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Содержание

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CHAPTER I – DISCONTENT AT CANYON PASS

The bluebird was no harbinger of spring at Canyon Pass. Most of the inhabitants had never seen that feathered songster and many had never heard of it. Incidentally these same Passonians would not have known a harbinger in any case, presuming possibly that it was one of those new-fangled nipples for the hydraulic pipes at the Eureka Washings, or something fancy that Bill Judson was selling in cans at the Three Star Grocery.

But spring had unmistakably arrived at Canyon Pass when those two irrepressible pocket-hunters, Steve Siebert and Andy McCann, got together their frayed and rusty outfits, exchanged the hard-earned money each had toiled for during the winter over the counter of the Three Star for supplies and loaded each his burro till the sad-eyed little brutes almost buckled under the weight of flour, beans, salt pork, coffee, and prospectors' tools.

Each ancient then mounted his moth-eaten cayuse, jerked the towline of his objecting burro, and proceeded out of town, Steve making the ford through the East Fork, while Andy

plodded through the shallows of the West Fork, both bound down the canyon for the desert country which they hated with an unbelievably bitter hatred, yet which dragged the old men back to its grim barrens as soon as the spring freshets cleared the canyon and gulches of winter's accumulation of snow.

Canyon Pass was no beauty spot over which an artist might rave; nor was the landscape surrounding it even passably attractive to the eye. Man, in delving for nature's treasures in the rocky headlands and along the benches of the East and West Forks, had marred past redemption what little beauty of form and color the rugged wedge of land at the head of the canyon once possessed.

But on this morning there was a soft blur of blue haze padding the sharp outlines of the canyon walls and brooding over the higher hills. The streams flowing on either side of the town crooned instead of foaming boisterously in their beds, and where they joined to make Runaway River, which followed the bed of the canyon southerly, the thunder of their waters seemed hushed.

It was not yet sunrise, but a pearl-gray radiance flooded the town and canyon as far south as one could see. Lights wavered drunkenly behind the window-panes of the all-night saloons and dance halls. This enticing spring morning followed the dregs of another riotous night in Canyon Pass.

The day before had been pay day at the Eureka Washings and the Oreode Company's diggings and at most of the major mining prospects in the vicinity. At noon the miners and other workmen

had knocked off work, drawn their pay, and, cleaned up and dressed in holiday attire, had sought the amusement places of the town. From dark till dawn they had as usual torn the town wide open like a paper sack, to quote Bill Judson, as he stood in the doorway of his store and watched the two old desert rats leaving the dulling merriment and drunkenness behind them as they weaved their several ways out of sight on either bank of Runaway River.

"They've been doing this for twenty years," added Judson, pointing with his pipe stem to the disappearing prospectors. "An' to my knowledge and belief ain't neither of 'em struck a smell of paying color in all that time."

"That so?" returned Smithy, his gangling clerk, coming outside to stretch and yawn. Smithy had the look of a young man who was still in growth and he needed, as Judson said, "all outdoors to stretch in."

"Say! What's the matter with them two old sour doughs? All the time they was buyin' that stuff they never spoke a word to each other, and if one of 'em caught a look from t'other he snarled like a wild tagger! They'd have showed their teeth – both of 'em – if they'd had any left but stubs."

"Ain't spoke, to my knowledge," said the storekeeper, "Steve and Andy ain't, in all of these twenty years. 'Fore that they was as thick as hasty puddin' an' throwed in together ev'ry spring – even steven – when they went prospecting; comin' back yere to Canyon Pass in the fall as happy as a bride and groom returning

from the honeymoon."

"What happened? What made 'em so sore on each other?" asked Smithy.

"Don't know. Never did know. Never could find out. 'Twas right after the big slide. You've heard tell o' that, even if you ain't been here six months?"

"A thousand times," returned Smithy in a bored tone.

"Well, Steve and Andy was perky as blackbirds in a strawyard that spring. 'Twas twenty years back. They hid out their camp somewhere near town that time. I always figgered they had a good prospect below there, in the canyon. 'Twas even reported that they took a sample of the right stuff to the assayer's office. But they was as close mouthed as twin clams in the last stages of hydrophoby.

"Then come the slide. Most of us that was yere then didn't think of much for a week or two but whether Canyon Pass was goin' to be left on the map or not. Our stake was yere, and the slide acted like a stopper in Runaway River – like to plugged the old canyon for fair.

"Howsumever, when the channel was more or less clear again and we could come down off the roofs of our shacks, Steve and Andy showed up, but from different directions, as sore at each other as two carbuncles, and they ain't never been knowed to speak to one another since. Won't even drink at the same bar. The only time they come into the Three Star together is the morning they pull stakes for the desert."

Smithy yawned again. Steve Siebert and Andy McCann had now disappeared beyond outcropping warts of rock at the foot of the canyon walls.

Down the street from the direction of the mining shafts sunk in the heights behind the town strode a well-proportioned young man whose bootsoles rang on the patches of earth out of which the frost had not yet thawed. He was cleanly shaved and clean-looking, and stood more than six feet tall, with an air of frank assertiveness even in his carriage. He owned a high color under the wind-tan of his countenance, sandy hair, and brown eyes with golden flecks in them when he was amused or when he was angry.

And Joe Hurley was usually swayed by one emotion or the other. Now he appeared to be amused as he came abreast of the Three Star Grocery.

"What's got you and Smithy up so early, Bill?" he asked.

"Dad burn it, Joe! Don't you know spring has came?"

"Pshaw! I thought I heard a tree-frog last night. So Steve Siebert and Andy McCann have lit out same as usual? We shall miss Steve at the Great Hope."

"Surest thing you know, Joe. They're on their way. And just as sociable as usual." Joe Hurley's eyes flashed with the gleam of fun that made him beloved of all who did not hate him. But before he could utter a comment the storekeeper added: "Wasn't you in to the Grub Stake to-night?"

Hurley wheeled to frown suddenly at the flickering lamps of

Boss Tolley's gambling hall and cabaret almost directly across the street. The quick change of emotion reflected in his face betrayed the character of the man. Hurley was given to sudden impulses, usually spurred by the primal passions. Yet he was a strong man, too, and kept the lid on those passions if he desired.

"Nell's got some new songs," went on Judson slyly. "Right cute they are. She certainly is some songbird, Joe. Dad burn it! She's too good for those roughnecks."

Hurley nodded slowly but did not show Judson his face at once, still watching the pale lights of the honkytonk fighting the advancing glow of the dawn. The storekeeper had not lived sixty-five years – thirty years of them right here in Canyon Pass – without gaining a pretty keen insight into human nature. He did not have to see that scowl on Joe Hurley's face. He knew what Joe was ruminating.

"And 'tain't only roughnecks that our Nell's too good for," pursued Judson finally. "The pizenest snakes, they tell me, is the prettiest. An' kids are tickled to look at pretties. Nell's only a kid after all."

"You're right, Bill!" ejaculated the mine owner with a snap of his jaws and his eyes sparking from no good humor.

He glanced balefully at the Grub Stake, his face set grimly, almost threatening.

There were fitful strains of music from within and still some clatter of feet and voices. Boss Tolley made it his boast that his show continued until the last reveler left.

The Grub Stake was a sprawling, T-shaped structure with the long bar and gaming tables in the shank of the T, the dance hall and stage at the rear. Beside the main entrance was the sign: "Check Your Guns and Spurs Here," and at the short counter presided a young woman in a sleeveless silk jersey and kneelength satin skirt, who dealt out brass checks and airy persiflage indiscriminately.

The rosewood bar, behind which Boss Tolley and his three barmen sweated at the height of the revelry, had cost a fortune to freight over the trail to Canyon Pass. The gaudy oil painting which hung back of the bar, to hear Boss Tolley tell it, had cost him a second fortune.

Dick Beckworth, who was Tolley's chief dealer at the tables of chance, was a privileged character. He was supposed to be a "killer" with the ladies. He dressed his long curls and heavy black mustache as carefully as he did his sleek and slender person. Cream-colored flannel shirt, a flowing tie, velvet jacket and broadcloth trousers tucked into patent-leather boots, and a Mexican sombrero heavy with silver cord to top this ensemble, he made a picture to rival the squalid painting over the bar.

The night had been strenuous at the tables, but the gambling fever had now abated. Dick lolled gracefully in the armchair at his empty table with half-closed eyes, smoking a cigarette. Around a table near the archway between the barroom and the hall was a noisy group of miners, but they were no longer playing. Their glasses had just been refilled at the bar.

The rasping chords of a hard-working male quartette beyond the archway repeated a syncopated rhythm for the entertainment of the patrons of the tables.

From beneath the arch into the barroom stepped suddenly an astonishingly brilliant figure – a figure engraved as sharply as a cameo against the blue mist of tobacco smoke that now drifted in a thin haze throughout the barnlike place. The group of miners about the first table roared a greeting.

"Nell! Nell Blossom! The blossom of Canyon Pass!"

"Give us a song of your own, Nellie!" added one burly miner, swaying from his seat toward her, a maudlin smile on his face.

The girl's smiling expression changed swiftly to one of flaring fury. She swept past the miners and headed straight for Dick Beckworth, who had watched the incident with a little smile flickering about his lips. The girl's face was still ablaze. She needed no rouge or lipstick in any case to lend it color.

"Dick," she said tensely, "I hate this place!"

"I've already told you I hate to see you in it," he rejoined with apparent frankness. "Singing and dancing for these roughnecks is far beneath you."

The flame of her anger gradually waned as she gazed down into his face. His usual calmness was somewhat ruffled by her near presence. Nell Blossom held a certain influence over him that "Dick the Devil" – his boasted cognomen among his admirers – was loath to acknowledge.

But she was sweet enough and pretty enough as she stood there

to stir the most placid heart. Even the tawdry costume she wore could not detract from her charm, the red silk blouse with the V-shaped cut at the neck, belted velvet skirt to the tops of tiny riding-boots on tiny feet, her clustering curls of a golden-brown color crowned by a "cowgirl" hat – all worn as a costume in which to sing "Pony Boy," and "Cheyenne," which popular hits had finally reached Canyon Pass.

"I hate this place, Dick," she said again, now wearily dropping into a chair at his elbow.

Nell Blossom possessed one of those rare complexions that remind one of nothing so much as a ripe Alberta peach. The crimson of her cheeks was vivid, but tinted away into the creaminess of her satin skin. Her lips were not too red. Her nose was a nose to be proud of without being large. Her ears were visible and like the blossoms of the dogwood tree in texture and coloring.

"You know how I feel, Nell," said Dick, with a calm that belied his heartbeats. "I'm sick of all this, too." He gestured gracefully with the hand that held his cigarette. A jewel sparkled on that hand. "Canyon Pass is a dirty hole. If you say the word we'll get out of it. I've made a good stake. My rake-off has given me a full poke at last. We'll go away from here, and I'll get into some paying business. I'll never turn a card again – for Boss Tolley or any other man. I mean it!"

The girl was looking straight into his eyes. He met that searching gaze as inscrutably as he had learned to endure the

scrutiny of his opponent at the poker table.

"Do you mean it, Dick?"

"Just that." He nodded. "As I told you yesterday, say the word and we'll light out – now – this morning. You don't know much about the world outside of Canyon Pass, Nell, but I'll show it to you. And I love you – love you like the devil!"

There was a force in his final phrase, although he did not stir in his chair, that made her tremble. A vivid flush slowly dyed her cheeks and throat. It passed, to leave her blue eyes humid and her lips smiling.

"If you don't believe me – "

"I do," she interrupted. "I believed you yesterday. My saddlebags are all packed, Dick, and I'm ready just whenever you are."

A sudden electric tremor passed through the man's nerves. He veiled his eyes for a moment that she might not see what flared into them. He rose with her.

"Get into your riding clothes and we'll start. I'll meet you with my horse in half an hour," he said almost sternly.

But his eyes now answered her look of gratefulness and adoration with what she thought was a reflection of her own chaste desire.

So it came about that two other riders left Canyon Pass on this spring morning while the sun still lingered abed, and, crossing the West Fork an hour behind Andy McCann, unlike him chose the wagon-track to the summit of the canyon wall on that side

of Runaway River.

"Which way do we go, Dick? To Crescent City?"

"South," he returned, without looking at her.

"We-ell. Lamberton is further but there's a parson there, too. That's another reason why I've come to hate Canyon Pass. It isn't decent like other towns – or even up-to-date. It never had a church or a parson. It's got everything else – saloons, gambling halls, honkytonks, stores, a bank, a hotel, a stamp mill, an express office, even a school, such as it is. But it's heathen – plumb heathen, Dick."

He smiled at her then, rather a superior smile. "It's not the only mining town that answers your description."

"I know it," Nell rejoined. "But I want to see the other kind of towns. Mother Tubbs says Canyon Pass ain't got no heart, and she's right. She says she can't even tell when Sunday comes, only that Sam always comes home drunk that day. This is Sunday, Dick. It's a good day on which to begin a new life."

"Oh, life's all right," the gambler said easily. "Take it as you find it, Nell."

They came up into the sunlight on the rim of the canyon wall. Once on the level trail their horses broke into a canter. They could look down at certain points into the sink of the canyon where Runaway River foamed in its narrow channel. They spied Steve Siebert with his outfit traveling on the river trail. McCann, of course, they could not see, for the canyon wall on this side was almost sheer.

Ahead, as they rode on, was the Overhang – that monstrous projection capping the scarp of the cliff, left ages ago when the canyon was roughed out by the glacial floods to threaten the pass below with utter extinction if its bulk ever fell. Parts of it had fallen some twenty years previous. This was the "big slide" which had for a time choked the river channel with soil and rubble and threatened to flood out Canyon Pass.

The scar on the steep slope of the west wall down which that slide had fallen was now masked by a hardy growth of scrubby trees and brush. But the two old prospectors never passed the place, either going out of or returning to Canyon Pass, without keenly studying the scar.

Halfway up the height had been a shelf with a hollow behind it – an ideal spot for a secret camp, for it could be observed neither from the trail on the opposite side of the river nor from the rim of the west wall of the canyon. Buried as this shelf had been by the slide, Steve Siebert and Andy McCann now marked the spot – and what it hid – and then glanced sardonically at each other across the foaming river. They snarled at each other like a pair of toothless old wolves. The fruit of their joint toil that lay behind that slide, one could not reach, and the other could not compass. The secret had festered in their hearts and poisoned the very souls of the two ancients for these twenty years.

Above, the two in the plane of sunshine and freer air rode along the brink of the Overhang.

"Say!" Dick said jerkily. "Let's not go to Lamberton – not

direct."

"What?"

There was a sharp note in her voice. She turned in her saddle to face him. Her gaze narrowed. Was there after all a doubt in the very depths of Nell's soul about the man?

"I know a fine place – better hotel than at Lamberton – really a nice place to stop. We can reach it before night. Hoskins. You know?"

He still spoke nervously. Nell's gaze no more left his face. She said evenly, as though her mind was quite placid again:

"There's no parson at Hoskins, either."

He darted her another side-glance. How was she taking it? Was she, after all, going to be "sensible?" Nell was seventeen, but a woman grown.

"Shucks, honey," Dick said, putting out a hand to touch her for the first time. "We'll ride on and find a parson later. We're in no rush. We're out for a grand, good time – "

She pulled her horse across the path with a fierce jerk of the bridle-rein, and so escaped the defilement of his touch. Her right hand clutched the handle of her quirt, the knuckles bone-white.

"Do you mean – you won't marry me?"

Dick smiled his most disarming smile, his brown eyes even twinkled. That frank and humorous look was what had first won his advantage with Nell Blossom.

"Shucks, honey," he drawled again. "Why so serious? Don't worry about that. I'm free to confess I'm not a marrying man.

Seen too much trouble for both parties when they are tied to one another with any silly string of the law. It's love that will hold us together."

"That's heathen, Dick!" she exclaimed hotly. "Just as heathen as Canyon Pass."

"Nonsense!" He laughed. "You're just as safe with me, whether we're married or not."

Which might have been quite true, but Nell stared at him, her expression as inscrutable as his own when he worked behind the green table. Dick the Devil was a shrewd gambler, but Nell Blossom had played poker herself ever since she could read the pips on the cards. And she had been fighting her own battles in harsh environment and against men almost from the same tender age. Her cold rage now sprang from the fact that he should so mistake her character.

"Come on, honey!" he said coaxingly.

The quirt came up slowly; then it sang through the air.

"You dog, you! Dick the Devil is your true name! And I thought – "

The man, shouting an oath, dragged his mount backward. The lash descended, missed his handsome face, but seared the horse across its neck.

Squealing, the animal leaped to one side – to the verge of the out-thrust lip of the Overhang. The gambler wheeled him again, seeking to save himself.

"Do you want to murder me – you wildcat!" he cried angrily.

There was a sudden crack, like the slapping of one board upon another. Between the plunging horse and the girl a gap yawned in the earth. Frost, the early rains, or perhaps time itself, had weakened this bit of the Overhang. A patch no larger than a good-sized dining table broke away and slid outward.

The scrambling, wild-eyed horse and the shrieking, white-faced man disappeared with it. The girl held in her own mount with a firm hand. The flare of insane anger faded from her blue eyes. But her countenance settled into a harsh and unlovely expression.

Yet she slipped down from her saddle, quieted her horse with a word, and stepped recklessly to the crumbling edge, trying to see down the face of the cliff.

She could mark no trace of horse or rider. She could no longer hear the rumble of the falling débris. An icy horror gripped her. He was gone!

Finally she drew back from the brink. She looked about at the landscape, but there was not a human being to be seen. She slowly mounted her horse again.

Something besides a terrible disaster had happened here at the brink of the Overhang. Something had happened to Nell Blossom so great, so soul-racking, that she would never be altogether the same girl again. It is a dreadful thing for one so young to find its love-idol shattered.

After a little Nell started her mount, but she did not ride back toward Canyon Pass.

CHAPTER II – DISCONTENT AT DITSON CORNERS

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt read twice these closing words of the long letter.

> … and so, my dear Willie, to use your own way of expressing it, I am steering straight for the devil – and enjoying the trip immensely.
>
> Wishing you were with me, Willie, I am, even after your rather bitter castigation,
>
> *Sincerely your friend,*
> *JOE HURLEY.*

He laid the missive on his desk with a full-bosomed sigh. Nor was that sigh wholly because of the reprobate Joe. Joe's flowers of speech did not much ruffle the parson's spirit.

Joe Hurley might be gay, irresponsible, reckless, even downright wicked; but he never could fail to be kind. Two years of close contact with the blithe Westerner – those final two years at college before Hunt went to the divinity school – had assured the latter that Joe Hurley owned a heart of gold. The gold might be tarnished, but it was true metal nevertheless.

Hunt's mental picture of his college friend, and never had scholastic friendship been more astounding, could not include any great blemish of later-developed character. It was five years

since they had seen each other. Those five years could not have made of Joe Hurley the "roughneck" that he intimated he had become. That was Joe's penchant for painting with a wide brush.

The reputation the Westerner had left behind him at college when he was requested by a horrified governing board to depart for the sake of the general welfare of the undergraduate body, revealed Joe's character unequivocally.

When Joe had been "bounced" by the faculty he had celebrated the occasion by giving a farewell banquet at one of the shadiest hotels in the college town, to the wildest crowd of students he could get together. On his own part Joe had dressed in full cowboy regalia, and as the apex of the evening's entertainment he had "shot up" the banquet room, paying the bill for damages the next morning with a cheerful smile.

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt remembered the occasion now with a little shiver of apprehension. Suppose the people of Ditson Corners should ever learn that he, their pastor, had been one of that company who had helped Joe Hurley celebrate his dismissal from scholastic halls!

Joe's father, a cattleman, had left him a considerable fortune. Joe had invested much of it in a certain mining claim called the Great Hope, for the young fellow had been keen enough to see that the day of the small cattleman was gone. The mine was paying a comfortable income with the promise of doing more than that in the future, so Joe wrote. But he wrote more – much more that was exceedingly interesting to Hunt in his present

discontented state of mind.

He picked up the letter again to re-read a part of the third page, this broken sentence first meeting his envious eye:

> … and if ever there was a peach, she surely is one, Willie. Golden-brown hair, big blue eyes, and a voice – Say! No songbird ever had anything on Nell. If you once saw her and heard her sing, you'd go crazy about her, old sobersides. All Canyon Pass – I mean the men-folks – are at her feet again, now she has returned to town and is singing in Colorado Brown's cabaret. Sounds sort of devilish and horrid, doesn't it, Willie? Believe me, Nell Blossom is some girl. But wild – say! You can't get near her. She's got a laugh that plays the deuce with a man's heart strings – accelerates the pit-a-pat of the cardiac nerve to top-notch and then some! She's got us all on her string, from gray-bearded sour doughs to the half-grown grocery clerk at the Three Star, who would commit suicide to-morrow at her behest – believe me!
>
> But no man, Willie, has seemed yet to put the come hither on Nell Blossom. She just won't be led, coaxed, or driven. She's as hard as molded glass. A man-hater, if ever you heard of one. With all your famed powers of persuasion, reverend, I'd like to make a wager that you couldn't mold our Nell into a pattern of the New England virtues, such as your own prim little sister has become by this time, I've no doubt. No insult to Miss Betty intended, Willie. But our Nell – well, you'd have your hands full in trying to make her do a thing that she did not want to do.

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was stung here, not by the

good-natured raillery aimed at his own traits of character by his old college mate. But why had Joe gone out of his way to drag Betty's name into it? It seemed to be a mild slur upon his sister's character, and Hunt had an uneasy feeling that he ought to resent it.

Betty had met Joe Hurley but once – to Hunt's knowledge. It was an occasion when she had stopped at the college town on her way home from boarding school. Hunt had met her at the station, and Joe had shown up, too. The three of them had sought a restaurant where they ate, and Betty had chattered like – well, just as a girl of her age and fresh from the excitement of boarding school would chatter. When her first fear of the big Westerner had worn off she had usurped the conversation almost completely. Hunt had often thought since that Joe Hurley was quite attracted by his lively sister.

But how did Joe know that Betty had changed so?

That his sister was not the same cheerful, brisk, chatterbox of a girl she had been when Joe met her, Hunt quite well knew. And the change puzzled him.

He visualized their Aunt Prudence Mason, who had lived all her long life in the rut of New England spinsterhood, molding more or less the characters of the orphaned brother and sister left at an early age to her sole care. Was Betty, here in the straitened environment of Ditson Corners, doomed to jog along the well-beaten track Aunt Prudence had followed? The brother shuddered as he thought of it.

He glanced at Joe's letter once more. A golden-haired, blue-eyed girl who really sang – not shrieked as did Miss Pelter whose top notes in the church choir rasped Hunt's nerves like a cross-cut saw dragged through a pine knot.

There was always a quarrel of some kind in that choir – the bickerings and heart-burnings of his volunteer church choir were perennial.

Then, there was the feud over the Ditson pew – which branch of the influential Ditson family should hold the chief seats in the church. Hunt could not satisfy everybody. There was still a clique, even after his two years' pastorate, who let it be frankly known that they had desired to call Bardell, instead of him, to the pulpit of the First Church.

These continued faultfindings and disputes were getting on Hunt's nerves. And they must be affecting Betty – influencing her more than he had heretofore considered.

This letter from Joe Hurley had come at a moment when Hunt was desperately and completely out of tune with his environment. He had brought to his first pastorate a modicum of enthusiasm which, during the first year, had expanded into an earnest and purposeful determination to do his duty as he saw it and to carry his congregation in spirit to the heights he would achieve.

He – and they – had risen to a certain apex of spiritual experience through the first months of his earnest endeavor, and then the cogs had begun to slip. Suddenly Willett Ford Hunt's castles toppled and collapsed about him. He found himself,

half stunned, wholly mazed, wallowing in the débris of his first church row, the renewed war over the Ditson pew.

Hunt had extricated himself from this cataclysm with difficulty, almost like a man lifting himself off the earth by his bootstraps. The Ditson feud was by no means at an end even now, and it never would be ended as long as two Ditsons of different branches of the family remained alive. Hunt had sought to renew his own and his congregation's spiritual life. It was then and not until then that he discovered the fire was out.

Oh, for a church where one might preach as one pleased, so long as one followed the spiritual instincts aroused by right living and a true desire to help one's fellow men! That is what Hunt said he longed for.

But actually what he longed for is what perhaps we all long for whether we know it or not – appreciation. Not fulsome praise, not a mawkishly sentimental fawning flattery. He desired to feel that the understanding heart of the community apprehended what he wished to do and respected his effort though he might fall short of the goal.

There seemed to be no heart – understanding or otherwise – in Ditson Corners. Why! A wild Western mining camp, such as Joe said Canyon Pass was, could be no more ungrateful a soil to cultivate than this case-hardened, hide-bound, self-centered and utterly uncharitable Berkshire community.

The thought – not even audibly expressed – nevertheless shocked Hunt.

Hunt reached for the letter again. What had Joe said about there being a field for religious endeavor in Canyon Pass? It was along in the first part of the screed, and when he had found it he read:

> Joshing aside, Willie, I believe you might dig down to the very heart of Canyon Pass – and I believe it has a heart. You were such a devil of a fellow for getting at the tap-root of a subject. If anybody can electrify the moral fiber of Canyon Pass – as some of them say I have the business part – it will be a man like you. You could do the "Lazarus, arise!" stunt if anybody could – make the composite moral man of Canyon Pass get up, put on a boiled shirt, and go forth a decent citizen. And believe me, the composite figure of the moral man here sadly needs such an awakening.

There was something that gripped Hunt in the rough and ready diction of this letter – something that aroused his imagination. It brought to his mind, too, a picture of Joe himself – a picture of both his physical and his mental proportions.

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was no pigmy himself, nor did he lack courage and vigor. He was good to look upon, dark without being sallow, crowned with a thick brush of dull black hair – there were some brown lights in it – possessing good features, keen gray eyes, broad shoulders, a hundred and eighty pounds of gristle and flesh on a perfect bony structure, and could look over a six-barred gate before he vaulted it. He had not allowed his spiritual experiences, neither rising nor falling, to

interfere with his gymnastics or his daily walk.

But Joe Hurley topped Hunt by two inches, was broader, hardier, a wholly out-of-door man. Joe was typically of the West and the wilderness. He knew the open places and the tall timber, the mountains and the canyons, the boisterous waters of cascade and rock-hemmed river. He was such an entirely different being from Hunt that the latter had often wondered why the Westerner had made such a chum and confidant of him during those two years at college.

And now the pastor of Ditson Corners' First Church realized that Joe Hurley had something that he wanted. He wished he was with Joe, out there in that raw country. He felt that he could get nearer to mankind out there and perhaps – he said it reverently – nearer to the God he humbly desired to serve. He thought of Betty.

"She needs a change as much as I do. How does Joe guess that she is becoming exactly a prim, repressed, narrow-thinking woman, and a Martha cumbered by many cares? She needs her chance as much as I need mine."

He heard Betty's step on the porch, and in a moment she entered the study, her hands full of those grateful mid-spring flowers, the lily of the valley.

Betty Hunt was not a fragile girl, but she did not possess much of that embonpoint the Greeks considered so necessary to beauty of figure. Nor was she angular. At least, her grace of carriage and credibly tailored frock masked any lack of flesh.

Slim hands she had, too, – beautiful hands, very white and with only a faint tracery of blue veins upon them. Really, they were a musician's hands – pliable, light of touch, but strong. The deftness with which they arranged the flowers suggested that she did not need vision to aid in the task.

Therefore she kept her gaze on Hunt. He felt it, turned, and smiled up at her. He shook the leaves of the letter in his hand.

"Bet," he said, "I've got another letter from Joe Hurley."

Betty's countenance changed in a flash.

"Oh! That Westerner?"

There was more than disapproval in her tone. She looked away from him quickly. Her own gray eyes filmed. A shocked, almost terrified expression seemed to stiffen all her face. But Hunt did not see this.

"There is no use talking, Bet," her brother pursued in an argumentative way, thoughtfully staring at the letter again. "There is no use talking. Joe has it right. We are vegetating here. Most people in towns like this, here in the East, might honestly be classified among the *flora* rather than the *fauna*. We're like rows of cabbages in a kitchen garden."

"Why, Ford!"

He grinned up at her – a suddenly recalled grimace of his boyhood.

"There speaks the cabbage, Bet! We're all alike – or most of us are. Here in the old Commonwealth I mean. We're afraid to step aside from the rutted path, to accept a new idea; really afraid

to be and live out each his own individuality.

"Ah! Out in this place Joe writes about – "

He fingered the sheets of the letter again. She watched with the slow fading of all animation from her face – just as though a veil were drawn across it by invisible fingers. Her expression was not so much one of disapproval – her eyes held something entirely different in their depths. Was it fear?

"This Canyon Pass is a real field for a man's efforts," burst out Hunt with sudden exasperation. "I tell you, Bet, I feel as though my usefulness here had evaporated. I haven't a thing in common with these people. Carping criticism and little else confronts me whichever way I turn."

"You – you are nervous, Ford."

"Nerves! What right has a man like me with nerves?" he demanded hotly.

"But, Ford – your work here?"

"Is a failure. Oh, yes. I can see better than you do, Bet – more clearly – that I have lost my grip on these people."

"Surely there are other churches in the East that would welcome a man of your talents."

"Aye! Another little hard-baked community in which I shall find exactly the elements that have made my pastorate here a failure."

"You are not a failure!" she cried loyally.

"That's nice of you, Bet. You are a mighty good sister. But I am letting you in for a share of the very difficulties that would

soon put gray in my hair and a stone in my bosom instead of a heart."

"Oh, Ford!"

"Out there – in some place like this Joe writes about – would be a new and unplowed field. A place where a man could develop – grow, not vegetate."

"But – but must it necessarily be the West, Ford? I am not fond of the West."

"You've never seen it."

"I'm not fond of Western people."

He looked at her with a dawning smile. "You're afraid of them, Bet."

"Yes. I am afraid of them," whispered his sister, turning her face away from his gaze. "They are not our kind, Ford."

"That's exactly it," he cried, smiting the desk with the flat of his palm. "We need to get out into the world, among people who are just as different from 'our kind,' as you term them, as possible. There we can expand. Out in Canyon Pass. I believe I could be a real help to that community. What is it Joe says?" He glanced again at the letter before him. "Yes! I might dig down to the very heart of Canyon Pass. Ditson Corners has merely a pumping station to circulate the blood of the community, patterned after the one at the reservoir on Knob Hill."

She did not speak again. When Hunt looked around she had stolen from the room.

"Poor Bet!" he muttered. "The idea of change alarms her as

it might have alarmed Aunt Prudence. Joe Hurley is right – he's right beyond a doubt!"

CHAPTER III – A SHADOW THROWN BEFORE

A rider had his choice in journeying to Canyon Pass from a southerly direction – say from Lamberton, which lies between the railroad and the desert – of following the river trail to be deafened by the boisterous voice of the flood, or of climbing to the high lands and there jogging along the wagon track which finally dipped down the steeps to the ford of the West Fork and so into the mining town.

Spring was drifting into the background of the year. The cottonwood leaves were the size of squirrel ears. The new fronds of the piñon had expanded to full size and now their needles quivered in the heat of the almost summer-like day. Joe Hurley, sitting his heavy-haunched bay, giving as easily to the animal's paces as a sack of meal, followed the wagon track rather than the river trail and so came to that fork where wheel-ruts from a westerly direction joined the road along the brink of the canyon wall.

A cream-colored pony came cantering along the trail from Hoskins, its rider as gaily dressed as a Mexican vaquero – a splotch of color against the background of the evergreens almost startling to his vision. But it was the identity of this rider that invigorated the tone of the mining man's reflections.

"Nell Blossom! The only sure-enough cure for ophthalmia! Am I going to have the pleasure of being your escort back to Canyon Pass? It will sure do me proud. The Passonians are honing for you, Nell."

"I'm going back to the Pass – yes, Mr. Hurley," she said, pulling down her pony to the more sedate pace of his big bay.

"Where you been since you left us all in the lurch? There was almost a riot at the Grub Stake when Tolley found out you had gone."

"Boss Tolley hasn't got anything on me," she said defensively. "I'd never sing there again, anyway."

"Somebody said you'd lit out for the desert with Steve Siebert and Andy McCann," and he chuckled. "They started the same day you vamoosed."

"I might just as well have gone with those old desert rats. Pocket hunting couldn't be much worse than Hoskins."

"Great saltpeter! What took you to Hoskins?" exclaimed Hurley. "Where's your local pride? If you weren't born at Canyon Pass, you've lived there most of your life. You shouldn't encourage a dump like Hoskins to believe for a moment that it has greater attractions than the Pass."

"If I thought it might be more attractive, I learned better," she said shortly.

"Mother Tubbs got a letter from you, but she wouldn't tell us where you were."

"No," Nell said. "I didn't want the boys riding over there and

starting a roughhouse at the Tin Can Saloon."

"Great saltpeter!" exclaimed Hurley again. "You don't mean to say you been caroling your roundelays in *that* place?"

"A girl has to work somewhere, and I was sick to death of the Grub Stake."

"Boss Tolley is no pleasant citizen and his joint is no sweet-scented garden spot, I admit," Hurley agreed. "Personally I'd like to see Tolley run out of town and the Grub Stake eliminated. But Colorado Brown has opened a new place and is going to run it right – so he says."

"That's what is bringing me back," Nell confessed. "He got word to me by Mother Tubbs, and he made me a better offer than Tolley ever would. But I expect one cabaret is about like another in these roughneck towns."

"I don't know about that," the man said defensively. "We mean to try to clean up Canyon Pass. The boys have got to have amusement. Colorado Brown is a white man, and, if he gets the backing of the better element, he can give a good show and sell better hootch and better grub than ever Boss Tolley dared to."

"Hootch is hootch," Nell interrupted. "It's all bad. There's nothing good about a rotten egg, Mr. Hurley. And the men's money is wasted in all those places – plumb wasted!"

He had been watching her closely as they talked. He had been watching Nell closely, off and on, for several years. Like many of the other young and unattached men of Canyon Pass, Joe Hurley had at one time attempted to storm the fortress of Nell Blossom's

heart. Finally he had become convinced that the girl was not for him.

Joe Hurley neither wore his heart on his sleeve nor was he unwise enough to anger Nell by forcing his attentions beyond that barrier she had raised between them. His were merely the objections of any clean-minded man when he had seen her yielding to the machinations of Dick the Devil. Joe knew the gambler's kind.

He had felt no little anxiety when, with the usual spring exodus of the two old desert rats, Steve Siebert and Andy McCann, Nell and Dick Beckworth had likewise disappeared from the Grub Stake. Dick, of course, had settled with Boss Tolley; he intimated that he was starting north for the railroad at Crescent City. The hour had been so early that nobody else had chanced to see the gambler and the girl ride away. Nell was missed later, and all the right thinking men of the town, although they said little, feared the worst for Nell Blossom.

Nell had displayed at the last some little interest in Dick the Devil. The other girls at the Grub Stake gossiped about it.

Then came Mother Tubbs with a bona-fide letter from the girl to dam the flood of gossip. Nell was working as usual in a cabaret. She had left Boss Tolley because she could not stand him any longer. She was bitter about the Grub Stake and its proprietor. And not a word in the letter about Dick Beckworth. It was plain, even to the most suspicious, that Dick had not gone with her after all.

These few facts colored Joe Hurley's thoughts as they rode along the track. What colored Nell's?

When the sprightly talk lapsed between them, the girl's face fell into unhappy lines. She who had been as blithe as a field lark all her life was showing to Joe Hurley for the first time a most unnatural soberness of spirit. Her eyes, their gaze fixed straight ahead, were filmed with remoteness that his friendly glance could not penetrate.

Something had changed Nell Blossom. She was no longer the happy-go-lucky girl she had been heretofore. He wondered if, after all, her affair with Dick Beckworth was serious.

They skirted the Overhang, their horses now at a canter. Nell suddenly pulled in her mount at a place where a patch along the brink of the treacherous cap had recently crumbled.

"Looks as if there might have been a small slide," observed Hurley cheerfully.

"Was – was anybody hurt?"

"Reckon not. Just about where the big slide was years ago. There are always bits dropping down this cliff. I tell 'em there's bound to be another landslip some time that will play hob with Runaway River and maybe flood out the town again. It's like living over a volcano."

Nell still looked back at the broken edge of the cliff. "Nobody missing, then? Nobody – er – left town?"

He laughed. "Nobody but you and old Steve and Andy McCann. Those old desert rats lit out the same morning you left

town. Hold on! I don't know as you know it; but Dick Beckworth went about that time. He's gone to Denver, so Tolley says, to deal faro at a big place there."

He could not see the girl's face. As far as he knew the statement made no impression upon her. They jogged on practically in silence until they came to the point where the wagon-track plunged steeply to the ford of the West Fork, and from which spot the squalid town was first visible.

"Ugh!" Nell shuddered and glanced at Joe again. "It is such an ugly place."

"Where's your civic pride, Nell?" and the other chuckled.

"What is there to be proud of?" was her sharp demand.

"It's a money-making town."

"Money!"

"Quite a necessary evil, that same money," he rejoined. "Gold is a good foundation to build a town upon. Canyon Pass has 'got a future in front of it,' as the feller said. Business is booming. Bank deposits are increasing. Three families have bought piano-players, and there are at least a dozen talking machines in town – besides the female citizens," and he laughed again.

"All that?" in a sneering tone. "Still, the bulk of the wages from the mines and washings are spent for drink and in gambling. The increase in bank deposits I bet are made by the merchants and honkytonk keepers, Mr. Hurley. Canyon Pass is prosperous – yes. But at the expense of everything decent and everybody's decency. Mother Tubbs has got it right. Canyon Pass hasn't got

a heart."

"Oh – heart!"

"Yes, heart. There's neither law nor gospel, she says. Only such law as is enforced at the muzzle of the sheriff's gun. And as far as religion goes – when was there ever a parson in Canyon Pass?"

"They're rare birds, I admit. But you needn't blame me, Nell."

"I do blame you!" she exclaimed fiercely. "You're at fault – you, and Slickpenny Norris who runs the bank, and Bill Judson of the Three Star, and the manager of the Oreode Company, and the other more influential men. It is your fault that there isn't a church and other civilized things in Canyon Pass."

"Great saltpeter, Nell! You're not wailing for a Sunday School and a sky pilot?"

"Me? I reckon not!" She almost spat out the scornful denial. "I'm just telling you what your old Canyon Pass is. It's a back number. But I'm free to confess if a parson and a crew of psalm-singing tenderfoots came here, I'd like enough pull my freight again – and that time for keeps! Even Hoskins would be more endurable."

At this outburst Joe Hurley broke into laughter. Nell Blossom was paradoxical – had always been.

And yet, what Nell had said about the shortcomings of Canyon Pass stuck in Joe Hurley's mind. Within a few days the thought, fermenting within him, resulted in that letter which had so interested – not to say excited – the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt in far-away Ditson Corners.

CHAPTER IV – PHILOSOPHY BOUND IN HOMESPUN

"No, there ain't no news – no news a-tall," declared Mrs. Sam Tubbs, comfortably rocking. "Nothing ever happens in Canyon Pass. For a right busy town on its main street, there's less happens in the back alleys than in any camp I ever seen – and I seen a-plenty.

"It's in the back alleys o' life, Nell, that the interesting things happen. Folks buy and sell, and argue and scheme, and otherwise play the fool out on the main streets. But in the alleys babies is born, and people die, and boys and gals make love and marry. Them's the re'lly interesting things in life."

"Ugh! Love and marriage! They are the biggest fool things the world knows anything about."

Mother Tubbs chuckled. It was an unctuous chuckle. It shook her great body like a violent explosion in a jelly-bag and made the wide-armed rocking-chair she sat in creak.

"Sho!" she said. "I've heard seventeen-year-old gals say as much 'fore now, who dandled their second young-un on their knee 'fore they was twenty. The things we're least sure of in this world is love and marriage. Lightning ain't nothin' to 'em – nothin'!

"Now, there's Mr. Joe Hurley – "

Nell started, turned on the top step of the Tubbs' back porch, and looked searchingly at the old woman with a frown on her brow.

"Now, there's Mr. Joe Hurley," pursued Mother Tubbs placidly. "There ain't a thing the matter with that man but that he needs a wife."

"Why doesn't he take one, then?" demanded Nell wickedly. "There are plenty of them around here whose husbands don't seem to care anything about them."

"Like me and my Sam, heh?" put forth Mother Tubbs, still amused. "But I reckon if Mr. Joe Hurley, or any other man, should attempt to run away with me, Sam would go gunning for him. What they call the 'first law of Nater' – which is the sense of possession, not self-preservation – would probably get to working in Sam's mind.

"He'd get to thinking of my flapjacks and chicken-with-fixin's and his bile would rise 'gainst the man – no matter who – who was enjoying them victuals.

"Oh, yes. Not only is the way to a man's heart through his stomach; but believe me, Nell, most men are like those people the Bible speaks of 'whose god is their stomach.'"

"Does the Bible say that, Mother Tubbs?" broke in the girl.

"Somethin' near to it."

"Then there is some sense in the Bible, isn't there?"

"Hush-er-you, Nell Blossom!" ejaculated the old woman sternly. "Does seem awful that you're such a heathen. The Bible's

plumb full of good advice, and lovely stories, and sweet truths. I used to read it a lot before I broke my specs. But I remember lots that I read, thanks be."

"I don't care for stories," said the girl crossly. "And I don't know that I believe there is a heaven," she went on quickly. "Once you are dead I reckon that's all there is to it. I won't learn any more songs about heaven. I used to cry over them – and about folks dying. I remember the first song Dad taught me to sing in the saloons. It used to make me cry when I came to the verse:

> Last night as I lay on my pillow —
> Last night as I lay on my bed —
> Last night as I lay on my pillow,
> I dreamt that my Bonnie was dead.
> Bring back! Oh, bring back!
> Bring back my Bonnie to me, to me —

It's all stuff and nonsense!" she broke off with confidence.

"That ain't a hymn," said Mother Tubbs placidly. "Hymns is different, Nell. A good, uplifting hymn like 'Am I a Soldier of the Cross,' or 'Beulah Land,' takes you right out of yourself – bears your heart up on wings o' hope and helps you forget you're only a poor, miserable worm – "

"I'm not a worm!" interrupted Nell with vigor. "I'm as good as anybody – as good as anybody in Canyon Pass, anyway, even if some of these women do look down on me."

"Of course you are, Nell. 'Worm' is just a manner o'

speaking."

"Dad trained me to sing in these saloons, I know," went on the girl quickly, angrily, "because he was too weakly to use a pick and shovel. We had to eat, and he thought he had to have drink. So I had to earn it. But I've been a good girl."

"I never doubted it, Nell," Mother Tubbs hastened to say. "Nobody could doubt it that knowed you as well as I do." She let her gaze wander over the squalid back yards of the row of shacks of which the Tubbs' domicile was no better than its neighbors. "They don't know you like I do, Nell. You've lived with me for three years – all the time you was growing into a woman, as ye might say. You hafter do what you do, and I don't 'low when we are forced into a job, no matter what it is, that it's counted against us as a sin."

Nell flashed the placid old woman another glance. There was something hidden behind that look – of late there was something secretive in all Nell Blossom said or did. Did Mother Tubbs understand that this was so? Was she, in her rude but kindly way, offering a sympathy that she feared to put into audible speech for fear of offending the proud girl?

The latter suddenly laughed, but it was not the songbird's note her voice expressed. There was something harsh – something scornful – in it.

"I reckon I could get away with murder, and you'd say I was all right, Mother Tubbs," she declared.

"Well, mebbe," the old woman admitted, her eyes twinkling.

"Suppose – " said Nell slowly, her face turned away again, "suppose a party was the cause of another's death – even if he deserved it – but didn't mean just that – suppose, anyway, what you did caused a man's death, for whatever reason, although unintended? Would it be a sin, Mother Tubbs?"

She might have been reflecting upon a quite casual supposition for all her tone and manner betrayed. Just how wise Mother Tubbs was – just how far-seeing – no human soul could know. The old woman had seen much and learned much during her long journey through a very rough and wicked world.

"I tell you, Nell," Mother Tubbs observed, "it's all according to what's in our hearts, I reckon. If what we done caused a party to die, and we had death in our heart when we done the thing that killed him, I reckon it would be a sin. No getting around that. For we can't take God's duties into our hands and punish even the wickedest man with death – like we'd crunch a black beetle under our bootsole. 'Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.'" She repeated the phrase with reverence. "No, sin is sin. And because a party deserves to be killed, in our opinion, don't excuse our killing him."

Nell was quite still for a minute. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Humph!" she said briskly. "I don't think much of your religion, Mother Tubbs. No, I don't."

Mother Tubbs began to croon:

It's the old-style religion,
The old-style religion,
The old-style religion,
That gets you on your way.
'Twas good enough for Moses,
Good enough for Moses —
The old-style religion,
That gets you on your way.

"It ain't no new-fangled religion, Nell. But it's comforting – "

"It wouldn't comfort me none," answered the girl. "I reckon it ain't religion – and a sky pilot – that Canyon Pass needs after all. If we'd just run about fifty of these tramps out of town – and Boss Tolley and his gang – we could get along without psalm-singing and such flubdubbery."

"You ain't talking like you used to, Nell," said the old woman, observing her curiously.

"I hadn't thought so much about it. Religion is too soft. These roughnecks would ride right over a parson and – and that kind. Now, wouldn't they?"

"Not altogether. I expect they'd try – at first. But if a man had enough grace in him, he'd stand up against 'em."

"He'd better have backbone."

"Same thing," chuckled Mother Tubbs. "Same thing. It takes the grace of God to stiffen a man's backbone – I tell you true. I hope this parson Mr. Joe Hurley talks about has got plenty of grace."

"Who – what?" gasped the girl. "What parson?"

"Well, now! That is a gob o' news. But I thought you must o' heard it – over to Colorado Brown's, or somewhere – the way you was talkin'. This parson is a friend of Mr. Joe Hurley, and he wants to get him out yere."

"From the East?"

"Yeppy. Mr. Joe says he went to school with him. And he's some preacher."

"What do you think o' that!" ejaculated Nell. "Mr. Hurley didn't say anything to me about it the day we rode into the Pass together."

"I reckon not. This has all been hatched up since then."

"But, Mother Tubbs!" cried the girl. "You don't expect any tenderfoot parson can come in here and make over Canyon Pass?"

"I reckon not. We folks have got to make ourselves over. But we need a leader – we need a Shower of the Way. We've lost our eyesight – the best of us – when it comes to seeing God's ways. My soul! I couldn't even raise a prayer in conference meeting no more. But I used to go reg'lar when I was a gal – played the melodeon – led the singin' – and often got down on my knees in public and raised a prayer."

"Humph!" scoffed the girl. "If God answered prayer, I bet you prayed over Sam enough to have cured him of getting drunk forty times over!"

"I don't know – I don't know," returned Mother Tubbs

thoughtfully. “I been thinking lately that, mebbe when I was praying to God to save Sam from his sins, I was cursing Sam for his meanness! I ain’t got as sweet a disposition as I might have, Nell.”

“Oh, yes you have, Mother Tubbs!” exclaimed Nell, and suddenly jumped up to kiss the old woman warmly. “You’re a dear, sweet old thing!”

“Well, now,” rejoined Mother Tubbs complacently, “I ought to purr like any old tabby-cat for that.”

CHAPTER V – HOW THE PASSONIANS TOOK IT

"Well," observed Bill Judson oracularly, "it's about time for something new to break in Canyon Pass. About once in so often even a dead-an'-alive camp like this yere has got to feel the bump of progress from the train behind. Otherwise we'd stay stalled till Gabriel's trump."

He spoke to Smithy, his single clerk at the Three Star Grocery. He had to speak to Smithy, or to the circumambient air, for nobody but the gangling clerk was within hearing. They lounged on the store porch in the middle of the afternoon, and the only other thing alive on the main street of Canyon Pass was a wandering burro browsing on the tufts of grass edging the shallow gutters.

"I don't see as Canyon Pass has got to be bumped by a gospel sharp to wake it up," complained Smithy, stretching his arms as though they were elastic. "Yahhoo! Well, he'll have a sweet time here, Mr. Judson."

"I dunno," said the storekeeper reflectively. "For my part I feel like I favored it."

"'Cause it's something new?"

"'Cause it's something needed. I ain't one of those fellers that run after every new thing just because it is new. But I'm for

progress. I want to see the Pass get ahead. Crescent City and Lamberton have both got churches and parsons."

"And they've got railroads," put in Smithy, making a good point. "Canyon Pass needs the railroad more'n it does a parson."

"Son," proclaimed Judson, "before Canyon Pass can get a railroad connection, mountains have got to be moved and the meanest stretch of desert that ever spawned lizards, sidewinders and cacti, and produce in their places about five hundred square mile of irrigated farmland to pay for spiking the rails to the sleepers. See?"

"Well, the farms might come," declared Smithy defensively.

"Sure. So might Christmas come at Fourth o' July. But we ain't never celebrated the two holidays together yet. No, sir. To irrigate the edge of that desert even, a dam would have to be built across the southern outlet of the canyon, and that would back the water up yere in freshet season till the roof of my shack would be so deep under the surface that about all I could properly keep in stock would be perch and rainbow trout.

"They ain't building branch railroads no more to mining camps like Canyon Pass. That's why we all chipped in for the stamp mill and the cyanide plant. Nope. We'll freight in our supplies with mules and communicate with the more effete centers of civilization by stagecoach for some time to come I reckon.

"That being the case we got to uplift ourselves without the help of the iron horse, as the feller said. And having a church and

a parson is uplifting."

"Nobody ain't talked very brash about a church."

"Parson comes first. Naturally. Of course this friend of Joe Hurley is only coming on a visit at first."

"He'll have a sweet visit here," repeated Smithy.

"That's according," said Judson. "We got to be hospitable. If a judge, or a senator, or a school teacher, or even a drummer sellin' fishin' tackle, came yere we'd feel like we wanted to show him the town's best side. Why not this parson?"

"Huh! A drummer don't try to convert us and innovate psalm-singing and such," grumbled Smithy.

"Son," drawled Judson, his eyes twinkling under his bushy brows, "you're convicted of sin right now. You're scare't of this parson – and that's the trouble with most of you fellers who are raising a yawp against progress as represented by this Reverend Hunt."

"'Taint only us fellers," grumbled Smithy. "Some of the womenfolk ain't pleased. Say! Nell says she don't want no black-coated parson in this camp. Says it would give her the willies, so she couldn't sing."

It was an indisputable fact – Joe Hurley himself had discovered it – that the Passonians were divided upon the matter of the expected coming of the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt. The sheep and the goats that had heretofore milled together in a general herd, were dividing upon strictly religious lines. Joe was somewhat surprised. Some of the very people he had presumed

would welcome the innovation, were suspicious of it.

Mr. Robertson Norris, "Slickpenny" Norris was his undignified appellation, became quite red of face and beat rather a futile fist upon the banking counter as he gave his opinion to Joe Hurley. Norris was a puny-looking, string-bean sort of man. The height of rage could not have made his appearance impressive.

"Joe Hurley, you are a director of this bank, and your last statement of the Great Hope shows that you are a good mining man. I find on most subjects you display good sense. But on this question you're all wrong – all wrong!"

"I don't get you – I don't get you at all," drawled Hurley. "A moral man like you, Norris, I reckoned would welcome the idea of having a parson in the town."

"I have no quarrel with parsons – none at all, Joe," declared the banker. "But Canyon Pass is in no present shape – financially, I mean – to contemplate the building of a church edifice. A church is something you can't tax, and it brings in absolutely no revenue to the town. It's not an asset, but a liability, and the Pass can't afford any such luxuries at this time."

"Great saltpeter!"

"Listen to me, Joe Hurley! I've advocated proper town improvements, even when they take the skin off my own nose, and always will. I am strong for Main Street being paved and sidewalks laid, though 'twould cost me a pretty penny. We ought to set out trees. Them oil lamps on wooden posts are a disgrace. I'd make every merchant paint the front of his buildings on Main

Street once a year, by law."

"Well! What's the matter with a church?" demanded Hurley. "That is, if we get that far."

"It's absolutely no use. If one is built it won't be nothing but a shack. It won't add anything to the importance of the town. No, I don't approve. I'm disappointed in you, Joe."

"All right – all right!" cried Joe in some heat. "But I'm not disappointed in you, old-timer. Great saltpeter! I wonder what you did before you drifted into Canyon Pass that a parson and religion are likely to bring fresh into your memory."

With this backhand slap at the banker, the young man went out. It was rather odd that Joe Hurley, like Bill Judson, should suspect the Passonians of the same secret reason for not desiring a spiritual refreshment of the town. But then, both the storekeeper and the owner of the Great Hope were observant of human nature and knew Canyon Pass and its inhabitants very well.

Joe Hurley's proposal was rattling the dry bones. If he saw two men conversing on the street, with both their arms and whiskers waving in the breeze, he might be sure the topic under discussion was the coming of "that gospel-sharp Joe Hurley's sicked on to us."

If two housewives met in midflight between store and store in the course of a forenoon's shopping, the principal subject of gossip was bound to be the possibility of a parson settling in Canyon Pass. Nor did the feminine opinion always march with

that of Mother Tubbs.

In spite of the emancipation of the sex and its introduction to the high office of the ballot, the women of the mining town were – like women everywhere – considerably influenced by the expressed opinions of their husbands, brothers, and sons. If Charlie Raidlaw, who dealt faro for Boss Tolley, or Phin Shattuck, one of Colorado Brown's "gentlemanly mixers," gave it as his opinion that a white-liveried, lily-handed parson was going to be a pest in the town and sure to hurt business, Mrs. Charlie and Sue Shattuck, Phin's sister, were pretty sure to scout the idea that a parson in the Pass would be any improvement.

"It's needed," Rosabell Pickett announced with conviction. Rosabell played the piano in the Grub Stake, painted her face like a Piute Indian, dressed as gaudily as a circus poster, and was the only employee Boss Tolley had who really was not afraid of him. In fact, Rosabell was not afraid of any man and had small respect for most; she was frank in saying so. A girl can be a piano player in a honkytonk and be long on self-respect. Rosabell approved of herself – quite.

"It's needed," repeated Rosabell. "I wish he'd preach in the street out there, just stir up the people till they was with him, every one, and then march in here with an ax and smash every hootch bottle behind your bar, Tolley – that's what I wish."

"You're crazy, Rosie!" cried the proprietor of the Grub Stake. "I'd hafter go a-gunnin' for any man that tried to smash up my business thataway, and that wouldn't make the Grub Stake

friends. You oughtn't to bite the hand that feeds you, Rosie. If it wasn't for the Grub Stake – and me – you wouldn't be wearin' rhinestone shoebuckles."

"Is that so?" countered the young woman. "You needn't worry none about my biting your hand 'nless you keep it washed oftener than is your present habit. And I want you to know that I don't sell my opinions when I take the Grub Stake's pay-envelope – not much!"

"Well, I wanter see that dratted parson come in yere!" said Tolley blusteringly.

"He won't come alone," put in Hurley, who had been listening at the bar to the argument.

"Huh?"

"I say he won't come in here alone. I might as well serve notice here and now that this Parson Hunt is a friend of mine. I don't never aim to throw a friend down or fail him when he gets into a jam. If he comes in here – for any purpose, Tolley – I'll likely be with him."

"You keep him out o' yere! You keep him out!" blustered the other. "We don't want no sky pilots here in the Pass. Anyway, I won't have 'em in the Grub Stake."

A burly fellow in overalls and riding boots broke in. He had already sampled Tolley's red-eye more deeply than was wise.

"You say the word, boss," he growled, "and we'll run the preacher out o' town."

Joe Hurley looked at the ruffian coldly. "You won't run

anybody out of town, Hicks – not any," the mine owner said. "But I'll tell you something that may be worth your attention. If Canyon Pass ever gets up on its hind legs and reares and starts to run certain tramps and ne'er-do-wells out of town, I'm ready to lay a bet with any man that you'll be right up in the forefront of them that are chased out. Get me?"

Hicks, scowling, dropped his hand to the gunbutt peeping above the waistband of his overalls. Joe Hurley did not flicker an eyelash nor move a finger. Finally Hicks lurched away with an oath and went out through the swinging doors.

"And that's that," said Rosabell briskly, cutting the tense chord of silence. "I always did say the more of a boozer a man is, the quicker he'll take water. I hope your friend Mr. Hunt, Joe, has got backbone same as you have. Is he an old gentleman?"

"Not so you'd notice it," replied Hurley with a sudden grin.

He remained awhile to bandy repartee with Rosabell and some of the other idlers. But Boss Tolley slipped out of the honkytonk, although he did not follow Hicks.

Mulligan Lane ran at the rear of the stores, saloons, and other amusement places facing this side of Main Street. Colorado Brown's cabaret was not far from Tolley's rear door. It was dusk of rather a sultry day – a day that had forecast the heat of the approaching summer.

Tolley lounged under the withered cottonwood behind Brown's dance-pavilion. The sign of the flood's highwater mark – that flood of twenty years before – had been cut by some idle

knifeblade deep into the bole of the tree high over Tolley's head, and he was a tall man. A sallow-faced, bony giant of a man was Tolley, hairy and brawny, without a redeeming feature in his cruel countenance. Had he not possessed, in the memorable words of Bill Judson, "a wishbone where his backbone should have been," Boss Tolley would have been a very dangerous man. Lacking personal courage he depended upon the backing of men like Hicks and his bouncer, Macpherson.

He slouched now under the tree and waited – a sullen lump of a figure whose dark garments blended with the shadowy trunk as the night fell. The small figure coming up the slope of the lane approached the back door of Colorado Brown's place without seeing the man until almost within arm's length.

"Hey, Nell!" She started, looked up, stepped back a pace. "Don't be scare't of me."

"Don't flatter yourself, Tolley," replied the girl curtly.

"I want to speak with you."

"I don't want to speak to you."

"Say – listen! You ain't treating me right. You walked out and left me flat. You didn't even ask me for a raise. How'd you know I wouldn't give you as much as Brown does?"

"I didn't want to know. I got through. You didn't have any hold on me, Tolley."

"Mebbe not. Mebbe I have. You better listen," for the girl was turning scornfully away. "You and Dick played it low down on me."

Now she gave him her full attention. It was so dark under the tree that he could not see her face clearly, but he knew some sudden emotion shook her. To himself he grinned.

"I got to admit my losing you and Dick has put a crimp in the Grub Stake's business. You was my best performer, and Dick Beckworth was the best card-sharp I had. Looker here! You come back to the Grub Stake and – and I won't say nothing more."

"What do you mean?" She had almost instantly gained control of herself. "You can say all you like. I am never going to sing in your joint again."

"You ain't?"

"No."

"You better think again." His voice was grim, menacing. "I can say something you won't like to hear."

"Say it." She spat the command out as boldly as was her usual speech; but in her heart sudden fear fluttered like a netted bird.

"I been tellin' them Dick Beckworth lit out for Crescent City, and that I heard later he was dealing 'em in Denver."

"Dick Beckworth?" gasped the girl.

"Yeppy. I told 'em that. But I know derned well he didn't ride north that day – "

"Why do you speak to me of Dick Beckworth?"

She tried to say it boldly, calmly. She stared at him in the dusk, her figure tense. He could see her blue eyes gleam like twin sapphires.

"I'm telling you. Listen," whispered Tolley hoarsely. "I could show 'em the bones of Dick's hoss in the gravel below the Overhang – right at the edge of Runaway River. I got his saddle right now in my big safe. What do you say to that?"

"Dick – "

"I reckon you know how the hoss and the saddle went over the cliff. And Dick was with 'em. He wasn't with 'em when I raked out the saddle. Dick had gone to some place a dern sight more distant than Crescent City – nor yet Denver."

She was silent. He could hear her quick, labored breathing. Satisfaction fired all the mean soul of the man.

"You think it over, Nell."

He turned and lurched heavily away. The girl stood rooted to the place, more shaken, more terrified, than even Boss Tolley suspected. He was out of sight before she gained strength to move.

CHAPTER VI – THE APPROACH

In fairylike traceries the tiny drops of a mist-like rain embroidered the broad pane of the Pullman. Betty Hunt gazed through this at the flying fields and woods, the panorama of the railroad fences, and the still nearer blur of telegraph poles with that hopeless feeling a sentenced prisoner must have as he journeys toward the prison pen.

Everything she cared for save her brother, everything she knew and that was familiar to her daily life, every object of her thought and interest, was being left behind by the onrush of the train. Time, with a big besom, was sweeping her quiet past into the discard – she felt it, she knew it! They would never go back to Ditson Corners again, or to Amberly where they had lived as children with Aunt Prudence or to any similar sanctuary.

That was what Betty had most longed for since her last term at boarding school, which had ended for her so abruptly with the death of her Aunt Prudence Mason. Her last previous journey by train had been that somber one to the funeral. When Betty and her brother had later moved to the Ditson Corners' parsonage they had done so by motor.

The drumming of the wheels over the rail-joints kept time with the swiftly flying thoughts of the girl. She lay in the corner of the broad, tan plush seat like a crumpled flower that had been carelessly flung there. Thoughts of that last train journey seared

her mind in hot flashes, as summer lightnings play about the horizon at dusk.

First one thing, then another, she glimpsed – mere jottings of the happenings that had gone before the hurried good-byes at school and the anxious trip homeward. These remembrances now were like the projection of a broken film upon the moving picture screen.

And those trying, anxious weeks which followed the funeral while Ford was completing his divinity course and received his ordination and which came to an end with his selection as pastor of the First Church at Ditson Corners! All through these weeks was the dull, miserable pain of disillusion and horror that Betty must keep to herself. She could not tell Ford. She could tell nobody. What had happened during the last few weeks at school was a secret that must be buried – buried in her mind and heart as deeply as Aunt Prudence was buried under the flowering New England sod.

Betty, with her secret, was like a hurt animal that hides away to die or recover of its wound as nature may provide. She could not die. She knew that, of course, from the first. Time, she felt, would never erase the scar upon her soul; but the wound itself must heal.

All that – that which was now such a horror in her thought – she had hoped to bury deeper as time passed. She had devoted herself to her brother's needs. She had made his comfort her constant care. Busy mind and busy hands were her salvation from

the gnawing regret for that secret happening that she believed must wither all her life.

Now this sudden and unlooked for change had come to shake up all her fragile plans like the shifting of a kaleidoscope. They were going West, toward the land she hated, toward people whom, she told herself, she had every reason to suspect and fear. Why had Ford kept up his correspondence with that Joe Hurley? Betty did not blame her brother for wishing to get away from Ditson Corners. But why need it have been that Westerner who offered the soul-sore minister the refuge that he so gladly accepted?

Betty, without a clear explanation, had no reason to oppose to Hunt's desire for a change that would satisfy him. And such explanation she would have died rather than have given him! She was swept on toward the West, toward whatever fate had in store for her, like a chip upon a current that could not be stemmed.

Aunt Prudence had left her money – conservatively invested – to Betty; but she was not to touch the principal until she was thirty. "If the girl marries before that age, no shiftless man can get it away from her," had been the spinster's frank statement in her will. "If she is foolish enough to marry after that age, it is to be hoped she will then have sense at least regarding money matters." The brother had a small nest egg left from his father's estate after paying his college and divinity school expenses.

So they were not wholly dependent upon Hunt's salary. He could afford to take a vacation, and it was on this ground –

the need of rest – that he had resigned from the pulpit of Ditson Corners' First Church. They had left some really good friends behind them in the little Berkshire town – some who truly appreciated the young minister. But the clique against him had shown its activity much too promptly to salve Hunt's pride. His resignation had been accepted without question, and he had remained only to see Bardell established in his place.

Betty condemned herself that she could not enter wholeheartedly into Hunt's high expectations of the new field that lay before him. It was adventure – high adventure – to his mind. And why should a parson not long for a bigger life and broader development as well as another healthy man?

He was going to Canyon Pass without a penny being guaranteed him. Joe Hurley urged him to come; but he told him frankly that there would be opposition. Certain Passonians would not welcome a parson or the establishment of religious worship.

But this opposition was that of the enemy. The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was not afraid of the devil in an open fight. Opposition in the church itself was what had conquered him at Ditson Corners. Let the phalanxes of wickedness confront him at Canyon Pass, he would stand against them!

Betty saw him coming back down the aisle of the car, smiling broadly, a handsome, muscular figure of a man. He did not look the cleric. She had been so used to seeing him in the black frock-coat and immaculate white collar that she was at first rather shocked when he had donned another suit to travel in.

He was almost boyish looking. He was a big man, and she believed him capable of big things. She could almost wish he had selected some other road in life – although that thought was shocking to her, too. Ford might well have been a business man, an engineer, a banker, a promoter. Betty's ideas were somewhat vague about business life; but she felt sure Ford would have shone in any line. She was a loyal sister.

She shook herself out of the fog of her own thoughts and smiled up at him.

"Met a man in the smoking room who knows that country about Canyon Pass like a book, Bet," Hunt said, dropping down beside her. "It really is a part of the last frontier. We shall always be a pioneer people, we Americans. There is something in the raw places of the earth that intrigues us all – save the saps. And sap, even, hardens in such an environment as this we are bound for."

"I hope you will not be disappointed, Ford."

"Disappointed? Of course I shall be disappointed and heart-sick and soul-weary. But I believe my efforts will not be narrowed and circumscribed and bound down by formalism and caste. As Joe says, I won't be 'throwed and hog-tied.' The old-time revivalists used to urge their converts to 'get liberty.' I'll get liberty out there, I feel sure, in Canyon Pass."

She could say nothing to dash his enthusiasm. It was too late for that now, in any case. Betty even tried to smile. But her face felt as stiff as though it were like to crack in the process.

"All that territory of which Canyon Pass is the heart," pursued Hunt, "has been phenomenally rich in ore in past time. They have to comb the mines and sweep the hydraulic-washed benches very scientifically now to make the game pay. Yet Canyon Pass is distinctly a mining town and always must be.

"My new acquaintance says it is really 'wild and woolly.'" He smiled more broadly. "I fancy it is all Joe said it is. Crude, rude, roughneck – but honest. If I can dig down to the honest heart of Canyon Pass, Bet, I shall succeed. We'll not worry about first impressions, or the lack of super-civilized conveniences, or the fact that men don't often shave, and the women wear their hair untidily. Of course, I'll make you as comfortable as possible – "

"I can stand whatever you can, Ford," she interrupted with brisk conviction.

"Well," with a sigh of relief, "that's fine. Oh, Bet! This is the life we're going to. I am sure you will be happier when you once get a taste of it."

But she made no reply.

When the two mountain-hogs, drawing and pushing the trans-continental train up the grade, ground to a brief stop at Crescent City, Betty Hunt was surprised to see brick office buildings, street cars, several taxi-cabs at the station, paved streets, and the business bustle of a Western city which always impresses the stranger with the idea that the place is commercially much more important than it actually is.

"This – this cannot be Canyon Pass?" she stammered to Hunt.

"No." He laughed. "But here's Joe Hurley – bless him! Joe!"

He shouted it heartily before dropping off the car step and turning to help Betty. But Joe Hurley strode across the platform and playfully shouldered the minister aside.

"Your servant, Miss Betty!" the Westerner cried, sweeping off his broad-brimmed hat in a not ungraceful bow.

The girl from the East floated off the step into his arms. Joe set her as lightly as a thistle-down upon the platform and somehow found her free hand.

"When Willie, here, told me you would come with him, Miss Betty, I promised the boys at the Great Hope a holiday when you arrived. Great saltpeter!" he added, stepping off to admire her from her rippling, bistered hair to her silk stockinged ankles. "You sure will make the boys sit up and take notice!"

Here Hunt, having relieved himself of the hand-bags, got hold of Hurley's hand and began pumping. The two young men looked into each other's eyes over that handclasp. They had little to say, but much to feel. Betty sighed as she looked on. Her last hope of quick escape from the West went with that sigh. The handclasp and the look were like an oath between the two young men to stand by each other.

"Well, old sobersides!" said Joe.

"Same old Joe, aren't you?" rejoined the minister.

"Come on. We'll get your bags into a taxi and go up to the hotel," Hurley said briskly. "I got rooms for you. We can't go on to the Pass till eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Is there but one train a day, Mr. Hurley?" Betty asked as he helped her into the cab.

"To Canyon Pass? Ain't ever been one yet," and he chuckled. "We go over with Lizard Dan and the mail. Some day, when the roads are fixed up, we may get motor service. Until then, a six-mule stagecoach has to serve."

"Oh!"

Hunt's eyes twinkled. "Break it to her gently, Joe," he advised. "Bet is prepared to be very much shocked, I know. This frontier life is going to be an eye-opener for her."

"'Frontier life!'" snorted Hurley. "Why, we're plumb civilized. Bill Judson has laid in a stock of near-silk hosiery and shirts with pleated bosoms. Wait till you see some of the boys in holiday rig. Knock your eye out, when it comes to style."

Betty smiled. She did not mind being laughed at. Besides, the modern appearance of Crescent City had somewhat relieved her apprehension. Even the hotel was not bad. Their rooms were cheerful and clean, so she could excuse the brand-new, shiny oak furniture and the garish brass beds.

She did not dislike Joe Hurley – not really. It was only his influence over Ford that she observed with a somewhat jealous eye. Although the mining man seldom addressed her brother seriously, she realized that he was fond of Ford. The latter was much the stronger character of the two – she was sure of that. He would never be overborne in any essential thing by the lighter-minded Hurley. But Ford admired the latter so much that Betty

felt her brother was likely to give heed to Hurley's advice in most matters connected with this new and strange environment to which they had come.

"Bet is scared of the West and of you Westerners," Hunt said lightly. "I don't know but what she expected you to have sprouted horns since she saw you before, Joe."

"Shucks!" chuckled the other. "We're mostly born with 'em out here, Miss Betty. But they de-horn us before they let us run loose out o' the branding pens. And remember, I spent two years in the effete East."

"It never touched you," and Hunt laughed. "You're just as wild and woolly as ever."

The girl noted that Hurley was thoughtful of their every comfort. He showed them the best of the town that day; but in the evening they rested at the hotel and talked. The two men conversed while they smoked in Hunt's room, with the door opened into Betty's. She heard the murmur of their voices as she sat by her darkened window and looked out into the electrically lighted main street of Crescent City.

She was not at all thrilled by the novelty of the situation. She was only troubled.

Those strangers passing by! She saw a face in the throng but seldom as the street lights flickered upon it. And always she was fearfully expectant of seeing – What? Whom? She shuddered.

CHAPTER VII – THE FIRST TRICK

The high-springed stagecoach lurched drunkenly over the trail that wound through a valley Betty thought gnomes might have hewn out when the world was young. Barren, riven rock, gaunt, stunted trees, painted cliffs hazed by distance, all added to a prospect that fell far short in the Eastern girl's opinion of being picturesque.

Rather, it was just what her brother had termed this Western country – raw. Betty did not like any rude thing. She shrank instinctively from anything crude and unfinished.

The three – herself, her brother, and Joe Hurley – occupied the seat on the roof of the plunging coach just behind the driver. "Lizard Dan" was an uncouth individual both in speech and appearance. He was bewhiskered, overalled, wore broken boots and an enormous slouched hat, and his hands were so grimy that Betty shuddered at them, although they so skillfully handled the reins over the backs of six frisky driving-mules.

Lizard Dan, Hurley told the Easterners, had gained his nickname when he was a pocket-hunter in a now far-distant day. He had been lost in the desert at one time and swore when he came out that he had existed by eating *Crotaphytus Wislizeni* roasted over a fire of dry cacti – the succulence of which saurian is much doubted by the Western white man, although it is a small brother of the South American iguana, there considered a

delicacy.

However, Dan acquired a nickname and such a fear of the desert thereby that he became the one known specimen of the completely cured desert rat. He never went prospecting again, but instead drove the stage between Crescent City and Canyon Pass.

"The boys expecting us at the Pass to-day, Dan?" Joe Hurley had asked early in the journey.

"Youbetcha!"

"Got your gun loaded?"

Dan kicked the heavy double-barreled shotgun at his feet and replied again:

"Youbetcha!"

"Do – do wild animals infest the road?" Betty had asked stammeringly.

"Not much," said Hurley. "But Dan carries a heap of registered mail in which wild men, rather than wild animals, might be interested."

"Youbetcha!" agreed Dan.

Hurley glanced sideways at Betty's face, caught its expression, and exploded into laughter.

"You've come to 'Youbetcha Land,' Miss Betty," he said, when he could speak again.

"He is a character," chuckled Hunt on her other side.

The suggestion of highwaymen stuck in the girl's mind. She looked from Lizard Dan's weapon to the ivory butt of the heavy revolver pouched at Joe Hurley's waist. These weapons could not

be worn exactly for show – an exhibition of the vanity of rather uncouth minds. It fretted her though without frightening her, this phase of Western life. It was not the possibility of gun-fights and brawls and the offices of Judge Lynch that made Betty Hunt shrink from contact with this country and its people.

The stagecoach mounted out of the valley – which might, Hunt said, have been fittingly described by Ezekiel – and followed a winding trail through the minor range of hills that divided Crescent City and its purlieus from the Canyon Pass country. The coach pitched and rocked as though it was a sea-going hack.

In time they crossed the small divide and came down the watershed into the valley of the East Fork.

Borne to their ears on the breeze at last, through the sound of the rumbling coach-wheels and the rattling trace-chains, was another noise. A throbbing rhythm of sound with the dull swish of intermittent streams of water.

"The hydraulic pumps at the Eureka Washings," explained Hurley. "We'll be in sight of them – and of Canyon Pass – before very long."

The stagecoach lurched around a corner, and the raw, red bench of the riverbank came into view. Steam pumps were noisily at work and men were busy at the sluices into which the gold-bearing earth and gravel were washed down from the high bank.

Three great, brass-nozzled hydraulic "guns" were at work – each machine straddled by a man in oil-skins and hip boots, who

manipulated the heavy stream of water that ate into the bank and crumbled it in sections.

At the moment of their sighting the hydraulic washings across the river, there was raised a wild, concerted shout from a point ahead. Out of a hidden cove galloped a cavalcade of a dozen or more mounted men, who swept up the road to meet the coach.

For an instant Betty thought of the shotgun at Dan's feet and of highwaymen. These coming riders waved guns and yelled like wild Indians. But she saw a broad grin on Joe Hurley's face.

"Here come some of the Great Hope boys," he explained. "Their idea of 'welcome to our city' may be a little noisy, but they mean you well, Hunt."

They came "a-shootin'," and Lizard Dan threw the long lash of his whip over the backs of his six mules to force them through the cavalcade on the gallop.

Firing their guns and yelling, the riders on their wiry ponies surrounding the coach as its escort, pounded down to the ford. Their hullabaloo announced far in advance the approach of the coach to Canyon Pass.

In all its ugliness the mining camp was revealed. The gaze of the Easterners was focused on its unpainted shacks and rutted streets. They saw men, women, children, and a multitude of dogs running from all points toward the main thoroughfare of the town.

It was like a picture – not like anything real. Betty's dazed mind could not accept this nightmare of a place as actually

being the town to which fate – and her brother's obstinacy – had brought them. Given an opportunity right then, the girl would have failed her brother! She was in a mood to desert him and return East as fast as she could travel.

Joe Hurley grinned at her. She had begun almost to hate those twinkling brown eyes of his with the golden sparks in them. He seemed to know just what her feelings were and to enjoy her horror of the crudity which assailed her on every hand. To her mind, Hurley was worse than his associates, for he had enjoyed the advantages of some culture.

The mules dashed into the shallows. Spray flew as high as the roof of the coach. The mules settled into a heavier pace as they dragged the vehicle up the farther bank and into the foot of Main Street.

The crowd – a couple of hundred people of all ages – had gathered before the Wild Rose Hotel. This stood opposite the bank and farther along the street than the Three Star Grocery and Boss Tolley's Grub Stake. The mules picked up their heels again under the cracking of Lizard Dan's whiplash, and cantered up to the chief hostelry of Canyon Pass. The yelling crew of horsemen – a bizarre committee of welcome indeed – rode ahead, punctuating their vociferous clamor by an occasional pistol-shot.

Betty caught sight of her brother's face. It was as broadly smiling as was that of Joe Hurley! Actually Ford was enjoying this awful experience.

The moment Dan drew the mules to a halt, Hurley was half way to the ground and turned on the step to help Betty down. She glanced timidly at Hunt again. He was preparing to descend on the other side of the coach, leaving her entirely to Hurley's care.

Then occurred that incident which would ever be engraved upon Betty's memory, and which marked indeed the coming of the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt to Canyon Pass on the archives of the town's history in letters that never would be effaced.

As Hunt started to descend from the roof of the coach there sounded a single pistol-shot and the hat he wore – a low-crowned affair, the single mark of the cleric in his dress – sailed into the air with a ragged hole through brim and crown.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.