

Cullum Ridgwell

The Golden Woman: A Story of the Montana Hills



Ridgwell Cullum

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	18
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	32
CHAPTER VII	37
CHAPTER VIII	42
CHAPTER IX	46
CHAPTER X	48
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	51

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CHAPTER I

AUNT MERCY

An elderly woman looked up from the crystal globe before her. The sound of horse's hoofs, clattering up to the veranda, had caught her attention. But the hard, gray eyes had not yet recovered their normal frigidity of expression. There were still traces in them of the groping mind, searching on, amidst the chaos of a world unseen. Nor was Mercy Lascelles posing at the trade which yielded her something more than her daily bread. She had no reason for pose. She was an ardent and proficient student of that remote science which has for its field of research the border-land between earthly life and the ultimate.

For some moments she gazed half-vacantly through the window. Then alertness and interest came back to her eyes, and her look resumed its normal hardness. It was an unlovely face, but its unloveliness lay in its expression. There was something so unyielding in the keen, aquiline nose and pointed chin. The gray eyes were so cold. The pronounced brows were almost threatening in their marking and depression. There was not a feature in her face that was not handsome, and yet, collectively, they gave her a look at once forbidding, and even cruel.

There was no softening, there never was any softening in Mercy Lascelles' attitude toward the world now. Years ago she may have given signs of the gentler emotions of her woman's heart. It is only reasonable to suppose that at some time or other she possessed them. But now no one was ever permitted beyond the harsh exterior. Perhaps she owed the world a grudge. Perhaps she hoped, by closing the doors of her soul, her attitude would be accepted as the rebuff she intended to convey.

"Is that you, Joan?" she demanded in a sharp, masterful tone.

"It certainly is, auntie," came the gentle, girlish response from the veranda.

The next moment the door of the little morning-room opened, and a tall girl stood framed in its white setting.

Joan Stanmore possessed nothing whatever in common with her aunt. She was of that healthy type of American girl that treats athletics as a large part of her education. She was tall and fair, with a mass of red-gold hair tucked away under the mannish hat which was part of her dark green, tightly-fitting riding habit. Her brow was broad, and her face, a perfect oval, was open and starred with a pair of fearless blue eyes of so deep a hue as to be almost violet. Her nose and mouth were delicately moulded, but her greatest beauty lay in the exquisite peach-bloom of her soft, fair skin.

Joan Stanmore was probably the handsomest girl in St. Ellis City, in a suburb of which she and her aunt lived. She was certainly one of the most popular girls, in spite of the overshadowing threat of an aunt whom everybody disliked and whom most people feared. Her disposition was one of serene gentleness, yet as fearless and open as her beautiful eyes suggested. She was of a strongly independent spirit too, but, even so, the woman in her was never for a moment jeopardized by it; she was never anything but a delightful femininity, rejoicing wholesomely in the companionship of the opposite sex.

She and her aunt had lived for five years in this suburb of St. Ellis. They had left New York for the southwest because the profession of the elder woman had gained unpleasant notoriety in that city of contradictions. The calling of the seer had appealed well enough to the citizens individually, but a wave of moral rectitude, hurling its municipal government spluttering upon a broken shore of repentance, had decided it to expurgate such wickedness from its midst, lest the local canker become

a pestilence which might jeopardize the immortal soul of the citizen, and, incidentally, hand the civic control over to the opposition party.

So aunt and orphaned niece had moved westward, seeking immunity in a region where such obscure professions were regarded with a more lenient eye. Joan had little enough sympathy with her relative's studies. She neither believed in them, nor did she disbelieve. She was so young, and so full of that vitality which makes for the wholesome enjoyment of life, as viewed through eyes as yet undimmed by the bitterness of experience, that she had neither time, place, nor serious thought for such matters. Her only interest, if interest it could be called, was an occasional wonderment at the extent of the harvest Aunt Mercy reaped out of the credulity of the merchant and finance-princes of the city. This, and the state of her aunt's health, as pronounced by Dr. Valmer, were the only things which ever brought such matters as "crystal gazing" and scientific astrology into her mind. Otherwise horoscopes, prognostications, warnings, omens, passed her by as mere words to raise a smile of youthful derision at the expense of those who heaped money for such readings into the seer's lap.

Joan was in no way dependent upon her aunt. Living with her was a matter of personal choice. Mercy Lascelles was her only relative for one thing, and the elder woman being a lonely spinster, it seemed only right that Joan should make her home under her scarcely hospitable roof. Then, too, there was another reason which influenced the girl. It was a purely sentimental reason, such as at her age might well appeal to her. A whisper had reached her to the effect that, hard and unsympathetic as her Aunt Mercy was, romance at one time had place in her life – a romance which left her the only sufferer, a romance that had spelt a life's disaster for her. To the adamant fortune-teller was attributed a devotion so strong, so passionate in the days of her youth that her reason had been well-nigh unhinged by the hopelessness of it. The object of it was her own sister's husband, Joan's father. It was said that at the moment of his death Mercy Lascelles' youth died too. All softness, all gentleness passed out of her life and left her the hard, prematurely aged woman she now was.

As a consequence Joan felt that her duty lay beside a woman whom Fate had treated so ill; that duty demanded that an effort must be made to bring a little brightness into so solitary and loveless a life.

So her choice was made. And as she grew accustomed to the stern companionship she often found herself wondering how a woman of such curiously harsh disposition could ever have been the victim of such a passion as was attributed to her. It was almost inconceivable, especially when she tried to picture the father, whom she had never known, but who was reputed to be such an intensely human man, so full of the many frailties of a Wall Street gambler.

Joan now saw the crystal lying in her aunt's lap. She saw, too, the fevered eyes lifted to her face. And with an uncomfortable feeling of disaster pending she moved across to the window-seat and flung herself upon the pile of down cushions.

"I do hope you're not – not seeing things again, auntie," she said in an anxious voice, her eyes fixed resentfully upon the detested crystal. "You know Dr. Valmer forbade you – practicing for at least six months," she added warningly.

"Dr. Valmer's a fool," came the sharp retort.

The girl flushed. It was not the words: it was the manner that could so hurt. But this time she felt it her duty to continue. Her aunt's health was seriously affected, and the doctor had warned her personally about it.

"I dare say he is, auntie," she protested. "But you pay him good dollars for being one. What is the use of it if you don't take his advice?"

Just for a second a peculiar look flashed into Mercy's eyes. Then she allowed them to drop to the crystal in her lap.

"Go and change your habit. It will keep you busy on your own affairs. They need all your attention – just now."

The rudeness left Joan untouched. She was too seriously concerned.

Mercy Lascelles had only recently recovered from a bad nervous breakdown, the result, so Dr. Valmer, the specialist, assured her, of the enormous strain of her studies. He had warned Joan of the danger to her aunt's mental balance, and begged her to use every effort to keep her from her practice. But Joan found her task well-nigh impossible, and the weight of her responsibility was heavy upon her.

She turned away to the window and gazed out. She was feeling rather hopeless. There were other things worrying her too, small enough things, no doubt, but sufficiently personal to trouble her youthful heart and shadow all her thought with regret. She was rapidly learning that however bright the outlook of her life might be there were always clouds hovering ready to obscure the smiling of her sun.

She looked at the sky as though the movement were inspired by her thought. There was the early summer sun blazing down upon an already parching earth. And there, too, were the significant clouds, fleecy white clouds for the most part, but all deepening to a heavy, gray density. At any moment they might obscure that ruddy light and pour out their dismal measure of discomfort, turning the world from a smiling day-dream to a nightmare of drab regret.

Her mood lightened as she turned to the picture of the garden city in which they lived. It was called a garden city, but, more properly, it was a beautiful garden village, or hamlet. The place was all hills and dales, wood-clad from their crowns to the deepest hollows in which the sandy, unmade roads wound their ways.

Here and there, amidst the perfect sunlit woodlands, she could see the flashes of white, which indicated homes similar to their own. They were scattered in a cunningly haphazard fashion so as to preserve the rural aspect of the place, and constructed on lines that could under no circumstances offend the really artistic eye. And yet each house was the last word in modernity; each house represented the abiding-place of considerable wealth.

Yes, there was something very beautiful in all this life with which she was surrounded. The pity of it was that there must be those clouds always hovering. She glanced up at the sky again. And with a shiver she realized that the golden light had vanished, and a great storm-cloud was ominously spreading its purplish pall.

At that moment her aunt's voice, low and significant, reached her from across the room. And its tone told her at once that she was talking to herself.

"You fool – you poor fool. It awaits you as surely as it awaits everybody else. Ride on. Your fate awaits you. And thank your God it is kept hidden from your blinded eyes."

Joan started.

"Auntie!"

A pair of cold, gray eyes lifted to her face. The shaking, bony hands clutched nervously at the crystal. The eyes stared unseeingly into the girl's face for some moments, then slowly the fever crept into them again – the fever which the doctor had warned Joan against.

"Oh, auntie, put – put that away." Joan sprang from her seat and ran to the other's side, where she knelt imploringly. "Don't – don't talk so. You – frighten me." Then she hurried on as though to distract the woman's attention. "Listen to me. I want to tell you about my ride. I want to tell about –"

"You need tell me nothing. I know it all," Mercy broke in, roughly pushing the clinging hands from about her spare waist. "You rode with young Sorley this morning – Dick Sorley. He asked you to marry him. He told you that since he had known you he had made a small fortune on Wall Street. That he had followed you here because you were the only woman in the world for him. He told you that life without you was impossible, and many other foolish things only fitted for the credulity of a young girl. You refused him. You regretted your refusal in conventional words. And he rode away, back to his hotel, and – his fate."

The girl listened breathlessly, wondering at the accuracy of this harsh recapitulation of the events of her morning ride. But as the final words fell from the seer's lips she cried out in protest —

"Oh, auntie. His fate? How? How? What do you mean? How do you know all this?"

Joan had risen to her feet and stood eyeing her aunt in wonder and amazement. The elder woman fondled her crystal in her thin hands. A look akin to joy suddenly leapt into her burning eyes. Her lips were parted so that they almost smiled.

"It is here, here. All here," she declared exultingly. "The mandates of Fate are voiced amongst the stars, and the moving hand delineates unerringly the enactments – here – here." She raised the crystal and gazed upon it with eyes alight with ecstasy. "It is for the eye to see, and for the mind to read. But the brain that comprehends must know no thought of human passions, no human emotions. There is nothing hidden in all the world from those who seek with the power of heart and brain."

Joan's amazement passed. It was replaced by something like horror and even terror as she listened. To her the words were dreadful, they spoke of the woman's straining brain, and her thoughts flew to the doctor's verdict. Was this the madness he had feared? Was this the final crash of a brain driven to breaking-point? The questions flew through her mind only to be swept aside by the recollection of what her aunt had told her of her morning ride. It was true – true. Every word of it. Where could the insanity lie? No – no. It could not be. But – but – such a power!

Her thoughts were cut short. Again her aunt was speaking. But now her voice had once more resumed its customary harshness. The fire had died out of her eyes. Again the dreaded crystal was lying in her lap, fondled by loving fingers. And something approaching a chuckle of malice was underlying the words which flowed so rapidly from her thin lips.

"Haven't you learned yet? Can't you read what the hand of Fate is trying to point out to your blinded eyes? Did not the man Cahusac ask you to marry him? Did not you refuse him? And did not he die of typhoid within two weeks of committing that foolishness? And Charlie Hemming. He dared to make love to you. What then? Didn't he make a fortune on the Cotton Exchange? Didn't he tell you that it was you who brought him his luck? Luck? Your luck is disaster – disaster disguised. What happened? Hemming plunged into an orgie of riotous living when you refused him. Didn't he squander his fortune, bolt to Mexico, and in twelve months didn't he get shot as a rebel and a renegade, and thus add himself to the list of the victims of your – so-called 'luck'? Luck! Oh, the madness, the blindness of it!"

The woman's passionate bitterness had lost all sense of proportion. She saw only through her straining nerves. And the injustice of it all brought swift protest to Joan's lips.

"You are wrong. You are cruel – bitterly, wickedly cruel, auntie," she cried. "How am I responsible? What have I done?"

In an instant the gray eyes were turned upon her with something akin to ferocity, and her voice rang with passion.

"Wrong? Cruel? I am stating undeniable facts. I am telling you what has happened. And now I am going to tell you the result of your morning's ride. How are you responsible? What have you done? Dick Sorley has gone to his fate as surely as though you had thrust a knife through his heart."

"Aunt! How – how dare – ?"

"How dare I say such things? Because I am telling you the truth – which you cannot bear to face. You must and shall hear it. Who are you to escape the miseries of life such as we all have to suffer? Such as you have helped to make *me* suffer."

"Don't – don't!" Joan covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the sight of that cruel, working face before her – as though to shut out of her mind the ruthless accusation hurled at her.

But the seer was full of the bitterness so long stored up in her heart, and the moment had come when she could no longer contain it beneath the cold mask she had worn for twenty years. The revelation was hers. Her strange mind and senses had witnessed the scenes that now held her in the grip of their horror. They had driven her to the breaking-point, and no longer had she thought for anything but her own sufferings, and the injustice that a pariah should walk at large, unknown to the world, unknown to itself.

“Don’t?” The woman laughed mirthlessly. Her thin lips parted, but the light in her eyes was unrelenting. “I tell you it is so. Dick Sorley has gone to his fate. Straight to his doom from your side. You sent him to it. I have witnessed the whole enactment of it here – in this crystal. You, and you alone, have killed him – killed him as surely as though you had deliberately murdered him! Hark! That is the telephone bell ringing – ”

She paused as the shrill peal of the instrument rang through the room. There was a prolonged ringing. Then it broke off. Then again and again it rang, in short, impatient jerks.

“Go to it, girl. Go and listen to the message. You say I am cruel. Hear what that senseless thing has to tell you. Listen to the voice at the other end. It is at the hospital. The doctor is there, and he will speak to you. And in a ward adjacent, your discarded lover lies – dead.”

CHAPTER II

OVER THE TELEPHONE

From the depths of her high-backed chair Mercy Lascelles stared at the white door beyond which Joan had just vanished. Her gaunt figure was no longer huddled over the fateful crystal she still clutched in her two hands. Her brain was busy, and her eyes were hot and feverish.

She was not thinking of the girl. She was not even thinking of the message traveling over the wire at that moment. That she knew. For her it had no greater significance than that it was the corroboration necessary to convince the girl who was receiving it – to convince her of the truth of that which she had charged her with.

Her mind was far away, back in the dim years of her earlier womanhood. Back amidst scenes of disaster through which she had long since passed. All the old pain and suffering was at the surface again. Again was she torn by the bitterness and injustice that had robbed her of all that seemed good to her in life. Again through her mental picture moved the figures of two men and one woman, the characters who went to make up the cast of her wretched drama. Her feelings were once more afire with hatred, hatred for one, and, for the others, a profound, contemptuous bitterness.

But hatred was dominant. The memory of one of those men had always power to drive her to the verge of madness. He was a handsome, brown-haired man of powerful physique. A man whose gentle manner and swift, hot temper she abhorred, and the memory of whose influence upon her life had still power to grind to ashes every gentle feeling she ever possessed.

It was of one of his terrible tempers she was thinking now. He had displayed a fury she could never, would never forget. It was a memory that tripped her even now at every turn, till it had become something akin to an obsession.

Every detail of the scene was as clear cut in her mind as a hideous cameo, every word he had uttered, the accusations, the insinuations he had made. Even the room, with its simple furnishings, its neatness, its air of care – her care – stood out sharply in her memory. She remembered it all so well. She was in the midst of preparing Charles Stanmore's supper, and Joan, only a couple of weeks old, was fast asleep in an adjoining bedroom. He had chosen this time to call, because he knew that she, Mercy, would be alone.

She remembered his handsome face clouded with sullen anger and jealousy when she let him in at the door of the apartment. And then his first words when he took up his position before the hard-coal stove in the parlor —

"So you've pitched everything to the devil, and taken up your abode with Charlie," he began, in tones of jealous fury. "And he – he is your brother-in-law."

There was no mistaking his meaning. He intended that she should make no mistake, for he added a laugh – a hateful laugh – to his words.

This was the man who had asked her to marry him almost numberless times. This was the man whom she had refused time and again, making it plain that, however hopelessly, her love was given to another. This was the man who knew that she had come at her sister's death to care for the little, new-born, motherless, baby girl, and help the man whom she had always loved out of the hopeless dilemma in which he found himself. This was the man who was the lifelong friend of Charles Stanmore, whose mistress he was accusing her of having become.

She remembered the sudden anger which leapt to her brain. She remembered, too, the thought which came in its midst, and formulated her instant retort.

"Yes," she said coldly. "I have."

Then she saw the real man as she had now come to regard him. She remembered the sudden blaze of his eyes, the ghastly pallor of his face, the look of almost insane jealousy which he turned

upon her. And then came that never-to-be-forgotten insult, those words which had seared themselves upon her woman's heart as though branded thereon with red-hot irons.

"And you are the woman I have loved. Woman?" He laughed. "It's too good for you. Do you know what we men call such creatures as you? All this time you have waited – waited, and the moment your poor sister is in her grave, almost before the blood in her veins is cold, you seize your opportunity to fulfil your mad desire. Taking advantage of Charlie's wretchedness and trouble, you force yourself upon him. You force a position upon him from which there is no escape. The world will accept the position at the value you intend, and he is powerless to do anything but accept it too. You meant to have him, and I suppose he is yours by now. And all this time I have wasted an honest love on you – you – "

And she had answered him, calmly and deliberately, before he could utter the filthy epithet she knew he intended.

"Please keep your voice down, or – or you'll wake little Joan."

Even now she could never quite understand her own attitude at the moment. Something inside her was urging her to fly at his throat and tear the foul words from it. Yet there was something gripping her, something compelling her to a calmness she was powerless to resist.

Then, as swiftly as he had blazed into fury, had come a miraculous change in the man. Perhaps it was the effect of her calm, perhaps it was something in the man himself. Anyway the madness abruptly died out of his eyes and left him shaking. He strove to speak, but no words came. He passed his hand across his forehead as though to remove something that was clouding his brain. He turned from her fixed stare as though he could no longer support it. He moved across the room. He hesitated. He turned to her. She did not see the movement, for her back was now turned, but somehow she felt it.

Then she heard his footsteps again, and, finally, the rattle of the door handle as he clutched it. After that came his voice. All the anger, the jealousy, had gone out of it. It was low, gentle, imploring. But she did not move.

"Mercy, Mercy! For – forgive me. I – "

"Never!"

Oh, the scorn, the hatred she had flung into the word!

The next she remembered was that he passed swiftly and silently from the room. Then, then at last her woman's weakness, a weakness she now so cordially despised, overcame her, and she fell into a chair and wept.

But her weakness was short-lived. Her spirit rose in rebellion, and her tears ceased to flow as the cruel iron entered her soul. She pondered long and deeply, and presently she went on with her preparations for Charles Stanmore's supper as though nothing unusual had occurred.

Nor, when he came home, did she tell him, nor did she ever by word or act permit the secret of that interview to pass out of her keeping. But the memory of it was forever with her. Day and night she hugged it to herself, she nursed it, and fostered it for all those twenty years, the bitterness, the cruel injustice of the insult, grinding its way till it became a part of the very essence of her being.

Suddenly a cry broke in upon her reverie. She started, and her eyes lit with a gleam of satisfaction. Her mind had returned to the present, and she called out —

"Joan!"

Without waiting for an answer she left her seat, and, crossing swiftly to the door, flung it wide open.

Joan staggered in, and, dropping into the welcoming arms of a rocking-chair, she buried her face in her hands.

Mercy Lascelles stood silently contemplating the bowed head. There was no sympathy in her attitude. Her heart was cold and hard as steel. But she was interested in the cause rather than the effect.

After a while the storm of grief slackened. The racking sobs came at longer intervals. Then it was that Mercy Lascelles broke the silence.

“Well?” she demanded sharply.

The tear-stained face was slowly lifted, and the sight of the girl’s distress was heart-breaking.

“He is dead,” Joan said in a choking voice. Then, with something like resentment – “Are – are you satisfied?”

Mercy went back to her chair and her beloved crystal. And after a moment she began to speak in a low, even tone, as though reciting a well-learned lesson.

“It was at the crossing of 36th Street and Lisson Avenue, here the street cars cross, here some also turn off. It was the fault of his horse. The creature shied at a heavy truck. Two cars were approaching from east and west. The shying horse slipped on the granite paving, fell, and was caught between the two meeting cars before they could pull up. The horse was killed on the spot, and – the rider was – ”

“Don’t, auntie! Don’t say it! Yes, yes, he was taken to the hospital, and died of his injuries. But don’t speak of his terrible mutilations. I – I can’t bear it.”

Again Joan buried her face in her hands as though to shut out the horror of it all. But the elder woman had no such scruples.

“Why harrow yourself with the picture?” she demanded brusquely. “Imagination can add nothing to the fact. Tears will not change one detail. They will only add to your distress. Dick Sorley left your side to go to certain death. Nothing could have averted that. Such was his fate – through you.”

CHAPTER III

THE PARIAH

Joan suddenly threw up her head. There was resentment in the violet depths of her eyes, and her whole expression had hardened. It was as though something of her youth, her softness, had passed from her.

"You must tell me, auntie," she demanded in a tone as cold as the other's. "I – I don't understand. But I mean to. You accuse me with the responsibility of – this. Of responsibility for all that has happened to those others. You tell me I am cursed. It is all too much – or too little. Now I demand to know that which you know – all that there is to know. It is my right. I never knew my father or mother, and you have told me little enough of them. Well, I insist that you shall tell me the right by which you dare to say such things to me. I know you are cruel, that you have no sympathy for any one but – yourself. I know that you grudge the world every moment of happiness that life contains. Well, all this I try to account for by crediting you with having passed through troubles of which I have no knowledge. But it does not give you the right to charge me with the things you do. You shall tell me now the reason of your accusations, or I will leave this home forever, and will never, of my own free will, set eyes on you again."

Mercy's thin lips parted into a half-smile.

"And I intend that you shall know these things," she replied promptly. "You shall know them from my lips. Nor has any one more right to the telling than I." The smile died abruptly, leaving her burning eyes shining in an icy setting. "I am cruel, eh?" she went on intensely. "Cruel because I have refused to bend beneath the injustice of my fellows and the persecutions of Fate. Cruel because I meet the world in the spirit in which it has received me. Why should I have sympathy? The world has robbed me of the only happiness I ever desired. What obligation, then, is mine? You are right. I have no sympathy for any living creature – none!"

Joan offered no comment. She was waiting – waiting for the explanation she had demanded. She was no longer the young girl just returned flushed with the healthy glow of her morning ride. Life had taken on a fresh tone for her since then. It seemed as if years had suddenly passed over her head and carried her into the middle of life.

"You shall have your explanation," Mercy went on after a moment's pause. "I will give it you from the beginning. I will show you how it comes that you are a pariah, shedding disaster upon all men who come under your influence."

"A pariah!"

Joan's eyes suddenly lit with horror at the loathsome epithet.

"Yes. Pariah!" There was no mistaking the satisfaction which the use of the word seemed to give the other woman. In her eyes was a challenge which defied all protest.

As Joan had no further comment she went on —

"But they were all blind – blind to the curse under which you were born – under which you live. You shall have your wish. You shall know the right which I have for charging these things at your door. And the knowledge of it will forever shatter the last castle of your day-dreams."

Something of awe took hold of the listening girl. Something of terror, too. What was the mystery into which she was blindly delving? Knowing her aunt as she did, she felt, by her manner, that her words were the prelude to disclosures that meant disaster to herself. And as the other proceeded her half-frightened eyes watched her, fascinated by the deliberateness of manner and the passionate sincerity underlying every word of the story she told.

"Listen," she said, checking her voice to a low, even monotone. "You are the child of disaster if ever woman was. Your father was a poor, weak fool, a big, handsome, good-hearted fool whom

Nature had endowed with nothing more than a perfect exterior. He was a Wall Street man, of a sort. One of those gamblers who live on the fringe of the big financial circles, and most of whom gather their livelihood from the crumbs falling from the rich man's table, but are ready to steal them when the fall is not sufficient to fill their hungry mouths. For three years he and I were engaged to be married."

She paused, and her hot eyes dropped to the crystal in her lap. Then she went on, with harsh sarcasm breaking the level of her tone —

"For three years we waited for the coming of that trifling luck which would enable us to marry. For three years I worked silently, joyfully, to fill the wonderful bottom drawer which never failed to inspire me with courage and hope. You see I — loved your father."

Again she paused, and Joan forgot something of her own trouble as she noted the evident pain these memories gave to her aunt.

"The luck came. It was small enough. But with the little money I had it was just sufficient. The license was procured. The wedding was fixed. And I — well, God was good, the world was good, and life was a joy beyond all dreams. You see I, too, was young then. My only relative was a younger sister. She was a beautiful girl with red-gold hair. And she was in business in California. I sent for her to come to the wedding."

Joan gave a tense sigh. She knew what was to follow. The red-gold hair told its own story. Mercy Lascelles raised a pair of stony eyes, and her thin lips were smiling.

"I can see you understand," she said, without emotion. "Yes, she came, and she stole your father from me. Oh, yes! she was handsome enough to steal any man. She was even more beautiful than you are. It was just before we were to be married. Less than a week. A good time to steal him from me — after three years of waiting." She laughed bitterly. "She stole him, and I — I cursed her. Oh, I didn't cry out! I simply cursed her, I cursed her offspring, and burned every garment I had made or bought for the wedding in my parlor stove. I sat by and watched the fire as it hungrily devoured each record of my foolish day-dreams. And as each one vanished in cinder and smoke I cursed her from the very bottom of my heart."

The woman laughed again, and Joan could not repress a shudder at the sound.

"Twelve months she had of him. And during those twelve months both he and she nearly drove me mad in their efforts to make me marry your father's great friend and fellow gambler. His name doesn't matter. He was a brown-haired creature, who was, if possible, a greater gambler than your father. But unlike your father his luck was phenomenal. He grew rich whilst Charles Stanmore, with every passing week, grew poorer. And for twelve long months he persecuted me with his attentions. He never left me alone. I sometimes think he was crazy in his desire to marry me. He knew the whole of my wretched story, yet it made no difference. He swore to me in his mildly deliberate way that I should marry him. Perhaps I ought to have read the real character of the man underlying his gentle manner, but, poor fool that I was, I didn't. It was left to later events to open my eyes, events which were to teach me that under the guise of friendship he hated Charles Stanmore, because — because, in spite of everything, I still loved him.

"At the end of those twelve months my cup of bitterness was filled to overflowing. You were born. You, with your deep-blue eyes and red-gold hair. You, Charles Stanmore's child — but not mine."

Her voice died out, and Joan understood something of the passion in this strange woman's soul. But the next moment a hard laugh jarred her nerves. It was a laugh that had no mirth. Only was it an audible expression designed to disguise real feelings.

"Oh, I had no grudge against you. You — you with your crumpled face and big blue eyes. You could make no difference to my life as I saw it. And yet you did." The woman's fingers suddenly clutched the crystal in her lap with a force that left the thin tips of them white and bloodless. "You did. A difference that in my maddest dreams I could never have hoped for. You brought with you the curse of disaster from which there was no escape for those to whom you belonged.

"I can see it all now," she went on exultingly. "I can see it as I saw it then, every detail of it. Your father's gambling had brought him down to something like want. A week before you were born his home was sold up, and he and your mother took shelter in a tiny three-roomed apartment for which they had no money to pay the rent. In desperation he came to *me*— to *me* for help. And I gave it him. The day before you were born I gave him the money for the expenses of your birth and to tide him over for three months. It was almost all I had in the world." Again came that mirthless laugh. Then she hurried on. "But the temptation was too much for Charles Stanmore, gambler that he was. He suddenly found himself with money in his pocket and hope in his foolish soul. There was a big wheat operation going on at the moment, and every penny of the money, along with all the credit he could procure, he plunged into it."

"And lost it all?" Joan whispered.

The other shook her head.

"No. The influence of your strange fate was at work. On the day that you saw light Charles Stanmore was a comparatively rich man. And your mother – was dead."

Joan breathed a deep sigh.

"Yes, wheat went up by leaps and bounds, and your father was delirious with joy. He stood over you – I can see him now – and talked at you in his foolish, extravagant way. 'You're the brightest, happiest, luckiest little hoodlam that ever came into the world,' he cried. 'And your name is "Golden," my little Golden Woman, for if ever there was a golden kiddie in the world you are she. Gold? Why, you've showered it on me. Luck? Why, I verily believe if you'd been around you'd have brought luck to Jonah when he got mixed up with the whale's internals.' And then, just as he finished, the bolt fell. The doctor came in from the next room and took him aside. Your mother was dead."

A sob broke from the listening girl, a great sob of sympathy for the kindly, weak, irresponsible father she had never known.

"Your father's disaster looked like my blessing. I had no regrets for the woman," Mercy went on. "He was mine now by every right. The thief had come by her reckoning. So I seized the opportunity that was thrust in my way. Mine was the right to care for him and help him in his trouble, nor have I shame in saying that I took it.

"But the curse of your life was working full and sure. But for your existence I should never have taken that step. But for that step other matters would never have occurred. When your father's – friend discovered what I had done his fury knew no bounds. His insults were unforgettable – at least by me. But I persisted. For a great hope was at work within me that now your mother was gone eventually Charles Stanmore might come back to his allegiance, and I might step into her place. It was a foolish hope, but – I loved your father.

"Bah!" she went on impatiently. "It is no use raking amongst those ashes. The details don't matter to you. Those things are dead. And only is their effect alive to-day. My hopes were never to be fulfilled. How should they be with the curse of your father's golden girl involving us all in disaster. Let me cut the wretched history as short as I can. At first money was plentiful enough, and luck in that direction seemed to border on the marvelous. To give you an instance your father – imbecile that he was – swore he would test it in your own interests. He hunted round till he found the most hair-brained, wildcat company ever floated for the purpose of robbing moneyed fools, and invested ten thousand dollars in it as a life-dowry for you. It was the joke of all his gambling friends. It was like pitching dollar bills into the Hudson. And then in a month the miraculous happened. After a struggle the company boomed, and you were left with a competence for life. Yes, at first money was plentiful enough, but your father never got over his shock of your mother's death. Sometimes I used to think his brain was weakening. Anyway, he plunged into a wild vortex of gambling. He drank heavily, and indulged himself in excesses from which he had always kept clear up to that time. He took to cards in a manner that frightened even me, used as I was to his weaknesses. And in all these things his friend encouraged and indulged him.

“The end was not far off. How could it be? Your father’s luck waned and his debauches increased. He grew nervous and worried. But he persisted in his mode of life. Then, in a little while, I knew that he was borrowing. He never touched your money. But he was borrowing heavily. This man whom I had come to regard as his evil genius undoubtedly lent him money – much money. Then came a particularly bad time. For two days Charles Stanmore went about like a madman. What the trouble was I never knew – except that it was a question of money. And this terminated in the night of disaster toward which everything had been driving.”

Mercy Lascelles’ voice dropped to a low, ominous pitch, and she paused as though to draw all the threads of memory into one firm grasp. Her look, too, changed. But it was a change quite unnoticed by Joan.

“It was one night in the apartment. I had gone to bed. They, your father and his – friend, were in the parlor. They had quarreled during the evening over some money affairs which I did not understand. Your father was headstrong, as he always was, and the other, well, he rarely raised his voice – he was one of those quiet men who disguise their purposes under a calm atmosphere – as a rule. However, on this occasion high words had passed, and I knew that stormy feelings were underlying the calm which finally ensued. At last, when they sat down to a heavy game of baccarat, I crept away to bed.

“I don’t know how long I had been in bed when it happened. I know I was asleep, for I awakened suddenly with a great sense of shock, and sat up trying to realize what had happened. It took me some moments. I know my mind ran over a dozen things before I decided what to do. I remembered that we were alone in the place. The servants had been dismissed more than a week before. There was only you, and your father, and me in the place. Then I remembered that his friend was there, and I had left them playing cards. Instantly I got out of bed. I slipped on a dressing-gown and crept out into the passage. I moved silently toward the door of the sitting-room. It was wide open. I had left it shut. The gas was full on. I reached the door and cautiously peered in. But there was no need for caution. Your father had fallen forward in his chair, and lay with his head, face downward, upon the table. He was dead and – the other had gone. I ran to the dead man’s side and raised him up. It was too late. All – all I had or cared for in the world had been taken from me by the hand of the murderer.”

“Murdered?” Joan whispered in horrified tones.

“Yes, murdered!” came the swift, vehement retort. “Shot – shot through the heart, and in the stomach – and his murderer had fled. Oh, God, shall I ever forget that moment!”

The woman fell back in her chair, her whole withered body shaking with emotion. Then with an effort she pulled herself together and went on more calmly —

“I hardly know what I did. All I remember is that I gave the alarm, and presently had the police there. I told them all I could, and gave the name and description of – the man who had done the deed. But it was useless. He had gone – bolted. Nor was he ever seen or heard of again. The curse had worked out. You, your father’s golden girl, were left orphaned to the care of the woman to whom your very existence was an ineradicable wrong, and who, through your coming, had been robbed of all that made life possible.”

She raised her crystal and held it poised on the gathered finger-tips of one hand. And when she spoke again her voice had gained strength and tone.

“Since those days I have learnt to read the words that are written by the hand of Fate. And here – here is the open book. It is all here. The storm of disaster that brought you into the world will dog your footsteps. You are cursed with the luck that leads to disaster. Wherever you go men will bless your name, and, almost in the same breath, their blessings shall turn to the direst curses. It is not I who am speaking. My tongue utters the words, but the writing of Fate has been set forth for me to interpret. Wherever you go, wherever you be, you cannot escape the destiny set out for you. I tell you you are a leper, a pariah, whom all men, for their own safeguarding, must shun.”

All through the final pronouncement Joan sat transfixed with horror. A leper! A pariah! Nor, in the light of those things which to her own knowledge had happened, could she doubt the hideous

denunciation. She had heard and understood that ill-luck could and did pursue its victims. But this! Oh, it was too terrible – too cruel! For an instant she thought of the doctor and his words of warning. But one glance at the bowed figure, again intent upon her crystal, and the thought passed. The story she had listened to was too real, too full of those things which had driven her poor aunt to her present unyielding attitude toward the world to be the ravings of an insane mind. And suddenly panic gripped her, that panic which, in a moment of weakness, so easily tends toward self-destruction.

“Is – is there no hope, auntie?” she asked helplessly.

Mercy Lascelles looked up from the crystal. She eyed her niece steadily, as though to read all there was hidden behind the desperate blue eyes.

Slowly she shook her head.

Again came that spasm of panic, and Joan seemed to hurl her whole young strength into denial.

“But there is. There must be,” she cried, with a fierceness that held the other in something like astonishment. “There must be,” she reiterated desperately. “No God could be so cruel – so – so wicked. What have I done to deserve this? The injustice is demoniacal. Far better go and throw myself before a passing train than live to carry such a pestilence with me wherever I go through life. If you can read these things – read on. Read on and tell me, for I swear that I will not live with this curse forever tied about my neck.”

“You will live – you must live. It is written here.” Mercy pointed at the crystal. Then she laughed her cold, mirthless laugh. “There was one power that served me, that helped me to save my reason through all those early days. God knows how it may help you – for I can’t see. I loved your father with a passion nothing, no disaster could destroy. I loved him so that I could crush every other feeling down, subservient to my passion. Go you, child, and find such a love. Go you and find a love so strong that no disaster can kill it. And maybe life may still have some compensations for you, maybe it will lift the curse from your suffering shoulders. It – it is the only thing in the world that is stronger than disaster. It is the only thing in the world that is stronger than – death.”

Joan had no answer. She stared straight ahead of her, focusing some trifling detail of the pattern on the wall paper. Her face was stony – stony as the face of the woman who was watching her. The moments passed rapidly. A minute passed, and neither spoke.

Then at last the girl abruptly rose from her seat. Almost mechanically she moved over to a mirror, and, removing her hat, deftly patted her beautiful hair till it assumed its wonted appearance. And quite suddenly she turned about.

“I have nearly fifty thousand dollars, auntie. I am going to realize that capital. I am going to leave this house – I am going to leave it forever. I shall change my name, and cover up my tracks, for I intend going where I am not known. I am going where men cannot figure in my life, which I intend to begin all over again. The burden Fate has imposed upon me is too great. I am going to run from it.”

She laughed. And her laugh was as mirthless as her aunt’s had been.

CHAPTER IV

TWO MEN OF THE WILDERNESS

The westering sun was drooping heavily toward its fiery couch. The purple of evening was deepening from the east, meeting and blending softly with the gold of the dying day. A great furnace of ruddy cloud rose above the mountain-tops, lighting the eternal snows of the peaks and ancient glaciers with a wealth of kaleidoscopic color. Viewed from the plains below there might have been a great fire raging among the hill-caps, where only snow and ice could provide the fuel.

The radiant colors of sunset held the quiet eyes of a solitary horseman riding amidst the broken lands of the lesser foot-hills. He was a big man, of powerful shoulders and stout limbs. He was a man of fifty or thereabouts, yet his hair was snow white, a perfect mane that reached low upon his neck, touching the soft collar of his cotton shirt. His face was calm with something of the peace of the world through which he was riding, something of the peace which comes to those who have abandoned forever the strife of the busy life beyond. It only needed the garb of the priest, and his appearance would have matched perfectly his sobriquet, "the Padre."

But Moreton Kenyon was clad in the rough moleskin, the riding boots and general make-up of the western life to which he belonged. Even he carried the protecting firearms by which to administer the personal laws of the wilderness. His whole appearance, the very horse under him, a prairie-bred broncho of excellent blood, suggested a man who knew the life amidst which he lived, and was more than capable of surviving it.

Whatever his appearance, whatever his capacity for the rougher corners of earth, Moreton Kenyon was a man of great kindliness, of great sympathy, as the mission from which he was now returning might well have testified. Those who knew him best held him in deep affection. Those who knew him less withheld their judgment, but never failed to treat him with a courtesy not usual amongst the derelicts of an out-world camp.

Just now something of the smallness of human life, of human aims and efforts, of human emotions, was occupying the busy brain behind his reflective eyes. The scene before him, upon which he had so often looked, never failed to remind him of the greatness of that which lay beyond the ken of man. Somehow it exalted his thoughts to planes to which no association with his kind could ever have exalted them. It never failed to inspire him with a reverence for the infinity of power which crowned the glory of creation, and reduced self to a humble realization of its atomic place in the great scheme of the Creator.

His horse ambled easily over the ribbon-like trail, which seemed to rise out of the eastern horizon from nowhere, and lose itself somewhere ahead, amidst the dark masses of forest-crowned hills. The journey was nearly over. Somewhere ahead lay the stable, which could be reached at leisure in the cool of the evening, and neither master nor beast seemed to feel the need for undue haste.

As the light slowly faded out and left the snow-white hill-crests drab with the gray of twilight, the man's mind reverted to those things which had sent him on his journey. Many doubts had assailed him by the way, doubts which set him debating with himself, but which rarely made him turn from a purpose his mind was once set upon. He knew that his action involved more than his own personal welfare, and herein had lain the source of his doubt. But he had clearly argued every point with himself, and through it all had felt the rightness of his purpose.

Then, too, he had had the support of that other with whom he was concerned. And he smiled as he thought of the night when his decision had been taken. Even now the picture remained in his mind of the eager face of his youthful protégé as they discussed the matter. The younger man had urged vehemently, protesting at every objection, that they two had no right to live in comparative comfort with women and children starving about them.

He remembered young Buck's eager eyes, large dark-brown eyes that could light with sudden, almost volcanic heat, or smile their soft, lazy smile of amusement at the quaintnesses of life about him. The Padre understood the largeness of heart, the courage which urged him, the singleness of purpose which was always his. Then, when their decision had been taken, he remembered the abrupt falling back of the man into the quiet, almost monosyllabic manner which usually belonged to him.

Yes, Buck was a good lad.

The thought carried him back to days long gone by, to a time when a lad of something less than eight years, clad in the stained and worn garb of a prairie juvenile, his feet torn and bleeding, his large brown eyes staring out of gaunt, hungry sockets, his thin, pinched, sunburnt face drawn by the ravages of starvation, had cheerfully hailed him from beneath the shelter of a trail-side bush.

That was nearly twenty years ago, but every detail of the meeting was still fresh in his memory. His horse had shied at the sudden challenge. He remembered he had thrashed the creature with his spurs. And promptly had come the youthful protest.

"Say, you needn't to lick him, mister," the boy piped in his thin treble. "Guess he'll stand if you talk to him."

Strangely enough the man had almost unconsciously obeyed the mandate. And the memory of it made him smile now. Then had followed a dialogue, which even now had power to stir every sympathy of his heart. He started by casually questioning the starving apparition.

"Where you from, sonny?" he asked.

And with that unequivocal directness, which, after twenty years, still remained with him, the boy flung out a thin arm in the direction of the eastern horizon.

"Back ther', mister."

The natural sequence was to ask him whither he was bound, and his answer came with a similar gesture with his other hand westward.

"Yonder."

"But – but who're your folks? Where are they?" the Padre had next hazarded. And a world of desolation was contained in the lad's half-tearful reply —

"Guess I ain't got none. Pop an' ma's dead. Our farm was burnt right out. Y' see there was a prairie fire. It was at night, an' we was abed. Pop got me out, an' went back for ma. I never see him agin. I never see ma. An' ther' wa'an't no farm left. Guess they're sure dead."

He fought the tears back manfully, in a way that set the Padre marveling at his courage.

After a moment he continued his interrogation.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Buck," came the frank response.

"Buck – what?"

"Buck – jest plain, mister."

"But your father's name – what was that?"

"Pop."

"Yes, yes. That's what you called him. What did the folks call him?"

"Ther' wa'an't no folks. Jest pop, an' ma, an' me."

A great lump had risen in the man's throat as he looked down into those honest, hungry eyes. And for a moment he was at a loss. But the boy solved his dilemma in a way that proved the man in after-life.

"Say, you ain't a farmer?" he inquired, with a speculative glance over his general outfit.

"Well, I am – in a small way," the Padre had replied, with a half-smile.

The boy brightened at once.

"Then mebbe you can give me a job – I'm lookin' for a job."

The wonder of it all brought a great smile of sympathy to the man's eyes now, as he thought of that little starving lad of eight years old, homeless, wandering amidst the vastness of all that world

– looking for a “job.” It was stupendous, and he had sat marveling until the lad brought him back to the business in hand.

“Y’ see I kin milk – an’ – an’ do chores around. Guess I can’t plough yet. Pop allus said I was too little. But mebbe I kin grow – later. I – I don’t want no wages – on’y food. Guess I’m kind o’ hungry, mister.”

Nor, for a moment, could the man make any reply. The pathos of it all held him in its grip. He leant over and groped in his saddle-bag for the “hardtack” biscuits he always carried, and passed the lad a handful.

He remembered how the boy snatched the rough food from his hands. There was something almost animal in the way he crammed his mouth full, and nearly choked himself in his efforts to appease the craving of his small, empty stomach. In those moments the man’s mind was made up. He watched in silence while the biscuit vanished. Then he carried out his purpose.

“You can have a job,” he said. “I’ve only a small farm, but you can come and help me with it.”

“Do you mean that, mister?” the boy asked, almost incredulously.

Then, as the Padre had nodded, a sigh of thankfulness escaped the young lips, which were still covered with the crumbs of his recent meal.

“Say, I’m glad. Y’ see I was gettin’ tired. An’ ther’ didn’t seem to be no farms around – nor nuthin’. An’ it’s lonesome, too, at nights, lyin’ around.”

The man’s heart ached. He could stand no more of it.

“How long have you been sleeping – out?”

“Three nights, mister.”

Suddenly the Padre reached out a hand.

“Here, catch hold, and jump.”

The boy caught the strong hand, and was promptly swung up into the saddle behind his benefactor. The next moment they were speeding back over the trail to the lad’s new home. Nor was the new-born hope solely beating in the starving child’s heart. The lonely farmer felt that somehow the day was brighter, and the green earth more beautiful – for that meeting.

Such had been the coming together of these two, and through all the long years of weary toil since then they still remained together, working shoulder to shoulder in a relationship that soon became something like that of father and son. The Padre remained the farmer – in a small way. But the boy – well, as had been prophesied by his dead father, later on he grew big enough to plough the furrows of life with a strong and sure hand.

The man’s reflections were broken into abruptly. The time and distance had passed more rapidly than he was aware of. The eager animal under him raised its head, and, pricking its small ears and pulling heavily on the reins, increased its pace to a gallop. Then it was that the Padre became suddenly aware that the home stretch had been reached, and before him lay a long, straight decline in the trail which split a dense pine-wood bluff of considerable extent.

A man was lounging astride of a fallen pine log. His lean shoulders were propped against the parent stump. All about him were other stumps left by those who had made the clearing in the woods. Beyond this the shadowy deep of the woods ranged on every side, except where the red sand of a trail broke the monotony of tone.

Near by two horses stood tethered together by a leading rein. One was a saddle-horse, and the other was equipped with a well-loaded pack-saddle. It was no mean burden of provisions. The carcass of a large, black-tailed deer sprawled across the back of the saddle, while on one side were secured three bags of flour, and on the other several jack-rabbits were strung together. But the powerful beast remained unconcernedly nibbling at the sparse green peeping here and there through the carpet of rotting pine cones and needles which covered the ground.

The man's eyes were half-closed, yet he was by no means drowsing. On the contrary, his mind was essentially busy, and the occasional puckering of his dark brows, and the tightening of his strong jaws, suggested that his thoughts were not always pleasant.

After a while he sat up. But his movement was only the restlessness caused by the worry of his thought. And the gaze he turned upon his foraging horses was quite preoccupied.

A change, however, was not long in coming. Simultaneously both horses threw up their heads, and one of them gave a sharp, comprehensive snort. Instantly the man's large brown eyes lit, and a pleasant expectancy shone in their depths. He was on his feet in an instant, and his tall figure became alert and vibrant with the lithe activity which was so wonderfully displayed in his whole poise. He, too, had become aware of a disturbing element in the silent depths of the woods.

He moved across to the trail, and, glancing down it, from out of the silence reached him the distant, soft plod of hoofs in its heavy covering of sand. His look of satisfaction deepened as he turned back to his horses and tightened the cinchas of the saddles, and replaced the bits in their mouths. Then he picked up the Winchester rifle propped against a tree stump and turned again to the trail.

A moment later another horseman appeared from beyond the fringe of pines and drew up with an exclamation.

"Why, Buck, I didn't reckon to find you around here!" he cried cordially.

"No." The young man smiled quietly up into the horseman's face. The welcome of his look was unmistakable. No words of his could have expressed it better.

The Padre sprang from his saddle with the lightness of a man of half his years, and his eyes rested on the pack-saddle on Buck's second horse.

"For the – folks?" he inquired.

"Guess so. That's the last of the flour."

For a moment a shadow passed across the Padre's face. Then it as suddenly brightened.

"How's things?" he demanded, in the stereotyped fashion of men who greet when matters of importance must be discussed between them.

"So," responded Buck.

The Padre glanced quickly round, and his eyes fell on the log which had provided the other with a seat.

"Guess there's no hurry. Let's sit," he said, indicating the log. "I'm a bit saddle weary."

Buck nodded.

They left the horses to their own devices, and moved across to the log.

"Quite a piece to Leeson Butte," observed Buck casually, as he dropped upon the log beside his friend.

"It surely is," replied the Padre, taking the young man in with a quick, sidelong glance.

Buck was good to look at, so strong, so calmly reliant. Every glance of his big brown eyes suggested latent power. He was not strikingly handsome, but the pronounced nose, the level, wide brows, the firm mouth and clean-shaven chin, lifted him far out of the common. He was clad simply. But his dress was perfectly suitable to the life of the farmer-hunter which was his. His white moleskin trousers were tucked into the tops of his Wellington boots, and a cartridge belt, from which hung a revolver and holster, was slung about his waist. His upper covering was a simple, gray flannel shirt, gaping wide open across his sunburnt chest, and his modest-hued silk handkerchief tied loosely about his neck.

"Leeson Butte's getting quite a city," Buck went on presently.

"That's so," replied the Padre, still bent upon his own thoughts.

After that it was quite a minute before either spoke. Yet there seemed to be no awkwardness. Finally it was the Padre who broached the matters that lay between them.

"I got ten thousand dollars for it!" he said.

“The farm?” Buck’s interrogation was purely mechanical. He knew well enough that the other had purposely gone to Leeson Butte to sell the farm on which they had both lived so long.

The Padre nodded.

“A fancy price,” he said. “The lawyers closed quick. It was a woman bought it. I didn’t see her, though she was stopping at the hotel. I figured on getting seven thousand five hundred dollars, and only asked ten thousand dollars as a start. Guess the woman must have wanted it bad. Maybe she’s heard they’re prospecting gold around. Well, anyway she ought to get some luck with it, she’s made it easy for us to help the folks.”

Buck’s eyes were steadily fixed on the horses.

“It makes me feel bad seeing those fellers chasin’ gold, and never a color to show – an’ all the while their womenfolk an’ kiddies that thin for food you can most see their shadows through ’em.”

The eyes of the elder man brightened. The other’s words had helped to hearten him. He had felt keenly the parting with his farm after all those years of labor and association. Yet, to a mind such as his, it had been impossible to do otherwise. How could he stand by watching a small community, such as he was surrounded with, however misguided in their search for gold, painfully and doggedly starving before his very eyes? For the men perhaps his sympathy might have been less keen, but the poor, long-suffering women and the helpless children – the thought was too painful. No, he and Buck had but their two selves to think of. They had powerful hands with which to help themselves. Those others were helpless – the women and children.

There was compensation in his sacrifice when he remembered the large orders for edible stores he had placed with the merchants of Leeson Butte before leaving that town.

“There’s a heap of food coming along for them presently,” he said after a pause.

Buck nodded.

“I’ve been settin’ that old fur fort to rights, way up in the hills back ther’,” he said, pointing vaguely behind them. “Guess we’d best move up ther’ now the farm’s – sold. We’ll need a few bits of furniture from the farm. That right – now you’ve sold it?”

“Yes. I made that arrangement. She didn’t seem to mind anything I suggested. She must be a bully sort of woman. I’m sorry I didn’t see her. The lawyer says she comes from St. Ellis.”

“Young?” suggested Buck.

The Padre shook his head.

“I wouldn’t say so. A young woman with money wouldn’t be likely to hide herself in these hills.”

“That’s so. Guess it’s the gold fetching her – the gold that isn’t here.”

“Gold’s a cursed thing,” said the Padre reflectively.

“Yet none of ’em seem to shy at the curse.” Buck smiled in his slow way.

“No. Not without experiencing it.” The Padre’s eyes were still serious. Then he went on, “We shan’t farm any up there – at the fur fort?”

Buck shook his head.

“It means clearing every inch of land we need. Guess we best hunt, as we said. We’ll make out with pelts. There’s the whole mountains for traps.”

The other stared over at the horses, and his face was very grave. After a while he turned directly to his companion, and his eyes were mildly anxious.

“See here, Buck,” he said, with what seemed unnecessary emphasis. “I’ve thought a heap on the way back – home. It seems to me I’m not acting square by you. And I’ve made up my mind.” He paused. Buck did not change his position, and his eyes were carefully avoiding those of his companion. Then the Padre went on with a decision that somehow lacked confidence. “You must take half the money, and – and get busy your own way. We’ve done farming, so there’s no reason for you to hang around here. You’re a man now, and you’ve your way to make in the world. You see, when we had the farm I thought it was good for you. It would be yours when I died, and then who knows, in time,

how valuable it might become? Now it's all different. You see the hills are best for me." He smiled strainedly. "They've always been good friends to me. But – "

"Yes, you don't fancy leavin' the hills." Buck's eyes wore a curious expression. They were half-smiling, half-angry. But the other could not see them. The Padre jumped eagerly at his words.

"Just so. I've known them so long now that there doesn't seem to be any other world for me. Even Leeson Butte makes me feel – er – strange."

Buck nodded. Then he changed the subject.

"Say, we don't sleep at the farm to-night," he said. "The blankets are up at the old fort. That's why I got around here. When's she comin' along?"

"In two or three days." The Padre had no choice but to follow the younger man's lead. "She's sending along a farm woman first. She's going to run the place herself."

"Ther's no man comin'?" Buck half turned to his friend.

"I don't think so."

"They can't do it – hereabouts," Buck retorted quickly. "That farm needs a man."

"Yes."

Buck rose abruptly and went over to the horses.

"Going?" inquired the Padre.

"I'll get along with the vittles, and hand 'em over to the boys. Guess I'll git back to the fort in a few hours."

The Padre sat hesitating. He watched the movements of his companion without observing them.

"Buck!"

The other paused as he was about to put his foot into the stirrup. He glanced over his shoulder.

"Yes?"

"About that money. There's five thousand of it yours."

"Not on your life, Padre!"

The elder man sighed as he stood up, and his look changed so that it almost seemed as if a weight had been lifted from his mind. Their eyes met as Buck swung himself into the saddle.

"Then we're going to the hills – together?" he said smilingly.

"Sure," responded Buck promptly. Then he added, "But we're goin' to hunt – not farm."

His decisive manner left no room for doubt, and the Padre, moving over to him, held out his hand. They gripped till the elder man winced.

"I'm glad I found you on the trail that time," he said, looking squarely into the steady brown eyes. "I've always been glad, but – I'm gladder still now."

"Me, too," said Buck, with a light laugh. "Guess I'd have hated to ha' fed the coyotes."

Buck swung round to the trail, leading his packhorse, and the Padre went back to his horse. Just as he was about to mount the younger man's voice reached him again. He paused.

"Say, what's the woman's name?" Buck inquired.

"Eh?" The Padre looked startled. "The woman that bought the farm?"

"Yes – sure."

The elder man's face flushed painfully. It was a curious sight. He looked as stupidly guilty as any schoolboy.

"I – I can't say. I never asked." He felt absurdly foolish and tried to explain. "You see, I only dealt with the lawyer."

Buck shook his head, and smiled in his slow fashion.

"Sold the farm, an' don't know who to! Gee!"

It was good to hear his laugh as he rode away. The Padre watched him till he was out of sight.

CHAPTER V

THE STEEPS OF LIFE

Buck leant over his horse's withers as the laboring creature clawed tenaciously up the face of the rugged hill. His whole poise was that of sympathetic straining. Nor were his eyes a whit less eager than those of the faithful animal under him.

He was making the last twenty yards of the climb up Devil's Hill from the side on which lay the new home adopted by the Padre and himself. Hitherto this point of approach had been accepted as inaccessible for a horseman, nor, until now, had Buck seen reason to dispute the verdict. But, to-day, a sudden impulse had constrained him to make the attempt, not from any vainglorious reason, or from the recklessness which was so much a part of his nature, but simply that somewhere high up on the great table-land at the summit of the hill he hoped to find an answer to a riddle that was sorely puzzling him.

It had been a great struggle even on the lower and more gradual slopes, for the basaltic rocks were barren, and broken, and slippery. There was no gripping soil, or natural foothold. Just the weather-worn rocks which offered no grip to Cæsar's metal-shod hoofs. Yet the generous-hearted beast had floundered on up to the last stretch, where the hill rose abruptly at a perilous angle.

It was a terrible scramble. As he looked above, at the point where the sky-line was cut by the broken rocks, even the reckless heart of the man quailed. Yet there was no turning back. To do so meant certain disaster. No horse, however sure-footed, could ever hope to make the descent by the way they had come. Buck had looked back just for one brief second, but his eyes had instantly turned again for relief to the heights above. Disaster lay behind him. To go on – well, if he failed to reach the brow of the blackened hill it would mean disaster anyway. And a smile of utter recklessness slowly lit his face.

So, with set jaws and straining body, he urged Cæsar to a last supreme effort, and the great black creature responded gallantly. With head low to the ground, his muscles standing out like ropes upon his shoulders, his forelegs bent like grappling-hooks, his quarters tucked beneath him, he put his giant heart into the work. Step by step, inch by inch he gained, yawing and sliding, stumbling and floundering, making way where all way seemed impossible. Slowly they crept up, slowly, slowly they neared that coveted line. Buck was breathing hard. Cæsar was blowing and had thrown his mouth agape, a sign that beyond this he could make no further effort. Five yards – two yards. The jagged line seemed to come down to meet them. At last, with a final spring, the great horse trampled it under foot.

Buck heaved a sigh of relief.

"Gee!" he murmured. Then with the wide, black plain stretching before him, its limits lost in a strange mist, he flung out of the saddle.

He stared about him curiously. Devil's Hill was in no way new to him. Many a time he had visited its mysterious regions, but always had he approached it from the prospecting camp, or his own farm, both of which lay away on the northern side of it.

A wide plateau, nearly two miles in extent, stretched out before him. It was as flat as the proverbial board, with just one isolated rock towering upon its bosom. This was the chief object of interest now. Away in the distance he beheld its ghostly outline, almost lost in the ruddy atmosphere which, just now, seemed to envelop the whole of that Western world.

It was a desolate scene. So desolate as to carry a strange sense of depression to the heart of the horseman. There was not a tree in sight – nor a single blade of grass. There was nothing but the funereal black of basaltic rock, of which the hill seemed to be one solid mass. Such was its desolation that even the horse seemed to be drooping at the sight of it. It was always the same with Buck. There was an influence about the place which always left him feeling rather hopeless. He knew the old

Indian stories of superstition. He knew the awe in which the more ignorant among the white folk held this hill. But these things left him unaffected. He only regarded it from his own personal observations, which were not very enlivening.

Apart from the fact that not one atom of vegetation would grow either upon the surface or slopes of Devil's Hill, no snows in winter had ever been known to settle upon its uninviting bosom. Long before the snow touched its surface, however low the temperature of the atmosphere, however severe a blizzard might be raging – and the Montana blizzards are notorious for their severity – the snow was turned to water, and a deluge of rain hissed upon its surface.

Then, too, there was that mystery rock in the distance of the great plateau. It was one of Nature's little enigmas with which she loves to puzzle the mind of man. How came it there, shot up in the midst of that wide, flat stretch of rock? It stood within a few hundred yards of the eastern brink of the hill which, in its turn, was another mystery. The eastern extremity was not a mere precipice, it was a vast overhang which left Yellow Creek, upon whose banks the mining camps were pitched, flowing beneath the roof of a giant tunnel supported by a single side.

The rock on the plateau reared its misshapen head to the heavens at a height of something over two hundred feet, and its great base formed a vast cavern out of which, fanwise, spread a lake of steaming water, which flowed on to the very brink of the hill where it overshadowed the creek below. Thus it was, more than half the lake was held suspended in mid-air, with no other support than the parent hill from which its bed projected. It was an awesome freak of nature, calculated to astonish even eyes that were accustomed to the sight of it.

But Buck was not thinking of these things now. He was looking at the view. He was looking at the sky. He was looking from this great height for an explanation of the curious, ruddy light in the sunless sky, the teeming haze which weighted down the brain, and, with the slightest movement, opened the pores of the skin and set the perspiration streaming.

In all his years of the Montana hills he had never experienced such a curious atmospheric condition. Less than an hour ago he had left the Padre at the fur fort under a blazing summer sky, with the crisp mountain air whipping in his nostrils. Then, quite of a sudden, had come this change. There were no storm-clouds, and yet storm was in every breath of the superheated air he took. There was no wind, nor anything definite to alarm except this sudden blind heat and the purple hue which seemed to have spread itself over the whole world. Thus it was, as he neared the mysterious mountain, he had made up his mind to its ascent in the hope of finding, there upon the unwholesome plateau, the key to the atmospheric mystery.

But none seemed to be forthcoming, so, turning at last to the patient Cæsar, he once more returned to the saddle and rode on to the barren shores of Devil's Lake.

The lake was a desolate spot. The waters stretched out before him, still, and silent, and black. There was not even a ripple upon its steaming surface. Here the haze hung as it always hung, and the cavern was belching forth deep mists, like the breathing of some prehistoric monster. He glanced up at the birdless rock above, and into the broken outlines of it he read the distorted features of some baleful, living creature, or some savage idol. But there was no answer here to the questions of his mind, any more than there had been on the rest of the plateau, so he rode on along the edge of the water.

He reached the extreme end of the lake and paused again. He could go no farther, for nothing but a rocky parapet, less than twenty feet wide, barred the waters from tumbling headlong to the depths below.

After a moment Cæsar grew restless, his equine nerves seemed to be on a jangle, and the steady hand of his master had no effect. His eyes were wistful and dilated, and he glanced distrustfully from side to side, snorting loudly his evident alarm. Buck moved him away from his proximity to the water, and turned to a critical survey of the remoter crests of the Rocky Mountains.

The white snowcaps had gone. The purple of the lesser hills, usually so delicate in their gradings, were lost in one monotony of dull red light. The nearer distance was a mere world of ghostly shadows

tinged with the same threatening hue, and only the immediate neighborhood was in any way clean cut and sharp to the eye. His brows drew together in perplexity. Again, down there in the valley, beyond the brink of the plateau, the dull red fog prevailed, and yet through it he could see the dim picture of grass-land, of woods, of river, and the rising slopes of more hills beyond.

No, the secret of the atmospheric phenomenon was not up here, and it was useless to waste more time. So he moved off, much to his impatient horse's relief, in a direction where he knew a gentle slope would lead him from the hilltop to the neighborhood of the old farm and the ford across Yellow Creek.

But even this way the road required negotiation, for the same bald rocks and barrenness offered no sure foothold. However, Cæsar was used to this path, and made no mistakes. His master gave him his head, and, with eyes to the ground, the sure-footed beast moved along with almost cat-like certainty. At last the soft soil of the valley was reached again, and once more the deepening woods swallowed them up.

The end of Buck's journey lay across Yellow Creek, where a few miserable hovels sheltered a small community of starving gold-seekers, and thither he now hastened. On his way he had a distant view of the old farm. He would have preferred to have avoided it, but that was quite impossible. He had not yet got over the parting from it, which had taken place the previous day. To him had fallen the lot of handing it over to the farm-wife who had been sent on ahead from Leeson Butte to prepare it for her employer's coming. And the full sense of his loss was still upon him. Wrong as he knew himself to be, he resented the newcomer's presence in his old home, and could not help regarding her as something in the nature of a usurper.

The camp to which he was riding was a wretched enough place. Nor could Nature, here in her most luxuriant mood, relieve it from its sordid aspect. A few of the huts were sheltered at the fringe of the dark woods, but most were set out upon the foreground of grass, which fronted the little stream.

As Buck approached he could not help feeling that they were the most deplorable huts ever built. They were like a number of inverted square boxes, with roofs sloping from front to back. They were made out of rough logs cut from the pine woods, roofed in with an ill-laid thatch of mud and grass, supported on the lesser limbs cut from the trees felled to supply the logs. How could such despairing hovels ever be expected to shelter men marked out for success? There was disaster, even tragedy, in every line of them. They were scarcely even shelters from the elements. With their broken mud plaster, their doorless entrances, their ill-laid thatch, they were surely little better than sieves.

Then their surroundings of garbage, their remnants of coarse garments hanging out upon adjacent bushes, their lack of every outward sign of industrial prosperity. No, to Buck's sympathetic eyes, there was tragedy written in every detail of the place.

Were not these people a small band of regular tramp gold-seekers? What was their outlook? What was their perspective? The tramp gold-seeker is a creature apart from the rest of the laboring world. He is not an ordinary worker seeking livelihood in a regular return from his daily effort. He works under the influence of a craze that is little less than disease. He could never content himself with stereotyped employment.

Besides, the rot of degradation soon seizes upon his moral nature. No matter what his origin, what his upbringing, his education, his pursuit of gold seems to have a deadening effect upon all his finer instincts, and reduces him swiftly to little better than the original animal. Civilization is forgotten, buried deep beneath a mire of moral mud, accumulated in long years, and often in months only of association with the derelicts and "hard cases" of the world. Rarely enough, when Fortune's pendulum swings toward one more favored individual, a flickering desire to return to gentler paths will momentarily stir amidst the mire, but it seldom amounts to more than something in the nature of a drunkard's dream in moments of sobriety, and passes just as swiftly. The lustful animal appetite is too powerful; it demands the sordid pleasures which the possession of gold makes possible. Nor will it be satisfied with anything else. A tramp gold-seeker is irreclaimable. His joy lies in his quest and the

dreams of fortune which are all too rarely fulfilled Every nerve centre is drugged with his lust, and, like all decadents, he must fulfil the destiny which his own original weakness has marked out for him.

Buck understood something of all this without reasoning it out in his simple mind. He understood with a heart as reckless as their own, but with a brain that had long since gathered strength from the gentle wisdom of the man who was a sort of foster-father to him. He did not pity. He felt he had no right to pity, but he had a deep sympathy and love for the strongly human motives which stirred these people. Success or failure, he saw them as men and women whose many contradictory qualities made them intensely lovable and sometimes even objects for respect, if for nothing else, at least for their very hardihood and courage.

He rode up to the largest hut, which stood beyond the shadow of a group of pine-trees, and dropped out of the saddle. With careful forethought he loosened the cinchas of Cæsar's saddle and removed the bit from his mouth. Then, with one last look at the purpling heavens, he pushed aside the tattered blanket which hung across the doorway and strode into the dimly-lit apartment.

It was a silent greeting that welcomed him. His own "Howdy" met with no verbal response. But every eye of the men lying about on blankets outspread upon the dusty floor was turned in his direction.

The scene was strange enough, but for Buck it had nothing new. The gaunt faces and tattered clothing had long since ceased to drive him to despairing protest. He knew, in their own phraseology, they were "up against it" – the "it" in this case meaning the hideous spectre of starvation. He glanced over the faces and counted seven of them. He knew them all. But, drawing forward an upturned soap-box, he sat down and addressed himself to Curly Saunders, who happened to be lying on his elbow nearest the door.

"Say, I just came along to give you word that vittles are on the way from Leeson Butte," he said, as though the fact was of no serious importance.

Curly, a short, thick-set man of enormous strength and round, youngish face, eased himself into a half-sitting position. But before he could answer another man, with iron-gray hair, sat up alertly and eyed their visitor without much friendliness.

"More o' the Padre's charity?" he said, in a manner that suggested resentment at the benefit he had no intention of refusing. Curiously enough, too, his careless method of expression in no way disguised the natural refinement of his voice.

Buck shook his head, and his eyes were cold.

"Don't guess there's need of charity among friends, Beasley."

Beasley Melford laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh.

"Guess it makes him feel good dopin' out stuff to us same as if we was bums," he said harshly.

"Shut up!" cried a voice from a remote corner. Buck looked over and saw a lean, dark man hugging his knees and smoking a well-burnt briar pipe. The same voice went on: "Guess you'd sicken most anybody, Beasley. You got a mean mind. Guess the Padre's a hell of a bully feller."

"He sure is," said Montana Ike, lolling over on to his side and pushing his canvas kit-bag into a more comfortable position. "You was sayin' there was vittles comin' along, Buck? Guess ther' ain't no 'chawin' now?"

"Tobacco, sure," responded Buck with a smile.

One by one the men sat up on their frowsy blankets. The thought of provisions seemed to have roused them from their lethargy. Buck's eyes wandered over the faces peering at him out of the murky shadows. The squalor of the hut was painful, and, with the knowledge that help was at hand, the sight struck him even more forcibly.

"Quit work?" he asked a moment later, in his abrupt fashion.

Somebody laughed.

Buck looked round for an answer. And again his eyes caught the steely, ironical gleam in the man Beasley's.

“The last o’ Slaney’s kids ‘passed in’ last night. Guess we’re goin’ to bury her.”

Buck nodded. He had no words. But he carefully avoided looking in the direction of Slaney Dick, who sat in a far corner smoking his pipe and hugging his great knees.

Beasley went on in the same half-mocking tone —

“Guess it’s up to me to read the service over her.”

“You!”

Buck could not help the ejaculation. Beasley Melford was an unfrocked Churchman. Nor was it known the reason of his dismissal from his calling. All Buck knew was that Beasley was a man of particularly low morals and detestable nature. The thought that he was to administer the last rites of the Church over the dead body of a pure and innocent infant set his every feeling in active protest. He turned to Slaney.

“The Padre buried the others?” he said questioningly.

It was Dick’s partner, Abe Allinson, who took it upon himself to answer.

“Y’ see the Padre’s done a heap. Slaney’s missis didn’t guess we’d orter worrit him. That’s how she said.”

Buck suddenly swung round on Beasley.

“Fix it for to-morrow, an’ the Padre’ll be right along.”

He looked the ex-Churchman squarely in the eye. He was not making a request. His words were an emphatic refusal to allow the other the office. It was Slaney who answered him.

“I’m glad,” he said. Then, as an afterthought, “an’ the missis’ll be glad, too.”

After that nobody seemed inclined to break the silence. Nor was it until somebody hawked and spat that the spell was broken.

“We bin holdin’ a meetin’,” said Curly Saunders heavily. “Y’ see, it ain’t no good.”

Buck nodded at the doorway.

“You mean – ?”

“The prospect,” Beasley broke in and laughed. “Say, we sure been suckers stayin’ around so long. Ther’ ain’t no gold within a hundred miles of us. We’re just lyin’ rottin’ around like – stinkin’ sheep.”

Curly nodded.

“Sure. That’s why we held a meeting. We’re goin’ to up stakes an’ git.”

“Where to?”

Buck’s quick inquiry met with a significant silence, which Montana Ike finally broke.

“See here,” he cried, with sudden force. “What’s the use in astin’ fool questions? Ther’ ain’t no gold, ther’ ain’t nuthin’. We got color fer scratchin’ when we first gathered around like skippin’ lambs, but ther’s nuthin’ under the surface, an’ the surface is played right out. I tell you it’s a cursed hole. Jest look around. Look at yonder Devil’s Hill. Wher’d you ever see the like? That’s it. Devil’s Hill. Say, it’s a devil’s region, an’ everything to it belongs to the devil. Ther’ ain’t nuthin’ fer us – nuthin’, but to die of starvin’. Ah, psha’! It’s a lousy world. Gawd, when I think o’ the wimminfolk it makes my liver heave. Say, some of them pore kiddies ain’t had milk fer weeks, an’ we only ke’p ’em alive thro’ youse two fellers. Say,” he went on, in a sudden burst of passion, “we got a right, same as other folk, to live, an’ our kids has, an’ our wimmin too. Mebbe we ain’t same as other folks, them folks with their kerridges an’ things in cities, mebbe our kiddies ain’t got no names by the Chu’ch, an’ our wimmin ain’t no Chu’ch writin’ fer sharin’ our blankets, but we got a right to live, cos we’re made to live. An’ by Gee! I’m goin’ to live! I tell youse folk right here, ther’s cattle, an’ ther’s horses, an’ ther’s grain in this dogone land, an’ I’m goin’ to git what I need of ’em ef I’m gettin’ it at the end of a gun! That’s me, fellers, an’ them as has the notion had best foller my trail.”

The hungry eyes of the man shone in the dusk of the room. The harsh lines of his weak face were desperate. Every word he said he meant, and his whole protest was the just complaint of a

man willing enough to accept the battle as it came, but determined to save life itself by any means to his hand.

It was Beasley who caught at the suggestion.

“You’ve grit, Ike, an’ guess I’m with you at any game like that.”

Buck waited for the others. He had no wish to persuade them to any definite course. He had come there with definite instructions from the Padre, and in his own time he would carry them out.

A youngster, who had hitherto taken no part in the talk, suddenly lifted a pair of heavy eyes from the torn pages of a five-cent novel.

“Wal!” he cried abruptly. “Wot’s the use o’ gassin’? Let’s light right out. That’s how we sed ’fore you come along, Buck.” He paused, and a sly grin slowly spread over his features. Then, lowering his voice to a persuasive note, he went on, “Here, fellers, mebbe ther’ ain’t more’n cents among us. Wal, I’d sure say we best pool ’em, an’ I’ll set right out over to Bay Creek an’ git whisky. I’ll make it in four hours. Then we’ll hev jest one hell of a time to-night, an’ up stakes in the morning, fer – fer any old place out o’ here. How’s that?”

“Guess our few cents don’t matter, anyways,” agreed Curly, his dull eyes brightening. “I’d say the Kid’s right. I ain’t lapped a sup o’ rye in months.”

“It ain’t bad fer Soapy,” agreed Beasley. “Wot say, boys?”

He glanced round for approval and found it in every eye except Slaney’s. The bereaved father seemed utterly indifferent to anything except his own thoughts, which were of the little waxen face he had watched grow paler and paler in his arms only yesterday morning, until he had laid the poor little dead body in his weeping woman’s lap.

Buck felt the time had come for him to interpose. He turned on Beasley with unmistakable coldness.

“Guess the Padre got the rest of his farm money yesterday – when the woman came along,” he said. “An’ the vittles he ordered are on the trail. I’d say you don’t need to light out – yet.”

Beasley laughed offensively.

“Still on the charity racket?” he sneered.

Buck’s eyes lit with sudden anger.

“You don’t need to touch the vittles,” he cried. “You haven’t any woman, and no kiddies. Guess there’s nothing to keep you from getting right out.”

He eyed the man steadily, and then turned slowly to the others.

“Here, boys, the Padre says the food and canned truck’ll be along to-morrow morning. And you can divide it between you accordin’ to your needs. If you want to get out it’ll help you on the road. And he’ll hand each man a fifty-dollar bill, which’ll make things easier. If you want to stop around, and give the hill another chance, why the fifty each will make a grub stake.”

The proposition was received in absolute silence. Even Beasley had no sneering comment. The Kid’s eyes were widely watching Buck’s dark face. Slaney had removed his pipe, and, for the moment, his own troubles were forgotten under a sudden thrill of hope. Curly Saunders sat up as though about to speak, but no words came. Abe Allinson, Ike, and Blue Grass Pete contented themselves with staring their astonishment at the Padre’s munificence. Finally Slaney hawked and spat.

“Seems to me,” he said, in his quiet, drawling voice, “the Padre sold his farm to help us out.”

“By Gee! that’s so,” exclaimed Curly, thumping a fist into the palm of his other hand.

The brightening eyes lit with hope. The whole atmosphere of the place seemed to have lost something of its depression.

Ike shook his head.

“I’m gettin’ out. But say, the Padre’s a bully feller.”

Abe nodded.

“Ike’s right. Slaney an’ me’s gettin’ out, too. Devil’s Hill’s a cursed blank.”

“Me, too,” broke in the Kid. “But say, wot about poolin’ our cents for whisky?” he went on, his young mind still intent upon the contemplated orgie.

It was Buck who helped the wavering men to their decision. He understood them. He understood their needs. The ethics of the proposition did not trouble him. These men had reached a point where they needed a support such as only the fiery spirits their stomachs craved could give them. The Padre’s help would come afterward. At the moment, after the long weeks of disappointment, they needed something to lift them, even if it was only momentarily. He reached round to his hip-pocket and pulled out two single-dollar bills and laid them on the dusty ground in front of him.

“Ante up, boys,” he said cheerfully. “Empty your dips. The Kid’s right. An’ to-morrow you can sure choose what you’re going to do.” Then he turned to the Kid. “My plug Cæsar’s outside. Guess you best take him. He’ll make the journey in two hours. An’ you’ll need to bustle him some, because ther’s a kind o’ storm gettin’ around right smart. Eh?” He turned and glanced sharply at Beasley. “You got a dollar?”

“It’s fer whisky,” leered the ex-Churchman, as he laid the dirty paper on the top of Buck’s.

In two minutes the pooling was completed and the Kid prepared to set out. Eight dollars was all the meeting could muster – eight dollars collected in small silver, which represented every cent these men possessed in the world. Buck knew this. At least he could answer for everybody except perhaps Beasley Melford. That wily individual he believed was capable of anything. He was sure that he was capable of accepting anything from anybody, while yet being in a position to more than help himself.

Buck went outside to see the Kid off, and some of the men had gathered in the doorway. They watched the boy swing himself into the saddle, and the desperate shadows had lightened on their hungry faces. The buoyancy of their irresponsible natures was reasserting itself. That bridge, which the Padre’s promise had erected between their despair and the realms of hope, however slight its structure, was sufficient to lift them once more to the lighter mood so natural to them.

So their tongues were loosened, and they offered their messenger the jest from which they could seldom long refrain, the coarse, deep-throated jest which sprang from sheer animal spirits rather than any subtlety of wit. They forgot for the time that until Buck’s coming they had contemplated the burial of a comrade’s only remaining offspring. They forgot that the grieving father was still within the hut, his great jaws clenched upon the mouthpiece of his pipe, his hollow eyes still gazing straight in front of him. That was their way. There was a slight ray of hope for them, a brief respite. There was the thought, too, of eight dollars’ worth of whisky, a just portion of which was soon to be in each stomach.

But Buck was not listening to them. He had almost forgotten the messenger riding away on his treasured horse, so occupied was he by the further change that had occurred in the look of the sky and in the atmosphere of the valley. Presently he lifted one strong, brown hand to his forehead and wiped the beads of perspiration from it.

“Phew! What heat! Here,” he cried, pointing at Devil’s Hill, away to his left, “what d’you make of that?”

For a moment all eyes followed the direction of his outstretched arm. And slowly there grew in them a look of awe such as rarely found place in their feelings.

The crown of the hill, the whole of the vast, black plateau was enveloped in a dense gray fog. Above that hung a mighty, thunderous pall of purple storm-cloud. Back, away into the mountains in billowy rolls it extended, until the whole distance was lost in a blackness as of night.

It was Curly Saunders who broke the awed silence.

“Jumpin’ Mackinaw!” he cried. Then he looked after their departing messenger. “Say, that feller oughtn’t to’ve gone to Bay Creek. He’ll never make it.”

Beasley, whose feelings were less susceptible, and whose mind was set on the promised orgie, sneered at the other’s tone.

“Skeered some, ain’t you? Tcha’! It’s jest wind – ”

But he never completed his sentence. At that instant the whole of the heavens seemed to split and gape open. A shaft of light, extending from horizon to horizon, paralyzed their vision. It was accompanied by a crash of thunder that set their ear-drums well-nigh bursting. Both lightning and the thunder lasted for what seemed interminable minutes and left their senses dazed, and the earth rocking beneath their feet. Again came the blinding light, and again the thunder crashed. Then, in a moment, panic had set in, and the tattered blanket had fallen behind the last man as a rush was made for the doubtful shelter of the hut.

CHAPTER VI

OUT OF THE STORM

The challenge had gone forth. In those two vivid shafts of light, in the deafening peals of thunder the war of elements had been proclaimed, and these men of the wilderness understood something of their danger.

Thereafter, for some moments, a threatening silence reigned everywhere. The birds, the insects even, all life seemed to crouch, hushed and expectant. The valley might have been the valley of death, so still, so dark, so threatening was the superheated atmosphere that hung over it.

The men within the shelter of the hut waited, and only Buck and Blue Grass Pete stood near the blanket-covered doorway. There was little enough confidence in the inefficient shelter of the hut, but it was their natural retreat and so they accepted it. Then the moment of tension passed, and Buck, glancing swiftly round the hut, seized a hammer and hastily secured the covering of the doorway.

“She’ll be on us right smart,” he observed to Pete, who assisted him while the others looked on.

“Yes,” replied Pete resignedly. “Guess we’re goin’ to git it good.” There was not only resignation, but indifference in his tone.

Buck glanced up at the roof, and the rest followed his gaze curiously. He shook his head.

“It’s worse than – ”

But he did not finish what he had to say. A strange hissing broke from the distance, like the sound of rushing water, and, with each passing moment, it grew in volume until, out of the heart of it, a deep-throated roar boomed over the hilltops.

It was a great wind-storm leaping down from the everlasting snows of the mountains, tearing its way through the lean branches of the forest-tops, the wide-gaping valleys, and rushing up the hillsides with a violence that tore limbs from the parent trunks and rooted out trees that had withstood a thousand storms. It was the deep breath of the storm fiend launched upon a defenseless earth, carrying wreck and destruction whithersoever its blast was turned.

“By Jing’!”

It was Montana Ike who voiced the awe crowding every heart.

But his exclamation brought the practical mind of Buck to consideration of their needs. His eyes turned again to the roof, and Pete voiced his thoughts.

“She’ll carry away like – like a kite when it hits us,” he declared. Several more pairs of eyes were turned helplessly upward. Suddenly Buck swung round upon the doorway.

“Here she comes,” he cried. “Holy – !”

With a rush and a deafening roar the wind hit the building and set it rocking. Buck and Pete flung themselves with arms outspread against the ballooning blanket, and it held. Again the wind crashed against the sides of the hut. Some one flung himself to the two men’s assistance. Then came a ripping and tearing, and the thatch hissed away on the breath of the storm like straw caught in a whirlwind. The men gazed stupidly up at the blackened heavens, which were now like night. There was nothing to be done. What could they do? They were helpless. And not even a voice could make itself heard in the howling of the wind as it shrieked about the angles of the building.

Then came the rain. It fell in great drops whose sheer weight and size carried them, at the moment of impact, through the ragged shirts to the warm flesh beneath. In a second, it seemed, a waterspout was upon them and was pouring its tide into the roofless hut.

With the deluge, the elemental battle began in desperate earnest. Peal after peal of thunder crashed directly overhead, and with it came such a display of heavenly pyrotechnics that in their wildest moments these men had never dreamed of. Their eyes were blinded, and their ear-drums were bursting with the incessant hammering of the thunder.

But the wind had passed on, shrieking and tearing its way into the dim distance until its voice was utterly drowned in the sterner detonations of the battle.

Drenched to the skin, knee-deep in water, the men stood herded together like sheep in a pen. Their blankets were awash and floated about, tangling their legs in the miniature lake that could not find rapid enough exit through the doorway. They could only stand there stupidly. To go outside was to find no other shelter, and only the more openly to expose themselves to the savage forks of lightning playing across the heavens in such blinding streaks. Nor could they help the women even if they needed help in the other huts. The roofs and doors would or would not hold, and, in the latter case, until the force of the storm abated no help could serve them.

The storm showed no signs of abatement. The black sky was the sky of an unlit night. There was no lightening in any direction, and the blinding flashes amidst the din of thunder only helped to further intensify the pitchy vault. The splitting of trees amidst the chaos reached the straining ears, and it was plain that every flash of light was finding a billet for its forked tongue in the adjacent forests.

The time dragged on. How long or how short was the period of the storm none of the men wondered or cared. The rapidity of the thunder crashes, the swift successions of lightning entirely held them, and, strong as they were, these things kept their nerves jumping.

Once in the midst of it all a man suddenly cried out. His cry came with a more than usually brilliant flash of purplish, steel-blue fire. The intensity of it carried pain to the now supersensitive nerves of his vision, and he turned and flung himself with his face buried upon his arm against the dripping wall. It was Beasley Melford. He stood there cowering, a dreadful terror shaking his every nerve.

The others turned stupidly in his direction, but none had thought for his suffering. Each was hard pressed to face the terror of it all himself; each was wondering at what moment his own limits would be reached. Buck alone showed no sign of the nervous tension. His deep brown eyes watched the group about him, automatically blinking with every flash of light, and with only the slightest possible start as the thunder crashed into his ears.

He was thinking, too – thinking hard of many things. The Padre was out in the hills with gun and traps. Would he have anticipated the swift rising storm and regained the shelter of the stout old fort? With the boom of falling trees going on about them, with the fiery crackle of the blazing light as it hit the topmost branches of the adjacent forest, he wondered and hoped, and feared for the old man in the same thought.

Then there were those others. The women and children in the other huts. How were they faring? But he remembered that the married quarters were better built than this hut had been, and he drew comfort from the thought. And what of the Kid, and of Cæsar?

More than two hours passed before any change came. The deafening peals of thunder seemed as though they would never lessen in tone. The night-like heavens seemed as though no sun could ever hope to penetrate them again. And the streaming rain – was there ever such a deluge since the old Biblical days!

Buck understood now the nature of the storm. Probably twenty years would elapse before another cloudburst would occur again, and the thought set him speculating upon the effect this might have upon the lake on Devil's Hill. What might not happen? And then the creek below! He remembered that these huts of the gold-seekers were on the low-lying banks of the creek. What if it flooded? He stirred uneasily, and, turning to the doorway, opened a loose fold in the blanket and peered out.

He saw the creek in a sudden blaze of light, and in that momentary brilliance he saw that the rushing water was rising rapidly. A grave feeling of uneasiness stirred him and he turned back to his companions. For once in his life he felt utterly helpless.

Another hour passed. The atmospheric heat had passed, and the men stood shivering in the water. The chill was biting into their very bones, but still there was no respite. Twice more Buck

turned anxious eyes upon the creek. And each time his alarm increased as the blinding light revealed the rapid rise of the water. He dared not voice his fears yet. He understood the condition of mind prevailing. To warn his companions would be to set them rushing to get their womenfolk out of their shelters, and this must not be thought of – yet.

He had just arrived at the conclusion that he would abide by his next observation when the long-looked-for change began. It came as suddenly as the rising of the storm itself. It came in a rapid lightening of the sky overhead. From black to gray it turned almost in a second. A dull, ominous, rolling world of gray rain-clouds. The thunder died away and the blinding flashes came no more. It was as though the storm had been governed by one all-powerful will and the word to “cease fire” had been hurled across the heavens as the last discharge of monstrous artillery had been fired. Then, with the lifting of the darkness, the rain slackened too, and the deluge eased.

Buck sighed his relief, and Curly Saunders, from near by, audibly expressed his.

“She’s lettin’ up,” he growled.

Pete caught at his words.

“It sure is.”

Buck was about to speak, but his lips remained open and he stood listening.

What was that?

Something was moving beyond the doorway. Something touched the blanket as though seeking support. Then it slid down, its movement visible in the bulging of the drenched cloth. This was followed by a heavy, squelching flop. The body, whatever it was, had fallen into the streaming water pouring from within the hut. Then came a long-drawn, piteous moan that held the men gazing silently and stupidly at the sagging blanket.

It was while they stood thus that the rain ceased altogether, and the great storm-clouds broke and began to disperse, and a watery sunbeam lit the wreck of the passing storm. As its light poured in upon the wretched interior a second moan, short and weak but distinctly audible, reached the astounded ears of the men. There was a moment’s pause as it died out, then Buck’s arm shot out, and, seizing the edge of the blanket, he ripped it from its fastenings and let it fall to the ground. Instantly every neck was set craning, and every eye was alight with wonder, for there, half-resting upon the sill of the doorway, and half-lying upon the ground with the water streaming everywhere about her, lay the huddled, half-drowned figure of a young woman.

“It’s – it’s a – woman,” cried Pete stupidly, unable to contain his astonishment longer.

“It sure is,” murmured Curly, with equal brightness.

But while they gave the company the benefit of their keenness of perception Buck had dropped upon his knees and was bending over the wretched victim of the storm. He raised her, and drew her tenderly into his arms.

“Tain’t one of ours,” announced Ike over his shoulder.

“No.” Buck’s monosyllable displayed no great interest in his remark.

Amidst a dead silence Buck suddenly straightened up, with the dripping figure clasped tightly in his strong arms. A great pity shone in his eyes as he gazed down into the fair young face. It was the first time in all his life he had held a woman in his arms, and the sensation of it made him forget those others about him.

Suddenly Ike’s voice aroused him.

“By Gar!” he cried. “Jest look at that red ha’r. Say, easy, boys, we’re treadin’ it around in the mud.”

It was true. The great masses of the girl’s red-gold hair had fallen loose and were trailing in the water as Buck held her. It reached from the man’s shoulder, where her head was pillowed, and the heavy-footed men were trampling the ends of it into the mud. Ike stooped and rescued the sodden mass, and laid it gently across Buck’s shoulders.

For a moment the sun shone down upon the wondering group. The clouds had broken completely, and were scattering in every direction as though eager to escape observation after their recent shameful display. No one seemed to think of moving out into the rapidly warming open. They were content to gather about Buck's tall figure and gape down at the beautiful face of the girl lying in his arms.

It was Beasley Melford who first became practical.

"She's alive, anyway," he said. "Sort o' stunned. Mebbe it's the lightnin'."

Pete turned, a withering glance upon his foxy face.

"Lightnin' nuthin'," he cried scornfully. "If she'd bin hit she'd ha' bin black an' dead. Why, she – she ain't even brown. She's white as white." His voice became softer, and he was no longer addressing the ex-Churchman. "Did y' ever see sech skin – so soft an' white? An' that ha'r, my word! I'd gamble a dollar her eyes is blue – ef she'd jest open 'em."

He reached out a great dirty hand to touch the beautiful whiteness of the girl's throat with a caressing movement, but instantly Buck's voice, sharp and commanding, stayed his action.

"Quit that!" he cried. "Ke'p your durned hands to yourself," he added, with a strange hoarseness.

Pete's eyes lit angrily.

"Eh? What's amiss?" he demanded. "Guess I ain't no disease."

Beasley chuckled across at him, and the sound of his mirth infuriated Buck. He understood the laugh and the meaning underlying it.

"Buck turned wet nurse," cried the ex-Churchman, as he beheld the sudden flush on the youngster's face.

"You can ke'p your durned talk," Buck cried. "You Beasley – and the lot of you," he went on recklessly. "She's no ord'nary gal; she's – she's a lady."

Curly and Ike nodded agreement.

But Beasley, whatever his fears of the storm, understood the men of his world. Nor had he any fear of them, and Buck's threat only had the effect of rousing the worst side of his nature, at all times very near the surface.

"Lady? Psha'! Write her down a woman, they're all the same, only dressed different. Seems to me it's better they're all just women. An' Pete's good enough for any woman, eh, Pete? She's just a nice, dandy bit o' soft flesh an' blood, eh, Pete? Guess you like them sort, eh, Pete?"

The man's laugh was a hideous thing to listen to, but Pete was not listening. Buck heard, and his dark face went ghastly pale, even though his eyes were fixed on the beautiful face with its closed, heavily-lashed eyes. Pete's attention was held by the delicate contours of her perfect figure and the gaping, bedraggled white shirt-waist, where the soft flesh of her fair bosom showed through, and the delicate lace and ribbons of her undergarments were left in full view.

No one offered Beasley encouragement and his laugh fell flat. And when Curly spoke it was to express something of the general thought.

"Wonder how she came here?" he said thoughtfully.

"Seems as though the storm had kind o' dumped her down," Abe Allinson admitted.

Again Beasley chuckled.

"Say, was ther' ever such a miracle o' foolishness as you fellers? You make me laff – or tired, or something. Wher'd she come from? Ain't the Padre sold his farm?" he demanded, turning on Buck. "Ain't he sold it to a woman? An' ain't he expectin' her along?"

Buck withdrew his eyes from the beautiful face, and looked up in answer to the challenge.

"Why, yes," he said, his look suddenly hardening as he confronted Beasley's face. "I had forgotten. This must surely be Miss – Miss Rest. That's the name Mrs. Ransford, the old woman at the farm, said. Rest." He repeated the name as though it were pleasant to his ears.

"Course," cried Curly cheerfully. "That's who it is – sure."

“Rest, eh? Miss – Rest,” murmured the preoccupied Pete. Then he added, half to himself, “My, but she’s a dandy! Ain’t – ain’t she a pictur’, ain’t she – ?”

Buck suddenly pushed him aside, and his action was probably rougher than he knew. But for some reason he did not care. For some reason he had no thought for any one but the fair creature lying in his arms. His head was throbbing with a strange excitement, and he moved swiftly toward the door, anxious to leave the inquisitive eyes of his companions behind him.

As he reached the door Beasley’s hateful tones arrested him.

“Say, you ain’t takin’ that pore thing up to the fort, are you?” he jeered.

Buck swung about with the swiftness of a panther. His eyes were ablaze with a cold fire.

“You rotten outlaw parson!” he cried.

He waited for the insult to drive home. Then when he saw the fury in the other’s face, a fury he intended to stir, he went on —

“Another insinuation like that an’ I’ll shoot you like the dog you are,” he cried, and without waiting for an answer he turned to the others. “Say, fellers,” he went on, “I’m takin’ this gal wher’ she belongs – down to the farm. I’m goin’ to hand her over to the old woman there. An’ if I hear another filthy suggestion from this durned skunk Beasley, what I said goes. It’s not a threat. It’s a promise, sure, an’ I don’t ever forgit my promises.”

Beasley’s face was livid, and he drew a sharp breath.

“I don’t know ’bout promises,” he said fiercely. “But you won’t find me fergittin’ much either.”

Buck turned to the door again and threw his retort over his shoulder.

“Then you sure won’t forgit I’ve told you what you are.”

“I sure won’t.”

Nor did Buck fail to appreciate the venom the other flung into his words. But he was reckless – always reckless. And he hurried through the doorway and strode off with his still unconscious burden.

CHAPTER VII

A SIMPLE MANHOOD

All thought of Beasley Melford quickly became lost in feelings of a deeper and stronger nature as Buck passed out into the open. His was not a nature to dwell unnecessarily upon the clashing of every-day life. Such pinpricks were generally superficial, to be brushed aside and treated without undue consideration until such time as some resulting fester might gather and drastic action become necessary. The fester had not yet gathered, therefore he set his quarrel aside for the time when he could give it his undivided attention.

As he strode away the world seemed very wide to Buck. So wide, indeed, that he had no idea of its limits, nor any desire to seek them. He preferred that his eyes should dwell only upon those things which presented themselves before a plain, wholesome vision. He had no desire to peer into the tainted recesses of any other life than that which he had always known. And in his outlook was to be witnessed the careful guidance of his friend, the Padre. Nor was his capacity stunted thereby, nor his strong manhood. On the contrary, it left him with a great reserve of power to fight his little battle of the wilderness.

Yet surely such a nature as his should have been dangerously open to disaster. The guilelessness resulting from such a simplicity of life ought surely to have fitted him for a headlong rush into the pitfalls which are ever awaiting the unwary. This might have been so in a man of less strength, less reckless purpose. Therein lay his greatest safeguard. His was the strength, the courage, the resource of a mind trained in the hard school of the battle for existence in the wilderness, where, without subtlety, without fear, he walked over whatever path life offered him, ready to meet every obstruction, every disaster, with invincible courage.

It was through this very attitude that his threat against Beasley Melford was not to be treated lightly. His comrades understood it. Beasley himself knew it. Buck had assured him that he would shoot him down like a dog if he offended against the unwritten laws of instinctive chivalry as he understood them, and he would do it without any compunction or fear of consequences.

A woman's fame to him was something too sacred to be lightly treated, something quite above the mere consideration of life and death. The latter was an ethical proposition which afforded him, where a high principle was in the balance against it, no qualms whatsoever. It was the inevitable result of his harsh training in the life that was his. The hot, rich blood of strong manhood ran in his veins, but it was the hot blood tempered with honesty and courage, and without one single taint of meanness.

As he passed down the river bank, beyond which the racing waters flowed a veritable torrent, he saw the camp women moving about outside their huts. He saw them wringing out their rain-drenched garments. Thus he knew that the storm had served their miserable homes badly, and he felt sorry for them.

For the most part they were heavy, frowsy creatures, slatternly and uncouth. They came generally from the dregs of frontier cities, or were the sweepings of the open country, gleaned in the debauched moments of the men who protected them. Nor, as his eyes wandered in their direction, was it possible to help a comparison between them and the burden of delicate womanhood he held in his arms, a comparison which found them painfully wanting.

He passed on under the bold scrutiny of those feminine eyes, but they left him quite unconscious. His thoughts had drifted into a wonderful dreamland of his own, a dreamland such as he had never visited before, an unsuspected dreamland whose beauties could never again hold him as they did now.

The sparkling sunlight which had so swiftly followed in the wake of the storm, lapping up the moisture of the drenching earth with its fiery tongue, shed a radiance over the familiar landscape,

so that it revealed new and unsuspected beauties to his wondering eyes. How came it that the world, his world, looked so fair? The distant hills, those hills which had always thrilled his heart with the sombre note of their magnificence, those hills which he had known since his earliest childhood, with their black, awe-inspiring forests, they were somehow different, so different.

He traced the purple ridges step by step till they became a blurred, gray monotony of tone fading away until it lost itself in the glittering white of the snowcaps. Everything he beheld in a new light. No longer did those hills represent the battle-ground where he and the Padre fought out their meagre existence. They had suddenly become one vast and beautiful garden where life became idyllic, where existence changed to one long joy. The torrents had shrunk to gentle streams, babbling their wonderful way through a fairy-land of scented gardens. The old forceful tearing of a course through the granite hearts of the hills was a thought of some long-forgotten age far back in the dim recesses of memory. The gloom of the darkling forests, too, had passed into the sunlit parks of delight. The rugged canyons had given place to verdant valleys of succulent pasture. The very snows themselves, those stupendous, changeless barriers, suggested nothing so much as the white plains of perfect life.

The old harsh lines of life had passed, and the sternness of the endless battle had given way to an unaccountable joy.

Every point that his delighted eyes dwelt upon was tinged with something of the beatitude that stirred his senses. Every step he took was something of an unreality. And every whispering sound in the scented world through which he was passing found an echo of music in his dreaming soul.

Contact with the yielding burden lying so passive in his strong arms filled him with a rapture such as he had never known. The thought of sex was still far from his mind, and only was the manhood in him yielding to the contact, and teaching him through the senses that which his upbringing had sternly denied him.

He gazed down upon the wonderful pale beauty of the girl's face. He saw the rich parted lips between which shone the ivory of her perfect, even teeth. The hair, so rich and flowing, dancing with glittering beams of golden light, as, stirring beneath the breath of the mountains, it caught the reflection of a perfect sun.

How beautiful she was. How delicate. The wonderful, almost transparent skin. He could trace the tangle of small blue veins like a fairy web through which flowed the precious life that was hers. And her eyes – those great, full, round pupils hidden beneath the veil of her deeply-fringed lids! But he turned quickly from them, for he knew that the moment she awoke his dream must pass into a memory.

His gaze wandered to the swanlike roundness of her white throat, to the gaping shirt-waist, where the delicate lace and tiny ribbon peeped out at him. It was all so wonderful, so marvelous. And she was in his arms – she, this beautiful stranger. Yet somehow she did not seem like a stranger. To his inflamed fancy she seemed to have lain in his arms all his life, all her life. No, she was no stranger. He felt that she belonged to him, she was part of himself, his very life.

Still she slept on. He suddenly found himself moving with greater caution, and he knew he was dreading the moment when some foolish stumble of his should bring her back to that life which he feared yet longed to behold. He longed for the delight of watching the play of emotions upon her lovely features, to hear her speak and laugh, and to watch her smile. He feared, for he knew that with her waking those delicious moments would be lost to him forever.

So he dreamed on. In his inmost soul he knew he was dreaming, and, in his reckless fashion, he desired the dream to remain unending. He saw the old fur fort no longer the uncouth shelter of two lonely lives, but a home made beautiful by a presence such as he had never dreamed of, a presence that shed beauty upon all that came under the spell of its influence. He pictured the warmth of delight which must be the man's who lived in such an atmosphere.

His muscles thrilled at the thought of what a man might do under such an inspiration. To what might he not aspire? To what heights might he not soar? Success must be his. No disaster could come —

The girl stirred in his arms. He distinctly felt the movement, and looked down into her face with sudden apprehension. But his anxiety was swiftly dispelled, and a tender smile at once replaced the look in his dark eyes. No, she had not yet awakened, and so he was content.

But the incident had brought him realization. His arms were stiff and cramped, and he must rest them. Strong man that he was he had been wholly unaware of the distance he had carried her.

He gently laid her upon the grass and looked about him. Then it was that wonder crept into his eyes. He was at the ford of the creek, more than two miles from the camp, and on the hither bank, where the road entered the water, a spring cart lay overturned and broken, with the team of horses lying head down, buried beneath the turbulent waters as they raced on down with the flood.

Now he understood the full meaning of her presence in the camp. His quick eyes took in every detail, and at once her coming was explained. He turned back in the direction whence he had come, and his mind flew to the distance of the ford from the camp. She had bravely faced a struggle over two miles of a trail quite unknown to her when the worst storm he had ever known was at its height. His eyes came back to the face of the unconscious girl in even greater admiration.

“Not only beautiful but — ”

He turned away to the wreck, for there were still things he wished to know. And as he glanced about him he became more fully aware of the havoc of the storm. Even in the brilliant sunshine the whole prospect looked woefully jaded. Everywhere the signs told their pitiful tale. All along the river bank the torn and shattered pines drooped dismally. Even as he stood there great tree trunks and limbs of trees were washed down on the flood before his eyes. The banks were still pouring with the drainings of the hills and adding their quota to the swelling torrent.

But the overturned spring cart held most interest just now, and he moved over to it. The vehicle was a complete wreck, so complete, indeed, that he wondered how the girl had escaped without injury. Two trunks lay near by, evidently thrown out by the force of the upset, and it pleased him to think that they had been saved to their owner. He examined them closely. Yes, the contents were probably untouched by the water. But what was this? The initials on the lid were “J. S.” The girl’s name was Rest. At least so Mrs. Ransford had stated. He wondered. Then his wonder passed. These were very likely trunks borrowed for the journey. He remembered that the Padre had a leather grip with other initials than his own upon it.

Where was the teamster? He looked out at the racing waters, and the question answered itself. Then he turned quickly to the girl. Poor soul, he thought, her coming to the farm had been one series of disasters. So, with an added tenderness, he stooped and lifted her gently in his arms and proceeded on his way.

At last he came to the farm, which only that morning he had so eagerly avoided. And his feelings were not at all unpleasant as he saw again the familiar buildings. The rambling house he had known so long inspired him with a fresh joy at the thought of its new occupant. He remembered how it had grown from a log cabin, just such as the huts of the gold-seekers, and how, with joy and pride, he and the Padre had added to it and reconstructed as the years went by. He remembered the time when he had planted the first wild cucumber, which afterward became an annual function and never failed to cover the deep veranda with each passing year. There, too, was the cabbage patch crowded with a wealth of vegetables. And he remembered how careful he had been to select a southern aspect for it. The small barns, the hog-pens, where he could even now hear the grunting swine grumbling their hours away. The corrals, two, across the creek, reached by a log bridge of their own construction. Then, close by stood the nearly empty hay corrals, waiting for this year’s crop. No, the sight of these things had no regrets for him now. It was a pleasant thought that it was all so orderly and flourishing, since this girl was its future mistress.

He reached the veranda before his approach was realized by the farm-wife within. Then, as his footsteps resounded on the rough surface of the flooring of split logs, Mrs. Ransford came bustling out of the parlor door.

"Sakes on me!" she cried, as she beheld the burden in her visitor's arms. "If it ain't Miss Rest all dead an' done!" Her red hands went up in the air with such a comical tragedy, and her big eyes performed such a wide revolution in their fat, sunburnt setting that Buck half-feared an utter collapse. So he hurriedly sought to reassure her, and offered a smiling encouragement.

"I allow she's mostly done, but I guess she's not dead," he said quickly.

The old woman heaved a tragic sigh.

"My! but you made me turn right over, as the sayin' is. You should ha' bin more careful, an' me with my heart too, an' all. The doctor told me as I was never to have no shock to speak of. They might set up hem – hemoritch or suthin' o' the heart, what might bring on sing – sing – I know it was suthin' to do with singin', which means I'd never live to see another storm like we just had, not if it sure come on this minit – "

"I'm real sorry, ma'm," said Buck, smiling quietly at the old woman's volubility, but deliberately cutting it short. "I mean about the shock racket. Y' see she needs fixin' right, an' I guess it's up to you to git busy, while I go an' haul her trunks up from the creek."

Again the woman's eyes opened and rolled.

"What they doin' in the creek?" she demanded with sudden heat. "Who put 'em ther'? Some scallawag, I'll gamble. An' you standin' by seein' it done, as you might say. I never did see sech a place, nor sech folk. To think o' that pore gal a-settin' watchin' her trunks bein' pushed into the creek by a lot o' loafin' bums o' miners, an' no one honest enough, nor man enough to raise a hand to – to – "

"With respec', ma'm, you're talkin' a heap o' foolishness," cried Buck impatiently, his anxiety for the girl overcoming his deference for the other's sex. "If you'll show me the lady's room I'll carry her right into it an' set her on her bed, an' – "

"Mercy alive, what's the world a-comin' to!" cried the indignant farm-wife. "Me let the likes o' you into the gal's bedroom! You? Guess you need seein' to by the State, as the sayin' is. I never heard the like of it. Never. An' she jest a slip of a young gal, too, an' all."

But Buck's patience was quite exhausted, and, without a moment's hesitation, he brushed the well-meaning but voluble woman aside and carried the girl into the house. He needed no guidance here. He knew which was the best bedroom and walked straight into it. There he laid the girl upon an old chintz-covered settee, so that her wet clothes might be removed before she was placed into the neat white bed waiting for her. And the clacking tongue of Ma Ransford pursued his every movement.

"It's an insult," she cried angrily. "An insult to me an' mine, as you might say. Me, who's raised two daughters an' one son, all of 'em dead, more's the pity. First you drown the gal an' her baggage, an' then you git carryin' her around, an' walkin' into her virgin bedroom without no by your leave, nor nuthin'."

But Buck quite ignored her protests. He felt it was useless to explain. So he turned back and gave his final instructions from the doorway.

"You jest get her right to bed, ma'm, an' dose her," he said amiably. "I'd guess you best give her hot flannels an' poultices an' things while I go fetch her trunks. After that I'll send off to Bay Creek fer the doctor. He ain't much, but he's better than the hoss doctor fer womenfolk. Guess I'll git back right away."

But the irate farm-wife, her round eyes blazing, slammed the door in his face as she flung her final word after him.

"You'll git back nuthin'," she cried furiously. "You let me git you back here agin an' you'll sure find a sort o' first-class hell runnin' around, an' you won't need no hot flannels nor poultices to ke'p you from freezin' stone cold."

Then, with perfect calmness and astonishing skill, she flung herself to the task of caring for her mistress in that practical, feminine fashion which, though he may appreciate, no man has ever yet quite understood.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECRET OF THE HILL

It was the morning following the great storm, a perfect day of cloudless sunshine, and the Padre and Buck were on their way from the fur fort to the camp. Their mission was to learn the decision of its inhabitants as to their abandonment of the valley; and in the Padre's pocket was a large amount of money for distribution.

The elder man's spirits were quietly buoyant. Nor did there seem to be much reason why they should be. But the Padre's moods, even to his friends, were difficult to account for. Buck, on the contrary, seemed lost in a reverie which held him closely, and even tended to make his manner brusque.

But his friend, in the midst of his own cheerful feelings, would not allow this to disturb him. Besides, he was a far shrewder man than his simple manner suggested.

"It's well to be doing, lad," he said, after some considerable silence. "Makes you feel good. Makes you feel life's worth a bigger price than we mostly set it at."

His quiet eyes took the other in in a quick, sidelong glance. He saw that Buck was steadily, but unseeingly, contemplating the black slopes of Devil's Hill, which now lay directly ahead.

"Guess you aren't feeling so good, boy?" he went on after a moment's thoughtful pause.

The direct challenge brought a slow smile to Buck's face, and he answered with surprising energy —

"Good? Why, I'm feelin' that good I don't guess even — even Beasley could rile me this mornin'."

The Padre nodded with a responsive smile.

"And Beasley can generally manage to rile you."

"Yes, he's got that way, surely," laughed Buck frankly. "Y' see he's — he's pretty mean."

"I s'pose he is," admitted the other. Then he turned his snow-white head and glanced down at the lean flanks of Cæsar as the horse walked easily beside his mare.

"And that boy, Kid, was out in all that storm on your Cæsar," he went on, changing the subject quickly from the man whom he knew bore him an absurd animosity. "A pretty great horse, Cæsar. He's looking none the worse for fetching that whisky either. Guess the boys'll be getting over their drunk by now. And it's probably done 'em a heap of good. You did right to encourage 'em. Maybe there's folks would think differently. But then they don't just understand, eh?"

"No."

Buck had once more returned to his reverie, and the Padre smiled. He thought he understood. He had listened overnight to a full account of the arrival of the new owner of their farm, and had gleaned some details of her attractiveness and youth. He knew well enough how surely the isolated mountain life Buck lived must have left him open to strong impressions.

They set their horses at a canter down the long declining trail which ran straight into the valley above which Devil's Hill reared its ugly head. And as they went the signs of the storm lay everywhere about them. Their path was strewn with débris. The havoc was stupendous. Tree trunks were lying about like scattered nine-pins. Riven trunks, split like match-wood by the lightning, stood beside the trail, gaunt and hopeless. Partially-severed limbs hung drooping, their weeping foliage appealing to the stricken world about them for a sympathy which none could give. Even the hard, sun-baked trail, hammered and beaten to an iron consistency under a hundred suns of summer, was scored with now dry water-courses nearly a foot deep. With all his knowledge and long experience of the mountains even the Padre was filled with awe at the memory of what he had witnessed.

"Makes you think, Buck, doesn't it?" he said, pointing at a stately forest giant stretched prone along the edge of the trail, its proud head biting deeply into the earth, and its vast roots lifting twenty

and more feet into the air. "I was out in the worst of it, too," he went on thoughtfully. Then he smiled at the recollection of his puny affairs while the elements had waged their merciless war. "I was taking a golden fox out of a trap, 'way back there on the side of the third ridge. While I was doing it the first two crashes came. A hundred and more yards away two pines, big fellers, guess they were planted before the flood, were standing out solitary on a big rock overhanging the valley below. They were there when I first bent over the trap. When I stood up they were gone – rock and all. It made me think then. Guess it makes me think more now."

"It surely was a storm," agreed Buck absently.

They reached the open valley, and here the signs were less, so, taking advantage of the clearing, they set their horses at a fast gallop. Their way took them skirting the great slope of the hill-base, and every moment was bearing them on toward the old farm, for that way, some distance beyond, lay the ford which they must cross to reach the camp.

Neither seemed inclined for further talk. Buck was looking straight out ahead in the direction of the farm, and his preoccupation had given place to a smile of anticipation. The Padre was intent upon the black slopes of the hill. Farther along, the hill turned away toward the creek, and the trail bore to the left, passing on the hither side of a great bluff of woods which stretched right up to the very corrals of the farm. It was here, too, where the overhang of the suspended lake came into view, where Yellow Creek poured its swift, shallow torrent in the shadowed twilight of the single-walled tunnel and the gold-seekers held their operations in a vain quest of fortune.

They had just come abreast of this point and the Padre was observing the hill with that never-failing interest with which the scene always filled him. He believed there was nothing like it in all the world, and regarded it as a stupendous example of Nature's engineering. But now, without warning, his interest leapt to a pitch of wonderment that set his nerves thrilling and filled his thoughtful eyes with an unaccustomed light of excitement. One arm shot out mechanically, pointing at the black rocks, and a deep sigh escaped him.

"Mackinaw!" he cried, pulling his horse almost on to its haunches. "Look at that!"

Buck swung round, while Cæsar followed the mare's example so abruptly that his master was almost flung out of the saddle.

He, too, stared across in the direction indicated. And his whispered exclamation was an echo of the other's astonishment.

"By the – !"

Then on the instant an almost unconscious movement, simultaneously executed, set their horses racing across the open in the direction of the suspended lake.

The powerful Cæsar, with his lighter burden, was the first to reach the spot. He drew up more than two hundred yards from where the domed roof forming the lake bed hung above the waters of the creek. He could approach no nearer, and his rider sat gazing in wonder at the spectacle of fallen rock and soil, and the shattered magnificence of the acres of crushed and broken pine woods which lay before him.

The whole face of the hill for hundreds and hundreds of feet along this side had been ruthlessly rent from its place and flung broadcast everywhere, and, in the chaos he beheld, Buck calculated that hundreds of thousands of tons of the blackened rock and subsoil had been dislodged by the tremendous fall.

Just for an instant the word "washout" flashed through his mind. But he dismissed it without further consideration. How could a washout sever such rock? Even he doubted the possibility of lightning causing such destruction. No, his thoughts flew to an earth disturbance of some sort. But then, what of the lake? He gazed up at where the rocky arch jutted out from the parent hill, and apprehension made him involuntarily move his horse aside. But his observation had killed the theory of an earth disturbance. Anything of that nature must have brought the lake down. For the dislodgment began under its very shadow, and had even further deepened the yawning cavern beneath its bed.

The Padre's voice finally broke his reflections, and its tone suggested that he was far less awed, and, in consequence, his thoughts were far more practical.

"Their works are gone," he said regretfully. "I'd say there's not a sluice-box nor a conduit left. Maybe even their tools are lost. Poor devils!"

The man's calm words had their effect. Buck at once responded to the practical suggestion.

"They don't leave their tools," he said. Then he pointed up at the lake. "Say, what if that had come down? What if the bowels o' that hill had opened up an' the water been turned loose? What o' the camp? What o' the women an' – the kiddies?"

His imagination had been stirred again. Again the Padre's practice brought him back.

"You don't need to worry that way, boy. It hasn't fallen. Guess the earth don't fancy turning her secrets loose all at once."

Buck sighed.

"Yet I'd say the luck sure seems rotten enough."

There was no answer, and presently the Padre pointed at the face of the hill.

"It was a washout," he said with quiet assurance. "See that face? It's softish soil. Some sort of gravelly stuff that the water got at. Sort of gravel seam in the heart of the rock."

Buck followed the direction indicated and sat staring at it. Then slowly a curious look of hope crept into his eyes. It was the fanciful hope of the imaginative.

"Here," he cried suddenly, "let's get a peek at it. Maybe – maybe the luck ain't as bad as we think." And he laughed.

"What d'you mean?" asked the Padre sharply.

For answer he had to put up with a curt "Come on." And the next moment he was following in Cæsar's wake as he picked his way rapidly amongst the trees skirting the side of the wreckage. Their way lay inland from the creek, for Buck intended to reach the cliff face on the western side of the fall. It was difficult going, but, at the distance, safe enough. Not until they drew in toward the broken face of the hill would the danger really begin. There it was obvious enough to anybody. The cliff was dangerously overhanging at many points. Doubtless the saturation which had caused the fall had left many of those great projections sufficiently loose to dislodge at any moment.

Buck sought out what he considered to be the most available spot and drew his horse up. The rest must be done on foot. No horse could hope to struggle over such a chaotic path. At his suggestion both animals were tethered within the shelter of trees. At least the trees would afford some slight protection should any more of the cliff give way.

In less than a quarter of an hour they stood a hundred feet from the actual base of the cliff, and Buck turned to his friend.

"See that patch up there," he said, pointing at a spread of reddish surface which seemed to be minutely studded with white specks. "Guess a peek at it won't hurt. Seems to me it's about ten or twelve feet up. Guess ther' ain't need for two of us climbin' that way. You best wait right here, an' I'll git around again after a while."

The Padre surveyed the patch, and his eyes twinkled.

"Ten or twelve feet?" he said doubtfully. "Twenty-five."

"May be."

"You think it's – ?"

Buck laughed lightly.

"Can't say what it is – from here."

The other sat down on an adjacent rock.

"Get right ahead. I'll wait."

Buck hurried away, and for some moments the Padre watched his slim figure, as, scrambling, stumbling, clinging, he made his way to where the real climb was to begin. Nor was it until he saw the tall figure halt under an overhanging rock, which seemed to jut right out over his head, and look up

for the course he must take in the final climb, that Buck's actual danger came home to the onlooker. He was very little more given to realizing personal danger than Buck himself, but now a sudden apprehension for the climber gripped him sharply.

He stirred uneasily as he saw the strong hands reach up and clutch the jutting facets. He even opened his mouth to offer a warning as he saw the heavily-booted feet mount to their first foothold. But he refrained. He realized it might be disconcerting. A few breathless moments passed as Buck mounted foot by foot. Then came the thing the Padre dreaded. The youngster's hold broke, and a rock hurtled by him from under his hand and very nearly dislodged him altogether.

In an instant the Padre was on his feet with the useless intention of going to his aid, but, even as he stood up, his own feet shot from under him, and he fell back heavily upon the rock from which he had just risen.

With an impatient exclamation he looked down to discover the cause of his mishap. There it lay, a loose stone of yellowish hue. He stooped to remove it, and, in a moment, his irritation was forgotten. In a moment everything else was forgotten. Buck was forgotten. The peril of the hill. The cliff itself. For the moment he was lifted out of himself. Years had passed away, his years of life in those hills. And something of the romantic dreams of his early youth thrilled him once again.

He stood up bearing the cause of his mishap clasped in his two hands and stared down at it. Then, after a long while, he looked up at the climbing man. He stood there quite still, watching his movements with unseeing eyes. His interest was gone. The danger had somehow become nothing now. There was no longer any thought of the active figure moving up the face of the hill with cat-like clinging hands and feet. There was no longer thought for his success or failure.

Buck reached his goal. He examined the auriferous facet with close scrutiny and satisfaction. Then he began the descent, and in two minutes he stood once more beside the Padre.

"It's high-grade quartz," he cried jubilantly as he came up.

The Padre nodded, his mind on other things.

"I'd say the luck's changed," Buck went on, full of his own discovery and not noticing the other's abstraction. He was enjoying the thought of the news he had to convey to the starving camp. "I'd say there's gold in plenty hereabouts and the washout – "

The Padre suddenly thrust out his two hands which were still grasping the cause of his discomfiture. He thrust them out so that Buck could not possibly mistake the movement.

"There surely is – right here," he said slowly.

Buck gasped. Then, with shining eyes, he took what the other was holding into his own two hands.

"Gold!" he cried as he looked down upon the dull yellow mass.

"And sixty ounces if there's a pennyweight," added the Padre exultantly. "You see I – I fell over it," he explained, his quiet eyes twinkling.

CHAPTER IX

GATHERING FOR THE FEAST

Two hours later saw an extraordinary change at the foot of Devil's Hill. The wonder of the "washout" had passed. Its awe was no longer upon the human mind. The men of the camp regarded it with no more thought than if the destruction had been caused by mere blasting operations. They were not interested in the power causing the wreck, but only in their own motives, their own greedy longings, their own lust for the banquet of gold outspread before their ravening eyes.

The Padre watched these people his news had brought to the hill with tolerant, kindly eye. He saw them scattered like a small swarm of bees in the immensity of the ruin wrought by the storm. They had for the time forgotten him, they had forgotten everything in the wild moment of long-pent passions unloosed – the danger which overhung them, their past trials, their half-starved bodies, their recent sufferings. These things were thrust behind them, they were of the past. Their present was an insatiable hunger for finds such as had been thrust before their yearning eyes less than an hour ago.

He stood by and viewed the spectacle with a mind undisturbed, with a gentle philosophy inspired by an experience which he alone could appreciate. It was a wonderful sight. The effort, the haste, the almost insane intentness of these people seeking the yellow metal, the discovery of which was the whole bounds of their horizon. He felt that it was good to see them. Good that these untamed passions should be allowed full sway. He felt that such as these were the advance guard of all human enterprise. Theirs was the effort, theirs the hardship, the risk; and after them would come the trained mind, perhaps the less honest mind, the mind which must harness the result of their haphazard efforts to the process of civilization's evolution. He even fancied he saw something of the influence of this day's work upon the future of that mountain world.

But there was regret too in his thought. It was regret at the impossibility of these pioneers ever enjoying the full fruits of their labors. They would enjoy them in their own way, at the moment, but such enjoyment was not adequate reward for their daring, their sacrifice, their hardihood. Well enough he knew that they were but the toilers in a weed-grown vineyard, and that it would fall to the lot of the skilled husbandman to be the man who reaped the harvest.

It was a picture that would remain long enough in his memory. The flaying picks rising and falling amongst the looser débris, the grinding scrape of the shovel, turning again and again the heavy red gravel. The shouts of hoarse voices hailing each other in jubilant tones, voices thrilling with a note of hope such as they had not known for weeks. He saw the hard muscles of sunburnt arms standing out rope-like with the terrific labor they were engaged in. And in the background of it all he saw the grim spectacle of the blackened hill, frowning down like some evil monster, watching the vermin life eating into a sore it was powerless to protect.

It was wonderful, the transformation of these things. And yet it was far less strange than his witness of the spectacle of the beaten, hopeless men he had helped so long up in the camp. He was glad.

He was glad, too, that even Buck had been caught in the fever of the moment. He saw him with the rest, with borrowed tools, working with a vigor and enthusiasm quite unsurpassed by the most ardent of the professional gold-seekers. Yet he knew how little the man was tainted with the disease of these others. He had no understanding whatever of the meaning of wealth. And the greed of gold had left him quite untouched. His was the virile, healthy enthusiasm for a quest for something which was hidden there in the wonderful auriferous soil, a quest that the heart of any live man is ever powerless to resist.

With him it would last till sundown, maybe, and after that the fever would pass from his veins. Then the claims of the life that had always been his would reassert themselves.

After a while the Padre's thoughts drifted to the pressing considerations of the future. Several times he had heard the shouts of men who had turned a nugget up in the gravel. And at each such cry he had seen the rush of others, and the feverish manner in which they took possession of the spot where the lucky individual was working and hustled him out. It was in these rushes that he saw the danger lying ahead.

Hitherto these men had been accustomed to the slow process of washing "pay-dirt." It was not only slow, but unemotional. It had not the power to stir the senses to a pitch of excitement like this veritable Tom Tiddler's ground, pitchforked into their very laps by one of Nature's freakish impulses.

With this thought came something very like regret at the apparent richness of the find. Something must be done, and done without delay, to regulate the situation. The place must be arranged in claims, and definite regulations must be laid down and enforced by a council of the majority. He felt instinctively that this would be the only way to avert a state of anarchy too appalling to contemplate. It would be an easy matter now, but a hopeless task to attempt later on. Yes, a big trouble lay in those rushes, which seemed harmless enough at present. And he knew that his must be the work of straightening out the threatened tangle.

But for the moment the fever must be allowed to run riot. It must work itself out with the physical effort of hard muscles. In the calm of rest after labor counsel might be offered and listened to. But not until then.

So that memorable day wore on to its close. The luck had come not in the petty find such as these men had looked for, but in proportions of prodigal generosity such as Nature sometimes loves to bestow upon those whom she has hit the hardest. She had called to her aid those strange powers of which she is mistress and hurled them headlong to do her bidding. She had bestowed her august consent, and lo, the earth was opened, and its wealth poured out at the very feet of those who had so long and so vainly sought it.

CHAPTER X

SOLVING THE RIDDLE

The new owner of the Padre's farm had quite recovered from the effects of her disastrous journey. Youth and a sound constitution, and the overwhelming ministrations of Mrs. Ransford had done all that was needed to restore her.

She was sitting in an old, much-repaired rocking-chair, in what was obviously the farm's "best" bedroom. Her trunks, faithfully recovered from the wreck of the cart by the only too willing Buck, stood open on the floor amidst a chaotic setting of their contents, while the old farm-wife herself stood over them, much in the attitude of a faithful and determined watch-dog.

The girl looked on indifferent to the confusion and to the damage being perpetrated before her very eyes. She was lost in thoughts of her own which had nothing to do with such fripperies as lawns, and silks, and *suèdes*, or any other such feminine excitements. She was struggling with recollection, and endeavoring to conjure it. There was a blank in her life, a blank of some hours, which, try as she would, she could not fill in. It was a blank, as far as she could make out, which terminated in her arrival at the farm *borne in the arms of some strange man*.

Well might such a thought shut out considerations like the almost certain destruction of a mere wardrobe at the hands of her ignorant but well-meaning helper. It would have been exciting, too, but for her memory of the latter stages of her journey. They were still painful. There was still uncertainty as to what had happened to the teamster and the horses.

At last, however, she abandoned further attempt to solve the riddle unaided, and decided to question her housekeeper.

"Was it the same man who brought those trunks – I mean the same man who – brought me here?" she demanded sharply.

"It surely was," replied Mrs. Ransford, desisting for a moment from her efforts to bestow a pile of dainty shoes into a night-dress case of elaborate drawn thread work. "An' a nice mess he's got things in. Jest look at 'em all tossed about, same as you might toss slap-jacks, as the sayin' is. It's a mercy of heaven, an' no thanks to him, you've got a rag fit to wear. It surely ain't fer me to say it, but it's real lucky I'm here to put things right for you. Drat them shoes! I don't guess I'll ever git 'em all into this bag, miss – ma'm – I mean miss, mum."

Something of the tragedy of her wardrobe became evident to the girl and she went to the rescue.

"I'm sorry, but they don't go in there," she said, feeling that an apology was due for her interference in such well-intended efforts. "That's – you see, that's my sleeping-suit case," she added gently.

"Sleepin'-soot?" A pair of round, wondering eyes stared out through the old woman's glasses.

The girl pointed at the silk trousers and jacket lying just inside the nearest trunk, and the farm-wife picked them up gingerly, letting them unfold as she did so. Just for one moment she inspected them, then she hurriedly let them drop back into the trunk as though they were some dangerous reptile, and, folding her arms, glared into the girl's smiling face in comical reproach.

"You sure don't wear them pants, miss – at night? Not reely?" she exclaimed in horrified tones.

The girl's smile hardened.

"Why, yes. Lots of girls wear sleeping-suits nowadays."

"You don't say!"

The old woman pursed up her lips in strong disapproval. Then, with a disdainful sniff, she went on —

"Wot gals ain't comin' to I don't know, I'm sure. Wot with silk next their skin an' them draughty stockin's, as you might say, things is gettin' to a pretty pass. Say, I wouldn't put myself into them

pants, no, not if the President o' the United States was to stand over me an' wouldn't let me put on nuthin' else."

The girl refrained from reply, but the obvious impossibility of the feat appealed to her sense of humor. However, the solution of her riddle was of prevailing interest, so she returned again to her questioning.

"Did he say how he found me?" she demanded. "Did he tell you any – any particulars of what happened to the cart, and – and the teamster?"

"No, ma'm – miss, beggin' your pardin, – that he didn't. I never see sech a fresh feller outside a noospaper office. An' him the owner of this farm that was, but isn't, as you might say. You take my word for it he'll come to a bad end, he sure will. Wot with them wicked eyes of his, an' that black, Dago-lookin' hair. I never did see a feller who looked more like a scallawag than him. Makes me shiver to think of him a-carryin' you in his two arms. Wher' from sez I —*an' why?*"

"Because I couldn't walk, I expect," the girl replied easily.

The farm-wife shook a fat, warning finger at her.

"Oh, ma'm – miss – that's wot he says! You jest wait till you've got more experience o' scallawags like him an' you'll sure know. Wot I sez is men's that full o' tricks wher' females is to be deceived it 'ud take 'em a summer vacation sortin' 'emself out. Men is shockin' scallawags," she finished up, flinging the shoes pell-mell into the open trunk.

A further rescue of her property was necessary and the girl protested.

"Please don't bother any more with those clothes," she cried hurriedly. "I'll see to them myself." Then, as the woman proceeded to mop her perspiring brow with a pair of silk stockings, she sprang up and thrust a hand-towel toward her. "Use this; you'll find it more absorbent than – er – silk."

The old woman thanked her profusely, and made the exchange. And when the operation was completed the relieved girl returned to her seat and went on with her examination.

"What did you say his name was?"

"I didn't say. An' he didn't tell me, neither. Fellers like him ain't never ready with their names. Maybe he calls himself Moreton Kenyon. Y' see he was the same as handed the farm over, an' you tol' me, back ther' in Leeson Butte, you'd bo't Moreton Kenyon's farm. 'Moreton Kenyon!' Sort o' high-soundin' name for such a scallawag. I don't never trust high-soundin' names. They're most like whitewash. You allus set that sort o' stuff on hog-pens an' sech, as you might say."

"Perhaps he's not as bad as you suspect," the girl suggested kindly. "Lots of good people start by making a bad impression."

"I don't know what that means," cried the other promptly. "But I do know what a scallawag is, an' that's him."

It was useless to seek further information from such a source, so the girl abandoned the attempt, and dismissed the pig-headed housekeeper to her work, work which she felt she was far better suited to than such a delicate operation as the straightening out a wardrobe.

When Mrs. Ransford had taken her unwilling departure, not without several well-meaning protests, the girl bent her own energies to restoring order to her wardrobe. Nor was it an easy task. The masculine manner of the bedroom left much to be desired in those little depositories and cupboards, without which no woman can live in comfort. And during the process of disposing her belongings many mental notes were made for future alterations in the furnishings of her new abode.

It was not a bad room, however. The simplicity and cleanliness of it struck wholesomely upon her. Yes, in spite of what her lieutenant had said about him, Mr. Moreton Kenyon was certainly a man of some refinement. She had never heard that such neatness and cleanliness was the habit amongst small bachelor farmers in the outlands of the West. And this was the man who had carried her – where from?

Again she sat down in the rocker and gave herself up to the puzzlement of those hours of her unconsciousness. The last event that was clear in her mind was the struggle of the teamster to

keep his horses head-on for the bank of the flooded river. She remembered the surging waters, she remembered that the bottom of the cart was awash, and that she sat with her feet lifted and resting on the side of the vehicle. She remembered that the horses were swimming before the driver's flogging whip and blasphemous shoutings. All this was plain enough still. Then came the man's order to herself. He warned her to get ready to jump, and she had been quick to realize the necessity. In spite of the horses' wildest struggles the cart was being washed down-stream. Then had come his final shout. And she had jumped on the instant.

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