EMERSON WILLIS GEORGE

THE TREASURE OF HIDDEN VALLEY

Willis Emerson

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Emerson W.

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Содержание

Willis George Emerson
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By Willis George Emerson

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Sons of the rugged, rock-ribbed hills,
Far from the gaudy show
Of Fashion's world-its shams and frills
Brothers of rain and snow:
Kith of the crags and the forest pines,
Kin of the herd and flock;
Wise in the lore of Nature signs
Writ in the grass and rock.

Beings of lithe and lusty limb,
Breathing the broad, new life,
Chanting the forest's primal hymn
Free from the world's crude strife.
Your witching lure my being thrills,
O rugged sons! O rugged hills!

CHAPTER I – AT THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

IT was a dear, crisp October morning. There was a shrill whistle of a locomotive, and then a westbound passenger train dashed into the depot of an Iowa town. A young man descended the car steps with an armful of luggage. He deposited his parcels on the platform, and half expectantly looked about him.

Just then there was a "honk! honk!" from a huge automobile as it came to a palpitating halt, and a familiar voice called out: "Hello, Roderick, old man!" And a moment later Roderick Warfield was shaking hands with his boon friend of former college days, Whitley Adams. Both were in their early twenties, stalwart, well set up, clean-cut young fellows.

Whitley's face was all aglow in the happiness of reunion. But Roderick, after the first cordial greeting, wore a graver look. He listened quietly while his comrade rambled on.

"Mighty glad to receive your wire last night at the club. But what brings you home so unexpectedly? We've been hearing all sorts of glowing stories – about your being in the thick of affairs in little old New York and rolling in the shekels to beat the band."

"Fairy tales," was the laconic reply, accompanied by a look that was compounded of a sigh and a wistful smile.

"How's that?" asked young Adams, glancing up into the other's face and for the first time noticing its serious expression. "Don't tell me you've struck a financial snag thus early in your Stock Exchange career."

"Several financial snags – and struck 'em pretty badly too, I'm afraid."

"Whew!" exclaimed Adams.

"Oh, I'm not down and out," laughed Roderick, half amused at the look of utter discomfiture on his companion's countenance. "Not by a long chalk! I'm in on several good deals, and six months from date will be standing on velvet. That is to say," he added, somewhat dubiously, "if Uncle Allen opens up his money bags to tide me over meanwhile."

"A pretty big 'if,' eh?" For the moment there was sympathetic sobriety in the youth's tone, but he quickly regained his cheerfulness. "However, he'll come through probably all right, Rod, dear boy. It's the older fellows' privilege, isn't it? My good dad has had the same experience, as you will no doubt have guessed. There, let me see; how long have you been away? Eight months! Gee! However, I have just gotten home myself. My old man was a bit furious at my tardiness in coming and the geometrical increase of my expense account. To do Los Angeles and San Francisco thoroughly, you know, runs into a pot of money. But now everything is fixed up after a fashion with no evidence in sight of further squalls." He laughed the laugh of an overgrown boy laboring under the delusion that because he has finished a collegiate course he is a "man."

"Of course," he continued with a swagger, "we chaps who put in four long years at college should not be expected to settle down without having some sort of a valedictory fling."

"There has not been much of a fling in my case," protested Warfield. "I tackled life seriously in New York from the start."

"But got a tumble all the same," grinned Adams. "However, there's no use in pulling a long face – at least not until your Uncle Allen has been interviewed and judiciously put through his paces. Come now, let us get your things aboard."

The conversation was halted while the young owner of the big 60 H. P. car helped his chauffeur to stow away the luggage. "To the club," he called out as he seated himself in the tonneau with his boyhood friend – college chum and classmate.

"Not this morning!" exclaimed Roderick, shaking his head as he looked frankly and a bit nervously into the eyes of Whitley Adams. "No club for me until I have squared things up on the hill."

"Oh, well, just as you say; if it's as bad as that, why of course – " He broke off and did not finish the sentence, but directed the chauffeur to the residence of Allen Miller, the banker.

They rode a little way in silence and then Whitley Adams observed: "You've made a muddle of things, no doubt," and he turned with a knowing look and a smile toward Roderick, who in turn flushed, as though hit.

"No doubt," he concurred curtly.

"Then when shall I see you?" asked Whitley as the auto slowed down at the approach to the stately Miller home.

"I'll 'phone you," replied Roderick. "Think I can arrange to be at the club this evening."

"Very well," said his friend, and a minute later he had whirled away leaving a cloud of dust in the trail of the machine.

Roderick Warfield met with a motherly reception at the hands of his Aunt Lois, Mrs. Allen Miller. The greetings over and a score of solicitous questions by his Aunt Lois answered, he went to his room for a bath and a change of clothes. Then without further delay he presented himself at the bank, and in a few moments was closeted in the president's private room with his uncle and guardian, Allen Miller.

The first friendly greetings were soon followed by the banker skidding from social to business considerations. "Yes," said Allen Miller, "I am glad to see you, Roderick, mighty glad. But what do you mean by writing a day ahead that a good big sum is required immediately, this without mention of securities or explanation of any kind?" He held up in his hand a letter that ran to just a few niggardly lines. "This apology for a business communication only reached me by last night's mail."

The kindly look of greeting had changed to one that was fairly flinty in its hardness. "What am I to expect from such a demand? A bunch of unpaid accounts, I suppose." As he uttered this last sentence, there was a wicked twang in his voice – a suggestion of the snarl of an angry wolf ready for a fierce encounter. It at least proved him a financier.

A flush of resentment stole over Roderick's brow. His look was more than half-defiant. On his side it showed at once that there would be no cringing for the favor he had come to ask.

But he controlled himself, and spoke with perfect calm.

"My obligations are not necessarily disgraceful ones, as your manner and tone, Uncle, might imply. As for any detailed explanation by letter, I thought it best to come and put the whole business before you personally."

"And the nature of the business?" asked the banker in a dry harsh voice.

"I am in a big deal and have to find my *pro rata* contribution immediately."

"A speculative deal?" rasped the old man.

"Yes; I suppose it would be called speculative, but it is gilt-edged all the same. I have all the papers here, and will show them to you." He plunged a hand into the breast pocket of his coat and produced a neatly folded little bundle of documents.

"Stop," exclaimed the banker. "You need not even undo that piece of tape until you have answered my questions. A speculative deal, you admit."

"Be it so."

"A mining deal, may I ask?"

Roderick's face showed some confusion. But he faced the issue promptly and squarely.

"Yes, sir, a mining deal."

The banker's eyes fairly glittered with steely wrathfulness.

"As I expected. By gad, it seems to run in the blood! Did I not warn you, when you insisted on risking your meagre capital of two thousand dollars in New York instead of settling down with what would have been a comfortable nest egg here, that if you ever touched mining it would be your ruin? Did I not tell you your father's story, how the lure of prospecting possessed him, how he could never throw it off, how it doomed him to a life of hardship and poverty, and how it would have left

you, his child, a pauper but for an insurance policy which it was his one redeeming act of prudence in carrying?"

"Please do not speak like that of my father," protested Roderick, drawing himself up with proud

The banker's manner softened; a kindlier glow came into his eyes.

"Well, boy, you know I loved your father. If your father had only followed my path he would have shared my prosperity. But it was not to be. He lost all he ever made in mining, and now you are flinging the little provision his death secured for you into the same bottomless pool. And this despite all my warnings, despite my stern injunctions so long as it was my right as your guardian to enjoin. The whole thing disgusts me more than words can tell."

Into the banker's voice the old bitterness, if not the anger, had returned. He rose and restlessly paced the room. A silence followed that was oppressive. Roderick Warfield's mind was in the future; he was wondering what would happen should his uncle remain obdurate. The older man's mind was in the past; he was recalling events of the long ago.

Roderick Warfield's father and Allen Miller had as young men braved perils together in an unsuccessful overland trip when the great California gold rush in the early fifties occurred. At that time they were only boys in their 'teens. Years afterward they married sisters and settled down in their Iowa homes – or tried to settle down in Warfield's case, for in his wanderings he had been smitten with the gold fever and he remained a mining nomad to the end of his days. Allen Miller had never been blessed with a child, and it was not until late in their married life that any addition came to the Warfield family. This was the beginning of Roderick Warfield's career, but cost the mother's life. Ten years later John Warfield died and his young son Roderick was given a home with Mr. and Mrs. Allen Miller, the banker accepting the guardianship of his old friend's only child.

The boy's inheritance was limited to a few thousand dollars of life insurance, which in the hands of anyone but Allen Miller would have fallen far short of putting him through college. However, that was not only accomplished, but at the close of a fairly brilliant college career the young man had found himself possessed of a round couple of thousand dollars. Among his college friends had been the son of a well-to-do New York broker, and it was on this friend's advice that Roderick had at the outset of his business life adventured the maelstrom of Gotham instead of accepting the placid backwaters of his Iowan home town. Hence the young man's present difficulties and precarious future, and his uncle's bitterness of spirit because all his past efforts on Roderick's account had proved of such little avail.

At last the banker resumed his chair. The tightly closed lips showed that his mind was made up to a definite line of action. Roderick awaited the decision in silence – it was not in his nature to plead a cause at the cost of losing his own self-respect He had already returned the unopened bundle of mining papers to the inner pocket of his coat.

"As for any advance to meet speculative mining commitments," began the man of finance, "I do not even desire to know the amount you have had in mind. That is a proposition I cannot even entertain – on principle and for your own ultimate good, young man."

"Then I lose all the money I have put in to date."

"Better a present loss than hopeless future entanglements. Your personal obligations? As you have been using all available funds for speculation, I presume you are not free from some debts."

"Less than a thousand dollars all told."

"Well, you have, I believe, $285.75 standing to your personal credit in this bank – the remnant of your patrimony."

"I did not know I had so much," remarked Roderick with a faint smile.

"All the better, perhaps," replied the banker, also smiling grimly. "The amount would have doubtless been swallowed up with the rest of your money. As matters stand, some payment can be made to account of your obligations and arrangements entered into for the gradual liquidation of the outstanding balance." Young Warfield winced. The banker continued: "This may involve some

personal humiliation for you. But again it is against my principles to pay any man's debts. Anyone who deliberately incurs a liability should have the highly beneficial experience of earning the money to liquidate it I propose to give you the chance to do so."

Roderick raised his eyebrows in some surprise. "In New York?" he enquired.

"No, sir," replied Allen Miller rather brusquely and evidently nettled at the very audacity of the question. "Not in New York, but right here – in Keokuk. Calm your impatience, please. Just listen to the proposals I have to make – they have been carefully thought out by me and by your Aunt Lois as well. In the first place, despite your rather reckless and improvident start in life, I am prepared to make you assistant cashier of this bank at a good salary." Again Roderick evinced amazement. He was quite nonplussed at his uncle's changed demeanor. The conciliatory manner and kindly tone disarmed him. But could he ever come to renounce his New York ambitions for humdrum existence in the old river town of Keokuk? He knew the answer in his heart. The thing was impossible.

"And if you are diligent," continued the banker, "prove capable and make good, you may expect in time to be rewarded with a liberal block of stock in the bank. Come now, what do you say to this part of my programme?" urged the speaker as Roderick hesitated.

The young man's mind was already made up. The offer was not even worth considering. And yet, he must not offend his guardian. It was true, Allen Miller's guardianship days were past, but still in his rapid mental calculations Roderick thought of his stanch old stand-by, Uncle Allen Miller, as "Guardian." He lighted a cigar to gain time for the framing of a diplomatic answer.

"Well," said the banker, with a rising inflection, "does it require any time to consider the generous offer I make?"

Roderick pulled a long breath at his cigar and blew rings of smoke toward the ceiling, and said: "Your offer, Uncle, is princely, but I hardly feel that I should accept until I have thought it all over from different points of view and have the whole question of my future plans fully considered. What are the other items on your programme?"

"They should be rather counted as conditions," replied the banker drily. "The conditions on which the offer I have just made are based."

"And they are what?"

"You must quit speculation, give up all expensive habits, marry and settle down." The words were spoken with all the definiteness of an ultimatum.

Again Roderick winced. He might have been led to all or at least some of these things. But to be driven, and by such rough horse-breaking methods – . never! no, never. He managed to restrain himself, however, and replied quietly: "My dear uncle, the idea of marrying for some years yet, to tell you the truth, has never entered my head. Of course," he went on lightly, "there is a young lady over at Galesburg, Stella Rain, where my Knox college days were spent, the 'college widow,' in a way a very lovely sort and in whom I have been rather interested for some two years, but – "

"That will do, young man," interrupted Allen Miller, sharply and severely. "Never mind your society flyers – these lady friends of yours in Galesburg. Your Aunt Lois and myself have already selected your future wife."

He laughed hoarsely, and the laugh sounded brutal even to his own ears. Allen Miller realized uncomfortably that he had been premature and scored against himself.

"Oh, is that so?" ejaculated Roderick in delicate irony. A pink flush had stolen into his cheeks.

The old banker hesitated in making reply. He grew hot and red and wondered if he had begun his match-making too abruptly – the very thing about which his good wife Lois had cautioned him. In truth, despite the harsh methods often imposed on him by his profession as a banker, a kinder heart than Allen Miller's never beat. But in this new rôle he was out of his element and readily confused. Finally after clearing his throat several times, he replied: "Yes, Roderick, in a way, your Aunt Lois and I have picked out the girl we want you to marry. Her father's wealth is equal to mine and some day perhaps – well, you can't tell – I'll not live always and, provided you don't disobey me, you may inherit

under my will a control of the stock of this banking house, and so be at the head of an important and growing financial institution."

Roderick instead of being fifty-four and calculating, was only twenty-four and indifferent to wealth, and the red blood of his generous youth revolted at the mercenary methods suggested by his uncle regarding this unknown girl's financial prospects. And then, too, the inducement thrown out that under conditions of obedience he might inherit the fortune of his uncle, was, he interpreted, nothing short of an attempt to bribe and deprive him of his liberty. He flushed with indignation and anger. Yet with a strong effort he still controlled his feelings, and presently asked: "Who is the fair lady?"

"The daughter of an old friend of mine. They live only a short distance down the river. Their home is at Quincy, Illinois. Mighty fine old family, I can tell you. Am sure you'll like her immensely."

"Am I to understand," asked Roderick rather caustically, "that the young lady acquiesces and enters graciously into your plans?"

"Well, I can't say that!" replied Allen Miller, rubbing his chin. "But your Aunt Lois and I have talked over the possible alliance in all its lights."

"With the young lady's family, I presume?"

"No, not even that. But we are perfectly certain that we have only to speak the word to put the business through all right."

"Business!" – Roderick repeated the word with bitter emphasis.

"Yes, sir, business," retorted Allen Miller, with some warmth. "To my mind matrimony is one of the most important deals in life – perhaps *the* most important."

"If the money is right," laughed the young man contemptuously. "But don't you think that before another word is said about such a matter I should have the chance of seeing the young lady and the young lady a chance of seeing me?"

The humor of the situation had brought a pleasant smile to his face. The banker looked relieved.

"Wait now, my boy," he replied musingly. "Do you remember when you were a little chap, perhaps twelve or thirteen years old, going with your Aunt Lois and myself to St. Louis on the Diamond Joe boat line?"

"Yes, I remember it perfectly."

"Well, then," continued Allen Miller, "you perhaps haven't forgotten a lady and gentleman with a little tot of a girl only five or six years old, who joined us at Quincy. You engaged in a regular boyish love affair at first sight with that little girl. Well, she is the one – a mighty fine young lady now – just passed eighteen and her father is rated away up in the financial world."

For the moment Roderick's indignation over the cold-blooded, cut-and-dried, matrimonial proposition was arrested, and he did not even notice the renewed reference to finance. He had become pensive and retrospective.

"How very long ago," he mused more to himself than to his Uncle Allen – "How very long ago since that trip down the river. Yes, I remember well the little blue-eyed, black-curly-headed chick of a girl. It was my first steamboat ride and of course it was a holiday and a fairyland affair to my boyish fancy."

He drew in a long breath and looked out through the window at the snow which was now falling, as if many chapters of the world's history had been written in his own life since that far away yet well remembered trip. He fell silent for a spell.

Allen Miller chuckled to himself. At last his scheme was working. All his life he had been a success with men and affairs, and his self-confidence was great. He rubbed his hands together and smiled, while he humored Roderick's silence. He would tell his wife Lois of his progress. Presently he said: "She is an only child, Roderick, and I think her father could qualify for better than a quarter of a million."

This time the reiterated money recommendation jarred unpleasantly on Roderick's nerves and revived his antagonism. He hastily arose from his chair and walked back and forth across the room.

Presently he halted before his uncle and with forced deliberation – for his anger was keyed to a high tension – said: “I am pleased, Uncle, to know the young lady is not a party to this shameful piece of attempted barter and sale business. When I marry, if ever, it shall be someone as regards whom wealth will count as of least importance. True love loathes avarice and greed. I require no further time to consider your proposals. I flatly reject your offer of a position in the bank, and shall leave Keokuk tomorrow. I prefer hewing out my own destiny and while doing so retaining my freedom and my self-respect. This is my decision, and it is an irrevocable one.”

The ebullition of pent-up feelings had come so suddenly and unexpectedly that Allen Miller was momentarily overwhelmed. He had arisen and was noticeably agitated. His face was very white, and there was a look in his eyes that Roderick Warfield had never seen before.

“Young man,” he said, and his voice was husky and trembling with suppressed rage – “you shall never have a dollar of my fortune unless you marry as I direct I will give you until tomorrow to agree to my plans. If you do not desire to accept my offer without change or modification in any shape, then take the balance of your money in the bank and go your way. I wash my hands of you and your affairs. Go and play football with the world or let the world play football with you, and see how it feels to be the ‘pigskin’ in life’s game.”

With these words the old man swung a chair round to the fireplace, dropped into it, and began vigorously and viciously pounding at a lump of coal. There was an interval of silence. At last Roderick spoke; his voice was firm and low.

“There will not be the slightest use, Uncle, in reopening this question tomorrow. My mind, as I have said, is already made up – unalterably.” The last word was uttered with an emphasis that rang finality.

The banker flung down the poker, and rose to his feet. His look was equally determined, equally final, equally unalterable.

“All right,” he snapped. “Then we’ll get through the banking business now.”

He touched a push-button by the side of the mantel. During the brief interval before a clerk responded to the summons, not another word was spoken.

“Bring me the exact figure of Mr. Warfield’s credit balance,” he said to his subordinate, “and cash for the amount. He will sign a check to close the account.”

Five minutes later Roderick had the little wad of bills in his pocket, and was ready to depart Uncle and nephew were again alone.

“There is one other matter,” said the banker with cold formality. “There is a paper in my possession which was entrusted to my keeping by your father just before he died. I was to deliver it to you at my discretion after you had attained your majority, but in any case on your reaching the age of twenty-five. I will exercise my discretion, and hand over the paper to you now.”

He advanced to a safe that stood open at one side of the room, unlocked a little drawer, and returned to the fireplace with a long linen envelope in his hand. A big red splash of wax showed that it had been carefully sealed.

“This is yours,” said the banker shortly, handing it over to the young man.

The latter was greatly agitated. A message from his dead father! What could it mean? But he mastered his emotions and quietly bestowed the packet in his breast pocket – beside the papers connected with the mining deal.

“I’ll read this later,” he said. And then he extended his hand. There was yearning affection in his eyes, in the tremor of his voice: “Uncle, we surely will part as friends.”

“You can regain my friendship only by doing my will. I have nothing more to say. Good-by.”

And without taking the proffered hand, Allen Miller turned away, leaning an elbow on the mantelshelf. His attitude showed that the interview was at an end.

Without another word Roderick Warfield left the room. Outside the soft snow was falling in feathery silence. At a street corner the young man hesitated. He glanced up the road that led to his old home – Allen Miller's stately mansion on the hill. Then he took the other turning.

"I guess I'll sleep at the Club to-night," he murmured to himself. "I can bid Aunt Lois good-by in the morning."

CHAPTER II – A MESSAGE FROM THE GRAVE

ALLEN MILLER, the rich banker, was alone – alone in the president's room at his bank, and feeling alone in the fullest sense of the word now that Roderick Warfield had gone, the youth he had reared and loved and cherished as his own child, now turned out of doors by the old man's deliberate act.

For full an hour he walked slowly back and forth the whole length of the apartment But at last he halted once again before the open grate where some slumbering chunks of coal were burning indifferently. He pushed them together with the iron poker, and a bright blaze sprung up.

Looking deep into the fire his thoughts went back to his boyhood days and he saw John Warfield, his chum of many years. He thought of their experience in the terrible massacre in the Sierra Madre Mountains in the region of Bridger Peak, of a lost trail, of hunger and thirst and weary tramps over mountain and down precipitous canyons, of abrupt gashes that cut the rocky gorges, of great bubbling springs and torrents of mountain streams, of a narrow valley between high mountains – a valley without a discoverable outlet – of a beautiful waterway that traversed this valley and lost itself in the sides of an abrupt mountain, and of the exhausting hardships in getting back to civilization.

Then Allen Miller, the flint-hearted financier, the stoic, the man of taciturn habits, did a strange thing. Standing there before the blazing fire, leaning against the mantel, he put his handkerchief to his eyes and his frame was convulsed with a sob. Presently he turned away from the open grate and muttered aloud: "Yes, John Warfield, I loved you and I love your boy, Roderick. Some day he shall have all I've got. But he is self-willed – a regular outlaw – and I must wake him up to the demands of a bread-winner, put the bits into his mouth and make him bridle-wise. Gad! He's a dynamo, but I love him;" and he half smiled, while his eyes were yet red and his voice husky.

"Ah, John," he mused as he looked again into the fire, "you might have been alive today to help me break this young colt to the plough, if you had only taken my advice and given up the search for that gold mine in the mountains. Thank God for the compact of secrecy between us – the secret shall die with me. The years, John, you spent in trying to re-dis-cover the vault of wealth – and what a will-o'-the-wisp it proved to be – and then the accident. But now I shall be firm – firm as a rock – and Roderick, the reckless would-be plunger, shall at last feel the iron hand of his old guardian beneath the silken glove of my foolish kindness. He's got to be subdued and broken, even if I have to let him live on husks for a while. Firm, firm – that's the only thing to be."

As he muttered the last words, Allen Miller shut his square jaws together with an ugly snap that plainly told the stern policy he had resolved on and would henceforth determinedly pursue. He put on his great fur-lined cloak, and silently went out into the evening shadows and thick maze of descending snow-flakes.

Meanwhile Roderick Warfield had reached his club, engaged a bedroom, and got a cheerful fire alight for companionship as well as comfort. He had telephoned to Whitley Adams to dine with him, but for two hours he would be by himself and undisturbed. He wanted a little time to think. And then there was the letter from his father. He had settled himself in an easy chair before the fire, the sealed envelope was in his hand, and the strange solemn feeling had descended upon him that he was going to hear his dead father speak to him again.

There was in the silence that enveloped him the pulsing sensation of a mysterious presence. The ordeal now to be faced came as a climax to the stormy interview he had just passed through. He had reached a parting of the ways, and dimly realized that something was going to happen that would guide him as to the path he should follow. The letter seemed a message from another world. Unknown to himself the supreme moment that had now arrived was a moment of transfiguration – the youth became a man – old things passed away.

With grave deliberation he broke the seal. Inside the folds of a long and closely written letter was a second cover with somewhat bulky contents. This he laid for the meantime on a little table by his side. Then he set himself to a perusal of the letter. It ran as follows:

"My dear Son: —

"This is for you to read when you have come to man's estate – when you are no longer a thoughtless boy, but a thoughtful man. With this letter you will find your mother's picture and a ring of pure gold which I placed upon her finger the day I married her – gold with a special sentiment attached to it, for I took it from the earth myself – also a few letters – love letters written by her to me and a tress of her hair. I am sure you will honor her memory by noble deeds. I loved her dearly.

"I was younger at the time than you are now, Roderick, my son. Your Uncle Allen Miller – about my own age – and myself planned a trip to California. It was at the time of the great gold excitement in that far off land.

"The Overland Train of some two score of ox teams that we were with traveled but slowly; frequently not more than eight or ten miles a day. I remembered we had crossed the south fork of the Platte River and had traveled some two days on westward into the mountains and were near a place called Bridger Peak. It must have been about midnight when our camp was startled with the most terrific and unearthly yells ever heard by mortals. It was a band of murderous Indians, and in less time than it takes to describe the scene of devastation, all of our stock was stampeded; our wagons looted and then set on fire. Following this a general massacre began. Your Uncle Allen and myself, both of us mere boys in our 'teens, alert and active, managed to make our escape in the darkness. Being fleet of foot we ran along the mountain side, following an opening but keeping close to a dense forest of pine trees. In this way we saved our lives. I afterwards learned that every other member of the party was killed.

"We were each equipped with two revolvers and a bowie knife and perhaps jointly had one hundred rounds of cartridges. A couple of pounds of jerked beef and a half a loaf of bread constituted our provisions. Fortunately, Allen Miller carried with him a flint and steel, so that we were enabled to sustain ourselves with cooked food of game we killed during the weary days that followed.

"With this letter I enclose a map, roughly drawn, but I am sure it will help you find the lost canyon where flows a beautiful stream of water, and where your Uncle Allen and myself discovered an amazing quantity of gold – placer gold. It is in a valley, and the sandbar of gold is about a mile up stream from where the torrent of rapid water loses itself at the lower end of the valley – seemingly flowing into the abrupt side of a mountain. At the place where we found the gold, I remember, there was a sandbar next to the mountain brook, then a gorge or pocket like an old channel of a creek bed, and it was here in this old sandbar of a channel that the nuggets of gold were found – so plentiful indeed, that notwithstanding we loaded ourselves with them to the limit of our strength, yet our 'takings' could scarcely be missed from this phenomenal sandbar of riches. We brought all we could possibly carry away with us in two bags which we made from extra clothing. Unfortunately we lost our way and could not find an opening from the valley, because the waters of the stream disappeared, as I have described, and we were compelled, after many unsuccessful attempts to find a water grade opening, to retrace our steps and climb out by the same precipitous trail that we had followed in going down into this strange valley.

"We wandered in the mountains as far south as a place now known as Hahn's Peak, and then eastward, circling in every direction for many miles in extent. After

tramping in an unknown wilderness for forty-seven days we finally came to the hut of a mountaineer, and were overjoyed to learn it was on a branch of the Overland trail Not long after this we fell in with a returning caravan of ox team freighters and after many weeks of tedious travel arrived at St. Joseph, Mo., footsore and weary, but still in possession of our gold. A little later we reached our home near Keokuk, Iowa, and to our great joy learned that our treasure was worth many thousands of dollars. Your Uncle Allen Miller's half was the beginning of his fortune. An oath of secrecy exists between your Uncle Allen Miller and myself that neither shall divulge during our lifetime that which I am now writing to you, but in thus communicating my story to you, my own flesh and blood, I do not feel that I am violating my promise, because the information will not come to you until years after my death.

"Since your mother's death, I have made seven trips into the Rocky Mountain region hunting most diligently for an odd-shaped valley where abrupt mountains wall it in, seemingly on every side, and where we found the fabulously rich sandbar of gold.

"But I have not succeeded in locating the exact place, not even finding the lost stream – or rather the spot where the waters disappeared out of sight at the base of a high mountain range. On my last trip, made less than one year ago, I met with a most serious accident that has permanently crippled me and will probably hasten my taking off. On the map I have made many notes while lying here ill and confined to my room, and they will give you my ideas of the location where the treasure may be found. To you, my beloved son, Roderick, I entrust this map. Study it well and if, as I believe, you have inherited my adventurous spirit, you will never rest until you find this lost valley and its treasure box of phenomenal wealth. In Rawlins, Wyoming, you will find an old frontiersman by the name of Jim Rankin. He has two cronies, or partners, Tom Sun and Boney Earnest. These three men rendered me great assistance. If you find the lost mine, reward them liberally.

"I have communicated to no one, not even your good Uncle Allen Miller, that I have decided on leaving this letter, and the information which it contains is for your eyes alone to peruse long after my mortal body has crumbled to dust In imparting this information I do so feeling sure that your Uncle Allen will never make any effort to relocate the treasure, so that it is quite right and proper the secret should descend to you.

"My pen drags a little – I am weary and quite exhausted with the effort of writing. I now find myself wondering whether this legacy – a legacy telling you of a lost gold mine that may be found somewhere in the fastnesses of the mountains of Wyoming – will prove a blessing to you or a disquieting evil. I shall die hoping that it will prove to your good and that your efforts in seeking this lost mine will be rewarded.

"With tenderest love and affection,
"Your father,
"John Warfield."

When Roderick reached the end of the letter, he remained for a long time still holding it in his hands and gazing fixedly into the glowing embers. He was seeing visions – visions of a Wyoming gold mine that would bring him unbounded wealth. At last he broke from his reveries, and examined the other package. It was unsealed. The first paper to come forth proved to be the map to which his father had referred – it was a pencil drawing with numerous marginal notes that would require close examination. For the present he laid the document on the table. Then reverently and tenderly he examined the little bunch of love letters tied together by a ribbon, the tress of hair placed between

two protecting pieces of cardboard, and the plain hoop of gold wrapped carefully in several folds of tissue paper. Lastly he gazed upon the photograph of his mother – the mother he had never seen, the mother who had given her life so that he might live. There were tears in his eyes as he gently kissed the sweet girlish countenance.

With thought of her and memories of the old boyhood days again he fell into a musing mood. Time sped unnoticed, and it was only the chiming of a church clock outside that aroused him to the fact that the dinner hour had arrived and that Whitley Adams would be waiting for him downstairs. He carefully placed all the papers in a writing desk that stood in a corner of the room, locked it, and put the key in his pocket. Then he descended to meet his friend.

"Nothing doing, I can see," exclaimed Whitley the moment he saw Roderick's grave face.

"You've got it right," he answered quietly. "The big 'if' you feared this morning turned out to be an uncompromising 'no.' Uncle Allen and I have said good-by."

"No wonder you are looking so glum."

"Not glum, old fellow. I never felt more tranquilly happy in my life. But naturally I may seem a bit serious. I have to cut out old things in my life, take up new lines."

"I suppose it's back to New York for you."

"No. Everything goes by the board there. I have to cut my losses and quit."

"What a cruel sacrifice!"

"Or what a happy release," smiled Roderick. "There is something calling me elsewhere – a call I cannot resist – a call I believe that beckons me to success."

"Where?"

"Well, we won't say anything about that at present I'll write you later on when the outlook becomes clearer. Meanwhile we'll dine, and I'm going to put up a little business proposition to you. I want you to buy my half share in the *Black Swan.*"

"Guess that can be fixed up all right," replied Whitley, as they moved toward the dining room. And, dull care laid aside, the two old college chums gave themselves up to a pleasant evening – the last they would spend together for many a long day, as both realized.

By eleven o'clock next morning Roderick Warfield had adjusted his financial affairs. He had received cash for his half interest in the *Black Swan,* a river pleasure launch which he and Whitley Adams had owned in common for several years. He had written one letter, to New York surrendering his holding in the mining syndicate, and other letters to his three or four creditors enclosing bank drafts for one-half of his indebtedness and requesting six months' time for the payment of the balance. With less than a hundred dollars left he was cheerfully prepared to face the world.

Then had come the most painful episode of the whole visit – the parting from Aunt Lois, the woman of gentle ways and kindly heart who had always loved him like a mother, who loved him still, and who tearfully pleaded with him to submit even at this eleventh hour to his uncle's will and come back to his room in the old home. But the adieus had been spoken, resolutely though tenderly, and now Whitley Adams in his big motor car had whisked Roderick and his belongings back to the railway depot.

He had barely time to check his trunk to Burlington and swing onto the moving train. "So long," he shouted to his friend. "Good luck," responded Whitley as he waved farewell. And Roderick Warfield was being borne out into the big new world of venture and endeavor.

Would he succeed in cuffing the ears of chance and conquer, or would heartless fate play football with him and make him indeed the "pig-skin" as his uncle had prophesied in the coming events of his destiny – a destiny that was carrying him away among strangers and to unfamiliar scenes? As the train rushed along his mind was full of his father's letter and his blood tingled with excitement over the secret that had come to him from the darkness of the very grave. The primal man within him was crying out with mad impatience to be in the thick of the fierce struggle for the golden spoil.

A witchery was thrumming in his heart – the witchery of the West; and instead of struggling against the impulse, he was actually encouraging it to lead him blindly on toward an unsolved mystery of the hills. He was lifted up into the heights, his soul filled with exalted thoughts and hopes.

Then came whisperings in a softer strain – gentle whisperings that brought with them memories of happy college days and the name of Stella Rain. It was perhaps nothing more nor less than the crude brutality with which his uncle had pressed his meretricious matrimonial scheme that caused Roderick now to think so longingly and so fondly of the charming little “college widow” who had been the object of his youthful aspirations.

All at once he came to a resolution. Yes; he would spend at least one day on the old campus grounds at Knox College. The call of the hills was singing in his heart, the luring irresistible call. But before responding to it he would once again press the hand and peep into the eyes of Stella Rain.

CHAPTER III – FINANCIAL WOLVES

ON the very day following Roderick Warfield's departure from Keokuk there appeared in one of the morning newspapers an item of intelligence that greatly surprised and shocked the banker, Allen Miller. It announced the death of the wife of his old friend General John Holden, of Quincy, Illinois, and with the ghoulish instincts of latter-day journalism laid bare a story of financial disaster that had, at least indirectly, led to the lady's lamented demise. It set forth how some years before the General had invested practically the whole of his fortune in a western smelter company, how the minority stockholders had been frozen out by a gang of financial sharps in Pennsylvania, and how Mrs. Holden's already enfeebled health had been unable to withstand the blow of swift and sudden family ruin. The General, however, was bearing his sad bereavement and his monetary losses with the courage and fortitude that had characterized his military career, and had announced his intention of retiring to a lonely spot among the mountains of Wyoming where his daughter, the beautiful and accomplished Gail Holden, owned a half section of land which had been gifted to her in early infancy by an unde, a prominent business man in San Francisco. Allen Miller was sincerely grieved over the misfortunes that had so cruelly smitten a life-long friend. But what momentarily stunned him was the thought that Gail Holden was the very girl designated, in mind at least, by himself and his wife as a desirable match for Roderick. And because the latter had not at once fallen in with these matrimonial plans, there had been the bitter quarrel, the stinging words of rebuke that could never be recalled, and the departure of the young man, as he had told his aunt, to places where they would never hear of him unless and until he had made his own fortune in the world.

As the newspaper dropped from his hands, the old banker uttered a great groan – he had sacrificed the boy, whom in his heart he had cherished, and still cherished, as a son, for a visionary scheme that had already vanished into nothingness like a fragile iridescent soap-bubble. For obviously Gail Holden, her only possessions an impoverished father and a few acres of rocky soil, was no longer eligible as the bride of a future bank president and leader in the financial world. The one crumb of consolation for Allen Miller was that he had never mentioned her name to Roderick – that when the sponge of time came to efface the quarrel the whole incident could be consigned to oblivion without any humiliating admission on his side. For financial foresight was the very essence of his faith in himself, his hold over Roderick, and his reputation in the business world.

The afternoon mail brought detailed news of General Holden's speculative venture and downfall. Allen Miller's correspondent was a lawyer friend in Quincy, who wrote in strict confidence but with a free and sharply pointed pen. It appeared that Holden's initial investment had been on a sound basis. He had held bonds that were underlying securities on a big smelting plant in Wyoming, in the very district where his daughter's patch of range lands was situated. It was during a visit to the little ranch that the general's attention had been drawn to the great possibilities of a local smelter, and he had been the main one to finance the proposition and render the erection of the plant possible. At this stage a group of eastern capitalists had been attracted to the region, and there had come to be mooted a big consolidation of several companies, an electric lighting plant, an aerial tramway, a valuable producing copper mine and several other different concerns that were closely associated with the smelting enterprise.

In the days that followed a Pennsylvanian financier with a lightning rod education, by the name of W. B. Grady had visited Holden at his Quincy home, partaken of his hospitality, and persuaded him to exchange his underlying bonds for stock in a re-organized and consolidated company.

By reputation this man Grady was already well known to Allen Miller as one belonging to the new school of unscrupulous stock manipulators that has grown up, developed, flourished and waxed fat under the blighting influence and domination of the Well Known Oil crowd. This new school of financiers is composed of financial degenerates, where the words "honor," "fair dealing" or the

"square deal" have all been effectually expunged – marked off from their business vocabulary and by them regarded as obsolete terms. Grady was still a comparatively young man, of attractive manners and commanding presence, with the rapacity, however, of a wolf and the cunning of a fox. He stood fully six feet, and his hair, once black as a raven's, was now streaked with premature gray which was in no way traceable to early piety. But to have mentioned his name even in a remote comparison to such a respectable bird as the raven rendered an apology due to the raven. It was more consistent with the eternal truth and fitness of things to substitute the term "vulture" – to designate him "a financial vulture," that detestable bird of prey whose chief occupation is feasting on carrion and all things where the life has been squeezed out by the financial octopus, known as "the system."

It developed, according to Banker Miller's correspondent, that no sooner had General Holden given up his underlying bonds of the smelter company and accepted stock, than foreclosure proceedings were instituted in the U. S. District Court, and the whole business closed out and sold and grabbed by Grady and a small coterie of financial pirates no better than himself. And all this was done many hundreds of miles away from the home of the unsuspecting old general, who until it was too late remained wholly ignorant and unadvised of the true character of the suave and pleasant appearing Mr. Grady whose promises were innumerable, yet whose every promise was based upon a despicable prevarication.

And thus it was when the affairs of General Holden were fairly threshed out, that Allen Miller discovered his old friend had been the prey of a financial vampire, one skilled in sharp practice and whose artful cunning technically protected him from being arrested and convicted of looting the victim of his fortune. Holden had fallen into the hands of a highwayman as vicious as any stage robber that ever infested the highways of the frontier. The evidence of the fellow's rascality was most apparent; indeed, he was in a way caught redhanded with the goods as surely as ever a sheep-killing dog was found with wool on its teeth.

To the credit of Allen Miller, he never hesitated or wavered in his generosity to anyone he counted as a true and worthy friend. That very evening Mrs. Miller departed for Quincy, to offer in person more discreetly than a letter could offer any financial assistance that might be required to meet present emergencies, and at the same time convey sympathy to the husband and daughter in their sad bereavement.

"Lois, my dear," the banker had said to his wife, "remain a few days with them if necessary. Make them comfortable, no matter what the expense. If they had means they wouldn't need us, but now – well, no difference about the why and wherefore – you just go and comfort and help them materially and substantially."

It was in such a deed as this that the true nobility of Allen Miller's character shone forth like a star of the brightest magnitude – a star guaranteeing forgiveness of all his blunders and stupid attempts to curb the impulsive and proud spirit of Roderick War-field Yet sympathy for Gail and her father in no way condoned their poverty to his judgment as a man of finance or reinstated the girl as an eligible match for the young man. He would have been glad of tidings of Roderick – to have him home again and the offensive matrimonial condition he had attached to his offer of an appointment in the bank finally eliminated.

But there was no news, and meanwhile his wife had returned from her mission, to report that the Holdens, while sincerely grateful, had declined all offers of assistance. As Mrs. Miller described, it was the girl herself who had declared, with the light of quiet self-reliance in her eyes, that by working the ranch in Wyoming as she proposed to work it there would be ample provision for her father's little luxuries and her own simple needs.

So Allen Miller put Gail Holden out of mind. But he had many secret heartaches over his rupture with Roderick, and every little stack of mail matter laid upon his desk was eagerly turned over in the hope that at last the wanderer's whereabouts would be disclosed.

CHAPTER IV – THE COLLEGE WIDOW

STELLA RAIN belonged to one of the first families of Galesburg. Their beautiful home, an old style Southern mansion, painted white with green shutters, was just across from the college campus ground. It was the usual fate of seniors about to pass out of Knox College to be in love, avowedly or secretly, with this fair "college widow." She was petite of form and face, and had a beautiful smile that radiated cheerfulness to the scores of college boys. There was a merry-come-on twinkle in her eyes that set the hearts of the young farmer lad students and the city chaps as well, in tumultuous riot. Beneath it all she was kind of heart, and it was this innate consideration for others that caused her to introduce all the new boys and the old ones too, as they came to college year after year, to Galesburg's fairest girls. She was ready to fit in anywhere – a true "college widow" in the broadest sense of the term. Her parents were wealthy and she had no greater ambition than to be a queen among the college boys. Those who knew her best said that she would live and die a spinster because of her inability to select someone from among the hundreds of her admirers. Others said she had had a serious affair of the heart when quite young. But that was several years before Roderick Warfield had come upon the scene and been in due course smitten by her charms. How badly smitten he only now fully realized when, after nearly a year of absence, he found himself once again tête-à-tête with her in the old familiar drawing-room of her home.

There had been an hour of pleasant desultory conversation, the exchange of reminiscences and of little sympathetic confidences, a subtly growing tension in the situation which she had somewhat abruptly broken by going to the piano and dashing off a brilliant Hungarian rhapsody.

"And so you are determined to go West?" she inquired as she rose to select from the cabinet another sheet of music.

"Yes," replied Roderick, "I'm going far West. I am going after a fortune."

"How courageous you are," she replied, glancing at him over her shoulder with merry, twinkling eyes, as if she were proud of his ambition.

"Stella," said Roderick, as she returned to the piano, where he was now standing.

"Yes?" said she, looking up encouragingly.

"Why; you see, Stella – you don't mind me telling you – well, Stella, if I find the lost gold mine – "

"If you find what?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, I mean," said Roderick in confusion, "I mean if I find a fortune. Don't you know, if I get rich out in that western country – "

"And I hope and believe you will," broke in Stella, vivaciously.

"Yes – I say, if I do succeed, may I come back for you – yes, marry you, and will you go out there with me to live?"

"Oh, Roderick, are you jesting now? You are just one of these mischievous college boys trying to touch the heart of the little college widow." She laughed gaily at him, as if full of disbelief.

"No," protested Roderick, "I am sincere."

Stella Rain looked at him a moment in admiration. He was tall and strong – a veritable athlete. His face was oval and yet there was a square-jawed effect in its moulding. His eyes were dark and luminous and frank, and wore a look of matureness, of determined purpose, she had never seen there before. Finally she asked: "Do you know, Roderick, how old I am?"

As Roderick looked at her he saw there was plaintive regret in her dark sincere eyes. There was no merry-come-on in them now; at last she was serious.

"Why, no," said Roderick, "I don't know how old you are and I don't care. I only know that you appeal to me more than any other woman I have ever met, and all the boys like, you, and I love you, and I want you for my wife."

"Sit down here by my side," said Stella. "Let me talk to you in great frankness."

Roderick seated himself by her side and reaching over took one of her hands in his. He fondled it with appreciation – it was small, delicate and tapering.

"Roderick," she said, "my heart was given to a college boy when I was only eighteen years old. He went away to his home in an eastern state, and then he forgot me and married the girl he had gone to school with as a little boy – during the red apple period of their lives. It pleased his family better and perhaps it was better; and it will not please your family, Roderick, if you marry me."

"My family be hanged," said Roderick with emphasis. "I have just had a quarrel with my uncle, Allen Miller, and I am alone in the world. I have no family. If you become my wife, why, we'll – . we'll be a family to ourselves."

Stella smiled sadly and said: "You enthusiastic boy. How old are you, Roderick?"

"I am twenty-four and getting older every day." They both laughed and Stella sighed and said: "Oh, dear, how the years are running against us – I mean running against me. No, no," she said, half to herself, "it never can be – it is impossible."

"What," said Roderick, rising to his feet, and at the same moment she also stood before him – "What's impossible? Is it impossible for you to love me?"

"No, not that," said Stella, and he noticed tears in her eyes. "No, Roderick," and she stood before him holding both his hands in hers – "Listen," she said, "listen!"

"I am all attention," said Roderick.

"I will tell you how it will all end – we will never marry."

"Well, I say we shall marry," said Roderick. "If you will have me – if you love me – for I love you better than all else on earth." He started to take her in his arms and she raised her hand remonstratingly, and said: "Wait! Here is what I mean," and she looked up at him helplessly. "I mean," – she was speaking slowly – "I mean that you believe today, this hour, this minute that you want me for your wife."

"I certainly do," insisted Roderick, emphatically.

"Yes, but wait – wait until I finish. I will promise to be your wife, Roderick – yes, I will promise – if you come for me I will marry you. But, oh, Roderick," – and there were tears this time in her voice as well as in her eyes – "You will never come back – you will meet others not so old as I am, for I am very, very old, and tonight I feel that I would give worlds and worlds if they were mine to give, were I young once again. Of course, in your youthful generosity you don't know what the disparagement of age means between husband and wife, when the husband is younger. A man may be a score of years older than a woman and all will be well – if they grow old together. It is God's way. But if a woman is eight or ten years older than her husband, it is all different. No, Roderick, don't take me in your arms, don't even kiss me until I bid you good-by when you start for that gold' mine of yours" – and as she said this she tried to laugh in her old way.

"You seem to think," said Roderick in a half-vexed, determined tone, "that I don't know my own mind – that I do not know my own heart. Why, do you know, Stella, I have never loved any other girl nor ever had even a love affair?"

She looked at him quickly and said: "Roderick, that's just the trouble – you do not know – you cannot make a comparison, nor you won't know until the other girl comes along. And then, then," she said wearily, "I shall be weighed in the balance and found wanting, because – oh, Roderick, I am so old, and I am so sorry – " and she turned away and hid her face in her hands. "I believe in you and I could love you with all my strength and soul. I am willing – listen Roderick," she put up her hands protectingly, "don't be impatient – I am willing to believe that you will be constant – that you will come back – I am willing to promise to be your wife."

"You make me the happiest man in the world," exclaimed Roderick, crushing her to him with a sense of possession.

"But there is one promise I am going to ask you to make," she said.

"Yes, yes," said he, "I will promise anything."

"Well, it is this: If the other girl should come along, don't fail to follow the inclination of your heart, for I could not be your wife and believe that the image of another woman was kept sacredly hidden away in the deep recesses of your soul. Do you understand?" There was something in her words – something in the way she spoke them – something in the thought, that struck Roderick as love itself, and it pleased him, because love is unselfish. Then he remembered that as yet he was penniless – it stung him. However, the world was before him and he must carve out a future and a fortune. It might take years, and in the meantime what of Stella Rain, who was even now deploring her many years? She would be getting older, and her chances, perhaps, for finding a home and settling down with a husband would be less and less.

But he knew there was no such thought of selfishness on her part – her very unselfishness appealed to him strongly and added a touch of chivalry to his determination.

Stella Rain sank into a cushioned chair and rested her chin upon one hand while, reaching to the piano keys with the other, she thrummed them softly. Roderick walked back and forth slowly before her in deep meditation. At last he paused and said: "I love you, I will prove I am worthy. There is no time to lose. The hour grows late. I have but an hour to reach my hotel, get my luggage and go to the depot I am going West tonight I will come for you within one year, provided I make my fortune; and I firmly believe in my destiny. If not – if I do not come – I will release you from your betrothal, if it is your wish that I do so."

Stella Rain laughed more naturally, and the old "come-on" twinkling was in her eyes again as she said: "Roderick, I don't want to be released, because I love you very, very much. It is not that – it's because – well, no difference – if you come, Roderick," and she raised her hand to him from the piano – "if you come, and still want me to be your wife, I will go with you and live in the mountains or the remotest corner of the earth."

He took her hand in both his own and kissed it tenderly. "Very well, Stella, – you make it plain to me. But you shall see – you shall see," and he looked squarely into her beautiful eyes.

"Yes," she said, rising to her feet, "we shall see, Roderick, we shall see. And do you know," the twinkling was now gone from her eyes once more and she became serious again – "do you know, Roderick, it is the dearest hope of my life that you will come? But I shall love you just as much as I do now, Roderick, if for any cause – for whatever reason – you do not come. Do you understand?"

"But," interposed Roderick, "we are betrothed, are we not?"

She looked at him and said, smiling half sadly: "Surely, Roderick, we are betrothed."

He put his big strong hands up to her cheeks, lifted her face to his and kissed her reverently. Then with a hasty good-by he turned and was gone.

As Roderick hurried across the old campus he felt the elation of a gladiator. Of course, he would win in life's battle, and would return for Stella Rain, the dearest girl in all the world. The stars were twinkling bright, the moon in the heavens was in the last quarter – bright moon and stars, fit companions for him in his all-conquering spirit of optimism.

CHAPTER V – WESTWARD HO!

AS the train rumbled along carrying Roderick back to Burlington, he was lost in reverie and exultation. He was making plans for a mighty future, into which now a romance of love was interwoven as well as the romance of a mysterious gold mine awaiting rediscovery in some hidden valley among rugged mountains. Yes; he would lose no further time in starting out for Wyoming. The winning of the one treasure meant the winning of the other – the making of both his own. As he dreamed of wealth unbounded, there was always singing in his heart the name of Stella Rain.

Next day he was aboard a westbound train, booked for Rawlins, Wyoming, where, as his father's letter had directed, he was likely to find the old frontiersman, Jim Rankin; perhaps also the other "cronies" referred to by name, Tom Sun and Boney Earnest At Omaha a young westerner boarded the train, and took a seat in the Pullman car opposite to Roderick. In easy western style the two fell into conversation, and Roderick soon learned that the newcomer's name was Grant Jones, that he was a newspaper man by calling and resided in Dillon, Wyoming, right in the midst of the rich copper mines.

"We are just over the mountain," explained Jones, "from the town of Encampment, where the big smelter is located."

As the train sped along and they became better acquainted, Grant Jones pointed out to Roderick a dignified gentleman with glasses and a gray mustache occupying a seat well to the front of the car, and told him that this particular individual was no other than the "Boss of Montana" – Senator "Fence Everything" Greed. Jones laughed heartily at the name.

"Of course, he is the U. S. Senator from Montana," continued Jones, soberly, "and his name is F. E. Greed. His enemies out in Montana will be highly pleased at the new name I have given him – 'Fence Everything,' because he has fenced in over 150,000 acres of Government land, it is claimed, and run the actual home-settlers out of his fenced enclosures while his immense herds of cattle trampled under foot and ate up the poor evicted people's crops. Oh, he's some 'boss,' all right, all right."

"Why," exclaimed Roderick, "that's lawlessness."

Grant Jones turned and looked at Roderick and said: "The rich are never lawless, especially United States Senators – not out in Montana. Why, bless your heart, they say the superintendent of his ranch is on the payroll down at Washington at $1800 a year.

"Likewise the superintendent of the electric lighting plant which Senator Greed owns, as well as the superintendent of his big general store, are said to be on the government payroll.

"It has also been charged that his son was on the public payroll while at college. Oh, no, it is not lawless; it is just a dignified form of graft. Of course," Jones went on with arched eyebrows, "I remember one case where a homesteader shot one of the Senator's fatted cattle – fine stock, blooded, you know. It was perhaps worth $100. Of course the man was arrested, had a 'fair trial' and is now doing time in the penitentiary. In the meantime, his wife and little children have been sent back East to her people. You see," said Jones, smiling, "this small rancher, both poor in purse and without influence, was foolish enough to lose his temper because five or six hundred head of Senator Greed's cattle were driven by his cowboys over the rancher's land and the cattle incidentally, as they went along, ate up his crops. Little thing to get angry about, wasn't it?" and Jones laughed sarcastically.

"Well, don't the state conventions pass resolutions denouncing their U. S. Senator for such cold-blooded tyrannizing methods?"

"If the state of Montana," replied Grant Jones, "should ever hold a state convention of its representative people – the bone and sinew of its sovereign citizens, why, they would not only retire Senator Greed to private life, but they would consign him to the warmer regions."

"You surprise me," replied Roderick. "I supposed that every state held conventions – delegates you know, from each county."

"They think they do," said Jones, winking one eye, "but they are only ratification meetings. The 'Boss,'"he continued, nodding his head towards Senator Greed, "has his faithful lieutenants in each precinct of every county. His henchmen select the alleged delegates and when they all get together in a so-called state convention they are by pre-arrangement program men. The slate is fixed up by the 'Boss' and is duly ratified without a hitch. Therefore instead of being a convention representing the people it is a great big farce – a ratification picnic where 'plums' are dealt out and the ears of any who become fractious duly cuffed."

At Grand Island in the afternoon, during a stop while engines were changed, Roderick left the train and stretched his legs by walking up and down the depot platform. Here he saw Grant Jones in a new rôle. Notwithstanding Jones was in rough western garb – khaki Norfolk coat, trousers to match, and leather leggings – yet he was the center of attraction for a bevy of young ladies. Two of these in particular were remarkable for their beauty; both had the same burnished golden hair and large brown eyes; they were almost identical in height and figure, petite and graceful, dressed alike, so that anyone at a first glance would have recognized them to be not only sisters but doubtless twins.

When the train was about ready to start, these two girls bade adieu to their numerous friends and permitted Grant Jones with all the gallantry of a Beau Brummel to assist them onto the car.

Later Grant Jones took great pains to assure Roderick that it was a pleasure to introduce him to the Misses Barbara and Dorothy Shields – "Two of our' mountain wild flowers," Grant said, laughing pleasantly, "who reside with their people way over south in the Wyoming hills, not far from Encampment, on one of the biggest cattle ranges in the state."

Roderick, already captivated by the whole-souled, frank manner of Grant Jones, now found himself much interested in the beautiful twin sisters as well. Hour followed hour in bright and sprightly conversation, and soon the tenderfoot who had been inclined to condole with himself as a lonely stranger among strangers was feeling quite at home in the great western world of hospitable welcome and good comradeship.

At an early hour next morning Grant Jones, the Shields girls and a dozen other people left the train at the little town of Walcott. They extended hearty invitations for Roderick to come over to southern Wyoming to see the country, its great mines and the big smelter. "If you pay us a visit," said Grant Jones, laughing, "I'll promise you a fine big personal in the *Dillon Doublejack*, of which mighty organ of public opinion I have the honor to be editor."

Roderick, with a bow of due reverence for his editorial majesty and a bright smile for the sisters, promised that he likely would make the trip before very long. Then he swung himself onto the already moving train and continued his westward journey to Rawlins.

CHAPTER VI – RODERICK MEETS JIM RANKIN

IT was seven o'clock the same morning when Roderick left the train at Rawlins.

The raw, cold wind was blowing a terrific gale, the streets were deserted save for a few half drunken stragglers who had been making a night of it, going the rounds of saloons and gambling dens.

A bright-faced lad took charge of the mail bags, threw them into a push cart and started rumbling away up the street. Warfield followed and coming up with him inquired for a hotel.

"Right over there is the Ferris House," said the young fellow, nodding his head in the direction indicated.

As Roderick approached the hotel he met a grizzled keen-eyed frontiersman who saluted him with a friendly "Hello, partner, you be a stranger in these yere parts, I'm assoomin'."

"Yes, I just arrived on this morning's train."

"Waal, my handle is Jim Rankin. Been prospectin' the range hereabouts nigh thirty years; uster be sheriff of this yere county when people wuz hostile a plenty – have the best livery stable today in Wyomin', and always glad to see strangers loiterin' 'round and help 'em to git their bearin's if I can be of service – you bet I am."

Thus early had Roderick encountered his father's old friend. He was delighted, but for the present kept his own counsel. A more fitting time and place must be found to tell the reason of his coming.

"Thank you," he contented himself with saying as he accepted the frontiersman's hand of welcome; "glad to meet you, Mr. Rankin."

"Here, boy," shouted the latter to an attache of the hotel, "take care of this yere baggage; it belongs to this yere gentleman, a dangnation good friend uv mine. He'll be back soon fur breakfast. Come on, stranger, let's go over to Wren's. I'm as dry as a fish."

Roderick smiled and turning about, accompanied his new discovery down the street to Wren's. As they walked along Rankin said: "Here's my barn and here's the alley. We'll turn in here and get into Wren's by the back door. I never pester the front door. Lots uv fellers git a heap careless with their artillery on front steps that are docile 'nuff inside." As they passed through a back gate, Jim Rankin, the typical old-time westerner, pushed his hat well back on his head, fished out of his pocket a pouch of "fine cut" tobacco, and stowing away a large wad in his mouth began masticating rapidly, like an automobile on the low gear. Between vigorous "chaws" he observed that the sun would be up in a "minute" and then the wind would go down. "Strange but true as gospel," he chuckled – perhaps at his superior knowledge of the West – "when the sun comes up the wind goes down."

He expectorated a huge pit-tew of tobacco juice at an old ash barrel, wiped his iron gray mustache with the back of his hand, pushed open the back door of the saloon and invited Roderick to enter.

A fire was burning briskly in a round sheet iron stove, and a half dozen wooden-backed chairs were distributed about a round-topped table covered with a green cloth.

Rankin touched a press button, and when a white-aproned waiter responded and stood with a silent look of inquiry on his face the frontiersman cleared his throat and said: "A dry Martini fur me; what pizen do you nominate, partner?"

"Same," was Roderick's rather abbreviated reply as he took in the surroundings with a furtive glance.

As soon as the waiter retired to fill the orders, Roderick's new found friend pulled a coal scuttle close to his chair to serve as a receptacle for his tobacco expectorations, and began: "You see, speakin' wide open like, I know all these yere fellers – know 'em like a book. Out at the bar in front is a lot uv booze-fightin' sheep herders makin' things gay and genial, mixin' up with a lot uv discharged railroad men. Been makin' some big shipments uv sheep east, lately, and when they get tumultuous like with

a whole night's jag of red liquor under their belt, they forgit about the true artickle uv manhood and I cut 'em out. Hope they'll get away afore the cattle men come in from over north, otherwise there'll be plenty uv ugly shootin'. Last year we made seven new graves back there," and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "seven graves as a result uv a lot uv sheep herders and cow punchers tryin' to do the perlite thing here at Wren's parlors the same night They got to shootin' in a onrestrained fashion and a heap careless. You bet if I wuz sheriff uv this yere county agin I'd see to it that law and order had the long end uv the stick – though I must allow they did git hostile and hang Big Nose George when I wuz in office," he added after a pause. Then he chuckled quietly to himself, for the moment lost in retrospection.

Presently the waiter brought in the drinks and when he retired Rankin got up very cautiously, tried the door to see if it was tightly shut. Coming back to the table and seating himself he lifted his glass, but before drinking said: "Say, pard, I don't want to be too presumin', but what's your handle?"

Roderick felt that the proper moment had arrived, and went straight to his story.

"My name is Roderick Warfield. I am the son of John Warfield with whom I believe you had some acquaintance a number of years ago. My father is dead, as you doubtless may have heard – died some fourteen years since. He left a letter for me which only recently came into my possession, and in the letter he spoke of three men – Jim Rankin, Tom Sun and Boney Earnest."

As Roderick was speaking, the frontiersman reverently returned his cocktail to the table.

"Geewhillikins!" he exclaimed, "you the son uv John Warfield! Well, I'll be jiggered. This just nachurly gits on my wind. Shake, young man." And Jim Rankin gave Roderick's hand the clinch of a vise; "I'm a mighty sight more than delighted to see you, and you can count on my advice and help, every day in the week and Sundays thrown in. As you're a stranger in these parts, I'm assoomin' you'll need it a plenty, you bet. Gee, but I'm as glad to see you as I'd be to see a brother. Let's drink to the memory uv your good father."

He again lifted his cocktail and Roderick joined him by picking up a side glass of water.

"What?" asked Rankin, "not drinkin' yer cocktail? What's squirmin' in yer vitals?"

"I drink nothing stronger than water," replied Roderick, looking his father's old friend squarely in the eyes. Thus early in their association he was glad to settle this issue once and for all time.

"Shake again," said Rankin, after tossing off his drink at a single swallow and setting down his empty glass, "you sure 'nuff are the son uv John Warfield. Wuz with him off and on fur many a year and he never drank spirits under no circumstances. You bet I wuz just nachurly so dangnation flabbergasted at meetin' yer I got plumb locoed and sure did fergit. Boney and Tom and me often speak uv him to this day, and they'll be dangnation glad to see you."

"So you're all three still in the ring?" queried Roderick with a smile.

"Bet yer life," replied Rankin sturdily. "Why, Tom Sun and Boney Earnest and me have been chums fur nigh on to thirty years. They're the best scouts that ever hunted in the hills. They're the chaps who put up my name at the convenshun, got me nominated and then elected me sheriff of this yere county over twenty-five years ago. Gosh but I'm certainly glad to see yer and that's my attitood." He smiled broadly.

"Now, Warfield," he continued, "what yer out here fur? But first, hold on a minute afore yer prognosticate yer answer. Just shove that 'tother cocktail over this way – dangnation afeerd you'll spill it; no use letting it go to waste."

"I've come," replied Roderick, smiling and pushing the cocktail across to Jim Rankin, "to grow up with the country. A young fellow when he gets through college days has got to get out and do something, and some way I've drifted out to Wyoming to try and make a start. I have lots of good health, but precious little money."

Jim Rankin drank the remaining cocktail, pulled his chair a little closer to Roderick's and spoke in a stage whisper: "You know, I'm assoomin', what yer father was huntin' fur when he got hurt?"

Roderick flushed slightly and remained silent for a moment. Was it possible that his father's old friend, Jim Rankin, knew of the lost mine? Finally he replied: "Well, yes, I know in a general way."

"Don't speak too dangnation loud," enjoined Rankin. "Come on and we'll hike out uv this and go into one uv the back stalls uv my livery stable. This's no place to talk about sich things – even walls have ears."

As they went out again by the back door the morning sun was looking at them from the rim of the eastern hills. Side by side and in silence they walked along the alley to the street, then turned and went into a big barn-like building bearing a sign-board inscribed: "Rankin's Livery, Feed and Sale Stable."

Although there was not a soul in sight, Rankin led his new acquaintance far back to the rear of the building. As they passed, a dozen or more horses whinnied, impatient for their morning feed.

Cautiously and without a word being spoken they went into an empty stall in a far corner, and there in a deep whisper, Rankin said: "I know the hull shootin' match about that 'ere lost gold mine, but Tom and Boney don't – they've been peevish, good and plenty, two or three different times thinkin' I know'd suthin' they didn't. Not a blamed thing does anybody know but me, you bet I went with your father on three different trips, but we didn't quite locate the place. I believe it's on Jack Creek or Cow Creek – maybe furder over – don't know which, somewhere this side or t'other side of Encampment River. You kin bet big money I kin help a heap – a mighty lot But say nothin' to nobody – specially to these soopercilious high-steppin' chaps 'round here – not a dangnation word – keep it mum. This is a razzle-dazzle just 'tween you an' me, young man."

A silence followed, and the two stood there looking at each other. Presently Roderick said: "I believe I'll go over to the hotel and get some breakfast; this western air gives one a ravenous appetite."

Then they both laughed a little as if anxious to relieve an embarrassing situation, and went out to the street together. Jim knew in his heart he had been outclassed; he had shown his whole hand, the other not one single card.

"All right," Rankin finally said, as if an invitation had been extended to him. "All right, I'll jist loiter along with yer over to'rd the hotel."

"At another time," observed Roderick, "we will talk further about my father's errand into this western country."

"That's the dope that sure 'nuff suits me, Mr. War-field," replied Rankin. "Whatever you say goes. Yer can unbosom yerself to me any time to the limit. I've got a dozen good mining deals to talk to you about; they're dandies – a fortune in every one uv 'em – 'a bird in every shell,' I might say," and Rankin laughed heartily at his happy comparison. "Remember one thing, Warfield," – he stopped and took hold of the lapel of Roderick's coat, and again spoke in a whisper – "this yere town is full uv 'hot air' merchants. Don't have nuthin' to do with 'em – stand pat with me and I'll see by the great horn spoon the worst you get will be the best uv everythin' we tackle. Well, so long until after breakfast; I'll see you later." And with this Rankin turned and walked briskly back to his stables, whistling a melody from the "Irish Washerwoman" as he went along.

Arriving at his stables he lighted a fire in a drumshaped stove, threw his cud of tobacco away and said: "Hell, I wish this young Warfield had money. I've got a copper prospect within three mile uv this here town that'll knock the spots out uv the Ferris-Haggerty mine all holler. Geewhillikins, it'll jist nachur-ally make all the best mines in Wyomin' look like small-sized Shetland ponies at a Perch'ron draft horse show. You bet that's what I've got."

After feeding his horses he came back to the livery barn office, now quite warm and comfortable, pulled up an old broken backed chair, sat down and lit his pipe. After a few puffs he muttered half aloud: "Expect I'm the only man in Wyomin' who remembers all the early hist'ry and traditions about that cussed lost mine. I've hunted the hills high and low, north, south, east and west, and dang my buttons if I can imagine where them blamed nuggets came from. And my failure used

to make me at times a plenty hostile and peevish. John Warfield brought three of 'em out with him on his last trip. He gave Tom one, Boney one and me one."

Thrusting his hand into his pocket Rankin produced a native nugget of gold, worn smooth and shiny, and looked at it long in silent meditation. It was a fine specimen of almost pure gold, and was worth perhaps five and twenty dollars.

Presently the old frontiersman brought his fist down with a startling thump on his knee and said aloud: "I'll be blankety-blanked if I don't believe in that dangnation fairy story yet. You bet I do, and I'll help John Warfield's boy find it, by the great horn spoon I will, if it takes every horse in the stable."

Jim Rankin relit his pipe, smoked vigorously and thought. The power of silence was strong upon him. The restless spirit of the fortune hunter was again surging in his blood and awaking slumbering half-forgotten hopes – yes, tugging at his heart-strings and calling to him to forsake all else and flee to the hills.

Rankin was a character, a representative of the advance band of sturdy trail-blazers of the West – tender-hearted as a child, generous to a fault, ready to divide his last crust with a friend, yet quick to resent an injury, and stubborn as a bullock when roused to self-defense. There was nothing cunning about him, nothing of greed and avarice, no spirit of envy for the possession of things for the things' sake. But for him there was real joy in the mad pursuit of things unattainable – a joy that enthralled and enthused him with the fervor of eternal youth. His was the simple life of the hills, loving his few chums and turning his back on all whom he disliked or mistrusted.

Other men and greater men there may be, but it was men of Jim Rankin's type that could build, and did build, monuments among the wild western waste of heat-blistered plains and gaunt rock-ribbed mountains, men who braved the wilderness and there laid the first foundation stones of a splendid civilization – splendid, yet even now only in its first beginnings, a civilization that means happy homes and smiling fields where before all was barrenness and desolation.

CHAPTER VII – GETTING ACQUAINTED

RODERICK spent a few days in Rawlins, improving his acquaintance with Jim Rankin and making a general survey of the situation. The ex-sheriff proved to be a veritable repository of local information, and Roderick soon knew a little about everyone and everything in the district. He learned that Tom Sun, one of his father's old associates, had from small beginnings come to be the largest sheep owner in the state; he was rich and prosperous. With Boney Earnest, however, the other friend mentioned in the letter, the case was different. Boney had stuck for years to prospecting and desultory mining without achieving any substantial success, but had eventually become a blast furnace man in the big smelting plant at Encampment. There he had worked his way up to a foreman's position, and with his practical knowledge of all the ores in the region was the real brains of the establishment, as Jim Rankin forcibly declared. He had a large family which absorbed all his earnings and always kept him on the ragged edge of necessity.

Rankin himself was not too well fixed – just making a more or less precarious subsistence out of his stage line and livery stable business. But he had several big mining deals in hand or at least in prospect, one or other of which was "dead sure to turn up trumps some day." The "some day" appeared to be indefinitely postponed, but meanwhile Jim had the happiness of living in the genial sunshiny atmosphere of hope. And the coming of Roderick had changed this mellowed sunshine into positive radiance, rekindling all the old fires of enthusiasm in the heart of the old-time prospector. With Roderick the first surge of eager impetuosity had now settled down into quiet determination. But old Jim Rankin's blood was at fever-heat in his eagerness to find the hidden valley. When alone with Roderick he could talk of nothing else.

Roderick, however, had shrewdly and cautiously summed up the measure of his usefulness. Jim Rankin had not the necessary capital to finance a systematic search among the mountain fastnesses where nature so jealously guarded her secret. Nor could he leave his horses and his livery business for any long period, however glibly he might talk about "going out and finding the blamed place." As for any precise knowledge of where the quest should be commenced, he had none. He had shared in the frequent attempts and failures of Roderick's father, and after a lapse of some fifteen or sixteen years had even a slimmer chance now than then of hitting the spot. So, all things duly considered, Roderick had adhered to his original resolution of playing a lone hand. Not even to Rankin did he show his father's letter and map; their relations were simply an understanding that the old frontiersman would help Roderick out to the best of his power whenever opportunity offered and in all possible ways, and that for services rendered there would be liberal recompense should golden dreams come to be realized.

Another reason weighed with Roderick in holding to a policy of reticence. Despite Jim's own frequent cautions to "keep mum – say nothing to nobody," he himself was not the best hand at keeping a secret, especially after a few cocktails had lubricated his natural loquacity. At such moments, under the mildly stimulating influence, Jim dearly loved to hint at mysterious knowledge locked up in his breast. And in a mining camp vague hints are liable to become finger posts and signboards – the very rocks and trees seem to be possessed of ears. So young Warfield was at least erring on the safe side in keeping his own counsel and giving no unnecessary confidences anywhere.

There was nothing to be gained by remaining longer at Rawlins. Roderick's slender finances rendered it imperative that he should find work of some kind – work that would enable him to save a sufficient stake for the prospecting venture, or give him the chance to search out the proper moneyed partner who would be ready to share in the undertaking. And since he had to work it would be well that his work should, if possible, be on the range, where while earning his maintenance and husbanding his resources, he could at the same time be spying out the land and gaining invaluable experience. So he had on several occasions discussed with Jim Rankin the chances of finding a temporary job on

one of the big cattle ranches, and after one of these conversations had come his decision to move at once from Rawlins. His first "voyage of discovery" would be to Encampment, the busy smelter town. He remembered the cordial invitation extended to him by Grant Jones, the newspaper man, and felt sure he would run across him there. From the first he had felt strongly drawn to this buoyant young spirit of the West, and mingled with his desire for such comradeship was just a little longing, maybe, to glimpse again the fair smiling faces of the twin sisters – "mountain wild flowers" as Grant Jones had so happily described Barbara and Dorothy Shields.

So one fine morning Roderick found himself seated beside Jim Rankin on the driver's seat of an old-fashioned Concord stage coach. With a crack of Jim's whip, the six frisky horses, as was their wont at the beginning of a journey, started off at a gallop down the street. Five or six passengers were stowed away in the coach. But these were nothing to Jim Rankin and Roderick Warfield. They could converse on their own affairs during the long day's drive. The old frontiersman was, as usual, in talkative mood.

"By gunnies," he exclaimed sotto-voce, as they wheeled along, "we'll find that pesky lost gold mine, don't you forget it. I know pretty dangnation near its location now. You bet I do and I'll unbosom myself and take you to it – jist you and me. I'm thinkin' a heap these yere days, you bet I am."

Along in the afternoon they crossed over Jack Creek, an important stream of water flowing from the west into the North Platte River. Jim Rankin stopped the stage coach and pointed out to our hero the "deadline" between the cattle and sheep range. "All this yere territory," said Jim, "lying north uv Jack Creek is nachure's sheep pasture and all lyin' south uv Jack is cattle range."

"It's well known," he went on, "where them blamed pesky sheep feed and graze, by gunnies, vegetation don't grow agin successful for several years. The sheep not only nachurlly eat the grass down to its roots, but their sharp hoofs cut the earth into fine pulp fields uv dust. Jack Creek is the dividin' line – the 'dead line.'.rdquo;

"What do you mean by the 'dead line'." asked Roderick.

"The 'dead line,'"replied old Jim as he clucked to his horses and swung his long whip at the off-leader – "the 'dead line' is where by the great horn spoon the sheep can't go any furder south and the cattle darsn't come any furder north, or when they do, Hell's a-pop-pin.'.rdquo;

"What happens?"

"What happens?" repeated the frontiersman as he expectorated a huge pit-tew of tobacco juice at a cactus that stood near the roadway. "Why, by gunnies, hundreds uv ondefensible sheep have been actooally clubbed to death in a single night by raidin' cowboys and the sheep-herders shot to death while sleepin' in their camp wagons: and their cookin' outfit, which is usually in one end uv the wagon, as well as the camp wagons, burned to conceal evidence of these dastardly murders. Oh, they sure do make things gay and genial like."

"Astonishing! The cowboys must be a pretty wicked lot," interrogated Roderick.

"Well, it's about six uv one and half a dozen uv the other. You see these pesky sheep herders and the cowboys are all torn off the same piece uv cloth. Many a range rider has been picked from his hoss by these sheep men hidden away in these here rocky cliffs which overlook the valley. They sure 'nuff get tumultuous."

"But what about the law?" inquired Roderick. "Does it afford no protection?"

Jim laughed derisively, pushed his hat far back and replied: "Everybody that does any killin' in these here parts sure does it in self-defense." He chuckled at his superior knowledge of the West. "Leastways, that's what the evidence brings out afore the courts. However, Tom Sun says the fussin' is about over with. Last year more'n twenty cattle men were sentenced to the pen'tentiary up in the Big Horn country. Sort uv an offset fur about a score uv sheep men that's been killed by the cow punchers while tendin' their flocks on the range. You bet they've been mixin' things up with artil'ry a heap."

"I clearly perceive," said Roderick, "that your sympathies are with the cattle men."

Jim Rankin turned quickly and with his piercing black eyes glared at Roderick as if he would rebuke him for his presumption.

"Young man, don't be assoomin'. I ain't got no sympathy fur neither one uv 'em. I don't believe in murder and I don't believe very much in the pen'tentiary. 'Course when I was sheriff, I had to do some shootin' but my shootin' wuz all within the law. No, I don't care a cuss one way or 'tother. There are lots uv good fellers ridin' range. Expect yer will be ridin' before long. Think I can help yer get a job on the Shields ranch; if I can't Grant Jones can. And ther's lots uv mighty good sheep-herders too. My old pal, Tom Sun, is the biggest sheep-man in this whole dang-nation country and he's square, he is. So you see I ain't got no preference, 'tho' I do say the hull kit and bilin' uv 'em could be improved. Yes, I'm nootral. Put that in yer pipe and smoke it, fur it goes dangnation long ways in this man's country to be nootral, and don't git to furgit'n it."

It was late in the afternoon when they neared the little town of Encampment. Old Jim Rankin began to cluck to his horses and swing his whip gently and finally more pronouncedly.

If it is the invariable habit of stage drivers at the point of departure to start off their horses in a full swinging gallop, it is an equally inviolable rule, when they approach the point of arrival, that they come in with a whoop and a hooray. These laws are just as immutable as ringing the bell or blowing the locomotive whistle when leaving or nearing a station. So when Jim Rankin cracked his whip, all six horses leaned forward in their collars, wheeled up the main street in a swinging gallop, and stopped abruptly in front of the little hotel.

As Roderick climbed down from the driver's seat he was greeted with a hearty "Hello, Warfield, welcome to our city." The speaker was none other than Grant Jones himself, for his newspaper instincts always brought him, when in town, to meet the stage.

The two young men shook hands with all the cordiality of old friends.

"If you cannot get a room here at the hotel, you can bunk with me," continued Grant. "I have a little shack down towards the smelter."

Roderick laughed and said: "Suppose, then, we don't look for a room. I'll be mighty pleased to carry my baggage to your shack now."

"All right, that's a go," said Grant; and together they started down the street.

Grant Jones' bachelor home consisted of a single room – a hastily improvised shack, as he had correctly called it, that had cost no very large sum to build. It was decorated with many trophies of college life and of the chase. Various college pennants were on the walls, innumerable pipes, some rusty antiquated firearms, besides a brace of pistols which Jim Rankin had given to Grant, supposed to be the identical flint-locks carried by Big Nose George, a desperado of the early days.

"You see," explained Grant as he welcomed his guest, "this is my Encampment residence. I have another shack over at Dillon where I edit my paper, the *Dillon Doublejack*. I spend part of my time in one place and part in the other. My business is in Dillon but social attractions – Dorothy Shields, you may have already guessed – are over this way." And he blushed red as he laughingly made the confession.

"And talking of the Shields, by the way," resumed Grant. "I want to tell you I took the liberty of mentioning your name to the old man. He is badly in need of some more hands on the ranch – young fellows who can ride and are reliable."

Roderick was all alert.

"The very thing I'm looking for," he said eagerly. "Would he give me a place, do you think?"

"I'm certain of it. In fact I promised to bring you over to the ranch as soon as you turned up at Encampment."

"Mighty kind of you, old fellow," remarked Roderick, gratefully and with growing familiarity.

"Well, you can take that bed over there," said the host. "This one is mine. You'll excuse the humble stretchers, I know. Then after you have opened your grip and made yourself a little at home, we'll take a stroll. I fancy that a good big porterhouse won't come amiss after your long day's drive.

We've got some pretty good restaurants in the town. I suppose you've already discovered that a properly cooked juicy Wyoming steak is hard to beat, eh, you pampered New Yorker?"

Roderick laughed as he threw open his valise and arranged his brushes and other toilet appurtenances on the small table that stood at the head of the narrow iron stretcher.

A little later, when night had fallen, the young men went out into the main street to dine and look over the town. It was right at the edge of the valley with mountains rising in a semi-circle to south and west, a typical mountain settlement.

"You see everything is wide open," said Grant, as he escorted Roderick along the streets, arm linked in arm. For they had just discovered that they belonged to the same college fraternity – Kappa Gamma Delta, so the bonds of friendship had been drawn tighter still.

"You have a great town here," observed Roderick.

"We have about 1200 to 1500 people and 18 saloons!" laughed the other. "And every saloon has a gambling lay-out – anything from roulette to stud-poker. Over yonder is Brig Young's place. Here is Southpaw's Bazaar. The Red Dog is a little farther along; the Golden Eagle is one of the largest gambling houses in the town. We'll have our supper first, and then I'll take you over to Brig Young's and introduce you."

As they turned across the street they met a man coming toward them. He was straight and tall, rather handsome, but a gray mustache made him seem older than his years.

"Hello, here is Mr. Grady. Mr. Grady, I want to introduce you to a newcomer. This is Mr. Roderick Warfield."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Warfield," said Grady in a smooth voice and with an oleaginous smile. To Roderick the face seemed a sinister one; instinctively he felt a dislike for the man.

"Your town is quite up-to-date, with all its brilliant electric lights," he observed with a polite effort at conversation.

"Yes," replied Grady, "but it is the monthly pay roll of my big smelting company that supports the whole place."

There was a pomposity in the remark and the look that accompanied it which added to Roderick's feelings of repulsion.

"Oh, I don't know," interposed Grant Jones, in a laughing way. "We have about five hundred prospectors up in the hills who may not yet be producers, but their monthly expenditures run up into pretty big figures."

"Of course, that amounts to something; but think of my pay roll," replied Grady, boastingly. "Almost a thousand men on my pay roll. We have the biggest copper mine in the Rocky Mountain region, Mr. War-field. Come down some day and see the smelter," he added as he extended his hand in farewell greeting, with a leer rather than a smile on his face. "I'll give you a pass."

"Thank you," said Roderick coldly. And the two friends resumed their walk toward Brig Young's saloon.

"I don't mind telling you," remarked Grant, "that Grady is the most pompous, arrogant and all-round hated man in this mining camp."

"He looks the part," replied Roderick, and they both laughed.

A minute later they were seated in a cosy little restaurant. Ample justice was done to the succulent Wyoming porterhouse, and cigars were lighted over the cups of fragrant coffee that completed the meal. Then the young men resumed their peregrinations pursuant to the programme of visiting Brig Young's place, certified by Grant Jones to be one of the sights of the town.

The saloon proved to be an immense room with a bar in the corner near the entrance. Roulette tables, faro lay-outs and a dozen poker tables surrounded with feverish players were all running full blast, while half a hundred men were standing around waiting to take the place of any player who went broke or for any reason dropped out of the game.

"I guess nearly all the gambling is done here, isn't it?" asked Roderick.

"Not by a big sight. There are eighteen joints of this kind, and they are all running wide open and doing business all the time."

"When do they close?" inquired Roderick.

"They never close," replied Grant. "Brig Young boasts that he threw the key away when this place opened, and the door has never been locked since."

As they spoke their attention was attracted to one corner of the gaming room. Seven players were grouped around a table, in the centre of which was stacked a pile of several thousand dollars in gold pieces. Grant and Roderick strolled over.

A score of miners and cowboys were standing around watching the game. One of them said to Grant Jones: "It's a jack pot and they're dealing for openers."

Finally someone opened the pot for $500. "It's an all-fired juicy pot and I wouldn't think of openin' it for less." Tom Lester was the player's name, as Grant whispered to Roderick.

"I'll stay," said One-Eyed Joe.

"So will I," said another.

The players were quickly assisted with cards – four refused to come in, and the other three, having thrown their discards into the deck, sat facing each other ready for the final struggle in determining the ownership of the big pot before them. It was a neck and neck proposition. First one would see and raise and then another would see and go better. Finally, the showdown came, and it created consternation when it was discovered that there were five aces in sight.

Instantly Tom Lester jerked his Colt's revolver from his belt and laid it carefully down on top of his three aces and said: "Steady, boys, don't move a muscle or a hand until I talk." The onlookers pushed back and quickly enlarged the circle.

"Sit perfectly still, gentlemen," said Tom Lester, quietly and in a low tone of voice, with his cocked revolver in front of him. "I'm not makin' any accusations or loud talk – I'm not accusin' anybody in particular of anything. Keep perfectly cool an' hear a cool determined man talk. Far be it from me to accuse anyone of crooked dealin' or holdin' high cards up their sleeves."

As he spoke he looked at One-Eyed Joe who had both a reputation at card skin games and a record of several notches on his gun handle.

"I want to say," Lester continued, "that I recognize in the game we're playin' every man is a perfect gentleman and it's not Tom Lester who suspicions any impure motives or crooked work.

"We will now order a new deck of cards," said Tom while fire was flashing out of his steel gray eyes. "We will play this game to a finish, by God, and the honest winner will take the stakes. But I will say here and now so there may be no misunderstandin' and without further notice, that if a fifth ace shows up again around this table, I'll shoot his other eye out." And he looked straight at One-Eyed Joe, who never quivered or moved a muscle.

"This ends my remarks concernin' the rules. How d'ye like 'em, Joe?"

"Me?" said Joe, looking up in a surprised way with his one eye. "I'm 'lowin' you have made yer position plain – so dangnation plain that even a blind man kin see the pint."

The new deck was brought and the game went on in silence. After a few deals the pot was again opened, and was in due course won by a player who had taken no part in the previous mix-up, without a word falling from the lips of either Tom Lester or One-Eyed Joe.

Roderick and Grant moved away.

"Great guns," exclaimed the former. "But that's a rare glimpse of western life."

"Oh, there are incidents like that every night," replied Grant, "and shooting too at times. Have a drink?" he added as they approached the bar.

"Yes, I will have a great big lemonade."

"Well," laughed Grant, "I'll surprise both you and my stomach by taking the same."

As they sipped their drinks, Grant's face became a little serious as he said: "I'm mighty glad you have come. You seem to be of my own kind. Lots of good boys out here, but they are a little

rough and many of them are rather careless. Guess I am getting a little careless myself. There are just two men in these mountains who have a good influence over the boys. One is Major Buell Hampton. Everybody trusts him. By the way, I must introduce you to him. He is one of the grandest men I have ever met" As Grant said this he brought his fist down decisively on the bar.

"The other is the Reverend Stephen Grannon," he went on, "the travelling horseback preacher – carries saddle bags, and all that. Why, do you know, the boys are so respectful to Reverend Grannon that they hire a man to go up and down the street ringing a bell, and they close up all their places for an hour every time he comes to town. He preaches mostly in the big tent you perhaps saw further up the street, at other times in the little church. The boys are mighty respectful to him, and all because they know he goes about doing good. If anyone falls ill, Reverend Grannon is the first to offer help. He visits the poor and cheers them with a spirit of hope. He never leaves town without going into every saloon and shaking hands with the barkeepers, giving them the same kind of advice but not in the same way – the same advice that we used to get when we stood around our mother's knee before we had learned the sorrows of the big world."

For a moment Grant was serious. Then looking up at Roderick, he laughed and said: "We all have to think of those old days once in a while, don't we?"

Roderick nodded gravely.

"Now I come to think of it," said Grant, "the present moment's a very good time. We'll go down and call on one of Nature's noblemen. He is somewhat of an enigma. You cannot tell how old he is by looking at him. He may have seen fifty years or a hundred and fifty – the Lord only knows, for nobody in this camp has any idea. But you will meet a magnificent character. Come along. I'm going to present you to my friend, Major Buell Hampton, about whom I've just been speaking. I guess we'll catch him at home."

CHAPTER VIII – A PHILOSOPHER AMONG THE MOUNTAINS

AS THE two young men walked down the brilliantly lighted main street of Encampment, Grant Jones explained that the water had been dammed several miles up the south fork of the Encampment river and conducted in a California red-wood pipe down to the smelter plant for power purposes; and that the town of Encampment was lighted at a less cost per capita than any other town in the world. It simply cost nothing, so to speak.

Grant had pointed out several residences of local celebrities, but at last a familiar name drew Roderick's special attention – the name of one of his father's old friends.

"This is Boney Earnest's home," Grant was remarking. "He is the fellow who stands in front of the furnaces at the smelter in a sleeveless shirt and with a red bandana around his neck. They have a family of ten children, every one of them as bright as a new silver dollar. Oh, we have lots of children here and by the way a good public school. You see that log house just beyond? That is where Boney Earnest used to live when he first came into camp – before his brood was quite so numerous. It now belongs to Major Buell Hampton. It is not much to look at, but just wait until you get inside."

"Then this Major Hampton, I presume, has furnished it up in great shape?"

"No, nothing but rough benches, a table, some chairs and a few shelves full of books. What I mean is that Major Hampton's personality is there and that beats all the rich furniture and all the bric-à-brac on earth. As a college man you will appreciate him."

Without ceremony Grant rapped vigorously at the door and received a loud response to "come in." At the far end of a room that was perhaps 40 feet long by 20 feet in width was an open fireplace in which huge logs of wood were burning. Here Major Hampton was standing with his back to the fire and his hands crossed behind him.

As his visitors entered, the Major said in courtly welcome: "Mr. Grant Jones, I am glad to see you." And he advanced with hand extended.

"Major, let me introduce you to a newcomer, Roderick Warfield. We belong to the same 'frat.'.rdquo;

"Mr. Warfield," responded the Major, shaking the visitor's hand, "I welcome you not only to the camp but to my humble dwelling."

He led them forward and provided chairs in front of the open fire. On the center table was a humidor filled with tobacco and beside it lay several pipes.

"Mr. Warfield," observed the Major, speaking with a marked southern accent, "I am indeed pleased, suh, to meet anyone who is a friend of Mr. Jones. I have found him a most delightful companion and I hope you will make free to call on me often. Interested in mining, I presume?"

"Well," replied Roderick, "interested, yes, in a way. But tentative arrangements have been made for me to join the cowboy brigade. I am to ride the range if Mr. Shields is pleased with me, as our friend here seems to think he will be. He is looking for some more cowboys and my name has been mentioned to him."

"Yes," concurred Grant, "Mr. Shields needs some more cowboys very badly, and as Warfield is accustomed to riding, I'm quite sure he'll fill the bill."

"Personally," observed the Major, "I am very much interested in mining. It has a great charm for me. The taking out of wealth from the bosom of the earth – wealth that has never been tainted by commercialism – appeals to me very much."

"Then I presume you are doing some mining yourself."

"No," replied the Major. "If I had capital, doubtless I would be in the mining business. But my profession, if I may term it so, is that of a hunter. These hills and mountains are pretty full of

game, and I manage to find two or three deer a week. My friend and next door neighbor, Mr. Boney Earnest, and his family consisting of a wife and ten children, have been very considerate of me and I have undertaken the responsibility of furnishing the meat for their table. Are you fond of venison, Mr. Warfield?"

"I must confess," said Roderick, "I have never tasted venison."

"Finest meat in the world," responded the Major. "Of course," he went on, "I aim to sell about one deer a week, which brings me a fair compensation. It enables me to buy tobacco and ammunition," and he laughed good naturedly at his limited wants.

"One would suppose," interjected Grant Jones, "that the Boney Earnest family must be provided with phenomenal appetites if they eat the meat of two deer each week. But if you knew the Major's practice of supplying not less than a dozen poor families with venison because they are needy, you would understand why he does not have a greater income from the sale of these antlered trophies of the hills."

The Major waved the compliment aside and lit his pipe. As he threw his head well back after the pipe was going, Roderick was impressed that Major Buell Hampton most certainly was an exceptional specimen of manhood. He was over six feet tall, splendidly proportioned, and perhaps weighed considerably more than two hundred pounds.

There were little things here and there that gave an insight into the character of the man. Hanging on the wall was a broad-brimmed slouch hat of the southern planter style. Around his neck the Major wore a heavy gold watch guard with many a link. To those who knew him best, as Roderick came subsequently to learn, this chain was symbolical of his endless kindnesses to the poor – notwithstanding his own poverty, of such as he had he freely gave; like the chain his charities seemed linked together without a beginning – without an end. His well-brushed shoes and puttees, his neatly arranged Windsor tie, denoted the old school of refinement and good breeding.

His long dark hair and flowing mustaches were well streaked with gray. His forehead was knotted, his nose was large but well formed, while the tangled lines of his face were deep cut and noticeable. From under heavily thatched eyebrows the eyes beamed forth the rare tenderness and gentle consideration for others which his conversation suggested. Long before the evening's visit was over, a conviction was fixed in Roderick's heart that here indeed was a king among men – one on whom God had set His seal of greatness.

In later days, when both had become well acquainted, Roderick sometimes discovered moments when this strange man was in deep meditation – when his eyes seemed resting far away on some mysterious past or inscrutable future. And Roderick would wonder whether it was a dark cloud of memory or anxiety for what was to come that obscured and momentarily dimmed the radiance of this great soul. It was in such moments that Major Buell Hampton became patriarchal in appearance; and an observer might well have exclaimed: "Here is one over whom a hundred winters or even countless centuries have blown their fiercest chilling winds." But when Buell Hampton had turned again to things of the present, his face was lit up with his usual inspiring smile of preparedness to consider the simplest questions of the poorest among the poor of his acquaintances – a transfiguration indescribable, as if the magic work of some ancient alchemist had pushed the years away, transforming the centenarian into a comparatively young man who had seen, perhaps, not more than half a century. He was, indeed, changeable as a chameleon. But in all phases he looked, in the broadest sense of the word, the humanitarian.

As the three men sat that night around the fire and gazed into the leaping flames and glowing embers, there had been a momentary lull in the conversation, broken at last by the Major.

"I hope we shall become great friends, Mr. War-field," he said. "But to be friends we must be acquainted, and in order to be really acquainted with a man I must know his views on politics, religion, social questions, and the economic problems of the age in which we live."

He waved his hand at the bookshelves well filled with volumes whose worn bindings showed that they were there for reading and not for show. Long rows of periodicals, even stacks of newspapers, indicated close attention to the current questions of the day.

"Rather a large order," replied Roderick, smiling. "It would take a long time to test out a man in such a thorough way."

The Major paid no heed to the comment. Still fixedly regarding the bookshelves, he continued: "You see my library, while not extensive, represents my possessions. Each day is a link in life's chain, and I endeavor to keep pace with the latest thought and the latest steps in the world's progress."

Then he turned round suddenly and asked the direct question: "By the way, Mr. Warfield, are you a married man?"

Roderick blushed the blush of a young bachelor and confessed that he was not.

"Whom God hath joined let no man put asunder," laughed Grant Jones. "The good Lord has not joined me to anyone yet, but I am hoping He will."

"Grant, you are a boy," laughed the Major. "You always will be a boy. You are quick to discover the ridiculous; and yet," went on the Major reflectively, "I have seen my friend Jones in serious mood at times. But I like him whether he is frivolous or serious. When you boys speak of marriage as something that is arranged by a Divine power, you are certainly laboring under one of the many delusions of this world."

Roderick remembered his compact with Stella Rain, the pretty little college widow. For a moment his mind was back at the campus grounds in old Galesburg. Presently he said: "I beg your pardon, Major, but would you mind giving me your ideas of an ideal marriage?"

"An ideal marriage," repeated the Major, smiling, as he knocked the ashes from his meerschaum. "Well, an ideal marriage is a something the young girl dreams about, a something the engaged girl believes she has found, and a something the married woman knows never existed."

He looked deep into the open grate as if re-reading a half forgotten chapter in his own life. Presently refilling and lighting his pipe he turned to Roderick and said: "When people enter into marriage – a purely civil institution – a man agrees to bring in the raw products – the meat, the flour, the corn, the fuel; and the woman agrees to manufacture the goods into usable condition. The husband agrees to provide a home – the wife agrees to take care of it and keep it habitable. In one respect marriage is slavery," continued the Major, "slavery in the sense that each mutually sentences himself or herself to a life of servitude, each serving the other in, faithfully carrying out, when health permits, their contract or agreement of partnership. Therefore marriages are made on earth – not in heaven. There is nothing divine about them. They are, as I have said, purely a civil institution."

The speaker paused. His listeners, deeply interested, were reluctant by any interruption to break the flow of thought. They waited patiently, and presently the Major resumed: "Since the laws of all civilized nations recognize the validity of a partnership contract, they should also furnish an honorable method of nullifying and cancelling it when either party willfully breaks the marriage agreement of partnership by act of omission or commission. Individuals belonging to those isolated cases 'Whom God hath joined' – if perchance there are any – of course have no objections to complying with the formalities of the institutions of marriage; they are really mated and so the divorce court has no terrors for them. It is only from among the great rank and file of the other class whom 'God hath *not* joined' that the unhappy victims are found hovering around the divorce courts, claiming that the partnership contract has been violated and broken and the erring one has proven a false and faithless partner.

"In most instances, I believe, and it is the saddest part of it all, the complainant is usually justified. And it is certainly a most wise, necessary, and humane law that enables an injured wife or husband to terminate a distasteful or repulsive union. Only in this way can the standard of humanity be raised by peopling the earth with natural love-begotten children, free from the effects of unfavorable pre-natal influences which not infrequently warp and twist the unborn into embryonic imbeciles or moral perverts with degenerate tendencies.

"Society as well as posterity is indebted fully as much to the civil institution of divorce as it is to the civil institution of marriage. Oh, yes, I well know, pious-faced church folks walk about throughout the land with dubs to bludgeon those of my belief without going to the trouble of submitting these vital questions to an unprejudiced court of inquiry."

The Major smiled, and said: "I see you young men are interested in my diatribe, or my sermon – call it which you will – so I'll go on. Well, the churches that are nearest to the crudeness of antiquity, superstition, and ignorance are the ones most unyielding and denunciatory to the institution of divorce. The more progressive the church or the community and the more enlightened the human race becomes, the less objectionable and the more desirable is an adequate system of divorce laws – laws that enable an injured wife or husband to refuse to stultify their conscience and every instinct of decency by bringing children into the world that are not welcome. A womanly woman covets motherhood – desires children – love offerings with which to people the earth – babes that are not handicapped with parental hatreds, regrets, or disgust. Marriage is not a flippant holiday affair but a most serious one, freighted not alone with grave responsibilities to the mutual happiness of both parties to the civil contract, but doubly so to the offspring resultant from the union. But I guess that is about enough of my philosophy for one evening, isn't it?" he concluded, with a little laugh that was not devoid of bitterness – it might have been the bitterness of personal reminiscence, or bitterness toward a blind and misguided world in general, or perhaps both combined.

Grant Jones turning to Roderick said: "Well, what do you think of the Major's theory?"

"I fear," said Roderick in a serious tone, "that it is not a theory but an actual condition."

"Bravo," said the Major as he arose from his chair and advanced to Roderick, extending his hand. "All truth," said he, "in time will be uncovered, truth that today is hidden beneath the débris of formalities, ignorance, and superstition."

"But why, Major," asked Grant, "are there so many divorces? Do not contracting parties know their own minds? Now it seems impossible to conceive of my ever wanting a divorce from a certain little lady I know," he added with a pleasant laugh – the care-free, confiding laugh of a boy.

"My dear Jones," said the Major, "the supposed reasons for divorce are legion – the actual reasons are perhaps few. However it is not for me to say that all the alleged reasons are not potent and sufficient. When we hear two people maligning each other in or out of the court we are prone to believe both are telling the truth. Truth is the underlying foundation of respect, respect begets friendship, and friendship sometimes is followed by the more tender passion we call love. A man meets a woman," the Major went on, thoughtfully, "whom he knows is not what the world calls virtuous. He may fall in love with her and may marry her and be happy with her. But if a man loves a woman he believes to be virtuous and then finds she is not – it is secretly regarded by him as the unforgivable sin and is doubtless the unspoken and unwritten allegation in many a divorce paper."

He mused for a moment, then went on: "Sometime there will be a single standard of morals for the sexes, but as yet we are not far enough away from the brutality of our ancestors. Yes, it is infinitely better," he added, rising from his chair, "that a home should be broken into a thousand fragments through the kindly assistance of a divorce court rather than it should only exist as a family battle ground." The tone of his voice showed that the talk was at an end, and he bade his visitors a courteous good-night, with the cordial addition: "Come again."

"It was great," remarked Roderick, as the young men wended their homeward way. "What a wealth of new thought a fellow can bring away from such a conversation!"

"Just as I told you," replied Grant "But the Major opens his inmost heart like that only to his chosen friends."

"Then I'm mighty glad to be enrolled among the number," said Roderick. "Makes a chap feel rather shy of matrimony though, doesn't it?"

"Not on your life. True love can never change – can never wrong itself. When you feel that way toward a girl, Warfield, and know that the girl is of the same mind, go and get the license – no possible mistake can be made."

Grant Jones was thinking of Dorothy Shields, and his face was aglow. To Roderick had come thought of Stella Rain, and he felt depressed. Was there no mistake in his love affair? – this was the uneasy question that was beginning to call for an answer. And yet he had never met a girl whom he would prefer to the dainty, sweet, unselfish, brave little "college widow" of Galesburg.

CHAPTER IX – THE HIDDEN VALLEY

WITHIN a few days of Roderick's advent into the camp he was duly added to the cowboy list on the ranch of the wealthy cattleman, Mr. Shields, whose property was located a few miles east from the little mining town and near the banks of the Platte River. A commodious and handsome home stood apart from the cattle corral and bunk house lodgings for the cowboy helpers. There were perhaps twenty cowboys in Mr. Shields' employment. His vast herds of cattle ranged in the adjoining hills and mountain canyons that rimmed the eastern edge of the valley.

Grant Jones had proved his friendship in the strongest sort of an introduction, and was really responsible for Roderick securing a job so quickly. But it was not many days before Roderick discovered that Doro-try Shields was perhaps the principal reason why Grant rode over to the ranch so often, ostensibly to visit him.

During the first month Roderick did not leave the ranch but daily familiarized himself with horse and saddle. He had always been a good rider, but here he learned the difference between a trained steed and an unbroken mustang. Many were his falls and many his bruises, but finally he came to be quite at home on the back of the fiercest bucking broncho.

One Saturday evening he concluded to look up Grant Jones and perhaps have another evening with Major Buell Hampton. So he saddled a pony and started. But at the edge of town he met his friend riding toward the country. They drew rein, and Grant announced, as Roderick had already divined, that he was just starting for the Shields home. They finally agreed to call on Major Buell Hampton for half an hour and then ride out to the ranch together.

As they approached Major Hampton's place they found him mounting his horse, having made ready for the hills.

"How is this, Major?" asked Grant Jones. "Is it not rather late in the afternoon for you to be starting away with your trusty rifle?"

"Well," replied the Major, after saluting his callers most cordially, "yes, it is late. But I know where there is a deer lick, and as I am liable to lose my reputation as a hunter if I do not bring in a couple more venisons before long, why I propose to be on the ground with the first streak of daylight tomorrow morning."

He glanced at the afternoon sun and said: "I think I can reach the deer lick soon after sundown. I shall remain over night and be ready for the deer when they first begin stirring. They usually frequent the lick I intend visiting."

The Major seemed impatient to be gone and soon his horse was cantering along carrying him into the hills, while Roderick and Grant were riding leisurely through the lowlands of the valley road toward the Shields ranch.

All through the afternoon Buell Hampton skirted numerous rocky banks and crags and climbed far up into the mountain country, then down abrupt hill-sides only to mount again to still higher elevations. He was following a dim trail with which he showed himself familiar and that led several miles away to Spirit River Falls.

Near these falls was the deer lick. For three consecutive trips the hunter had been unsuccessful. He had witnessed fully a dozen deer disappear along the trail that led down to the river's bank, but none of them had returned. It was a mystery. He did not understand where the deer could have gone. There was no ford or riffle in the river and the waters were too deep to admit belief of the deer finding a crossing. He wondered what was the solution.

This was the real reason why he had left home late that afternoon, determined, when night came on, to tether his horse in the woods far away from the deer lick, make camp and be ready the following morning for the first appearance of some fine buck as he came to slake his thirst. If he

did not get that buck he would at least find the trail – indeed on the present occasion it was less the venison he was after than the solving of the mystery.

Arriving at his destination, the improvised camp was leisurely made and his horse given a generous feed of oats. After this he lighted a fire, and soon a steaming cup of coffee helped him to relish the bread and cold meat with which he had come provided.

After smoking several pipes of tobacco and building a big log fire for the night – for the season was far advanced and there was plenty of snow around – Buell Hampton lay down in his blankets and was soon fast asleep, indifferent to the blinking stars or to the rhythmic stirring of clashing leafless limbs fanned into motion by the night winds.

With the first breaking of dawn the Major was stirring. After refreshing himself with hot coffee and glancing at the cartridges in his rifle, he stole silently along under the overhanging foliage toward the deer lick.

The watcher had hardly taken a position near an old fallen tree when five deer came timidly along the trail, sniffing the air in a half suspicious fashion.

Lifting his rifle to his shoulder the hunter took deliberate aim and fired. A young buck leaped high in the air, wheeled about from the trail and plunged madly toward his enemy. But it was the stimulated madness of death. The noble animal fell to its knees – then partially raised itself with one last mighty effort only to fall back again full length, vanquished in the uneven battle with man. The Major's hunting knife quickly severed the jugular vein and the animal was thoroughly bled. A little later this first trophy of the chase had been dressed and gambreled with the dexterity of a stock yard butcher and hung high on the limb of a near by tree.

The four remaining deer, when the Major fired, had rushed frantically down the trail bordered with dense underbrush and young trees that led over the brow of the embankment and on down to the river. The hunter now started in pursuit, following the trail to the water's edge. But there were no deer to be seen.

Looking closely he noted that the tracks turned directly to the left toward the waterfall.

The bank was very abrupt, but by hugging it closely and stepping sometimes on stones in the water, while pushing the overhanging and tangled brushwood aside, he succeeded in making some headway. To his surprise the narrow trail gave evidence of much use, as the tracks were indeed numerous. But where, he asked himself, could it possibly lead? However, he was determined to persevere and solve the mystery of where the deer had gone and thus escaped him on the previous occasions.

Presently he had traversed the short distance to the great cataract tumbling over the shelf of rock almost two hundred feet above. Here he found himself under the drooping limbs of a mammoth tree that grew so close to the waterfall that the splashing spray enveloped him like a cold shower. Following on, to his astonishment he reached a point behind the waterfall where he discovered a large cavern with lofty arched roof, like an immense hall in some ancient ruined castle.

While the light was imperfect yet the morning sun, which at that hour shone directly on the cascade, illuminated up the cavern sufficiently for the Major to see into it for quite a little distance. It seemed to recede directly into the mountain. The explorer cautiously advanced, and soon was interested at another discovery. A stream fully fifteen feet wide and perhaps two feet deep flowed directly out of the heart of the mountain along the center of the grotto, to mingle its waters with those of Spirit River at the falls.

Major Hampton paused to consider this remarkable discovery. He now remembered that the volume of Spirit River had always impressed him as being larger below the noted Spirit River Falls than above, and here was the solution. The falls marked the junction of two bodies of water. Where this hidden river came from he had no idea. Apparently its source was some great spring situated far back in the mountain's interior.

The Major was tensioned to a high key, and determined to investigate further. Making his way slowly and carefully along the low stone shelf above the river, he found that the light did not penetrate more than about three hundred feet. Looking closely he found there was an abundance of deer sign, which greatly mystified him.

Retracing his steps to the waterfall, the Major once more crept along the path next to the abrupt river bank, and, climbing up the embankment, regained the deer trail where he had shot the young buck. He seated himself on an old fallen tree. Here on former occasions Major Hampton had waited many an hour for the coming of deer and indulged in day-dreaming how to relieve the ills of humanity, how to lighten the burdens of the poor and oppressed. Now, however, he was roused to action, and was no longer wrapped in the power of silence and the contemplation of abstract subjects. His brain and his heart were throbbing with the excitement of adventure and discovery.

After full an hour's thought his decision was reached and a course of action planned. First of all he proceeded to gather a supply of dry brush and branches, tying them into three torch-like bundles with stout cord, a supply of which he invariably carried in his pockets. Then he inspected his match box to make sure the matches were in good condition. Finally picking up his gun, pulling his hunting belt a little tighter, examining his hatchet and knife to see if they were safe in his belt scabbard, he again set forth along the deer trail, down to the river. Overcoming the same obstacles as before, he soon found himself in the grotto behind the waterfall.

Lighting one of his torches the Major started on a tour of further discovery. His course again led him over the comparatively smooth ledge of rock that served as a low bank for the waters of the hidden stream. But now he was able to advance beyond the point previously gained. After a while his torch burned low and he lighted another. The subterranean passage he was traversing narrowed at times until there was scarcely more than room to walk along the brink of the noisy waters, and again it would widen out like some great colosseum. The walls and high ceilings were fantastically enchanting, while the light from his torch made strange shadows, played many tricks on his nerves, and startled him with optical illusions. Figures of stalactites and rows of basaltic columns reflected the flare of the brand held aloft, and sometimes the explorer fancied himself in a vault hung with tapestries of brilliant sparkling crystals.

Finally the third and last torch was almost burned down to the hand hold and the Major began to awaken to a keen sense of his difficult position, and its possible dangers. When attempting to change the stub of burning brushwood from one hand to the other and at the same time not drop his rifle, the remnants of the torch fell from his grasp into the rapid flowing waters and he was left in utter darkness. Apprehension came upon him – an eerie feeling of helplessness. True, there was a box of matches in the pocket of his hunting coat, but these would afford but feeble guidance in a place where at any step there might be a pitfall.

Major Hampton was a philosopher, but this was a new experience, startling and unique. Everything around was pitch dark. He seemed to be enveloped in a smothering black robe. Presently above the murmur and swish of running water he could hear his heart beating. He mentally figured that he must have reached a distance of not less than three miles from Spirit River Falls. The pathway had proved fairly smooth walking, but unknown dangers were ahead, while a return trip in Stygian darkness would be an ordeal fraught with much risk.

Stooping over the low bank he thrust his hand into the current to make sure of its course. The water was only a little below the flat ledge of rock on which he was standing, and was cold as the waters of a mountain spring. It occurred to him that he had been thirsty for a long time although in his excitement he had not been conscious of this. So he lay down flat and thrust his face into the cool grateful water.

Rising again to his feet he felt greatly refreshed, his nerve restored, and he had just about concluded to retrace his steps when his eyes, by this time somewhat accustomed to the darkness, discovered in an upstream direction, a tiny speck of light He blinked and then questioningly rubbed

his eyes. But still the speck did not disappear. It seemed no larger than a silver half dollar. It might be a ray of light filtering through some crevice, indicating a tunnel perhaps that would afford means of escape.

Using his gun as a staff wherewith to feel his way and keeping as far as possible from the water's edge, Major Hampton moved slowly upstream toward the guiding spot of radiance. In a little while he became convinced it was the light of day shining in through an opening. The speck grew larger and larger as he slowly moved forward.

Every once in a while he would stop and turn his face in the opposite direction, remaining in this position for a few moments and then quickly turning round again to satisfy himself that he was under no illusion. But the luminous disc was really growing larger – it appeared now to be as big as a saucer. His heart throbbed with hope and his judgment approved that the advance should be continued.

Yes, the light was increasing, and looking down he fancied he could almost see the butt of his gun which was being used as a walking stick. Presently his feet could indistinctly be seen, and then the rocky pavement over which he was so cautiously shuffling his way.

Ten minutes later the mouth of a tunnel was reached, and he was safe once more, bathed in God's own sunshine, his eyes still dazzled after the Cimmerian blackness from which he had emerged. He had traversed the entire length of the subterranean cave or river channel, and had reached the opposite side of a high mountain. Perhaps the distance through was only about three and a half miles. Trees and underbrush grew in profusion about the mouth of the tunnel into which the hidden river flowed. There was less snow than on the other side of the barrier. Deer sign were everywhere, and he followed a zig-zag deer path out into an open narrow valley.

The Major's heart now leaped with the exultation of accomplishment. Brushing the light covering of snow away, he seated himself on the bank of the stream which could not, now that he looked upon it in the open day, be dignified by calling it a river. Along the edges of the watercourse were fringes of ice but in the center the rapid flow was unobstructed.

It was only a big mountain brook, but one perhaps that had never been seen before by the eyes of man. The exploration and the excitement together had greatly fatigued Buell Hampton, and he was beginning to be conscious of physical exhaustion and the need of food notwithstanding the sustaining stimulus of being a discoverer in one of Nature's jealously guarded wonderlands.

After resting a short time he started to walk farther into the valley and forage along the stream. The hunter was on the lookout for grouse but succeeded in shooting only a young sage hen. This was quickly dressed and broiled, the forked stick that served as a spit being skilfully turned in the blaze of a fire of twigs and brushwood. The repast was a modest one, but the wayfarer felt greatly refreshed, and now stepped briskly on, following the water channel toward its fountain head.

It was indeed a beautiful valley – an ideal one – very little snow and the deer so plentiful that at a distance they might be mistaken for flocks of grazing sheep. The valley appeared to be exceedingly fertile in season. It was a veritable park, and so far as the explorer could at present determine was completely surrounded by high snow-capped mountains which were steep enough to be called precipices. He soon came to a dyke that ran across the valley at right angles to the stream. It was of porphyry formation, rising to a height of from three to four feet, and reaching right across the narrow valley from foothill to foothill. When Major Hampton climbed upon this dyke he noticed that the swiftly flowing brook had cut an opening through it as evenly almost as if the work had been chiseled by man. He was anxious to know whether the valley would lead to an opening from among the mountains, and after a brief halt pushed hurriedly on.

But an hour later he had retraced his steps and was again seated on the bench-like dyke of porphyry. He had made a complete circuit of this strange "nest" or gash in the vastness of the Rocky Mountain Range and was convinced there was no opening. The brook had its rise in a number of mammoth springs high up on the mountain foothills at the upper end of the valley, where it was also fed by several waterfalls that dropped from the dizzy cliffs far above.

The valley was perhaps three miles long east and west and not over one-half mile wide north and south. The contour of the mountain sides to the south conformed to the contour on the north, justifying the reasonable conjecture that an earthquake or violent volcanic upheaval must have tom the mountains apart in prehistoric times. It was evidently in all truth a hidden valley – not on the map of the U. S. Survey – a veritable new land.

"To think," mused the Major, aloud, "that I have discovered a new possession. What an asylum for the weary! Surely the day has been full of startling surprises."

He was seated on the dyke almost at the very edge of the brock where the waters were singing their song of peaceful content. He let his glance again sweep the valley with the satisfied look of one conscious of some unanalyzed good fortune.

There was no snow on the porphyry dyke where he rested. It was moss-covered in many places with the coating of countless centuries. Most likely no human foot but his had ever pressed the sod of this sequestered nook among the mighty mountains. The very thought was uplifting – inspiring. Pulling his hunter's hatchet from its sheath he said aloud: "I christen thee 'Hidden Valley,'"and struck the porphyry rock a vigorous blow, so vigorous indeed that it chipped off a goodly piece.

Major Buell Hampton paused, astonished. He looked and then he looked again. He picked up the chipped off piece of rock and gazed long and earnestly at it, then rubbed his eyes in amazement. It was literally gleaming with pure gold.

Immediately the hatchet again came into play. Piece after piece was broken open and all proved to be alike – rich specimens fit for the cabinet of a collector. The drab moss-covered dyke really contained the wealth of a King Solomon's mine. It was true – true, though almost unbelievable. Yet in this moment of overwhelming triumph Buell Hampton saw not with the eyes of avarice and greed for personal gain, but rather with the vision of the humanitarian. Unlimited wealth had always been for him a ravishing dream, but he had longed for it, passionately, yearningly, not as a means to supply pleasures for himself but to assuage the miseries of a suffering world.

He was not skilled in judging rock carrying values of precious metals, but in this instance the merest novice could hardly be mistaken. Hastily breaking as much of the golden ore as he could carry in his huge coat pockets and taking one last sweeping survey over the valley, the Major started on his return trip to Spirit River Falls. Arriving at the point where the waters of the brook disappeared in the natural tunnel of the "Hidden River," the name he mentally gave to the romantic stream, he gathered some torch material and then started on the return trip. Two hours later he emerged from behind the turbulent waters at Spirit River Falls. In the waning afternoon he regained his camp. After watering his patient horse, giving it another feed of oats and apologizing with many a gentle caressing pat for his long absence and seeming neglect, the Major set out for home, the dressed deer strapped on behind his saddle, with the deer skin rolled around the venison as a protection.

Early the following morning Buell Hampton visited an assay office, carrying with him an ore sack containing nine pounds and a half of ore. The Major felt certain it was ore – gold ore, almost pure gold – but was almost afraid of his own convictions. The discovery was really too good to be true.

The assayer tossed the sack of gold onto a table where other samples were awaiting his skill and said: "All right, Major, come in sometime tomorrow."

"It's important," replied the Major, "that you assay it at once. It is high grade; I wish to sell."

"Oh, ho!" replied the assayer with elevated eyebrows. Possibly he was like many another who encouraged the "high-graders" in their nefarious thefts from their employers when they were trusted to work on a rich property.

"Why, Major Hampton, I didn't know you were one of 'em – one of us," and he finished with a leer and a laugh. "Bet I can tell what mine it came from," he went on as he leisurely untied the ore sacks.

"I will remain right here," replied Major Hampton firmly, without yielding to the assayer's offensive hilarity, "until you have my samples assayed and make me an offer."

By this time the sack of rock had been emptied into an ore pan and the astonishment depicted on the assayer's countenance would have beggared description. The sight of the ore staggered him into silence. Other work was pushed hurriedly aside and before very long the fire test was in process of being made. When finally finished the "button" weighed at the rate of $114.67 per pound, and the assayer, still half bewildered, handed over a check for almost eleven hundred dollars.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.