

**GRAHAM  
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STORIES OF THE  
FOOT-HILLS

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**Stories of the Foot-hills**

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# Margaret Collier Graham

## Stories of the Foot-hills

### THE WITHROW WATER RIGHT

#### I

Lysander Sproul, driving his dun-colored mules leisurely toward the mesa, looked back now and then at the winery which crowned its low hill like a bit of fortification.

"If I'd really had any idee o' gettin' ahead o' him," he reflected, "or circumventin' him an inch, I reckon I'd been more civil; it's no more 'n fair to be civil to a man when you're gettin' the best of 'im; but I hain't. I don't s'pose Indian Pete's yaller dog, standin' ahead there in the road ready to bark at my team like mad, has any idee of eatin' a mule, much less two, but all the same it's a satisfaction to him to be sassy; an' seein' he's limited in his means of entertainin' hisself, I don't begrudge him. And the Colonel don't begrudge me. When a man has his coat pretty well wadded with greenbacks, he can stand a good deal o' thumpin'."

The ascent was growing rougher and more mountainous. Lysander put on the brake and stopped "to blow" his team. Whiffs of honey-laden air came from the stretch of chaparral on the slope behind him. He turned on the high spring-seat, and, dangling his long legs over the wagon-box, sent a far-reaching, indefinite gaze across the valley. There were broad acres of yellowing vineyard, fields of velvety young barley, orange-trees in dark orderly ranks, and here and there a peach orchard robbed of its leaves, – a cloud of tender maroon upon the landscape. Lysander collected his wandering glance and fixed it upon one of the pale-green barley-fields.

"It's about there, I reckon. Of course the old woman'll kick; but if the Colonel has laid out to do it he'll do it, kickin' or no kickin'. If he can't buy her out or trade her out, he'll freeze her out. Well, well, I ain't a-carin'; she can do as she pleases."

The man turned and took off the brake, and the mules, without further signal, resumed their journey. Boulders began to thicken by the roadside. The sun went down, and the air grew heavy with the soft, resinous mountain odors. Some one stepped from the shadow of a scraggy buckthorn in front of the team.

"Is that you, Sandy?"

It was a woman's voice, but it came from a figure wearing a man's hat and coat. Lysander stopped the mules.

"Why, Minervy! what's up?"

"Oh, nothin'. I just walked a ways to meet you." The woman climbed up beside her husband. "You're later 'n I 'lowed you'd be. Something must 'a' kep' you."

"Yes, I come around by the winery. I saw Poindexter over t' the Mission, an' he said the old Colonel wanted to see me."

"The old Colonel wanted to see *you*, Sandy?" The woman turned upon him anxiously in the yellow twilight. The rakishness of her attire was grotesquely at variance with her troubled voice and small, freckled face. "What did he want with you?"

"Well, he *said* he wanted me to help him make a trade with the old man," – Lysander sent a short, explosive laugh through his nostrils; "an' I told 'im I reckoned he knowed that the old woman was the old man, up our way."

"Oh, I'm glad you give it to 'im that way, Sandy," said the woman earnestly, rising to her habiliments. "Mother'll be prouder 'n a peacock of you. I hope you held your head high and sassed

him right and left." Mrs. Sproul straightened her manly back and raised her shrill, womanish voice nervously. "Oh, I hope you told him you'd stood at the cannon's mouth before, an' wasn't afraid to face him or any other red-handed destroyer of his country's flag. I hope you told him that, Sandy."

"Well, I wasn't to say brash," returned her husband slowly and soothingly. "It wouldn't do, Minervy; it wouldn't do." Lysander uncoiled his long braided lash and whipped off two or three spikes of the withering, perfumed sage. "I talked up to 'im, though, middlin' impident; but law! it didn't hurt 'im; he's got a hide like a hypothenuse."

Mrs. Sproul drew a long, excited breath.

"I wish mother'd been along, Sandy; she'd 'a' told 'im a thing or two."

Lysander was discreetly silent. The sage and greasewood ended abruptly, and a row of leafless walnut-trees stretched their gaunt white branches above the road. Here and there an almond-tree, lured into premature bloom by the seductive California winter, stood like a wraith by the roadside. They could see the cabin now. A square of flaring and fading light marked the open doorway. The mules quickened their pace, and the wagon rattled over the stony road.

"Talk about increasin' the value o' this piece o' property!" the man broke out contemptuously. "I told 'im it would take a good deal o' chin to convince the old woman that anything would increase the value o' this ranch o' hern, and danged if I didn't think she was right. I'd pegged away at it two years, an' I couldn't."

"What did he say to that, Sandy?" demanded the woman, with admiring eagerness.

"Say? Oh, he said the soil was good. An' I 'lowed it was, – what there was of it; an' so was the boulders good, for boulders, – the trouble was in the mixin'. 'Don't talk to me about your "decomposed granite,"' says I: 'it's the granite what ain't decomposed that bothers me.' But pshaw!" – and Lysander dropped his voice hopelessly, – "he ain't a-carin'. I'd about as soon work the boulders as try to work him; he's harder'n any boulder on the ranch."

The mules turned into a narrow road, and stopped before the stable, a shakly, semi-tropical structure, consisting of four sycamore posts and a brush-covered roof. The lower half of the firelit doorway beyond suddenly darkened, and there was a swift, scurrying sound among the bushes that intervened between the house and the shed. A succession of heads, visible even in the deepening twilight by reason of a uniform glimmering whiteness, appeared in the barnyard.

Mrs. Sproul ran over the number with a rapid maternal calculation.

"Where's the baby, Sheridan?"

"Grammuzgotim."

Lysander climbed out of the wagon, and came around to his wife's side.

"Shan't I h'ist you down, Minervy?"

She gave him her hand, and stood beside him for an instant, meditatively, after he had lifted her to the ground.

"I guess I won't say nothin' to mother till you come in, Sandy. Be as spry as you can with the chores. Mebbe M'lissy'll milk the cow fer you."

She turned, and went up the walk toward the house, her mannish attire and the glimmering white heads that encircled her faintly suggestive of Jupiter and his attendant moons.

The sea-breeze had died away, and the wind was blowing in cooler gusts from the mountain; breezes laden with the aromatic sweetness of the bay-tree and the heavy scent of the shade-loving bracken wandered from far up the cañon into the cabin and out again, only to find themselves profaned and sordid with the smell of frying bacon.

A high, energetic voice was making itself heard even above the sizzle of the meat and the voice of a crying baby.

"What under the sun makes ye set up that yell every night jest at supper-time? Ye ain't a-lackin' anything, as I kin see, exceptin' a spankin', and I'm too busy to give ye that. Hark! There comes your mammy, now. Straighten up yer face and show 'er what a good boy you've been."

Thus adjured, the baby brought his vocalizing to that abrupt termination indicative of feeling not so deep-seated as to be entirely beyond control, and scrambled toward the door on all fours, breaking in upon the approaching planetary system, a somewhat dimmed and bedraggled comet. Mrs. Sproul picked him up, and looked around the room questioningly.

"What's M'lissy doin', mother?"

"Dawdlin'," answered the old woman, with a curtness that was eloquent, lifting the frying-pan from the stove, and shaking it into a more aggravated sputter.

"Is she upstairs?"

"I s'pose so. She gener'ly is, when there's anything doin' down."

Mrs. Sproul put her hand over the baby's mouth and called upward, "M'lissy!"

There was a sound of slow moving above, plainly audible through the unplastered ceiling, leisurely sliding steps on the stairs, and Melissa appeared in the doorway. She was still elevated above them by two or three steps, and leaned against the casement, looking down into the smoke and disorder of the room with a listless, irresponsible gaze. A tall, unformed girl, with a braid of red hair hanging across her shoulder, and ending in a heavy, lustrous curl upon the limp folds of her blue cotton dress.

The baby had resumed a subdued but dismal proclamation of the grief from which his mother's return had afforded him but a temporary relief, and Mrs. Sproul elevated her thin, anxious voice coaxingly.

"Lysander's late, M'lissy, and I thought mebbe you'd milk the cow fer 'im."

"Why, yes, of course," answered the girl, with a soft, good-natured drawl, descending the remaining steps slowly. "Where's the milk-pail, mother?"

"On top o' the chimbly," answered the old woman tartly, pointing with the frying-pan to a bench in the corner. "If it'd 'a' been a snake, it'd 'a' bit you."

The young girl crossed the room, and the satellites surrounding Mrs. Sproul's chair, with an erratic change of orbit, transferred themselves to the newcomer. The older sister took a handkerchief from the pocket of her coat.

"You'd best tie this around your neck, M'lissy; it's gettin' chill."

The girl accepted it carelessly, and stood in the doorway tying the bit of faded silk about her round, white throat.

"Where's the cow, mother?"

"She's staked on the 'fileree, t'other side of the barn. If ye don't find her when ye git there, come an' ask." The old woman drawled the last three words sarcastically.

Melissa smiled, showing a row of teeth, not small, but white and regular.

"Oh, if she's got away, I know where she's gone."

"Yes, I'll bet you do. Some folks has a heap of onnecessary learnin'."

There was no demand upon Melissa's supply of undervalued information. The cow was mooing reproachfully in a cropped circle of musky alfilaria behind the shed. The moon had risen, and rested for an instant upon the edge of Cucamonga, like a silver ball rolling down the mountain-side. Melissa laid her arms on the spotted heifer's back, and gazed at the landscape dreamily. Not discontent, nor longing, nor vague, troublesome aspirations mirrored themselves in the girl's placid face. Gentle, ease-loving natures, that might show in fair relief against a delicate background of luxury, become dull and lifeless in contrast with the coarser tints of poverty. In the parlance of those about her, Melissa was "dawdlin'," – and those about us are likely to be just, for they speak from the righteous standpoint of results.

The moon had floated high above Cucamonga, – so high that every nook and fastness of the mountain lay revealed in her soft, nocturnal splendor; even the tops of the mottled sycamores, far below in Sawpit Cañon, were touched with a vague, ghostly light; and still the council that sat in Lysander Sproul's kitchen was loud-voiced and shrill. The children, huddled in a corner that they might whisper and giggle beyond the reach of manual reproof, had fallen asleep, a confused heap

of dejected weariness. The baby's head hung at an alarming angle from his father's arm, and even the acrid, high-pitched notes of his grandmother's voice failed to disturb the sleep of bedraggled innocence.

"So he's a-wantin' to develop the cañon, is he? Time wuz when you'd 'a' thought that cañon wuz good enough even fer him, from the lawin' and the lyin' and the swearin' he done to git his clutches onto it. Well, if he wants to improve it, why don't he improve it? Nobody's goin' to hender."

"That's what I told 'im," answered her son-in-law, taking the pipe from his mouth, and sending a halo of blue smoke about the head of his slumbering charge. "He said he wanted to improve the water. 'Nobody's goin' to kick at that,' says I; 'if they do, they're fools. I think the old lady'll tell you to go ahead. I shouldn't be s'prised, though,' says I, 'if she'd add that the water o' Sawpit Cañon's good enough fer her without any improvin'."

Mrs. Sproul glanced at her mother triumphantly.

"I told you Sandy talked up to him, mother. Oh, I do *wish* you'd 'a' wore your uniform, Sandy; then you could 'a' rose up before him proudly, an' told 'im you'd fought the battles of your country before" —

"Oh, shucks, Minervy!" interrupted the old woman dejectedly; "what does Nate Forrester care for anybody's country? What else'd he say, Lysander?"

"He said — well" — the man hesitated, and hitched his high shoulders a trifle uneasily — "he swore he hated to do business with a woman."

Spots of a deep, coppery red glowed through the tan of the old woman's cheeks.

"He said that, did 'e, Lysander Sproul? Then he must 'a' found some woman hard to cheat. Nate Forrester don't hate to do business with nobody he can cheat. The next time you see 'im, tell 'im it's mut'chal."

"I told 'im that," answered Lysander grimly. "I told 'im he didn't hate to do business with the hull female sect no worse than this partikiler woman hated to do business with him; but I reckoned you wouldn't bother 'im if he wanted to go to work on the cañon, — that'd be onreasonable."

"He hain't no notion o' doin' that," asserted the old woman contemptuously. "Ketch him improvin' anybody else's water right. We're nothin' to him but sticks to boil his pot. What's he up to now?"

"Well," rejoined Lysander skeptically, "he *said* he wanted to divide that upper volunteer barley-patch into ten-acre lots and put it onto the market. An' he b'lieved he could double the water right by tunnelin'."

"Why don't he tunnel away, then? Nobody's a-carin'," demanded the old woman shrilly.

"That's what I told 'im; and he 'lowed, of course, he wasn't a-goin' to put money into another feller's water right. An' then he figured away, showin' me how it'd increase the value o' this piece o' property; an' I told 'im this property was 'way up now," — Lysander sneered audibly, — "consider'ble higher 'n most folks wanted to go; an' then he went to blowin' about it, braggin' up the ranch, an' tellin' what a big thing he done when he give it to you" —

The old woman broke in upon him fiercely.

"Did he say that, Lysander?" She turned, and bent upon her son-in-law a quick, wrathful glance from under her shaggy brows; the muscles of her weather-beaten face twitched nervously. "I'd 'a' give my right hand to 'a' heerd 'im. I'd like to have Colonel Nate Forrester try to say anything to me about givin' anybody this ranch." She measured her words biting. "I s'pose when a feller puts his pistol at yer head, and tells you to hold up yer hands, and goes through yer pockets, if he happens to overlook a ten-cent piece he *gives* ye that much, does 'e? That's the way Colonel Nate Forrester *give* me this ranch. Loss Anjelus County hadn't heerd o' him when I settled onto this claim, and it ain't heerd no good of 'im sence."

The old woman's harsh, discordant voice rose higher with her wrath. The baby stirred uneasily in his father's arms. Even Melissa raised her eyes, — Melissa, who sat on the lowest step of the



projecting staircase, twisting and untwisting the faded blue silk handkerchief in her lap with a gentle, listless monotony. It was impossible to tell whether ignorance or indifference characterized the girl, so calm, so inert, so absent was she, sitting in the half-shadow of the dimly lighted corner, her lustrous auburn head outlined against the sombre-hued redwood of the wall behind her.

There was a little hush in the room after the tempest.

"No, that's a fact, – that's a fact. Well – then – you see – " continued Lysander, groping for his forgotten place in the recital. "Oh, yes, – I got up and told 'im 'Addyoce,' as if I s'posed he was through, and started off; an' he called me back, an' 'lowed mebbe the old folks didn't have much loose change lyin' 'round to put into water improvements; an' I told 'im I didn't know, – I reckoned you could mortgage the ranch. From the way he talked, he'd make you a handsome loan on it, and jump at the chance; an' after he'd hummed and hawed a while, he offered to give you a clear title to Flutterwheel Spring if you'd deed 'im your int'rest in the rest o' the cañon. I told 'im it wasn't my funeral. I'd tell you what he said, an' you could do as you pleased."

The old woman fixed her small, shrewd eyes on her son-in-law.

"What else 'd he say, Lysander?"

"Nothin' much. Wanted me to use my influence with the old man!"

His mother-in-law gave a short, contemptuous sniff.

"I reckon he'd like to do business with the old man. What'd you tell 'im?"

"I told 'im I'd be sure to put my influence where it'd do the most good, an' I 'dvised him to see you. I 'lowed him an' you'd git on peaceable as a meetin' to 'lect a preacher," – Lysander rubbed his gnarled hand over his face, as if to erase a lurking grin, – "but he didn't seem anxious."

"I reckon not. Is that all he said?"

"'Bout all. He said it was a damned good trade."

"Lysander!" Mrs. Sproul sprang up, placing herself between her husband and the heap of slumbering innocents in the corner. "Lysander Sproul, – and you a father! This comes of consortin' with the ungodly, and settin' in the chair of the scorner."

"Oh, come now, Minervy, I was only quotin'." Lysander's eye twinkled, but he spoke contritely, with generous consideration for his wife's condition, which was imminently delicate.

"Oh, you're hystericky, Minervy. You'd best go to bed," observed her mother. "You're all tuckered out with yer walk. I guess Lysander's told all he knows, hain't you, Lysander?"

"'Bout all, – yes. He followed me out to the wagon, and hinted something about Poindexter wantin' help if he went to work on the tunnel, and 'lowed I'd find it handier to have a job nearer home, now that the grape-haulin' was over. But I told 'im there was no trouble about that. The nearer home I got, the more work I found, gener'ly. Pay was kind o' short, but then a man must be a trifle stickin' that wouldn't do his own work fer nothin'."

Lysander got up and carried the baby into the adjoining room, bending his lank form from habit rather than from necessity, as he passed through the doorway.

Mrs. Sproul, tearfully resentful of the charge of hysterics, investigated the sleeping children with a view to more permanent disposal of them for the night, a process which resulted in much whimpering, and a limp, somnolent sense of injury on the part of the investigated.

"I don't take much stock in Nate Forrester's trades," said the grandmother, elevating her voice so that Lysander could hear; "there's some deviltry back of 'em, gener'ly; the better they look, the more I'm afraid of 'em. I don't purtend to know what he's drivin' at now, not bein' the prince o' darkness, but I reckon he can wait till I do."

## II

The next day Melissa turned her gray eyes with a vague, kindling interest toward the "volunteer barley-patch." Two or three points of white gleamed upon it in the afternoon sun. She mused upon them speculatively for awhile, and then consulted Lysander.

"I reckon it's the survey stakes, M'lissy," he said kindly. "Forrester's dividin' it up, as he said. I wouldn't say nothin' 'bout it to yer maw, 'f I was you; it'll only rile her up."

Melissa looked at the field in a quiet, dispassionate way.

"The land's his'n, ain't it, Lysander?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, the land's his'n, an' a good part o' the cañon, too, – all but a little that b'longs to yer maw. But the hull thing used to be hern; quite a spell back, though."

Lysander was hauling stones from a knoll near the house, and dumping them on the edge of the cañon, – a leisurely process, carried on by means of a sled, of unmistakable home manufacture, drawn by one of the dun-colored mules. Melissa was helping him in a desultory, intermittent fashion. There was a very friendly understanding between these two peace-loving members of the family.

The young girl carried two or three speckled granite boulders and dropped them into the rude vehicle, and then sat down on the edge of it meditatively. The dark rim of her hat made a background for her head with its little billows of richly tinted hair. Exertion had brought a faint transitory pink to her fair, freckled face.

"Did Colonel Forrester steal the land and water from mother, Lysander?" she asked, with the calm, unreasoning candor of youth.

Lysander straightened his lank form, and then betook himself to a seat on a neighboring boulder, evidently of the opinion that the judicial nature of the question before him demanded a sitting posture.

"I dunno about that, M'lissy," he said, shutting one eye and squinting across the valley sagaciously. "The *Soopreme* Court of the State of Californy said he didn't, an' yer maw says he did, – with regards to the cañon, that is. The land, – well, she deeded him the land, but he sort o' had the snap on her when she done it. You'll find, M'lissy," he added, with a careful disavowal of prejudice, "that there's as much difference of 'pinion about stealin' as there is about heaven."

There was a long, serene, comfortable silence. Even the mule seemed dreamily retrospective. Bees reveled in the honeyed wealth of the buckthorn, and chanted their content in drowsy monotony. The upland lavished its spicy sweetness on the still, yellow air. A gopher peered out of its freshly made burrow with quick, wary turns of its little head, and dropped suddenly out of sight as Melissa spoke.

"How come mother to deed him the land, Sandy?"

The weight of decision being lifted from Lysander's shoulders, he got up and resumed his work, evidently esteeming a mild form of activity admissible in purely narrative discourse.

"Well, ye see, M'lissy, yer maw home-stidded the land and filed a claim on the water in the cañon eight or ten years back, when neither of 'em was worth stealin'; an' she 'lowed she done the thing up in good shape, and had everything solid an' reg'lar, till Colonel Forrester come and bought the Santa Elena ranch and a lot o' dry land j'inin' it, and commenced nosin' around the cañon, an' hirin' men to overhaul the county record; an' the fust thing you know, he filed a claim onto the water in the cañon. Then you can guess what kind of a racket there was on hand."

Lysander paused, and sat down on a pile of stones, shaking his head in vague, reminiscent dismay. The young girl turned and looked at him, a sudden gleam of recollection widening her eyes.

"I b'lieve I remember 'bout that, Sandy," she said, with a little thrill of animation in her voice.

"Like enough. You was quite a chunk of a girl then. Minervy an' me was bee-ranchin' over t' the Verdugo, that spring. The rains was late and lodged yer maw's barley, so as 't she didn't have half a crop; an' you know yer paw's kind o' – kind o' – easy," – having chosen the adjective after

some hesitation, Lysander lingered over it approvingly, – "and bein' as she was dead set on fightin' the Colonel, she mortgaged the ranch to raise the money for the lawsuit."

Lysander stopped again. Memories of that stormy time appeared to crowd upon him bewilderingly. He shook his head in slow but emphatic denial of his ability to do them dramatic justice in recital.

There was another long silence. The noonday air seemed to pulsate, as if the mountain were sleeping in the sun and breathing regularly. The weeds, which the weight of the sled had crushed, gave out a fragrance of honey and tar. A pair of humming-birds darted into the stillness in a little tempest of shrill-voiced contention, and the mule, aroused from dejected abstraction by the intruders, shook his tassel-like tail and yawned humanly.

Melissa got up and wandered toward the edge of the cañon, and Lysander, aroused from the plentitude of his recollections by her absence, completed his load and drove the dun-colored mule leisurely after her.

The stones fell over the precipice, breaking into the quiet of the depths below with a long, resounding crash that finally rippled off into silence, and the two sat down on the side of the empty sled and rode back to the stone-pile.

"I've always thought," said Lysander, resuming his work and his narrative with equal deliberation, "that there was a good deal missed by yer maw bein' took down with inflammatory rheumatiz jest about the time o' the trial o' that lawsuit. I dunno as it would 'a' made much difference in the end, but it would 'a' made consider'ble as it went along, and I think she'd 'a' rested easier if she'd 'a' had her say. Of course they come up an' took down her testimony in writin'; but it was shorthand, an' yer maw don't speak shorthand fer common. Well, of course, the old Colonel got away with the jury, and then yer maw found out that he'd bought the mortgage; an' about the time it was due he come up here, as smooth as butter, an' offered to give her this little patch o' boulders an' let her move the house onto it, an' give her share 'nough in the cañon to irrigate it, if she'd deed him the rest o' the land, an' save him the trouble o' foreclosin'. So she done it. But I don't think he enj'yed his visit, all the same. She wasn't sparin' o' her remarks to 'im, an' I think some o' 'em must 'a' hurt his feelin's, fer he hain't been here sence." Lysander chuckled with reminiscent relish.

Melissa had walked around the sled, and stood facing him, with her hands behind her. Her slight figure in its limp blue cotton drapery had the scarred mountain-side for a background.

"I don't see yet as he done anything so awful mean," she protested leniently.

"Ner do I, M'lissy," acquiesced her brother-in-law. "But after the hull thing was signed, sealed, and delivered," – Lysander rested from his labors again on the strength of these highly legal expressions, – "after it was closed up, so to speak, it came to yer maw's ears, in some way, that there was a mistake in the drawin' of that mortgage, an' this land was left out of it, an' would 'a' been hern anyway; and somehow that thing has stuck in her craw all these years, and sort o' soured her."

Melissa mused on the problem, wide-eyed and grave. The mule seemed to await her verdict with humble resignation. Lysander sat on the side of the sled and looked across the valley seaward, to where Catalina was outlined against the horizon in soft, cloud-like gray.

"An' it was a mistake? she meant to put it in the mortgage?" queried the girl.

"Yes, she meant to, so far as a person can be said to mean anything when they're a-mortgagin' their homestead; usually they're out o' their heads. But the law don't take no 'count o' that kind o' craziness. You can do the fooliest things, M'lissy, without the court seein' a crack in your brain; but if you happen to get mad an' put a bullet through some good-fer-nothin' loafer, then immedjitly yer insane. That's the law, M'lissy."

Melissa received this exposition of her country's code with wondering, luminous eyes. It had a wild, unreasonable sound which was a sufficient guarantee of its correctness. The doings of authorities were liable to be misty by reason of elevation. The fault lay in her limited vision.

"I s'pose the law's right. An' the law said the cañon didn't belong to mother. I think that ought to 'a' settled it. I don't see any good in it all, – this talkin' so loud, an' scoldin', an' callin' people names. Do you, Sandy?"

"I hain't seen much good come of it," confessed the man reluctantly; "but it's human to talk, – it's human, M'lissy. Some folks find it relievin', an' it don't do any harm."

The young girl did not assent. Deep down in her placid, peace-loving nature was the obstinate conviction that it did a great deal of harm. She sat down in the velvety burr-clover, clasping her hands about her knees.

"Is Flutterwheel Spring more 'n mother's share o' the cañon?" she inquired.

"Yes, I think it is. Of course I never measured the water, an' I didn't admit it when Forrester said so; but I'd 'a' resked sayin' it was, if anybody else'd asked me."

"Why wouldn't you say so to him?"

Lysander laughed, and flipped a pebble toward a gray squirrel, who gave a little rasping, insulted bark, and whisked into his hole in high dudgeon.

"Well, because he ain't a-lackin' for information, an' I hain't got none to spare, M'lissy."

The young girl rocked herself gently in the clover.

"I don't understand it," she said hopelessly. "It looks as if he was tryin' to be fair, an' mother wouldn't let him. I should think she'd be glad, even if he did used to be mean, – an' I can't see as he was any meaner than the law 'lowed him to be. I s'pose the law's right. You went to the war for the law, didn't you, Sandy?"

Her companion winced. There was one thing dearer to him than his neutrality in the family feud.

"Mebbe I did, M'lissy, – mebbe I did," he answered, with a trifling accession of dignity: "fer the law as I understood it. The law's all right, but it ain't every judge nor every jury that knows what it is; they think they do, but they're liable to be mistaken. Seems to me they're derned liable to be mistaken!" he added, with some asperity.

And so the paths that to Melissa's straightforward consciousness seemed so simple and direct ended, one and all, in hopeless confusion. Even Lysander had failed her. The foundations of human knowledge were certainly giving way when Lysander indulged in the mysterious.

Melissa turned and left him, walking absently up the little path that led to the cañon. She had not noticed a speck crawling like an overburdened insect along the winding road in the valley. Visible and invisible by turns, as the sage-brush was sparse or high, and emerging at last into permanent view where the wild growth came to an end and Mrs. Withrow's "patch" began, it resolved itself, to Lysander's intent and curious gaze, into a diminutive gray donkey, bearing a confused burden of blankets and cooking utensils, and followed by a figure more dejected, if possible, than the donkey himself.

"I'll be hanged if the old man hain't showed up!" said Lysander, dropping down on the sled, and throwing back into the pile two boulders he held, as if to indicate a general cessation of all logical sequence and a consequent embargo on industry.

Evidently the old man was conscious that he "showed up" to poor advantage, for he began prodding the donkey with a conscientious absorption that filled that small brute with amazement, and made him amble from one side of the road to the other, in a vain endeavor to look around his pack and discover the reason for this unexpected turn in the administration of affairs.

Lysander watched their approach with an expression of amused contempt. The traveler started, in a clumsy attempt at surprise, when he was opposite his son-in-law, and, giving the donkey a parting whack that sent him and his hardware onward at a literally rattling pace, turned from the road, and sidled doggedly through the tarweed toward the stone-pile.

Lysander folded his arms, and surveyed him in a cool, sidelong way that was peculiarly withering.

"Well," he said, with a caustic downward inflection, – "well, it's you, is it?"

The newcomer admitted the gravity of the charge by an appealing droop of his whole person.

"Yes," he answered humbly, "it's me, – an' I didn't want to come. I vum I didn't. But Forrester made me. He 'lowed you wouldn't hev no objections to my comin' – on business."

He braced himself on the last two words, and made a feeble effort to look his son-in-law in the face. What he saw there was not encouraging. It became audible in a sniff of undisguised contempt.

"Where'd you see Forrester?"

"At the winery. Ye see I was a-goin' over to the Duarte, an' I stopped at the winery" —

"What'd you stop at the winery fer?" interrupted the younger man savagely.

"Why, I tole ye, – Forrester wanted to see me *on business*. I stopped to see Forrester, Lysander. What else'd I stop fer? I was in a big hurry, too, an' I vum I hated to stop, but I hed to. When a man like Forrester wants to see you" —

"How'd you know he wanted to see you?" demanded Sproul.

The old man gave his questioner a look of maudlin surprise.

"Why, he tole me so hisself; how else'd I find it out? I was a-settin' there in the winery on a kaig, an' he come an' tole me he wanted to see me *on business*. 'Pears to me you're duller 'n common, Lysander." The speaker began to gather courage from his own ready comprehension of intricacies which evidently seemed to puzzle his son-in-law. "Why, sho, – yes, Lysander, don't ye see?" he added encouragingly.

"Oh, yes, I see, – I see," repeated Lysander sarcastically. "It's as clear as mud. Now, look here," he added, turning upon his visitor sternly, "you let Forrester alone. You don't know any more about business than a hog does about holidays, an' you know it, an' Forrester knows it. You'll put your foot in it, that's what you'll do."

The old man looked pensively at one foot and then at the other, as if speculating on the probable damage from such a catastrophe.

"I'm sure I dunno," he said plaintively. "Forrester 'peared to think I ought to come; he tole me why, but I vum I've fergot." He took off his hat and gazed into it searchingly, as if the idea that had mysteriously escaped from his brain might have lodged in the crown.

Lysander fell to work with an energy born of disgust for another's uselessness.

"Seein' I'm here, I reckon nobody'll object to my payin' my respects to the old woman," continued the newcomer, glancing from the crown of his hat to Lysander's impassive face with covert inquiry.

"I guess if you c'n stand it, the rest of us'll have to," sneered his son-in-law. "I've advised you over 'n' over again to steer clear of the old woman; but there's no law agen a man courtin' his own wife, even if she don't give 'im much encouragement."

The old man put on his hat, and shuffled uneasily toward the house. Lysander stopped his work, and looked after him with a whimsical, irreverent grimace.

"You're a nice old customer, you are; an' Forrester's 'nother. I wish to the livin' gracious the old woman'd send you a-kitin'; but she won't; she'll bark at you all day, but she won't bite. Women's queer."

Mrs. Withrow was engaged in what she called "workin' the bread into the pans." She received her dejected spouse with a snort of disapproval.

"When the donkey come a-clatterin' up to the door, I knowed there was another follerin'," she said acridly. "Come in an' set down. I s'pose you're tired: you mostly are."

The old man sidled sheepishly into the room and seated himself, and his wife turned her back upon him and fell to kneading vigorously a mass of dough that lay puffing and writhing on the floured end of a pine table.

"I jess come on Forrester's 'count," he began haltingly: "that is, he didn't want me to come, but I wasn't goin' to do what Forrester said. I ain't a-carin' fer Forrester. I wasn't goin' to take a trip 'way up here jess because he wanted me to, so I didn't. I" —

"Shut up!" said his wife savagely, without turning her head.

The visitor obeyed, evidently somewhat relieved to escape even thus ignominiously from the bog into which his loquacity was leading him.

The old woman thumped and pounded the mass of dough until the small tenement shook. Then, after much shaping and some crowding, she consigned her six rather corpulent loaves to "the pans," and turned on her nominal lord.

He had fallen asleep, with his head dropped forward on his breast: his hat had fallen off, and lay in his lap in a receptive attitude, as if expecting that the head would presently drop into it.

Mrs. Withrow gave him a withering glance.

"Forrester sent you, did 'e? You miser'ble old jelly-fish! You're a nice match fer Forrester, you are!"

She pushed her loaves angrily under the stove, to the discomfiture of the cat, who, being thus rudely disturbed, yawned and stretched, and curved its back to the limit of spinal flexibility, as it rubbed against the old woman's knees.

### III

The California winter had blossomed and faded. The blaze of the poppies on the mesa had given place to the soft, smoky tint of the sage, and almost insensibly the cloudless summer had come on.

Work had commenced in Sawpit Cañon. Unwillingly, and after much wrangling, the old woman had yielded to the evident fairness of Forrester's offer. Even in yielding, however, she had permitted herself the luxury of defiance, and had refused to appear before a notary in the valley to sign the deed. If it afforded her any satisfaction when that official was driven to the door by Colonel Forrester, and entered her kitchen, carrying his seal, and followed by an admiring and awestricken group of children, she did not display it by the faintest tremor of her grim countenance. She had held the end of the penholder gingerly while she made her "mark," and it was when old Withrow had been banished from the room, and the notary, in a bland, perfunctory way, had made her acquainted with the contents of the document, and inquired whether she signed the same freely and voluntarily, that she deigned to speak.

"Did Nate Forrester tell you to ask me that?" she demanded, darting a quick glance through the open door at the Colonel, who sat in his road-wagon under the trailing pepper-tree, flicking the flies from his roadster's back. "Ef he did, you tell 'im fer me that the man don't live that kin make me do what I don't want to. An' ef he thinks the two or three kaigs of wine he's poured into that poor, miser'ble, sozzlin' old man o' mine has had anything to do with me signin' this deed, he's a bigger fool than I took 'im to be, an' that's sayin' a good deal."

And with this ample though somewhat novel declaration of freedom from marital compulsion the notary was quite willing to consider the majesty of the law satisfied, and proceeded to affix his seal on its imposing star of gilded paper, a process which drew the children about him in a rapidly narrowing circle from which he was glad to escape.

"Damn it," he said, as he climbed into the road-wagon and tucked the robe about his legs, – "damn it, Colonel, I thought you were popular with the gentler sex; but there certainly seems to be a coolness between you and the old lady," and the two men drove off, laughing as they went.

The document they had left behind them, which made Mrs. Withrow the owner of Flutterwheel Spring, "being the most southerly spring on the west side of Sawpit Cañon," had lain untouched upon the table until Lysander had taken it in charge, and it was this lofty indifference on the part of his mother-in-law that had justified her in the frequent boast that, "whatever she'd done, she hadn't stirred out of her tracks, nohow."

So at last the stillness of Sawpit Cañon was invaded. Poindexter had come from San Gabriel Mission, and with him a young engineer from Los Angeles, – a straight, well-made young fellow, whose blue flannel shirt was not close enough at the collar to hide the line of white that betokened his recent escape from civilization. There were half a dozen workmen besides, and the muffled boom of blasting was heard all day among the boulders. At night, the touch of a banjo and the sound of men's voices singing floated down from the camp among the sycamores.

This camp was a bewildering revelation to Melissa, who carried milk to the occupants every evening. The Chinese cook, who came to meet her and emptied her pail, trotting hither and thither, and swearing all the time with a cheerful confidence in the purity of his pigeon English, was not to her half so much a foreigner and an alien as was either of the two men who occupied the engineer's tent. They raised their hats when she appeared among the mottled trunks of the sycamores. One of them – the younger, no doubt – sprang to help her when her foot slipped in crossing the shallow stream, and the generous concern he manifested for her safety, and which was to him the merest commonplace of politeness, was to Melissa a glimpse into Paradise.

"By Jove, she's pretty, Poindexter," he had said, as he came back and picked up his banjo; "she has eyes like a rabbit."

And Poindexter had added up two columns of figures and contemplated the result some time before he asked, "Who?"

"The milkmaid, – she of the bare feet and blue calico. I have explored the dim recesses of her sunbonnet, and am prepared to report upon the contents. The lass is comely."

But Poindexter had relapsed into mathematics, and grunted an unintelligible reply.

Melissa heard none of this. All that she heard was the faint, distant strum of a banjo, and a gay young voice announcing to the rocks and fastnesses of the cañon that his love was like a red, red rose. His love! Melissa walked along the path beside the flume in vague bewilderment. It was his love, then, whose picture she had seen pinned to the canvas of the tent. The lady was scantily attired, and Melissa had a confused idea that her heightened color might arise from this fact. She felt her own cheeks redden at the thought.

Lysander was at work in the cañon some distance below the new tunnel, "ditching" the water of Flutterwheel Spring to Mrs. Withrow's land.

"That long-legged tenderfoot thinks you're purty, M'lissy," he announced, as he smoked his pipe on the doorstep one evening. "He come down to the ditch this afternoon to see if I could sharpen a pick fer 'em, and he asked if you was my little dotter. I told 'im no, I was your great-grandpap," and Lysander laughed teasingly.

Melissa was sitting on a low chair behind him, holding her newly arrived niece in her arms. She bent over the little puckered face, her own glowing with girlish delight. The baby stirred, and tightened its wrinkles threateningly, and Melissa stooped to kiss the little moist silken head.

"I – I don't even know his name," she faltered.

"Nor me, neither," said Lysander. "Poindexter calls him 'Sterling,' but I don't know if it's his first name or his last. Anyway, he seems to be a powerful singer."

The baby broke into a faint but rapidly strengthening wail.

"Come, now, Pareppy Rosy," said Lysander soothingly, "don't you be jealous; your old pappy ain't a-goin' back on you as a musicianer. Give 'er to me, M'lissy."

Melissa laid the little warm, unhappy bundle in its father's arms, and stood in the path in front of them, looking over the valley, until the baby's cries were hushed.

"Was the pick much dull?" she asked, with a faint stirring of womanly tact.

"Oh, yes," rejoined the unsuspecting Lysander; "they get 'em awful dull up there in the rock. I had to bring it down to the forge, an' I guess I'll git you to take it back to 'em in the morning. I've got through with the ditch, and I want to go to makin' basins; them orange-trees west o' the road needs irrigatin'."

"Yes, they're awful dry; they're curlin' a little," said the girl, with waning interest. "I thought mebbe Mr. Poindexter done the singin'?" she added, after a little silence.

Her brother-in-law hesitated, and then found his way back.

"No, I guess not; I s'pose he joins in now and then, but it's the Easterner that leads off."

"Jee-ee-rusalem, my happy home!"

Lysander threw his head back against the casement of the door, and broke into the evening stillness with his heavy, unmanageable bass. Mrs. Sproul came to the door to "take the baby in out of the night air;" the air indoors being presumably a remnant of midday which had been carefully preserved for the evening use of infants.

The next morning Melissa carried the pick to the workmen at the tunnel.

A fog had drifted in during the night, and was still tangled in the tops of the sycamores. The soft, humid air was sweet with the earthy scents of the cañon, and the curled fallen leaves of the live oaks along the flume path were golden-brown with moisture. Beads of mist fringed the silken fluffs of the clematis, dripping with gentle, rhythmical insistence from the trees overhead.

Melissa had set out at the head of a straggling procession, for the children had clamored to go with her.



"You can go 'long," she said, with placid good nature, "if you'll set down when you give out, and not go taggin' on, makin' a fuss."

In consequence of this provision various major-generals had dropped out of the ranks, and were stationed at different points in the rear, and only Melissa and Ulysses S. Grant were left. Even that unconquerable hero showed signs of weakening, lagging behind to "sick" his yellow cur into the wild-grape thickets in search of mountain lion and other equally ambitious game.

Melissa turned in the narrow path, and waited for him to overtake her.

"I b'lieve you'd better wait here, 'Lyss," she said gravely. "You can go up the bank there and pick some tunas. Look out you don't get a cactus spine in your foot, though, for I hain't got anything to take it out with exceptin' the pick," – she smiled in the limp depths of her sunbonnet, – "an' I won't have that when I come back."

The dog, returned from the terrors of his unequal chase at the sound of Melissa's voice, looked and winked and wagged his approval, and the two comrades darted up the bank with mingled and highly similar yaps of release.

Melissa quickened her steps, following the path until she heard the sound of voices and the ring of tools in the depths below. Then she turned, and made her way through the underbrush down the bank.

Suddenly she heard a loud, prolonged whistle and the sound of hurrying feet. She stood still until the footsteps had died away. Then the sharp report of an explosion shook the ground beneath her feet, and huge pieces of rock came crashing through the trees about her. The girl gave a shrill, terrified scream, and fell cowering upon the ground. Almost before the echo had ceased, Sterling sprang through the chaparral, his face white and his lips set.

"My God, child, are you hurt?" he said, dropping on his knees beside her.

"No, I ain't hurt," she faltered, "but I was awful scared. I didn't know you was blastin' here; I thought it was on up at the tunnel."

"It was until this morning. We are going to put in a dam." He frowned upon her, unable to free himself from alarm. "I did not dream of any one being near. What brought you so far up the cañon?"

"I brung you the pick."

She stooped toward it, and two or three drops of blood trickled across her hand.

"You are hurt, see!" said Sterling anxiously.

The girl turned back her sleeve and showed a trifling wound.

"I must 'a' scratched it on the Spanish bayonet when I fell. It's no difference. Nothin' struck me. Lysander's gettin' ready to irrigate; he said if you wanted any more tools sharpened, I could fetch 'em down to the forge."

The young man showed a preoccupied indifference to her message. Producing a silk handkerchief, fabulously fine in Melissa's eyes, he bound up the injured wrist, with evident pride in his own deftness and skill.

"Are you quite sure you are able to walk now?" he asked kindly.

"Why, I ain't hurt a bit; not a speck," reiterated the girl, her eyes widening.

Her companion's face relaxed into the suggestion of a smile. He helped her up the bank, making way for her in the chaparral, and tearing away the tangled ropes of the wild-grape vines.

"Tell your father not to send you above the camp again," he said gently, when she was safe in the path; "one of the men will go down with the tools."

Melissa stood beside the flume a moment, irresolute. Her sunbonnet had fallen back a little, disclosing her rustic prettiness.

"I'm much obliged to you," she said quaintly, exhausting her knowledge of the amenities. "I'll send the hankecher back as soon as I can git it washed and done up."

The young man smiled graciously, bowed, raised his hat, and waited until she turned to go; then he bounded down the bank, crashing his way through the underbrush with the pick.

None of the men below had heard the cry, and Poindexter refused to lash himself into any retrospective excitement.

"Confound the girl!" fumed Sterling, vexed, after the manner of men, over the smallest waste of emotion; "why must she frighten a fellow limp by screaming when she wasn't hurt?"

"Possibly for the same reason that the fellow became limp before he knew she *was* hurt," suggested Poindexter; "or she may have thought it an eminently ladylike thing to do; she looks like a designing creature. If the killed and wounded are properly cared for, suppose we examine the result of the blast."

## IV

It was Saturday morning, and Lysander and Melissa were irrigating the orange-trees. Old Withrow sat by the ditch at the corner of the orchard, watching them with a feeble display of interest, while two or three of the children climbed and tumbled over him as if he were some inoffensive domestic animal.

The old man had hung about the place longer than was his wont, filled with a maudlin glee over his own importance as having been in some way instrumental in the trade with Forrester; and he had followed Lysander to the orchard this morning with a confused alcoholic idea that he ought to be present when the water from Flutterwheel Spring was turned on for the first time.

"You'll git a big head," he had said to his wife, as he started, – "a deal bigger head 'n ever. I tole Forrester I'd tell ye it was a good trade, an' I done what I said I'd do. Forrester knowed what he was doin' when he got me" —

"G'long, you old gump!" his spouse had hurled at him wrathfully, ceasing from a vigorous wringing of the mop to grasp the handle with a gesture that was not entirely suggestive of industry.

The old man had put up his hand and wriggled in between Melissa and Lysander with a cur-like movement that brought a grim smile to his son-in-law's face, and made Melissa shrink away from him noticeably. Out in the orchard, however, he ceased to trouble them, being content to smoke and doze by the ditch, while the water ran in a gentle, eddying current from one basin to another, guided now and then by Lysander's hoe.

The boom of the blasting could be heard up the cañon, fainter as the afternoon sea-breeze arose, and Melissa, standing barefoot in the warm, sandy soil, let the water swirl about her ankles as she mended the basins, and thought of the tall young surveyor who had bound up her wounded arm.

"I'm a-goin' to take his hankecher to him to-morruh. Bein' it's Sunday they won't be blastin'."

She leaned on her hoe and looked up the cañon, where the blue of the distant mountains showed soft and smoky among the branches of the sycamores.

"M'lissy!" Lysander called from the lower end of the row of orange-trees, "hain't the ditch broke som'ers, or the water got into a gopher-hole? There ain't no head to speak of."

The girl turned quickly and looked about her. The water had settled into the loose soil of the basins, and was no longer running in the furrow. She walked across, following the main ditch to the edge of the cañon, looking anxiously for the break. The wet sand rippled and glistened in the bottom of the ditch, but no water was to be seen. Lysander, tired of waiting, came striding through the tarweed, with his hoe on his shoulder.

"I guess it's broke funder on up the cañon, Sandy."

Melissa stepped back, as she spoke, to let him precede her on the narrow path, and the two walked silently beside the empty ditch. Lysander's face gathered gloom as they went.

"It's some deviltry, I'll bet!" he broke out, after a while. "Danged if I don't begin to think yer maw's right!"

Melissa did not ask in what her mother was vindicated; she had a dull prescience of trouble. Things seemed generally to end in that way. She turned to her poor hopeless little dream again, and kept close behind Lysander's lank form all the way to Flutterwheel Spring.

Alas! not to Flutterwheel Spring. Where the spray had whirled in a fantastic spiral the day before, the moss was still wet, and the ferns waved in happy unconsciousness of their loss; but the stream that had flung itself from one narrow shelf of rock to another, in mad haste to join the rush and roar of Sawpit Cañon, had utterly disappeared.

Lysander turned to his companion, his face ashen-gray under the week-old stubble of his beard. Neither of them spoke. The calamity lay too near the source of things for bluster, even if Lysander had been capable of bluster. In swift dual vision they saw the same cruel picture: the shriveling orange-

trees, the blighted harvest of figs dropping withered from the trees, the flume dry and useless, the horse-trough empty and warping in the sun, – all the barren hopelessness of a mountain claim without water, familiar to both. And through it all Melissa felt rather than imagined the bitterness of her mother's wrath. Perhaps it was this latter rather than the real catastrophe that whitened the poor young face, turned toward Lysander in helpless dismay.

"Danged if I don't hate the job o' tellin' yer maw," said the man at last, raking the dry boulders with his hoe aimlessly, – "danged if I don't. I can't figger out who's done it, but one thing's certain, – it beats the devil."

Lysander made the last statement soberly, as if this vindication of his Satanic majesty were a simple act of justice. Seeming to consider the phenomenon explained by a free confession of his own ignorance, he ceased his investigation, and sat down on the edge of the ditch hopelessly.

"Don't le' 's tell mother right away, Sandy. Paw's fell asleep, an' he'll think you turned the water off. Mebbe if we wait it'll begin to run again." The hopefulness of youth crept into Melissa's quivering voice.

Lysander shook his head dismally.

"I'm willin' enough to hold off, M'lissy, but I hain't got much hope. There ain't any Moses around here developin' water, that I know of. The meracle business seems to have got into the wrong hands this time; danged if it hain't. It gets away with me how Forrester can dry up a spring at long range that-a-way; there ain't a track in the mud around here bigger 'n a linnet's, – not a track. It's pure deviltry, you can bet on that." Lysander fell back on the devil with restful inconsistency, and fanned himself with his straw hat, curled by much similar usage into fantastic shapelessness.

"I don't believe he done it," said Melissa, obstinately charitable. "I don't believe anybody done it. I believe it just happened. I don't think folks like them care about folks like us at all, or want to pester us. I believe they just play on things and sing," – the color mounted to her face, until the freckles were drowned in the red flood, – "an' laugh, an' talk, an' act pullite, an' that's all. I don't believe Colonel Forrester hates mother like she thinks he does at all. I think he just don't care!"

It was the longest speech Melissa had ever made. Her listener seemed a trifle impressed by it. He rubbed his hair the wrong way, and distorted his face into a purely muscular grin, as he reflected.

"I've a mind to go and see Poindexter," Lysander announced presently. "Poindexter's a smart man, and I b'lieve he's a square man. 'T enny rate, it can't do any good to keep it a secret. Folks'll find it out sooner or later. You stay here a minute, M'lissy, and I'll go on up the cañon."

The young girl seated herself, with her back against a ledge of rocks, and her bare feet straight out before her. She was used to waiting for Lysander. Their companionship antedated everything else in Melissa's memory, and she early became aware that Lysander's "minutes" were fractions of time with great possibilities in the way of physical comfort hidden in the depths of their hazy indefiniteness.

She took off her corded sunbonnet, and crossed her hands upon it in her lap. The shifting sunlight that fell upon her through the moving leaves of the sycamores lent a grace to the angularity of her attitude. She closed her eyes and listened drearily to the sounds of the cañon. The water fretting its way among the boulders below, the desultory gossip of the moving leaves, the shrill, iterative chirp of a squirrel scolding insistently from a neighboring cliff, – all these were familiar sounds to Melissa, and had often brought her relief from the rasping discomfort of family contention; but to-day she refused to be comforted. She had the California mountaineer's worship of water, and the gurgle of the stream among the sycamores filled her with vague rebellion.

"Why couldn't he 'a' let us alone?" she mused resentfully. "As long as he had a share o' the spring it didn't show any signs o' dryin' up. Mother never said nothin' about Flutterwheel to him; it was all his doin's. But it's no use." She dropped her hands at her sides with a little gesture of despair. "He never done it, but mother'll always think so. She does hate him so – so —*pizenous*."

There was a sound of approaching footsteps, and the girl scrambled to her feet. It was not Lysander coming at that businesslike pace. Sterling, hurrying along the path, became conscious of her standing there, in the rigid awkwardness of unculture, and touched his hat lightly.

"Your father says the spring has stopped flowing," he said, pushing aside the ferns where the rocks were yet slimy and moss-grown. "It is certainly very strange."

"Yes, sir," faltered the girl, rubbing the sole of one foot on the instep of the other. "But Lysander ain't my father; he's my brother-'n-law; he merried my sister."

"I beg your pardon," returned the young man absently, running his eye along the stratum of rock in the ledge above them. "I believe he did tell me he was not your father."

No one had ever begged Melissa's pardon before. She meditated a while as to the propriety of saying, "You're welcome," but gave it up, wondering a little that polite society had made no provision for such an emergency, and stood in awkward silence, tying and untying her bonnet-strings.

Sterling pursued his investigations in entire forgetfulness of her presence, until Poindexter appeared in the path. Lysander followed, managing, by length of stride, to keep up with the engineer's brisk movements.

There was much animated talk among the three men, which Melissa made no attempt to follow. The two engineers smiled leniently at Lysander's theory concerning Forrester, and fell into a discussion involving terms which were incomprehensible to both their hearers. All that Melissa did understand was the frank kindness of the younger man's manner, and his evident desire to allay their fears. Colonel Forrester, he assured Lysander, was the kindest-hearted man in the world, – a piece of information which seemed to carry more surprise than comfort to its recipient. He would make it all right as soon as he knew of it, and they would go down and see him at once; that is, Mr. Poindexter would go, and he turned to Poindexter, who said, with quite as much kindness, but a good deal less fervor, that he was going down to Santa Elena that evening to see the Colonel, and would mention the matter to him.

"Don't worry yourself, Sproul," he added guardedly. "If we find out that the work in the cañon has affected the spring, I think it will be all right."

"I reckon you won't be back before Monday?" said Lysander, with interrogative ruefulness.

"Well, hardly; but that isn't very long."

"Folks can git purty dry in two days, 'specially temperance folks, and some of our fam'ly 'll need somethin' to wet their whistles, for there'll be a good deal o' talkin' done on the ranch between this and Monday, if the water gives out." Lysander turned his back on Melissa, who was pressing her bare foot in the soft wet earth at the bottom of the ditch, and made an eloquent facial addition to his remarks, for the benefit of the two men.

Sterling looked mystified, but his companion laughed.

"Oh, is that it? Well, turn some water from the sand-box into the old flume and run it down to your new ditch until I get back. I presume the ownership won't affect the taste. It isn't necessary to say anything about it; that is, unless you think best." He looked toward Melissa doubtfully.

"M'lissy won't blab," returned her brother-in-law laconically.

The young girl blushed, in the security of her sunbonnet, at the attention which this delicately turned compliment drew upon her, and continued to make intaglios of her bare toes in the mud of the ditch.

It occurred to Sterling for the first time that she might represent a personality. He went around the other two men, who had fallen into some talk about the flume, and stood in the path beside her.

"I have not seen you since you were up the cañon," he said kindly. "I hope your arm did not pain you."

Melissa shook her head without looking up.

"It was only a scratch; it didn't even swell up. I never said nothin' about it," she added in a lower tone.

The young man entered into the situation with easy social grace, and lowered his own voice.

"You didn't want to alarm your mother" —

"M'lissy," interrupted Lysander, "I guess I'll go on up to the sand-box with Mr. Poindexter and turn on some water. I wish you'd go 'long down to the orchard and look after the basins till I git back. I won't be gone but a minute."

Sterling lifted his hat with a winsome smile that seemed to illuminate the twilight of poor Melissa's wilted sunbonnet, and the three men started up the cañon, the bay that they pushed aside on the path sending back a sweet, spicy fragrance.

Melissa shouldered her hoe and proceeded homeward.

"He does act awful pullite," she mused, "an' he had on a ring: I didn't know men folks ever wore rings. I wish I hadn't 'a' been barefooted."

Poor Melissa! Sterling remembered nothing at all about her except a certain unconsciously graceful turn she had given her brown ankle as she stood pressing her bare foot in the sand.

## V

On Sunday morning the Withrow establishment wore that air of inactivity which seems in some households intended to express a mild form of piety. Mother Withrow, it is true, had not yielded to the general weakness, and stood at the kitchen table scraping the frying-pan in a resounding way that might have interfered with the matin hymn of a weaker-lunged man than Lysander. That stentorian musician seemed rather to enjoy it, as giving him something definite to overcome vocally, and roared forth his determination to "gather at the river" from the porch, where he sat with his splint-bottomed chair tipped back, and his eyes closed in a seeming ecstasy of religious fervor.

Old Withrow sat on the step, with his chin in his hands, smoking, and two dove-colored hounds stood, in mantel-ornament attitude, before him, looking up with that vaguely expectant air which even a long life of disappointment fails to erase from the canine countenance. Five or six half-clad chickens, huddling together in the first strangeness of maternal desertion, were drinking from an Indian mortar under the hydrant, and mother Withrow, coming to the door to empty her dish-pan, stood a moment looking at them.

"That there hydrant's quit drippin' again," she said gruffly, turning toward the old man. "Them young ones turned it on to get a drink, and then turned it clear off. 'Pears to me they drink most o' the time. I'd think they come by it honestly, if 't wuzn't water. If you ain't too tired holdin' your head up with both hands, s'posin' you stir your stumps and turn it on a drop fer them chickens."

The old man got up with confused, vinous alacrity and started toward the hydrant.

"There's no need o' savin' water on this ranch," he blustered feebly, "I kin tell you that. You'd ought to go up to the spring and see what a good trade you made. I'm a-goin' myself by 'n' by. I knowed" —

He broke off abruptly, as the old woman threw the dish-water dangerously near him.

"If water's so plenty, some folks had ought to soak their heads," she retorted, disappearing through the door.

The old man regulated the hydrant somewhat unsteadily, and returned to a seat on the porch. Lysander's musical efforts had subsided to a not very exultant hum at the first mention of the water supply. Evidently his reflections on that subject were not conducive to religious enthusiasm. Old Withrow assumed a confidential attitude and touched his son-in-law on the knee.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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