Garland Hamlin

They of the High Trails

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They of the High Trails:

Содержание

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THE AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

Many changes have swept over the mountain West since twenty years ago, but romance still clings to the high country. The Grub-Staker, hammer in hand, still pecking at the float, wanders the hills with hopeful patience, walking the perilous ledges of the cliffs in endless search of gold.

The Cow-Boss, reckless rear-guard of his kind, still urges his watch-eyed bronco across the roaring streams, or holds his milling herd in the high parks, but the Remittance Man, wayward son from across the seas, is gone. Roused to manhood by his country's call, he has joined the ranks of those who fight to save the shores of his ancestral isle.

The Prospector still pushes his small pack-mule through the snow of glacial passes, seeking the unexplored, and therefore more alluring, mountain ranges.

The Lonesome Man still seeks forgetfulness of crime in the solitude, building his cabin in the shadow of great peaks.

The Trail-Tramp, mounted wanderer, horseman of the restless heart, still rides from place to place, contemptuous of gold, carrying in his folded blanket all the vanishing traditions of the

wild.

The Fugitive still seeks sanctuary in the green timber – finding the storms of the granite peaks less to be feared than the fury of the law.

The Leaser – the tenderfoot hay-roller from the prairies – still tries his luck in some abandoned tunnel, sternly toiling for his faithful sweetheart in the low country; and

The Forest Ranger, hardy son of the pioneers, representing the finer social order of the future, rides his lonely woodland trail, guarding with single-hearted devotion our splendid communal heritage of mine and stream.

On the High Trail, Spring, 1916.

THE GRUB-STAKER

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THEY OF THE HIGH TRAILS

I
THE GRUB-STAKER

I

"There's gold in the Sierra Blanca country – everybody admits it," Sherman F. Bidwell was saying as the Widow Delaney, who kept the Palace Home Cooking Restaurant in the town of Delaney (named after her husband, old Dan Delaney), came into the dining-room. Mrs. Delaney paused with a plate of steaming potatoes, and her face was a mask of scorn as she addressed the group, but her words were aimed especially at Bidwell, who had just come in from the lower country to resume his prospecting up the gulch.

"It's aisy sayin' gould is in thim hills, but when ye find it rainbows will be fishin'-rods." As she passed the potatoes over Bidwell's head she went on: "Didn't Dan Delaney break his blessed neck a-climbin' the high places up the creek – to no purpis includin' that same accident? You min may talk and talk, but talk don't pay for petaties and bacon, mind that. For eight years I've been here and I'm worse off to-day than iver before – an' the town, phwat is it? Two saloons and a boardin'-house – and not a ton of ore dug – much less shipped out. Y'r large words

dig no dirt, I'm thinkin', Sherm Bidwell."

Bidwell was a mild-spoken man who walked a little sidewise, with eyes always on the ground as though ceaselessly searching for pieces of float. He replied to his landlady with some spirit: "I've chashayed around these mountains ever since I got back from Californey in fifty-four and I know good rocks. I can't just lay my pick on the vein, but I'm due to find it soon, for I'm a-gettin' old. Why, consider the float, it's everywhere – and you know there's colors in every sand-bar? There's got to be a ledge somewhere close by."

The widow snorted. "Hah! Yiss, flo-at! Me windysills is burthened with dirty float – but where's the gould?"

"I'll find it, Mrs. Delaney – but you must be patient," he mildly replied.

"Pashint! Me, pashint! Sure Job was a complainin' mill-wheel beside me, Sherm Bidwell. Me boarders have shrunk to five and you're one o' the five – and here you are after another grub-stake to go picnicking into the mountains wid. I know your smooth tongue – sure I do – but ye're up against me determination this toime, me prince. Ye don't get a pound o' meat nor a measure o' flour from Maggie Delaney – "

Bidwell sat with an air of resigned Christian fortitude while the widow delivered herself. To tell the truth, he had listened to these precise words before – and resented them only because spoken publicly.

The other boarders finished their supper in silence and went

out, but Bidwell lingered to wheedle the mistress while she ate her own fill at the splotched and littered table. The kerosene-lamp stood close to her plate and brought out the glow of her cheek and deepened the blue of her eyes into violet. She was still on the right side of forty and well cared for.

Bidwell shot a shy glance at her. "I like to stir you up, Maggie darlin'; it makes you purty as a girl."

She caught up a loaf of bread and heaved it at him. He caught it deftly and inquired, guilelessly: "Is this the first of my grub-stake, lassie?"

"It is *not!* 'Tis the last crumb ye'll have of me. Out wid ye! Grub-stake indade! You go out this night, me bucko!"

Bidwell rose in pretended fright and shuffled to the door. "I don't need much – a couple o' sacks o' flour – "

She lifted an arm. "You tramp!"

He slammed the door just in time to prevent a cup from flying straight into his smiling eyes. After a moment of silent laughter, and with a wink at the men in the "office," he reopened the door and said:

"Ye're a warm-hearted, handsome girl, Maggie. Two strips o' bacon – "

A muffled cry and a crash caused him to again slam the door and withdraw.

Coming back to the middle of the room, he took out his pipe and began to fill it. One of the younger men said:

"You'll get that grub-stake over the eye; the widdy is

dangerous to-night."

Sherm seemed not much concerned. Having fired his pipe, he took a piece of rock from his pocket. "What do you think o' this?" he inquired, casually.

The other examined it eagerly, and broke out: "Jee – cripes! Why, say! that's jest *rotten* with gold. Where'd you find it?"

"Out in the hills," was the placid reply; "a new vein – high up."

The third man took the rock and said: "That vein has got to be low down – that can't come from high up. We're on the wrong trail. Think o' Cripple Creek – mine's right under the grass on the hills. Yer can't fool me."

"But we know the veins are high – we've seen 'em," argued the other men.

"Yes – but they're different veins. This rock comes from lower down."

"What do you say to that, Sherm?"

"One guess is as good as another," he replied, and moved away with his piece of ore.

"The old man's mighty fly this evenin'. I wonder if he really has trailed that float to a standstill. I'd sooner think he's stringin' us."

Bidwell went out on the edge of the ravine, and for a long time sat on a rock, listening to the roar of the swift stream and looking up at the peaks which were still covered with heavy yellow snow, stained with the impalpable dust which the winter winds had rasped from the exposed ledges of rock. It was chill in the cañon,

and the old man shivered with cold as well as with a sense of discouragement. For twenty years he had regularly gone down into the valleys in winter to earn money with which to prospect in summer – all to no purpose. For years Margaret Delaney had been his very present help in time of trouble, and now she had broken with him, and under his mask of smiling incredulity he carried a profoundly disturbed conscience. His benefactress was in deadly earnest – she meant every word she said – that he felt, and unless she relented he was lost, for he had returned from the valley this time without a dollar to call his own. He had a big, strong mule and some blankets and a saddle – nothing further.

The wind grew stronger and keener, roaring down the cañon with the breath of the upper snows, and the man's blood cried out for a fire (June stands close to winter in the high ranges of the Crestones), and at last he rose stiffly and returned to the little sitting-room, where he found the widow in the midst of an argument with her boarders to prove that they were all fools together for hangin' to the side of a mountain that had no more gould in it than a flatiron or a loomp o' coal – sure thing!

"What you goin' to do about our assays?" asked young Johnson.

"Assays, is it? Annybody can have assays – that will pay the price. Ye're all lazy dogs in the manger, that's phwat ye air. Ye assay and want somebody else to pay ye fer the privilege of workin'. Why don't ye work yer-silves – ye loots? Sit around here expectin' some wan ilse to shovel gould into yer hat. Ye'll

pay me yer board – moind that," she ended, making a personal application of her theories; "ivery wan o' ye."

If any lingering resolution remained in Bidwell's heart it melted away as he listened to Mrs. Delaney's throaty voice and plain, blunt words. Opening the door timidly, he walked in and without looking at the angry woman seized upon his bundles, which lay behind the door.

The widow's voice rang out: "Where ye gawun wid thim bags?"

Bidwell straightened. "They're my bundles, I reckon. Can't a man do as he likes with his own?"

"Not whin he's owin' fer board. Put thim boondles down!"

The culprit sighed and sat down on the bundles. Even young Johnson lost his desire to laugh, for Bidwell looked pathetically old and discouraged at the moment, as he mildly asked:

"You wouldn't send a man out in the night without his blankets, would you?"

"I'd send a sneak to purgatory – if I c'u'd. Ye thought ye'd ooze out, did ye? Nice speciment you are!"

Bidwell was roused. "If I had planned to sneak I wouldn't 'a' come into the room with you a-standin' in the middle of the floor," he replied, with some firmness. "You ordered me out, didn't you? Well, I'm goin'. I can't pay you – you knew that when you told me to go – and I owe you a good deal – I admit that – but I'm going to pay it. But I must have a little time."

The other men, with a grateful sense of delicacy, got up and

went out, leaving Bidwell free space to justify himself in the eyes of the angry woman.

As the door slammed behind the last man the widow walked over and gave Bidwell a cuff. "Get *off* thim boondles. Gaw set on a chair like a man, an' not squat there like a baboon." She pitched his bundles through an open door into a small bedroom. "Ye know where yer bed is, I hope! I do' know phwat Dan Delaney w'u'd say to me, housin' and feedin' the likes o' you, but I'll do it wan more summer – and then ye gaw flyin'. Ye hear that now!"

And she threw the door back on its hinges so sharply that a knob was broken.

Bidwell went in, closed the door gently, and took to his bed, dazed with this sudden change in the climate. "She's come round before – and surprised me," he thought, "but never so durn sudden as this. I hope she ain't sick or anything."

Next morning at breakfast Maggie was all smiles. The storm of the evening before had given place to brilliant sunshine. She ignored all winks and nudgings among her boarders, and did not scruple to point out to Bidwell the choicest biscuit on the plate, and to hand him the fattest slice of bacon, all of which he accepted without elation.

"Old Sherm must be one o' these hypnotical chaps," said Johnson as they were lighting their pipes in the sitting-room. "He's converted the widow into another helping. He's goin' to get his flour and bacon all right!"

"You bet he is, and anything else he wants. Beats me what she

finds in that old side-winder, anyhow."

"Oh, Sherm isn't so worse if he had a decent outfit."

Bidwell was deeply touched by Maggie's clemency, and would have put his feelings into the best terms he was familiar with, but the widow stopped him.

"The best way to thank me is to hustle out and trail up that flo-at. If it's there, find it. If it's not there, give o'er the search, for ye are a gray man, Sherm Bidwell, and I'm not the woman I was eight years ago."

In the exaltation of the moment Bidwell rose, and his shoulders were squared as he said: "I'm a-goin', Maggie. If I find it I'll come back and marry you. If I don't – I'll lay my useless old bones in the hills."

"Ah – go 'long! Don't be a crazy fool!" she said, but her face flushed with pleasure at the sincerity of his tone. "Ye've made such promises ivery time before."

"I know I have, but I mean it now."

"Aho! so that's the way of it – ye didn't mean it before? Is that phwat ye're sayin'?"

His proud pose collapsed. "You know what I mean – only you're such a tormentin' little devil."

"Thank ye for the compliment, Mr. Bidwell."

Bidwell turned. "I'm going after old Nebuchadnezzar," he said, firmly. "I can't waste time on a chicken-headed woman – "

"Out wid ye before I break the measly head of ye!" she retorted.

An hour later, with his mule packed with food and blankets and tools, he moved off up the trail. The other men stood to watch him go, consumed with curiosity, yet withholding all question.

The widow did not so much as look from the door as her grub-staker disappeared.

II

Three days later Bidwell crept stealthily down the trail, leading his mule as silently as possible. He timed his arrival so that Mrs. Delaney would be in the kitchen alone with the Chinaman, getting the dishes ready for breakfast.

"Who is ut?" called the widow as he softly knocked.

"Me – Sherm," he replied.

"Saints in hevin! What's the matter? Are ye sick?" she gasped as she flung the door open.

"'Sh! Don't speak so loud," he commanded. "Sit down; I want to speak solemn-like to you."

His tone impressed her deeply. "Have ye struck ut?" she asked, tremulously.

"I hain't found it yet, but I want to tell ye – I believe I've had a hunch. Send the 'chink' away."

Something in his tone stopped all scornful words upon her lips. Ordering the Chinaman to bed, she turned and asked:

"Phwat do ye mean? Spake, man!"

"Well, sir, as I started up the trail something kept sayin' to me,

'Sherman, you're on the wrong track.' It was just as if you pulled my sleeve and nudged me and said, '*This* way!' I couldn't sleep that night. I just lay on the ground and figured. Up there high – terrible high – are seams of ore – I know that – but they're in granite and hard to get at. That's one gold belt. There's money in a mine up there, but it will take money to get it. Then there's another gold belt down about here – or even lower – and I've just come to the conclusion that our mine, Maggie, is down here in the foot-hills, not on old Blanca."

The air of mystery which enveloped and transformed the man had its effect on the woman. Her eyes opened wide.

"Was it a voice like?"

"No, it was more like a pull. Seemed to be pulling me to cross the creek where I found that chunk of porph'ritic limestone. I couldn't sleep the second night – and I've been in camp up there in Burro Park tryin' to figure it all out. I hated to give up and come back – I was afraid ye'd think I was weakening – but I can't help it. Now I'll tell you what I'm going to do – I'm going to make a camp over on the north side of the creek. I don't want the boys to know where I've gone, but I wanted you to know what I'm doing – I wanted you to know – it's plum ghostly – it scared me."

She whispered, "*Mebbe it's Dan.*"

"I thought o' that. Him and me were always good friends, and he was in my mind all the while."

"But howld on, Sherm; it may be the divil leadin' ye on to break y'r neck as did Dan. 'Twas over there he fell."

"Well, I thought o' that, too. It's either Dan or the devil, and I'm going to find out which."

"The saints go wid ye!" said the widow, all her superstitious fears aroused. "And if it *is* Dan he'll sure be good to you fer my sake."

III

Sierra Blanca is the prodigious triple-turreted tower which stands at the southern elbow of the Sangre de Cristo range. It is a massive but symmetrical mountain, with three peaks so nearly of the same altitude that the central dome seems the lowest of them all, though it is actually fourteen thousand four hundred and eighty feet above the sea. On the west and south this great mass rises from the flat, dry floor of the San Luis Valley in sweeping, curving lines, and the piñons cover these lower slopes like a robe of bronze green.

At eight thousand feet above the sea these suave lines become broken. The piñons give place to pine and fir, and the somber cañons begin to yawn. It was just here, where the grassy hills began to break into savage walls, that Bidwell made his camp beside a small stream which fell away into Bear Creek to the south. From this camp he could look far out on the violet and gold of the valley, and see the railway trains pass like swift and monstrous dragons. He could dimly see the lights of Las Animas also, and this led him to conceal his own camp-fire.

Each day he rode forth, skirting the cliffs, examining every bit of rock which showed the slightest mineral stain. Scarcely a moment of the daylight was wasted in this search. His mysterious guide no longer touched him, and this he took to be a favorable omen. "I'm near it," he said.

One day he hitched his mule to a small dead pine at the foot of a steep cliff, and was climbing to the summit when a stone, dislodged by his feet, fell, bounced, thumped the mule in the ribs, and so scared the animal that he pulled up the tree and ran away.

Angry and dispirited (for he was hungry and tired) Bidwell clambered down and began to trail the mule toward camp. The tree soon clogged the runaway and brought him to a stand in a thicket of willows.

As Bidwell knelt to untie the rope his keen eyes detected the glitter of gold in the dirt which still clung to the moist root of the pine. With a sudden conviction of having unearthed his fortune, the miner sprang to his saddle and hurried back to the spot whence the tree had been rived. It was dusk by the time he reached the spot, but he could detect gold in the friable rock which lined the cavity left by the uprooted sapling. With a mind too excited to sleep he determined to stay with his find till morning. To leave it involved no real risk of losing it, and yet he could not bring himself to even build a camp-fire, for fear some one might be drawn from the darkness to dispute his claim.

It was a terribly long night, and when old Blanca's southern peak began to gleam out of the purple receding waves of the

night the man's brain was numb with speculation and suspense. Hovering over the little heap of broken rock which he had scooped out with his hands, he waited in almost frenzied impatience for the sun.

He could tell by the feeling that the ore was what miners of his grade call "rotten quartz," and he knew that it often held free gold in enormous richness. It was so friable he could crumble it in his hands, and so yellow with iron-stains that it looked like lumps of clay as the dawn light came. A stranger happening upon him would have feared for his reason, so pale was his face, so bloodshot his eyes.

At last he could again detect the gleam of gold. Each moment as the light grew the value of the ore increased. It was literally meshed with rusty free gold. The whole mound was made up of a disintegrated ledge of porphyry and thousands of dollars were in sight. As his mind grasped these facts the miner rose and danced —*but he did not shout*!

All that day he worked swiftly, silently, like an animal seeking to escape an enemy, digging out this rock and carrying it to a place of concealment in a deep thicket not far away. He did not stop to eat or drink till mid-afternoon, and then only because he was staggering with weakness and his hands were growing ineffective. After eating he fell asleep and did not wake till deep in the night. For some minutes he could not remember what had happened to him. At last his good fortune grew real again. Saddling his mule, he rode up the creek and crossed miles above

his newly discovered mine, in order to conceal his trail, and it was well toward dawn before he tapped on the widow's window.

"Is that you, Sherm?" she asked.

"Yes. Get up quick; I have news!"

When she opened the kitchen door for him she started back. "For love of God, man, phwat have you been doin' wid yersilf?"

"Be quiet!" he commanded, sharply, and crept in, staggering under the weight of a blanket full of ore. "You needn't work any more, Maggie; I've got it. Here it is!"

"Man, ye're crazy! What have you there? Not gould!"

"You bet it is! Quartz jest *rotten* with gold. Where can I hide it?" His manner would not have been wilder had his bag of ore been the body of a man he had murdered. "Quick! It's almost daylight."

"Let me see ut. I do *not* believe ut."

He untied the blanket, and as the corners unrolled, disclosing the red-brown mass, even her unskilled eyes could see the gleaming grains of pure metal. She fell on her knees and crossed herself.

"Praise be to Mary! Where did ye find ut – and how?"

"Not a word about that. I'm scared. If any one should find it while I am away they could steal thousands of dollars. Why, it's like a pocket in a placer! Get me every sack you can. Give me grub – and hide this. There are tons of it! This is the best of it. We are rich – rich as Jews, Maggie!"

They worked swiftly. The widow emptied a cracker-barrel and

put the ore at the bottom, and then tumbled the crackers in on top of the ore. She set out some cold meat and bread and butter, and while Bidwell ate she brought out every rag that could serve as a sack.

"I'll have more for ye to-morrow. I wish I c'u'd go wid ye, Sherm. I'd like to set me claws at work at that dirt."

"I need help, but I am afraid to have a man. Well, I must be off. Good-by. I'll be back to-night with another load. I guess old Sherm is worth a kiss yet – eh – Maggie!"

"Be off wid ye. Can't ye see the dawn is comin'?" A moment later she ran up to him and gave him a great hug. "There – now haste ye!"

"Be silent!"

"As the grave itself!" she replied, and turned to brush up the cracker-crumbs. "That Chinese divil has sharp eyes," she muttered.

IV

It was inevitable that the golden secret should escape. Others besides the Chinese cook had sharp eyes, and the Widow Delaney grew paler and more irritable as the days wore on. She had a hunted look. She hardly ever left her kitchen, it was observed, and her bedroom door had a new lock. Every second night Bidwell, gaunt and ragged, and furtive as a burglar, brought a staggering mule-load of the richest ore and stowed it away under

the shanty floor and in the widow's bedroom. Luckily miners are sound sleepers, or the two midnight marauders would have been discovered on the second night.

One day John, the cook, seized the cracker-barrel, intending to put it into a different corner. He gave it a slight wrench, looked a little surprised, and lifted a little stronger. It did not budge. He remarked:

"Klackels belly hebby. No sabbe klackels allee same deese."

"*Let that alone!*" screamed Mrs. Delaney. "Phwat will ye be doin' nixt, ye squint-eyed monkey? I'll tell ye whin to stir things about."

The startled Chinaman gave way in profound dismay. "Me goin' s'eep lound klackel-ballell, you sabbe?"

"Well, I'll do the sweepin' there. I nailed that barrel to the flure apurpis. L'ave it alone, will ye?"

This incident decided her. That night, when Bidwell came, she broke out:

"Sherm, I cannot stand this anny longer. I'm that nairvous I can't hear a fly buzz widout hot streaks chasin' up and down me spine like little red snakes. And man, luk at yersilf. Why, ye're hairy as a go-at and yer eyes are loike two white onions. I say stop, Sherm dear!"

"What'll we do?" asked Bidwell in alarm.

"Do? I'll tell ye phwat we'll do. We'll put our feets down and say, 'Yis, 'tis true, we've shtruck ut, and it's ours.' Then I'll get a team from Las Animas and load the stuff in before the face and

eyes of the world, and go wid it to sell it, whilst you load y'r gun an' stand guard over the hole in the ground. I'm fair crazy wid this burglar's business. We're both as thin as quakin' asps and full as shaky. You go down the trail this minute and bring a team and a strong wagon – no wan will know till ye drive in. Now go!"

Bidwell was ruled by her clear and sensible words, and rode away into the clear dark of the summer's night with a feeling that it was all a dream – a vision such as he had often had while prospecting in the mountains; but, as day came on and he looked back upon the red hole he had made in the green hillside, the reality of it all came to pinch his heart and make him gasp. His storehouse, his well of golden waters, was unguarded, and open to the view of any one who should chance to look that way. He beat his old mule to a gallop in the frenzy of the moment.

The widow meanwhile got breakfast for the men, and as soon as they were off up the trail she set the awed and wondering Chinaman to hauling the sacks of ore out from beneath the shanty and piling them conveniently near the roadway. She watched every movement and checked off each sack like a shipping-clerk. "Merciful powers! the work that man did!" she exclaimed, alluding to Bidwell, who had dug all that mass of ore and packed it in the night from the mine to its safe concealment.

Of course, Mrs. Clark, the storekeeper's wife, saw them at work and came over to see what was going on.

"Good morning, Mrs. Delaney. You're not going to move?"

"I am."

"I'm sorry. What's the reason of it? Why, that looks like ore!" she said as she peered at a sack.

"It *is* ore! and I'm goin' to ship it to the mill. Have ye anny objection?" asked Mrs. Delaney, defiantly.

"Where did it come from?"

"That's *my* business. There's wan more under there," she said to the Chinaman, and as he came creeping out like a monstrous bug tugging a pair of Bidwell's overalls (ore-filled), as if they formed the trunk of a man whom he had murdered and hidden, Mrs. Clark turned and fled toward the store to tell her husband.

"There ye go, now! Ye screech-owl," sneered the Widow Delaney. "It's all up wid us; soon the whole world will know of ut. Well – we're here first," she defiantly added.

Clark came over, pale with excitement. "Let me see that ore!" he called out as he ran up and laid his hand on a sack.

"Get off – and stay off!" said Maggie, whipping a revolver out of her pocket. "That's my ore, and you let it alone!"

Clark recoiled in surprise, but the widow's anxiety to protect her property added enormously to his excitement. "The ore must be very rich," he argued. "How do I know but that comes from one of my claims?" he asked.

The widow thrust the muzzle of the revolver under his nose. "Would ye call me a thafe? 'Tis well Bidwell is not here; he'd do more than make ye smell of a gun. Go back to yer own business – if ye value a whole skin – an' stay away from phwat does not concern ye."

All this was characteristically intemperate of Maggie, and by the time Bidwell came clattering up the trail with a big freight-wagon the whole gulch was aroused, and a dozen men encircled the heap of motley bags on which Mrs. Delaney sat, keeping them at bay.

When she heard the wagon her nerves steadied a little and she said, more soberly: "Boys, there comes Bidwell with a wagon to haul this stuff away, and, Johnson, you help him load it while I go see about dinner."

As Bidwell drove up a mutter of amazement ran round the group and each man had his say.

"Why, Bid, what's the matter? You look like a man found dead."

"I'm just beginning to live!" said Bidwell, and the reply was long remembered in Bear Gulch.

"Well, now ye know all about it, ye gawks, take hold and help the man load up. I'll have dinner ready fer ye in a snort," repeated the widow.

Clark drew his partners aside. "He packed that ore here; he must have left a trail. You take a turn up the cañon and see if you can't find it. It's close by somewhere."

Bidwell saw them conferring and called out: "You needn't take any trouble, Clark; I'll lead you to the place after dinner. My claim is staked and application filed – so don't try any tricks on me."

The widow's eyes were equally keen, and the growing cupidity

of the men did not escape her. Coming out with a big meat sandwich, she said: "'Twill not do to sit down, Sherm; take this in yer fist and go. They'll all be slippin' away like snakes if ye don't. I'll take John and the ore – we'll make it somehow – and I'll stay wid it till it's paid for."

She was right. The miners were struggling with the demons of desire and ready to stampede at any moment. Hastily packing his mule, Bidwell started up the trail, saying:

"Fall in behind me, boys, and don't scrouge. The man who tries to crowd me off the trail will regret it."

They were quiet enough till he left the trail and started down toward the Bear. Then Johnson cried, "I know where it is!" and plunged with a whoop into the thicket of willows that bordered the creek.

"Mebbe he does and mebbe he don't," said Clark. "I'm going to stick by Bid till we get the lay o' the land."

They maintained fairly good order until Bidwell's trail became a plain line leading up the hillside; then the stampede began. With wild halloos and resounding thwacking of mules they scattered out, raced over the hilltop, and disappeared, leaving Bidwell to plod on with his laden burro.

When he came in sight of his mine men were hammering stakes into the ground on all sides of the discovery claim, and Clark and Johnson were in a loud wrangle as to who reached the spot first. Leading his mule up to the cliff wall where he had built a shelter, Bidwell unpacked his outfit, and as he stood his rifle

against a rock he said:

"I'm planted right here, neighbors. My roots run deep underground, and the man who tries to jump this claim will land in the middle of hell fire – now, that's right."

Their claims once staked and their loud differences stilled, the men had leisure to come and examine the discovery claim.

"You've the best of it," said Cantor, an old miner. "There may not be an ounce of gold outside your vein. It's a curious formation; I can't tell how it runs."

Toward night the other miners left and went back to camp, leaving Bidwell alone. As darkness came on he grew nervous again. "They'd kill me if they dared," he muttered, as he crouched in his shelter, his gun on his knee. He was very sleepy, but resolved not to close his eyes. "If I only had a dog – some one I could trust; but I haven't a soul," he added, bitterly, as his weakness grew. The curse of gold sat heavily upon him and his hands were lax with weariness.

"I was a fool to let Maggie go off with that ore," he muttered, his mind following the widow in her perilous journey down the gulch. He did not distrust her; he only feared her ability to override the difficulties of her mission. For the best part of his life he had sought the metal beneath his feet, and, now that he had found it, his blood ran cold with suspicion and fear.

Daylight brought a comparative sense of safety, and, building a fire, he cooked his breakfast in peace – though his eyes were restless. "Oh, they'll come," he said, aloud. "They'll boil in here

on me in another hour or two."

And they did. The men from Delaney came first, followed a little later by their partners from the high gulches, and after them the genuine stampeders. The merchants, clerks, hired hands, barbers, hostlers, and half-starved lawyers from the valley towns came pouring up the trail and, pausing just long enough to see the shine of gold in Bidwell's dump, flung themselves upon the land, seizing the first unclaimed contiguous claim without regard to its character or formation. Their stakes once set, they began to roam, pawing at the earth like prairie-dogs and quite as ineffectually. Swarms of the most curious surrounded Bidwell's hole in the ground, picking at the ore and flooding the air with shouts and questions till the old man in desperation ordered them off his premises and set up a notice:

"Keep off this ground or meet trouble!"

To his friends he explained, "Every piece of rock they carry off is worth so much money."

"Ye've enough here to buy the warrld, mon," protested Angus Craig, an old miner from the north.

"I don't know whether I have or not," said Bidwell. "It may be just a little spatter of gold."

That night the whole range of foot-hills was noisy with voices and sparkling with camp-fires. From the treeless valleys below these lights could be seen, and the heavily laden trains of the San Luis Accommodation trailed a loud hallelujah as the incoming prospectors lifted their voices in joyous greeting to those on the

mountainside.

"It's another Cripple Creek!" one man shouted, and the cry struck home. "We're in on it," they all exulted.

Bidwell did not underestimate his importance in this rush of gold-frenzied men. He was appalled by the depth and power of the streams centering upon him. For weeks he had toiled to the full stretch of his powers without sufficient sleep, and he was deathly weary, emaciated to the bone, and trembling with nervous weakness, but he was indomitable. A long life of camping, prospecting, and trenching had fitted him to withstand even this strain, and to "stay with it" was an instinct with him. Therefore he built a big fire not far from the mine and spread his blankets there; but he did not lie down till after midnight, and only then because he could not keep awake, even while in sitting posture. "I must sleep, anyhow," he muttered. "I can't stand this any longer. I must sleep" – And so his eyes closed.

He was awakened by a voice he knew calling out: "Is this the way ye watch y'r mine, Sherm Bidwell?" And, looking up, he saw the Widow Delaney sitting astride a mule and looking down at him with tender amusement. "Ye are a pitcher; sure! Ye look like wan o' the holy saints of ould – or a tramp. Help me off this baste and I'll turn to and scorch a breakfast for ye."

He staggered stiffly to his feet and awkwardly approached her. "I had only just dropped off," he apologized.

"Ye poor lad!" she said, compassionately. "Ye're stiff as a poker wid cold."

"How did ye come out with the ore?" he asked.

"Thrust y'r Maggie! I saw it loaded into a car and sent away. Bedad, I had a moind to go wid it to the mill, but I says, Sherm nor mesilf can be in two places to wanst. So I gave o'er the notion and came home. They'll thieve the half of it, av coorse, but so goes the world, divil catch it!"

The widow was a powerful reinforcement. She got breakfast while Bidwell dozed again, and with the influence of hot coffee and the genial sun the firm grew confident of holding at least the major part of their monstrous good luck.

"Thrust no wan but me," said the widow in decisive warning. "The world is full of rogues. From this toime ivery man's hand is agin' y'r gold – schamin' to reach y'r pockets. Rest yersilf and I'll look after the gould. From this toime on we work only wid our brains."

She did indeed become the captain. On her advice he sent a man for ore-sacks and tools, while other willing hands set to work to build a cabin to shelter them.

"We're takin' no chances," she said; "we camp right here."

That day Las Animas, Crestone, Powder Gulch, and Los Gatos emptied themselves upon the hills, and among them were representatives of big firms in Denver, Colorado Springs, and Pueblo. The path past the Maggie Mine was worn deep by the feet of the gold-seekers, and Bidwell's rude pole barrier was polished by the nervous touch of greedy palms.

About ten o'clock a quiet man in a gray suit of clothes asked

Bidwell if he wanted to sell. Bidwell said, "No," short and curt, but Maggie asked, with a smile, "How much?"

"Enough to make you comfortable for life. If it runs as well as this sample I'll chance fifty thousand dollars on it."

Maggie snorted. "Fifty thousand! Why, I tuk twoice that to the mill last night."

"Let me get in and examine the mine a little closer. I may be able to raise my bid."

"Not till ye make it wan hundred thousand may you even have a luk at it," she replied.

Other agents came – some confidential, others coldly critical, but all equally unsuccessful. The two "idiots" could not see why they should turn over the gold which lay there in sight to a syndicate. It was theirs by every right, and though the offers went far beyond their conception they refused to consider them.

All day axes resounded in the firs, and picks were busy in the gullies. Camp goods, provisions, and bedding streamed by on trains of mules, and by nightfall a city was in its initial stages – tent stores, open-air saloons, eating-booths, and canvas hotels. A few of the swarming incomers were skeptical of the find, but the larger number were hilariously boastful of their locations, and around their evening camp-fires groups gathered to exult over their potentialities.

The sun had set, but the western slope of the hill was still brilliant with light as Bidwell's messenger with his sumpter horse piled high with bales of ore-sacks came round the clump of firs

at the corner of Bidwell's claim. He was followed by a tall man who rode with a tired droop and nervous clutching at the rein.

Bidwell stared and exclaimed, "May I be shot if the preachers aren't takin' a hand in the rush!"

The widow looked unwontedly rosy as she conclusively said, "I sent for him, man dear!"

"You did? What for?"

The widow was close enough now to put her hand in the crook of his elbow. "To make us wan, Sherm darlin'. There's no time like the prisent."

Bidwell tugged at his ragged beard. "I wish I had time to slick up a bit."

"There'll be plinty of time for that afterward," she said. "Go welcome the minister."

In the presence of old Angus Craig and young Johnson they were married, and when the minister gave Mrs. Bidwell a rousing smack she wiped her lips with the back of her hand and said to Bidwell:

"Now we're ayqul partners, Sherm, and all old scores wiped out."

And old Angus wagged his head and said, "Canny lass, the widdy!"

When the news of this marriage reached the camp demons of laughter and disorder were let loose. Starting from somewhere afar off, a loud procession formed. With camp-kettles for drums and aspen-bark whistles for pipes, with caterwaul and halloo, the

whole loosely cohering army of prospectors surrounded the little log cabin of the Maggie Mine and shouted in wild discord:

"Bidwell! Come forth!"

"A speech! A speech!"

Bidwell was for poking his revolver out through the unchinked walls and ordering the mob to disperse, but his wife was diplomatic.

"'Tis but an excuse to get drink," she said. "Go give them treat."

So Bidwell went forth, and, while a couple of stalwart friends lifted him high, he shouted, sharp and to the point, "It's on me, Clark!"

The mob, howling with delight, rushed upon him and bore him away, struggling and sputtering, to Clark's saloon, where kegs of beer were broached and the crowd took a first deep draught. Bidwell, in alarm for Maggie, began to fight to get back to the cabin. But cries arose for the bride.

"The bride – let's see the bride!"

Bidwell expostulated. "Oh no! Leave her alone. Are you gentlemen? If you are, you won't insist on seeing her."

In the midst of the crowd a clear voice rang out:

"The bride, is it? Well, here she is. Get out o' me way."

"Clear the road there for the bride!" yelled a hundred voices as Maggie walked calmly up an aisle densely walled with strange men. She had been accustomed to such characters all her life, and knew them too well to be afraid. Mounting a beer-keg, she

turned a benign face on the crowd. The light of the torches lighted her hair till it shone like spun gold in a halo round her head. She looked very handsome in the warm, sympathetic light of the burning pitch-pine.

"Oh yiss, Oi'll make a speech; I'm not afraid of a handful of two-by-fours like you tenderfeet from the valley, and when me speech is ended ye'll go home and go to bed. Eleven days ago Sherm, me man, discovered this lode. Since then we've both worked night and day to git out the ore – we're dog-tired – sure we are – but we're raisonable folk and here we stand. Now gaze y'r fill and go home and l'ave us to rest – like y'r dacent mothers would have ye do."

"Good for you, Maggie!" called old Angus Craig, who stood near her. "Mak' way, lads!"

The men opened a path for the bride and groom and raised a thundering cheer as they passed.

Old Angus Craig shook his head again and said to Johnson: "Sik a luck canna last. To strike a lode and win a braw lass a' in the day, ye may say. Hoo-iver, he waited lang for baith."

THE COW-BOSS

– the reckless cowboy on his watch-eyed bronco still lopes across the grassy foot-hills – or holds his milling herd in the high parks.

II
THE COW-BOSS

I

The post-office at Eagle River was so small that McCoy and his herders always spoke of the official within as "the Badger," saying that he must surely back into his den for lack of room to turn round. His presentment at the arched loophole in his stockade was formidable. His head was large, his brow high and seamed, his beard long and tangled, and the look of his hazel-gray eyes remote with cold abstraction.

"He's not a man to monkey with," said McCoy when the boys complained that the old seed had put up a sign, "NO SPITTING IN THIS OFFICE." "I'd advise you to act accordingly. I reckon he's boss of that thing while he's in there. He's a Populist, but he's regularly appointed by the President, and I don't see that we're in any position to presume to spit if he objects. No, there ain't a thing to do but get up a petition and have him removed – and I won't agree to sign it when you do."

Eagle River was only a cattle-yard station, a shipping-point for the mighty spread of rolling hills which make up the Bear Valley range to the north and the Grampa to the south. Aside from the

post-office, it possessed two saloons, a store, a boarding-house or two, and a low, brown station-house. That was all, except during the autumn, when there was nearly always an outfit of cowboys camped about the corrals, loading cattle or waiting for cars.

On the day when this story opens, McCoy had packed away his last steer, and, being about to take the train for Kansas City, called his foreman aside.

"See here, Roy, seems to me the boys are extra boozed already. It's up to you to pull right out for the ranch."

"That's what I'm going to try to do," answered Roy. "We'll camp at the head of Jack Rabbit to-night."

"Good idea. Get 'em out of town before dark – every mother's son of 'em. I'll be back on Saturday."

Roy Pierce was a dependable young fellow, and honestly meant to carry out the orders of his boss; but there was so little by way of diversion in Eagle, the boys had to get drunk in order to punctuate a paragraph in their life. There was not a disengaged woman in the burg, and bad whisky was merely a sad substitute for romance. Therefore the settlers who chanced to meet this bunch of herders in the outskirts of Eagle River that night walked wide of them, for they gave out the sounds of battle.

They could all ride like Cossacks, notwithstanding their dizzy heads, and though they waved about in their saddles like men of rubber, their faithful feet clung to their stirrups like those of a bat to its perch. In camp they scuffled, argued, ran foot-races, and howled derisive epithets at the cook, who was getting supper

with drunken gravity, using pepper and salt with lavish hand.

Into the midst of this hullabaloo Roy, the cow-boss, rode, white with rage and quite sober.

"I'll kill that old son of a gun one of these days," said he to Henry Ring.

"Kill who?"

"That postmaster. If he wasn't a United States officer, I'd do it now."

"What's the matter? Wouldn't he shuffle the mail fer you?"

"Never lifted a finger. '*Nothing*,' he barked out at me. Didn't even look up till I let loose on him."

"What did he do then?"

"Poked an old Civil War pistol out of the window and told me to hike."

"Which you did?"

"Which I did, after passing him a few compliments. 'Lay down your badge,' I says, 'come out o' your den, and I'll pepper you so full of holes that your hide won't hold blue-joint hay.' And I'll do it, too, the old hound!"

"But you got out," persisted Ring, maliciously.

"I got out, but I tell you right now he's got something coming to him. No mail-sifter of a little two-for-a-cent town like Eagle is goin' to put it all over me that way and not repent of it. I've figured out a scheme to get even with him, and you have got to help."

This staggered Henry, who began to side-step and limp.

"Count me out on that," said he. "The old skunk treated me just about the same way. I don't blame you; a feller sure has a right to have his postmaster make a bluff at shuffling the deck. But, after all – "

However, in the end the boss won his most trusted fellows to his plan, for he was a youth of power, and besides they had all been roiled by the grizzled, crusty old official, and were quite ready to take a hand in his punishment.

Roy developed his plot. "We'll pull out of camp about midnight, and ride round to the east, sneak in, and surround the old man's shack, shouting and yelling and raising Cain. He'll come out of his hole to order us off, and I'll rope him before he knows where he's at; then we'll toy with him for a few minutes – long enough to learn him a lesson in politeness – and let him go."

No one in the gang seemed to see anything specially humorous in this method of inculcating urbanity of manner, and at last five of them agreed to stand their share of the riot, although Henry Ring muttered something about the man's being old and not looking very strong.

"He's strong enough to wave a two-foot gun," retorted Roy, and so silenced all objection.

One night as soon as the camp was quiet Pierce rose and, touching his marauders into activity, saddled and rode away as stealthily as the leader of a band of Indian scouts. He made straightway over the divide to the east, then turned, and, crossing the river, entered the town from the south, in order to deceive

any chance observer.

Just below the station, in a little gully, he halted his war-party and issued final orders. "Now I'll ride ahead and locate myself right near the back door; then when I strike a light you fellows come in and swirl round the shack like a gust o' hell. The old devil will come out the back door to see what's doin', and I'll jerk him end-wise before he can touch trigger. I won't hurt him any more than he needs. Now don't stir till I'm in position."

Silently, swiftly, his pony shuffled along the sandy road and over the railway-crossing. The town was soundless and unlighted, save for a dim glow in the telegraph office, and the air was keen and crisp with frost. As he approached the Badger's shack Pierce detected a gleam of light beneath the curtain of the side windows. "If he's awake, so much the better," he thought, but his nerves thrilled as he softly entered the shadow.

Suddenly the pony trod upon something which made a prodigious crash. The door opened, a tall young girl appeared in a wide flare of yellow light which ran out upon the grass like a golden carpet. With eager, anxious voice she called out:

"Is that you, Doctor?"

The raider stiffened in his saddle with surprise. His first impulse was to set spurs to his horse and vanish. His next was to tear off his disguise and wait, for the voice was sweeter than any he had ever heard, and the girl's form a vision of beauty.

Alarmed at his silence, she again called out: "Who are you? What do you want?"

"A neighbor, miss," he answered, dismounting and stepping into the light. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

At this moment hell seemed to have let loose the wildest of its warriors. With shrill whoopings, with flare of popping guns, Roy's faithful herders came swirling round the cabin, intent to do their duty, frenzied with delight of it.

Horrified, furious at this breach of discipline, Pierce ran to meet them, waving his hat and raising the wild yell, "Whoo-ee!" with which he was wont to head off and turn a bunch of steers. "Stop it! Get out!" he shouted as he succeeded in reaching the ears of one or two of the raiders. "It's all off – there's a girl here. Somebody sick! Skeedoo!"

The shooting and the tumult died away. The horsemen vanished as swiftly, as abruptly, as they came, leaving their leader in panting, breathless possession of the field. He was sober enough now, and repentant, too.

Slowly he returned to the door of the shack with vague intent to apologize. Something very sudden and very terrible must have fallen upon the postmaster.

After some hesitation he knocked timidly on the door.

"Have they gone?" the girl asked.

"Yes; I've scared 'em away. They didn't mean no harm, I reckon. I want to know can't I be of some kind of use?"

The door opened cautiously and the girl again appeared. She was very pale and held a pistol in her hand, but her voice was calm. "You're very good," she said, "and I'm much obliged. Who

are you?"

"I am Roy Pierce, foreman for McCoy, a cattleman north of here."

"Was it really a band of Indians?"

"Naw. Only a bunch of cow-punchers on a bat."

"You mean cowboys?"

"That's what. It's their little way of havin' fun. I reckon they didn't know you was here. I didn't. Who's sick?"

"My uncle."

"You mean the postmaster?"

"Yes."

"When was he took?"

"Last night. They telegraphed me about six o'clock. I didn't get here till this morning – I mean yesterday morning."

"What's the ail of him?"

"A stroke, I'm afraid. He can't talk, and he's stiff as a stake. Oh, I wish the doctor would come!"

Her anxiety was moving. "I'll try to find him for you."

"I wish you would."

"You aren't all alone?"

"Yes; Mrs. Gilfoyle had to go home to her baby. She said she'd come back, but she hasn't."

Roy's heart swept a wide arc as he stood looking into the pale, awed, lovely face of the girl.

"I'll bring help," he said, and vanished into the darkness, shivering with a sense of guilt. "The poor old cuss! Probably he

was sick the very minute I was bullyragging him."

The local doctor had gone down the valley on a serious case, and would not be back till morning, his wife said, thereupon Roy wired to Claywall, the county-seat, for another physician. He also secured the aid of Mrs. James, the landlady of the Palace Hotel, and hastened back to the relief of the girl, whom he found walking the floor of the little kitchen, tremulous with dread.

"I'm afraid he's dying," she said. "His teeth are set and he's unconscious."

Without knowing what to say in way of comfort, the herder passed on into the little office, where the postmaster lay on a low couch with face upturned, in rigid, inflexible pose, his hands clenched, his mouth foam-lined. Roy, unused to sickness and death, experienced both pity and awe as he looked down upon the prostrate form of the man he had expected to punish. And yet these emotions were rendered vague and slight by the burning admiration which the niece had excited in his susceptible and chivalrous heart.

She was tall and very fair, with a face that seemed plain in repose, but which bewitched him when she smiled. Her erect and powerful body was glowing with health, and her lips and eyes were deliciously young and sweet. Her anxious expression passed away as Roy confidently assured her that these seizures were seldom fatal. He didn't know a thing about it, but his tone was convincing.

"I knew a man once who had these fits four or five times a

year. Didn't seem to hurt him a bit. One funny thing – he never had 'em while in the saddle. They 'most always come on just after a heavy meal. I reckon the old man must of over-et."

Mrs. James came in soon – all too soon to please him – but he reported to her his message to Claywall. "A doctor will be down on 'the Cannonball' about five o'clock," he added.

"That's very kind and thoughtful of you," said the girl. Then she explained to Mrs. James that Mr. Pierce had just driven off a horrid band of cowboys who were attacking the town.

The landlady snorted with contempt. "I'm so used to boozy cowboys howlin' round, I don't bat an eye when they shoot up the street. They're all a lot of cheap skates, anyway. You want to swat 'em with the mop if they come round; that's the way I do."

Roy was nettled by her tone, for he was now very anxious to pose as a valorous defender of the innocent; but agreed with her that "the boys were just having a little 'whiz' as they started home; they didn't mean no harm."

"Ought I to sit in there?" the girl asked the woman, with a glance toward the inner room.

"No; I don't think you can do any good. I'll just keep an eye on him and let you know if they's any change."

The girl apologized for the looks of the kitchen. "Poor uncle has been so feeble lately he couldn't keep things in order, and I haven't had any chance since I came. If you don't mind, I'll rid things up now; it'll keep my mind occupied."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Roy. "I'll help."

He had been in a good many exciting mix-ups with steers, bears, cayuses, sheriffs' posses, and Indians, but this was easily the most stirring and amazing hour of his life. While his pony slowly slid away up the hill to feed, he, with flapping gun and rattling spurs, swept, polished, and lifted things for Lida – that was her name – Lida Converse.

"My folks live in Colorado Springs," she explained in answer to his questions. "My mother is not very well, and father is East, so I had to come. Uncle Dan was pretty bad when I got here, only not like he is now. This fit came on after the doctor went away at nine."

"I'm glad your father was East," declared the raider, who was unable to hold to a serious view of the matter, now that he was in the midst of a charming and intimate conversation. "Just think – if he had 'a' come, I'd never have seen *you*!"

She faced him in surprise and disapproval of his boldness. "You're pretty swift, aren't you?" she said, cuttingly.

"A feller's got to be in this country," he replied, jauntily.

She was prepared to be angry with him, but his candid, humorous, admiring gaze disarmed her. "You've been very nice," she said, "and I feel very grateful; but I guess you better not say any more such things to me – to-night."

"You mustn't forget I chased off them redskins."

"You said they were cowboys."

"Of course I did; I wanted to calm your mind."

She was a little puzzled by his bluffing. "I don't believe there

are any Indians over here."

"Well, if they were cowboys, they were a fierce lot."

She considered. "I've told you I feel grateful. What more can I do?"

"A good deal; but, as you say, that can go over till to-morrow. Did I tell you that I had a bunch of cattle of my own?"

"I don't remember of it."

"Well, I have. I'm not one of these crazy cowboys who blows in all his wad on faro and drink – not on your life! I've got some ready chink stacked away in a Claywall bank. Want to see my bank-book?"

She answered, curtly: "Please take that kettle of slop out and empty it. And what time did you say the express was due?"

Roy was absorbed, ecstatic. He virtually forgot all the rest of the world. His herders could ride to the north pole, his pony might starve, the Cannonball Express go over the cliff, the postmaster die, so long as he was left in service to this princess.

"Lord A'mighty! wasn't I in luck?" he repeated to himself. "Suppose I'd 'a' roped *her* instead of the old man!"

When he returned from listening for the train he found her washing her hands at the end of her task, and the room in such order as it had never known before. The sight of her standing there, flushed and very womanly, rolling down her sleeves, was more than the young fellow could silently observe.

"I hope the old man'll be a long time getting well," he said, abruptly.

"That's a nice thing to say! What do you mean by such a cruel wish?"

"I see my finish when you go away. No more lonely ranch-life for me."

"If you start in on that talk again I will not speak to you," she declared, and she meant it.

"All right, I'll shut up; but I want to tell you I'm a trailer for keeps, and you can't lose me, no matter where you go. From this time on I forget everything in the world but you."

With a look of resolute reproof she rose and joined Mrs. James in the inner room, leaving Roy cowed and a good deal alarmed.

"I reckon I'm a little *too* swift," he admitted; "but, oh, my soul! she's a peach!"

When the train whistled, Lida came out again. "Will you please go to meet the doctor?" she asked, with no trace of resentment in her manner.

"Sure thing; I was just about starting," he replied, instantly.

While he was gone she asked Mrs. James if she knew the young man, and was much pleased to find that the sharp-tongued landlady had only good words to say of Roy Pierce.

"He's no ordinary cowboy," she explained. "If he makes up to you you needn't shy."

"Who said he was making up to me? I never saw him before."

"I want to know! Well, anybody could see with half an eye that he was naturally rustlin' round you. *I* thought you'd known

each other for years."

This brought tears of mortification to the girl's eyes. "I didn't mean to be taken that way. Of course I couldn't help being grateful, after all he'd done; but I think it's a shame to be so misunderstood. It's mean and low down of him – and poor uncle so sick."

"Now don't make a hill out of an ant-heap," said the old woman, vigorously. "No harm's done. You're a mighty slick girl, and these boys don't see many like you out here in the sage-brush and piñons. Facts are, you're kind o' upsettin' to a feller like Roy. You make him kind o' drunk-like. He don't mean to be sassy."

"Well, I wish you'd tell him not to do anything more for me. I don't want to get any deeper in debt to him."

The Claywall physician came into the little room as silently as a Piute. He was a plump, dark little man of impassive mien, but seemed to know his business. He drove the girl out of the room, but drafted Mrs. James and Roy into service.

"It's merely a case of indigestion," said he; "but it's plenty serious enough. You see, the distended stomach pressing against the heart – "

The girl, sitting in the kitchen and hearing the swift and vigorous movement within, experienced a revulsion to the awe and terror of the midnight. For the second time in her life death had come very close to her, but in this case her terror was shot through with the ruddy sympathy of a handsome, picturesque young cavalier. She could not be really angry with

him, though she was genuinely shocked by his reckless disregard of the proprieties; for he came at such a dark and lonely and helpless hour, and his prompt and fearless action in silencing those dreadful cowboys was heroic. Therefore, when the doctor sent Roy out to say that her uncle would live, a part of her relief and joy shone upon the young rancher, who was correspondingly exalted.

"Now you must let me hang round till he gets well," he said, forgetful of all other duties.

"That reminds me. You'll need some breakfast," she said, hurriedly; "for here comes the sun." And as she spoke the light of the morning streamed like a golden river into the little room.

"It's me to the wood-pile, then," cried Roy, and his smile was of a piece with the sunshine on the wall.

II

Beside the fallen monarch of the wood the lifting saplings bud and intertwine. So over the stern old postmaster these young people re-enacted the most primitive drama in the world. Indifferent to the jeers of his fellows, Roy devoted himself to the service of "The Badger's Niece," and was still in town when McCoy returned from "the East"; that is to say, from Kansas City.

Lida had ceased to protest against the cowboy's attendance and his love-making, for the good reason that her protests were

unavailing. He declined to take offense, and he would not remain silent. A part of his devotion was due, of course, to his sense of guilt, and yet this was only a small part. True, he had sent warnings and dire threats to silence his band of marauders; but he did not feel keenly enough about their possible tale-bearing to carry his warnings in person. "I can't spare the time," he argued, knowing that Lida would be going home in a few days and that his world would then be blank.

"I lose too much of you," he said to her once; "I can't afford to have you out of my sight a minute."

She had grown accustomed to such speeches as these, and seldom replied to them, except to order the speaker about with ever-increasing tyranny. "You're so anxious to work," she remarked, "I'll let you do a-plenty. You'll get sick o' me soon."

"Sick of you! Lord heavens! what'll I do when you leave?"

"You'll go back to your ranch. A fine foreman you must be, fooling round here like a tramp. What does your boss think?"

"Don't know and don't care. Don't care what anybody thinks – but you. You're my only landmark these days. You're my sun, moon, and stars, that's what you are. I set my watch by you."

"You're crazy!" she answered, with laughter.

"Sure thing! Locoed, we call it out here. You've got me locoed – you're my pink poison blossom. There ain't any feed that interests me but you. I'm lonesome as a snake-bit cow when I can't see you."

"Say, do you know Uncle Dan begins to notice you. He asked

me to-day what you were hanging round here for, and who you were."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him you were McCoy's hired man just helping me take care of him."

"That's a lie. I'm *your* hired man. I'm takin' care of you – willing to work for a kiss a day."

"You'll not get even that."

"I'm *not* getting it – yet."

"You'll never get it."

"Don't be too sure of that. My life-work is *collecting* my dues. I've got 'em all set down. You owe me a dozen for extra jobs, and a good hug for overtime."

She smiled derisively, and turned the current. "The meals you eat are all of a dollar a day."

"They're worth a bushel of diamonds – when you cook 'em. But let me ask you something – is your old dad as fierce as Uncle Dan?"

She nodded. "You bet he is! He's crusty as old crust. Don't you go up against my daddy with any little bank-book. It's got to be a fat wad, and, mind you, no cloves on your breath, either. He's crabbed on the drink question; that's why he settled in Colorado Springs. No saloons there, you know."

He considered a moment. "Much obliged. Now here's something for you. You're not obliged to hand out soft words and a sweet smile to every doggone Injun that happens to call

for mail. Stop it. Why, you'll have all the cow-punchers for fifty miles around calling for letters. That bunch that was in here just now was from Steamboat Springs. Their mail don't come here; it comes by way of Wyoming. They were runnin' a bluff. It makes me hot to have such barefaced swindling going on. I won't stand for it."

"Well, you see, I'm not really deputized to handle the mail, so I must be careful not to make anybody mad – "

"Anybody but me. I don't count."

"Oh, *you* wouldn't complain, I know that."

"I wouldn't, hey? Sure of that? Well, I'm going to start a petition to have myself made postmaster – "

"Better get Uncle Dan out first," she answered, with a sly smile. "The office won't hold you both."

At the end of a week the old postmaster was able to hobble to the window and sort the mail, but the doctor would not consent to his cooking his own meals.

"If you *can* stay another week," he said to Lida, "I think you'd better do it. He isn't really fit to live alone."

Thereupon she meekly submitted, and continued to keep house in the little kitchen for herself, her uncle, and for Roy, who still came regularly to her table, bringing more than his share of provisions, however. She was a good deal puzzled by the change which had come over him of late. He was less gay, less confident of manner, and he often fell into fits of abstraction.

He was, in fact, under conviction of sin, and felt the need of

confessing to Lida his share in the zealous assault of the cowboys that night. "It's sure to leak out," he decided, "and I'd better be the first to break the news." But each day found it harder to begin, and only the announcement of her intended departure one morning brought him to the hazard. He was beginning to feel less secure of her, and less indifferent to the gibes of the town jokers, who found in his enslavement much material for caustic remark. They called him the "tired cowboy" and the "trusty."

They were all sitting at supper in the kitchen one night when the old postmaster suddenly said to Roy: "Seems to me I remember you. Did I know you before I was sick?" His memory had been affected by his "stroke," and he took up the threads of his immediate past with uncertain fingers.

"I reckon so; leastwise I used to get my mail here," answered Roy, a bit startled.

The old man looked puzzled. "Yes; but it seems a little more special than that. Someway your face is associated with trouble in my mind. Did we have any disagreement?"

After the postmaster returned to his chair in the office, Roy said to Lida, "They're going to throw your uncle out in a few weeks."

"You don't mean it!"

"Sure thing. He really ain't fit to be here any more. Don't you see how kind o' dazed he is? They're going to get him out on a doctor's certificate – loss of memory. Now, why don't you get deputized, and act in his place?"

"Goodness sakes! I don't want to live here."

"Where do you want to live – on a ranch?"

"Not on your life! Colorado Springs is good enough for me."

"That's hard on Roy. What could I do to earn a living there?"

"You don't have to live there, do you?"

"Home is where you are." She had come to the point where she received such remarks in glassy silence. He looked at her in growing uneasiness, and finally said: "See here, Lida, I've got something to tell you. You heard the old man kind o' feelin' around in his old hay-mow of a mind about me? Well, him and me did have a cussin'-out match one day, and he drawed a gun on me, and ordered me out of the office."

"What for?"

"Well, it was this way – I think. He was probably sick, and didn't feel a little bit like sorting mail when I asked for it. He sure was aggravatin', and I cussed him good and plenty. I reckon I had a clove on my tongue that day, and was irritable, and when he lit onto me, I was hot as a hornet, and went away swearing to get square." He braced himself for the plunge. "That was *my* gang of cowboys that came hell-roaring around the night I met you. They were under my orders to scare your uncle out of his hole, and I was going to rope him."

"Oh!" she gasped, and drew away from him; "that poor, sick old man!"

He hastened to soften the charge. "Of course I didn't know he was sick, or I wouldn't 'ave done it. He didn't look sick the day

before; besides, I didn't intend to hurt him – much. I was only fixin' for to scare him up for pullin' a gun on me, that was all."

"That's the meanest thing I ever heard of – to think of that old man, helpless, and you and a dozen cowboys attacking him!"

"I tell you I didn't know he was ailin', and there was only six of us."

Her tone hurt as she pointed at him. "And *you* pretend to be so brave."

"No, I don't."

"You *did*!"

"No, I didn't. *You* said I was brave and kind, but I denied it. I never soberly claimed any credit for driving off that band of outlaws. That's one reason why I've been sticking so close to business here – I felt kind o' conscience-struck."

Her eyes were ablaze now. "Oh, it is! You've said a dozen times it was on *my* account."

"That's right – about eighty per cent, on yours and twenty per cent, on my own account – I mean the old man's."

"The idea!" She rose, her face dark with indignation. "Don't you dare come here another time. I never heard of anything more – more awful. You a rowdy! I'll never speak to you again. Go away! I despise you."

Her anger and chagrin were genuine, that he felt. There was nothing playful or mocking in her tone at the moment. She saw him as he was, a reckless, vengeful young ruffian, and as such she hated him.

He got upon his feet slowly, and went out without further word of defense.

III

The sun did not rise for Roy Pierce on the day which followed her departure. His interest in Eagle River died and his good resolutions weakened. He went on one long, wild, wilful carouse, and when McCoy rescued him and began to exhort toward a better life, he resigned his job and went back to the home ranch, where his brothers, Claude and Harry, welcomed him with sarcastic comment as "the returning goat."

He tried to make his peace with them by saying, "I'm done with whisky forever."

"Good notion," retorted Claude, who was something of a cynic; "just cut out women *and* drink, and you'll be happy."

Roy found it easier to give up drink than to forget Lida. To put away thought of her was like trying to fend the sunlight from his cabin window with his palm. He was entirely and hopelessly enslaved to the memory of her glowing face and smiling eyes. What was there in all his world to console him for the loss of her?

Mrs. Pierce wonderingly persisted in asking what had come over him, that he should be so sad and silent, and Claude finally enlightened her.

"He's all bent up over a girl – the postmaster's niece – of Eagle River, who had to quit the country to get shut of him."

The mother's heart was full of sympathy, and her desire to comfort her stricken son led to shy references to his "trouble" which made him savage. He went about the ranch so grimly, so spiritlessly, that Claude despairingly remarked:

"I wish the Lord that girl *had* got you. You're as cheerful to have around as a poisoned hound. Why don't you go down to the Springs and sit on her porch? That's about all you're good for now."

This was a bull's-eye shot, for Roy's desire by day and his dream by night was to trail her to her home; but the fear of her scornful greeting, the thought of a cutting query as to the meaning of his call, checked him at the very threshold of departure a dozen times.

He had read of love-lorn people in the *Saturday Storyteller*, which found its way into the homes of the ranchers, but he had always sworn or laughed at their sufferings as a part of the play. He felt quite differently about these cases. Love was no longer a theme for jest, an abstraction, a far-off trouble; it had become a hunger more intolerable than any he had ever known, a pain that made all others he had experienced transitory and of no account.

Even Claude admitted the reality of the disease by repeating: "Well, you *have* got it bad. Your symptoms are about the worst ever. You're locoed for fair. You'll be stepping high and wide if you don't watch out."

In some mysterious way the whole valley now shared in a knowledge of the raid on the post-office, as well as in an

understanding of Roy's "throw-down" by the postmaster's niece, and the expression of this interest in his affairs at last drove the young rancher to desperation. He decided to leave the state. "I'm going to Nome," he said to his brothers one day.

"Pious thought," declared Claude. "The climate may freeze this poison out of you. Why, sure – go! You're no good on earth here."

Roy did not tell him or his mother that he intended to go by way of the Springs, in the wish to catch one last glimpse of his loved one before setting out for the far northland. To speak with her was beyond his hope. No, all he expected was a chance glimpse of her in the street, the gleam of her face in the garden. "Perhaps I may pass her gate at night, and see her at the window."

IV

The town to him was a maze of bewildering complexity and magnificence, and he wandered about for a day in awkward silence, hesitating to inquire the way to the Converse home. He found it at last, a pretty cottage standing on a broad terrace, amid trees and vines vivid with the autumn hues; and if any thought of asking Lida to exchange it for a shack on a ranch still lingered in his mind, it was instantly wiped out by his first glance at the place.

He walked by on the opposite side of the street, and climbed the mesa back of the house to spy upon it from the rear, hoping

to detect his loved one walking about under the pear-trees. But she did not appear. After an hour or so he came down and paced back and forth with eyes on the gate, unable to leave the street till his soul was fed by one look at her.

As the sun sank, and the dusk began to come on, he grew a little more reckless of being recognized, and, crossing the way, continued to sentinel the gate. He was passing it for the fourth time when Lida came out upon the porch with an older woman. She looked at the stranger curiously, but did not recognize him. She wore a hat, and was plainly about to go for a walk.

Roy knew he ought to hurry away, but he did not. On the contrary, he shamelessly met her with a solemn, husky-voiced greeting. "Hello, girl! How's Uncle Dan?"

She started back in alarm, then flushed as she recognized him. "How dare you speak to me – like that!"

In this moment, as he looked into her face, his courage began to come back to him. "Why didn't you answer my letters?" he asked, putting her on defense.

"What business had you to write to me? I told you I would not answer."

"No, you didn't; you only said you wouldn't *speak* to me again."

"Well, you knew what I meant," she replied, with less asperity.

Someway these slight concessions brought back his audacity, his power of defense. "You bet I did; but what difference does that make to a sick man? Oh, I've had a time! I'm no use to the

world since you left. I told you the truth – you're my sun, moon, and stars, and I've come down to say it just once more before I pull out for Alaska. I'm going to quit the state. The whole valley is on to my case of loco, and I'm due at the north pole. I've come to say good-by. Here's where I take my congee."

She read something desperate in the tone of his voice. "What do you mean? You aren't really leaving?"

"That's what. Here's where I break camp. I can't go on this way. I've got the worst fever anybody ever had, I reckon. I can't eat or sleep or work, just on account of studying about you. You've got me goin' in a circle, and if you don't say you forgive me – it's me to the bone-yard, and that's no joke, you'll find."

She tried to laugh, but something in his worn face, intense eyes, and twitching lips made her breathing very difficult. "You mustn't talk like that. It's just as foolish as can be."

"Well, that don't help me a little bit. You no business to come into my life and tear things up the way you did. I was all right till you came. I liked myself and my neighbors bully; now nothing interests me – but just you – and your opinion of me. You think I was a cowardly coyote putting up that job on your uncle the way I did. Well, I admit it; but I've been aching to tell you I've turned into another kind of farmer since then. You've educated me. Seems like I was a kid; but I've grown up into a man all of a sudden, and I'm startin' on a new line of action. I'm not asking much to-day, just a nice, easy word. It would be a heap of comfort to have you shake hands and say you're willing to let

the past go. Now, that ain't much to you, but it's a whole lot to me. Girl, you've got to be good to me this time."

She was staring straight ahead of her with breath quickened by the sincere passion in his quivering voice. The manly repentance which burdened his soul reached her heart. After all, it was true: he had been only a reckless, thoughtless boy as he planned that raid on her uncle, and he had been so kind and helpful afterward – and so merry! It was pitiful to see how changed he was, how repentant and sorrowful.

She turned quickly, and with a shy, teary smile thrust her hand toward him. "All right. Let's forget it." Then as he hungrily, impulsively sought to draw her nearer, she laughingly pushed him away. "I don't mean – so much as you think." But the light of forgiveness and something sweeter was in her face as she added: "Won't you come in a minute and see mother and father – and Uncle Dan?"

"I'm *wild* to see Uncle Dan," he replied with comical inflection, as he followed her slowly up the path.

THE REMITTANCE MAN

– wayward son from across the seas – is gone. Roused to manhood by his country's call, he has joined the ranks of those who fight to save the shores of his ancestral isle.

III
THE REMITTANCE MAN

I

The Kettle Hole Ranch house faces a wide, treeless valley and is backed by an equally bare hill. To the west the purple peaks of the Rampart range are visible. It is a group of ramshackle and dispersed cabins – not Western enough to be picturesque, and so far from being Eastern as to lack cleanliness or even comfort, and the young Englishman who rode over the hill one sunset was bitterly disappointed in the "whole plant."

"I shall stay here but one night," said he, as he entered the untidy house.

He stayed five years, and the cause of this change of mind lay in the person of Fan Blondell, the daughter of the old man who owned the ranch and to whom young Lester had been sent to "learn the business" of cattle-raising.

Fan was only seventeen at this time, but in the full flower of her physical perfection. Lithe, full-bosomed, and ruddy, she radiated a powerful and subtle charm. She had the face of a child – happy-tempered and pure – but every movement of her body appealed with dangerous directness to the sickly young

Englishman who had never known an hour of the abounding joy of life which had been hers from the cradle. Enslaved to her at the first glance, he resolved to win her love.

His desire knew no law in affairs of this kind, but his first encounter with Blondell put a check to the dark plans he had formed – for the rancher had the bearing of an aged, moth-eaten, but dangerous old bear. His voice was a rumble, his teeth were broken fangs, and his hands resembled the paws of a gorilla. Like so many of those Colorado ranchers of the early days, he was a Missourian, and his wife, big, fat, worried and complaining, was a Kentuckian. Neither of them had any fear of dirt, and Fan had grown up not merely unkempt, but smudgy. Her gown was greasy, her shoes untied, and yet, strange to say, this carelessness exercised a subduing charm over Lester, who was fastidious to the point of wasting precious hours in filling his boots with "trees" and folding his neckties. The girl's slovenly habits of dress indicated, to his mind, a similar recklessness as to her moral habits, and it sometimes happens that men of his stamp come to find a fascination in the elemental in human life which the orderly no longer possess.

Lester, we may explain, was a "remittance man" – a youth sent to America by his family on the pretense of learning to raise cattle, but in reality to get him out of the way. He was not a bad man; on the contrary, he was in most ways a gentleman and a man of some reading – but he lacked initiative, even in his villainy. Blondell at once called him "a lazy hound" – provoked thereto

by Lester's slowness of toilet of a morning, and had it not been for Fan – backed by the fifty dollars a month which Lester was paying for "instruction" – he would have been "booted off the place."

Fan laughed at her father. "You better go slow; George Adelbert is heeled."

Blondell snorted. "Heeled! He couldn't unlimber his gun inside of fifteen minutes."

"Well, he can ride."

The old man softened a little. "Yes, he can ride, and he don't complain, once he gets mounted, but he carries 'pajammys' in his saddle-bags and a tooth-brush on his slicker; hanged if he don't use it, too!"

"That's what I like about him," she answered, defiantly. "We're all so blamed careless about the way we live. I wish he'd jack us all up a bit."

Truly Fan was under conviction, brought to a realization of her slouchiness by Lester's care of his own room as well as by his lofty manners. She no longer wore her dress open at the throat, and she kept her yellow hair brushed, trying hard to make each meal a little less like a pig's swilling. She knew how things ought to be done, a little, for at "The Gold Fish Ranch" and at Starr Baker's everything was spick and span (Mrs. Baker especially was a careful and energetic housekeeper), but to keep to this higher level every day was too great an effort even for a girl in love. She dropped back, now and again, weary and disheartened.

It was her mating-time. She leaned to Lester from the first glance. The strangeness of his accent, his reference to things afar off, to London and Paris, appealed to her in the same way in which poetry moved her – dimly, vaguely – but his hands, his eyes, his tender, low-toned voice won her heart. She hovered about him when he was at home, careless of the comments of the other men, ignoring the caustic "slatting" of her mother. She had determined to win him, no matter what the father might say – for to her all men were of the same social level and she as good as the best. Indeed, she knew no other world than the plains of Colorado, for she was born in the little dugout which still remained a part of the kitchen. The conventions of cities did not count with her.

She was already aware of her power, too, and walked among the rough men of her acquaintance with the step of an Amazonian queen, unafraid, unabashed. She was not in awe of Lester; on the contrary, her love for him was curiously mingled with a certain sisterly, almost maternal pity; he was so easily "flustered." He was, in a certain sense, on her hands like an invalid.

She soon learned that he was wax beneath her palm – that the touch of a finger on his arm made him uneasy of eye and trembling of limb. It amused her to experiment with him – to command him, to demand speech of him when he was most angry and disgusted with the life he was living. That he despised her father and mother she did not know, but that he was sick of

the cowboys and their "clack" she did know, and she understood quite as well as if he had already told her that she alone kept him from returning at once to Denver to try some other manner of earning a living. This realization gave her pride and joy.

She had but one jealousy – he admired and trusted Mrs. Baker and occasionally rode over there to talk with her, and Fan could not understand that he sought intellectual refuge from the mental squalor of the Blondells, but she perceived a difference in his glance on his return. Mrs. Baker, being a keen-sighted, practical little woman, soon fell upon the plainest kind of speech with the young Englishman.

"This is no place for you," she defiantly said. "The rest of us are all more or less born to the plains and farm-life, but you're not; you're just 'sagging,' that's all. You're getting deeper into the slough all the time."

"Quite right," he answered, "but I don't know what else I can do. I have no trade – I know nothing of any art or profession, and my brother is quite content to pay my way so long as he thinks I'm on a ranch, and in the way of learning the business."

She, with her clear eyes searching his soul, replied: "The longer you stay the more difficult it will be to break away. Don't you see that? You're in danger of being fastened here forever."

He knew what she meant, and his thin face flushed. "I know it and I am going to ask Starr to give me a place here with you, and I'm about to write my brother stating full reasons for the change. He might advance me enough to buy into Starr's herd."

She considered this. "I'll take the matter up with Starr," she replied, after a pause. "Meanwhile, you can come over and stay as a visitor as long as you please – but don't bring Fan," she added, sharply. "I can't stand slatterns, and you must cut loose from her once for all."

Again he flushed. "I understand – but it isn't easy. Fan has been mighty good to me; life would have been intolerable over there but for her."

"I should think life would have been intolerable *with* her," Mrs. Baker answered, with darkening brow, and then they talked of other things till he rose to ride away.

He headed his horse homeward, fully resolved to give notice of removal, but he did not. On the contrary, he lost himself to Fan. The girl, glowing with love and anger and at the very climax of her animal beauty, developed that night a subtlety of approach, a method of attack, which baffled and in the end overpowered him. She was adroit enough to make no mention of her rivals; she merely set herself to cause his committal, to bend him to her side. As the romping girl she played round him, indifferent to the warning glances of her mother, her eyes shining, her cheeks glowing, till the man he was, the life he had lived, the wishes of his brother, were fused and lost in the blind passion of the present. "This glorious, glowing creature can be mine. What does all the rest matter?" was his final word of renunciation.

In this mood he took her to his arms, in this madness he told her of his love (committing himself into her hands, declining into

her life), and in the end requested of her parents the honor of their daughter's hand.

Mrs. Blondell wept a tear or two and weakly gave her consent, but the old ranchman thundered and lightened. "What can you do for my girl?" he demanded. "As I understand it, you haven't a cent – the very clothes you've got on your back are paid for by somebody else! What right have you to come to me with such a proposal?"

To all this Lester, surprised and disconcerted, could but meekly answer that he hoped soon to buy a ranch of his own – that his brother had promised to "set him up" as soon as he had mastered the business.

Blondell opened his jaws to roar again when Fan interposed and, taking a clutch in his shaggy beard, said, calmly: "Now, dad, you hush! George Adelbert and I have made it all up and you better fall in gracefully. It won't do you any good to paw the dirt and beller."

Lester grew sick for a moment as he realized the temper of the family into which he was about to marry, but when Fan, turning with a gay laugh, put her round, smooth arm about his neck, the rosy cloud closed over his head again.

II

Blondell was silenced, but not convinced. A penniless son-in-law was not to his liking. Fan was his only child, and the big ranch

over which he presided was worth sixty thousand dollars. What right had this lazy Englishman to come in and marry its heiress? The more he thought about it the angrier he grew, and when he came in the following night he broke forth.

"See here, mister, I reckon you better get ready and pull out. I'm not going to have you for a son-in-law, not this season. The man that marries my Fan has got to have sabe enough to round up a flock of goats – and wit enough to get up in the morning. So you better vamoose to-morrow."

Lester received his sentence in silence. At the moment he was glad of it. He turned on his heel and went to packing with more haste, with greater skill, than he had ever displayed in any enterprise hitherto. His hurry arose from a species of desperation. "If I can only get out of the house!" was his inward cry.

"Why pack up?" he suddenly asked himself. "What do they matter – these boots and shirts and books?" He caught a few pictures from the wall and stuffed them into his pockets, and was about to plunge out into the dusk when Fan entered the room and stood looking at him with ominous intentness.

She was no longer the laughing, romping girl, but the woman with alert eye and tightly closed lips. "What are you doing, Dell?"

"Your father has ordered me to leave the ranch," he answered, "and so I'm going."

"No, you're not! I don't care what he has ordered! You're not going" – she came up and put her arms about his neck – "not

without me." And, feeling her claim to pity, he took her in his arms and tenderly pressed her cheek upon his bosom. Then she began to weep. "I can't live without you, Dell," she moaned.

He drew her closer, a wave of tenderness rising in his heart. "I'll be lonely without you, Fan – but your father is right. I am too poor – we have no home – "

"What does that matter?" she asked. "I wouldn't marry you for any amount of *money*! And I know you don't care for this old ranch! *I'll* be glad to get shut of it. I'll go with you, and we'll make a home somewhere else." Then her mood changed. Her face and voice hardened. She pushed herself away from him. "No, I won't! I'll stay here, and so shall you! Dad can't boss me, and I won't let him run you out. Come and face him up with me."

So, leading him, she returned to the kitchen, where Blondell, alone with his wife, was eating supper, his elbows on the table, his hair unkempt, his face glowering, a glooming contrast to his radiant and splendid daughter, who faced him fearlessly. "Dad, what do you mean by talking this way to George Adelbert? He's going to stay and I'm going to stay, and you're going to be decent about it, for I'm going to marry him."

"No, you're not!" he blurted out.

"Well, I am!" She drew nearer and with her hands on the table looked down into his wind-worn face and dim eyes. "I say you've got to be decent. Do you understand?" Her body was as lithe, as beautiful, as that of a tigress as she leaned thus, and an unalterable resolution blazed in her eyes as she went on, a deeper

significance coming into her voice: "Furthermore, I'm as good as married to him right now, and I don't care who knows it."

The old man's head lifted with a jerk, and he looked at her with mingled fear and fury. "What do you mean?"

"Anything you want to have it mean," she replied. "You drive him out and you drive me out – that's what I mean."

Blondell saw in her face the look of the woman who is willing to assume any guilt, any shame for her lover, and, dropping his eyes before her gaze, growled a curse and left the room.

Fan turned to her lover with a ringing, boyish laugh, "It's all right, Dell; he's surrendered!"

III

Lester passed the month before his marriage in alternating uplifts and depressions, and the worst of it lay in the fact that his moments of exaltation were sensual – of the flesh, and born of the girl's presence – while his depression came from his sane contemplation of the fate to which he was hastening. He went one day to talk it all over with Mrs. Baker, who now held a dark opinion of Fan Blondell. She frankly advised him to break the engagement and to go back to England.

"I can't do that, my dear Mrs. Baker. I am too far committed to Fan to do that. Besides, I know she would make a terrible scene. She would follow me. And besides, I am fond of her, you know. She's very beautiful, now – and she does love me, poor beggar!

I wonder at it, but she does." Then he brightened up. "You know she has the carriage of a duchess. Really, if she were trained a little she would be quite presentable anywhere."

Mrs. Baker shook her head. "She's at her best this minute. Look at the mother; that's what she'll be like in a few years."

"Oh no – not really! She's an improvement – a vast improvement – on the old people, don't you think?"

"You can't make a purse out of a sow's ear. Fan will sag right down after marriage. Mark my words. She's a slattern in her blood, and before the honeymoon is over she'll be slouching around in old slippers and her nightgown. That is plain talk, Mr. Lester, but I can't let you go into this trap with your eyes shut."

Lester went away with renewed determination to pack his belongings and bolt, but the manly streak in his blood made it impossible for him to go without some sort of explanation to her.

The other hands, who called him "George Adelbert" in mockery, were more and more contemptuous of him, and one or two were sullen, for they loved Fan and resented this "lily-fingered gent," who was to their minds "after the old man's acres." Young Compton, the son of a neighboring rancher, was most insulting, for he had himself once carried on a frank courtship with Fan, and enjoyed a brief, half-expressed engagement. He was a fine young fellow, not naturally vindictive, and he would not have uttered a word of protest had his successful rival been a man of "the States," but to give way to an English adventurer whose way was paid by his brother was a

different case altogether.

Of George Adelbert's real feeling the boys, of course, knew nothing. Had they known of his hidden contempt for them they would probably have taken him out of the country at the end of a rope, but of his position with Fan they were in no doubt, for she was very frank with them. If they accused her of being "sweet on the bloody Englishman" she laughed. If they threatened his life in a jocular way she laughed again, but in a different way, and said: "Don't make a mistake; George Adelbert is a fighter from way back East." And once, in a burst of rage, she said: "I won't have you saying such things, Lincoln Compton. I won't have it, I tell you!" No one could accuse her of disloyalty or cowardice.

In his letters home Lester had put his fiancée's best foot forward. "She's quite too good for me," he wrote to his brother. "She's young and beautiful and sole heiress of an estate twice as big as our whole family can muster. She's uncultivated, the diamond in the rough, and all that sort of thing, you understand, but she'll polish easily." He put all this down in the sardonic wish to procure some sort of settlement from his brother. He got it by return mail.

Edward was suavely congratulatory, and in closing said: "I'm deucedly glad you're off my hands just now, my boy, for I'm confoundedly hard up. You're doing the sensible thing – only don't try to bring your family home – not at present."

Lester was thrown into despairing fury by this letter, which not only cut him off from his remittances, but politely shut the

paternal door in his own face as well as in the face of his bride. For the moment he had some really heroic idea of setting to work to show them what he could do. "The beggar! He squats down on the inheritance, shoves me out, and then takes on a lot of 'side' as to his superiority over me! He always was a self-sufficient ass. I'd like to punch his jaw!"

Then his rage faded out and a kind of sullen resignation came to him. What was the use? Why not submit to fate? "Everything has been against me from the start," he bitterly complained, and in this spirit he approached his wedding-day.

The old man, acknowledging him as a son-in-law prospective, addressed him now with gruff kindness, and had Lester shown the slightest gain in managerial ability he would have been content – glad to share a little of his responsibility with a younger man. In his uncouth, hairy, grimy fashion Blondell was growing old, and feeling it. As he said to his wife: "It's a pity that our only child couldn't have brought a real man, like Compton, into the family. There ain't a hand on the place that wouldn't 'a' been more welcome to me. What do you suppose would become of this place if it was put into this dandy's hands?"

"I don't know, pa. Fan, for all her slack ways, is a purty fair manager. She wouldn't waste it. She might let it run down, but she'd hang on to it."

"But she's a fool about that jackass."

"She is now," answered the mother, with cynical emphasis, which she softened by adding, "Dell ain't the kind that would try

to work her."

He sighed with troubled gaze and grumbled an oath. "I don't know what to think of him! He gits me." And in that rather mournful spirit he went about his work, leaving the whole matter of the marriage festival in the hands of the women. In a dim way he still felt that haste was necessary, although Fan's face was as joyous, as careless, and as innocent as a child's. As she galloped about the country with her George Adelbert she sowed her "bids" broadcast, as if wishing all the world to share her happiness. There was nothing exclusive, or shrinking, or parsimonious in Frances Blondell.

IV

The marriage feast was indeed an epoch-making event in the county. It resembled a barbecue and was quite as inclusive. Distinctions of the social sort were few in Arapahoe County. Cattle-rustlers and sheepmen were debarred, of course, but aside from these unfortunates practically the whole population of men, women, children, and babies assembled in the Kettle Hole Ranch grove. The marriage was to be "*al fresco*," as the Limone *Limerick* repeated several times.

Blondell found it a hard day, for what with looking after the roasting ox and the ice and the beer, he was almost too busy to say hello to his guests. Fan had contrived to get a clean shirt on him by the trick of whisking away his old one and substituting

a white one in its place. He put this on without realizing how splendid it was, but rebelled flatly at the collar, and by the time the ox was well basted his shirt was subdued to a condition which left him almost at ease with himself.

Fan received the people at the door of the shack – her mother being too busy in the preparation for dinner to do more than say "Howdy?" to those who deliberately sought her out; but Fan was not embarrassed or wearied. It was her great day – she was only a little disturbed when George Adelbert fled to his room for a little relief from the strain of his position, for he lacked both her serenity of spirit and her physical health.

Once Lester would have enjoyed the action and comment of these people as characters in a play, but now the knowledge that he was about to sink to their level and be nailed there filled him with a fear and disgust which not even the radiant face and alluring body of his bride could conceal or drive out. These lumbering ranchers, these tobacco-chewing, drawling lumpkins, were they to be his companions for the rest of his life? These women with their toothless, shapeless mouths, these worn and weary mothers in home-made calico and cheap millinery, were they to be the visitors at his fireside? What kind of woman would they make of Fan?

By one o'clock the corrals were full of ponies and the sheds and yards crowded with carriages all faded by the pitiless sun and sucked dry by the never-resting wind of the plain.

Meanwhile the young women had set long tables in the back

yard and covered them with food – contributed chicken, home-made biscuit, cake, and pie, while the young fellows had been noisily working at constructing a "bowery" for the dance which was to follow the ceremony at three. And at last Fan raised a bugle-call for "*dinner!*" and they all came with a rush.

The feast did not last long, for every one was hungry and ate without permitting delay or distraction. Nearly all remarked on having had a very early breakfast, and they certainly showed capacity for not merely beef and beer, but pie and ice-cream, and when they shoved back, and lighted the cigars which Lester had provided with prodigal hand, they all agreed that the barbecue was "up to the bills."

The ceremony at three was short, almost hurried, so great was the bustle about the house and yard. Fan wore no veil and George Adelbert made no change from the neat sack-suit which he had put on at rising. At the close of the clergyman's blessing he was called upon for a second time to pump the hard hands and stringy arms of his neighbors as they filed by to bid them both a hearty God-speed.

After this painful procession was ended Fan dragged him away to the bower where the young folks were already dancing with prodigious clatter. "How young she is!" he exclaimed, as he saw her mix with the crowd of tireless, stamping, prancing cowboys.

As the dance went on he grew furious with her lack of reserve, her indelicacy. Her good-natured laughter with the men who crowded about her familiarly was a kind of disloyalty. She

seemed at times to be exchanging doubtful jests with them; and at last, to protect her from the results of her own fatuity, he danced with her himself – danced almost incessantly, notwithstanding the heat and the noise.

At sunset they all returned to the tables and ate up what remained of the ox and the pies.

Lester was well enough acquainted with these rough youths to know that some deviltry was preparing, and, already furious with his bride and distrustful of the future, his self-command at last gave way. Drawing Fan away from the crowd he said, tenderly:

"I've had enough of this! I'm having Aglar harness the buckskins into the red cart, and I want you to go to the house and pack a few things – we're going to Limone and catch the early train for Denver."

"We can't do that, Dell; we got to stay here and feed this gang once more."

"Oh, hang the gang! I'm sick of them. Get ready, I tell you! Who cares what these beggars think?"

She laughed. "You're jealous of them." Then, rising to his passion, she answered, "All right; I'll sneak some clothes into a bag and we'll slide out and leave the gang."

A half-hour later they stole away toward the back of the garden and out upon the prairie, where a Mexican was holding a spirited team. Fan was giggling so hard that she was barely able to lift the valise which she carried in her hand.

"Don't you tell," she said to the Mexican. "If they ask, say we

went to Holcombe."

"All right. I *sabe*," the Mexican replied. Even as he spoke the music in the bower ceased and voices were heard in question.

Fan sobered. "They've missed us already."

Lester took the reins. "Send 'em south, Aglar," and at his chirp the team sprang forward out upon the road into the coolness and silence of the midnight plain.

Fan, clutching Lester's arm, shook with laughter. "It's like eloping – ain't it?"

The tone of her voice irritated him. "Good Heaven! how vulgar she is! And she is my wife," was his thought; and he took no pleasure in her nearness.

Wild whoops reached them from the ranch-house now hid in the valley behind them, and a few moments later the yells broke out again perceptibly nearer.

"They're after us!" cried Fan, vastly excited and pleased. "It's a race now," and, catching the whip from his hand, she lashed the horses into a gallop.

He said: "I'll turn into the Sun-Fish Trail; we'll throw 'em off the track."

"No use," she laughed. "No use, Dell; they can read a trail like Injuns; besides, they're overtaking us. We might as well turn and go back."

His only answer was a shout to the horses. He was burning with fury now. All his hidden contempt, his concealed hatred of the vulgarians behind him, filled his heart. It was like them, the

savages, to give chase.

With shrill whoops in imitation of Comanches the cowboys came on, riding their swift and tireless ponies; like skimming hawks they swept down the swells, and the bride, clinging to her husband's arm, called each of them by his name.

"Link Compton is in the lead. Pull up!" She reached a firm hand and laid it on the lines. "Pull up, Dell; it's no use."

He tried to shake off her grasp, but could not. Her voice changed to command. "Don't be a fool!" she called, sharply, and, laying both hands upon the reins, she brought the horses into a trot in spite of his furious objection, just as the first of the pursuing cowboys rode alongside and, seizing one of the horses by the bit, cried out:

"Come back. We need you!"

Even as he spoke a whistling rope settled round the fleeing couple and the team came to a stand, surrounded by a hooting mob of mounted men. The noose, tight-drawn, was like a steel embrace, and Compton called:

"Thought you'd give us the slip, did ye? Well, I don't think!"

"Leave us alone, you ruffians," shouted Lester, "or it'll be the worse for you!"

They all laughed at this, and Compton drew the rope tighter, pinning Lester's arms to his side.

"Boys – " began Fan in appeal, but she got no further.

Lester, wrenching his right arm loose, began to shoot. What happened after that no one ever clearly knew, but the team sprang

wildly forward, and Compton's pony reared and fell backward, and the bride and groom were thrown violently to the ground.

When Fan opened her eyes she saw the big stars above her and felt a sinewy arm beneath her head. Compton was fanning her with his hat and calling upon her to speak, his voice agonized with fear and remorse.

Slowly it all came back to her, and, struggling to a sitting position, she called piteously: "Dell, where are you? Dell!" Her voice rose in fear, a tone no man had ever heard in it before. She staggered to her feet and dazedly looked about her. A group of awed, silenced, dismounted men stood not far away, and on the ground, lying in a crumpled, distorted heap, was her husband. With a shriek of agony she fell on her knees beside him, calling upon him to open his eyes, to speak to her.

Then at last, as the conviction of his death came to her, she lifted her head and with a voice of level, hoarse-throated hate, she imprecated her murderers. "I'll kill you, every one of you! I'll kill you for this – you cowardly wolves – I'll kill – "

V

They lifted them both up for dead, and Compton, taking Fan in his strong arms, held her like a child as they drove slowly back to the ranch. All believed Lester dead; but Compton, who held his ear to Fan's lips, insisted that she was breathing, and indeed she recovered from her swoon before they reached the house.

Blondell, more powerfully moved than ever before in his life, after a swift curse upon the culprits took his girl to his bosom and carried her to her bed.

As her brain cleared, Fan rose and, staggering across the room, took her husband's head in her arms. "Bring some water. Dell is hurt. Don't you see he is hurt? Be quick!"

"Has somebody gone for the doctor?" asked the mother, to whom this was the raving of dementia. "Somebody go."

No one had, for all believed the man to be dead; but Compton exclaimed, "I'll go!" turning to vault his horse, glad of something to do, eager to escape the sight of Fan's agonized face.

The dash of cold water on his bruised face brought a flutter of life to Lester's eyelids, and in triumph the bride cried out:

"I told you so! He is alive! Oh, Dell, can't you speak to me?"

He could not so much as lift his eyelids, but his breathing deepened, and with that sign of returning vitality Fan was forced to be content. She was perfectly composed now, and helped to bathe his crushed and bleeding head and his broken shoulder with a calmness very impressive to all those who were permitted to glance within the room.

Slowly the guests departed. The cowboys, low-voiced and funereal of mien, rode away in groups of three or four.

The doctor came hurrying down the slope about ten of the morning, his small roan mustang galloping, his case of instruments between his feet. He was very young, and, luckily, very self-confident, and took charge of "the case" with thrilling

authority.

"The coma was induced," he explained, "by the concussion of the brain. The shoulder is also badly contused and the collar-bone broken, but if brain fever does not set in the man will live. The treatment so far as it has gone is admirable."

Compton returned with him, or a little before him, and seemed to be waiting for arrest. He was a lean, brown young fellow with good, gray eyes and a shapely nose. "Yes, I threw the rope," he confessed to every one. "It was all in fun, but he shot my horse, and as he reared up he jerked the people out of the buggy. I guess the broncos jumped ahead at the same time. But it was my fault. I had no business to rope 'em. In fact, we had no business chasing 'em up at all."

At last Blondell gruffly told him to go home. "If the man dies we'll come after you," he added, with blunt ferocity.

"All right," responded the young fellow, with lofty spirit. "I'll be there – but I want to see Fan a moment before I leave. I want to know if there is anything I can do for her or him."

Blondell was for refusing this utterly, but his wife said: "You didn't mean nothing, Link – I'm sure of that – and I've always liked you, and so has Fan. She won't lay it up against you, I know. I'll tell her you're here."

Fan, sitting beside Lester's bed, turned at her mother's word and saw the young fellow standing in the doorway in mute appeal. Her glance was without anger, but it was cold and distant. She shook her head, and the young rancher turned away, shaken with

sobs. That look was worse than her curse had been.

From the dim, grim region of his delirium and his deathlike unconsciousness George Lester struggled slowly back to life. His reawakening was like a new birth. He seemed born again, this time an American – a Western American. In the measure of a good old homely phrase, some sense (a sense of the fundamental oneness of humanity) had been beaten into his head.

As he lay there, helpless and suffering, he was first of all aware of Fan, whose face shone above him like the moon, and was soon able to understand her unwearying devotion and to remember that she was his wife. She was always present when he woke, and he accepted her presence as he accepted sunshine, knowing nothing of the sleeplessness and toil which her attendance involved – a knowledge of this came later.

At times gruff old Blondell himself bent his shaggy head above his bed to ask how he felt, and no mother could have been more considerate than Mrs. Blondell.

"What right have I to despise these people?" he asked himself one day. "What have I done to lift myself above them?" (And this question extended to the neighbors, to the awkward ranchers who came stiffly and with a sort of awe into his room to "pass a good word," as they said.) "They are a good sort, after all" – his heart prompted him to admit.

But his deepest penitence, his tenderest gratitude, rose to Fan, whom care and love had marvelously refined. He was able to forget her careless speech and to look quite through her untidy

ways to the golden, good heart which beat beneath her unlovely gowns. Nothing was too hard, too menial, for her hands, and her smile warmed his midnight sick-room like sunshine.

He was curiously silent even after his strength was sufficient for speech. Content to lie on his bed and watch her as she moved about him, he answered only in monosyllables, while the deep current of his love gathered below his reticence. As he came to a full understanding of what he had been and to a sense of his unworthy estimate of her and her people, his passion broke bounds.

"Fan!" he called out one morning, "I'm not fit to receive all your care and devotion – but I'm going to try to be; I'm going to set to work in earnest when I get up. Your people shall be my people, your cares my cares." He could not go on, and Fan, who was looking down at him in wonder, stooped and laid a kiss on his quivering lips.

"You get well, boy; that's all you need to worry about," she said, and her face was very sweet – for she smiled upon him as if he were a child.

THE LONESOME MAN

– the murderer still seeks forgetfulness in the solitude, building his cabin in the shadow of great peaks.

IV
THE LONESOME MAN

The road that leads to the historic north shoulder of Solidor is lonely now. The stages that once crawled painfully upward through its flowery meadows are playhouses for the children of Silver Plume, and the brakes that once howled so resoundingly on the downward way are rusting to ashes in the weeds that spring from the soil of the Silverado Queen's unused corral. The railway, half a hundred miles to the north, has left the famous pass to solitude and to grass.

Once a week, or possibly oftener, a cattleman or prospector rides across, or a little band of tourists plod up or down, – thinking they are penetrating to the heart of the Rockies, – but for the most part the trail is passing swiftly to the unremembered twilight of the tragic past. There are, it is true, one or two stamp-mills above Pemberton, but they draw their supplies from the valley to the west and not from the plain's cities, and the upper camps have long since been deserted by the restless seeker of sudden gold.

It is a desolate, unshaded country, made so by the reckless hand of the tenderfoot prospector, who, in the days of the silver rush, cut and burned the timber sinfully, and the great peaks are meticulated with the rotting boles of noble pines and spotted with

the decaying stumps of the firs which once made the whole land as beautiful as a park. Here and there, however, a segment of this splendid ancient forest remains to give some hint of what the ranges were before the destroying horde of silver-seekers struck and scarred it.

Along this trail and above the last vestige of its standing trees a man could be seen, walking eastward and upward, one bright afternoon in August, a couple of years ago. He moved slowly, for he was heavily built and obviously not much used to climbing, for he paused often to breathe. The air at that altitude is thin and, to the one not accustomed to it, most unsatisfying. In the intervals of his pauses the traveler's eyes swept the heights and explored each cañon wall as if in search of a resting-place. Around him the conies cried and small birds skimmed from ledge to ledge, but his dark face did not lighten with joy of the beauty which shone over his head nor to that which flamed under his feet. It was plain that he was too preoccupied with some inner problem, too intent on his quest, to give eye or ear to the significance of bird or flower.

Huge Solidor, bare and bleak, rose grandly to the north, propping the high-piled shining clouds, and the somber, dust-covered fields of snow showed to what far height his proud summit soared above his fellows. Little streams of icy water trickled through close-knit, velvety sward whereon small flowers, white and gold and lilac, showed like fairy footprints. Down from the pass a chill wind, delicious and invigorating, rushed as

palpably as if it were a liquid wave. In all this upper region no shelter offered to the tired man.

A few minutes later, as he rounded the sloping green bastion which flanks the peak to the south, the man's keen eyes lighted upon a small cabin which squatted almost unnoticeably against a gray ledge some five hundred feet higher than the rock whereon he stood. The door of this hut was open and the figure of a man, dwarfed by distance, could be detected intently watching the pedestrian on the trail. Unlike most cabin-dwellers, he made no sign of greeting, uttered no shout of cheer; on the contrary, as the stranger approached he disappeared within his den like a marmot.

There was something appealing in the slow mounting of the man on foot. He was both tired and breathless, and as he neared the cabin (which was built on ground quite twelve thousand feet above sea-level) his limbs dragged, and every step he made required his utmost will. Twice he stopped to recover his strength and to ease the beating of his heart, and as he waited thus the last time the lone cabin-dweller appeared in his door and silently gazed, confronting his visitor with a strangely inhospitable and prolonged scrutiny. It was as if he were a lonely animal, jealous of his ground and resentful even of the most casual human inspection.

The stranger, advancing near, spoke. "Is this the trail to Silver Plume?" he asked, his heaving breast making his speech broken.

"It is," replied the miner, whose thin face and hawk-like eyes

betrayed the hermit and the man on guard.

"How far is it across the pass?"

"About thirty miles."

"A good night's walk. Are there any camps above here?"

"None."

"How far is it to the next cabin?"

"Some twelve miles."

The miner, still studying the stranger with piercing intensity, expressed a desire to be reassured. "What are you doing up here on this trail? Are you a mining expert? A spy?" he seemed to ask.

The traveler, divining his curiosity, explained. "I stayed last night at the mill below. I'm a millwright. I have some property to inspect in Silver Plume, hence I'm walking across. I didn't know it was so far; I was misinformed. I'm not accustomed to this high air and I'm used up. Can you take care of me?"

The miner glanced round at the heap of ore which betrayed his craft, and then back at the dark, bearded, impassive face.

"Come in," he said at last, "I'll feed you." But his manner was at once surly and suspicious.

The walls of the hovel were built partly of logs and partly of boulders, and its roof was compacted of dirt and gravel; but it was decently habitable. The furniture (hand-rived out of slabs) was scanty, and the floor was laid with planks, yet everything indicated many days of wear.

"You've been here some time," the stranger remarked rather than asked.

"Ten years."

Thereafter the two men engaged in a silent duel. The millwright, leaning back in his rude chair, stretched his tired limbs and gazed down the valley with no further word of inquiry, while his grudging host prepared a primitive meal and set it upon a box which served as a table.

"You may eat," he curtly said.

In complete silence and with calm abstraction the stranger turned to the food and ate and drank, accepting it all as if this were a roadhouse and he a paying guest. The sullen watchfulness of his host seemed not to disturb him, not even to interest him.

At length the miner spoke as if in answer to a question – the question he feared.

"No, my mine has not panned out well – not yet. The ore is low-grade and the mill is too far away."

To this informing statement the other man did not so much as lift an eyebrow. His face was like a closed door, his eyes were curtained windows. He mused darkly as one who broods on some bitter defeat.

Nevertheless, he was a human presence and the lonely dweller on the heights could not resist the charm of his guest's personality, remote as he seemed.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

There was a moment's hesitation.

"In St. Paul."

"Ever been here before?"

The dark man shook his shaggy head slowly, and dropped his eyes as if this were the end of the communication. "No, and I never expect to come again."

The miner perceived power in his guest's resolute taciturnity, and the very weight of the silence eventually opened his own lips. From moment to moment the impulse to talk grew stronger within him. There was something as compelling as heat in this reticent visitor whose soul was so intent on inward problems that it perceived nothing of interest in an epaulet of gold on the shoulder of Mount Solidor.

"Few come this trail now," the miner volunteered, as he cleared the table. "I am alone and seldom see a human being drifting my way. I do not invite them."

The stranger refilled his pipe and again leaned back against the wall in ponderous repose. If he heard his host's remark he gave no sign of it, and yet, despite the persistence of his guest's silence – perhaps because of it – the lonely gold-seeker babbled on with increasing candor, contradicting himself, revealing, hiding, edging round his story, confessing to his hopes of riches, betraying in the end the secrets of his lonely life. It was as if the gates of his unnatural reserve had broken down and the desire to be heard, to be companioned, had over-borne all his early caution.

"It's horribly lonesome up here," he confessed. "Sometimes I think I'll give it all up and go back to civilization. When I came here the pass had its traffic; now no one rides it, which is lucky

for me," he added. "I have no prying visitors – I mean no one to contest my claim – and yet a man can't do much alone. Even if my ore richens I must transport it or build a mill. Sometimes I wonder what I'm living for, stuck away in this hole in the hills. I was born to better things – "

He checked himself at this moment, as if he were on the edge of self-betrayal, but his listener seemed not vitally interested in these personal details. However, he made some low-voiced remark, and, as if hypnotized, the miner resumed his monologue.

"The nights are the worst. They are endless – and sometimes when I cannot sleep I feel like surrendering to my fate – " Here again he broke off sharply. "That's nonsense, of course. I mean, it seems as if a life were too much to pay for a crazy act – I mean a mine. You'll ask why I don't sell it, but it's all I have and, besides, no one has any faith in it but myself. I cannot sell, and I can't live down there among men."

Gabbling, keeping time to his nervous feet and hands, endlessly repeating himself, denying, confessing, the miner raged on, and through it all the dark-browed guest smoked tranquilly, too indifferent to ask a question or make comment; but when, once or twice, he lifted his eyes, the garrulous one shuddered and turned away, a scared look on his haggard face. He seemed unable to endure that steady glance.

At last, for a little space, he remained silent; then, as if compelled by some increasing magic in his hearer, he burst forth:

"I'm not here entirely by my own fault – I mean my own

choice. A man is a product of his environment, you know that, and mine made me idle, wasteful. Drink got me – drink made me mad – and so – and so – here I am struggling to win back a fortune. Once I gambled – on the wheel; now I am gambling with nature on the green of these mountain slopes; but I'll win – I have already won – and soon I shall sell and go back to the great cities."

Again his will curbed his treacherous tongue, and, walking to the doorway, he stood for a moment, looking out; then he fiercely snarled:

"Oh, God, how I hate it all – how I hate myself! I am going mad with this life! The squeak of these shadowy conies, the twitter of these unseen little birds, go on day by day. They'll drive me mad! If you had not come to-night I could not have slept – I would have gone to the mill, and that means drink to me – drink and oblivion. You came and saved me. I feared you – hated you then; now I bless you."

Once more he seemed to answer an unspoken query:

"I have no people. My mother is dead, my father has disowned me – he does not even know I am alive. I'm the black devil of the family – but I shall go back – "

His face was working with passion, and though he took a seat opposite his guest, his hands continued to flutter aimlessly and his head moved restlessly from side to side.

"I don't know why I am telling all this to you," he went on after a pause. "I reckon it's because of the weakness of the thirst

that is coming over me. Some time I'll go down to those hell-holes at the mills and never come back – the stuff they sell to me is destructive as fire – it is poison! You're a man of substance, I can see that – you're no hobo like most of the fellows out here – that's why I'm talking to you. You remind me of some one I know. There's something familiar in your eyes."

The man with the beard struck the ashes from his pipe and began scraping it. "There is always a woman in these cases," he critically remarked.

The miner took this simple statement as a challenging question. His excitement visibly increased, but he did not at once reply. He talked on aimlessly, incoherently, struggling like a small animal in a torrent. He rose at last, and as he stood in the doorway, breathing deeply, his face livid in the sunset light, the muscles of his jaw trembled.

The stranger observed his host's agitation, but put away his pipe with slow and steady hand. He said nothing, and yet an observer would have declared he held the other and weaker man in the grasp of an inexorable hypnotic silence. Finally he fixed a calm, cold glance upon his host, as if summoning him to answer.

"Yes," the miner confessed, "there is always a woman in the case – another and more fortunate man. The woman is false, the man is treacherous. You trust and they betray. Such beings ruin and madden – they make outlaws such as I am – "

"Love is above will," asserted the millwright, with decision.

The other man fiercely turned. "I know what you mean –

you mean the woman is not to be condemned – that love goes where it is drawn. That is true, but deceit is not involuntary – it is deliberate – "

"Sometimes we deceive ourselves."

"In her case it was deceit," retorted the miner, who was now so deeply engaged with his own story that each general observation on the part of his guest was taken to be specific and personal.

The room was growing dusky, and the stranger's glance appeared keener, more insistent, as his body melted into the shadow. His shaggy head and black beard all but disappeared; only the faint outlines of his forehead remained, and yet, as his physical self faded into the gloom, his personality, his psychic self, loomed larger. His will enveloped the hermit, drawing upon him with irresistible power. It was as if he were wringing him dry of a confession as the priest closes in upon the culprit.

"I had my happy days – my days of care-free youth," the unquiet man was saying. "But my time of innocence was short. Evil companions came early and reckless deeds followed… I knew I was losing something, I knew I was being drawn downward, but I could not escape. Day and night I called for help, and then —*she* came – "

"Who came?"

"The one who made me forget all the others, the one who made me ashamed."

"And then?"

"And then for a time I was happy in the hope that I might win

her and so redeem my life."

"And she?"

"She pitied me – at first – and loved me – at least I thought so."

As his excitement increased his words came slower, burdened with passion. He spoke like a prisoner addressing a judge, his voice but a husky whisper.

"I told her I was unworthy of her – that was when I believed her to be an angel. I promised to begin a new life for her sake. Then she promised me – helped me – and all the while she was false to me – false as a hell-cat!"

"How?" queried the almost invisible man, and his voice was charged with stern demand.

"All the time she was promised to another man – and that man my enemy."

Here his frenzy flared forth in a torrent of words.

"Then – then I went mad. My brain was scarred and numb. I lost all sense of pity – all fear of law – all respect for woman. I only knew my wrongs – my despair – my hate. I watched, I waited, I found them together – "

"And then? What did you do then?" demanded the stranger, rising from his seat with sudden energy, his voice deep, insistent, masterful. "Tell me what you did?"

The miner's wild voice died to a hesitant whisper. "I – I fled."

"But before that – before you fled?"

"What is it to you?" asked the hermit, gazing with scared eyes at the man who towered above him like the demon of retribution.

"Who are you?"

"I am the avenger!" answered the other. "The man you hated was my brother. The woman you killed was his wife."

The fugitive fell upon his knees with a cry like that of one being strangled.

Out of the darkness a red flame darted, and the crouching man fell to the floor, a crumpled, bloody heap.

For a long time the executioner stood above the body, waiting, listening from the shadow to the faint receding breath-strokes of his victim. When all was still he restored his weapon to its sheath and stepped over the threshold into the keen and pleasant night.

As he closed the door behind him the stranger raised his eyes to Solidor, whose sovereign, cloud-like crest swayed among the stars.

"Now I shall rest," he said, with solemn satisfaction.

THE TRAIL TRAMP

– mounted wanderer, horseman of the restless heart, still rides from place to place, contemptuous of gold, carrying in his parfleche all the vanishing traditions of the West.

V
THE TRAIL TRAMP

KELLEY AFOOT

I

Kelley was in off the range and in profound disgust with himself, for after serving honorably as line-rider and later as cow-boss for ten years or more, he had ridden over to Keno to meet an old comrade. Just how it happened he couldn't tell, but he woke one morning without a dollar and, what was worse, incredibly worse, without horse or saddle! Even his revolver was gone.

In brief, Tall Ed, for the first time in his life, was set afoot, and this, you must understand, is a most direful disaster in cowboy life. It means that you must begin again from the ground up, as if you were a perfectly new tenderfoot from Nebraska.

Fort Keno was, of course, not a real fort; but it was a real barracks. The town was an imitation town. The fort, spick, span, in rows, with nicely planted trees and green grass-plats (kept in condition at vast expense to the War Department), stood on the bank of the sluggish river, while just below it and across the

stream sprawled the town, drab, flea-bitten, unkempt, littered with tin cans and old bottles, a collection of saloons, gambling-houses and nameless dives, with a few people – a very few – making an honest living by selling groceries, saddles, and coal-oil.

Among the industries of Keno City was a livery-and-sales stable, and Kelley, with intent to punish himself, at once applied for the position of hostler. "You durned fool," he said, addressing himself, "as you've played the drunken Injun, suppose you play valet to a lot of mustangs for a while."

As a disciplinary design he felicitated himself as having hit upon the most humiliating and distasteful position in Keno. It was understood that Harford of the Cottonwood Corral never hired a real man as hostler. He seemed to prefer bums and tramps, either because he could get them cheaper or else because no decent man would work for him. He was an "arbitrary cuss" and ready with gun or boot. He came down a long trail of weather-worn experiences in the Southwest, and showed it in both face and voice. He was a big man who had once been fatter, but his wrinkled and sour visage seldom crinkled into a smile. He had never been jolly, and he was now morose.

Kelley hated him. That, too, was another part of his elaborate scheme of self-punishment – hated, but did not fear him, for Tall Ed Kelley feared nothing that walked the earth or sailed the air. "You bum," he continued to say in bitter derision as he caught glimpses of himself of a morning in the little fragment of broken

glass which, being tacked on the wall, served as mirror in the office. "You durned mangy coyote, you need a shave, but you won't get it. You need a clean shirt and a new bandanna, but you won't get them, neither – not yet awhile. You'll earn 'em by going without a drop of whisky and by forking manure fer the next six months. You hear me?"

He slept in the barn on a soiled, ill-smelling bunk, and his hours of repose were broken by calls on the telephone or by some one beating at the door late at night or early in the morning; but he always responded without a word of complaint. It was all lovely discipline. It was like batting a measly bronco over the head in correction of some grievous fault (like nipping your calf, for example), and he took a grim satisfaction in going about degraded and forgotten of his fellows, for no one in Keno knew that this grimy hostler was cow-boss on the Perco. This, in a certain degree, softened his disgrace and lessened his punishment, but he couldn't quite bring himself to the task of explaining just how he had come to leave the range and go into service with Harford.

The officers of the fort, when tired of the ambulance, occasionally took out a team and covered rig, and so Kelley came in contact with the commanding officer, Major Dugan, a fine figure of a man with carefully barbered head and immaculate uniform. In Kelley's estimation he was almost too well kept for a man nearing fifty. He was, indeed, a gallant to whom comely women were still the fairest kind of game.

In truth, Tall Ed as hostler often furnished the major with a carriage, in which to make some of his private expeditions, and this was another and final disgrace which the cowman perceived and commented upon. To assist an old libertine like the major in concealing his night journeys was the nethermost deep of "self-discipline," but when the pretty young wife of his employer became the object of the major's attention Kelley was thrown into doubt.

Anita Harford, part Spanish and part German, as sometimes happens in New Mexico, was a curious and interesting mixture with lovely golden-brown hair and big, dark-brown eyes. She had the ingratiating smile of the señora, her mother, and the moods of gravity, almost melancholy, of her father.

She had been away in Albuquerque during the first week of Kelley's hostlership, and though he had heard something of her from the men about the corral, he had no great interest in her till she came one afternoon to the door of the stable, where she paused like a snow-white, timid antelope and softly said:

"Are you the new hostler?"

"I am, miss."

She smiled at his mistake. "I am Mrs. Harford. Please let me have the single buggy and bay Nellie."

Kelley concealed his surprise. "Sure thing, mom. Want her right now?"

"If you please."

As she moved away so lightly and so daintily Kelley stared

in stupefaction. "Guess I've miscalculated somewhere. Old Harf must have more drag into him than I made out. How did the old seed get a woman like that? 'Pears like he's the champion hypnotic spieler when it comes to 'skirts.'"

He hitched-up the horse in profound meditation. For the first time since his downfall his humiliation seemed just a trifle deeper than was necessary. He regretted his filthy shirt and his unshorn cheeks, and as he brought the horse around to the door of the boss's house he slipped out of the buggy on the off side, hurriedly tethered the mare to the pole, and retreated to his alley like a rat to its burrow. The few moments when Anita's clear eyes had rested upon him had been moments of self-revelation.

"Kelley, you're all kinds of a blankety fool," said he. "You're causing yourself a whole lot of extra misery and you're a disgustin' object, besides. It isn't necessary fer you to be a skunk in order to give yourself a welting. Go now and get a shave and a clean shirt, and start again."

This he did, and out of his next week's pay he bought a clean pair of overalls and a new sombrero, so that when he came back to the barn Harford was disturbed.

"Hope you aren't going to pull out, Kelley? You suit me, and if it's a question of pay, I'll raise you a couple of dollars on a week."

"Oh no, I'm not leaving. Only I jest felt like I was a little too measly. 'Pears like I ought to afford a clean shirt. It does make a heap of difference in the looks of a feller. No, I'm booked to stay with you fer a while yet."

Naturally thereafter little Mrs. Harford filled a large place in Kelley's gloomy world. He was not a romantic person, but he was often lonesome in the midst of his self-imposed penance. He forbade himself the solace of the saloon. He denied himself a day or even an hour off duty, and Harford, secretly amazed and inwardly delighted, went so far one day as to offer him a cigar.

Kelley waved it away. "No, I've cut out the tobacco, too."

This astounded his boss. "Say, it's a wonder you escaped the ministry."

"It's more of a wonder than you know," replied Kelley. "I was headed right plumb that way till I was seventeen. My mother had it all picked out fer me. Then I broke away."

Harford, with the instinctive caution of the plainsman, pursued the subject no further. He was content to know that for a very moderate wage he had secured the best man with horses that the stable had ever known. His only anxiety related to the question of keeping his find.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.