

**EDFRID
BINGHAM**

THE HEART OF
THUNDER
MOUNTAIN

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Edfrid A. Bingham

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CHAPTER I

THE FORBIDDEN PASTURE

She sat hunched up in the middle of the silent pasture, where the tall, thin grass ran ripening before the breeze in waves the hue of burnished bronze. Her cow pony grazed greedily a few yards away, lifting his head now and then to gaze inquiringly at her, and then returning to his gluttony with a satisfied snort, commendatory of this long rest. The girl had removed her small sombrero to adjust the masses of tawny hair that had become disordered in her morning ride; and the breeze now played with it, and the sun sought out its glints of gold. She was fair, of a curiously rich complexion with soft golden tints beneath the skin, as if the rusty gold in her hair was just the outcropping of what ran in solution in her veins. And there was a certain air about her that contrasted strangely with the scene upon which she now gazed intently, with her head bent forward, and her hands clasped round her upthrust knees.

It was a little valley she had come upon by chance, snugly tucked away among the hills. Below the bronze-colored slope there were lush meadows of a brilliant green, and a shallow, swift stream that flashed over black boulders and white sand; beyond the meadows lay more shining pastures rising to pale-green aspen groves and then to dark-green pines; and above all these the foothills climbed swiftly to the mountains, and the mountains more swiftly to the sky. There were faint blue mists in the foothills, fainter violet shadows on the distant fields, an icy whiteness on the peaks; and in the sky no more than two small puffs of cloud like eiderdown adrift in the depths of blue. What at first had seemed an utter silence laid upon that summer landscape had now become, as she looked and listened, a silence full of sound; of that indefinable humming undertone of nature maturing in the sun; of insects busy at their harvest; of birds in the distance calling; of grasses rustling in the breeze; of pines on the long ridge droning like an organ in the Recessional.

Yes, it was very beautiful, she thought. And sweet. And peaceful. She had come a long way—halfway across the great continent—to find that peace. But why should there be a touch of sadness in all that beauty? And why should there be need to search for her handkerchief to press against her eyes? For the first time since she had come to Paradise Park she felt a little lonely, a little doubtful about the wisdom of her brave revolt.

She sank back at last, and lay curled up in the grass with her head pillowed on one bent arm. There, to her half-closed eyes, the grass seemed like a fairy forest, soon peopled by her fancy, the fancy of a girl who still retained the quick imagination of a child. An Indian paintbrush flamed at her with barbaric passion; nodding harebells tinkled purple melodies; and a Mariposa lily with a violet eye seemed like a knight in white armor, bowing himself into her outstretched hand. Her eyelids drooped more and more. The music of the pines and the murmur of the pasture blended in a faint and fading lullaby...

Tuesday's shrill neigh awakened her. She sat up shivering, for the warm air was underlaid with cold; and quivering, for the alarm had fallen pat upon the climax of her dream. She rubbed her eyes, a little blinded by the sunlight, and saw that Tuesday stood with head high and nostrils distended, gazing past her toward the upper end of the pasture. She was not surprised, being yet under the spell of her dream-fairyland, to see a horseman galloping straight toward her. If not the white knight, then—For some seconds she stared, awakening slowly; and smiled at length at her childish fancy. It was only a cowboy, doubtless, riding upon his own prosaic business. And yet—She became gradually aware

of something unusual, something disquieting in the manner of the man's approach. The horse was leaping under the spurs; the rider sat upright and alert in the saddle; and suddenly, as she watched him, the man's hand went to his hip, and there was a gleam of metal in the sun.

She was not afraid. Seth Huntington had assured her there was nothing to be feared in Paradise Park. But for all that, it was not without uneasiness that she hastily arranged the meager folds of her divided skirt, and passed her hands quickly over the still disordered masses of her hair. And then he was fairly upon her, reining up with a jerk that brought the sweating pony back upon its haunches.

There was an angry glitter in the man's dark eyes, his face was black with passion, and the bright object she had seen flashing in his hand was the twin brother of Huntington's six-shooter. He was roughly, even meanly, dressed. His coarse blue flannel shirt was unbuttoned at the throat; his soiled brown corduroy trousers were thrust unevenly into dusty and wrinkled boot tops; his old, gray hat was slouched over one side of his forehead, shading his eyes. But the face beneath that faded and disreputable hat, as Marion saw with a slight thrill of curiosity, belonged to no ranch hand or cow-puncher. Whoever he might be, and whatever he might be doing there scowling at her, she felt at once that he was as foreign as herself to that neighborhood. But there was no time at that moment to analyze her feeling, to formulate her thought. And her next impression, following very swiftly, was one of vague antagonism. She felt that she was going to hate him.

"What new trick is this?" he demanded angrily, when he had looked from the girl to her pony, and at her again, with unconcealed suspicion.

For a moment she was undecided whether to answer him sharply or to rebuke his incivility with silence.

"I don't know!" she replied at last, by way of compromise between her two impulses, with a half-playful emphasis on the "I," accompanied by a very solemn, shaking of the head and a very innocent widening of the eyes.

There was a pause while he searched her face with a distrustful scrutiny.

"You're not just the person I was looking for," he said finally, with a touch of irony.

"How fortunate!" she replied, in a tone that was like a mocking echo of his own.

Her eyes met his unflinchingly, a little impudently, telling him nothing; then they slowly fell, and rested on the revolver in his hand. With a shrug he thrust the weapon into its holster.

"Thank you!" she said sweetly. "You really won't need it."

He jerked his head impatiently.

"How did you get in here?" he demanded, quite as roughly as before.

There was no reason in the world why she should not have answered him simply and directly; but she did not. She was exasperated, not so much by his words as by his manner, and not so much by his manner even as by something provocative in the man himself. He was rude, but it was not his rudeness that most annoyed her. She scarcely knew what it was,—perhaps a certain indifference, a certain cold contempt that she detected underlying all his anger, a certain icy and impenetrable reserve that, for all his hot words, and for all his lowering looks, she resented most as being in some way personal to her. And instantly the minx in her rose up for mischief.

"By aeroplane, of course!" she said tartly.

It was a silly speech, and she regretted it almost before it had left her lips.

A faint flush came into the enemy's face.

"Spoken like a woman!" he retorted. "Always tragic over little things and flippant over big ones."

That brought the color up into her face. But she was not subdued; for the cat in woman also has nine lives—at least.

"There's my horse," she said, with a toss of her head. "You saw him."

"True! But cow ponies don't easily jump four-wire fences."

"Why should they when the fences are down?"

“Good! We arrive by the devious ways that women love. Perhaps you’ll give me the answer now that you should have given in the first place. *How did you get in here?*”

She bit her lip, reflected a moment, and attempted a flank movement.

“My name is Marion Gaylord.”

“I knew that.”

“But you have never seen me before!”

“No. But that’s one of Huntington’s horses, and Miss Gaylord is a guest at his house. You see, I am more courteous than you after all. I answer your questions.”

“Perhaps I’ll answer yours when I know what right you have to ask them.”

A light began to dawn upon him.

“Do you mean—you don’t know where you are?”

“No.”

He gave her a long, searching look before he spoke again.

“My name is Philip Haig,” he said, leaning forward with a curious smile.

The result was all that he could have wished for. Until that moment she had remained seated, firm in her determination not to be disturbed by him. But now she rose slowly to her feet, her face reddening, her lips parted, a frightened look in her eyes. The shoe was on the other foot, with a vengeance.

He saw all this, and without compunction, seized his advantage. With a grim smile he threw the reins over the pony’s head, swung himself out of the saddle, and stepped toward her. As he came on he removed his dilapidated hat with a gesture that made her forget it was dilapidated,—a mocking, insolent gesture though it was. In spite of her embarrassment she let none of his features escape her quickening interest. She saw that he was tall, erect, alert; handsome in some strange and half-repellent way, with his pale dark face, rather long in contour, and with his black, curly hair matted on the broad forehead. But she almost recoiled when, on his drawing nearer, she saw for the first time—it had been hidden by the shadow of his slouched hat—an ugly scar that ran from the outer corner of his left eye down to the jawbone below the ear. It gave to one side of his face a singularly sinister expression that vanished when he turned and disclosed a profile that was not without nobility and charm.

Then suddenly her mystification was complete. Their eyes met, not as before, but very near, so close had he come to her, still smiling. And instantly, instinctively, she lowered hers; for she felt as if she had been caught peering through a window at something she had no right to see. Yet the next instant she was looking again, half-guiltily, but irresistibly drawn. The eyes were of a curious color,—smoky black, or dark gray-blue, or somber purple,—liquid and deep like a woman’s, but with a steady, dull glow in their depths that was unlike anything she had ever seen or imagined. What was it that burned there? Suffering? Hunger? Evil? Sorrow? Shame? It gave her something to think about for many a day and night. Meanwhile—

“I see you have heard of me,” he said mockingly.

She had no reply. She was realizing slowly that she had trespassed, that she had perhaps seriously compromised her cousin, and, most humiliating of all, that she had assumed quite the wrong attitude toward the man.

“You really didn’t know you were on my land?” he demanded, with a little less offensiveness in his tone.

“No,” she answered weakly.

“And Huntington didn’t send you here?”

“No.”

“I believe you, of course. But it’s rather queer. How did you happen—if you don’t mind—”

She did not mind in the least—was eager, indeed, to explain her presence there.

“I’m just learning to ride,” she began impulsively.

“This was my first venture off the valley road, and I—”

“And you came straight to me!” he exclaimed, chuckling.

At that a strange thing happened. He had meant only that she, the guest and cousin of Seth Huntington, his bitter foe, had blundered straight into the camp of the enemy; and that was a rare joke on Huntington. But she was a girl; her little adventure was already rosy with romance; and the effect of his careless speech was as if he had looked into her heart, and read aloud for her something she had not known was there. To his surprise and wonder the girl’s fair face turned red to the roots of her tawny hair, and a look of helpless confusion came into the clear, blue eyes that until now, for all her embarrassment, had frankly met his own. She looked suddenly away from him.

“You make me ashamed,” she said at length, stealing a look at him.

“If you know anything about my difficulty with Huntington,” he began, “you’ll understand that—”

“I do. I do understand!” she interrupted eagerly. “I don’t know much about it—the trouble. They haven’t told me. I’ve only overheard some talk—and I didn’t ask. I rode down the valley this morning trying to do it like a cowboy. And there was a branch road—and then the break in the fence—and before I knew it I’d fallen asleep. That’s all—except—” She shot a half-mischievous glance at him “—you spoiled a very beautiful dream.”

But this was all lost upon him. His face was clouding again.

“Where is it—the break in the fence?”

Chagrined at the failure of her bit of coquetry, she merely pointed in the direction whence she had come.

“Thank you!” he said. “At last!”

With that he went swiftly to his pony, mounted, and started to ride away. But suddenly he reined up again, whirled his horse savagely around, and faced Marion with the sunlight full upon the scarred side of his face, now ugly with menace.

“If that fence has been cut,” he said, in a hard and level tone, “it’s been cut by Huntington or his men. You tell him for me, please—and you’ll be doing *him* a favor not to forget it—tell him that he’s a fool to anger me. I’ve been very patient in this business, but I don’t claim patience as one of my virtues. Do you hear? Tell him he’s a fool to anger me!”

She watched him gallop to the gap in the barb-wire fence; she watched him dismount to examine the severed wires; she watched him leap on his horse again, and ride furiously down the road until he was lost to view below the dip in the slope toward the valley. And still for some minutes she stood staring at the place where he had disappeared. Then, left alone with her pent-up emotions, she no longer resisted them. Tears of vexation started in her eyes; chagrin, resentment, anger swept over her in turn. She dug the heel of one small boot into the unoffending soil—his soil—and thrust her clenched hands down at her side.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” she cried, over and over again, striding forward and back across some yards of pasture, trampling lilies and harebells under her heedless feet, turning her flaming face at intervals toward the spot in the smiling landscape that had last held the figure of Philip Haig.

The shame of it! She had never—never—never been treated so outrageously. It was unendurable—and she had endured it! She flung herself down on the ground and wept.

Marion was now facing life alone. Her nearest remaining relative was her cousin, Claire Huntington. Her mother—a Southern girl who might have stepped out of a panel by Fragonard, so fine and soft and Old-World-like was her beauty—had died when she was still a child. Her father, Doctor Gaylord, was the antithesis of the sprite-like creature he had married,—a big, athletic, outdoor sort of man, with truly violent red hair and beard, whose favorite expression about himself had been that a very capable pirate had been sacrificed to make a tolerable physician. But he had prospered in his profession; and then had died with amazing suddenness, leaving his estate in an almost hopeless mess.

Robert Hillyer had tackled the problem,—Robert, the alert, the busy, the supremely confident, the typical money-getter of the money-worshipping metropolis. He had long been deeply in love with

Marion, but he had not made great headway in his suit, despite the advantage of Doctor Gaylord's approval. Now, having saved enough out of the estate (for so he said, though he never told Marion the details of that miracle) to provide her with an income barely sufficient to keep her in comfort but not in the luxury to which she had been accustomed, he plainly expected his reward. And this was to Marion an intolerable situation. She did not love Robert. She liked him, admired him, trusted him; no more. Knowing her father's wishes, she saw the way marked straight before her; for Robert already had wealth, and could and would give her all the material things she desired. Time and again she was on the point of yielding, but something checked her, held her back, as if a voice had whispered in her ear, and strong arms had seized her. She grew restless, discontented, melancholy. And suddenly, on a moment's inspiration, the strangest impulse she had ever known, she had revolted and fled from the scene of her unhappiness, telling Robert (by letter) only that she must have time to think, and that for six months he must leave her to herself. She had fled to Claire, that cousin on her father's side, who some years before, to the wonder and chagrin of many Gaylords east and west,—to all except the Viking physician, who had rejoiced in her spirit,—had eloped with a cowboy, since turned successful cattleman, whom she had met at the Denver Carnival. Ten days now had Marion been in Paradise Park, rejoicing in her freedom, rejoicing in the half-wild life, rejoicing in the tonic air and the tonic beauty of this Rocky Mountain valley, shut in, isolated, and so aptly named. And only to-day had there come any emotions that disturbed her peace.

When she looked up again her eyes were sharply arrested by a scene that seemed curiously to picture her own mood. Far up at the head of the valley a cloud that was scarcely heavier than a mist came stealing out of a gulch to take its shining way along the range of mountains. Dropping in its flight a shower as light as a bridal veil, it sped glistening across the face of mountain after mountain, softening the stark grays and reds, while above it the peaks gleamed white. On and on it came until at last it arrived at the mouth of a deep, dark gorge in the side of a mountain that, in its strange and forbidding aspect, differed notably from all the others in the majestic range. There it paused as if arrested by some stern command, hung for a moment in palpable agitation, and was swiftly swallowed up in the gorge. And again she had a vague and uneasy feeling, as she had when first she saw it, that Thunder Mountain,—but she could not fit that feeling into thought, could find no words to frame it. Yet she was fascinated.

It was half-hidden now in surging, black storm-clouds, while all the sharp and snow-clad peaks around it glittered in the sun. Even in those rare moments when it was freed from clouds and mists it stood alone in its peculiar grandeur. Unlike all the others it wore no diadem of snow. Some terrible convulsion of nature, some cataclysm at its birth or in the fiery days of its youth, had left it bald-headed, ugly, and deformed. But for that catastrophe it would have been far loftier than any of its fellows; and even now the hunchback towered among them, its flat head level with their pointed peaks, the most conspicuous figure in the imposing pageant raised against the western sky.

And its deformity was not the whole of its misfortune. It bore the brunt of every tempest that broke upon that massive barrier of mountains. Its granite head was the very breeding-place of storms. The peaks around it had their days of calm, but Thunder Mountain never. An hour or two perhaps—no more. It knew no peace. The elements were, and are now, and forever will be quarreling upon its worn and battered head; lightning and rain and snow and wind are forever hammering and beating it turn by turn. It is the Quasimodo and the Lear and the Gray Friar of mountains, all in one. And if, on some still and perfect day, its tonsured head emerges from the clouds, the watcher in the Park has but to turn his head a moment, and look again, and lo! it wears its gray cowl as before, and stoops growling and grumbling under its endless punishment.

Suddenly, as Marion looked, the silence was rudely shattered. Roll on roll of thunder swept across the valley, crashed against the hills, rebounded from wall to wall of mountains, until all the Park was filled with the sullen bellowing. And then, amid all the tumult, Marion heard something more,—a voice that mingled with the voice of the mountain, and thrilled her while it filled her with

a singular disquietude. She had dismissed Haig from her thoughts. She was sure of that. And yet through all the uproar, and in the tense silence that ensued, she heard his taunting voice:

“And you came straight to me!”

CHAPTER II

THE ROAD TO PARADISE

The gap in the fence remained exactly as it had been when it invited her to adventure. But now she halted there, dismounted, and picked up the end of a wire that lay trailing on the ground. With new-found interest she examined the fracture, and stared at it in wonder. Dropping it, and kneeling excitedly in the grass, she searched another, and still another wire, and with the same result. Even to her unpractised eye the facts were plain: the four wires had not been broken; they had been cleanly cut, and very recently, as shown by the absence of rust on the severed ends. By whom? And why? Seth Huntington, Haig had said. Impossible! Absurd! True, she had heard Seth denouncing him; Claire also; and without knowing the cause of the feud, or caring, she had learned that Huntington and Haig were bitterly at odds about something,—cattle, she thought, or was it land? But that Seth could have stooped to the low trick implied in these cut wires! And yet—

She looked down the half-made road by which Haig had disappeared. It was quite empty now, save for Tuesday and herself. Nor was there sight of man or beast in all the valley. Haig's cattle, like Seth's and the other ranchmen's, were grazing in the summer pastures, no doubt in little shut-in valleys far up among the pines yonder, where the violet mists were deepening.

She mounted her horse again, and rode slowly up the hill. But just where the road entered the woods at the summit of the ridge she stopped once more, and turned for a last look at her lost valley. Her gaze swept it lovingly from where, at her left, the long ridge shut off the view, to where, far at her right, the valley narrowed into a pine-screened gulch; and back again almost to the spot where the road dipped and disappeared. There her eyes were suddenly caught by something she had not seen before,—a thin spiral of blue smoke that mounted slowly until it was struck and dissipated by the breeze from across the ridge. Haig's ranchhouse, surely, nestling below the hill! The house would be visible, doubtless, from the place where Haig had vanished from her sight. What would it be like? she wondered.

The next instant she had pulled her pony half-around toward the valley. But Tuesday turned his head, and looked at her; and she felt the blood rushing into her face.

“Go on, Tuesday!” she cried, jerking him back into the road. “What are you doing?”

She rode on into the pines, embarrassed beyond all belief.

In a few minutes she had emerged again from the woods, descended the hill, and regained the main-traveled road along the Brightwater. Still she rode slowly, forgetting that she had learned at last to ride like a cowboy. She was reluctant to return to Huntington's, reluctant to relate her experiences as she had always related them until to-day. Haig had sent a warning to Huntington. It was her duty to deliver it. But how could she tell just so much and no more? There would be questions. She would be cross-examined, kindly enough but relentlessly. And in some strange way this meeting had become a private matter; Haig's warning was inextricably mixed with other things that did not concern Huntington. Just what these were, and why they were so very private, she could not quite explain to herself; and for the moment she did not try. They were things to be thought about later, when she could think more clearly. She knew only that she should never be able to endure either the banter or the disapproval of Huntington. What did Claire see in him anyhow,—the soft and sensitive Claire, with her blue eyes and her pretty face always upturned so trustfully to him? For the first time she realized that she had distrusted Seth from the beginning.

In the midst of these confused and disconcerting thoughts, she became aware that she was no longer alone in the highway. Slowly as she rode, she was steadily overtaking a group of horsemen that appeared to be in difficulties. At intervals there was a commotion in the group, and clouds of dust from time to time concealed it from her sight. She reined up Tuesday, and hesitated, having had

her fill of adventure for one day. Then, as the men seemed to be quite oblivious to her presence, and deeply absorbed in their own affair, curiosity drew her onward; and all her scruples were forgotten when she had ridden near enough to see the cause of the disturbance.

Three men on cow ponies were leading, driving, and avoiding a fourth horse, which was not a cow pony by any possible extension of the word. This horse, which wore neither saddle nor bridle, but only a rope around his neck, maintained an almost uninterrupted struggle with his guards. At the first near glimpse she caught of him through the dust, Marion uttered an exclamation of surprise and admiration. He was larger than the ponies ridden by the men, larger than any cow pony, yet not a big horse measured by any standard with which she was familiar. His lines were like those of a thoroughbred, and in his movements, for all his fury, there was a lightness, a daintiness, an eloquence that suggested nothing so much as the airy grace of a young girl skipping and dancing across a playground.

But it was his color especially that drew the cry from Marion's lips. This was pale yellow, not the cream color of the familiar buckskin breed, but something golden; of a brilliant luster like gold leaf, but softer; rather like cloth-of-gold, with a living, quivering sheen. All the horse's body was of this uniform, strange tint, but his mane and tail were a dull, tawny yellow deepening at the extremities into the hue of rusty gold. Though his hide was streaked with the sweat of his rebellion, and caked in places with the dust of the long road he had come, and welted by the whips of his tormentors, the color and the gloss shone out as undimmed as his proud spirit was undaunted by the hard knocks of his captivity.

The three men clearly were hard pressed. Their faces were coated thick with dust; their eyes were red-rimmed, bulging, and bloodshot; their movements were heavy with fatigue. Scarcely a sound escaped their lips as they watched for every fresh maneuver of their prisoner, and fought doggedly to gain a yard or two along the road. In the silence and intensity of the struggle there was something savage, elemental, and incomparable, heightened by the extraordinary beauty of the animal and the uncouth appearance of the men. Between them, the captive and his captors, Marion's sympathy was about equally divided. At every gallant sally made by the horse her heart leaped, and she hoped instinctively that he would go free. But then, the next instant, she was thrilled by the bold and shrewd counter-play of the cow-punchers that blocked the horse's strategy.

Marion had scarcely comprehended all this, and imperfectly, when a terrifying thing occurred. The golden horse seemed to have paused and gathered all his forces for an effort that should make his best previous performance look like the silly antics of a colt. Suddenly, and without any warning maneuver, he charged the full length of his rope straight at the man who held it coiled in his hand, with the end looped around the horn of his saddle. At the final bound, he reared as if to fall upon the cowboy and mangle him with his forefeet. But instead of finishing this attack, he whirled on his hind legs with incredible swiftness; and before the man could gather up the slack of the rope, or brace himself for the shock, the wild horse dashed across the road with all the strength and fury there was in him.

Marion screamed, and closed her eyes. There were dreadful sounds of falling bodies, of bodies dragged on the ground, with grunts and groans and smothered cries. Then silence. When she dared to look she could see at first only a welter of men and horses half-hidden by the dust. Near her lay the gold horse with his head twisted backward by the taut rope, which choked him until his eyes bulged, and foam dripped from his lips. The man who had held the lariat lay half under his fallen pony, whose efforts to rise were checked by the tightened rope still tied to the saddlebow. The two other men were on their feet, one clutching the straightened halter, the second deftly slipping a lariat around the prisoner's pawing hind legs.

It was all over in a minute. The taut rope was cut near the saddle of the fallen pony, which then scrambled to its feet; the leader rose, shook himself, and proceeded phlegmatically to adjust the turned saddle, and to climb stiffly into it; the leading-rope was passed to him again, the second

lariat was loosed from the outlaw's feet, permitting him to rise; the other men remounted; and the procession moved on again in silence, scarcely a word having been spoken from the time the horse made his mad charge for liberty. And now he seemed to have had enough of the conflict, for he stepped forward obediently and, Marion fancied, as demurely as a child that has finished a naughty tantrum.

Then at last there was speech. One of the men had dropped back a few paces to be in the rear of the prisoner. He sat heavily in the saddle, leaning forward as if he would fall on the pony's neck. But his eyes never left the golden horse, and when he spoke it was not to the girl, who had ridden close up to his side, but to himself, in a kind of hoarse and guttural soliloquy.

"But he ain't done. He's foolin'," the man said again and again, as if he had started the words and could not stop them. "He ain't done. He's foolin'."

Marion looked at him curiously. He was the typical cow-puncher, in blue flannel shirt and leather chaps, with the inevitable revolver hanging loosely at his hip, and a long quirt suspended from his right wrist. The dust on his face was stained with blood that had flowed from a raw bruise on his temple, and Marion now noticed that his left arm hung limp at his side.

"You're hurt!" she said softly.

The man turned, and stared at her blankly, and she saw that his face was distorted into a set expression of pain.

"Arm busted," he said, after a moment, as if surprised by her question; and then renewed his watch.

"How did it happen?" she asked.

"Threwed me."

"You don't mean you tried to ride him!"

"Jerked me. Th' man ain't born't c'n ride 'im."

"You were leading him?"

"No, just thought I was," he said grimly. "He drug me."

"When was that?"

"This morning—about seven miles back."

"Where did he come from?"

"San Luis."

"Where is that, please?"

"Over yander," he answered, nodding toward the western mountains.

Marion stared.

"You haven't brought him over the mountains!"

"Round by Pinto Pass, an' up through the canyon."

"I've never seen a horse like that before," she said, after a brief silence.

"Nor anybody else has," he replied, with a note of pride.

"But he's no cow pony—surely."

"You ain't never heard o' Sunnysides?"

"No."

He looked at her curiously.

"Of course not," he said apologetically. "You're f'm the city. East, maybe?"

"Yes, I'm from New York."

"Then it's natch'ral. Everybody in these parts has heard o' Sunnysides, though it's not many that's seen him."

"Please tell me about him."

The man's eyes brightened a little.

"He's got some strange blood in him," he began. "Nobody knows what it is, but th' ain't another one o' that color, nor his devil spirit, in the whole bunch. The rest of 'em's just ordinary wild horses

runnin' up an' down the sandhills of the San Luis. There's people't say he's a ghost horse. Fact! An' they say't he'll never stay caught. I don't know. It's certain't he's been caught three times,—not countin' the times cow-punchers an' others has thought they'd caught him, but hadn't. The first time he was caught actual he broke out o' the strongest corral in the San Luis—at night—an' nobody sees hide nor hair of 'im—not so much as a flicker o' yellow in the moonlight. An' back he was, headin' the herd again.

“Nex' time Thad Brinker ropes him. Thad's the topnotch cow-puncher between the Black Hills an' the Rio Grande, an' he comes all the way f'm Dakoty when he hears the yarn about Sunnysides. Thad gits fourteen men to help him round up the bunch, an' then he ropes the gold feller after a fight that's talked about yit in the San Luis. He ropes him. An' then what does Brinker do?”

He looked at Marion as if he dared her to make as many guesses as she wished. She shook her head.

“You ain't the only one that'd never hit it,” he went on with satisfaction. “Thad ropes him, an' while they lay there restin', Sunnysides all tied up so he can't move, an' Brinker rubbin' some bumps he'd come by in the fracas, just then the red comes up onto Sangre de Cristo. Brinker sees it—Ever seen the sunset color on Sangre de Cristo? No? That's a pity, Miss. Indeed, that's a pity. But you're f'm Noo York, you said.”

He paused again, and Marion began to realize the full degree of her provinciality and ignorance. She was from New York. What a pity!

“Well,” said the cowboy, as if resolved to do the best he could in the circumstances, “sometimes—maybe three or four times a year—it's weird. It's religious. The white peaks turn red as blood—that's why they're called Sangre de Cristo. It's Spanish for Blood of Christ. It makes you feel queer-like”—He paused a moment thoughtfully, watching the golden horse as it stepped quietly, lightly, with head high, just ahead of them. “The red comes onto Sangre de Cristo, an' Brinker sees it. He looks at the blood on the peaks, an' then at the gold horse lyin' there all torn an' dirty, an' this is what Brinker does, an' maybe he couldn't help it. He ups an' cuts the ropes, an' Sunnysides's off to his waitin' bunch, an' they all go snortin' down the valley.”

There was a touch of awe in the man's voice, and Marion felt a little of it too. She looked toward the serrated barrier of mountains, in the very middle of which stood old Thunder under his pall of cloud. Beyond lay San Luis—Sangre de Cristo—and what romance! Would she ever—Her eyes rested for a moment on the black pile that now, as always, fascinated and yet disturbed her.

“And you?” she said at length, turning to the cowboy.

“There wasn't no red sunset this time,” the man answered, with a grim smile. “But we ain't slept since,” he added, with a return of weariness.

“You caught him?” she asked admiringly.

“Us three.”

“But what are you doing with him here?”

“He's sold, if we c'n find the man't offered a thousand for him a year ago.”

“Who was he?”

But she knew already. Some swift flash of intuition told her there was but one man in Paradise Park who—

“His name's Haig, an' he's—”

“Philip Haig!” she murmured.

“You know him?”

“Yes—no. That is, I've heard of him.”

It was on her lips,—the explanation that the men had passed the branch road leading to Haig's ranch, that they were now riding away from it. But she hesitated. And why? She did not know then; but an hour later she would be reproaching herself bitterly for that moment's indecision. The words

were almost spoken, but something checked them; and before she could make up her mind to follow her first natural impulse it was too late.

The leader of the party turned in his saddle, and called to the man at Marion's side, who rode quickly forward and joined his companions. There was a conversation inaudible to her ears, and while she still pondered over her inexplicable hesitation the cowboys and the golden horse, followed by Marion, approached the group of squat, unpainted houses that bore without apology the name of Paradise.

CHAPTER III

SETH HUNTINGTON'S OPPORTUNITY

It was Thursday, the one day of the week when Paradise needed no apologist. For on Thursdays the stage arrived from Tellurium, bringing the mail and, now and then, a passenger, and always a whiff of the outside world. No resident of Paradise Park would willingly have missed the arrival of the stage; and on this occasion fully two-thirds of the male population, with nine-tenths of the female, had already assembled. But the stage was not due for an hour or more. The women bargained and gossiped in Thompson's store; the men, most of them, were gathered around a stiff game of freeze-out in the Square Deal Saloon; and only the score or more of saddle horses hitched in front of the store, and the dozen or so of buckboards and road wagons parked in the rear of it, showed that Paradise was in its weekly state of mild and patient expectancy.

So the three cow-punchers, the yellow horse, and Marion rode into Paradise without being seen or heard, and halted in front of the post-office.

"Hal-lo! Hallo!" sang out the leader of the cowboys. And then, with the petulance of one that is "all in": "Is this a dam' graveyard?"

A thin man in his shirt sleeves, with a whisky glass in one hand and a towel in the other, came to the door of the Square Deal Saloon. His pallid face had the look of settled weariness that is characteristic of keepers of such oases. Slavin had never, within the recollection of the oldest frequenter of his establishment, betrayed the slightest interest in anything. If there was a certain change in his expression as he looked out between narrowed eyelids into the garish sunlight it was one indicative of mild resentment at having been disturbed in his methodic occupation behind the bar. He saw with neither interest nor anticipation the three strangers, who ought to have had enough sense to dismount and walk in if they wanted anything.

"Well," he began in a drawling and sarcastic tone, "what—"

It probably would have been a cautious and covered insult to the presumed intelligence of the strangers, if he had finished the question. But it died away on his thin lips. His fishy, blue eyes had caught at last the gleam of Sunnysides, half in eclipse behind the dull-hued cow ponies. For a few seconds he stared, while his mouth stood open, and his features slowly responded to the first emotion he had felt in years.

"Hell's bobcats!" he yelled.

The glass slipped from his hand, and fell tinkling in pieces on the floor as he lunged out into the road.

In the saloon there was a moment of tense silence as the men there slowly realized that a phenomenon had occurred. Slavin was excited! The silence was followed by a hubbub of raised voices and a racket of overturned chairs and the scrape and thud of boots on the sanded floor. At that instant a woman in a pink calico dress, drawn by Slavin's yell, came to the door of Thompson's, and promptly screeched. The poker game was never finished; Thompson's trade was ruined for the day; and the strange group in the roadway became the center of a jostling, uproarious crowd of men and women, who alternately bombarded the three cow-punchers with questions and stared at Sunnysides in silent wonder. But they were careful to maintain a respectful distance between themselves and the formidable captive, though he stood motionless amid all the uproar, like a golden statue of a horse, with his head raised proudly, his yellow-black eyes flashing defiance and suspicion, and his lustrous hide gleaming in the sun.

Marion's enjoyment of this exciting scene was tinged with a vague uneasiness. She had watched the men come tumbling out of the Square Deal Saloon and the women swarming from Thompson's store, and had felt a curious relief at seeing neither Seth nor Claire among them. Though she could

not have given any reason for her satisfaction, their absence, and Seth's especially, seemed to her a piece of rare good fortune. Haig's warning—"Tell him he's a fool to anger me!"—was still echoing at the back of her brain; her recent act of incomprehensible errancy still troubled and perplexed her; and try as she would, she was unable to suppress the feeling that she had become inextricably entangled in the feud between Haig and Huntington. She was not yet ready to face Huntington. Thank Heaven, he was not there!

But at the very instant of her self-congratulation, and when she was just turning her attention again to the hubbub around the golden outlaw, her eye was suddenly caught, across the heads of the crowd, by a figure that caused her to stiffen in the saddle.

"Seth!" she gasped.

He came striding rapidly from the direction of the blacksmith's, the most distant of the group of buildings,—a large and heavy but well-built man, whose black, short-cropped beard and bushy, overhanging eyebrows gave him a somewhat truculent expression, which was heightened by his rough and domineering demeanor. He was better dressed, or more carefully at least, than any of the other men. He wore a coat and trousers of dark-brown corduroy, a light-gray flannel shirt with a flowing black tie, and a wide-brimmed Stetson hat. His belt, under the unbuttoned coat, was of elaborately stamped leather, with a pocket at one side from which a heavy, gold watch chain was looped to a silver ring, and with an ornate holster at the other where the black butt of a revolver was visible as he moved.

He shouldered his way through the crowd in the heedless manner of most bulky men, who seldom realize how much space they take that properly belongs to others. At six feet from the golden horse he halted, and surveyed him with shining eyes.

"Sunnysides, eh?" he said, turning toward the nearest of the strangers.

"The's only one," replied the cow-puncher.

"Who caught him this time?"

"Us three. That's Jim Raley, with the busted arm. That other is Jud Smith, My name's Larkin. We belong to the X bar O outfit on Lost Soldier Creek."

"Second outfit below Forty-Mile," said Huntington, familiarly.

"Right!"

"Sanders still foreman?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you doing with that horse up here?"

The cow-puncher grinned.

"I ketch your meanin'," he replied. "It's like this. Sanders chased Sunnysides three seasons, an' thought he'd roped him. But all he gits 's a cracked leg, an' not a yeller hair of the slippery beast. Then us three takes on the job—not presumin' to be better'n Sanders, but hopin' for luck. It comes our way, an' there you are. We offer him to Sanders—for a price, natch'rally—but he says he don't believe in ghosts, an' we c'n go to hell with him."

"You must have missed the road. This is Paradise," said Huntington.

The crowd roared its appreciation.

"The' ain't much in names," observed Larkin testily.

The crowd laughed again, though, of course, less heartily.

"Well, Heaven or Hell," said Huntington, "is the horse for sale?"

"He is—if he ain't sold already."

"How's that?"

"We're offered a price for him—if it still holds good. That's why we've come to Paradise—an' no other reason, believe me!"

"How much?"

"Thousand."

There was a stir in the crowd.

“That’s some price for a bronco,” said Huntington, with an assumed indifference.

“It sure is—if you’re talkin’ about a *bronco*,” retorted the cow-puncher.

There was a brief silence, in which all eyes were turned again upon the golden horse, standing motionless but alert, as if keenly alive to all that passed. The common ponies around him stamped, and champed their bits, and moved restlessly in their places, but Sunnysides remained calm and observant, with all the dignity and contempt of a captive patrician in a crowd of yokels.

Marion saw admiration and desire growing in Seth’s eyes, and knew that her foreboding had not been without reason.

“And who’s paying a thousand dollars for him?” asked Huntington.

“Haig’s his name, Philip Haig,” answered Larkin. “Know him?”

If Larkin had been a little nettled by the levity of the Paradisians he now had his revenge, though much to his surprise, in the extraordinary effect produced by his simple announcement. The smiles faded from the faces assembled around him; significant glances were exchanged; and there followed a silence so deep that the murmur of the Brightwater could be heard quite clearly across the meadows. Then there was a rustling movement in the crowd, and every face, as if by a common impulse, or at a given signal, was turned toward Huntington.

Marion was not sure of the feelings of the others, but there could be no mistake in what she read in Huntington’s black countenance. She was not only frightened, but surprised and pained. For all his coarseness and crudity, she had until to-day believed him to be innately gentle, with only a rough and ungracious exterior. She had seen him always tender with Claire, whom undoubtedly he loved with all the best there was in him. But now she perceived the other side of his character, which she had indeed divined at first, but which she had firmly, on account of Claire, refused to acknowledge. An unworthy passion glowed in his eyes; his features were distorted by an expression of mingled cunning and hate; and his head somehow seemed to sink lower between his shoulders as he leaned slightly forward, studying the face of the cow-puncher. Then swiftly he took himself in hand, and masked his passions under an air of careless badinage that was, for the moment, suited to his purpose.

“But I don’t just understand,” he drawled insinuatingly. “Haig hasn’t been away from the Park lately—unless he’s gone an’ come by night.”

A snicker or two, and one loud guffaw rewarded him for this insult to his absent foe. But Marion felt the color rising to her cheeks.

“It’s a year ago he’s seen him, ’way off, shinin’ in the sun,” explained Larkin. “He stops at the X bar O, an’ says he’ll give a thousand for him.”

“So that’s all you’ve got to go on, is it?” sneered Huntington.

“Yes,” answered Larkin uneasily.

“An’ you think he’ll make good, do you?”

“If a man’s word ain’t good he don’t stay in this country long, does he?”

“That’s right—he won’t stay long!” replied Huntington, with a savage laugh.

“You mean to say—” queried Larkin pointedly, leaning across the neck of his pony, and looking keenly into Huntington’s eyes.

“Nothing,” answered Huntington, lifting his huge shoulders.

“That’s sayin’ a lot an’ sayin’ nothing,” retorted Larkin.

“You’ll know more when you try to collect that thousand.”

“All right,” responded Larkin, gathering up the reins as if to terminate the interview. “Where’s his place—if it ain’t a secret?”

“It’s over beyond that ridge,” said Huntington, pointing toward the west. “You go back about three miles the way you came, an’ there’s a branch road—”

“Hell!” snorted the cowboy whose arm hung limp at his side.

The three men exchanged glances. They were very weary; they had used almost the last of their powers to bring the outlaw this far; and they were plainly reluctant to undertake another tussle with the tireless animal, now ready, without doubt, to renew his struggle for liberty.

Huntington watched them narrowly.

"I'm all in!" grumbled Raley.

"You look it," said Huntington. Then he added lightly: "Still, you ought to fetch up at Haig's place before morning."

Marion felt disgust and resentment rising in her at this misrepresentation of the distance to Haig's ranch. Whatever Haig had done, this was cowardly and unfair. She looked eagerly at the other men, expecting to hear some one correct the gross exaggeration. But the faces were all blank, and no one spoke.

Something like a groan escaped from the lips of the injured cowboy. He looked as if he might tumble from the saddle at any instant.

"Sure we can!" said Larkin doggedly. "Come, men! Let's move on."

"Well, good luck!" said Huntington carelessly. And then, as if on second thought: "But see here! You fellows look all right to me, and if Haig's changed his mind, or hasn't got the cash handy, bring the horse back here, and I'll talk business with you."

"Talk business now!" Smith blurted out, averting his eyes from Larkin.

"Very well. I'll give you five hundred for him—if you don't want to go any farther. He ain't worth it, but he's a kind of a curiosity, and—"

"That ain't talkin' business worth a dam'!" cried Larkin. "Come along, men!"

He turned his pony's head, and took a fresh grip on the halter that held the prisoner. Smith moved also, though slowly, but Raley did not budge.

"I'm damned if I go any further!" he growled.

Smith stopped, and looked uncertainly from Raley to Larkin, from Larkin to Huntington, who was studying him craftily.

"The five hundred isn't wind," said Huntington sneeringly. "It's over there in Thompson's safe, if you want it."

"We'll see Haig first," said Larkin, compressing his lips, and speaking more to his companions than to Huntington.

Smith shifted uneasily in his saddle, while Raley avoided Larkin's eyes, and looked appealingly at Huntington. The ranchman, in his turn, took a sidelong glance, furtive and questioning, at the faces of his neighbors. The moment was critical, and much more was involved in the crisis than the possession of the golden outlaw. For a long time Huntington had assumed a certain leadership in the Park, but it had not always been unquestioned. His qualifications for leadership were not as apparent to all his neighbors as they were to himself, and there were some who even resented his pretensions. Nevertheless he had, in a way, succeeded; and he had been permitted to represent the entire valley as far as he liked in the war with Philip Haig. One and all, indeed, regarded Haig as an intruder; many of them had more than once threatened violence against him; and there was not among them one whom Haig, if he had wanted a defender, could have counted on. Yet, for all that, Huntington was practically alone in the depth of his hatred and the violence of his methods. If Haig had no friends in the Park, he had only a few, perhaps no more than two or three, inveterate enemies, of whom Huntington was the active representative.

Huntington now saw in the faces of the men around him that they were doubtful of him, and that the time was opportune to turn their passivity into energetic support of his plans. Moreover, he had already "put his foot in it," had gone too far to withdraw without discredit. Having openly insulted the absent enemy, and having clearly revealed his intention to cheat him of this prize, to weaken now would be to abandon forever all hope of ascendancy. For an instant he regretted what he had done, and cursed himself under his breath. Then, taking a new grip on himself, he returned to the attack.

“Seven hundred and fifty, then!” he said with a swagger. “And it’s cash, not words.”

There was a moment of suspense. The three men, who were moving slowly away, turned in their saddles. Not a muscle quivered, not a foot stirred in the expectant crowd. Marion felt that in another minute she would cry out, shrieking at Seth, shrieking the warning Haig had sent by her.

“That’s good enough, for me!” declared Raley, throwing the reins over his pony’s head, and preparing painfully to dismount.

“No, Jim!” cried Smith. “Let him say a thousand, an’ I’m with you. ’Tain’t exactly on the square, but the’s no use killin’ ourselves for—”

His speech was cut short by a shrill cry from a woman who stood on a horse block at the outer edge of the crowd.

“Look! Look!” she called, pointing a finger toward the long white road.

CHAPTER IV

THE HIGHEST BIDDER

Far up the road appeared a little cloud of dust with a black speck in its center.

A murmur ran through the crowd; a name was passed from mouth to mouth; and the men nearest Huntington began to edge away instinctively, leaving a larger and larger space clear around him and the three cow-punchers.

Marion too looked, and understood. She had not dismounted, but still sat her pony within ten feet of the outlaw, at the side of the roadway, in about the middle of which stood Huntington. With an effort she drew her eyes away from that ominous black spot in the distance, and turned toward Seth. A shiver ran through her body, but her cheeks burned, and there was a voice in her ears that shouted, "Tell him he's a fool to anger me!" For a moment she was on the point of rushing upon Seth, and shrieking that warning into his face. But now it was too late.

Like all the others Huntington stood for a few seconds fascinated by that figure in the puff of dust. And for just those few seconds there was a certain unsteadiness in his attitude, irresolution in the black eyes beneath their bushy brows. But the blue-whiteness under the dark beard was not the pallor of fear, so called. Seth Huntington was as incapable of physical cowardice as he was of moral courage. He was not afraid of Philip Haig, but he was dreadfully afraid of being thought afraid of him. There was yet time to avoid a clash with Haig, to withdraw from an undertaking in which he knew he was wholly in the wrong. But he was not equal to that test of character. He would sooner tackle all the Haigs in Christendom than face the derision of his neighbors, whom he had assiduously taught to expect great things of him on the first occasion. Here was the occasion; he had seized it, blinded by passion; and there was no way for him now but to see it through. He straightened up, and faced the three cow-punchers.

"All right!" he cried defiantly. "It's a thousand."

But the three had heard the name murmured by the crowd, had seen the distant horseman. Larkin was plainly elated. Raley and Smith, as plainly abashed, looked this way and that, avoiding the eyes of their leader, and every other eye as well. Huntington, seeing the game about to slip from his hands, whirled on his heel and looked swiftly toward the store.

"Thompson!" he yelled.

"Here!" was the answer, as a small, gray-bearded man in shirt sleeves advanced a step or two from the door.

"Fetch me that roll from your safe, will you?"

"Right!"

As Thompson disappeared within the store, Huntington turned again toward the cowboys.

"A thousand dollars—cash!" he repeated.

Larkin leaned forward on his horse, and looked at him shrewdly.

"Seems to me it's not the horse you're after so much as him," he said, with a grin and a nod toward the road.

"That's as may be," retorted Huntington. "Money talks."

"An' it says mighty funny things sometimes," replied Larkin, who now made no concealment of his dislike of Huntington and his "game."

"We'll see!" cried Huntington angrily. "How does twelve hundred sound to you two?"

He looked steadily at Raley and Smith, who exchanged glances.

"What's your awful hurry?" Larkin demanded, in a drawling tone, but with an anxious eye for the galloping figure now in plain view. "We'll give Haig a chance to bid—eh, men?"

Smith shot an angry but uneasy look at the leader. Huntington saw it, and guessed that there was more than weariness and greed in the willingness of Smith and Raley to combine against Larkin. Probably, he thought, there had been differences of opinion, disputes even, on the road to Paradise. He turned impatiently toward the store.

At that instant Thompson ran out, broke through the ring of men, and handed a roll of “yellowbacks” to Huntington, who hurriedly peeled off several of the bills, and thrust them at arm’s length toward the wavering cow-punchers.

“Haig talked about a thousand dollars!” he cried. “There’s fifteen hundred. Do you want it?”

For a moment it was heads or tails. Even Larkin eyed the money hungrily. Then his teeth clicked together, and he turned upon his partners, whose faces showed plainly the answer that was upon their lips.

“An’ what’ll you say to *him*?” he demanded.

“Eighteen hundred!” shouted Huntington.

“That’s good enough for me!” cried Raley. “Say it, Jud!”

There was a distant thunder of hoofs as Haig’s horse took the short bridge over the Brightwater. The crowd backed still farther away from Huntington, who was again fingering his roll of bills.

“Two thousand!” he roared, shaking the handful of “yellowbacks” at the wavering Smith.

Raley leaned from his saddle, and grabbed Smith’s arm.

“Quick, Jud!” he pleaded hotly. “Don’t be a fool!”

“All right! We’ll take it!” answered Smith.

“No!” said Larkin firmly, pulling his horse around between Huntington and the two partners.

“Yes!” the two cried out together.

Huntington stepped forward, and thrust both handfuls of bills almost into Larkin’s face.

“Name your price then!” he bellowed.

Larkin looked at the money,—smelt it,—as he said afterwards, grimly confessing his weakness at the sight of more than he could save in years of riding the range and branding mavericks. If there had been ten seconds more—

Haig galloped into the crowd, which gave him plenty of room, and reined up his pony just in front of the golden outlaw. For some instants he saw only the horse; and his eyes kindled. Then he faced the cowboys and Huntington.

They were fixed in almost the very attitudes in which he had come upon them. Huntington’s outstretched hands had indeed fallen to his side, but they still clutched the crumpled bills. Raley’s blood-stained face was purple with anger and chagrin, while Smith’s wore a sullen, hangdog look. As for Larkin, he met Haig’s questioning scrutiny with a look of mingled triumph and guilt.

“Well, why don’t you go on?” asked Haig, with a smile.

There was no response. The silence was again so complete that the music of the Brightwater was heard across the meadows.

Haig slowly swept the crowd with an inquiring glance. All these men were hostile toward him, of course; but how far would they support Huntington? No matter! He swung himself suddenly out of the saddle, and addressed himself to the leader of the cowboys.

“You’re Larkin, aren’t you?” he said.

“Yes,” answered the embarrassed cow-puncher.

“And the others are Smith and—”

“Raley,” prompted Larkin.

“And here, of course, is my good friend Huntington, looking like Fortune with both hands full.”

Several men in the crowd laughed, whereupon Huntington, who had evidently forgotten the money, made matters worse for himself by hastily and clumsily thrusting it into the pockets of his coat, while his face flushed angrily.

“That’s right, Cousin Seth,” Haig said lightly. “You may need it.”

Marion, at these words, quivered with alarm. Was he going to tell Huntington, there in that crowd, of the incident in the pasture? His next speech, however, reassured her.

“Now, Larkin,” he said, “let’s understand things. That’s my horse, isn’t it?”

“That’s what I’ve been sayin’ some time back,” answered Larkin, in a tone of relief.

“And you, Smith?”

“I suppose so,” was the sullen reply.

“And Raley?”

“No, it ain’t!” answered that one with a sudden flare-up of courage.

“Then whose horse is it?”

“It belongs to Larkin an’ Smith an’ me.”

“Of course. But why did you bring him to Paradise Park?”

“To sell him.”

“To whom, please?”

Raley, caught in the trap, looked appealingly toward Smith, but got no help from him.

“To whom?” repeated Haig sharply.

“To you—if you wanted him!” Raley blurted out at last.

“If I wanted him!” retorted Haig ironically. “I bargained for him with you, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” growled Raley.

“And you went and caught him *for me*?”

“Yes.”

“And you brought him to Paradise Park *for me*?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Don’t be downhearted!” he said cheerfully. “A good name is more to be desired than great riches. Isn’t that so, Cousin Seth?”

The ranchman’s face flamed.

“If you’ve got anything to say to me, say it quick!” he jerked out.

“I have several things to say to you, one at a time,” replied Haig smoothly. “To begin with, these men told you the horse was mine, didn’t they?”

“No, they didn’t. They said you’d offered a thousand dollars for him.”

Haig laughed.

“All right, if that suits you better! They told you they had brought him here to deliver him to me for a thousand dollars, and you thought it would be a fine joke to buy him yourself. Is that it?”

Huntington did not respond to this, but watched Haig narrowly, a little puzzled by his manner.

“How much did he offer you?” Haig asked Larkin.

“Two thousand dollars—and then he said name our price.”

Haig whistled.

“Well, I’m damned if you haven’t got some sporting blood in you!” he said, smiling at Huntington. “How much was in your roll?”

Huntington’s first impulse was to tell Haig that it was none of his business. But he was deceived by Haig’s manner, having expected his enemy to fall upon him like a thunderbolt. His surprise was shared, indeed, by most of the men, who had expected gun-play on the jump. Only Marion, sitting still and watchful on her pony, was not misled. She felt that Haig was playing with Huntington, and biding his time.

Huntington’s vanity completed his self-delusion.

“Four thousand, two hundred dollars” he replied boastfully, glancing around at his neighbors.

“Whew!” uttered Haig, between pursed lips. Then to Larkin: “You were hard pressed, weren’t you? But never mind, boys, I’ll do better than I promised—and charge it up to Cousin Seth.”

Another laugh flickered around the crowd. It was evident that there was no great objection to seeing Huntington baited.

“My name’s Huntington!” he snorted. “What’s this damned cousin business, anyhow?”

Haig raised his eyebrows.

“Does it annoy you?” he asked, in a tone of exaggerated politeness.

Huntington merely glared. He was one of those self-made wits who enjoy their own jokes immensely but grumble at plucking barbed shafts out of their own skins. He began to wish for the thunderbolt.

“But it’s your own fault, you know,” Haig added.

“What in hell are you talking about?” Huntington growled.

“I’m talking about your last visit to my ranch.”

“My last—What do you mean, damn you!” the ranchman thundered, his right hand moving to his belt.

There was a hurried movement among those of the crowd who, absorbed in the dialogue, had half-consciously crept nearer. But Haig appeared to have noticed neither Huntington’s motion nor the backing away of the spectators.

“And wouldn’t it have been reckless extravagance to pay good money for Sunnysides when you might just have come and taken him out of my corrals?”

For a few seconds Huntington, as if he could scarce believe that he heard aright, was speechless with amazement and rage.

“Say it, damn you!” he said chokingly. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t get so excited, or you may break a blood vessel, Cous—I beg your pardon, *Mister* Huntington.”

“Say it!” roared the ranchman.

Then Haig dropped his mask.

“I will say it,” he began in a voice that rang ominously. “I’ll say it so that even you cannot fail to understand me. I mean that I’m tired of your threats and persecutions. I mean that you have harassed me and my men at every opportunity. I mean that you drove that bunch of my cattle off the cliff last September. I mean that within twenty-four hours another fence has been cut, and that you know who did it. I mean that your attempt to buy my horse was only another of the contemptible and cowardly tricks you have played on me. I mean, Huntington, that you are a bully, a liar and a thief!”

Huntington’s hand had slipped to the butt of his revolver at the beginning of this intolerable speech; but he had waited, as if fascinated, as if unable to move under the torrent of denunciation. Then to the onlookers it appeared that the bold young man, who had not yet made the slightest motion toward his own weapon, would be slain in his tracks. But Haig was as much the quicker in action as he was the nimbler in wit.

The two revolvers cracked, it seemed, as one, but with very different results. Haig’s battered old hat, lifted as if by a sudden gust of wind, slid from his head, and fell to the ground with a bullet hole through it. But Huntington threw up his hands, pitched forward, and fell in a heap in the dusty road.

There was a single shrill, short-cut shriek as a woman near the door of the post-office slipped down in a faint; and then a chorus of quavering cries as other women clutched the arms of the men nearest them.

Marion swayed in her saddle, her head drooping on her breast. A young cowboy darted from the crowd, and grabbed her as she fell. He started to lift and carry her away, but, with a desperate effort, she recovered, and stood erect, trying to thrust him from her. He held her nevertheless, supporting her with an arm under one of hers.

Haig had quickly turned and faced the group of men at the left of the road.

“Is there anybody else here that wants to buy my horse?” he demanded coolly.

There was no response, no movement. He whirled, and confronted the silent row of men on the other side.

“Is there anybody else here who thinks he can drive me out of Paradise Park?”

Still no one replied; and Haig, with a shrug, thrust his revolver back in its holster.

“Thompson!” he called out.

“Here!” was the answer, in the same tone of readiness with which he had responded to Huntington. By keeping his mouth shut, and never taking sides in any of the occasional disagreements and disputes that enlivened the tedium of life in that community, Thompson had established a reputation for neutrality and trustworthiness, and was permitted to be everybody’s friend.

“Look after Huntington, please!” said Haig. “He’s not badly hit—you’ll find the bullet under the left shoulder blade. It’ll do him good.”

Thompson and some others lifted Huntington, and carried him into the store; and at that moment the stage, its approach unnoticed, rattled up, and stopped with shrieking brakes and creaking harness. There was a sudden outbreak of speech on all sides, as if the tension had been relaxed by the recurrence of a familiar and orderly event. In the confusion Haig turned toward Sunnysides and the three cow-punchers.

“Now, Larkin,” he began briskly, “we’ll finish this business, and then—”

He stopped short, and stared.

By the side of the golden horse stood Marion. Still shocked and bewildered, yet strangely thrilled, she had stretched out one trembling arm, and rested her hand on the neck of the wild creature, from which every other person in the crowd around—and she too in her right senses—had kept away, in full appreciation of his reputation. Whether it was that the outlaw had for the time given up all notion of resistance and hostility, or that he felt the difference between the girl’s gentle touch and the rough handling he had undergone, he did not stir. But this docility, this understanding, was only a part of the sight that brought Haig to a standstill.

He had left many things behind him, but there was one thing he had not been, able to destroy as he would have destroyed it, root and branch and flower. He would always have a weakness—he called it that—for beauty in whatever form it appeared to him. Sunsets and twilights, the shadows of trees in still waters, flowers and reeds, old ruins in the moonlight, sometimes even faces moved him until he was ashamed, and berated himself for a sentimental weakling. And now—

The girl was tawny as a leopard. Her hair was almost exactly the color of the outlaw’s dull yellow mane, but finer, of course, and softer; and her complexion—he wondered that he had not noticed it before—had a peculiar richness and brilliancy that seemed to reflect the luster of Sunnysides’ golden hide. They stood there entrancing his artist-eye with their perfect harmony of line and color; and the last thin rays of the setting sun bathed horse and girl in a golden light—an atmosphere in which they glowed like one of Titian’s mellowed canvases.

“Don’t move, please!” he exclaimed.

But Marion did not hear, or did not heed. She dropped her hand, and glided toward him, while he watched her, curious and rapt. Perhaps it was because he saw her through that golden glow, perhaps because his nerves were a little unsteady in the reaction from the strain they had undergone, that she made a singular appeal to his imagination. He fancied that for all the fineness of her figure, the exquisite poise of her small head, the cameo-like delicacy of her face, there was something in her as wild, untamed, and elemental as the heart of Sunnysides.

Thus she moved slowly past him, and passing gave him a long and steady look, with an unfathomable expression in her eyes,—an expression neither of anger nor of bitterness nor of disgust nor of anything he might have expected after all he had done that day. He turned, and watched her until she had disappeared in the crowd around the stagecoach; and with her went out the last rays of the sun.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” said Philip Haig.

With a shake of his shoulders, as if to throw off some unwelcome weight upon them, he turned again to take up his business with the gaping cow-punchers.

CHAPTER V

“HE SHALL TELL ME!”

Doctor Wilson, arriving from Tellurium on the third day after the encounter at Paradise, found Huntington in a bad way, due not so much to the wound in his left shoulder as to the state of his mind. Haig’s bullet was extracted without difficulty or serious complications, but Haig’s words were encysted too deep for any probe. Huntington’s self-love had been dealt a mortal blow; and somebody must pay for it.

First of all it was Claire that paid; then Marion. He did not mean to be disagreeable to them, but never having cultivated self-restraint he had none of it now to ease the days of his convalescence. He filled the house with his clamor, and required as much attention as an ailing child. There were just two ways to keep him quiet. Claire soothed him when she sat at his bedside, with one of his huge “paws” held in her tiny hands; and Marion found, somewhat to her surprise, that Seth liked music. The piano was one of the wonders of the Huntington house, for pianos are not essential instruments in the equipment of cattle ranches, and this was the only one in all that region of cattledom.

In music Seth’s tastes were sentimental. “Lost Chords” and “Rosaries” subdued him almost to tears; and if Marion only brought him tuneful violets every morn he tried his best to be good. So when Claire was not on duty at the bedside Marion must needs be on duty at the piano,—an ordeal that Claire endured, of course, more patiently than Marion.

Claire was almost comically unfit to be a ranchman’s wife, and she too had been a trial on occasions. She was small and delicate, but vivacious, amiable, bright. Her blue eyes always had a childlike wonder in them, and she was fond of wearing her fluffy, golden hair in a girlish knot low on her neck, or even in a long, thick braid down her back, with a blue ribbon bow at the end. She flitted about the house like a butterfly, and yet she had managed somehow to make her home the marvel of Paradise Park.

To begin with it was the ordinary, one-story, rambling house of pine, with spruce-clad hills rising behind it, and a little stream, rollicking down between it and the corrals. But a wide veranda had been constructed on three sides of it, furnished with wicker chairs, and half-screened with boxes of growing flowers. All around the house flowers grew,—old-fashioned garden flowers, roses and geraniums; beds of them everywhere, and blossoming shrubs along the stream.

The house contained, besides the kitchen and the bedrooms, just one big room. This, with its low ceiling, unpainted timbers, and small windows, was not unlike the hall of some old manor house. The floor was covered with Navajo rugs in rich and barbaric colors; the walls were draped with burlap in dull red dyes; and the windows were curtained with chintz in bright yellows and reds. Above the windows and doors hung many heads of deer and elk and mountain sheep, and rifles on racks of horn. Between the two front windows stood the upright piano, and near it a small bookcase filled with novels and volumes of poetry. The big oak table at mealtime was made to look very inviting with white napery and modest china and silver, and a bouquet always in its center. At other times it was a library table, heaped with books and magazines, and in the evening, when the kerosene lamps were lighted, and the piñon was blazing in the great fireplace, the room seemed as remote from Paradise Park as Claire herself.

There was an occasional visitor at Huntington’s in the period of his convalescence, usually a ranchwife eager for another glimpse at Claire’s wonderful housekeeping, or a young cow-puncher drawn by the attraction of two very pretty and unusual women in one house. But the ranchmen themselves, with two or three exceptions, were content to be solicitous at long range—an abstention that relieved and at the same time troubled Huntington. He was not eager to talk with his neighbors

about that episode at the post-office, but their aloofness filled him with uneasiness. Well, let them wait! They would hear from him again, and so should Haig!

There was, among the visitors, one whose coming perceptibly lightened the tedium of those days. Marion had the good fortune to see him in time not to be taken by surprise. Seated on the veranda after an exhausting recital for the benefit of Huntington, she perceived the figure of a horseman—yes, it was a horseman—riding out of the pines toward the corrals. She stared. He was so little and so lost between his pony, which seemed extraordinarily big, and his sombrero, which undoubtedly was enormous, that she remained for a moment dumb, and then, choking with laughter, fled into the house.

“Look, Claire, look!” she cried, grabbing her cousin’s arm.

Claire, dragged to the door, looked and giggled.

“Haven’t you seen that before?” she asked.

“No! Never!” answered Marion, her hand upon her mouth.

“Of course. He’s just arrived—for the season. He was here last year, and the year before.”

“And they let him?” demanded Marion, thinking of the irrepressible cow-punchers.

“Oh, he’s all right!” Claire assured her. “That is, after you get used to him. The men had all sorts of fun with him the first summer he was here. But he took all their fun good-naturedly, and showed them he had pluck too. They began to like him. Everybody likes him, and so will you.”

“But in the name of—who is he?”

The little man had descended like a parachute from his pony, and was now bobbing rapidly up the graveled walk.

“Smythe,” explained Claire hurriedly. “But he’s here now—I’ll let him tell you—he likes to talk.”

At the foot of the steps he caught sight of the two women in the doorway; removed his wonderful headgear with an eighteenth-century gesture; ducked his head in a twentieth-century bow; and smiled. Claire stepped quickly out on the veranda.

“Oh, Mr. Smythe!” she cried gaily. “I’m so glad to see you. Come in!”

He was an undersized young man, immaculately dressed in brown tweeds and shining boots, a very high white collar and a sky-blue tie. The sombrero swinging in his hand was quite new, ornamented with a broad band of stamped leather, and it had the widest brim obtainable at the shop in Denver where a specialty is made of equipping the tenderfoot for life in the cattle country.

Smythe took Claire’s proffered hand, and bent over it as if he had thought of kissing it, but lacked the courage of his gallantry. Claire introduced him to Marion, answered his questions about Seth, and then fluttered away to the kitchen, where she had an angel cake in the oven not to be entrusted to the cook.

“I arrived only yesterday, Miss Gaylord,” Smythe chirped. “But I’ve heard of you already.”

“I don’t know whether to thank you or not,” answered Marion.

“Oh, if you please! What I heard made me very solicitous about Huntington’s health.”

He smiled knowingly at her, and Marion loosed some of her pent-up laughter. Truly, Smythe was going to be a treat! She studied him stealthily while he chattered on. He wore a pointed beard of reddish hue; his head was quite bald on top, and bulging at the brow; and the contour of that head, with its polished dome, and the narrow face tapering down to the pointed beard, was comically suggestive of a carrot. But it was an intelligent, even intellectual countenance, and his blue eyes were honest and bright. He might be laughed at, but he could not be flouted, she thought.

“Then you’ve been here before, Mr. —” she began, and hesitated.

“Smythe,” he prompted her generously. “J. Hamerton Smythe. S-m-y-t-h-e. I didn’t change it from Smith, and I don’t know what one of my esteemed ancestors did. But I’m glad he did. It gives me a touch of artificiality, don’t you think? I fear being too natural.”

Marion laughed, and that pleased him. She led the way to chairs near an open window where a black and yellow butterfly hovered over a honeysuckle blossom that had nodded its friendly way into the room.

"I'm from New York too," Smythe rattled on. "Columbia. Doing a little tutoring and a little postgraduate work. This is my third summer in the Park. Found it by chance. Wanted to go somewhere, and was tired of the old places—Maine and Adirondacks and the rest. Looked at a map in a railroad office, and there it was, sticking right out at me, the first name I lighted on. In small type too—curious, wasn't it? Clerks in office hadn't heard of it, but I started out to find it. Thought I'd better get to Paradise when I could. And now I'm glad. I feel like an old settler, and I believe the cow-punchers have ceased to regard me as a tenderfoot. That's as flattering as a Ph.D."

"I'm afraid they laugh at me," said Marion.

"On the contrary. Believe me, these cowboys have taken to reading poetry since you came."

"Please be natural, Mr. Smythe!"

"Fact! I'd hardly got my things unpacked before one of them was riding over to ask me if I had a book about Lady Clara Vere de Vere. It seems he'd heard the poem recited somewhere. I asked him why he wanted it, but he looked so flustered that I let him off. Didn't have a Tennyson with me, unfortunately, but I gave him my Byron, and I think that will hold him for a while."

"Charming!" exclaimed Marion. "But what has all that to do with me?"

"He's the chap that grabbed you in his arms when you were falling from your horse after that little business at Thompson's the other day."

Marion blushed, and then laughed.

"But how did you come to hear about that?" she demanded.

He chuckled.

"Oh, I hear everything!" he replied. "My friends say I've a nose for news."

"Well, I shall be very careful what I say to you."

"Please, no!" he protested. "I'm a safety vault when it comes to secrets."

She glanced quickly toward the door of Seth's bedroom, then toward the kitchen, before she spoke.

"So you've heard all about that day at the post-office?" she said in a low voice.

"Yes."

"Terrible!"

"But not unexpected."

"Why not unexpected?"

"Well," he replied, lowering his voice, and leaning nearer to Marion, "I'm afraid Huntington was looking for it."

"You mean—he deserved it?"

"I won't say that. You see—I'm neutral, like Thompson. I like Huntington, and I like Haig. I look at this fight without prejudice, even though I've a reason to be prejudiced."

"In favor of—?"

"Huntington."

"Why, please?"

"Huntington accepts my friendship, after a fashion."

"But—the other?"

"Nothing doing!"

Marion stared at him, wondering.

"Fact!" he assured her, with a sheepish smile.

"But why?"

"Don't know. I'd like to, but he lives like a hermit. Latchstring never hangs outside his door."

There was a certain evidence of feeling in Smythe's speech.

“You speak as if you—”

“As if I knew!” He took the words out of her mouth. “I do.”

“How do you know?”

“I tried it.”

“And then?”

“Kicked out!” he replied with a grimace.

Marion laughed in spite of her burning eagerness to hear more.

“Not exactly kicked,” Smythe explained. “But I’d rather have been. He was as polite as—he’s a gentleman, you see, so he knew how to do it without using his hands or his feet.”

“But why?” insisted Marion.

“Why did I try? Curiosity. Simple, elemental, irresponsible curiosity.”

She laughed again at his frank confession.

“No, I mean why did he kick you out, as you call it?”

“That’s what I want to know. And I will know, too. I tell you, Miss Gaylord, I admire the man immensely. His secretiveness only makes me like him the more, probably because I myself am so garrulous. Most persons, though, cannot tolerate a man who minds his own business. Those who have no reason to hate Haig dislike him because he does not ask them to like him. His affairs are his own. Did you notice that scar?”

“Yes,” answered Marion, scarcely above a whisper.

“Well, you can build any sort of romance you like around that. He has had his romance or tragedy or something, you may be sure. But he’s no ordinary man, whatever he may be doing in Paradise Park. I have heard that he’s surrounded with books and pictures in his cottage. He’s got a Chinaman for a valet, and an Indian for his man Friday, and their mouths are as tight as his. What’s more, he must be all right in the main things, for his foreman and cowboys stick to him through thick and thin, and say nothing. I tell you, Miss Gaylord, I’d like to be a friend of his, if only he gave a—”

“A damn, I believe they say,” she prompted demurely.

“By Jove!” he said with enthusiasm. “You are a—”

She held up a warning finger.

“We’re going to be friends, you know,” she said. “And friends understand each other—without words.”

“Done!” he agreed, reaching for her hand, and shaking it.

“But this mystery,” she said. “Doesn’t anybody know—”

“You know as much as all of us. Of course,” he added banteringly, “there’s no denying a woman, when she starts. He might tell you!”

The speech startled her, and she blushed.

“Now, that’s sheer impudence!” she retorted.

But he continued to look at her with a curious expression. How much had he guessed? In her confusion an impulse seized her. She leaned suddenly toward him, with flushed face and sparkling eyes.

“You dare me?” she demanded, her voice quivering.

“I dare you!” he answered gleefully.

“Well then, he shall tell me!”

“Good!” he exclaimed. “And I’ll be around to take the kicks if he—”

“Oh, Cousin Seth!” cried Marion, leaping to her feet.

The bedroom door had opened, and Huntington came out, dressed in his familiar corduroy suit, but with his left arm still bandaged to his side, Smythe hastened forward to greet him.

CHAPTER VI

THE STORY OF THE SCAR

She was awakened by the shrill chatter of the magpies in the tall pine near her window. Often she had resented their quarrelsome dialogue at dawn, but now she slipped eagerly out of bed, and hurried to the window. There had been rain in the night, but when she had pulled apart the chintz curtains and opened the wooden shutters the air was sweet and clean in her face, and the thin light showed the world rising joyously to the day.

She dressed hastily in her oldest clothes, stole on tiptoe to the kitchen for a biscuit and a glass of milk, found fishing tackle on the veranda, and was soon running breathlessly past the corrals toward the banks of the Brightwater. And all this was a deliberate deception. She purposed to fish, of course—a little, to justify the clandestine expedition; but what she really sought was solitude.

It was half in jest that she had said to Smythe, “He shall tell me!” But in the night, by some strange alchemy, that jest had been transmuted into a purpose of which she was still doubtful, if not afraid. And yet to go forward seemed less difficult than to go back. For she had let the days of Seth’s recovery and convalescence slip by without telling Claire of her experience in the Forbidden Pasture and on the road to Paradise. The duel at the post-office, she argued, surely had made it unnecessary to warn Huntington of Haig’s anger. And yet, as their guest, as Claire’s cousin—But had they been quite fair to her? They had not warned her of the hostility across the Ridge; they had let her go blundering into the Forbidden Pasture; not that it mattered so much, though it might have been worse—

Her thoughts were becoming very much confused. She had permitted a man to treat her most offensively, and she had seen him shoot down another without compunction; and that other was her cousin, in whose house she was a guest. And yet she felt no resentment, no detestation, no censure, no rebuke. Instead, here she was running away to think out a plan whereby she might hear the whole story of the feud, and more, from Haig himself.

The morning advanced in rose and pearl nuances. A hundred tantalizing perfumes filled the air; field-spiders’ webs sparkled in the dew like silver gossamer; meadow larks rose at her feet, and wove delicate patterns in the air with threads of melody. Who could think amid such diverting beauty? She lifted her head, and went singing through the meadows, knee-deep in the wet and clinging grass, and laughing when the parted branches of the willows splashed her face and drenched her. And then, at the first cast she made into a still, deep pool, where the night loitered under the very eye of day, an imprudent trout took the gray hackle fly, and made off with it. The splash, and the “zip” of the tightening line through the water; and then the fight, and the capture—Well, if they were going to rise like that—

The sun was high before she became aware that she was very hot and tired and hungry. Her shoes were soaking wet, her skirts and stockings splashed with mud; one shoulder was being sunburned where a twig had caught and ripped her white flannel waist; and Seth’s red silk handkerchief around her neck was scarcely a deeper crimson than her face.

“But I can’t catch them all in one day!” she exclaimed reluctantly, leaning wearily against a tree.

At that instant, under her very eyes, a trout leaped in the nearby pool.

“Impudence!” she cried. “I’ll just get you, and then quit.”

But it was one pool too many; for at the second cast her hook caught in the rough bark of a log that projected far out into the stream.

“Oh! Now I’ve done it!” she groaned.

Several smart tugs at the line, with a whipping of the rod to right and left of the log, convinced her that the hook was too deeply embedded to be released by any such operation. Sinking down on a heap of driftwood on the bank, she gloomily contemplated the consequences of her greed. There

were two ways to go about it now,—to break the line and leave the hook to its fate, or to crawl out on the log and rescue it. The first was unsportsmanlike, the second was very likely to be dangerous.

“Um-m-m!” she muttered, with a grimace. “It’s not easy.”

The log ran out, at a slight inclination upward, from the center of the heap of driftwood, and its free end, where the hackle fly reposed at a distance of fully twenty feet from the bank, was suspended barely two feet above the middle of the pool. She leaned forward, and gazed into its dark depths, which appeared to be scarcely stirred by the current, though five yards away the stream was making a merry racket over the shallows.

She stood up, and looked around her. Through the screen of willows and cottonwoods on each sloping bank she saw the meadows lying green and silent in the sun. There was no sound except the prattle of the Brightwater and the murmur of the breeze in the foliage. She assured herself that she was quite alone.

Next she folded and pinned up her skirt so that it hung just to her knees, and after a final glance in all directions, stepped cautiously out to the edge of the driftwood, knelt down on the fallen trunk, and began to creep warily out toward the embedded hook. The log was round, and none too large; her knees, protected only by thin stockings, were bruised by the rough and partly-loosened bark; and she scarcely dared to breathe lest she should lose her balance, and tumble into the yawning pool. Once she incautiously looked down, and saw her image waving dizzily on the slow-moving surface of the water.

“Oh!” she gasped, as she drew back her gaze, and dug her nails into the log.

But for all her fears, and because of them, it was tremendously exciting, and she became deeply absorbed in her task. Now clinging close to the log in sudden panic, now laughing tremulously at her trepidation, she forgot everything except her goal, and the inches by which she was approaching it. She had arrived within two feet of the hook, and was just about to reach a trembling hand to detach it, when she received a shock that was near to ending her expedition in an ignominious splash.

“Wait!” called out a voice, somewhere behind her. “I’ll help you!”

The fright first nearly caused her to lose her grip on the log, and then left her cold and shivering. After that a wave of heat swept over her, and the blood tingled in her flushed and perspiring face.

Who was it? Philip Haig, by all the ill luck in the world? Who else could have had the effrontery? She dared not turn to look, both in fear of falling, and in shame at being caught in that absurd predicament. What a sight! she thought. Her skirt was above her knees, and one stocking, caught by a projection of bark, had slipped down to her ankle. And that was not all!.. With a desperate effort, she lifted one hand from its hold on the log, and tried to adjust her skirt; but the movement only unbalanced her. With a shriek she flattened herself, and lay there panting and miserable.

“Wait!” the voice cried, more sharply than before. “No move—for minute!”

She was arrested by the words. “No move for minute!” It was not the voice of Philip Haig, but in that assurance there was only a doubtful consolation. If not Haig—who? There was something oddly foreign in that heavy, harsh, and yet not displeasing voice. A new fear presently mingled with the others. It was a wild country after all; and she had taken no note of the distance she had come, and little of her surroundings. But she could only obey, and wait.

There came the sound of quick splashing in the water, and a few seconds later a man’s head and shoulders appeared in the stream at her side. At sight of the strange, dark countenance suddenly upturned to her, within a foot of her own, she almost fainted. It was a face she had never seen before, solemn, stolid, with a copper-colored skin, high cheek bones, and deep-set, black eyes in which there was no more expression than there was on the thin, straight lips. She closed her eyes.

But that was only for an instant, since nothing terrible was happening. When she dared to look again the man was quietly releasing the offending fly. He tossed it back in the direction of the bank, then stood for a moment regarding her, still without the trace of an expression on his dark face.

“Don’t be ’fraid!” he said. “Hold still!”

She obeyed him, though his next move was one to have brought a scream to her lips if she had not become incapable of utterance. Standing in the water, which came almost up to his armpits, he had kept his arms high above the surface of the pool. Now he stretched them out toward her, clasped both her ankles with one huge hand, slipped the other under her waist, and with what seemed incredible strength and assurance, lifted her off the log. Then, without so much as wetting the edge of her skirt, he bore her to the bank, and seated her gently on the heap of driftwood from which she had ventured so bravely only a little while before.

Should she weep, or laugh, or rage at him? Through eyes half-blinded by tears, she searched his face; but he met her troubled and fiery gaze with the most perfect calm. Then, after a moment, he deliberately turned, and stood facing squarely away from her,—an act of stoicism that at once removed her fears and completed her discomfiture. She took the hint implied in his movement, and bent down, blushing furiously, to pull up the fallen stocking, and let down her skirt.

When she sat erect again the man had not changed his position; and she seized the opportunity to study him. His figure, though she had just had proof of his strength, was lean almost to thinness, very straight, and borne, she fancied, with a certain dignity and even majesty in its erectness. The straight, black hair under the sombrero was touched with gray. He was not young, past middle age perhaps; but she could hazard no nearer guess at his age. No matter! Looking at him thus, she began to feel her resentment falling away, as if every shaft from her angry eyes had broken harmlessly on that serene and unoffending back. Even her embarrassment began to seem inexcusable. The man had carried her ashore in much the manner he would have used if she had been a sack of oats to be saved from wetting.

“You are very strong!” Marion said at last.

He turned slowly toward her. His face was grave and expressionless, but by no means dull; and his eyes were very black and bright.

“You—~~are~~—~~all~~—~~right~~—~~now~~?” he asked, ignoring her praise.

There was a curious slowness and lack of emphasis in his speech, with a pause after each word, that gave a singular impressiveness to all he said.

“But why did you do it?” she demanded.

“Fraid you fall,” was his simple answer.

“But I don’t mind getting wet.”

“Easy drown in little water,” he said laconically.

She laughed at the idea of her drowning in a pool like that—she who had battled triumphantly with the breakers at Atlantic City, Newport, and Bar Harbor.

“But I can swim!” she assured him.

“I not know that,” he replied, unmoved.

True. And she must have appeared to be greatly in need of assistance.

“Anyhow, I thank you!” she said sincerely. “But who am I thanking, please?”

“Pete.”

“Pete! Pete who?”

“Only Pete.”

“But have you no other name?”

“Yes. Indian name.”

And he rolled out a string of guttural syllables that sounded like names of places in the Maine woods.

Indian name! Marion started; and in a flash she knew. Haig’s man Friday! Here was luck indeed.

“You are Mr. Haig’s—” She hesitated.

“Friend,” he said, completing her sentence.

Marion was again embarrassed. She did not know what to say next, fearing to say the wrong thing, and so to throw away a golden opportunity. In her search for the right lead, her eyes lighted on a fishing basket that lay on the ground not far from her own.

“Oh!” she cried. “But it’s strange I didn’t hear or see you!”

“Indian not make noise.”

“I should say not!” she retorted, laughing.

“Trout very smart,” he added quietly.

“I’ve caught fourteen,” she volunteered eagerly. “And you?”

For answer he fetched his creel, and opened it.

“Oh!” she cried, in envy and admiration, seeing that the creel was almost full, and that not a fish in sight was as small as her largest prize.

“I give you some,” he said, glancing at her own basket.

“No! No!” she protested quickly. “I have plenty.”

She showed him her catch, which was by no means insignificant. Nevertheless Pete took three of his largest trout, and transferred them to her basket, ignoring her protests.

“But they are for—him, aren’t they?” she asked.

“Biggest you no see. At bottom.”

That satisfied her, and she watched him silently while he found her rod, and reeled in the offending fly.

“Brown fly better now,” he said. “You ought see what trout eating before you try catch big ones.”

On this he drew a book of flies from his pocket, and replaced the gray hackle with a brown one. She questioned him eagerly, following this plain lead; and presently they were seated on the pile of driftwood, while he told her about the native trout and the rainbow and the California, of little brooks far up among the mountains where the trout were small but of a delicious flavor, of the time for flies and the time for worms, of famous catches he had made, of the way the Indians fished before the white man showed them patent rods and reels. By slow degrees Pete’s iron features softened, and he smiled at her, not with his lips, but with his eyes, which were the blackest, surely, in the world.

But Marion was not diverted from the questions that were next her heart. With all her woman’s cunning of indirection, she brought the talk around to Philip Haig. Did he fish? Sometimes. Did he hunt? Much, when the deer came down from the heights with the first snows. Then—she could resist no longer.

“It must have been terrible—the accident,” she said, placing a finger on her cheek.

He looked at her strangely, while she held her breath.

“That no accident,” he said at last, after what seemed to her an interminable interval of suspense.

“No accident?” she repeated, trying not to appear too eager.

“He call it accident, maybe. He say it is nothing. Pete say it is much. It is big debt. Some day Pete pay.”

There was deep silence for a moment. The stream gurgled and splashed; the breeze whispered through the cottonwoods; and over all, or under all, was the vague, insistent, seductive sound that the summer makes in the fulness of its power.

Marion hesitated, quivering with eagerness and uncertainty. She was afraid to ask more, lest she should be shortly rebuffed, and lose her opportunity. But Pete was looking at her steadily. She felt a flush coming into her face again. Had he guessed—something—already in her manner, in her impulsive questions? More likely it was the charm that, for once unconsciously, she wielded—the elusive charm of woman that makes men want to tell, without the asking.

“You like to hear?” Pete said; and her heart leaped.

“Oh, please!”

And she was keenly disappointed. She had expected something romantic, something ennobling and fine. And it was only a barroom brawl, though Philip was not in it until the end, to be sure! Five

Mexican sheep herders against the lone Indian. Guns and knives in the reeking border saloon; and afterwards in the street; and the Indian almost done for, bleeding from a dozen wounds; and then a voice ringing out above the fracas: “No, I’m damned if you do! Five to one, and greasers at that!” And Philip Haig had jumped from his horse, and plunged into the mêlée, disdaining to draw his gun on greasers. Smash! Bang! went his fists, front and right and left.

Pete had accounted for one Mexican, who would herd sheep no more on the plains of Conejos. The others fled. Then Haig, despite the knife-wound in his face, grabbed the Indian, and somehow lifted him up behind him on his horse.

“Quick, Indian!” he cried. “This town’s full of greasers. You’ve got no chance here.”

And then the long ride to Del Norte, with the Indian drooping on Haig’s back; and a doctor of Haig’s acquaintance, who sheltered and cured the silent savage. And Pete, convalescent, had come straight to Haig’s ranch, and remained there, despite Haig’s protests that he did not need another hand.

“Pete stay until big debt is paid,” said the Indian solemnly. And then, with a straight look into Marion’s eyes, “You ought tell Huntington he is damn fool.”

Marion started. There it was again—the warning!

“But why?” she managed to ask.

“Haig is brave man. Brave man always good man. So—Huntington got no chance.”

CHAPTER VII

THE WAY OF A MAID WITH A MAN

She rode casually down the Brightwater, and casually up the Brightwater; she loitered at crossroads, and tarried at Thompson's store; and not one glimpse did she catch of Philip Haig. Then one morning she rose at dawn, as she had risen on the day of her fishing exploit, with a purpose. But this time she dressed with exceeding care, in a riding suit she had not yet worn in the Park. It was soft dove-gray in color, with a long coat that showed the fine lines of her figure and, when she rode, revealed snug-fitting breeches above the tops of the polished boots,—a very different costume from the black divided skirts and the short jacket in which she had galloped about the Park.

Thus arrayed and resolute, she rode straight down the valley to the branch road that had once tempted her to adventure; straight up the hill; and straight through the woods until she halted once more in the shade of the outpost pine that stood beyond its clustered fellows like a sentinel above the valley. Her valley! She waited a moment, wondering if it welcomed her. There was the stream, still flashing in the sun, the meadows as brightly green as then, the grass of the pasture running in bronze waves before the breeze. From the heart of a wild rose a gorgeous red and brown butterfly flew out and fluttered over her head. Not a dozen yards below her a meadow lark, unseen, burst into sudden, thrilling song; and somewhere down the hill another took up the strain, then another and another, until the air was charged and quivering with melody, piercing sweet. She listened, her heart throbbing to the music, until the chorus died away in dripping cadences, and only a drowsy murmur came from the ripening fields to mingle with the low droning of the pine organ on the hill. Yes! Her valley welcomed her.

She rode on down the hill, with only a quick and embarrassed glance into the Forbidden Pasture; and suddenly raised herself excitedly in the stirrups. There again was the spiral of blue smoke; then a chimney and a red roof; and finally the house itself, and barn and corrals, all tucked away against the foot of the hill. Dismounting, she led Tuesday back a few yards, and left him to feed along the roadside. Then she returned, and seated herself on a rock, half-hidden by a blackberry bush, to study the group of houses lying low and silent in the sun.

There were more buildings than at Huntington's, but she saw no beds of flowers, no wide veranda screened with potted plants; a certain bareness and air of inhospitality, she thought. No tea and angel cake for visitors! Behind the ranch house were two cottages of unpainted pine, scorched to a yellow-brown by many a summer sun. One of them, doubtless, was the hermit's lodge. The barn, larger than Seth's, had a red roof, newly painted. And in one of the corrals—yes—the flash of a golden hide.

“Sunnysides!” murmured Marion.

Then her heart stood still. She had descried the figure of a man seated with his back against the bars of this corral. But it was not Philip Haig; Sunnysides' guard, no doubt, for he never left his post until relieved by another an hour or so later, when the dinner bell had been rung at the door of the ranch house.

She had scarcely time to feel her disappointment before a man emerged from the stable leading a saddle horse. Another immediately followed, and this time there was no mistake. The second man was Philip Haig. He mounted quickly, and started off; then stopped to address a word or two, apparently, to the man at the stable door; and finally galloped past the ranch house and the cottages, and up the slope behind them toward the pines, across the valley from where she sat.

“Oh!” cried Marion, in a tone of vexation and reproach.

She watched him until he had disappeared among the trees; and tears started in her eyes. Would he always be riding away from her, behind the hills, the woods, a turn of the road? She sat a while

in deep dejection; but not for long. Her spirit was too resilient for futile moping, and her purpose too firmly held to be abandoned on one reverse. She reflected that if he had gone he must as certainly return; and so, with a toss of her head, she presently arose, and fetched her raincoat and her luncheon from the saddle. The coat she spread out on the ground, seated herself on it with her back against the rock, and settled down to eat, and watch, and wait.

Morning mounted hot and humming into noon, and noon dropped languidly into afternoon. The blazing sun centered his rays upon her; insects found and pestered her; discomfort cramped her limbs, and weariness weighted down her eyelids. Twice she dozed, and wakened with a start of fear lest she had slept her chance away. But each time she was reassured by a hurried survey of the group of buildings, where no one stirred, and there was no sign of Philip Haig. So the hours dragged their slow length along.

It was late in the afternoon before her vigil was rewarded. Not from just the direction in which he had galloped away, but from farther up the valley, Haig reappeared. He rode as rapidly as before, straight to the door of the stable, reined up a moment there, and was off again,—this time down the valley on a white road that was visible to Marion until it curved behind the distant point of the ridge on which she sat.

“Now where’s he going?” she murmured, wrinkling her forehead as she saw him once more vanish from her sight.

She did not know that road, but guessed that it joined the main highway somewhere far down the Brightwater. No matter! Here was her opportunity; for she saw, with quick appreciation, that she would now be able to place herself between him and the ranch buildings without showing herself to the men at the corrals. And then? She could not “hold him up” like a highwayman; and if she did not stop him he would raise his hat (perhaps), and ride past her without a word. And how was she to stop him? She had come there with a very definite purpose, but with no clear plan, trusting to the inspiration of the moment. And now the moment had arrived; but where was the inspiration? She had risen impulsively to her feet, and stood staring between narrowed eyelids, and beneath a puckered brow, at the white road, now quite empty again. Then suddenly—

“Ah!” she gasped.

And thereupon she blushed, and looked furtively around her, as if she had been caught in some doubtful, if not discreditable, act. But there was no time for moral subtleties. She staggered—for her legs were stiff from inaction—to her pony, replaced her raincoat behind the saddle, mounted in hot haste, and rode down the steep hill toward the houses. At a little distance from them the road she traveled joined the other. There she turned abruptly, and followed the unfamiliar road until she was safely out of sight of any chance observer at the barn, and yet not so far from the trail she had just left but that she could return to it if, by any chance, he should come back that way.

Dismounting quickly at the chosen spot, she turned Tuesday until he stood squarely across the road. Then her nimble fingers flew at the cinches of the saddle.

“There now!” she exclaimed, hot with excitement and exertion.

She stepped back to view her handiwork, and laughed nervously. Next she drew a tiny mirror and a bit of chamois skin from her bosom, and swiftly removed some of the dust and moisture from her flushed face. Then her hair, always somewhat unruly, required a touch or two. That done, she smoothed down the gray coat over her slender hips, adjusted the gray silk tie at her throat, and waited.

He came, in his habitual cloud of dust; pulled up his pony within ten feet of the obstruction; saw the saddle hanging at a dangerous angle over Tuesday’s side; and accepted the obvious conclusion that Miss Marion Gaylord, looking very warm and embarrassed, but certainly very pretty in her confusion, had narrowly escaped a fall.

“I think I’d better help you with that, Miss Gaylord,” he said.

“Thank you!” she said, with an appealing reluctance. “I can do it—I often saddle my own horse, and—”

“I should judge that you had saddled him this time,” he interrupted her to say, without the slightest trace of irony in his tone.

She bit her lip, as she silently made way for him, and stood at Tuesday’s head, stroking his neck with one small, gloved hand while Haig adjusted the blanket, fitted the saddle firmly, and tightened the double cinch. He was dressed in the nondescript costume he had worn at their first meeting. That same hat, uniquely insolent, soiled and limp and disreputable, was stuck on the back of his head, revealing a full, clean-moulded brow, over which, at one side, his thick black hair fell carelessly. His eyes were calm gray rather than stormy black to-day, but a gray that was singularly dark and deep and luminous. His manner was in the strangest contrast with the two different moods in which she had already seen him—as if the fires were out, as if all emotion and interest had been dissolved in listlessness. And she divined at once that her chance of success was small.

“That will hold, I think,” he said gravely; and started toward his horse.

“It wasn’t Tuesday’s fault,” she said eagerly.

Haig paused, on one foot as it were, and looked over his shoulder.

“It was fortunate for you that he’s been well gentled,” he said. “You should look to your cinches rather often when you ride these hills.”

(“You should keep your feet dry, and come in when it rains,” he might as well have said, she thought angrily.)

“Yes, it was careless of me,” she answered, trying to say it brightly, but really wanting to shriek.

“It happens to everybody once in a while,” he said.

On that, he stepped to his pony, put a foot in the stirrup, and one hand on the saddle horn, and paused.

She could easily have flopped down in the road, and wept. Once he had raged at her, once he had thrilled her with a look, and now he was simply dismissing her,—leaving her, as her father would have put it, “to stew in her own juice.” She saw all her elaborate strategy, her long vigil on the hill, her struggle with the saddle, her appealing glances—all, all about to go for nothing.

“He might at least help me on my horse!” she thought, in bitter resentment.

Perhaps tears blinded her. At any rate—and this was without pretence, and no part of her scheme—she did not see clearly what she was doing. It was nothing new to mount her pony from the level; she had done it a hundred times without mishap. But now, in her agitation, she stood somewhat too far away from Tuesday’s shoulder; and the pony, as ponies will sometimes do, started forward the instant he felt the weight in the stirrup.

“Look out!” cried Haig.

It was too late. She missed the saddle; her right foot struck Tuesday’s back, and slipped off; and she fell sprawling on the ground, with her left foot fast in the stirrup.

“Whoa, Tuesday!” she cried shrilly as she fell.

Luckily the horse did not take alarm and run, as a less reliable animal might have done, dragging the girl under his heels. He stopped in his tracks, and stood obediently, even turning his head as if to see what damage had been done. It was enough. Marion was uninjured, but badly frightened; and her humiliation was complete. She lay on her back, struggling vainly to extricate her foot from the stirrup. Her coat skirts had fallen back, and—Thank Heaven for the riding breeches, and not what she had worn under divided skirts!

“Lie still!” yelled Haig, remembering what he had seen happen to men in such circumstances.

In three leaps he was at her side. With a swift movement (and none too gentle), he wrenched her foot loose from the stirrup, and helped her to sit up, dazed and trembling and very white.

“Your ankle—is it hurt?” he asked sharply.

“I don’t know,” she said.

And then the expected “inspiration of the moment” came.

“A little,” she added.

And so it was done. Her foot had indeed been twisted slightly; she had truly, *truly* felt a twinge of pain. At another time she would have thought no more about it, but now—The color rushed back into her cheeks; she fetched a smile that was half a grimace; and the game was on again.

Haig reached a hand to her. She took it, and let him draw her to her feet.

“Try the ankle—just a step!” he commanded.

She rested her weight on her left foot.

“Oh!” she cried out, and looked helplessly at Haig.

A shadow, unmistakably of annoyance, passed over his face.

“You’re not going to faint, are you?” he asked, looking keenly at her.

Her color always came and went easily, and now, a little frightened by her bold deception, she was pale again.

“No—I think not,” she said. (“At any rate not here,” she might have added.)

“Can you ride to the corrals?” was his next question.

The look of annoyance was now fixed on his face, but it did not discourage her.

“Yes, if—”

She looked doubtfully at Tuesday. Thereupon, without a word, Haig led the horse close to her, but placed so that she was at Tuesday’s right side instead of the left. Then, while she supported herself with one hand on his shoulder, he raised her right foot, and thrust it into the stirrup; and, with a hand under each of her arms, lifted her until she was able to throw the left foot over, and her body into the saddle. Once more Marion bit her lip. His action was as devoid of personal interest as Pete’s had been when he carried her out of the pool; and she had not come to Philip Haig to be treated like a sack of oats!

Haig mounted his pony, and rode up close beside her; and thus, in unbroken silence, they arrived at the door of the stable. There Haig dismounted quickly, stepped briskly around her horse, and almost before she was aware of his intention, lifted her out of the saddle, and set her on her feet—all very carefully and gently, but also very scrupulously, without an unnecessary pressure, without even a glance into her waiting eyes. What was the man made of? Why would he not look at her? Why did he not rage at her—if he could do nothing better? Well, the cat had at least seven lives left!

She almost forgot to limp, but bethought herself in time, and gasped as he led her to an empty soap box at the side of the stable door. Having seated her there, he called out to the man on guard at Sunnysides’ corral: “Where’s Curly?”

“Down by the crick,” was the answer.

“Bring him here! I’ll watch the horse.”

Thereupon he took the man’s place, and stood with his arms crossed on the top rail of the fence, his eyes fixed on the golden horse. And Marion felt a real pain at last,—a pang of jealousy. So he preferred to look at the horse, did he? If he had chanced at that instant to glance at her he would have seen a pair of blue eyes blazing with wrath.

The two men came hurrying from the creek.

“Here, Curly!” said Haig, resigning his post. “Miss Gaylord has hurt her ankle. I found her unseated down the road yonder.” He paused, as if to let that be thoroughly understood. “I want you to hitch up the sorrels and drive her home.”

“Right!” responded Curly, going into the stable.

Marion then did almost faint. She had not foreseen that manœuver.

“I’d rather not, please,” she said, as sweetly as she could in her dismay.

“Rather not what?” asked Haig, turning at last to her.

“I’d rather rest a while—somewhere—” Her glance went past him in the direction of the cottage. “Then I can ride home—alone.”

“And tumble off in the road somewhere!” he retorted, with a touch of derision in his tone.

“Oh, no!” she pleaded. “It’s not as bad as that.”

“No matter! I can’t allow you to take any chances,” he insisted curtly.

“Really, I need only a little rest,” she persisted. “If I could lie down a few minutes—” her eyes again were turned toward the cottage.

He saw what she meant, and frowned.

“No!” he snapped. Then, checking himself, “I don’t mean to be inhospitable, but you ought to know that’s impossible.”

“You mean—Cousin Seth?”

He shot a look at her that frightened her, but gratified her too. Was she rousing him at last?

“Yes, if you like,” he said, quietly enough. “I’m having a hard enough time with the fool without a woman being mixed up in the affair.”

“I don’t understand,” said Marion.

“You don’t understand!” he repeated. “Of course not. Women never understand—until afterwards. I’ll make it plainer. I’m a bad man, as you have doubtless heard. What would Paradise Park say when it learned that you had been inveigled into my house?”

She was silent a moment.

“Well then, let me sit here and rest!” she insisted.

“But why?” he demanded impatiently.

She took her courage in both hands, and plunged.

“I want to talk to you,” she said eagerly. “I want to ask you if there is no way—”

“Excuse me!” he broke in. “I don’t want you to talk to me. If I did—”

He stopped, with a shrug. Marion felt her face reddening, but she dissembled her embarrassment.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

It was spoken archly, in her most playful, most kittenish manner, and so she was amazed to see his face distorted as if by some violent emotion. But he spoke with restraint, though in a tone that was hard and harsh.

“Yes, I am afraid of you. The only thing in the world a man needs to fear is a woman.”

The first effect of this speech was to surprise and shock her. The next was to make her heart leap. Had she come near the secret, after all? Then, finally, something deep in the man’s eyes roused in her a thrill of pity. In another minute she would have melted, in her compassion, and begged him humbly to pardon her. But at that instant Curly emerged from the barn, leading the sorrels; and the devil that lurks behind a woman’s tongue spoke for her before she was aware of it.

“So you’d rather one of your men took me to Cousin Seth!”

It was scarcely out before she regretted it with all her heart. If there was a devil behind her tongue there was another back of the somber shadows in Haig’s eyes. He flashed one comprehending look at her; his whole manner underwent a swift and terrifying change; he was again the Philip Haig of that day at the post office.

“Great!” he exclaimed. “That will be the best joke of all. I’ll drive you home myself, of course.”

For a moment Marion sat very still on the soap box, stunned, staring open-mouthed at Haig. What had she done? That mad speech! Then she leaped to her feet.

“No! No!” she cried. “You shall not!”

He smiled at her.

“Shall not?” he repeated sardonically.

“I mean—please not that!” she faltered.

“Why not?” he demanded, almost gaily.

“Oh, please! I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Of course you didn’t mean it! Women never do mean it—that way. And I suppose you didn’t mean to let those men ride on to Paradise when they told you the horse was mine, did you?”

“Oh!” cried Marion, almost in a scream. “How did you—know?”

He laughed.

“I happened to ask Larkin if he had met nobody on the road who could have directed him. He said there was no one but a ‘purty girl.’ That was you, wasn’t it?”

She was speechless.

“And my warning to Huntington. Did you deliver that?”

“No,” she answered, scarcely above a whisper.

“Of course not. That would have been too simple and honest and direct. You can’t be honest and straightforward to save your lives. You live by deception, and boast about your love of truth. Your deepest craving is for violence, while you prate about your gentle influence over men. I haven’t the least doubt in the world that Mrs. Huntington, for all her baby face, is back of all Huntington’s violence—thinks she’s a wonderful inspiration to him, with a special genius for the cattle business! And when she gets him killed—with your assistance—she’ll flop down, and weep—and you too, both of you—and wail that you didn’t mean it!”

She recoiled from him, and leaned helplessly against the wall of the stable.

“So you let the men ride on to Paradise,” he went on with relentless mockery, “and you let Huntington plunge into that business when you knew, from me, exactly what it meant. And you rode over here to-day—I wonder, now, if your foot’s really hurt, or if that also is some trick!”

It was the merest chance shot. He had no suspicion that she had been shamming, for he had been too much annoyed by the whole incident to be critical of her demeanor. But the shot went home. The girl, without a word or cry, suddenly sank down on the box, with her face buried in her hands.

There ensued a moment of tense silence. For all the bitterness that surged under his railing speech, Haig was not untouched by the sight of the girl, bent and cowering before him. But at the same time he was exasperated anew by the scene that was being enacted under the eyes of his two men.

“Come!” he said presently, not without reluctant gentleness. “It’s growing late. We must start at once.”

The words increased her terror. Through the hands that covered her eyes she could see Haig and Huntington—with revolvers drawn; and Claire’s white face—She rose impulsively, dropping her hands from her hot and tear-stained cheeks. She would confess all to him, though it should betray the inmost secret of her heart; and would beseech him not to go—

“Don’t say it—here!” he commanded sharply, lowering his voice as he bent toward her. “They think there’s something queer about all this. Come!”

She obeyed him silently, her resolution vanishing before his authority. Besides, there was yet time, somewhere on the road.

CHAPTER VIII

THE END OF HER STRATAGEM

For some minutes there was no speech, no sound except the swift beat of the horses' hoofs on the hard roadway, and the crisp crunching of wheels in the sand. Marion sat rigid, staring straight in front of her, yet seeing nothing. Dazed and benumbed, her thoughts were in a hopeless tangle, without beginnings, without ends. How she had bungled the whole thing! And she might have been so happy, there at his side.

Twilight was coming on in the serene, clear beauty of the mountains: the distant peaks glowed like great opals in the sundown hues; there was an indescribable sweetness in the air, something magical in the soft but cold night breeze that began to pour down upon the valley from the eternal snows.

Timidly, out of the corner of her eye, Marion glanced at Haig, and saw that he was gazing steadily at the changing colors on the distant range. But there was no beauty for her in that perfect panorama. The fire had gone out of her, and she was shivering. He must have felt her movement, for suddenly he leaned forward, lifted the edge of the heavy lap-robe that had lain neglected at their feet, and tucked it around her. She drew back with a quick intake of breath as his face was for an instant close to her own. A moment later he began to speak in a tone that surprised and encouraged her, so little did it resemble the tones he had employed before. It was as if nothing had happened, as if they had long been talking of things casual, impersonal to them both.

"It's different in the San Luis," he said. "There's red down there. Nature's palette is a little short of red in this valley. Too much blue. Even nature sometimes gets a one-color obsession, like the painters. Here she's gone off on blue. It's the most dangerous color. Darwin says it was the last color produced in nature's laboratory. Ordinarily it's the least common in flowers and birds and insects. Hearn—Have you read Lafcadio Hearn? No? But you ought to, that is, if you care for such things. He goes after blue—the misuse of it. He says it's the color most pleasureable to the eye in its purest intensity. But you mustn't dab it on. A blue house is a crime. Blue's overdone here too, blue sky, blue mists, blue shadows, blue lakes, blue flowers,—anemones, harebells, columbines and the rest. It's a relief to get into the reds of the San Luis—"

"Where Sunnysides came from!" interrupted Marion, eager despite her misery.

"Yes."

"Tell me about him, please!"

She wanted him to continue in that strain, and even Sunnysides was a less dangerous subject than—another.

"Well, about Sangre de Cristo first. That's a great range that stands up high and white along the east. Sangre de Cristo is Spanish for Blood of Christ. I can see those pious old rascal adventurers uncovering their blessed heads when they first glimpsed it. At sunset it takes the color—not always, not often, in fact, perhaps a dozen times a year. There are days and days when the range is only white and cold, days when it's black with storms, and days when it's dismal gray. Then there comes an evening when the sun goes down red behind the San Juan, and the snows on Sangre de Cristo run like blood. The whole world, for a few minutes, seems to halt and stand still in awe at that weird and mysterious spectacle—trainmen setting the brakes on squealing ore trains on Marshall Pass, and miners coming out of their tunnels above Creed all stop and look; Mexican sheep-herders in Conejos pause to cross themselves; ranchmen by their lonely corrals up and down the San Luis, and cowboys in the saddle on the open range—all spellbound. It gives you a strange feeling—something that goes back to the primitive instincts of mankind—something of reverence, something of wonder, something of fear—the fear that the first men had when they gazed on the phenomena they could not understand,

and began to make their myths and their religions. Primitive superstition, primitive terror will never quite down in us, no matter how wise and practical we become. There's always, in beauty—in sheer beauty something terrifying, as well as something sad. But—do I bore you with my dithyrambs?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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