

ANNA BARBOUR

THE AWARD OF JUSTICE;
OR, TOLD IN THE
ROCKIES: A PEN
PICTURE OF THE WEST

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A. Maynard Barbour

The Award of Justice; Or, Told in the Rockies: A Pen Picture of the West

CHAPTER I

The Pacific Express was due at Valley City at 1:45 p.m. Within ten minutes of that time, a spring-board wagon, containing two young men and drawn by a pair of bronchos, suddenly appeared around one end of the dingy little depot. One of the men, dressed in a tweed traveling suit, jumped hastily from the wagon, while the other, who looked like a prosperous young ranchman, seemed to have all he could attend to in holding the restive little ponies, who were rearing and kicking in their impatience at being compelled to stand.

"I'm afraid, Ned," he said, "that you'll have to look out for your traps yourself; these little rats haven't been driven for four days, and they're feeling pretty frisky."

"All right, Tom," responded the other, diving under the seat of the spring-board and bringing out the said "traps," which consisted of two grips, a rifle case, a set of fishing rods, and, last but not least, a large, square case which he handled with great care, and now held up to his companion saying,

"See that, Tom? that's my set of cameras; they're fine too, I tell you."

"But why do you bother to take them around with you all the time, like that?" inquired his friend.

"Oh," replied Ned, "I do that so as to be ready to catch any choice scenes I come across; I'm making a collection of views, you know, and I expect to get a good many on this trip. By the way, I got some stunning views over there at your place this morning, just before breakfast."

"The dickens, you did!" exclaimed Tom, suddenly remembering a ludicrous predicament in which his guest had caught him.

"Oh, yes," said Ned, "and when I get away at a safe distance I'm going to develop them and send them to you. I've got an awfully fine—well, by Jove, if that isn't just my luck!"

Ned had just deposited his belongings on the depot platform and in doing so, noticed a piece of blackboard propped up against the wall, on which were chalked these words, "Train 3 ours late." His eyes seemed riveted to the spot.

"What's the matter now?" asked Tom, who took in the situation at a glance.

"Matter! Why, that blasted train is three hours behind time."

"Too bad!" said Tom, with a grin; "if I'd only known that I needn't have driven my horses so hard."

"Oh, confound those little beasts of yours;" exclaimed Ned, "a little exercise won't hurt them, but to think of three hours in a place like this! and say, don't you know how to spell out here?"

"Well," said Tom, coolly, "I don't hold myself personally responsible for the wording of that blackboard, but I suppose that's the phonetic spelling they used to talk about when I lived east; you see we've adopted it out here, for we westerners have to rustle lively, and don't have time for old-fashioned ways."

"I see," said Ned, rather sarcastically; "perhaps you can tell me why they don't 'rustle' that train along on time."

"I suppose," replied Tom, "it's on account of that wreck two days ago; you know your train was ten hours late yesterday."

"Yes," assented Ned, gazing about him with an expression of intense disgust; "I got here after dark; that's how it comes about that I never realized until the present moment what a paradise this place is. Valley City! I can't see more than a dozen buildings here."

“That’s probably because you’re so near-sighted, my dear boy,” replied Tom; and Ned, who was very sensitive on the subject of his near-sightedness, colored, and readjusted his eye-glasses, while he asked in a tone of despair:

“Well, what am I to do in this beastly place, anyhow?”

“You might take a stroll about the city,” suggested Tom, “if you get lost you’ll have to inquire your way of some of the police. I would be delighted to stay and keep you company, but work on the ranch is rushing and I must hurry back; so I’ll wish you good luck and good-bye.”

“All right, old fellow,” said Ned, shaking hands in a slightly patronizing way, “if you ever get out of this country, and find yourself within the limits of civilization again, just take a run down to the ‘Hub’ and see me.”

“Much obliged,” said Tom, turning around for a parting shot; “I say, Ned, while you’re waiting for the train, you’d better get out your cameras; you might catch some more ‘stunning views’ you know,” and lightly snapping his whip, he started off, the bronchos standing on their forefeet with their heels in the air.

“Good-bye, Tom,” Ned called, after the rapidly retreating spring-board, “if you ever had any brains to lose I’d be anxious about you, but I guess you’re safe enough.”

Tom’s only reply was a crack of the whip, and he and the ponies soon disappeared in a cloud of dust, leaving Ned to survey his surroundings at his leisure.

In the foreground was the low, dingy depot, and on the platform, leaning against the building as though their spinal columns were unable to support them, were two specimens of the genus homo, which were entirely new to the young Bostonian. He gazed at them with undisguised interest, being unable to determine whether they were cow-boys or miners, these being the two classes into which, as he imagined, the western population was about evenly divided. That they immediately classified him, in their western vernacular, as a “tenderfoot,” and a remarkably verdant specimen at that, was not owing to their superior penetration, as it was a self-evident fact.

Mr. Edward B. Rutherford, Jr., prided himself upon being a resident of Boston, a son of one of her best families, and a graduate of Harvard, and it is scarcely to be wondered at if he felt himself slightly superior to ordinary mortals who had not been blessed with these advantages. Nevertheless, the fact remained that Mr. Rutherford’s personal appearance could not be considered especially prepossessing, even when moving in his own sphere where he felt himself, as he would have expressed it, “en rapport” with his surroundings; under other circumstances, as at the present time, it very nearly approached the ludicrous. He was small in stature, but his bump of self-esteem was developed in an inverse ratio to his size. He seemed to be making a constant effort to maintain his dignity at the proper level, in which direction he was greatly assisted by a pair of eye-glasses, perched on a very large and decidedly Roman nose. It had been claimed by his college chums that the eye-glasses were worn for this especial purpose; be that as it may, without their assistance, his task would certainly have been a difficult one, as his eyes, which were very full and round, and surmounted by a pair of extremely high-arched eyebrows, gave him always an expression of exaggerated surprise and bewilderment, which, when intensified as on the present occasion, rendered his appearance very far from the otium cum dignitate to which he aspired. But upon very few is the “giftie” bestowed, “to see oursel’s as ithers see us,” and to many besides the junior Mr. Rutherford, such a vision would be anything but satisfactory.

At the present time, however, Rutherford’s only troubles were his immediate surroundings, and the problem of how to pass the next three hours. The loungers, who by this time had changed to a sitting posture, and who were staring at him with an unwinking fixedness which made him rather nervous, did not seem very congenial companions. The town consisted of merely a few, straggling, unpainted buildings, while in every direction extended the apparently interminable stretches of undulating prairie, partially covered with sage brush and wild cactus. Though early in the season, the heat was intense, and the glare of the sunlight reflected from the patches of white, chalk-like sand, was so blinding as to seem unendurable.

The interior of the depot was even more cheerless than the exterior. A rusty stove, minus one leg, two or three battered benches, a flaming circus poster, and an announcement of the preceding year's county fair constituted the entire furnishing and decoration. No signs of life were visible, the window into the ticket office being closed, while from somewhere within the little inclosure, a telegraphic instrument clicked with a cheerful pertinacity that to Rutherford seemed simply exasperating.

In the course of half an hour, however, the monotony was relieved by the appearance of half a dozen soldiers, who strolled over from a neighboring fort, about two miles distant. Rutherford had soon introduced himself to them, with a formality which they considered highly amusing, and they entertained him with tales of various thrilling adventures and hair breadth escapes, nearly all invented for the occasion, to which he listened with an open-mouthed astonishment that elicited many winks and grins from the blue-coats. Finally, two of them escorted him to a small Indian camp, about a mile distant, which was hidden from view by a sandy knoll, where, in some cottonwood brush, beside a small creek, they found half a dozen tepees, around which were squatted twenty or thirty disreputable-looking Indians, their ponies tethered in the brush near by. The bucks were sullen and uncommunicative, maintaining a solemn silence broken only by an occasional grunt. Their dress was a combination of Indian costume and articles purchased from the white people, the latter being put on to suit the individual taste of the wearer, without the least regard to the use for which it was originally intended. One, who seemed a leader in the camp, in addition to his native toggery of feathers, beads and brass rings, wore trousers of striped bed-ticking, two or three pairs of gayly colored suspenders knotted together for a belt and sash, and a flaming red necktie braided in his hair. The squaws in their blankets were quite socially inclined, and the wig-wams at a little distance looked very romantic to the young easterner, but the odors wafted from them were sufficient for him, and he declined to penetrate any further into the mysteries of an Indian camp; and after taking one or two views of the Indians and their tepees, he returned to the depot.

It was now nearly train time, and the number of loungers and loafers had increased amazingly, considering the size of the town. There were thirty or forty of them, all more or less resembling the first specimens, and Rutherford wondered where they stowed themselves away, not realizing that many came in from little shacks scattered over the prairies; for to them, the coming of the train from the east was the one great event of the day.

Among them Rutherford noticed a man, who, though clad as roughly as the others, yet had an individuality so distinct from them as to be noticeable even to a stranger. He wore an old soft hat and rough blouse, his trousers being tucked into a pair of heavy, hobnailed boots that reached to his knees. He was tall and stooped slightly, but there was none of the slouching figure and gait that characterized those around him. His movements were quick, and, when standing motionless, there was something in his very pose that conveyed an impression of alertness and of latent strength. His back was turned toward Rutherford, who was watching him under a sort of subtle fascination, when suddenly he wheeled, facing him. His eyes were keen and piercing, and as he looked for an instant at Rutherford with an expression of suspicion and distrust, and then seemed to survey his diminutive figure with a quick glance of contempt, that young man felt a sudden and violent terror in his inmost soul, which was not lessened when his eyes fell upon a sheath knife and huge revolver in the stranger's belt. Involuntarily Rutherford's hand went to his hip pocket, where reposed a dainty, pearl-handled Smith and Wesson, 38-calibre, but he immediately regretted the movement, for the blue-black eyes watching him scintillated for a moment with a cold, steel-like glitter, and the lips under the heavy, black beard curled with a smile of fine scorn, that made our young hero exceedingly uncomfortable.

The whistle of the approaching train afforded him unspeakable relief, and at the first opportunity he put himself and his belongings aboard with a celerity very remarkable in one of his usual dignity.

CHAPTER II

As the Pacific Express was speeding westward across the prairies, a young man, half reclining among the cushions of the smoking car, was enjoying a choice Havana. He took no note of external objects as they flashed with almost lightning rapidity past the car windows, and he seemed equally unconscious of the presence of his fellow passengers. His dress and manner, as well as his nonchalant, graceful attitude, and even the delicate poise of his cigar, were all indicative of wealth and refinement, and of a courtesy innate, not acquired. His head was slightly thrown back, and with half-closed, dreamy eyes, he watched the coils of blue smoke wreathing and curling above his head, but his mind was actively engaged in planning the details of the new life opening up before him in the west. Walter Everard Houston, of New York, the possessor of a million in his own name, and prospective heir to many millions more, was en route for a small mining camp, far west, in the heart of the Rockies, where he was to fill the position of bookkeeper and corresponding secretary in the office of a mining company, at a salary of one hundred dollars per month.

Mr. Houston's parents had died when he was very young, and he had been tenderly reared in the home of his uncle, his mother's brother, Walter Everard Cameron. Even now, as he watched the blue coils above his head, his memory was going back to the time when he had entered that beautiful home. He recalled the different members of that lovely family, as they then appeared to him; the dark, patrician face of his aunt, with its wondrous beauty, which, in the following years had been so softened and deepened by sorrow that now it was almost saint-like in the calm look of peace and love which it wore, with the soft, snow-white hair surrounding it like a halo of glory. Then his beautiful cousin Edna, with her sunny hair and starry eyes, and her wonderful voice filling the home with music. She had married soon after he entered the family, and went with her husband to a distant, western city, often returning to visit the old home. How well he remembered the last visit! Her baby was then nearly two years old; he could not now recall her name, but she was a little, golden-haired toddler, with her mother's eyes and voice. His cousin was suddenly called home by a telegram that her husband was ill; then, in a day or two, came the news of a frightful railroad accident, a collision and a fire which quickly consumed the wreck. Edna was rescued from the flames, unconscious and dying, but no trace could be found of the little one. Then followed word of the death of Edna's husband; he had died a few hours later than the accident occurred, ignorant of the terrible fate of his wife and child.

Next came the memory of his cousin, Guy Cameron, but a few years older than himself; dark and beautiful like his mother, proud spirited and headstrong, the pride of his parents, but through him came their most bitter sorrow. Through fast living and gambling he became deeply involved, and forged his father's name to several checks, amounting to nearly a hundred thousand; then, overcome by shame and remorse, he had fled in the night, no one knew whither. His father paid the full amount of the debt, without even betraying his son's guilt, and then for years employed the most skillful detectives, trying to bring back the wanderer to the love and forgiveness which awaited him; but in vain, no trace of him existed. The father had long ago given up all hope of ever seeing his boy again, and doubted whether he were living. Only the sweet-faced mother, strong in her mother-love and in her faith in God, believed that he would yet return, and was content to watch and wait.

Meantime, Everard Houston had become like a son to Mr. and Mrs. Cameron. After leaving college, he had been taken by his uncle as a partner into his enormous banking house, and intrusted more or less with the charge of various departments of business with which he was connected, and he had proven himself worthy of the trust reposed in him.

For a number of years, Mr. Cameron had been president of a large investment company, which, among other properties, owned a number of mines in the west which had been represented to be very valuable, and which, at the time of purchase, possessed every indication of being heavy producers of very rich ore. Lately, these mines had not been yielding the profit which it was reasonable to

expect from them, and there were indications of bad management, if not of dishonesty, at the western end of the line. One or two so-called experts had been sent out to investigate, but they had after all so little knowledge of practical mining, that they were unable to produce any tangible evidence against the company who constituted their western agents, although their reports had only tended to strengthen Mr. Cameron's belief that there was underhanded and dishonest dealing somewhere, which could only be detected by a person on the ground whom the western company would not suspect of being personally interested. Happening to learn, through a Chicago firm who were friends of Mr. Cameron's, that the western company were desirous of getting a bookkeeper and confidential clerk, it was decided, after consultation, to send out Everard Houston to take this position. Accordingly, he had gone to Chicago, and the firm there had written a letter to the mining company, recommending him as a young man of their acquaintance, of exceptional ability, reliable, and thoroughly to be trusted in all confidential matters. The company had responded favorably, offering the position to Mr. Houston for one month on trial, at one hundred dollars, his traveling expenses to be paid by them. If he proved satisfactory, they would retain him as long as would be mutually agreeable, and if his services proved as valuable as expected, would increase his salary. Mr. Houston was, therefore, on his way to the mines to accept this position, together with the munificent salary, and hoped to prove so satisfactory as to soon be admitted to the "confidential" clerkship, in which event he anticipated being able to accomplish a nice little piece of detective work.

CHAPTER III

Mr. Houston was aroused from his pleasant reverie by the rather noisy entrance of a young man, who, with flushed face, and manner more indicative of self-assertion than self-possession, passed down the car and took a seat facing himself. This was none other than our friend, Rutherford, who, having secured his berth in the sleeper, and arranged his belongings to his entire satisfaction, immediately repaired to the smoking car to soothe his perturbed and agitated spirits by a cigar.

From under his heavily drooping eyelids, Houston regarded his vis-a-vis with concealed amusement, for he was an apt student of human nature, and possessed an unusual degree of insight into the characteristics of those with whom he was thrown in contact.

Rutherford, on his part, was watching Houston with his usual degree of interest and curiosity. Each was measuring the other from his own standpoint: Houston's prompt decision was,—“A good-hearted fellow, but something of a cad;” while Rutherford's vague surmises, summed up verbally, would have been,—“Nice looking sort of fellow, a gentleman; guess he's got the stuff, too; 'twon't do any harm to make his acquaintance.”

An opportunity for this soon presented itself, for as the conductor passed leisurely through the car, examining tickets, Rutherford discovered that their destinations were the same, and hastily drawing his card case from his pocket, said:

“As we seem likely to be fellow travelers for a while, I should be pleased to make your acquaintance; allow me,” at the same time offering his card.

Houston took the card, greeting him courteously, and giving his own in exchange. He half smiled as he looked at the diminutive slip of cardboard with its Boston address made unnecessarily prominent, while Rutherford, after scanning the card he held, bearing simply the name of W. E. Houston, remarked with a decidedly upward inflection,

“You are from—?”

“From Chicago,” Houston replied promptly.

“Ah,” Rutherford responded, “then I suppose you are quite familiar with this part of the country.”

“Well, not exactly,” replied Houston, smiling, “Chicago, I'll admit, seems inclined to embrace a small part of the state of Illinois within her city limits, but I never heard of her attempting to claim the prairies of the Missouri valley among her suburbs.”

“Well, no,” said Rutherford, laughing, “not quite so bad as that, I guess, but perhaps I didn't convey my meaning very clearly; my idea was, that living in one of the western cities, you know, perhaps you were out this way often.”

“On the contrary, this is my first trip out here.”

“Indeed! A pleasure trip, I presume?”

“No, I am out on business,” replied Houston, not caring to state very definitely just then the nature of his business.

“Well,” said Rutherford, settling himself into an attitude more comfortable than graceful, “I came out on a pleasure trip, but I must say that so far, the pleasure has been rather an uncertain quantity; for the last forty-eight hours, I haven't seen much besides dust, Indians and desperadoes.”

“Forty-eight hours!” exclaimed his companion, “you surely have not been on this train that length of time.”

“Not on this train; I stopped off last night to see an old friend of mine that has a ranch out here,” and forthwith, Rutherford launched into a recital of his experiences of the last few hours, not omitting a description of the man whose appearance had struck such terror to his heart and expedited his departure from Valley City.

“I tell you, he was a man I wouldn’t like to meet in the dark; he was armed to the teeth, and there was a look in his eye that was awfully unpleasant.”

Mr. Houston judged from his companion’s manner that he had not been particularly pleased at meeting this alleged desperado in broad daylight, but he courteously refrained from any such insinuation, and as supper was just then announced, the young men adjourned to the dining car, and the experiences of Mr. Rutherford were, for the time, forgotten.

Nothing special occurred that evening, except that the monotony of the journey was slightly relieved by the train entering upon the Bad Lands. For some time, Houston and Rutherford stood upon the rear platform, enjoying their cigars, and watching the strange phenomena of that weird region; on all sides, vast tracts of ashen gray or black, as if burnt to a crisp, with no sign of life, animal or vegetable, the lurid lights flashing and playing in the distance, until it seemed as though they might be gliding through the borderland of Dante’s Inferno.

Their cigars finished, they separated for the night, to be agreeably surprised by the delightful change that met their eyes the following morning. Houston was already at the breakfast table enjoying the scenery, when Rutherford sauntered into the dining car. They exchanged greetings, and the latter dropped into a seat facing his companion, exclaiming as he did so,

“Well, say now, this looks a little more like civilization, doesn’t it?” and having ordered his breakfast and helped himself to fruit, he proceeded to watch the beautiful panorama flashing past in the sunlight.

They were passing through one of the most fertile valleys of the northwest. Away to the south, a beautiful river glistened like a broad ribbon of silver, and leading from it was a gleaming net-work of irrigating canals and ditches, carrying the life-giving waters over thousands of broad acres; some already green with grass and alfalfa, while others were dotted with scores of men and horses opening the brown earth in long, straight lines of furrows, or scattering broadcast the golden grain.

Far in the distance, faintly outlined against the blue sky, was a fleecy, cloud-like mass, grayish blue at the base, with points here and there of dazzling whiteness, which Houston had known at once as the first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains, but which Rutherford failed to notice.

“Well,” said the latter, withdrawing his head from the window, and preparing to attack his breakfast, “it seems to me, after nearly forty hours of nothing but prairies, it’s about time to see some mountains.”

“They’re in sight now,” responded Houston quietly.

“What!” exclaimed his companion, dropping his knife and fork in haste.

“You can see them now; I’ve been waiting for you to recognize them,” said Houston, smiling; “look off there to the southwest,” he added, as Rutherford was readjusting his eye-glasses, preparatory to a careful survey of the horizon.

“Well, I’ll be blessed!” ejaculated the latter, “I supposed those were clouds. My! but they must be mighty far away, twenty-five miles, I expect, at the least.”

“Sixty miles, at least,” said Houston, glancing at them, “perhaps more.”

“Pardon me, gentlemen,” said a bland voice across the aisle, and the young men, turning, saw a much-bejewelled individual, with a florid, but very smiling face; “I see you have not yet become accustomed to the vast distances of this great country of ours in the northwest. Those mountains which you are discussing are about ninety miles distant.”

Rutherford’s eyes expressed an immense amount of incredulity, while Houston simply bowed silently. The man continued:

“The wonderful rarity of our atmosphere in these altitudes is something that has to be experienced in order to be thoroughly understood and appreciated, or even believed. You tell an eastern man of the great distances here at which you can see and hear, clearly and readily; he will immediately doubt your veracity, simply because it is without the line of his experience. Now I myself,

personally, with my own, unaided vision, have been able to count the mules in a pack-train sixty-three miles distant, and have repeatedly held conversations at a distance of fifteen miles.”

“Guess the conversation was pretty much all on one side, wasn’t it?” asked Rutherford, adding sotto voce to Houston, “as on the present occasion.”

“Ah, no, indeed not,” the man replied; “I see, my young friend, that you are inclined, like all strangers, to be a little incredulous and skeptical, but if you remain in this country of ours any length of time, that will soon pass away, very soon.”

“I don’t think I care to remain here very long then, if it will have any such effect on my brain as that,” said Rutherford.

“You are inclined to be facetious, my friend; that is all right, I appreciate a little witticism myself occasionally. By the way,” he continued, evidently determined to get into conversation with Houston, “I suppose you young gentlemen are out here on business, looking for valuable investments in this wonderful country.”

At the word “Business” Mr. Rutherford instantly assumed his dignity, dropping into the slightly drawling tone he always used on such occasions, and which he intended as an extingisher on any person whom he deemed too familiar.

“Well, no,” he replied, twirling an incipient mustache, “at least, not so far as I am concerned; I am just out on a sort of an extended pleasure trip, you know.”

“Ah, your friend is a business man, I judge; perhaps,” turning to Houston, “we can interest you in some of our rare bargains in the line of real estate, improved or unimproved, city or country; or possibly in our mines, gold or silver properties, quartz or placer, we have them all.”

“You seem to have a ‘corner’ on this part of the northwest?” remarked Rutherford, rather sarcastically.

“Indeed, young man, we have a good many ‘corners,’ pretty valuable ones, too,” the man replied imperturbably, still watching Houston, who replied in a courteous but indifferent tone:

“I am out here on business, but am not in a position to make any investments at present, nor do I expect to be for some time.”

“Ah, your business?” asked his interlocutor.

“I am an accountant,” he replied quietly.

The man seemed satisfied. “Well, gentlemen,” he said, rising from the table, “I am glad to have met you, and hope to have the pleasure of seeing you later in our city. Allow me to present my card, and if there is anything we can ever do for you in our line, please give us a call,” and smilingly handing each a card, he bowed himself out of the car.

“Well, by Jove!” exclaimed Rutherford, his grammar getting a little mixed, “either that man’s a fool, or he thought we were; I don’t know which.”

“Probably the latter,” said Houston, smiling; then glancing at the card beside his plate, he read, “J. D. Wilson, President of the Northwestern Mining, Land and Investment Company, Silver City;” and he was the prospective clerk of The Northwestern Mining, Land and Investment Company!

CHAPTER IV

An hour or two later, the Pacific Express was slowly winding up the long mountain grade, the engine puffing and wheezing in apoplectic fashion, and occasionally emitting short shrieks of protest. The mountains, which had gradually been assuming shape and color, were now looming up in grand proportions, their rugged outlines clearly defined against the sky. Already the mountain breezes, fragrant with the breath of tamarack, spruce and pine, stole in on adventurous wings through the car windows; lifted locks, both golden and silvered, from heated brows, kissed a fretful infant into peaceful slumber, turned the pages of novels and flapped newspapers so persistently that their readers were compelled to abandon them, and brought new energy and inspiration to the languid, listless passengers, so that they began to evince symptoms of interest in their surroundings.

In his favorite lounging attitude, Houston sat, his eyes fixed on the mountains, moment by moment growing more distinct in their rugged grandeur, a half-smile of amusement playing over his face, as he recalled the interview with the president of The Northwestern Mining, Land and Investment Company. Upon inquiry, he had learned that Mr. Wilson had boarded the train at a little way station, before daylight that morning, and the zeal displayed by that gentleman in thus seeking to ascertain something regarding the characteristics of his future clerk, by anticipating his arrival in this manner seemed to Houston decidedly amusing, and at the same time furnished him a clue concerning the character of one of the men with whom he was to be associated.

He was aroused by the entrance of Rutherford, who, having learned that the train would make stops among the canyons they were approaching, was getting his kodak and plates in readiness, preparatory to taking impressions of some of the finest views.

After a few moments, the conversation drifted to the subject of their destination, which they would reach in three or four hours.

"I suppose," said Rutherford, addressing his companion rather hesitatingly, "I suppose you will remain in Silver City for some time?"

"I am not quite certain," he replied, "my impression is, however, that I shall not be detained there more than a day or two."

"Indeed! then are you going on farther west?"

"No, I expect to go out among the mines for a while."

"Among the mines! Now I should think that would be fine; you'll have a chance to see western life in earnest. So you are interested in mines! Well, I thought something of the kind when you said you were out on business. No wonder you were so cool with old Boomerang this morning, and didn't care for any of his wonderful investments."

Houston was silent for a moment, a curious smile playing over his fine features; then watching Rutherford keenly through half-closed eyes, he said,

"On the contrary, instead of being a mine owner, as you surmise, I am the employe of a mining company, and 'old Boomerang,' as you call him, is the president of that company."

Rutherford sat for an instant as if petrified; then managed to gasp, "Great Heavens! are you associated in business with that man?"

"Yes," said Houston, looking almost as if he enjoyed the situation, "associated as employer and employe. I am going out to fill the position of accountant for the same company of which he is president."

"Oh, I see; you are just going to take the position. Did you know all the time who he was?"

"I had no more idea than you until I saw his card; but I think he knew me, was looking around, in fact, to see what his new clerk was like."

"The old beast!" exclaimed Rutherford. His face was a study, it represented so many conflicting emotions; several times he seemed about to speak, then remained silent, looking more and more

perplexed. He was sorely puzzled; Houston was the embodiment of courtesy and refinement, his every word and gesture revealed a man of wealth, education and culture,—and yet, a clerk, and for such a man! and strangest of all, he seemed to feel no chagrin in speaking of his position.

Houston's voice broke in pleasantly upon his cogitations: "I saw it would never do for you to travel about here under such erroneous impressions; imagining you were associating with a heavy capitalist, or a mining broker, when—"

"Oh, hang it all!" interrupted Rutherford, brusquely, "What difference does it make? You're a gentleman, anybody can see that. I'll own up that it did knock me out at first to find you were connected in any way with that old chap; but I know you're all right, and I had no business questioning around as I did about your affairs; I beg your pardon, and I'll explain now why I did it. I'm a stranger out here, and I've taken an awful liking to you, and when we get to Silver City, if you don't mind, I'd like to keep in with you until I get a little accustomed to the ways out here; that is, if you've no objections."

"That's all right," responded Houston cordially, "stay with me as long as you like; and now, let's go out and take a look at the mountains," and the two young men shook hands, each feeling a sort of presentiment that the friendship begun under these peculiar circumstances was one for life, and such it proved.

On reaching the rear platform they discovered that the train was following the course of a river winding through a rocky gorge that grew narrower, moment by moment. The walls grew higher and steeper at every turn, while towering above and beyond were the mountain peaks. They stood clinging to the railings, and watching the rapidly changing scene, as the train swerved and swept from one direction to another, following the winding of the river.

Suddenly the walls shot upward almost perpendicularly for hundreds of feet, shutting out the sunlight, leaving nothing visible but a narrow strip of sky; and still the great rocks came closer and closer, until little more than the width of the car was left, and it seemed that in a moment that must be crushed. The ponderous wheels were slowly revolving over a trestle bridge of steel, mortised into the rocks, while the deafening echoes reverberated between the narrowing walls, and rippled the surface of the river flowing deep and black below. Then suddenly another swift, sharp turn, and they were out in the dazzling sunshine, amidst a scene of untold beauty and grandeur.

Here, at the entrance of the canyon, the train stopped, giving the passengers an opportunity to alight and enjoy the scenery. On all sides rose masses of rock, some fashioned in wondrous beauty, others in forms weird and fantastic; some gray and rugged, some tinted with intermingling shades of color, and others sparkling in the sunlight as though studded with gems innumerable. Here and there were piles of rock, crimson and green and golden, resembling the moss-grown, ivy-covered castles of the olden time. Farther on were mountains covered with heavy forests of pine, through which the winds sighed and whispered mysteriously, while at their feet the little streams lingered lovingly long enough to catch the whispered secrets, and bear them away, laughing and singing, on their journey toward the great sea.

The train moved slowly on to another canyon, more grand in its awful solitude than the first, surrounded on all sides by walls nearly a thousand feet in height. At one side, a broad sheet of water, shimmering in the sunlight, fell, like a bridal veil, down the precipitous rock, with a deafening roar disappearing into unseen depths below, while at the base of the canyon lay a lake of sapphire, in whose calm, untroubled depths, rocks and cascade and sky were mirrored in perfect beauty.

Slowly the train wound its way upward, until it paused again near the summit of the range, on the "divide," the boundary line between the east and the west. There were the serried ranks of the mountains, vast, solemn, grand; and in that awful solitude, under the spell of that eternal silence, a sense of the infinite hushed every tongue, and each one stood with bated breath, as if on holy ground. On every side the billowy ranges surged, like the gigantic waves of a storm-tossed ocean suddenly congealed to stone, while here and there, towered mighty peaks, like huge sentinels, their

brows seamed with furrows plowed by the hand of the centuries, their heads white with the snows of countless ages.

Here two tiny streams flowed side by side, then separated; the one to start on its long journey toward the old Atlantic, the other toward the Golden Gate, to mingle its waters with those of the sunset sea.

Slowly the passengers returned to the train, stopping on their way to gather the little wild flowers growing between the loosened rocks,—frail mountain children of the sun and wind,—to be preserved as souvenirs of the “divide.”

CHAPTER V

Rutherford had so diligently improved the opportunities afforded by the stopping of the train, in securing views of some of the finest scenes, that when the divide was reached, he had only two plates left. These he quickly used, and then gave himself up to silent contemplation and enjoyment of the beauty around him. Very slowly and regretfully he and Houston followed the example of the others, and turned toward the waiting train, like them, picking the delicate wild flowers and pressing them in their note books.

It was during the first of these stops, at the entrance to the canyons, that Rutherford, hastily glancing up from his work, saw, standing among the passengers, a little in the background, the man whom he had last seen at the Valley City depot. He was standing in the same alert, watchful attitude, but the soft hat was drawn downward over his face concealing his eyes, and the knife and revolver were hidden by a rough jacket. He was not then looking toward Rutherford, but was facing in another direction, where Houston was strolling among the rocks, and when, a few moments later, Houston sauntered over to observe his work, Rutherford called his attention to the man, but he was nearly hidden behind a group of men, only a little of his figure being visible. Later, when they were again seated in the car, descending the western grade, Rutherford asked his companion whether he had succeeded in getting a glimpse of the man.

"Yes," said Houston, "a glimpse and no more; once or twice I was near him, but his face was turned the other way. I passed him in taking the train, but I had only a hurried glimpse of his face; it seemed to me that it was a face of unusual intelligence for a man of that class, as I should judge him to be a miner, but I did not think he looked particularly dangerous."

"Wait till you see his eyes," said Rutherford, then inquired, "By the way, did you see the old mining chap anywhere?"

"Oh, yes," said Houston, laughing, "twice; once with a townsite map spread out before him, talking real estate to a couple of men, and again in the smoking car where he was playing poker."

"I didn't see him out looking at the mountains."

"No, probably they have no interest for him, except just so far as they contain gold mines."

They talked of the mountains, and Rutherford suddenly exclaimed, "I wish I could find some way of getting out and camping right among the mountains themselves. I don't care to stop in any little half-civilized western town for any length of time, but if I could just go right out into the heart of the mountains somewhere, and stay for a few weeks, that would be an experience worth having."

Houston smiled; "How would you like a trip out into the part of the country where I am going? As near as I can make out, it is twenty-five miles from the nearest town, just a rough mining camp, with very few people aside from the miners."

"Why," replied Rutherford, "I think that would be fine; anyhow, I'll try it if you have no objections; it will be a change anyway."

And so it was decided that Rutherford should extend his pleasure trip into the mining camp, and Houston was pleased with the arrangement, for, notwithstanding the work which he had planned, he expected to find many lonely hours and monotonous days, little dreaming of the interests that awaited him, or that he was entering upon the most eventful portion of his life.

At about one o'clock the train arrived at Silver City, a town of about fifteen thousand inhabitants. The young men, as they left the train, caught a glimpse of the indefatigable Mr. Wilson as he was boarding a street car in company with two intended victims which he had already secured. They took a carriage, and as they were whirled rapidly through the steep, narrow streets on their way to the hotel, the little city seemed to them like a thoroughly typical, western, mining town. The town was surrounded by mountains, and prospect holes and abandoned placer diggings could be seen in

every direction, while interspersed among the business blocks of brick and stone, were tiny cabins, built of logs,—all relics of the earlier days when Silver City was but a large mining camp.

After lunch, Houston started forth in search of the city office of The Northwestern Mining, Land and Investment Company, which he found without difficulty. He was surprised to discover that business there was conducted on something of a co-operative plan, as the one large room in which he found himself constituted the offices of some half-dozen mining and real estate companies, and was occupied at the time by eight or ten different men, each seated at his own desk, and separated from his neighbors by a little wooden railing. A broad aisle extended through the center of the room, and at the farther end were two or three accountants' desks, two large safes and two typewriters.

The whole arrangement seemed to Houston extremely crowded and confusing, but he afterward learned that it had its advantages; as certain deeds, contracts and leases could be so easily mislaid and lost; then too, it had an effect upon the minds of some of their patrons that was particularly desirable, as they usually left the office in a state of such bewilderment, that they were unable to tell with any degree of certainty, just which one of the many high-sounding companies it was, with which they had entered into agreement, and as the eight or ten men were each connected in some way with all of the companies, they all came in for a share of the profits, no matter who was the victim.

Houston having inquired of a white-haired, benevolent-looking individual at his right, for Mr. Wilson, was politely directed to the third desk on the left-hand side. Here he found Mr. Wilson, who greeted him effusively, and introduced him to Mr. Blaisdell, the general manager of the company. The secretary of the company was, at that moment, doing duty in another part of the room, as president of The North American Townsite & Irrigation Company, consequently Houston did not meet him until later.

As Messrs. Wilson and Blaisdell were just then engaged with a customer, they begged Mr. Houston to excuse them for a few moments, which he did very willingly, and thus was afforded an opportunity to observe the two men closely. Mr. Blaisdell had rather a long and narrow face, and what is called a "sandy" complexion; his hair, face and small goatee (he wore no mustache) were all of the same, light, indefinite color; his eyes were small and pale blue, while his lips were thin and tightly compressed. His face, when at rest, had a sanctimonious expression which was sadly at variance with the avaricious, grasping look which it instantly assumed when animated. He said little, but Houston soon discovered that he was in reality the head man of the company, while Mr. Wilson was but the mouthpiece.

In the twenty or thirty minutes which elapsed before these gentlemen could give Mr. Houston their undivided attention, he obtained sufficient insight into their characters, and enough of an inkling of their business methods, to make him more determined than ever to unearth their schemes, and doubly anxious to succeed in the role which he had assumed.

As soon as they were at liberty, Mr. Wilson and the general manager turned very smilingly toward their new clerk, and after some questions regarding his business qualifications and experience, all of which he answered in a manner very satisfactory, they proceeded to give him detailed instructions relating to his future duties in the branch office, at the mining camp.

"Of course," remarked Mr. Wilson, "you understand that as you become accustomed to the business, greater responsibility will devolve upon you; for the present, you are to have charge of the books and our correspondence from that point; and when you have sufficiently familiarized yourself with the details of the business, we shall expect you, in Mr. Blaisdell's absence, to take charge of the office, to receive the reports of the different superintendents and foremen of the mines, and if necessary, to inspect the work at the mines yourself, occasionally, in order to see that our instructions are being carried out."

Houston thought that this included quite a range of work for an accountant, but as he was only too glad of the opportunities which would thus be afforded him for his own investigations, he raised no objections.

"I suppose, Mr. Houston," added Mr. Blaisdell, very deliberately, "it is unnecessary to say that in a position of this kind, we require the utmost secrecy on your part regarding the affairs of the company. In giving you this very responsible position, we repose great confidence in you, and we expect you to prove yourself worthy of it."

"Oh well," chuckled Mr. Wilson, "I should say, judging by Mr. Houston's appearance on the train this morning, he understands the art of preserving a golden silence as well as any one I ever saw. It was all I could do to get a dozen words out of him."

Mr. Blaisdell smiled in a way that Houston understood he had received a full account of the meeting on the train. There being little more to be said, Houston inquired regarding accommodations at the camp, stating that a young acquaintance of his wished to remain in the mountains for a week or two.

"Is he interested in mines?" inquired Mr. Blaisdell.

"Oh, no," replied Houston, "he is the young man who informed Mr. Wilson he was out on an extended pleasure trip, and he imagines it would be great sport to be out in a genuine mining camp for a while, as far from civilization as possible."

"That's all right," responded Mr. Blaisdell, "I was only going to state that we allow no visitors through the mines except those who are personally interested, or who have intentions of becoming purchasers, but if your friend merely wants to stop among the mountains for the fun of the thing, why, he's welcome to stay all summer for aught I care. As to accommodations, I think we can fix you both very comfortably. There are two boarding houses near the mines, for the miners, of course you would not go there; but old Jim Maverick and his wife run a boarding house about a quarter of a mile from there that is very good, and is a sort of stopping place for any tourists that find their way out there. I stop there myself, and I know Maverick and his wife are glad of all the boarders they can get. I believe they already had a lady when I was there last week, a school teacher or something of that sort, who had just come, and I think you will find it very comfortable there."

Having learned that they would have to start for the camp at eight o'clock the next morning, Houston took his leave, promising to be in readiness at that time. He next visited a number of assay offices, where he learned a good many valuable points regarding the different classes of ore in that vicinity; then having purchased two or three works on practical mining and mineralogy, which he thought might be of assistance to him, he returned to the hotel, where he entertained Rutherford until dinner with an account of their trip to be taken on the morrow and the accommodations that awaited them, with the added attraction of the society of a solitary school teacher, whom their imaginations already depicted as of uncertain age, with short hair and spectacles. Many were Rutherford's speculations concerning this individual.

"I've had the pleasure of the acquaintance of two specimens of that class," said he, "one was in the Catskill Mountains; she had a geological fad, and went out every morning with a little hammer, to hammer among the rocks all day; the other was a botanist, and returned every evening about covered with plants which she had pulled up, root and branch; I wonder which of them this one will resemble."

"We shall soon see," said Houston.

CHAPTER VI

Nearly twenty-five miles from the nearest town, and not a human being visible from the point of observation occupied by Miss Gladden, as she slowly swung backward and forward in her hammock under the pines, half way up the mountain side; and the only sign of human life was a faint, blue smoke curling upward among the evergreens on one side, at the base of the mountain.

Directly at the foot of the mountain lay a small lake of azure blue, at one end of which was a narrow bridge crossing the stream which formed the outlet to the lake, and from which a footpath wound in the direction of the solitary house from which the smoke ascended. At the other extremity of the lake, where the gulch narrowed into a deep ravine, walled with irregular masses of gray rock, a mountain stream came dashing down over the ledges, forming a series of cascades, and with a final leap plunged into the azure waters. It was a wild, solitary place, and had there been another human being visible, he doubtless would have been much astonished at the sight of a young lady, dressed in the height of fashion, lazily swinging to and fro, half way up the pine covered mountain.

But for Miss Gladden the charm of the situation lay in its solitude; she was tired of society, and, glad to free herself for a while at least from its conventionalities, was congratulating herself upon her good fortune in finding this retreat, all unconscious that others were already entering into her little world, soon to enter into her heart and life.

As she swung dreamily under the pines she was aroused by a clear, musical voice calling her name, and turning, saw the lithe, slender form of Lyle Maverick, the daughter of her host, rapidly approaching. Although Miss Gladden had been but a few days among the mountains, there already existed between her and Lyle Maverick a mutual admiration, though each was, as yet, unconscious of the admiration of the other.

Lyle secretly worshipped Miss Gladden as the most beautiful being she had ever seen, nor was it strange, for Leslie Gladden had all her life received the homage always yielded to beauty, and from hearts far less susceptible than that of this untutored child of the mountains; but Lyle, notwithstanding her surroundings and her disadvantages, was proud spirited, and did not proclaim her admiration for the beautiful stranger. Miss Gladden, on her part, admired the imperious mountain maid, as the loveliest specimen of uncultured, untrained girlhood, just blossoming into womanhood, that she had ever met. She wondered how she came to be so unlike her surroundings, and what would be the result if this wild mountain flower could be transplanted to some more favorable spot, there to receive the care and nurture bestowed on so many far less beautiful. She had within the last few days, led by a desire to know the proud, shy girl, made a companion of her; this was a new experience for Lyle, and was fast deepening her admiration for Miss Gladden into confidence and regard.

Miss Gladden watched Lyle now, as she came up the mountain path, as fleet of foot and graceful in every motion as a deer, her head thrown proudly back, her wavy hair rippling over her shoulders to her waist, and shining in the sunlight like fine spun gold.

"Oh, Miss Gladden," she exclaimed, as, having reached the group of pines, she threw herself carelessly at the foot of one of them, "the solitude and isolation which you have prized so highly are to be invaded by two new boarders of masculine gender."

A slight frown gathered on Miss Gladden's face, at the prospect of intruders thus encroaching upon the mountain retreat which she was beginning to regard as hers exclusively. Lyle, watching her, saw the frown, and continued, her eyes dancing with mischief:

"They are city gentlemen, too, from the east; from Chicago and from Boston, only think of the honor conferred upon us! They have come from the land of civilization and culture to the wild west, to see how we barbarians live; at least that is the object of one of them who is out on a pleasure trip, for that is usually the meaning of western pleasure trips."

"Lyle, are you not rather severe? They come for the sake of the scenery, or as I have, for rest."

“A few for rest perhaps, but scenery? nonsense! Look at the majority of your ‘western stories,’ as they are called; how much is there in them of scenery? A few lines here and there, but pages devoted to descriptions of western life with its ignorance and uncouthness.”

“But stories of western life usually contain a great deal of originality and piquancy; that is why they are popular.”

“Possibly,” said Lyle dryly, “but I have seen very little originality in the life I have led here. It may seem original to outsiders; it is monotonous enough to those who live it, year after year. The scenery of the west is grand, I love it, and if I could see it with such eyes as yours, eyes accustomed to beauty in all its infinite kinds and degrees, and with a mind cultivated, fed on the choicest thought than can be culled not only from our own country and in our own tongue, but from other countries and in other tongues as well, I would appreciate the beauty about me more keenly than I can now; but I despise this life in which I have been reared, a life of ignorance, coarseness, brutality and deceit. Here I have lived for the past ten years, here I am likely to live for ten, twenty years to come.”

Both were silent for a few moments, while Miss Gladden watched the beautiful face, in this instance an index of an equally beautiful soul, and she marveled more than ever. At last she said gently:

“Lyle, dear, pardon me for asking such a question, but you are an anomaly; how is it, living all these years as you have, in these surroundings, that you have so good an education? You have evidently read considerable, and you converse well; you cannot be called ignorant.”

“No,” the girl replied sadly, “I am not quite so ignorant as a stranger would think to see me, but I have learned just enough to make me realize how little I do know, and that little I have acquired by stealth. I could read a very little when we came here from some small town, somewhere in the east, I have forgotten where, and I wanted to learn, but father forbade it; he said he wouldn’t have any of his children putting on airs, that what was good enough for him would have to do for them. He has always been severe with me, I suppose he didn’t want any girls, that’s what mother says. Mother was always as kind to me as she dared to be, but she was afraid to help me to learn anything, and she couldn’t have taught me much anyway. I studied every little bit of print I could come across, if it were nothing more than a scrap of newspaper, I was so anxious to be able to read. Then, when I was about twelve years old, a little girl who stayed here one summer with her governess, left some of her old, worn-out school books and writing books. I hid them in my room as carefully as if they had been diamonds, and pored over them every chance I could get for the next year. About that time, I got acquainted with one of the miners who had been here a long time, a strange, silent man, who was very different from the others, and who kept by himself. He seemed to take a great liking to me, and I consider him to-day the best friend that I have in the world. He found out how I was studying and trying to learn, and he helped me, for he had had a fine education. He bought books for me, not only school books, but choice books to read, stories, poems and plays, and he has talked with me a great deal, and told me about places and people and authors, and so has saved me from being a total ignoramus.”

“How kind!” exclaimed Miss Gladden, “I don’t wonder that you consider him your friend. Is he here now?”

“Yes,” replied Lyle, “he has been away for a few days, but he came back last night, and I went down to his cabin to see him. He brought me some beautiful books, but I keep them at his cabin most of the time, so no one at the house will get hold of them.”

“Does he live alone?” asked Miss Gladden.

“No, an Irishman, who has a pretty good education, lives with him most of the time; he is quite a musician and is teaching me to play the violin. ‘Mike’ they call the Irishman, and my friend is ‘Jack’; the other miners nicknamed him ‘Lone Jack,’ but nobody, I suppose, knows what their real names are.”

“Why, how interesting!” exclaimed Miss Gladden. “Why haven’t you ever told me before? It sounds like a story with a deep-laid plot, and a typical villain lurking somewhere.”

“There are plots enough, and villains enough, but Jack is not one of them,” quietly replied the girl, with a curious expression.

“Would he let me come and see him?” inquired Miss Gladden.

“He might, if I asked him, but you would find him very uncommunicative. He does not care for strangers. He was telling me last night about a comical, dudish looking fellow whom he saw on the train, and who got off at Silver City, and he said he was coming up here into the mountains in company with another young gentleman; he thought I would be likely to see them, and I think they are the new boarders.”

“Why, have you seen them?” asked Miss Gladden, in surprise.

“Yes,” laughed Lyle, “one of them, from my post of observation behind the kitchen door, and he did appear so ridiculous with his gold eye-glasses, looking as solemn as an owl, and glancing around with that expression of supercilious curiosity, as though he expected to find us all wild Indians, or something of the sort.”

“Ah, that accounts for the little tirade against western pleasure tourists I heard when you first came up. Evidently the eye-glasses did not produce a very favorable impression on you.”

“Well,” retorted Lyle, “see him yourself, and see what impressions you will receive.”

“Well, my dear,” said Miss Gladden, “as it is nearly dinner time, I would suggest that we adjourn to the house, alleviate these pangs of hunger, take an observation of the gold eye-glasses and report our impressions later.”

“Agreed,” said Lyle merrily, and the two began to descend the mountain.

CHAPTER VII

Houston and Rutherford were promptly at the depot, as agreed, to take the early morning train to the mines.

Mr. Blaisdell met them with a great show of cordiality, his thin lips contracted into a smile which was doubtless intended to be very agreeable, but which produced a sensation exactly the reverse.

“Well,” Rutherford began, with his peculiar drawl, when he and Houston were seated together in the car, with Mr. Blaisdell safely engaged in conversation at a little distance, “I can’t say that I’m any more favorably impressed with Mr. Buncombe, or whatever his name is, than I was with old Boomerang yesterday. That fellow looked like a silly, pompous, old fool, and this one like a sly, old villain. I wish he’d stop that confounded, wolfish grin of his, it makes me feel uncomfortable, he looks as if he knew he had his prey just dead easy, and his chops were watering in anticipation. I say, old fellow, I don’t think much of this Buncombe-Boomerang combination of yours, and I guess it’s a good thing I’m along with you till we find out what sort of a trap we’re getting into.”

Houston smiled; Rutherford had expressed his own opinion a great deal nearer than he cared to admit. He had seen enough of the men with whom he was to be associated to convince him that they were villains, cowardly villains too, the very sort of men that would be most desperate and dangerous when cornered; but he was fast laying his plans, and now the only drawback seemed that he would have no assistant, and he felt the time would come when he would need one, and some one familiar with mining. An expert from the east would not do, he would be suspected; and a detective would not possess the necessary information regarding mining in general, and these mines in particular. At times, a vague idea of taking Rutherford into his confidence came into his mind, but he was not ready to do this yet, if at all.

All this flashed through Houston’s mind as Rutherford made the above remark, and he answered:

“I don’t apprehend any particular danger at present, but I am glad you are with me.”

“The question with me is,” continued Rutherford, “how I’ll amuse myself during your office hours in such a region as this; I don’t imagine I’ll find a great many congenial companions.”

“You seem to have forgotten the school teacher,” Houston remarked, with a quiet smile.

“Oh, bother the school ma’am! I had forgotten her. I suppose she’ll be as graceful as a scalene triangle, and about as entertaining as a mummy. They’re mostly that kind, or else the gushing, adoring sort, that can’t talk of anything but Browning, or Emerson, or theosophy, or something of that kind; and the most conceited lot of creatures that ever lived.”

Meanwhile, the train wound in and out among the mountains, stopping for a few moments at a small town where huge smelters were pouring forth their clouds of dense smoke, darkening the air until it seemed more like night than day; then on a few miles farther, to the little station known as the “Y,” so-called on account of the form of the spur tracks owned by the mining company, by which the ore was brought down from the mines above.

At the station was a store containing general mining supplies, with the post-office in one front window, a boarding and lodging house, and three or four saloons and gambling houses, these last designed to catch the wages of the miners from the surrounding camps.

Mr. Blaisdell having found one of the superintendents who had come down with a team for supplies, they were soon on their way up the gulch, and in the course of an hour were left at the office buildings, while the team went on to the mines.

Here Rutherford waited in the outer room of the little unpainted, frame building, while Mr. Blaisdell took Houston into the further room, and introduced him to Morgan, the general superintendent, and to his work, at the same time. Then, having seen Houston duly installed at his

post of duty, perched on a wabby stool, before a rickety, ink-bespattered desk, beside a window gray with the dust and smoke of ages, through which a few straggling sunbeams fell, Mr. Blaisdell sailed complacently forth to escort Rutherford to Jim Maverick's boarding house, whither the baggage had already been taken by the team; then, all necessary arrangements for rooms and board having been completed, he went out to the mines, leaving Rutherford alone in the camp of the Philistines. He found no one, however, more formidable than Mrs. Maverick, an old woman bent nearly double, with white hair and hollow, deep-sunken eyes, so faded it was impossible to tell what their original color might have been, and the "help," a stout, red-cheeked, coarse-featured girl of fifteen, whom Mrs. Maverick called "Minty," but who rejoiced in the euphonious name of Araminta Bixby, and who ogled and grinned at Rutherford until he found the task of preserving his dignity more difficult than ever.

In the course of an hour he sauntered down to the office to meet Houston, and a little later the two sat in the porch of the low, wide-spreading house, partly frame and partly of logs, the roof of the porch supported by the trunks of slender trees, unhewn, from which even the bark had not been removed.

From the porch there was a view of the lake, and in the distance the gleaming cascades, while just opposite, the gulch road followed its winding course and disappeared among the mountains.

Presently there came up the winding road three men, apparently father and sons,—low-browed, heavy-eyed, brutal looking creatures,—who followed the foot path up toward the house, and glaring sullenly at the young men, shuffled around to the back door.

"Evidently mine host and his sons," remarked Houston.

"Well," replied Rutherford, "I think if I see a few more such specimens as those, I'll take the first train out. Say though, I haven't seen a sign of that school teacher, I begin to think she is a myth."

"Sh!" said Houston quickly, under his breath, "see what you think of this!"

Rutherford turned in the direction Houston was facing, and had two beings just then descended from the mythical regions, he could not have been more astonished than at sight of the pair approaching from the lake. The first was a young girl, apparently about sixteen, but tall and well developed, the scant garments that she wore revealing the beautifully rounded outlines of her form, her carriage free and every movement full of grace. Her face was exquisitely beautiful, the features refined and perfect as though chiseled in marble; her eyes shone with a star-like brilliancy, and her hair fell about her shoulders like a mass of burnished gold.

Beside her was a woman several years her senior, equally beautiful, but an altogether different type of beauty; more mature, more perfect and more rare. Tall and splendidly developed, she moved with a queenly grace. Her face was classical in its contours, the profile resembling that of some of the old Grecians, while its beauty was so refined, so subtle, it could not be easily described. Perhaps the eyes were its chief attraction; large and dark, and of Madonna-like depth and tenderness; soulful eyes that reflected every emotion of the pure, womanly nature, as the calm lake mirrors the sunlit sky or the lowering storm-cloud, the silvery moon or the lightning's flash. The wavy, auburn hair, tinged in the sunlight with red gold, was gathered into a knot near the top of a shapely, well-poised head, while stray curls clustered rebelliously about the broad, fair brow, forming a shining aureole.

Like a vision, the pair passed silently into the house, leaving Rutherford, for once in his life, speechless, and Houston watching him, apparently enjoying the situation.

"What's the matter, my boy?" he asked, in a low, laughing tone, "Are you spell-bound?"

"Spell-bound? well, slightly!" responded Rutherford. "Great Heavens, Houston! do they have such women as those out here?"

"Evidently they have some fine samples of the genuine article, but I am not prepared to state how large a stock they carry. I'm positive of one thing though, that within the last three minutes you have changed your mind about taking the next train out. Not all the desperadoes and villains you've met from Valley City out, could drive you away from the mountains now."

“You’re right, they couldn’t,” said Rutherford, with a broad grin, “not if I know myself; no, sir, when I’m in the line of duty nothing can scare me out of it worth a cent, and just now I feel it to be my duty to solve some of the mysteries thickening around me, among them, that of the mountain nymphs.”

“Altogether too substantial for mountain nymphs, my boy,” said Houston, “and you will please remember, while pursuing your line of duty, that I have vouched for your good behavior here, and am in a measure responsible for you, and I don’t want to get into any trouble on your account.”

Rutherford cleared his throat, and rising slowly with all the dignity he could muster, looked gravely over his glasses at Houston in exact imitation of Mr. Blaisdell, and in an oracular tone remarked:

“And you will please remember, my young friend, that I am out here as your duly constituted guardian, and as such, it is my duty to form the acquaintance of these—ahem!—these fair daughters of Eve, and judge for myself whether or not they will be suitable companions for an unsophisticated youth, like yourself.”

“Good!” said Houston, and after a few more jokes, dinner being announced by the moon-faced Minty, they went in to partake of their first meal in what Rutherford styled the “Hotel de Maverick.”

CHAPTER VIII

A few moments later, Houston and his friend had been duly presented by Mrs. Maverick, to Miss Gladden and to “our daughter, Lyle,” the former in a gown of soft, clinging material, of a delicate, golden tint, combined with a reddish brown velvet, which suited her style of beauty to perfection; and Lyle, in dainty white apron, her beautiful hair loosely plaited in an enormous braid, prepared to act in the capacity of waiter.

Never were guests served so deftly, or with such grace and dignity; she seemed absolutely free from all coquettish airs, and although the glances of the two gentlemen were about evenly divided between the beauty at their side and the fair waitress, Lyle carried herself with an equanimity that was remarkable. Not until the arrival, later, of the other boarders, Morgan, the general superintendent, and Haight, the mining expert,—so-called, though his expertness embraced much beside mining,—was there any change in her demeanor; then her eyes flashed, her lips curled, and a look of superb scorn passed over her face, an expression that reminded Rutherford unaccountably of the face he had seen at Valley City.

Old Jim Maverick and his sons were not present, having taken their meal hastily in the kitchen. Beside her husband and sons, poor, old Mrs. Maverick was positively refined. She was a kind-hearted, motherly woman, and looked as though, in her younger days, she might have been very pretty, but poverty, hard work and abuse had very nearly obliterated all traces of youthful bloom, and her face had a hopeless, appealing look which was pathetic.

A little later, Mr. Blaisdell arrived, rubbing his hands and smiling in his usual complacent manner, and he entertained the guests for some time with anecdotes of western life, some of them very well told, but in most of which it was noticeable that he bore a very prominent part.

After dinner, Houston returned to the office in company with Morgan and the expert, two new characters which he was studying attentively. The former was a tall, raw-boned individual, with a genial, good-natured manner, but a weak face; one who would willingly be a tool for any villain, but an unreliable tool. He would betray his best friend, and knowing nothing of honor himself, he did not believe in its existence, among men or women. To him, all men were rogues, all business simply gambling on a large scale, and his only care was to be on the winning side.

Haight was a small, dark man, with soft, insinuating manner, and, in accordance with his pet theory that every person, high or low, rich or poor, might sometime be useful to him in the furtherance of his own objects, he treated every one with punctilious politeness. To some his manner might have been pleasing, but to one with any degree of penetration, the crafty, scheming nature under the thin veneer was very apparent.

Meanwhile, Rutherford had rather reluctantly accepted an invitation from Mr. Blaisdell to go through the mills and visit one or two of the less important mines. The young easterner was soon much interested, as, after having explored one of the smaller mines, the Peep o’Day,—which he thought very appropriately named as he glanced upward from a depth of a few hundred feet,—he was taken to the mills, and there saw the various stages through which the ores pass in the process of reduction. He almost forgot his dislike of Mr. Blaisdell as he listened to his explanation of the different classes of ore, and the various kinds of treatment which they required, and met some of his old college acquaintances,—the sulphates, nitrates, carbonates, and other members of that numerous family,—in new and startling array; for Mr. Blaisdell was thoroughly at home in chemistry and mineralogy, and enjoyed nothing so much as airing the knowledge he possessed in that one direction. Of other branches of science, and even on subjects of general information, he was profoundly ignorant, although blissfully unconscious of the fact.

Rutherford was next shown the method by which the ore ready for shipment was conveyed down the mountain to the cars on the spur tracks, hundreds of feet below, by means of a rail

tramway on trestle work, some three thousand feet in length, having a grade of nine feet per each hundred feet, over which cars of ore were passing, operated by gravity, the weight and velocity of the descending, loaded car, carrying the empty car upward. He thoroughly enjoyed these novel scenes, and congratulated himself upon the many picturesque mining views which he would add to his collection.

As they were passing through one of the sorting rooms, they came upon Mr. Haight seated before a large table covered with specimens of ore, which he was examining with a powerful microscope, while beside him were various chemical and mechanical appliances for testing the different ores. Rutherford was enthusiastic in his admiration of the specimens, particularly those from the copper mines, with their beautiful coloring,—the blending tints of green and purple and blue,—and he created considerable amusement by his ecstasies over a large sample of iron pyrites, which he had mistaken for a splendid specimen of gold ore. Altogether it was a novel and pleasant experience for him, and when he joined Houston later, he felt himself considerably wiser in western lore.

After supper, Mr. Blaisdell and Haight returned to the office for a private conference regarding some new ores which the latter had been testing. Morgan strolled down the gulch in the direction of the Y, drawn by the attractions of the gambling house and dance hall, leaving the two strangers to seek their own amusement, or to be entertained by Miss Gladden; they chose the latter, and, since among the mountains as on the ocean, friendships are quickly formed, the three were soon chatting as pleasantly, out in the low, rustic porch, as though their acquaintance dated back a number of days, instead of only a few hours. At the kitchen door, old Jim Maverick and his sons, with a dozen or so miners, lounged about, smoking their pipes, and enlivened by the blushing, giggling Miss Bixby.

With the latter crowd Lyle would never mingle, much to the indignation of Maverick himself, and the chagrin of two or three would-be admirers, and not feeling at liberty to join, unasked, the group in the porch, she withdrew to her little room up-stairs, and taking from its hiding place one of the new books her friend had brought her, she was for a while unconscious of everything else. Then, as the twilight deepened, she closed the book, and having again concealed it, sat watching the stars just beginning to appear, one by one, and musing, as she often did, on her own life. Why had she not, with her passionate love of the beautiful and her thirst for knowledge, been given the birth and training, the social advantages of any one of that little group below? Or, if the fates had decreed that she must be born in such ignorance and degradation, and spend her life in such surroundings, why had they not given her a nature corresponding to her environment, as indifferent and unambitious as that of the phlegmatic Miss Bixby? Why must she always feel as if she had been born to a better life than this, when in all probability, it must always go on in the same old routine which she hated and despised? She wondered what Jack meant by the questions he had asked her so often lately, as to where they had lived before coming to the mountains, and regarding her earliest recollections. Well, what were her earliest recollections? Something so shadowy she could not determine whether it were remembrance or imagination; but it was a vague idea of light and music and beauty; and why was it that when she heard or read of that bright life, so foreign to her, of which she had never had one glimpse, that it all seemed somehow half familiar? She did not believe she would be very awkward or out of place, if she could step for the first time into some of those bright scenes as she imagined them; why did it all seem so home-like to her?

Meanwhile, the little group below were discussing the same problem that Lyle herself was trying to solve.

"I cannot understand," Rutherford was saying, "how such a style of beauty, so delicate and refined you know, could ever exist in such surroundings."

"She is a mystery," added Houston, "and unless I am greatly mistaken, she has a nature as sensitive and refined as her face."

"You are right, Mr. Houston," replied Miss Gladden, "she possesses a refinement of nature that is wonderful; and not only that, she has a brilliant intellect if she could only have advantages, and

notwithstanding all the difficulties and obstacles with which she has had to contend, she has already acquired a fair education, is remarkably well informed and a good conversationalist.”

A few moments later, Lyle was aroused from her reverie by a familiar voice calling her, and coming down stairs, found Miss Gladden awaiting her.

“You runaway!” she exclaimed, “why have you been hiding when you should have been helping me entertain the new guests?”

“I didn’t think you needed any help,” replied Lyle, brightly.

“You never made a worse mistake in your life,” said Miss Gladden, leading the way out on the porch. “I have been trying to tell these gentlemen something about this country around here, and I have only succeeded in betraying my own ignorance.”

Both gentlemen greeted Lyle pleasantly, and Houston rose and gave her his chair with a grave, gentle courtesy which was new to her, and which she was quick to observe and appreciate. For some time they chatted of the surrounding country, Lyle telling them where the finest scenery, the best hunting and fishing and the pleasantest picnic grounds were to be found.

“About a quarter of a mile from here,” she said, “in Strawberry gulch is a small canyon that has been fitted up for tourists and excursionists, and every summer numerous camping parties come out from Silver City for a few days or weeks. There is a fine lake at the head of the canyon, a boat house, and a good supply of boats, tents, and almost everything needed for camp life.”

“Have there been any camping parties yet?” asked Houston.

“Not yet,” replied Lyle. “It is too early; they usually begin coming in July; we are likely to have snow-storms out here in the mountains yet.”

“Snow-storms!” they all exclaimed; “What!” said Miss Gladden, “after such warm weather as this?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lyle, “this is only the early warm weather we always have in May, but it will be much colder again before summer really begins in earnest; though the weather is never so severe here as in the gulches farther up the mountains.”

“It seems to me,” said Rutherford, “I’ve heard of the greatest number of ‘gulches’ out here, and some of them have the most remarkable names; very original, certainly.”

“Their names are mostly indicative of their early history,” Lyle answered; “there are a number of them in this vicinity,—Last Chance gulch, Poor Man’s gulch, Lucky gulch, Bloody gulch, and so on.”

“Has this gulch where we are, any such euphonious title?” inquired Miss Gladden.

“This one has two names, equally euphonious and equally historical; it is now called Spotted Horse gulch, but years since it was known as Dead Man’s gulch.”

“That sounds cheerful!” commented Miss Gladden.

“Is there a ghost story connected with the gulch, Miss Maverick?” inquired Houston.

“Yes,” said Lyle, “several of them, for the miners are mostly very superstitious. Years ago, when there were no well developed mines here, only a few prospects, a man who had just sold one of the properties, was murdered for his money, about half way between here and the mines, where the road is so narrow and passes under the overhanging rocks. He rode a spotted horse, and from the indications when he was found a few days after, he must have made a desperate fight, for both he and the horse were shot several times. Ever since, it has been said that the spotted horse goes up and down the gulch at night, sometimes alone, and sometimes with his rider, and so the gulch received its name.”

“Is that story still believed here?” asked Houston.

“More or less,” replied Lyle. “There is just enough faith in it, that, excepting Jack,” and she nodded slightly to Miss Gladden, “there is not a miner in camp who could be hired to pass through that part of the gulch at midnight, for fear of seeing the phantom horse and his rider.”

“Possibly,” said Miss Gladden, “it would be well for us to adjourn for the night, or we may have a glimpse of the phantoms; it must be after ten o’clock.”

“After ten, impossible!” exclaimed Rutherford, springing to his feet; “I beg your pardon, ladies, for having detained you so long; I never dreamed it was so late.”

“The long twilight here deceives one, I have hardly become accustomed to it myself,” said Miss Gladden.

“The ladies will surely pardon us,” said Houston, “since it is through their making the time pass so pleasantly that we have trespassed.”

They separated for the night, and a little later, Mr. Blaisdell and Haight came up from the office, but Morgan did not return until daylight was beginning to tinge the eastern sky.

CHAPTER IX

A number of days passed uneventfully. Houston was occupied in getting familiarized with the work at the office, having first created an epoch in the history of that institution by having the windows thoroughly cleaned.

One of the noted characters of the mining camp was a small boy who, when he could scarcely walk, had, on account of his fearless spirit and indomitable pluck, been dubbed with the name of "Bull-dog." The name was so appropriate, and the little fellow himself so proud of it, that as he grew older it was forgotten if he ever had any other; if he had, no one knew what it was. He was now nearly twelve years of age, as small as most boys of eight or nine, but he possessed the same spirit as of old. Bull-dog was the oldest of five children; his parents lived at the Y, a worthless, disreputable pair; he spent very little time under the parental roof, and filial respect was entirely left out of his composition, and no wonder! He was a favorite among the miners, spending much of his time in the camp, and the shrewd little fellow was very observant of what went on around him, and very keen and worldly-wise in his judgment of human nature as he found it.

He speedily made the acquaintance of Houston, and when the latter came down to the office on his second morning, he found the boy awaiting him, and an idea occurred to him.

"Say, Bull-dog, can you wash windows?" he asked.

"Bet yer life," was the laconic reply, accompanied by a grin.

"What will you charge me for washing these four?"

The small individual surveyed the windows critically, then answered:

"Six bits."

"Go ahead," said Houston, "let's see how good a job you can do."

Two hours afterward the windows were shining, and Houston paid the little fellow an equally shining dollar, instead of the six bits, thus making of Bull-dog a friend for life, and one whose friendship afterward proved of great value.

Nearly every afternoon found Lyle at Jack's cabin, diligently reading or studying, guarded by Rex, the faithful collie, who would let no one but Lyle enter the cabin while Jack and Mike were at their work. Two or three evenings of each week she spent there, reviewing her lessons with Jack, or listening, either to the stories which he and Mike told of other countries, or to the music of Mike's violin, fierce and wild, or sweet and pathetic, according to the mood of the musician. The cabin, built of logs and plaster, and consisting of two rooms and a small attic, resembled miners' cabins in general, with the exception of the second and inner room. Here, the floor was nearly covered with skins of animals, while on the walls were shelves and brackets, hand-carved in delicate designs, and filled with books and choice pictures, beautiful etchings and photographs of various works of art. A few larger pictures hung on the walls, framed in some of the same skillfully carved work. The pine table, covered with a brightly colored spread, was strewn with finely bound volumes, and scattered about the room were several comfortable folding chairs, which Jack had bought in some of his trips to Silver City. A rude fireplace had been built in one side of the room, over which were arranged artistically two or three rifles, and the heads and horns of various animals, while on the mantel was a fine collection of ores. Altogether, it was a pleasant room, and gave more evidence of good taste, education and refinement than could have been found for more than a score of miles in that region. This was Jack's sanctum, and none but his two friends, Lyle and Mike, were ever allowed within it.

In this room, a few evenings after the arrival of the two strangers, Lyle was sitting with her friends. The weather was already much cooler, and a bright fire was burning, before which Rex was comfortably stretched, while he watched the faces of his two friends, Jack and Lyle, who, having finished their usual reading, were silent for a few moments, looking into the fire and listening to Mike

as he sat in his corner, his eyes closed, his head bent lovingly over his violin, while he evoked some of the wild, plaintive airs of his native country.

Jack was the first to speak, as he asked in a low tone, "You have met the young men I spoke of the other evening?"

"Yes," replied Lyle, still gazing into the fire, "they are stopping at the house."

"How long will they remain?"

"The younger one, the one you particularly admired, is to stop for a few weeks only; the other will probably remain permanently, as he is bookkeeper for the mining company."

Jack gave an almost imperceptible start, but slight as it was, Lyle noticed it, and turning quickly, saw a peculiar expression of mingled surprise, perplexity and annoyance on his usually immobile face.

"Bookkeeper for the mining company!" he exclaimed, "are you sure you are correct?"

"I can only quote for my authority the Honorable J. O. Blaisdell," she replied archly, "you surely wouldn't doubt his word under any circumstances, would you? You look surprised; did you consider Mr. Houston one of the 'lilies'?"

Jack looked at her inquiringly.

"One of the 'lilies' like Mr. Rutherford," she explained, "who 'toil not neither do they spin,' I supposed him one at first, but I think differently now; I believe he would always be a worker of some kind, whether it were necessary or not; at the same time I don't believe it is exactly necessary for him to be a bookkeeper."

"You seem to have made a study of him," remarked Jack, quietly.

"Of course," answered Lyle, "what else are my eyes and my small stock of brains for, but to study everybody and everything that comes in my way? Besides, it's rather interesting to find a person of some depth, after such shallow people as Mr. Blaisdell and Haight, and that class."

"Sometimes, Lyle," said Jack, slowly, "these deep people make a dangerous study; they are likely to become too interesting."

"Never you fear for me, Jack," said the girl, with considerable spirit, but kindly, "I know too well how the world would look upon old Jim Maverick's daughter, to carry my heart on my sleeve."

Both were silent for a moment, Jack watching her face intently. Mike had left the room. Lyle continued, in a gentler tone,

"Mr. Houston is a perfect gentleman; he would make a safe study for me, even if I didn't realize my position. He reminds me of you, Jack, in some ways."

"Of me!" said Jack sarcastically, "your Mr. Houston would doubtless feel nattered at being compared to a weather-beaten miner."

"You were not always a miner," retorted Lyle quickly, "and you are a gentleman, and always will be."

"In your opinion, child," said Jack pleasantly; then turning the subject, he asked, "What do you think of the 'lily' as you styled him, Mr. Rutherford, I think you called his name?"

"Oh, he is a gentlemanly fellow, not so ridiculous as he looks; good-hearted, but not deep like the other,—not half so interesting to study."

"Very well," replied Jack, "go on with your 'study,' but I wish you would make a little more of a study of yourself and of your own life," and as he spoke, he carelessly took up a magazine and began turning the pages.

"I don't know why," answered Lyle slowly, at the same time going over to the table where she had caught sight of a photograph which had evidently been concealed by the magazine, "my life before you became my friend and teacher would not make an interesting study for any one.—Oh, Jack, whose picture is this? and when did you get it?"

"That?" said Jack, answering indifferently, but watching her face keenly, "Oh, that is a picture I've had a great while."

"But, Jack, I never saw it, did I?"

“No, Lyle, I haven’t seen it myself for years, until to-night.”

“Not for years? how strange!” said Lyle in a low tone; then looking wistfully at the picture, she said, half to herself, “She must have been some one you loved some time.”

“She was very dear to me,” he replied, so quietly that Lyle said nothing, but remained looking long and earnestly at the photograph. It was the picture of a young girl, a few years older than herself, but much more matured, and wondrously beautiful. The features were almost perfect, and the eyes, even there, seemed so radiant and tender. There seemed a wealth of love and sympathy in those eyes that touched Lyle’s lonely heart, and her own eyes filled with tears, while she gazed as if under a spell; then she asked in a sort of bewildered tone:

“Jack, I never saw her, did I?”

“Certainly not while you have been here,” he replied, “I cannot say whom you may have seen before that.”

“Before I came here,” repeated Lyle dreamily, laying down the picture and preparing to go, “that is a sort of blank for the most part. It seems as though this hateful life had obliterated everything before it; the early years of my life seem buried out of sight.”

“Try to resurrect them,” said Jack, adding, “Keep your eyes and ears open, and let me know results. Had I not better go home with you?”

“Oh, no, thank you,” said Lyle, smiling brightly, “it isn’t late.”

“Then Rex must go,” and Rex who was only waiting for the word bounded to the door to signify his readiness.

After Lyle had gone, Jack took the picture, and after looking at it sadly for a moment, replaced it in the little case in his trunk where it had lain so long, and then sat down by the fire, muttering, “Strange she did not see the resemblance! I hoped she would; there could not be two faces more alike.”

All the way home, Lyle was thinking of the beautiful face, wondering where she had seen it, that it should seem so familiar, and after dismissing Rex with a caress, she sat for some time in the low porch, trying to solve the mystery.

“It is no use,” she said to herself at length, “it is no face I have ever seen, unless in some of those strange dreams I used to have.”

Going into the house, she found her parents had retired. Rutherford sat in his room reading, waiting for Houston, who was working late that night, Mr. Blaisdell having gone back to the city for a day or two. Miss Gladden was writing in her room, but Lyle would not disturb her, and going quietly to her own little room, she was soon sleeping peacefully, and the beautiful face was for a time forgotten.

CHAPTER X

The next morning was several degrees colder, and there were indications of a snow-storm. Within doors, the atmosphere betokened a coming storm, as old Jim Maverick was several degrees more quarrelsome and ugly-tempered than usual. He glared sullenly at Lyle, as she stepped quietly about the kitchen, preparing the early breakfast that he and the boys took before starting for their work.

Finally he growled, "What was you doin' out so late last night? Pretty time 'twas when you come in, where'd you been?"

Lyle seemed to take no notice of his questions for a moment, then replied, without a glance at him:

"I was not out late; I went out for a walk early in the evening, and came back early, but I staid out on the porch."

"Oh," he replied with a sneer, "so you was settin' out there waitin' for the new clerk to come home, wasn't you?"

"I didn't even know he was out of the house," said Lyle, indifferent to his sneers, so long as he did not mistrust where she had really spent the evening.

"Oh, no, of course not! I understand you pretty well, and don't you forgit it, always puttin' on your damned airs round here, too nice for any of your own folks; I'd like to see you made a fool of by some of the dudes you're so stuck on."

"You never will have that pleasure," replied Lyle, coolly, "I know too well the opinion that people have of you and your family, to ever be in any danger of being made a fool of."

Old Jim's face grew livid with rage, and he clenched his hand with an oath, but hearing some of the boarders coming in to breakfast in the next room, he only hissed, with a terrible leer:

"Never mind, even if you are my child, with that doll-face o' yours, you might rope in that rich young feller for a few thousands."

Lyle staggered under the insult as if she had received a blow, and pale and trembling, went into the next room to wait on the guests. She was relieved to see that Rutherford was not there; she felt she could not have faced him while those words of her father's were ringing in her ears. There was only Mr. Houston, who greeted her with his usual gentle courtesy, and Morgan, whom she despised.

Out in the kitchen, however, her cause was being championed by Mrs. Maverick, the fire flashing from her faded eyes, as she talked in a manner very unusual for her.

"You may abuse me as much as you like, Jim Maverick," she was saying, "I've had nothing but abuse from you for the past twenty years, and I don't never expect nothing else, but if you ever lay a hand on that girl, or speak to her like that again, you'll be sorry for it. I can make you smart for it, and you know it, and I'll do it too."

The boys, Joe and Jim, aged respectively twenty and eighteen, stared at their mother in astonishment, but their father, several shades paler, ordered them from the house; then advancing toward his wife, shaking his fist and cursing her, he exclaimed:

"You damned old fool! do you think you can try to scare me? you'll find 'tain't very healthy business for you."

"Kill me, if you want to," she replied doggedly, "but you'll find it won't make you any better off; I've fixed you for that."

"What do you mean?" he asked, now thoroughly frightened.

"Mean!" said his wife, as she saw that she at last had the brute in her power, "it means that you've got to let that girl alone, and behave yourself to me, or you'll wish you had, that's all."

Just then, Minty entered on the scene, her round eyes wide open with astonishment, and Lyle entering an instant later from the breakfast room, Maverick slunk away to his work.

Meanwhile, the other boarders were gathering in the breakfast room, Miss Gladden and Rutherford being the last to enter.

“Whew!” exclaimed the latter, rubbing his hands, “this seems a little wintry, doesn’t it? Looks like a storm, too!”

“Yes,” said Morgan, glancing up, “we’ll probably have a snow-storm before noon.”

“How do you pleasure seekers intend to spend the day?” inquired Houston, addressing Miss Gladden and Rutherford.

“I think I shall spend it beside the fire,” replied Miss Gladden, shivering slightly, and sitting down for a moment beside the little box stove, where a wood fire was crackling and spluttering; “I haven’t quite decided what to do, because I didn’t come out here prepared for snow-storms.”

“I believe,” said Rutherford, “I’ll take a day off and develop some of the pictures I’ve taken lately, and sort over my collection of views.”

“That will be delightful,” exclaimed Miss Gladden, smiling brightly at Lyle who had entered the room in time to hear Rutherford’s remark, “We will make Mr. Rutherford entertain us with his collection, won’t we Lyle?”

Lyle smiled in assent, but Miss Gladden very quickly detected traces of trouble in her face, and determined, if possible, to gain her confidence, and find the cause. Rutherford also noticed the change in her appearance, and remarked, after she had again left the room:

“Miss Maverick doesn’t look like herself this morning, I wonder what is the matter.”

“I think there has been a storm of some kind in the kitchen,” Houston replied, “I heard pretty loud talk when I first came in.”

“Yes,” said Morgan, joining in the conversation, “she and the old man have some high old times, once in a while; and one thing is curious, the girl never seems afraid of him, and that’s more than can be said of many of the men around here.”

“Why,” asked Houston, “is he considered dangerous?”

“He is a pretty tough customer,” said Morgan, “I guess there’s no job too dirty for him to do, if he’s only paid for it;” and then added carelessly, “that’s the kind of a man Blaisdell likes to have ’round once in a while.”

“What does he do?” asked Houston, “does he work in the mines?”

“He used to,” replied Morgan, “but he don’t do any more underground work, he—”

“Doesn’t he?” interrupted Haight, with a peculiar emphasis.

“Oh, yes, in some ways, plenty of it,” laughed Morgan, “but I was speaking of the mines; he’s a sort of foreman now in one of ’em, and tends to the sorting of the ore occasionally; helps Haight out sometimes, when he has a particularly delicate job on hand,” and Morgan winked across the table at the expert, who smiled knowingly in return.

Lyle coming into the room again, the talk regarding Maverick ceased, but when she had left, Morgan continued:

“She’s a queer girl; she gives it to the old man sometimes, up and down; the boys don’t dare give him any lip, but she’s no more afraid of him, than—”

“Than she is of you,” again interrupted Haight, with a smile that seemed to discompose Morgan considerably, for he colored and bit his lip.

Miss Gladden looked annoyed, as did Houston, and Rutherford, feeling something was amiss, unintentionally said about the worst thing he could just at that moment.

“I think Miss Maverick is an awfully nice girl.”

“We all think so,” said Haight, in his blandest manner, “Mr. Morgan especially.”

“Oh,” said Morgan, angrily, but trying to speak indifferently, “she’s nice enough, as nice as girls of her class generally are.”

With a look of scorn and contempt that neither Haight nor Morgan soon forgot, Miss Gladden rose from the table and left the room, while Rutherford exclaimed indignantly:

“Whatever ‘her class’ is, she is deucedly your superior, you contemptible puppy!”

Lyle just then entering, there was an ominous silence for an instant; then Houston, rising from the table, remarked in a cool, even tone:

“There has been enough said for the present, but” turning toward Morgan and Haight, “I’ve something to say to you two, a little later.”

Morgan put on his hat and started sullenly for the office, but Haight, assuming his most ingratiating smile, stepped up to Houston, and, in a low tone, began to apologize. Houston interrupted him.

“There is no need of any words here,” he said coldly, “I shall call on you at the sorting rooms this morning, and shall then have something to say to you, but I wish no words from you, at all,” and retiring to his room, he left Haight in a state of considerable trepidation. He hurried after Morgan, and soon overtook him.

“I say,” he began, “we’ve got that new fellow stirred up, and I wish we hadn’t; I don’t want any trouble.”

“Hang you, you little, sneaking coward!” answered Morgan, “if you didn’t want trouble, why didn’t you hold your tongue? Whatever fuss there is you’ve kicked up yourself, with your own smartness, so what are you whining about?”

“Oh, well, you know my principles, Morgan; I never want quarrels with anybody; you know the old saying, ‘the good will of a dog is better than—’”

“Oh, shut up!” said Morgan, “you make me tired! You’re a damned coward, and that’s all there is about it. It’s my opinion, though, in the case of this dog, that his bark is a good deal worse than his bite.”

Meanwhile, Houston was preparing to go to the office.

“Say, old boy,” said Rutherford, “hadn’t I better go down with you? You may have some trouble, you know, and I shouldn’t wonder if they would be two pretty nasty fellows to meddle with.”

“Much obliged, Ned,” said Houston, “but I can take care of those two fellows, and twenty more just like them. Haight is an out and out coward, he wouldn’t fight any more than he would cut his own throat. Morgan would show fight, perhaps, but I’d finish him up before he even knew where he was.”

“I guess I put my foot in it, saying what I did,” said Rutherford, staring through his eye-glasses in a meditative manner, “but it did make me hot, their insinuating things in that way about such a nice little girl as Lyle, and before Miss Gladden, too.”

“There will be no more of it, that is certain,” replied Houston decidedly, and he was gone.

CHAPTER XI

A few moments later, Houston stepped briskly into the office. Morgan sat at his desk, sorting some mining reports, and looked up with a sullen, defiant glance, but Houston ignored him, and going to his own desk, began making preparations for his day's work.

Bull-dog, who, since washing the windows, had constituted himself office boy, had built the fire and was now sweeping. Houston greeted him pleasantly, but his keen eyes at once detected trouble between Houston and Morgan, and he was immediately on the alert.

After the little fellow had finished his work, and Houston supposed he had gone, he walked with a firm, decided step, over to where Morgan stood lounging and looking out of the window. Morgan turned, and angry as he was, he could not help a feeling of admiration for the splendid, athletic form standing, firm as a rock, before him. Houston's keen, dark eyes looked straight into his own, and for a moment, not a muscle of his face moved, the finely cut features might have been chiseled in stone; then he spoke, in even, measured tones, cold and cutting as steel itself:

"Mr. Morgan, I have this much to say to you, and it will be well for you to remember it; that if I ever hear another insinuation against that young lady of whom you were speaking this morning, or an improper word of any kind in the presence of either of those ladies at the house, I will put you in such shape, that you will not be able to come to the office for a week; and more than that, there will be no office work here for you."

"What do you mean by that last threat?" asked Morgan defiantly.

"I mean just this; that I know enough about you, that if I should repeat what I know to Mr. Blaisdell, you would not remain in this office one day longer."

Morgan grew pale. "You seem to know a great deal for a man that's been here no longer than you have. I suppose Lyle Maverick has been filling you up with stuff about me."

"She has never mentioned your name to me, and you will do well not to bring her name into this conversation."

"Seems to me you're wonderfully particular about old Jim Maverick's girl," Morgan sneered, "I suppose you want her for yourself, though I should think the other one—"

Morgan never finished his sentence; a blow that he afterwards said was "worse than the kick of a mule," had closed one eye.

With an oath, he made a terrible lunge toward Houston, but he knew nothing more until about fifteen minutes later, when he found himself lying on the floor, under the long desk, on the opposite side of the room, while Houston stood a few feet away, watching him.

"You dirty contemptible cur!" said Houston, "do you think because you have no sense of honor, because you are so vile you can have no idea of what purity means, that every one is like yourself? You deserve to be kicked like a dog; come out from there and fight, why don't you?"

"I don't believe I'm very anxious to, if you'd just as soon excuse me," said Morgan, who had gradually assumed a sitting posture, and was passing his hand over his eye and jaw. Then, looking up with as much of a grin as he could muster, with his rapidly swelling face, he said, "Give it up, Houston; you're a better man than I am; I'll let you boss this ranch."

"Do you mean," asked Houston sternly, "that from this time there will be no more insinuations against ladies, and no innuendoes in their presence?"

"Yes, I agree," said Morgan, "I'll never say anything myself, and I'll smash any other fellow that does; I think," he added, reflectively, "that you've showed me how pretty well, though I'd a little rather you'd practiced on some other fellow, Haight, for instance."

"I'll attend to Haight," said Houston, helping Morgan to his feet, and smiling grimly at the figure he made.

An hour later, Houston presented himself at the sorting rooms, where Haight met him with many smiles, offering to show him through the rooms.

"Another time will do, Mr. Haight," said Houston coldly, "I have business with yourself this morning."

"Oh, yes," said Haight, as if the thought had just occurred to him, "that unfortunate business at the table this morning; Mr. Houston, I am more than sorry for what happened, and assure you, that, so far as I am concerned, it shall never occur again."

"It will be much better for your interests that it should not," replied Houston; "I have not been in the habit of hearing such insinuations against ladies, or such language in their presence; and there is something more I have to say to you," he continued, as he saw Haight was trying to speak; "you were bookkeeper for the company, for a while, were you not?"

"Certainly," replied Haight in a tone of surprise, "I kept the books for a few months last year."

"So I have been informed since coming here, and I wish to state that the other day I had occasion to refer to some of the old books kept by you, and I very soon found evidences of a few shady transactions on your part that I think you would not care to have come to the knowledge of the company."

"You must be mistaken, Mr. Houston," said Haight, trying to preserve a calm exterior, but paling visibly; "it must have been some of Mr. Johnson's work you found."

"No, Mr. Haight," said Houston firmly, "it was your own work, in your own writing, and very bunglingly done at that; a man would not need to be an expert accountant,—and that is what I am,—to detect the fraud."

"Mr. Houston," interrupted Haight, in trembling tones, "everything here shall be as you wish, and I will help you too,—I can be of use to you,—if you will just say nothing. There were certain circumstances that I cannot now explain, that justified the transactions you allude to; and as I have told you, I regret what occurred this morning, and it shall not be repeated. But really, Mr. Houston," he continued, "I had no idea that my teasing Morgan this morning would have such an effect; you see, what I was joking about was really to Miss Maverick's credit; it seems that a few weeks ago, he was rather smitten with her and attempted to be what she thought was a little too familiar, and she gave him a black eye, and—"

"He has another one now," said Houston, rising abruptly.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Haight.

"Yes, and there will be more black eyes if there are any more insinuations of that character," and Houston returned to the office, leaving behind him a bitter enemy, but one whose enmity would be concealed by a cloak of friendship.

Meanwhile, while Houston was pursuing his chivalric course, Miss Gladden, sitting by the fire in the deserted breakfast room, was planning in what way and by what means she could best help her young friend in whom she felt such an interest. The scene at the table had given her a new insight into Lyle's surroundings; the rudeness and insult to which the beautiful girl was likely to be subjected in such a home, the possible dangers to which she might also be exposed, and she was more than ever determined to win the confidence of the reserved, proud-spirited girl.

In the midst of her reflections, Lyle entered the room, and Miss Gladden saw there were still traces of trouble in her face. Unconscious of the friends who were beginning to care for her welfare, Lyle had felt that morning as though she could endure her life there no longer. She had felt by a sort of instinct that she was in some way connected with the talk at the table, and she knew that both Morgan and Haight would not hesitate to injure her by their insinuations, in retaliation for the manner in which she had met their advances. Thirsting for human sympathy, her heart quickly responded to Miss Gladden's words, as she told Lyle of her interest in her, her sympathy for her, and her desire to help her, and in reply to one or two questions, she spoke freely of the trials she had suffered,

inevitably connected with a life such as hers, and touched by the kindness of her new-found friend, Lyle continued:

“The insults and insinuations of those men, and others like them, are bad enough, but I expect nothing else from such as they, but when one receives insult from the source where one would expect protection,—that is hardest of all,” and with flushed cheeks and quivering lips, Lyle related the scene with her father, and his words to her, while Miss Gladden looked inexpressibly shocked.

“I was almost desperate this morning,” she said in conclusion, “I felt as though I could not live such a life any longer; I must go somewhere, anywhere, to get away from it. Mother says that nothing of that kind shall ever happen again, that father is in her power in some way, and she will not let him abuse me; but it is this whole wretched life that I despise, if I could only be freed from that!”

“I hope, dear, your life will not always be like this,” said Miss Gladden, “it shall not be if it is in my power to prevent it; perhaps I may be able to brighten it in some way.”

“You have already,” said Lyle gratefully, “I shall be happy now, as long as you are here; after you are gone away,—” she shuddered slightly, then added, “who knows what may happen before that time?”

CHAPTER XII

A few hours later, a wild, mountain storm was raging outside, the wind roaring down the canyon from the icy fields above, driving the fast falling snow in every direction, with blinding fury.

Within doors, however, a happy group were seated around the fire, oblivious of the storm outside, or with just enough consciousness of its fury to add to the enjoyment of the warmth and comfort inside.

Miss Gladden was, as usual, becomingly gowned in a house dress of rich, warm color, while she had persuaded Lyle to put on a dark blue dress of her own, which, with a very little change, fitted as though originally intended for her, and also to dress her beautiful, golden hair high on her head, thus producing a change in her appearance which astonished even Miss Gladden herself.

The perfectly fitting gown revealed the outlines of her well developed and finely proportioned form; its color seemed to enhance the delicacy of her face and the brilliancy of her eyes, while the graceful coiffure showed to good advantage the beautifully shaped head, and added to her dignity. She seemed suddenly to have been transformed from shy, reserved girlhood, to graceful, royal womanhood.

As she, with Miss Gladden, entered the room where Rutherford awaited them, that young gentleman started suddenly, and turning, gazed at the regal little beauty, with her golden coronet, in undisguised admiration, much to the amusement of both ladies.

“Great Cæsar!” he exclaimed, “what metamorphosis is this? Excuse me, Miss Maverick, I really couldn’t help it; I thought you were a sort of little girl, you know, and you are,—begging your pardon,—a very beautiful young lady.”

Both ladies laughed merrily, and Miss Gladden secretly resolved that Lyle, in the future, should always be dressed becomingly, if her influence could accomplish anything in that direction.

The afternoon passed very pleasantly in looking over the beautiful views which Rutherford had collected since he left his distant, eastern home. The pictures taken among the mountains had developed finely, and they all grew enthusiastic over them. Then there were pictures of his friends, in groups and singly, and in laughable combinations and positions; among them, some which Rutherford had taken of his friend, Tom Durston, and his family, at the ranch where he had stopped over night on his way out. There was one of Tom himself, in a futile attempt to milk a refractory cow, where he lay sprawling ingloriously upon the ground, the milk bucket pouring its foaming contents over him, the excited cow performing a war dance, while two others, more peaceably inclined, looked on in mild-eyed astonishment: chickens were flying in every direction, with outstretched necks and wings, while in the background, a company of geese were hissing their disapproval of the scene.

The girls laughed until the tears were in their eyes. “How did you ever get such a picture? and so perfect!” they asked.

“Oh, I just happened to,” he answered, “I was out that morning, with my kodak all ready, looking for a subject, and I saw Tom milking, and thought it would be fun to take a picture of him to send back to the class-boys, you know; I held the kodak up and was just ready—when that old cow sent him flying quicker than lightning, and I caught the picture all right. I’m going to mail him one copy.”

There was a picture of Tom’s baby, taking his bath, his mouth wide open and his eyes shut, crying lustily for his mother, who had deserted him to run to Tom’s assistance. Then there were pictures of Rutherford’s home and friends, among them, that of a brother, older than himself, which particularly attracted Lyle’s attention; she looked at it long and earnestly. He was sitting in an easy attitude, smoking a cigar, and looking at the face of a beautiful, dark-eyed girl, of about her own age, which appeared above him, encircled by the light clouds of smoke,—just the face and no more. Rutherford stated that it was his brother and their only sister, and explained the process by which it was taken, but the picture remained in Lyle’s memory for many a day.

After a while, Houston, returning a little early on account of the storm, joined them, and the four friends spent the most enjoyable evening which they had yet known together, notwithstanding the storm.

It had been an eventful day. To Lyle, and one or two of the others, it was the beginning of a new life, though they did not then realize it; the first, faint flush that heralds the coming of the sun to brighten the new day, but which is so subtle and silent, that few are aware of its presence.

Houston, on his return to the house at noon, had given, in answer to Rutherford's eager inquiries, an account of the "skirmish" as he called it. Rutherford was so proud of his friend, and of the victory he had won, that at the first opportunity, he told the story to Miss Gladden, before Houston had even returned to the office. Miss Gladden was enthusiastic in her admiration of the course he had taken, so different from many of the young men she had known in wealthy, aristocratic circles, in thus defending a poor, friendless girl, subject to insult because she had the misfortune, under such circumstances, to be beautiful; and obeying the impulses of her noble-hearted, high-spirited nature, she went to Houston, as she saw him standing alone a few minutes after dinner, and extending her hand, with a bright smile, said:

"Sir Knight, I want to thank you, in Lyle's name and my own, for the chivalric course you have taken this morning."

She could get no further; Houston, still holding her hand, interrupted her.

"Do not thank me, Miss Gladden; I have only done what it is the duty of every true man to do."

"Then," said Miss Gladden, interrupting him in turn, "true men must be exceedingly rare. I know very few, Mr. Houston, who would champion the cause of a girl in Lyle's circumstances, in the manner you have done," and then, with much feeling, she spoke of some of Lyle's trials, and of her own determination to help her.

A beautiful woman is never so lovely as when defending the cause of some sister less fortunate than herself, and Houston thought he had never seen Miss Gladden so beautiful as at that moment, and the thought must in some way have conveyed itself to his eyes, for there was something in his glance that brought a bright color to Miss Gladden's cheek, and an added tenderness to her soulful eyes; something that remained with her all that day, and somehow made life, even in the heart of the mountains, shut out from the rest of the world, look more inviting, more alluring than it had ever done before.

With Houston, also, the memory of those eyes with their depths of tenderness, and the hand whose touch had thrilled him with its magnetism, lingered, and brightened all that stormy afternoon.

To Lyle, this day seemed the beginning of a new epoch in her solitary, isolated life. For the first time, she had found genial companionship, human sympathy and love, and chivalrous protection; for Miss Gladden had hastened to tell her of the part Mr. Houston had taken in her defense; and as the slowly maturing bud suddenly unfolds in the morning sunlight, so in the new light and warmth which she had found that day, her nature had suddenly expanded into mature, conscious womanhood.

That evening, as the little group of friends were separating for the night, Miss Gladden having already gone up-stairs, Lyle, with a new dignity and grace, walked over to where Houston stood by the fire, with dreamy, thoughtful eyes.

"Mr. Houston," said she, in low, sweet tones, "Miss Gladden has told me of your kindness toward me to-day, and though she has thanked you for us both, yet I wish to thank you personally."

"Miss Maverick," he replied in his grave, gentle manner, "you are more than welcome to any kindness I can do for you, but do not thank me for what I did to-day; that was nothing, I would have been a beast not to have done that little."

"If you could know," she said, earnestly, "how rare such kindness and protection have been in my past life, you would realize that it does not seem like 'nothing' to me."

To Houston, Lyle seemed much less mature than Miss Gladden, and though he had been quick to observe the added charm in her manner that evening, still she seemed to him little more than a

child. Her words, and something in the expression of those star-like eyes, touched him deeply, and taking her hands in his, he answered tenderly:

“My dear child, I am very sorry for the loneliness of your past life, and I want you, from this time, to regard me as a brother, and if there should be any way in which I could protect you, or help you, do not hesitate to tell me freely.”

For the first time in all those weary years within her recollection, Lyle went to her rest that night with a heart satisfied; for as yet, only the surface of her affections had been stirred, and the hidden depths below were still unfathomed, awaiting the influence of some mightier power.

CHAPTER XIII

The snow-storm detained Mr. Blaisdell in the city rather longer than he intended, and Houston had improved the time in going over all the old books and office records which were available.

The books of the company he could examine at his leisure, on some pretext or other, in Morgan's presence, but his extra work, which had occupied his evenings, consisted in going over the old letter files, mining reports and assay statements, making copies of whatever he found that would be of value to him later. He had found evidence of fraudulent transactions in the books of the company, and of these he had made careful memoranda, but so far, the greatest amount of evidence which he had secured, had been discovered in the old letters written by Mr. Blaisdell to other members of the company at Silver City, and received by him in return. These were copied exactly into a set of small books which he had brought for that purpose, and he had also made tracings and blue print copies of plats and maps of the most important mines, and of the plans of their underground workings.

What he now particularly desired was some turn of affairs that would necessitate his visiting the mines, and give him an opportunity to become familiar with their workings, and that, in some way, he could gain access to the books and papers of the main office at Silver City, as he would there find records of the business transacted directly with the company in New York. He had taken the precaution to bring with him copies of letters on file in the New York offices, but he now felt that much of the most important evidence was contained in the office at Silver City, and was the missing link which he would need before going much farther, and as he sat at his desk one bright morning, a few days after the storm, mentally reviewing the whole situation, he was planning how he could best secure this also.

Morgan, still carrying a few scars, sat with his legs crossed on top of his table, reading a newspaper, when the door opened, and Mr. Blaisdell entered.

"Well, boys, good-morning," was his greeting, as he glanced quickly around the office, and Morgan's feet suddenly descended to the floor. "What's the matter with your eye, Morgan?"

"Oh, nothing, been sparring a little, that's all."

"Been down to the mines this morning?"

"No, sir, not yet; I thought maybe you'd be up and want to give some directions before I went down."

"Very considerate!" remarked Mr. Blaisdell sarcastically, "you know I would come to the mines myself, anyway, and could give directions there just as well as here. Get ready to go down there with me, I'm going in a few minutes."

Going over to Houston's desk, he glanced hastily over the books, gave some instructions, and saying that he wished to see him later, went out to join Morgan.

"Morgan, how did you get that eye?" he asked again.

"Oh, Houston and I had a little set-to the other day, and he hit me pretty hard, that's all."

"What was it about?" demanded Mr. Blaisdell.

"Nothing much," answered Morgan, carelessly, "we had some words about that girl of Maverick's; I guess he's a little stuck on her himself, and was afraid I'd be in his way, or something of the kind; I got mad and hit him, or tried to, and he gave me a knock-out."

"I was going to say that he doesn't look as though you had hit him very hard," remarked Mr. Blaisdell dryly, and then continued, "Well, I don't see the use of coming to blows over Maverick's girl, or any other for that matter, they're not so scarce as all that. Jim's girl has got a pretty face, but she isn't worth fighting about, that I can see."

There were reasons for Mr. Blaisdell's superior indifference to Lyle's attractions, as she had been compelled more than once, in a most emphatic manner, to check attempts at undue familiarity on his part, notwithstanding the fact that he was a much-married man, living with his third wife, his

table surrounded with “olive plants”—fifteen in number—of all sizes and descriptions, and regarded in the bosom of his family as a model husband and father.

Late in the afternoon, Mr. Blaisdell returned to the office, looking very weary and somewhat worried. Morgan remained at the mines the rest of the day. Mr. Blaisdell went over the books with Houston, and after expressing considerable satisfaction at the work which he had accomplished, he sat down by himself, and seemed lost in thought for some time. At last he said:

“Mr. Houston, I’ve been thinking for some time that we need a little extra help in the office at Silver City, and yet not enough that it has seemed advisable to employ another bookkeeper. Our books there are getting behind, and a little mixed, too, I’m afraid. Mr. Lewis, our bookkeeper, is quite an old man, and he has charge of two or three sets of books for the different companies, and it is not to be wondered at if he occasionally gets a little confused; and it occurred to me while sitting here, that perhaps you might be willing to come down, for a day or two, and straighten out the books for us.”

Houston seemed for a moment to be weighing the matter very deliberately.

“Of course I could do it,” he replied, “but it would involve considerable extra time and expense for me, and I would want extra compensation.”

“Oh, of course,” responded Mr. Blaisdell, readily, “I understand that; indeed, I was going to remark that you have already accomplished so much work, and your methods seem to be so exact and, at the same time, expeditious, that we will consider your term of probation here at an end; we agreed to raise your salary at the end of the month, if your services were satisfactory; they are eminently so, and I will take the responsibility of paying you one hundred and twenty-five dollars for this first month also. As to your fare back and forth between here and Silver City, of course we will pay that.”

“Then,” said Houston, smiling and inwardly congratulating himself, “I do not see but that it is settled that I go to Silver City whenever you are ready.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Blaisdell, “you will not need to go down there for ten days or so, as the time will make no appreciable difference in the state of affairs there, and I shall need you here during that time, as some parties are coming out from the east to look at some mining properties, and both Morgan and myself will probably have to spend most of our time at the mines.”

That evening, at the boarding house, Houston sat apparently interested in a game of chess between Miss Gladden and Rutherford, but in reality, paying close attention to a conversation carried on in low tones between Mr. Blaisdell and Morgan. Only an occasional sentence was audible, but he could gather enough to satisfy himself regarding the nature of their plans.

“Clean the rubbish out of the shaft, and set a couple of men to work there for a day or two,” Mr. Blaisdell was saying; a few words were lost, and then he said, “Whenever I hear what day they are coming up, we’ll put on a good force.”

“They’ll have their own expert with them, I suppose?” asked Morgan.

“Yes,” answered Mr. Blaisdell, “but if he’s like the most of those eastern experts, Haight and I can fix him very easily.”

A little later the conversation ended, Mr. Blaisdell saying, as he rose to go to his room:

“It is a confoundedly poor property, but I think a few tons of ore from the Yankee Boy will sell it all right.”

This remark gave Houston considerable food for reflection, as the Yankee Boy was one of the richest properties owned by the New York company. He had that day received his first letter from his uncle, in New York, sent under cover of an envelope from the Chicago firm, and written in reply to a letter from himself mailed immediately upon his arrival at the mines; and Mr. Blaisdell and Morgan having left, Houston retired to his room to make his first report of the information he had secured and seemed likely to secure, concerning the ways and means of the western mining company; leaving the chess players deep in their game, and Lyle watching them.

Lyle, though keeping up her studies afternoons, had not been down to Jack's cabin since the evening he had shown her the picture, partly on account of the storm, and partly because she feared her father might be watching her.

Jack had wondered at her absence, thinking perhaps her new friends had something to do with it; but on this night, Jack had other company, as Bull-dog had ensconced himself in Mike's chair beside the stove, and having also appropriated Mike's briar pipe,—its owner being absent,—was smoking with all the gravity and self-possession of an old-timer, and entertaining Jack with his quaint talk.

"Say," he said at last, clasping his hands about his knee, and holding the pipe between his teeth, "have ye seen that new feller up at the orifice. Mister Houston, they call him?"

Jack replied, very indifferently, that he had seen him once or twice.

"Well, now, he's a Joe-dandy, a regular cracker-jack; an' he's goin' ter be boss of that whole shootin' match, Morgan an' that little, black, snaky feller, an' old Blaisdell, too, if he don't look out fer hisself."

"What makes you think so?" asked Jack, much amused.

"I don't think so, I know it. He's got more sand than all the rest of 'em put together, an' he ain't afraid of nobody. 'D ye hear 'bout that fight that him 'n Morgan had?"

"No, did they fight?" inquired Jack, much surprised.

"Did they fight!" exclaimed the little Arab, removing the pipe from his mouth, and shaking his head with evident satisfaction at the remembrance of the scene, "well, I should smile! Morgan, he tried hard enough ter fight, but the other feller did him up in 'bout the sixteenth part of a second!"

"Were you there?" asked Jack, laughing.

"I was peekin' through a crack in the door; they s'posed I'd gone, but I see somethin' was up when Mister Houston first come in, an' I just makes up my mind I'll see the fun through, an' when I goes out, I bangs the door hard, and then opens it agin, careful like, and peeks in; an' Mister Houston, he had walked over ter where Morgan was, an' had lit into him 'bout somethin' or ruther he'd ben sayin', an' if he didn't lay down the law ter him, I'll eat my hat. An' then Morgan he sets out to give him some of his lip, and by Jiminy! 'fore he could spit the words out, biff! comes a stunner right in his face, and shut one eye. My, wasn't he mad though! Then he goes ter give the other feller a punch in the head, an' Houston, he ducked the purtiest ye ever see, and let out a blow at Morgan's jaw, an' gee-whizz! Morgan goes a flying across the room, and lan's under the big desk, and he never come to fer 'bout twenty minits. My, but 'twas the slickest knock-out ye ever see, Corbett couldn't a done it slicker hisself! an' I rolled down them steps a laughin' so I 'most died. I went back after he'd come to, an' Mister Houston was a tellin' him ter come out an' fight, but he didn't seem ter wan'ter very bad, an' I see the fun was over, so I come away."

Jack had laughed heartily over Bull-dog's description of the scene; now he asked:

"What was the fight about?"

"Well," said Bull-dog, gravely replacing his pipe in his mouth, "'s near 's I could make out, 'twas 'bout some girl."

"What girl?" inquired Jack, rather quickly.

"Well, the new feller, he didn't call no names, but I heerd Morgan say somethin' 'bout Lyle Maverick, an' so I guess 'twas her, but I knew you was always kinder sweet on her yourself, an' so I wasn't goin' ter say nothin', 'cause, 'nless you're a scrapper, you won't stand no sort of a chance with that feller."

"All right, Bull-dog," said Jack, "I'm something of a 'scraper' myself, but I don't expect to get into any trouble;" the tone was kind, and he spoke with a half smile, but the keenly observant eyes of the boy detected a shade on Jack's face. However, all conversation was suddenly checked by the entrance of Mike, who, in a manner more forcible than ceremonious, dispossessed Bull-dog of his chair and pipe. The little waif soon took his departure, but it was some time before the cloud on Jack's brow was dispelled.

CHAPTER XIV

For the next day or two, Houston saw very little of either Mr. Blaisdell or Morgan, as they spent most of their time at the mines, but his own work was greatly increased, as copies of mining reports regarding the Sunrise mine, and duplicate sets of statements of the assay values of samples of ore taken from its various shafts, were to be made out with the greatest care. There were tracings and blue prints to be made from the original plats, by which it was to be shown that the vein of the Sunrise mine was but an extension of that of the Morning Star, one of the famous North Star group of mines; and there were also very important and strictly confidential letters to be written, under Mr. Blaisdell's directions, to the Silver City office, more particularly to Mr. Rivers, the secretary of the company, whom Houston had not yet seen.

The Sunrise mine which was suddenly looming up into such prominence, was one of which Houston had never heard, but judging from the rich samples of ore produced, and the testimony of experts and assayers, it seemed to be one of the most valuable properties in that locality; but to Houston, situated as he was, behind the scenes, it only afforded an additional glimpse of the business methods of the company.

As he still sat at his desk, having just completed his day's work, Morgan came in and threw himself down heavily into a chair, taking his favorite attitude, with his feet crossed on the table, and his hands clasped behind his head.

"You look tired, Morgan," commented Houston.

"I am tired," he replied, "too tired to breathe if I wasn't obliged to; this has been a hard day's work, and if old Blaisdell sells that mine, as he expects to, he'll have to divy up pretty liberally."

Houston turned around facing Morgan, with a peculiar smile.

"The Sunrise mine seems to have developed wonderfully within the past few days," he remarked quietly.

Morgan laughed; "You'd think so," he replied, "if you could have seen it four days ago. There hasn't been a day's work done on it for over a year; some of it had caved in, and even the main shaft was pretty well filled up with rubbish. Now that's all cleaned out, and the few places where there is any quantity of ore in sight show up to good advantage, and we've hauled eight or ten tons of ore from the Yankee Boy down onto the dump, so it makes a pretty respectable showing. Oh, the boss is a cuckoo for any job of that kind."

"Does the mining company own the Yankee Boy?" asked Houston.

"No," answered Morgan, "that whole group of mines is owned by a set of New Yorkers; this company out here is their agent, that's all."

"And New Yorkers are not supposed to know all the ins and outs of their western agent's mining deals," commented Houston.

"Well, I should say not! There's a good many things going on that they are not supposed to know about, and that they wouldn't be very likely to get onto, either, some of 'em, even if they were right on the ground. Some of those ducks are pretty green, and fellows like Blaisdell or Rivers can make them believe most anything. If Blaisdell was half as smart as he makes some of those eastern fellows think he is, he would have been a rich man before this."

"Why," said Houston, in surprise, "Blaisdell is quite well off, isn't he?"

Morgan's only answer was a significant shake of the head.

"What!" exclaimed Houston in astonishment.

"Really, he is not worth a dollar," answered Morgan, "every nickle's worth of property that he ever had, that he hasn't lost outright, has been put into the hands of his wife, or his sons, or somebody or other, heaven knows who, I don't, nor nobody else."

“Well, I am surprised,” said Houston, “he seems shrewd and sharp in business matters, and I supposed he was a rich man. He must have made considerable money, what has become of it?”

Morgan shrugged his shoulders; “Have you seen old Rivers yet?” he inquired.

“The secretary? No, I’ve never met him.”

“Well,” continued Morgan, “you probably will, in a day or two, he’ll be likely to come up with the eastern party; and when you’ve seen him, you’ve seen the biggest rascal, and at the same time the slickest duck there is on this side of the divide, and I doubt if there’s any on the other side can beat him. Old Blaisdell’s pretty smooth, but he ain’t a circumstance to Rivers. Rivers will rob you of your last dollar, and make you think he’s your best friend all the time. Oh, he’s a lulu, and no mistake!”

Further conversation was prevented by the entrance of Mr. Blaisdell, with a fine lot of ore samples with their assay values attached, which he arranged on his desk, his thin lips drawn back meanwhile in his accustomed self-satisfied smile. When this was done, he turned to the young men.

“Well,” he began, with a low chuckle of delight, “I’ve got word my party is coming all right. Haight just got a telegram from Rivers, that Winters had wired him that he and his son and the expert would be in Silver City, on to-morrow’s train, so I will have to go back to the city to-night, to be in readiness to meet them. Let me see, this is Wednesday, they arrive Thursday; Morgan, set the men to work on that mine Friday morning; we will be up here in the course of the forenoon, you see that everything is in first-class order. Houston, are those statements and tracings all ready?”

“They are,” replied Houston.

“Very well, put them up as quick as you can, I’ll take them to the city with me, and the team will be here in half a minute; I want to catch that six o’clock train. I didn’t expect to have to go to-night, but that telegram has hurried up matters. Morgan, you keep everything straight to-morrow, and be ready for us Friday morning.”

“Shall I send a team down?” asked Morgan.

“No, no matter about that, I’ll take Joe Hunt’s team there at the Y, it will be a rather more stylish turnout than one of the mining teams. Everything is here O.K. I suppose,” as Houston handed him the papers he had requested, “all right, there’s my team; well, so long, boys, don’t get into any more fights while I’m gone,” and he was soon rattling down the canyon toward the Y, while Houston and Morgan began to make preparations for closing the office.

“Well,” said Morgan, as he stood looking out of the window, and waiting for Houston to put away his books and papers for the night, “I can just imagine the little scene that will be enacted down there at the main office to-morrow, it would be as good as a play just to watch it. There will be old Wilson, with his diamonds and palaver, expatiating on the country and the mines; and Blaisdell, with that dignified way of his, talking of nitrates and sulphides, and so many milligrams equaling so many grains troy, and so many gramestons in so many pounds avoirdupois, and all that razzle-dazzle, and Rivers, not saying much of anything, but smiling, and calculating how many thousands he is going to put in his own pockets.”

Houston laughed, and was about to reply, when Rutherford came in, as he often walked down to meet Houston and accompany him to the house.

“Come in, Ned,” said Houston, “you should have been here a minute ago; Morgan has been giving some verbal portraits of the mining company. Your descriptive powers are excellent, Morgan, and you seem to know these men pretty well.”

“Know them,” said Morgan, swinging himself astride a chair and folding his arms upon the back, while Rutherford perched upon a large writing table, and Houston leaned against his long desk, with his arms folded, “Know them, I should think I ought to. I worked in the Silver City office as bookkeeper for a year before coming out here, and six months of that time I boarded in Blaisdell’s family; and as his wife hates Rivers’ wife, and couldn’t say enough about her, I knew about as much of one family as the other before I came away.”

“Does Mr. Blaisdell try to impress his better half with a sense of his intellectual superiority, as he does the rest of his fellow mortals?” asked Rutherford.

“If he ever did,” answered Morgan, “he must have got bravely over it some time ago; she treats him with a contempt that would have cured him of that habit. I’ve sometimes thought that the reason he swells so much out among people is because he’s so unmercifully snubbed at home.”

“I see,” said Rutherford, “just a natural effort to keep his self-respect in equilibrium.”

“Has he many children?” inquired Houston.

“Well, no,” said Morgan, “not many, only fifteen.”

“Only fifteen!” said Houston, in astonishment, while Rutherford exclaimed, “Oh, come off now, you’re joking!”

“No joking about it,” said Morgan seriously, “I took the old man’s word for it. I tried several times to count ’em, but had to give it up, it seemed that every day I saw a new one. Some of ’em are as old as I; you see this is his third wife, and some of the children are older than she.”

“I think,” said Rutherford, “I’d like a wife younger than my children.”

“He seems to,” replied Morgan, “they’re as spooney as can be, when they’re not quarreling.”

“Oh, deliver me!” said Rutherford, “I don’t want to hear any more about them. How about that other man, Rivers? He hasn’t such a surplus of children and wives, has he?”

“Well,” said Morgan slowly, “I guess if his children could all be got together, there’d be more of ’em than of Blaisdell’s, and he has full as many wives, only, in his case, they are all living.”

“Great Scott!” said Rutherford, “is he a Mormon?”

Morgan shook his head, and Houston said:

“Morgan, I think in your efforts to be entertaining, you are drawing slightly on your imagination, thinking that we are fresh enough to believe anything you choose to tell us.”

“No, it’s all true, whether you believe it or not. That man left a wife and family of children somewhere in New York State, more than ten years ago, and ran away with another woman; they have five or six children, and here, about three years ago, since I came here, he got his divorce from the first woman, and married this one. Then he spent last winter in San Francisco, and it seems now, that he circulated around there under another name,—and his name is no more Rivers, than mine is Jenks,—and passed himself off for an unmarried man, and now there’s a woman there has entered suit against him, for breach of promise.”

“Well,” said Rutherford, descending from his elevated position, “I move that we adjourn to the boarding house at once; if I hear any more such stuff, I’ll lose my appetite.”

“The mystery to me is,” said Houston, when they were started on their way to the house, “how such a man is allowed to live and do business in a respectable community.”

“Oh,” said Morgan carelessly, “he isn’t any worse than the rest of ’em, only he’s a little more out and out with it; and the rest of ’em know it, and as long as they all live in glass houses, they don’t any of ’em want to throw any stones.”

“It cannot be quite as bad as that,” said Houston.

“Well, I’ve found ’em all about alike, men and women too, for that matter, though I believe you shut me off from expressing my views about women.”

“But you certainly would not include all women in such an assertion?” said Houston.

“I don’t know why not, as far as my experience goes, they’re all off the same piece.”

“Why, man,” said Houston indignantly, “what are you talking about? You had a mother once, you do not mean to traduce her memory?”

For a moment, Morgan was silent, then he replied in a tone that sounded very unlike his usual voice:

“Yes, I had a mother once, and that is what has made me what I am; sometime I will tell you about her.”

And nothing more was said until they reached the house.

CHAPTER XV

Friday morning, word was received from Mr. Blaisdell, over the private wire connecting the office at Silver City with the mines, that he and Mr. Rivers would be up on the first train with a party of four, and to have everything in readiness for them; also to make arrangements for their accommodation at the boarding house. Morgan had already placed a small force of men at work on the mine, and after carrying out Mr. Blaisdell's instructions, remained himself at the mine, superintending the work.

It was one of those perfect days, so frequent among the mountains; a cloudless sky, and the air so clear that one could see the most distant mountain peaks with wonderful distinctness. The weather was again warm, yet the air was cool and invigorating, and aromatic with the breath of the evergreen forests clothing the sides of the mountains and foot hills, while everywhere, the spring flowers were adding their color and beauty to the scene, their fragrance rising continuously, like an invisible cloud of incense, on every hand.

At about eleven o'clock, Houston heard the noise of the approaching team, and stepping to the window, saw a three-seated, open wagon, drawn by a pair of powerful horses. On the back seat, with Mr. Blaisdell, was an old gentleman, evidently Mr. Winters, and on the second seat, facing them, were two whom Houston judged to be Mr. Rivers and the junior Mr. Winters; but he took little notice of them, for his attention was arrested by one of the two young men sitting on the front seat, with the driver. The figure looked wonderfully familiar, but the face was almost wholly concealed by a broad-brimmed, soft hat. The team stopped, and at once the passengers prepared to alight; the hat was suddenly pushed back, revealing to the astonished Houston, the shining spectacles and laughing face of Arthur Van Dorn, his college class mate and chum.

The men were alighting, and it was evident that Mr. Blaisdell was in a most genial frame of mind, he fairly beamed on every one; but Houston, not waiting to meet him, made a hasty retreat into the back room, to decide quickly upon his course of action. Nearly a thousand plans occurred to him, but none seemed feasible. If Mr. Blaisdell were the only member of the firm present, he felt he would have little difficulty, but the presence of Mr. Rivers made it considerably harder for him.

Meanwhile, in the front room, Mr. Blaisdell was receiving his guests in the most effusive manner, reminding Houston, even in his dilemma, of a gushing school girl.

"Mr. Winters, let me assist you, you must be exceedingly weary; here, take this chair, you will find it a little more comfortable; sorry not to have more luxurious quarters in which to receive you, but this is the wild west, you know. Mr. Rivers, won't you see that Mr. Winters is comfortable, while I wait on his son. Mr. Lindlay, let me show you these specimens of ore, I think you will appreciate them as few can."

In the midst of all this effusion, Mr. Rivers suddenly appeared in the back room. He was a small man, quite bald, with small, twinkling, peering eyes, and a quick motion of his head from one side to the other that reminded Houston of a ferret. Seeing Houston, his eyes twinkled until they nearly closed, he smiled, and extending his hand, said:

"Ah, the new clerk, Mr. Houston, I suppose; very glad to meet you."

At that moment Mr. Blaisdell entered; "Well, Mr. Rivers, you have found Mr. Houston, I see; Mr. Houston, this is Mr. Rivers, the secretary of the company. I was just looking for you, Houston, I want you to come in and meet the people in the other room."

"In a moment, Mr. Blaisdell," said Houston, "but first, will you and Mr. Rivers just look over something I have found here. This looks to me as though a serious error had been made in this report regarding the Sunrise mine, and as you will probably need it to-day, had it better not be corrected?"

“Error in the report of the Sunrise!” said Mr. Blaisdell, adjusting his spectacles, “let me see; why yes, that is an error, and a bad one, too, I am glad you called our attention to it; look here, Rivers,” and the two men were deeply engrossed in a study of the papers before them.

Houston improved the opportunity to reconnoiter the situation in the front room. Mr. Winters and his son were in a close consultation. The third man was busily engaged in looking at some ores, his back towards the door, while beside him stood Van Dorn, indifferently watching him. Houston gave a slight cough that attracted Van Dorn’s attention; he turned, and seeing Houston, his face brightened, and he was about to spring forward to greet him, when the latter, with a quick motion of his hand, gave him the signal of their old college days, its equivalent in the western vernacular being, “Don’t give me away,” at the same time putting his finger on his lips. A look of intense surprise flashed across Van Dorn’s face, but he grasped the situation at once, and silently giving the return signal, he turned and walked in the opposite direction with the most nonchalant manner imaginable, and Houston knew that his secret was safe. A few moments afterward, “Mr. Houston, our private secretary,” was introduced to the entire party, and a hearty grip from Van Dorn’s hand, which Houston returned with interest, was the only sign of mutual recognition.

“Well friends,” said Mr. Blaisdell, blandly, having looked at his watch, “it is now so near noon, that when we have allowed Mr. Winters ample time for rest, we had better proceed to the house and have our dinner, before going to the mines.”

“If you dine at noon,” replied Mr. Winters, in a very genial, yet dignified manner, “there is scarcely time for a very extended exploration, but don’t discommode yourselves in the least, gentlemen, on account of my age and feebleness. I have always enjoyed perfect health, and notwithstanding my gray hairs, I don’t believe I am much older than my friend, here, Mr. Blaisdell.”

“Not older than I am, sir!” exclaimed Mr. Blaisdell, who prided himself upon his youthful appearance, “why, how old do you take me to be?”

“Much older than you look,” replied Mr. Winters, “I am sixty-five, and you are at least sixty, although you look ten years younger than that.”

“You have certainly proven yourself a Yankee by your guessing,” said Mr. Blaisdell, slightly disconcerted, while the others joined in a general laugh at his expense, “I wouldn’t have thought you would have made so good a guess as that, neither did I think you were so near my own age.”

“You have the advantage of me now,” returned Mr. Winters, pleasantly, “but if we live twenty years, as I expect to, I’ll then look younger than you, for I have the better health of the two.”

“Have you ever visited the west before, Mr. Winters?” inquired Mr. Rivers.

“Yes, a few times,” replied the old gentleman, while the mining expert, an Englishman, with large blue eyes, full face and blond mustache, smiled quietly at Van Dorn and Houston, who were seated near each other; “I’ve been west once or twice a year for the last ten years.”

“Indeed!” said Mr. Rivers, with considerable surprise, while the younger Mr. Winters said with a laugh, “Oh, you couldn’t keep father at home in New York, any more than you could one of these Indians out here; he’s got to be roaming around all over the country continually. If he didn’t drag me about with him everywhere, I wouldn’t object.”

“You have been out in this country often, I suppose,” said Mr. Blaisdell, addressing the expert, who replied coolly, with a very slight accent:

“No, sir; I simply come out ’ere once in a w’ile, you know, just as an accommodation to Mr. Winters.”

“You live in New York, I suppose?”

“No, sir; my ’ome is in London,” he replied, with an air that seemed to indicate he did not care for any further conversation.

“Blaisdell,” said Mr. Rivers, “I thought you said something some time ago, about dinner; if the ride in the mountain air has given the rest of these gentlemen such an appetite as it has me, we would like to see that dinner materialize before very long.”

On the way to the boarding house, Van Dorn managed to walk with Houston, and exclaimed in a low tone:

“Good heavens, Everard, what does this mean? What are you masquerading around in this style for?”

“Don’t ask me to explain now, there are too many around; after dinner we will go down by ourselves, and I’ll tell you the whole story. I may want a little advice from you, as you’re a mining expert yourself.”

“Don’t let any of these people out here know that,” Van Dorn answered quickly; “Mr. Winters has introduced me as an inventor of some mining machinery that they use, just out here looking around for the pleasure of it; you know I did invent an amalgamator that is being used to some extent; but I’m not supposed to know anything about practical mining.”

Houston laughed; “How about the Englishman?” he asked.

“He’s no fool,” said Van Dorn quickly, “though he is playing verdant; only comes out here to accommodate Mr. Winters, and so forth; that’s all right, but he accommodates Mr. Winters pretty often. He’s a fine expert and understands his business thoroughly, only I happen to be a little more familiar with the ores in this locality, as I spent a good many months out here in the mountains two years ago, experting mines; not in this camp of course, but only a few miles from here. Mr. Winters himself is sharp, and with Lindlay and myself out here, he’s not going to be very badly taken in.”

“Good!” said Houston, “and now there is one thing more before we get to the house. You remember Morton Rutherford?”

“Mort Rutherford, of old college days? well, I should say so; what about him?”

“His brother is stopping here, you will see him at dinner.”

“What!” interrupted Van Dorn, “little Ned? What under heaven is he doing out here? Are you two fellows out here incognito making love to rustic maidens? or what are you doing?”

“No, Ned is out here in his own name, you won’t need be under any restrictions with him, but what I want to say is this: Don’t let him know who I am, or that you used to know me, or that I know his brother.”

“Anything else I’m not to let him know?” queried Van Dorn, taking out a small note book.

“No, put up your book, or Mr. Blaisdell will think I am giving you pointers on the mine. But this is how it is; Rutherford met me on the train coming out here, introduced himself to me, took a fancy to the mountains, and decided to stay a few weeks. He thinks I am—what you found me—the clerk for this company, and my home in Chicago. I am not ready to explain matters to him yet, so just simply appear as if you had never met me or heard of me till to-day.”

“But how is it Ned didn’t know you? Didn’t you ever see him when you visited Mort?”

“No, I was there only once, and he was away at school at the time, and then he never went to Yale, you know, he is a Harvard graduate.”

“Oh, I see; all right, I’ll be mum.”

A sharp turn in the road brought the house into view, with Rutherford seated on the porch, reading a magazine.

He glanced up with his usual assumption of dignity, as the party approached, but catching sight of Van Dorn, at the rear of the little procession, his magazine and his dignity were suddenly flung to the winds, and he bounded down from the porch like a school-boy.

“By Jove! Hello there, Van Dorn, how do you do? Great Scott! how did you ever come out here? I’m awfully glad to see you.”

“Very glad to see you, my dear boy,” said Van Dorn, heartily, “but the mystery to me is, how do you happen to be here?”

Mr. Blaisdell looked on greatly astonished and amused by Rutherford’s impetuous greeting.

“Well, Mr. Rutherford,” he remarked, “you seem to have met an old friend; ah, yes, I see, you are from Boston, and so is Mr. Van Dorn.”

Introductions followed, and the party sat down to dinner. Houston, seated between Van Dorn and Rutherford, did not lack for entertainment, but he had been at the table but a few seconds when he became aware that Miss Gladden was not there. He waited till the meal was nearly over, and then quietly inquired of Lyle whether Miss Gladden were ill.

“Oh no,” Lyle answered, in a low tone, “Miss Gladden thought best, as so many gentlemen were to be here, and on business, to let them have the table to themselves.”

After dinner, Houston started a little early for the office, and Van Dorn took his hat, saying:

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I’ll walk down with Mr. Houston. You know I’m not so crazy on mining as you are, and I’d like to see somebody for a change, that can talk on some other subject.”

“Go ahead,” said Mr. Winters, “I suppose you’ll want to go through the mines in our company, though, by and by.”

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