

Coolidge Dane

Shadow Mountain



Dane Coolidge
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CHAPTER I

The Last of Ten Thousand

Under the rim of Shadow Mountain, embraced like a pearl of great price by the curve of Bonanza Point and the mined-out slope of Gold Hill, the deserted city of Keno lay brooding and silent in the sun. A dry, gusty wind, swooping down through the northern pass, slammed the great iron fire-doors that hung creaking from the stone bank building, caught up a cloud of sand and dirt and, whirling it down past empty stores and assay offices, deposited it in the doorways of gambling houses and dance halls, long since abandoned to the rats. An old man, pottering about among the ruins, gathered up some broken boards and hobbled off; and once more Keno, the greatest gold camp the West has ever seen, sank back to silence and dreams.

A round of shots wakened the echoes of Shadow Mountain; a lonely miner came down the trail from Gold Hill, where in the old days the Paymaster had turned out its million a month; and then, far out across the floor of the desert on the road that led in from the railroad, there appeared an arrow-point of dust. It grew to a racing streak of white, the distant purring of the motor gave way to a deep-voiced thunder and as the powerful car glided swiftly up the street the doors of old houses opened unexpectedly and the last of ten thousand looked out.

There were old men and cripples, left stranded by the exodus; and prospectors who had moved into the vacant houses along with the other desert rats; but out on the gallery of the old Huff mansion—where the creepers still clung to the lattice—there was a flutter of white and a girl came out with a kitten in her arms. In the days of gold—when ten thousand men, the choice spirits of two hemispheres, had tramped down this same deserted street—the house of Colonel Huff, the discoverer of the Paymaster, had been the social center of Keno. And so it was still, for the Widow Huff remained; but across the front of the hospitable gallery where the Colonel had entertained the town, a cheap cloth sign announced meals fifty cents and Virginia, his daughter, was the waiter. She stood by the sign, still high-headed and patrician, and when the driver of the car saw her he came to a sudden stop. He was long and gaunt, with deep lines around his mouth from bucking the wind and dust and after a moment's hesitation he threw on his brake and leapt out.

“Did you want something?” she asked and, glancing warily about, he nodded and came up the steps.

“Yes,” he said, still eyeing her doubtfully, “what’s the chance for something to eat?”

“Why, good,” she answered with a suspicion of a smile. “Or—well, come in; I’ll speak to mother.”

She showed him into the spacious dining room, where the Colonel had once presided in state, and hurried into the kitchen. The young man gazed after her, looked swiftly about the room and backed away towards the door; then his strong jaw closed down, he smiled grimly to himself and sat down unbidden at a table. The table was mahogany and, in a case against the wall, there was a scant display of cut glass; but the linen was worn thin and the expensive velvet carpet had been ruined by hob-nailed boots. Heavy workingmen’s dishes lay on the tables, the plating was worn from the knives, and the last echoing ghost of vanished gentility was dispelled by a voice from the kitchen. It was the Widow Huff, once the first lady of Keno, but now a boarding-house cook.

“What—a dinner now? At half-past three? And with this wind fairly driving me crazy? Well, I can’t *hire* anybody to keep such hours for *me* and—”

There was a murmur of low-voiced protest as Virginia pleaded his cause and then, as the Widow burst out anew, the young man pushed back his chair. His blue eyes, half hidden beneath bulging brows, turned a steely, fighting gray, his wind-blown hair fairly bristled; and as he listened to the last of the Widow's remarks his lower lip was thrust up scornfully.

"You danged old heifer," he muttered and then the kitchen door flew open. The baleful look which he had intended for the Widow was surprised on his face by Virginia and after a startled moment she closed the door behind her.

"Why—Wiley Holman!" she cried accusingly and a challenge leapt into his eyes.

"Well?" he demanded and gazed at her sullenly as she scanned him from head to foot.

"I knew it," she burst out. "I'd know that stubborn look anywhere! You double up your lip like your father. Honest John!" she added sarcastically and brushed some crumbs from the table.

"Yes—Honest John!" he retorted. "And you don't need to say it like that, either. He's my father—I know him—and I'll tell you right now he never cheated a man in his life."

"Well, he did!" she flared back, her eyes dark with anger, "and I'll bet—I'll bet if my father was here he'd—he'd prove it to your face!"

She ended in a sob and as he saw the tears starting the son of Honest John relented.

"Aw, Virginia," he pleaded, "what's the use of always fighting? He's gone now, so let's be friends. I was just going by when I saw you on the gallery, and I thought—well, let's you and I be friends."

"What? After old Honest John robbed Papa of the Paymaster, and then hounded him to his death on the desert?"

"He did nothing of the kind—he never robbed anybody! And as for hounding your father to his death, the Old Man never even knew about it. He was down on the ranch, and when they told him the news—"

"Yes, that's you," she railed, stifling back her sobs, "you can always prove an alibi. But you'd better drift, Mr. Holman; because if mother knows you're here—"

"Well, what?" he demanded, truculently.

"She'll fill you full of buckshot."

"Pah!" he scoffed and snapped his fingers in the air, after which he lapsed into silence.

"Well, she will," she asserted, after waiting for him to speak, but Wiley only grunted.

"Wait till I get that dinner," he said at last and slumped down into a chair. He muttered to himself, gazing dubiously towards the kitchen, and turned impatiently to look at some specimens in a case against the wall. They were the usual chunks of high-grade gold ore, but he examined one piece with great care.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked, holding up a piece of white rock, and she sighed and brushed away her tears.

"Over on the dump," she answered wearily. "That's all Paymaster ore. Don't you think you'd better go?"

"Never ran away yet," he answered briefly and balanced the rock in his hand. "Pretty heavy," he observed, "I'll bet it would assay. Have you got very much on the dump?"

"What—*that*?" she cried, snatching the specimen away from him and bursting into a nervous laugh. "That assay? Well, you are a greenie—it's nothing but barren white quartz!"

"Oh, it is, eh?" he rejoined and gazed at her hectoringly. "You seem to know a whole lot about mineral."

"Yes, I do," she boasted. "Death Valley Charley teaches me. I've learned how to pan, and everything. But that rock there—that's the barren quartz that the Paymaster ran into when the values went out of the ore. Old Charley knows all about it."

"Yes, they all do," he observed and as his lip went up her eyes dilated suddenly in a panic.

“Oh, you went to that school—I forgot all about it—where they study about the mines! Are you in the mining business now?”

“Why, yes,” he acknowledged, “but that doesn’t make much difference. I find I can learn something from most everybody.”

“Well, of course, then,” she stammered, “I shouldn’t have said that; but the whole Paymaster dump is covered with that heavy quartz, and everybody knows it’s barren. Are you just looking around or—”

She hesitated politely and as he reached for another specimen she noticed a ring on his finger. It was of massive gold and, set in clutching claws, there were three stupendous diamonds. Not imitation stones nor small, off-colored diamonds, but brilliants of the very first water, clear as dew, yet holding in their hearts the faintest suggestion of blue.

“Oh!” she gasped, and as he did not seem to notice, she drew her skirts away with a flourish. “I’m surprised,” she mocked, “that you condescend to speak to us—of course you own your own mines!”

“Nope,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders at her sarcasm, “I’m nothing but a prospector, yet. And you don’t need to be so surprised.”

“No!” she retorted, giving way to swift resentment. “I guess I don’t—when you consider how you got your money. Here’s Mother out cooking for you, and I’m the waiter; and you’re traveling around in racing cars with thousand-dollar rings on your hands. But if old Honest John hadn’t sold all his stock while he was advising my father to hold on—”

“He did not!”

“Yes, he did! He did, too! And now, after Father has been lost in Death Valley, and we have come down to this, your father writes over and offers to buy our stock for just the same as nothing. That’s *my* ring you’re wearing, and the money that paid for it—”

“Oh, all right then,” he sneered, stripping off the ring and handing it abruptly over to her, “if it’s your ring, take it! But don’t you say my father—”

“Well, he did,” she declared, “and you can keep your old ring! It won’t bring back my father—now!”

“No, it won’t,” he agreed, “but while we’re about it I just want to tell you something. My father went broke, buying back Paymaster stock from friends he’d advised to go in—and he’s got the stock to prove it—and when he heard that the Colonel was dead he decided to buy in your mother’s. He mortgaged his cows to raise the money for her and then that old terror—I don’t care if she is your mother—she slapped him in the face by refusing it. Well, he didn’t like to say anything, but you can tell her from me she don’t have to cook unless she wants to! She can sell—or buy—a hundred thousand shares of Paymaster any day she says the word; and if that isn’t honest I don’t know what is! I ask you, now; isn’t that fair?”

“What, at ten cents a share? When it used to sell for forty dollars! He’s just trying to get control of the mine. And as for offering to buy or sell, that’s perfectly ludicrous, because he knows we haven’t any money!”

“Well, what *do* you want?” he demanded irritably, and then he thrust up his lip. “I know,” he said, “you want your own way! All right, I’ll never trouble you again. You can keep right on guarding that hole-in-the-ground until you dry up and blow away across the desert. And as for that old she-devil—”

He paused at a sudden slam from the kitchen, and Virginia’s eyes grew big; but as he rose to face the Widow Huff he slipped the white rock into his pocket.

CHAPTER II

The Shotgun Widow

The Widow Huff was burdened with a tray and her eye sought wildly for Virginia but when she glimpsed Wiley moving swiftly towards the door she set down his dinner with a bang. The disrespectful epithet which he had applied to her had been lost in the clatter of plates, but the moment the Widow came into the room she sensed the hair-trigger atmosphere.

“Here!” she ordered, taking command on the instant. “Come back here, young man, and pay me for this dinner! And Virginia Huff, you go out into the kitchen—how many times do I have to speak to you?”

Virginia started and stopped, her resentful eyes on Wiley, a thin smile parting her lips.

“He said—” she began, and then Wiley strode back and slapped down a dollar on the table.

“Yes, and I meant it, too,” he answered fiercely. “There’s your pay—and you can keep your mine.”

“Why, certainly,” responded the Widow without knowing what she was talking about, “and now you eat that dinner!”

She pointed a finger to the tray of food and looked Wiley Holman in the eye. He wavered, gazing from her to the smiling Virginia, and then he drew up his chair.

“I’ll go you,” he said and showed his teeth in a grin. “You can’t hurt my feelings that way.”

He lifted the T-bone steak from the platter and transferred it swiftly to his plate and then, as he fell to eating ravenously, the Widow condescended to smile.

“When I go to the trouble of cooking a man a steak,” she announced with the suggestion of a swagger, “I expect him to stay and eat it.”

“All right,” mumbled Wiley, and glancing flearingly at Virginia, he went ahead with his meal.

The Widow looked over her shoulder at her daughter and then back at the stranger, but as she was about to inquire into the cause of their quarrel she spied his diamond ring. She approached him closer under pretext of pouring out some water and then she sank down into a chair.

“That is a very fine ring,” she stated briefly. “Worth fifteen hundred dollars at the least. Haven’t I seen you somewhere, before?”

“Very likely,” returned Wiley, not venturing to look up, “my business takes me everywhere.”

“I thought I recognized you,” went on the Widow ingratiatingly; “you’re a mining man, aren’t you, Mister—er—”

“Wiley,” he answered, and at this bold piece of effrontery Virginia caught her breath.

“Ah, yes, I remember you now,” said the Widow. “You knew my husband, of course—Colonel Huff? He passed away on the twentieth of July; but there was a time, not so many years ago, that I wore a few diamonds myself.” She fixed her restless eyes on his ring and heaved a discontented sigh. “Virginia,” she directed, “run out into the kitchen and clean up that skillet and all. I declare, you do less and less every day—are you a married man, Mr. Wiley?”

Without awaiting the answer to this portentous question, Virginia flung out into the kitchen and, left alone, the Widow drew nearer and her manner became suddenly confidential.

“I’d like to talk with you,” she began, “about my husband’s mine. Of course you’ve heard of the famous Paymaster—that’s the mill right over east of town—but there are very few men that know what I do about the reasons why that mine was shut down. It was commonly reported that Colonel Huff was trying to get possession of the property, but the truth of the matter is he was deceived by old John Holman and finally left holding the sack. You see, it was this way. My husband and John Holman had always been lifelong friends, but Colonel Huff was naturally generous while Holman thought of nothing but money. Well, my husband discovered the Paymaster—he was led to it by an

Indian that he had saved from being killed by the soldiers—but, not having any money, he went to John Holman and they developed the mine together. It turned out very rich and such a rush you never saw—this valley was full of tents for miles—but it was so far from the railroad—seventy-four miles to Vegas—that the work was very expensive. The Company was reorganized and Mr. Blount, the banker, was given a third of the promotion stock. Then the five hundred thousand shares of treasury stock was put on the market in order to build the new mill; and when the railroad came in there was such a crazy speculation that everybody lost track of the transfers. My husband, of course, was generous to a fault and accustomed to living like a gentleman—and he invested very heavily in real estate, too—but this Mr. Blount was always out for his interest and Honest John would skin a dead flea.”

“Honest John!” challenged Wiley, looking up from his eating with an ugly glint in his eye, but the Widow was far away.

“Yes, Honest John Holman,” she sneered, without noticing his resentment. “They called him Honest John. Did you ever know one of these ‘Honest John’ fellows yet that wasn’t a thorough-paced scoundrel? Well, old John Holman he threw in with Blount to deprive Colonel Huff of his profits and, with these street certificates everywhere and no one recording their transfers, the Colonel was naturally deceived into thinking that the selling was from the outside. But all the time, while they were selling their stock and hammering down the price of Paymaster, they were telling the Colonel that it was only temporary and he ought to support the market. So he bought in what he could, though it wasn’t much, as he was interested in other properties, and then when the crash came he was left without anything and Blount and Holman were rich. The great panic came on and Blount foreclosed on everything, and then Mr. Huff fell out with John Holman and they closed the Paymaster down. That was ten years ago and, with the litigation and all, the stock went down to nothing. The whole camp went dead and all the folks moved away—but have you ever been through the mine? Well, I want you to go—that ground has hardly been scratched!”

Wiley Holman glanced up doubtfully from under his heavy eyebrows and the Widow became voluble in her protests.

“No, sir,” she exclaimed, “I certainly ought to know, because the Colonel was Superintendent; and when he had been drinking—the town was awful, that way—he would tell me all about the mine. And that was his phrase—he used it always: ‘That ground has hardly been scratched!’ But when he fell out with old John Holman he—well, there was an explosion underground and the glory-hole stope caved in. They cleaned it out afterwards and hunted around, but all the rich ore was gone; but I’m just as certain as I’m sitting here this minute the Colonel knew where there was more! He never would admit it—he was peculiar, that way, he never would discuss his business before a woman. But he wouldn’t deny it, and when he had been drinking—well, I know it’s there, that’s all!”

She paused for her effect but Mr. Wiley, the mining man, was singularly unimpressed. He continued eating in moody silence and the Widow tried the question direct.

“Well, what do you think about it?” she demanded bluffly. “Would you like to consider the property?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he answered impersonally. “I’m on my way up north.”

“Well, when you come back, then. Since my husband is gone I’m so sick and tired of it all I’ll consider any offer—for cash.”

“Nope,” he responded, “I’m out for something different.” Then to stem the tide of her impending protest, he broke his studious silence. “I’m looking for molybdenum,” he went on quickly, “and some of these other rare metals that are in demand on account of the war. Ever find any vanadium or manganese around here? No, I guess they’re all further north.”

He returned to his meal and the Widow surveyed him appraisingly with her bold, inquisitive eyes. She was a big, strapping woman, and handsome in a way; but the corners of her mouth were drawn down sharply in a sulky, lawless pout.

“Aw, tell me the truth,” she burst out at last. “What have you got against the property?”

A somber glow came into his eyes as he opened his lips to speak, and then he veiled his smouldering hate behind a crafty smile.

“The parties that I represent,” he said deliberately, “are looking for a *mine*. But the man that puts his money into the Paymaster property is simply buying a lawsuit.”

“What do you mean?” demanded the Widow, rousing up indignantly in response to this sudden thrust.

“I mean, no matter how rich the Paymaster may be—and I hear the whole district is worked out—I wouldn’t even go up the hill to look at it until you showed me the title was good.”

The Widow sat and glowered as she meditated a fitting response and then she rose to her feet.

“Well, all right, then,” she sulked, “if you don’t want to consider it—but you’re missing the chance of your life.”

“Very likely,” he muttered and reached for his hat. “Much obliged for cooking my dinner.”

He started for the door, but she flew swiftly after him and snatched him back into the room.

“Now here!” she cried, “I want you to listen to me—I’ve got tired of this everlasting waiting. I waited around for ten years on the Colonel, to settle this matter up, and now that he’s gone I’m going to settle it myself and get out of the cussed country. Maybe I don’t own the mine, but I own a good part of it—I’ve got two hundred thousand shares of stock—and I could sell it to-morrow for twenty thousand dollars, so you don’t need to turn up your nose. There must be something there after all these years, to bring an offer of ten cents a share; but I wouldn’t take that money if it was the last act of my life—I just hate that Honest John Holman! He cheated my husband out of everything he had—and yet he did it in such a deceitful way that the Colonel would never believe it. I’ve called him a coward a thousand times for tolerating such an outrage for an instant, and now that he’s gone I’m going to show Honest John that he can’t put it over *me!*”

She shook her head until her heavy black hair flew out like Medusa’s locks and then Wiley laughed provokingly.

“All right,” he said, “but you can’t rope me in on your feuds. If you want to give me an option on your stock in the company for five or ten cents a share I may take a look at your mine. But I’ll tell you one thing—you’ll sign an agreement first to leave the country and never come back. I’m a business man, working for business people, and these shotgun methods don’t go.”

“Well, I’ll do it!” exclaimed the Widow, passing by his numerous insults in a sudden mad grab at release. “Just draw up your paper and I’ll sign it in a minute—but I want ten cents a share!”

“Ten cents or ten dollars—it makes no difference to me. You can put it as high as you like—but if it’s too high, my principals won’t take it. I can’t stop to inspect it now, because I’m due up north, but I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You give me an option on all your stock, with a written permission to take possession, and if the other two big owners will do as much I’ll come back and consider the mine. But get this straight—the first time you butt in, this option and agreement is off!”

“What do you mean—butt in?” demanded the Widow truculently, and then she bit her lip. “Well, never mind,” she said, “just draw up your papers. I’ll show you I’m business myself.”

“Huh!” he grunted and, whipping out a fountain pen, he sat down and wrote rapidly at a table. “There,” he said tearing the leaf from his notebook and putting it into her hands, “just read that over and if you want to sign it we’ll close the deal, right here.”

The Widow took the paper and, turning it to the light, began a labored perusal.

“Memorandum of agreement,” she muttered, squinting her eyes at his handwriting, “hmm, I’ll have to go and get my glasses. ‘For and in consideration of the sum of ten dollars—to me in hand paid by M. R. Wiley,’ and so forth—oh well, I guess it’s all right, just show me where to sign.”

“No,” he said, “let me read it to you—you ought to know what you’re signing.”

“No, just show me where to sign,” protested the Widow petulantly, “and where it says ten cents a share.”

“Well, it says that here,” answered Wiley, putting his finger on the place, “but I’m going to read it to you—it wouldn’t be legal otherwise.”

He wiped the beaded sweat from his brow and glanced towards the kitchen door. In this desperate game which he was framing on the Widow the luck had all come his way, but as he cleared his throat and commenced to read Virginia came bounding in. She was carrying a kitten, but when she saw the paper between them she dropped it on the floor.

“Virginia!” cried her mother, “go and hunt my glasses. They’re somewhere in my bedroom.”

“All right,” she responded, but when she came back she glanced inquiringly at the paper.

“You can go now,” announced the Widow, adjusting her glasses, but Virginia threw up her head.

“Do you know who that is?” she demanded brusquely, pointing an accusing finger at Wiley.

“Why—er—no,” returned the Widow, now absorbed in the agreement.

“Well, all right,” she said after a hasty perusal, “but where’s that sum of ten dollars? Now you hush, Virginia, and go—into—the—*kitchen!* Now, it says right here—oh, where is that place? Oh yes, ‘the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged’! *Virginia!*”

She stamped her foot, but Virginia’s blood was up and she made a grab at the paper.

“Now, *listen!*” she screamed, stopping her mother in her rush. “That man there is Wiley Holman! Yes—Holman! Old Honest John’s son! What’s this you’re going to sign?”

She backed away, her eyes fixed on the agreement, while the Widow stood astounded.

“Wiley *Holman!*” she shrieked, “why, you limb of Satan, you said your name was Wiley!”

“It is,” returned Wiley with one eye on the door, “the rest of my name is Holman.”

“But you signed it on this paper—you wrote it right there! Oh, I’ll have the law on you for this!”

She clutched at the paper and as Virginia gave it to her mother she turned an accusing glance upon Wiley.

“Yes, that’s just like you, Mr. M. R. Wiley,” she observed with scathing sarcasm. “You were just that way when you were a kid here in Keno— always trying to get the advantage of somebody. But if I’d thought you had the nerve—” She glanced at the paper and gasped and Wiley showed his teeth in a grin.

“Well, she crowded me to it,” he answered with a swagger. “I’m strictly business—I’ll sign up anybody. You can just keep that paper,” he nodded to the Widow, “and send it to me by mail.”

He winked at Virginia and slipped swiftly out the door as the Widow made a rush for her gun. She came out after him, brandishing a double-barreled shotgun, just as he cranked up his machine to start.

“I’ll show you!” she yelled, jerking her gun to her shoulder. “I’ll learn you to get funny with *me!*”

She pulled the trigger, but Wiley was watching her and he ducked down behind the radiator.

Clank, went the hammer and with a wail of rage the Widow snapped the other barrel.

“You, Virginia!” she cried in a terrible voice, “have you been monkeying with my shotgun?”

The answer was lost in a series of explosions that awoke every echo in Keno, and Wiley Holman leapt into his machine. He jerked off his brake and stepped on the foot throttle but as he roared off up the street he waved a grimy hand at Virginia.

CHAPTER III

The Shadow

The old, settled quiet returned to sleepy Keno—the quiet of the desert and of empty, noiseless houses stretching in long, sunburned rows down the canyon. The black lava patch, laid across the gray rhyolite flank of Shadow Mountain like the shade of an angry cloud, still frowned down upon the town like a portent of storms to come. But the sky was hot and gleaming and no storms came; nor did Wiley Holman return, though the Widow waited for him patiently. After all his boldness, his unbelievable effrontery in trying to steal her Paymaster stock, he had gone on laughing to seek other adventures and left her with the mine on her hands. But he would come back, she knew it; and with her gun loaded with buckshot she watched from the shelter of the gallery.

Yet the days went by and then the weeks and at last the Widow, with a sigh of vexation, put up her gun and retired within. Now that the episode was over she felt vaguely regretful that he had failed, after all, in his purpose. If he had procured his option, under cover of her blindness, and obtained her quit-claim to the mine, she would at least have had the satisfaction of obtaining her own terms—and she would have the twenty thousand to spend. It was maddening, disgusting, when she thought it over, that he had turned out to be Holman's son, and she never quite forgave Virginia for dinning the fact into her ears. For what you don't know will never hurt you, and she had lost her last chance to sell. When she went back into the house she went back into the kitchen, and there she would have to stay. Either that or take Honest John's money.

But he wanted the property—the Widow knew it—else why had he sent his son? All the wise-acres in Keno agreed with the Widow that Honest John had designs on her property and Death Valley Charley, who had jumped half the claims in the district, began once more to carry his gun. It was by virtue of that, more than of assessment work done or of any other legal right, that Charley held title to his claims; and until Wiley had come through town and attempted to bond the Paymaster he had feared no one but Stiff Neck George. Stiff Neck George had been Blount's gunman on the momentous occasion when they had tried to jump the Paymaster—and the Widow Huff had put him to flight with one blast from her trusty shotgun. But now that big interests were sending in their experts and mining was picking up everywhere Stiff Neck George might forget that humiliating defeat, so Death Valley Charley put on his six-shooter.

He was a little, stooping man, burned chocolate brown by the sun and with eyes half blinded by the glare, and as the Widow gave up her fruitless vigil, Death Valley Charley took her place. But he was not alone, for through all the weary weeks Virginia had been watching her mother. She had slipped in and out, now lingering on the gallery, now listening through the doorway, expectant but at the same time afraid. She knew Wiley Holman much better than her mother, and she knew that he would come back. He was patient, that was all, more patient than an Indian, and he had his eye on their mine. For ten years and more Colonel Huff, and now the Widow, had held physical possession of the Paymaster. Every great iron-bound door was locked and padlocked and the Huff family held the keys, but in all those ten years Holman had never come near it and Blount had merely seized it on a labor lien. The very title to the mine was shrouded in mystery, for no one could locate the shares, and to openly lay claim to it and produce a majority of the stock would be equivalent to a confession of treachery. All that anyone knew surely was that some one of the three original owners—or some unsuspected party outside—had bought in and sequestered the almost valueless stock and was patiently biding his time. Since the Huffs did not own the stock themselves they knew for a certainty that it was held by either Holman or Blount.

As Virginia sat on the gallery, listening subconsciously for the drumming of Wiley's racing motor up the road, she ran over in her mind the circumstances of his visit; and she could explain them

all but one. Why, after failing of his mission, and narrowly escaping her mother's gun, had he waved his hand and smiled so gayly as he thundered away up the street? Had he other schemes more subtle; or was he simply reckless, regarding even this adventure as a joke? As a boy he had been both—a crafty schemer and reckless doer—but now he was grown to a man. And if the lines about his mouth were any criterion he would soon be coming back to carry out by stealth what he failed to accomplish by assault. So she, too, waited patiently, to foil his machinations and uphold the honor of the Huffs.

In the good old days it had never been forgotten that the Huffs belonged to the Virginia quality, while the Holmans came from Maine; hence the Colonel's relations with Honest John Holman had at first been strictly business. John Holman was a Northerner, with no social graces and abstemious to a fault, but when his commercial honor upon a certain occasion had saved the Colonel from bankruptcy he had cast the traditions of the South to the winds and taken Honest John as his friend. "My friend," he called him and neither his wife nor his enemies could shake the Colonel's faith in his partner. Then, after years of mutual trust, the panic had come on, and the crash in Paymaster stock; and as their fortunes went tumbling and ugly rumors filled the air they had broken their friendship completely. Yet so great was his love for his old-time friend that he had never openly accused him; and Honest John Holman, after months of somber silence, had moved away and started a cow ranch. But it was a question of honesty between the two men and their children had never forgotten. Ten years had passed since they had been boy and girl together, but the moment they met the old quarrel flashed up again and now the feud was on.

A boisterous blast of wind, whirling dust and papers down the street, announced the beginning of another sandstorm; and Death Valley Charley, who had been sitting outside the gate, came muttering up the steps. Behind him trotted Heine, his worshipful little dog, and as Virginia's pet cat suddenly arched its back, Death Valley took Heine in his arms.

"Can't you hear 'em?" he asked tiptoeing rapidly up to Virginia. "It's them big guns, over in Europe. It's them forty-two centimeter howitzers and the French seventy-fives in the trenches along the Somme."

"Do you think so?" murmured Virginia, smoothing down her cat's back, "it sounds like blasting to me."

"No—big guns!" repeated Charley, regarding her intently through his wavering, sun-blinded eyes, and then he burst into a laugh. "You can hear 'em, can't you, Heine?" he cried to his dog, and Heine squirmed ecstatically and sneezed. "Hah, that's my little dog—you're so confectionate! Now get down on the floor, and don't you go near that cat."

He put down the dog and advanced closer to Virginia.

"He's coming!" he whispered. "I can hear him, plain—jurr, jurr; hud, hud, hud, hud, hud!"

"Who's coming?" demanded Virginia, looking swiftly up the road.

"Why—him! The man you're waiting for. Can't you hear him! Hrrrr—rud! He's coming to grab you and take you away in his auto!"

"Oh, Charley!" exclaimed Virginia, not entirely displeased, "and where will you go then?"

"I'll go to Death Valley," he answered mysteriously. "There's lots of gold over there. I came back one time and they says to me: 'Charley, where've you been for such a long time?' 'In Death Valley,' I says, 'in the Funeral Range. Working in the Coffin mine, on the graveyard shift.' Hah, hah; they can't get nothing out of me. I know where there's gold—in the Ube-Hebes; it's a place where nobody goes. I saw your father there, the last time I went through, and he sent word to you not to worry. 'But for Christ's sake,' he says, 'don't tell my wife I'm here—I'm tired of her devilish chatter!'"

"Charley!" reprimanded Virginia, and as he subsided into mutterings, she looked about with shocked eyes. "You talk too much," she said at last. "Didn't I tell you not to say that again? Because if mother hears it she'll drive you out of the house, and then what will Heine do?"

"Heine! Come here, sir!" commanded Charley abruptly, and slapped him until he yelped. "Well, now," he warned as Heine slunk away, "you look out or you lose your house."

“I guess you’d better go now,” said Virginia discreetly, and continued her vigil alone. Death Valley was harmless, but when he began hearing things there was no telling where he would stop. The next minute he would be seeing things, and then getting messages, and then looking through mountains with radium. He was harmless, of course, but when there was a sandstorm—well, some people thought he was crazy. And there was a sandstorm coming up. It was blowing in from the north and rushing clouds of dirt down the street; and along in the night, when it had gained its full force, the sand and gravel would fly. She rose to go in, but just at that moment she heard a low drumming up the street. It increased to a bubbling, a drumming, a thunder, and like the spirit of the rough north wind Wiley Holman went racing through the town. His hat was off and as he drifted by his hair thrashed wildly in his eyes, yet he glanced up in passing and it seemed to Virginia that he gave her a roguish smile. Then in a series of explosions that brought the Widow running he dashed on and whirled out across the desert.

“Oh, that devil!” she raged, brandishing her heavy shotgun at the disappearing cloud of dust. “He’s just making that hubbub to mock me! He’ll be coming back—I know it, the scoundrel—but you wait, he won’t fool me again!”

She stood on the gallery while the food scorched in the kitchen and watched the boring arrow of dust, but it swept on and on across the boundless desert until at last it was lost in the storm. “Oh, he’ll be back!” she screamed to the gathering neighbors. “I know him, he’s after my mine. But he’d better watch out! If he ever goes near it, I’ll shoot him, you mark my word!”

“No, he won’t,” said Virginia, but when they were all gone she came back and gazed down the road.

CHAPTER IV

The Ghost-Man

As the sun paled to nothing in the yellow murk of dust, a high cloud of sand overleapt the northern peaks and came sifting down the slopes of Shadow Mountain. The gusts of wind began to wail in boding fury and then the storm struck the town. Dirt and papers flew before it; tin cans leapt forth from holes and alleys; and sticks and small stones, sucked up in the vortex, joined in on the devil's dance. Ancient signs creaked and groaned and threatened to leave their moorings, old houses gave up shingles and loose boards, and up the street on the deserted bank building, the fire-doors banged like cannon. Then the night came on and the streets of Keno were empty, except for the flying dirt.

But it is nights such as this that move some men to greater daring and as Wiley Holman, far out on the desert, felt the rush and surge of wind he struck a swift circle and, turning back towards Keno, he bored his way into the teeth of the storm. The gravel from the road slashed and slatted against his radiator and his machine trembled before the buffets of the gale, but it was just such a night as he needed for his purpose and he ran with his lights switched off. If the Widow Huff, by any chance, should glance out across the plain she might notice their gleam and divine his purpose, which was to inspect the Paymaster mine. As a stockholder and part owner it was, of course, his right to enter the premises at will, but the Widow had placed her own personal mandate above the laws of the land, and it was better, and safer, to avoid all discussion by visiting the property after dark.

Up the long slope of the valley the white racer moved slowly, shuddering and thundering as it took the first hill, and as the outlying houses leaped up from the darkness, Wiley muffled his panting exhaust. In the sheltered valley, under the lee of Shadow Mountain, the violence of the wind was checked and some casual citizen, out looking at the stars, might hear him above the storm. He turned off the main road and, following up a side street, glided quietly into the shelter of a barn, and five minutes later, with his prospector's pick and ore-sacks, he toiled up the trail to the mine.

The Paymaster mine lay on the slope of Gold Hill, directly overlooking the town—first the huge, dismantled mill; then the white slide of the waste dump; and then, up the gulch, the looming gallows-frame of the hoist and the dim bulk of abandoned houses. The mine had made the town, and the town had clustered near it in the broad oval of the valley below; but in its day the Paymaster had been a community by itself, with offices and bunk-houses and stores. Now all was deserted and in the pale light of the moon it seemed the mere ghost of a mine. A loose strip of zinc on the corrugated-iron mill drummed and shuddered in a menacing undertone and at uncertain intervals some door inside smote its frame with a resounding bang. Straining timbers creaked and groaned, the wind mourned like a disembodied spirit, and as Wiley Holman jumped at a sudden sound he turned and glanced nervously behind him.

It was not a shadow but the passing of a shadow that caught his roving eye and as he stripped off his wind-goggles and looked again he felt by instinct for his six-shooter. But it was not on his hip. He had taken his pick instead, and for the first time he felt a thrill of fear—not fear for his life nor of anything tangible, but that old, primordial fear of the night that only a gun can banish. He picked up a rock and walked back down the trail; but nothing leapt forth at him—even the shadow was gone, and he threw the rock petulantly away. It was the wind, and the noises, and the blinders on his goggles; but now that the great fear was born he jumped at every sound. He had been out before on worse nights than this—what was it, then, that he feared? With his back against a rock he stared about and listened until at last his nerve returned; then he went boldly to the dump, where the white quartz lay the thickest, and began to dig a hole with his pick.

Deep as he could dig there was nothing but the white waste and he paced off the width of the pile; then very systematically he moved across the slope, grabbing handfuls of fine dirt at measured

intervals and throwing them into an ore-sack. There was something about Virginia's piece of "barren quartz" that had appealed to his prospector's eye and even in the excitement of meeting the Widow he had not forgotten to sequester it. But a piece of rock from a girl's case of specimens is a far call from "ore in place" and he had come back that night to look the mine over and collect an average sample from the dump. There were hundreds of tons of that rock on the dump and it certainly was his right, as a part owner in the property, to sample it and have it assayed.

Back and forth across the slide, now buffeted by the wind, now pelted by loosened stones, he continued his methodical test and then as he knelt to dig out a hole a great rock came bounding past. It came out of the darkness and went smashing down the hillside like some terrific engine of destruction and before he had more than scrambled from its path a second boulder was upon him. He dodged it by a hair's breadth and fell flat on his face, just as a stream of loose stone which the first flying rock had dislodged sent him rolling and tumbling down the slope in an avalanche of flying débris. For a minute he lay breathless while the waste rattled past him, and then he looked up the hill. No movement of his had started those great boulders. They had been launched by someone from above, and as he raised his head cautiously he beheld a gaunt figure standing outlined against the sky. It stood like a gibbet, its head to one side, a pistol in its hand; but as Wiley moved the man crouched and drew back as if he feared to be seen.

Who he was Wiley did not know, nor could he divine his animus in thus attempting to take his life, but, being caught in the open without his gun, he played safe and lay quiet where he had fallen. The wind howled along the ridges and trailed off into silence and, looking around, Wiley caught the wink of a lantern as it came across the flat from town. The crash of the boulders as they bounded down the dump and then on through the brush below had undoubtedly aroused some inquisitive citizen, who was coming over to investigate. Wiley rose up quickly, for he did not wish to be discovered, but as he started towards the trail he met the ghost-man, creeping forward with his pistol ready to shoot.

At times like this a man acts by instinct, and Wiley Holman dropped to the ground; then with the swiftness of an Indian he bellied off down the hill, looking back after every lightning move. The man was a murderer, a cold-blooded assassin; and, thinking him injured, he had been stealing up to his hiding-place to give him the *coup de grace*. Wiley rolled into a gulch and peered over the bank, his eyes starting out of his head with fear; and then, as the lantern began to bob below him, he turned and crept up the hill. Two trails led towards the mine, one on either side of the dump, and as the wind swept down with a sudden gust of fury, he ran up the farther trail. Once over the hill he could avoid both his pursuers and, cutting a wide circle, slip back to his machine and escape. The wind died to nothing as he neared the summit and he turned and looked back down the trail. Something moved—it was the man, his head twisted over his shoulder, his gun still held at a ready, creeping waspishly up the path.

Wiley turned and fled, sick with rage at his own impotence, but as he whipped over the dump the earth opened up before him and he slipped and stopped on the brink of a chasm. It was the caved-in stope, the old glory-hole of the Paymaster, and it cut off his last escape. A sudden sinking of the heart, a feeling of fate being against him, came over him as he slunk along the bank; and then, as a path opened up before him, he took the steep slope at a bound. Further on in the darkness he saw the roof of the mill and the broken hummocks of the dump; beyond lay the other trail and the open country and his car—and the six-shooter—beyond! His feet seemed to fly as he dashed across the level and breasted a sudden ascent and then on its summit as the wind snatched him back someone struck him in full flight. "God!" he cried, and fought himself free but the other clutched him again.

"Run!" she begged, and he knew it was Virginia, but he was in a panic for fear of what was behind.

"No!" he cried, catching her roughly in his arms and starting the other way, "there's a crazy man back there and—"

“No–no–no!” she clamored, bringing him to a halt with her struggles. “The other way–can’t you hear what I’m saying to you—” And then Wiley saw the Widow.

She was standing on the dump with her shotgun raised and pointed, and he hurled Virginia to one side.

“Don’t shoot!” he yelled, but as he ducked and started to run, the Widow’s gun spoke out. A blow like that of a club struck his leg from under him and he fell to the ground in a heap, but even in his pain he remembered the presence which had followed with its head on one side.

“You danged fool!” he cursed as the Widow ran up to him. “Keep that cartridge, whatever you do. There’s a crazy man after me and—”

“I see him!” shrieked the Widow, making a dash for the bank with her gun at her hip for the shot. “You git, you dastard!” she shrilled into the darkness and once more the old shotgun roared forth.

“Oh, mother!” wept Virginia, throwing her arms about Wiley, and attempting to raise him up. “Oh, look what you’ve done–it’s Wiley Holman–and now I hope you’re satisfied!”

“You bet I’m satisfied!” answered the Widow, exultingly. “That other fellow was Stiff Neck George!”

CHAPTER V

A Load of Buckshot

Since he had turned back, far out on the desert, and braved the storm to inspect the Paymaster Mine, Wiley Holman had met nothing but disaster; but as he lay on the ground with one leg full of buckshot he blamed it all on the Widow. Without warning or justification, without even giving him a chance, she had sneaked up and potted him like a rabbit; and now, as men came running to witness his shame, she gloried in her badness.

“Aha-ah!” she jeered, coming back to stand over him and Wiley reached for a stone.

“You old she-cat,” he burst out, “you say another word to me and I’ll bounce this rock off your head!”

He groaned and dropped the rock to take his leg in both hands, and then Virginia rushed to the rescue.

“How badly are you hurt?” she asked, kneeling down beside him, but he jerked ungraciously away.

“Go away and leave me alone!” he shouted to the world at large and the Widow took the hint to withdraw. Then in a series of frenzied curses Wiley stripped off his puttee and felt of his injured leg. It was wet with blood and two shot-holes in his shin-bone were giving him the most exquisite pain; the rest were just flesh-wounds where the buckshot had pierced his leggings and imbedded themselves in the muscles. He looked them over hastily by the light of a flashing lantern and then he rose up from the ground.

“Gimme that gun for a crutch!” he demanded of the Widow; and Mrs. Huff, who had been surveying her work with awe, passed over the shotgun in silence. “All right, now,” he went on, turning to Death Valley Charley, who had been patiently holding his lantern, “just show me the trail and I’ll get out of camp before some crazy dastard ups and kills me.”

“That was Stiff Neck George,” observed Charley mysteriously. “He’s guarding the Paymaster for Blount.”

“Who—that fellow that was after me?” burst out Wiley in a passion as he hobbled off down the trail. “What the hell was he trying to do? The whole rotten mine isn’t worth stealing from anybody. What’s the matter with you people—are you crazy?”

“Well, that’s all right!” returned the Widow from the darkness. “You can’t sneak in and jump *mymine!*”

“*Yourmine*, you old tarrier!” yelled Wiley furiously. “You’d better go to town and look it up. The whole danged works is mine—I bought it in for taxes!”

“You—what?” cried the Widow, brushing Virginia and Charley aside and halting him in the trail. “You bought the Paymaster for *taxes!*”

“Yes, for taxes,” answered Wiley, “and got stung at that! Gimme eighty-three dollars and forty-one cents and you can have it back, with costs. But now listen, you old battle-ax; I’ve taken enough off of you. You went up on my property when I was making an inspection of it and made an attempt on my life; and if I hear a peep out of you, from this time on, I’ll go down and swear out a warrant.”

“I didn’t aim to kill you,” defended the Widow, weakly. “I just tried to shoot you in the leg.”

“Well, you did it,” returned Wiley, and, pushing her aside, he limped on down the trail. The Widow followed meekly, talking in low tones with her daughter, and at last Virginia came up beside him.

“Take him right to our house,” she said to Charley, “and I’ll nurse him until he gets well.”

“No, you take me to the Holman house!” directed Wiley, obstinately. “I guess we’ve got a house of our own.”

“Well, suit yourself,” she murmured, and fell back to the rear while Wiley went hobbling on. At every step he jabbed the muzzle of the shotgun vindictively into the ground, but as he reached the flat and met a posse of citizens, he submitted to being carried on a door. The first pain had passed and a deadly numbness seemed to take the place of its bite; but as he moved his stiffened muscles, which were beginning to ache and throb, he realized that he was badly hurt. With a leg like that he could not drive out across the desert, seventy-four long miles to Vegas; nor would he, on the other hand, find the best of accommodations in the deserted house of his father. It had been a great home in its day, but that day was past, and the water connections too, and somebody must be handy to wait on him.

“Say,” he said, turning to Death Valley Charley, “have you got a house here in town? Well, take me to it and I’ll pay you well, and for anything else that you do.”

“It won’t cost you nothing,” answered Charley quickly. “I used to know your father.”

“Well, you knew a good man then,” replied Wiley grimly, but Death Valley did not respond. The Widow Huff was listening behind; and besides, he had his doubts.

“I’ll run on ahead,” said Charley noncommittally, and when Wiley arrived a canvas cot was waiting for him, fully equipped except for the sheets. Virginia came in later with a pair on her arm, and after a look at Charley’s greasy blankets Wiley allowed her to spread them on the bed. Then, as Death Valley laid a grimy paw on his leg and began to pick out the shot Wiley jerked away and asked Virginia impatiently if she didn’t have a little carbolic.

“Aw, he’ll be all right,” protested Charley cheerfully, as Virginia pushed him aside; “them buckshot won’t hurt him much, nohow. Jest put on some pine pitch and a chew of tobacco and he’ll fall off to sleep like a child.”

He stood blinking helplessly as Virginia heated some water and poured in a teaspoonful of carbolic, then as she bathed the wounds and picked out the last shot, Charley placed a disc on his phonograph.

“Does he want some music?” he inquired of Heine, who was sitting up and begging, but Virginia put down her foot. “No, Charley,” she said with a forbidding frown, “you go ask mother for a needle and thread.”

“He’s kind of crazy to-night,” she whispered to Wiley, when Death Valley was safely out of sight, “you’d better come over to the house.”

“Huh, I guess we’re all crazy,” answered Wiley, laughing shortly. “I can stand it—but how does he act?”

“Oh, he hears things—and gets messages—and talks about Death Valley. He got lost over there, three years ago last August, and the heat kind of cooked his brains. He heard your automobile, when you came back to-night—that’s why mother and all the rest of them went over to the mine to get you. I’m sorry she shot you up.”

“Well, don’t you care,” he said reassuringly. “But she sure overplayed her hand.”

“Yes, she did,” acknowledged Virginia, trying not to quarrel with her patient, “but, of course, she didn’t know about that tax sale.”

“Well, she knows it now,” he answered pointedly, and when Charley came back they were silent. Virginia bandaged up his wound and slipped away and then Wiley lay back and sighed. There had been a time when he and Virginia had been friends, but now the fat was in the fire. It was her fighting mother, of course, and their quarrel about the Paymaster; but behind it all there was the old question between their fathers, and he knew that his father was right. He had not rigged the stock market, he had not cheated Colonel Huff, and he had not tried to get back the mine. That was a scheme of his own, put on foot on his own initiative—and brought to nothing by the Widow. He had hoped to win over Virginia and effect a reconciliation, but that hole in his leg told him all too well that the Widow could never be fooled. And, since she could not be placated, nor bought off, nor bluffed, there was nothing to do but quit. The world was large and there were other Virginias, as well as other

Paymasters—only it seemed such a futile waste. He sighed again and then Death Valley Charley burst out into a cackling laugh.

“I heard you,” he said, “I heard you coming—away up there in the pass. Chuh, chuh, chuh, chud, chud, chud, chud; and I told Virginny you was coming.”

“Yes, I heard about it,” answered Wiley sourly, “and then you told the Widow.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t!” exulted Charley. “She’d’ve killed you, sure as shooting. I just told Virginny, that’s all.”

“Oh!” observed Wiley, and lay so still that Charley regarded him intently. His eyes were blue and staring like a newborn babe’s, but behind their look of childlike innocence there lurked a crafty smile.

“I told her,” went on Charley, “that you was coming to git her and take her away in your auto. She’s a nice girl, Virginny, and never rode in one of them things—I never thought you’d try to steal her mine.”

“I did not!” denied Wiley, but Death Valley only smiled and waved the matter aside.

“Never mind,” he said, “they’re all crazy, anyhow. They get that way every north wind. I’m here to take care of them—the Colonel asked me to, and keep people from stealing his mine. It’s electricity that does it—it’s about us everywhere—and that’s what makes ’em crazy; but electricity is my servant; I bend it to my will; that’s how I come to hear you. I heard you coming back, away out on the desert, and I knowed your heart wasn’t right. You was coming back to rob the Colonel of his mine; and the Colonel, he saved my life once. He ain’t dead, you know, he’s over across Death Valley in them mountains they call the Ube-Hebes. Yes, I was lost on the desert and he followed my tracks and found me, running wild through the sand-hills; and then Virginia and Mrs. Huff, they looked after me until my health returned.”

“You can hear pretty well, then,” suggested Wiley diplomatically. “You must know everything that goes on.”

“It’s the electricity!” declared Charley. “It’s about us everywhere, and that’s what makes them crazy. All these desert rats are crazy, it’s the electric storms that does it—Nevada is a great state for winds. But when they comes a sandstorm, and Mrs. Huff she wraps up her head, I feel the power coming on. I can hear far away and then I can hear close—I make the electricity my slave. But the rest, they go crazy; they have headaches and megrims, and Mrs. Huff she always wants to fight; but I’m here to take care of ’em—the Colonel asked me to, so you keep away from that mine.”

“Oh, sure,” responded Wiley, “I won’t bother the mine. As soon as I’m well I’ll go home.”

“No, you stay,” returned Charley, becoming suddenly confidential. “I’ll show you a mountain of gold. It’s over across Death Valley, in the Ube-Hebes; the Colonel is over there now.”

“Is that so?” inquired Wiley, and Charley looked at him strangely, as if dazed.

“Aw, no; of course not!” he burst out angrily. “I forgot—the Colonel is dead. You Heine; come over here, sir.”

Heine crept up unwillingly and Charley slapped him. “Now—shut up!” he admonished and went off into crazy mutterings.

“What’s that?” he cried, rousing up suddenly to listen, and a savage look replaced the blank stare. “Can’t you hear him?” he asked. “It’s Stiff Neck George—he’s coming up the alley to kill you. Here, take my gun; and when he opens the door you fill him full of holes!”

Wiley listened intently, then he reached for the heavy pistol and sat up, watching the door. The wind soughed and howled and rattled at the windows, over which Charley had stretched heavy blankets, and it seemed to his startled imagination that someone was groping at the door. The memory of the skulking form that had followed him rose up with the distinctness of a vision and at a knock on the door he cocked his pistol and beckoned Death Valley to one side.

“Come in!” he called, but as the door swung open it was Virginia who stood facing his gun.

“O—oh!” she screamed, and then she flushed angrily as Charley began to laugh.

“Well, laugh then, you fool,” she said to Wiley, “and when you’re through, just look at this that we found!”

She held up the ore-bag that Wiley had lost and strode dramatically in. “Look at that!” she cried, and strewing the white quartz on the table she pointed her finger in his face. “You stole my specimen!” she cried accusingly. “That’s why you came back for more. But you give it back to me—I want it this minute. I see you’re honest—like your father!”

She spat it out venomously, more venomously than was needful, for he was already fumbling for the rock; and when he gave it back he smiled over-scornfully and his lower lip mounted up.

“All right,” he said, “you don’t have to holler for it. You’re getting to be just like your mother.”

“I’m not!” she denied, but after looking at him a minute she burst into tears and fled.

CHAPTER VI

All Crazy

The wind was still blowing when Wiley was awakened by the cold of the October morning. In the house all was dark, on account of the blankets which Death Valley had nailed over the windows, but outside he could hear the thump of an axe and the whining yelp of a dog. Then Charley came in, his arms full of wood, and lit a roaring fire in the stove. Wiley dozed off again, for his leg had pained him and kept him awake half the night, and when he woke up it was to the strains of music and the mournful howls of Heine.

“Ah, you are so confectionate!” exclaimed Charley in honeyed tones and laughed and patted him on the back. “Don’t you like the fiddle, Heine? Well, listen to this now; the sweetest song of all.”

He stopped the rasping phonograph to put on another record and when Heine heard “Listen to the Mocking-bird” he barked and leapt with joy. Wiley listened for awhile, then he stirred in bed and at last he tried to get up; but his leg was very stiff and old Charley was oblivious, so he sank back and waited impatiently. Heine sat upon the floor before the largest of three phonographs, which ground out the Mocking-bird with variations; and each time he heard the whistled notes of the bird he rolled his eyes on Charley with a soulful, beseeching glance. The evening before, when his master had cuffed him, Wiley had considered Heine badly abused; but now as the concert promised to drag on indefinitely he was forced to amend his opinion.

“Say,” he spoke up at last, in a pause between records, “what’s the chance of getting something to eat?”

“Yes, there’s plenty,” answered Charley, and went on with his frolic until Wiley rose up in disgust. He had heated some water, besides tearing down a blanket and letting the daylight in, when there came a hurried knock at the door and the Widow appeared with his breakfast. She avoided his eyes, but her manner was ingratiating and she supplied the conversation herself.

“Good morning!” she smiled,—“Charley, stop that awful racket and let Heine go out for his scraps. Well, I brought you your breakfast—Virginia isn’t feeling very well—and I hope you’re going to be all right. No, get right back into bed and I’ll prop you up with pillows; Charley’s got a hundred or so. I declare, it’s a question which can grab the most; old Charley or Stiff Neck George. Every time anyone moves out—and sometimes when they don’t—you’ll see those two ghouls hanging around; and the minute they’re gone, well, you never saw anything like it, the way they will fight for the loot. Charley’s got a whole room filled up with bedding, and stoves and tables and chairs; and George—he’s vicious—he takes nearly everything and piles it up down in his warehouse. It isn’t his, of course, but—”

“He hauls it off in a wheelbarrow,” broke in Charley, virtuously. “He don’t care what he does. They was a widow woman here whose daughter got sick and she had to go out for a week, and when she came back—”

“Yes, her whole house was looted—he carried off even her sewing-machine!”

“And a deep line of wheelbarrow tracks,” added Charley, unctuously, “leading from her house right down to his. She nailed up all her windows before she went, but he—”

“Yes, he broke in,” supplied the Widow. “He’s a desperate character and everybody is afraid of him, so he can do whatever he pleases; but you bet your life he can’t run it over me—I filled him up with buckshot twice. Oh—that is—er—did you ever hear how he got his head twisted? Well, go right ahead now and eat up your toast. I asked him one time—that was before we’d had our trouble—what was the cause of his head being to one side. He looks, you know, for all the world like he was watching for a good kick from behind; but he tried to appear pathetic and told me a long story about saving a mother and her child in a flood. And when it was all over, according to him, he fell down in a

faint in the mud; but the best accounts I get say he was dead drunk in the gutter and woke up with his head on one side.”

She ended with a sniff and Wiley glanced at Charley, but he was staring blankly away.

“I don’t like that man,” spoke up Charley at last, “he kicked my dog, one time.”

“And he bootlegs something awful,” added the Widow, desperately, for fear that the chatter would lag. “There doesn’t a day go by but some drunken Piute comes whooping up the road, and that bunch of Shooshonnies—”

“Yes, he sells to the bucks,” observed Death Valley, slyly. “They’re no good—they get drunk and tell. But you can trust the squaws—I had one here yesterday—”

“You what?” shrieked the Widow, and Charley looked up startled, then rose and whistled to his dog.

“Go lay down!” he commanded and slapped him till he yelped, after which he slipped fearfully away.

“The very idea!” exclaimed the Widow frigidly and then she glanced at Wiley.

“Mr. Holman,” she began, “I came out here to talk business—there’s nothing round-the-corner about me. Now what about this tax sale, and what does Blount mean by allowing you to buy it in for nothing?”

“Well, I don’t know,” answered Wiley. “He refused to pay the taxes, so I bought in the property myself.”

“Yes, but what does he *mean*?”

The Widow’s voice rose to the old quarrelsome, nagging pitch, and Wiley winced as if he had been stabbed.

“You’ll have to ask *him*, Mrs. Huff, to find out for sure; but to a man with one leg it looks like this. Whatever you can say about him, Samuel J. is a business man, and I think he decided that, as a business investment, the Paymaster wasn’t worth eighty-three, forty-one. Otherwise he would have bought it himself.”

“Unless, of course,” added the Widow scornfully, “there was some understanding between you.”

“Oh, yes, sure,” returned Wiley, and went on with his eating with a wearied, enduring sigh.

“Well, I declare,” exclaimed the Widow, after thinking it over, “sometimes I get so discouraged with the whole darned business you could buy me out for a cent!”

She waited for a response, but Wiley showed no interest, so she went on with her general complaint.

“First, it was the Colonel, with his gambling and drinking and inviting the whole town to his house; and then your father, or whoever it was, started all this stock market fuss; and from that time it’s gone from bad to worse until I haven’t a dollar to my name. I was brought up to be a lady—and so was Virginia—and now we’re keeping a restaurant!”

Wiley pulled down his lip in masterful silence and set the breakfast tray aside. It was nothing to him what the Widow Huff suffered—she had brought it all on herself. And whenever she was ready to write to his father she could receive her ten cents a share. That would keep her as a lady for several years to come, if she had as many shares as she claimed; but there was nothing to his mind so flat, stale and unprofitable as a further discussion of the Paymaster. Indeed, with one leg wound up in a bandage, it might easily prove disastrous. So he looked away and, after a minute, the Widow again took up her plaint.

“Of course,” she said, “I’m not a business woman, and I may have made some mistakes; but it doesn’t seem right that Virginia’s future should be ruined, just because of this foolish family quarrel. The Colonel is dead now and doesn’t have to be considered; so—well, after thinking it over, and all the rest of it, I think I’ll accept your offer.”

“Which offer?” demanded Wiley, suddenly startled from his ennui, and the Widow regarded him sternly.

“Why, your offer to buy my stock—that paper you drew up for me. Here it is, and I’m willing to sign it.”

She drew out the paper and Wiley read it silently, then rolled it into a ball and chucked it into the corner.

“No,” he said, “that offer doesn’t hold. I didn’t know you then.”

“Well, you know me now!” she flashed back resentfully, “and you’d better come through with that money. I’ve taken enough off of you and your father without standing for any more of your gall. Now you write me out a check for twenty thousand dollars and here’s my two hundred thousand shares. I know you’re robbing me but I simply can’t endure it—I can’t stay here a single day longer!”

She burst into angry tears as he shook his head and regarded her with steady eyes.

“No,” he said, “you can’t do business that way. I haven’t got twenty thousand dollars.”

“But—you offered it to me! You wrote out this paper and put it right under my eyes—”

“No,” he said, “I never offered you twenty thousand—I offered to take an option at that price. I wanted to see that mine, and I wanted to see it peaceably, and I thought I could do it that way; but that piece of paper simply gave me the option of buying the stock if I wanted to.”

“Well, you wanted to buy the stock—you were crazy to get hold of it—and now, when I’m willing, you won’t take it!”

“No, that’s right,” agreed Wiley, leaning back against his pillow. “And now, what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m going to kill you!” shrieked the Widow in a frenzy. “I’m going to *make* you take it! I declare, it seems like every single soul is against me—and me a poor helpless woman!”

She sank back in a chair and began to sob hysterically and Wiley looked about for the old shotgun. It was far too short, but it had served once as a crutch, and in a pinch it must serve him again. Keno was no place for him, he saw that very plainly, and it was better to risk the long drive across the desert than to stay with this weeping virago. If she didn’t kill him then she would kill him later, and he was powerless to strike back in defense. She would take advantage of every immunity of her sex to obtain her own way in the end. He located the gun—it was down behind his bed where he had dropped it when they helped him in—but as he was fishing it up the door burst open and Virginia stood looking at her mother. Behind her appeared Death Valley Charley, his eyes blinking fearfully; but at sight of the Widow he ducked around the corner while Virginia came resolutely in.

“Oh, mother!” she burst out in a pleading, reproachful voice, “can’t you see that Wiley is sick? Well, what’s the use of creating a scene when it’s likely to make him worse?”

“I don’t care!” wailed the Widow. “I hope he dies. I wish I’d killed him—I do!”

“You do not!” returned Virginia, and shook her reprovingly. “I declare, I wonder what poor father would think if he heard how we’d treated a guest. Now you go back to the house and don’t you come out again until Mr. Holman sends for you.”

“You shut up!” burst out the Widow, pushing her brusquely aside. “I guess I know what I’m about. But I’ll fool you,” she cried, whirling about on Wiley as she started towards the door. “I’ll sell my stock to Blount!”

She paused for the effect but Wiley did not answer and she returned to pursue her advantage.

“I know you!” she announced. “You and old Honest John—you’re trying to steal my mine. But I’m going to fool you, I’m going right down to Vegas and sell every share to Blount!”

“Well, go to it,” returned Wiley after a long, defiant silence, “and I hope you stick him a-plenty!”

“Why, what’s the matter?” inquired the Widow, brushing Virginia away again and swaggering up to his bed. “I thought you and Blount were good friends.”

“Yeh, guess again,” replied Wiley grimly. “I’ll tell him the mine shows up fine.”

“Well, it does!” she asserted. “The Colonel said it wasn’t scratched. And didn’t you steal that piece of quartz from Virginia? Oh, you gave it back, eh? Well, how did it assay? I know you found *something* pretty good!”

“How could I give it back, if I’d had it assayed?” asked Wiley with compelling calm.

“Well what *did* you come back for?” demanded the Widow, triumphantly. “You must have figured to win somewhere.”

“Yes, I did,” sighed Wiley, “but I was badly mistaken. All I want now is to get out of town.”

“Well, how about your father? That offer he made me! Has he backed out on that, too?”

“No, he hasn’t,” answered Wiley, “my father keeps his word. You can get your money any time.”

“Well, of all the crazy crooked deals,” the Widow began to rave, and then Wiley grabbed for the shotgun.

“It may be crazy!” he shouted savagely, “but believe me, it isn’t crooked. My father never did a crooked thing in his life, and you know it as well as I do; and if it wasn’t that you’re such a crook yourself—”

“Wiley Holman!” raged the Widow, but he rose up on his crutch and shouldered his way out the door.

“You’re crazy!” he yelled, “the whole danged town’s crazy. All except old Charley and me.”

He jerked his head and winked at Charley as he hobbled towards the street and Death Valley nodded gravely. There was a long, hateful silence; then the great motor roared out and the white racer rushed away across the desert.

“Well, I don’t care!” declared the Widow as she gazed after his dust and when the stage went out that day it took a lady passenger to Vegas.

CHAPTER VII

Between Friends

The madness of the Widow and Old Charley and Stiff Neck George was no mystery to Wiley Holman—it was the same form of mania which he encountered everywhere when he went to see men who owned mines. If he offered them a million for a ten-foot hole they would refuse it and demand ten million more, and if he offered them nothing they immediately scented a conspiracy to starve them out and gain possession of their mine. It was the illusion of hidden wealth, of buried treasure, which keeps half the mines in the West closed down and half of the rest in litigation; except that in Keno it seemed to be associated with gun-plays and a marked tendency towards homicide. So, upon his return from a short stay in the hospital he came up the main street silently, then stepped on the throttle and went through town a-smoking. But the Widow was out waiting for him in the middle of the road and, rather than run her down, he threw on both brakes and stopped.

“Well, what now?” he inquired, frowning at the odor of heated rubber. “What’s your particular grievance this trip?” He regarded her coldly, then bowed to Virginia and waved a friendly hand at Charley. “Hello, there, Death Valley,” he called out jovially, as the Widow choked with a rush of words, “what’s the news from the Funeral Range?”

“Now, here!” exclaimed the Widow, advancing from the dust cloud, and glancing into the machine. “I want you to bring back that gun!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Huff,” he replied with finality, “but you’ll have to get along without it. I turned it over to the sheriff, along with three buckshot and an affidavit regarding the shooting—”

“What, you great, big coward!” stormed the Widow in a fury. “Did you run and complain to the sheriff?”

“No, I walked,” said Wiley, “and on one leg at that. But I might as well warn you that next time you make a gun-play you’re likely to break into jail.”

“You’re a coward!” she taunted. “You’re standing in with Blount to beat me out of my mine. First you sneak off with my gun, so I can’t protect my rights, and then Stiff Neck George comes up and jumps the Paymaster!”

“The hell!” burst out Wiley, rising up in his seat and looking across at the mine.

“Yes, the hell,” she returned, “and he’s warned off all comers and is holding the mine for Blount!”

“For Blount!” he echoed and, seeing him roused at last, the Widow became subtly provocative.

“For Samuel J. Blount,” she repeated impressively. “He—he’s got all my stock on a loan.”

“Oh!” observed Wiley, and as she raved on with her story he rubbed his chin in deep thought.

“Yes, I went down to see him and he wouldn’t buy it, so I left it as collateral on a loan. And then he came out here and looked over the mine again and told Stiff Neck George to stand guard. They’re fixing to pump out the water.”

“Oho!” exclaimed Wiley, and his eyes began to kindle as he realized what Blount had done. Then reaching for the pistol that lay handy beside his leg, he leapt out with waspish quickness, only to stop short as he hurt his lame foot.

“Go on!” hissed the Widow, advancing to his shoulder and pointing the way up the trail. “He stays right there by the dump. The mine is yours; go put him off—I would, if I had my gun.”

“Aw, pfooy!” he exclaimed, suddenly turning back and clamoring into his seat. “I’ve got one game leg already. Let ’im have the doggoned mine.”

“What? Are you going to back out? Well, you are a good one—and it stands in your name, this minute!”

“Yes, and it isn’t worth—that!” he said with conviction, and snapped his finger in the air. “He can have it. You can tell Blount, the next time you see him, he can buy in that tax title for the costs.”

He paused and muttered angrily, gazing off towards the dump where crooked-necked George stood guard, and then he hopped out to crank up.

“Want a ride?” he asked, as he saw Virginia watching him and she hesitated and shook her head. “Come on,” he smiled, casting aside his black mood, “let’s take a little spin—just down on the desert and back. What’s going on—getting ready to move?”

He gazed with alarm at a pile of packing boxes that the Widow had marshaled on the gallery and then he looked back at Virginia. She was attired in a gown that had been very chic in the fall of nineteen ten, but, though it was scant for these bouffant days, she was the old Virginia still—slim and strong and dainty, and highbred in every line, with dark eyes that mirrored passing thoughts. She was the Virginia he had played with when Keno was booming and his own sisters had been there for company; and now after ten years he remembered the time when he had asked her, in vain, for a kiss.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” he said at last and Virginia stepped into the racer.

“Virginia!” reminded the Widow, and then at a glance she turned round and flung into the house. There were times and occasions when she had found it safer not to press her maternal authority too far, and the look that she received was first notice from Virginia that such an occasion had arrived. The motor began to thunder, Wiley threw in the clutch, and with a speed that was startling, they whipped a sudden circle and went bubbling away down the road.

It stretched on endlessly, this road across the desert, as straight as a surveyor’s line, and as they cleared the rough gulches and glided down into its immensity Virginia glanced at the desert and sighed.

“Pretty big,” he suggested and as she nodded slowly he raised his eyes to the hills. “I don’t know,” he went on, “whether you’ll like Los Angeles. You’ll get lonely for this, sometimes.”

“Yes, but not for that”—she jerked a thumb back at Keno—“that place is pretty small. What’s left, of course; but it seems to me sometimes they’re all of them lame, halt and blind. Always quarreling and backbiting and jumping each other’s claims—but—what do you think of the Paymaster?”

She shot the question at him and it occurred suddenly to Wiley that perhaps she had a programme, too.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” he began, deftly changing his ground, “I’m in Dutch on that, all around. When I came home full of buckshot and the Old Man heard about it I got my orders to come back and apologize. Well, I’ll do that—to you—and you can tell your mother I’m sure sorry I went up on that dump.”

He grinned and motioned to his injured foot, but Virginia was in no mood for a joke.

“That’s all right,” she said, “and I accept your apology—though I don’t know exactly what it’s for. But I asked your opinion of the Paymaster.”

“Oh, yes,” he replied and then he began to temporize. “You’d better tell me what you want it for, first.”

“What? Do you have one opinion for one set of people and another for somebody else? I thought!”—She paused and the hot blood leapt to her cheeks as she saw where her temper had led her. “Well,” she explained, “I’ve got a few shares of stock.”

She said it quietly and the suggestion of scolding gave way to a chastened appeal. She remembered—and he sensed it—that winged shaft which he had flung back when she had said he was honest, like his father. He had told her then she was becoming like her mother, and Virginia could never endure that.

“Ah, I see,” he answered and went on hurriedly with a new note of friendliness in his voice. “Well, I’ll tell you, Virginia, if it will be any accommodation to you I’ll take over that stock myself. But—well, I hate to advise you—because—how many shares have you got?”

“Oh, several thousand,” she responded casually. “They were given to me by father—and by different men that I’ve helped. Mr. Masters, you know, that I took care of for a while, he gave me all he had when he died. But I don’t want to sell them—I know there’s no market, because Blount wouldn’t give Mother anything—but if he should happen to strike something—”

She glanced across at him swiftly but Wiley’s face was grim.

“Yes, *him* find anything!” he jeered. “That fat-headed old tub! He knows about as much about mining as a hog does about the precession of the equinox. No; miracles may happen but, short of that, he’ll never get back a cent!”

“No, but Wiley,” she protested, “you know as well as I do that the Paymaster isn’t worked out. Now what’s to prevent my stock becoming valuable sometime when they open it up?”

“What’s to prevent?” he repeated. “Well, I’ll tell you what. If Blount makes a strike he’ll close that mine down and send the company through bankruptcy. Then he’ll buy the mine back on a judgment and you’ll be left without a cent.”

“But what about you?” she suggested shrewdly. “Will you let him serve *you* like that?”

“Don’t you think it!” he answered. “I know him too well—my money is somewhere else.”

“But if you should buy the mine?”

“Well—” he stirred uneasily and then shot his machine ahead—“I haven’t bought it yet.”

“No, but you offered to, and I don’t see why—”

“Do you want to sell your stock?” he asked abruptly and she flushed and shook her head. “Well!” he said and without further comment he slowed down and swung about.

“Oh, dear,” she sighed, as they started back and he turned upon her swiftly.

“Do you know why I wouldn’t have that mine,” he inquired, “if you’d hand it to me as a gift? It’s because of this everlasting fight. I own it, right now, if anybody does, and I’ve never been down the shaft. Now suppose I’d go over there and shoot it out with George and get possession of my mine. First Blount would come up with some other hired man-killer and I’d have a bout with him; and then your respected mother—”

“Now you hush up!” she chided and he closed down his jaw like a steel-trap. She watched him covertly, then her eyes began to blink and she turned her head away. The desert rushed by them, worlds of waxy green creosote bushes and white, gnarly clumps of salt bush; and straight ahead, frowning down on the forgotten city, rose the black cloud-shadow of Shadow Mountain.

“Oh, turn off here!” she cried, impulsively as they came to a fork in the road and, plowing up the sand, he skidded around a curve and struck off up the Death Valley road. They came together at the edge of the town—the long, straight road to the south, and the road-trail that led west into the silence. There were no tracks in it now but the flat hoof-prints of burros and the wire-twined wheel-marks of desert buckboards; even the road was half obliterated by the swoop of the winds which had torn up the hard-packed dirt, yet the going was good and as the racer purred on Virginia settled back in her seat.

“I can’t believe it,” she said at last, “that we’re going to leave here, forever. This is the road that Father took when he left home that last time—have you ever been over into Death Valley? It’s a great, big sink, all white with salt and borax; and at the upper end, where he went across, there are miles and miles of sand-hills. He’s buried out there somewhere, and the hills have covered him—but oh, it’s so awful lonesome!”

She turned away again and as her head went down Wiley stared straight ahead and blinked. He had known the Colonel and loved him well, and his father had loved him, too; but that rift had come between them and until it was healed he could never be a friend of Virginia’s. She distrusted him in everything—in his silence and in his speech, his laughter and his anger, in his evasions and when he talked straight—it was better to say nothing now. He had intended to help her, to offer her money or any assistance he could give; but her heart was turned against him and the most he could hope for was to get back to Keno without a quarrel. The divide was far ahead, where the road struck the

pass and swung over and down into the Great Valley; and, glancing up at the sun, he turned around slowly and rumbled back into town. Shadow Mountain rose before them; it towered above the valley like a brooding image of hate but as he smiled farewell at the sad-eyed Virginia something moved him to take her hand.

“Good-by,” he said, “you’ll be gone when I come back. But if you get into trouble—let me know.”

He gave her hand a squeeze and Virginia looked at him sharply, then she let her dark lashes droop.

“I’m in trouble now,” she said at last. “What good did it do to tell you?”

He winced and shrugged his shoulders, then gazed at her again with a challenge in his eyes.

“If you’d trust *memore*,” he said very slowly, “perhaps I’d trust *you* more. What is it you want me to do?”

“I want you to answer me—yes or no. Shall I keep my stock, or sell it?”

“You keep it,” he answered, and avoided her eye until she climbed out and entered the house.

CHAPTER VIII

The Tip

“Well?” inquired the Widow as her daughter came back from her ride with Wiley Holman; but Virginia was not giving out confidences. At last, and by a trick, she had surprised the truth from Wiley and he had told her to keep her stock. For weeks, for months, he had told her and everybody else that the Paymaster was not worth having; but when she had drooped her lashes and asked him for his opinion he had told her not to sell. Not hesitatingly nor doubtfully, or with any crafty intent; but honestly, as a friend, perhaps as a lover—and then he had looked away. He knew, of course, how his past actions must appear in the light of this later advice; but he had told her the truth and gone. The question was: What should she do?

Virginia returned to her room and locked the door while her mother stormed around outside and at last she came to a decision. What Wiley had told her had been said in strictest confidence and it would not be fair to pass it on; but if he advised her not to sell he had a reason for his advice, and that reason was not far to find. It was in that white stone that he had stolen from her collection, and in the white quartz he had gathered from the dump. He claimed, of course, that he had not had her specimen assayed; but why, then, had he come back for more? And why had he been so careful to tell her and everyone that he would not take the Paymaster as a gift? As a matter of fact, he owned it that minute by virtue of his delinquent tax-sale, and his goings and comings had been nicely timed to enable him to keep track of his property. He was shrewd, that was all, but now she could read him; for he had spoken, for once, from his heart.

The mail that night bore a sample of white quartz to a custom assayer in Vegas, but Virginia guarded her secret well. She had gained it by wiles that were not absolutely straight-forward, in that she had squeezed Wiley’s hand in return, and since by so doing she had compromised with her conscience she placated it by withholding the great news. If she told her mother she would create a scene with Blount and demand the return of her stock; and the secret would get out and everybody would be buying stock and Wiley would blame it on her. No, everything must be kept dark and she mailed her sample when even the postmistress was gone. Perhaps Wiley was right in his extreme subterfuges and in always covering up his hand, but she would show him that there were others just as smart. She would take a leaf from his book and play a lone hand, too; only now, of course, she could not leave town.

“Virginia!” scolded the Widow, when for the hundredth time she had discovered her dawdling at her packing. “If you don’t get up and come and help me this minute I’ll unpack and let you go alone.”

“Well, let’s both unpack,” said Virginia thoughtfully, and the Widow sat down with a crash.

“I knew it!” she cried. “Ever since that Wiley Holman—”

“Now, you hush up!” returned Virginia, flushing angrily. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Well, if I don’t know I can guess; but I never thought a Huff—”

“Oh, you make me tired!” exclaimed Virginia, spitefully. “I’m staying here to watch that mine.”

“That—mine!” The Widow repeated it slowly and her eyes opened up big with triumph. “Virginia, do you mean to say you got the best of that whipper-snapper and—”

“No, nothing of the kind! No! Can’t you hear me? Oh, Mother, you’d drive a person crazy!”

“I—see!” observed the Widow and stood nodding her head as Virginia went on with her protests. “Oh, my Lord!” she burst out, “and I put up all my stock for a measly eight hundred dollars! That scoundrelly Blount—I saw it in his eye the minute I mentioned my stock! He’s tricked me, the rascal; but I’ll fool him yet—I’ll pay him back and get my stock!”

“You’ll pay him back? Why, you’ve spent half the money to redeem your jewels and the diamonds!”

“Well, I’ll pawn them again. Oh, it makes me wild to think how that rascal has tricked me!”

“But, Mother,” protested Virginia, “*he* hasn’t done any work yet. They haven’t made any strike at the mine. Why not let it go until they pump out the water and really find some ore? And besides, how could Wiley know anything about it? He’s never been down the shaft.”

“But—why you told me yourself—”

“I never told you anything!” burst out Virginia tearfully. “You just jump at everything like a flea. And now you’ll tell everybody, and Wiley’ll say I did it, and—”

“Virginia Huff!” cried her mother, dramatically, “are you in love with that—thief?”

“He is not! No, I am not! Oh, I wish you’d quit talking to me—I tell you he never told me *anything!*”

“Well, for goodness sake!” exclaimed the Widow pityingly, and stalked off to think it over.

“You, Charley!” she exclaimed as she found Death Valley on the gallery pretending to nail up a box, “you leave those things alone. Well, that’s all right; we’ve changed our minds and now we’re going to stay.”

“That’s good,” replied Charley, laying his hammer aside, “I’ve been telling ’em so for days. It’s coming everywhere; all the old camps are opening up, but Keno will beat them all.”

“Yes, that’s right,” assented the Widow absently, and as she bustled away to begin her unpacking, Death Valley looked at Heine and leered.

“Didn’t I tell you!” he crowed and, scuttling back to get his six-shooter, he went out and began re-locating claims. That was the beginning. The real rush came later when the pumps began to throb in the Paymaster. A stream of water like a sheet of silver flowed down the side of the dump and as if it’s touch had brought forth men from the desert sands, the old-timers came drifting in. Once more the vacant sidewalks resounded to the thud of sturdy hob-nailed boots; and along with the locaters came pumpmen and miners to sound the flooded depths of the Paymaster.

It was a great mine, a famous mine, the richest in all the West; within twenty months it had produced twelve million dollars and the lower levels had never been touched. But what was twelve million to what it would turn out when they located the hidden ore-body? On its record alone the Paymaster was a world-beater, but the ground had barely been scratched. Even Samuel Blount, who was cold as a stone and had sold out the entire town, even he had caught the contagion; and he was talking large on the bank corner when Holman came back through town.

Wiley drove in from the north, his face burned by sun and wind and his machine weighed down with sacks of samples, but when he saw the crowd, and Blount in the middle of it, he threw on his brakes with a jerk.

“Hello!” he hailed. “What’s all the excitement? Has the Paymaster made a strike?”

All eyes turned to Blount, who stepped down ponderously and waddled out to the auto. He was a very heavy man, with his mouth on one side and a mild, deceiving smile; and as he shook hands perfunctorily he glanced uneasily at Wiley, for he had heard about the tax-sale.

“Why, no,” he replied, “no strike as yet. How’s everything with you, Mr. Holman?”

“Fine and dandy, I guess,” returned Wiley civilly. “Where did all these men jump up from?”

“Oh, they just dropped in, or stopped over in passing. Do you still take an interest in mines?”

“Well, yes,” responded Wiley. “I’m a mining engineer, and so naturally I do take quite an interest. And by the way, Mr. Blount, did it ever occur to you that the Paymaster has been sold for taxes? Oh, that’s all right, that’s all right; I didn’t know whether you’d heard about it—do you recognize my title to the mine?”

“Well,” began Blount, and then he smiled appeasingly, “I didn’t just know where to reach you. Of course, according to law, you do hold the title; but I suppose you know that the stockholders of the company have five years in which to buy back the mine. Yes, that is the law; but I thought under

the circumstances—the mine lying idle and all—you might be willing to waive your strict rights in the interests of, well, harmony.”

“I get you,” answered Wiley, glancing at the staring onlookers, “and of course these gentlemen are our witnesses. You acknowledge my title, and that every bit of your work is being done on another man’s ground; but, of course, if you make a strike I won’t put any obstacles in your way. I’m for harmony, Mr. Blount, as big as a wolf; but there’s one thing I want to ask you. Did you or did you not employ this Stiff Neck George to act as guard on the mine? Because two months ago, after I’d bought in the Paymaster for taxes, I went over to inspect the ground and Stiff Neck George—”

“Oh, no! Oh dear, no!” protested Blount vigorously. “He was acting for himself. I heard about his actions, but I had nothing to do with them—I never even knew about it till lately.”

“But was he in your employ at the time of the shooting, and did you tell him to drive off all comers? Because—”

“No! My dear boy, of course not! But come over to my office; I want to talk with you, Wiley.”

The banker beamed upon him affectionately and, shaking out a white handkerchief, wiped the sudden sweat from his brow; and then Wiley leapt to the ground.

“All right,” he said, “but let’s go and see the mine first.”

He strapped on his pistol and waited expectantly and at last Blount breathed heavily and assented. Nothing more was said as they went across the flat and toiled up the trail to the mine. Wiley walked behind and as they mounted to the shaft-house his eyes wandered restlessly about; until, at the tool-shed, they suddenly focussed and a half-crouching man stepped out. He was tall and gnarly and the point of his chin rested stiffly on the slope of his shoulder. It was Stiff Neck George and he kept a crook in his elbow as he glanced from Blount to Wiley.

“How’s this?” demanded Wiley, putting Blount between him and George, “what’s this man doing up here?”

“Why, that’s George,” faltered Blount, “George Norcross, you know. He works for me around the mine.”

“Oh, he does, eh?” observed Wiley, in the cold tones of an examining lawyer. “How long has he been in your employ?”

“Oh, since we opened up—that’s all—just temporarily. This gentleman is all right, George; you can go.”

Stiff Neck George stood silent, his sunken eyes on Wiley, his sunburned lips parted in a grin, and then he turned and spat.

“Eh, heh; hiding!” he chuckled and, stung by the taunt, Wiley stepped out into the open. His gun was pulled forward, his jaws set hard, and he looked the hired man-killer in the eye.

“Don’t you think it,” he said, “I know you too well. You’re afraid to fight in the day-time; you dirty, sneaking murderer!”

He waited, poised, but George only laughed silently, though his poisonous eyes began to gleam.

“What are you doing on my ground?” demanded Wiley, advancing threateningly with his pistol raised. “Don’t you know I own this mine?”

“No,” snarled Stiff Neck George, coming suddenly to a crouch, “and, furthermore, I don’t give a damn!”

“Now, now, George,” broke in Blount, “let’s not have any words. Mr. Holman holds the title to this claim.”

“Heh—Holman!” mocked George, “Honest John’s boy—eh?” He laughed insultingly and spat against the wind and Wiley’s lip curled up scornfully.

“Yes—Honest John,” he repeated evenly. “And it’s a wonder to me you don’t take a few lessons and learn to spit clear of your chin.”

“You shut up!” snapped George as venomous as a rattlesnake. “Your damned old father was a thief!”

“You’re a liar!” yelled Wiley and, swinging his pistol like a club, he made a rush at the startled gunman. His eyes were flashing with a wild, reckless fury and as Stiff Neck George dodged and broke to run he leapt in and placed a fierce kick. “Now you git, you old dastard!” he shouted hoarsely and as George went down he grabbed him by the trousers and sent him sprawling down the dump. Sand, rocks and waste went avalanching after him, and a loose boulder thundered in his wake, until, at the bottom George scrambled to his feet and stood motionless, looking back. His head sank lower as he saw Wiley watching him and he slunk down closer to the ground, then with the swiftness of a panther that has marked down its prey he turned and skulked away.

“That’s bad business, Wiley,” protested Blount half-heartedly and Wiley nodded assent.

“Yes,” he said, “he’s dangerous now. I should have killed the dastard.”

CHAPTER IX

A Peace Talk

While his blood was pounding and his heart was high, Wiley Holman went down into his mine. He rode down on the bucket, deftly balanced on the rim and fending off the wall with one hand, and when he came up he was smiling. Not smiling with his lips, but far back in his eyes, like a man who has found something good. Perhaps Blount surprised the look before it had fled for he beamed upon Wiley benevolently.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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