

Lynde Francis

The King of Arcadia



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I

THE CRYPTOGRAM

The strenuous rush of the day of suddenly changed plans was over, and with Gardiner, the assistant professor of geology, to bid him God-speed, Ballard had got as far as the track platform gates of the Boston & Albany Station when Lassley's telegram, like a detaining hand stretched forth out of the invisible, brought him to a stand.

He read it, with a little frown of perplexity sobering his strong, enthusiastic face.

"S.S. *Carania*, New York.

"To Breckenridge Ballard, *Boston*.

"You love life and crave success. Arcadia Irrigation has killed its originator and two chiefs of construction. It will kill you. Let it alone.

"Lassley."

He signed the book, tipped the boy for his successful chase, and passed the telegram on to Gardiner.

"If you were called in as an expert, what would you make of that?" he asked.

The assistant professor adjusted his eye-glasses, read the message, and returned it without suggestive comment.

"My field being altogether prosaic, I should make nothing of it. There are no assassinations in geology. What does it mean?"

Ballard shook his head.

"I haven't the remotest idea. I wired Lassley this morning telling him that I had thrown up the Cuban sugar mills construction to accept the chief engineer's billet on Arcadia Irrigation. I didn't suppose he had ever heard of Arcadia before my naming of it to him."

"I thought the Lassleys were in Europe," said Gardiner.

"They are sailing to-day in the *Carania*, from New York. My wire was to wish them a safe voyage, and to give my prospective address. That explains the date-line of this telegram."

"But it does not explain the warning. Is it true that the Colorado irrigation scheme has blotted out three of its field officers?"

"Oh, an imaginative person might put it that way, I suppose," said Ballard, his tone asserting that none but an imaginative person would be so foolish. "Braithwaite, of the Geodetic Survey, was the originator of the plan for constructing a storage reservoir in the upper Boiling Water basin, and for transforming Arcadia Park into an irrigated agricultural district. He interested Mr. Pelham and a few other Denver capitalists, and they sent him out as chief engineer to stand the project on its feet. Shortly after he had laid the foundations for the reservoir dam, he fell into the Boiling Water and was drowned."

Gardiner's humour was as dry as his professional specialty. "One," he said, checking off the unfortunate Braithwaite on his fingers.

"Then Billy Sanderson took it – you remember Billy, in my year? He made the preliminary survey for an inlet railroad over the mountains, and put a few more stones on Braithwaite's dam. As they say out on the Western edge of things, Sanderson died with his boots on; got into trouble with somebody about a camp-following woman and was shot."

"Two," checked the assistant in geology. "Who was the third?"

"An elderly, dyspeptic Scotchman named Macpherson. He took up the work where Sanderson dropped it; built the railroad over the mountain and through Arcadia Park to the headquarters at the dam, and lived to see the dam itself something more than half completed."

"And what happened to Mr. Macpherson?" queried Gardiner.

"He was killed a few weeks ago. The derrick fell on him. The accident provoked a warm discussion in the technical periodicals. A wire guy cable parted – 'rusted off,' the newspaper report said – and there was a howl from the wire-rope makers, who protested that a rope made of galvanised wire couldn't possibly 'rust off.'"

"Nevertheless, Mr. Macpherson was successfully killed," remarked the professor dryly. "That would seem to be the persisting fact in the discussion. Does none of these things move you?"

"Certainly not," returned the younger man. "I shall neither fall into the river, nor stand under a derrick whose guy lines are unsafe."

Gardiner's smile was a mere eye wrinkle of good-natured cynicism. "You carefully omit poor Sanderson's fate. One swims out of a torrent – if he can – and an active young fellow might possibly be able to dodge a falling derrick. But who can escape the toils of the woman 'whose hands are as bands, and whose feet –'"

"Oh, piff!" said the Kentuckian; and then he laughed aloud. "There is, indeed, one woman in the world, my dear *Herr* Professor, for whose sake I would joyfully stand up and be shot at; but she isn't in Colorado, by a good many hundred miles."

"No? Nevertheless, Breckenridge, my son, there lies your best chance of making the fourth in the list of sacrifices. You are a Kentuckian; an ardent and chivalric Southerner. If the Fates really wish to interpose in contravention of the Arcadian scheme, they will once more bait the deadfall with the eternal feminine – always presuming, of course, that there are any Fates, and that they have ordinary intelligence."

Ballard shook his head as if he took the prophecy seriously.

"I am in no danger on that score. Bromley – he was Sanderson's assistant, and afterward Macpherson's, you know – wrote me that the Scotchman's first general order was an edict banishing every woman from the construction camps."

"Now, if he had only banished the derricks at the same time," commented Gardiner reflectively. Then he added: "You may be sure the Fates will find you an enchantress, Breckenridge; the oracles have spoken. What would the most peerless Arcadia be without its shepherdess? But we are jesting when Lassley appears to be very much in earnest. Could there be anything more than coincidence in these fatalities?"

"How could there be?" demanded Ballard. "Two sheer accidents and one commonplace tragedy, which last was the fault – or the misfortune – of poor Billy's temperament, it appears; though he was a sober enough fellow when he was here learning his trade. Let me prophesy awhile: I shall live and I shall finish building the Arcadian dam. Now let us side-track Lassley and his cryptogram and go back to what I was trying to impress on your mind when he butted in; which is that you are not to forget your promise to come out and loaf with me in August. You shall have all the luxuries a construction camp affords, and you can geologise to your heart's content in virgin soil."

"That sounds whettingly enticing," said the potential guest. "And, besides, I am immensely interested in dams; and in wire cables that give way at inopportune moments. If I were you, Breckenridge, I should make it a point to lay that broken guy cable aside. It might make interesting matter for an article in the *Engineer*; say, 'On the Effect of the Atmosphere in High Altitudes upon Galvanised Wire.'"

Ballard paid the tributary laugh. "I believe you'd have your joke if you were dying. However, I'll keep the broken cable for you, and the pool where Braithwaite was drowned, and Sanderson's inamorata – only I suppose Macpherson obliterated her at the earliest possible... Say, by Jove! that's my train he's calling. Good-by, and don't forget your promise."

After which, but for a base-runner's dash down the platform, Ballard would have lost the reward of the strenuous day of changed plans at the final moment.

II THE TRIPPERS

It was on the Monday afternoon that Breckenridge Ballard made the base-runner's dash through the station gates in the Boston terminal, and stood in the rearmost vestibule of his outgoing train to watch for the passing of a certain familiar suburb where, at the home of the hospitable Lassleys, he had first met Miss Craigmiles.

On the Wednesday evening following, he was gathering his belongings in the sleeper of a belated Chicago train preparatory to another dash across platforms – this time in the echoing station at Council Bluffs – to catch the waiting "Overland Flyer" for the run to Denver.

President Pelham's telegram, which had found him in Boston on the eve of closing a contract with the sugar magnates to go and build refineries in Cuba, was quite brief, but it bespoke haste:

"We need a fighting man who can build railroads and dams and dig ditches in Arcadia. Salary satisfactory to you. Wire quick if you can come."

This was the wording of it; and at the evening hour of train-changing in Council Bluffs, Ballard was sixteen hundred miles on his way, racing definitely to a conference with the president of Arcadia Irrigation in Denver, with the warning telegram from Lassley no more than a vague disturbing under-thought.

What would lie beyond the conference he knew only in the large. As an industrial captain in touch with the moving world of great projects, he was familiar with the plan for the reclamation of the Arcadian desert. A dam was in process of construction, the waters of a mountain torrent were to be impounded, a system of irrigating canals opened, and a connecting link of railway built. Much of the work, he understood, was already done; and he was to take charge as chief of construction and carry it to its conclusion.

So much President Pelham's summons made clear. But what was the mystery hinted at in Lassley's telegram? And did it have any connection with that phrase in President Pelham's wire: "We need a fighting man"?

These queries, not yet satisfactorily answered, were presenting themselves afresh when Ballard followed the porter to the section reserved for him in the Denver sleeper. The car was well filled; and when he could break away from the speculative entanglement long enough to look about him, he saw that the women passengers were numerous enough to make it more than probable that he would be asked, later on, to give up his lower berth to one of them.

Being masculinely selfish, and a seasoned traveller withal, he was steeling himself to say "No" to this request what time the train was rumbling over the great bridge spanning the Missouri. The bridge passage was leisurely, and there was time for a determined strengthening of the selfish defenses.

But at the Omaha station there was a fresh influx of passengers for the Denver car, and to Ballard's dismay they appeared at the first hasty glance to be all women.

"O good Lord!" he ejaculated; and finding his pipe retreated precipitately in the direction of the smoking-compartment, vaguely hoping to dodge the inevitable.

At the turn around the corner of the linen locker he glanced back. Two or three figures in the group of late comers might have asked for recognition if he had looked fairly at them; but he had eyes for only one: a modish young woman in a veiled hat and a shapeless gray box travelling-coat, who was evidently trying to explain something to the Pullman conductor.

"Jove!" he exclaimed; "if I weren't absolutely certain that Elsa Craigmiles is half-way across the Atlantic with the Lassleys – but she is; and if she were not, she wouldn't be here, doing the 'personally conducted' for that mob." And he went on to smoke.

It was a very short time afterward that an apologetic Pullman conductor found him, and the inevitable came to pass.

"This is Mr. Ballard, I believe?"

A nod, and an uphanging of tickets.

"Thank you. I don't like to discommode you, Mr. Ballard; but – er – you have an entire section, and – "

"I know," said Ballard crisply. "The lady got on the wrong train, or she bought the wrong kind of ticket, or she took chances on finding the good-natured fellow who would give up his berth and go hang himself on a clothes-hook in the vestibule. I have been there before, but I have not yet learned how to say 'No.' Fix it up any way you please, only don't give me an upper over a flat-wheeled truck, if you can help it."

An hour later the dining-car dinner was announced; and Ballard, who had been poring over a set of the Arcadian maps and profiles and a thick packet of documents mailed to intercept him at Chicago, brought up the rear of the outgoing group from the Denver car.

In the vestibule of the diner he found the steward wrestling suavely with a late contingent of hungry ones, and explaining that the tables were all temporarily full. Ballard had broad shoulders and the Kentucky stature to match them. Looking over the heads of the others, he marked, at the farther end of the car, a table for two, with one vacant place.

"I beg your pardon – there is only one of me," he cut in; and the steward let him pass. When he had dodged the laden waiters and was taking the vacant seat he found himself confronting the young woman in the veiled hat and the gray box-coat, identified her, and discovered in a petrifying shock of astoundment that she was not Miss Elsa Craigmiles's fancied double, but Miss Craigmiles herself.

"Why, Mr. Ballard – of all people!" she cried, with a brow-lifting of genuine or well-assumed surprise. And then in mock consternation: "Don't tell me that *you* are the good-natured gentleman I drove out of his section in the sleeping-car."

"I sha'n't; because I don't know how many more there are of me," said Ballard. Then, astonishment demanding its due: "Did I only dream that you were going to Europe with the Herbert Lassleys, or – "

She made a charming little face at him.

"Do you never change your plans suddenly, Mr. Ballard? Never mind; you needn't confess: I know you do. Well, so do I. At the last moment I begged off, and Mrs. Lassley fairly scolded. She even went so far as to accuse me of not knowing my own mind for two minutes at a time."

Ballard's smile was almost grim.

"You have given me that impression now and then; when I wanted to be serious and you did not. Did you come aboard with that party at Omaha?"

"Did I not? It's my – that is, it's cousin Janet Van Bryck's party; and we are going to do Colorado this summer. Think of that as an exchange for England and a yachting voyage to Tromsoe!"

This time Ballard's smile was affectionately cynical.

"I didn't suppose you ever forgot yourself so far as to admit that there was any America west of the Alleghany Mountains."

Miss Elsa's laugh was one of her most effective weapons. Ballard was made to feel that he had laid himself open at some vulnerable point, without knowing how or why.

"Dear me!" she protested. "How long does it take you to really get acquainted with people?" Then with reproachful demureness: "The man has been waiting for five full minutes to take your dinner order."

One of Ballard's gifts was pertinacity; and after he had told the waiter what to bring, he returned to her question.

"It is taking me long enough to get acquainted with you," he ventured. "It will be two years next Tuesday since we first met at the Herbert Lassleys', and you have been delightfully good to me,

and even chummy with me – when you felt like it. Yet do you know you have never once gone back of your college days in speaking of yourself? I don't know to this blessed moment whether you ever had any girlhood; and that being the case – "

"Oh, spare me!" she begged, in well-counterfeited dismay. "One would think – "

"One would not think anything of you that he ought not to think," he broke in gravely; adding: "We are a long way past the Alleghanies now, and I am glad you are aware of an America somewhat broader than it is long. Do I know any of your sight-seers, besides Mrs. Van Bryck?"

"I don't know; I'll list them for you," she offered. "There are Major Blacklock, United States Engineers, retired, who always says, 'H'm – ha!' before he contradicts you; the major's nieces, Madge and Margery Cantrell – the idea of splitting one name for two girls in the same family! – and the major's son, Jerry, most hopeful when he is pitted against other young savages on the football field. All strangers, so far?"

Ballard nodded, and she went on.

"Then there are Mrs. Van Bryck and Dosia – I am sure you have met them; and Hetty Bigelow, their cousin, twice removed, whom you have never met, if Cousin Janet could help it; and Hetty's brother, Lucius, who is something or other in the Forestry Service. Let me see; how many is that?"

"Eight," said Ballard, "counting the negligible Miss Bigelow and her tree-nursing brother."

"Good. I merely wanted to make sure you were paying attention. Last, but by no means least, there is Mr. Wingfield —*the* Mr. Wingfield, who writes plays."

Without ever having been suffered to declare himself Miss Elsa's lover, Ballard resented the saving of the playwright for the climax; also, he resented the respectful awe, real or assumed, with which his name was paraded.

"Let me remember," he said, with the frown reflective. "I believe it was Jack Forsyth the last time you confided in me. Is it Mr. Wingfield now?"

"Would you listen!" she laughed; but he made quite sure there was a blush to go with the laugh. "Do you expect me to tell you about it here and now? – with Mr. Wingfield sitting just three seats back of me, on the right?"

Ballard scowled, looked as directed, and took the measure of his latest rival.

Wingfield was at a table for four, with Mrs. Van Bryck, her daughter, and a shock-headed young man, whom Ballard took to be the football-playing Blacklock. In defiance of the clean-shaven custom of the moment, or, perhaps, because he was willing to individualise himself, the playwright wore a beard closely trimmed and pointed in the French manner; this, the quick-grasping eyes, and a certain vulpine showing of white teeth when he laughed, made Ballard liken him to an unnamed singer he had once heard in the part of *Mephistopheles*.

The overlooking glance necessarily included Wingfield's table companions: Mrs. Van Bryck's high-bred contours lost in adipose; Dosia's cool and placid prettiness – the passionless charms of unrelieved milk-whiteness of skin and masses of flaxen hair and baby-blue eyes; the Blacklock boy's square shoulders, heavy jaw, and rather fine eyes – which he kept resolutely in his plate for the better part of the time.

At the next table Ballard saw a young man with the brown of an out-door occupation richly colouring face and hands; an old one with the contradictory "H'm – ha!" written out large in every gesture; and two young women who looked as if they might be the sharers of the single Christian name. Miss Bigelow, the remaining member of the party, had apparently been lost in the dinner seating. At all events, Ballard did not identify her.

"Well?" said Miss Craigmiles, seeming to intimate that he had looked long enough.

"I shall know Mr. Wingfield, if I ever see him again," remarked Ballard. "Whose guest is he? Or are you all Mrs. Van Bryck's guests?"

"What an idea!" she scoffed. "Cousin Janet is going into the absolutely unknown. She doesn't reach even to the Alleghanies; her America stops short at Philadelphia. She is the chaperon; but our host isn't with us. We are to meet him in the wilds of Colorado."

"Anybody I know?" queried Ballard.

"No. And – oh, yes, I forgot; Professor Gardiner is to join us later. I knew there must be one more somewhere. But he was an afterthought. I – Cousin Janet, I mean – got his acceptance by wire at Omaha."

"Gardiner is not going to join you," said Ballard, with the cool effrontery of a proved friend. "He is going to join me."

"Where? In Cuba?"

"Oh, no; I am not going to Cuba. I am going to live the simple life; building dams and digging ditches in Arcadia."

He was well used to her swiftly changing moods. What Miss Elsa's critics, who were chiefly of her own sex, spoke of disapprovingly as her flightiness, was to Ballard one of her characterizing charms. Yet he was quite unprepared for her grave and frankly reproachful question:

"Why aren't you going to Cuba? Didn't Mr. Lassley telegraph you not to go to Arcadia?"

"He did, indeed. But what do you know about it? – if I may venture to ask?"

For the first time in their two years' acquaintance he saw her visibly embarrassed. And her explanation scarcely explained.

"I – I was with the Lassleys in New York, you know; I went to the steamer to see them off. Mr. Lassley showed me his telegram to you after he had written it."

They had come to the little coffees, and the other members of Miss Craigmiles's party had risen and gone rearward to the sleeping-car. Ballard, more mystified than he had been at the Boston moment when Lassley's wire had found him, was still too considerate to make his companion a reluctant source of further information. Moreover, Mr. Lester Wingfield was weighing upon him more insistently than the mysteries. In times past Miss Craigmiles had made him the target for certain little arrows of confidence: he gave her an opportunity to do it again.

"Tell me about Mr. Wingfield," he suggested. "Is he truly Jack Forsyth's successor?"

"How can you question it?" she retorted gayly. "Some time – not here or now – I will tell you all about it."

"Some time," he repeated. "Is it always going to be 'some time'? You have been calling me your friend for a good while, but there has always been a closed door beyond which you have never let me penetrate. And it is not my fault, as you intimated a few minutes ago. Why is it? Is it because I'm only one of many? Or is it your attitude toward all men?"

She was knotting her veil and her eyes were downcast when she answered him.

"A closed door? There is, indeed, my dear friend: two hands, one dead and one still living, closed it for us. It may be opened some time" – the phrase persisted, and she could not get away from it – "and then you will be sorry. Let us go back to the sleeping-car. I want you to meet the others." Then with a quick return to mockery: "Only I suppose you will not care to meet Mr. Wingfield?"

He tried to match her mood; he was always trying to keep up with her kaleidoscopic changes of front.

"Try me, and see," he laughed. "I guess I can stand it, if he can."

And a few minutes later he had been presented to the other members of the sight-seeing party; had taken Mrs. Van Bryck's warm fat hand of welcome and Dosa's cool one, and was successfully getting himself contradicted at every other breath by the florid-faced old campaigner, who, having been a major of engineers, was contentiously critical of young civilians who had taken their B.S. degree elsewhere than at West Point.

III

THE REVERIE OF A BACHELOR

It was shortly after midnight when the "Overland Flyer" made its unscheduled stop behind a freight train which was blocking the track at the blind siding at Coyote. Always a light sleeper, Ballard was aroused by the jar and grind of the sudden brake-clipping; and after lying awake and listening for some time, he got up and dressed and went forward to see what had happened.

The accident was a box-car derailment, caused by a broken truck, and the men of both train crews were at work trying to get the disabled car back upon the steel and the track-blocking train out of the "Flyer's" way. Inasmuch as such problems were acutely in his line, Ballard thought of offering to help; but since there seemed to be no special need, he sat down on the edge of the ditch-cutting to look on.

The night was picture fine; starlit, and with the silent wideness of the great upland plain to give it immensity. The wind, which for the first hundred miles of the westward flight had whistled shrilly in the car ventilators, was now lulled to a whispering zephyr, pungent with the subtle soil essence of the grass-land spring.

Ballard found a cigar and smoked it absently. His eyes followed the toilings of the train crews prying and heaving under the derailed car, with the yellow torch flares to pick them out; but his thoughts were far afield, with his dinner-table companion to beckon them.

"Companion" was the word which fitted her better than any other. Ballard had found few men, and still fewer women, completely companionable. Some one has said that comradeship is the true test of affinity; and the Kentuckian remembered with a keen appreciation of the truth of this saying a summer fortnight spent at the Herbert Lassleys' cottage on the North Shore, with Miss Craigmiles as one of his fellow-guests.

Margaret Lassley had been kind to him on that occasion, holding the reins of chaperonage lightly. There had been sunny afternoons on the breezy headlands, and blood-quickenings mornings in Captain Tinkham's schooner-rigged whale-boat, when the white horses were racing across the outer reef and the water was too rough to tempt the other members of the house-party.

He had monopolised Elsa Craigmiles crudely during those two weeks, glorying in her beauty, in her bright mind, in her triumphant physical fitness. He remembered how sturdily their comradeship had grown during the uninterrupted fortnight. He had told her all there was to tell about himself, and in return she had alternately mocked him and pretended to confide in him; the confidences touching such sentimental passages as the devotion of the Toms, the Dicks, and the Harrys of her college years.

Since he had sometimes wished to be sentimental on his own account, Ballard had been a little impatient under these frivolous appeals for sympathy. But there is a certain tonic for growing love even in such bucketings of cold water as the loved one may administer in telling the tale of the predecessor. It is a cold heart, masculine, that will not find warmth in anything short of the ice of indifference; and whatever her faults, Miss Elsa was never indifferent. Ballard recalled how he had groaned under the jesting confidences. Also, he remembered that he had never dared to repel them, choosing rather to clasp the thorns than to relinquish the rose.

From the sentimental journey past to the present stage of the same was but a step; but the present situation was rather perplexingly befogged. Why had Elsa Craigmiles changed her mind so suddenly about spending the summer in Europe? What could have induced her to substitute a summer in Colorado, travelling under Mrs. Van Bryck's wing?

The answer to the queryings summed itself up, for the Kentuckian, in a name – the name of a man and a playwright. He held Mr. Lester Wingfield responsible for the changed plans, and was irritably resentful. In the after-dinner visit with the sight-seeing party in the Pullman there had been

straws to indicate the compass-point of the wind. Elsa deferred to Wingfield, as the other women did; only in her case Ballard was sure it meant more. And the playwright, between his posings as a literary oracle, assumed a quiet air of proprietorship in Miss Craigmiles that was maddening.

Ballard recalled this, sitting upon the edge of the ditch-cutting in the heart of the fragrant night, and figuratively punched Mr. Wingfield's head. Fate had been unkind to him, throwing him thus under the wheels of the opportune when the missing of a single train by either the sight-seers or himself would have spared him.

Taking that view of the matter, there was grim comfort in the thought that the mangling could not be greatly prolonged. The two orbits coinciding for the moment would shortly go apart again; doubtless upon the morning's arrival in Denver. It was well. Heretofore he had been asked to sympathise only in a subjective sense. With another lover corporeally present and answering to his name, the torture would become objective – and blankly unendurable.

Notwithstanding, he found himself looking forward with keen desire to one more meeting with the beloved tormentor – to a table exchange of thoughts and speech at the dining-car breakfast which he masterfully resolved not all the playmakers in a mumming world should forestall or interrupt.

This determination was shaping itself in the Kentuckian's brain when, after many futile backings and slack-takings, the ditched car was finally induced to climb the frogs and to drop successfully upon the rails. When the obstructing freight began to move, Ballard flung away the stump of his cigar and climbed the steps of the first open vestibule on the "Flyer," making his way to the rear between the sleeping emigrants in the day-coaches.

Being by this time hopelessly wakeful, he filled his pipe and sought the smoking-compartment of the sleeping-car. It was a measure of his abstraction that he did not remark the unfamiliarity of the place; all other reminders failing, he should have realised that the fat negro porter working his way perspiringly with brush and polish paste through a long line of shoes was not the man to whom he had given his suit-cases in the Council Bluffs terminal.

But thinking pointedly of Elsa Craigmiles, and of the joy of sharing another meal with her in spite of the Lester Wingfields, he saw nothing, noted nothing; and the reverie, now frankly traversing the field of sentiment, ran on unbroken until he became vaguely aware that the train had stopped and started again, and that during the pause there had been sundry clankings and jerkings betokening the cutting off of a car.

A hasty question fired at the fat porter cleared the atmosphere of doubt.

"What station was that we just passed?"

"Short Line Junction, sah; whah we leaves the Denver cyar – yes, sah."

"What? Isn't this the Denver car?"

"No, indeed, sah. Dish yer cyar goes on th'oo to Ogden; yes, sah."

Ballard leaned back again and chuckled in ironic self-derision. He was not without a saving sense of humour. What with midnight prowlings and sentimental reveries he had managed to sever himself most abruptly and effectually from his car, from his hand-baggage, from the prefigured breakfast, with Miss Elsa for his *vis-à-vis*; and, what was of vastly greater importance, from the chance of a day-long business conference with President Pelham!

"Gardiner, old man, you are a true prophet; it isn't in me to think girl and to play the great game at one and the same moment," he said, flinging a word to the assistant professor of geology across the distance abysses; and the fat porter said: "Sah?"

"I was just asking what time I shall reach Denver, going in by way of the main line and Cheyenne," said Ballard, with cheerful mendacity.

"Erbout six o'clock in the evenin', sah; yes, sah. Huccome you to get lef', Cap'n Boss?"

"I didn't get left; it was the Denver sleeper that got left," laughed the Kentuckian. After which he refilled his pipe, wrote a telegram to Mr. Pelham, and one to the Pullman conductor about his

hand-baggage, and resigned himself to the inevitable, hoping that the chapter of accidents had done its utmost.

Unhappily, it had not, as the day forthcoming amply proved. Reaching Cheyenne at late breakfast-time, Ballard found that the Denver train over the connecting line waited for the "Overland" from the West; also, that on this day of all days, the "Overland" was an hour behind her schedule. Hence there was haste-making extraordinary at the end of the Boston-Denver flight. When the delayed Cheyenne train clattered in over the switches, it was an hour past dark. President Pelham was waiting with his automobile to whisk the new chief off to a hurried dinner-table conference at the Brown Palace; and what few explanations and instructions Ballard got were sandwiched between the *consommé au gratin* and the dessert.

Two items of information were grateful. The Fitzpatrick Brothers, favourably known to Ballard, were the contractors on the work; and Loudon Bromley, who had been his friend and loyal understudy in the technical school, was still the assistant engineer, doing his best to push the construction in the absence of a superior.

Since the chief of any army stands or falls pretty largely by the grace of his subordinates, Ballard was particularly thankful for Bromley. He was little and he was young; he dressed like an exquisite, wore neat little patches of side-whiskers, shot straight, played the violin, and stuffed birds for relaxation. But in spite of these hindrances, or, perhaps, because of some of them, he could handle men like a born captain, and he was a friend whose faithfulness had been proved more than once.

"I shall be only too glad to retain Bromley," said Ballard, when the president told him he might choose his own assistant. And, as time pressed, he asked if there were any other special instructions.

"Nothing specific," was the reply. "Bromley has kept things moving, but they can be made to move faster, and we believe you are the man to set the pace, Mr. Ballard; that's all. And now, if you are ready, we have fifteen minutes in which to catch the Alta Vista train – plenty of time, but none to throw away. I have reserved your sleeper."

It was not until after the returning automobile spin; after Ballard had checked his baggage and had given his recovered suit-cases to the porter of the Alta Vista car; that he learned the significance of the fighting clause in the president's Boston telegram.

They were standing at the steps of the Pullman for the final word; had drawn aside to make room for a large party of still later comers; when the president said, with the air of one who gathers up the unconsidered trifles:

"By the way, Mr. Ballard, you may not find it all plain sailing up yonder. Arcadia Park has been for twenty years a vast cattle-ranch, owned, or rather usurped, by a singular old fellow who is known as the 'King of Arcadia.' Quite naturally, he opposes our plan of turning the park into a well-settled agricultural field, to the detriment of his free cattle range, and he is fighting us."

"In the courts, you mean?"

"In the courts and out of them. I might mention that it was one of his cow-men who killed Sanderson; though that was purely a personal quarrel, I believe. The trouble began with his refusal to sell us a few acres of land and a worthless mining-claim which our reservoir may submerge, and we were obliged to resort to the courts. He is fighting for delay now, and in the meantime he encourages his cow-boys to maintain a sort of guerrilla warfare on the contractors: stealing tools, disabling machinery, and that sort of thing. This was Macpherson's story, and I'm passing it on to you. You are forty miles from the nearest sheriff's office over there; but when you need help, you'll get it. Of course, the company will back you – to the last dollar in the treasury, if necessary."

Ballard's rejoinder was placatory. "It seems a pity to open up the new country with a feud," he said, thinking of his native State and of what these little wars had done for some portions of it. "Can't the old fellow be conciliated in some way?"

"I don't know," replied the president doubtfully. "We want peaceable possession, of course, if we can get it; capital is always on the side of peace. In fact, we authorised Macpherson to buy peace at

any price in reason, and we'll give you the same authority. But Macpherson always represented the old cattle king as being unapproachable on that side. On the other hand, we all know what Macpherson was. He had a pretty rough tongue when he was at his best; and he was in bad health for a long time before the derrick fell on him. I dare say he didn't try diplomacy."

"I'll make love to the cow-punching princesses," laughed Ballard; "that is, if there are any."

"There is one, I understand; but I believe she doesn't spend much of her time at home. The old man is a widower, and, apart from his senseless fight on the company, he appears to be – but I won't prejudice you in advance."

"No, don't," said Ballard. "I'll size things up for myself on the ground. I –"

The interruption was the dash of a switch-engine up the yard with another car to be coupled to the waiting mountain line train. Ballard saw the lettering on the medallion: "08".

"Somebody's private hotel?" he remarked.

"Yes. It's Mr. Brice's car, I guess. He was in town to-day."

Ballard was interested at once.

"Mr. Richard Brice? – the general manager of the D. & U. P.?"

The president nodded.

"That's great luck," said Ballard, warmly. "We were classmates in the Institute, and I haven't seen him since he came West. I think I'll ride in the Naught-eight till bedtime."

"Glad you know him," said the president. "Get in a good word for our railroad connection with his line at Alta Vista, while you're about it. There is your signal; good-by, and good luck to you. Don't forget – 'drive' is the word; for every man, minute, and dollar there is in it."

Ballard shook the presidential hand and swung up to the platform of the private car. A reluctant porter admitted him, and thus it came about that he did not see the interior of his own sleeper until long after the other passengers had gone to bed.

"Good load to-night, John?" he said to the porter, when, the private car visit being ended, the man was showing him to his made-down berth.

"Yes, sah; mighty good for de branch. But right smart of dem is ladies, and dey don't he'p de po' portah much."

"Well, I'll pay for one of them, anyway," said the Kentuckian, good-naturedly doubling his tip. "Be sure you rout me out bright and early; I want to get ahead of the crowd."

And he wound his watch and went to bed, serenely unconscious that the hat upon the rail-hook next to his own belonged to Mr. Lester Wingfield; that the hand-bags over which he had stumbled in the dimly lighted aisle were the *impedimenta* of the ladies Van Bryck; or that the dainty little boots proclaiming the sex – and youth – of his fellow-traveller in the opposite Number Six were the foot-gear of Miss Elsa Craigmiles.

IV ARCADY

Arcadia Park, as the government map-makers have traced it, is a high-lying, enclosed valley in the heart of the middle Rockies, roughly circular in outline, with a curving westward sweep of the great range for one-half of its circumscribing rampart, and the bent bow of the Elk Mountains for the other.

Apart from storming the rampart heights, accessible only to the hardy prospector or to the forest ranger, there are three ways of approach to the shut-in valley: up the outlet gorge of the Boiling Water, across the Elk Mountains from the Roaring Fork, or over the high pass in the Continental Divide from Alta Vista.

It was from the summit of the high pass that Ballard had his first view of Arcadia. From Alta Vista the irrigation company's narrow-gauge railway climbs through wooded gorges and around rock-ribbed snow balds, following the route of the old stage trail; and Ballard's introductory picture of the valley was framed in the cab window of the locomotive sent over by Bromley to transport him to the headquarters camp on the Boiling Water.

In the wide prospect opened by the surmounting of the high pass there was little to suggest the human activities, and still less to foreshadow strife. Ballard saw a broad-acred oasis in the mountain desert, billowed with undulating meadows, and having for its colour scheme the gray-green of the range grasses. Winding among the billowy hills in the middle distance, a wavering double line of aspens marked the course of the Boiling Water. Nearer at hand the bald slopes of the Saguache pitched abruptly to the forested lower reaches; and the path of the railway, losing itself at the timber line, reappeared as a minute scratch scoring the edge of the gray-green oasis, to vanish, distance effaced, near a group of mound-shaped hills to the eastward.

The start from Alta Vista with the engine "special" had been made at sunrise, long before any of Ballard's fellow-travellers in the sleeping-car were stirring. But the day had proved unseasonably warm in the upper snow fields, and there had been time-killing delays.

Every gulch had carried its torrent of melted snow to threaten the safety of the unballasted track, and what with slow speed over the hazards and much shovelling of land-slips in the cuttings, the sun was dipping to the westward range when the lumbering little construction engine clattered down the last of the inclines and found the long level tangents in the park.

On the first of the tangents the locomotive was stopped at a watering-tank. During the halt Ballard climbed down from his cramped seat on the fireman's box and crossed the cab to the engine-man's gangway. Hoskins, the engine-driver, leaning from his window, pointed out the projected course of the southern lateral canal in the great irrigation system.

"It'll run mighty nigh due west here, about half-way between us and the stage trail," he explained; and Ballard, looking in the direction indicated, said: "Where is the stage trail? I haven't seen it since we left the snow balds."

"It's over yonder in the edge of the timber," was the reply; and a moment later its precise location was defined by three double-seated buckboards, passenger-laden and drawn by four-in-hand teams of tittupping broncos, flicking in and out among the pines and pushing rapidly eastward. The distance was too great for recognition, but Ballard could see that there were women in each of the vehicles.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Those people must have crossed the range from Alta Vista to-day. What is the attraction over here? – a summer-resort hotel?"

"Not any in this valley," said the engine-man. "They might be going on over to Ashcroft, or maybe to Aspen, on the other side o' the Elk Mountains. But if that's their notion, they're due to camp out somewhere, right soon. It's all o' forty mile to the nearest of the Roaring Fork towns."

The engine tank was filled, and the fireman was flinging the dripping spout to its perpendicular. Ballard took his seat again, and became once more immersed in his topographical studies of the new field; which was possibly why the somewhat singular spectacle of a party of tourists hastening on to meet night and the untaverned wilderness passed from his mind.

The approach to the headquarters camp of the Arcadia Company skirted the right bank of the Boiling Water, in this portion of its course a river of the plain, eddying swiftly between the aspen-fringed banks. But a few miles farther on, where the gentle undulations of the rich grass-land gave place to bare, rock-capped hills, the stream broke at intervals into noisy rapids, with deep pools to mark the steps of its descent.

Ballard's seat on the fireman's box was on the wrong side for the topographical purpose, and he crossed the cab to stand at Hoskins's elbow. As they were passing one of the stillest of the pools, the engineman said, with a sidewise jerk of his thumb:

"That's the place where Mr. Braithwaite was drowned. Came down here from camp to catch a mess o' trout for his supper and fell in – from the far bank."

"Couldn't he swim?" Ballard asked.

"They all say he could. Anyhow, it looks as if he might 'a' got out o' that little mill-pond easy enough. But he didn't. They found his fishing tackle on the bank, and him down at the foot of the second rapid below – both arms broke and the top of his head caved in, like he'd been run through a rock crusher. They can say what they please; I ain't believin' the river done it."

"What do you believe?" Ballard was looking across to a collection of low buildings and corrals – evidently the headquarters of the old cattle king's ranch outfit – nestling in a sheltered cove beyond the stream, and his question was a half-conscious thought slipping into speech.

"I believe this whole blame' job is a hoodoo," was the prompt rejoinder. And then, with the freedom born of long service in the unfettered areas where discipline means obedience but not servility, the man added: "I wouldn't be standin' in your shoes this minute for all the money the Arcadia Company could pay me, Mr. Ballard."

Ballard was young, fit, vigorous, and in abounding health. Moreover, he was a typical product of an age which scoffs at superstition and is impatient of all things irreducible to the terms of algebraic formulas. But here and now, on the actual scene of the fatalities, the "two sheer accidents and a commonplace tragedy" were somewhat less easily dismissed than when he had thus contemptuously named them for Gardiner in the Boston railway station. Notwithstanding, he was quite well able to shake off the little thrill of disquietude and to laugh at Hoskins's vicarious anxiety.

"I wasn't raised in the woods, Hoskins, but there was plenty of tall timber near enough to save me from being scared by an owl," he asseverated. Then, as a towering derrick head loomed gallows-like in the gathering dusk, with a white blotch of masonry to fill the ravine over which it stood sentinel: "Is that our camp?"

"That's Elbow Canyon," said the engineman; and he shut off steam and woke the hill echoes with the whistle.

Ballard made out something of the lay of the land at the headquarters while the engine was slowing through the temporary yard. There was the orderly disorder of a construction terminal: tracks littered with cars of material, a range of rough shed shelters for the stone-cutters, a dotting of sleeping-huts and adobes on a little mesa above, and a huge, weathered mess-tent, lighted within, and glowing orange-hued in the twilight. Back of the camp the rounded hills grew suddenly precipitous, but through the river gap guarded by the sentinel derrick, there was a vista distantly backgrounded by the mass of the main range rising darkly under its evergreens, with the lights of a great house starring the deeper shadow.

V

"FIRE IN THE ROCK!"

Bromley was on hand to meet his new chief when Ballard dropped from the step of the halted engine. A few years older, and browned to a tender mahogany by the sun of the altitudes and the winds of the desert, he was still the Bromley of Ballard's college memories: compact, alert, boyishly smiling, neat, and well-groomed. With Anglo-Saxon ancestry on both sides, the meeting could not be demonstrative.

"Same little old 'Beau Bromley,'" was Ballard's greeting to go with the hearty hand-grip; and Bromley's reply was in keeping. After which they climbed the slope to the mesa and the headquarters office in comradely silence, not because there was nothing to be said, but because the greater part of it would keep.

Having picked up the engine "special" with his field-glass as it came down the final zigzag in the descent from the pass, Bromley had supper waiting in the adobe-walled shack which served as the engineers' quarters; and until the pipes were lighted after the meal there was little talk save of the golden past. But when the camp cook had cleared the table, Ballard reluctantly closed the book of reminiscence and gave the business affair its due.

"How are you coming on with the work, Loudon?" he asked. "Don't need a chief, do you?"

"Don't you believe it!" said the substitute, with such heartfelt emphasis that Ballard smiled. "I'm telling you right now, Breckenridge, I never was so glad to shift a responsibility since I was born. Another month of it alone would have turned me gray."

"And yet, in my hearing, people are always saying that you are nothing less than a genius when it comes to handling workingmen. Isn't it so?"

"Oh, that part of it is all right. It's the hoodoo that is making an old man of me before my time."

"The what?"

Bromley moved uneasily in his chair, and Ballard could have sworn that he gave a quick glance into the dark corners of the room before he said: "I'm giving you the men's name for it. But with or without a name, it hangs over this job like the shadow of a devil-bat's wings. The men sit around and smoke and talk about it till bedtime, and the next day some fellow makes a bad hitch on a stone, or a team runs away, or a blast hangs fire in the quarry, and we have a dead man for supper. Breckenridge, it is simply *hell!*"

Ballard shook his head incredulously.

"You've let a few ill-natured coincidences rattle you," was his comment. "What is it? Or, rather, what is at the bottom of it?"

"I don't know; nobody knows. The 'coincidences,' as you call them, were here when I came; handed down from Braithwaite's drowning, I suppose. Then Sanderson got tangled up with Manuel's woman – as clear a case of superinduced insanity as ever existed – and in less than two months he and Manuel jumped in with Winchesters, and poor Billy passed out. That got on everybody's nerves, of course; and then Macpherson came. You know what he was – a hard-headed, sarcastic old Scotchman, with the bitterest tongue that was ever hung in the middle and adjusted to wag both ways. He tried ridicule; and when that didn't stop the crazy happenings, he took to bullyragging. The day the derrick fell on him he was swearing horribly at the hoister engineer; and he died with an oath in his mouth."

The Kentuckian sat back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head.

"Let me get one thing straight before you go on. Mr. Pelham told me of a scrap between the company and an old fellow up here who claims everything in sight. Has this emotional insanity you are talking about anything to do with the old cattle king's objection to being syndicated out of existence?"

"No; only incidentally in Sanderson's affair – which, after all, was a purely personal quarrel between two men over a woman. And I wouldn't care to say that Manuel was wholly to blame in that."

"Who is this Manuel?" queried Ballard.

"Oh, I thought you knew. He is the colonel's manager and ranch foreman. He is a Mexican and an all-round scoundrel, with one lonesome good quality – absolute and unimpeachable loyalty to his master. The colonel turns the entire business of the cattle raising and selling over to him; doesn't go near the ranch once a month himself."

"The colonel," repeated Ballard. "You call him 'the colonel,' and Mr. Pelham calls him the 'King of Arcadia.' I assume that he has a name, like other men?"

"Sure!" said Bromley. "Hadn't you heard it? It's Craigmiles."

"What!" exclaimed Ballard, holding the match with which he was about to relight his pipe until the flame crept up and scorched his fingers.

"That's it – Craigmiles; Colonel Adam Craigmiles – the King of Arcadia. Didn't Mr. Pelham tell you –"

"Hold on a minute," Ballard cut in; and he got out of his chair to pace back and forth on his side of the table while he was gathering up the pieces scattered broadcast by this explosive petard of a name.

At first he saw only the clearing up of the little mysteries shrouding Miss Elsa's suddenly changed plans for the summer; how they were instantly resolved into the commonplace and the obvious. She had merely decided to come home and play hostess to her father's guests. And since she knew about the war for the possession of Arcadia, and would quite naturally be sorry to have her friend pitted against her father, it seemed unnecessary to look further for the origin of Lassley's curiously worded telegram. "Lassley's," Ballard called it; but if Lassley had signed it, it was fairly certain now that Miss Craigmiles had dictated it.

Ballard thought her use of the fatalities as an argument in the warning message was a purely feminine touch. None the less he held her as far above the influences of the superstitions as he held himself, and it was a deeper and more reflective second thought that turned a fresh leaf in the book of mysteries.

Was it possible that the three violent deaths were not mere coincidences, after all? And, admitting design, could it be remotely conceivable that Adam Craigmiles's daughter was implicated, even to the guiltless degree of suspecting it? Ballard stopped short in his pacing sentry beat and began to investigate, not without certain misgivings.

"Loudon, what manner of man is this Colonel Craigmiles?"

Bromley's reply was characteristic. "The finest ever – type of the American country gentleman; suave, courteous, a little inclined to be grandiloquent; does the paternal with you till you catch yourself on the edge of saying 'sir' to him; and has the biggest, deepest, sweetest voice that ever drawled the Southern 'r.'"

"Humph! That isn't exactly the portrait of a fire-eater."

"Don't you make any mistake. I've described the man you'll meet socially. On the other side, he's a fighter from away back; the kind of man who makes no account of the odds against him, and who doesn't know when he is licked. He has told us openly and repeatedly that he will do us up if we swamp his house and mine; that he will make it pinch us for the entire value of our investment in the dam. I believe he'll do it, too; but President Pelham won't back down an inch. So there you are – irresistible moving body; immovable fixed body: the collision imminent; and we poor devils in between."

Ballard drew back his chair and sat down again. "You are miles beyond my depth now," he asserted. "I had less than an hour with Mr. Pelham in Denver, and what he didn't tell me would make a good-sized library. Begin at the front, and let me have the story of this feud between the company and Colonel Craigmiles."

Again Bromley said: "I supposed, of course, that you knew all about it" – after which he supplied the missing details.

"It was Braithwaite who was primarily to blame. When the company's plans were made public, the colonel did not oppose them, though he knew that the irrigation scheme spelled death to the cattle industry. The fight began when Braithwaite located the dam here at Elbow Canyon in the foothill hogback. There is a better site farther down the river; a second depression where an earthwork dike might have taken the place of all this costly rockwork."

"I saw it as we came up this evening."

"Yes. Well, the colonel argued for the lower site; offered to donate three or four homesteads in it which he had taken up through his employees; offered further to take stock in the company; but Braithwaite was pig-headed about it. He had been a Government man, and was a crank on permanent structures and things monumental; wherefore he was determined on building masonry. He ignored the colonel, reported on the present site, and the work was begun."

"Go on," said Ballard.

"Naturally, the colonel took this as a flat declaration of war. He has a magnificent country house in the upper valley, which must have cost him, at this distance from a base of supplies, a round half-million or more. When we fill our reservoir, this house will stand on an island of less than a half-dozen acres in extent, with its orchards, lawns, and ornamental grounds all under water. Which the same is tough."

Ballard was Elsa Craigmiles's lover, and he agreed in a single forcible expletive. Bromley acquiesced in the expletive, and went on.

"The colonel refused to sell his country-house holding, as a matter of course; and the company decided to take chances on the suit for damages which will naturally follow the flooding of the property. Meanwhile, Braithwaite had organised his camp, and the foundations were going in. A month or so later, he and the colonel had a personal collision, and, although Craigmiles was old enough to be his father, Braithwaite struck him. There was blood on the moon, right there and then, as you'd imagine. The colonel was unarmed, and he went home to get a gun. Braithwaite, who was always a cold-blooded brute, got out his fishing-tackle and sauntered off down the river to catch a mess of trout. He never came back alive."

"Good heavens! But the colonel couldn't have had any hand in Braithwaite's drowning!" Ballard burst out, thinking altogether of Colonel Craigmiles's daughter.

"Oh, no. At the time of the accident, the colonel was back here at the camp, looking high and low for Braithwaite with fire in his eye. They say he went crazy mad with disappointment when he found that the river had robbed him of his right to kill the man who had struck him."

Ballard was silent for a time. Then he said: "You spoke of a mine that would also be flooded by our reservoir. What about that?"

"That came in after Braithwaite's death and Sanderson's appointment as chief engineer. When Braithwaite made his location here, there was an old prospect tunnel in the hill across the canyon. It was boarded up and apparently abandoned, and no one seemed to know who owned it. Later on it transpired that the colonel was the owner, and that the mining claim, which was properly patented and secured, actually covers the ground upon which our dam stands. While Sanderson was busy brewing trouble for himself with Manuel, the colonel put three Mexicans at work in the tunnel; and they have been digging away there ever since."

"Gold?" asked Ballard.

Bromley laughed quietly.

"Maybe you can find out – nobody else has been able to. But it isn't gold; it must be something infinitely more valuable. The tunnel is fortified like a fortress, and one or another of the Mexicans is on guard day and night. The mouth of the tunnel is lower than the proposed level of the dam, and the colonel threatens all kinds of things, telling us frankly that it will break the Arcadia Company

financially when we flood that mine. I have heard him tell Mr. Pelham to his face that the water should never flow over any dam the company might build here; that he would stick at nothing to defend his property. Mr. Pelham says all this is only bluff; that the mine is worthless. But the fact remains that the colonel is immensely rich – and is apparently growing richer."

"Has nobody ever seen the inside of this Golconda of a mine?" queried Ballard.

"Nobody from our side of the fence. As I've said, it is guarded like the sultan's seraglio; and the Mexicans might as well be deaf and dumb for all you can get out of them. Macpherson, who was loyal to the company, first, last, and all the time, had an assay made from some of the stuff spilled out on the dump; but there was nothing doing, so far as the best analytical chemist in Denver could find out."

For the first time since the strenuous day of plan-changing in Boston, Ballard was almost sorry he had given up the Cuban undertaking.

"It's a beautiful tangle!" he snapped, thinking, one would say, of the breach that must be opened between the company's chief engineer and the daughter of the militant old cattle king. Then he changed the subject abruptly.

"What do you know about the colonel's house-hold, Loudon?"

"All there is to know, I guess. He lives in state in his big country mansion that looks like a World's Fair Forest Products Exhibit on the outside, and is fitted and furnished regardless of expense in its interiors. He is a widower with one daughter – who comes and goes as she pleases – and a sister-in-law who is the dearest, finest piece of fragile old china you ever read about."

"You've been in the country house, then?"

"Oh, yes. The colonel hasn't made it a personal fight on the working force since Braithwaite's time."

"Perhaps you have met Miss – er – the daughter who comes and goes?"

"Sure I have! If you'll promise not to discipline me for hobnobbing with the enemy, I'll confess that I've even played duets with her. She discovered my weakness for music when she was home last summer."

"Do you happen to know where she is now?"

"On her way to Europe, I believe. At least, that is what Miss Cauffrey – she's the fragile-china aunt – was telling me."

"I think not," said Ballard, after a pause. "I think she changed her mind and decided to spend the summer at home. When we stopped at Ackerman's to take water this evening, I saw three loaded buckboards driving in this direction."

"That doesn't prove anything," asserted Bromley. "The old colonel has a house-party every little while. He's no anchorite, if he does live in the desert."

Ballard was musing again. "Adam Craigmiles," he said, thoughtfully. "I wonder what there is in that name to set some sort of bee buzzing in my head. If I believed in transmigration, I should say that I had known that name, and known it well, in some other existence."

"Oh, I don't know," said Bromley. "It's not such an unusual name."

"No; if it were, I might trace it. How long did you say the colonel had lived in Arcadia?"

"I didn't say. But it must be something over twenty years. Miss Elsa was born here."

"And the family is Southern – from what section?"

"I don't know that – Virginia, perhaps, measuring by the colonel's accent, pride, hot-headedness, and reckless hospitality."

The clue, if any there were, appeared to be lost; and again Ballard smoked on in silence. When the pipe burned out he refilled it, and at the match-striking instant a sing-song cry of "Fire in the rock!" floated down from the hill crags above the adobe, and the jar of a near-by explosion shook the air and rattled the windows.

"What was that?" he queried.

"It's our quarry gang getting out stone," was Bromley's reply. "We were running short of headers for the tie courses, and I put on a night-shift."

"Whereabouts is your quarry?"

"Just around the shoulder of the hill, and a hundred feet, or such a matter, above us. It is far enough to be out of range."

A second explosion punctuated the explanation. Then there was a third and still heavier shock, a rattling of pebbles on the sheet-iron roof of the adobe, and a scant half-second later a fragment of stone the size of a man's head crashed through roof and ceiling and made kindling-wood of the light pine table at which the two men were sitting. Ballard sprang to his feet, and said something under his breath; but Bromley sat still, with a faint yellow tint discolouring the sunburn on his face.

"Which brings us back to our starting-point – the hoodoo," he said quietly. "To-morrow morning, when you go around the hill and see where that stone came from, you'll say that it was a sheer impossibility. Yet the impossible thing has happened. It is reaching for you now, Breckenridge; and a foot or two farther that way would have – " He stopped, swallowed hard, and rose unsteadily. "For God's sake, old man, throw up this cursed job and get out of here, while you can do it alive!"

"Not much!" said the new chief contemptuously. And then he asked which of the two bunks in the adjoining sleeping-room was his.

VI ELBOW CANYON

Ballard had his first appreciative view of his new field of labor before breakfast on the morning following his arrival, with Bromley as his sightsman.

Viewed in their entirety by daylight, the topographies appealed irresistibly to the technical eye; and Ballard no longer wondered that Braithwaite had overlooked or disregarded all other possible sites for the great dam.

The basin enclosed by the circling foothills and backed by the forested slopes of the main range was a natural reservoir, lacking only a comparatively short wall of masonry to block the crooked gap in the hills through which the river found its way to the lower levels of the grass-lands.

The gap itself was an invitation to the engineer. Its rock-bound slopes promised the best of anchorages for the shore-ends of the masonry; and at its lower extremity a jutting promontory on the right bank of the stream made a sharp angle in the chasm; the elbow which gave the outlet canyon its name.

The point or crook of the elbow, the narrowest pass in the cleft, had been chosen as the site for the dam. Through the promontory a short tunnel was driven at the river-level to provide a diverting spillway for the torrent; and by this simple expedient a dry river-bed in which to build the great wall of concrete and masonry had been secured.

"That was Braithwaite's notion, I suppose?" said Ballard, indicating the tunnel through which the stream, now at summer freshet volume, thundered on its way around the building site to plunge sullenly into its natural bed below the promontory. "Nobody but a Government man would have had the courage to spend so much time and money on a mere preliminary. It's a good notion, though."

"I'm not so sure of that," was Bromley's reply. "Doylan, the rock-boss, tells a fairy-story about the tunnel that will interest you when you hear it. He had the contract for driving it, you know."

"What was the story?"

Bromley laughed. "You'll have to get Mike to tell it, with the proper Irish frills. But the gist of it is this: You know these hogback hills – how they seem to be made up of all the geological odds and ends left over after the mountains were built. Mike swears they drove through limestone, sandstone, porphyry, fire-clay, chert, mica-schist, and *mud* digging that tunnel; which the same, if true, doesn't promise very well for the foundations of our dam."

"But the plans call for bed-rock under the masonry," Ballard objected.

"Oh, yes; and we have it – apparently. But some nights, when I've lain awake listening to the peculiar hollow roar of the water pounding through that tunnel, I've wondered if Doylan's streak of mud mightn't under-lie our bed-rock."

Ballard's smile was good-naturedly tolerant.

"You'd be a better engineer, if you were not a musician, Loudon. You have too much imagination. Is that the colonel's country house up yonder in the middle of our reservoir-that-is-to-be?"

"It is."

Ballard focussed his field-glass upon the tree-dotted knoll a mile away in the centre of the upper valley. It was an ideal building site for the spectacular purpose. On all sides the knoll sloped gently to the valley level; and the river, a placid vale-land stream in this upper reach, encircled three sides of the little hill. Among the trees, and distinguishable from them only by its right lines and gable angles, stood a noble house, built, as it seemed, of great tree-trunks with the bark on.

Ballard could imagine the inspiring outlook from the brown-pillared Greek portico facing westward; the majestic sweep of the enclosing hills, bare and with their rocky crowns worn into a

thousand fantastic shapes; the uplift of the silent, snow-capped mountains to right and left; the vista of the broad, outer valley opening through the gap where the dam was building.

"The colonel certainly had an eye for the picturesque when he pitched upon that knoll for his building-site," was his comment. "How does he get the water up there to make all that greenery?"

"Pumps it, bless your heart! What few modern improvements you won't find installed at Castle 'Cadia aren't worth mentioning. And, by the way, there is another grouch – we're due to drown his power-pumping and electric plant at the portal of the upper canyon under twenty feet of our lake. More bad blood, and a lot more damages."

"Oh, damn!" said Ballard; and he meant the imprecation, and not the pile of masonry which his predecessors had heaped up in the rocky chasm at his feet.

Bromley chuckled. "That is what the colonel is apt to say when you mention the Arcadia Company in his hearing. Do you blame him so very much?"

"Not I. If I owned a home like that, in a wilderness that I had discovered for myself, I'd fight for it to a finish. Last night when you showed me the true inwardness of this mix-up, I was sick and sorry. If I had known five days ago what I know now, you couldn't have pulled me into it with a two-inch rope."

"On general principles?" queried Bromley curiously.

"Not altogether. Business is business; and you've intimated that the colonel is not so badly overmatched in the money field – and when all is said, it is a money fight with the long purse to win. But there is a personal reason why I, of all men in the world, should have stayed out. I did not know it when I accepted Mr. Pelham's offer, and now it is too late to back down. I'm a thousand times sorrier for Colonel Craigmiles than ever you can be, Loudon; but, as the chief engineer of the Arcadia Company, I'm pledged to obliterate him."

"That is precisely what he declares he will do to the company," laughed Bromley. "And there," – pointing across the ravine to an iron-bound door closing a tunnel entrance in the opposite hillside – "is his advanced battery. That is the mine I was telling you about."

"H'm," said the new chief, measuring the distance with his eyes. "If that mining-claim is the regulation size, it doesn't leave us much elbow room over there."

"It doesn't leave us any – as I told you last night, the dam itself stands upon a portion of the claim. In equity, if there were any equity in a law fight against a corporation, the colonel could enjoin us right now. He hasn't done it; he has contented himself with marking out that dead-line you can see over there just above our spillway. The colonel staked that out in Billy Sanderson's time, and courteously informed us that trespassers would be potted from behind that barricade; that there was a machine-gun mounted just inside of that door which commanded the approaches. Just to see if he meant what he said, some of the boys rigged up a scarecrow dummy, and carefully pushed it over the line one evening after supper. I wasn't here, but Fitzpatrick says the colonel's Mexican garrison in the tunnel fairly set the air afire with a volley from the machine-gun."

Ballard said "H'm" again, and was silent what time they were climbing the hill to the quarries on their own side of the ravine. When he spoke, it was not of the stone the night shift had been getting out.

"Loudon, has it ever occurred to you that the colonel's mine play is a very large-sized trump card? We can submerge the house, the grounds, and his improvements up yonder in the upper canyon and know approximately how much it is going to cost the company to pay the bill. But when the water backs up into that tunnel, we are stuck for whatever damages he cares to claim."

"Sure thing," said Bromley. "No one on earth will ever know whether we've swamped a five-million-dollar mine or a twenty-five-cent hole in the ground."

"That being the case, I mean to see the inside of that tunnel," Ballard went on doggedly. "I am sorry I allowed Mr. Pelham to let me in for this; but in justice to the people who pay my salary, I must know what we are up against over there."

"I don't believe you will make any bad breaks in that direction," Bromley suggested. "If you try it by main strength and awkwardness, as Macpherson did, you'll get what he very narrowly escaped – a young lead mine started inside of you by one of the colonel's Mexican bandits. If you try it any other way, the colonel will be sure to spot you; and you go out of his good books and Miss Elsa's – no invitations to the big house, no social alleviations, no ice-cream and cake, no heavenly summer nights when you can sit out on the Greek-pillared portico with a pretty girl, and forget for the moment that you are a buccaneering bully of labouring men, marooned, with a lot of dry-land pirates like yourself, in the Arcadia desert. No, my dear Breckenridge; I think it is safe to prophesy that you won't do anything you say you will."

"Won't I?" growled the new chief, looking at his watch. Then: "Let's go down to breakfast." And, with a sour glance at the hill over which the roof-smashing rock of the previous night must have been hurled: "Don't forget to tell Quinlan to be a little more sparing with his powder up here. Impress it on his mind that he is getting out building stone – not shooting the hill down for concrete."

VII THE POLO PLAYERS

Ballard gave the Saturday, his first day in the new field, to Bromley and the work on the dam, inspecting, criticising, suggesting changes, and otherwise adjusting the wheels of the complicated constructing mechanism at the Elbow Canyon nerve centre to run efficiently and smoothly, and at accelerated speed.

"That's about all there is to say," he summed up to his admiring assistant, at the close of his first administrative day. "You're keyed up to concert pitch all right, here, and the *tempo* is not so bad. But 'drive' is the word, Loudon. Wherever you see a chance to cut a corner, cut it. The Fitzpatricks are a little inclined to be slow and sure: crowd the idea into old Brian's head that bonuses are earned by being swift and sure."

"Which means that you're not going to stay here and drive the stone and concrete gangs yourself?" queried Bromley.

"That is what it means, for the present," replied the new chief; and at daybreak Monday morning he was off, bronco-back, to put in a busy fortnight quartering the field in all directions and getting in touch with the various subcontractors at the many subsidiary camps of ditch diggers and railroad builders scattered over the length and breadth of the Kingdom of Arcadia.

On one of the few nights when he was able to return to the headquarters camp for supper and lodging, Bromley proposed a visit to Castle 'Cadia. Ballard's refusal was prompt and decided.

"No, Loudon; not for me, yet a while. I'm too tired to be anybody's good company," was the form the refusal took. "Go gossiping, if you feel like it, but leave me out of the social game until I get a little better grip on the working details. Later on, perhaps, I'll go with you and pay my respects to Colonel Craigmiles – but not to-night."

Bromley went alone and found that Ballard's guess based upon his glimpse of the loaded buckboards *en route* was borne out by the facts. Castle 'Cadia was comfortably filled with a summer house-party; and Miss Craigmiles had given up her European yachting voyage to come home and play the hostess to her father's guests.

Also, Bromley discovered that the colonel's daughter drew her own conclusions from Ballard's refusal to present himself, the discovery developing upon Miss Elsa's frank statement of her convictions.

"I know your new tyrant," she laughed; "I have known him for ages. He won't come to Castle 'Cadia; he is afraid we might make him disloyal to his Arcadia Irrigation salt. You may tell him I said so, if you happen to remember it."

Bromley did remember it, but it was late when he returned to the camp at the canyon, and Ballard was asleep. And the next morning the diligent new chief was mounted and gone as usual long before the "turn-out" whistle blew; for which cause Miss Elsa's challenge remained undelivered; was allowed to lie until the dust of intervening busy days had quite obscured it.

It was on these scouting gallops to the outlying camps that Ballard defined the limits of the "hoodoo." Its influence, he found, diminished proportionately as the square of the distance from the headquarters camp at Elbow Canyon. But in the wider field there were hindrances of another and more tangible sort.

Bourke Fitzpatrick, the younger of the brothers in the contracting firm, was in charge of the ditch digging; and he had irritating tales to tell of the lawless doings of Colonel Craigmiles's herdsmen.

"I'm telling you, Mr. Ballard, there isn't anything them devils won't be up to," he complained, not without bitterness. "One night they'll uncouple every wagon on the job and throw the coupling-pins away; and the next, maybe, they'll be stampeding the mules. Two weeks ago, on Dan Moriarty's

section, they came with men and horses in the dead of night, hitched up the scrapers, and put a thousand yards of earth back into the ditch."

"Wear it out good-naturedly, if you can, Bourke; it is only horse-play," was Ballard's advice. That grown men should seriously hope to defeat the designs of a great corporation by any such puerile means was inconceivable.

"Horse-play, is it?" snapped Fitzpatrick. "Don't you believe it, Mr. Ballard. I can take a joke with any man living; but this is no joke. It comes mighty near being war – with the scrapping all on one side."

"A night guard?" suggested Ballard.

Fitzpatrick shook his head.

"We've tried that; and you'll not get a man to patrol the work since Denny Flaherty took his medicine. The cow-punchers roped him and skidded him 'round over the prairie till it took one of the men a whole blessed day to dig the cactus thorns out of him. And me paying both of them overtime. Would you call that a joke?"

Ballard's reply revealed some latent doubt as to the justification for Bromley's defense of Colonel Craigmiles's fighting methods.

"If it isn't merely rough horse-play, it is guerrilla warfare, as you say, Bourke. Have you seen anything to make you believe that these fellows have a tip from the big house in the upper valley?"

The contractor shook his head.

"The colonel doesn't figure in the details of the cow business at all, as far as anybody can see. He turns it all over to Manuel, his Mexican foreman; and Manuel is in this guerrilla deviltry as big as anybody. Flaherty says he'll take his oath that the foreman was with the gang that roped him."

Ballard was feeling less peaceable when he rode on to the next camp, and as he made the round of the northern outposts the fighting strain which had come down to him from his pioneer ancestors began to assert itself in spite of his efforts to control it. At every stopping-place Fitzpatrick's complaint was amplified. Depredations had followed each other with increasing frequency since Macpherson's death; and once, when one of the subcontractors had been provoked into resistance, arms had been used and a free fight had ensued.

Turning the matter over in his mind in growing indignation, Ballard had determined, by the time he had made the complete round of the outlying camps, upon the course he should pursue. "I'll run a sheriff's posse in here and clean up the entire outfit; that's about what I'll do!" he was saying wrathfully to himself as he galloped eastward on the stage trail late in the afternoon of the final day. "The Lord knows I don't want to make a blood-feud of it, but if they will have it –"

The interruption was a little object-lesson illustrating the grievances of the contractors. Roughly paralleling the stage trail ran the line of the proposed southern lateral canal, marked by its double row of location stakes. At a turn in the road Ballard came suddenly upon what appeared to be an impromptu game of polo.

Flap-hatted herdsmen in shaggy overalls, and swinging long clubs in lieu of polo sticks, were riding in curious zigzags over the canal course, and bending for a drive at each right and left swerve of their wiry little mounts. It took the Kentuckian a full minute to master the intricacies of the game. Then he saw what was doing. The location stakes for the ditch boundaries were set opposite and alternate, and the object of the dodging riders was to determine which of them could club the greatest number of stakes out of the ground without missing a blow or drawing rein.

Ballard singled out the leader, a handsome, well-built *caballero*, with the face, figure, and saddle-seat of the Cid, and rode into the thick of things, red wrath to the fore.

"Hi! you there!" he shouted. "Is your name Manuel?"

"*Si, Señor,*" was the mild reply; and the cavalier took off his bullion-corded sombrero and bowed to the saddle-horn.

"Well, mine is Ballard, and I am the chief engineer for the Arcadia Company."

"Ha! Señor Ballar', I am ver' much delight to meet you."

"Never mind that; the pleasure isn't mutual, by a damned sight. You tell your men to stop that monkey-business, and have them put those stakes back where they found them." Ballard was hot.

"You give-a the h-order in this valley, señor?" asked the Mexican softly.

"I do, where the company's property is concerned. Call your men off!"

"Señor Ballar', I have biffed to-day killed a man for that he spik to me like-a that!"

"Have you?" snorted Ballard contemptuously. "Well, you won't kill me. Call your men off, I say!"

There was no need. The makeshift polo game had paused, and the riders were gathering about the quarrelling two.

"Bat your left eye once, and we'll rope him for you, Manuel," said one.

"Wonder if I c'd knock a two-bagger with that hat o' his'n without mussin' his hair?" said another.

"Say, you fellers, wait a minute till I make that bronc' o' his'n do a cake-walk!" interposed a third, casting the loop of his riata on the ground so that Ballard's horse would be thrown if he lifted hoof.

It was an awkward crisis, and the engineer stood to come off with little credit. He was armed, but even in the unfettered cattle country one cannot pistol a laughing jeer. It was the saving sense of humour that came to his aid, banishing red wrath. There was no malice in the jeers.

"Sail in when you're ready, boys," he laughed. "I fight for my brand the same as you'd fight for yours. Those pegs have got to go back in the ground where you found them."

One of the flap-hatted riders dropped his reins, drummed with his elbows, and crowed lustily. The foreman backed his horse deftly out of the enclosing ring; and the man nearest to Ballard on the right made a little cast of his looped rope, designed to whip Ballard's pistol out of its holster. If the engineer had been the tenderfoot they took him for, the trouble would have culminated quickly.

With the laugh still on his lips, the Kentuckian was watching every move of the Mexican. There was bloodthirst, waiting only for the shadow of an excuse, glooming in the handsome black eyes. Ballard remembered Sanderson's fate, and a quick thrill of racial sympathy for the dead man tuned him to the fighting pitch. He knew he was confronting a treacherous bully of the type known to the West as a "killer"; a man whose regard for human life could be accurately and exactly measured by his chance for escaping the penalty for its taking.

It was at this climaxing moment, while Ballard was tightening his eye-hold upon the one dangerous antagonist, and foiling with his free hand the attempts of the playful "Scotty" at his right to disarm him, that the diversion came. A cloud of dust on the near-by stage trail resolved itself into a fiery-red, purring motor-car with a single occupant; and a moment later the car had left the road and was heading across the grassy interspace.

Manuel's left hand was hovering above his pistol-butt; and Ballard took his eyes from the menace long enough to glance aside at the approaching motorist. He was a kingly figure of a man well on in years, white-haired, ruddy of face, with huge military mustaches and a goatee. He brought the car with a skilful turn into the midst of things; and Ballard, confident now that the Mexican foreman no longer needed watching, saw a singular happening.

While one might count two, the old man in the motor-car stared hard at him, rose in his place behind the steering-wheel, staggered, groped with his hands as the blind grope, and then fell back into the driving-seat with a groan.

Ballard was off his horse instantly, tendering his pocket-flask. But the old man's indisposition seemed to pass as suddenly as it had come.

"Thank you, suh," he said in a voice that boomed for its very depth and sweetness; "I reckon I've been driving a little too fast. Youh – youh name is Ballard – Breckenridge Ballard, isn't it?" he inquired courteously, completely ignoring the dissolving ring of practical jokers.

"It is. And you are Colonel Craigmiles?"

"At youh service, suh; entiahly at youh service. I should have known you anywhere for a Ballard. Youh mother was a Hardaway, but you don't take after that side. No, suh" – with calm deliberation – "you are youh father's son, Mistah Ballard." Then, as one coming at a bound from the remote past to the present: "Was thah any – ah – little discussion going on between you and – ah – Manuel, Mistuh Ballard?"

Five minutes earlier the engineer had been angry enough to prefer spiteful charges against the polo players all and singular. But the booming of the deep voice had a curiously mollifying effect.

"It is hardly worth mentioning," he found himself replying. "I was protesting to your foreman because the boys were having a little game of polo at our expense – knocking our location stakes out of the ground."

The kingly old man in the motor-car drew himself up, and there was a mild explosion directed at the Mexican foreman.

"Manuel, I'm suhprised – right much suhprised and humiliated, suh! I thought it was – ah – distinctly undehtood that all this schoolboy triflin' was to be stopped. Let me heah no more of it. And see that these heah stakes are replaced; carefully replaced, if you please, suh." And then to the complainant: "I'm right sorry, I assure you, Mistuh Ballard. Let me prove it by carrying you off to dinneh with us at Castle 'Cadia. Grigsby, heah, will lead youh horse to camp, and fetch any little necessaries you might care to send for. Indulge me, suh, and let me make amends. My daughter speaks of you so often that I feel we ought to be mo' friendly."

Under much less favourable conditions it is conceivable that the Kentuckian would have overridden many barriers for the sake of finding the open door at Castle 'Cadia. And, the tour of inspection being completed, there was no special duty call to sound a warning.

"I shall be delighted, I'm sure," he bumbled, quite like an infatuated lover; and when the cowboy messenger was charged with the errand to the headquarters camp, Ballard took his place beside the company's enemy, and the car was sent purring across to the hill-skirting stage road.

VIII CASTLE 'CADIA

It was a ten-mile run to the bowl-shaped valley behind the foothills; and Colonel Craigmiles, mindful, perhaps, of his late seizure, did not speed the motor-car.

Recalling it afterward, Ballard remembered that the talk was not once suffered to approach the conflict in which he and his host were the principal antagonists. Miss Elsa's house-party, the matchless climate of Arcadia, the scenery, Ballard's own recollections of his Kentucky boyhood – all these were made to do duty; and the colonel's smile was so winning, his deep voice so sympathetic, and his attitude so affectionately paternal, that Ballard found his mental picture of a fierce old frontiersman fighting for his squatter rights fading to the vanishing point.

"Diplomacy," Mr. Pelham had suggested; and Ballard smiled inwardly. If it came to a crossing of diplomatic weapons with this keen-eyed, gentle-voiced patriarch, who seemed bent on regarding him as an honoured guest, the company's cause was as good as lost.

The road over which the motor-car was silently trundling avoided the headquarters camp at the dam by several miles, losing itself among the hogback foothills well to the southward, and approaching the inner valley at right angles to the course of the river and the railway.

The sun had sunk behind the western mountain barrier and the dusk was gathering when the colonel quickened the pace, and the car topped the last of the hills in a staccato rush. Ballard heard the low thunder of the Boiling Water in its upper canyon, and had glimpses of weird shapes of eroded sandstone looming in huge pillars and fantastic mushroom figures in the growing darkness.

Then the lights of Castle 'Cadia twinkled in their tree-setting at the top of the little knoll; the drought-hardened road became a gravelled carriage-drive under the pneumatic tires; and a final burst of speed sent the car rocketing to the summit of the knoll through a maple-shadowed avenue.

The great tree-trunk-pillared portico of the country house was deserted when the colonel cut out the motor-battery switch at the carriage step. But a moment later a white-gowned figure appeared in the open doorway, and the colonel's daughter came to the step, to laugh gayly, and to say:

"Why, Mr. Ballard, I'm astounded! Have you really decided that it is quite safe to trust yourself in the camp of the enemy?"

Ballard had seen Castle 'Cadia at field-glass range; and he had Bromley's enthusiastic description of the house of marvels to push anticipation some little distance along the way to meet the artistic reality. None the less, the reality came with the shock of the unexpected.

In the softened light of the shaded electric pendants, the massive pillars of the portico appeared as single trees standing as they had grown in the mountain forest. Underfoot the floor was of hewn tree-trunks; but the house walls, like the pillars, were of logs in the rough, cunningly matched and fitted to conceal the carpentry.

A man had come to take the automobile, and the colonel paused to call attention to a needed adjustment of the motor. Ballard made use of the isolated moment.

"I have accounted for you at last," he said, prolonging the greeting hand-clasp to the ultimate limit. "I know now what has made you what you are."

"Really?" she questioned lightly. "And all these years I have been vainly imagining that I had acquired the manner of the civilized East! Isn't it pathetic?"

"Very," he agreed quite gravely. "But the pathos is all on my side."

"Meaning that I might let you go and dress for dinner? I shall. Enter the house of the enemy, Mr. Ballard. A cow-punching princess bids you welcome."

She was looking him fairly in the eyes when she said it, and he acquitted her doubtfully of the charge of intention. But her repetition, accidental or incidental, of his own phrase was sufficiently disconcerting to make him awkwardly silent while she led the way into the spacious reception-hall.

Here the spell of the enchantments laid fresh hold on him. The rustic exterior of the great house was only the artistically designed contrast – within were richness, refinement, and luxury unbounded. The floors were of polished wood, and the rugs were costly Daghestans. Beyond portières of curious Indian bead-work, there were vistas of harmonious interiors; carved furnishings, beamed and panelled ceilings, book-lined walls. The light everywhere came from the softly tinted electric globes. There was a great stone fireplace in the hall, but radiators flanked the openings, giving an added touch of modernity.

Ballard pulled himself together and strove to recall the fifty-mile, sky-reaching mountain barrier lying between all this twentieth-century country-house luxury and the nearest outpost of urban civilisation. It asked for a tremendous effort; and the realising anchor dragged again when Miss Craigmiles summoned a Japanese servant and gave him in charge.

"Show Mr. Ballard to the red room, Tagawi," she directed. And then to the guest: "We dine at seven – as informally as you please. You will find your bag in your room, and Tagawi will serve you. As you once told me when I teased you in your Boston workshop – 'If you don't see what you want, ask for it.'"

The Kentuckian followed his guide up the broad stair and through a second-floor corridor which abated no jot of the down-stair magnificence. Neither did his room, for that matter. Hangings of Pompeian red gave it its name; and it was spacious and high-studded, and critically up to date in its appointments.

The little brown serving-man deftly opened the bag brought by the colonel's messenger from Ballard's quarters at the Elbow Canyon camp, and laid out the guest's belongings. That done, he opened the door of the bath. "The honourable excellency will observe the hot water; also cold. Are the orders other for me?"

Ballard shook his head, dismissed the smiling little man, and turned on the water.

"I reckon I'd better take it cold," he said to himself; "then I'll know certainly whether I'm awake or dreaming. By Jove! but this place is a poem! I don't wonder that the colonel is fighting Berserk to save it alive. And Mr. Pelham and his millionaires come calmly up to the counter and offer to buy it – with mere money!"

He filled the porcelain bath with a crystal-clear flood that, measured by its icy temperature, might have been newly distilled glacier drip; and the cold plunge did something toward establishing the reality of things. But the incredibilities promptly reasserted themselves when he went down a little in advance of the house-party guests, and met Elsa, and was presented to a low-voiced lady with silvery hair and the face of a chastened saint, named to him as Miss Cauffrey, but addressed by Elsa as "Aunt June."

"I hope you find yourself somewhat refreshed, Mr. Ballard," said the sweet-voiced châtelaine. "Elsa tells me you have been in the tropics, and our high altitudes must be almost distressing at first; I know I found them so."

"Really, I hadn't noticed the change," returned Ballard rather vaguely. Then he bestirred himself, and tried to live up to the singularly out-of-place social requirements. "I'm not altogether new to the altitudes, though I haven't been in the West for the past year or two. For that matter, I can't quite realise that I am in the West at this moment – at least in the uncited part."

Miss Cauffrey smiled, and the king's daughter laughed softly.

"It does me so much good!" she declared, mocking him. "All through that dining-car dinner on the 'Overland Flyer' you were trying to reconcile me with the Western barbarities. Didn't you say something about being hopeful because I was aware of the existence of an America west of the Alleghanies?"

"Please let me down as easily as you can," pleaded the engineer. "You must remember that I am only a plain workingman."

"You are come to take poor Mr. Macpherson's place?" queried Miss Cauffrey; which was Ballard's first intimation that the Arcadian promotion scheme was not taboo by the entire house-hold of Castle 'Cadia.

"That is what I supposed I was doing, up to this evening. But it seems that I have stumbled into fairyland instead."

"No," said the house-daughter, laughing at him again – "only into the least Arcadian part of Arcadia. And after dinner you will be free to go where you are impatient to be at this very moment."

"I don't know about that," was Ballard's rejoinder. "I was just now wondering if I could be heroic enough to go contentedly from all this to my adobe shack in the construction camp."

Miss Craigmiles mocked him again.

"My window in the Alta Vista sleeper chanced to be open that night while the train was standing in the Denver station. Didn't I hear Mr. Pelham say that the watchword – your watchword – was to be 'drive,' for every man, minute, and dollar there was in it?"

Ballard said, "Oh, good Lord!" under his breath, and a hot flush rose to humiliate him, in spite of his efforts to keep it down. Now it was quite certain that her word of welcome was not a mere coincidence. She had overheard that brutal and uncalled-for boast of his about making love to "the cow-punching princesses"; and this was his punishment.

It was a moment for free speech of the explanatory sort, but Miss Cauffrey's presence forbade it. So he could only say, in a voice that might have melted a heart of stone: "I am wholly at your mercy – and I am your guest. You shouldn't step on a man when he's down. It isn't Christian."

Whether she would have stepped on him or not was left a matter indeterminate, since the members of the house-party were coming down by twos and threes, and shortly afterward dinner was announced.

By this time Ballard was growing a little hardened to the surprises; and the exquisitely appointed dining-room evoked only a left-over thrill. And at dinner, in the intervals allowed him by Miss Dosia Van Bryck, who was his table companion, there were other things to think of. For example, he was curious to know if Wingfield's air of proprietorship in Miss Craigmiles would persist under Colonel Craigmiles's own roof.

Apparently it did persist. Before the first course was removed Ballard's curiosity was in the way of being amply satisfied; and he was saying "Yes" and "No" like a well-adjusted automaton to Miss Van Bryck.

In the seating he had Major Blacklock and one of the Cantrell girls for his opposites; and Lucius Bigelow and the other sharer of the common Cantrell Christian name widened the gap. But the centrepiece in the middle of the great mahogany was low; and Ballard could see over it only too well.

Wingfield and Elsa were discussing playmaking and the playmaker's art; or, rather, Wingfield was talking shop with cheerful dogmatism, and Miss Craigmiles was listening; and if the rapt expression of her face meant anything... Ballard lost himself in gloomy abstraction, and the colours of the electric spectrum suddenly merged for him into a greenish-gray.

"I should think your profession would be perfectly grand, Mr. Ballard. Don't you find it so?" Thus Miss Dosia, who, being quite void of subjective enthusiasm, felt constrained to try to evoke it in others.

"Very," said Ballard, hearing nothing save the upward inflection which demanded a reply.

Miss Van Bryck seemed mildly surprised; but after a time she tried again.

"Has any one told you that Mr. Wingfield is making the studies for a new play?" she asked.

Again Ballard marked the rising inflection; said "Yes," at a venture; and was straightway humiliated, as he deserved to be.

"It seems so odd that he should come out here for his material," Miss Van Bryck went on evenly. "I don't begin to understand how there can be any dramatic possibilities in a wilderness house-party, with positively no social setting whatever."

"Ah, no; of course not," stammered Ballard, realising now that he was fairly at sea. And then, to make matters as bad as they could be: "You were speaking of Mr. Wingfield?"

Miss Van Bryck's large blue eyes mirrored reproachful astonishment; but she was too placid and too good-natured to be genuinely piqued.

"I fear you must have had a hard day, Mr. Ballard. All this is very wearisome to you, isn't it?" she said, letting him have a glimpse of the real kindness underlying the inanities.

"My day has been rather strenuous," he confessed. "But you make me ashamed. Won't you be merciful and try me again?" And this time he knew what he was saying, and meant it.

"It is hardly worth repeating," she qualified – nevertheless, she did repeat it.

Ballard, listening now, found the little note of distress in the protest against play-building in the wilderness; and his heart warmed to Miss Dosia. In the sentimental field, disappointment for one commonly implies disappointment for two; and he became suddenly conscious of a fellow-feeling for the heiress of the Van Bryck millions.

"There is plenty of dramatic material in Arcadia for Mr. Wingfield, if he knows where to look for it," he submitted. "For example, our camp at the dam furnishes a 'situation' every now and then." And here he told the story of the catapulted stone, adding the little dash of mystery to give it the dramatic flavour.

Miss Dosia's interest was as eager as her limitations would permit. "May I tell Mr. Wingfield?" she asked, with such innocent craft that Ballard could scarcely restrain a smile.

"Certainly. And if Mr. Wingfield is open to suggestion on that side, you may bring him down, and I'll put him on the trail of a lot more of the mysteries."

"Thank you so much. And may I call it my discovery?"

Again her obviousness touched the secret spring of laughter in him. It was very evident that Miss Van Bryck would do anything in reason to bring about a solution of continuity in the sympathetic intimacy growing up between the pair on the opposite side of the table.

"It is yours, absolutely," he made haste to say. "I should never have thought of the dramatic utility if you hadn't suggested it."

"H'm! – ha!" broke in the major. "What are you two young people plotting about over there?"

Ballard turned the edge of the query; blunted it permanently by attacking a piece of government engineering in which, as he happened to know, the major had figured in an advisory capacity. This carrying of the war into Africa brought on a battle technical which ran on unbroken to the ices and beyond; to the moment when Colonel Craigmiles proposed an adjournment to the portico for the coffee and the tobacco. Ballard came off second-best, but he had accomplished his object, which was to make the shrewd-eyed old major forget if he had overheard too much; and Miss Van Bryck gave him his meed of praise.

"You are a very brave man, Mr. Ballard," she said, as he drew the portières aside for her. "Everybody else is afraid of the major."

"I've met him before," laughed the Kentuckian; "in one or another of his various incarnations. And I didn't learn my trade at West Point, you remember."

IX THE BRINK OF HAZARD

The summer night was perfect, and the after-dinner gathering under the great portico became rather a dispersal. The company fell apart into couples and groups when the coffee was served; and while Miss Craigmiles and the playwright were still fraying the worn threads of the dramatic unities, Ballard consoled himself with the older of the Cantrell girls, talking commonplace nothings until his heart ached.

Later on, when young Bigelow had relieved him, and he had given up all hope of breaking into the dramatic duet, he rose to go and make his parting acknowledgments to Miss Cauffrey and the colonel. It was at that moment that Miss Elsa confronted him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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