and had germinated as only such seeds can. It only remained for the husbandman to gaze regretful and impotent upon his handiwork. His hand had planted the seedling, and now—already the wilderness was beyond all control.

Something of this was in the Padre's mind as he sat in his doorway awaiting Buck's return for the night. The dusk was growing, and already the shadows

within the ancient stockade were black with approaching night. The waiting man had forgotten his pipe, so deeply was he engrossed with his thoughts, and it rested cold in his powerful hand.

He sat on oblivious of everything but that chain of calm reasoning with which he tried to tell himself that the things happening down there on the banks of the Yellow Creek must be. He told himself that he had always known it; that the very fact of this lawlessness pointed the camp's prosperity, and showed how certainly the luck had come to stay. Later, order would be established out of the chaos, but for the moment there was nothing to be done but—wait. All this he told himself, but it left him dissatisfied, and his thoughts concentrated upon the one person he blamed for all the mischief. Beasley was the man—and he felt that wherever Beasley might be, trouble would never be far—What was that?

An unusual sound had caught and held his attention. He rose quickly from his seat and stood peering out into the darkness which he had failed to notice creeping on him. There was no mistaking it. The sound of running feet was quite plain. Why running?

He turned about and moved over to the arm rack. The next moment he was in the doorway again with his Winchester at his side.

A few moments later a short, stocky man leapt out of the darkness and halted before him. As the Padre recognized him his finger left the trigger of his gun.

“For Gawd’s sake don’t shoot, Padre!”

It was Curly Saunders’ voice, and the other laid his gun aside.

“What’s amiss?” demanded the Padre, noting the man’s painful gasping for breath.

For a moment Curly hesitated. Then, finally, between heavy breaths he answered the challenge.

“I got mad with the Kid—Soapy,” he said. “Guess I shot him up. He ain’t dead an’ ain’t goin’ to die, but Beasley, curse him, set ’em on to lynch me. They’re all mad drunk—guess I was, too, ’fore I started to run—an’ they come hot foot after me. I jest got legs of ’em an’ come along here. It’s—it’s a mighty long ways.”

The Padre listened without moving a muscle—the story so perfectly fitted in with his thoughts.

“The Kid isn’t dead? He isn’t going to die?” His voice had neither condemnation nor sympathy in it.

“No. It’s jest a flesh wound on the outside of his thigh.”

“What was the trouble?”

“Why, the durned young skunk wus jest tryin’ to set them—them women payin’ a ‘party’ call on the gal at the farm, an’ they wus drunk enough to do it. It made me mad—an’—an’, wal, we got busy with our tongues, an’ I shot him up fair an’ squar’.”

“And how about Beasley?”

“Why, it was him set the Kid to git the women on the racket. When he see how I’d stopped it he got madder than hell, an’ went right out fer lynchin’ me. The boys wus drunk enough to listen to his lousy talk.”

“Was he drunk?”

“Not on your life. Beasley’s too sweet on the dollars. But I guess he’s got his knife into that Golden Woman of ours.”

The Padre had no more questions to ask. He dropped back into the room and lit the oil lamp.

“Come right in, Curly,” he said kindly. Then he laid his rifle on the table and pointed at it. “The magazine’s loaded plumb up. Guess no man has a right to give up his life without a kick. That’ll help you if they come along—which they won’t. Maybe Buck’ll be along directly. Don’t shoot him down. Anyway he’s got Cæsar with him—so you’ll know. I’m going down to the camp.”

For a second the two men looked into each other’s eyes. The Padre read the suspicion in Curly’s. He also saw the unhealthy lines in his cheeks and round his mouth. Nor could he help feeling disgusted at the thoughts of the fortune that had come to the camp and brought all these hideous changes in its wake.

He shook his head.

“I’m not giving you away,” he said. “Guess I’ll be back in an hour.”

Curly nodded and moved over to one of the two chairs.

“Thanks, Padre,” he said as the other passed quickly out of the room.



CHAPTER XVII

TWO POINTS OF VIEW

Beasley Melford was in a detestable mood. For one reason his miserable bar was empty of all customers, and, for another, he knew that he was responsible for the fact.

Had he any sense of humor, the absurdity of the thing must have forced itself upon him and possibly helped to improve his temper. But he had no humor, and so abandoned himself to the venomous temper that was practically the mainspring of his life.

He cursed his absent customers. He cursed the man, Curly Saunders. He cursed the girl whom the trouble had been about. But more than all he cursed himself for his own folly in permitting a desire to bait Joan Rest to interfere with his business.

In his restless mood he sought to occupy himself, and, nothing else offering, he cleared his rough counter of glasses, plunged them into a bucket of filthy water, and set them out to drain. Then he turned his attention to his two oil lamps. He snuffed them with his dirty fingers in a vain attempt to improve their miserable light. Then, seating himself upon his counter, he lit a cheap green cigar and prepared to wait.

“Damn ’em all anyway,” he muttered comprehensively, and abandoned himself to watching the hands of a cheap alarm clock creeping on toward the hour of nine.

Apparently the soothing influence of his cigar changed the trend of his thoughts, for presently he began to smile in his own unpleasant way. He was reviewing the scene which his venom had inspired, and the possibilities of it—at the moment delayed, but not abandoned—gave him a peculiar sense of gratification.

He was thinking, too, of Joan Rest and some others. He was thinking of the day of her arrival in the camp, and the scene that had followed Buck’s discovery of her. He could never forgive that scene, or those who took part in it. Buck, more surely than anybody else, he could never forgive. He had always hated Buck and

his friend the Padre. They had been in a position to hand out benefits to the starving camp, and patronage was an intolerable insult to a man of his peculiar venom. The thought that he owed those men anything was anathema to him, for he knew in his heart that they despised him.

Since the day of Joan's coming he had pondered upon how he could pay Buck something of that which he owed him for the insult that still rankled. He had been called an "outlaw parson," and the truth of the appellation made the insult only the more maddening. Nothing else could have hurt the man so much as to remind him of the downfall which had reduced him to an "outlaw parson."

He had told Buck then that he would not forget. He might have added that he could not forget. So, ever since, he had cast about for any and every means of hurting the man who had injured him, and his curiously mean mind set him groping in the remotest and more subtle directions. Nor had it taken him long to locate the most vulnerable point in Buck's armor. He had realized something of the possibilities at the first coming of Joan. He had seen then the effect of the beautiful inanimate body upon the man's susceptibilities. It had been instantaneous. Then had come that scene at the farm, and Buck's further insult over the gold which he had hated to see pass into the girl's possession. It was then that the first glimmer of an opening for revenge had shown itself to him.

The rest was the simple matter of camp gossip. Here he learned, through the ridicule bestowed upon Montana Ike and Pete, who were always trying to outdo each other in their rivalry for the favors of Joan, and who never missed an opportunity of visiting the farm when they knew they would find her there, of Buck's constant attendance upon Joan. He needed very little of his evil imagination to tell him the rest. With Buck in love with the woman it was a simple enough process to his scheming mind to drive home his revenge upon the man—through her.

The necessary inspiration had come that night, when the four women vultures, plying their trade of preying upon the men in his bar, had reached a sufficient degree of drunkenness. Then it had occurred to his devilish mind to bribe them into going across to the farm and paying what he was pleased to call a "party" call upon its mistress, and, in their own phraseology, to "raise hell with her."

It was a master stroke. Then had come Curly's interference. The fool had spoilt it all. Nobody but Curly had attempted to interfere. The men had all been too drunk to bother, and the women had jumped at the chance of morally rending a

virtuous member of their own sex.

He laughed silently as he thought of it all. But his laugh only expressed his gratification at the subtlety of his ideas. His failure still annoyed him. Curly had stood champion for this Golden Woman, as they called her. Well, it wasn't his, Beasley's, fault if he hadn't paid for his interference by this time. The men were quite drunk enough to hang him, or shoot him for "doing up" young Kid, who had been a mere tool in the matter. He cordially hoped they had. Anyway, the sport at Joan's expense was too good to miss, and the night was still young.

The prospect almost entirely restored his good-humor, and he was still smiling when the door was suddenly pushed open and the Padre's burly figure appeared on the threshold.

The saloon-keeper's smile died at sight of the familiar white hair. Of all the people on Yellow Creek this was the man he least wanted to see at the moment. But he was shrewd enough to avoid any sign of open antagonism. He knew well enough that Moreton Kenyon was neither a fool nor a coward. He knew that to openly measure swords with him was to challenge a man of far superior intellect and strength, and the issue was pretty sure to go against him. Besides, this man they affectionately called the Padre had the entire good-will of the place.

But though he always avoided open antagonism the storekeeper never let go his grip on his dislike. He clung to it hoping to discover some means of breaking the man's position in the camp and bringing about an utter revulsion of the public feeling for him. There was much about the Padre that gave him food for thought. One detail in particular was always in his mind, a detail such as a mind like his was bound to question closely. He could never understand the man's object in the isolation of the life he had lived for so many years here in the back country of the West.

However, he was only concerned at the moment with the object of this unusual visit, and his shrewd speculation turned upon the pursuit of Curly.

"Evenin', Padre," he said, with a cordiality the most exacting could have found no fault with.

"Good-evening," replied the newcomer, smiling pleasantly as he glanced round the sordid hovel. Then he added: "Times are changed, sure. But—where are your customers?"

Beasley's quick eyes gazed sharply at the perfect mask of disarming geniality. He was looking for some sign to give him a lead, but there was only easy good-nature in the deep gray eyes beneath their shaggy brows.

"Guess they're out chasin' that fool-head Curly Saunders," he said unguardedly. However, he saw his mistake in an instant and tried to rectify it. "Y' see they're always skylarkin' when they git liquor under their belts."

"Skylarking?" The Padre propped himself against the bar, and his eyes suddenly rested on an ugly stain on the sand floor.

Beasley followed his glance, and beheld the pool of blood which had flowed from the Kid's wound. He cursed himself for not having obliterated it. Then, in a moment, he decided to carry the matter with a high hand.

"Psha'! What's the use'n beatin' around!" he said half-defiantly. "They're chasin' Curly to lynch him for shootin' up the Kid."

The Padre gave a well-assumed start and emitted a low whistle. Then he turned directly toward the counter.

"You best have a drink on me—for the good of the house," he said. "I'll take rye."

Beasley swung himself across the counter with a laugh.

"Say, that beats the devil!" he cried. "I'll sure drink with you. No one sooner."

The Padre nodded.

"Splendid," he smiled. Then as the other passed glasses and the bottle, he went on: "Tell us about it—the racket, I mean."

Beasley helped himself to a drink and laughed harshly.

"Wal, I didn't get it right," he said, raising his glass. "Here's 'how'!" He gulped down his drink and set the empty glass on the counter. "Y' see, I was handin' out drinks when the racket started. They were all muckin' around with them four sluts that come in town the other day. Guess they was all most sloshed to the gills. First thing I know they were quarreling, then some un got busy with a gun. Then they started chasin' Curly, an' I see the Kid lying around shot up. It was jest a flesh wound, an' I had him boosted out to his own shack. His partner, Pete—they struck a partnership, those two—why, I guess he's seein' to him. 'Tain't

on'y a scratch.”

The Padre set his glass down. He had not drunk his liquor at a gulp like the other.

“Pity,” he said, his eyes turned again to the blood-stained floor. “I s’pose it was the women—I mean the cause?”

The man’s manner was so disarming that Beasley felt quite safe in “opening out.”

“Pity?” he laughed brutally. “Wher’s the pity? Course it was the women. It’s always the women. Set men around a bunch of women and ther’s always trouble. It’s always been, and it always will be. Ther’s no pity about it I can see. We’re all made that way, and those who set us on this rotten earth meant it so, or it wouldn’t be.”

The Padre’s gray eyes surveyed the narrow face before him. This man, with his virulent meanness, his iron-gray hair, his chequered past, always interested him.

“And do you think this sort of trouble would occur if—if the men hadn’t been drunk?” he asked pointedly.

Beasley’s antagonism surged, but his outward seeming was perfectly amiable.

“Meaning me?” he asked, with a grin.

The Padre shrugged.

“I was thinking that these things have been occurring ever since the camp was flooded with——”

“Rye!” Beasley’s eyes sparkled. He reached the Padre’s now empty glass and gave him a fresh one, pushing the bottle toward him. “You’ll hev a drink on me, an’ if you’ve got time, I’ll tell you about this thing.”

The other submitted, and the drink was poured out. The Padre ignored his.

“Get right ahead,” he said in his easy way.

Beasley leered over the rim of his glass as he drank his whisky.

“You think it’s rye,” he said, setting his glass down with unnecessary force. “An’ I say it’s the women—or the woman. Trouble come to this camp with that tow-

headed gal over at the farm. Anybody with two eyes could see that. Anybody that wasn't as blind as a dotin' mother. The boys are all mad 'bout her. They're plumb-crazed. They got her tow-head and sky-blue eyes on their addled brains, an' all the youngsters, anyway, are fumin' jealous of each other, and ready to shoot, or do anything else that comes handy, to out the other feller. That's the root of the trouble—an' you brought that about selling her your farm."

Beasley had let himself go intending to aggravate, but the other's manner still remained undisturbed.

"But this only happens when they're drunk," he said mildly.

Beasley's angry impatience broke out.

"Tcha'! Drunk or sober it don't make any difference. I tell you the whole camp's on edge over that gal. It only needs a word to set things hummin'. It's that gal! She's a Jonah, a Hoodoo to us all—to this place. She's got rotten luck all over her—and you brought her here. You needn't try an' sling mud at me fer handing them the rot-gut the boys ask for. Get that woman out of the place and things'll level up right away."

The man's rudeness still seemed to have no effect.

"But all this doesn't seem to fit in with—with this affair to-night," the Padre argued. "You said it began, you thought, over the four women you allow in here."

Beasley was being steadily drawn without knowing it. His swift-rising spleen led him farther into the trap.

"So it did," he snapped. Then he laughed mirthlessly. "Y' see some one suggested those gals pay a 'party' call on your Golden Woman," he said with elaborate sarcasm. "And it was because Mr. Curly Saunders sort o' fancies he's got some sort of right to that lady he butted in and shot up the Kid."

"Who suggested it?" asked the other quickly, his mild gray eyes hardening.

"Why, the Kid."

The Padre looked the saloon-keeper squarely in the eye.

"And who put it into that foolish boy's head?" he asked slowly.

Beasley's face purpled with rage.

"You needn't to put things that way with me," he cried. "If you got things to say, say 'em right out. You reckon I was the man who suggested——"

"I do."

The Padre's eyes were wide open. The hard gray gleam literally bored into the other's heated face. He stood up, his whole body rigid with purpose.

"I say right here that you were responsible for it all. The Kid wasn't capable of inventing such a dirty trick on a decent girl. He was sufficiently drunk to be influenced by you, and, but for Curly's timely interference, you would doubtless have had your rotten way. I tell you the trouble, whatever trouble happens in this camp, is trouble which you are directly or indirectly responsible for. These men, in their sober senses, are harmless. Give them the poison you charge extortionately for and they are ready to do anything. I warn you, Beasley, to be careful what you do—be damned careful. There are ways of beating you, and, by thunder! I'll beat you at your own game! Good-night!"

The Padre turned and walked out, leaving the discomfited storekeeper speechless with rage, his narrow eyes glaring after him.

Moreton Kenyon was never a man to allow an impulse of anger to get the better of him. All that he had said to Beasley he had made up his mind to say before starting for the camp. There was only one way of dealing with the man's genius for mischief. And that way did not lie in the direction of persuasion or moral talk. Force was the only thing such a nature as his would yield to. The Padre knew well enough that such force lay to his command should he choose to exert his influence in the camp. He was man of the world enough to understand that the moral condition of the life in this camp must level itself. It could not be regulated—yet. But the protection of a young and beautiful girl was not only his duty, but the duty of every sane citizen in the district, and he was determined it should be carried out. There was no ordinary law to hold this renegade in check, so, if necessary, he must be treated to the harshness of a law framed by the unpracticed hands of men who only understood the wild in which they lived.

On his way home the Padre encountered Buck, who had been back to the fur fort, and, learning from Curly the facts of what had occurred, was now on his way to join his friend.

They paused to talk for some minutes, and their talk was upon those things which were still running through their minds in a hot tide of resentment. After a while they parted, Buck to continue his way to the camp, and the Padre to his home.

“I think it’s all right for to-night,” the Padre said as he prepared to move off. “I don’t think he’ll make another attempt. Anyway, the boys will be sober. But you might have an eye on him.”

Buck nodded, and in the darkness the fierce anger in his dark eyes was lost to his companion.

“I’ll be to home when the camp’s abed,” he said. “I’ll sure see the gal safe.”

So they parted, leaving the Padre perfectly confident in Buck’s ability to make good his assurance.



It was a wild scene inside the drinking-booth over which the ex-Churchman presided. The men had returned from their fruitless pursuit of their intended victim. And as they came in, no longer furiously determined upon a man’s life, but laughing and joking over the events of their blind journey in the darkness, Beasley saw that they were rapidly sobering.

Still raging inwardly at the result of the Padre’s visit he set to work at once, and, before any one else could call for a drink, he seized the opportunity himself. He plied them with a big drink at his own expense, and so promptly enlisted their favor—incidentally setting their appetites for a further orgie with a sharpness that it would take most of the night to appease.

The ball set rolling by his cunning hand quickly ran riot, and soon the place again became the pandemonium which was its nightly habit. Good-humor was the prevalent note, however. The men realized now, in their half-sober senses, that the Kid was only wounded, and this inclined them to leniency toward Curly. So it was quickly evident that their recently-intended victim need no longer have any fear for his life. He was forgiven as readily and as easily as he had been condemned.

So the night proceeded. The roulette board was set going again in one corner of

the hut and a crowd hung about it, while the two operators of it, "Diamond" Jack and his partner, strangers to the place, raked in their harvest. The air was thick with the reek of cheap cigars, sold at tremendous prices, and the foul atmosphere of stale drink. The usual process of a further saturation had set in. Nor amidst the din of voices was there a discordant note. Even the cursings of the losers at the roulette board were drowned in the raucous din of laughter and loud-voiced talk around the bar.

As time went on Beasley saw that his moment was rapidly approaching. The shining, half-glazed eyes, the sudden outbursts of wild whoopings, told him the tale he liked to hear. And he promptly changed his own attitude of bonhomie, and began to remind those who cared to listen of the fun they had all missed through Curly's interference. This was done at the same time as he took to pouring out the drinks himself in smaller quantities, and became careless in the matter of making accurate change for the bigger bills of his customers.

Beasley's hints were not long in bearing the fruit he desired. Some one recollected the women who had been participants in their earlier frolic, and instantly there was a clamor for their presence.

Beasley grinned. He was feeling almost joyous.

The women readily answered the summons. They came garbed in long, flowing, tawdry wrappers, the hallmark of the lives they lived. Nor was it more than seconds before they were caught in the whirl of the orgie in progress.

The sight was beyond all description in its revolting and hideous pathos. These blind, besotted men hovered about these wrecks of womanhood much in the manner of hungry animals. They plied them with drink, and sought to win their favors by ribald jesting and talk as obscene as their condition of drunkenness would permit them, while the women accepted their attentions in the spirit in which they were offered, calculating, watching, with an eye trained to the highest pitch of mercenary motive, for the direction whence the greatest benefit was to come.

Beasley was watching too. He knew that the Padre's threat had been no idle one, but he meant to forestall its operation. The Padre was away to his home by now. Nothing that he could do could operate until the morning, when these men were sober. He had got this night, at least, in which to satisfy his evil whim.

His opportunity came sooner than he expected. One of the girls, quite a young

creature, whose originally-pretty face was now distorted and bloated by the life she lived, suddenly appealed to him. She jumped up from the bench on which she had been sitting listening to the drunken attentions of a stranger who bored her, and challenged the saloon-keeper with a laugh and an ingratiating wink.

“Say, you gray-headed old beer-slinger,” she cried, “how about that ‘party’ call you’d fixed up for us? Ain’t ther’ nuthin’ doin’ since that mutt with the thin yellin’ thatch got busy shootin’? Say, he got you all scared to a pea shuck.”

She laughed immoderately, and, swaying drunkenly, was caught by the attentive stranger.

“Quit it, Mamie,” protested one of the other girls. “If you want another racket I don’t. You’re always raisin’ hell.”

“Quit yourself,” shrieked Mamie in sudden anger. “I ain’t scared of a racket.” She turned to Beasley, who was pouring out a round of drinks for Abe Allinson, now so drunk that he had to support himself against the counter. “Say, you don’t need to be scared, that feller’s out o’ the way now,” she jeered. “Wot say? Guess it would be a ‘scream.’”

Beasley handed the change of a twenty-dollar bill to Abe and turned to the girl.

“Sure it would,” he agreed promptly, his face beaming. Then he added cunningly: “But it’s you folks are plumb scared.”

“Who the h—— scared of a gal like that?” Mamie yelled at him, her eyes blazing. “I ain’t. Are you, Lulu? You, Kit?” She turned to the other women, but ignored the protesting Sadie.

Lulu sprang from the arms of a man on whose shoulder she had been reclining.

“Scared?” she cried. “Come right on. I’m game. Beasley’s keen to give her a twistin’—well, guess it’s always up to us to oblige.” And she laughed immoderately.

Kit joined in. She cared nothing so long as she was with the majority. And it was Beasley himself who finally challenged the recalcitrant Sadie.

“Guess you ain’t on, though,” he said, and there was something like a threat in his tone.

Sadie shrugged.

“It don’t matter. If the others——”

“Bully for you, Sadie!” cried Mamie impulsively. “Come right on! Who’s comin’ to get the ‘scream’?” she demanded of the men about her, while Beasley nodded his approval from his stand behind the bar.

But somehow her general invitation was not received with the same enthusiasm the occasion had met with earlier in the evening. The memory of the Kid still hovered over some of the muddled brains, and only a few of those who were in the furthest stages of drunkenness responded.

Nothing daunted, however, the girl Mamie, furiously anxious to stand well with the saloon-keeper, laughed over at him.

“We’ll give her a joyous time,” she shrieked. “Say, what’s her name? Joan Rest, the Golden Woman! She’ll need the rest when we’re through. Come on, gals. We’ll dance a cancan on her parlor table. Come on.”

She made a move and the others prepared to follow. Several of the men, laughing recklessly, were ready enough to go whither they led. Already Mamie was within a pace of the closed door when a man suddenly pushed Abe Allinson roughly aside, leant his right elbow on the counter, and stood with his face half-turned toward the crowd. It was Buck. His movements had been so swift, so well calculated, that Beasley found himself looking into the muzzle of the man’s heavy revolver before he could attempt to defend himself.

“Hold on!”

Buck’s voice rang out above the din of the barroom. Instantly he had the attention of the whole company. The girls stood, staring back at him stupidly, and the men saw the gun leveled at the saloon-keeper’s head. They saw more. They saw that Buck held another gun in his left hand, which was threatening the entire room. Most of them knew him. Some of them didn’t. But one and all understood the threat and waited motionless. Nor did they have to wait long.

“Gals,” said Buck sternly, “this racket’s played out. Ther’s been shootin’ to-night over the same thing. Wal, ther’s going to be more shootin’ if it don’t quit right here. If you leave this shanty to go across to the farm to molest the folks there, Beasley, here, is a dead man before you get a yard from the door.”

Then his glance shifted so that the saloon-keeper came into his focus, while yet he held a perfect survey of the rest of the men.

“Do you get me, Beasley?” he went on coldly. “You’re a dead man if those gals go. An’ if you send them to the farm after this—ever—I’ll shoot you on sight. Wal?”

Beasley knew when he was beaten. He had reckoned only on the Padre. He had forgotten Buck. However, he wouldn’t forget him in the future.

“You can put up your gun, Buck,” he said, with an assumption of geniality that deceived no one, and Buck least of all. “Quit your racket, gals,” he went on. Then he added with the sarcasm he generally fell back on in such emergencies: “Guess this gentleman feels the same as Curly—only he ain’t as—hasty.”

The girls went slowly back to their seats, and Buck, lowering his guns, quietly restored them both to their holsters.

Beasley watched him, and as he saw them disappear his whole manner changed.

“Now, Mister Buck,” he said, with a snarl, “I don’t guess I need either your dollars or your company on my premises. You’ll oblige me—that door ain’t locked.” And he pointed at it deliberately for the man to take his departure.

But Buck only laughed.

“Don’t worry, Beasley,” he said. “I’m here—till you close up for the night.”

And the enraged saloon-keeper had a vision of a smile at his expense which promptly lit the faces of the entire company.



CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN LIFE HOLDS NO SHADOWS

The mellow evening light glows with a living warmth of color upon hill, and valley, and plain. The myriad tints shine in perfect harmony, for Nature is incapable of discord whether in her reign of beauty or her moments of terror. Discord belongs to the imperfect human eye, the human brain, the human heart. Thus must the most perfect human creation be ever imperfect.

But Nature's perfections are never lost upon the human mind. They are not intended to be lost. They serve well their purpose of elevating, of uplifting all thought, and affording inspiration for all that which is good and beautiful in hearts thrilling with emotions which need strong support to save them from their own weaknesses.

Something of this influence was at work in the hearts of a man and a girl riding over the hard sand trail in the pleasant evening light. The man's youthful heart was thrilling with a hope he dared not attempt to define, and could not if he would. His every feeling was inspired by a joy he had no proper understanding of. The glance of his dark eyes bespoke his mood, and his buoyancy seemed to communicate itself to the great horse under him. All he knew was that the glory of the day was all about him, and, beside him, Joan was riding the Padre's sturdy horse.

The girl at his side was no less uplifted. At the moment shadows troubled her not at all. They were gone, merged into soft, hazy gauzes through which peeped the scenes of life as she desired life to be, and every picture was rose-tinted with the wonderful light of an evening sun.

Her fair young face was radiant; a wonderful happiness shone in the violet depths of her eyes. Her sweet lips were parted, displaying her even, white teeth, and her whole expression was much that of a child who, for the first time, opens its eyes to the real joy of living. Every now and again she drew a deep, long sigh of content and enjoyment.

For a while they rode in silence, their bodies swaying easily to the rhythmic gait of the horses. Their direction lay toward the sun, that direction which ever makes

for hope. Ahead of them, and behind them, lay the forest of tall, garbless trunks, their foliage-crowned, disheveled heads nodding in the light breezes from the hilltops, which left the lower atmosphere undisturbed. The scented air, pungent with pleasant odors, swept them by as their horses loped easily along. It was a moment of perfect peace, a moment when life could hold no shadows.

But such feelings are only for the silent moments of perfect companionship. The spoken word, which indexes thought, robs them of half their charm and beauty. The girl felt something of this as the calm voice of her companion broke the wonderful spell.

“That feller’s shaping well,” he said, his thoughts for the moment evidently upon the practical side of her comfort.

The girl nodded. That look of rapturous joy had left her, and she too became practical.

“I think so—when Mrs. Ransford leaves him alone,” she said, with a little laugh. “She declares it is always necessary to harass a ‘hired’ man from daylight to dark. If I were he I’d get out into the pastures, or hay sloughs, or forest, or somewhere, and stay there till she’d gone to bed. Really, Buck, she’s a terrible woman.”

In the growing weeks of companionship Joan had learned to use this man’s name as familiarly as though she had known him all her life. It would have seemed absurd to call him anything but Buck now. Besides, she liked doing so. The name fitted him. “Buck;” it suggested to her—spirit, independence, courage, everything that was manly; and she had long ago decided that he was all these things—and more.

Buck laughed in his quiet fashion. He rarely laughed loudly. Joan thought it sounded more like a deep-throated gurgle.

“She sure is,” he declared heartily.

“Of course,” Joan smiled. “You have crossed swords with her.”

The man shook his head.

“Not me,” he said. “She did the battlin’. Guess I sat tight. You see, words ain’t as easy to a man, as to—some women.”

Joan enjoyed the tact of his remark. She leant forward and smoothed the silky neck of the Padre's horse, and Buck's admiring eyes took in the perfect lines of her well-cut habit. He had never seen anything like it before, and failed to understand the excellence of its tailoring, but he knew that everything about this girl was wonderfully beautiful, and he would have liked to have been able to tell her so.

As he watched her he could not help thinking of the moment when he had held her in his arms. It was a thought almost always with him, a thought which never failed to stir his pulses and set them racing.

"But you see I can't do without her," the girl went on as she sat up in her saddle again. "She's a good worker, herself. She's taught me a good deal already. Oh, yes," she smiled at his look of incredulity, "I've begun my lessons. I am learning all I can, preparing for the bigger lessons of this—this"—she gave a comprehensive glance at the hills—"wonderful world."

Buck nodded. But he rode on in silence, his face for the moment clouded with deep thought. He was thinking of that night in Beasley's store. He was thinking of what might have happened there if those women had carried out their purpose. He was wondering what the lessons might be that this girl might yet find herself confronted with. The matter troubled him. And Joan's surreptitious glance into his face warned her that the cloud had obscured his sun.

The man finally broke the silence.

"Have you got any menfolk?" he asked abruptly.

Joan turned quickly.

"No—why?"

"An uncle—a brother. Maybe a—father?"

There was something almost anxious in Buck's manner as he enumerated the possible relationships.

But the girl shook her head at each one, and he went on in a tone of disappointment.

"It's kind of a pity," he observed. Then, in answer to the girl's quick look of inquiry, he added evasively: "You see it's lonesome for a gal—out in these hills."

Joan knew that that was not the reason of his inquiry, and she smiled quietly at her horse's ears.

"Why did you want to know if I had—menfolk?" she asked. "I mean the real reason." She looked up frankly smiling, and compelled his attention.

Buck was not easy to corner, even though he had no experience of women. Again Joan heard his strange gurgle, and her smile broadened.

"You could sure learn your lessons easier with your menfolk around to help you," he said.

For a second the girl's face dropped. Then she laughed good-humoredly.

"You're smart, Buck," she exclaimed. "But—but you're most exasperating. Still, I'll tell you. The only relative I have in the world, that I know of, is—Aunt Mercy."

"Ah! she's a woman."

"Yes, a woman."

"It's a pity." Suddenly Buck pointed ahead at a great mass of towering rock above the trees. "There's Devil's Hill!" he exclaimed.

Joan looked up, all eager delight to behold this wonderful hill Buck had brought her out to see. She expected something unusual, for already she had listened to several accounts of this place and the gold "strike" she was supposed to have brought about. Nor was she disappointed now, at least at first. She stared with wondering eyes at the weird, black giant raising its ugly head in a frowning threat above them, and gave a gasp of surprise.

Then in a moment her surprise died out, and into her eyes crept a strange look of repulsion and even fear. She had no words to offer. She made no move. It was almost as if she sat fascinated like some harmless bird held by the hypnotic stare of a python. So long did she remain silent that Buck at last turned and looked into her face. And something like alarm caught and held him when he beheld her gray look of horror as she faced the gloomy crags mounting up before them.

He too looked out ahead. But his imagination failed him, and his eyes came back to her. The change in her happy, smiling eyes was incredible. Her smile had gone utterly—the bright color of her cheeks. There was no awe in her look, neither

curiosity nor admiration. To him it almost seemed that her whole body was thrilled with an utter repugnance and loathing at what she beheld.

“It’s—ugly,” he hazarded at last.

“It’s—it’s dreadful.” The girl’s reply came in a tone there was no mistaking. It was one of concentrated detestation.

“You don’t—like it?” Buck felt helpless.

But Joan’s next words left him without any doubt.

“I—I think I—hate it,” she said harshly.

Buck drew rein on the instant.

“Then we’ll get back to home.”

But Joan had no such intention.

“No—no!” she exclaimed quickly. “We’ll go on. I want to see it. I—I *must* see it.”

Her manner had suddenly become agitated, and Buck was left wondering the more. She was stirred with strange feelings which embodied a dozen different emotions, and it was the sight of that great black crown, like the head of a Gorgon, which had inspired them. Its fascination was one of cruel attraction. Its familiarity suggested association with some part of her life. It seemed as if she belonged to it, or that it belonged to her—that in some curious way it was actually a part of her life. And all the time her detestation, her fear surged through her heart and left her revolting. But she knew she must go on. Its fascination claimed her and drew her, calling to her with a summons she dared not disobey—had no real desire to disobey.

It was she who took the lead now. She pressed on at a rapid gallop. Her fair young face was set and cold. She remained silent, and her manner forbade the man’s interruption.

But Buck kept pace with her, and a great sympathy held him silent too. He had no real understanding of her mood, only he knew that, for the moment, his presence had no place in her thought.

So they drew toward the shadow of the hill. Each was lost in disturbed

reflections. Joan was waiting, expectant of she knew not what, and the man, filled with puzzlement, knew that the solution lay only with the girl beside him.

It had been his thought to point out the things which his practiced mind suggested as of interest, but now, as he beheld the rapt expression of her face, it all became different. Therefore he checked the eager Cæsar and let her lead the way.

Joan had no observation for anything as she rode on right up to the very shadow of the suspended lake. Then, almost mechanically, as though urged by some unseen hand, she drew up sharply. She was no longer looking at the hill, she sat in her saddle limply, and stared vacantly at the rough workings of the miners which had been abandoned for the day.

Still Buck waited in silence.

At last he had his reward. The girl made a movement almost like a shiver. Then she sat up erect. The color came back to her cheeks and she turned to him with eyes in which a ghost of a smile flitted.

“I—I had forgotten,” she said half-apologetically. “This is what has brought prosperity to the camp. This is what has saved them from starvation. We—we should owe it gratitude.”

“I don’t guess the rocks need gratitude,” replied Buck quietly.

“No!”

Joan looked up at the black roof above her and shivered.

“It’s a weird place, where one might well expect weird happenings.”

Buck smiled. He was beginning to obtain some insight into the girl’s mood. So used was he to the gloomy hill that its effect was quite lost on him. Now he knew that some superstitious chord had been struck in the girl’s feelings, and this strange hill had been the medium of its expression.

He suddenly leant forward. Resting on the horn of his saddle he looked into the fair face he so loved. He had seen that haunted look in her face before. He remembered his first meeting with her at the barn. Its termination had troubled him then. It had troubled him since. He remembered the incident when the gold had been presented to her. Again he had witnessed that hunted, terrified look,

that strange overpowering of some painful thought—or memory.

Now he felt that she needed support, and strove with all his power to afford it her.

“Guess ther’s nothing weird outside the mind of man,” he said. “Anyway, nothing that needs to scare folk.” He turned and surveyed the hill and the wonderful green country surrounding them. “Get a look around,” he went on, with a comprehensive gesture. “This rock—it’s just rock, natural rock; it’s rock you’ll find most anywhere. It’s got dumped down right here wher’ most things are green, an’ dandy, an’ beautiful to the eye; so it looks queer, an’ sets your thoughts gropin’ among the cobwebs of mystery. Ther’s sure no life to it but the life of rock. This great overhang has just been cut by washouts of centuries in spring, when the creek’s in flood, an’ it just happens ther’s a hot sulphur lake on top, fed by a spring. I’ve known it these years an’ years. Guess it’s sure always been the same. It ain’t got enough to it to scare a jack-rabbit.”

Joan shook her head. But the man was glad to see the return of her natural expression, and that her smiling eyes were filled with a growing interest. He knew that her strange mood was passing.

He went on at once in his most deliberate fashion.

“You needn’t to shake your head,” he said, with a smile of confidence. “It’s jest the same with everything. It sure is. We make life what it is for ourselves. It’s the same for everybody, an’ each feller gets busy makin’ it different. The feller that gets chasin’ trouble don’t need to run. He only needs to set around and shout. Guess it’ll come along if he’s yearnin’ for it. But it don’t come on its own. That’s sure as sure. Keep brain an’ body busy doin’ the things that lie handy, an’ when you got to make good among the rocks of life, why, I sure guess you won’t find a rock half big enough to stop you.”

Watching the deep glowing eyes of the man Joan felt that his confidence was not merely the confidence of brave words. A single glance into his purposeful face left the definite impression that his was a strength that is given to few. It was the strength of a simple, honest mind as yet unfouled by the grosser evils of an effete civilization. His was the force and courage of the wild—the impulse which governs all creatures who live in the midst of Nature’s battle-grounds.

“That’s—that’s because you’re so strong you feel that way,” she said, making no attempt to disguise the admiration she felt. “The burden of life does not always fall so easily. There are things, too, in spite of what you say, that we cannot control—evils, I mean evils which afflict us.”

Buck glanced away down the creek. Then his eyes came back to her, and a new resolve lay behind them.

“I’m no stronger than others,” he said. “Guess I haven’t ha’f the strength of some. I’d say——” he paused. Then he went on, his eyes gazing fearlessly into hers: “I’d say I haven’t ha’f the strength of a gal who gives up the city—a young gal jest beginning a woman’s life with ’most everything in her favor—an’ comes right out here to farm without a livin’ soul to pass her a hand. I ain’t got ha’f the courage of a gal who does that jest because she’s chased by thoughts that worry her an’ make her days no better than to set her—hatin’ them. Strength? Say, when you ken laff an’ all the time feel that life ain’t ha’f so pleasant as death, why, I’d sure say ther’ ain’t no greater strength this side of the check-taker’s box.”

Joan could hardly believe her ears as she listened. Astonishment, resentment, helplessness, incredulity, all struggled for place. How had this man discovered her secret? How? How? What did he know besides? For a moment her feelings robbed her of speech and betrayed themselves in her expressive face.

But the man’s smile, so easy, so disarming, held her. He saw and understood, and he hastened to reassure her.

“Guess I ain’t pryin’,” he said bluntly. “These things just come along to my tongue, feeling you were troubled at this—hill. You’ve told me a heap since you come to the farm. You told me things which I don’t guess you wer’ yearnin’ to tell any one. But you didn’t tell ’em with your tongue. An’ I don’t guess you need to. Set your mind easy. You’re scared to death of some trouble which ain’t of your seekin’—wal, I don’t believe in such trouble.”

Then he laughed in so unconcerned, so buoyant and whole-hearted a fashion that Joan's confidence and hope leapt again.

"Say," he added, as he saw the brightening of her face, "when you fancy that trouble's gettin' around, when you fancy it's good an' big, an' a whole heap to carry, why, you can pass it right on to me. I'm yearnin' to get busy with jest sech a proposition."

Buck's manner was irresistible. Joan felt herself swept along by it. She longed there and then to tell him the whole of her miserable little story. Yes, he made it seem so small to her now. He made it, at the moment, seem like nothing. It was almost as though he had literally lifted her burden and was bearing the lion's share of it himself. Her heart thrilled with gratitude, with joy in this man's wonderful comradeship. She longed to open her heart to him—to implore him to shield her from all those terrible anxieties which beset her. She longed to feel the clasp of his strong hand in hers and know that it was there to support her always. She felt all these things without one shadow of fear—somehow his very presence dispelled her shadows.

But only did she permit her warm smile to convey something of all she felt as she rejected his offer.

"You don't know what you are asking," she said gently. Then she shook her head. "It is impossible. No one can shift the burdens of life on to the shoulders of another—however willing they be. No one has the right to attempt it. As we are born, so we must live. The life that is ours is ours alone."

Buck caught at her words with a sudden outburst of passionate remonstrance.

"You're wrong—dead wrong," he declared vehemently, his eyes glowing with the depth of feeling stirring him, a hot flush forcing its way through the deep tanning of his cheeks. "No gal has a right to carry trouble with a man around to help. She's made for the sunlight, for the warmth an' ease of life. She's made to set around an' take in all those good things the good God meant for her so she can pass 'em right on to the kiddies still to be born. A woman's jest the mother of the world. An' the men she sets on it are there to see her right. The woman who don't see it that way is wrong—dead wrong. An' the man that don't get right up on to his hind legs an' do those things—wal, he ain't a man."

It was a moment Joan would never forget. As long as she lived that eager face, with eyes alight, the rapid tongue pouring out the sentiments of his simple heart

must ever remain with her. It was a picture of virile manhood such as in her earliest youth she had dreamed of, a dream which had grown dimmer and dimmer as she progressed toward womanhood and learned the ways of the life that had been hers. Here it was in all reality, in all its pristine simplicity, but—she gathered up her reins and moved her horse round, heading him toward home.

“I’m glad I came out here—in the wilderness,” she said earnestly. “I’m glad, too, that I came to see this great black hill. Yes, and I’m glad to think that I have begun the lessons which this great big world is going to teach me. For the rest—we’d better go home. Look! The daylight is going.”



CHAPTER XIX

A STUDY IN MISCHIEF

Nearly three months had passed and all Beasley Melford's affairs were amply prospering. His new saloon was the joy of his heart. It had been completed more than a week, which week had been something in the nature of a triumph of financial success. The camp was booming as he had never dared to hope it would boom. Traders were opening up business all round him, and the output of gold was increasing every day. But, with all this rapid development, with all the wrangling and competition going on about him, he was the centre of the commercial interests of Yellow Creek, and his saloon was the centre of all its traffic.

But he was quite alive to the fact that he must maintain his position and custom by keeping well in line, even just a little ahead of all competition. He knew that to rest on his oars would be to court swift disaster. It must be his constant thought to make his place more and more attractive, to listen to the voice of public requirements, and seize every opportunity of catering for them.

His saloon was no better than a gambling-hell and drinking-booth, the dry goods side of his enterprise being almost insignificant. For he knew that the more surely his customers could indulge in such pastimes in comparative comfort the more surely he would keep them. So he made these things the basis of his trade. But there were other needs to be provided for. Therefore, on the completion of his new saloon, and the moment his vanity had been satisfied by the erection of a great board top, set up on the pitch of the roof, announcing in blatant lettering that it was "Melford's Hotel," he set to work to erect a dance hall and a livery barn. He foresaw the necessity of running a stage, and he never lost sight of the fact that a great number of the women of the class he wished to see about were invading the place. Then, too, the dance hall could be used as a boarding establishment for those who had no homes of their own.

It was a precious thought, and, after a journey to Leeson Butte to consult his partner, these matters were put in hand. He no longer worked single-handed. His establishment was increased by the advent of a bartender, a Chinese cook, and a livery stable keeper. These, and some casual labor from among the loafers,

supplied him with all the help he so far found necessary.

The bar and the gambling-tables were always his own care. These were the things he would never trust to other hands. The bartender was his helper only, who was never allowed to escape the observation of his lynx eyes.

Yes, Beasley Melford was flourishing as he intended to flourish, and his satisfaction was enormous. In the mornings he was always busy supervising the work, in the afternoons he gave himself what leisure his restless spirit demanded. But in the evenings he gathered his harvest by rascally methods of flagrant extortion.

It was during the latter part of his afternoon leisure that he was suddenly disturbed by the appearance of Montana Ike in his bar. He was stretched full length upon his counter, comfortably reviewing a perfect maze of mental calculations upon the many schemes which he had in hand, when the youngster pushed the swing door open and blustered in.

Beasley was sitting up in an instant. He hated this sort of sudden disturbance. He hated men who rushed at him. He could never be certain of their intentions. When he saw who his visitor was there was very little friendliness in his greeting.

“Wot in hell you want rushin’ that way?” he demanded arrogantly. “Guess your thirst ain’t on a time limit.”

But the ginger-headed youth ignored his ill-temper. He was too full of his own affairs. He simply grinned.

“Fish out them durned scales o’ yours,” he cried gleefully. “Fish ’em out, an’ set your big weights on ’em. Ther’ ain’t goin’ to be no chat nor drink till you weighed in. Then I guess the drink’ll be right up to you.”

Beasley’s mood changed like lightning. He swung over behind his bar and dropped to the floor on the other side, his eyes alight, and every faculty alert for trade.

“Wot’s it?” he demanded. “Struck it big?” he went on as the dingy gold scales were produced from the shelf at the back. Then he laughed amiably. “It needs to be big, wakin’ me in my slack time.”

“Oh, it’s big enuff,” cried Ike confidently, his eager, young, animal face alight

with pleasure.

He watched the other with impatient eyes as he deliberately picked out the weights. But Beasley was too slow, and, with an impatient exclamation, he snatched up the biggest of them and set it on the somewhat delicate scales with a heavy hand.

“Say, you’re rapid as a sick funeral,” he cried. “I ain’t got no time to waste. What I got here’ll need that—an’ more. Ther’!”

Beasley’s temper was never easy, and his narrow eyes began to sparkle.

“You’re mighty fresh,” he cried. “Guess I’m——”

But his remark remained unfinished. With a boisterous laugh the boy flung a small canvas bag on the counter and emptied its contents before the other’s astonished eyes.

“Ther’,” he cried gleefully. “I want dollars an’ dollars from you. An’ you’ll sure see they ain’t duds.”

Beasley’s eyes opened wide. In a moment he had forgotten his ill-humor.

From the gold spread out before him he looked up into the other’s face with a half-suspicious, wholly incredulous stare.

“You got that from your claim—to-day?” he asked.

“An’ wher’ in hell else?”

“Sure!” Beasley fingered the precious nuggets lovingly. “Gee! Ther’s nigh five hundred dollars there.”

“Fi’ hundred—an’ more,” cried Ike anxiously.

But Beasley’s astonishment was quickly hidden under his commercial instincts. He would have called them “commercial.”

“We’ll soon fix that,” he said, setting the scales.

Ike leant against the bar watching the man finger his precious ore as he placed each of the six nuggets in the scale and weighed them separately. He took the result down on paper and worked their separate values out at his own market prices. In five minutes the work was completed, and the man behind the bar

looked up with a grin.

“I don’t gener’ly make a bad guess,” he said blandly. “But I reckoned ’em a bit high this journey. Ther’s four hundred an’ seventy-six dollars comin’ to you—ha’f cash an’ ha’f credit. Is it a deal?”

The other’s face flamed up. A volcanic heat set him almost shouting.

“To hell!” he cried fiercely. “Ther’s fi’ hundred dollars ther’ if ther’s a cent. An’ I want it all cash.”

Beasley shook his head. He had this boy’s exact measure, and knew just how to handle him.

“The scales don’t lie,” he said. “But ther’, it’s the way wi’ youse fellers. You see a chunk o’ gold an’ you don’t see the quartz stickin’ around it. Here, I’ll put a hundred an’ seventy-six credit an’ the rest cash. I can’t speak fairer.”

He drew a roll of bills from his hip-pocket and began counting the three hundred out. He knew the sight of them was the best argument he could use. It never failed. Nor did it do so now.

Ike grumbled and protested in the foulest language he was capable of, but he grabbed the dollars when they were handed to him, and stowed them into his hip-pocket with an eagerness which suggested that he feared the other might repent of his bargain. And Beasley quickly swept the precious nuggets away and securely locked them in his safe, with the certain knowledge that his profit on the deal was more than cent for cent.

“You’ll take rye,” he said as he returned his keys to his pocket. “An’ seein’ it’s your good day, an’ it’s on me, we’ll have it out o’ this thirteen-year-old bottle.”

He pushed the bottle across the counter and watched Ike pour himself out a full “four fingers.” The sight of his gluttony made Beasley feel glad that the thirteen-year-old bottle had been replenished that morning from the common “rot-gut” cask. After their drink he became expansive.

“That’s an elegant claim of yours, Ike,” he said, taking up his favorite position on the bar. “It’s chock full of alluvial. Don’t scarcely need washing. Guess I must ha’ paid you two thousand dollars an’ more since—since we got busy. Your luck was mighty busy when they cast the lots.”

“Luck? Guess I’m the luckiest hobo in this layout,” Ike cried with a confidence that never seemed to require the support of rye whisky.

Beasley’s eyes sparkled maliciously.

“How about Pete?” he grinned. He knew that Ike had an utter detestation of Pete, and did not have to guess at the reason. “I paid him more than that by fi’ hundred. How’s that?”

“Tcha’! Pete ain’t no account anyways,” Ike retorted angrily. “Say, he pitches his dollars to glory at poker ’most every night. Pete ain’t got no sort o’ savee. You don’t see me bustin’ my wad that way.”

“How about the gals? Guess you hand ’em a tidy pile.”

“Gals!” Ike suddenly became thoughtful. His gaze wandered toward the window. Then he abruptly turned back to the bar and clamored for another drink. “We’ll have that thirteen-year-old,” he cried. “An’ guess I’ll have a double dose. Gals!” he went on, with a sneer, as the other watched him fill a brimming tumbler.

“Ther’s sure on’y one gal around here. That’s why I got around now. Guess I’m payin’ her a ‘party’ call right now, ’fore the folks get around. Say, I’m goin’ to marry that gal. She’s sure a golden woman. Golden! Gee, it sounds good!”

Beasley grinned. He was on a hot trail and he warmed to his work.

“Goin’ to ask her now?” he inquired amiably, eyeing the spirit the man had poured out.

Ike laughed self-consciously.

“Sure,” he said, draining his glass.

“What about Pete?”

Ike looked sharply into the other’s grinning face. Then he banged his glass angrily on the counter and moved toward the door.

“Pete ken go plumb to hell!” he cried furiously over his shoulder as he passed out.

Beasley dropped nimbly from his counter and looked after him through the window. He saw him vault into the saddle and race away down the trail in the direction of the farm.

His eyes were smiling wickedly.

“Don’t guess Pete’s chasin’ ther’ to suit you, Master Ike,” he muttered. “Marry that gal, eh? Not on your life. You pore silly guys! You’re beat before you start—beat a mile. Buck’s got you smashed to a pulp. Kind of wish I’d given you less cash and more credit. Hello!”

He swung round as the door was again thrust open. This time it was Blue Grass Pete who strode into the room.

“Wher’s Ike?” he demanded without preamble the moment he beheld the grinning face of the saloon-keeper.

“Gee!” Beasley’s grin suddenly broke out into a loud laugh. He brought his two hands down on the counter and gave himself up to the joy of the moment.

Pete watched him with growing unfriendliness.

“You’re rattled some,” he said at last, with elaborate sarcasm. Then, as Beasley stood up choking with laughter and rubbing his eyes, he went on: “Seems to me I asked you a civil question.”

Beasley nodded, and guffawed again.

“You sure did,” he said at last, stifling his mirth as he beheld the other’s threatening frown. “Well, I ain’t laffin’ at you. It’s—it’s jest at things.”

But Pete had no sense of humor. He disliked Beasley, and simply wanted his information now.

“Ike been along?” he demanded doggedly.

Beasley spluttered. Then he subsided into a malicious grin again.

“Sure,” he said. “He’s been in with a fat wad. Say, he’s a lucky swine. ’Most everything comes his way. Guess he can’t never touch bad. He’s ahead on the game, he’s a golden-haired pet with the gals, an’ he gits gold in—lumps.”

But Pete’s dark face and hungry eyes showed no appreciation, and Beasley knew that the man’s mood was an ugly one.

“Wher’s he now?”

“Can’t jest say. I didn’t ask him wher’ he was goin’. Y’ see I cashed his gold, and we had a drink. He seemed excited some. Guess he was sort of priming himself. Maybe he’s gone along to the gals. Have a drink?”

“No—yes, give us a horn of rye.”

The man behind the bar pushed the bottle across.

“What you needin’ him for?” he asked with apparent unconcern.

Pete snatched at his drink.

“That ain’t your affair,” he retorted surlily.

“Sure it ain’t. I jest asked—casual.”

Pete banged his empty glass on the counter.

“I’m needin’ him bad,” he cried, his eyes furiously alight. “I’m needin’ him cos I know the racket he’s on. See? He quit his claim early cos—cos——”

“Cos he’s goin’ to pay a ‘party’ call on that Golden Woman,” cried Beasley, appearing to have made a sudden discovery. “I got it, now. That’s why he was in sech a hurry. That’s why he needed a good dose o’ rye. Say, that feller means marryin’ that gal. I’ve heard tell he’s got it all fixed with her. I’ve heard tell she’s dead sweet on him. Wal, I ain’t sure but wot it’s natural. He’s a good looker; so is she. An’ he’s a bright boy. Guess he’s got the grit to look after a gal good. He’s a pretty scrapper. Another drink?”

Pete refilled his glass. His fury was at bursting-point, and Beasley reveled in the devil now looking out of his angry eyes.

“He’s gone across ther’ now?” he demanded, after swallowing his second drink. His question was ominously quiet.

Beasley saw the man’s hands finger the guns at his waist. It was a movement the sight of which gave him a wonderful satisfaction.

“Seems like it,” he said. “Though course I can’t rightly say. I see him ride off down the trail that way——”

“Here, I’ll take another drink. I’m goin’ after——”

“Say, you ain’t goin’ to butt in with two folks courtin’?” cried Beasley, blandly

innocent.

But Pete had no reply. He drained his third drink and, flinging the glass down, bolted out of the bar; while Beasley turned with a malicious chuckle, and scrupulously entered up three drinks against the man's name on the slate.

"I'd give somethin' to see it," he muttered. Then he rubbed out the entry he had made. "Guess I'll make it six drinks. He's too rattled to remember."

Ten minutes later a number of men were lounging in the saloon, and Beasley, in the leisure of administering to their wants, was relating to them the story of the afternoon's events. At the conclusion he added his own comment, which was not without definite purpose.

"Say, if they ain't jest like two dogs worritin' a bone you got me plumb beat," he said. Then he added with an air of outraged virtue: "I'd like to say right here she's jest playin' them fellers for their wads. Oh, she's a keen one, her eyes is right on to business. She'll sure have 'em shootin' each other right up. Seems to me a gal like that ain't no right in this yer city. She's a scandal to the place. An' a danger. Wot we fellers needs to figure on is the liberty an' safety of our citizens, an' anything calc'lated to be a danger to that needs to git seen to."

Some of the men concurred half-heartedly. They were men who had come into the camp with the rush, and were anxious to keep in with the saloon-keeper. Still, even they were very little stirred by his appeal. They cared not the least bit in the world who was shot up, or who did the shooting, so long as they were not personally concerned beyond the rôle of spectators.

So for once his mischief fell flat. It was too early in the day to make the impression he needed. They were not sufficiently primed with rye. So Beasley contented himself with insinuating the bottle toward doubtful customers, and easing his disappointment by making all the trade he could.

But presently a diversion occurred by the advent of Buck. He rode up, his great horse loaded down with the carcasses of three splendid deer. He had brought them in for sale. Game was a precious thing in this camp, where a diet of simple beef ruled.

The moment he displayed his wares there was a rush to bid for them, and Beasley, much to his chagrin, found himself forced to pay boom prices before he could secure them for retailing. He paid ungraciously enough. If there was one

man more than another in the camp he begrudged anything to it was Buck. Besides, it made him utterly furious to think that he never came up against this man on any debatable matter but what he managed to come off worst.

However, his policy forced him to stifle his resentment, and he paid, mentally adding another item to the long list of his personal animosities to be wiped out at some future date.

But Buck's presence was an opportunity for mischief not to be altogether missed. Nor was Beasley the man to let the moment pass without availing himself of it. Buck's interest in Joan was something to be played upon at all times. Therefore he drew him aside in a manner as portentous and ingratiating as he could make it.

Buck, wondering at his drift, submitted all unwillingly.

"Say," Beasley began, the moment they were out of ear-shot of the rest, "guess you ain't bin around the farm lately—I mean this afternoon?"

Buck looked him coldly in the eye.

"No—why?"

Beasley returned his look in consummate irritation. He pretended to be annoyed at his coolness. He shrugged and turned away, speaking over his shoulder as he went.

"Oh, nuthin'! Guess it might be as well if you had."

He went back to his bar, and in a moment was busy again at his trade. Buck looked after him for one doubting second. Then he too turned away and went out to his horse.



CHAPTER XX

THE ABILITIES OF MRS. RANSFORD

Joan was smiling happily, watching the waging of a droll little farmyard warfare. Just now her life was running very smoothly, and the shadows of memory were steadily receding. She had almost forgotten the few unpleasant moments when she had first beheld the repellent ugliness of Devil's Hill nearly a week ago. Since then nothing had occurred to raise fresh alarm, and memory, with that pleasant knack inspired of perfect physical health, had gently mellowed and lost something of its power to disturb.

It was a curious scene. The farm was still, so still, in the glowing afternoon heat. The cattle were out in the pastures filling themselves with the succulent grass and dozing the long daylight hours away. The "hired" man was out with the team, breaking a new patch of prairie land in the interim between the haying and harvesting. The hogs were gently snuffling in their pens, and a few hens and cockerels were amiably flirting whilst scratching about amongst the barn litter in that busy, inconsequent manner so suggestive to the human mind of effort for the sheer delight of being busy.

It was a scene such as she had often dreamed of, and something which very nearly approached her ideal.

Here, in one corner of the yard, where she stood, sun-bonneted to shelter her face from the burning attentions of the summer sun, leaning idly against a water barrel standing at the corner of the barn, she watched the farmyard comedy which was rapidly threatening to disturb the general peace. A large hen with a late-hatched brood of chicks, whose colors suggested the polygamous conditions under which her matrimonial affairs were carried on, with feathers ruffled and comb flaming, with head lowered and beak agape, was angrily defying an absurd-looking pig which had scarcely passed its sucking age.

They had met quite suddenly round the corner of the implement shed. For the moment they stood disconcerted, while the agitated hen clucked alarm at her offspring. The pig, squealing in a high treble, was standing with snout twitching and front feet apart, a picture of idiotic confusion. Perhaps the hen, with the

superior feminine knowledge of her age, understood something of the situation, and appreciated the young porker's inability. Anyway, she took the initiative in aggression, and, vainly struggling to cover her rather riotous brood with outspread wings, cackled furiously and prepared for the onslaught which secretly she knew was not forthcoming.

The porker's mind seemed to be in a whirl of doubt, for he looked vainly from side to side to find some adequate means of escape. His sense did not carry him sufficiently far to prompt him to turn tail and bolt for safety. He just stood there and continued his helpless baby squealing. This was all the old hen needed to drive her to extremities. Realizing his weakness she gave one fluttering spring, scattering her chicks in all directions, pecked the pig's nose violently, turned something like a somersault as she landed on the ground, gathered herself together, and incontinently fled, leaving her brood to care for themselves. Thus the pig was left looking after her with an expression in its silly eyes that suggested to the girl nothing so much as an amazed wonder as to what the fuss was all about.

Joan stood convulsed with laughter. The pig interested her vastly more than the hen, and she waited the further working of its stupid mind. But she was disappointed. Its momentary confusion had passed, and, lowering its pink snout, it groveled on in search of offal, the delights of which its young mind was just awakening to.

She had moved away to pass on toward the house when she was startled by the sound of a harsh laugh close behind her. She turned and found herself staring into the grinning face of Montana Ike.

She was angry and not without a qualm of apprehension. This man had become a constant caller at the farm at all sorts of odd and unexpected moments. And his attitude was such that she thoroughly resented him. In his vaunting, braggadocio manner he had assumed a sort of proprietary interest in her and her affairs.

The moment she faced him, his confident attitude became more pronounced.

"Comic, ain't it?" he suggested. Then he added, as though to assure her of his appreciation: "Nigh as comic as a cirkis."

But all Joan's delight in the scene was gone. Her beautiful eyes were sparkling angrily. She made up her mind then and there to be rude to the man. She would not have him about the place.

“What do you want?” she inquired bluntly.

The boy’s grin remained, but his furtive eyes opened a shade wider.

“Wot do I want? Gee! You’re feelin’ friendly.” Then he put on a manner he intended to be facetious. “An’ me left my patch o’ pay-dirt, an’ all, to pay a ‘party’ call. Say, Miss Golden, that ain’t sassiety ways in this yer camp.”

His attempt at pleasantry went for nothing. Joan, studying the man closely, saw that his face was flushed, and, even at that distance, she could smell the drink he had been imbibing. She must get rid of him, but it was not so easy to her gentle nature. However, she took a firm stand.

“Maybe not,” she said coldly. “But when people make ‘party’ calls they generally do it at convenient times. I’m very busy.”

The man laughed in the harsh manner she disliked and rather feared.

“Kind o’ seemed busy when I got around. Y’ see you was sure that busy you didn’t hear my hoss comin’ along, you never see me git off him an’ leave him back ther’, an’ me come along over an’ stand watchin’ you doin’ nuthin’ fer nigh fi’ minutes. Oh, you’re sure busy!”

Joan flushed. She knew she had lied, but to be told so by this man was infuriating. She made no attempt to further disguise her feelings.

“I said I was busy,” she cried deliberately. “Surely that should be sufficient.”

But the man had no intention of accepting his dismissal.

“It jest depends wot a feller’s come around for,” he said, no whit disconcerted. “Mebbe you won’t find you’re busy when you heard what I got to say.” He laughed immoderately. Beasley’s whisky was at work, and he had no fear for the purpose in hand.

Suddenly he dived a hand into his hip-pocket and drew out the bills the saloon-keeper had paid him.

“Look at them,” he cried in a voice that was high-pitched with elation. “Ther’s dollars an’ dollars ther’, but ’tain’t nuthin’ to wot’s to come. Say, I got another cache o’ gold waitin’ back ther’ at my shack, but I ain’t handin’ it to Beasley,” he went on cunningly. “Oh, no, not me! I’m a business guy, I am. I hold that up, an’ all the rest I git from my patch, an’ I’m goin’ to cash it in Leeson Butte, at the

bank, fer a proper exchange. See? Oh, I ain't no sucker, I ain't. An' a feller needs a heap o' dollars, treatin' his gal right."

Joan hardly knew how to deal with such a situation. Besides, the now obvious condition of the man alarmed her. However, he gave her no opportunity to reply. For, delighted with his own talk, he went on promptly—

"Now I tho't a whole heap since I got this wad. A wad like this takes you thinkin', that is, ef you ain't a low-down rattle-brain like Pete, or a psalm-smitin' son-of-a-moose like that feller, Buck. Course they ain't got no sort o' savvee, anyways, so they don't count nuthin'. But wi' a feller like me things is diff'rent. Now, this is what I got fixed. Y' see you can't have no sort of a time in this yer camp, but it's diff'rent in Leeson Butte. Guess we'll get a buggy from the camp an' drive into Leeson. Ther's dance halls ther', an' they run a decent faro joint at a place I know. An' they sell elegant rye, too. Wal, we'll git that buggy, an' git fixed up reg'lar in Leeson, an' have a bully time, an' git right back to here an' run this yer farm between us. How's that?"

"I—I don't think I understand."

Joan's alarm grew. This man was deliberately proposing to marry her. Supported by the nerve his half-drunken condition inspired, his senses were so inflamed that he took the whole matter for granted. She looked into his sensual young face, the hard eyes, and at the loose lips that surrounded his unclean teeth, and something like panic seized her. However, she knew she must not show her fear.

But he was waiting. And in reality her reply came without any hesitation. She shook her head.

"You've made a mistake," she said decidedly but gently. "I have no intention of marrying anybody." Then, taking her courage in both hands, she permitted something of her dislike and contempt to creep into her manner. "It seems to me you take a great deal too much for granted. You come here when you think you will, wholly uninvited, and, from the first, you hint broadly that you regard me as—as the person you intend to marry. That is presumption, to put it mildly, and I have no use for people who—presume."

She moved as though to return to the house. But Ike, all his confidence suddenly merged into a volcanic heat, reached out a hand to detain her. His hand came into rough contact with the soft flesh of her shoulder, and, shaking it off, she faced him with flaming eyes.

“Don’t dare to do that again,” she cried, with bosom heaving. “Go, leave this farm instantly. Remember you are trespassing here!”

Her anger had outweighed all her alarm, even, perhaps, all discretion. For the man was in no mood to accept his dismissal easily.

“So that’s it, is it?” he cried with a sudden hoarseness. “Oho, my lady! We’re putting on airs,” he sneered. “Not good enough, eh? Presuming, am I? An’ who in blazes are you that you can’t be touched? Seems to me a decent honest citizen’s jest as good fer you as fer any other gal, an’ my dollars are clean. What in thunder’s amiss?” Then his heat lessened, and his manner became more ingratiating. “See here, Golden,” he went on persuasively, “you don’t mean that, sure! Wot’s the matter with me? I ain’t weak-kneed, nor nuthin’. I ain’t scared o’ no man. I’d scrap the devil ef you ast me. An’ say, just think wot we ken do with the dollars. You’d make a real upstander in a swell house, with folks waitin’ around on you, an’ di’monds an’ things. Say, I’m jest bustin’ to make good like that. You can’t jest think how much gold ther’ is in my patch—an’ you brought it along with you. You give it to me—your luck.”

There was something almost pathetic in his pleading, and for a brief moment a shade of sympathy softened the girl.

“Please don’t persist, Ike,” she said almost gently. “Still, I can never marry you. It’s—it’s—absurd,” she added, with a touch of impatience she could not wholly keep back.

But that touch of impatience suddenly set fire again to the man’s underlying intolerance of being thwarted.

“Absurd, is it?” He laughed with a curious viciousness which once more disturbed the girl. “Absurd fer you to marry me,” he cried harshly. “Absurd fer you, cos I ain’t got no smarmy eddication, cos I ain’t dressed in swaller tails an’ kids, same as city folks. Oh, I know! You’re a leddy—a city-raised leddy, an’ I—I’m jest a prairie hog. That’s it. You ain’t got no use fer me. You jest come along right here an’ laff, an’ laff at us folks. Oh, you needn’t to say you hav’n’t!” as she raised a protesting hand. “Think I’m blind, think I’m deaf. Me! Say, you shown it right along jest so plain ther’ wer’n’t no need to tell it in langwidge.” He broke off for a moment as though his anger had robbed him of further speech, and Joan watched the growing purpose in his hot eyes. Her own face was the color of marble. She was inwardly trembling, but she stood her ground with eyes stonily cold. She made no attempt to speak now, or defend herself against his

accusations. She knew it would be useless. Only she longed in her mind for the presence of Buck to protect her from the insult she felt to be coming. Nor was she mistaken.

The man's pause gave way before the surge of his anger.

"See here," he suddenly cried, as though he had just arrived at a decision. "I ain't an easy man to laff at, as the folks around here knows. Ther' ain't no man around here can laff at Montana Ike, an' I don't guess no gal wi' red ha'r's goin' to neither. See?" He glanced swiftly round the farm. There was no one in sight. Suddenly one great hand shot out and he seized the girl by the arm in a crushing, powerful grasp and dragged her to him.

"You guess you ken laff at me," he cried, seizing her with both hands and holding her in spite of her struggles. "Wal, you ken laff after you kissed me. You ken laff, oh, yes! when I tell the folks you kissed me. Seems to me the laff'll mostly be with me."

He drew her toward him while she struggled violently. Then she shrieked for help, but she knew the only help she could hope for was the wholly inadequate help of her housekeeper. She shrieked Mrs. Ransford's name with all her power, while the man's face came nearer. It was quite hopeless; she knew she could not defend herself. And the half-drunken man was laughing as though he enjoyed her terror.

She felt his hot breath on her cheeks, she closed her eyes to shut out the sight of his grinning face. He released his hold with one hand and flung his arm about her waist. She fought with might and main, shrieking with all the power of her lungs. She suddenly felt the impress of his hot lips on her cheek, not once, but a dozen times. Then of a sudden he released her with a bitter oath, as the shrieking voice of Mrs. Ransford sounded close by, and the thwack of a heavy broom fell upon his head and shoulders.

"I'll teach you, you miser'ble hoboe!" cried the old woman's strident voice as her powerful arms swung her lusty broom aloft. "I'll teach you, you scallawag!" Thwack fell the broom, and, releasing Joan, the man sought to protect his head with his arms. "I'll give you a dose you won't fergit, you scum o' creation!" Thwack went the broom again. "Wait till the folks hear tell o' this, you miser'ble, miser'ble cur!" Again the broom fell, and the man turned to flee. "You'd run, would you? Git a fork, Miss Joan!" With a surprising rush the fat creature lunged another smash at the man's head with her favorite weapon.

The blow fell short, for Ike had made good his retreat. And curiously enough he made no attempt to disarm her, or otherwise stand his ground once he was beyond the range of her blows. Perhaps he realized the immensity of his outrage, perhaps he foresaw what might be the result to himself when the story of his assault reached the camp. Perhaps it was simply that he had a wholesome terror of this undoubted virago. Anyway, he bolted for his horse and vaulted into the saddle, galloping away as though pursued by something far more hurtful than a fat farm-wife's avalanche of vituperation.

"Mussy on us!" cried the old woman, flinging her broom to the ground as the man passed out of sight. "Mussy me, wot's he done to you, my pretty?" she cried, rushing to the girl's side and catching her to her great bosom. "There, there, don't 'e cry, don't 'e to cry for a scallawag like that," she said, as the girl buried her face on her shoulder and sobbed as though her heart would break. "There, there," she went on, patting the girl's shoulder, "don't 'e demean yerself weppin' over a miser'ble skunk like that. Kiss yer, did he? Kiss yer! Him! Wal, he won't kiss nobody no more when the folks is put wise. An' I'll see they gets it all. You, a 'Merican gal, kissed by a hog like that. Here, wipe yer cheeks wi' this overall; guess they'll sure fester if you don't. Ther', that's better," she went on as Joan, choking back her sobs, presently released herself from her bear-like embrace.

"It's my own fault," the girl said tearfully. "I ought never to have spoken to him at all. I——"

But Mrs. Ransford gave her no chance to finish what she had to say.

"Wot did I tell you?" she cried, with a power of self-righteousness. "Wot did I tell you? You ain't got no right to git a hob-a-nobbin' with sech scum. They're all scallawags, every one of 'em. Men!—say, these yer hills is the muck-hole o' creation, an' the men is the muck. I orter know. Didn't I marry George D. Ransford, an' didn't I raise twins by him, as you might say, an' didn't I learn thereby, an' therewith, as the sayin' is, that wi' muck around there's jest one way o' cleanin' it up an' that's with a broom! Come right into the house, pretty. You're needin' hot milk to soothe your nerves, my pore, pore! Come right in. Guess I'm a match fer any male muck around these hills. Mussy on us, what's that!"

Both women started and stood staring with anxious, terrified eyes down the trail which led to the camp. Two shots had been fired almost simultaneously, and

now, as they waited in horrified silence, two more shots rang out, echoing against the hills in the still air with ominous threat. After that all was quiet again.

Presently the strained look in the farm-wife's face relaxed, and she turned to her charge.

"That's him," she cried, with a swift return to her angry, contemptuous manner. "It's him showin' off—like all them scallawags. Come right in, missie," she added, holding out her hands to lead the girl home.

But her kindly intention received an unexpected shock. Joan brushed her roughly aside, and her look was almost of one suddenly demented.

"No, no," she cried in a voice of hysterical passion. "You don't understand. You can't understand. Those shots—oh! It is my fate—my curse. I must go!"

And she fled down the trail in the direction whence the sound had proceeded—fled, leaving Mrs. Ransford staring stupidly after her, a prey to utter bewilderment.



CHAPTER XXI

THE MEETING ON THE TRAIL

The quiet was profound. All the world seemed so still. There was no sign of life, yet the warm air was thrilling with the unseen life of an insect world. The heat haze rose from the soft, deep surface sand of the trail, and the grass-lined edges looked parched beneath the glare of the summer sun. There was no breath from the mountains down here, where the forest trees crowded in on either side, forming a great screen against the cooling breezes, and holding the heat like the sides of an oven.

A startled bird fluttered amongst the branches of a tree with that restless movement which so surely indicates the alarm of some subtle sense which no other creature possesses in so keen a degree. An answering rustle came from near by. And in a moment this was followed by a bustling rush among the leaves as two winged mates fled farther into the forest. Yet the sudden flight seemed quite unnecessary.

Again the stillness was broken. This time it was by the harsh voice of a black carrion. This too was followed by movement, only the movement had no haste or suggestion of fear. It was simply the heavy flapping of slow-moving wings. Two enormous crows launched themselves upon the air from the topmost branches of a distant tree, and perched on the crest of another at the trail-side.

They sat there in solemn, unmoving silence, but with eyes alert and watchful, and who might tell the thought passing through their unwholesome minds!

But now a further sound broke the stillness—a sound which perhaps accounted for the movements of the birds. A soft patter grew out of the distance like the pad of muffled feet. But it was faint and seemingly far off. The sharp eyes of the feathered watchers were scanning the horizon from their lofty perches. The sound grew. And as it grew the waiting carrion turned to view both distances of the trail. It was evident that the growing sound had a double source.

The padding feet became more distinct. Yes, the sounds were sharper. The softness had gone, developing into the rhythmic beat of hard hoofs speeding from either direction. Two horses were galloping down the trail at a rapid pace,

and quickly it became evident that their meeting must occur somewhere almost directly beneath the watchful eyes of the waiting birds.

Nearer and nearer came the hoof-beats. The birds were plucking at their feathers with an unconcern all too apparent. They ruffled their wings and preened their plumage, a sure indication of satisfaction. One of the galloping horses slackened its gait. Perhaps its rider had heard the approach of that other, and, with the curious instinctive suspicion of the western trail, prepared to pass him under the best conditions for defensiveness. Perhaps it was simply the natural action of a horseman on the trail.

But the horse from the other direction had slackened speed too. His rider, too, had reduced his gait to a walk.

The birds overhead ceased their preening and looked below for the possible development they seem to be ever awaiting. It makes no difference, they follow the trail of all animal life, waiting, waiting, with a patience inexhaustible, for the moment of stillness which tells them that life has passed and the banquet awaits them.

One of the horsemen came into full view from the height above. The second horseman appeared round a bend. Both men were mounted on the lean, hard-muscled horses of prairie breeding. They were spare of flesh and uncared for, but their muscles were hard and their legs clean. Between them a bend in the trail still intervened, but with each moment they were drawing nearer to each other.

Right under the tree upon which the crows were perched Pete drew rein and sat listening to the shuffling gait of the oncoming horse. The man's lean face was dark with a brooding hatred. His eyes were fiercely alight with expectancy. A revolver lay across his thigh, the butt of it firmly grasped in a hand clutching it with desperate purpose.

The trail was the trail to the farm. Ike had gone to the farm. A horseman was returning along that trail from the direction of the farm. Such was the argument behind his aggressive action. It was a simple argument which in his sober senses might have needed support to urge him to the course he now contemplated. But he was not sober; Beasley had seen to that. He was no more sober than was Ike.

Ike's horse was moving slowly—much slower than its usual walking gait. The man was craning forward. Who, he wondered, was riding toward the farm, and for what purpose? His right hand was on the butt of his revolver, but his weapon

was still in its holster, for his action was purely precautionary in a country where, when a man has enemies, or has done those things which he knows his fellows resent, it is advisable to look for no support outside his own ability to defend himself.

He remembered the screams of Joan, and he knew how the hills echoed. He wondered, and wondering he regretted something of what he had done. But he regretted it only for possible consequences to himself. In reality he reveled in the warm memory of the feel of the girl's soft cheek.

His horse reached the bend. He could no longer hear the hoof-beats of the other. He drew up with a sudden, nervous movement, and his gun left its holster. But his nerves passed, and, with a foul oath, he urged his horse forward. He rounded the bend and came face to face with the figure of Blue Grass Pete.

"Wher' you bin?" demanded the latter in a manner that was a deliberate insult.

Ike did the only thing his wit could prompt. He laughed. It was a harsh, mirthless laugh, which was equally an insult.

"Quit it!" roared Pete in a blind fury. "Wher' you bin, I say?"

Ike abandoned his laugh, but his face was furiously grinning.

"Bin?" he echoed. "I bin wher' you needn't to go—wher' it ain't no use your goin'," he cried, his love of boast prompting him. "I bin to fix things up. She's goin' to mar——"

A shot rang out. Ike's face blanched, but like lightning his pistol bit out its retort. Pete reeled and recovered himself, and again he fired. Ike leant forward as though seeking support from the horn of his saddle. Pete had fallen forward on to his horse's neck. Ike raised his gun and fired again, but there had really been no need for the shot. Even as his gun spoke the other man fell to the ground and rolled over. His dark face was turned upward, so that the waiting crows had a full view of it.

After that Ike remained quite still. His pale face, turning to a greenish hue in contrast to his ginger hair, was staring down at the result of his handiwork. But his eyes were almost unseeing. He was faint and weary, and in great pain.

The moments passed. At last he stirred. But his movement was merely to clutch with feeble fingers at the mane of his horse. Vainly his left hand clawed amongst

the lank hair, while the fingers of his right released their grip upon his pistol and let it clatter to the ground.

He crouched there breathing heavily, while a harsh croak from above split the air. Again he moved as though the sound had awakened him. He strove to sit up, to lift the reins, and to urge his horse forward. The beast moved in response to his effort. But the movement was all that was needed. The man reeled, lost his balance, and fell heavily to the ground. He too had rolled on to his back—he too was gazing up with unseeing eyes at the dark-hued carrion whose patience was inexhaustible.

For a moment all was still. Then the horses moved as by common consent. They drew near to each other, and their noses met in that inquiring equine fashion which suggests friendly overtures. They stood thus for a while. Then both moved to the side of the trail and began to graze upon the parching grass after the unconcerned manner of their kind.

The heavy flapping of wings told of a fresh movement in the trees above. Two great black bodies swung out upon the air. They circled round as though assuring themselves that all was as they could wish it. Then they settled again. But this time it was on the boughs of a low bush less than six feet above the staring faces of their intended victims.



CHAPTER XXII

A MAN'S SUPPORT

Buck looked up as two crows flew low over his head and passed on their way, croaking out their alarm and dissatisfaction. Mechanically his eyes followed their movements. For he was well versed in the sights, and sounds, and habits of his world.

Presently he turned again to the trail, and the expression of his eyes had changed to one of speculation. Cæsar was traveling eagerly. He had not yet forgotten that farther on along that trail lay the old barn which had been his home from his earliest recollections.

Buck had had no intention of making this visit to the farm when he left Beasley's saloon. He had not had the remotest intention of carrying out the man's broadly-given hint. A hint from Beasley was always unwelcome to him, and generally roused an obstinate desire to take an opposite course. Nor was it until he reached the ford of the creek that the significance of the man's tone penetrated his dislike of him. Quite abruptly he made up his mind to keep straight on. Curiosity, added to a slight feeling of uneasiness, urged him, and, leaving the ford behind him, he kept on down the trail.

His decision once taken, he felt easier as he rode on. Besides, he admitted to himself now, he was rather thankful to the saloon-keeper for providing him with something in the nature of an excuse for such a visit. He was different from those others, who, in perfect confidence and ignorance, required not the least encouragement to persecute Joan with their attentions. He found it more than difficult to realize that his visits were anything but irksome to the new owner of the farm now that she had settled down with the adequate support of her "hired" man.

Joan's graciousness to him was the one great delight of his every waking hour. But he dreaded the moment when her manner might become the mere tolerance she displayed toward Ike and Pete, and any of the others who chose to make her farm a halting-place. So his visits had become rarer; far rarer than made for his own peace of mind, for Joan was always in his thoughts.

Tramping the long trail of the mountains her smiling eyes were always somewhere ahead of him, encouraging him, and shedding a radiance of hope and delight upon the dullest moments of his routine. Never for one moment was the delightful picture of her presence absent from his thoughts. And to him there was nothing in the whole wide world so fair, and sweet, and worthy of the worship he so willingly cast at her feet.

His life had always been full in his wilderness of Nature's splendor. In his moments of leisure he had been more than happily content in the pleasant friendship of the man who had sheltered him from childhood. But now—now as he looked back over all those years, the associations seemed dull and empty—empty of all that made life worth living. Not only had he come to realize the woman's place in a man's life. It was the old story of the fruit of knowledge. Woman had always been a sealed book to him. Now, at last, the cover had been turned and the pages lay before him for the reading. He yearned for Joan with all the strength and passionate ardor of his strong young heart. Nor, even in his yearning, had he full understanding of the real depths of his feelings.

How could he study or analyze them? His love had no thought of the world in it. It had no thought of anything that could bring it down to the level of concrete sensation. He could not have told one feeling that was his. With Joan at his side he moved in a mental paradise which no language could depict. With Joan at his side he lived with every nerve pulsating, attuned to a perfect consciousness of joy. With Joan at his side there was nothing but light and radiance which filled every sense with a happiness than which he could conceive no greater. Alone, this great wide world about him was verily a wilderness.

The man's feelings quickly mastered his momentary uneasiness as his horse bore him on toward his goal. The forest path over which he was traveling had lost its hue of gloom which the shadowed pine woods ever convey. There was light everywhere, that light which comes straight from the heart and is capable of lending radiance even to the grave-side itself.

The trail lay straight ahead of him for some distance. Then it swerved in a big sweep away to the left. He knew this bend. The farm lay something less than half a mile beyond it. As they neared it Cæsar pricked his ears and whinnied. Buck leant forward and patted his neck out of the very joy of anticipation. It almost seemed to him as if the creature knew who was waiting at the end of the journey and was rejoicing with him. For once he had misunderstood the mood of his horse.

He realized this in a moment. The eager creature began to move with a less swinging stride, and his gait quickly became something in the nature of a “prop.” They were round the bend, and the horse whinnied again. This time it raised its head and snorted nervously. And instantly Buck was alive to the creature’s anxiety. He understood the quick glancing from side to side, and the halting of that changing step which is always a sign of fear.

Ahead the trail completed the letter S it had begun. They were nearing the final curve to the right. Buck searched the distance for the cause of Cæsar’s apprehension. And all unconsciously his mind went back to the winging of the crows overhead and the sound of their harsh voices. He spurred the creature sharply, and steadied him down.

They reached the final bend and passed round it, and in a moment Buck had an answer to the questions in his mind. It was a terrible spectacle that greeted his eyes as he reined his horse in and brought him to an abrupt halt. He had reached the battle-ground where death had claimed its toll of human passion. There, swiftly, almost silently, two men had fought out their rivalry for a woman’s favor—a favor given to neither.

It needed little enough imagination to read the facts. All the ingredients of the swift-moving drama were there before his eyes—the combatants stretched out in the sand of the trail, with staring eyes and dropping jaws, gazing up at the brilliant vault of the heavens, whither, may be, their savage spirits had fled; the woman crouching down at the roadside with face buried upon outstretched arms, her slight body heaving with hysterical sobs; the horses, horses he knew well enough by sight, lost to the tragedy amidst the more succulent roots of the parching grass beneath the shadow of overhanging trees.

One glance at the combatants told Buck all he wanted to know. They were dead. He had been too long upon the western trail to doubt the signs he beheld. His duty and inclination were with the living. In a moment he was out of the saddle and at Joan’s side, raising her from her position of grief and misery in arms as gentle as they were strong.

He had no real understanding of the necessities of the moment. All he knew, all he desired, was to afford the girl that help and protection he felt she needed. His first thought was to keep her from a further sight of what had occurred. So he held her in his arms, limp and yielding, for one uncertain moment. Then, for the second time in his life, he bore her off toward her home.

But now his feelings were of a totally different nature. There was neither ecstasy nor dreaming. He was anxious and beset. As he bore her along he spoke to her, encouraging her with gentle words of sympathy and hope. But her fainting condition left him no reward, and her half-closed eyes, filled with unshed tears, remained dull and unresponsive.



No sound broke the stillness in the parlor at the farm. Buck was leaning against the small centre-table gravely watching the bowed head of the silently-weeping girl, who was seated upon the rough settle which lined the wall. Her slight figure was supported by the pillows which had been set in place by the ministering hands of Mrs. Ransford.

Buck's reception by the farm-wife had been very different on this occasion. She had met him with his burden some distance down the trail, whither she had followed her young mistress, whose fleetness had left her far behind. Her tongue had started to clack at once, but Buck was in no mood to put up with unnecessary chatter. A peremptory order had had the astonishing effect of silencing her, and a further command had set her bustling to help her mistress.

Once immediate needs had been attended to, the man told his story briefly, and added his interpretation of the scene he had just witnessed. He further dispatched the old woman to summon the hired man from his ploughing, and, for once, found ready obedience where he might well have expected nothing but objection.

Thus it was the man and girl were alone in the parlor. Buck was waiting for Joan's storm of tears to pass.

The moment came at last, and quite abruptly. Joan stirred; she flung her head up and dashed the weak tears from her eyes, struggling bravely for composure. But the moment she spoke her words belied the resolution, and showed her still in the toils of an overwhelming despair.

"What can I do?" she cried piteously. "What am I to do? I can see nothing—nothing but disaster in every direction. It is all a part of my life; a part of me. I cannot escape it. I have tried to, but—I cannot. Oh, I feel so helpless—so helpless!"

Buck's eyes shone with love and pity. He was stirred to the depths of his manhood by her appeal. Here again was that shadow she had spoken of before, that he had become familiar with. He tried to tell himself that she was simply unnerved, but he knew her trouble was more than that. All his love drove him to a longing for a means of comforting her.

"Forget the things you seen," he said in a low tone. And he felt that his words were bald—even stupid.

The girl's troubled eyes were looking up into his in a desperate hope. It was almost as if this man were her only support, and she were making one final appeal before abandoning altogether her saving hold.

"Forget them? Oh, Buck, Buck, you don't know what you are saying. You don't understand—you can't, or you would not speak like that. You see," she went on, forgetting in her trouble that this man did not know her story, "Ike was here. Here! He made—love to me. He—he kissed me. He brutally kissed me when I had no power to resist him. And now—now this has happened."

But the man before her had suddenly changed while she was speaking. The softness had left his eyes. They had suddenly become hot, and bloodshot, and hard. His breath came quickly, heavily, his thin nostrils dilating with the furious emotion that swept through his body. Ike had kissed her. He had forgotten all her sufferings in his own sudden, jealous fury.

Joan waited. The change in the man had passed unobserved by her. Then, as no answer was forthcoming, she went on—

"Wherever I go it is the same. Death and disaster. Oh, it is awful! Sometimes I think I shall go mad. Is there no corner of the earth where I can hide myself from the shadow of this haunting curse?"

"Ike kissed you?"

Buck's voice grated harshly. Somehow her appeal had passed him by. All his better thoughts and feelings were overshadowed for the moment. A fierce madness was sweeping through his veins, his heart, his brain, a madness of feeling such as he had never before experienced.

The girl answered him, still without recognizing the change.

"Yes," she said in a dull, hopeless way. "And the inevitable happened. It

followed swiftly, surely, as it always seems to follow. He is dead.”

“He got it—as he should get it. He got no more than he’d have got if I’d been around.”

Buck’s mood could no longer escape her. She looked into the hard, young face, startled. She saw the fury in his eyes, the clenched jaws, with their muscles outstanding with the force of the fury stirring him.

The sight agitated her, but somehow it did not frighten. She half understood. At least she thought she did. She read his resentment as that of a man who sees in the outrage a breaking of all the laws of chivalry. She missed the real note underlying it.

“What does his act matter?” she said almost indifferently, her mind on what she regarded as the real tragedy. “He was drunk. He was not responsible. No, no. It is not that which matters. It was the other. He left me—to go to his death. Had Pete not been waiting for him it would have been just the same. Disaster! Death! Oh! can you not see? It is the disaster which always follows me.”

Her protest was not without its effect. So insistent was she on the resulting tragedy that Buck found himself endeavoring to follow her thought in spite of his own feelings. She was associating this tragedy with herself—as part of her life, her fate.

But it was some moments before the man was sufficiently master of himself—before he could detach his thought altogether from the human feelings stirring him. The words sang on his ear-drums. “He—he kissed me.” They were flaming through his brain. They blurred every other thought, and, for a time, left him incapable of lending her that support he would so willingly give her. Finally, however, his better nature had its way. He choked down his jealous fury, and strove to find means of comforting her.

“It’s all wrong,” he cried, with a sudden force which claimed the girl’s attention, and, for the time at least, held her troubled thought suspended. “How can this be your doing? Why for should it be a curse on you because two fellers shoot each other up? They hated each other because of you. Wal—that’s natural. It’s dead human. It’s been done before, an’ I’m sure guessin’ it’ll be done again. It’s not you. It’s—it’s nature—human nature. Say, Miss Joan, you ain’t got the lessons of these hills right yet. Folks out here are diffrent to city folks. That is, their ways of doin’ the same things are diff’rent. We feel the same—that’s because we’re

made the same—but we act diff'rent. If I'd bin around, I'd have shot Ike—with a whole heap of pleasure. An' if I had, wher's the cuss on you? Kissin' a gal like that can't be done around here."

"But Pete was not here. He didn't know."

Joan was quick to grasp the weakness of his argument.

"It don't matter a cent," cried Buck, his teeth clipping his words. "He needed his med'cine—an' got it."

Joan sighed hopelessly.

"You don't understand, and—and I can't tell it you all. Sometimes I feel I could kill myself. How can I help realizing the truth? It is forced on me. I am a leper, a—a pariah."

The girl leant back on her cushions, and her whole despairing attitude became an appeal to his manhood. The last vestige of Buck's jealousy passed from him. He longed to tell her all there was in his heart. He longed to take her in his arms and comfort her, and protect her from every shadow the whole wide world held for her. He longed to tell her of the love that was his, and how no power on earth could change it. But he did none of these things.

"The things you're callin' yourself don't sound wholesome," he said simply. "I can't see they fit in anyway. Guess they ain't natural."

Joan caught at the word.

"Natural!" she cried. "Is any of it natural?" She laughed hysterically.

Buck nodded.

"It's all natural," he said. "You've hit it. You don't need my word. Jest you ask the Padre. He'll give it you all. He'll tell you jest how notions can make a cuss of any life, an' how to get shut of sech notions. He's taught me, an' he'll teach you. I can't jest pass his words on. They don't git the same meaning when I say 'em. I ain't wise to that sort of thing. But ther's things I am wise to, and they're the things he's taught me. You're feeling mean, mean an' miser'ble, that makes me ter'ble mean to see. Say, Miss Joan, I ain't much handin' advice. I ain't got brain enough to hand that sort of thing around, but I'd sure ask you to say right here ther' ain't no cuss on your life, an' never was. You jest guess there's a cuss

around chasin' glory at your expense. Wal, git right up, an' grit your teeth an' fight good. Don't sit around feeling mean. If you'd do that, I tell you that cuss'll hit the trail so quick you won't git time to see it, an' you'll bust yourself laffin' to think you ever tho't it was around your layout. An' before I done talkin' I'll ast you to remember that when menfolks git around insultin' a helpless gal, cuss or no cuss, he's goin' to git his med'cine good—an' from me."

Buck's effort had its reward. The smile that had gradually found its way into his own eyes caught something of a reflection in those of the girl. He had dragged her from the depths of her despair by the force of the frank courage that was his. He had lifted her by the sheer strength and human honesty which lay at the foundation of his whole, simple nature. Joan sighed, and it was an acknowledgment of his success.

"Thank you, Buck," she said gently. "You are always so good to me. You have been so ever since I came. And goodness knows you have little enough reason for it, seeing it is I who have turned you out of this home of yours——"

"We got your money," interrupted Buck, almost brusquely. "This farm was the Padre's. You never turned me out. An' say, the Padre don't live a big ways from here. Maybe you'd like him to tell you about cusses an' things." His eyes twinkled. "He's sure great on cusses."

But Joan did not respond to the lightness of his manner, and Buck realized that her trouble was still strong upon her.

He waited anxiously, watching for the signs of her acceptance of his invitation. But they were not forthcoming. The deep violet of her eyes seemed to grow deeper with a weight of thought, and gradually the man's hopes sank. He had wanted her to see his friend, he had wanted his friend to see her. But more than all he had wanted to welcome her to his own home. Nor was the reason of his desire clear even to himself.

At last she rose from her seat and crossed over to the window, just as the sound of voices heralded the return of Mrs. Ransford and the hired man. It was at that moment she turned to him, speaking over her shoulder.

"They've got back," she said. "What are you going to do?"

"Send those—others—on into camp."

"Yes." Joan shivered.

Then she came back to him, and stood with one hand resting on the table.

"I—I think I should like to see the Padre. Will you take me to him one day?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BRIDGING OF YEARS

It was nearly a week later that Joan paid her visit to the fur fort.

The Padre moved about the room a little uncertainly. Its plainness troubled him, but its cleanliness was unquestionable. Both he and Buck had spent over two hours, earlier in the day, setting the place to rights and preparing for their visitor.

He shook his head as he viewed the primitive condition of the furniture. It was all very, very home-made. There was not one seat he felt to be suitable to offer to a lady. He was very dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with it all, and particularly with Buck for bringing Joan to this wretched mountain abode. It would have been far better had he called at the farm. It even occurred to him now as curious that he had never done so before.

Yet perhaps it was not so curious after all. He had been attached to the home which had sheltered him all those years, the home his own two hands had built. Yes, it was different making a place, building it, driving every nail oneself, setting up every fence post, turning every clod of soil. It was different to purchasing it, ready-made, or hiring labor. He had no desire to go near the farm again. That, like other things, had passed out of his life forever.

Three times he rearranged the room in the vain hope of giving it an added appearance of comfort, but the task was hopeless. Finally, he sat down and lit his pipe, smiling at his almost childish desire that his home should find favor in the eyes of the girl Buck was bringing to see him.

Buck had told him very little. He had spoken of the visit, and hinted at Joan's desire for advice. He had been very vague. But then that was Buck's way in some things. It was not often that he had need to go into reasons in his intercourse with his friend. Such a perfect understanding had always existed between them that they were rarely discursive. He had told the Padre of the shooting, and explained the apparent cause. He had also told him of the reception of the news in the camp, and how a small section of the older inhabitants had adopted an attitude of resentment against the innocent cause of it. He had shown him that there was plainly no sympathy, or very little, for Joan

when the story was told. And to the elder man this was disquieting. Buck had treated it with the contempt of youth, but the Padre had detected in it a food for graver thought than he let the boy understand.

It would be time enough to break up Buck's confidence should any trouble develop. In the meantime he had understood that there was something like real necessity for him to see this girl. If she needed any help then it was plainly his duty to give it her. And, besides, there was another reason. Buck desired this interview.

He smiled to himself as he thought of the turn events had taken with Buck. He must have been blind indeed if he had not seen from the very first the way things were going. The boy had fallen hopelessly in love with the first girl with whom he had definitely been brought into contact. And why not? Yes, he was rather anxious to see and talk with this girl who had set the boy's heart on fire.

Yet it seemed strange. Buck had never been anything but a boy to him. He had never really grown up. He was still the small, pathetic figure he had first encountered on the trail-side. And now here he was hopelessly, madly in love with a girl. He would never forget the fire of jealousy that had lain behind his words when Buck had told him that Ike had forcibly kissed her.

His thought lost its more sympathetic note, and he became grave. Love had come into this youngster's life, and he wondered in what direction it would influence it. He knew well enough, no one better, how much damage love could do. He knew well enough the other, and right side of the picture. But Buck was an unusual experiment. Even to him, who knew the boy so well, he was still something of a problem in many ways. One thing was certain. He would get the trouble badly, and time alone could show what ravages and complications might be forthcoming.

He rose from his chair and knocked out his pipe. Then, in smiling dismay, he sniffed the air. He had done the very thing he had meant to avoid. He shook his white head, and opened wide both the window and the door in the hope that the fresh mountain air would sweeten the atmosphere before the girl's arrival.

But his hopes were quickly dashed. As he took up his position in the doorway, prepared to extend her the heartiest greeting, he heard the clatter of hoofs on the trail, and the man and the girl rode into the stockade.

Buck had departed to perform his usual evening tasks. He had gone to water and

feed the horses, to “buck” cord-wood for the stove, and to draw the water for their household purposes. He was full early with his work, but he was anxious that the Padre and Joan should remain undisturbed. Such was his faith in the Padre that he felt that on this visit depended much of the girl’s future peace of mind.

Now the white-haired man and the girl were alone—alone with the ruddy westering sun pouring in through window and door, in an almost horizontal shaft of gracious light. Joan was sitting bending over the cook-stove, her feet resting on the rack at the foot of the oven, her hands outstretched to the warming glow of the fire. The evenings in the hills, even in the height of summer, were never without a nip of cold which drifted down from the dour, ages-old glaciers crowning the distant peaks. She was talking, gazing into the glowing coals. She was piecing out her story as it had been told her by her Aunt Mercy, feeling that only with a full knowledge of it could this wise old white-haired friend of Buck’s understand and help her.

The Padre was sitting close under the window. His back was turned to it, so that his face was almost lost in the shadow. And it was as well. As the story proceeded, as incident after incident was unfolded, the man’s face became gray with unspeakable emotion, and from robust middle age he jumped to an old, old man.

But Joan saw none of this. Never once did she turn her eyes in his direction. She was lost in painful recollections of the hideous things with which she seemed to be surrounded. She told him of her birth, those strange circumstances which her aunt had told her of, and which now, in her own cold words, sounded so like a fairy tale. She told him of her father and her father’s friend, the man who had always been his evil genius. She told him of her father’s sudden good fortune, and of the swift-following disaster. She told him of his dreadful death at the hands of his friend. Then she went on, mechanically reciting the extraordinary events which had occurred to her—how, in each case where men sought her regard and love, disaster had followed hard upon their heels; how she had finally fled before the disaster which dogged her; how she had come here, here where she thought she might be free from associations so painful, only to find that escape was impossible.

“I need not tell you what has happened since I came,” she finished up dully. “You know it all. They say I brought them their luck. Luck? Was there ever such luck? First my coming cost a man’s life, and now—now Ike and Pete. What is to

follow?”

The Padre had not once interrupted her in her long story, and, even now, as the last sound of her voice died out, it was some moments before he spoke.

The fire in the grate rustled and the cinders shook down.

It was then that the girl stirred as though suddenly made aware of the silence. Immediately the man’s voice, cold—almost harsh, in contrast to his usual tone, startled her.

“‘Rest’ is not your name,” he said. “You have changed your name—to further aid your escape from——”

“How do you know that?” Then the girl went on, wondering at the man’s quickness of understanding. “I had not intended telling you. But it doesn’t matter. Nothing seems to matter. Evidently my disguise is useless with you. No, my name is not Rest. My father was Charles Stanmore.”

The man made no reply. He did not move. His keen eyes were on the red-gold hair so neatly coiled about the girl’s head. His lips were compressed, and a deep frown had disturbed the usual serenity of his broad brow.

For a moment Joan bowed her head, and her hands clasped tightly as they were held toward the fire. Presently her voice sounded again. It began low, held under a forced calm.

“Is there no hope?” she implored him. “Buck said you could help me. What have I done that these things should curse my life? I only want peace—just a little peace. I am content to live and die just as I am. I desire nothing more than to be left—alone.”

“Who told you—all this?” The Padre’s voice had no sympathy.

“My aunt. Aunt Mercy.”

“You were—happy before she told you?”

“Yes.”

“Why did she tell you?”

“I don’t know. At least—yes, she told me so as to warn me. So that I might avoid bringing disaster upon those whom I had no desire to hurt.”

The Padre rose from his seat and crossed to where the girl was sitting. He stood for a moment just behind her chair. Then, very gently, he laid one sunburnt hand upon her shoulder.

“Little girl,” he said, with a wonderful kindness that started the long-threatened tears to the girl’s eyes, “you’ve got a peck of trouble inside that golden head of yours. But it’s all in there. There’s none of it outside. Look back over all those things you’ve told me. Every one of them. Just show me where your hand in them lies. There is not a disaster that you have mentioned but what possesses its perfectly logical, natural cause. There is not one that has not been duplicated, triplicated, ah! dozens and dozens of times since this quaint old world of ours began. You believe it is due to your influence because a silly old woman catches you in an overwrought moment and tells you so. She has implanted a parasite in your little head that has stuck there and grown out of all proportion. Believe me, child, you cannot influence the destinies of men. You have no say in the matter. As we are made, so we must work out our own salvation. It has been your lot to witness many disasters, but had these things occurred with other girls as the central figure, would you have attributed this hideous curse to their lives? Would you? Never. But you readily attribute it to your own. I am an old man my dear; older to-day, perhaps, by far than my years call for. I have seen so much of misery and trouble that sometimes I have thought that all life is just one long sea of disaster. But it isn’t—unless we choose to make it so. You are rapidly making yours such. You are naturally generous, and kind, and sympathetic. These things you have allowed to develop in you until they have become something approaching disease. Vampires sucking out all your nervous strength. Abandon these things for a while. Live the life the good God gave you. Enjoy your living moments as you were intended to enjoy them. And be thankful that the sun rises each morning, and that you can rise up from your bed refreshed and ready for the full play of heart, and mind, and limbs. Disasters will go on about you as they go on about me, and about us all. But they do not belong to us. That is just life. That is just the world and its scheme. There are lessons in all these things for us to learn—lessons for the purification of our hearts, and not diseases for our silly, weak brains. Now, little girl, I want you to promise that you will endeavor to do as I say. Live a wholesome, healthy life. Enjoy all that it is given you to enjoy. Where good can be done, do it. Where evil lies, shun it. Forget all this that lies behind you, and—Live! Evil is merely the absence of Good. Life is all Good. If we deny that good, then there is Evil. Live your life with all its blessings, and your God will bless *you*. This is your duty to yourself; to your fellows; to life; to

your God.”

Joan had risen from her seat. Her face was alight with a hope that had not been there for many days. The man’s words had taken hold of her. Her troubled mind could not withstand them. He had inspired her with a feeling of security she had not known for weeks. Her tears were no longer tears of despair. They were tears of thankfulness and hope. But when she spoke her words seemed utterly bald and meaningless to express the wave of gratitude that flooded her heart.

“I will; I will,” she cried with glistening eyes. “Oh, Padre!” she went on, with happy impulse, “you don’t know what you’ve done for me—you don’t know _____”

“Then, child, do something for me.” The man was smiling gravely down into the bright, upturned face. “You must not live alone down there at the farm. It is not good in a child so young as you. Get some relative to come and share your home with you.”

“But I have no one—except my Aunt Mercy.”

“Ah!”

“You see she is my only relative. But—but I think she would come if I asked her.”

“Then ask her.”



The Padre was sitting in the chair that Joan had occupied. He too was bending over the stove with his hands outstretched to the warming blaze. Perhaps he too was feeling the nip of the mountain air. Feeling it more than usual to-night. Buck was sitting on the edge of the table close by. He had just returned from taking Joan back to the farm.

The young man’s journey home had been made in a condition of mental exhilaration which left him quite unconscious of all time and distance. The change wrought in Joan had been magical, and Cæsar, for once in his life, felt the sharp spur of impatience in the man’s eager desire to reach his friend and speak something of the gratitude he felt.

But habit was strong upon Buck, and his gratitude found no outlet in words when the moment came. Far from it. On his arrival he found the Padre sitting at their fireside without even the most ordinary welcome on his lips. A matter so unusual that it found Buck dumb, waiting for the lead to come, as he knew it inevitably would, in the Padre's own good time.

It took longer than he expected, however, and it was not until he had prepared their frugal supper that the elder man stirred from his moody contemplation of the fire.

He looked up, and a smile struggled painfully into his eyes.

"Hungry, Buck?" he inquired.

"So!"

"Ah! then sit right down here, boy, an' light your pipe. There's things I want to say—first."

"Get right ahead." Buck drew up a chair, and obediently filled and lit his pipe.

"Life's pretty twisted," the Padre began, his steady gray eyes smiling contemplatively. "So twisted, it makes you wonder some. That girl's happier now, because I told her there were no such things as cusses. Yes, it's all queer."

He reached out and helped himself from Buck's tobacco pouch. Then he, too, filled and lit his pipe.

"You've never asked me why I live out here," he went on presently. "Never since I've known you. Once or twice I've seen the question in your eyes, but—it never stayed there long. You don't ask many questions, do you, Buck?"

The Padre puffed slowly at his pipe. His manner was that of a man looking back upon matters which had suddenly acquired an added interest for him. Yet the talk he desired to have with this youngster inspired an ill-flavor.

"If folks want to answer questions ther' ain't no need to ask 'em." Buck's philosophy interested the other, and he nodded.

"Just so. That's how it is with me—now. I want to tell you—what you've never asked. You'll see the reason presently."

Buck waited. His whole manner suggested indifference. Yet there was a

thoughtful look in his dark eyes.

“That girl,” the Padre went on, his gaze returning to a contemplation of the fire. “She’s put me in mind of something. She’s reminded me how full of twists and cranks life is. She’s full of good. Full of good thoughts and ideals. Yet life seems to take a delight in impressing her with a burden so unwholesome as to come very nearly undoing all the good it has endowed her with. It seems queer. It seems devilish hard. But I generally notice the harder folk try in this world the heavier the cross they have to carry. Maybe it’s the law of fitness. Maybe folks must bear a burden at their full capacity so that the result may be a greater refining. I’ve thought a lot lately. Sometimes I’ve thought it’s better to sit around and—well, don’t worry with anything outside three meals a day. That’s been in weak moments. You see, we can’t help our natures. If it’s in us to do the best we know—well, we’re just going to do it, and—and hang the result.”

“H’m.” Buck grunted and waited.

“I was thinking of things around here,” the other went on. “I was wondering about the camp. It’s a stinking hole now. It’s full of everything—rotten. Yet they think it’s one huge success, and they reckon we helped them to it.”

“How?”

“Why, by feeding them when they were starving, and so making it possible for them to hang on until Nature opened her treasure-house.”

Buck nodded.

“I see.”

“All I see is—perhaps through our efforts—we’ve turned loose a hell of drunkenness and debauchery upon earth. These people—perhaps through our efforts—have been driven along the very path we would rather have saved them from. The majority will end in disaster. Some have already done so. But for our help this would not have been.”

“They’d jest have starved.”

“We should not have sold our farm, and Ike and Pete would have been alive now.”

“In Ike’s case it would have been a pity.”

The Padre smiled. He took Buck's protest for what it was worth.

"Yes, life's pretty twisted. It's always been the same with me. Wherever I've got busy trying to help those I had regard for I generally managed to find my efforts working out with a result I never reckoned on. That's why I am here."

The Padre smoked on for some moments in silence.

"I was hot-headed once," he went on presently. "I was so hot-headed that I—I insulted the woman I loved. I insulted her beyond forgiveness. You see, she didn't love me. She loved my greatest friend. Still, that's another story. It's the friend I want to talk about. He was a splendid fellow. A bright, impetuous gambler on the New York Stock Exchange. We were both on Wall Street. I was a gambler too. I was a lucky gambler, and he was an unlucky one. In spite of my love for the woman, who loved him, it was my one great desire to help him. My luck was such that I believed I could do it—my luck and my conceit. You see, next to the woman I loved he was everything in the world to me. Do you get that?"

Buck nodded.

"Well, in spite of all I could and did do, after a nice run of luck which made me think his affairs had turned for the better, a spell of the most terrible ill-luck set in. There was no checking it. He rode headlong for a smash. I financed him time and again, nearly ruining myself in my effort to save him. He took to drink badly. He grew desperate in his gambling. In short, I saw he had given up all hope. Again I did the best I could. I was always with him. My object was to endeavor to keep him in check. In his drinking bouts I was with him, and when he insisted on poker and other gambling I was there to take a hand. If I hadn't done these things—well, others would have, but with a different object. By a hundred devices I managed to minimize the bad results of his wild, headstrong career.

"Then the end came. Had I been less young, had I been less hopeful for him, less wrapped up in him, I must have foreseen it. We were playing cards in his apartments. His housekeeper and his baby girl were in a distant room. They were in bed. You see, it was late at night. It was the last hand. His luck had been diabolical, but the stakes were comparatively low. I shall never forget the scene. His nerves were completely shattered. He picked up his hand, glanced at it—we were playing poker—jack pots—and flung it down. 'I'm done,' he cried, and, kicking back his chair, rose from the table. He moved a pace away as though to

go to the side-table where the whisky and soda stood. I thought he meant having a drink. His back was turned to me. The next moment I heard shots. He seemed to stumble, swung round with a sort of jerk, and fell face downward across the table.

“I jumped to his assistance. But—he was dead. He had shot himself through the heart and in the stomach. My horror? Well, it doesn’t matter now. I was utterly and completely unnerved. If I hadn’t been perhaps I should have acted differently. I should have called his—housekeeper. I should have summoned the police—a doctor. But I did none of these. My horror and grief were such that I—fled; fled like the coward I was. Nor did I simply flee from the house. I left everything, and fled from the city that night. It was not until some days afterward that I realized what my going meant to me. You see, I had left behind me, in his housekeeper, the woman I loved—and had insulted past forgiveness. I was branded as his murderer. Do you see? She loved him, and was his housekeeper. Oh, there was nothing wrong in it! I knew that. His baby girl was the child of his dead wife. Several times I thought of returning to establish my innocence, but somehow my conduct and my story wouldn’t have fitted in the eyes of a jury. Besides, there was that insulted woman. She had accused me of the murder. It was quite useless to go back. It meant throwing away my life. It was not worth it. So I came here.”

Buck offered no comment for a long time. Comment seemed unnecessary. The Padre watched him with eyes striving to conceal their anxiety.

Finally, Buck put a question that seemed unnecessary.

“Why d’you tell me now?” he asked. His pipe had gone out and he pushed it into his hip-pocket.

The Padre’s smile was rather drawn.

“Because of you. Because of my friend’s—baby girl.”

“How?”

“The child’s name was Joan. Joan Rest is the daughter of Charles Stanmore—the man I am accused of murdering. This afternoon I advised her to have some one to live with her—a relative. She is sending for the only one she has. It is her aunt, Stanmore’s housekeeper—the woman I insulted past forgiveness.”

Not for an instant did Buck’s expression change.

“Why did you advise—that?” he asked.

The Padre’s eyes suddenly lit with a subdued fire, and his answer came with a passion such as Buck had never witnessed in him before.

“Why? Why? Because you love this little Joan, daughter of my greatest friend. Because I owe it to you—to her—to face my accusers and prove my innocence.”

The two men looked long and earnestly into each other’s eyes. Then the Padre’s voice, sharp and strident, sounded through the little room.

“Well?”

Buck rose from his seat.

“Let’s eat, Padre,” he said calmly. “I’m mighty hungry.” Then he came a step nearer and gripped the elder man’s hand. “I’m right with you, when things—get busy.”



CHAPTER XXIV

BEASLEY PLAYS THE GAME

Joan lost no time in carrying out the Padre's wishes. Such was her changed mood, such was the strength of her new-born hope, such was the wonderful healing his words had administered to her young mind, that, for the time at least, her every cloud was dispersed, lost in a perfect sheen of mental calm.

The change occurred from the moment of her return home. So changed indeed was she that her rough but faithful housekeeper, dull of perception to all those things outside the narrow focus of her life in domestic service, caught a faint glimpse of it without anything approaching a proper understanding. She realized an added energy, which seriously affected her own methods of performing her duties and caused her to make a mental note that her young mistress was assuming "airs" which did not fit in with her inexperience of those things amidst which she, the farm-wife, had floundered all her life. She heard her moving about the house, her joy and hope finding outlet in song such as had never echoed through the place before. And promptly she set this new phase down to the result of her associations with the young "scallawag" Buck. She noted, too, an added care in her toilet, and this inspired the portentous belief that she was "a-carryin' on" with the same individual. But when it came to a general "turning-out" of the living-rooms of the house, a matter which added an immense amount of effort to her own daily duties, her protest found immediate vent in no uncertain terms.

It came while the midday dinner was in preparation. It rose to boiling-point amidst the steam from her cooking pots. Finally it bubbled over, much as might one of her own kettles.

Joan was standing in the kitchen giving her orders preparatory to departing to the camp, whither she was going to mail her letter to her aunt at Beasley's store.

"You see," she was saying, "I'll have to make some changes in the house. I'm expecting my aunt from St. Ellis to come and stay with me. She won't be able to do with the things which have been sufficient for me. She will have my room. I shall buy new furniture for it. I shall get Beasley to order it for me from Leeson

Butte. Then I shall use the little room next yours. And while we're making these changes we'll have a general housecleaning. You might begin this afternoon on the room I am going to move into."

The old woman turned with a scarlet face. It may have been the result of the heat of cooking. Then again it may have had other causes.

"An' when, may I ast, do I make bricks?" she inquired with ponderous sarcasm.

Joan stood abashed for a moment. So unexpected was the retort, so much was it at variance with her own mood that she had no answer ready, and the other was left with the field to herself.

"Now jest look right here, Miss Joan—ma'm," she cried, flourishing a cooking spoon to point her words. "I ain't a woman of many words by no means, as you might say, but what I sure says means what I mean, no more an' no less, as the sayin' is. I've kep' house all my life, an' I reckon ther's no female from St. Ellis ken show *me*. I've bin a wife an' a mother, an' raised my offsprings till they died. I did fer a man as knew wot's wot in my George D. An' if I suffered fer it, it was jest because I know'd my duty an' did it, no matter the consequences to me an' mine. I tell you right here, an' I'm a plain-spoken woman who's honest, as the sayin' is, I turn out no house, nor room, nor nothin' of an afternoon. I know my duty an' I do it. Ther's a chapter of the Bible fer every day o' my life, an' it needs digestin' good—with my dinner. An' I don't throw it up fer nobody."

"But—but——" Joan began to protest, but the other brushed objection aside with an added flourish of her spoon.

"It ain't no use fer you to persuade, nor cajole, nor argify. What I says goes fer jest so long as I'm willin' to accept your ter'ble ordinary wages, which I say right here won't be fer a heap long time if things don't change some. I'm a respectable woman an' wife that was, but isn't, more's the pity, an' it ain't my way to chase around the house a-screechin' at the top o' my voice jest as though I'd come from a cirkis. You ain't got your mind on your work. You ain't got your heart in it, singin' all over the house, like—like one o' them brazen cirkis gals. No, nor wot with scallawags a-comin' around sparkin' you, an' the boys shootin' theirselves dead over you, an' folks in the camp a-callin' of you a Jony gal, I don't guess I'll need to stay an' receive con—contamination, as you might say. That's how I'm feelin'; an' bein' a plain woman, an' a 'specterble widow of George D., who was a man every inch of him, mind you, if he had his failin's, chasin' other folks' cattle, an' not readin' their brands right, why, out it comes

plump like a bad tooth you're mighty glad to be rid of, as the sayin' is."

The woman turned back to her cooking. Her manner was gravely disapproving, and she had managed to convey a sting which somehow hurt Joan far more than she was willing to admit. Her refusal to undertake the added work was merely churlish and disconcerting, but those other remarks raised a decided anger not untouched by a feeling of shame and hurt. But Joan did not give way to any of these feelings in her reply. She did the only dignified thing possible.

"You need not wait until your dissatisfaction with me overwhelms you, Mrs. Ransford," she said promptly. "I engaged you by the month, and I shall be glad if you will leave me to-day month." Then she added with a shadow of reproach: "Really, I thought you were made of better stuff."

But her attitude had a far different result to what she had expected. She turned to go, preferring to avoid a further torrent of abuse from the harsh old woman, when the spoon flourished in the air as the widow of George D. swung round from her pots with an amazing alacrity.

"You ain't chasin' me out, Miss Joan—ma'm?" she cried aghast, her round eyes rolling in sudden distress. "Why, miss—ma'm, I never meant no harm—that I didn't. Y' see I was jest sore hearin' them sayin' things 'bout you in the camp, an' you a-singin' made me feel you didn't care nuthin'. An' these scallawags a-comin' around a-sassin' you, an' a-kissin' you, sort o' set my blood boilin'. No, miss—ma'm, you ain't a-goin' to chase me out! You wouldn't now, would you?" she appealed. "Jest say you won't, an' I'll have the house turned sheer upside down 'fore you know wher' you are. There, jest think of it. You may need some un to ke'p that scallawag Buck in his place. How you goin' to set about him without me around? I ain't quittin' this day month, am I, miss—ma'm?"

The old woman's abject appeal was too much for Joan's soft heart, and her smiling eyes swiftly told the waiting penitent that the sentence was rescinded. Instantly the shadow was lifted from the troubled face.

"It was your own fault, Mrs. Ransford," Joan said, struggling to conceal her amusement. "However, if you want to stay—Well, I must drive into the camp before dinner, and we'll see about the little room when I return."

"That we will, mum—miss. That we will," cried the farm-wife in cordial relief as Joan hurried out of the room.

Joan drew up at Beasley's store just as that individual was preparing to adjourn his labors for dinner. The man saw her coming from the door of his newly-completed barn, and softly whistled to himself at the sight of the slim, girlish figure sitting in the wagon behind the heavy team of horses he had so long known as the Padre's.

This was only the third time he had seen the girl abroad in the camp, and he wondered at the object of her visit now.

Whatever malice he bore her, and his malice was of a nature only to be understood by his warped mind, his admiration was none the less for it. Not a detail of her appearance escaped his quick, lustful eyes. Her dainty white shirt-waist was covered by the lightest of dust coats, and her pretty face was shadowed by a wide straw hat which protected it from the sun's desperate rays. Her deeply-fringed eyes shone out from the shade, and set the blood pulsing through the man's veins. He saw the perfect oval of her fair face, with its ripe, full lips and delicate, small nose, so perfect in shape, so regular in its setting under her broad open brow. Her wonderful hair, that ruddy-tinted mass of burnished gold which was her most striking feature, made him suck in a whistling breath of sensual appreciation. Without a moment's hesitation, hat in hand he went to meet her.

As he came up his foxy eyes were alight with what he intended for a grin of amiability. Whatever his peculiarly vindictive nature he was more than ready to admit to himself the girl's charms.

"Say, Miss Golden," he cried, purposely giving her the name the popular voice had christened her, "it's real pleasant of you to get around. Guess the camp's a mighty dull show without its lady citizens. Maybe you'll step right up into my storeroom. I got a big line of new goods in from Leeson. Y' see the saloon ain't for such as you," he laughed. "Guess it does for the boys all right. I'm building a slap-up store next—just dry goods an' notions. Things are booming right now. They're booming so hard there's no keepin' pace. I'll tie your hosses to this post."

His manner was perfect in its amiability, but Joan detested it because of the man. He could never disguise his personality, and Joan was beginning to understand such personalities as his.

“Thanks,” she said coldly, as, taking advantage of his being occupied with the horses, she jumped quickly from the vehicle. “I came to mail a letter,” she said, as she moved on up to the big barn which was Beasley’s temporary storehouse, “and to give you a rather large order for furnishing and things.”

She produced a paper with her list of requirements, and handed it to him.

“You see, I’m refurnishing the farm,” she went on, while the man glanced an appreciative eye over the extensive order. “Can you do those things?” she asked as he looked up from his perusal.

“Why, yes. There’s nothing difficult there. What we can’t do here we can send on to Leeson Butte for. I’ve got some elegant samples of curtains just come along. Maybe you’ll step inside?”

In spite of her dislike of the man Joan had no hesitation in passing into the storeroom. She had no desire in the world to miss the joy of inspecting a fresh consignment of dry goods. She felt almost as excited, and quite as much interested, as though she were visiting one of the great stores in St. Ellis.

In a few moments she was lost in a close inspection of the display. Nor had she any thought, or wonder, that here in the wilderness, on the banks of Yellow Creek, such things should already have found their way. For a long time the keen man of business expended his arts of persuasion upon her, and, by the time the girl had exhausted his stock, he had netted a sound order. His satisfaction was very evident, and now he was prepared to regard her rather as a woman than a customer.

“Makes you think some,” he observed, with a wave of his hand in the direction of the piled-up fabrics and unopened cases. Then he laughed in a way that jarred upon the girl. “There’s money to burn here. Money! Whew!” Then his eyes became serious. “If it only lasts!”

“Why shouldn’t it?” asked Joan unsuspectingly. She had finished, and was anxious to get away. But the man seemed to want to talk, and it seemed churlish to deny him.

Beasley shook his head, while his eyes devoured her appealing beauty.

“It won’t,” he said decidedly. “It’s too big—too rich. Besides——”

“Besides what?”

The man's eyes had lost their grin. They were the eyes of the real man.

"It's—devil's luck. I've said it all along. Only ther's sech plaguey knowalls around they won't believe it. Buck now—I got nothing against Buck. He's a good citizen. But he's got a streak o' yellor in him, an' don't hold with no devil's luck. Maybe you remember." He grinned unpleasantly into the girl's eyes.

She remembered well enough. She was not likely to forget the manner in which Buck had come to her help. She flushed slightly.

"What do you mean by 'a streak of yellow'?" she demanded coldly.

"It don't need a heap of explaining. He's soft on mission talk."

Joan's flush deepened. This man had a mean way of putting things.

"If you mean that he doesn't believe in—in superstitions, and that sort of thing, if you mean he's just a straightforward, honest-thinking man—well, I agree with you."

Beasley was enjoying the spectacle of the warmth which prompted her defense. She was devilish pretty, he admitted to himself.

"Maybe you feel that way," he said, in a tone that jarred. "Say," he went on shrewdly, "I'm no sucker, I'm not one of these slob chasin' gold they're eager to hand on to the first guy holdin' out his hand. I'm out to make a pile. I had a claim in the ballot. Maybe it's a good claim. I ain't troubled to see. Why? I'll tell you. Maybe I'd have taken a few thousand dollars out of it. Maybe a heap. Maybe only a little. Not good—with all these slob around." He shook his head. "I figured I'd git the lot if I traded. I'd get the show of *all* of the claims. See? The 'strike' ain't goin' to last. It's a pocket in the hill, an' it'll peter out just as dead sure as—well as can be. An' when it's petered out there's going to be jest one feller around here who's made a profit—an' it ain't one of those who used the sluice-boxes. No, you can believe what you like. This 'strike' was jest a devil's laugh at folks who know no better. An' master Buck has handed you something of devil's luck when he made you take that gold."

There was something very keen about this man, and in another Joan might have admired it; but Beasley's mind was tainted with such a vicious meanness that admiration was impossible.

"I don't believe it," said Joan staunchly. "Neither does Buck. He would never

willingly hand me the trouble you suggest.”

Her words were the result of an impetuous defense of the absent man. To hear this man attack Buck was infuriating. But the moment she had uttered them, the moment she had seen their effect, that meaning laugh which they brought to the storekeeper’s lips, she wished they had never been spoken.

“Don’t guess Buck needs to scrap fer himself with you around, Miss Golden,” he laughed. “Gee! He’s in luck. I wonder!”

Joan choked back her swift-rising indignation. The man wasn’t worth it, she told herself, and hurriedly prepared to depart. But Beasley had no intention of letting her go like that.

“I wonder whether he is in luck, though,” he went on quickly, in a tone he knew the girl would not be able to resist. His estimate was right. She made no further move to go.

“How?” she asked.

“Oh, nuthin’ of consequence,” he said aggravatingly. “I was just thinking of the way folks are talking.” Then he laughed right out; and if Joan had only understood the man she would have known that his merriment was but the precursor of something still more unpleasant.

But such natures as his were quite foreign to her. She merely instinctively disliked him.

“What do you mean?” she asked unsuspectingly.

Beasley was serious again, and wore an air of deprecation when he answered her.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, “’tain’t nuthin’. Y’ see folks are always most ready to gas around. It’s ’bout them two boys. They’re hot about ’em. Y’ see Pete was a mighty popular feller, an’ Ike had good friends. Y’ see they were always good spenders—an’ most folks like good spenders. But ther’—’tain’t nuthin’ that needs tellin’ you. Guess it’ll only make a dandy gal like you feel mean.”

The man’s purpose must have been evident to anybody less simple than Joan. As it was she jumped at the bait so skilfully held out.

“But you must tell me,” she said, remembering Mrs. Ransford’s remarks. “I

insist on knowing if it is anything concerning me.”

Beasley’s air was perfect. His eyes were as frankly regretful as he could make them.

“Wal,” he said, “it certainly does concern you—but I’d rather not say it.”

“Go on.”

Joan’s face was coldly haughty.

“I wouldn’t take it too mean,” said Beasley warningly. “I sure wouldn’t. You see folks say a heap o’ things that is trash. They guess it’s your doin’ ’bout them boys. They reckon you played ’em one ag’in t’other for their wads, an’ both o’ them ag’in—Buck. Y’ see—mind I’m jest tellin’ you cos you asked—they guess you ast ’em both to supper that evenin’. Pete said he was ast, an’ Ike let on the same. You ast ’em both for the fun of the racket. An’ you had Buck around to watch the fun. Yes, they’re pretty hot. An’ you can’t blame ’em, believin’ as they do. One of ’em—I forget who it rightly was—he called you the camp Jonah. Said just as long as you wer’ around ther’d be trouble. He was all for askin’ you to clear right out. He said more than that, but I don’t guess you need to know it all.”

“But I do need to know it all. I need to know all they said, and—who said it.”

Joan’s eyes were blazing. Beasley made no attempt to conceal his satisfaction, and went on at once—

“Course I can’t give you names. But the facts I don’t guess I’m likely to forget—they made me so riled. They said that farm of yours was just a blind. It—it was—well, you’d come along here for all you could get—an’ that——”

Joan cut him short.

“That’s enough,” she cried. “You needn’t tell me any more. I—I understand. Oh, the brutal, heartless ruffians! Tell me. Who was it said these things? I demand to know. I insist on the names. Oh!”

The girl’s exasperation was even greater than Beasley had hoped for. He read, too, the shame and hurt underlying it, and his satisfaction was intense. He felt that he was paying her off for some of the obvious dislike she had always shown him, and it pleased him as it always pleased him when his mischief went home.

But now, having achieved his end, he promptly set about wriggling clear of consequences, which was ever his method.

“I’d like to give you the names,” he said frankly. “But I can’t. You see, when fellers are drunk they say things they don’t mean, an’ it wouldn’t be fair to give them away. I jest told you so you’d be on your guard—just to tell you the folks are riled. But it ain’t as bad as it seems. I shut ’em up quick, feeling that no decent citizen could stand an’ hear a pretty gal slandered like that. An’ I’ll tell you this, Miss Golden, you owe me something for the way I made ’em quit. Still,” he added, with a leer, “I don’t need payment. You see, I was just playin’ the game.”

Joan was still furious. And somehow his wriggling did not ring true even in her simple ears.

“Then you won’t tell me who it was?” she cried.

Beasley shook his head.

“Nuthin’ doin’,” he said facetiously.

“Then you—you are a despicable coward,” she cried. “You—oh!” And she almost fled out of the hated creature’s storeroom.

Beasley looked after her. The satisfaction had gone from his eyes, leaving them wholly vindictive.

“Coward, am I, ma’m!” he muttered. Then he looked at the order for furniture which was still in his hand.

The sight of it made him laugh.

CHAPTER XXV

BUCK LAUGHS AT FATE

The telling of the Padre's story cost Buck a wakeful night. It was not that he had any doubts either of the truth of the story, or of his friend. He needed no evidence to convince him of either. Or rather, such was his nature that no evidence could have broken his faith and friendship. Strength and loyalty were the key-note of his whole life. To him the Padre was little less than a god, in whom nothing could shake his belief. He honored him above all men in the world, and, such as it was, his own life, his strength, his every nerve, were at his service. Moreover, it is probable that his loyalty would have been no whit the less had the man pleaded guilty to the crime he was accused of.

No, it was not the story he had listened to which kept him wakeful. It was not the rights or wrongs, or the significance of it, that inspired his unrest. It was something of a far more personal note.

It was the full awakening of a mind and heart to a true understanding of themselves. And the manner of his awakening had been little short of staggering. He loved, and his love had risen up before his eyes in a manner the full meaning of which he had only just realized. It was his friend who had brought about his awakening, his friend who had put into brief words that which had been to him nothing but a delicious dream.

The man's words rang through his brain the night long.

"Why? Why?" they said. "Because you love this little Joan, daughter of my greatest friend. Because I owe it to you—to her, to face my accusers and prove my innocence."

That brief passionate declaration had changed the whole outlook of his life. The old days, the old thoughts, the old unexpressed feelings and hazy ambitions had gone—swept away in one wave of absorbing passion. There was neither future nor past to him now. He lived in the thought of this woman's delightful presence, and beyond that he could see nothing.

Vaguely he knew that much must lay before him. The past, well, that was

nothing. He understood that the drift of life's stream could no longer carry him along without his own effort at guidance. He knew that somewhere beyond this dream a great battle of Life lay waiting for his participation. He felt that henceforth he was one of those struggling units he had always regarded as outside his life. And all because of this wonderful sunlight of love which shone deep into the remotest cells of brain and heart. He felt strong for whatever lay before him. This perfect sunshine, so harmonious with every feeling, thrilled him with a virile longing to go out and proclaim his defiance against the waiting hordes in Life's eternal battle. No road could be so rough as to leave him shrinking, no fight so fierce that he was not confident of victory, no trouble so great that it could not be borne with perfect cheerfulness. As he had awakened to love so had he awakened to life, yearning and eager.

As the long night wore on his thought became clearer, more definite. So that before his eyes closed at last in a broken slumber he came to many decisions for the immediate future. The greatest, the most momentous of these was that he must see Joan again without delay. He tried to view this in perfect coolness, but though the decision remained with him the fever of doubt and despair seized him, and he became the victim of every fear known to the human lover's heart. To him who had never known the meaning of fear his dread became tenfold appalling. He must see her—and perhaps for the last time in his life. This interview might well terminate once and for all every thought of earthly happiness, and fling him back upon the meagre solace of a wilderness, which now, without Joan, would be desolation indeed.

Yet he knew that the chances must be faced now and at once. For himself he would probably have delayed, rather basking in the sunshine of uncertainty than risk witnessing the swift gathering clouds which must rob him of all light forever. But he was not thinking only of himself. There was that other, that white-haired, lonely man who had said, "Because you love this little Joan."

The wonderful unselfishness of the Padre had a greater power to stir Buck's heart than any other appeal. His sacrifice must not be permitted without a struggle. He knew the man, and he knew how useless mere objection would be. Therefore his duty lay plain before him. Joan must decide, and on her decision must his plans all be founded. He had no reason to hope for a return of his love. On the contrary, it seemed absurd even to hope, and in such an event then the Padre's sacrifice would be unnecessary. If on the other hand—but he dared not let the thought take shape. All he knew was that with Joan at his side no power of law should touch one single white hair of the Padre's head, while the breath of

life remained in his body.

It was a big thought in the midst of the most selfish of human passions. It was a thought so wide, that, in every aspect, it spoke of the great world which had been this man's lifelong study. It told of sublime lessons well learned. Of a mind and heart as big, and broad, and loyal as was the book from which the lessons had been studied.

With the morning light came a further steadiness of decision. But with it also came an added apprehension, and lack of mental peace. The world was radiant about him with the wonder of his love, but his horizon was lost in a mist of uncertainty and even dread.

The morning dragged as such intervening hours ever drag, but at length they were done with, and the momentous time arrived. Neither he nor the Padre had referred again to their talk. That was their way. Nor did any question pass between them until Cæsar stood saddled before the door.

The Padre was leaning against the door casing with his pipe in his mouth. His steady eyes were gravely thoughtful.

"Where you making this afternoon?" he inquired, as Buck swung into the saddle.

Buck nodded in the direction of Joan's home.

"The farm."

The Padre's eyes smiled kindly.

"Good luck," he said. And Buck nodded his thanks as he rode away.

But Buck's outward calm was studied. For once in his life his confidence had utterly failed him. He rode over the trail in a dazed condition which left him almost hopeless by the time he reached the familiar corrals of the girl's home. As a consequence he reduced Cæsar's pace to a walk with something almost childlike in his desire to postpone what he now felt must be his farewell to the wonderful dream that had been his.

But even at a walk the journey must come to an end. In his case it came all too soon for his peace of mind, and, to his added disquiet, he found himself at the door of the old barn. Just for one moment he hesitated. Then he lightly dropped to the ground. The next moment the horse itself had taken the initiative. With

none of its master's scruples it clattered into the barn, and, walking straight into its old familiar stall, commenced to search in the corners of the manger for the sweet-scented hay usually awaiting it.

The lead was irresistible to the man. He followed the creature in, removed its bridle and loosened the cinchas of the saddle. Then he went out in search of hay.

His quest occupied several minutes. But finally he returned with an ample armful and filled up the manger. Then came upon him a further avalanche of doubt, and he stood beside his horse, stupidly smoothing the beautiful creature's warm, velvet neck while it nuzzled its fodder.

"Why—is that you, Buck?"

The exclamation startled the man out of his reverie and set his pulses hammering madly. He turned to behold Joan framed in the doorway. For a moment he stared stupidly at her, his dark eyes almost fearful. Then his answer came quietly, distinctly, and without a tremor to betray the feelings which really stirred him.

"It surely is," he said. Then he added, "I didn't know I was coming along when you were up at the fort yesterday."

But Joan was thinking only how glad she was of his coming. His explanation did not matter in the least. She had been home from the camp something over an hour, and had seen some one ride up to the barn without recognizing Buck or the familiar Cæsar. So she had hastened to investigate. Something of her gladness at sight of him was in the manner of her greeting now, and Buck's despondency began to fall from him as he realized her unfeigned pleasure.

"I'm so glad you came," Joan went on impulsively. "So glad, so glad. I've been in camp to order things for—for my aunt's coming. You know your Padre told me to send for her. I mailed the letter this morning."

"You—sent for your aunt?"

In a moment the whole hideous position of the Padre came upon him, smothering all his own personal feelings, all his pleasure, all his doubts and fears.

"Why—yes." Joan's eyes opened wide in alarm. "Have I done wrong? He said, send for her."

Buck shook his head and moved out of the stall.

“You sure done dead right. The Padre said it.”

“Then what was the meaning in your—what you said?”

Buck smiled.

“Nothing—just nothing.”

Joan eyed him a moment in some doubt. Then she passed the matter over, and again the pleasure at his coming shone forth.

“Oh, Buck,” she cried, “there are some mean people in the world. I’ve been talking to that horror, Beasley. He is a horror, isn’t he? He’s been telling me something of the talk of the camp. He’s been telling me how—how popular I am,” she finished up with a mirthless laugh.

“Popular? I—I don’t get you.”

Buck’s whole expression had changed at the mention of Beasley’s name. Joan had no reason to inquire his opinion of the storekeeper.

“You wouldn’t,” she hastened on. “You could never understand such wicked meanness as that man is capable of. I’m sure he hates me, and only told me these—these things to make me miserable. And I was feeling so happy, too, after seeing your Padre,” she added regretfully.

“An’ what are the things he’s been sayin’?”

Buck’s jaws were set.

“Oh, I can’t tell you what he said, except—except that the men think I’m responsible for the death of those two. The other things were too awful. It seems I’m—I’m the talk of the camp in—in an awful way. He says they hate me. But I believe it’s simply him. You see, he’s tried to—to ingratiate himself with me—oh, it’s some time back, and I—well, I never could stand him, after that time when the boys gave me the gold. I wish they had never given me that gold. He still persists it’s unlucky, and I—I’m beginning to think so, too.”

“Did he—insult you?” Buck asked sharply, ignoring the rest.

Joan looked quickly into the man’s hot eyes, and in that moment realized the necessity for prudence. The fierce spirit was shining there. That only partly

tamed spirit, which made her so glad when she thought of it.

“Oh, no,” she said. “It wasn’t that he insulted me. No—no. Don’t think that. Only he went out of his way to tell me these things, to make me miserable. I was angry then, but I’ve got over it now. It—it doesn’t matter. You see I just told you because—because——”

“If that man insulted you, I’d—kill him!”

Buck had drawn nearer to her. His tall figure was leaning forward, and his eyes, so fiercely alight, burned down into hers in a manner that half frightened her, yet carried with it a feeling that thrilled her heart with an almost painful delight. There was something so magnetic in this man’s outburst, something so sweeping to her responsive nature. It was almost as though he had taken her in his two strong hands and made her yield obedience to his dominating will. It gave her a strange and wonderful confidence. It made her feel as if this power of his must possess the same convincing strength for the rest of the world. That he must sway all who came into contact with him. Her gladness at his visit increased. It was good to feel that he was near at hand.

But her woman’s mind sought to restrain him.

“Please—please don’t talk like that,” she said, in a tone that carried no real conviction. “No, Beasley would not dare insult me—for himself.”

The girl drew back to the oat-box, and seated herself. Buck’s moment of passion had brought a deep flush to his cheeks, and his dark eyes moved restlessly.

“Why did you tell me?”

There was no escaping the swift directness of this man’s mind. His question came with little less force than had been his threat against Beasley. He was still lashed by his thought of the wretched saloon-keeper.

But Joan had no answer ready. Why had she told him? She knew. She knew in a vague sort of way. She had told him because she had been sure of his sympathy. She had told him because she knew his strength, and to lean on that always helped her. Without questioning herself, or her feelings, she had come to rely upon him in all things.

But his sharp interrogation had given her pause. She repeated his question to herself, and somehow found herself avoiding his gaze. Somehow she could give

him no answer.

Buck chafed for a moment in desperate silence. He turned his hot eyes toward the door, and stared out at the distant hills. Cæsar rattled his collar chain, and scattered the hay in his search for the choicest morsels. The heavy draft horses were slumbering where they stood. Presently the man's eyes came back to the girl, devouring the beauty of her still averted face.

“Say,” he went on presently, “you never felt so that your head would burst, so that the only thing worth while doin’ would be to kill some one?” He smiled. “That’s how I feel, when I know Beasley’s been talkin’ to you.”

Joan turned to him with a responsive smile. She was glad he was talking again. A strange discomfort, a nervousness not altogether unpleasant had somehow taken hold of her, and the sound of his voice relieved her.

She shook her head.

“No,” she said frankly. “I—don’t think I ever feel that way. But I don’t like Beasley.”

Buck’s heat had passed. He laughed.

“That was sure a fool question to ask,” he said. “Say, it ’ud be like askin’ a dove to get busy with a gun.”

“I’ve heard doves are by no means the gentle creatures popular belief would have them.”

“Guess ther’s doves—an’ doves,” Buck said enigmatically. “I can’t jest see you bustin’ to hurt a fly.”

“Not even Beasley?”

Joan laughed slily.

But Buck ignored the challenge. He stirred restlessly. He thrust his fingers into the side pockets of the waist-coat he wore hanging open. He withdrew them, and shifted his feet. Then, with a sudden, impatient movement, he thrust his slouch hat back from his forehead.

“Guess I can’t say these things right,” he gulped out with a swift, impulsive rush. “What I want to say is that’s how I feel when anything happens amiss your way.

I want to say it don't matter if it's Beasley, or—or jest things that can't be helped. I want to get around and set 'em right for you——”

Joan's eyes were startled. A sudden pallor had replaced the smile on her lips, and drained the rich, warm color from her cheeks.

“You've always done those things for me, Buck,” she interrupted him hastily. “You've been the kindest—the best——”

“Don't say those things,” Buck broke in with a hardly restrained passion. “It hurts to hear 'em. Kindest? Best? Say, when a man feels same as me, words like them hurt, hurt right in through here,” he tapped his chest with an awkward gesture. “They drive a man nigh crazy. A man don't want to hear them from the woman he loves. Yes, loves!”

The man's dark eyes were burning, and as the girl rose from her seat he reached out one brown hand to detain her. But his gesture was needless. She made no move to go. She stood before him, her proud young face now flushing, now pale with emotion, her wonderful eyes veiled lest he should read in their depths feelings that she was struggling to conceal. Her rounded bosom rose and fell with the furious beatings of a heart she could not still.

“No, no,” the man rushed on, “you got to hear me, if it makes you hate me fer the rest of your life. I'm nothing but jest a plain feller who's lived all his life in this back country. I've got no education, nothin' but jest what I am—here. An' I love you, I love you like nothing else in all the world. Say,” he went on, the first hot rush of his words checking, “I bin gropin' around these hills learning all that's bin set there for me to learn. I tried to learn my lessons right. I done my best. But this one thing they couldn't teach me. Something which I guess most every feller's got to learn some time. An' you've taught me that.

“Say.” The restraint lost its power, and the man's great passion swept him on in a swift torrent. “I never knew a gal since I was raised. I never knew how she could git right hold of your heart, an' make the rest of the world seem nothing. I never knew how jest one woman could set the sun shining when her blue eyes smiled, and the storm of thunder crowding over, when those eyes were full of tears. I never dreamed how she could get around in fancy, and walk by your side smilin' and talkin' to you when you wandered over these lonesome hills at your work. I never knew how she could come along an' raise you up when you're down, an' most everything looks black. I've learned these things now. I've learned 'em because you taught me.”

He laughed with a sort of defiance at what he felt must sound ridiculous in her ears. “You asked me to teach you! Me teach you! Say, it’s you taught me—everything. It’s you taught me life ain’t just a day’s work an’ a night’s sleep. It’s you taught me that life’s a wonderful, wonderful dream of joy an’ delight. It’s you taught me the sun’s shining just for *me* alone, an’ every breath of these mountains is just to make *me* feel good. It’s you taught me to feel there’s nothing on God’s earth I couldn’t and wouldn’t do to make you happy. You, who taught me to Live! You, with your wonderful blue eyes, an’ your beautiful, beautiful face. You, with your mind as white an’ pure as the mountain snow, an’ your heart as precious as the gold our folks are forever chasin’. I love you, Joan. I love you, every moment I live. I love you so my two hands ain’t enough by a hundred to get helping you. I love you better than all the world. You’re jest—jest my whole life!”

He stood with his arms outstretched toward the shrinking girl. His whole body was shaking with the passion that had sent his words pouring in a tide of unthought, unconsidered appeal. He had no understanding of whither his words had carried him. All he knew was that he loved this girl with his whole soul and body. That she could love him in return was something unbelievable, yet he must tell her. He must tell her all that was in his simple heart.

He waited. It seemed ages, but in reality it was only moments.

Presently Joan looked up. She raised her eyes timidly, and in a moment Buck saw that they were filled with unshed tears. He started forward, but she shrank back farther. But it was not with repugnance. Her movement was almost reluctant, yet it was decided. It was sufficient for the man, and slowly, hopelessly he dropped his arms to his sides as the girl’s voice so full of distress at last broke the silence.

“Oh, Buck, Buck, why—oh, why have you said these things to me? You don’t know what you have done. Oh, it was cruel of you.”

“Cruel?” Buck started. The color faded from his cheeks. “Me cruel—to you?”

“Yes, yes. Don’t you understand? Can’t you see? Now—now there is nothing left but—disaster. Oh, to think that I should have brought this upon you—you of all men!”

Buck’s eyes suddenly lit. Unversed as he was in all such matters, he was not blind to the feeling underlying her words. But the light swiftly died from his

eyes as he beheld the great tears roll slowly down the girl's fair cheeks, and her face droop forward into her hands.

In a moment all restraint was banished in the uprising of his great love. Without a thought of consequences he bridged the intervening space at one step, and, in an instant, his arms were about the slim, yielding figure he so tenderly loved. In a moment his voice, low, tender, yet wonderful in its consoling strength, was encouraging her.

“Disaster?” he said. “Disaster because I love you? Where? How? Say, there’s no disaster in my love for you. There can’t be. All I ask, all I need is jest to make your path—easier. Your troubles ain’t yours any longer. They sure ain’t. They’re mine, now, if you’ll jest hand ’em to me. Disaster? No, no, little gal. Don’t you to cry. Don’t. Your eyes weren’t made for cryin’. They’re jest given you to be a man’s hope. For you to see just how much love he’s got for you.”

Joan submitted to his embrace for just so long as he was speaking. Then she looked up with terrified eyes and released herself.

“No, no, Buck. I must not listen. I dare not. It is my fate. My terrible fate. You don’t understand. Beasley was right. I *was* responsible for Ike’s death. For Pete’s death. But not in the way he meant. It is my curse. They loved me, and—disaster followed instantly. Can’t you see? Can’t you see? Oh, my dear, can’t you see that this same disaster must dog you—now?”

Buck stared. Then he gathered himself together.

“Your fate?”

“Yes, yes. I am cursed. Oh,” Joan suddenly gave a shrill laugh that was painful to hear. “Every man that has ever told me—what you have told me—has met with disaster, and—death.”

For one second no sound broke the stillness of the barn but the restless movements of Cæsar. Then, suddenly, a laugh, a clear, buoyant laugh, full of defiance, full of incredulity, rang through the building.

It was Buck. He moved forward, and in a moment the girl was lying close upon his breast.

“Is that the reason you mustn’t, daren’t, listen to me?” he cried, in a voice thrilling with hope and confidence. “Is that the only reason? Jest because of death an’ disaster to me? Jest that, an’—nothing more? Tell me, little gal. Tell me or—or I’ll go mad.”

“Yes, yes. But oh, you don’t——”

“Yes, I do. Say, Joan, my little, little gal. Tell me. Tell me right now. You ain’t—
hatin’ me for—for loving you so bad. Tell me.”

Joan hid her face, and the tall man had to bend low to catch her words.

“I couldn’t hate you, Buck. I—I——”

But Buck heard no more. He almost forcibly lifted the beautiful, tearful face to his, as he bent and smothered it with kisses.

After a few moments he stood her away from him, holding her slight shoulders, one in each hand. His dark eyes were glowing with a wild happiness, a wonderful, reckless fire, as he peered into her blushing face.

“You love me, little gal? You love me? Was ther’ ever such a thought in the mind of sane man? You love me? The great big God’s been mighty good to me. Disaster? Death? Let all the powers of man or devil come along, an’ I’ll drive ’em back to the hell they belong to.”



CHAPTER XXVI

IRONY

The hills roll away, banking on every side, mounting up, pile on pile, like the mighty waves of a storm-swept ocean. The darkening splendor, the magnificent ruggedness crowds down upon the narrow open places with a strange sense of oppression, almost of desolation. It seems as if nothing on earth could ever be so great as that magnificent world, nothing could ever be so small as the life which peoples it.

The oppression, the desolation grows. The silent shadows of the endless woods crowd with a suggestion of horrors untold, of mysteries too profound to be even guessed at. A strange feeling as of a reign of enchantment pervading sets the flesh of the superstitious creeping. And the narrow, patchy sunlight, by its brilliant contrast, only serves to aggravate the sensitive nerves.

Yet in the woods lurk few enough dangers. It is only their dark stillness. They are still, still in the calm of the brightest day, or in the chill of a windless night. A timid bear, a wolf who spends its desolate life in dismal protest against a solitary fate, the crashing rush of a startled caribou, the deliberate bellow of a bull moose, strayed far south from its northern fastnesses. These are the harmless creatures peopling the obscure recesses. For the rest, they are the weird suggestions of a sensitive imagination.

The awe, however, is undeniable and the mind of man can never wholly escape it. Familiarity may temper, but inborn human superstition is indestructible. The brooding silence will shadow the lightest nature. The storms must ever inspire wonder. The gloom hushes the voice. And so the growing dread. Man may curse the hills in his brutal moments, the thoughtful may be driven to despair, the laughter-loving may seek solace in tears of depression. But the fascination clings. There is no escape. The cloy of the seductive drug holds to that world of mystery, and they come to it again, and yet again.

Something of all this was vaguely drifting through the mind of one of the occupants of a four-horsed, two-wheeled spring cart as it rose upon the monstrous shoulder of one of the greater hills. Before it lay a view of a dark and

wild descent, sloping away unto the very bowels of a pit of gloom. The trail was vague and bush-grown, and crowding trees dangerously narrowed it. To the right the hill fell sharply away at the edge of the track, an abyss that might well have been bottomless for aught that could be seen from above. To the left the crown of the hill rose sheer and barren, and only at its foot grew the vegetation that so perilously narrowed the track. Then, ahead, where the trail vanished, a misty hollow, dark and deep—the narrowing walls of a black canyon.

The blue eyes of the teamster were troubled. Was there ever such a country for white man to travel? His horses were jaded. Their lean sides were tuckered. Gray streaks of sweat scored them from shoulder to flank.

The man lolled heavily in his driving seat in the manner of the prairie teamster. He knew there was trouble ahead, but it was practically all he did know of the journey before him.

As the cart topped the rise he bestirred himself. His whip flicked the air without touching the horses, and he chirruped encouragingly. The weary but willing creatures raised their drooping heads, their ribs expanded as they drew their “tugs” taut, and, at a slow, shuffling trot, they began the descent.

A voice from behind caused the man to glance swiftly over his shoulder.

“It’s no use asking you where we are now, I suppose?” it said in a peevish tone.

But the teamster’s mood was its match.

“Not a heap, I guess, ma’m,” he retorted, and gave up his attention to avoiding the precipice on his right.

“How far is the place supposed to be?”

The woman’s unease was very evident. Her eyes were upon the darkening walls of the canyon toward which they were traveling.

“Eighty miles from Crowsfoot. That’s how the boss said, anyways.”

“How far have we come now?”

The man laughed. There seemed to be something humorous in his passenger’s inquiries.

“Crowsfoot to Snarth’s farm, thirty-five miles, good. Snarth’s to Rattler Head,

thirty. Sixty-five. Fifteen into this precious camp on Yellow Creek. Guess we bin comin' along good since sun-up, an' now it's noon. Countin' our stop fer breakfast we ought to make thirty odd miles. Guess we come a good hundred." He laughed again.

The woman gave an exclamation of impatience and vexation.

"I think your employer ought to be ashamed of himself sending you to do the journey. You don't know where you are, or what direction we're going in. The horses are nearly foundered, and we may be miles and miles from our destination. What are you going to do?"

"Ke'p goin' jest as long as the hosses ken ke'p foot to the ground. Guess we'll ease 'em at the bottom, here. It's nigh feed time. Say, ma'm, it ain't no use worritin'. We'll git som'eres sure. The sun's dead ahead."

"What's the use of that?" Mercy Lascelles snapped at the man's easy acceptance of the situation. "I wish now I'd come by Leeson Butte."

"That's sure how the boss said," retorted the man. "The Leeson trail is the right one. It's a good trail, an' I know most every inch of it. You was set comin' round through the hills. Gussed you'd had enough prairie on the railroad. It's up to you. Howsum, we'll make somewheres by nightfall. Seems to me I got a notion o' that hill, yonder. That one, out there," he went on, pointing with his whip at a bald, black cone rising in the distance against the sky. "That kind o' seems like the peak o' Devil's Hill. I ain't jest sure, but it seems like."

Mercy looked in the direction. Her eyes were more angry than anxious, yet anxiety was her principal feeling.

"I hope to goodness it is. Devil's Hill. A nice name. That's where the camp is, isn't it? I wish you'd hurry on."

The teamster spat over the dashboard. A grim smile crept into his eyes. His passenger had worried him with troublesome questions all the journey, and he had long since given up cursing his boss for sending him on the job.

"'Tain't no use," he said shortly. Then he explained. "Y' see, it 'ud be easy droppin' over the side of this. Guess you ain't yearnin' fer glory that way?"

"We'll never get in at this pace," the woman cried impatiently.

But the teamster was losing patience, too. Suddenly he became very polite, and his pale blue eyes smiled mischievously down upon his horses' backs.

"Guess we don't need to hurry a heap, ma'm," he said. "Y' see, in these hills you never can tell. Now we're headin' fer that yer canyon. Maybe the trail ends right ther'."

"Good gracious, man, then what are we going to do?"

"Do? Why, y' see, ma'm, we'll have to break a fresh trail—if that dogone holler ain't one o' them bottomless muskegs," he added thoughtfully.

He flicked his whip and spat again. His passenger's voice rose to a sharp staccato.

"Then for goodness' sake why go on?" she demanded.

"Wal, y' see, you can't never tell till you get ther' in these hills. Maybe that canyon is a river, an' if so the entrance to it's nigh sure a muskeg. A bottomless muskeg. You seen 'em, ain't you? No? Wal, they're swamps, an' if we get into one, why, I guess ther's jest Hail Columby, or some other fool thing waitin' for us at the bottom. Still ther' mayn't be no muskeg. As I sez, you never can tell, tho' ther' most gener'ly is. Mebbe that's jest a blank wall without no trail. Mebbe this trail ends at a sheer drop of a few hundred feet an' more. Mebbe agin the trail peters out 'fore we get ther'. That's the way in these yer hills, ma'm; you never can tell if you get lost. An' gittin' lost is so mighty easy. Course we ain't likely to starve till we've eat up these yer dogone ol' hosses. Never eaten hoss? No? 'Tain't so bad. Course water's easy, if you don't light on one o' them fever swamps. Mountain fever's pretty bad. Still, I don't guess we'll git worried that way, ma'm. I'd sure say you're pretty tough fer mountain fever to git a holt of. It's the time that's the wust. It might take us weeks gittin' out,—once you git lost proper. But even so I don't guess ther's nothin' wuss than timber wolves to worry us. They're mean. Y' see they're nigh allus starvin'—or guess they are. B'ars don't count a heap, less you kind o' run into 'em at breedin' season. Le's see, this is August. No, 'tain't breedin' season." He sighed as if relieved. Then he stirred quickly and glanced round, his face perfectly serious. "Guess you got a gun? It's allus good to hev a gun round. You never ken tell in these yer hills—when you git lost proper."

"Oh, you're a perfect fool. Go on with your driving." Mercy sat back in her seat fuming, while the teamster sighed, gently smiling down at his horses.

“Mebbe you’re right, ma’m,” he said amiably. “These dogone hills makes fools o’ most fellers, when they git lost proper—as I’d sure say we are now.”

But the man had achieved his object. The woman desisted from further questioning. She sat quite still, conscious of the unpleasant fact that the man was laughing at her, and also perfectly aware that his incompetence was responsible for the fact that they were utterly lost amongst the wild hills about them.

She was very angry. Angry with the man, angry with herself, for not being guided by the hotel keeper at Crowsfoot, but more than all she was angry with Joan for bidding her make the journey.

Yet she had been unable to resist the girl’s appeal. Her inability was not from any sentimental feeling or sympathy. Such feelings could never touch her. But the appeal of the manner in which her curse still followed the girl, and the details she had read through the lines of her letter, a letter detailing the circumstances of her life on Yellow Creek, and written under the impulse and hope inspired by the Padre’s support had given her the keenest interest. All the mystical side of her nature had been stirred in a manner she could not deny, had no desire to deny.

Yes, she had come to investigate, to observe, to seek the truth of her own pronouncement. She had come without scruple, to watch their effect. To weigh them in the balance of her scientific mysticism. She had come to watch the struggles of the young girl in the toils which enveloped her. Her mind was the diseased mind of the fanatic, prompted by a nature in which cruelty held chief place.

But now had come this delay. Such was her nature that personal danger ever appalled her. Death and disaster in the abstract were nothing to her, but their shadows brushing her own person was something more than terrifying. And as she thought of the immensity of the world about her, the gloom, the awful hush, the spirit of the hills got hold of her and left her full of apprehension.

The teamster now devoted his whole attention to his whereabouts. His passenger’s interminable questioning silenced, he felt more at his ease. And feeling at his ease he was able to bring his prairie-trained faculties to bear on the matter in hand. As they progressed down the slope he closely observed the tall, distant crown which he thought he recognized, and finally made up his mind that his estimate was right. It certainly was the cone crown of Devil’s Hill. Thus his certainty now only left him concerned with the ultimate development of the trail they were on.

It was quite impossible to tell what that might be. The road seemed to be making directly for the mouth of the canyon, and yet all his experience warned him that such a destination would be unusual. It must turn away. Yet where? How?

He searched ahead on the hillside above him for a modification of its slope. And a long way ahead he fancied he detected such an indication. But even so, the modification was so slight that there seemed little enough hope.

He kept on with dogged persistence. To return was not to be thought of yet. Any approach to vacillation now would be quite fatal.

The trail was fading out to little more than a double cattle track, and the farther he looked along it the more indistinct it seemed to become. Yet it continued, and the ever downward slope went on, and on.

His anxious eyes were painfully alert. Where? Where? He was asking himself with every jog of his weary horses. Then all of a sudden his questions ceased, and a decided relief leapt into his eyes as he drew his horses up to a halt.

He turned to his passenger and pointed with his whip at the hill abreast of them, his eyes undoubtedly witnessing his relief.

“See that, ma’m?” he cried. And Mercy beheld a narrow, rough flight of steps cut in the face of the hill. Each step was deliberately protected with a timber facing securely staked against “washouts,” and though the workmanship was rough it was evidently the handiwork of men who thought only of endurance. It rose from the trail-side in a slanting direction, and, adopting the easiest course on the slope, wound its way to the very crown of the hill, over the top of which it vanished.

“Well?”

The woman’s inquiry was ungracious enough.

“Why, that’s the meanin’ o’ this yer trail.” The man pointed above. “That sure leads somewheres.”

“I suppose it does.”

Mercy snapped her reply.

“Sure,” said the man. “There’s shelter up ther’, anyways. An’ by the looks o’ them steps I’d say folks is livin’ ther’ right now.”

“Then for goodness’ sake go up and see, and don’t sit there wasting time. I never had to deal with such a perfect fool in my life. Pass the reins over to me, and I’ll wait here.”

The man grinned. But instead of handing her the reins he secured them to the iron rail of the cart.

“Guess them hosses know best wot to do ’emselves,” he observed quietly, as he scrambled from the cart. “Best let ’em stand theirselves, ma’m,—you never know wot’s along the end of that trail—muskegs is——” His final jibe was lost in a deep-throated chuckle as he began the steep ascent before him.

Mercy watched him with angry eyes. The man added impertinence to his foolishness, and the combination was altogether too much for her temper. But for the fact that she required his services, she would well have wished that he might fall and break his neck. But her chief concern was to reach her destination, so she watched him climb the long steps in the hope that some comforting result might follow.

As the man rose higher and higher, and his figure grew smaller, his climb possessed an even greater interest for Mercy Lascelles than she admitted. She began to appreciate the peril of it, and peril, in others, always held her fascinated.

He was forced to move slowly, clinging closely with both hands to the steps above him. It would be easy to slip and fall, and she waited for that fall. She waited with nerves straining and every faculty alert.

So absorbed was she that she had forgotten the horses, forgotten her own position, everything, in the interest of the moment. Had it been otherwise, she must have noticed that something had attracted the drooping horses’ attention. She must have observed the suddenly lifted heads, and pricked ears. But these things passed her by, as did the approach of a solitary figure bearing a burden of freshly taken fox pelts, which quite enveloped its massive shoulders.

The man was approaching round a slight bend in the trail, and the moment the waiting cart came into view, he stood, startled at the apparition. Then he whistled softly, and glanced back over the road he had come. He looked at a narrow point where the trail suddenly ended, a sharp break where the cliff dropped away abruptly, and further progress could only be made by an exhausting downward climb by a skilled mountaineer.

Then he came slowly on, his gray eyes closely scrutinizing the figure in the cart. In a moment he saw that it was a woman, and, by her drooping pose, recognized that she was by no means young. His eyes took on a curious expression—half doubt, half wonder, and his face grew a shade paler under his tan. But the change only lasted a few seconds. He quickly pulled himself together, and, shaking his white head thoughtfully, continued his way toward the vehicle with the noiseless gait which moccasins ever give to the wearer. He reached the cart quite unobserved. The woman's whole attention was absorbed by the climbing man, and the newcomer smiled curiously as he passed a greeting.

“You've hit a wrong trail, haven't you?” he inquired.

The woman in the cart gave a frantic start, and clutched at the side rail as though for support. Then her eyes came on a level with the man's smiling face, and fear gave way to a sudden expression of relentless hatred.

“You?” she cried, and her lean figure seemed to crouch as though about to spring.

The man returned her stare without flinching. His eyes still wore their curious smile.

“Yes,” he said. “It is I.”

The woman's lips moved. She swallowed as though her throat had suddenly become parched.

“Moreton Bucklaw,” she murmured. “And—and after all these years.”

The man nodded. Then several moments passed without a word.

Finally it was the man who spoke. His manner was calm, so calm that no one could have guessed a single detail of what lay between these two, or the significance of their strange meeting.

“You've hit a bad trail,” he said. “There's a big drop back there. These steps go on up to my home. The old fort. They're an old short cut to this valley. Guess your man'll need to unhitch his horses and turn the cart round. He can't get it round else. Then, if you go back past the shoulder of the hill, you'll see an old track, sharp to your right. That leads into the trail that'll take you right on down to the farm where little Joan lives.” He moved toward the steps. “I'll tell your man,” he said.

He mounted the steps with the ease of familiarity, his great muscles making the effort appear ridiculously easy. A little way up he paused, and looked down at her.

“Guess I shall see you again?” he said, with the same curious smile in his steady eyes.

And the woman’s reply came sharply up the hillside to him. It came with all the pent-up hatred of years, concentrated into one sentence. The hard eyes were alight with a cold fury, which, now, in her advancing years, when the freshness and beauty that had once been hers could no longer soften them, was not without its effect upon the man.

“Yes. You will see me again, Moreton Bucklaw.”

And the man continued the ascent with a feeling as though he had listened to the pronouncement of his death sentence.



CHAPTER XXVII

THE WEB OF FATE

Joan had looked forward to her aunt's coming with very mixed feelings. There were moments when she was frankly glad at the prospect of a companionship which had been hers since her earliest childhood. Her nature had no malice in it, and the undoubted care, which, in her early years, the strange old woman had bestowed upon her counted for much in her understanding of duty and gratitude. Then, besides, whatever Aunt Mercy's outlook, whatever the unwholesomeness of the profession she followed with fanatical adherence, she was used to her, used to her strangenesses, her dark moments. If affection had never been particularly apparent in the elder woman's attitude toward her, there had certainly been a uniform avoidance of the display of any other feeling until those last few days immediately preceding her own flight from St. Ellis. Habit was strong with Joan, so strong, indeed, that in her happy moments she was glad at the thought of the return into her life of the woman who had taken the place of her dead parents.

Then, too, even the memory of that frenzied morning, when Aunt Mercy, laboring under her awful disease of mysticism, had assumed the rôle of prophetess, and accuser, and hurled at her troubled head a denunciation as cruel as it was impossible, had lost something of its dread significance and sting. At the time it had been of a blasting nature, but now—now, since she had conferred with Buck's great friend, since Buck's wonderful support had been added to her life, all the harshness of the past appeared in a new and mellowed light. She believed she saw her aunt as she really was, a poor, torn creature, whose mind was diseased, as a result of those early fires of disappointment through which she had passed.

The Padre had denied the fate that this aunt had convinced her of. Buck had defied it, and laughed it out of countenance. These men, so strong, so capable, had communicated to her receptive nature something of the hope and strength that was theirs. Thus she was ready to believe, to stand shoulder to shoulder with them, feeling that in the future nothing could hurt her. So she was ready for her aunt's coming.

But to live up to her determination was not always easy. She had yielded to all her old superstitious dread at the moment when Buck had first opened her eyes to the wonderful love that had so silently, so unknown, yet so swiftly grown up in her heart for him. In that delicious awakening, when lost in a joy almost inconceivable, when her defenses were at their weakest, the enemy's attack had come swiftly and surely. Her very love had aided it. Her dread for the man had gripped her heart, and all her mind and senses had gone back to the unspeakable fears she had only just learnt to deny. Nor was it until his denial, a denial given with that wonderful laugh of confidence, had she been able to drag herself back to the new path which his white-haired friend had marked out for her.

Since then, however, she had been able to contemplate her aunt's coming in something of the spirit in which she desired to welcome her. She felt that now, at least, she was proof against the unwholesome thought of the woman's diseased mind. There were certain unacknowledged trepidations as the time drew near, but these she contrived to smother under the excitement and interest of preparing her house for the reception, and the radiant confidence of Buck, which never failed to support her.

Every morning and every evening brought Buck's strong presence to the farm for a brief visit. And each visit was a dream of delight to the simple, loving girl. All day long, as she labored through her household cares, and the affairs of the farm she lived in, she dwelt on the memory of the morning visit, or looked forward to her lover's coming as the sun reached the western skies. Every night, when she sought the snow-white ease of her bed, it was to spend her few remaining minutes of waking dwelling on the happiness of past moments, and ultimately to anticipate in dreams the delights of the morrow.

So the days sped rapidly by and the time for Aunt Mercy's arrival drew on. And with each passing day the shadows receded, her trepidations became less and less, until they almost reached the vanishing-point. She felt that in Buck's love no shadow could live. With him at her side she need have no fear of evil. He was exalted by the very wholesomeness of his mind and heart, and the strength and confidence that was his, far, far above the level of hideous superstitions and happenings. His love for her, her love for him were too great, far too great, for disaster to ever touch them.

Then came Aunt Mercy.

She came in the middle of an oppressive afternoon. The days of late had

assumed an extraordinary oppressiveness for the season of the year. She came amidst the peaceful calm when all farm life seems to be wrapped in a restful somnolence, when the animal world has spent its morning energies, and seeks rest that it may recuperate for the affairs surrounding its evening meal.

With her coming Joan's first realization was of dismay at the manner in which she had underestimated the woman's personality, how strangely absence had distorted her view of the mind behind those hard, gray eyes. And with this realization came an uneasy feeling that the power and influence which had sent her rushing headlong from her home, to seek the peace of the wilderness, was no fancy of a weak, girlish mind, but a force, a strong, living force, which made itself felt the instant she came into the woman's uncanny presence again.

She was just the same unyielding creature she had always known. Her peevish plaint at the journey, her railing at the stupidity and impertinence of the teamster, her expressed disgust at the country, her complaining of everything. These things were just what Joan must have expected, had she not lived away from her aunt, and so lost her proper focus. Joan did her best to appease her. She strove by every art of her simple mind to interest her and divert her thought and mood into channels less harsh. But she had little success, and it quickly became apparent that the lapse of time since her going from home had aggravated rather than improved the strange mental condition under which her aunt labored.

After the first greetings, and Joan had conducted her to her room, which she had spent infinite time and thought in arranging, the old woman remained there to rest until supper-time. Then she reappeared, and, by the signs of her worn, ascetic face, the cruel hollows about those adamant eyes, the drawn cheeks and furrowed brow, the girl realized that rest with her was not easy to achieve. She saw every sign in her now that in the old days she had learned to dread so acutely.

However, there was no help for it. She knew it was not in the nature of that busy brain to rest, and one day the breaking-point would be reached, and the end would come suddenly.

But at supper-time there was a definite change in her aunt's mental attitude. Whereas before her whole thought had been for the outpouring of her complaint at her personal discomforts, now all that seemed to have been forgotten in something which held her alert and watchful. Joan had no thought or suspicion of the working of the swift-moving brain. Only was she pleased, almost

delighted at the questioning and evident interest in her own affairs.

The meal was nearly over. Aunt Mercy, as was her habit, had eaten sparingly, while she alternately listened to the details of the girl's farm life, the manner of the gold camp, the history of her arrival there and the many vicissitudes which had followed, and voiced the questions of her inquisitorial mind. Now she leant back in her chair and slowly sipped a cup of strong, milkless tea, while her eyes watched the girl's expressive face.

Joan had purposely avoided mention of the many details which had had such power to disturb her in the past. She had no desire to afford a reopening of the scene she had endured that morning at St. Ellis. But Mercy Lascelles was not to be thwarted by any such simple subterfuge.

"You've told me a lot of what doesn't matter," she said sharply, after a pause, while she sipped her tea. "Now tell me something that does." She glanced down at the flashing diamond rings upon her fingers. "By your letter you have not escaped from those things you hoped to—when you left St. Ellis."

Joan started. She was sitting with her elbows on the table, her chin resting on her clasped hands. Mercy Lascelles observed the start, but offered no comment. She waited. She could afford to wait. She had read and understood the girl's letter. Besides, there was something else in her mind. Something else which required piecing into the web which linked their lives together. She knew that it held an important place, but its exact position her busy brain was still groping to resolve.

"Do you want me to talk about—those things?" the girl asked half appealingly. "Is it necessary? I am very happy, auntie, so happy that I don't want to risk losing a moment of it. I have not always been happy since I came here."

The hard, gray eyes suddenly lifted to the girl's face, and there was mocking in their depths.

"You mentioned them light-heartedly enough in your letter. You spoke of the death of two men to point your assurance that their death had nothing to do with your—fate. Some one had reassured you. Some one had made plain the absurdity that such a fate could ever be. Some one had shown you that such convictions only lived in the human mind and had no actual place in the scheme of things. Surely with this wonderful truth behind you, you need not shrink from details of things which have no connection with your life."

The icy sarcasm would not be denied. It was the old note Joan had been so familiar with. Its sting was as poignant as ever, but somehow now it stirred her to a defense of those who had come to her aid in her direst need.

But this was her aunt's first day on the farm. She felt she must restrain herself. She tried to smile, but it was a weakly attempt.

"You are quite unchanged, auntie," she said.

"I might say the same of you, Joan," came the sharp retort.

But Joan shook her head.

"You would be quite wrong. I have changed so much that you can never make me believe again in—all that which you made me believe before. Let me be frank. Nothing but my conviction that I am no more cursed by an evil fate than is every other living creature would have induced me to ask you here. I have asked you to come here and share my home because you are my aunt, my only relative, who has been good to me in the past. Because I am lonely here without you, and—and—oh, don't you understand? There are only us two left. Yes, I want to be with you." She broke off, but in a moment went on rapidly. "But this could never have been had I still believed what you made me believe. Under that old shadow I would have gone to the ends of the world rather than have been near you. Can't you understand? Let us forget it all—let us begin a new life together."

Mercy shook her head. She was quite unmoved by the girl's appeal.

"There is only one life. There is no beginning again. Those who talk like that are fools. That is why I say you, too, are unchanged." The woman's eyes lit. They suddenly became filled with that cold fire which Joan knew so well. "You think you are changed. You think by an effort of will—your own, combined with that of another, you have escaped that which has followed you from your birth. You think that every disaster that has ever occurred to those with whom you have been associated, and those who have belonged to you, can be accounted for naturally. You, with your foolish brain, and the equally foolish brain of that other. Why, girl, you deny it in every line of the letter you wrote me. It is there—there in every word, in its very atmosphere. You are lying to yourself under the influence of this other—who lies to you. Prove what you say if you want me to believe. The scientific mind must have proof, undeniable, irrefutable proof. Statements, mere statements of unbelief are meaningless things which do not convince even their authors. If you need to convince yourself, and convince me,

then engage yourself to some man, marry him, and I tell you now you will bring about the direst tragedy that ever befel human creature.”

“I—I have done what—what you dare me to do. I have engaged myself to marry. I am going to marry the man I love more than life itself.”

Joan had risen from her seat. She stood erect, her beautiful head thrown back. An ecstatic light shone in the deep velvet softness of her eyes. But even as she spoke a sudden paling lessened the delicate bloom of her cheeks.

The other, with her cold eyes leveled at her, was quick to observe.

“And who is—your victim?”

Joan’s pallor increased as she stared for a moment with dilating eyes at the woman who could be capable of such cruelty. Then, of a sudden, a protest of such bitterness sprang to her lips that even Mercy Lascelles was startled.

“Oh, God, was there ever such callous heartlessness in human creature? Was there ever such madness in sane woman? You ask me to prove my convictions, you ask me for the one method by which even you can be convinced, and when I show you how far my new faith has carried me you taunt me by asking who is my—victim. Oh, aunt, for the love of all you ever held dear, leave me in peace. Let me prove to you my own destiny, but leave me in peace until I have done so, or—failed. Can you not see that I am trying to preserve my sanity? And by every word and look you are driving me to the verge of madness. The man I love knows all, he and his great friend. He knows all you have ever told me, and his love is the strongest and bravest. He laughs this fate to scorn, he has no fears for himself, or for me. I tell you you shall have your proof. But you must leave me in peace.”

For a moment it almost seemed as if her aunt were abashed at the passion of her protest. She withdrew her cold stare, and, with her jeweled hands folded in her lap, gazed down at the white table-cloth. She waited until Joan dropped despairingly back into her chair, then she looked up, and her glance was full of malicious irony.

“You shall have your way—after to-night. You shall not hear one word of warning from me. But to-night you must let me have my way. You say you believe. I tell you I *know*. You must do your best, and—fail. Have your way.” She withdrew her gaze and her eyes became introspective. “Who is this man—

you say you are going to marry?"

Joan warmed under the change in her aunt's manner. Her relief at the other's assurance was almost boundless, although the effect of the woman's previous attitude was to leave her far less sure of herself.

"It is Buck," she said impulsively. "He is the great friend of the man from whom I bought this farm. Oh, auntie, wait until you see him. You will realize, as I have, his strength, his goodness. You will have no doubts when you know him. You will understand that he has no fear of any—any supernatural agencies, has no fear of any fancied fate that may be awaiting him. Auntie, he is tall, so tall, and—oh, he's wonderful. And his name, Buck—don't you like it? It is so like him. Buck—independence, courage, confidence. And, oh, auntie, I love him so."

Mercy remained quite unmoved. It almost seemed doubtful if she heard and understood all the simple girlishness in her niece's rhapsody, so preoccupied she seemed with her own thoughts.

"It was his friend, you say, who has taught you that—you have nothing further to fear? And who is this paragon?"

"He is the man who sold me the farm. He is such a good, kind creature. He is loved and respected by every soul in the place. He is so wise, too,—he is quite wonderful. You know, he only sold his farm to me to keep the miners from starving before they found the gold. He is a sort of foster-father to Buck. He found him when he was a little boy—picked him up on the trail-side. That's about twenty years ago, soon after the Padre—that's what they call him—first came here."

"Yes, yes; but his name?"

Mercy had little patience with such detail as interested the fresh young mind of the girl.

"Moreton Kenyon."

The eyes of the old woman shot a swift glance into the girl's face.

"Moreton—who?"

"Kenyon."

Mercy sat up in her chair. Her whole figure was poised alertly. Her eyes were no

longer uninterested. She was stirred to swift mental activity. She knew that the web was readjusting itself. The portion she had been seeking to place was finding its own position.

“He has a head of thick white hair. He has gray eyes, darkly fringed. He is a man of something over fifty. His shoulders are massive. His limbs sturdy and powerful.”

Mercy detailed her description of the man in sharp, jerky sentences, each one definite and pointed. She spoke with the certainty of conviction. She was not questioning.

Joan’s surprise found vent in a wondering interrogation.

“Then, you have seen him? You know him?”

Her aunt laughed. It was a painful, hideous laugh, suggesting every hateful feeling rather than mirth. Joan was shocked, and vaguely wondered when she had ever before heard her aunt laugh.

“Know him? Yes, I know him.” The laugh was gone and a terrible look had suddenly replaced the granite hardness of her eyes. “I have known him all my life. I saw him only to-day, in the hills. He knew me. Oh, yes, he knew me, and I knew him. We have reason to know each other. But his name is not Moreton Kenyon. It is—Moreton Bucklaw.”

Joan’s wonder gave place to alarm as the other’s venomous manner increased. The look in her eyes she recognized as the look she had seen in the woman’s eyes when she had first listened to the story of her childhood.

“Moreton Bucklaw?”

“Yes, Moreton Bucklaw,” her aunt cried, with sudden vehemence, which seemed to grow with every word she spoke. “Moreton Bucklaw. Do you understand? No, of course you don’t. So this is your paragon of goodness and wisdom. This is the man who has told you that your fate only exists in distorted fancy. This is the man who is the foster-father of your wonderful Buck, who defies the curse of disaster which dogs your feet. Child, child, you have proved my words out of your own lips. The disaster you deny is hard upon your heels, hard upon the heels of this man you love. Your own hand, the hand even of your lover, is in it. Was it fate that brought you here? Was it fate that you should love this man? Was it fate that made my teamster lose his way and so bring me face to face with this

man, almost at the door of his own home? Was it fate that brought me here? Yes, yes, yes! I tell you it was fate that did all these things—your fate. The curse from which you can never escape. Moreton Bucklaw!” She mouthed the words with insane glee. “It is almost laughable,” she cried. “You have promised to marry the foster-son of the man who is shortly to pay the penalty for the murder of—your father.”



CHAPTER XXVIII

A BLACK NIGHT

The Padre sat staring into space before the stove. Buck was in his favorite position at the open door, gazing out into the darkness of the night. As he smoked his evening pipe he was thinking, as usual, of the woman who was never quite out of his thoughts. He was intensely happy in the quiet fashion that was so much a part of him. It seemed to him unbelievable that he could have lived and been content before he met Joan. Now there could be no life without her, no world even. She pervaded his every sense, his whole being, with her beautiful presence.

He breathed deeply. Yes, it was all very, very wonderful. Then, by degrees, his thoughts ran on to the expected arrival of Joan's relative—that aunt whom he had heard so much about from the Padre. And in a moment an uneasy feeling made him shift his position. The Padre's story was still vivid in his mind; he could never forget it. Nor could he forget this woman's place in it. These thoughts set him speculating uneasily as to the possible result of her visit.

He surreptitiously glanced over at the silent figure beside the stove. The man's pipe was still in his mouth, but it had gone out. Also he saw, in that quick glance, that the fire in the stove had fallen low. But he made no move to replenish it. The night was very sultry.

He turned again to his contemplation of the outer world. The night was black, jet black. There was not a star visible. The mountain air had lost its cool snap, the accustomed rustle of the woods was gone. There was a tense stillness which jarred in an extraordinary degree.

"A desperate, dark night," he said suddenly. He was merely voicing his thought aloud.

The sound of his voice roused the other from his reverie. The Padre lifted his head and removed the pipe from between his teeth.

"Yes—and hot. Throw us your tobacco."

Buck pitched his pouch across, but remained where he was.

“Guess that leddy’s down at the farm by now,” Buck went on. “Joan was guessing she’d get around to-day. That’s why I didn’t go along there.”

“Yes, she is there.” The Padre lit his pipe and smoked steadily.

Buck turned quickly.

“How d’you know?”

“I met her on the trail. They missed their way this morning and hit the trail below here, at the foot of the steps.”

“You didn’t—let her see you?” Buck asked, after a pause.

The Padre smiled.

“I spoke to her. I put her on the right trail.”

“You spoke to her?” Buck’s tone was half incredulous. “Did she—recognize you?”

The other nodded.

“You see, I’ve not changed much—except for my hair.”

“What did she do—say?”

The Padre’s smile remained.

“Said—I should see her again.”

For some moments the two men faced each other across the room. The yellow lamplight plainly revealed their different expressions. The Padre’s smile was inimitable in its sphinx-like obscurity, but Buck’s eyes were frankly troubled.

“And that means?” Buck’s question rang sharply.

“She has neither forgotten nor—forgiven.”

Buck returned abruptly to his contemplation of the night, but his thoughts were no longer the happy thoughts of the lover. Without knowing it he was proving to himself that there were other things in the world which could entirely obscure the happy light which the presence of Joan shed upon his life.

The Padre sat back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head, while his pipe burned hot and the smoke of it rose thickly. It was the only outward sign he gave of any emotion. Buck suddenly forgot the night. A desperate thought was running hotly through his brain. His friend's admission had set his fertile young brain working furiously. It was traveling just whither a vivid imagination carried it. A reckless purpose was swiftly formulating.

After a while he turned again. His resolve was taken on the impulse of the moment.

"Padre," he said, "you shall never——" But his sentence remained incomplete. He broke off, listening.

The other was listening too.

There was the sharp cracking of a forest tree—one of those mysterious creakings which haunt the woodland night. But there was another sound too. The trained ears of these men caught its meaning on the instant. It was the vague and distant sound of wheels upon the soft bed of the sandy trail.

"A heavy wagon, an'—two hosses," said Buck.

The Padre nodded.

"Coming from the direction of the farm. Sounds like the old team,—and they're being driven too fast for heavy horses. Joan hasn't got a saddle-horse of her own."

His last remark explained his conviction, and the suggestion found concurrence in Buck's mind.

They waited, and the sound grew louder. Then, without a word, Buck passed out of the room.

A few minutes later the rumble of wheels ceased, and the Padre heard Buck's voice greeting Joan.



A tragic light shone in Joan's eyes as she stood in the centre of the room glancing from her lover to his friend. She was searching for an opening for what

she had come to say. Her distraught brain was overwhelmed with thoughts she could not put into words. She had driven over with the heavy team and wagon because she had no other means of reaching these two, and unless she reached them to-night she felt that by morning her sanity must be gone. Now—now—she stood speechless before them. Now, her brain refused to prompt her tongue. All was chaos in her mind, and her eyes alone warned the men of the object of her coming.

It was the Padre's voice that finally guided her. He read without hesitation or doubt the object of her mission.

"Yes," he said simply. "I am Moreton Bucklaw, the man accused of your father's murder."

Suddenly the girl's head drooped forward, and her hands covered her face as though to shut out the terrible truth which the man's words conveyed.

"O God!" she cried. "Then she was not lying to me."

Buck's eyes, fierce, almost savage at the sight of the girl's despair, shot a swift glance at his friend. It was a glance which only the white-haired man could have understood. To the looker-on it would have expressed a terrible threat. To the Padre it was the expression of a heart torn to shreds between love and friendship.

"If she told you I killed him—she was lying."

The man had not raised his tone. There was no other emotion in his manner than distress for the girl's suffering.

Joan looked up, and a gleam of hope struggled through her despair.

"Then it's not true? Oh, I knew it—I knew it! She *was* lying to me. She *was* lying to me as she has always lied to me. Oh, thank God, thank God!" She dropped back into the chair that had been placed for her, but which up to that moment she had ignored.

The two men waited for her emotion to pass. Buck as yet had nothing to say. And the Padre knew that until she was mistress of herself words would only be wasted.

Presently she looked up. Her eyes were dry, and the agony that had sent her upon her headlong mission was passing. The Padre's relief showed in the smile with

which he met her glance. Buck stood steadily regarding her, longing to help her, but knowing that his time had not come yet.

“Tell me,” she said, struggling hard for steadiness. “Tell me all—for I—I cannot seem to understand anything.”

The Padre bowed his head.

“You know your own story. It is all substantially true that Mercy Lascelles has told you. All, that is, except that she claims I killed your father. She did not see your father die. I did. I was the only one who saw him die—by his own hand, a desperate and ruined man. Listen, and I will tell you the whole story without concealing one tittle of my own doings and motives.”

Half an hour passed while the man’s even voice recited without emotion all the details leading up to Charles Stanmore’s death. He kept nothing back—his own love for the then handsome Mercy, and the passionate insult he had offered her, when, in her love for the dead man, she became his housekeeper. He intended that, for Buck’s sake, this girl should know everything, nor had he the least desire for any concealment on personal account. He did not spare his own folly and the cowardice of his flight. He felt that concealment of any sort could only injure Buck, whom at all costs he must not hurt. He even analyzed, with all the logic at his command, Mercy Lascelles’ motives in accusing him. He declared his belief in her desire to marry the widowed man and her own consequent hatred of himself, whose presence was a constant thwart to her plans.

And when he had finished something of the trouble had passed out of the girl’s eyes. The color had returned to her cheeks, and he knew that he had achieved his purpose.

“I suppose it is terrible to you, child, to hear me speak of your aunt, one of your own sex, a blood relative, in this way,” he said in conclusion. “But I believe that she is absolutely mad in her hatred of me. And now that she has discovered my whereabouts nothing less will satisfy her than that I must stand my trial, and—go to the electric chair. It is my purpose to stand my trial. It was for that reason, when I recognized her this morning, before she even saw me, I purposely thrust myself in her way. I intended that she should not lack opportunity, and my reason—well, that doesn’t much matter.”

The girl nodded.

“I think I am glad of your decision,” she said simply. “You see, when you have established your innocence——”

“I fear that result is—doubtful.”

The man’s admission was quite frank. Nor was there even a suggestion of regret in his voice. But Joan’s heart gripped with alarm. The thought of such a contingency had never occurred to her simple mind. He had not committed murder. Then, of course, he was innocent. It had all been made so simple. Now—now she was suddenly overwhelmed with a new terror.

“You mean—you cannot prove—your innocence?” she cried incredulously.

“You forget I was the only man with him. I was the last person with him. And—I fled when I should have stayed to—help. The circumstances are terribly against me.”

Joan’s throat had suddenly parched. She struggled to speak, but no sound came. She looked to Buck for help and the man ran to her side.

The gentle pressure of his protecting arm, as he rested one caressing hand upon her shoulder, gave her the relief she needed.

“Oh, Buck, Buck! For the love of Heaven say something—do something,” she appealed. “They will kill him for a crime—of which he is innocent.”

Suddenly the Padre’s eyes glowed with a strange light of happiness. The girl’s appeal to Buck had been the one saving touch in the midst of the cloud of tribulation overshadowing him. The daughter of his best friend, the daughter of the man he was supposed to have done to death, had given her verdict. She believed in his innocence. He sighed with the depth of his thankfulness. He could now face whatever lay before him with perfect equanimity.

But Buck had yet to play his part in the little drama so swiftly working itself out. His part was far different to the passive attitude of the other man. He had no tolerance for the possible sacrifice of an innocent life at the demand of a crazy woman who had come so nearly wrecking the life of the girl he loved. As Joan appealed to him his eyes lit with a sudden fire of rebellion. And his answer came in a hot rush.

“You think I’m goin’ to let him die, Joan?” he cried, the hot blood staining his cheeks and brow. “I tell you he won’t. I swear to you, sure, sure, he shan’t die a

murderer's death! I tell you right here, little gal, ther' ain't a sheriff in the country big enough to take him. He says he must give up to arrest when the time comes. Wal, he'll have to do it over my dead body."

His words were in answer to Joan's appeal, but they were hurled at the man beside the fire, and were a defiance and a challenge from the depths of a loyal heart.

The Padre's smile was good to see. But he shook his head. And instantly Joan caught at the enthusiasm which stirred her lover and hugged it to herself. She sprang to her feet, and a wonderful light shone in her eyes.

"Buck is right, Padre. He is right," she cried. "Do you hear? You shall not take the risk, you must not. Oh, Padre! you must live for our sakes. We know your innocence, then what more is needed after all these years? For once let us be your mentors—you who have always been the mentor of others. Padre, Padre, you owe this to us. Think of it! Think of what it would mean. A murderer's death! You shall not, you cannot give yourself up. Buck is right. I, too, am with him."

She turned to the man at her side, and, raising her arms, clasped her hands about his neck.

"Buck—my Buck. Let us swear together that, while we have life, he shall never be the victim of this crazy, terrible woman. It shall be our fight—yours and mine."

Buck gazed down into her beautiful, pleading eyes as he clasped her slim body in his strong, young arms. Her eyes were alight with a love, radiant in its supremacy over her whole being. Her championship of his innocent friend would have endeared her a thousandfold had such a thing been possible. In that moment it was as though her courage, her loyalty, had completed the bond between them. His jaws gritted tight. His eyes shone with a fervent resolution.

"It goes, little gal," he cried. "It's our lives for his. It sure goes—every time."



CHAPTER XXIX

BEASLEY IN HIS ELEMENT

The camp was sweltering under an abnormal heat. There was not one breath of the usual invigorating mountain air. A few more degrees of humidity, and the cup of endurance would have been filled to overflowing and toiling humanity breathing something like sheer moisture. The sky was heavy and gray, and a dull sun, as though it too had been rendered faint-hearted, was painfully struggling against the laden atmosphere.

The work of the camp went on. For hours human nature wrestled with a growing inertia which robbed effort of all snap. But gradually, as the day wore on, the morning impetus gave way, and peevish tongues voiced the general plaint. Men moved about slowly, their tongues actively cursing. They cursed the heat as they mopped their dripping brows. They cursed the flies, and hurled mighty blows for their destruction. They cursed all work, and gold became the last thing in the world they desired at such a price. They cursed the camp, the country, but more than all they cursed the black hill from which they drew their living.

Then came acknowledgment of defeat. One by one at first, and finally in batches, they shouldered their tools and moodily withdrew from the attack. As they went weary eyes glanced back with hate and disgust at the frowning buttresses of the hill, with awe at the steaming cloud hanging above the simmering waters of the suspended lake. The depressing shadow of Devil's Hill had for the moment become intolerable.

Beasley hated the heat just as cordially as these toilers, but he would have hated still more its sudden going, and the consequent appeasement of unnatural thirsts, which it was his pleasure and profit to slake. His own feelings were at all times subservient to his business instincts. This sudden, unaccountable heat meant added profit to him, therefore his complaint was half-hearted. It was almost as if he feared to give offense to the gods of his good fortune.

Then, too, Beasley had so many things to occupy his busy brain. His trade was one that required much scheming, a matter in which he reveled at all times. Problems of self-interest were his salt of life, and their accurate solution brought

him as near earthly happiness as well could be.

Curiously enough problems were always coming his way. He chanced upon one that morning while busy in his storeroom, his attention divided between pricing and stacking new dry goods and smashing flies on the back of his superheated neck. And it served him with food for thought for the rest of the day.

It took him quite unawares, and for that very reason gave him ample satisfaction. He was bending over a pile of rolls of fabric when a voice suddenly hailed him from the doorway.

“Are you the proprietor of the livery stables?”

He turned about with a start. Such a question in that camp seemed superfluous. It was absurd. He looked up, and his astonished eyes fell upon the vision of an extremely well-dressed, refined-looking woman whom he judged to be anything over fifty. But what held his attention most was the lean, emaciated face and penetrating eyes. There was something of the witch about it, as there was about the bowed figure. But more than all she was a *stranger*.

He admitted the impeachment in the midst of his astonishment with an abruptness equal to her own.

“Sure,” he said, and waited.

“Where will I find the sheriff of this place?”

Beasley’s eyes opened wider.

“Guess ther’ ain’t no sheriff in this camp.”

The woman’s next words came impatiently.

“Why isn’t there? Is there a lawyer?”

Beasley grinned. His astonishment was giving place to curiosity and speculation. He tapped the revolver at his hip.

“We’re mostly our own lawyers around here,” he said easily.

But the woman ignored his levity.

“Where can I find one—a lawyer, or sheriff?” she demanded with an added imperiousness.

“Guess Leeson Butte’s nearest.”

The stranger considered a moment. Beasley’s eyes never left her. He had noticed the refinement of her accent, and wondered the more.

“How can I get there—best?” the woman next demanded.

“Guess I ken let you have a team,” Beasley said with alacrity. He smelt good business.

“How much?”

“Fifty dollars. In an’ out—with teamster.”

“Does he know the way?”

“Sure.”

The woman eyed him steadily.

“I don’t want any mistakes. This—is a case of murder.”

Beasley’s interest suddenly redoubled. The problem was growing in its attractiveness.

“Who’s the feller?” he asked unguardedly.

“That’s not your business.” The woman’s eyes were cold. “Send the team over to the farm down the river in two hours’ time. The horses must be able to travel fast. Here’s the money.”

The saloon-keeper took the money promptly. But for once his astonishment held him silent. Mercy Lascelles had reached the door to go. Then she seemed to change her mind. She paused.

“There’s fifty dollars more when I get back—if you keep your tongue quiet,” she said warningly. “I don’t want my business to get around. I should say gossip travels fast amongst the hills. That’s what I don’t want.”

“I see.”

It was all the astonished man could think of to say at the moment. But he managed an abundant wink in a markedly friendly way.

His wink missed fire, however, for the woman had departed; and by the time he

reached the door to look after her he saw her mounting the wagon, which was drawn by the heavy team from Joan's farm, and driven by her hired man.

As the stranger drove off he leant against the doorway and emitted a low whistle. In his own phraseology he was "beat," completely and utterly "beat."

But this state of things could not last long. His fertile brain could not long remain under such a cloud of astonished confusion. He must sort out the facts and piece them together. This he set to work on at once.

Abandoning his work in the storeroom he went at once to the barn, and gave orders for the dispatch of the team. And herein, for once, he traded honestly with his visitor. He ordered his very best team to be sent. Perhaps it was in acknowledgment of the problem she had offered him.

Then he questioned his helpers. Here he was absolutely despotic. And in less than half an hour he had ascertained several important facts. He learned that a team had come in from Crowsfoot the previous afternoon, bringing a passenger for the farm. The team had remained at the farm, likewise the teamster. Only the fact that daylight that morning had brought the man into camp for a supply of fodder and provisions had supplied them with the news of his presence in the district. This had happened before Beasley was up.

With this Beasley went back to the saloon, where his dinner was served him in the bar. His bartender was taking an afternoon off. It was a thoughtful meal. The man ate noisily with the aid of both knife and fork. He had acquired all the habits of the class he had so long mixed with. Nor was it until his plate of meat and canned vegetables had nearly disappeared that light began to creep into his clouded brain.

He remembered that Joan had refurnished the farm. Why? Because some one from the East, no doubt, was coming to stay with her. Who? Mother? Aunt? Cousin? Female anyway. Female arrives. Queer-looking female. Goes to farm. Stays one night. Comes looking for sheriff next morning. A case of murder. No murder been done around here. Where? East? Yes. Then there's some one here she's found—or she knows is here—and he's wanted for murder. Who?

At this point Beasley grinned. How many might there not be on Yellow Creek who could be so charged?

But his shrewd mind was very quick. This woman had not been into camp until

she visited him. Where had she been? In the hills—coming from Crowsfoot. Still she might have been aware of the presence of her man before she came—through Joan.

For a moment he was disappointed.

But it was only for a moment. He quickly brightened up. A new idea had occurred to him which narrowed his field of possibilities. This woman was educated, she belonged to a class he had once known himself. She would know nothing of the riffraff of this camp. It must be somebody of the same class, or near it, somebody of education——He drew a sharp breath, and his wicked eyes lit.

The wildest, the most impossible thought had occurred to him. He pondered long upon the passage of the trail from Crowsfoot to the farm. He remembered how she did not desire the “gossip” to travel—especially to the hills.

Suddenly he hailed his Chinese cook and flung his knife and fork down upon his plate. In his elation he forgot the heat, the sticky flies. He forgot his usual custom of abstention during the day. He poured himself out a long drink of really good whisky, which he gulped down, smacking his lips with appreciation before flinging his customary curse at the head of his Mongolian servitor.

He had never had such a morning in his life.

Two of the boys came in for a drink. Such was his mood that he upset their whole focus of things by insisting that they have it at his expense. And when a third came along with a small parcel of gold dust he bought it at its full value.

These were significant signs. Beasley Melford was in a generous mood. And such a mood in such a man required a lot of inspiration.

But it was not likely to continue for long. And surely enough it quickly reached its limit, and resolved itself into his every-day attitude, plus a desire to make up, at the first opportunity, the losses incurred by his moments of weak generosity.

The heat of the day soon afforded him his desire, for the limp and sweating miners straggled back into camp long before their usual working day was ended. And what is more, they came to seek solace and refreshment under his willing roof.

By the middle of the afternoon the bar was fairly well filled. The place was little better than a furnace of humid heat. But under the influence of heartening spirits the temperature passed almost unnoticed, or at least uncared. Here at least the weary creatures were called upon for no greater effort than to deal cards, or raise a glass to their lips and hold it there until drained. They could stand any heat in the pursuit of such pastimes.

Beasley watched his customers closely. Three tables of poker were going, and from each he drew a percentage for the “chips” sold at the bar. Each table was well supplied with drinks. A group of five men occupied one end of the counter, and two smaller groups were farther along. They were all drinking with sufficient regularity to suit his purposes. Amongst the crowd gathered he noticed many of the men of the original camp. There was Curly Saunders and Slaney at one poker table with Diamond Jack. Abe Allinson was in close talk with two financial “sharps” from Leeson, at the bar. The Kid was with a number of new hands who had only just come in to try their luck. He was endeavoring to sell a small share of his claim at a large price. Two others were with the larger group at the bar, discussing “outputs” and new methods of washing gold. It was a mixed collection of humanity, but there were sufficient of the original members of the camp to suit him.

In a lull in the talk, when for a moment only the click of poker “chips” and the shuffle of cards broke the silence, Beasley propped himself against his counter and, for once, paused from his everlasting habit of glass wiping.

“Guess none o’ you heard the news?” he inquired, with a grin of anticipation.

His first effort failed to produce the effect he desired, so a repetition followed quickly. For a moment play was suspended at one of the tables, and the men looked up.

“Noos?” inquired Diamond Jack.

The Kid and his youthful companions looked round at the foxy face of their host.

“Oh! I don’t guess it’s nuthin’,” said Beasley. “Only—it’s so dogone queer.”

His manner was well calculated. His final remark drew the entire barroom. All play and all talk was abruptly held up.

“Wot’s queer?” demanded Diamond Jack, while all eyes searched the saloon-keeper’s sharp face.

Beasley bit the end off a green cigar.

“That’s just it,” he said. “Ther’s suthin’ I can’t jest make out. Say——” he paused while he lit his cigar with a sulphur match. “Any you fellers heard of a murder around here lately? Can’t say I have.”

He puffed leisurely at his cigar. The scattered groups at the bar drew closer. There was no question but he now had the attention he desired. The blank negative on the faces about him gave him his answer.

“Sure,” he observed thoughtfully. “That’s wher’ I’m beat. But—ther’s sure murder been done, an’ ther’s goin’ to be a big doin’ around—in consequence. Ther’s word gone in to the sheriff at Leeson, an’ the law fellers o’ that city is raisin’ a mighty business to get warrants signed. Say, I heerd they’re sendin’ a dozen dep’ties to hunt these hills. Seems to me the guy whoever it is is a pretty hot tough, an’ he’s livin’ in the hills. I heard more than that. I heard the murder was a low-down racket that if folks knew about it they’d be right out fer lynchin’ this guy. That’s why it’s bin kep’ quiet. I bin goin’ over the folks in my mind to locate the—murderer. But it’s got me beat.”

“Ther’ ain’t bin no murder since the camp got boomin’,” said Abe Allinson thoughtfully, “’cept you reckon that racket of Ike an’ Pete’s.”

Beasley shook his head.

“’Tain’t that. That was jest clear shootin’. Though it’s queer you mention that. Say, this racket’s got somethin’ to do with that farm. It’s mighty queer about that farm. That gal’s brought a heap of mischief. She sure is an all-fired Jonah.”

“But what’s she to do wi’ this new racket?” inquired Slaney.

Beasley shook his head.

“You got me beat again. The sheriff’s comin’ right out to that farm, chasin’ some feller for murder. Ther’s the fact—plain fact. He’s comin’ to that farm—which shows that gal is mussed-up with the racket someways. Now I tho’t a heap on

this thing. An' I'm guessin' this murder must have been done back East. Y' see that gal comes from back East. 'Wal, now,' says I, 'how do we shape then?' Why, that gal—that Jonah gal—comes right here an' locates some feller who's done murder back East. Who is it? I gone over every feller in this yer camp, an' 'most all are pretty clear accounted for. Then from what I hear the sheriff's posse is to work the hills. Who is ther' in the hills?"

Beasley paused for effect. His purpose was rapidly becoming evident. He glanced over the faces about him, and knew that the same thought was in each mind.

He laughed as though an absurd thought had passed through his mind.

"Course," he exclaimed, "it's durned ridic'lous. Ther's two fellers we know livin' in the hills. Jest two. Ther's Buck an'—the Padre. Buck's bin around this creek ever since he was raised. I ain't no use for Buck. He's kind o' white livered, but he's a straight citizen. Then the Padre," he laughed again, "he's too good. Say, he's next best to a passon. So it can't be him."

He waited for concurrence, and it came at once.

"I'll swar' it ain't the Padre," cried Curly warmly.

"It sure ain't," agreed Slaney, shaking his serious head.

"The Padre?" cried Abe, with a scornful laugh. "Why, I'd sooner guess it's me."

Beasley nodded.

"You're dead right ther', boys," he said, with hearty good-will. "It sure ain't the Padre. He's got religion, an' though I'm 'most allus curious 'bout folks with religion—it ain't right to say ther's any queer reason fer 'em gettin' it. Then the Padre's bin here nigh twenty years. Jest fancy! A feller of his eddication chasin' around these hills fer twenty years! It's easy fer a feller raised to 'em, like Buck. But when you've been a feller in a swell position East, to come an' hunt your hole in these hills fer twenty years, why, it's—it's astonishin'. Still, that don't make no diff'rence. It can't be the Padre. He's got his reasons fer stayin' around here. Wal, nigh all of us has got reasons fer bein' here. An' it ain't fer us to ask why. No, though I don't usually trust folks who get religion sudden, I ain't goin' agin the Padre. He's a white man, sure."

"The whitest around here," cried Curly. He eyed Beasley steadily. "Say, you," he

went on suspiciously, “who give you all this?”

It was the question Beasley had been waiting for. But he would rather have had it from some one else. He twisted his cigar across his lips and spat a piece of tobacco leaf out of his mouth.

“Wal,” he began deliberately, “I don’t guess it’s good med’cine talkin’ names. But I don’t mind sayin’ right here this thing’s made me feel mean. The story’s come straight from that—that—Jonah gal’s farm. Yep, it makes me feel mean. Ther’s nothin’ but trouble about that place now—’bout her. I ain’t got over Ike and Pete. Wal, I don’t guess we’ll get to the rights of that now. They wer’ two bright boys. Here are us fellers runnin’ this camp fer all we know, all good citizens, mind, an’ ther’ ain’t nothin’ amiss. We ke’p the place good an’ clean of rackets. We’re goin’ to boom into a big concern, an’ we’re goin’ to make our piles—clean. An’ we got to put up with the wust sort of mischief—from this farm. It ain’t right. It ain’t a square shake by a sight. I sez when ther’s Jonahs about they need to be put right out. An’ mark you, that gal, an’ that farm are Jonahs. Now we got this sheriff feller comin’ around with his dep’ties chasin’ glory after a crook. He’ll get his nose into everybody. An’ sheriffs’ noses is quick at gettin’ a nasty smell. I ain’t sayin’ a thing about any citizen in this place—but I don’t guess any of us has store halos about us, an’ halos is the only things’ll keep any feller safe when sheriffs get around.”

A murmur of approval greeted his argument. Few of the men in the camp desired the presence of a sheriff in their midst. There were few enough among them who would care to have the ashes of their past disturbed by any law officer. Beasley had struck the right note for his purpose.

“How’d you put this Jonah out, Beasley?” cried Diamond Jack.

Beasley thought for a moment.

“How’d I put her out?” he said at last. “That’s askin’ some. How’d I put her out? Say,” his face flushed, and his eyes sparkled, “ef I had my way I’d burn every stick o’ that dogone farm. Then she’d light out. That’s what I’d do. I ain’t got no use for Jonahs. An’ I say right here I’d give five hundred dollars to see her back turned on this place. I tell you, boys, an’ I’m speakin’ for your good, an’ mine, if she stops around here we’re goin’ to get it—we’ll get it good. The Lord knows how it’s goin’ to come. But it’s comin’, I feel it in my bones. It’s comin’ as sure as my name’s Beasley.”

He threw such a sincerity and earnestness into his manner that he made a marked impression. Even Curly Saunders, who, with one or two of the older hands, had some sort of regard for the girl they believed had founded their fortunes, was not quite without doubts. There was no question but mischief did seem to hang about the farm. Ike and Pete had been popular enough. The newer people had no sentiment on the matter, but they listened with interest to the saloon-keeper, feeling that his was the voice of the leading citizen. Besides, the matter of the sheriff's coming was not pleasant. Many had spent a great part of their lives avoiding such contact.

"Seems to me you're forgettin' that gal brought us our luck," the Kid suggested impulsively. "You were ther' when we handed her the——"

"Death's-head," laughed Beasley. Then his face hardened. "Tcha!" he cried with some heat. "You make me sick. I told you then, as I tell you now, it was that storm brought us our luck, an' it brought us our Jonah with it. If you'd got a cent's worth of grit that gal 'ud go. We don't wish her harm. I ain't one to wish a gal harm. But go she must if we want to be quit of trouble. Still, I'm on'y just sayin' what I feel. It don't matter a heap. Ther's the sheriff comin' along to grab some one for murder. Maybe he'll chase up a few other rackets to fill in his time. It's things of that nature do matter. He's got to git some one. Maybe it's some one in the hills. Maybe it ain't. Maybe—wal, I sure do hope it ain't—the Padre."

He laughed as he turned to attend the wants of some fresh customers who entered the bar at that moment. The malice underlying his jest must have been plain to any one observing the man.

With this fresh diversion play at the card tables was resumed while the men at the bar fell back into their original groups. But the general interest was absorbed in Beasley's news, and the channels of talk were diverted. Beasley had sown his seed on fruitful soil. He knew it. The coming of a sheriff, or any form of established law, into a new mining camp was not lightly to be welcomed by the earliest pioneers.

In the midst of this atmosphere a further interest arose. The last person Beasley expected to see in his bar at that hour of the day was Buck. He was not even sure he wanted to see him after what had passed. Yet Buck suddenly pushed his way through the swing-doors.

The saloon-keeper was in the act of replacing the whisky bottle under the counter, having just served his fresh customers, when his foxy eyes encountered

the dark face of the man he most hated on Yellow Creek.

In a moment he was all smiles.

“Howdy, Buck,” he cried, as though the sight of him was the one thing in the world he desired. Then he covertly winked at those nearest him.

His wink conveyed all he intended, and the men turned and eyed the newcomer curiously.

Buck responded to the greeting indifferently, and proceeded to business. He had not come for the pleasure of the visit. He passed a slip of paper across the counter.

“Can you do them for me?” he inquired. “Just cast an eye over that list. If you’ll get ’em put up I’ll ride in in the mornin’ an’ fetch ’em out. I’ll need ’em early.”

His manner was short and cold. It was his way with Beasley, but now there was more in his mind to make for brevity.

Beasley studied the paper closely. And as he read down the list a smile spread over his mean face. It was a long list of supplies which included rifle and revolver ammunition. He whistled softly.

“Mackinaw!” Then he looked up into the dark eyes of the waiting man, and his own expressed an unwonted good-humor. “Say, wot’s doin’ at the fort? Gettin’ ready for a siege? Or—or are you an’ the Padre chasin’ the long trail?”

Buck’s thin cheeks flushed as he pointed at the paper.

“You can do that for me?” he inquired still more coldly.

Beasley shot a swift glance round at the interested faces of the men standing by.

“Oh, guess I can do it,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “Sure I can do it. Say, you fellers ain’t lightin’ out?”

He winked again. This time it was deliberately at Buck.

“They’re winter stores,” said Buck shortly.

Then, as Beasley laughed right out, and he became aware of a general smile at his expense, he grew hot.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded sharply. And his demand was not intended for the saloon-keeper alone.

“Ke’p your shirt on, Buck,” exclaimed Beasley, with studied good-nature. “We couldn’t jest help but laff.” Then his eyes became sentimentally serious. “Y’ see, we bin worried some. We wus guessin’ when you came along. Y’ see, ther’s a sheriff an’ a big posse o’ dep’ties comin’ right along to this yer camp. Y’ see, ther’s some guy chasin’ around the hills, an’ he’s wanted fer—murder.”

The man was watching for an effect in Buck’s face. But he might as well have looked for expression in that of a sphinx.

“Wal?”

It was the only response Buck afforded him.

“Wal,” Beasley shifted his gaze. He laughed feebly, and the onlookers transferred their attention to him. “Y’ see, it was sort o’ laffable you comin’ along buyin’ winter stores in August, an’ us jest guessin’ what guy the sheriff would be chasin’—in the hills. He won’t be smellin’ around the fort now?” He grinned amiably into the dark face. But deep in his wicked eyes was an assurance which Buck promptly read.

Nor did it take him a second to come to a decision. He returned the man’s look with a coolness that belied his real feelings. He knew beyond question that Mercy Lascelles had already commenced her campaign against the Padre. He had learned of her journey into the camp from Joan. The result of that journey had not reached him yet. At least it was reaching him now.

“You best hand it me straight, Beasley,” he said. “Guess nothin’ straight is a heap in your line. But jest for once you’ve got no corners to crawl around. Hand it out—an’ quick.”

Buck’s manner was dangerously sharp set. There was a smouldering fire growing in his passionate eyes. Beasley hesitated. But his hesitation was only for the reason of his own growing heat. He made one last effort to handle the matter in the way he had originally desired, which was with a process of good-humored goading with which he hoped to keep the company present on his side.

“Ther’s no offense, Buck,” he said. “At least ther’ sure needn’t to be. You never could play easy. I wus jest handin’ you a laff—same as we had.”

“I’m waitin’,” said Buck with growing intensity, utterly ignoring the explanation.

But Beasley’s hatred of the man could not be long denied. Besides, his last attempt had changed the attitude of the onlookers. There was a lurking derision, even contempt in their regard for him. It was the result of what had occurred before Buck’s coming. They expected him to talk as plainly as he had done then. So he gave rein to the venom which he could never long restrain.

“Guess I hadn’t best ke’p you waitin’, sure,” he said ironically. Then his eyes suddenly lit. “Winter stores, eh?” he cried derisively. “Winter stores—an’ why’ll the Padre need ’em, the good kind Padre, when the sheriff’s comin’ along to round him up fer—murder?”

There was a moment of tense silence as the man flung his challenge across the bar. Every eye in the room was upon the two men facing each other. In the mind of every one present was only one expectation. The lightning-like play of life and death.

But the game they all understood so well was not forthcoming. For once Buck’s heat was controlled by an iron will. To have shot Beasley down where he stood would have been the greatest delight of his life, but he restrained the impulse. There were others to think of. He forced himself to calmness.

Beasley had fired his shot in the firm conviction it would strike home unflinching. Yet he knew that it was not without a certain randomness in it. Still, after what had been said, it was imperative to show no weakening. He was certain the quarry was the Padre, and his conviction received further assurance as he watched Buck’s face.

For an instant Buck would willingly have hurled the lie in his teeth. But to do so would have been to lie himself, and, later, for that lie to be proved. There was only one course open to him to counter the mischief of this man. He looked squarely into the saloon-keeper’s face.

“The truth don’t come easy to you, Beasley,” he said calmly, “unless it’s got a nasty flavor. Guess that’s how it’s come your way to tell it now.”

“Winter stores,” laughed the man behind the bar. And he rubbed his hands gleefully, and winked his delight in his own astuteness at the men looking on.

Then his face sobered, and it seemed as though all his animosity had been absorbed in a profound regret. His whole attitude became the perfection of a

righteous indignation and sympathy, which almost deceived Buck himself.

“See here, Buck,” he exclaimed, leaning across his bar. “You an’ me don’t always see things the same way. Guess I don’t allus hit it with the Padre. No, I guess ther’ ain’t a heap of good feeling among the three of us. But before you leave here I want to say jest one thing, an’ it’s this. Sheriff or no sheriff, deputies or no deputies, if they’re lookin’ fer the Padre for murder I say it’s a jumped-up fake. That man couldn’t do a murder, not to save his soul. An’ it’ll give me a whole heap o’ pleasure fixin’ up your winter stores. An’ good luck to you both—when you hit the long trail.”

A murmur of approval went round the room amongst those of the company who remembered the days before the gold strike. And Beasley, in his long career of mischief, almost achieved popularity.

Buck could scarcely believe his ears. And his incredulity was not lessened as he looked into the furtive eyes of the man who had expressed himself so cordially.

But he had been given the opportunity he knew he would need sooner or later. He knew that there were men in the camp who would stand by the Padre in emergency, and they must know the truth. Since Aunt Mercy’s campaign had opened, and the news of it was spread abroad, these men must be told the facts, and know his own attitude. He might well need their assistance in the future, as they, in the past, had needed the Padre’s.

“I take it you mean that, Beasley,” he said without warmth. Then, ignoring the man, he turned to those gathered about him. “I don’t know how Beasley’s got this thing, fellers,” he said, in his simple fashion. “It don’t matter, anyway. I hadn’t a notion the sheriff was comin’ along yet, either. That don’t matter. Anyways I guessed he would be comin’ sooner or later, an’ that’s the reason I’m layin’ in stores of gun stuff an’ things. Yes, he’s comin’ for the Padre on a charge of murder, a low-down charge of murder that he never committed. You know the ways of the law, an’ how things sure go in such rackets. The charge is nigh twenty years old. Wal, maybe it’ll be nigh impossible for him to prove he didn’t do it. It looks that way. Anyways, I tell you right here, ther’ ain’t no sheriff in this country goin’ to git him while I’m alive. He’s raised me from a starvin’ kid, an’ he’s bin the biggest thing on earth to me, an’ I’m goin’ to see him through. You fellers, some o’ you, know the Padre. You know what he’s done right here to help folks when they were starvin’. He even sold his farm to help. Sold it right out, an’ give up twenty years’ work to hand grub to empty bellies. Wal, they

want him fer murder. Him, the best and straightest man I ever knew. I ain't got nothin' more to say 'cept Beasley's right—the sheriff's comin'. An' when he comes he'll find the hills hotter than hell fer him, an' I'll have a hand in makin' 'em that way." He turned abruptly to Beasley, and pointed at the paper lying on the counter. "You'll do them things for me, an' I'll get 'em to-morrow."

He turned away, flinging his farewell back over his shoulder as he reached the door.

"So long, fellers," he cried, and pushed his way out.

The moment he had gone every tongue was let loose. The gamblers cashed their "chips" at the bar. There was no more play that afternoon. Excitement ran high, and discussion was at fever heat. To a man those who knew the Padre, and those who didn't, commended Buck's attitude. And amongst the older hands of the camp was an ardent desire to take a hand in resisting the law. Beasley was in agreement with nearly everybody. He expressed a wonderful fury at the absurdity and injustice, as he described it, of the charge. And, finally, he possessed himself of the floor again for the purposes of his own subtle scheming.

"What did I tell you, fellers?" he cried, when he had obtained a general hearing. "What did I tell you?" he reiterated in a fine fury. "I don't like him, but Buck's a man. A straight, bully feller. He's goin' to do the right thing. He'll stand by that Padre feller while he's got a breath in his body, an' he'll shoot the sheriff up as sure as sure. An' why? Because that feller, the Padre, sold his farm to help us old hands. Because he sold his farm to that 'Jonah' gal, who's brought all this trouble about. If she hadn't come around Pete an' Ike would have bin living now. If she hadn't come around the Padre wouldn't be wanted for a murder he never committed. If she hadn't come around Buck wouldn't have set himself up agin the law, an' found himself chasin' the country over—an outlaw. D'yer see it? You're blind if you don't." He brought his clenched fist down on the counter in a whirlwind of indignation. "She's got to go," he cried. "I tell you, she's got to go. Chase her out. Burn her out. Get rid of her from here. An' I got five hundred dollars says—do it."

Beasley knew his men. And in every eye he saw that they were with him now. Nor could anything have pleased him more than when Curly shouted his sudden sympathy.

"Beasley's right, boys," he cried. "She's brought the rotten luck. She must go. Who's to say whose turn it'll be next?"

“Bully for you,” cried Beasley. “Curly’s hit it. Who’s the next victim of the rotten luck of this Golden Woman?”

His final appeal carried the day. The men shouted a general approval, and Beasley reveled inwardly in his triumph. He had played his hand with all the skill at his command—and won. And now he was satisfied. He knew he had started the ball rolling. It would grow. In a few hours the majority of the camp would be with him. Then, when the time came, he would play them for his own ends, and so pay off all his old scores.

The Padre would be taken. He would see to that. The sheriff should know every detail of Buck’s intentions. Buck would ultimately be taken—after being outlawed. And Joan—the proud beauty whom Buck was in love with—well, if she got out with her life it would be about all she would escape with.

Beasley felt very happy.

CHAPTER XXX

THE MOVING FINGER

The Padre stood at the top of the steps and looked out over the wide stretching valley below him. His long day was drawing to a close, but he felt no weariness of body. There was a weariness of mind, a weariness of outlook. There was something gray and cold and hopeless upon his horizon, something which left him regretful of all that which lay within his view now.

There was a half smile in his eyes, as, for a moment, they rested on the narrow indistinct trail which looked so far below him. He was thinking of that apparition he had met only a few days back, the apparition which had suddenly leapt out of his past. It was all very strange, very wonderful, the working of those mysterious things which make it certain that no page in a human creature's life can be turned once and for all.

Yes, it was all very wonderful. The hand of Fate had begun to move against him when he had greeted that starving fragment of humanity at the trail-side, more than twenty years ago. It had moved steadily since then in every detail of his life. It had been progressing in the work he had done in the building of his farm. Its moving finger had pointed every day of Buck's young life. In the necessities of those poor gold-seekers it had shown its unerring direction, even in the spirit which had prompted him to help them, which involved the selling of his farm.

Then he saw its bitter irony. It had done its work by bringing Joan into contact with Buck, and, with cruel derision, had shown him how unnecessary his sacrifice had been. Then had come all those other things, moving so swiftly that it was almost impossible to count each step in the iron progress of the moving finger. It had come with an overwhelming rush which swept him upon its tide like a feather upon the bosom of the torrent. And now, caught in the whirling rapids below the mighty falls, he could only await the completion of the sentence so long since pronounced.

The smile broadened, spreading gently across his face. He realized he was admitting all he had denied to Joan. But the thought brought him no weakening. The wisdom of years had taught him much that must not be communicated to a

younger generation. Life would teach them in their turn; they must not learn the truths which lay before them before their time. It was better to lie than to destroy the hope of youth.

His conscience was clear, his resolve perfect in its steadiness. The happiness of two people was at stake. For Buck he would give up all. There was no sacrifice too great. For Joan—she was the fair daughter of his oldest friend. His duty was clear by her. There was one course, and one course only that he could see for himself. To remove the last shadow from these young lives he must face the ordeal which lay before him. What its outcome might be he could not quite see, but he was not without hope. There were certain details surrounding the death of his friend which did not fit in with his guilt. He had no weapon upon him in that house. Nor was there the least reason for the crime. He knew he would be confronted by the evidence of a woman who hated him, a woman capable of manufacturing evidence to suit her own ends. But, whatever else she might do, she could not produce a weapon belonging to him, nor could she invent a reason for the crime that could not be disproved. At least this was the hope he clung to.

However, he knew that he could not leave the shadow of his possible guilt to cloud the lives of these two, just setting out on their long journey together. The possibilities of it for harm were far too great. The ocean of hot, youthful love was far too possible of disaster for an unnecessary threat to overshadow it.

No, he had refused the request of these two from the first moment when he had realized his duty by them, and now, after careful thought, his resolve remained unshaken.

Still, he was not without regret as he gazed out over that vast world he had learned to love so well. The thought of possibly never seeing it again hurt him. The wide valleys, the fair, green pastures, the frowning, mysterious woods with their utter silence, the butting crags with their barren crests, or snow-clad shoulders. They held him in a thrall of almost passionate devotion. They would indeed be hard to part with.

He looked away down the gaping jaws of the valley at the black crest of Devil's Hill. It was a point that never failed to attract him, and now more so than ever. Was it not round this hill that all his past efforts had been concentrated?

He studied it. Its weirdness held him. A heavy mist enveloped its crown, that steaming mist which ever hung above the suspended lake. It was denser now than usual. It had been growing denser for the last two days, and, in a vague way,

he supposed that those internal fires which heated the water were glowing fiercer than usual. He glanced up at the sky, and almost for the first time realized the arduous efforts of the westering sun to penetrate the densely humid atmosphere. It was stiflingly hot, when usually the air possessed a distinct chill.

But these things possessed only a passing interest. The vagaries of the mountain atmosphere rarely concerned him. His vigorous body was quite impervious to its changes. He picked up his “catch” of pelts and shouldered them. They were few enough, and as he thought of the unusual scarcity of foxes the last few days he could not help feeling that the circumstance was only in keeping with the rest of the passing events of his life.

He made his way along the foot-path which wound its way through the pine bluff, in the midst of which the old fur fort lay hidden inside its mouldering stockade. He flung the pelts into the storeroom, and passed on to the house, wondering if Buck had returned from the camp, whither he knew he had been that day.

He found him busy amidst a pile of stores spread out upon the floor and table, and a mild surprise greeted the youngster as he looked round from his occupation.

“You never said—you were getting stores, Buck?”

The Padre eyed the pile curiously. Finally his eyes paused at the obvious ammunition cases.

Buck followed the direction of his gaze.

“No,” he said; and turned again to his work of bestowing the goods in the places he had selected for them.

The Padre crossed the room and sat down. Then he leisurely began to exchange his moccasins for a pair of comfortable house-shoes.

“Had we run short?” he asked presently.

“No.”

Buck’s manner was touched with something like brusqueness.

“Then—why?”

Buck straightened up, bearing in his arms an ammunition box.

“Because we may need ’em,” he said, and bestowed the box under the settle with a kick.

“I don’t get you—that’s revolver ammunition you just put away.”

“Yes.”

Buck continued his work until the room was cleared. The other watched him interestedly. Then as the younger man began to prepare their supper the Padre again reverted to it.

“Maybe you’ll tell me about ’em—now?” he said, with his easy smile.

Buck had just set the kettle on the stove. He stood up, and a frown of perplexity darkened his brow.

“Maybe I won’t be able to get to camp again,” he said. “Maybe we’ll need ’em for another reason.”

“What other?”

“The sheriff’s comin’. That woman’s sent for him. I’ve figgered out he can’t get along till ’bout to-morrow night, or the next mornin’. Anyway it don’t do to reckon close on how quick a sheriff can git doin’.”

The Padre’s smile had died out of his eyes. He sighed.

“The sheriff’s coming, eh?” Then he went on after a pause. “But these stores—I don’t see——”

A dark flame suddenly lit Buck’s eyes, but though he broke in quickly it was without the heat that was evidently stirring within him.

“They’re for Joan, an’ me—an’ you. When the time comes guess we’re going where no sheriff can follow us, if you don’t make trouble. I don’t guess you need tellin’ of the valley below us. You know it, an’ you know the steps. You know the canyon away on toward Devil’s Hill. That’s the way we’re goin’—when the time comes. An’ I’d say there ain’t no sheriff or dep’ties’ll care to follow us through that canyon. After that we cut away north. Ther’s nobody can follow our trail that way.”

Something almost of defiance grew into his voice as he proceeded. He was

expecting denial, and was ready to resist it with all his force.

The Padre shook his head.

“Buck, Buck, this is madness—rank madness,” he cried. “To resist the law in the way your hot head dictates is to outlaw yourselves beyond all redemption. You don’t understand what you are doing. You don’t know to what you are condemning this little Joan. You don’t know how surely your methods will condemn *me*.”

But Buck was on fire with rebellion against the injustice of a law which claimed the Padre as its victim. He saw the hideous possibilities following upon his friend’s arrest, and was determined to give his life in the service of his defense.

“It’s not madness,” he declared vehemently. “It’s justice, real justice that we should defend our freedom. If you wer’ guilty, Padre, it would be dead right to save yourself. It’s sure the right of everything to save its life. If you’re innocent you sure got still more right. Padre, I tell you they mean to fix you. That woman’s got a cinch she ain’t lettin’ go. She’s lived for this time, Joan’s told me. She’ll raise plumb hell to send you to your death. Padre, just listen to us. It’s me an’ Joan talkin’ now. What I say she says. We can see these things different to you; we’re young. You say it’s your duty to give up to this woman. We say it’s our duty you *shan’t*. If you give up to her you’re giving up to devil’s mischief, an’ that’s dead wrong. An’ nothin’ you can say can show me you got a right to help devil’s work. We’ll light out of here before they come. Us three. If you stop here, we stop too, an’ that’s why I got the ammunition. More than that. Ther’s others, too, won’t see you taken. Ther’s fellers with us in the camp—fellers who owe you a heap—like I do.”

The Padre watched the steam rising from the kettle with moody eyes. The youngster was tempting him sorely. He knew Buck’s determination, his blind loyalty. He felt that herein lay his own real danger. Yes, to bolt again, as he had done that time before, would be an easy way out. But its selfishness was too obvious. He could not do it. To do so would be to drag them in his train of disaster, to blight their lives and leave them under the grinding shadow of the law.

No, it could not be.

“Looked at from the way you look at it, there is right enough in what you say, boy,” he said kindly. “But you can’t look at civilized life as these mountains

teach you to look at things. When the sheriff comes I yield to arrest, and I trust in God to help us all. My mind is made up.”

For some moments Buck stared down at the sturdy friend who had taken the place of his dead father. His eyes softened, and their fire died out. But there was no rescinding of his desperate decision. He was thinking of what it would mean, the thought of this white-haired man in the hands of the executioner. He was thinking of the kindly heart beating within that stalwart bosom. He was thinking of the wonderful, thoughtful kindness for others which was always the motive of his life. And a deep-throated curse rose to his lips. But it found no utterance. It could not in that presence.

“An’ my mind’s made up,” he jerked out at last, with concentrated force. Then he added with an abrupt softening, “Let’s eat, Padre. I was forgettin’. Mebbe you’re hungry some.”



CHAPTER XXXI

THE JOY OF BEASLEY

An unusual number of horses were tethered at the posts outside Beasley's saloon, and, a still more unusual thing, their owners, for the most part, were not in their usual places within the building. Most of them were lounging on the veranda in various attitudes best calculated to rest them from the effects of the overpowering heat of the day. Beasley was lounging with them. For once he seemed to have weakened in his restless energy, or found something of greater interest than that of netting questionable gains.

The latter seemed to be the more likely, for his restless eyes displayed no lack of mental activity. At any rate, he displayed an attitude that afternoon which startled even his bartender. Not once, but several times that individual, of pessimistic mood, had been called upon to dispense free rations of the worst possible liquor in the place, until, driven from wonder to protest, he declared, with emphatic conviction and an adequate flow of blasphemy, addressing himself to the bottles under the counter, the smeary glasses he breathed upon while wiping with a soiled and odoriferous cloth, that the boss was "bug—plumb bug." Nevertheless, his own understanding of "crookedness" warned him that the man had method, and he was anxious to discover the direction in which it was moving. Therefore he watched Beasley's doings with appreciative eyes, and his interest grew as the afternoon waned.

"He's on a crook lay," he told himself after a while. And the thought brightened his outlook upon life, and helped to banish some of his pessimism.

The chief feature of interest for him lay in the fact that the men foregathered were a collection of those who belonged to the "something-for-nothing" class, as he graphically described them. And he observed, too, that Beasley was carefully shepherding them. There were a few of the older hands of the camp, but these seemed to have less interest for his boss. At least he showed far less consideration for them. And it quickly became evident that the whole afternoon's object was the adequate ingratiation and stimulation of these dregs of frontier life.

This the bartender saw quite clearly. For the rest he was content to wait. He had spent most of his life in thus waiting and watching the nefarious schemes of unscrupulous men.

The heat was overpowering. It was almost an effort to breathe, let alone move about. The men lolled, propped against the baulks of timber supporting the veranda roof, stretched out on benches, or crouching on the raised edge of the wooden flooring. One and all were in a state of wilting in the stewing heat, from which only an intermittent flow of fiery spirit could rouse them.

Beasley was the one exception to this general condition of things. Mentally he was particularly alert. And, what is more, his temper, usually so irritable and fiery, was reduced to a perfect level of good humor.

For some moments talk had died out. Then in a sudden fit of irritability Abe Allinson kicked a loose stone in the direction of the tethered horses.

“Say,” he observed, “this ’minds one o’ the time we struck color at the hill.”

His eyes wandered toward the gathering shadows, slowly obscuring the grim sides of Devil’s Hill. His remark was addressed to no one in particular.

Beasley took him up. It was his purpose to keep these men stirring.

“How?” he inquired.

“Why, the heat. Say, git a peek at that sky. Look yonder. The sun. Get them durned banks o’ cloud swallerin’ it right up atop o’ them hills. Makes you think, don’t it? That’s storm. It’s comin’ big—an’ before many hours.”

“For which we’ll all be a heap thankful.” Beasley laughed. “Another day of this an’ I’ll be done that tender a gran’ma could eat me.”

His remark drew a flicker of a smile.

“She’d need good ivories,” observed the gambler, Diamond Jack, with mild sarcasm.

Beasley took the remark as a compliment to his business capacity, and grinned amiably.

“Jack’s right. You’d sure give her an elegant pain, else,” added Curly, in a tired voice. He was steadily staring down the trail in a manner that suggested

indifference to any coming storm. Somebody laughed half-heartedly. But Curly had no desire to enliven things, and went on quite seriously.

“Say, when’s this bum sheriff gettin’ around?” he demanded.

Beasley took him up at once.

“Some time to-night,” he said, in a well-calculated tone of resentment. “That’s why I got you boys around now,” he added significantly.

“You mean——?” Diamond Jack nodded in the direction of the farm.

Beasley nodded.

“That old crow bait got back early this mornin’,” he went on. “I was waitin’ on her. She guessed she hadn’t a thing to say, an’ I surely was up agin a proposition. So I jest made out I was feelin’ good seein’ her git back, an’ told her I wa’an’t lookin’ for information she didn’t guess she was givin’, and ther’ wasn’t no need fer her to say a thing. She guessed that was so. After that I passed things by, sayin’ how some o’ the boys hated sheriffs wuss’n rattlesnakes—an’ she laffed. Yes, sir, she laffed, an’ it must have hurt her some. Anyways she opened out at that, an’ said, if any boys hated the sight of sheriffs they’d better hunt their holes before sun-up. Guess she didn’t just use them words, but she give ’em that time limit. Say, if I was the Padre I’d sooner have the devil on my trail than that old—bunch o’ marrow bones.”

Slaney looked up from the bench on which he was spread out.

“Guess he’ll have wuss’n her when Bob Richards gets around,” he said gloomily.

“D’you reckon they’ll git him—with Buck around?” inquired Curly anxiously.

“Buck! Tcha!” Beasley’s dislike for the moment got the better of his discretion. But he quickly realized his mistake, and proceeded to twist his meaning. “It makes me mad. It makes me plumb crazed when I think o’ that bully feller, the Padre, bein’ give dead away by the folks at the farm. Buck? Psha’! Who’s Buck agin a feller like Bob Richards? Bob’s the greatest sheriff ever stepped in Montana. He’ll twist Buck so he won’t know rye whisky from sow-belly. Buck’s grit, elegant grit, but Bob—wal, I’d say he’s the wisest guy west of Chicago, when it comes to stringin’ up a crook.”

“I’m with you, boss,” cried Diamond Jack, in a quick rage. “This farm needs lookin’ to to-night sure. We got to git in ’fore sheriffs git around. They’re playin’ a low-down racket. Jonahs don’t cut no ice with me, but they’re chasin’ up glory agin the camp. That’s how I read it. Guess none of us is saints, anyways I don’t seem to hear no wings flappin’; but givin’ folks up to the law is—low.”

Abe Allinson grunted, and a general atmosphere of silent approval prevailed. Beasley, whose eyes were watching every expression, pushed the ball further along.

“Low?” he cried. “You, Jack, don’t know the guy we’re so dead keen to help out. If you did you’d git right up on to your hind legs an’ cuss terrible—an’ you’ve cussed some in your time. But for him this camp wouldn’t be the bonanza it is. You wouldn’t be nettin’ a pile of dollars every night in my bar. I wouldn’t be runnin’ a big proposition in dollar makin’. These boys wouldn’t be chasin’ gold on full bellies. Gee, it makes me mad—an’ thirsty. Let’s get around inside an’ see what that glass rustler of mine can do.”

The response was immediate and complete. No man had ever been known to refuse Beasley’s hospitality. Everybody drank. And they drank again at Diamond Jack’s expense. Then later they drank at their own. And all the while Beasley, with consummate skill, shepherded them to his own ends.

It was truly wonderful to see the manner in which he handled them. He adopted the simplest tactics, once he had set the ball rolling, contenting himself with dropping in a word here and there every time the subject of the sheriff drifted toward his ears. He knew these men. He possessed that keenness of insight into his customers which no successful saloon-keeper fails to acquire. He understood their weaknesses in a manner which left it a simple enough task to play upon them. In this case the basis of his procedure was drink—strong, harsh whisky, of a violent type.

The banking clouds rose ponderously upon the hilltops, blacking out the twilight with an abruptness which must have held deep significance for men less occupied. But the dominant overcast of their minds was the coming of the sheriff. For many of them it was far more ominous than any storm of nature.

The bar filled to overflowing. No one cared to gamble. There would have been no room for them, anyway. Even Diamond Jack showed no inclination to pursue his trade. Perhaps this was the most significant feature of all.

His was a weighty word thrown in the balance of public opinion. Perhaps this was the result of his well-understood shrewdness. At any rate he never failed to find a ready audience for his opinions, and to-night his opinions were strongly and forcefully declared. Beasley listened to him with interest, and smiled as he observed him moving about amongst the crowd drinking with one, treating another, his tongue never idle in his denunciation of sheriffs, and all those who called in their aid. It almost seemed as if the man was acting under orders, orders, perhaps inspired by a subtler mind, to disguise the real source whence they sprang.

The gambler was truly a firebrand, and so well did he handle his people, so well did he stir them by his disgust and righteous horror at the employment of a sheriff in their midst, that by nine o'clock the camp was loud in its clamor for retribution to be visited upon those who had brought such a terror into their midst.

Beasley's amiability grew. His bartender watched it in amazement. But it oppressed him. His pessimism resented it. He hated joy, and the evidences of joy in others. There was real pleasure for him in Diamond Jack's hectoring denunciations. It was something which appealed to him. Besides, he could see the gambler was harassed, perhaps afraid of the sheriff himself. He even envied him his fear. But Beasley's satisfaction was depressing, and, as a protest, he neglected to overcharge the more drunken of their customers. Beasley must not have all the satisfaction.

But, as far as Beasley was concerned, the bartender was little better than a piece of furniture that night. His employer had almost forgotten his existence. Truth to tell, Beasley had lost his head in his disease of venom. One thought, and one thought only urged him. To-night, before the advent of the sheriff to seize upon the person of the hated Padre, he hoped, by one stroke, to crush the heart of Buck, and bow the proud head of the girl who had so plainly showed her dislike and contempt for him, in the dust of shame and despair.

It was a moment worth waiting for. It was a moment of joy he would not lightly forego. Nor did he care what time, patience, or money it cost him. To strike at those whom he hated was as the breath of life to him. And he meant to drink deeply of his cup of joy.

His moment came. It came swiftly, suddenly, like most matters of great import. His opportunity came at the psychological moment, when the last shred of

temperance had been torn from wild, lawless hearts, which, in such moments, were little better than those of savage beasts. It came when the poison of complaint and bitterness had at last searched out the inmost recesses of stunted, brutalized minds. And Beasley snatched at it hungrily, like a worm-ridden dog will snatch at the filthiest offal.

The drunken voice of Abe Allinson lifted above the general din. He was lolling against one end of the counter, isolated from his fellows by reason of his utterly stupefied condition. He was in a state when he no longer had interest for his companions. He rolled about blear-eyed and hopelessly mumbling, with a half-emptied glass in his hand, which he waved about uncertainly. Suddenly an impotent spasm of rage seemed to take hold of him. With a hoarse curse he raised his glass and hurled it crashing against the wall. Then, with a wild, prolonged whoop he shouted the result of his drunken cogitations.

“We’ll burn ’em! Drown ’em! Shoot ’em! Hang ’em! Come on, fellers, foller me!”

He made a staggering effort to leave his support. He straightened up. For a moment he poised, swaying. Then he pitched forward on his face and lay stretched full length upon the floor.

But all had heard. And Beasley snatched at his opportunity. He sprang upon the counter in the moment of astonished quiet, and, before tongues broke loose again, he had the whole attention of the crowd.

“Here, boys,” he cried. “Abe’s right. Drunk as he is, he’s right. Only he sure wants to do too much—more than his legs’ll let him.” He grinned. “We’re goin’ to do this thing right now. But we’re goin’ to do it like good citizens of a dandy city. We ain’t goin’ to act like a gang of lynchers. We’re dealin’ with a gal, with gold ha’r an’ blue eyes, an’ we’re goin’ to deal accordin’. We ain’t lookin’ fer her life. That’s too easy, an’, wal—she’s a woman. No, we’re goin’ to rid this place of her an’ all her tribe. We’re goin’ to make it so she can’t stop to do no more harm, bringin’ sheriffs around. We’re goin’ to burn her home right out, an’ we’re goin’ to set her in her wagon an’ team, an’ let her drive to hell out of here. We’re goin’ to do it right now, before the sheriff gets busy along here. After that we’ll be too late. Are you game? Who’s comin’? We’re goin’ to burn that Jonah farm till ther’ ain’t a stick left above ground to say it ever stood there. That’s what we’re goin’ to do, an’ I’m the man who’ll start the bonfire. Say, we’ll make it like a fourth o’ July. We’ll have one royal time—an’ we’ll be quit of all Jonahs.”

As he finished speaking he leapt to the ground amidst the crowd. Nor did he need to wait to hear the response to his appeal. It came in one of those unanimous, drunken roars, only to be heard in such a place, at such a time, or on a battle-field, when insensate fury demands a raucous outlet. Every man in the place, lost, for the moment, to all the dictates of honest manhood, was ready to follow the leadership of one whom, in sober moments, they all disliked. It was an extraordinary exhibition of the old savage which ever lies so near the surface in men upon the fringe of civilization.

Nor did Beasley give them time to think. His orders came rapidly. The bartender, for once his eyes sparkling at the thought of trouble about to visit an unsuspecting fellow-creature, hurled himself to the task of dealing out one large final drink to everybody. Then when a sufficient supply of materials of an inflammatory nature had been gathered together, the saloon-keeper placed himself at the head of his men, supported by the only too willing Diamond Jack, and the procession started out.



CHAPTER XXXII

STRONGER THAN DEATH

From the time of her aunt's going to Leeson Butte to the morning of her return to the farm Joan passed through a nightmare of uncertainty and hopelessness. Every moment of her time seemed unreal. Her very life seemed unreal. It was as though her mind were detached from her body, and she was gazing upon the scenes of a drama in which she had no part, while yet she was weighted down with an oppressive fear of the tragedy which she knew was yet to come.

Every moment she felt that the threat of disaster was growing. That it was coming nearer and nearer, and that now no power on earth could avert it.

Twice only during that dreary interval of waiting she saw Buck. But even his presence did little more than ease her dread and despair, leaving it crushing her down the more terribly with the moment of his going. He came to her with his usual confidence, but it was only with information of his own preparations for his defense of his friend. She could listen to them, told in his strong, reliant manner, with hope stirring her heart and a great, deep love for the man thrilling her every nerve. But with his going came the full realization of the significance of the necessity of such preparations. The very recklessness of them warned her beyond doubt how small was the chance of the Padre's escape. Buck had declared his certainty of outwitting the law, even if it necessitated using force against the man whom he intended to save.

Left to her own resources Joan found them weak enough. So weak indeed that at last she admitted to herself that the evidences of the curse that had dogged her through life were no matters of distorted imagination. They were real enough. Terribly real. And the admission found her dreading and helpless. She knew she had gone back to the fatal obsession, which, aided by the Padre and her lover, she had so loyally contended. She knew in those dark moments she was weakly yielding. These men had come into her life, had sown fresh seeds of promise, but they had been sown in soil choked with weeds of superstition, and so had remained wholly unfruitful.

How could it be otherwise? Hard upon the heels of Buck's love had come this

deadly attack of fate upon him and his. The miracle of it was stupendous. It had come in a way that was utterly staggering. It had come, not as with those others who had gone before, but out of her life. It had come direct from her and hers. And the disaster threatened was not merely death but disgrace, disgrace upon a good man, even upon her lover, which would last as long as they two had life.

The sense of tragedy merged into the maddening thought of the injustice of it. It was monstrous. It was a tyranny for which there was no justification, and it goaded her to the verge of hysteria. Whatever she did now the hand of fate would move on irrevocably fulfilling its purpose to the bitter end. She knew it. In spite of all Buck's confidence, all his efforts to save his friend, the disaster would be accomplished, and her lover would be lost to her in the vortex of her evil destiny.

Fool—fool that she had been. Wicked even, yes, wicked, that she had not foreseen whither her new life was drifting. It was for her to have anticipated the shoals of trouble in the tide of Buck's strong young life. It was for her to have prevented the mingling of their lives. It was for her to have shut him out of her thoughts and denied him access to the heart that beat so warmly for him. She had been weak, so weak. On every count she had failed to prove the strength she had believed herself to possess. It was a heart-breaking thought.

But she loved. It would have been impossible to have denied her love. She would not have denied it if she could. Her rebellion against her fate now carried her further. She had the right to love this man. She had the right which belongs to every woman in the world. And he desired her love. He desired it above all things in the world—and he had no fear.

Then the strangeness of it. With all that had gone before she had had no misgivings until the moment he had poured out all the strength of his great love into her yearning ears. She had not recognized the danger besetting them. She had not paused to ask a question of herself, to think of the possibilities. She loved him, and the thought of his love thrilled her even now amidst all her despair. But the moment his words of love had been spoken, even with the first wonderful thrill of joy had come the reality of awakening. Then—then it was that the evil of her fate had unmasked itself and showed its hideous features, leering, mocking, in the memory of what had gone before, taunting her for her weakly efforts to escape the doom marked out for her.

All this she thought of in her black moments. All this and far, far more than

could ever take shape in words. And her terror of what was to come became unspeakable. But through it all one thing, one gleam of hope obtruded itself. It was not a tangible hope. It was not even a hope that could have found expression. It was merely a picture that ever confronted her, even when darkness seemed most nearly to overwhelm her.

It was the picture of Buck's young face, full of strength and confidence. Somehow the picture was always one of hope. It caught no reflection of her own trouble, but lived in her memory undiminished by any despair, however black.

Once or twice she found herself wondering at it. Sometimes she felt it to be merely a trick of memory to taunt her with that which could never be, and so she tried to shut out the vague hopes it aroused. But, as time went on, and the hour for her aunt's return drew near, the recurrence of the picture became so persistent that it was rarely out of her mental vision. It was a wonderful thought. She saw him as she had seen him when first he laughed her threat of disaster and death to scorn. She could never forget that moment. She could hear his laugh now, that laugh, so full of youthful courage, which had rung through the old barn.

Pondering thus her mind suddenly traveled back to something which, in the midst of all her tribulations, had completely passed out of her recollection. She was startled. She was startled so that she gasped with the sudden feeling it inspired. What was it? Something her aunt had said. Yes, she remembered now. And with memory the very words came back to her, full of portentous meaning. And as they rushed pell-mell through her straining brain a great uplifting bore her toward that hope which she suddenly realized was not yet dead.

“Go you and find a love so strong that no disaster can kill it. And maybe life may still have some compensations for you, maybe it will lift the curse from your suffering shoulders. It—it is the only thing in the world that is stronger than disaster. It is the only thing in the world that is stronger than—death.”

They were her aunt's words spoken in the vehemence of her prophetic passion. It was the one thing, she had warned her, that could save her.

Was this the love she had found? Was this the love to lead her to salvation—this wonderful love of Buck's? Was this that which was to leave life some compensations? Was this that which was stronger than disaster—than death? Yes, yes! Her love was her life. And now without it she must die. Yes, yes! Buck—young, glorious in his courage and strength. He was stronger than disaster, and their love—was it not stronger than death?

From the moment of this wonderful recollection, a gentle calm gradually possessed her. The straining of those two long wakeful nights, the nightmare of dread which had pursued her into the daylight hours, left her with a sudden ease of thought she had never hoped to find again. It all came back to her. Her aunt had told her whither she must seek the key that would unlock the prison gates of fate, and all inadvertently she had found it.

In Buck's love must lay her salvation. With that stronger than death no disaster could come. He was right, and she was all wrong. He had laughed them to scorn—she must join in his laugh.

So at last came peace. The last wakeful night before the morning of her aunt's return terminated in a few hours of refreshing, much-needed slumber. Hope had dawned, and the morrow must bring the morrow's events. She would endeavor to await them with something of the confidence which supported Buck.



The room was still, so still that its atmosphere might have been likened to the night outside, which was heavy with the presage of coming storm. There was a profound feeling of opposing forces at work, yet the silence remained undisturbed.

It was nearly nine o'clock, and the yellow lamplight shed its soft monotony over the little parlor, revealing the occupants of the room in attitudes of tense concentration, even antagonism. Mercy Lascelles swayed slowly to and fro in the new rocking-chair Joan had purchased for her comfort. Her attenuated figure was huddled down in that familiar attitude which the girl knew so well, but her face wore an expression which Joan had never beheld before.

Usually her hard eyes were coldly unsmiling. Now they smiled—terribly. Usually her thin cheeks were almost dead white in their pallor. Now they were flushed and hectic with a suggestion of the inward fire that lit her eyes. The harsh mouth was irrevocably set, till nose and chin looked as though they soon must meet, while the hideous dark rings showed up the cruel glare of her eyes, which shone diabolically.

Joan stood some paces away. She was looking down aghast at the crouching figure, and her eyes were horrified. This was the first she had seen of her relative since her return that morning. The old woman had shut herself up in her

bedroom, refusing to speak, or to eat, all day. But now she had emerged from her seclusion, and Joan had been forced to listen to the story of her journey.

It was a painful story, and still more painfully told. It was full of a cruel enjoyment such as never in her life Joan had believed this woman capable of. Her eccentricities were many, her nervous tendencies strange and often weird, but never had such a side of her character as she now presented been allowed to rise to the surface.

At first Joan wondered as she listened. She wondered at the fierce purpose which underlaid this weakly body. But with each passing moment, with each fresh detail of her motives and methods, her wonder deepened to a rapidly growing conviction which filled her with horror and repulsion. She told herself that the woman was no longer sane. At last she had fallen a victim to her racked and broken nerves, as the doctors had prophesied. To them, and to the everlasting brooding upon her disappointments and injuries for all these long years.

This she felt, and yet the feeling conveyed no real conviction to her mind. All she knew was that loathing and repulsion stirred her, until the thought revolted her that she was breathing the same air as one who could be capable of such vicious cruelty. But she struggled to stifle all outward sign. And though she was only partly successful she contrived to keep her words calm, even if her eyes, those windows of her simple girl's soul, would not submit to such control.

"I'm over fifty now, girl," Mercy finished up, in a low suppressed tone, husky with feeling, yet thrilling with a cruel triumph. "Over fifty, and, for the last twenty and more years of it, I have waited for this moment. I have waited with a patience you can never understand because you have never been made to suffer as I have. But I knew it would come. I have known it every day of those twenty years, because I have read it in that book in which I have read so many things which concern human life. I was robbed of life years and years ago. Yes, life. I have been a dead woman these twenty years. My life was gone when your father died, leaving you, another woman's child, in my hands. God in heaven! Sometimes I wonder why I did not strangle the wretched life out of you years ago—you, another woman's child, but yet with Charles Stanmore's blood in your veins. Perhaps it was because of that I spared your life. Perhaps it was because I read your fate, and knew you had to suffer, that I preferred my sister's child should reap the reward of her mother's crime—yes, crime. Perhaps it was that while Charles Stanmore lived my hopes and longings were still capable of fulfilment. But he is dead—dead years and years ago. And with his death my life

went out too. Now there is only revenge. No, not revenge," she laughed, "justice to be dealt out. That justice it is my joy to see dispensed. That justice it is my joy to feel that my hand has brought its administering about.

"I have laid all the information necessary. I have a lawyer in Leeson Butte in communication with my man in New York. And—and the sheriff and his men will be here before daylight. Oh, yes, I can afford to tell you now that the work is accomplished. You shall have no opportunity of communicating with your friends. I shall not sleep to-night. Nor will you leave this house. There is a means of holding you here. A means which will never be far from my hand." She tapped the bosom of her dress significantly, and Joan understood that she had armed herself. "The arrest will be made while they are still sleeping in that old fort of theirs—and your young Buck will pay the penalty if he interferes. Yes, yes," she added, rubbing her lean, almost skeleton hands together in an access of satisfaction, "when you sip your coffee in the morning, my girl, your Buck's foster-father will be on his way to the jail from which he will only emerge for the comfort of an electric chair. I have endured twenty years of mental torture, but—I have not endured them in vain."

The cold, consummate completeness with which the woman detailed her carefully considered plans turned Joan's heart to stone. It chilled her and left her shivering in the awful heat. For one moment, one weak moment when her woman's spirit quailed before the deadly array of facts, she felt faint, and one hand sought the table for support. But with a tremendous effort she recovered herself. It was the thought of Buck which helped her. She could not let him fall into the trap so well laid by this—this creature, without an effort to save them both. In a flash her mind pictured the scene of the Padre's capture. She saw the fort surrounded by the "deputies." She saw the Padre shackled before he could rise from his blankets. She saw Buck, under cover of ruthless firearms, hurl himself to the rescue and pay for his temerity with his life. In a sudden overwhelming passion of appeal she flung herself on her knees before the terrible old woman.

"Aunt, aunt!" she cried. "You cannot be so heartless, so cruel. There is a mistake. You are mistaken. The Padre swears to his innocence, and if you knew him as I know him, as all this countryside knows him, you *must* believe. He is not capable of murder. My father committed suicide. Think, think of all that went before his death, and you, too, will see that everything points to suicide. Oh, aunt, think of what you are doing. The plans you have made *must* involve the man I love. A perfectly innocent man, as even you know. If my father was all

your world, so is Buck all mine. He will defend the Padre. I know him. And as you say he will pay the penalty with his life. If you have one grain of pity, if you have one remaining thought of love for my dead father, then spare this man to his daughter. Where is the right that you should involve Buck? You do not even know him. Oh, aunt, you have lived all these twenty years with me. In your own way you have cared for me. Sacrifice your enmity against this innocent man. It will give you a peace of mind you have never known before, and will give me the happiness of the man I love.”

Mercy's eyes lit with fine scorn as she caught at Joan's final words.

"The happiness of the man you love!" she cried with passionate anger, "Why should I give you your man's love? Why should I help any woman to a happiness I have never been allowed to taste? Perhaps it pleases me to think that your Buck will be involved. Have I not warned you of the disaster which you have permitted him to court? Listen, girl, not one detail of all that which I have waited for will I forego. Not one detail. When it is accomplished nothing on earth matters to me. The sooner I am off it the better. The sooner I leave this world for other realms the sooner I shall be able to pursue those others who have injured me and passed on to—a fresh habitation. Do you understand? Do you understand that I will brook no interference from you? Peace, child, I want no more talk. When this night is over I leave here—nor shall I ever willingly cross your path again. You are another woman's child, and so long as you live, so long as we are brought into contact, the sting of the past must ever remain in my heart. Go to your bed, and leave me to watch and wait until the morning."

The old woman's domination was strong—it was so strong that Joan felt appalled before the terrible mental force she was putting forth. The horror of her diseased mind sickened her, and filled her with something closely allied to terror. But she would not submit. Her love was greater than her courage, her power to resist for herself. She was thinking of those two men, but most of all she was thinking of Buck. She was determined upon another effort. And when that effort was spent—upon still another.

"Listen to me, aunt," she cried with no longer any attempt at appeal, with no longer any display of regard for this woman as a relation. "I am mistress in my own house, and I shall do as I choose. I, too, shall sit up and you will have to listen to me."

Mercy smiled ironically.

"Yes, you are mistress in your own house, so long as you do not attempt to interfere with my plans. Sit up, girl, if you choose, and talk. I am prepared to listen even though your twaddle bores me."

A sound caught Joan's attention, and the desperate position of her lover and his friend set thought flashing swiftly through her mind. The sound was of Mrs. Ransford moving in the kitchen.

“Then listen to this,” she cried. “You have told me that I am cursed. You have told me that death and disaster must follow me wherever I go. I love Buck. It is the first and only time I shall ever love. I know that. He is the love of my whole life. Without him, without his love, life to me is inconceivable. He and his love are so precious to me that I would give my life for his at any moment—now, if need be. I want you to know that. You have armed yourself so that I shall not interfere with your plans. I tell you it is useless, for I shall warn him—cost me what it may.”

She watched the other closely. She watched for the effect of her words—every one of which was spoken from the bottom of her heart. The effect was what she anticipated. She knew this woman’s expressed intention was deliberate, and would be carried out. One hand moved toward her lean bosom, and Joan knew, without doubt, what she had to face. Turning her back deliberately she moved across to the window, which was wide open in a vain attempt to cool the superheated room, and took up her place near the table, so that she was in full view of her aunt’s insane eyes. Then she went on at once—

“You call it justice that you would mete out to the Padre. I tell you it is a ruthless, cold-hearted revenge, which amounts to deliberate murder. It is murder because you know he cannot prove his innocence. That, perhaps, is your affair. But Buck’s life is mine. And in threatening the Padre you threaten him, because he will defend his friend to the last. Perhaps by this, in your insane vanity, you hope to justify yourself as a seer and prophetess, instead of being forced to the admission that you are nothing but a mountebank, an unscrupulous mountebank—and even worse. But I will humor you. I will show you how your own words are coming back on you. I had almost forgotten them, so lost was I in my foolish belief in your powers. You told me there was salvation for me in a love that was stronger than death. Well, I have found that love. And if, as you claim, there is truth in your science, then I challenge you, the disaster and death you would now bring about cannot—will not take place. You are only a woman of earthly powers, a heartless creature, half demented by your venomous hatred of a good man. Your ends can, and will be defeated.”

She paused, breathing hard with the emotion which the effort of her denunciation had inspired, and in that pause she beheld a vision of devilish hatred and purpose such as she could never have believed possible in her aunt.

“You would rebel! You challenge me!” cried Mercy, springing from her chair with a movement almost unbelievable in so ailing a creature. “You are mad—

utterly mad. It is not I who am insane, but you—you. You call me a mountebank. What has your life been? Has not everything I have told you been part of it? Even here—here. Did I not tell you you could not escape your curse? Have you escaped it? And you think you can escape it now.” She laughed suddenly, a hideous laugh which set Joan shuddering. “The love you have found must prove itself. You say it is the love that will save you. I tell you it is not. Nothing can save this man now. Nothing can save your Buck if he interferes now. Nothing can save you, if you interfere now. I tell you I have taken every care that there is no loophole of escape. No earthly power can serve you.”

“No earthly power?” Joan echoed the words unconsciously, while she stood fascinated by that terrible face so working with malignant hatred.

But only for a moment it held her. Her love was stronger than all her woman’s fears. Her Buck was in danger, and that other. The warning. She must get that warning to them.

Suddenly she leant forward upon the table as though to emphasize what she had to say.

“Whatever happens to-night, aunt,” she cried, her big eyes glowing in a growing excitement, her red-gold hair shining like burnished copper in the light from the lamp which was so near to it, “I hope God may forgive you this terrible wicked spirit which is driving you. Some day I may find it in my heart to forgive you. That which I have to do you are driving me to, and I pray God I may succeed.”

As the last word left her lips she seized the lamp from the table, and, with all her strength, hurled it through the open window. As it sped it extinguished itself and crashed to the ground outside, leaving the room in utter darkness. At the same instant she sprang to the sill of the open window, and flung herself from the room. As she, too, fell to the ground a shot rang out behind her, and she felt the bullet tear through her masses of coiled hair.

But her excitement was at fever heat. She waited for nothing. Her lover’s life was claiming every nerve in her body. His life, and that other’s. She scrambled to her feet and dodged clear of the window, just as a chorus of harsh execration reached her ears. She looked toward the barns and hay corrals whence the sound came, and, on the instant, a hideous terror seized upon her. The barn was afire! The hay had just been fired! And, in the inky blackness of the night, the ruddy glow leapt suddenly and lit up the figures of a crowd of men, now shouting and blaspheming at the result of the shot from the house.

For one moment Joan stood still, trembling in every limb, heedless of the vengeful creature behind her. She was overwhelmed by the now utter and complete hopelessness of her case. Her horses were in the barn which had been fired. And they were her only means of reaching her lover.

Then in a moment, as she beheld the shouting crowd coming toward the house, voicing their intent to burn that, along with its occupants, her mind went back to those still within. The wretched woman, whose death by burning might save the Padre, and her rough but faithful housekeeper. Regardless of all consequences to herself, now regardless even of the lives of those two men she had hoped to save, she ran back to the house.

Flight alone could save the women inside from this drunken crowd. Flight—and at once. For, resentful at the shot which had felled one of their comrades, the lawless minds of these creatures saw but one course to pursue. Well enough Joan knew their doctrine of a life for a life. She must go back. She must save those two from this ravaging horde.



CHAPTER XXXIII

THE TEMPEST BREAKS

Buck moved out of Cæsar's stall. He had just finished lightly securing the double cinchas of his saddle. The bulging saddle-bags had been made fast behind the cantle and the wallets strapped upon the horn. Now the great animal was hungrily devouring an added feed of oats which his master had poured into its manger.

The man glanced over the equipments, and moved to the other end of the stable, where stood the Padre's heavily built chestnut. It, too, was ready saddled as though for a journey. Here again the saddle-bags and wallets had been filled and adjusted. Here again the creature was devouring an extra feed.

Buck heaved a sigh of satisfaction and turned away to where the lantern was hanging on a nail in the wooden wall. Close beside this a belt, loaded down with revolver ammunition, and carrying two holsters from which the butts of a pair of heavy revolvers protruded, was suspended from another nail. This he took down and strapped about his waist.

His work for the night was done, and all his preparations made. The night itself must direct the further course of action for him. As far as he could see he had prepared for every possible development, but, as he admitted to himself, he could only see from his own point of view. He was at work against two opposing forces. There was the law and Bob Richards on the one hand, and, on the other, the Padre, with a determination equal to his own. Of the two, he felt that the redoubtable Bob, backed by the law, would be far the easier to deal with.

This night, he anticipated, was to be the last he spent in that old fort. He more than anticipated it; he felt certain. He had heard early in the day of the return of Joan's Aunt Mercy, and this was an all-sufficient reason for his belief. Since that moment he had completed every preparation which before he had only tentatively considered; and such matters had been attended to entirely independent of his friend.

This had to be. It was useless to inform him of anything, worse than useless, until the last moment, when he intended that his schemes should be executed to

the last detail. After much painful thought he had finally decided upon coercion to gain his ends. No mere bluff, but a straightforward, honest declaration of his intentions. It was very hurtful that he must do this thing. But he could not help it. He had resolved on saving his friend from himself, and no considerations of personal feelings or, in fact, anybody's feelings, should be allowed to stand in his way. He regarded his duty as a man, and not as a law-abiding citizen. He had no real understanding of the law. His was the only law that guided him, and his law demanded of him, rightly or wrongly, the defense from all harm of those whom he loved.

His manhood dictated this, and he had no thought of personal danger, or toward what painful destiny it might carry him. The future belonged to the future, life and death were things of no more account than waking to daylight, or the profound slumbers of night. Those who would injure him or his friend must be dealt with in the only way he understood. To outwit them was his first thought, but he must defeat their ends if it cost him his life.

This was the man who had learned from the book of Life, as it is written in the earth's rough places. He was not naturally desperate, but, as with the creatures of the forests, which had taught him so many lessons, when brought to bay in defense of their own, so he was ready to bare his teeth—and use them.

He reached for the lantern with the thought of extinguishing it. But he changed his mind. There was no window that the light might become a beacon. He would close the door and leave it burning.

He turned to pass out, but remained where he was. The Padre was standing in the doorway, and his steady eyes were upon the saddled horses.

Buck had no word of greeting to offer. His dark eyes were intently fixed upon the other's face. In a moment his friend turned to him.

"It's just on nine, Buck," he said, in his kindest fashion. "We haven't eaten yet—it's ready."

It was Buck's turn to glance over at the horses so busily eating their oats. A curious smile lit his eyes. He knew well enough that the other had more than fathomed the meaning of those preparations. He was glad he had made no attempt to conceal them. That sort of thing was never his way. He had nothing to conceal from his friend.

“I had a few chores to git fixed,” he said easily, indicating the horses. “They’ll sure need a good feed before daylight, I guess.”

The Padre pointed at his belt and revolvers.

“And you’re sleeping in—them.”

“Guess I’m not sleepin’—to-night.”

“No—I suppose not.”

The Padre looked into the strong young face with a speculative glance.

Buck returned his look with a sudden eagerness.

“You heard?” he asked sharply.

“I’ve heard—Mercy is back.”

Buck watched him turn away to continue his survey of the horses.

“So have you—I s’pose,” the older man went on a moment later, indicating the horses.

“Yep. Guess they’ll need to do a long journey soon. Mebbe—to-night.”

“Cæsar?” said the Padre.

“Both,” returned Buck, with an emphasis, the meaning of which could not well be missed.

The Padre’s eyes were smiling. He glanced round the tumbled-down old barn. They had contrived to house their horses very comfortably, and Buck kept them wonderfully cared for. These things appealed to him in a way that made him regret many things.

“Who’s riding—my plug?” the Padre asked deliberately.

Buck shrugged.

“Why ask?” he said doggedly. “Who generally does? I don’t seem to guess we need beat around,” he went on impatiently. “That ain’t bin our way, Padre. Guess those hosses are ready for us. They’ll be ready night an’ day—till the time comes. Then—wal, we’re both goin’ to use ’em.”

The younger man's impatience had no disturbing effect upon the other. But his smile deepened to a great look of affection.

"Still chewin' that bone?" he said. Then he shook his head. "What's the use? We're just men, you and I; we got our own way of seeing things. Twenty years ago maybe I'd have seen things your way. Twenty years hence no doubt you'll see things mine——"

"Jest so," Buck broke in, his eyes lighting, and a strong note suddenly adding force to his interruption. "But I'm not waitin' twenty years so's to see things diff'rent."

"That's what I should have said—twenty years ago."

Buck's face suddenly flushed, and his dark brows drew together as he listened to the calm words of his friend. In a moment his answer was pouring from his lips in a hot tide which swept his hearer along and made him rejoice at the bond which existed between them. Nor, in those moments, could he help feeling glad for that day when he had found the hungry wayfarer at the trail-side.

"Ther's more than twenty years between us, sure," Buck cried with intense feeling. "Nuthin' can alter that, an' ther's sure nuthin' can make us see out o' the same eyes, nor feel with the same feelin's. Ther's nuthin' can make things seem the same to us. I know that, an' it ain't no use you tellin' me. Guess we're made diff'rent that way—an' I allow it's as well. If we weren't, wal, I guess neither of us would have things right. See here, Padre, you give most everything to me you could, ever since you brought me along to the farm. That's because it's your way to give. I hadn't nuthin' to give. I haven't nuthin' to give now. I can't even give way. Guess you can, though, because it's your nature, and because I'm askin' it. Padre, I'm goin' to act mean. I'm goin' to act so mean it'll hurt you. But it won't hurt you more than it'll hurt me. Mebbe it won't jest hurt you so much. But I'm goin' to act that way—because it's my way—when I'm set up agin it. You're settin' me up agin it now."

He paused, vainly watching the other's steady eyes for a sign.

"Go on." The Padre's smile was undiminished.

Buck made an impatient movement, and pointed at the horses.

"See them? Ther' they stand," he cried. "Ther' they'll sure stand till we both set out for the long trail. I got it all fixed. I got more than that fixed. See these

guns?” He tapped one of the guns at his waist. “They’re loaded plumb up. The belt’s full of shots. I got two repeatin’ rifles stowed away, an’ their magazines are loaded plumb up, too. Wal—unless you say right here you’re goin’ to hit the trail with me, when—things get busy; unless you tell me right out you’re goin’ to let me square off jest a bit of the score you got chalked up agin me all these years by lettin’ me help you out in this racket, then I’m goin’ to set right out ther’ by the old stockade, and when Bob Richards gets around, he an’ as many of his dogone dep’ties as I can pull down are goin’ to get their med’cine. They’ll need to take me with you, Padre. Guess I’m sharin’ that ‘chair’ with you, if they don’t hand it me before I get ther’. What I’m sayin’ goes, every word of it. This thing goes, jest as sure as I’ll blow Bob Richards to hell before he lays hand on you.”

The younger man’s eyes shone with a passionate determination. There was no mistaking it. His was a fanatical loyalty that was almost staggering.

The Padre drew a sharp breath. He had not studied this youngster for all those years without understanding something of the recklessness he was capable of. Buck’s lips were tightly compressed, his thin nostrils dilating with the intense feeling stirring him. His cheeks were pale, and his dark eyes flashed their burning light in the dim glow of the lantern. He stood with hands gripping, and the muscles of his bare arms writhed beneath the skin with the force with which they clenched. He was strung to an emotion such as the Padre had never before seen in him, and it left the older man wavering.

He glanced away.

“Aren’t we worrying this thing on the crossways?” he said, endeavoring to disguise his real feelings.

But Buck would have none of it. He was in no mood for evasion. In no mood for anything but the straightest of straight talk.

“Ther’s no crosswise to me,” he cried bluntly, with a heat that might almost have been taken for anger. Then, in a moment, his manner changed. His tone softened, and the drawn brows smoothed. “Say, you bin better’n a father to me. You sure have. Can I stand around an’ see you passed over to a low-down sort o’ law that condemns innocent folks? No, Padre, not—not even for Joan’s sake. I jest love that little Joan, Padre. I love her so desprit bad I’d do most anything for her sake. You reckon this thing needs doin’ for her.” He shook his head. “It don’t. An’ if it did, an’ she jest wanted it done—which she don’t—I’d butt in to stop it. Say, I love her that way I want to fix her the happiest gal in this country—in the world.

But if seein' you go to the law without raisin' a hand to stop it was to make her happy, guess her chances that way 'ud be so small you couldn't never find 'em. If my life figures in her happiness, an' I'm savin' that life while you take your chance of penitentiary an'—the 'chair,' wal, I guess she'll go miserable fer jest as many years as she goes on livin'."

The Padre turned away. It was impossible for him to longer face those earnest young eyes pleading to be allowed to give their life for his liberty. The reckless prodigality of the youngster's heart filled him with an emotion that would not be denied. He moved over to where Cæsar stood, and smoothed the great creature's silky quarters with a shaking hand. Buck's storming he could have withstood, but not—this.

The other followed his every movement, as a beggar watches for the glance of sympathy. And as the moments passed, and the Padre remained silent, his voice, keyed sharply, further urged him.

"Wal?"

But the other was thinking, thinking rapidly of all those things which his conscience, and long years of weary hiding prompted. He was trying to adapt his focus anew. His duty had seemed so plain to him. Then, too, his inclination had been at work. His intention had not seemed a great sacrifice to him. He was weary of it all—these years of avoiding his fellows. These years during which his mind had been thrown back upon the thought of whither all his youthful, headlong follies and—cowardice had driven him. Strong man as he was, something of his strength had been undermined by the weary draining of those years. He no longer had that desire to escape, which, in youth, had urged him. He was almost anxious to face his accusers. And with that thought he knew that he was getting old. Yes, he was getting old—and Buck—Buck was almost his son. He could not see the boy's young life thrown away for him, a life so full of promise, so full of quiet happiness. He knew that that would happen if he persisted. He knew that every word of Buck's promise would be carried out to the letter. That was his way. There was no alternative left now but for him to give way. So he turned back and held out his hand.

"What you say—goes," he said huskily. "I—I hope what we're doing is right."

Buck caught the strong hand in his, and the other winced under his grip.

"Right?" he cried, his eyes shining with a great happiness. "Right? You'll save

that old woman the worst crime on earth. You're savin' the law from a crime which it's no right to commit. You're handin' little Joan a happiness you can't even guess at in keepin' your liberty—an' me, wal, you're handin' me back my life. Say, I ain't goin' to thank you, Padre. I don't guess I know how. That ain't our way." He laughed happily. "Guess the score you got agin me is still mountin' right up. I don't never seem to git it squared. Wal, we'll let it go. Maybe it's almost a pity Bob Richards won't never have the chance of thanking you for—savin' his life, too."

The delight in his manner, his shining joy were almost sufficient recompense to the Padre. He had given way to this youngster as he always gave way. It had been so from the first. Yes, it was always so, and—he was glad.

Buck turned toward the door, and, as he did so, his arm affectionately linked into that of his friend.

"We'll need that supper, Padre," he said, more soberly. "There's a long night, and it ain't easy to guess what may happen before daylight. Come right along."

They passed the doorway, but proceeded no farther. Buck held up his hand, and they stood listening.

"Wait! Hark!" he cried, and both turned their eyes toward the westward hills.

As they stood, a low, faint growl of thunder murmured down the distant hillsides, and died away in the long-drawn sigh of a rising wind. The wind swept on, and the rustling trees and suddenly creaking branches of the forest answered that sharp, keen breath.

"It's coming—from the northwest," said the Padre, as though the direction were significant.

"Yes." Buck nodded with understanding. "That's wher' the other come from."

They stood for some moments waiting for a further sign. But nothing came. The night was pitch black. There was no break anywhere in the sky. The lamplight in the house stared out sharp and clear, but the house itself, as with the barns and other outbuildings, the stockade, even the line of the tree tops where they met the sky, was quite lost in the inky night.

"It'll come quick," said the Padre.

“Sure.”

They moved on to the house, and in a few minutes were sitting down to one of those silent meals which was so much a part of their habit. Yet each man was alert. Each man was thinking of those things which they knew to be threatening. Each man was ready for what might be forthcoming. Be it tempest or disaster, be it battle or death, each was ready to play his part, each was ready to accept the verdict as it might be given.

Buck was the first to push back from the table. He rose from his seat and lit his pipe. Then, as the pungent fumes lolled heavily on the superheated air, he passed over to the open window and took his seat upon the sill.

The Padre was more leisurely. He remained in his seat and raked out the bowl of his pipe with the care of a keen smoker. Then he cut his tobacco carefully from his plug, and rolled it thoughtfully in the palms of his hands.

“Say, about little Joan,” he said abruptly. “Will she join us on——?”

His question remained unfinished. At that instant Buck sprang from his seat and leant out of the window. The Padre was at his side in an instant.

“What——?”

“Holy Mackinaw! Look!” cried Buck, in an awed tone.

He was pointing with one arm outstretched in a direction where the ruined stockade had fallen, leaving a great gaping space. The opening was sharply silhouetted against a wide glow of red and yellow light, which, as they watched, seemed to grow brighter with each passing moment.

Each man was striving to grasp the full significance of what he beheld. It was fire. It needed no second thought to convince them of that. But where—what? It was away across the valley, beyond the further lip which rose in a long, low slope. It was to the left of Devil’s Hill, but very little. For that, too, was dimly silhouetted, even at that distance.

The Padre was the first to speak.

“It’s big. But it’s not the camp,” he said. “Maybe it’s the—forest.”

For a moment Buck made no answer. But a growing look of alarm was in his straining eyes.

“It’s not a prairie fire,” the Padre went on. “There’s not enough grass that way. Say, d’you think——” A sudden fear had leapt into his eyes, too, and his question remained unfinished.

Buck stirred. He took a deep breath. The alarm in his eyes had suddenly possessed his whole being. Something seemed to be clutching his heart, so that he was almost stifled.

“It’s none o’ them things,” he said, striving to keep his voice steady. Then of a sudden he reached out, and clutched the arm of his friend, so that his powerful fingers sank deep into its flesh.

“It’s the—farm!” he cried, in a tone that rang with a terrible dread. “Come on! The hosses!” And he dashed from the room before the last sound of his voice had died out.

The Padre was hard on his heels. With danger abroad he was no laggard. Joan—poor little Joan! And there were miles to be covered before her lover could reach her.

But the dark shadows of disaster were crowding fast. Evil was abroad searching every corner of the mountain world for its prey. Almost in a moment the whole scene was changed, and the dull inertia of past days was swept aside amidst a hurricane of storm and demoniacal tempest.

A crash of appalling thunder greeted the ears of the speeding men. The earth seemed to shake to its very foundations. Ear-splitting detonations echoed from crag to crag, and down deep into the valleys and canyons, setting the world alive with a sudden chaos. Peal after peal roared over the hills, and the lightning played, hissing and shrieking upon ironstone crowns, like a blinding display of pyrotechnics.

There was no pause in the sudden storm. There was no mercy for wretched human nerves. The blinding light was one endless chain, sweeping across the heavens as though bent on forever wresting from its path the black shadows that defied it.

And amidst all this turmoil, amidst all the devastating roar, which shook the earth as though bent on wrecking the very mountains themselves, amidst all the blinding, hellish light, so fierce, so intense, that the last secrets of the remotest forest depths must be yielded up, two horsemen dashed down the trail from the

fur fort as fast as sharp spurs could drive their eager beasts.



CHAPTER XXXIV

THE EYES OF THE HILLS

The thunder roared without intermission. It rose and fell, that was all. From a truculent piano it leapt to a titanic crescendo only to find relief again in a fierce growling dissatisfaction. It seemed less of an elemental war than a physical attack upon a shuddering earth. The electric fires rifting the darkness of this out-world night were beyond compare in their terror. The radiance of sunlight might well have been less than the blaze of a rush candle before the staggering brilliancy. It was wild, wild and fearsome. It was vicious and utterly terrifying.

Below the quaking earth was in little better case. Only was the scene here in closer touch with human understanding. Here the terror was of earth, here disaster was of human making. Here the rack of heart was in destruction by wanton fire. Shrieking, hissing, crackling, only insignificant by comparison with the war of the greater elements, flames licked up and devoured with ravening appetites the tinder-like structures of Joan's farm.

The girl was standing in the open. A confined enough open space almost completely surrounded by fire. Before her were the blazing farm buildings, behind her was the raging furnace that once had been her home. And on one side of her the flames commingled so as to be impassable. Her head was bowed and her eyes were closed, her hands were pressed tight over her ears in a vain attempt to shut out cognizance of the terror that reigned about and above her. She stood thus despairing. She was afraid, terribly afraid.

Beside her was her aunt, that strange creature whose brain had always risen superior to the sufferings of the human body. Now she was crushed to earth in mute submission to the powers which overwhelmed her. She lay huddled upon the ground utterly lost to all consciousness. Terror had mercifully saved her from a contemplation of those things which had inspired it.

These two were alone. The other woman had gone, fled at the first coming of that dreaded fiend—fire. And those others, those wretched, besotted creatures whose mischief had brought about this wanton destruction, they too had fled. But their flight was in answer to the wrathful voice of the heavens which they

feared and dreaded above all things in the wild world to which they belonged.

Alone, helpless, almost nerveless, Joan waited that end which she felt could not long be delayed. She did not know, she could not understand. On every hand was a threat so terrible that in her weakness she believed that life could not long last. The din in the heavens, the torturing heat so fierce and painful. The glare of light which penetrated even her closed eyelids, the choking gasps of smoke-laden, scorching air with which she struggled. Death itself must come, nor could it be far from her now.

The wind rushed madly down from the hilltops. It swept over forest and plain, it howled through canyon and crevasse in its eager haste to reach the centre of the battle of elements. It pounced upon the blinding smoke-cloud and swept it from its path and plunged to the heart of the conflagration with a shriek and roar of cruel delight. One breath, like the breath of a tornado, and its boisterous lungs had sent its mischief broadcast in the flash of an eye. With a howl of delight it tore out the blazing roof of the house, and, lifting it bodily, hurled it like a molten meteor against the dark walls of the adjacent pine forest.

Joan saw nothing of this, she understood nothing. She was blind and deaf to every added terror. All she felt, all she understood was storm, storm, always storm. Her poor weary brain was reeling, her heart was faint with terror. She was alive, she was conscious, but she might well have been neither in the paralysis that held her. It meant no more that that avalanche of fire, hurled amidst the resinous woods, had suddenly brought into existence the greatest earthly terror that could visit the mountain world; it meant no more to her that an added roar of wind could create a greater peril; it meant no more to her that, in a moment, the whole world about her would be in a blaze so that the burning sacrifice should be complete. Nothing could possibly mean more to her, for she was at the limit of human endurance.

But other eyes, other brains were alive to all these things, eyes and minds trained by a knowledge which only that mountain world could teach. To them the significance was all absorbing. To them this new terror was a thousandfold more appalling than all other storm and tempest. With the forest afire there was safety for neither human nor beast. With that forest afire flight was well-nigh impossible. With that forest afire to save any living creature would be well-nigh a miracle, and miracles had no place in their thoughts.

Yet those eyes, so watchful, remained unchanged. Those straining brains only

strained the harder. Those eager hearts knew no flinching from their purpose, and if they quailed it was merely at the natural dread for those whom they were seeking to succor.

Even in face of the added peril their purpose remained. The heavens might roar their thunders, the lightnings might blind their staring eyes, the howling gale might strew their path with every obstruction, nothing could change them, nothing could stop them but death itself.

So with horses a-lather they swept along. Their blood-stained spurs told their tale of invincible determination. These two men no longer sat in their saddles, they were leaning far out of them over their racing horses' necks, urging them and easing them by every trick in a horseman's understanding. They were making a trail which soon they knew would be a path of fire. They knew that with every stride of the stalwart creatures under them they were possibly cutting off the last hope of a retreat to safety. They knew, none better, that once amidst that furnace which lay directly ahead it was something worse than an even chance of life.

Buck wiped the dripping sweat out of his eyes that he might get a clearer view. The blaze of lightning was of no use to him. It only helped to make obscure that which the earthly fires were struggling to reveal. The Padre's horse was abreast of his saddle. The sturdy brute was leaving Cæsar to make the pace while she doggedly pursued.

"We'll make it yet!" shouted Buck, over his shoulder, amidst the roar of thunder.

The Padre made no attempt at response. He deemed it useless.

Buck slashed Cæsar's flanks with ruthless force.

The blazing farm was just ahead, as was also the roaring fire of the forest. It was the latter on which both men were concentrating their attention. For the moment its path lay eastward, away to the right of the trail. But this they knew was merely the howling force of the wind. With a shift of direction by half a point and the gale would drive it straight down the trail they were on.

The trail bent away to the left. And as they swung past the turn Buck again shouted.

"Now for it!"

He dashed his spurs again at the flanks of his horse, and the great beast stretched out for a final burst across the bridge over the narrow creek.



CHAPTER XXXV

FROM OUT OF THE ABYSS

Joan swayed where she stood. She stumbled and fell; and the fall went on, and on, and on. It seemed to her that she was rushing down through endless space toward terrors beyond all believing. It seemed to her that a terrific wind was beating on her, and driving her downward toward a fiercely storm-swept ocean, whose black, hideous waves were ever reaching up to engulf her.

She cried out. She knew she cried out, and she knew she cried out in vain. Some one, it seemed to her, was far, far up above her, watching, seeking to aid her, but powerless to respond to her heart-broken cries. Still she called, and she knew she must go on calling, till the dark seas below drowned the voice in her throat.

Now shadows arose about her, mocking, cruel shadows. They were definite figures, but she could not give them definite form in her mind. She reached out toward them, clutching vainly at fluttering shapes, but ever missing them in her headlong career. She sped on, buffeted and hurtling, and torn; on, on, making that hideous journey through space.

Her despairing thoughts flashed at lightning speed through her whirling brain. Faster they came, faster and faster, till she had no time to recognize, no power to hold them. She could see them, yes, she could literally see them sweep by, vanishing like shadows in that black space of terror.

Then came a sudden accession of sharp stabbing pain. It seemed to tick through her body as might a clock, and each stab came as with the sway of the pendulum, and with a regularity that was exquisite torture. The stabs of pain came quicker, the pendulum was working faster. Faster and faster it swung, and so the torture was ever increasing. Now the pain was in her head, her eyes, her ears, her brain. The agony was excruciating. Her head was bursting. She cried louder and louder, and, with every cry, the pain increased until she felt she was going mad. Then suddenly the pendulum stopped swinging and her cries and her agony ceased, and all was still, silent and dark.

It might have been a moment, or it might have been ages. Suddenly this wonderful peace was disturbed. It was as though she had just awakened from a

deep refreshing sleep in some strange, unfamiliar world. The darkness remained, but it was the darkness of peace. The beating wind had gone, and she only heard it sighing afar off. She was calling again, but no longer in despair. She was calling to that some one far above her with the certain knowledge that she would be answered. The darkness was passing, too. Yes, and she was no longer falling, but soaring up, up, winging her way above, without effort, without pain.

The savage waves were receding, their voices had died to a low murmur, like the voice of a still, summer sea on a low foreshore. Now, too, between every cry she waited for that answer which she knew must be forthcoming. It was some man's voice she was awaiting, some man, whose name ever eluded her searching brain. She strained to hear till the pulses of her ear-drums throbbed, for she knew when she heard the voice she would recognize the speaker.

Hark, there it was, far, far away. Yes, she could hear it, but how far she must have fallen. There it was again. It was louder, and—nearer. Again and again it came. It was quite plain. It was a voice that set her brain and heart afire with longing. It was a voice she loved more than all the world. Hark! What was that it said? Yes, there it was again.

“Pore little gal, pore little Joan.”

Now she knew, and a flood of thankfulness welled up in her heart. A great love thrilled through her veins, and tears flooded her eyes, tears of thankfulness and joy. Tears for herself, for him, for all the world. It was Buck's voice full of pity and a tender love.

In a moment she was awake. She knew she was awake to a sort of dazed consciousness, because instantly her brain was flooded with all the horror of memory. Memory of the storm, the fire, of the devastation of her home.

For long minutes she had no understanding of anything else. She was consumed by the tortures of that memory. Yes, it was still storming, she could hear the howling of the wind, the roar of thunder, and the hiss and crackling of fire. Where was she? Ah, she knew. She was outside, with the fire before and behind her. And her aunt was at her side. She reached out a hand to reassure herself, and touched something soft and warm. But what was that? Surely it was Buck's voice again?

“Thank God, little gal, I tho't you was sure dead.”

In desperate haste she struggled to rise to her feet, but everything seemed to rock and sway under her. And then, as Buck spoke again, she abandoned her efforts.

“Quiet, little gal, lie you still, or I can’t hold you. You’re dead safe fer the moment. I’ve got you. We’re tryin’ to git out o’ this hell, Cæsar an’ me. An’ Cæsar’s sure doin’ his best. Don’t you worrit. The Padre’s behind, an’ he’s got your auntie safe.”

Joan’s mind had suddenly become quite clear. There was no longer any doubt in it. Now she understood where she was. Buck had come to save her. She was in his arms, on Cæsar’s back—and she knew she would be saved.

With an effort she opened her eyes and found herself looking into the dark face of the man she loved, and a great sigh of contentment escaped her. She closed them again, but it was only to open them almost immediately. Again she remembered, and looked about her.

Everywhere was the lurid glow of fire, and she became aware of intense heat. Above her head was the roar of tempest, and the vivid, hellish light of the storm. Buck had called it “hell.”

“The whole world seems to be afire,” she said suddenly.

Buck looked down into her pale face.

“Well nigh,” he said. Then he added, “Yes, it’s afire, sure. It’s afire that bad the Almighty alone guesses if we’ll git out.”

But his doubt inspired no apprehension. Somehow Joan’s confidence was the effect of his strong supporting arm.

She stirred again in his arms. But it was very gently.

“Buck,” she said, “let me sit up. It will ease you—and help poor Cæsar. I’m—I’m not afraid now.”

Buck gave a deep-throated laugh. He felt he wanted to laugh, now he was sure that Joan was alive.

“You don’t need. Say, you don’t weigh nuthin’. An’ Cæsar, why, Cæsar’s mighty proud I’m lettin’ him carry you.”

But the girl had her way, and, in a moment, was sitting up with one arm about

the man's broad shoulders. It brought her face near to his, and Buck bent his head toward her, and kissed the wonderful ripe lips so temptingly adjacent.

For a moment Joan abandoned herself to the joy of that kiss. Then the rhythmic sway of Cæsar's body under her reminded her that there were other things. She wanted to ask Buck how they had known and come to her help. She wanted to ask a dozen woman's questions. But she refrained. Buck had spoken of "hell," and she gazed about her seeking the reason of his doubt.

In a few minutes she was aware of it all. In a few minutes she realized that he had well named the country through which they were riding. In a few minutes she knew that it was a race for life, and that their hope was in the great heart of Cæsar.

Far as the eye could see in that ruddy light, tortured and distorted by the flashes of storm above, was an ocean of fire spread out. The crowning billows of smoke, like titanic foam-crests, rolled away upward and onward before them. They, too, were ruddy-tinted by the reflection from below. They crowded in every direction. They swept along abreast of them, they rose up behind them, and the distance was lost in their choking midst. The scorching air was laden to suffocation by the odors of burning resin. She knew they were on a trail, a narrow, confined trail, which was lined by unburnt woods. And the marvel of it filled her.

"These woods are untouched," she said.

Again Buck laughed. It was a grim laugh which had no mirth, but yet was it dashed by a wonderful recklessness.

"So far," he said. Then he added, with a quick look up at the belching smoke, "If they weren't I don't guess we'd be here now. Say, it's God's mercy sure this trail heads from the farm southeast. Further on it swings away at a fork. One trail goes due east, an' the other sou'west. One of 'em's sure cut by the fire. An' the other—wal, it's a gamble with luck."

"It's the only way out?" The girl's eyes were wide with her question and the knowledge of the meaning of a reply in the affirmative.

"That's so."

"We're like—rats in a trap."

A sharp oath escaped the man's lips.

"We ain't beat yet," he cried fiercely.

The reply was the heart of the man speaking. Joan understood it. And from it she understood more. She understood the actual peril in the midst of which they were.

There was nothing more to be said. Buck's whole attention was upon the billows of smoke and the lurid reflections thereon. The thunders above them, the blinding lightnings, left him undisturbed. The wind, the smoke and the fire were his only concern now. Already, ahead, he could see in the vague light where the trail gave to the left. Beyond that was the fork.

Joan gave no thought to these things. She had no right understanding of how best they could be served. She was studying the face of the man, the dark, brave face that was now her whole world. She was aware of the horseman behind, with his burden, she was aware of the horrors surrounding them, but the face of the man held her, held her without a qualm of fear—now. If death lay before them she was in his arms.

Buck's thoughts were far enough from death. He had snatched the woman he loved from its very jaws, and he had no idea of yielding. There was no comfort for him in the thought of their dying together. Living, yes. Life was more sweet to him just then than ever it had been before. And he meant that they two should live on, and on.

They passed the bend and the forking trail loomed up amidst the shadows. The crisis had come. And as they reached the vital spot Buck took hold of the horse and reined him up. In a moment the Padre was at his side with his inanimate burden.

Joan stared at the still form of her relative while the men talked.

"It's got us beat to the eastward," said Buck, without a moment's hesitation.

"Yes. The fire's right across the trail. It's impassable."

The Padre's eyes were troubled. The eastward trail led to the open plains.

"We must make the other," Buck said sharply, gathering up his reins.

"Yes. That means——"

“Devil’s Hill, if the fire ain’t ahead of us.”

“And if it is?” Curiously enough the Padre, even, seemed to seek guidance from Buck.

“It sure will be if we waste time—talkin’.”

Cæsar leapt at his bit in response to the sharp stroke of the spur.

Now Buck had no thought for anything but the swift traveling fire on his left. It was the pace of his horse against the pace at which the gale was driving this furnace. It was the great heart of his horse against endurance. Would it stand the test with its double burden? If they could reach that bald, black hill, there was safety and rest. If not—but they must reach it. They must reach it if it was the last service he ever claimed from his faithful servant. For once in his life the mystery of the hill afforded Buck hope and comfort. For once it was a goal to be yearned for, and he could think of no greater delight than to rest upon its black summit far from the reach of the hungry flames, that now, like an invading army, were seeking by every means to envelop him.

Could they make it?

A hundred thoughts and sensations were passing through the man’s body and mind. He was sub-consciously estimating Cæsar’s power by the gait at which he was traveling. He was guessing at the rate of the racing fire. He was calculating the direction of the wind to an absurd fraction. He was observing without interest the racing of a strangely assorted commingling of forest creatures down the trail, seeking safety in flight from the speeding fire. He cared nothing for them. He had no feelings of pity for anything or any one but Joan. Every hope in his heart, every atom of power in his body, every thought was for her well-being and ultimate safety. Oh, for the rain; oh, for such a rain as he had seen that time before.

But the storming heavens were dry-eyed and merciless. That freakish phenomenon of a raging thunder-storm without the usual deluge of rain was abroad with all its deadly danger. It was extraordinary. It was so extraordinary that Buck was utterly at a loss. Why, why? And his impatient questioning remained without answer. There had been every indication of rain and yet none had come——What was that?

Cæsar suddenly seemed to sway drunkenly. He shook his head in the manner of

a horse irritated, and alarm set his ears flat back in his head, and he stretched his neck, and, of his own accord, increased his pace. Buck saw nothing to cause this sudden disturbance other than that which had been with them all the time, and yet his horse's alarm was very evident.

A moment later occurred something still more unusual. Cæsar stumbled. He did not fall. It was a mere false step, and, as he recovered, Buck felt the poor beast trembling under him. Was it the end of his endurance? No. The horse was traveling even faster than before, and he found it necessary to check the faithful creature, an attention that quickly aroused its opposition.

Buck's puzzled eyes lifted from his horse to the rapidly nearing fire. It must be that Cæsar must have realized its proximity, and, in his effort to outstrip it, had brought about his own floundering. So he no longer checked the willing creature, and the race went on at the very limit of the horse's pace. Then, in a moment, again came that absurd reeling and uncertainty. And Buck's added puzzlement found expression in words, while his eyes watched closely for some definite cause.

"Ther's suthin' amiss with Cæsar," he said, with an unconcern of manner which his words belied.

"What do you mean?" Joan's eyes lifted to his in sudden alarm. Then she added, "I seemed to notice something."

"Seems like he's—drunk." Buck laughed.

"Perhaps—the earth's shaking. I shouldn't wonder, with this—this storm."

"Shaking?"

Buck echoed her word, but his mind had suddenly seized upon it with a different thought from hers. If the earth were shaking, it would not be with the storm above. His eyes peered ahead. Devil's Hill lay less than a mile away, and that was where he reckoned the fire would strike the trail. Devil's Hill. A sudden uncomfortable repulsion at the thought of its barren dome took hold of him. For some subtle reason it no longer became the haven to be yearned for that it had been. Rather was it a resting-place to be sought only in extremity—if the earth were shaking.

His attention now became divided between the fire and Cæsar. The horse was evidently laboring. He was moving without his accustomed freedom of gait, and

yet he did not seem to be tiring.

Half the distance to the foot of the hill had been covered. The fire was nearing rapidly, so near indeed was it that the air was alive with a perfect hail of glowing sparks, swept ahead of it by the terrific wind. The scorching air was becoming unendurable, and the mental strain made the trail seem endless, and their efforts almost hopeless. Buck looked down at the girl's patient face.

"It's hot—hot as hell," he said with another meaningless laugh.

The girl read through his words and the laugh—read through them to the thought behind them, and promptly protested.

"Don't worry for me. I can stand—anything now."

The added squeeze of her arm upon his shoulders set Buck's teeth gritting.

Suddenly he reined Cæsar in.

"I must know 'bout that—shakin'," he said.

For a second the horse stood with heaving body. It was only a moment, but in that moment he spread out his feet as though to save himself from falling. Then in answer to the spur he sped on.

"It's the earth, sure," cried Buck. And had there been another escape he would have turned from the barren hill now rising amidst the banking smoke-clouds ahead of him.

"Earthquake!" said the girl.

"Yes."

Nothing more was said. The air scorched their flesh, and Joan was fearful lest the falling sparks should fire her clothing. With every passing moment Cæsar was nearing their forbidding goal. The fire was so adjacent that the roar and crackle of it shrieked in their ears, and through the trees shone the hideous gleam of flame. It was neck and neck, and their hope lay beneath them. Buck raked the creature's flanks again with his spurs, and the gallant beast responded. On, on they sped at a gait that Buck knew well could not last for long. But with every stride the hill was coming nearer, and it almost seemed as if Cæsar understood their necessity, and his own. Once Joan looked back. That sturdy horse of the Padre was doggedly pursuing. Step for step he hugged his stable companion's

trail, but he was far, far behind.

“The Padre,” cried Joan. “They are a long way back.”

“God help him!” cried Buck, through clenched teeth. “I can’t. To wait fer him sure means riskin’ you.”

“But——” Joan broke off and turned her face up to the canopy of smoke driving across them. “Rain!” she cried, with a wild thrill of hope. “Rain—and in a deluge.”

In a moment the very heavens seemed to be emptying their reservoirs. It came, not in drops, but in streams that smote the earth, the fire, themselves with an almost crushing force. In less than half a minute they were drenched to the skin, and the water was pouring in streams from their extremities.

“We’ve won out,” cried Buck, with a great laugh.

“Thank God,” cried Joan, as she turned her scorched face up to receive the grateful water.

Buck eased the laboring Cæsar.

“That fire won’t travel now, an’—ther’s the hill,” the man nodded.

They had steadied to a rapid gallop. The hill, as Buck indicated, was just ahead. Joan’s anxious eyes looked for the beginning of the slope. Yes, it was there. Less than two hundred yards ahead.

The air filled with steam as the angry fire strove to battle with its arch-enemy. But the rain was as merciless in its onslaught as had been the storm, and the fire itself. The latter had been given full scope to work its mischief, and now it was being called to its account. Heavier and heavier the deluge fell, and the miracle of its irresistible power was in the rapid fading of the ruddy glow in the smoke-laden atmosphere. The fire was beaten from the outset and its retreat before the opposing element was like a panic flight.

In five minutes Cæsar was clawing his way up over the boulder-strewn slopes of the hill, and Joan knew that, for the time at least, they were safe. She knew, too, if the rain held for a couple of hours, the blazing woods would be left a cold waste of charred wreckage.



But the rain did not hold. It lasted something less than a quarter of an hour. It was like a merciful act of Providence that came at the one moment when it could serve the fugitives. The chances had been all against them. Buck had known it. The fire must have met them at the foot of the hill and so barred their ultimate escape. The Padre behind had been inevitably doomed.



CHAPTER XXXVI

THE CATAclySM

Two hours later two men and a girl gazed out from the plateau of Devil's Hill. The whole earth it seemed was a raging sea of fire. Once more the forests were ablaze in every direction. The blistering tongues of fire had licked up the heavy rain, and were again roaring destruction over the land.

Far as the eye could reach the lurid pall of smoke was spread out, rolling upward and onward, borne upon the bosom of the gale. In its midst, and through it, the merciless flames leapt up and up. The booming of falling timbers, and the roar of the flames smote painfully upon the hearts of the watchers. It was a spectacle to crush every earthly hope. It was a sight so painful as to drive the mind of man distracted. In all their lives these people had never imagined such a terror. In all their lives they could never witness such again.

They stood there silent and awed. They stood there with eyes straining and eardrums throbbing with the din of the battle. Their horses were roaming at will and the still form of Aunt Mercy was at their feet. There was no shelter. There was no hope. Only they knew that where they stood was safety, at least, from the fire below.

Presently Joan knelt at her aunt's side and studied her ashen features in the ruddy light. The woman's unconsciousness had remained through all that journey. Or was she dead? Joan could not make up her mind.

Once, as she knelt, she reeled and nearly fell across that still body. And when, recovering herself, she looked up at the men she saw that they were braced, with feet apart, supporting each other. Then, in the roar of the storm she heard Buck's voice shouting in the Padre's ear.

"Guess—ther's more to come yet," he said with a profound significance.

She saw the Padre's nod, and she wondered at the fresh danger he saw ahead.

Buck turned and looked out over the desolate plateau with troubled eyes. She followed his gaze. Strangely she had little fear, even with that trouble in her

lover's eyes.

The plateau was desperately gloomy. It was hot, too, up there, terribly hot. But Joan had no thought for that except that she associated it with the hot wind blowing up from below. Her observation was narrowed to a complete dependence on Buck. He was her hope, her only hope.

Suddenly she saw him reel. Then, in a moment, she saw that both men were down on hands and knees, and, almost at the instant, she, herself, was hurled flat upon the ground beside the body of her aunt.

The earth was rocking, and now she understood more fully her lover's trouble. Her courage slowly began to ebb. She fought against it, but slowly a terror of that dreadful hill crept up in her heart, and she longed to flee anywhere from it—anywhere but down into that caldron of fire below. But the thought was impossible. Death was on every hand beyond that hill, and the hill itself was—quaking.

Now Buck was speaking again.

“We'll have to git som'ere from here,” he said.

The Padre answered him—

“Where?”

It was an admission of the elder man's weakness. Buck must guide. The girl's eyes remained upon her lover's face; she was awaiting his reply. She understood, had always known it, that all human help for her must come from him.

Her suspense was almost breathless.

“There's shelter by the lake,” Buck said, after a long pause. “We can get to leeward of the rock, an'—it's near the head of that path droppin' to the creek. The creek seems better than anywher' else—after this.”

His manner was decided, but his words offered poor enough comfort.

The Padre agreed, and, at once, they moved across to Joan. For the moment the earth was still again. Its convulsive shudder had passed. Joan struggled to her feet, but her increasing terror left her clinging to the man she loved. The Padre silently gathered Mercy into his arms, and the journey across the plateau began.

But as they moved away the subterranean forces attacked again. Again came that awful rocking, and shaking, which left them struggling for a foothold. Twice they were driven to their knees, only to stagger on as the convulsions lessened. It was a nightmare of nervous tension. Every step of the journey was fraught with danger, and every moment it seemed as though the hill must fall beneath them to a crumbling wreckage.

With heart-sick apprehension Joan watched the growing form of the great rock, which formed the source of the lake, as it loomed out of the smoke-laden dusk. It was so high, so sheer. What if it fell, wrecked with those dreadful earth quakings? But her terror found no voice, no protest. She would not add to the burden of these men. The rock passed behind them, and her relief was intense as the shadow was swallowed up again in the gloom. Then a further relief came to her as the edge of the plateau was reached, and the Padre set his burden down at the head of the narrow path which suggested a possible escape to the creek below.

She threw herself beside her aunt, and heard Buck speaking again to his friend.

“Stop right here with the women,” he said. “I’m goin’ around that lake—seems to me we need to get a peek at it.”

Joan understood something of what he feared. She remembered the weirdness of that suspended lake, and thought with a shudder of the dreadful earth quakings. So she watched him go with heart well-nigh breaking.

Buck moved cautiously away into the gloom. He knew the lake shore well. The evident volcanic origin of it might well answer many questions and doubts in his mind. Its rugged shore offered almost painful difficulties with the, now, incessant quakings below. But he struggled on till he came to the eminence he sought. Here he took up a position, lying on his stomach so that he had a wide view of the surface of the wind-swept water.

He remained for a long while watching, watching, and striving to digest the signs he beheld. They were many, and alarming. But their full meaning was difficult to his untutored mind.

Here it was that the Padre ultimately found him. He had been gone so long that the elder man’s uneasiness for his safety had sent him in search.

“What d’you make of it, Buck?” he demanded, as he came up, his apprehensions

finding no place in his manner.

Buck displayed no surprise. He did not even turn his head.

“The fires are hotting. The water’s nigh boiling. There’s goin’ to be a mighty bust-up.”

The Padre looked out across the water.

“There’s fire around us, fire above us, and now—fire under us. We’ve got to choose which we’re going to face, Buck—quick.”

The Padre’s voice was steady. His feelings were under perfect control.

Buck laughed grimly.

“Ther’s fire we know, an’ fire we don’t. Guess we best take the fire we know.”

They continued to gaze out across the lake in silence after that. Then the Padre spoke again.

“What about the horses?” he asked.

The question seemed to trouble Buck, for he suddenly caught his breath. But, in a moment, his answer came with decision.

“Guess they must take their chances,” he said. “Same as we have to. I hate to leave him, but Cæsar’s got sense.”

“Yes.”

The Padre’s eyes were fixed upon one spot on the surface of the water. It was quite plain, even in that light, that a seething turmoil was going on just beneath it. He pointed at the place, but went on talking of the other things in his mind.

“Say, you best take this pocketbook. We may get separated before the night’s out. It’s half the farm money. You see—ther’s no telling,” he ended up vaguely.

For one instant Buck removed his eyes from the surface of the lake to glance at the snow-white head of his friend. Then he reached out and took the pocketbook.

“Maybe Joan’ll need it, anyway,” he said, and thrust it in his pocket. “We must——Say, git busy! Look!”

Buck’s quick eyes had suddenly caught sight of a fresh disturbance in the water.

Of a sudden the whole surface of the lake seemed to be rising in a great commotion. And as he finished speaking two terrific detonations roared up from somewhere directly beneath them.

In an instant both men were on their feet and racing in headlong flight for the point where they had left the women.

“Get Joan!” shouted the Padre from behind. He was less swift of foot than Buck. “Get Joan! I’ll see to the other.”

Buck reached the girl’s side. She had heard the explosions of the underworld and stood shaking with terror.

“We’re up agin it, Joan,” he cried. And before the panic-stricken girl could reply she was in his strong young arms speeding for the downward path, which was their only hope.

“But the Padre! Aunt Mercy!” cried Joan, in a sudden recollection.

“They’re comin’ behind. He’ll see to her——God in heaven!”

A deafening roar, a hundred times greater than the first explosions, came from directly beneath the man’s feet. The air was full of it. To the fugitives it was as if the whole world had suddenly been riven asunder. For one flashing moment it seemed to Buck that he had been struck with fearful force from somewhere behind him, and as the blow fell he was hurled headlong down the precipitous path.

A confused, painful sense of cruel buffeting left him only half-conscious. There was a roar in his ears like the bombardment of unearthly artillery. It filled his brain to the exclusion of all else, while he hugged the girl close in his arms with some instinct of saving her, and shielding her from the cruel blows with his own body.

Beyond that he had practically no sensation. Beyond that he had no realization whatever. They were falling, falling, and every limb in his body seemed to find the obstructions with deadly certainty. How far, how long they were falling, whither the awful journey was carrying them, these things passed from him utterly.

Then, abruptly, all sensation ceased. The limit of endurance had been reached. For him, at least, the battle for life seemed ended. The greater forces might contest in bitter rage. Element might war with element, till the whole face of the world was changed; for Providence, in a belated mercy, had suspended animation, and spared these two poor atoms of humanity a further witness of a conflict of forces beyond their finite understanding.



CHAPTER XXXVII

ALONE—

“Buck! Buck!”

Faint and small, the cry was lost in the wilderness of silence. It died out, a heart-broken moan of despair, fading to nothingness in the still, desolate world.

Then came another sound. It was the crash of a falling tree. It was louder, but it, too, could scarcely break the stillness, so silent was the world, so desolate was it in the absence of all life.

Day had broken. The sky was brilliant with swift-speeding clouds of fleecy white. The great sun had lifted well above the horizon, and already its warming rays were thirstily drinking from a sodden, rain-drenched earth.

The perfect calm of a summer morning reigned. Up above, high up, where it was quite lost to the desolation below, a great wind was still speeding on the fleecy storm-clouds, brushing them from its path and replacing them with the frothing scud of a glorious day. But the air had not yet regained its wonted freshness. The reek of charred timber was everywhere. It poisoned the air, and held memory whence it would willingly escape.

“Oh, Buck, speak to me! Open your eyes! Oh, my love, my dear, dear love!”

The cry had grown in pitch. It was the cry of a woman whose whole soul is yearning for the love which had been ruthlessly torn from her bosom.

Again it died away in a sob of anguish, and all was still again. Not a sound broke the appalling quiet. Not a leaf rustled, for the world seemed shorn of all foliage. Not a sound came from the insect world, for even the smallest, the most minute of such life seemed to have fled, or been destroyed. There was neither the flutter of a wing, nor the voice of the prowling carnivora, for even the winged denizens of the mountains and the haunting scavengers had fled in terror from such a wilderness of desolation.

“Buck, oh, my Buck! Speak, speak! He’s dead! Oh, my God, he’s dead!”

Louder the voice came, and now in its wail was a note of hysteria. Fear had made harsh the velvet woman's tones. Fear, and a rising resentment against the cruel sentence that had been passed upon her.

She crouched down, rocking herself amidst a low scrub upon which the dead leaves still hung where the fires had scorched them. But the fire had not actually passed over them. A wide spread of barren rock intervened between the now skeleton woods and where the girl sat huddled.

In front of her lay the figure of a man, disheveled and bleeding, and scarcely recognizable for the staunch youth who had yielded himself to the buffets of life that the woman he loved might be spared.

But Joan only saw the radiant young face she loved, the slim, graceful figure so full of life and strength. He was hers. And—and death had snatched him from her. Death had claimed him, when all that she could ever long for seemed to be within her grasp. Death, ruthless, fierce, hateful death had crushed out that life in its cruellest, most merciless fashion.

She saw nothing of the ruin which lay about her. She had no thought of anything else, she had no thought of those others. All she knew was that her Buck, her brave Buck, lay before her—dead.

The girl suddenly turned her despairing eyes to the white heavens, their deep blue depths turned to a wonderful violet of emotion. Her wealth of golden hair hung loose about her shoulders, trailing about her on the sodden earth, where it had fallen in the midst of the disaster that had come upon her. Her rounded young figure was bent like the figure of an aged woman, and the drawn lines of anguish on her beautiful face gave her an age she did not possess.

“Oh, he is not dead!” she cried, in a vain appeal. “Tell me he is not dead!” she cried, to the limitless space beyond the clouds. “He is all I have, all I have in the world. Oh, God, have mercy upon me! Have mercy!”

Her only reply was the stillness. The stillness as of death. She raised her hands to her face. There were no tears. She was beyond that poor comfort. Dry, hard sobs racked her body, and drove the rising fever to her poor brain.

For long moments she remained thus.

Then, after a while, her sobs ceased and she became quite still. She dropped her hands inertly from her face, and let them lie in her lap, nerveless, helpless, while

she gazed upon the well-loved features, so pale under the grime and tanning of the skin.

She sat quite still for many minutes. It almost seemed as if the power of reason had at last left her, so colorless was her look, so unchanging was her vacant expression. But at last she stirred. And with her movement a strange light grew in her eyes. It was a look bordering upon the insane, yet it was full of resolve, a desperate resolve. Her lips were tightly compressed, and she breathed hard.

She made no sound. There were no further lamentations. Slowly she reached out one hand toward the beloved body. Nor was the movement a caress. It passed across the tattered garments, through which the painfully contused flesh peered hideously out at her. It moved with definite purpose toward one of the gaping holsters upon the man's waist-belt. Her hand came to a pause over the protruding butt of a revolver. Just for a moment there was hesitation. Then it dropped upon it and her fingers clasped the weapon firmly. She withdrew it, and in a moment it rested in her lap.

She gazed down upon it with straining, hopeless eyes. It was as if she were struggling to nerve herself for that one last act of cowardice which the despairing find so hard to resist. Then, with a deep-drawn sigh, she raised the weapon with its muzzle ominously pointing at her bosom.

Again came a pause.

Then she closed her eyes, as though fearing to witness the passing of the daylight from her life, and her forefinger moved to embrace the trigger. It reached its object, and its pressure tightened.

But as it tightened, and the trigger even moved, she felt the warm grip of a hand close over hers, and the pistol was turned from its direction with a wrench.

Her startled eyes abruptly opened, and her grip upon the weapon relaxed, while a cry broke from her ashen lips. She had left the gun in Buck's hand, and his dark eyes were gazing into hers from his bed amongst the crushed branches of the bush amidst which he was lying.

For long moments she stared at him almost without understanding. Then, slowly, the color returned to her cheeks and lips, and great tears of joy welled up into her loving eyes.

"Buck," she murmured, as the heavy tears slowly rolled down her cheeks, and

her bosom heaved with unspeakable joy. “My—my Buck.”

For answer the man’s eyes smiled. Her heaven had opened at last.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

—IN THE WILDERNESS

The golden sun was high in the heavens. Its splendor was pouring down upon a gently steaming earth. But all its joyous light, all its perfect beneficence could not undo one particle of the havoc the long dark hours of night had wrought.

High up on a shattered eminence, where a sea of tumbled rock marked the face of Devil's Hill, where the great hot lake had been held suspended, Joan and Buck gazed out upon the battle-ground of nature's forces.

Presently the girl's eyes came back to the face of her lover. She could not long keep them from the face, which, such a few hours ago, she had believed she would never behold again in life. She felt as though he were one returned to her from the grave, and feared lest she should wake to find his returning only a dream.

He was a strange figure. The tattered remains of his clothing were scarcely enough to cover his nakedness, and Joan, with loving, unskilled hands, had lathered and dressed his wounds with portions of her own undergarments and the waters of the creek, whither, earlier, she had laboriously supported his enfeebled body. But Providence had spared him an added mercy besides bringing him back to life. It seemed a sheer miracle that his bones had been left whole. His flesh was torn, his whole body was terribly bruised and lacerated, but that worst of all disasters in life had been spared him, and he was left with the painful use of every limb.

But the thought of this miracle left the man untouched. Only did Joan remember, and offer up her thankfulness. The man was of the wild, he was young, life was with him, life with all its joys and sorrows, all its shadowy possibilities, so he recked nothing of what he had escaped. That was his way.

While Joan's devoted eyes watched the steady light in his, staring out so intently at the wreck of world before him, no word passed her lips. It was as though he were the lord of their fate and she waited his commands.

But for long Buck had no thought for their personal concerns. He forgot even the

pains which racked his torn body, he forgot even the regrets which the destruction he now beheld had first inspired him with. He was marveling, he was awed at the thought of those dread elements, those titanic forces he had witnessed at play.

There lay the hideous skeleton picked bare to the bones. Every semblance of the beauty lines, which, in the earth's mature completion, it had worn, had vanished, and only mouldering remains were left. How had it happened? What terrible, or sublime purpose, had been achieved during that night of terror? He could not think.

His eyes dropped to that which lay immediately before him. He was gazing into chaotic depths of torn black rock amidst which a great cascade of water poured out from the bowels of the earth and flowed on to join the waters of Yellow Creek. It was the site where had hung the suspended lake. Half the great hill had been torn away by some terrible subterranean upheaval, which seemed to have solely occurred on that side where the lake had been, and where the hill had confronted the distant camp. Gone were the workings of the miners. Gone was that great bed of auriferous soil. And in their places lay an ocean of rock, so vast, so torn, that the power which had hurled it broadcast was inconceivable to his staggered mind.

For a while he contemplated the scene with thoughts struggling and emotions stirring. Then with a sigh he looked out beyond. The valley of the creek, that little narrow strip of open grass-land, bordered by pine forests all its length, was gone, too. The creek was now a wide-spread expanse of flowing water, which had swept from its path the last vestige of the handiwork of those people who had lived upon the banks of the original stream.

There was not a sign of a house or log hut to be seen anywhere. Gone, gone, swept away like the buildings of children's toy bricks.

What of those who had dwelt where the water now flowed? Had they, too, gone on the rushing tide? He wondered. Where had been their escape? Maybe they had had time. And yet, somehow it seemed doubtful. The skeleton forests stretched out on every hand to a great distance. They backed where the camp had stood. They rose up beyond the northern limits. To the west of the water it was the same. Had he not witnessed the furnace upon that side? And here, here to the south would they have faced this terrible barrier belching out its torrential waters, perhaps amidst fire and smoke?

He did not know. He could not think. They were gone as everything else that indicated life was gone, and—they two were left alone in a wilderness of stricken earth.

He sighed again as he thought of the gracious woods which the long centuries had built up. All Nature's wonderful labors, the patient efforts of ages, wiped out in a few moments of her own freakish mood. It was heart-breaking to one who had always loved the wild hills where the all-powerful Dame's whimsies had so long run riot.

Then as he stared out upon the steaming horizon where hills greater and greater rose up confronting him and narrowed the limits of his vision, he saw where the dividing line ran. He remembered suddenly that even in her destructions Nature had still controlled. The floods of the heavens must have been abruptly poured out at some time during the night, or the fire would still be raging on, searching out fresh fuel beyond those hills, traveling on on and on through the limitless forests which lay to the north, and south, and west.

The memory gave him fresh hope. It told him that the world was still outside waiting to welcome them to its hostels. And so he turned at last to the patient woman at his side.

"It seems so a'mighty queer, little Joan," he said gently. "It seems so a'mighty queer I can't rightly get the hang of things. Yesterday—yesterday—why, yesterday all this," he waved an arm to indicate the broken world about him, "was as God made it, an' now ther's jest ruin—blank ruin that'll take all your life, and mine, an' dozens who're comin' after us to—to build up agin. Yesterday this camp was full of busy folk chasin' a livin' from the products Nature had set here. Now she's wiped 'em out. Why? Yesterday a good man was threatened by man's law, an' it looked as if that law was to suck us all into its web an' make criminals of us. Now he's gone an' the law'll be chased back to hunt around for its prey in places with less danger to 'em. It's all queer—mighty queer. An' it's queerer still to think of you an' me sittin' here puzzlin' out these things."

"Yes."

Joan nodded without removing her eyes from the face she loved so well. Then after a pause she went on—

"You think—he's dead?"

Buck was some time before he answered her. His grave eyes were fixed on a spot across the water, where a break in the charred remains of the forest revealed a sky-line of green grass.

“How else?” he said, at last. “He was behind me with your aunt. He was on the hill. You’ve scoured what remains of the plateau. Wal, he ain’t there, an’ he didn’t come down the path wher’ we come. We ain’t see ’em anyways. Yep,” he went on, with a sigh, “guess the Padre’s dead, an’ one o’ them rocks down ther’ is markin’ his grave. Seems queer. He went with her. She was the woman he had loved. They’ve gone together, even though she just—hated him. He was a good man an’—he’d got grit. He was the best man in the world an’—an’ my big friend.”

His voice was husky with emotion, and something like a sob came with his last word, and Joan’s eyes filled with tears of sympathy and regret.

“Tell me,” he went on, after a pause. “I ain’t got it right. The fall knocked you plumb out. An’ then?”

His eyes were still on the distant break of the trees.

“I don’t know what happened,” Joan said wearily, spreading out her drenched skirt to the now blazing sun. “I know I woke up quite suddenly, feeling so cold that even my teeth were chattering. The rain was falling like—like hailstones. It was dark, so dark, and I was terribly afraid. I called to you, but got no answer, and—and I thought I was alone. It was terrible. The thunder had ceased, and the lightning was no longer playing. There was no longer any forest fire, or—or earthquakings. All was still and black, and the rain—oh, it was dreadful. I sat where I was, calling you at intervals. I sat on, and on, and on, till I thought the dark would never go, that day would never break again, and I began to think that all the world had come to an end, and I, alone, was left. Then at last the rain stopped, and I saw that day was breaking. But it was not until broad daylight that I knew where I was. And then—and then I saw you lying close at my feet. Oh, Buck, don’t let me think of it any more. Don’t remind me of it. It was awful. I believed you were dead—dead. And it seemed to me that my heart died, too. It was so dreadful that I think I—I was mad. And then—you saved me—again.”

Buck raised a stiff arm and gently drew her toward him with a wonderfully protecting movement. The girl yielded herself to him, and he kissed her sweet upturned lips.

“No, little Joan, gal. Don’t you think of it. We got other things to think of—a whole heap.”

“Yes, yes,” cried the girl eagerly. “We’ve got life—together.”

Buck nodded with a grave smile.

“An’ we must sure keep it.”

He released her and struggled to his feet, where he stood supporting himself by clinging to a projection of rock.

“What do you mean, Buck? What are you going to do?” Joan demanded anxiously, springing to her feet and shaking out her drenched skirt.

“Do? Why, look yonder. Ther’ across the water. Ther’ wher’ them burnt-up woods break. See that patch o’ grass on the sky-line? Look close, an’ you’ll see two—somethings standin’ right ther’. Wal, we got to git near enough that way so Cæsar can hear my whistle.”

“Cæsar? Is—is that Cæsar? Why—how——?”

Buck nodded his head.

“Maybe I’m guessin’. I ain’t sayin’. But—wal, you can’t be sure this ways off. Y’ see, Cæsar has a heap o’ sense, an’ his saddle-bags are loaded down with a heap o’ good food. An’ you’re needin’ that—same as me.”



CHAPTER XXXIX

LOVE'S VICTORY

The rightness of Buck's conjecture was proved before evening, but not without long and painful effort. Joan was utterly weary, and the man was reduced to such weakness and disability as, in all his life, he had never known.

But they faced their task with the knowledge that with every moment of delay in procuring food their chances of escape from that land of ruin were lessening. With food, and, consequently, with Buck's horse, safety would be practically assured. They would then, too, be able to prosecute a search for the man they both had learned to love so well.

With nightfall their hopes were realized, but only at a terrible cost to the man. So great had become his weakness and suffering that it was Joan who was forced to make provision for the night.

Both horses were grazing together with an unconcern that was truly equine. Nor, when reviewed, was their escape the miracle it appeared. At the height of the storm they had been left on the farthest confines of the plateau of Devil's Hill, where no fire would reach them, and at a considerable distance from the lake. Their native terror of fire would have held them there in a state bordering on paralysis. In all probability no power on earth could have induced them to stir from the spot where they had been left, until the drenching rain had blotted out the furnace raging below. This had been Buck's thought. Then, perhaps, laboring under a fear of the quakings caused by the subterranean fires of the hill, and their hungry stomachs crying out for food, they had left the dreaded hill in quest of the pastures they craved.

The well-stocked saddle-bags, which Buck's forethought had filled for the long trail, now provided these lonely wanderers in the wilderness with the food they needed, the saddle-blankets and the saddles furnished their open-air couches, and the horses, well, the horses were there to afford them escape when the time came, and, in the meantime, could be left to recover from the effects of the storm and stress through which they, too, had passed.

With the following dawn Buck's improvement was wonderful, and Joan awoke

from a deep, night-long slumber, refreshed and hopeful. An overhauling of their supplies showed them sufficient food, used sparingly, to last a week. And with this knowledge Buck outlined their plans to the girl, who hung upon his every word.

“We can’t quit yet,” he said, when they had broken their fast.

The girl waited, watching his dark contemplative eyes as they looked across the water at the diminished hill.

“Nope,” he went on. “We owe him more’n that. We must chase around, an’—find him. We must——”

“Yes,” Joan broke in, her eyes full of eager acquiescence. “We must not leave him—to—to—the coyotes.” She shuddered.

“No. Guess I’ll git the horses.”

“You? Oh, Buck—let me. I am well and strong. It is my turn to do something now. Your work is surely finished.”

Her pleading eyes smiled up into his, but the man shook his head with that decision she had come to recognize and obey almost without question.

“Not on your life, little gal,” he said, in his kindly, resolute fashion, and Joan was left to take her woman’s place in their scheme of things.

But she shared in the search of the hill and the woods. She shared in the ceaseless hunt for three long, weary, heart-breaking days over a land of desolation and loneliness. She rode at Buck’s side hour after hour on the sturdy horse that had served the Padre so faithfully, till her body was healthily weary, and her eyes grew heavy with straining. But she welcomed the work. For, with the tender mother eye of the woman in her, she beheld that which gladdened her heart, and made the hardest work a mere labor of love. Each passing day, almost with each passing hour, she witnessed the returning vigor of the man she loved. His recuperative powers were marvelous, and she watched his bodily healing as though he were her own helpless offspring.

For the rest their search was hopeless. The battling forces of a storm-riven earth had claimed their toll to the last fraction, and with the cunning of the miser had secreted the levy. Not a trace was there of any human life but their own. The waters from the hill swept the little valley, and hugged to their bosom the secrets

that lay beneath their surface. And the fall of rock held deeply buried all that which it had embraced in its rending. The farm was utterly destroyed, and with it had fallen victims every head of stock Joan had possessed. The old fur fort had yielded to the fire demon, where, for all the ages, it had resisted the havoc of storm. There was nothing left to mark the handiwork of man, nothing but the terrible destruction it had brought about.

Thus it was on the fourth morning, after breaking their fast, and the horses had been saddled, Buck once more packed the saddle-bags and strapped them into their places behind the saddles. Joan watched him without question. She no longer had any question for that which he chose to ordain.

When all was ready he lifted her into her saddle, which she rode astride, in the manner of the prairie. She was conscious of his strength, now returned to its full capacity. She was nothing in his arms now, she might have been a child by the ease with which he lifted her. He looked to her horse's bridle, he saw that she was comfortable. Then he vaulted into Cæsar's saddle with all his old agility.

"Which way, Buck?" The girl spoke with the easy manner of one who has little concern, but her eyes belied her words. A strange thrill was storming in her bosom.

"Leeson Butte," said Buck, a deep glow shining in his dark eyes.

Joan let her horse amble beside the measured, stately walk of Cæsar. Her reins hung loose, and her beautiful eyes were shining as they gazed out eagerly ahead. She was thrilling with a happiness that conflicted with a strange nervousness at the naming of their destination. She had no protest to offer, no question. It was as if the lord of her destiny had spoken, and it was her happiness and desire to obey.

They rode on, and their way lay amidst the charred skeleton of a wide, stately wood. The air was still faint with the reek of burning. There was no darkness here beyond the blackened tree trunks, for the brilliant summer sun lit up the glades, which, for ages, no sun's rays had ever penetrated. The sense of ruin was passing from the minds of these children of the wilderness. Their focus had already adapted itself. Almost, even, their youthful eyes and hearts saw new beauties springing up about them. It was the work of that wonderful fount of hope, which dies so hardly in us all, and in youth never.

At length they left the mouldering skeletons behind them, and the gracious, waving, tawny grass of the plains opened out before their gladdened eyes. A

light breeze tempered the glorious sunlight, and set ripples afloat upon the waving crests of the motionless rollers of a grassy ocean.

Buck drew his horse down to a walk beside the girl, and his look had lost its reflection of the sadness they were leaving behind. He had no desire now to look back. For all his life the memory of his “big friend” would remain, for the rest his way lay directly ahead, his life, and his—hope.

“It’s all wonderful—wonderful out here, little Joan,” he said, smiling tenderly down upon her sweet face from the superior height at which Cæsar carried him. “Seems like we’re goin’ to read pages of a—fresh book. Seems like the old book’s all mussed up, so we can’t learn its lessons ever again.”

Joan returned the warmth of his gaze. But she shook her head with an assumption of wisdom.

“It’s the same book, dear, only it’s a different chapter. You see the story always goes on. It must go on—to the end. Characters drop out. They die, or are—killed. Incidents happen, some pleasant, some—full of sadness. But that’s all part of the story, and must be. The story always goes on to the end. You see,” she added with a tender smile, “the hero’s still in the picture.”

“An’ the—gal-hero.”

Joan shook her head decidedly.

“There’s no heroine to this story,” she said. “You need courage to be a heroine, and I—I have none. Do you know, Buck,” she went on seriously, “when I look back on all that’s gone I realize how much my own silly weakness has caused the trouble. If I had only had the courage to laugh at my aunt’s prophecies, my aunt’s distorted pronouncements, all this trouble would have been saved. I should never have come to the farm. My aunt would never have found the Padre. Those men would never have fired those woods when they burnt my farm, and—and the gentle-hearted Padre would never have lost his life.”

It was Buck’s turn to shake his head.

“Wrong, wrong, little gal,” he said with a warmth of decision. “When you came to us—to me, an’ we saw your trouble, we jest set to work to clear a heap o’ cobwebs from your mind. That was up to us, because you were sure sufferin’, and you needed help. But all we said, all we told you not to believe, those things were sure marked out, an’ you, an’ all of us had to go thro’ with ’em. We can’t

talk away the plans o' Providence. You jest had to come to that farm. You jest had to do all the things you did. Maybe your auntie, in that queer way of hers, told you the truth, maybe she saw things us others didn't jest see. Who can tell?"

Joan's eyes lit with a startled look as she listened to the man's words. They made her wonder at the change in him. Had that terrible cataclysm impressed him with a new view of the life by which he was surrounded? It might be. Then, suddenly, a fresh thought occurred to her. A memory rose up and confronted her, and a sudden joyous anxiety thrilled her.

"Do you really think that, Buck?" she cried eagerly. "Do you? Do you?"

"Things seem changed, little gal," he said, half ruefully. "Seems to me the past week's been years an' years long." He laughed. "Maybe I got older. Maybe I think those things now, same as most folks think 'em—when they get older."

But Joan was full of her own thought, and she went on eagerly, passing his reasons by.

"Listen, Buck, when Aunt Mercy told me all my troubles, she told me something else. But it seemed so small by the side of those other things, that I—that I almost forgot it. What was it? Her words? Yes, yes, I asked her, was there no hope for me? No means by which I could be saved from my fate? And she said that my only hope lay in finding a love that was stronger than death. These were her words——

"I loved your father with a passion nothing, no disaster could destroy. Go you, child, and find you such a love. Go you and find a love so strong that no disaster can kill it. And maybe life may still have some compensations for you, maybe it will lift the curse from your suffering shoulders. It—it is the only thing in the world that is stronger than disaster. It is the only thing in the world that is stronger than—death."

Her words dropped to a whisper as she finished speaking, and she waited, like a criminal awaiting sentence, for the man's judgment on them. Her eyes were downcast, and her rounded bosom was stirring tumultuously. What would he say? What would he think? And yet she must have told him. Was he not the one person in the world who held her fate in his hands? Yes, he must know all there was in her mind. And she knew in her heart that he would understand as she wanted him to understand.

Buck suddenly reined Cæsar in, and brought him to a standstill, turning him about so that he looked back upon the world they were leaving behind them forever. In silence Joan responded to his movement, and her horse closed up against the other.

“Guess your auntie’s notions were all queer, so queer they’re mighty hard to understand,” he said reflectively. “But seems to me she’s hit a big truth some way. That curse is sure lifted—sure, sure.”

He pointed at the grim outline of Devil’s Hill, now fading in the distance.

“Look ther’ yonder. Yonder’s the disaster, yonder is—death. An’ we—we’ve sure passed through it. She’s right. Our love is stronger than disaster—stronger than death.”

Then he turned and gazed ardently into her upturned face. “Guess we sure found that love together, little gal. An’ it’s ours to keep forever an’ ever. Ther’ ain’t no other love comin’ around. I’m yours fer jest so long as I have life, an’ you—wal, you’re jest my whole, whole world.”

He leant toward her, his dark eyes shining with his great love. Reaching out he drew her toward him, his strong, protecting arm encircling her slim waist.

“Say, little gal,” he went on urgingly, “we’re goin’ right on now to Leeson Butte. Ther’s a passon ther’ who can fix us right. An’ when that’s done, an’ ther’ ain’t nuthin’ in the world can come between us, why, then I sure got two mighty strong hands yearnin’ to git busy handin’ you those things which can make a woman’s life easy, an’—an’ happy. Will you come, little Joan? Will you sure come?”

His eager young face was close to hers, and his deep breath fanned her warm cheek. She gave him no verbal reply. At that moment she had no words. But she turned toward him. And, as she turned, her lips met his in one long, passionate kiss. He needed no other reply. She was giving him herself. It was the soul of the woman speaking.

Some moments later their horses were again heading for Leeson Butte. The eyes of the girl were shining with a happiness such as she had never known before, and Buck sat with head erect, and the light of a great purpose in his eyes. For a while they rode thus. Then the man’s eyes twinkled with a sudden thought. For a moment he glanced at the golden head so close beside him. Then he smiled.

“Say, little Joan,” he cried, “guess you’re that gal-hero after all.”

Joan responded to his look.

“How?” she inquired, with a heightened color.

“Why, jest git a look at me. Me! You’re goin’ to marry me! I’d sure say you’ve a heap more grit than any gal-hero I’ve heard tell of.”

Joan surveyed his unkempt figure,—the torn clothing, his unshaven face; the bandages made of her own undergarments, which he still wore,—and the happy smile on her young face broadened.

“Well, you see, Buck, dear,” she said joyously, “you can’t be a proper hero if you don’t carry the scars of battle on you.” She sighed contentedly. “No, I’m afraid it doesn’t need much ‘grit’ to marry you.”

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