

Lynde Francis

The City of Numbered Days



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I

The Heptaderm

It was not characteristic of Brouillard – the Brouillard Grislow knew best – that he should suffer the purely technical talk of dams and reservoirs, bed-rock anchorages, and the latest word in concrete structural processes to languish and should drift into personal reminiscences over their first evening camp-fire in the Niquoia.

Because the personalities were gratefully varying the monotonies, and also because he had a jocose respect for the unusual, Grislow was careful not to discourage the drift. There had been a benumbing surfeit of the technical talk dating from the day and hour when the orders had come from Washington giving Brouillard his step up and directing him to advance with his squad of Reclamation-Service pioneers upon the new work in the western Timanyonis. But, apart from this, the reminiscences had an experimental value. Grislow's one unamiable leaning manifested itself in a zest for cleverly turning the hidden facets of the human polygon up to the light; and if the facets chose to turn themselves of their own accord, as in Brouillard's case, why, so much the better.

"As you were saying?" he prompted, stretching himself luxuriously upon the fragrant banking of freshly clipped spruce tips, with his feet to the blaze and his hands locked under his head. He felt that Brouillard was merely responding to the subtle influences of time, place, and encompassments and took no shame for being an analytical rather than a sympathetic listener. The hundred-odd men of the pioneer party, relaxing after the day-long march over the mountains, were smoking, yarning, or playing cards around the dozen or more camp-fires. The evening, with a half-grown moon silvering the inverted bowl of a firmament which seemed to shut down, lid-like, upon the mountain rim of the high-walled valley, was witchingly enchanting; and, to add the final touch, there was comradely isolation, Anson, Griffith, and Leshington, the three other members of the engineering staff, having gone to burn candles in the headquarters tent over blue-prints and field-notes.

"I was saying that the present-day world slant is sanely skeptical – as it should be," Brouillard went on at the end of the thoughtful pause. "Being modern and reasonably sophisticated, we can smile at the signs and omens of the ages that had to get along without laboratories and testing plants. Just the same, every man has his little atavistic streak, if you can hit upon it. For example, you may throw flip-flaps and call it rank superstition if you like, but I have never been able to get rid of the notion that birthdays are like the equinoxes – turning-points in the small, self-centred system which we call life."

"Poodle-dogs!" snorted the one whose attitude was both jocose and analytical, stuffing more of the spruce branches under his head to keep the pipe ashes from falling into his eyes.

"I know; being my peculiar weakness instead of your own, it's tommy-rot to you," Brouillard rejoined good-naturedly. "As I said a few minutes ago, I am only burbling to hear the sound of my own voice. But the bottoming fact remains. You give a screw twist to a child's mind, and if the mind of the man doesn't exhibit the same helical curve – "

"Suppose you climb down out of the high-browed altitudes and give it a plain, every-day name?" grumbled the staff authority on watersheds.

"It's casting pearls before swine, but you're a pretty good sort of swine, Grizzy. If you'll promise to keep your feet out of the trough, I'll tell you. Away back in the porringer period, in which we are all like the pin-feathered dicky-birds, open-mouthed for anything anybody may drop into us, some one fed me with the number seven."

"Succulent morsel!" chuckled Grislow. "Did it agree with you?"

Brouillard sat back from the fire and clasped his hands over his bent knees. He was of a type rare enough to be noteworthy in a race which has drawn so heavily upon the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic stocks for its build and coloring: a well-knit figure of a man, rather under than over the normal stature, but bulging athletically in the loose-fitting khaki of the engineer; dark of skin, even where the sun had not burned its rich mahogany into the olive, and owning a face which, with the upcurled mustaches, the brooding black eyes, and the pure Gallic outline of brow and jaw, might have served as a model for a Vierge study of a fighting *franc-tireur*.

"I don't remember how early in the game the thing began," he resumed, ignoring Grislow's joking interruption, "but away back in the dimmest dawns the number seven began to have a curious significance for me. From my earliest recollections things have been constantly associating themselves with seven or some multiple of it. You don't believe it, of course; but it is true."

"Which means that you have been sitting up and taking notice when the coincidences hit, and have forgotten the millions of times when they didn't," scoffed the listener.

"Probably," was the ready admission. "We all do that. But there is one set of 'coincidences,' as you call them, that can't be so easily turned down. Back in the pin-feather time that I mentioned somebody handed me a fact – the discovery of the physiologists about the waste and replacement that goes on in the human organism, bringing around a complete cellular change about once in every seven years. Are you asleep?"

"Not yet; go on," said the hydrographer.

"It was a long time ago, and I was only a little tad; but I surrounded the idea and took it in literally, in the sense of a sudden and sort of magical change coming at the end of each seven-year period and bound to occur at those particular fixed times. The notion stuck to me like a cockle-bur, and sometimes I wonder if it isn't still sticking."

"Bugs!" ranted Grislow, in good-natured ridicule, and Brouillard laughed.

"That is what I say to myself, Murray, every time the fatal period rolls around. And yet – "

"There isn't any 'and yet,'" cut in the scoffer derisively. "This is merely your night for being batty. 'Fatal period' – suffering humanity!"

"No, hold on: let me tell you, Murray – I'd like to get it out of my system if I can. Up to my seventh birthday I was a sickly child, puny and only about half alive. I recollect, as if it were only yesterday, how the neighbor women used to come in and condole with my mother, ignoring me, of course, as if I hadn't any ears. I can remember old Aunt Hetty Parsons saying, time and again: 'No, Mis' Brouillard; you'll never raise that boy the longest day you live!'"

"I'm waiting for the 'and yet,'" put in Grislow, sitting up to relight his pipe with a blazing splinter from the fire.

"It came – the change, I mean – when I was seven years old. That was the year of our removal to Vincennes from the country village where I was born. Since that time I haven't known what it means to be sick or even ailing."

"Bully old change!" applauded Grislow. "Is that all?"

"No. What the second period spent on my body it took out of my mind. I grew stouter and stronger every year and became more and more the stupidest blockhead that ever thumbed a school-book. I simply couldn't learn, Murray. My mother made excuses for me, as mothers will, but my father was in despair. He was an educated man, and I can imagine that my unconquerable doltishness went near to breaking his heart."

"You are safely over that stage of it now, at all events," said the hydrographer in exaggerated sarcasm. "Any man who can stare into the fire and think out fetching little imaginations like these you are handing me – "

"Sometimes I wish they were only imaginings, Grizzly. But let me finish. I was fourteen to a day when I squeezed through the final grammar grade; think of it – fourteen years old and still with

the women teachers! I found out afterward that I got my dubiously given passport to the high school chiefly because my father was one of the best-known and best-loved men in the old home town. Perhaps it wasn't the magic seven that built me all over new that summer; perhaps it was only the change in schools and teachers. But from that year on, all the hard things were too easy. It was as if somebody or something had suddenly opened a closed door in my brain and let the daylight into all the dark corners at once."

Grislow sat up and finished for him.

"Yes; and since that time you have staved your way through the university, and butted into the Reclamation Service, and played skittles with every other man's chances of promotion until you have come out at the top of the heap in the Construction Division, all of which you're much too modest to brag about. But, say; we've skipped one of the seven-year flag-stations. What happened when you were twenty-one – or were you too busy just then chasing the elusive engineering degree to take notice?"

Brouillard was staring out over the loom of the dozen camp-fires – out and across the valley at the massive bulk of Mount Chingringo rising like a huge barrier dark to the sky-line save for a single pin-prick of yellow light fixing the position of a solitary miner's cabin half-way between the valley level and the summit. When he spoke again the hydrographer had been given time to shave another pipe charge of tobacco from his pocket plug and to fill and light the brier.

"When I was twenty-one my father died, and" – he stopped short and then went on in a tone which was more than half apologetic – "I don't mind telling you, Grislow; you're not the kind to pass it on where it would hurt. At twenty-one I was left with a back load that I am carrying to this good day; that I shall probably go on carrying through life."

Grislow walked around the fire, kicked two or three of the charred log ends into the blaze, and growled when the resulting smoke rose up to choke and blind him.

"Forget it, Victor," he said in blunt retraction. "I thought it was merely a little splashing match and I didn't mean to back you out into deep water. I know something about the load business myself; I'm trying to put a couple of kid brothers through college, right now."

"Are you?" said Brouillard half-absently; and then, as one who would not be selfishly indifferent: "That is fine. I wish I were going to have something as substantial as that to show for my wood sawing."

"Won't you?"

"Not in a thousand years, Murray."

"In less than a hundredth part of that time you'll be at the top of the Reclamation-Service payroll – won't that help out?"

"No; not appreciably."

Grislow gave it up at that and went back to the original contention.

"We're dodging the main issue," he said. "What is the active principle of your 'sevens' – or haven't you figured it out?"

"Change," was the prompt rejoinder; "always something different – radically different."

"And what started you off into the memory woods, particularly, to-night?"

"A small recurrence of the coincidences. It began with that hopelessly unreliable little clock that Anson persists in carrying around with him wherever he goes. While you were up on the hill cutting your spruce tips Anson pulled out and said he was going to unpack his camp kit. He went over to his tent and lighted up, and a few minutes afterward I heard the clock strike – seven. I looked at my watch and saw that it lacked a few minutes of eight, and the inference was that Anson had set the clock wrong, as he commonly does. Just as I was comfortably forgetting the significant reminder the clock went off again, striking slowly, as if the mechanism were nearly run down."

"Another seven?" queried Grislow, growing interested in spite of a keen desire to lapse into ridicule again.

"No; it struck four. I didn't imagine it, Murray; I counted: one – two – three – four."

"Well?" was the bantering comment. "You couldn't conjure an omen out of that, could you? You say there was a light in the tent – I suppose Anson was there tinkering with his little tin god of a timepiece. It's a habit of his."

"That was the natural inference; but I was curious enough to go and look. When I lifted the flap the tent was empty. The clock was ticking away on Anson's soap-box dressing-case, with a lighted candle beside it, and for a crazy half second I had a shock, Murray – the minute-hand was pointing to four and the hour-hand to seven!"

"Still I don't see the miraculous significance," said the hydrographer.

"Don't you? It was only another of the coincidences, of course. While I stood staring at the clock Anson came in with Griffith's tool kit. 'I've got to tinker her again,' he said. 'She's got so she keeps Pacific time with one hand and Eastern with the other.' Then I understood that he had been tinkering it and had merely gone over to Griffith's tent for the tools."

"Well," said Grislow again, "what of it? The clock struck seven, you say; but it also struck four."

Brouillard's smile tilted his curling mustaches to the sardonic angle.

"The combination was what called the turn, Grizzly. To-day happens to be my twenty-eighth birthday – the end of the fourth cycle of seven."

"By George!" ejaculated the hydrographer in mock perturbation, sitting up so suddenly that he dropped his pipe into the ashes of the fire. "In that case, according to what seems to be the well-established custom, something is due to fall in right now!"

"I have been looking for it all day," returned Brouillard calmly, "which is considerably more ridiculous than anything else I have owned to, you will say. Let it go at that. We'll talk about something real if you'd rather – that auxiliary reservoir supply from the Apache Basin, for example. Were the field-notes in when you left Washington?" And from the abrupt break, the technicalities came to their own again; were still holding the centre of the stage after the groups around the mess fires had melted away into the bunk shelters and tents, and the fires themselves had died down into chastened pools of incandescence edged each with its beach line of silvered ashes.

It was Murray Grislow who finally rang the curtain call on the prolonged shop-talk.

"Say, man! do you know that it is after ten o'clock?" he demanded, holding the face of his watch down to the glow of the dying embers. "You may sit here all night, if you like, but it's me for the blankets and a few lines of 'tired Nature's sweet restorer, balmy' – Now, what in the name of a guilty conscience is *that*?"

As it chanced, they were both facing toward the lower end of the valley when the quotation-breaking apparition flashed into view. In the deepest of the shadows at the mouth of the gorge, where the torrenting Niquoia straightened itself momentarily before entering upon its plunging race through the mountain barrier, a beam of white light flickered unsteadily for a fraction of a second. Then it became a luminous pencil to trace a zigzag line up the winding course of the river, across to the foot-hill spur where the camp of the Reclamation-Service vanguard was pitched, and so on around to the base of Chigringo. For certain other seconds it remained quiescent, glowing balefully like the eye of some fabled monster searching for its prey. Then it was gone.

Grislow's comment took the form of a half-startled exclamation.

"By Jove! wouldn't that give you a fit of the creepies? – this far from civilization and a dynamo?"

"It wasn't an electric," returned Brouillard thoughtfully, apparently taking Grislow's suggestion literally. "It was an acetylene."

"Supposing it was – what's the difference? Aren't we just as far from a carbide shop as we are from the dynamo? What are you calling it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," was the half-absent reply. Brouillard was still staring fixedly at the distant gulf of blackness where the mysterious light had appeared and disappeared.

"Then I'll make it and go to bed," said the hydrographer, rising and stretching his arms over his head. "If it had come a couple of hours ago we should have called it the 'spot-light,' turned on to mark the end of your fourth act and the beginning, auspicious or otherwise, of the fifth. Maybe it is, anyway; maybe the property-man was asleep or drunk and forgot to turn it on at the spectacular instant. How will that do?"

Brouillard had got upon his feet and was buttoning his many-pocketed shooting-coat.

"It will do to put you into the Balaam saddle-beast class, Grizzy," he said, almost morosely. Then he added: "I'm going to take a little hike down yonder for investigative purposes. Want to come along?"

But the mapper of watersheds was yawning sleepily. "Not on your tintype," he refused. "I'm going to 'cork it orf in me 'ammick.' Wake me up when you come back and tell me what the fifth act is going to do to you. The more I think of it the more I'm convinced that it *was* the spot-light, a little overdue, after all." And he turned away chuckling.

It was only a short mile from the camp on the inward slopes of the eastern foot-hills to the mouth of the outlet gorge, across which Brouillard could already see, in mental prevision, the great gray wall of the projected Niquoia dam – his future work – curving majestically from the broken shoulder of Chigringo to the opposing steep of Jack's Mountain. The half-grown moon, tilting now toward the sky-line of the western barrier, was leaving the canyon portal in deepest gloom. As Brouillard swung along he kept a watchful eye upon the gorge shadows, half expecting a return of the mysterious apparition. But when he finally reached the canyon portal and began to seek for the trail which roughly paralleled the left bank of the stream the mystery was still unexplained.

From its upper portal in the valley's throat to the point where the river debouches among the low sand-hills of the Buckskin Desert the canyon of the Niquoia measures little more than a mile as the bird flies, though its crookings through the barrier mountains fairly double the distance. Beginning as a broken ravine at the valley outlet, the gorge narrows in its lower third to a cliff-walled raceway for the torrent, and the trail, leaving the bank of the stream, climbs the forested slope of a boundary spur to descend abruptly to the water's edge again at the desert gateway, where the Niquoia, leaping joyously from the last of its many hamperings, becomes a placid river of the plain.

Picking his way judiciously because the trail was new to him, Brouillard came in due time to the descending path among the spruces and scrub-pines leading to the western outlook upon the desert swales and sand-hills. At the canyon portal, where the forest thinned away and left him standing at the head of the final descending plunge in the trail, he found himself looking down upon the explanation of the curious apparition.

None the less, what he saw was in itself rather inexplicable. In the first desert looping of the river a camp-fire of piñon knots was blazing cheerfully, and beside it, with a picnic hamper for a table, sat a supper party of three – two men and a woman – in enveloping dust-coats, and a third man in chauffeur leather serving the sitters. Back of the group, and with its detachable search-light missing, stood a huge touring-car to account for the picnic hamper, the dust-coats, the man in leather, and, doubtless, for the apparitional eye which had appeared and disappeared at the mouth of the upper gorge. Also it accounted, in a purely physical sense, for the presence of the picnickers, though the whim which had led them to cross the desolate Buckskin Desert for the dubious pleasure of making an all-night bivouac on its eastern edge was not so readily apparent.

Being himself a Bedouin of the desert, Brouillard's first impulse was hospitable. But when he remarked the ample proportions of the great touring-car and remembered the newness and rawness of his temporary camp he quickly decided that the young woman member of the party would probably fare better where she was.

This being the case, the young engineer saw no reason why he should intrude upon the group at the cheerful camp-fire. On the contrary, he began speedily to find good and sufficient reasons why he should not. That the real restraining motive was a sudden attack of desert shyness he would not have

admitted. But the fact remained. Good red blood with its quickenings of courage and self-reliance, and a manful ability to do and dare, are the desert's gifts; but the penalty the desert exacts in return for them is evenly proportioned. Four years in the Reclamation Service had made the good-looking young chief of construction a man-queller of quality. But each year of isolation had done something toward weakening the social ties.

A loosened pebble turned the scale. When a bit of the coarse-grained sandstone of the trail rolled under Brouillard's foot and went clattering down to plunge into the stream the man in chauffeur leather reached for the search-light lantern and directed its beam upon the canyon portal. But by that time Brouillard had sought the shelter of the scrub-pines and was retracing his steps up the shoulder of the mountain.

II

J. Wesley Crœsus

Measured even by the rather exacting standards of the mining and cattle country, Brouillard was not what the West calls "jumpy." Four years of field-work, government or other, count for something; and the man who has proved powder-shy in any stage of his grapple with the Land of Short Notice is customarily a dead man.

In spite of his training, however, the young chief of construction, making an early morning exploration of the site for the new dam at the mouth of the outlet gorge while the rank and file of the pioneer force were building the permanent camp half-way between the foot-hills and the river, winced handsomely when the shock of a distance-muffled explosion trembled upon the crisp morning air, coming, as it seemed, from some point near the lower end of the canyon.

The dull rumble of the explosion and the little start for which it was accountable were disconcerting in more ways than one. As an industry captain busy with the preliminaries of what promised to be one of the greatest of the modern salvages of the waste places, Brouillard had been assuring himself that his work was large enough to fill all his horizons. But the detonating crash reminded him forcibly that the presence of the touring party was asserting itself as a disturbing element and that the incident of its discovery the night before had been dividing time pretty equally with his verification of the locating engineer's blue-print mappings and field-notes.

This was the first thought, and it was pointedly irritating. But the rebound flung him quickly over into the field of the common humanities. The explosion was too heavy to figure as a gun-shot; and, besides, it was the closed season for game. Therefore, it must have been an accident of some sort – possibly the blowing up of the automobile. Brouillard had once seen the gasolene tank of a motor-car take fire and go up like a pyrotechnic set piece in a sham battle.

Between this and a hurried weighting of the sheaf of blue-prints with his field-glass preparatory to a first-aid dash down the outlet gorge, there was no appreciable interval. But the humane impulse doubled back upon itself tumultuously when he came to his outlook halting place of the night before.

There had been no accident. The big touring-car, yellow with the dust of the Buckskin, stood intact on the sand flat where it had been backed and turned and headed toward the desert. Wading in the shallows of the river with a linen dust robe for a seine, the two younger men of the party were gathering the choicest of the dead mountain trout with which the eddy was thickly dotted. Coming toward him on the upward trail and climbing laboriously to gain the easier path among the pines, were the two remaining members of the party – an elderly, pudgy, stockily built man with a gray face, stiff gray mustaches and sandy-gray eyes to match, and the young woman, booted, gauntleted, veiled, and bulked into shapelessness by her touring coat, and yet triumphing exuberantly over all of these handicaps in an ebullient excess of captivating beauty and attractiveness.

Being a fisherman of mark and a true sportsman, Brouillard had a sudden rush of blood to the anger cells when he realized that the alarm which had brought him two hard-breathing miles out of his way had been the discharge of a stick of dynamite thrown into the Niquoia for the fish-killing purpose. In his code the dynamiting of a stream figured as a high crime. But the two on the trail had come up, and his protest was forestalled by the elderly man with the gray face and the sandy-gray eyes, whose explosive "Ha!" was as much a measure of his breathlessness as of his surprise.

"I was just telling Van Bruce that his thundering fish cartridge would raise the neighbors," the trail climber went on with a stout man's chuckle. And then: "You're one of the Reclamation engineers? Great work the government is undertaking here – fine opportunity to demonstrate the lifting power of aggregated capital backed by science and energy and a whole heap of initiative. It's a high honor to be connected with it, and that's a fact. You *are* connected with it, aren't you?"

Brouillard's nod was for the man, but his words were for the young woman whose beauty refused to be quenched by the touring handicaps. "Yes, I am in charge of it," he said.

"Ha!" said the stout man, and this time the exclamation was purely approbative. "Chief engineer, eh? That's fine, *fine!* You're young, and you've climbed pretty fast. But that's the way with you young men nowadays; you begin where we older fellows leave off. I'm glad we met you. My name is Cortwright – J. Wesley Cortwright, of Chicago. And yours is – ?"

Brouillard named himself in one word. Strangers usually found him bluntly unresponsive to anything like effusiveness, but he was finding it curiously difficult to resist the good-natured heartiness which seemed to exude from the talkative gentleman, overlaying him like the honeydew on the leaves in a droughty forest.

If Mr. J. Wesley Cortwright's surprise on hearing the Brouillard surname was not genuine it was at least an excellent imitation.

"Well, well, well – you don't say! Not of the Brouillards of Knox County, Indiana? – but, of course, you must be. There is only the one family that I ever heard of, and it is mighty good, old *voyageur* stock, too, dating 'way back to the Revolutionary War, and further. I've bought hogs of the farmer Brouillards hundreds of times when I was in the packing business, and I want to tell you that no finer animals ever came into the Chicago market."

"Yes?" said Brouillard, driving the word in edgewise. "I am sorry to say that I don't know many of the farmers. Our branch of the family settled near Vincennes, and my father was on the bench, when he wasn't in politics."

"What? Not Judge Antoine! Why, my dear young man! Do you know that I once had the pleasure of introducing your good father to my bankers in Chicago? It was years ago, at a time when he was interested in floating a bond issue for some growing industry down on the Wabash. And to think that away out here in this howling wilderness, a thousand miles from nowhere, as you might say, I should meet his son!"

Brouillard laughed and fell headlong into the pit of triteness.

"The world isn't so very big when you come to surround it properly, Mr. Cortwright," he asserted.

"That's a fact; and we're doing our level best nowadays to make and keep it little," buzzed the portly man cheerfully, with a wave of one pudgy arm toward the automobile. "It's about a hundred and twenty miles from this to El Gato, on the Grand Canyon, isn't it, Mr. Brouillard? Well, we did it in five hours yesterday afternoon, and we could have cut an hour out of that if Rickert hadn't mistaken the way across the Buckskin. Not that it made any special difference. We expected to spend one night out and came prepared."

Brouillard admitted that the touring feat kept even pace with the quickening spirit of the age; but he did not add that the motive for the feat was not quite so apparent as it might be. This mystery, however, was immediately brushed aside by Mr. Cortwright, speaking in his character of universal ouster of mysteries.

"You are wondering what fool notion chased us away out here in the desert when we had a comfortable hotel to stop at," he rattled on. "I'll tell you, Mr. Brouillard – in confidence. It was curiosity – raw, country curiosity. The papers and magazines have been full of this Buckskin reclamation scheme, and we wanted to see the place where all the wonderful miracles were going to get themselves wrought out. Have you got time to 'put us next'?"

Brouillard, as the son of the man who had been introduced to the Chicago money gods in his hour of need, could scarcely do less than to take the time. The project, he explained, contemplated the building of a high dam across the upper end of the Niquoia Canyon and the converting of the inland valley above into a great storage reservoir. From this reservoir a series of distributing canals would lead the water out upon the arid lands of the Buckskin and the miracle would be a fact accomplished.

"Sure, sure!" said the cheerful querist, feeling in the pockets of the automobile coat for a cigar. At the match-striking instant he remembered a thing neglected. "By George! you'll have to excuse me, Mr. Brouillard; I'm always forgetting the little social dewdabs. Let me present you to my daughter Genevieve. Gene, shake hands with the son of my good old friend Judge Antoine Brouillard, of Vincennes."

It was rather awkwardly done, and somehow Brouillard could not help fancying that Mr. Cortwright could have done it better; that the roughly informal introduction was only one of the component parts of a studied brusquerie which Mr. Cortwright could put on and off at will, like a well-worn working coat. But when the unquenchable beauty stripped her gauntlet and gave him her hand, with a dazzling smile and a word of acknowledgment which was not borrowed from her father's effusive vocabulary, he straightway fell into another pit of triteness and his saving first impressions of Mr. J. Wesley Cortwright's character began to fade.

"I'm immensely interested," was Miss Cortwright's comment on the outlining of the reclamation project. "Do you mean to say that real farms with green things growing on them can be made out of that frightful desert we drove over yesterday afternoon?"

Brouillard smiled and plunged fatuously. "Oh, yes; the farms are already there. Nature made them, you know; she merely forgot to arrange for their watering." He was going on to tell about the exhaustive experiments the Department of Agriculture experts had been making upon the Buckskin soils when the gentleman whose name had once figured upon countless thousands of lard packages cut in.

"Do you know what I'm thinking about, Mr. Brouillard? I'm saying it over soft and slow to myself that no young man in this world ever had such a magnificent fighting chance as you have right here," he averred, the sandy-gray eyes growing suddenly alert and shrewd. "If you don't come out of this with money enough to buy in all those bonds your father was placing that time in Chicago – but of course you will."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you mean, Mr. Cortwright," said Brouillard, with some inner monitor warning him that it would be better not to understand.

The portly gentleman became suddenly facetious.

"Hear him, Gene," he chuckled, sharing the joke with his daughter; "he says he doesn't understand!" Then to Brouillard: "Say, young man; you don't mean to tell me that your father's son needs a guardian, do you? You know exactly where these canals are going to run and all the choice spots they are going to irrigate; what's to prevent your getting in ahead of the rush and taking up a dozen or so of those prime quarter-sections – homesteads, town sites, and the like? Lack of money? Why, bless your soul, there are plenty of us who would fall all over ourselves running to back a proposition like that – any God's quantity of us who would fairly throw the working capital at you! For that matter, I don't know but I'd undertake to finance you alone."

Brouillard's first impulse sprang full-grown out of honest anger. That any man who had known his father should make such a proposal to that father's son was a bald insult to the father's memory. But the calmer second thought turned wrath into amused tolerance. The costly touring-car, the idle, time-killing jaunt in the desert, the dynamiting of the river for the sake of taking a few fish – all these were the indices of a point of view limited strictly by a successful market for hog products. Why should he go out of his way to quarrel with it on high moral grounds?

"You forget that I am first of all the government's hired man, Mr. Cortwright," he demurred. "My job of dam building will be fully big enough and strenuous enough to keep me busy. Aside from that, I fancy the department heads would take it rather hard if we fellows in the field went plum picking."

"Let them!" retorted the potential backer of profitable side issues. "What's the odds if you go to it and bring back the money? I tell you, Mr. Brouillard, money – bunched money – is what talks. A good, healthy bank balance makes so much noise that you can't hear the knockers. If the Washington

crowd had your chance – but never mind, that's your business and none of mine, and you'll take it as it's meant, as a good-natured hint to your father's son. How far is it up to where you are going to build your dam?"

Brouillard gave the distance, and Mr. Cortwright measured the visible trail grades with a deprecatory eye.

"Do you think my daughter could walk it?" he asked.

Miss Genevieve answered for herself: "Of course I can walk it; can't I, Mr. Brouillard?"

"I'll be glad to show you the way if you care to try," Brouillard offered; and the tentative invitation was promptly accepted.

The transfer of view-points from the lower end of the canyon to the upper was effected without incident, save at its beginning, when the father would have called down to the young man who had waded ashore and was drying himself before the camp-fire. "Van Bruce won't care to go," the daughter hastened to say; and Brouillard, whose gift it was to be able to pick out and identify the human derelict at long range, understood perfectly well the reason for the young woman's hasty interruption. One result of the successfully marketed lard packages was very plainly evident in the dissipated face and hangdog attitude of the marketer's son.

Conversation flagged, even to the discouragement of a voluble money king, on the climb from the Buckskin level to that of the reservoir valley. The trail was narrow, and Brouillard unconsciously set a pace which was almost inhospitable for a stockily built man whose tendency was toward increasing waist measures. But when they reached the pine-tree of the anchored blue-prints at the upper portal, Mr. Cortwright recovered his breath sufficiently to gasp his appreciation of the prospect and its possibilities.

"Why, good goodness, Mr. Brouillard, it's practically all done for you!" he wheezed, taking in the level, mountain-enclosed valley with an appraisive eye-sweep. "Van Bruce and the chauffeur came up here last night, with one of the car lamps for a lantern, but of course they couldn't bring back any idea of the place. What will you do? – build your dam right here and take out your canal through the canyon? Is that the plan?"

Brouillard nodded and went a little further into details, showing how the inward-arching barrier would be anchored into the two opposing mountain buttresses.

"And the structure itself – how high is it to be?"

"Two hundred feet above the spillway apron foot."

The lard millionaire twisted his short, fat neck and guessed the distance up the precipitous slopes of Chigringo and Jack's Mountain.

"That will be a whale of a chunk of masonry," he said. Then, with business-like directness: "What will you build it of? – concrete?"

"Yes; concrete and steel."

"Then you are going to need Portland cement – a whole world of it. Where will you get it? And how will you get it here?"

Brouillard smiled inwardly at the pork packer's suddenly awakened interest in the technical ways and means. His four years in the desert had taken him out of touch with a money-making world, and this momentary contact with one of its successful devotees was illuminating. He had a growing conviction that the sordid atmosphere which appeared to be as the breath of life to Mr. J. Wesley Cortwright would presently begin to make things taste coppery, but the inextinguishable charm of the veiled princess was a compensation. It was partly for the sake of seeing her with the veil abolished that he recovered the paper-weighting field-glass and gave it to her, showing her how to focus it upon the upper reaches of the valley.

"We are in luck on the cement proposition," he told the eager money-maker. "We shall probably manufacture our own supply right here on the ground. There is plenty of limestone and an excellent

shale in those hills just beyond our camp; and for burning fuel there is a fairly good vein of bituminous coal underlying that farther range at the head of the valley."

"H'm," said the millionaire; "a cement plant, eh? There's money in that anywhere on the face of the globe, just now. And over here, where there is no transportation – Gad! if you only had somebody to sell cement to, you could ask your own price. The materials have all been tested, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; we've had experts in here for more than a year. The material is all right."

"And your labor?"

"On the dam, you mean? One advantage of concrete work is that it does not require any great proportion of skilled labor, the crushing, mixing, and placing all being done by machinery. We shall work all the Indians we can get from the Navajo Reservation, forty-odd miles south of here; for the remainder we shall import men from the States, bringing them in over the Timanyoni High Line – the trail from Quesado on the Red Butte Western. At least, that is what we shall do for the present. Later on, the railroad will probably build an extension up the Barking Dog and over War Arrow Pass."

Mr. Cortwright's calculating eye roved once more over the attractive prospect.

"Fuel for your power plant? – wood I take it?" he surmised; and then: "Oh, I forgot; you say you have coal."

"Yes; there is coal, of a sort; good enough for the cement kilns. But we sha'n't burn it for power. Neither shall we burn the timber, which can be put to much better use in building and in false- and form-work. There are no finer lumber forests this side of the Sierras. For power we shall utilize the river. There is another small canyon at the head of the valley where a temporary dam can be built which will deliver power enough to run anything – an entire manufacturing city, if we had one."

Mr. Cortwright made a clucking noise with his tongue and blew his cheeks out like a swimmer gasping for breath.

"Julius Cæsar!" he exploded. "You stand there and tell me calmly that the government has all these resources cooped up here in a barrel? – that nobody is going to get a chance to make any money out of them? It's a crime, Mr. Brouillard; that's just what it is – a crime!"

"No; I didn't say that. The resources just happen to be here and we shall turn them to good account. But if there were any feasible transportation facilities I doubt if we should make use of these native raw materials. It is the policy of the department to go into the market like any other buyer where it can. But here there are no sellers, or, rather, no way in which the sellers can reach us."

"No sellers and no chance for a man to get the thin edge of a wedge in anywhere," lamented the money-maker despairingly. Then his eye lighted upon the graybeard dump of a solitary mine high up on the face of Mount Chigringo. "What's that up there?" he demanded.

"It is a mine," said Brouillard, showing Miss Cortwright how to adjust the field-glass for the shorter distance. "Two men named Massingale, father and son, are working it, I'm told." And then again to Miss Genevieve: "That is their cabin – on the trail a little to the right of the tunnel opening."

"I see it quite plainly," she returned. "Two people are just leaving it to ride down the path – a man and a woman, I think, though the woman – if it is a woman – is riding on a man's saddle."

Brouillard's eyebrows went up in a little arch of surprise. Harding, the topographical engineer who had made all the preliminary surveys and had spent the better part of the former summer in the Niquoia, had reported on the Massingales, father and son, and his report had conveyed a hint of possible antagonism on the part of the mine owners to the government project. But there had been no mention of a woman.

"The Massingale mine, eh?" broke in the appraiser of values crisply. "They showed us some ore specimens from that property while we were stopping over in Red Butte. It's rich – good and plenty rich – if they have the quantity. And somebody told me they had the quantity, too; only it was too far from the railroad – couldn't jack-freight it profitably over the Timanyonis."

"In which case it is one of many," Brouillard said, taking refuge in the generalities.

But Mr. Cortwright was not to be so easily diverted from the pointed particulars – the particulars having to do with the pursuit of the market trail.

"I'm beginning to get my feet on bottom, Brouillard," he said, dropping the courtesy prefix and shoving his fat hands deep into the pockets of the dust-coat. "There's a business proposition here, and it looks mighty good to me. That was a mere nursery notion I gave you a while back – about picking up homesteads and town sites in the Buckskin. The big thing is right here. I tell you, I can smell money in this valley of yours – scads of it."

Brouillard laughed. "It is only the fragrance of future Reclamation-Service appropriations," he suggested. "There will be a good bit of money spent here before the Buckskin Desert gets its maiden wetting."

"I don't mean that at all," was the impatient rejoinder. "Let me show you: you are going to have a population of some sort, if it's only the population that your big job will bring here. That's the basis. Then you're going to need material by the train load, not the raw stuff, which you say is right here on the ground, but the manufactured article – cement, lumber, and steel. You can ship this material in over the range at prices that will be pretty nearly prohibitory, or, as you suggest, it can be manufactured right here on the spot."

"The cement and the lumber can be produced here, but not the steel," Brouillard corrected.

"That's where you're off," snapped the millionaire. "There are fine ore beds in the Hophras and a pretty good quality of coking coal. Ten or twelve miles of a narrow-gauge railroad would dump the pig metal into the upper end of your valley, and there you are. With a small reduction plant you could tell the big steel people to go hang."

Brouillard admitted the postulate without prejudice to a keen and growing wonder. How did it happen that this Chicago money king had taken the trouble to inform himself so accurately in regard to the natural resources of the Niquoia region? Had he not expressly declared that the object of the desert automobile trip was mere tourist curiosity? Given a little time, the engineer would have cornered the inquiry, making it yield some sort of a reasonable answer; but Mr. Cortwright was galloping on again.

"There you are, then, with the three prime requisites in raw material: cement stock, timber, and pig metal. Fuel you've got, you say, and if it isn't good enough, your dummy railroad can supply you from the Hophra mines. Best of all, you've got power to burn – and that's the key to any manufacturing proposition. Well and good. Now, you know, and I know, that the government doesn't care to go into the manufacturing business when it can help it. Isn't that so?"

"Unquestionably. But this is a case of can't-help-it," Brouillard argued. "You couldn't begin to interest private capital in any of these industries you speak of."

"Why not?" was the curt demand.

"Because of their impermanence – their dependence upon a market which will quit definitely when the dam is completed. What you are suggesting predicates a good, busy little city in this valley, behind the dam – since there is no other feasible place for it – and it would be strictly a city of numbered days. When the dam is completed and the spillway gates are closed, the Niquoyastcàdje and everything in it will go down under two hundred feet of water."

"The – what?" queried Miss Cortwright, lowering the glass with which she had been following the progress of the two riders down the Buckskin trail from the high-pitched mine on Chigringo.

"The Niquoyastcàdje – 'Place-where-they-came-up,'" said Brouillard, elucidating for her. "That is the Navajo name for this valley. The Indians have a legend that this is the spot where their tribal ancestors came up from the underworld. Our map makers shortened it to 'Niquoia' and the cow-men of the Buckskin foot-hills have cut that to 'Nick-wire.'"

This bit of explanatory place lore was entirely lost upon Mr. J. Wesley Cortwright. He was chewing the ends of his short mustaches and scowling thoughtfully out upon the possible site of the future industrial city of the plain.

"Say, Brouillard," he cut in, "you get me the right to build that power dam, and give me the contracts for what material you'd rather buy than make, and I'll be switched if I don't take a shot at this drowning proposition myself. I tell you, it looks pretty good to me. What do you say?"

"I'll say what I said a few minutes ago," laughed the young chief of construction – "that I'm only a hired man. You'll have to go a good few rounds higher up on the authority ladder to close a deal like that. I'm not sure it wouldn't require an act of Congress."

"Well, by George, we might get even that if we have to," was the optimistic assertion. "You think about it."

"I guess it isn't my think," said Brouillard, still inclined to take the retired pork packer's suggestion as the mere ravings of a money-mad promoter. "As the government engineer in charge of this work, I couldn't afford to be identified even as a friendly intermediary in any such scheme as the one you are proposing."

"Of course, I suppose not," agreed the would-be promoter, sucking his under lip in a way ominously familiar to his antagonists in the wheat pit. Then he glanced at his watch and changed the subject abruptly. "We'll have to be straggling back to the chug-wagon. Much obliged to you, Mr. Brouillard. Will you come down and see us off?"

Brouillard said "yes," for Miss Cortwright's sake, and took the field-glass she was returning to put it back upon the sheaf of blue-prints. She saw what he did with it and made instant acknowledgments.

"It was good of you to neglect your work for us," she said, smiling level-eyed at him when he straightened up.

He was frank enough to tell the truth – or part of it.

"It was the dynamite that called me off. Doesn't your brother know that it is illegal to shoot a trout stream?"

She waited until her father was out of ear-shot on the gorge trail before she answered:

"He ought to know that it is caddish and unsportsmanlike. I didn't know what he and Rickert were doing or I should have stopped them."

"In that event we shouldn't have met, and you would have missed your chance of seeing the Niqoyastcàdje and the site of the city that isn't to be – the city of numbered days," he jested, adding, less lightly: "You wouldn't have missed very much."

"No?" she countered with a bright return of the alluring smile which he had first seen through the filmy gauze of the automobile veil. "Do you want me to say that I should have missed a great deal? You may consider it said if you wish."

He made no reply to the bit of persiflage, and a little later felt the inward warmth of an upflash of resentment directed not at his companion but at himself for having been momentarily tempted to take the persiflage seriously. The temptation was another of the consequences of the four years of isolation which had cut him off from the world of women no less completely than from the world of money-getting. But it was rather humiliating, none the less.

"What have I done to make you forget how to talk?" she wished to know, five minutes further on, when his silence was promising to outlast the canyon passage.

"You? Nothing at all," he hastened to say. Then he took the first step in the fatal road of attempting to account for himself. "But I have forgotten, just the same. It has been years since I have had a chance to talk to a woman. Do you wonder that I have lost the knack?"

"How dreadful!" she laughed. And afterward, with a return to the half-serious mood which had threatened to reopen the door so lately slammed in the face of temptation: "Perhaps we shall come back to Niqo – Niqoy – I simply *can't* say it without sneezing – and then you might relearn some of the things you have forgotten. Wouldn't that be delightful?"

This time he chose to ignore utterly the voice of the inward monitor, which was assuring him coldly that young women of Miss Cortwright's world plane were constrained by the accepted rules

of their kind to play the game in season and out of season, and his half-laughing reply was at once a defiance and a counter-challenge.

"I dare you to come!" he said brazenly. "Haven't you heard how the men of the desert camps kill each other for the chance to pick up a lady's handkerchief?"

They were at the final descent in the trail, with the Buckskin blanknesses showing hotly beyond the curtaining of pines, and there was space only for a flash of the beautiful eyes and a beckoning word.

"In that case, I hope you know how to shoot straight, Mr. Brouillard," she said quizzically; and then they passed at a step from romance to the crude realities.

The realities were basing themselves upon the advent of two new-comers, riding down the Chingingo trail to the ford which had been the scene of the fish slaughtering; a sunburnt young man in goatskin "shaps," flannel shirt and a flapping Stetson, and a girl whose face reminded Brouillard of one of the Madonnas, whose name and painter he strove vainly to recall. Ten seconds farther along the horses of the pair were sniffing suspiciously at the automobile, and the young man under the flapping hat was telling Van Bruce Cortwright what he thought of cartridge fishermen in general, and of this present cartridge fisherman in particular.

"Which the same, being translated into Buckskin English, hollers like this," he concluded. "Don't you tote any more fish ca'tridges into this here rese'vation; not no more, whatsoever. Who says so? Well, if anybody should ask, you might say it was Tig Smith, foreman o' the Tri'-Circ' outfit. No, I ain't no game warden, but what I say goes as she lays. *Savez?*"

The chauffeur was adjusting something under the upturned bonnet of the touring-car and thus hiding his grin. Mr. Cortwright, who had maintained his lead on the descent to the desert level, was trying to come between his sullen-faced son and the irate cattleman, money in hand. Brouillard walked his companion down to the car and helped her to a seat in the tonneau. She repaid him with a nod and a smile, and when he saw that the crudities were not troubling her he stepped aside and unconsciously fell to comparing the two – the girl on horseback and his walking mate of the canyon passage.

They had little enough in common, apart from their descent from Eve, he decided – and the decision itself was subconscious. The millionaire's daughter was a warm blonde, beautiful, queenly, a finished product of civilization and high-priced culture; a woman of the world, standing but a single remove from the generation of quick money-getting and yet able to make the money take its proper place as a means to an end.

And the girl on horseback? Brouillard had to look twice before he could attempt to classify her, and even then she baffled him. A rather slight figure, suggestive of the flexible strength of a silken cord; a face winsome rather than beautiful; coils and masses of copper-brown hair escaping under the jaunty cow-boy hat; eyes ... it was her eyes that made Brouillard look the third time: they were blue, with a hint of violet in them; he made sure of this when she turned her head and met his gaze fearlessly and with a certain calm serenity that made him feel suddenly uncomfortable and half embarrassed. Nevertheless, he would not look aside; and he caught himself wondering if her cow-boy lover – he had already jumped to the sentimental conclusion – had ever been able to look into those steadfast eyes and trifle with the truth.

So far the young chief of construction had travelled on the road reflective while the fish-slaughtering matter was getting itself threshed out at the river's edge. When it was finally settled – not by the tender of money that Mr. Cortwright had made – the man Smith and his pretty riding mate galloped through the ford and disappeared among the barren hills, and the chauffeur was at liberty to start the motor.

"*Au revoir*, Mr. Brouillard," said the princess, as the big car righted itself for the southward flight into the desert. Then, when the wheels began to churn in the loose sand of the halting place, she leaned out to give him a woman's leave-taking. "If I were you I shouldn't fall in love with the calm-

eyed goddess who rides like a man. Mr. Tri'-Circ' Smith might object, you know; and you haven't yet told me whether or not you can shoot straight."

There was something almost heart-warming in the bit of parting badinage; something to make the young engineer feel figuratively for the knife with which he had resolutely cut around himself to the dividing of all hindrances, sentimental or other, on a certain wretched day years before when he had shouldered his life back-load.

But the warmth might have given place to a disconcerting chill if he could have heard Mr. J. Wesley Cortwright's remark to his seat companion, made when the canyon portal of the Niquoia and the man climbing the path beside it were hazy mirage distortions in the backward distances.

"He isn't going to be the dead easy mark I hoped to find in the son of the old bankrupt hair-splitter, Genie, girl. But he'll come down and hook himself all right if the bait is well covered with his particular brand of sugar. Don't you forget it."

III

Sands of Pactolus

If Victor Brouillard had been disposed to speculate curiously upon the possibilities suggested by Mr. J. Wesley Cortwright on the occasion of the capitalist's brief visit to the Niquoia, or had been tempted to dwell sentimentally upon the idyllic crossing of orbits – Miss Genevieve's and his own – on the desert's rim, there was little leisure for either indulgence during the strenuous early summer weeks which followed the Cortwright invasion.

Popular belief to the contrary notwithstanding, it is not precisely true that all government undertakings are dilatory industrial imitations, designed, primarily, to promote the even-handed cutting of some appropriation pie, and, secondarily, to provide easy sinecures for placemen and political heelers. Holding no brief for the government, one may still say without fear of contradiction that *laissez-faire* has seldom been justly charged against the Reclamation Service. Fairly confronting his problem, Brouillard did not find himself hampered by departmental inertia. While he was rapidly organizing his force for the constructive attack, the equipment and preliminary material for the building of the great dam were piling up by the train load on the side-tracks at Quesado; and at once the man- and beast-killing task of rushing the excavating outfit of machinery, teams, scrapers, rock-drilling installations, steam-shovels, and the like, over the War Arrow trail was begun.

During the weeks which followed, the same trail, and a little later that from the Navajo Reservation on the south, were strung with ant-like processions of laborers pouring into the shut-in valley at the foot of Mount Chigringo. Almost as if by magic a populous camp of tents, shelter shacks, and Indian tepees sprang up in the level bed-bottom of the future lake; camp-fires gave place to mess kitchens; the commissary became a busy department store stocked with everything that thrifty or thriftless labor might wish to purchase; and daily the great foundation scorings in the buttressing shoulders of Jack's Mountain and Chigringo grew deeper and wider under the churning of the air-drills, the crashings of the dynamite, and the rattle and chug of the steam-shovels.

Magically, too, the life of the isolated working camp sprang into being. From the beginning its speech was a curious polyglot; the hissings and bubblings of the melting-pot out of which a new citizenry is poured. Poles and Slovaks, men from the slopes of the Carpathians, the terraces of the Apennines, and the passes of the Balkans; Scandinavians from the pineries of the north, and a colony of railroad-grading Greeks, fresh from the building of a great transcontinental line; all these and more were spilled into the melting-pot, and a new Babel resulted. Only the Indians held aloof. Careful from the first for these wards of the nation, Brouillard had made laws of Draconian severity. The Navajos were isolated upon a small reservation of their own on the Jack's Mountain side of the Niquoia, a full half mile from the many-tongued camp in the open valley; and for the man caught "boot-legging" among the Indians there were penalties swift and merciless.

It was after the huge task of foundation digging was well under way and the work of constructing the small power dam in the upper canyon had been begun that the young chief of construction, busy with a thousand details, had his first forcible reminder of the continued existence of Mr. J. Wesley Cortwright.

It came in the form of a communication from Washington, forwarded by special post-rider service from Quesado, and it called a halt upon the up-river power project. In accordance with its settled policy, the Reclamation Service would refrain, in the Niquoia as elsewhere, from entering into competition with private citizens; would do nothing to discourage the investment of private capital. A company had been formed to take over the power production and to establish a plant for the manufacture of cement, and Brouillard was instructed to govern himself accordingly. For his information, the department letter-writer went on to say, it was to be understood that the company

was duly organized under the provisions of an act of Congress; that it had bound itself to furnish power and material at prices satisfactory to the Service; and that the relations between it and the government field-staff on the ground were to be entirely friendly.

"It's a graft – a pull-down with a profit in it for some bunch of money leeches a little higher up!" was the young chief's angry comment when he had given Grislow the letter to read. "Without knowing any more of the details than that letter gives, I'd be willing to bet a month's pay that this is the fine Italian hand of Mr. J. Wesley Cortwright!"

Grislow's eyebrows went up in doubtful interrogation.

"Ought I to know the gentleman?" he queried mildly. "I don't seem to recall the name."

Brouillard got up from his desk to go and stand at one of the little square windows of the log-built office quarters. For some reason which he had not taken the trouble to define, even to himself, he had carefully refrained from telling the hydrographer anything about the early morning meeting with the automobilists at the edge of the desert basin; of that and of the subsequent visit of two of them to the site of the dam.

"No; you don't know him," he said, turning back to the worker at the mapping table. "It was his motor party that was camping at the Buckskin ford the night we broke in here – the night when we saw the search-light."

"And you met him? I thought you told me you merely went down and took a look – didn't butt in?"

"I didn't – that night. But the next morning – "

The hydrographer's smile was a jocose grimace.

"I recollect now; you said that one of the motorists was a young woman."

Brouillard resented the implication irritably.

"Don't be an ass, Murray," he snapped; and then he went on, with the frown of impatience still wrinkling between his eyes. "The young woman was the daughter. There was a cub of a son, and he fired a stick of dynamite in the river to kill a mess of trout. I heard the explosion and thought it might be the gasolene tank of the car."

"Naturally," said Grislow guilelessly. "And, quite as naturally, you went down to see. I'm not sure that I shouldn't have done it myself."

"Of course you would," was the touchy retort. "When I got there and found out what had happened, I meant to make a second drop-out; but Cortwright and his daughter were coming up the trail, and he hailed me. After that I couldn't do less than the decent thing. They wanted to see the valley, and I showed them the way in. Cortwright is the multimillionaire pork packer of Chicago, and he went up into the air like a lunatic over the money-making chances there were going to be in this job. I didn't pay much attention to his chortlings at the time. It didn't seem remotely credible that anybody with real money to invest would plant it in the bottom of the Niquoia reservoir."

"But now you think he is going to make his bluff good?"

"That looks very much like it," said Brouillard sourly, pointing to the letter from Washington. "That scheme is going to change the whole face of Nature for us up here, Grislow. It will spell trouble right from the jump."

"Oh, I don't know," was the deprecatory rejoinder. "It will relieve us of a lot of side-issue industries – cut 'em out and bury 'em, so far as we are concerned."

"That part of it is all right, of course; but it won't end there; not by a hundred miles. We've started in here to be a law to ourselves – as we've got to be to handle this mixed multitude of brigands and ditch diggers. But when this new company gets on the ground it will be different. There will be pull-hauling and scrapping and liquor selling, and we can't go in and straighten things out with a club as we do now. Jobson says in that letter that the relations have got to be friendly! I'll bet anything you like that I'll have to go and read the riot act to those people before they've been twenty-four hours on their job!"

Grislow was trying the point of his mapping-pen on his thumb nail. "Curious that this particular fly should drop into your pot of ointment on your birthday, wasn't it?" he remarked.

"O suffering Jehu!" gritted Brouillard ragefully. "Are you never going to forget that senseless bit of twaddle?"

"You're not giving me a chance to forget it," said the map-maker soberly. "You told me that night that the seven-year characteristic was change; and you're a changed man, Victor, if ever there was one. Moreover, it began that very night – or the next morning."

"Oh, damn!"

"Certainly, if you wish it. But that is only another proof of what I am saying. It's getting on your nerves now. Do you know what the men have named you? They call you 'Hell's-Fire.' That has come to be your word when you light into them for something they've done or haven't done. No longer ago than this morning you were swearing at Griffith, as if you'd forgotten that the boy is only a year out of college and can't be supposed to know as much as Leshington or Anson. Where is your sense of humor?"

Brouillard laughed, if only to prove that his sense of humor was still unimpaired.

"They are a fearful lot of dubs, Grizzly," he said, meaning the laborers; "the worst we've ever drawn, and that is saying a good deal. Three drunken brawls last night, and a man killed in Haley's Place. And I can't keep liquor out of the camp to save my soul – not if I should sit up nights to invent new regulations. The Navajos are the best of the bunch and we've managed to keep the fire from spreading over on their side of the Niquoia, thus far. But if the whiskey ever gets hold in the tepees, we'll have orders to shoot Chief Nicagee's people back to their reservation in a holy minute."

Grislow nodded.

"Niyoastcàdje – 'Place-where-they-came-up.' It will be 'Place-where-they-go-down' if the tin-horns and boot-leggers get an inning."

"We'll all go to the devil on a toboggan-slide and there is the order for it," declared the chief morosely, again indicating the letter from Washington. "That means more human scum – a new town – an element that we can neither chase out nor control. Cortwright and his associates, whoever they are, won't care a rotten hang. They'll be here to sweat money out of the job; to sweat it in any and every way that offers, and to do it quick. All of which is bad enough, you'd say, Murray; but it isn't the worst of it. I've just run up against another thing that is threatening to raise merry hell in this valley."

"I know," said the hydrographer slowly. "You've been having a *séance* with Steve Massingale. Leshington told me about it."

"What did he tell you?" Brouillard demanded half-angrily.

"Oh, nothing much; nothing to make you hot at him. He happened to be in the other room when Massingale was here, and the door was open. He said he gathered the notion that the young sorehead was trying to bully you."

"He was," was the brittle admission. "See here, Grizzly."

The thing to be seen was a small buckskin bag which, when opened, gave up a paper packet folded like a medicine powder. The paper contained a spoonful of dust and pellets of metal of a dull yellow lustre.

The hydrographer drew a long breath and fingered the nuggets. "Gold – placer gold!" he exclaimed, and Brouillard nodded and went on to tell how he had come by the bag and its contents.

"Massingale had an axe to grind, of course. You may remember that Harding talked loosely about the Massingale opposition to the building of the dam. There was nothing in it. The opposition was purely personal and it was directed against Harding himself, with Amy Massingale for the exciting cause."

"That girl? – the elemental brute!" Grislow broke in warmly. He knew the miner's daughter fairly well by this time and, in common with every other man on the staff, not excepting the staff's chief, would have fought for her in any cause.

Brouillard nodded. "I don't know what Harding did, but Smith, the Triangle-Circle foreman, tells me that Steve was on the war-path; he told Harding when he left, last summer, that if he ever came back to the Niquoia, he'd come to stay – and stay dead."

"I never did like Harding's sex attitude any too well," was the hydrographer's definitive comment; and Brouillard went back to the matter of the morning's *séance* and its golden outcome.

"That is only a little side issue. Steve Massingale came to me this morning with a proposal that was about as cold-blooded as a slap in the face. Naturally, for good business reasons of their own, the Massingales want to see the railroad built over War Arrow Pass and into the Niquoia. In some way Steve has found out that I stand in pretty well with President Ford and the Pacific Southwestern people. His first break was to offer to incorporate the 'Little Susan' and to give me a block of the stock if I'd pull Ford's leg on the Extension proposition."

"Well?" queried Grislow. "The railroad over War Arrow Pass would be the biggest thing that ever happened for our job here. If it did nothing else, it would make us independent of these boomers that are coming in to sell us material at their own prices."

"Exactly. But my hands are tied; and, besides, Massingale's offer was a rank bribe. You can imagine what I told him – that I could neither accept stock in his mine nor say anything to influence the railroad people; that my position as chief engineer for the government cut me out both ways. Then he began to bully and pulled the club on me."

Again Grislow's smile was jocose.

"You haven't been tumbling into the ditch with Leshington and Griffith and the rest of us and making love to the little sister, have you?" he jested.

"Don't be a fool if you can help it," was the curt rejoinder. "And don't give yourself leave to say things like that about Amy Massingale. She is too good and sweet and clean-hearted to be dragged into this mix-up, even by implication. Do you get that, Murray?"

"Oh, yes; it's only another way of saying that I'm one of the fools. Go on with the Stephen end of it."

"Well, when I turned him down, young Massingale began to bluster and to say that I'd have to boost the railroad deal, whether I wanted to or not. I told him he couldn't prove it, and he said he would show me, if I'd take half an hour's walk up the valley with him. I humored him, more to get quit of him than for any other reason, and on the way past the camp he borrowed a frying-pan at one of the cook shacks. You know that long, narrow sand-bar in the river just below the mouth of the upper canyon?"

Grislow nodded.

"That is where we went for the proof. Massingale dipped up a panful of the bar sand, which he asked me to wash out for myself. I did it, and you have the results there in that paper. That bar is comparatively rich placer dirt."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the map-maker. "Comparatively rich, you say? – and you washed this spoonful out of a single pan?"

"Keep your head," said Brouillard coolly. "Massingale explained that I had happened to make a ten-strike; that the bar wasn't any such bonanza as that first result would indicate. I proved that, too, by washing some more of it without getting any more than a few 'colors.' But the fact remains: it's placer ground."

It was at this point that the larger aspect of the fact launched itself upon the hydrographer.

"A gold strike!" he gasped. "And we – we're planning to drown it under two hundred feet of a lake!"

Brouillard's laugh was harsh.

"Don't let the fever get hold of you, Grislow. Don't forget that we are here to carry out the plans of the Reclamation Service – which are more far-reaching and of a good bit greater consequence than a dozen placer-mines. Not that it didn't make me grab for hand-holds for a minute or two, mind you."

I wasn't quite as cold about it as I'm asking you to be, and I guess Massingale had calculated pretty carefully on the dramatic effect of his little shock. Anyway, he drove the peg down good and hard. If I would jump in and pull every possible string to hurry the railroad over the range, and keep on pulling them, the secret of the placer bar would remain a secret. Otherwise he, Stephen Massingale, would give it away, publish it, advertise it to the world. You know what that would mean for us, Murray."

"My Lord! I should say so! We'd have Boomtown-on-the-pike right now, with all the variations! Every white man in the camp would chuck his job in the hollow half of a minute and go to gravel washing!"

"That's it precisely," Brouillard acquiesced gloomily. "Massingale is a young tough, but he is shrewd enough, when he is sober. He had me dead to rights, and he knew it. 'You don't want any gold camp starting up here in the bottom of your reservoir,' he said; and I had to admit it."

Grislow had found a magnifying-glass in the drawer of the mapping table, and he was holding it in focus over the small collection of grain gold and nuggets. In the midst of the eager examination he looked up suddenly to say: "Hold on a minute. Why is Steve proposing to give this thing away? Why isn't he working the bar himself?"

"He explained that phase of it, after a fashion – said that placer-mining was always more or less of a gamble and that they had a sure thing of it in the 'Little Susan.' Of course, if the thing had to be given away, he and his father would avail themselves of their rights as discoverers and take their chance with the crowd for the sake of the ready money they might get out of it. Otherwise they'd be content to let it alone and stick to their legitimate business, which is quartz-mining."

"And to do that successfully they've got to have the railroad. Say, Victor, I'm beginning to acquire a great and growing respect for Mr. Stephen Massingale. This field is too small for him; altogether too small. He ought to get a job with some of the malefactors of great wealth. How did you settle it finally?"

"Massingale was too shrewd to try to push me over the edge while there seemed to be a fairly good chance that I would walk over of my own accord. He told me to take a week or two and think about it. We dropped the matter by common consent after we left the bar in the Quadjenäi bend, and on the way down the valley Massingale pitched in a bit of information out of what seemed to be sheer good-will. It seems that he and his father have done a lot of test drilling up and down the side of Chigringo at one time and another, and he told me that there is a bed of micaceous shale under our south anchorage, cautioning me not to let the excavation stop until we had gone through it."

"Well! That was pretty decent of him."

"Yes; and it shows that Harding was lying when he said that the Massingales were opposing the reclamation project. They are frankly in favor of it. Irrigation in the Buckskin means population; and population will bring the railroad, sooner or later. In the matter of hurrying the track-laying, Massingale is only adopting modern business methods. He has a club and he is using it."

Grislow was biting the end of his penholder thoughtfully.

"What are you going to do about it, Victor?" he asked at length. "We can't stand for any more chaos than the gods have already doped out for us, can we?"

Brouillard took another long minute at the office window before he said: "What would you do if you were in my place, Murray?"

But at this the map-maker put up his hands as if to ward off a blow.

"No, you don't!" he laughed. "I can at least refuse to be that kind of a fool. Go and hunt you a professional conscience keeper; I went out of that business for keeps in my sophomore year. But I'll venture a small prophecy: We'll have the railroad – and you'll pull for it. And then, whether Massingale tells or doesn't tell, the golden secret will leak out. And after that, the deluge."

IV

A Fire of Little Sticks

Two days after the arrival of the letter from Washington announcing the approaching invasion of private capital, Brouillard, returning from a horseback trip into the Buckskin, where Anson and Griffith were setting grade stakes for the canal diggers, found a visitor awaiting him in the camp headquarters office.

One glance at the thick-bodied, heavy-faced man chewing an extinct cigar while he made himself comfortable in the only approach to a lounging chair that the office afforded was sufficient to awaken an alert antagonism. Quick to found friendships or enmities upon the intuitive first impression, Brouillard's acknowledgment was curt and business-brusque when the big man introduced himself without taking the trouble to get out of his chair.

"My name is Hosford and I represent the Niquoia Improvement Company as its manager and resident engineer," said the lounge, shifting the dead cigar from one corner of his hard-bitted mouth to the other. "You're Brillard, the government man, I take it?"

"Brouillard, if you please," was the crisp correction. And then with a careful effacement of the final saving trace of hospitality in tone or manner: "What can we do for you, Mr. Hosford?"

"A good many things, first and last. I'm two or three days ahead of my outfit, and you can put me up somewhere until I get a camp of my own. You've got some sort of an engineers' mess, I take it?"

"We have," said Brouillard briefly. With Anson and Griffith absent on the field-work, there were two vacancies in the staff mess. Moreover, the law of the desert prescribes that not even an enemy shall be refused bread and bed. "You'll make yourself at home with us, of course," he added, and he tried to say it without making it sound too much like a challenge.

"All right; so much for that part of it," said the self-invited guest. "Now for the business end of the deal – why don't you sit down?"

Brouillard planted himself behind his desk and began to fill his blackened office pipe, coldly refusing Hosford's tender of a cigar.

"You were speaking of the business matter," he suggested bluntly.

"Yes. I'd like to go over your plans for the power dam in the upper canyon. If they look good to me I'll adopt them."

Brouillard paused to light his pipe before he replied.

"Perhaps we'd better clear away the underbrush before we begin on the standing timber, Mr. Hosford," he said, when the tobacco was glowing militantly in the pipe bowl. "Have you been given to understand that this office is in any sense a tail to your Improvement Company's kite?"

"I haven't been 'given to understand' anything," was the gruff rejoinder. "Our company has acquired certain rights in this valley, and I'm taking it for granted that you've had the situation doped out to you. It won't be worth your while to quarrel with us, Mr. Brouillard."

"I am very far from wishing to quarrel with anybody," said Brouillard, but his tone belied the words. "At the same time, if you think that we are going to do your engineering work, or any part of it, for you, you are pretty severely mistaken. Our own job is fully big enough to keep us busy."

"You're off," said the big man coolly. "Somebody has bungled in giving you the dope. You want to keep your job, don't you?"

"That is neither here nor there. What we are discussing at present is the department's attitude toward your enterprise. I shall be exceeding my instructions if I make that attitude friendly to the detriment of my own work."

The new resident manager sat back in his chair and chewed his cigar reflectively, staring up at the log beaming of the office ceiling. When he began again he did not seem to think it worth while to shift his gaze from the abstractions.

"You're just like all the other government men I've ever had to do business with, Brouillard; pig-headed, obstinate, blind as bats to their own interests. I didn't especially want to begin by knocking you into line, but I guess it'll have to be done. In the first place, let me tell you that there are all kinds of big money behind this little sky-rocket of ours here in the Niquoia: ten millions, twenty millions, thirty millions, if they're needed."

Brouillard shook his head. "I can't count beyond a hundred, Mr. Hosford."

"All right; then I'll get you on the other side. Suppose I should tell you that practically all of your bosses are in with us; what then?"

"Your stockholders' listings concern me even less than your capitalization. We are miles apart yet."

Again the representative of Niquoia Improvement took time to shift the extinct cigar.

"I guess the best way to get you is to send a little wire to Washington," he said reflectively. "How does that strike you?"

"I haven't the slightest interest in what you may do or fail to do," said Brouillard. "At the same time, as I have already said, I don't wish to quarrel with you or with your company."

"Ah! that touched you, didn't it?"

"Not in the sense you are imagining; no. Send your wire if you like. You may have the use of the government telegraph. The office is in the second shack north of this."

"Still you say you don't want to scrap?"

"Certainly not. As you have intimated, we shall have to do business together as buyer and seller. I merely wished to make it plain that the Reclamation Service doesn't put its engineering department at the disposal of the Niquoia Improvement Company."

"But you have made the plans for this power plant, haven't you?"

"Yes; and they are the property of the department. If you want them, I'll turn them over to you upon a proper order from headquarters."

"That's a little more like it. Where did you say I'd find your wire office?"

Brouillard gave the information a second time, and as Hosford went out, Grislow came in and took his place at the mapping table.

"Glad you got back in time to save my life," he remarked pointedly, with a sly glance at his chief. "He's been ploughing furrows up and down my little potato patch all day."

"Humph! Digging for information, I suppose?" grunted Brouillard.

"Just that; and he's been getting it, too. Not out of me, particularly, but out of everybody. Also, he was willing to impart a little. We're in for the time of our lives, Victor."

"I know it," was the crabbed rejoinder.

"You don't know the tenth part of it," asserted the hydrographer slowly. "It's a modest name, 'The Niquoia Improvement Company,' but it is going to be like charity – covering a multitude of sins. Do you know what that plank-faced organizer has got up his sleeve? He is going to build us a neat, up-to-date little city right here in the middle of our midst. If I hadn't made him believe that I was only a draughtsman, he would have had me out with a transit, running the lines for the streets."

"A city? – in this reservoir bottom? I guess not. He was only stringing you to kill time, Grizzly."

"Don't you fool yourself!" exclaimed the map-maker. "He's got the plans in his grip. We're going to be on a little reservation set apart for us by the grace of God and the kindness of these promoters. The remainder of the valley is laid off into cute little squares and streets, with everything named and numbered, ready to be listed in the brokers' offices. You may not be aware of it, but this palatial office building of ours fronts on Chingringo Avenue."

"Stuff!" said Brouillard. "What has all this bubble blowing got to do with the building of a temporary power dam and the setting up of a couple of cement kilns?"

Grislow laid his pen aside and whirled around on his working-stool.

"Don't you make any easy-going mistake, Victor," he said earnestly. "The cement and power proposition is only a side issue. These new people are going to take over the sawmills, open up quarries, build a stub railroad to the Hophra mines, grade a practicable stage road over the range to Quesado, and put on a fast-mule freight line to serve until the railroad builds in. Wouldn't that set your teeth on edge?"

"I can't believe it, Murray. It's a leaf out of the book of Bedlam! Take a fair shot at it and see where the bullet lands: this entire crazy fake is built upon one solitary, lonesome fact – the fact that we're here, with a job on our hands big enough to create an active, present-moment market for labor and material. There is absolutely nothing else behind the bubble blowing; if we were not here the Niquoia Improvement Company would never have been heard of!"

Grislow laughed. "Your arguing that twice two makes four doesn't change the iridescent hue of the bubble," he volunteered. "If big money has seen a chance to skin somebody, the mere fact that the end of the world is due to come along down the pike some day isn't going to cut any obstructing figure. We'll all be buying and selling corner lots in Hosford's new city before we're a month older. Don't you believe it?"

"I'll believe it when I see it," was Brouillard's reply; and with this the matter rested for the moment.

It was later in the day, an hour or so after the serving of the hearty supper in the engineers' mess tent, that Brouillard was given to see another and still less tolerable side of his temporary guest. Hosford had come into the office to plant himself solidly in the makeshift easy-chair for the smoking of a big, black, after-supper cigar.

"I've been looking over your rules and regulations, Brouillard," he began, after an interval of silence which Brouillard had been careful not to break. "You're making a capital mistake in trying to transplant the old Connecticut blue laws out here. Your working-men ought to have the right to spend their money in any way that suits 'em."

Brouillard was pointedly occupying himself at his desk, but he looked up long enough to say: "Whiskey, you mean?"

"That and other things. They tell me that you don't allow any open gambling, or any women here outside of the families of the workmen."

"We don't," was the short rejoinder.

"That won't hold water after we get things fairly in motion."

"It will have to hold water, so far as we are concerned, if I have to build a stockade around the camp," snapped Brouillard.

Hosford's heavy face wrinkled itself in a mirthless smile. "You're nutty," he remarked. "When I find a man bearing down hard on all the little vices, it always makes me wonder what's the name of the corking big one he is trying to cover up."

Since there was obviously no peaceful reply to be made to this, Brouillard bent lower over his work and said nothing. At every fresh step in the forced acquaintance the new-comer was painstakingly developing new antagonisms. Sooner or later, Brouillard knew, it would come to an open rupture, but he was hoping that the actual hostilities could be postponed until after Hosford had worn out his temporary welcome as a guest in the engineers' mess.

For a time the big man in the easy-chair smoked on in silence. Then he began again:

"Say, Brouillard, I saw one little girl to-day that didn't belong to your workmen's-family outfit, and she's a peach; came riding down the trail with her brother from that mine up on the south mountain – Massingale's, isn't it? By Jove! she fairly made my mouth water!"

Inasmuch as no man can read field-notes when the page has suddenly become a red blur, Brouillard looked up.

"You are my guest, in a way, Mr. Hosford; for that reason I can't very well tell you what I think of you." So much he was able to say quietly. Then the control mechanism burned out in a flash of fiery rage and he cursed the guest fluently and comprehensively, winding up with a crude and savage threat of dissection and dismemberment if he should ever venture so much as to name Miss Massingale again in the threatener's hearing.

Hosford sat up slowly, and his big face turned darkly red.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he broke out. "So you're *that* kind of a fire-eater, are you? Lord, Lord! I didn't suppose anything like that ever happened outside of the ten-cent shockers. Wake up, man; this is the twentieth century we're living in. Don't look at me that way!"

But the wave of insane wrath was already subsiding, and Brouillard, half ashamed of the momentary lapse into savagery, was once more scowling down at the pages of his note-book. Further along, when the succeeding silence had been undisturbed for five full minutes, he began to realize that the hot Brouillard temper, which he had heretofore been able to keep within prudent bounds, had latterly been growing more and more rebellious. He could no longer be sure of what he would say or do under sudden provocation. True, he argued, the provocation in the present instance had been sufficiently maddening; but there had been other upflashings of the murderous inner fire with less to excuse them.

Hosford finished his cigar, and when he tossed the butt out through the opened window, Brouillard hoped he was going. But the promoter-manager made no move other than to take a fresh cigar from his pocket case and light it. Brouillard worked on silently, ignoring the big figure in the easy-chair by the window, and striving to regain his lost equilibrium. To have shown Hosford the weakness of the control barriers was bad enough, but to have pointed out the exact spot at which they were most easily assailable was worse. He thought it would be singular if Hosford should not remember how and where to strike when the real conflict should begin, and he was properly humiliated by the reflection that he had rashly given the enemy an advantage.

He was calling Hosford "the enemy" now and making no ameliorating reservations. That the plans of the boomers would speedily breed chaos, and bring the blight of disorder and lawlessness upon the Niquoia project and everything connected with it, he made no manner of doubt. How was he to hold a camp of several hundred men in decent subjection if the temptations and allurements of a boomers' city were to be brought in and set down within arm's reach of the work on the dam? It seemed blankly incredible that the department heads in Washington should sanction such an invasion if they knew the full meaning of it.

The "if" gave him an idea. What if the boomers were taking an unauthorized ell for their authorized inch? He had taken a telegraph pad from the desk stationery rack and was composing his message of inquiry when the door opened and Quinlan, the operator, came in with a communication fresh from the Washington wire. The message was an indirect reply to Hosford's telegraphed appeal to the higher powers. Brouillard read it, stuck it upon the file, and took a roll of blue-prints from the bottom drawer of his desk.

"Here are the drawings for your power installation, Mr. Hosford," he said, handing the roll to the man in the chair. And a little later he went out to smoke a pipe in the open air, leaving the message of inquiry unwritten.

V

Symptomatic

For some few minutes after the gray-bearded, absent-eyed old man who had been working at the mine forge had disappeared in the depths of the tunnel upon finishing his job of drill pointing, the two on the cabin porch made no attempt to resume the talk which had been broken by the blacksmithing. But when the rumbling thunder of the ore-car which the elder Massingale was pushing ahead of him into the mine had died away in the subterranean distances Brouillard began again.

"I do get your point of view – sometimes," he said. "Or perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that I have had it now and then in times past. Civilization, or what stands for it, does have a way of shrinking into littleness, not to say cheapness, when one can get the proper perspective. And your life up here on Chingringo has given you the needful detached point of view."

The trouble shadows in the eyes of the young woman who was sitting in the fish-net hammock gave place to a smile of gentle derision.

"Do you call *that* civilization?" she demanded, indicating the stragglng new town spreading itself, map-like, in the valley below.

"I suppose it is – one form of it. At least it is civilization in the making. Everything has to have some sort of a beginning."

Miss Massingale acquiesced in a little uptilt of her perfectly rounded chin.

"Just the same, you don't pretend to say that you are enjoying it," she said in manifest deprecation.

"Oh, I don't know. My work is down there, and a camp is a necessary factor in it. You'd say that the more civilized the surroundings become, the less need there would be for me to sit up nights to keep the lid on. That would be the reasonable conclusion, wouldn't it?"

"If you were really trying to make the fact fit the theory – which you are not – it would be a sheer, self-centred eye-shutting to all the greater things that may be involved," she continued. "Don't you ever get beyond that?"

"I did at first. When I learned a few weeks ago that the boomers had taken hold of us in earnest and that we were due to acquire a real town with all the trimmings, I was righteously hot. Apart from the added trouble a wide-open town would be likely to give us in maintaining order in the camp, it seemed so crudely unnecessary to start a pigeon-plucking match at this distance from Wall Street."

"But now," she queried – "now, I suppose, you have become reconciled?"

"I am growing more philosophical, let us say. There are just about so many pigeons to be plucked, anyway; they'd moult if they weren't plucked. And it may as well be done here as on the Stock Exchange, when you come to think of it."

"I like you least when you talk that way," said the young woman in the hammock, with open-eyed frankness. "Do you do it as other men do? – just to hear how it sounds?"

Brouillard, sitting on the top step of the porch, leaned his head against the porch post and laughed.

"You know too much – a lot too much for a person of your tender years," he asserted. "Which names one more of the charming collection of contradictions which your father or mother or somebody had the temerity to label 'Amy,' sweetest and most seraphic of diminutives."

"If you don't like my name – " she began, and then she went off at another tangent. "Please tell me why I am a 'collection of contradictions.' Tig never says anything like that to me."

"'Tig,'" said Brouillard, "'Tig' Smith. Speaking of names, I've often wondered how on earth our breezy friend of the Tri'-Circ' ever got such a handle as that."

"It's his own name – or a part of it. His father was a country preacher back in Tennessee, and I imagine he had the Smith feeling that the surname wasn't very distinctive. So he named the poor boy Tiglath-Pileser. Just the same, it is not to laugh," she went on in friendly loyalty. "Tig can't help his name, and, anyway, he's the vastest possible improvement on those old Assyrian gentlemen who were the first to wear it."

Brouillard's gaze went past the shapely little figure in the string hammock to lose itself in the far Timanyoni distances.

"You are a bundle of surprises," he said, letting the musing thought slip into speech. "What can you possibly know about the Assyrians?"

She made a funny little grimace at him. "It was 'contradictions' a moment ago and now it is 'surprises.' Which reminds me, you haven't told me why I am a 'collection.'"

"I think you know well enough," he retorted. "The first time I saw you – down at the Nick-wire ford with Tig, you remember – I tried to recall which Madonna it is that has your mouth and eyes."

"Well, did you succeed in placing the lady?"

"No. Somehow, I haven't cared to since I've come to know you. You're different – always different, and then – oh, well, comparisons are such hopelessly inadequate things, anyway," he finished lamely.

"You are not getting on very well with the 'contradictions,'" she demurred.

"Oh, I can catalogue them if you push me to it. One minute you are the Madonna lady that I can't recall, calm, reposeful, truthful, and all that, you know – so truthful that those childlike eyes of yours would make a stuttering imbecile of the man who should come to you with a lie in his mouth."

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