

GALE ZONA

HEART'S
KINDRED

Zona Gale
Heart's Kindred

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24859347

Heart's Kindred:

Содержание

I	4
II	14
III	29
IV	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	40

Zona Gale

Heart's Kindred

I

A hut of bark, thatched with palm-leaves; a gigantic rock at whose base lay old ashes; an open grassy space bordering a narrow mountain stream, and a little garden – these made the home of the Inger, where a man might live and die as a man was meant, neither planning like a maniac nor yet idling like an idiot, but well content with what the day brought forth.

Toward a June sunset, the Inger sat outside his doorway, fashioning a bowl from half a turtle shell. Before him the ground sloped down to the edge of the garden, and beyond dropped to the clearing's edge. When he lifted his eyes, he could look for miles along thick tops of live oaks and larches, and beyond to a white line of western sea. At his back rose the foothills, cleft by cañons still quite freshly green. Above them, the monstrous mountains swept the sky, and here their flanks were shaggy with great pines. The whole lay now in that glory of clear yellow by which the West gives to the evenings some hint of a desert ancestry.

The Inger worked in silence. He was not a man to sing or whistle – those who live alone are seldom whistling men. Perhaps the silence becomes something definite, and not lightly to be

shattered. A man camping alone will work away quietly day-long – and his dog understands. The Inger had no dog any more. He had owned a wolf hound whom, in a fit of passion, he had kicked so that the dog had died. And such was his remorse that he would own no other, and the sight of another man's dog pulled at him as at an old wound.

It was so still that, presently, in that clear air the sound of a bell in the valley came up to him with distinctness. He looked to the south, and in a deep place in the trees, already lights twinkled out as if they, like the bells, would announce something. The Inger remembered and understood.

“Hell,” he said aloud. “The wedding.”

He went on scraping at his turtle shell, his mind on the man who would be married that night – early, so that there would be ample time for much merrymaking and drunkenness before the east bound train at midnight. Bunchy Haight was the man, the owner of the run-down inn in the village of Inch. The woman was the Moor girl, whose father, abetted by the Inger himself, had killed a sheriff or two for interfering with his gambling place and had gone free, because no one was sure whether it was he or the Inger who did the shooting. Moor's promissory notes had been accumulating in the hands of Bunchy Haight for a dozen years, and it was no secret that the wedding settled the long score.

“And in dead luck to get a good provider like Bunchy, the Moor girl is,” was the way Inch took it.

Inch welcomed a wedding. In the old days it had been

different, and nobody cared whether anybody had a wedding or not. For then there had been a race track at Inch, and a summer hotel, and a fine glass-front showing of saloons, and other magnificence. With the passing of the California law, the track had been closed, the resort keepers had moved away, and the bottom had fallen from Inch.

Mothers amused their children by telling of the traps and the four-in-hands and the tally-ho's with rollicking horns, and the gaily dressed strangers who used to throng the town for a fortnight in Spring and in Autumn, when Inch knew no night and no darkness and no silence, and abundantly prospered.

Now all this was changed. There were, literally, no excitements save shootings and weddings. Jem Moor, being supposed to have achieved his share of the former, was prepared further to adorn his position by setting up drinks for the whole village and all strangers, to celebrate his daughter's nuptial day.

These things the Inger turned over in his mind as he scraped away at his shell; and when the dark had nearly fallen, he rose, shook out from the shell the last fragments, polished it with his elbow, balanced it between his hands to regard it, and came to his conclusion:

“Hell,” he said again, “I’m bust if I don’t go to it.”

The next instant he laid down the shell, slipped to his door and caught up the gun that lay inside, on a shelf of the rude scantling. A wood duck had appeared over the lower tree tops, flying languidly to its nest, somewhere in the foothills. Long before

it reached the wood's edge, the Inger was in his doorway. The bird's heavy flight led straight across the clearing. One moment the big body came sailing above the hut, then it seemed to go out in a dozen ugly angles and dropped like a stone to the edge of the garden. It lay fluttering strongly when the Inger reached it. He lifted and examined it approvingly. One wing was shot almost clear of the body. That was the mark he liked to make. He swung the bird under his arm, took out his jack-knife, pried open the mouth, slit the long tongue, tied the feet together and hung it outside his door to bleed to death. This death, he had heard, improved the flavor.

Without washing his hands, he prepared his supper – salt pork and bacon fried together, corn cakes soaked in the gravy, and coffee. The fire glowed in the hollow of the great rock, and the smell of the cooking crept about. The Inger was almost ready to eat by the clear light of the transparent sky, when he saw a figure coming across the clearing.

He leapt for his rifle – since the last sheriff had been shot he was never perfectly at ease with any stranger. But before his hand had closed, it relaxed at the sound of a triple whistle. He wheeled and looked again. The stranger had almost reached the bourne of the firelight.

“Blast my bones and blast me!” cried the Inger. “Dad!”

Something deep and big had come in his voice. As the two men met and shook hands, there was a gladness in them both. They moved apart in a minute, the Inger took the pack which the

older man swung off, and went about cutting more salt pork and bacon. His father found the wash basin, and washed, breathing noisily through the water cupped in his hands. Not much was said, but any one would have known that the two were glad of the moment.

“Not much grub,” said his father. “I ain’t grub hungry,” and flung himself on the ground before the camp fire. “I’m dead beat – and my bones ache,” he added.

The Inger filled his father’s plate and went on frying meat. In the firelight, their faces looked alike. The older man’s skin was beginning to draw tightly, showing the rugged modelling of the thick bones. His huge hands looked loose and ineffectual. Something welled up and flooded the Inger when he saw his father’s hand tremble as it lifted his tin cup.

Larger in scale, more definite in drawing, and triumphantly younger the Inger was, brown skinned, level eyed, and deep chested, his naked, veined right arm grasping the handle of the skillet as if it were a battering ram. When the Inger registered in the inn at Inch or signed a check in his bank in the City, his pen bit through the paper like acid, because he did everything as if his tool were a battering ram. But his eyes, as they rested now on his father’s hand that trembled, were soft and mute, like a dog’s eyes.

“What kind of luck, Dad?” he said.

The older man looked across his wooden platter and smiled whimsically.

“Same kind,” he answered. “None. But look a-here, Sonny –” he added, “I found out something.”

“I bet you did,” said the Inger.

“I ain’t ever going to have any luck,” said the old man. “I’m done for. I’m done. A year or two more and I’ll be spaded in. It’s the darndest, funniest feeling,” he said musingly, “to get on to it that you’re all in – a back number – got to quit plannin’ it.”

“Not on your life –” the Inger began, but his father roared at him.

“Shut up!” he said fondly. “You danged runt you, you must have knowed it for two years back.”

“Knowed nothin’,” said the Inger, stoutly.

The older man put his plate on the ground and lay down beside it, his head on his hand.

“It’s a devil of a feel,” he said.

“Don’t feel it,” said the Inger.

“Cut it,” said his father, almost sternly. “I brought you up to kill a man if you have to – but not to lie to him, ain’t I? Well, don’t you lie to me now.”

The Inger was silent, and his father went on. “I was always so dead sure,” he said, “that

I was cut out to be rich. When I was a kid in the tannery, I was dead sure. When I hit the trail for the mines I thought the time was right ahead. That was fifty years ago...”

“Quit, Dad,” said the Inger, uncomfortably. “I’ve got it – what’s the difference? The Flag-pole is good for all either of us

will ever want.”

“I ain’t forgot, though,” said the older man, quickly, “that you banked on the Flag-pole agin’ my advice. If you’d done as I said, you’d been grubbin’ yet, same as me.”

“It’s all luck,” said the Inger. “What can anybody tell? We’re gettin’ the stuff – and there’s a long sight more’n we need. Ain’t that enough? What you want to wear yourself out for?”

His father leaned against the end of the warm rock, and lighted his pipe.

“Did I say I wanted to?” he asked. “I done it so long I can’t help myself. I’ll be schemin’ out deals, and bein’ let in on the ground floor, and findin’ a sure thing till I croak. *And* gettin’ took in, regular.”

He regarded his son curiously.

“What you goin’ to do with your pile?” he inquired.

The Inger sat clasping his knees, looking up at the height of Whiteface, thick black in the thin darkness. His face was relaxed and there was a boyishness and a sweetness in his grave mouth.

“Nothin’,” he said, “till I get the pull to leave here.”

“To leave Inch?” said his father, incredulously.

“To leave here,” the Inger repeated, throwing out his arm to the wood. “This is good enough for me – for a while yet.”

“I thought mebbe the society down there,” said his father, with a jerk of his head to the lights in the valley, “was givin’ you some call to sit by.”

The Inger sprang up.

“So it is,” he said, “to-night. Bunchy’s gettin’ spliced.”

“Who’s the antagonist?” asked the other.

“The Moor girl,” said the Inger. “Bunchy’s a fine lot to draw her,” he added. “She’s too good a hand for him. Want to go down and see it pulled off?” he asked.

His father hesitated, looking down the valley to the humble sparkling of Inch.

“I don’t reckon I really *want* to get drunk to-night,” he said slowly. “I’ll save up till I do.”

The Inger stretched prodigiously, bunching his great shoulders, lifting his tense arms, baring their magnificent muscles.

“I gotta, I guess,” he said. “But, gosh, how I hate it.”

He carried the remnants of the food into the hut, and made his simple preparation for festivity. As he emerged he was arrested by a faint stirring and fluttering. He listened and it was near at hand, and then he saw the wood duck, writhing at the end of the string that bound its legs. Beneath it lay a little dark pool.

“No sense in bleedin’ *all* the good out of ye,” thought the Inger, and with the butt of the six-shooter that he was pocketing, he struck the bird a friendly blow on the head and stilled it.

The forest lay in premature night, save where a little mountain brook caught and treasured the dying daylight. It was intensely still. The Inger’s tread and brushing at the thickets silenced whatever movement of tiny life had been stirring before him. The trail wound for half a mile down the incline, in the never-

broken growth.

Once in the preceding winter when the Flag-pole mine was at last known with certainty to be the sensation of the year, the Inger had sewed a neat sum in the lining of his coat and had gone to inspect San Francisco. He had wanted to see a library, and he saw one, and stood baffled among books of which he had never heard, stammering before a polite young woman who said, "Make out your card, please, over there, and present it at the further desk." He had wanted to see an art gallery, and he went confused among alien shapes and nameless figures, and had obediently bought a catalogue, of which he made nothing. Then he had gone to dinner with the family of one of the stockholders, and had suffered anguish among slipping rugs and ambiguous silver. The next night, the new collar and cravat discarded, he had turned up in one of his old haunts on the Barbary Coast. On his experience he made only one comment:

"They know too damn much, and there's too damn much they don't know," he said.

But the woods he understood. All that he had hoped to feel in the library and the art gallery and in that home, he felt when the woods had him. Out there he was his own man.

As he went he shouted out a roaring music-hall song. Then when he had ceased, as if he became conscious of some incongruity, he stood still, perhaps with some vague idea of restoring silence. In a moment, he heard something move in the tree above his head – an anxious "Cheep – cheep!" in the leaves,

as if some soft breast were beating in fear and an inquiring head were poised, listening. Instantly he lifted his revolver and fired, and fired again. He heard nothing. Had anything fallen, he could certainly not have come upon it next day. It was the need to do something.

As he cleared the wood, the lights of the town lay sparkling in a cup of the desert. At sight of them there was something that he wanted to do or to be. The vastness of the sky, the nearness of the stars, the imminence of people, these possessed him. He caught off his cap, and broke into a run, tossing back his hair like a mane.

“Damn that little town – damn it, damn it!” he chanted, like an invocation to the desert and to the night.

II

Inch was in glory. On the little streets and in the one-story shops, all the lights were kindled. Bursts of music, and screaming laughter, came from the saloons, whose doors stood wide open to the street, and at whose bars already men and women were congregating. In the Mission Saloon, the largest of these hospitable places, an impromptu stage had been arranged, and the seats about the tables were nearly all filled. Here the Inger went in and called for his first drink, negligently including everybody present. He was greeted boisterously by those who knew him and pointed out to those who did not know him. Not one of them understood the sources of his power, or what it signified. He was the only man in the county to be called by his last name and the definite article. This was a title of which a man might be proud, conferred upon him by common consent of his peers.

There was no formality of introduction. The Inger merely scanned the crowd, flashing a smile at one or two of the women who nearly pleased him. When the drinking began, it was to one of these that he lifted his glass. But when immediately she came and sat beside him, linking her arm in his, he drew away laughing, and addressed the crowd at large.

“What’s up?” he demanded. “What’s doin’?”

“B-basket o’ peaches,” volunteered one of the cow punchers,

who early in the day had begun to observe the occasion. "B-Bunchy's complimumps!"

When the improvised curtain of sheets drew back, revealing ten or twelve half-clothed strange women, the Inger understood. This was Bunchy's magnanimous contribution to the general jollity of his marriage night.

"Let me have an absinthe," he said to the barkeeper.

The man leaned across the bar and whispered something.

"No absinthe!" shouted the Inger. "What the hell kind of a joint is this?"

"Leadpipe Pete licked up the bottom of the bottle," growled the barkeeper, pointing with the stump of a thumb.

The Inger looked. Beside him a big ranchman, swarthy and sweaty and hairy, was just lifting to his lips a tall tumbler of the absinthe. He leered at the Inger, closed one eye, and began to drink luxuriously. The Inger leapt a pace backward; and in an instant a bullet crashed through the glass, shattered it, and the man stood, dripping, with the bottom of the tumbler in his hand. The bullet buried itself in the tin mirror of the bar.

"About how much do I owe you for the lookin' glass?" inquired the Inger, easily, resting his elbows on the bar. "And charge me up with Pete's drink he's mussed himself up with so bad. What'll be the next one, Pete?"

"Leave Pete name the damages," said the barkeeper, unconcernedly wiping up the liquid.

"You're too hellish handy with your tools, you are," grumbled

Pete, combing the glass from his beard. "Make it brandy, neat."

"Brandy, neat, one two," repeated the Inger. "*Bein'* your absinthe has run out."

Presently he strolled up the street toward the hotel, where the evening's interest centred. He glanced indifferently into the saloons, nodded a greeting when he wished, but more often ignored one. At a corner a beggar, attracted to the little place from some limbo where news of the wedding had filtered, held out his cap.

"It's my thirty-third birthday to-day, pal," he said. "It'll bring you good luck to cough up somethin' on me, see if it don't."

The Inger stopped with simulated interest. The man – a thin, degenerate creature, with a wrinkled smile – approached him hopefully. Abruptly the Inger's powerful arm shot out, caught him below the waist, lifted him squirming in the air, and laid him carefully in the gutter.

"What you need is rest," he said, with perfect gentleness, and left him there.

The hotel where the wedding was to be celebrated had light in every window. Here Bunchy's preparations had been prodigal. Blankets and skins lined the walls and covered the floor of the office where a fire was roaring and the card tables were in readiness. Shouting and imprecation, chiefly from women, came from the kitchen, where the wedding supper was in preparation. In the hotel desk was Bunchy himself, engaged in somewhat delayed attention to his nails. His hair, still wet from its brushing,

ran away from his temples, lifting the corners of his forehead so that it seemed to be smiling. He had a large face, and a little tight mouth, with raw-looking, shiny lips. There was something pathetic in his careful black clothes and his uncomfortable collar and his plaid cravat.

“How much would you sink to back out?” was the Inger’s salutation.

Bunchy grinned sheepishly.

“How much did it cost you?” he inquired.

“Done it for nothing,” the Inger declared. “I ain’t the charmer you are, Bunchy. Never was.”

The groom leaned nearer the light, minutely examining a black, cracked finger.

“She ain’t goin’ to be very much in the way,” said he, confidentially.

“What?” asked the Inger, attentively.

Bunchy shook his head, pursing the tight, raw lips.

“Not her,” he said. “She believes anything you tell her – the whole works. There won’t never be no kickin’ from her about me not loafin’ home.”

“Well,” said the Inger, still with minute attention, “what you gettin’ married for, then?”

“Huh?” said Bunchy, an obstinate finger between his lips.

“I thought,” explained the Inger, “that a fellow got married for to have a home. Far as I can see, though,” he added with an air of great intellectual candor, “home is hell.”

Bunchy threw back his head and looked at him. Curiously, when he laughed, his little tight mouth revealed no teeth. His answer was deliberate, detailed, unspeakable.

For a minute the Inger looked at him, quietly, himself wondering at the surge of something hot through all his veins. In his slow swing round the end of the desk where Bunchy stood, there was no hint of what he meant to do. Bunchy did not even look up from the fat forefinger which he scrupulously pruned. Nor was there anything passionate in the Inger's voice when he spoke.

"You ain't got the time to-night," he said, "but when you get back from your honeymoon, look me up and —*remember this!*"

The last words came with a rush, as the Inger lifted his hand, and with his open palm, struck Bunchy full in the face. He struck harder than he had intended, and the blood spurted. Even as he caught the ugly look of wrath and amazement in that face, the Inger tore the handkerchief knotted about his own neck and wiped the blood from Bunchy's chin.

"No call to splash on the weddin'-finery," the Inger said, with compunction. "Any time'll do to bleed. She's Jem Moor's girl — you hound!" he blazed out again, and flung toward the door.

Bunchy, having recovered his speech, gave vent to it long and variously. All that he said was worse than the observation which had caused his trouble. In the doorway, the Inger halted and turned, and listened. He seemed to be seeing Bunchy for the first time. And yet he had heard all this from the man scores of times

before, and for that matter, from all the men of Inch. But this was about Jem Moor's girl.

As he passed into the street, he wondered at himself. Though she had been a familiar figure ever since he had lived near Inch, he had spoken to the girl no more than twice: once when he had come riding into town from the camp, warm with the knowledge, not yet quite certainty, that the Flag-pole was to pan out, Lory Moor had crossed his path singing, a great coil of clothes-line over one bare arm, the other hand fastening her hair. The Inger, inwardly exultant with life and his lot, had called out to her in the manner of his kind:

“Hello, sweetie! What you got for me this morning?”

Without lowering her brown arm, she had looked up at him, and he had been startled by the sheer ripe loveliness of her. While he stared, wholly unprepared for her sudden movement, a twist of wrist and a fling of hand had let out the length of rope, and it fell in a neat lasso about his neck.

“This!” she said and laughed. He had never forgotten her laugh. Once or twice afterward he had ineffectually tried to mock its scale, softly, in his throat.

“Done,” cried the Inger, “and by the Lord Harry, now you take me along with you!”

At this her laughter had doubled, and realizing that, in her obvious advantage, his command was absurd, he had laughed with her. For a few paces she had run before him, over the sand and mesquite, and he had liked to see the sun falling on her brown

neck and thick hair, and her tight, torn sleeves. And as he looked and looked, suddenly he pricked at his horse, thundered down on her, leaned sideways in his saddle, and with one arm swept her up before him.

She did not cry out, but her laughter was suddenly silenced, and she looked in his face, swiftly and searchingly, as if to read it through. She disdained to cling to him, and sat erect, but her body was in his arm, and with his free hand he gathered in the rope and held it bunched on his mare's neck. Then they galloped. They were a quarter of a mile from the town, and they took a great circle about it. When she saw what he meant to do, her tenseness relaxed, and she sat at ease, but still she did not speak nor did he. The Inger threw back his head, and felt the ground leave his horse's hoofs, and felt the sky come near. He swam in the sun and the sands blurred, and there was nothing but the girl and the gallop of his horse. And then suddenly, as they bore toward the town, he had been intoxicated to see her throw out her arms, toss them out and up, and laugh again.

Had not the appraisers been waiting at the hotel for him, the Inger might have turned to the desert with her. As it was, at the edge of the settlement, where she suddenly and imperiously pointed, he set her down, ducking from the loop of rope and tossing it to her when she had dismounted.

"You took me along with you all right," he reminded her.

She laughed and ran away.

"What have you got for me now?" the Inger called after her.

“This!” she said, and threw a kiss somewhere in the air.

There followed days of anxiety when the men at the mine doubted, and the appraisers hung fire, and pretended to less than they knew. In the midst of it, the Inger had ridden away to the desert and camped for three days, and had returned to find them cursing him out and making an estimate of millions. Riding in after dark to send the message to his father, still grub-staking to the north, the Inger for the second time had seen Lory Moor. She was in the crowd which he was breasting, outside a motion picture house. She was in tawdry pink, with a flame of rose in her hat, and she was with Bunchy. His hands were upon her and he was saying something in her ear from one corner of his mouth. She was not listening, the Inger thought as he passed her. She did not see him, and for this he felt vaguely thankful – as if he had come on her in some shame. A day or two after this Jem had told him that she was to marry Bunchy.

To marry Bunchy, the Inger thought as he lounged in the street outside the Inn on her wedding night, was the worst that could come to her. He drifted into a saloon across the way, one of the meaner places, and on this night of plenty almost unfrequented. He sat down at a table in range with the doors of the Inn, and drank reflectively. That day that he had had her, what if he had galloped away with her to the foothills, to the camp, to the other side of somewhere? He sat thinking of her, wondering why he had not dared it, playing at what might have been.

On the table lay a San Francisco newspaper, three days old.

As he drank he glanced at the headlines. "War May Last Another Year," he read. "Reserves of Three Nations to be Called Out Within the Month."

The thought had come to him before, since the money came. To-night he turned to it in a kind of relief: Why not go there? There was fighting worth a man's hand. Drunken Indians, an outlaw or two, a horse thief strung up in a wink and all over – these were all that he knew of warfare. Was he to die with no more understanding than this of how a man might live and die? The thing was happening now – the adventure of the great guns and the many deaths. Yet he, a man like other men, sat here idle. He closed his eyes and lay with those men in the trenches, or leapt up to kill again and again at fifty yards, saw the men roll in torture, saw them red and grovelling in red... A lust of the thing came on him. He wanted it, as he wanted no other thing that his mind had ever played with. He forgot Jem Moor's daughter in that imaginary desert. He swallowed and tasted and opened his eyes as on a forgotten world. He pounded the table for more liquor.

"Why don't you go to the war, you scared, snivelling Pale-liver?" he demanded of the shuffling bartender.

The small man's little red-rimmed and red-shot eyes lighted, and his lips drew back over black teeth.

"If I was a young dog like you, I'd be there stickin' in the lead, you bet," he said. "What you 'fraid of?"

"Nothin'," said the Inger, suddenly; "I'm goin'!"

“Plough some of ’em up prime for me,” begged the old man. “I croaked two men myself afore I was your age. It were in a sheriff’s raid, though,” he regretfully added.

The Inger looked at him thoughtfully. It occurred to him that though he was credited with it, he himself had never killed a man in his life. Yet killing was a man’s job, and over there was the war, and he had the means to get to it. There was need of more to kill – and to be killed. And he had been hanging on a shelf of Whiteface for all these months!

He drained his glass and went to the door, as if the need to do something at once were upon him. He saw that the wedding guests were filling the streets, and moving into the Inn. All of Inch was out there – the women gorgeous in all that they had, and even some of the men dressed in the clothes which they wore on a journey. Already some were drunken, and all were loud with merriment, which they somehow felt was required of them, like eating three times a day or scorning a stranger. Everywhere there were children, who must needs go where the grown folk went or be left alone. “Parents Must Keep Children Off the Floor,” was posted on the walls of the Inch public dance halls.

Next to the office door, the door of the hotel bar stood open now, and by the array of cut colored paper hanging from the chandeliers, he guessed that the wedding was to be solemnized in there. This was natural – the bar was the largest room in the house, and the most magnificent in the town – the only bar, in fact, with a real mirror at the back. Moreover, Bunchy’s

barkeeper was a man of parts, being a bass singer and a justice of the peace. With his apron laid aside, he was to give a tune while the guests assembled, and afterward it was he who was to perform the ceremony. Nobody thought of expecting the ceremony to be held in Jem Moor's 'dobe.

It was Jem Moor himself who, while the wedding guests were still noisily passing in the hotel, the Inger saw coming down the street. He was neatly dressed in the best he had, and though one trouser leg had crept to the top of a boot, and his red cravat was under an ear, still he bore signs of a sometime careful toilet. He broke into an uneven run – the running of a man whose feet are old and sore – and disappeared in the doorway of the Inn office.

The Inger's look followed him, speculatively.

“But one more drink and I could be over there makin' more kinds of hell than usual,” he said to himself, and went back to the bar.

He was draining his glass when the sound of confused talk and movement came to him, and, as he wheeled, he saw that across the street the interior of the Inn bar and office were in an uproar. The wedding guests were rising, there were shouts and groans, and a shrill scream or two. Some came running to the street, and over all there burst occasional great jets of men's laughter.

“S up?” asked the old barkeeper behind him.

The Inger did not answer. He stood in the doorway waiting for something. He did not know what he waited for, but the imminent thing, whatever it was, held him still. A hope, which

he could not have formulated, came shining slowly toward him, in him.

In a moment, Jem Moor emerged from the office door, still brokenly running, seeking to escape from those who crowded with him, questioning him. The Inger strolled from the doorway, across the street, took his way through the little group which fell back for him, and brought his hand down on the old man's shoulder.

“Anything wrong?” he inquired.

Jem Moor looked up at him. He was pinched and the lines of his nose were drawn, and his lips were pulling.

“She's skipped,” he said. “I'm in for 'Leven Hundred odd, to Bunchy.”

Something in the Inger leaped out and soared. He stood there, saying what he had to say, conscious all the time that as soon as might be he should be free to soar with it.

“Alone?” he demanded.

Jem Moor held out a scrap of paper. The Inger took it and read, the others peering over his arms and shoulders.

“Dad,” it said, “I can't go Bunchy. I know what this'll do to you, but I can't never do it – I can't. I've gone for good. Dear old Dad, don't you hate me.

“Lory.”

The tears were running down Jem Moor's face.

“‘Leven Hundred odd,” said he, “and I ain't a red. Not a red.” The Inger threw up his head.

“Lord Harry,” he cried. “Why didn’t I think of it before? Buck up!” he cried, bringing down his hand on Jem’s little shoulder. “And drink up! Come along in!”

He led the way to the Mission Saloon, and bade the man take orders for everybody. Then he went to the back of the place, and found for himself ink and a pen, and tore a leaf from a handy account book. When he had filled in the name of his bank, he wrote and signed:

“Pay to Bunchy Haight, Twelve Hundred Dollars and be damned to him.”

Then he wrote out a receipt to Jem Moor, with a blank for the sum and for Bunchy’s signature.

When he could, he drew Jem in a corner and thrust at him the papers. The little man stared at them, with a peculiarly ugly, square dropping of his jaw, and eyes pointed at top.

“Don’t bust,” said the Inger, “and don’t think it’s you. It ain’t you. The check isn’t drawn to you, is it? I want to hell-and-devil Bunchy some, that’s all. Shut up your mouth!” he added, when Jem tried gaspingly to thank him.

Then he got out of the place, where sharp music was beginning and the ten or twelve women were dancing among the tables, and went down the street, thronged now with the disappointed guests, intent on forcing the ruined evening to some wild festivity. When they called to him to join them, he hardly heard. He went straight through the town and shook it from him and met the desert, and took his own trail.

The night was now one of soft, thick blackness, on which the near stars pressed. The air had a sharp chill – as if it bore no essence of its own but hung empty of warmth when the daylight was drained from it. The stillness was insistent. In a place of water, left from the rains, and still deep enough to run in ripples over the sedge, frogs were in chorus.

There was a sentinel pepper tree on the edge of the town and here a mocking-bird sang out, once, and was still. These left behind, and the saw and crack and beat of the music dying, the Inger faced the dark, gave himself to the exultation which flowed in him, mounted with it to a new place.

The liquor which he had drunk was in his veins, and to this the part of him which understood all the rest of him credited his swimming delight. But separate from this, as his breath was separate, there came and went like a pulse, something else which he could not possibly have defined, born in him in the street, when he had heard Jem Moor's bad news.

He threw out his arms and ran, staggering. What was there that he must do? Here he was, ready for it. What was there that he must do? Then he remembered. The War! He would have that. That was what he could do.

He stood still on the desert, and imagined himself one of thousands on the plain. What if he were with them there in the darkness? What if the rise of the sand were the edge of the opposite trenches, with men breathing behind them, waiting? With a drunken laugh, he pulled his revolver, and fired and

shouted. Why, he could plough his way through anything. He should not go down – not he! But he should be fighting like this in the field of civilized men, and not taking his adventures piecemeal, in a back lot of the world, with a skulking sheriff or two and Bunchy for adversary. To-morrow! He would go to-morrow, and find what his life could give him.

But this other thing that was pulsing in him ... the girl! What about her? Was he not to find her, was he not to have her? He closed his eyes and swam in the thought of her. War and the woman – suddenly he was aflame with them both.

When he went into the wood, he went singing. He himself was the centre of the night and of his universe. The wood, Whiteface, his journey, the war, lay ready to his hand as accessory and secondary to his consciousness. He felt his own life, and other life was its background. He made a long crying guttural noise, like an animal. He shook his great body and crashed through the undergrowth, the young saplings stinging his cheeks. To-morrow – he would be off to-morrow...

He emerged upon the little space which was his home. The fire had fallen and was a red glow, and a watching eye. Rolled in his blanket beside it lay his father, deeply breathing. In a moment the Inger became another being. He stood tense, stepped softly, entered quietly the open door of his hut.

Within something stirred, was silent, stirred again, with a movement as of garments. Out of the darkness, her voice came: “Mr. Inger: ... It’s Lory Moor.”

III

For a moment he thought that this would be a part of his crazy dreaming, and he said nothing. But then he knew that she had risen and was standing before him; and he heard her breath, taken tremblingly. Her words came rushing – almost the first words that he had ever heard her say:

“You been down there. You know. I don’t know where to go. Oh – don’t tell ’em!”

“Tell ’em,” he muttered, stupidly. “Tell ’em?”

“I can’t do it,” she said gaspingly. “I can’t – I can’t.”

She was sobbing, and the Inger, so lately a flame of intent and desire, did not dare to touch her, and had no least idea what to say to her. In a moment she was able to speak again.

“I thought I could hide here for a day or two,” she said, “till they quit huntin’. Then I could get away. Would you hide me, somehow? – would you?”

He was silent, trying to think, with a head not too clear, how best to do it; and she misunderstood.

“Don’t make me go back – don’t tell Dad and Bunchy! If you can’t hide me, I’ll go now,” she said.

“What you talkin’?” he said, roughly. “I’m thinkin’. Thinkin’ up how. Thinkin’ up how.” He put his hands to his temples. “My head don’t think,” he said thickly.

“Here in the hut,” she said, eagerly and clearly. “They’ll never

think of comin' up here. Why, I don't hardly know you."

"Won't they though?" said the Inger, suddenly, and dimly remembered Bunchy, and the blow for the sake of the girl. Last, there came dancing to him something about a check for the debt to Bunchy which she had not paid.

"As it happens," said the Inger, "this is jus' the first place where they will come lookin' for you. Jus' the first place..."

"Why?" she cried.

"Nev' you mind," he said.

He could almost see her, standing within his door, her white face blooming from the black. But his sense of her was obscured to him by the need for immediate action, and by his utter present inability to cope with that need.

"How'd you come – to come – to come up here?" he asked curiously.

For a breath she hesitated, and there was a soft taking of breath in her answer.

"I didn't know no woman I could tell," she said, "nor no other decent man."

From head to foot a fire went over the Inger, such as he had never known. And first he was weak with her words, and then he was jubilantly strong. He put them away, but they lay within him burning, where again and again he could turn to them for warmth.

"How – how'd you hit the trail up?" he asked almost gently.

Again she was silent for a moment, and her answer was very

low.

“I’d been by here once-to-twice before,” she said.

Hazily he turned this over. The trail led only to his hut. No one ever came who had not come to be there. Unless —

He threw back his head as something new swam to consciousness. She stood quietly, waiting to hear what he would do. Some sense of this sudden new dependence on him beset him like words.

“They’s a way over the mountain,” he muttered. “I made it in that sheriff business. Can you take that?”

“I’ll go any way,” she said.

“It’s pretty rough,” he told her. “It’s pretty rough,” he repeated with intense care. “I’ll take you. I’ll take you,” he insisted thickly.

“You mean you’d go with me?” she asked.

“You’d never fin’ it if I didn’t,” he told her. “Y-you’d never fin’ it. Never.”

“I’ll go any way,” she repeated. “But I didn’t mean to — to come down on to you like that.”

“Tha’s nothing,” he said. “Tha’s nothing. Tha’s nothing.”

He put his hand to his head, with the need to touch it and to make it work properly. He had to think of things to do, and how could he do that? His father, for example — what should he do about him? He went a few steps without the door, and tried to consider, looking at the sleeping figure by the fire. The faint glow of the coals made a little ring of dim light. In it he stood, swaying.

“Oh my God,” she said, behind him. “You are drunk.”

“Li’l bit,” he admitted. “Li’l bit. Not enough to scare a b-baby.”

She put this away scornfully. “Scare nothin’,” she said sharply. “Can you keep to the trail? That’s all.”

He laughed foolishly. “Tha’s all right,” he repeated, “I can find trail, drunk or sober.”

She stood pressing her hands in and out and turning helplessly to the dark. The dark gave her back only the lights of Inch.

“There’s nothing else to do,” she said dully. “If you show me the trail, maybe I can keep you on it.”

In some indeterminate shame, he went without a word, brought his blanket, and turned again to the hut.

“I’ve got a kit,” she said. “It’s got enough to eat. Do you understand? Don’t get anything else. Oh, let’s start, let’s start!”

As he emerged, his hand had brushed the feathers of the wood duck. He took it down and slung it fumblingly to his roll of blanket. Less by taking thought than by old instinct, he remembered his cartridge belt, and found and strapped it on. Then he stood hesitating.

“Gotta tell ’em,” he suggested, looking at his father.

She had shouldered her pack and stood waiting.

“Why?” she demanded. “It’ll only be harder for him if they come. This way he won’t know, and he can tell ’em so.”

In this there was reason, but not, it seemed, enough reason. The Inger stood trying to recall something pressing on him for remembrance: if not his father, what was it that he must do or

fetch, before he left. He put both hands to his head, but in there was only a current and a beating.

“There’s s’more to do,” he said indistinctly.

Lory Moor stepped toward him and laid her hand briskly on his shoulder, with a boy’s gesture of eager haste.

“The trail – the trail!” she said, with authority. “Find us the trail.”

Without a word he started, went round the end of the hut, and plunged into the wood, which ran down to the very wall. In a half dozen steps the ascent began.

Even by daylight the trail was little more than an irregular line of bent branches and blazed trunks. Since he had finished it, the Inger had taken it a dozen times by daylight with a boy’s delight in a secret way. By night he had never taken it at all. But he had the woodsman’s instinct and, now that his thoughts were stilled or lost in a maze of their own inconsequent making, this secondary consciousness was for a time paramount. He went as a man goes who treads his own ways, and though he went irregularly and sometimes staggeringly, he managed at first to keep to the course that he had taken.

Over the mountain by the trail to the railway station – that had become clear to him. When they should reach it or how the railway should serve, was not his concern at all. Meanwhile, here she was with him. He tried to get this straight, and cursed his head that only buzzed with the knowledge and whipped him with the need to keep to the trail.

“Lory Moor,” he tried to grasp it; “Jem Moor’s girl. She never married Bunchy at all. She’s here —*with me*. I’ve got her with me...”

The girl was not a pace behind him. She had stretched out her hand and laid it on his roll of blanket and thus, though seeing nothing, she was able to fit her steps somewhat to his, to halt when he halted, to swerve or to slow or to retrace. She was profoundly thankful for his consent to take her away, and in that consent she rested without thought or plan.

An hour passed before the Inger missed the trail. In a stretch fairly free of undergrowth, he stood still for a moment to take his bearings, and thrust out his hand against a declivity, sharp with fallen rock. To the right the wall extended to meet the abrupt shoulder of the slope; to the left it dropped away so that a stone, sent down, went crashing far below.

“Stay here,” the Inger commanded, and found his way up in a shower of falling rocks, to the summit of the obstruction. He clung to a tree, and listened. The mountain brook, which they should cross some rods ahead, was not yet audible. On the other side the rocks fell precipitately; and leaning out, he seemed to sense tree-tops.

“Look out!” he called, and clambered down again, and bade her wait while he went and came back and went and came back in vain. She heard him stumbling, no more fit to find a trail than to think his thoughts.

“I’m stumped,” he said. “We’ve got wrong somewheres.”

She answered nothing. She was sitting on the ground where he had left her. Her silence touched him somehow as a rebuke. “You think it’s because I’m drunk,” he said, in a challenge.

“I don’t think anything,” she answered. “Rest a little – then mebbe we can get right again.”

He flung himself down on his face. The scent of pine needles and dead leaves was there, waiting for him. The stillness of the wood took them both, and for a few minutes they were silent.

And as he lay there, with her sitting beside him, something of the desert, of an hour before, came running along his veins and took him, and, something, too, of the time when he had had her before him on his horse, galloping. When that time had been he could not say; but he remembered it with distinctness, and that day he had had his arms about her.

“We rode – on a horse,” he submitted, suddenly. “C’n you ’member that day?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Don’t talk,” she begged him, “just rest. I want to rest.”

The Inger was silent. His mind was busy trying to piece together what he knew of that day – of her there before him on his horse, of her face laughing at him as she ran away.

“You threw me a kiss,” he offered, after a pause.

“Don’t talk, don’t talk,” she begged him. “I can’t breathe – let me rest.”

“I wish it was that day now,” he said foolishly, and drew a deep breath, and lay quiet. But in a few minutes he roused himself, his

mind struggling with a new problem. What a fool he was, wishing for that day, when here she was, just the same as then. What was the matter with this day?

“Wha’s the matter with this day?” he inquired, reasonably. Then he remembered. They were lost, of course. The trail was gone – gone clean off.

“Gone clean off,” he muttered, reproachfully. “Damn dirty trick to play.”

Then he was shot through with his dominant consciousness. Here she was, here she was – with him. There was something else, something that she had said which made a reason why he should not touch her. But what was that? It was gone – gone clean off, gone with the trail...

Back upon him came flooding the desire of the desert, as he had run with the thought of her and with the thought of battle. Then he had believed that she belonged to Bunchy. That was a lie and Bunchy was a fool. Everything was different, and now here she was and nobody knew...

He lifted himself, and scrambled forward toward her.

“We’re lost,” he said thickly. “Wha’d we care? Wha’d we care...”

He put out his arms, but they did not touch her. He swept a circle, and they did not enclose her. Alarmed, he rose and lurched forward, feeling out in all directions, an arm’s span. And she was not within his reach nor within the crazy length which he ran, with outspread hands, trying to find her.

At last his foot caught in a root and he fell, and lay there, and began quietly weeping. Now she was gone and the trail was gone. He was treated like a dog by both of them. He fumbled for his pack, but he had slipped that off when he climbed the rocks, and now that was gone too. He wept, and lay still. In a few moments he was sleeping.

IV

When he awoke, he looked into soft branches, gray in dim light. The whole mountain was lyric with birds. There was no other sound, save the lift and touch of branches, and the chatter of a squirrel, and there was as yet no sun.

He remembered. And with the memory, a rush of aching, eating shame seized on him and he closed his eyes again. Then he thought that he must have dreamed it all. And that it was impossible that such a thing should be. Yet here he was in the woods, where she had left him because he was a fool. Where had she gone? He sprang up, mad to find her, possessed by the need to make amends, and by the sheer need to find her.

As he sat up, he threw off his blanket, and he marvelled that this should have been covering him. Then he found himself looking into Lory Moor's face.

She was sitting near him, wrapped in her own blanket, leaning against a tree. She was wide awake, and by all signs she had been so for a long time, for a great cluster of mountain violets lay on her blanket.

When she saw that he was awake, she smiled, and this seemed to the Inger the most marvellous thing that ever had befallen him: that she was there and that she smiled.

He looked at her silently, and slowly under the even brownness of his skin, the color rose from his throat to his forehead, and

burned crimson. But more than this color of shame, it was his eyes that told. They were upon her, brown, deep, like the eyes of a dog that has disobeyed, and has come back. For a moment he looked at her, then he dropped his face in his hands.

She moved so quietly that he did not hear her rise. He merely felt her hand on his shoulder. And when he looked up again, she was sitting there beside him.

“Don’t,” she said.

He looked at her in amazement. Her look was gentle, her voice had been gentle.

“You mustn’t,” she said. “It’s all over now.”

“What do you think of me? What do you think of me?” he muttered, stupidly.

She shrugged lightly. “It don’t make any difference what I think of you,” she said. “Ain’t it whether I’m goin’ to get away from Inch or not? Ain’t that the idea?”

When he came to think of it, that was the immediate concern. With his first utterance he had blundered, as he had blundered since the moment when she had put herself in his keeping. None the less his misery was too sharp to dismiss. But he had no clear idea how to ask a woman’s forgiveness – a thing that he had never done in his life.

“I feel as bad as hell,” he blurted out.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.