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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CLAIM JUMPERS: A ROMANCE ***

THE CLAIM JUMPERS

A ROMANCE

BY

STEWART EDWARD WHITE

NEW YORK

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CHAPTER I

JIM LESLIE WRITES A LETTER

In a fifth-story sitting room of a New York boarding house four youths were holding a discussion. The sitting room was large and square, and in the wildest disorder, which was, however, sublimated into a certain system by an illuminated device to the effect that one should "Have a Place for Everything, and then there'll be one Place you won't have to look." Easels and artists' materials thrust back to the wall sufficiently advertised the art student, and perhaps explained the untidiness.

Two of the occupants of the room, curled up on elevated window ledges, were emitting clouds of tobacco smoke and nursing their knees; the other two, naked to the waist, sat on a couple of ordinary bedroom mattresses deposited carefully in the vacant centre of the apartment. They were eager, alert-looking young men, well-muscled, curly of hair, and possessing in common an unabashed carriage of the head which, more plainly than any mere facial resemblance, proved them brothers. They, too, were nursing their knees.

"He must be an unadorned ass," remarked one of the occupants of the window seats, in answer to some previous statement.

"He is not," categorically denied a youth of the mattresses. "My dear Hench, you make no distinctions. I've been talking about the boy's people and his bringing up and the way he acts, whereupon you fly off on a tangent and coolly conclude things about the boy himself. It is not only unkind, but stupid."

Hench laughed. "You amuse me, Jeems," said he; "elucidate."

Jeems let go his knees. The upper part of his body, thus deprived of support, fell backward on the mattress. He then clasped his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling.

"Listen, ye multitude," he began; "I'm an artist. So are you. I'm also a philosopher. You are not. Therefore, I'll deign to instruct you. Ben de Laney has a father and a mother. The father is pompous, conceited, and a bore. The mother is pompous, conceited, and a bore. The father uses language of whose absolutely vapid correctness Addison would have been proud. So does the mother, unless she forgets, in which case the old man calls her down hard. They, are rich and of a good social position. The latter worries them, because they have to keep up its dignity."

"They succeed," interrupted the other brother fervently, "they succeed. I dined there once. After that I went around to the waxworks to get cheered up a bit."

"Quite so, Bertie," replied the philosopher; "but you interrupted me just before I got to my point. The poor old creatures had been married many years before Bennie came to cheer *them* up. Naturally, Bennie has been the whole thing ever since. He is allowed a few privileges, but always under the best auspices. The rest of the time he stays at home, is told what or what not a gentleman should do, and is instructed in the genealogy of the de Laney's."

"The mother is always impressing him with the fact that he is a de Laney on both sides," interpolated Bert.

"Important, if true, as the newspapers say," remarked the other young man on the window ledge. "What constitutes a de Laney?"

"Hereditary lack of humour, Beck, my boy. Well, the result is that poor Bennie is a sort of----" the speaker hesitated for his word.

"Willy boy," suggested Beck, mildly.

"Something of the sort, but not exactly. A 'willy boy' never has ideas. Bennie has."

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, he wants to get away. He doesn't seem quite content with his job of idle aristocrat. I believe he's been pestering the old man to send him West. Old man doesn't approve."

"That the fine bloom of culture will become rubbed off in the contact with rude, rough men, seems to me inevitable," mimicked Bert in pedantic tones, "unless a firm sense of personal dignity and an equally firm sense of our obligations to more refined though absent friends hedges us about with adequate safeguards."

The four laughed. "That's his style, sure enough," Jim agreed.

"What does he want to do West?" asked Hench.

"*He* doesn't know. Write a book, I believe, or something of that sort. But he *isn't* an ass. He has a lot of good stuff in him, only it will never get a chance, fixed the way he is now."

A silence fell, which was broken at last by Bert.

"Come, Jeems," he suggested; "here we've taken up Hench's valuable idea, but are no farther with it."

"True," said Jeems.

He rolled over on his hands and knees. Bert took up a similar position by his side.

"Go!" shouted Hench from the window ledge.

At the word, the two on the mattress turned and grappled each other fiercely, half rising to their feet in the strenuousness of endeavour. Jeems tried frantically for a half-Nelson. While preventing it the wily Bert awaited his chance for a hammer-lock. In the moment of indecision as to which would succeed in his charitable design, a knock on the door put an end to hostilities. The gladiators sat upright and panted.

A young man stepped bashfully into the room and closed the door behind him.

The newcomer was a clean-cut young fellow, of perhaps twenty-two years of age, with regular features, brown eyes, straight hair, and sensitive lips. He was exceedingly well-dressed. A moment's pause followed his appearance. Then:

"Why, it's our old friend, the kid!" cried Jeems.

"Don't let me interrupt," begged the youth diffidently.

"No interruption. End of round one," panted Jeems. "Glad you came. Bertie, here, was twisting my delicate clavicle most cruelly. Know Hench and Beck there?"

De Laney bowed to the young men in the window, who removed their pipes from their mouths and grinned amiably.

"This, gentlemen," explained Jeems, without changing his position, "is Mr. Bennie de Laney on both sides. It is extremely fortunate for Mr. de Laney that he is a de Laney on both sides, for otherwise he would be lop-sided."

"You will find a seat, Mr. de Laney, in the adjoining bedroom," said the first, with great politeness; "and if you don't care to go in there, you will stand yourself in the corner by that easel

until the conclusion of this little discussion between Jeems and myself.—Jeems, will you kindly state the merits of the discussion to the gentleman? I'm out of breath."

Jeems kindly would.

"Bert and I have, for the last few weeks, been obeying the parting commands of our dear mother. 'Boys,' said she, with tears in her eyes, 'Boys, always take care of one another.' So each evening I have tried to tuck Bertie in his little bed, and Bertie, with equal enthusiasm, has attempted to tuck *me* in. It has been hard on pyjamas, bed springs, and the temper of the Lady with the Piano who resides in the apartments immediately beneath; so, at the wise suggestion of our friends in the windows"—he waved a graceful hand toward them, and they gravely bowed acknowledgment—"we are now engaged in deciding the matter Græco-Roman. The winner 'tucks.' Come on, Bertie."

The two again took position side by side, on their hands and knees, while Mr. Hench explained to de Laney that this method of beginning the bout was necessary, because the limited area of the mat precluded flying falls. At a signal from Mr. Beck, they turned and grappled, Jeems, by the grace of Providence, on top. In the course of the combat it often happened that the two mattresses would slide apart. The contestants, suspending their struggles, would then try to kick them together again without releasing the advantage of their holds. The noise was beautiful. To de Laney, strong in maternal admonitions as to proper deportment, it was all new and stirring, and quite without precedent. He applauded excitedly, and made as much racket as the rest.

A sudden and vigorous knock for the second time put an end to hostilities. The wrestlers again sat bolt upright on the mattresses, and listened.

"Gentlemen," cried an irritated German voice, "there is a lady schleeping on the next floor!"

"Karl, Karl!" called one of the irrepressibles, "can I never teach you to be accurate! No lady could possibly be sleeping anywhere in the building."

He arose from the mattress and shook himself.

"Jeems," he continued sadly, "the world is against true virtue. Our dear mother's wishes can not be respected."

De Laney came out of his corner.

"Fellows," he cried with enthusiasm, "I want you to come up and stay all night with me some time, so mother can see that gentlemen can make a noise!"

Bertie sat down suddenly and shrieked. Jeems rolled over and over, clutching small feathers from the mattress in the agony of his delight, while the clothed youths contented themselves with amused but gurgling chuckles.

"Bennie, my boy," gasped Jeems, at last, "you'll be the death of me! O Lord! O Lord! You unfortunate infant! You shall come here and have a drum to pound; yes, you shall." He tottered weakly to his feet. "Come, Bertie, let us go get dressed."

The two disappeared into the bedroom, leaving de Laney uncomfortably alone with the occupants of the window ledge.

The young fellow walked awkwardly across the room and sat down on a partly empty chair, not because he preferred sitting to standing, but in order to give himself time to recover from his embarrassment.

The sort of chaffing to which he had just been subjected was direct and brutal; it touched all his tender spots—the very spots wherein he realized the intensest soreness of his deficiencies, and about which, therefore, he was the most sensitive—yet, somehow, he liked it. This was because the Leslie boys meant to him everything free and young that he had missed in the precise atmosphere of his own home, and so he admired them and stood in delightful inferiority to them in spite of his wealth and position. He would have given anything he owned to have felt himself one of their sort; but, failing that, the next best thing was to possess their intimacy. Of this intimacy chaffing was a gauge. Bennington Clarence de Laney always glowed at heart when they rubbed his fur the wrong way, for it showed that they felt they knew him well enough to do so. And in this there was something just a little pathetic.

Bennington held to the society standpoint with men, so he thought he must keep up a conversation. He did so. It was laboured. Bennington thought of things to say about Art, the Theatre, and Books. Hench and Beck looked at each other from time to time.

Finally the door opened, and, to the relief of all, two sweated and white-ducked individuals appeared.

"And now, Jeems, we'll smoke the pipe of peace," suggested Bert, diving for the mantel and the pipe rack.

"Correct, my boy," responded Jeems, doing likewise. They lit up, and turned with simultaneous interest to their latest caller.

"And how is the proud plutocrat?" inquired Bert; "and how did he contrive to get leave to visit us rude and vulgar persons?"

The Leslies had called at the de Laney's, and, as Bert said, had dined there once. They recognised their status, and rejoiced therein.

"He is calling on the minister," explained Jeems for him. "Bennington, my son, you'll get caught at that some day, as sure as shooting. If your mamma ever found out that, instead of talking society-religion to old Garnett, you were revelling in this awful dissipation, you'd have to go abroad again."

"What did you call him?" inquired Bert.

"Call who?"

"Him—Bennie—what was that full name?"

"Bennington."

"Great Scott! and here I've been thinking all the time he was plain Benjamin! Tell us about it, my boy. What is it? It sounds like a battle of the Revolution. *Is* it a battle of the Revolution? Just to think that all this time we have been entertaining unawares a real live battle!"

De Laney grinned, half-embarrassed as usual.

"It's a family name," said he. "It's the name of an ancestor."

He never knew whether or not these vivacious youths really desired the varied information they demanded.

The Leslies looked upon him with awe.

"You don't mean to tell me," said Bertie, "that you are a Bennington! Well, well! This is a small world! We will celebrate the discovery." He walked to the door and touched a bell five times. "Beautiful system," he explained. "In a moment Karl will appear with five beers. This arrangement is possible because never, in any circumstances, do we ring for anything but beer."

The beer came. Two steins, two glasses, and a carefully scrubbed shaving mug were pressed into service. After the excitement of finding all these things had died, and the five men were grouped about the place in ungraceful but comfortable attitudes, Bennington bid for the sympathy he had sought in this visit.

"Fellows," said he, "I've something to tell you."

"Let her flicker," said Jim.

"I'm going away next week. It's all settled."

"Bar Harbour, Trouville, Paris, or Berlin?"

"None of them. I'm going West."

"Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, San Diego, or Monterey?"

"None of them. I'm going to the real West. I'm going to a mining camp."

The Leslies straightened their backbones.

"Don't spring things on us that way," reproved Bertie severely; "you'll give us heart disease. Now repeat softly."

"I am going to a mining camp," obeyed Bennington, a little shamefacedly.

"With whom?"

"Alone."

This time the Leslies sprang quite to their feet.

"By the Great Horn Spoon, man!" cried Jim. "Alone! No chaperon! Good Lord!"

"Yes," said Bennington, "I've always wanted to go West. I want to write, and I'm sure, in that great, free country, I'll get a chance for development. I had to work hard to induce father and mother to consent, but it's done now, and I leave next week. Father procured me a position out there in one of the camps. I'm to be local treasurer, or something like that; I'm not quite sure, you see, for I haven't talked with Bishop yet. I go to his office for directions to-morrow."

At the mention of Bishop the Leslies glanced at each other behind the young man's back.

"Bishop?" repeated Jim. "Where's your job located?"

"In the Black Hills of South Dakota, somewhere near a little place called Spanish Gulch."

This time the Leslies winked at each other.

"It's a nice country," commented Bert vaguely; "I've been there."

"Oh, have you?" cried the young man. "What's it like?"

"Hills, pines, log houses, good hunting—oh, it's Western enough."

A clock struck in a church tower outside. In spite of himself, Bennington started.

"Better run along home," laughed Jim; "your mamma will be angry."

To prove that this consideration carried no weight, Bennington stayed ten minutes longer. Then he descended the five flights of stairs deliberately enough, but once out of earshot of his friends, he ran several blocks. Before going into the house he took off his shoes. In spite of the precaution, his mother called to him as he passed her room. It was half past ten.

Beck and Hench kicked de Laney's chair aside, and drew up more comfortably before the fire; but James would have none of it. He seemed to be excited.

"No," he vetoed decidedly. "You fellows have got to get out! I've got something to do, and I can't be bothered."

The visitors grumbled. "There's true hospitality for you," objected they; "turn your best friends out into the cold world! I like that!"

"Sorry, boys," insisted James, unmoved. "Got an inspiration. Get out! Vamoose!"

They went, grumbling loudly down the length of the stairs, to the disgust of the Lady with the Piano on the floor below.

"What're you up to, anyway, Jimmie?" inquired the brother with some curiosity.

James had swept a space clear on the table, and was arranging some stationery.

"Don't you care," he replied; "you just sit down and read your little Omar for a while."

He plunged into the labours of composition, and Bert sat smoking meditatively. After some moments the writer passed a letter over to the smoker.

"Think it'll do?" he inquired.

Bert read the letter through carefully.

"Jeems," said he, after due deliberation, "Jeems, you're a blooming genius."

James stamped the envelope.

"I'll mail it for you when I go out in the morning," Bert suggested.

"Not on your daily bread, sonny. It is posted now by my own hand. We won't take any chances on *this* layout, and that I can tell you."

He tramped down four flights and to the corner, although it was midnight and bitter cold. Then, with a seraphic grin on his countenance, he went to bed and slept the sleep of the just.

The envelope was addressed to a Mr. James Fay, Spanish Gulch, South Dakota.

CHAPTER II

THE STORY-BOOK WEST

When a man is twenty-one, and has had no experience, and graduates from a small college where he roomed alone in splendour, and possesses a gift of words and a certain delight in reading, and is thrown into new and, to him, romantic surroundings—when all these stars of chance cross their orbits, he begins to write a novel. The novel never has anything to do with the aforesaid new and romantic surroundings; neither has it the faintest connection with anything the author has ever seen. That would limit his imagination.

Once he was well settled in his new home, and the first excitement of novel impressions had worn off, Bennington de Laney began to write regularly three hours a day. He did his scribbling with a fountain pen, on typewriter paper, and left a broad right-hand margin, just as he had seen Brooks do. In it he experienced, above all, a delightful feeling of power. He enjoyed to the full his ability to swing gorgeous involved sentences, phrase after phrase, down the long arc of rhetoric, without a pause, without a quiver, until they rushed unhasting up the other slope to end in beautiful words, polysyllabic, but with just the right number of syllables. Interspersed were short sentences. He counted the words in one or the other of these two sorts, carefully noting the relations they bore to each other. On occasions he despaired because they did not bear the right relations. And he also dragged out, squirming, the Anglo-Saxon and Latin derivations, and set them up in a row that he might observe their respective numbers. He was uneasily conscious that he ought, in the dread of college anathema, to use the former, but he loved the many-syllabled crash or modulated music of the latter. Also, there was the question of getting variety into his paragraph lengths. It was all excellent practice.

And yet this technique, absorbing as it was, counted as nothing in comparison with the subject-matter.

The method was talent; the subject-matter was Genius; and Genius had evolved an Idea which no one had ever thought of before—something brand new under the sun. It goes without saying that the Idea symbolized a great Truth. One department, the more impersonal, of Bennington's critical faculty, assured him that the Idea would take rank with the Ideas of Plato and Emerson. Emerson, Bennington worshipped. Plato he also worshipped—because Emerson told him to. He had never read Plato himself. The other, the more personal and modest, however, had perforce to doubt this, not because it doubted the Idea, but because Bennington was not naturally conceited.

To settle the discrepancy he began to write. He laid the scene in Arabia and decided to call it *Aliris: A Romance of all Time*, because he liked the smooth, easy flow of the syllables.

The consciousness that he could do all this sugar-coated his Wild Western experiences, which otherwise might have been a little disagreeable. He could comfort himself with the reflection that he was superior, if ridiculous.

In spots, he was certainly the latter. The locality into which his destinies had led him lay in the tumultuous centre of the Hills, about thirty miles from Custer and ten from Hill City. Spanish Gulch was three miles down the draw. The Holy Smoke mine, to which Bennington was accredited, he found to consist of a hole in the ground, of unsounded depth, two log structures, and a chicken coop. The log structures resembled those he had read about. In one of them lived Arthur and his wife. The wife did the cooking. Arthur did nothing at all but sit in the shade and smoke a pipe, and this in spite of the fact that he did not look like a loafer. He had no official connection with the place, except that of husband to Mrs. Arthur. The other member of the community was Davidson, alias Old Mizzou.

The latter was cordial and voluble. As he was blessed with a long white beard of the patriarchal type, he inspired confidence. He used exclusively the present tense and chewed tobacco. He also played interminable cribbage. Likewise he talked. The latter was his strong point. Bennington found that within two days of his arrival he knew all about the company's business without having proved the necessity of stirring foot on his own behalf. The claims were not worth much, according to Old Mizzou. The company had been cheated. They would find it out some day. None of the ore assayed very high. For his part he did not see why they even did assessment work. Bennington was to look after the latter? All in good time. You know you had until the end of the year to do it. What else was there to do? Nothing much; The present holders had come into the property on a foreclosed mortgage, and weren't doing anything to develop it yet. Did Bennington know of their plans? No? Well, it looked as though the two of them were to have a pretty easy time of it, didn't it?

Old Mizzou tried, by adroit questioning, to find out just why de Laney had been sent West. There was, in reality, not enough to keep one man busy, and surely Old Mizzou considered himself quite competent to attend to that. Finally, he concluded that it must be to watch him—Old Mizzou. Acting on that supposition, he tried a new tack.

For two delicious hours he showed up, to his own satisfaction, Bennington's ignorance of mining. That was an easy enough task. Bennington did not even know what country-rock was. All he succeeded in eliciting confirmed him in the impression that de Laney was sent to spy on him. But why de Laney? Old Mizzou wagged his gray beard. And why spy on him? What could the company want to know? He gave it up. One thing alone was clear: this young man's understanding of his duties was very simple. Bennington imagined he was expected to see certain assessment work done (whatever that was), and was to find out what he could about the value of the property.

As a matter of sedulously concealed truth, he was really expected to do nothing at all. The place had been made for him through Mr. de Laney's influence, because he wanted to go West.

"Now, my boy," Bishop, the mining capitalist, had said, when Bennington had visited him in his New York office, "do you know anything about mining?"

"No, sir," Bennington replied.

"Well, that doesn't matter much. We don't expect to do anything in the way of development. The case, briefly, is this: We've bought this busted proposition of the people who were handling it, and have assumed their debt. They didn't run it right. They had a sort of a wildcat individual in charge of the thing, and he got contracts for sinking shafts with all the turtlebacks out there, and then didn't pay for them. Now, what we want you to do is this: First of all, you're to take charge financially at that end of the line. That means paying the local debts as we send you the money, and looking after whatever expenditures may become necessary. Then you'll have to attend to the assessment work. Do you know what assessment work is?"

"No, sir."

"Well, in order to hold the various claims legally, the owners have to do one hundred dollars' worth of work a year on each claim. If the work isn't done, the claims can be 'jumped.' You'll have to hire the men, buy the supplies, and see that the full amount is done. We have a man out there named Davidson. You can rely on him, and he'll help you out in all practical matters. He's a good enough practical miner, but he's useless in bossing a job or handling money. Between you, you ought to get along."

"I'll try, anyway."

"That's right. Then, another thing. You can put in your spare time investigating what the thing is worth. I don't expect much from you in that respect, for you haven't had enough experience; but do the best you can. It'll be good practice, anyway. Hunt up Davidson; go over all the claims; find out how the lead runs, and how it holds out; get samples and ship them to me; investigate everything you can, and don't be afraid to write when you're stuck."

In other words, Bennington was to hold the ends of the reins while some one else drove. But he did not know that. He felt his responsibility.

As to the assessment work, Old Mizzou had already assured him there was no immediate hurry; men were cheaper in the fall. As to investigating, he started in on that at once. He and Davidson climbed down shafts, and broke off ore, and worked the gold pan. It was fun.

In the morning Bennington decided to work from seven until ten on *Aliris*. Then for three hours he and Old Mizzou prospected. In the afternoon the young man took a vacation and hunted Wild Western adventures.

It may as well be remarked here that Bennington knew all about the West before he left home. Until this excursion he had never even crossed the Alleghanies, but he thought he appreciated the conditions thoroughly. This was because he was young. He could close his eyes and see the cowboys scouring the plain. As a parenthesis it should be noted that cowboys always scour the plain, just as sailors always scan the horizon. He knew how the cowboys looked, because he had seen Buffalo Bill's show; and he knew how they talked, because he had read accurate authors of the school of Bret Harte. He could even imagine the romantic mountain maidens.

With his preconceived notions the country, in most particulars, tallied interestingly. At first Bennington frequented the little town down the draw. It answered fairly well to the story-book descriptions, but proved a bit lively for him. The first day they lent him a horse. The horse looked sleepy. It took him twenty minutes to get on the animal and twenty seconds to fall off. There was an audience. They made him purchase strange drinks at outlandish prices. After that they shot holes all around his feet to induce him to dance. He had inherited an obstinate streak from some of his forebears, and declined when it went that far. They then did other things to him which were not pleasant. Most of these pranks seemed to have been instigated by a laughing, curly-haired young man named Fay. Fay had clear blue eyes, which seemed always to mock you. He could think up more diabolical schemes in ten minutes than the rest of the men in as many hours. Bennington came shortly to hate this man Fay. His attentions had so much of the gratuitous! For a number of days, even after the enjoyment of novelty had worn off, the Easterner returned bravely to Spanish Gulch every afternoon for the mail. It was a matter of pride with him. He did not like to be bluffed out. But Fay was always there.

"Tender *foot!*" the latter would shriek joyously, and bear down on the shrinking de Laney.

That would bring out the loafers. It all had to happen over again.

Bennington hoped that this performance would cease in time. It never did.

By a mental process, unnecessary to trace here, he modified his first views, and permitted Old Mizzou to get the mail. Spanish Gulch saw him no more.

After all, it was quite as good Western experience to wander in the hills. He did not regret the other. In fact, as he cast in review his research in Wild West literature, he perceived that the incidents of his town visits were the proper thing. He would not have had them different—to look back on. They were inspiring—to write home about. He recognised all the types—the miner, the gambler, the saloon-keeper, the bad man, the cowboy, the prospector—just as though they had stepped living from the pages of his classics. They had the true slouch; they used the picturesque language. The log cabins squared with his ideas. The broncos even exceeded them.

But now he had seen it all. There is no sense in draining an agreeable cup to satiety. He was quite content to enjoy his rambles in the hills, like the healthy youngster he was. But had he seen it all? On reflection, he acknowledged he could not make this statement to himself with a full consciousness of sincerity. One thing was lacking from the preconceived picture his imagination had drawn. There had been no Mountain Flowers. By that he meant girls.

Every one knows what a Western girl is. She is a beautiful creature, always, with clear, tanned skin, bright eyes, and curly hair. She wears a Tam o' Shanter. She rides a horse. Also, she talks deliciously, in a silver voice, about "old pards." Altogether a charming vision—in books.

This vision Bennington had not yet realized. The rest of the West came up to specifications, but this one essential failed. In Spanish Gulch he had, to be sure, encountered a number of girls. But they were red-handed, big-boned, freckled-faced, rough-skinned, and there wasn't a Tam o' Shanter in the lot. Plainly servants, Bennington thought. The Mountain Flower must have gone on a visit. Come to think of it, there never was more than one Mountain Flower to a town.

CHAPTER III

BENNINGTON HUNTS FOR GOLD AND FINDS A KISS

One day Old Mizzou brought him a blue-print map.

"This y'ar map," said he, spreading it out under his stubby fingers, "shows the deestrect. I gets it of Fay, so you gains an idee of th' lay of the land a whole lot. Them claims marked with a crost belongs to th' Company. You kin take her and explore."

This struck Bennington as an excellent idea. He sat down at the table and counted the crosses. There were fourteen of them. The different lodes were laid off in mathematically exact rectangles, running in many directions. A few joined one another, but most lay isolated. Their relative positions were a trifle confusing at first, but, after a little earnest study, Bennington thought he understood them. He could start with the Holy Smoke, just outside the door. The John Logan lay beyond, at an obtuse angle. Then a jump of a hundred yards or so to the southwest would bring him to the Crazy Horse. This he resolved to locate, for it was said to be on the same "lode" as a big strike some one had recently made. He picked up his rifle and set out.

Now, a blue-print map maker has undoubtedly accurate ideas as to points of the compass, and faultless proficiency in depicting bird's-eye views, but he neglects entirely the putting in of various ups and down, slants and windings of the country, which apparently twist the north pole around to the east-south-east. You start due west on a bee line, according to directions; after about ten feet you scramble over a fallen tree, skirt a boulder, dip into a ravine, and climb a ledge. Your starting point is out of sight behind you; your destination is, Heaven knows where, in front. By the time you have walked six thousand actual feet, which is as near as you can guess to fifteen hundred theoretical level ones, your little blazed stake in a pile of stones is likely to be almost anywhere within a liberal quarter of a mile. Then it is guess-work. If the hill is pretty thickly staked out, the chase becomes exciting. In the middle distance you see a post. You clamber eagerly to it, only to find that it marks your neighbour's claim. You have lost your standpoint of a moment ago, and must start afresh. In an hour's time you have discovered every stake on the hill but the one you want. In two hours' time you are staggering homeward a gibbering idiot. Then you are brought back to profane sanity by falling at full length over the very object of your search.

Bennington was treated to full measure of this experience. He found the John Logan lode without much difficulty, and followed its length with less, for the simple reason that its course lay over the round brow of a hill bare of trees. He also discovered the "Northeast Corner of the Crazy Horse Lode" plainly marked on the white surface of a pine stake braced upright in a pile of rocks. Thence he confidently paced south, and found nothing. Next trip he came across pencilled directions concerning the "Miner's Dream Lode." The time after he ran against the "Golden Ball" and the "Golden Chain Lodes." Bennington reflected; his mind was becoming a little heated.

"It's because I went around those ledges and boulders," he said to himself; "I got off the straight line. This time I'll take the straight line and keep it."

So he addressed himself to the surmounting of obstructions. Work of that sort is not easy. At one point he lost his hold on a broad, steep rock, and slid ungracefully to the foot of it, his elbows digging frantically into the moss, and his legs straddled apart. As he struck bottom, he imagined he heard a most delicious little laugh. So real was the illusion that he gripped two handfuls of moss and looked about sharply, but of course saw nothing. The laugh was repeated.

He looked again, and so became aware of a Vision in pink, standing just in front of a big pine above him on the hill and surveying him with mischievous eyes.

Surprise froze him, his legs straddled, his hat on one side, his mouth open. The Vision began to pick its way down the hill, eyeing him the while.

That dancing scrutiny seemed to mesmerize him. He was enchanted to perfect stillness, but he was graciously permitted to take in the particulars of the girl's appearance. She was dainty. Every posture of her slight figure was of an airy grace, as light and delicate as that of a rose tendril swaying in the wind. Even when she tripped over a loose rock, she caught her balance again with a pretty little uplift of the hand. As she approached, slowly, and evidently not unwilling to allow her charms full time in which to work, Bennington could see that her face was delicately made; but as to the details he could not judge clearly because of her mischievous eyes. They were large and wide and clear, and of a most peculiar colour—a purple-violet, of the shade one sometimes finds in flowers, but only in the flowers of a deep and shady wood. In this wonderful colour—which seemed to borrow the richness of its hue rather from its depth than from any pigment of its own, just as beyond soundings the ocean changes from green to blue—an hundred moods seem to rise slowly from within, to swim visible, even though the mere expression of her face gave no sign of them. For instance, at the present moment her features were composed to the utmost gravity. Yet in her eyes bubbled gaiety and fun, as successive upswellings of a spring; or, rather, as the ruffles of sunlight and wind, or the pictured flight of birds across a pool whose surface alone is stirred.

Bennington realized suddenly, with overwhelming fervency, that he preferred to slide in solitude.

The Vision in the starched pink gingham now poised above him like a humming-bird over a flower. From behind her back she withdrew one hand. In the hand was the missing claim stake.

"Is this what you are looking for?" she inquired demurely.

The mesmeric spell broke, and Bennington was permitted to babble incoherencies.

She stamped her foot.

"Is this what you're looking for?" she persisted.

Bennington's chaos had not yet crystallized to relevancy.

"Wh-where did you get it?" he stammered again.

"IS THIS WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR?" she demanded in very large capitals.

The young man regained control of his faculties with an effort.

"Yes, it is!" he rejoined sharply; and then, with the instinct that bids us appreciate the extent of our relief by passing an annoyance along, "Don't you know it's a penal offence to disturb claim stakes?"

He had suddenly discovered that he preferred to find claim stakes on claims.

The Vision's eyes opened wider.

"It must be nice to know so much!" said she, in reverent admiration.

Bennington flushed. As a de Laney, the girls he had known had always taken him seriously. He disliked being made fun of.

"This is nonsense," he objected, with some impatience. "I must know where it came from."

In the background of his consciousness still whirled the moil of his wonder and bewilderment. He clung to the claim stake as a stable object.

The Vision looked straight at him without winking, and those wonderful eyes filled with tears. Yet underneath their mist seemed to sparkle little points of light, as wavelets through a vapour which veils the surface of the sea. Bennington became conscious-stricken because of the tears, and still he owned an uneasy suspicion that they were not real.

"I'm so sorry!" she said contritely, after a moment; "I thought I was helping you so much! I found that stake just streaking it over the top of the hill. It had got loose and was running away." The mist had cleared up very suddenly, and the light-tipped sparkles of fun were chasing each other rapidly, as though impelled by a lively breeze. "I thought you'd be ever so grateful, and, instead of that, you scold me! I don't believe I like you a bit!"

She looked him over reflectively, as though making up her mind.

Bennington laughed outright, and scrambled to his feet. "You are absolutely incorrigible!" he exclaimed, to cover his confusion at his change of face.

Her eyes fairly danced.

"Oh, what a *lovely* word!" she cried rapturously. "What *does* it mean? Something nice, or I'm sure you wouldn't have said it about me. *Would* you?" The eyes suddenly became grave. "Oh, please tell me!" she begged appealingly.

Bennington was thrown into confusion at this, for he did not know whether she was serious or not. He could do nothing but stammer and get red, and think what a ridiculous ass he was making of himself. He might have considered the help he was getting in that.

"Well, then, you needn't," she conceded, magnanimously, after a moment. "Only, you ought not to say things about girls that you don't dare tell them in plain language. If you will say nice things about me, you might as well say them so I can understand them; only, I do think it's a little early in our acquaintance."

This cast Bennington still more in perplexity. He had a pretty-well-defined notion that he was being ridiculed, but concerning this, just a last grain of doubt remained. She rattled on.

"Well!" said she impatiently, "why don't you say something? Why don't you take this stick? I don't want it. Men are so stupid!"

That last remark has been made many, many times, and yet it never fails of its effect, which is at once to invest the speaker with daintiness indescribable, and to thrust the man addressed into nether inferiority. Bennington fell to its charm. He took the stake.

"Where does it belong?" he asked.

She pointed silently to a pile of stones. He deposited the stake in its proper place, and returned to find her seated on the ground, plucking a handful of the leaves of a little erect herb that grew abundantly in the hollow. These she rubbed together and held to her face inside the sunbonnet.

"Who are you, anyway?" asked Bennington abruptly, as he returned.

"D' you ever see this before?" she inquired irrelevantly, looking up with her eyes as she leaned over the handful. "Good for colds. Makes your nose feel all funny and prickly."

She turned her hands over and began to drop the leaves one by one. Bennington caught himself

watching her with fascinated interest in silence. He began to find this one of her most potent charms—the faculty of translating into a grace so exquisite as almost to realize the fabled poetry of motion, the least shrug of her shoulders, the smallest crook of her finger, the slightest toss of her small, well-balanced head. She looked up.

"Want to smell?" she inquired, and held out her hands with a pretty gesture.

Not knowing what else to do, Bennington stepped forward obediently and stooped over. The two little palms held a single crushed bit of the herb in their cup. They were soft, pink little palms, all wrinkled, like crumpled rose leaves. Bennington stooped to smell the herb; instead, he kissed the palms.

The girl sprang to her feet with one indignant motion and faced him. The eyes now flashed blue flame, and Bennington for the first time noticed what had escaped him before—that the forehead was broad and thoughtful, and that above it the hair, instead of being blonde and curly and sparkling with golden radiance, was of a peculiar wavy brown that seemed sometimes full of light and sometimes lustreless and black, according as it caught the direct rays of the sun or not. Then he appreciated his offence.

"Sir!" she exclaimed, and turned away with a haughty shoulder.

"And we've never been introduced!" she said, half to herself, but her face was now concealed, so that Bennington could not see she laughed. She marched stiffly down the hill. Bennington turned to follow her, although the action was entirely mechanical, and he had no definite idea in doing so.

"Don't you dare, sir!" she cried.

So he did not dare.

This vexed her for a moment. Then, having gone quite out of sight, she sank down and laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks.

"I didn't think he knew enough!" she said, with a final hysterical chuckle.

This first impression of the Mountain Flower, Bennington would have been willing to acknowledge, was quite complicated enough, but he was destined to further surprises.

When he returned to the Holy Smoke camp he found Old Mizzou in earnest conversation with a peculiar-looking stranger, whose hand he was promptly requested to shake.

The stranger was a tall, scraggly individual, dressed in the usual flannel shirt and blue jeans, the latter tucked into rusty cowhide boots. Bennington was interested in him because he was so phenomenally ugly. From the collar of his shirt projected a lean, sinewy neck, on which the too-abundant skin rolled and wrinkled in a dark red, wind-roughened manner particularly disagreeable to behold. The neck supported a small head. The face was wizened and tanned to a dark mahogany colour. It was ornamented with a grizzled goatee.

The man smoked a stub pipe. His remarks were emphasized by the gestures of a huge and gnarled pair of hands.

"Mr. Lawton is from Old Mizzou, too, afore he moved to Illinoy," commented Davidson. One became aware, from the loving tones in which he pronounced the two words, whence he derived his sobriquet.

Lawton expressed the opinion that Chillicothe, of that State, was the finest town on top of earth.

Bennington presumed it might be, and then opportunely bethought him of a bottle of Canadian Club, which, among other necessary articles, he had brought with him from New York. This he produced. The old Missourians brightened; Davidson went into the cabin after glasses and a corkscrew. He found the corkscrew all right, but apparently had some difficulty in regard to the glasses. They could hear him calling vociferously for Mrs. Arthur. Mrs. Arthur had gone to the spring for water. In a few moments Old Mizzou appeared in the doorway exceedingly red of face.

"Consarn them women folks!" he grumbled, depositing the tin cups on the porch. "They locks up an' conceals things most damnable. Ain't a tumbler in th' place."

"These yar is all right," assured Lawton consolingly, picking up one of the cups and examining the bottom of it with great care.

"I reckon they'll hold the likker, anyhow," agreed Davidson.

They passed the bottle politely to de Laney, and the latter helped himself. For his part, he was glad the tin cups had been necessary, for it enabled him to conceal the smallness of his dose. Lawton filled his own up to the brim; Davidson followed suit.

"Here's how!" observed the latter, and the two old turtlebacks drank the raw whisky down, near a half pint of it, as though it had been so much milk.

Bennington fairly gasped with astonishment. "Don't you ever take any water?" he asked.

They turned slowly. Old Mizzou looked him in the eye with glimmering reproach.

"Not, if th' whisky's good, sonny," said he impressively.

"Wall," commented Lawton, after a pause, "that is a good drink. Reckon I must be goin'."

"Stay t' grub!" urged Old Mizzou heartily.

"Folks waitin'. Remember!"

They looked at Bennington and chuckled a little, to that young man's discomfort.

"Lawton's a damn fine fella'," said Old Mizzou with emphasis. Bennington thought, with a shudder, of the loose-skinned, turkey-red neck, and was silent.

After supper Bennington and Old Mizzou played cribbage by the light of a kerosene lamp.

"While I was hunting claims this afternoon," said the Easterner suddenly, "I ran across a mighty pretty girl."

"Yas?" observed Old Mizzou with indifference. "What fer a gal was it?"

"She didn't look as if she belonged around here. She was a slender girl, very pretty, with a pink dress on."

"Ain't no female strangers yar-about. Blue eyes?"

"Yes."

"An' ha'r that sometimes looks black an' sometimes yaller-brown?"

"Yes, that's the one all right. Who is she?"

"Oh, that!" said Old Mizzou with slight interest, "that's Bill Lawton's girl. Live's down th' gulch. He's th' fella' that was yar afore grub," he explained.

For a full minute Bennington stared at the cards in his hand. The patriarch became impatient.

"Yore play, sonny," he suggested.

"I don't believe you know the one I mean," returned Bennington slowly. "She's a girl with a little mouth and a nose that is tipped up just a trifle----"

"Snub!" interrupted Old Mizzou, with some impatience. "Yas, I knows. Same critter. Only one like her in th' Hills. Sasshays all over th' scenery, an' don't do nothin' but sit on rocks."

"So she's the daughter of that man!" said Bennington, still more slowly.

"Wall, so Mis' Lawton sez," chuckled Mizzou.

That night Bennington lay awake for some time. He had discovered the Mountain Flower; the story-book West was complete at last. But he had offended his discovery. What was the etiquette in such a case? Back East he would have felt called upon to apologize for being rude. Then, at the thought of apologizing to a daughter of that turkey-necked old whisky-guzzler he had to laugh.

CHAPTER IV

THE SUN FAIRY

The next afternoon, after the day's writing and prospecting were finished, Bennington resolved to go deer hunting. He had skipped thirteen chapters of his work to describe the heroine, Rhoda. She had wonderful eyes, and was, I believe, dressed in a garment whose colour was pink.

"Keep yore moccasins greased," Old Mizzou advised at parting; by which he meant that the young man was to step softly.

This he found to be difficult. His course lay along the top of the ridge where the obstructions were many. There were outcrops, boulders, ravines, broken twigs, old leaves, and dikes, all of which had to be surmounted or avoided. They were all aggravating, but the dikes possessed some intellectual interest which the others lacked.

A dike, be it understood, is a hole in the earth made visible. That is to say, in old days, when mountains were much loftier than they are now, various agencies brought it to pass that they split and cracked and yawned down to the innermost cores of their being in such hideous fashion that chasms and holes of great depth and perpendicularity were opened in them. Thereupon the interior fires were released, and these, vomiting up a vast supply of molten material, filled said chasms and holes to the very brim. The molten material cooled into fire-hardened rock. The rains descended and the snows melted. Under their erosive influence the original mountains were cut down somewhat, but the erstwhile molten material, being, as we have said, fire-hardened, wasted very little, or not at all, and, as a consequence, stands forth above its present surroundings in exact mould of the ancient cracks or holes.

Now, some dikes are long and narrow, others are short and wide, and still others are nearly round. All, however, are highest points, and, head and shoulders above the trees, look abroad over the land.

When Bennington came to one of these dikes he was forced to pick his way carefully in a detour around its base. Between times he found hobnails much inclined to click against unforeseen stones. The broken twig came to possess other than literary importance. After a little his nerves asserted themselves. Unconsciously he relaxed his attention and began to think.

The subject of his thoughts was the girl he had seen just twenty-four hours before. He caught himself remembering little things he had not consciously noticed at the time, as, for instance, the strange contrast between the mischief in her eyes and the austerity of her brow, or the queer little fashion she had of winking rapidly four or five times, and then opening her eyes wide and looking straight into the depths of his own. He considered it quite a coincidence that he had unconsciously returned to the spot on which they had met the day before—the rich Crazy Horse lode.

As though in answer to his recognition of this fact, her voice suddenly called to him from above.

"Hullo, little boy!" it cried.

He felt at once that he was pleased at the encounter.

"Hullo!" he answered; "where are you?"

"Right here."

He looked up, and then still up, until, at the flat top of the castellated dike that stood over him, he caught a gleam of pink. The contrast between it, the blue of the sky, and the dark green of the trees, was most beautiful and unusual. Nature rarely uses pink, except in sunsets and in flowers. Bennington thought pleasedly how every impression this girl made upon him was one of grace or beauty or bright colour. The gleam of pink disappeared, and a great pine cone, heavy with pitch, came buzzing through the air to fall at his feet.

"That's to show you where I am," came the clear voice. "You ought to feel honoured. I've only three cones left."

The dike before which Bennington had paused was one of the round variety. It rose perhaps twenty feet above the *débris* at its base, sheer, gray, its surface almost intact except for an insignificant number of frost fissures. From its base the hill fell rapidly, so that, even from his own inferior elevation, he was enabled to look over the tops of trees standing but a few rods away from him. He could see that the summit of this dike was probably nearly flat, and he surmised that, once up there, one would become master of a pretty enough little plateau on which to sit; but his careful circumvallation could discover no possible method of ascent. The walls afforded no chance for a squirrel's foothold even. He began to doubt whether he had guessed aright as to the girl's whereabouts, and began carefully to examine the tops of the trees. Discovering nothing in them, he cast another puzzled glance at the top of the dike. A pair of violet eyes was scrutinizing him gravely over the edge of it.

"How in the world did you get up there?" he cried.

"Flew," she explained, with great succinctness.

"Look out you don't fall," he warned hastily; her attitude was alarming.

"I am lying flat," said she, "and I can't fall."

"You haven't told me how you got up. I want to come up, too."

"How do you know I want you?"

"I have such a lot of things to say!" cried Bennington, rather at a loss for a valid reason, but feeling the necessity keenly.

"Well, sit down and say them. There's a big flat rock just behind you."

This did not suit him in the least. "I wish you'd let me up," he begged petulantly. "I can't say what I want from here."

"I can hear you quite well. You'll have to talk from there, or else keep still."

"That isn't fair!" persisted the young man, adopting a tone of argument. "You're a girl----"

"Stop there! You are wrong to start with. Did you think that a creature who could fly to the tops of the rocks was a mere girl? Not at all."

"What do you mean?" asked the easily bewildered Bennington.

"What I say. I'm not a girl."

"What are you then?"

"A sun fairy."

"A sun fairy?"

"Yes; a real live one. See that cloud over toward the sun? The nice downy one, I mean. That's my couch. I sleep on it all night. I've got it near the sun so that it will warm up, you see."

"I see," cried Bennington. He could recognise foolery—provided it were ticketed plainly enough. He sat down on the flat rock before indicated, and clasped his knee with his hands, prepared to enjoy more. "Is that your throne up there, Sun Fairy?" he asked. She had withdrawn her head from sight.

"It is," her voice came down to him in grave tones.

"It must be a very nice one."

"The nicest throne you ever saw."

"I never saw one, but I've often heard that thrones were unpleasant things."

"I am sitting, foolish mortal," said she, in tones of deep commiseration, "on a soft, thick cushion of moss—much more comfortable, I imagine, than hard, flat rocks. And the nice warm sun is shining on me—it must be rather chilly in the woods to-day. And there is a breeze blowing from the Big Horn—old rocks are always damp and stuffy in the shade. And I am looking away out over the Hills—I hope some people enjoy the sight of piles of quartzite."

"Cruel sun fairy!" cried Bennington. "Why do you tantalize me so with the delights from which you debar me? What have I done?"

There was a short silence.

"Can't you think of anything you've done?" asked the voice, insinuatingly.

Bennington's conscience-stricken memory stirred. It did not seem so ridiculous, under the direct charm of the fresh young voice that came down through the summer air from above, like a dove's note from a treetop, to apologize to Lawton's girl. The incongruity now was in forcing into this Arcadian incident anything savouring of conventionality at all. It had been so idyllic, this talk of the sun fairy and the cloud; so like a passage from an old book of legends, this dainty episode in the great, strong, Western breezes, under the great, strong, Western sky. Everything should be perfect, not to be blamed.

"Do sun fairies accept apologies?" he asked presently, in a subdued voice.

"They might."

"This particular sun fairy is offered one by a man who is sorry."

"Is it a good big one?"

"Indeed, yes."

The head appeared over the edge of the rock, inspected him gravely for a moment, and was withdrawn.

"Then it is accepted," said the voice.

"Thank you!" he replied sincerely. "And now are you going to let down your rope ladder, or whatever it is? I really want to talk to you."

"You are so persistent!" cried the petulant voice, "and so foolish! It is like a man to spoil things by questionings!"

He suddenly felt the truth of this. One can not talk every day to a sun fairy, and the experience can never be repeated. He settled back on the rock.

"Pardon me, Sun Fairy!" he cried again. "Rope ladders, indeed, to one who has but to close her eyes and she finds herself on a downy cloud near the sun. My mortality blinded me!"

"Now you are a nice boy," she approved more contentedly, "and as a reward you may ask me one question."

"All right," he agreed; and then, with instinctive tact, "What do you see up there?"

He could hear her clap her hands with delight, and he felt glad that he had followed his impulse to ask just this question instead of one more personal and more in line with his curiosity.

"Listen!" she began. "I see pines, many pines, just the tops of them, and they are all waving in the breeze. Did you ever see trees from on top? They are quite different. And out from the pines come great round hills made all of stone. I think they look like skulls. Then there are breathless descents where the pines fall away. Once in a while a little white road flashes out."

"Yes," urged Bennington, as the voice paused. "And what else do you see?"

"I see the prairie, too," she went on half dreamily. "It is brown now, but the green is beginning to shine through it just a very little. And out beyond there is a sparkle. That is the Cheyenne. And beyond that there is something white, and that is the Bad Lands."

The voice broke off with a happy little laugh.

Bennington saw the scene as though it lay actually spread out before him. There was something in the choice of the words, clearcut, decisive, and descriptive; but more in the exquisite modulations of the voice, adding here a tint, there a shade to the picture, and casting over the whole that poetic glamour which, rarely, is imitated in grosser materials by Nature herself, when, just following sunset, she suffuses the landscape with a mellow afterglow.

The head, sunbonneted, reappeared perked inquiringly sideways.

"Hello, stranger!" it called with a nasal inflection, "how air ye? Do y' think minin' is goin' t' pan out well this yar spring?" Then she caught sight of his weapon. "What are you going to shoot?" she asked with sudden interest.

"I thought I might see a deer."

"Deer! hoh!" she cried in lofty scorn, reassuming her nasal tone. "You is shore a tenderfoot! Don' you-all know that blastin' scares all th' deer away from a minin' camp?"

Bennington looked confused. "No, I hadn't thought of that," he confessed stoutly enough.

"I kind of like to shoot!" said she, a little wistfully. "What sort of a gun is it?"

"A Savage smokeless," answered Bennington perfunctorily.

"One of the thirty-calibres?" inquired the sunbonnet with new interest.

"Yes," gasped Bennington, astonished at so much feminine knowledge of firearms.

"Oh! I'd like to see it. I never saw any of those. May I shoot it, just once?"

"Of course you may. More than once. Shall I come up?"

"No. I'll come down. You sit right still on that rock."

The sunbonnet disappeared, and there ensued a momentary commotion on the other side of the dike. In an instant the girl came around the corner, picking her way over the loose blocks of stone. With the finger-tips of either hand she held the pink starched skirt up, displaying a neat little foot in a heavy little shoe. Diagonally across the skirt ran two irregular brown stains. She caught him looking at them.

"Naughty, naughty!" said she, glancing down at them with a grimace.

She dropped her skirt, and stood up beside him with a pretty shake of the shoulders.

"Now let's see it," she begged.

She examined the weapon with much interest, throwing down and back the lever in a manner that showed she was accustomed at least to the old-style arm.

"How light it is!" she commented, squinting through the sights. "Doesn't it kick awfully?"

"Not a bit. Smokeless powder, you know."

"Of course. What'll we shoot at?"

Bennington fumbled in his pockets and produced an envelope.

"How's this?" he asked.

She seized it and ran like an antelope—with the same *gliding* motion—to a tree about thirty paces distant, on which she pinned the bit of paper. They shot. Bennington hit the paper every time. The girl missed it once. At this she looked a little vexed.

"You are either very rude or very sincere," was her comment.

"You're the best shot I ever saw----"

"Now don't dare say 'for a girl!'" she interrupted quickly. "What's the prize?"

"Was this a match?"

"Of course it was, and I insist on paying up."

Bennington considered.

"I think I would like to go to the top of the rock there, and see the pines, and the skull-stones, and the prairies."

She glanced toward him, knitting her brows. "It is my very own," she said doubtfully. "I've never let anybody go up there before."

One of the diminutive chipmunks of the hills scampered out from a cleft in the rocks and perched on a moss-covered log, chattering eagerly and jerking his tail in the well-known manner of chipmunks.

"Oh, see! see!" she cried, all excitement in a moment. She seized the rifle, and taking careful aim, fired. The chattering ceased; the chipmunk disappeared.

Bennington ran to the log. Behind it lay the little animal. The long steel-jacketed bullet had just grazed the base of its brain. He picked it up gently in the palm of his hand and contemplated it.

It was such a diminutive beast, not as large as a good-sized rat, quite smaller than our own fence-corner chipmunks of the East. Its little sides were daintily striped, its little whiskers were as perfect as those of the great squirrels in the timber bottom. In its pouches were the roots of pine cones. Bennington was not a sentimentalist, but the incident, against the background of the light-hearted day, seemed to him just a little pathetic. Something of the feeling showed in his eyes.

The girl, who had drawn near, looked from him to the dead chipmunk, and back again. Then she burst suddenly into tears.

"Oh, cruel, cruel!" she sobbed. "What did I do it for? What did you *let* me do it for?"

Her distress was so keen that the young man hastened to relieve it.

"There," he reassured her lightly, "don't do that! Why, you are a great hunter. You got your game. And it was a splendid shot. We'll have him skinned when we get back home, and we'll cure the skin, and you can make something out of it—a spectacle case," he suggested at random. "I know how you feel," he went on, to give her time to recover, "but all hunters feel that way occasionally. See, I'll put him just here until we get ready to go home, where nothing can get him."

He deposited the squirrel in the cleft of a rock, quite out of sight, and stood back as though pleased. "There, that's fine!" he concluded.

With one of those instantaneous transitions, which seemed so natural to her, and yet which appeared to reach not at all to her real nature, she had changed from an aspect of passionate grief to one of solemn inquiry. Bennington found her looking at him with the soul brimming to the very surface of her great eyes.

"I think you may come up on my rock," she said simply after a moment.

They skirted the base of the dike together until they had reached the westernmost side. There Bennington was shown the means of ascent, which he had overlooked before because of his too close examination of the cliff itself. At a distance of about twenty feet from the dike grew a large pine tree, the lowest branch of which extended directly over the little plateau and about a foot above it. Next to the large pine stood two smaller saplings side by side and a few inches apart. These had been converted into a ladder by the nailing across of rustic rounds.

"That's how I get up," explained the girl. "Now you go back around the corner again, and when I'm ready I'll call."

Bennington obeyed. In a few moments he heard again the voice in the air summoning him to approach and climb.

He ascended the natural ladder easily, but when within six or eight feet of the large branch that reached across to the dike, the smaller of the two saplings ceased, and so, naturally, the ladder terminated.

"Hi!" he called, "how did you get up this?"

He looked across the intervening space expectantly, and then, to his surprise, he observed that the girl was blushing furiously.

"I—I," stammered a small voice after a moment's hesitation, "I guess I—*shinned!*"

A light broke across Bennington's mind as to the origin of the two dark streaks on the gown, and he laughed. The girl eyed him reproachfully for a moment or so; then she too began to laugh in an embarrassed manner. Whereupon Bennington laughed the harder. He shinned up the tree, to find that an ingenious hand rope had been fitted above the bridge limb, so that the crossing of the short interval to the rock was a matter of no great difficulty. In another instant he stood upon the top of the dike.

It was, as he had anticipated, nearly flat. Under the pine branch, which might make a very good chair back, grew a thick cushion of moss. The one tree broke the freedom of the eye's sweep toward the west, but in all other directions it was uninterrupted. As the girl had said, the tops of pines alone met the view, miles on miles of them, undulating, rising, swelling, breaking against the barrier of a dike, or lapping the foot of a great round boulder-mountain. Here and there a darker spot suggested a break for a mountain peak; rarely a fleck of white marked a mountain road. Back of them all—ridge, mountain, cavernous valley—towered old Harney, sun-browned, rock-diademed, a few wisps of cloud streaming down the wind from his brow, locks heavy with the age of the great Manitou whom he was supposed to represent. Eastward, the prairie like a peaceful sea. Above, the alert sky of the west. And through all the air a humming—vast, murmurous, swelling—as the mountain breeze touched simultaneously with strong hand the chords, not of one, but a thousand pine harps.

Bennington drew in a deep breath, and looked about in all directions. The girl watched him.

"Ah! it is beautiful!" he murmured at last with a half sigh, and looked again.

She seized his hand eagerly.

"Oh, I'm so glad you said that—and no more than that!" she cried. "I feel the sun fairy can make you welcome now."

CHAPTER V

THE SPIRIT MOUNTAIN

"From now on," said the girl, shaking out her skirts before sitting down, "I am going to be a mystery."

"You are already," replied Bennington, for the first time aware that such was the fact.

"No fencing. I have a plain business proposition to make. You and I are going to be great friends. I can see that now."

"I hope so."

"And you, being a—well, an open-minded young man" (Now what does she mean by that? thought Bennington), "will be asking all about myself. I am going to tell you nothing. I am going to be a mystery."

"I'm sure----"

"No, you're not sure of anything, young man. Now I'll tell you this: that I am living down the gulch with my people."

"I know—Mr. Lawton's."

She looked at him a moment. "Exactly. If you were to walk straight ahead—not out in the air, of course—you could see the roof of the house. Now, after we know each other better, the natural thing for you to do will be to come and see me at my house, won't it?"

Bennington agreed that it would.

"Well, you mustn't."

Bennington expressed his astonishment.

"I will explain a very little. In a month occurs the Pioneer's Picnic at Rapid. You don't know what the Pioneer's Picnic is? Ignorant boy! It's our most important event of the year. Well, until that time I am going to try an experiment. I am going to see if—well, I'll tell you; I am going to try an experiment on a man, and the man is you, and I'll explain the whole thing to you after the Pioneer's Picnic, and not a moment before. Aren't you curious?"

"I am indeed," Bennington assured her sincerely.

She took on a small air of tyranny. "Now understand me. I mean what I say. If you want to see me again, you must do as I tell you. You must take me as I am, and you must mind me."

Bennington cast a fleeting wonder over the sublime self-confidence which made this girl so certain he would care to see her again. Then, with a grip at the heart, he owned that the self-confidence was well founded.

"All right," he assented meekly.

"Good!" she cried, with a gleam of mischief. "Behold me! Old Bill Lawton's gal! If you want to be pard, put her thar!"

"And so you are a girl after all, and no sun fairy," smiled Bennington as he "put her thar."

"My cloud has melted," she replied quietly, pointing toward the brow of Harney.

They chatted of small things for a time. Bennington felt intuitively that there was something a little strange about this girl, something a little out of the ordinary, something he had never been conscious of in any other girl. Yet he could never seize the impression and examine it. It was always just escaping; just taking shape to the point of visibility, and then melting away again; just rising in the modulations of her voice to a murmur that the ear thought to seize as a definite chord, and then dying into a hundred other cadences. He tried to catch it in her eyes, where so much else was to be seen. Sometimes he perceived its influence, but never itself. It passed as a shadow in the lower deeps, as though the feather mass of a great sea growth had lifted slowly on an undercurrent, and then as slowly had sunk back to its bed, leaving but the haunting impression of something shapeless that had darkened the hue of the waters. It was most like a sadness that had passed. Perhaps it was merely an unconscious trick of thought or manner.

After a time she asked him his first name, and he told her.

"I'd like to know your's too, Miss Lawton," he suggested.

"I wish you wouldn't call me Miss Lawton," she cried with sudden petulance.

"Why, certainly not, if you don't want me to, but what am I to call you?"

"Do you know," she confided with a pretty little gesture, "I have always disliked my real name. It's ugly and horrid. I've often wished I were a heroine in a book, and then I could have a name I really liked. Now here's a chance. I'm going to let you get up one for me, but it must be pretty, and we'll have it all for our very own."

"I don't quite see----" objected the still conventional de Laney.

"Your wits, your wits, haven't you any wits at *all*?" she cried with impatience over his unresponsiveness.

"Well, let me see. It isn't easy to do a thing like that on the spur of the moment, Sun Fairy. A fairy's a fay, isn't it? I might call you Fay."

"Fay," she repeated in a startled tone.

Bennington remembered that this was the name of the curly-haired young man who had lent him the bucking horse, and frowned.

"No, I don't believe I like that," he recanted hastily.

"Take time and think about it," she suggested.

"I think of one that would be appropriate," he said after some little time. "It is suggested by that little bird there. It is Phoebe."

"Do you think it is appropriate," she objected. "A Phoebe bird or a Phoebe girl always seemed to me to be demure and quiet and thoughtful and sweet-voiced and fond of dim forests, while I am a frivolous, laughing, sunny individual who likes the open air and doesn't care for shadows at all."

"Yet I feel it is appropriate," he insisted. He paused and went on a little timidly in the face of his new experience in giving expression to the more subtle feelings. "I don't know whether I can express it or not. You are laughing and sunny, as you say, but there is something in you like the Phoebe bird just the same. It is like those cloud shadows." He pointed out over the mountains. Overhead a number of summer clouds were winging their way from the west, casting on the earth those huge irregular shadows which sweep across it so swiftly, yet with such dignity; so rushingly, and yet so harmlessly. "The hills are sunny and bright enough, and all at once one of the shadows crosses them, and it is dark. Then in another moment it is bright again."

"And do you really see that in me?" she asked curiously. "You are a dear boy," she continued, looking at him for some moments with reflective eyes. "It won't do though," she said, rising at last. "It's too 'fancy.'"

"I don't know then," he confessed with some helplessness.

"I'll tell you what I've always *wanted* to be called," said she, "ever since I was a little girl. It is 'Mary.'"

"Mary!" he cried, astonished. "Why, it is such a common name."

"It is a beautiful name," she asserted. "Say it over. Aren't the syllables soft and musical and caressing? It is a lovely name. Why I remember," she went on vivaciously, "a girl who was named Mary, and who didn't like it. When she came to our school she changed it, but she didn't dare to break it to the family all at once. The first letter home she signed herself 'Mae.' Her father wrote back, 'My dear daughter, if the name of the mother of Jesus isn't good enough for you, come home.'" She laughed at the recollection.

"Then you have been away to school?" asked the young man.

"Yes," she replied shortly.

She adroitly led him to talk of himself. He told her naively of New York and tennis, of brake parties and clubs, and even afternoon teas and balls, all of which, of course, interested a Western girl exceedingly. In this it so happened that his immaturity showed more plainly than before. He did not boast openly, but he introduced extraneous details important in themselves. He mentioned knowing Pennington the painter, and Brookes the writer, merely in a casual fashion, but with just the faintest flourish. It somehow became known that his family had a crest, that his position was high; in short, that he was a de Laney on both sides. He liked to tell it to this girl, because it was evidently fresh and new to her, and because in the presence of her inexperience in these matters he gained a confidence in himself which he had never dared assume before.

She looked straight in front of her and listened, throwing in a comment now and then to assist the stream of his talk. At last, when he fell silent, she reached swiftly out and patted his cheek with her hand.

"You are a dear big *boy*," she said quietly. "But I like it—oh, so much!"

From the tree tops below the clear warble of the purple finch proclaimed that under the fronds twilight had fallen. The vast green surface of the hills was streaked here and there with irregular

peaks of darkness dwindling eastward. The sun was nearly down.

A sudden gloom blotted out the fretwork of the pine shadows that had, during the latter part of the afternoon, lain athwart the rock. They looked up startled.

The shadow of Harney had crept out to them, and, even as they looked, it stole on, cat-like, across the lower ridges toward the East. One after another the rounded hills changed hue as it crossed them. For a moment it lingered in the tangle of woods at the outermost edge, and then without further pause glided out over the prairie. They watched it fascinated. The sparkle was quenched in the Cheyenne; the white gleam of the Bad Lands became a dull gray, scarce distinguishable from the gray of the twilight. Though a single mysterious cleft a long yellow bar pointed down across the plains, paused at the horizon, and slowly lifted into the air. The mountain shadow followed it steadily up into the sky, growing and growing against the dullness of the east, until at last over against them in the heavens was the huge phantom of a mountain, infinitely greater, infinitely grander than any mountain ever seen by mortal eyes, and lifting higher and higher, commanded upward by that single wand of golden light. Then suddenly the wand was withdrawn and the ghost mountain merged into the yellow afterglow of evening.

The girl had watched it breathless. At its dissolution she seized the young man excitedly by the arm.

"The Spirit Mountain!" she cried. "I have never seen it before; and now I see it—with you."

She looked at him with startled eyes.

"With you," she repeated.

"What is it? I don't understand."

She did not seem to hear his question.

"What is it?" he asked again.

"Why—nothing." She caught her breath and recovered command of herself somewhat. "That is, it is just an old legend that I have often heard, and it startled me for a minute."

"Will you tell me the legend?"

"Not now; some time. We must go now, for it will soon be dark."

They wandered along the ridge toward Deerfoot Gulch in silence. She had taken her sunbonnet off, and was enjoying the cool of the evening. He carried the rifle over the crook of his arm, and watched her pensive face. The poor little chipmunk lay stiffening in the cleft of the rock, forgotten. The next morning a prying jay discovered him and carried him away. He was only a little chipmunk after all—a very little chipmunk—and nobody and nothing missed him in all the wide world, not even his mate and his young, for mercifully grief in the animal world is generally short-lived where tragedies are frequent. His life meant little. His death---

At the dip of the gulch they paused.

"I live just down there," she said, "and now, good-night."

"Mayn't I take you home?"

"Remember your promise."

"Oh, very well."

She looked at him seriously. "I am going to ask you to do what I have never asked any man before," she said slowly—"to meet me. I want you to come to the rock to-morrow afternoon. I want to hear more about New York."

"Of course I'll come," he agreed delightedly. "I feel as if I had known you years already."

They said good-bye. She walked a few steps irresolutely down the hillside, and then, with a sudden impulsive movement, returned. She lifted her face gravely, searchingly to his.

"I like you," said she earnestly. "You have kind eyes," and was gone down through the graceful alder saplings.

Bennington stood and watched the swaying of the leaf tops that marked her progress until she emerged into the lower gulch. There she turned and looked back toward the ridge, but apparently could not see him, though he waved his hand. The next instant Jim Fay strolled into the "park" from the direction of Lawton's cabin. Bennington saw her spring to meet him, holding out both hands, and then the two strolled back down the gulch talking earnestly, their heads close together.

Why should he care? "Mary, Mary, Mary!" he cried within himself as he hurried home. And in remote burial grounds the ancient de Laney on both sides turned over in their lead-lined coffins.

CHAPTER VI

BENNINGTON AS A MAN OF BUSINESS

That evening Old Mizzou returned from town with a watery eye and a mind that ran to horses.

"He is shore a fine cayuse," he asserted with extreme impressiveness. "He is one of them broncs you jest *loves*. An' he's jes 's cheap! I likes you a lot, sonny; I deems you as a face-card shore, an' ef any one ever tries fer to climb yore hump, you jest calls on pore Old Mizzou an' he mingles in them troubles immediate. You must have that cayuse an' go scoutin' in th' hills, yo' shore must! Ol' man Davidson'll do th' work fer ye, but ye shore must scout. 'Taint healthy not t' git exercise on a cayuse. It shorely ain't! An' you must git t' know these yar hills, you must. They is beautiful an' picturesque, and is full of scenery. When you goes back East, you wants to know all about 'em. I wouldn't hev you go back East without knowin' all about 'em for anythin' in the worl', I likes ye that much!"

Old Mizzou paused to wipe away a sympathetic tear with a rather uncertain hand.

"Y' wants to start right off too, that's th' worst of it, so's t' see 'em all afore you goes, 'cause they is lots of hills and I'm 'feared you won't stay long, sonny; I am that! I has my ideas these yar claims is no good, I has fer a fact, and they won't need no one here long, and then we'll lose ye, sonny, so you mus' shore hev that cayuse."

Old Mizzou rambled on in like fashion most of the evening, to Bennington's great amusement, and, though next morning he was quite himself again, he still clung to the idea that Bennington should examine the pony.

"He is a fine bronc, fer shore," he claimed, "an' you'd better git arter him afore some one else gits him."

As Bennington had for some time tentatively revolved in his mind the desirability of something to ride, this struck him as being a good idea. All Westerners had horses—in the books. So he abandoned *Aliris: A Romance of all Time*, for the morning, and drove down to Spanish Gulch with Old Mizzou.

He was mentally braced for devilment, but his arch-enemy, Fay, was not in sight. To his surprise, he got to the post office quite without molestation. There he was handed two letters. One was from his parents. The other, his first business document, proved to be from the mining capitalist. The latter he found to inclose separate drafts for various amounts in favour of six men. Bishop wrote that the young man was to hand these drafts to their owners, and to take receipts for the amounts of each. He promised a further installment in a few weeks.

Bennington felt very important. He looked the letter all over again, and examined the envelope idly. The Spanish Gulch postmark bore date of the day before.

"That's funny," said Bennington to himself. "I wonder why Mizzou didn't bring it up with him last night?" Then he remembered the old man's watery eye and laughed. "I guess I know," he thought.

The next thing was to find the men named in the letter. He did not know them from Adam. Mizzou saw no difficulty, however, when the matter was laid before him.

"They're in th' Straight Flush!" he asserted positively.

This was astounding. How should Old Mizzou know that?

"I don't exactly know," the old man explained this discrepancy, "but they generally is!"

"Don't they ever work?"

"Work's purty slack," crawfished Davidson. "But I tells you I don't *know*. We has to find out," and he shuffled away toward the saloon.

Anybody but Bennington would have suspected something. There was the delayed letter, the supernatural knowledge of Old Mizzou, the absence of Fay. Even the Easterner might have been puzzled to account for the crowded condition of the Straight Flush at ten in the morning, if his attention had not been quite fully occupied in posing before himself as the man of business.

When Mizzou and his companion entered the room, the hum of talk died, and every one turned expectantly in the direction of the newcomers.

"Gents," said Old Mizzou, "this is Mr. de Laney, th' new sup'rintendent of th' Holy Smoke. Mr. de Laney, gents!"

There was a nodding of heads.

Every one looked eagerly expectant. The man behind the bar turned back his cuffs. De Laney, feeling himself the centre of observation, grew nervous. He drew from his pocket Bishop's letter, and read out the five names. "I'd like to see those men," he said.

The men designated came forward. After a moment's conversation, the six adjourned to the hotel, where paper and ink could be procured.

After their exit a silence fell, and the miners looked at each other with ludicrous faces.

"An' he never asked us to take a drink!" exclaimed one sorrowfully. "That settles it. It may not be fer th' good of th' camp, Jim Fay, but I reckons it ain't much fer th' harm of it. I goes you."

"Me to," "and me," "and me," shouted other voices.

Fay leaped on the bar and spread his arms abroad.

"Speech! Speech!" they cried.

"Gentlemen of the great and glorious West!" he began. "It rejoices me to observe this spirit animating your bosoms. Trampling down the finer feelings that you all possess to such an unlimited degree, putting aside all thought of merely material prosperity, you are now prepared, at whatever cost, to ally yourselves with that higher poetic justice which is above barter, above mere expediency, above even the ordinary this-for-that fairness which often passes as justice among the effete and unenlightened savages of the East. Gentlemen of the great and glorious West, I congratulate you!"

The miners stood close around the bar. Every man's face bore a broad grin. At this point they interrupted with howls and cat-calls of applause. "Ain't he a *peach!*" said one to another, and composed himself again to listen. At the conclusion of a long harangue they yelled enthusiastically, and immediately began the more informal discussion of what was evidently a popular proposition. When the five who had been paid off returned, everybody had a drink, while the newcomers were made acquainted with the subject. Old Mizzou, who had listened silently but with a twinkle in his eye, went to hunt up Bennington.

They examined the horse together. The owner named thirty dollars as his price. Old Mizzou said this was cheap. It was not. Bennington agreed to take the animal on trial for a day or two, so they hitched a lariat around its neck and led it over to the wagon. After despatching a few errands they returned to camp. Bennington got out his ledger and journal and made entries importantly. Old Mizzou disappeared in the direction of the corral, where he was joined presently by the man Arthur.

CHAPTER VII

THE MEETING AT THE ROCK

On his way to keep the appointment of the afternoon, Bennington de Laney discovered within himself a new psychological experience. He found that, since the evening before, he had been observing things about him for the purpose of detailing them to his new friend. Little beauties of nature—as when a strange bird shone for an instant in vivid contrast to the mountain laurel near his window; an unusual effect of pine silhouettes near the sky; a weird, semi-poetic suggestion of one of Poe's stories implied in a contorted shadow cast by a gnarled little oak in the light of the moon—these he had noticed and remembered, and was now eager to tell his companion, with full assurance of her sympathy and understanding. Three days earlier he would have passed them by.

But stranger still was his discovery that he had *always* noticed such things, and had remembered them. Observations of the sort had heretofore been quite unconscious. Without knowing it he had always been a Nature lover, one who appreciated the poetry of her moods, one who saw the beauty of her smiles, or, what is more rare, the greater beauty of her frown. The influence had entered into his being, but had lain neglected. Now it stole forth as the odour of a dried balsam bough steals from the corner of a loft whither it has been thrown carelessly. It was all delightful and new, and he wanted to tell her of it.

He did so. After a little he told her about *Aliris: A Romance of all Time*, in which she appeared so interested that he detailed the main idea and the plot. At her request, he promised to read it to her. He was very young, you see, and very inexperienced; he threw himself generously, without reserve, on this girl's sympathies in a manner of which, assuredly, he should have been quite ashamed. Only the very young are not ashamed.

The girl listened, at first half amused. Then she was touched, for she saw that it was sincere, and youthful, and indicative of clear faith in what is beautiful, and in fine ideals of what is fitting. Perhaps, dimly, she perceived that this is good stuff of which to make a man, provided it springs from immaturity, and not from the sentimentalism of degeneracy. The loss of it is a price we pay for wisdom. Some think the price too high.

As he talked on in this moonshiny way, really believing his ridiculous abstractions the most important things in the world, gradually she too became young. She listened with parted lips, and in her great eyes the soul rose and rose within, clearing away the surface moods as twilight clears the land of everything but peace.

He was telling of the East again with a certain felicity of expression—have we not said he had the gift of words?—and an abandon of sentiment which showed how thoroughly he confided in the sympathy of his listener. When we are young we are apt to confide in the sympathy of every listener, and so we make fools of ourselves, and it takes us a long time to live down our

reputations. As we grow older, we believe less and less in its reality. Perhaps by and by we do not trust to anybody's sympathy, not even our own.

"We have an old country place," he was saying; "it belonged to my grandfather. My grandfather came by it when the little town was very small indeed, so he built an old-fashioned stone house and surrounded it with large grounds." He was seeing the stone house and the large grounds with that new inner observation which he had just discovered, and he was trying to the best of his ability to tell what he saw. After a little he spoke more rhythmically. Many might have thought he spoke sentimentally, because with feeling; but in reality he was merely trying with great earnestness for expression. A jarring word would have brought him back to his everyday mood, but for the time being he was wrapt in what he saw. This is a condition which all writers, and some lovers, will recognise. "Now the place is empty—except in summer—except that we have an old woman who lives tucked away in one corner of it. I lived there one summer just after I finished college. Outside my window there was an apple tree that just brushed against the ledge; there were rose vines, the climbing sort, on the wall; and then, too, there was a hickory tree that towered 'way over the roof. In the front yard is what is known all over town as the 'big tree,' a silver maple, at least twice as tall as the house. It is so broad that its shade falls over the whole front of the place. In the back is an orchard of old apple trees, and trellises of big blue grapes. On one side is a broad lawn, at the back of which is one of the good old-fashioned flower gardens that does one good to look at. There are little pink primroses dotting the sod, sweet-william, lavender, nasturtiums, sweet peas, hollyhocks, bachelor's buttons, portulaca, and a row of tall sunflowers, the delight of a sleepy colony of hens. I learned all the flowers that summer." He clasped his hands comfortably back of his head and looked at her. She was gazing out over the Bad Lands to the East. "In the very centre, as a sort of protecting nurse to all the littler flowers," he went on, "is a big lilac bush, and there the bees and humming birds are thick on a warm spring day. There are plenty of birds too, but I didn't know so many of them. They nested everywhere—in the 'big tree,' the orchard, the evergreens, the hedges, and in the long row of maple trees with trunks as big as a barrel and limbs that touch across the street."

"It must be beautiful!" said the girl quietly without looking around.

Then he began to "suppose." This, as every woman knows, is dangerous business.

"It *was* beautiful," said he. "I can't tell you about it. The words don't seem to fit some way. I wish you could see it for yourself. I know you'd enjoy it. I always wanted some one with me to enjoy it too. Suppose some way we were placed so we could watch the year go by in those deep windows. First there is the spring and the birds and the flowers, all of which I've been talking about. Then there is the summer, when the shades are drawn, when the shadows of the roses wave slowly across the curtains, when the air outside quivers with heat, and the air inside tastes like a draught of cool water. All the bird songs are stilled except that one little fellow still warbles, swaying in the breeze on the tiptop of the 'big tree,' his notes sliding down the long sunbeams like beads on a golden thread. Then we would read together, in the half-darkened 'parlour,' something not very deep, but beautiful, like Hawthorne's stories; or we would together seek for these perfect lines of poetry which haunt the memory. In the evening we would go out to hear the crickets and the tree toads, to see the night breeze toss the leaves across the calm face of the moon, to be silenced in spirit by the peace of the stars. Then the autumn would come. We would taste the 'Concords' and the little red grapes and the big red grapes. We would take our choice of the yellow sweetings, the hard white snow apples, or the little red-cheeked fellows from the west tree. And then, of course, there are the russets! Then there are the pears, and all the hickory nuts which rattle down on us every time the wind blows. The leaves are everywhere. We would rake them up into big piles, and jump into them, and 'swish' about in them. How bracing the air is! How silvery the sun! How red your cheeks would get! And think of the bonfires!"

"And in winter?" murmured the girl. Her eyes were shining.

"In the winter the wind would howl through the 'big tree,' and everything would be bleak and cold out doors. We would be inside, of course, and we would sit on the fur rug in front of the fireplace, while the evening passed by, watching the 'geese in the chimney' flying slowly away."

"'Suppose' some more," she begged dreamily. "I love it. It rests me."

She clasped her hands back of her head and closed her eyes.

The young man looked quietly about him.

"This is a wild and beautiful country," said he, "but it lacks something. I think it is the soul. The little wood lots of the East have so much of it." He paused in surprise at his own thoughts. His only experiences in the woods East had been when out picnicking, or berrying, and he had never noticed these things. "I don't know as I ever thought of it there," he went on slowly, as though trying to be honest with her, "but here it comes to me somehow or another." A little fly-catcher shot up from the frond below, poised a moment, and dropped back with closed wings.

"Do you know the birds?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not," he admitted; "I don't really *know* much about Nature, but I love it, and I'm going to learn more. I know only the very common birds, and one other. Did you ever hear the hermit thrush sing?"

"Never."

"Oh!" he cried in sudden enthusiasm, "then there is another 'suppose' for us, the best of all."

"I love the dear old house!" she objected doubtfully.

"But the hermit thrush is better. The old country minister took me to hear him one Sunday afternoon and I shall never forget it."

She glanced at his animated face through half-closed eyes.

"Tell me," she urged softly.

"'Suppose' we were back East," he began, "and in the country, just about this time of year. We would wait until the afternoon—why! just about this time, when the sun is getting low. We would push through the bushes at the edge of the woods where the little tinkling birds sing in the fence corners, and would enter the deep high woods where the trees are tall and still. The moss is thick and soft in there, and there are little pools lying calm and dark, and there is a kind of a *hush* in the air—not silence, you know, but like when a big crowd of people are keeping still. And then we would walk very carefully, and speak low, and we would sit by the side of a fallen log and wait. After a while the thrush would sing, a deep note, with a thrill in it, like a bell slow and solemn. When you hear it you too feel a thrill as though you had heard a great and noble thought. Why, it is almost *holy*!"

He turned to the girl. She was looking at him.

"Why, hullo!" he exclaimed, "what's the matter?"

Her eyes were brimming with tears.

"Nothing," she said. "I never heard a man talk as you have been talking, that is all. The rest of them are cynical and hard and cold. They would be ashamed to say the things you have said. No, no!" she cried, laying her hand on his arm as he made a little uneasy movement, "do not misunderstand me. I like it. I love it. It does me good. I had lost faith. It is not nice to know the other kind—well."

"You speak bitterly," he expostulated.

She laughed. "It is a common experience enough. Pray that you may never know it. I began as a little child, loving and trusting every one, and giving my full free heart and confidence to every one who offered his best to me. All I can say is, that I am thankful for you that you have escaped the suffering such blind trust leads to."

She laughed again, bitterly, and threw her arms out.

"I suppose I shall go on trusting people forever. It's in my nature, and I can't help it."

"I hope you will feel you can trust me," said he, troubled at this passion so much beyond his experience. "I would do anything for you."

"Do! do!" she cried with contempt. "Yes. Any number of people will *do* anything for me. I want some one to *be* for me!"

"I'm so sorry!" he said simply, but with great feeling.

"Don't pity me, don't believe in me!" she cried suddenly in a passion. "I am not worth it. I am cruel and hard and cold, and I'll never care for anybody in any way. My nature has been hardened. I *can't* be good. I can't care for people. I *can't* think of giving way to it. It frightens me."

She burst into sudden tears and sobbed convulsively. In a moment she became calm. Then she took her hands from her eyes and smiled. In the distress of his sympathy Bennington thought he had never seen anything more beautiful than this breaking forth of the light.

"You must think I am a very peculiar young person," she said, "but I told you I was a mystery. I am a little tired to-day, that's all."

The conversation took a lighter tone and ran on the subject of the new horse. She was much interested, inquiring of his colour, his size, his gaits, whether he had been tried.

"I'll tell you what we will do," she suggested; "we'll go on an expedition some day. I have a pony too. We will fill up our saddlebags and cook our own dinner. I know a nice little place over toward Blue Lead."

"I've one suggestion to add," put in Bennington, "and that is, that we go to-morrow."

She looked a trifle doubtful.

"I don't know. Aren't we seeing a good deal of each other?"

"Oh, if it is going to bore you, by all means put it off!" cried Bennington in genuine alarm.

She laughed contentedly over his way of looking at it. "I'm not tired then, so please you; and when I am, I'll let you know. To-morrow it is."

"Shall I come after you? What time shall I start?"

"No, I'd rather meet you somewhere. Let's see. You watch for me, and I'll ride by in the lower gulch about nine o'clock."

"Very well. By the way, the band's going to practise in town to-night. Don't you want to go?"

"I'd like to, but I promised Jim I'd go with him."

"Jim?"

"Jim Fay."

Bennington felt this as a discordant note.

"Do you know him very well?" he asked jealously.

"He's my best friend. I like him very much. He is a fine fellow. You must meet him."

"I've met him," said Bennington shortly.

"Now you must go," she commanded, after a pause. "I want to stay here for a while." "No," as he opened his mouth to object. "I mean it! Please be good!"

After he had gone she sat still until sundown. Once she shook her shoulders impatiently. "It is *silly!*" she assured herself. As before, the shadow of Harney crept out to the horizon's edge. There it stopped. Twilight fell.

"No Spirit Mountain to-night," she murmured wistfully at last. "Almost do I believe in the old legend."

CHAPTER VIII

AN ADVENTURE IN THE NIGHT

After supper that night Bennington found himself unaccountably alone in camp. Old Mizzou had wandered off up the gulch. Arthur had wandered off down the gulch. The woman had locked herself in her cabin.

So, having nothing else to do, he got out the manuscript of *Aliris: A Romance of all Time*, and read it through carefully from the beginning. To his surprise he found it very poor. Its language was felicitous in some spots, but stilted in most; the erudition was pedantic, and dragged in by the ears; the action was idiotic; and the proportions were padded until they no longer existed as proportions. He was astounded. He began to see that he had misconceived the whole treatment of it. It would have to be written all over again, with the love story as the ruling *motif*. He felt very capable of doing the love story. He drew some paper toward him and began to write.

You see he was already developing. Every time a writer is made to appreciate that his work is poor he has taken a step in advance of it. Although he did not know that was the reason of it, Bennington perceived the deficiencies of *Aliris*, because he had promised to read it to the girl. He saw it through her eyes.

The young man became absorbed in redescribing the heroine with violet eyes. A sudden slamming of the door behind him brought him, startled, to his feet. He laughed, and was about to sit down again, but noticed that the door had remained open. He arose to shut it. Over the trunks of the nearer pines played a strange flickering light, throwing them now into relief, now into shadow. "Strange!" murmured Bennington to himself, and stepped outside to investigate. As he crossed the sill he was seized on either side.

He cried out and struggled blindly, but was held as in a vice. His captors, whom he dimly perceived to be large men in masks, whirled him sharply to the left, and he found himself face to face with a third man, also masked. Beyond him were a score or so more, some of whom bore pine torches, which, partly blazing and partly smoking, served to cast the weird light he had seen flickering on the tree trunks. Perfect silence reigned. The man with whom Bennington was fronted eyed him gravely through the holes in his mask.

"I'd like to know what this means?" broke out the Easterner angrily.

The men did not reply. They stood motionless, as silent as the night. In spite of his indignation, the young man was impressed. He twisted his shoulders again. The men at either arm never tightened a muscle to resist, and yet he was held beyond the possibility of escape.

"What's the matter? What're you trying to do? Take your hands off me!" he cried.

Again the silence fell.

Then at the end of what seemed to the Easterner a full minute the masked figure in front spoke.

"Thar is them that thinks as how it ain't noways needful thet ye knows," it said in slow and solemn accents, "but by the mercy of th' others we gives y' thet much satisfaction."

"You comes hyar from a great corp'ration thet in times gone by we thinks is public spirited an' enterprisin', which is a mistake. You pays th' debt of said corp'ration, so they sez, an' tharfore we welcomes you to our bosom cordial. What happens? You insults us by paying such low-down ornary cusses as Snowie. Th' camp is just. She arises an' avenges said insult by stringin' of you up all right an' proper. We gives you five minutes to get ready."

"What do you mean?"

"We hangs you in five minutes."

The slow, even voice ceased, and again the silence was broken only by the occasional bursting crackle of a blister in the pine torches. Bennington tried to realize the situation. It had all come about so suddenly.

"I guess you've got the joke on me, boys," he ventured with a nervous little laugh. And then his voice died away against the stony immobility of the man opposite as laughter sinks to nothing against the horror of a great darkness. Bennington began to feel impressed in earnest. Across his mind crept doubts as to the outcome. He almost screamed aloud as some one stole up behind and dropped over his throat the soft cold coil of a lariat. Then, at a signal from the chief, the two men haled him away.

They stopped beneath a gnarled oak halfway down the slope to the gulch bottom, from which protruded, like a long witch arm, a single withered branch. Over this the unseen threw the end of the lariat. Bennington faced the expressionless gaze of twenty masks, on which the torchlight threw Strong black shadows. Directly in front of him the leader posted himself, watch in hand.

"Any last requests?" he inquired in his measured tones.

Bennington felt the need of thinking quickly, but, being unused to emergencies, he could not.

"Anywhar y' want yore stuff sent?" the other pursued relentlessly.

Bennington swallowed, and found his voice at last.

"Now be reasonable," he pleaded. "It isn't going to do you any good to hang me. I didn't mean to make any distinctions. I just paid the oldest debts, that's all. You'll all get paid. There'll be some more money after a while, and then I can pay some more of you. If you kill me, you won't get any at all."

"Won't get any any way," some one muttered audibly from the crowd.

The man with the watch never stirred.

"Two minutes more," he said simply.

One of the men, who had been holding the young man's arms, had fallen back into the crowd when the lariat was thrown over the oak limb. During the short colloquy just detailed, the attention of the other had become somewhat distracted. Bennington wrenched himself free, and struck this man full in the face.

He had never in his well-ordered life hit in anger, but behind this blow was desperation, and the weight of a young and active body. The man went down. Bennington seized the lariat with both hands and tried to wrench it over his head.

The individual who had done all the talking leaped forward toward him, and dodging a hastily aimed blow, seized him about the waist and threw him neatly to the ground. Bennington struggled furiously and silently. The other had great difficulty in holding him down.

"Come here, some of you fellows," he cried, panting and laughing a little. "Tie his hands, for the love of Heaven."

In another moment the Easterner, his arms securely pinioned, stood as before. He was breathing hard and the short struggle had heated his blood through and through. Bunker Hill had waked up. He set his teeth, resolving that they should not get another word out of him.

The timekeeper raised one hand warningly. Over his shoulder Bennington dimly saw a tall muscular figure, tense with the expectation of effort, lean forward to the slack of the lariat. He stared back to the front.

The leader raised his pistol to give the signal. Bennington shut his eyes. Then ensued a pause and a murmuring of low voices. Bennington looked, and, to his surprise, perceived Lawton's girl in earnest expostulation with the leader of the band. As he listened their voices rose, so he caught snatches of their talk.

"Confound it all!" objected the man in exasperated tones, "you don't play fair. That wasn't the agreement at all."

"Agreement or no agreement, this thing's gone far enough," she rejoined sharply. "I've watched the whole performance, and I've been expecting for the last ten minutes you'd have sense enough to quit."

The voices died to a murmuring. Once the girl stamped her foot, and once the man spread his hands out in deprecation. The maskers grouped about in silent enjoyment of the scene. At last the

discussion terminated.

"It's all up, boys," cried the man savagely, tearing off his mask. To Bennington's vast surprise, the features of Jim Fay were discovered. He approached and began sullenly to undo the young man's pinioned arms. The others rolled up their masks and put them in their pockets. They laughed to each other consumedly. The tall man approached, rubbing his jaw.

"You hits hard, sonny," said he, "and you don't go down in yore boots [\[A\]](#) a little bit."

The group began to break up and move down the gulch, most of the men shouting out a good-natured word or so of farewell. Bennington, recovering from his daze at the rapid passage of these events, stepped forward to where Fay and the girl had resumed their discussion. He saw that the young miner had recovered his habitual tone of raillery, and that the girl was now looking up at him with eyes full of deprecation.

"Miss Lawton," said Bennington with formality, "I hope you will allow me, after your great kindness, to see that you get down the gulch safely."

Fay cut in before the girl could reply.

"Don't bother about that, de Laney," said he, in a most cavalier fashion. "I'll see to it."

"I did not address you, sir!" returned Bennington coldly. The Westerner's eyes twinkled with amusement. The girl interrupted.

"Thank you very much, Mr. de Laney, but Mr. Fay is right—I wouldn't trouble you." Her eyes commanded Fay, and he moved a little apart.

"Don't be angry," she pleaded hurriedly, in an undertone, "but it's better that way to-night. And I think you acted grandly."

"You are the one who acted grandly," he replied, a little mollified. "How can I ever thank you? You came just in time."

She laughed.

"You're not angry, are you?" she coaxed.

"No, of course not; what right have I to be?"

"I don't like that—quite—but I suppose it will do. You'll be there to-morrow?"

"You know I will."

"Then good-night." She gave his folded arm a hasty pat and ran on down the hill after Fay, who had gone on. Bennington saw her seize his shoulders, as she overtook him, and give them a severe shake.

The light of the torches down the gulch wavered and disappeared. Bennington returned to his room. On the table lay his manuscript, and the ink was hardly dried on the last word of it. Outside a poor-will began to utter its weird call. The candle before him sputtered, and burned again with a clear flame.

[\[A\]](#)

Western—to become frightened.

CHAPTER IX

THE HEAVENS OPENED

Bennington awoke early the next morning, a pleased glow of anticipation warming his heart, and almost before his eyes were opened he had raised himself to leap out of the bunk. Then with a disappointed sigh he sank back. On the roof fell the heavy patter of raindrops.

After a time he arose and pulled aside the curtains of a window. The nearer world was dripping; the farther world was hidden or obscured by long veils of rain, driven in ragged clouds before a west wind. Yesterday the leaves had waved lightly, the undergrowth of shrubs had uplifted in feathery airiness of texture, the ground beneath had been crisp and aromatic with pine needles. Now everything bore a drooping, sodden aspect which spoke rather of decay than of the life of spring. Even the chickens had wisely remained indoors, with the exception of a single bedraggled old rooster, whose melancholy appearance added another shade of gloom to the dismal outlook. The wind twisted his long tail feathers from side to side so energetically that, even as Bennington looked, the poor fowl, perforce, had to scud, careened from one side to the other, like a heavily-laden craft, into the shelter of his coop. The wind, left to its own devices, skittered across cold-looking little pools of water, and tried in vain to induce the soaked leaves of the autumn before to essay an aerial flight.

The rain hit the roof now in heavy gusts as though some one had dashed it from a pail. The

wind whistled through a loosened shingle and rattled around an ill-made joint. Within the house itself some slight sounds of preparation for breakfast sounded the clearer against the turmoil outside. And then Bennington became conscious that for some time he had *felt* another sound underneath all the rest. It was grand and organlike in tone, resembling the roar of surf on a sand beach as much as anything else. He looked out again, and saw that it was the wind in the trees. The same conditions that had before touched the harp murmur of a stiller day now struck out a rush and roar almost awe-inspiring in its volume. Bennington impulsively threw open the window and leaned out.

The great hill back of the camp was so steep that the pines growing on its slope offered to the breeze an almost perpendicular screen of branches. Instead of one, or at most a dozen trees, the wind here passed through a thousand at once. As a consequence, the stir of air that in a level woodland would arouse but a faint whisper, here would pass with a rustling murmur; a murmur would be magnified into a noise as of the mellow falling of waters; and now that the storm had awakened, the hill caught up its cry with a howl so awful and sustained that, as the open window let in the full volume of its blast, Bennington involuntarily drew back. He closed the sash and turned to dress.

After the first disappointment, strange to say, Bennington became quite resigned. He had felt, a little illogically, that this giving of a whole day to the picnic was not quite the thing. His Puritan conscience impressed him with the sacredness of work. He settled down to the fact of the rainstorm with a pleasant recognition of its inevitability, and a resolve to improve his time.

To that end, after breakfast, he drew on a pair of fleece-lined slippers, donned a sweater, occupied two chairs in the well-known fashion, and attacked with energy the pages of Le Conte's *Geology*. This book, as you very well know, discourses at first with great interest concerning erosions. Among other things it convinces you that a current of water, being doubled in swiftness, can transport a mass sixty-four times as heavy as when it ran half as fast. This astounding proposition is abstrusely proved. As Bennington had resolved not to make his reading mere recreation, he drew diagrams conscientiously until he understood it. Then he passed on to an earnest consideration of why the revolution of the globe and the resistance of continents cause oceanic currents of a particular direction and velocity. Besides this, there was much easier reading concerning alluvial deposits. So interested did he grow that Old Mizzou, coming in, muddy-hoofed and glistening from a round of the stock, found him quite unapproachable on the subject of cribbage. The patriarch then stumped over to Arthur's cabin.

After dinner, Bennington picked up the book again, but found that his brain had reached the limit of spontaneous mental effort. He looked for Old Mizzou and the cribbage game. The miner had gone to visit Arthur again. Bennington wandered about disconsolately.

For a time he drummed idly on the window pane. Then he took out his revolver and tried to practise through the open doorway. The smoke from the discharges hung heavy in the damp air, filling the room in a most disagreeable fashion. Bennington's trips to see the effect of his shots proved to him the fiendish propensity of everything he touched, were it never so lightly, to sprinkle him with cold water. Above all, his skill with the weapon was not great enough as yet to make it much fun. He abandoned pistol shooting and yawned extensively, wishing it were time to go to bed.

In the evening he played cribbage with Old Mizzou. After a time Arthur and his wife came in and they had a dreary game of "cinch," the man speaking but little, the woman not at all. Old Mizzou smoked incessantly on a corncob pipe charged with a peculiarly pungent variety of tobacco, which filled the air with a blue vapour, and penetrated unpleasantly into Bennington's mucous membranes.

The next morning it was still raining.

Bennington became very impatient indeed, but he tackled Le Conte industriously, and did well enough until he tried to get it into his head why various things happen to glaciers. Then viscosity, the lines of swiftest motion, relegation, and directions of pressure came forth from the printed pages and mocked him. He arose in his might and went forth into the open air.

Before going out he had put on his canvas shooting coat and a pair of hobnailed leather hunting boots, laced for a little distance at the front and sides. He visited the horses, standing disconsolate under an open shed in the corral; he slopped, with constantly accruing masses of sticky earth at his feet, to the chicken coop, into which he cast an eye; he even took the kitchen pails and tramped down to the spring and back. In the gulch he did not see or hear a living thing. A newly-born and dirty little stream was trickling destructively through all manner of shivering grasses and flowers. The water from Bennington's sleeves ran down over the harsh canvas cuffs and turned his hands purple with the cold. He returned to the cabin and changed his clothes.

The short walk had refreshed him, but it had spurred his impatience. Outside, the world seemed to have changed. His experience with the Hills, up to now, had always been in one phase of their beauty—that of clear, bright sunshine and soft skies. Now it was as a different country. He could not get rid of the feeling, foolish as it was, that it was in reality different; and that the whole episode of the girl and the rock was as a vision which had passed. It grew indistinct in the presence of this iron reality of cold and wet. He could not assure himself he had not imagined it all. Thus, belated, he came to thinking of her again, and having now nothing else to do, he fell into daydreams that had no other effect than to reveal to him the impatience which had been,

from the first, the real cause of his restlessness under the temporary confinement. Now the impatience grew in intensity. He resolved that if the morrow did not end the storm, he would tramp down the gulch to make a call. All this time *Aliris* lay quite untouched.

The next day dawned darker than ever. After breakfast Old Mizzou, as usual, went out to feed the horses, and Bennington, through sheer idleness, accompanied him. They distributed the oats and hay, and then stood, sheltered from the direct rain, conversing idly.

Suddenly the wind died and the rain ceased. In the place of the gloom succeeded a strange sulphur-yellow glare which lay on the spirit with almost physical oppression. Old Mizzou shouted something, and scrambled excitedly to the house. Bennington looked about him bewildered.

Over back of the hill, dimly discernible through the trees, loomed the black irregular shape of a cloud, in dismal contrast to the yellow glare which now filled all the sky. The horses, frightened, crowded up close to Bennington, trying to push their noses over his shoulder. A number of jays and finches rushed down through the woods and darted rapidly, each with its peculiar flight, toward a clump of trees and bushes standing on a ridge across the valley.

From the cabin Old Mizzou was shouting to him. He turned to follow the old man. Back of him something vast and awful roared out, and then all at once he felt himself struggling with a rush of waters. He was jammed violently against the posts of the corral. There he worked to his feet.

The whole side of the hill was one vast spread of shallow tossing water, as though a lake had been let fall on the summit of the ridge. The smaller bushes were uprooted and swept along, but the trees and saplings held their own.

In a moment the stones and ridgelets began to show. It was over. Not a drop of rain had fallen.

Bennington climbed the corral fence and walked slowly to the house. The blacksmith shop was filled to the window, and Arthur's cabin was not much better. He entered the kitchen. The floor there was some two inches submerged, but the water was slowly escaping through the down-hill door by which Bennington had come in. Across the dining-room door Mrs. Arthur had laid a folded rug. In front of the barrier stood the lady herself, vigorously sweeping back the threatening water from her only glorious apartment.

Bennington took the broom from her and swept until the cessation of the flood made it no longer necessary. Mrs. Arthur commenced to mop the floor. The young man stepped outside. There he was joined a moment later by the other two.

They offered no explanation of their whereabouts during the trouble, but Bennington surmised shrewdly that they had hunted a dry place.

"Glory!" cried Old Mizzou. "Lucky she misses us!"

"What was it? Where'd it come from?" inquired Bennington, shaking the surface drops from his shoulders. He was wet through.

"Cloud-burst," replied the miner. "She hit up th' ridge a ways. If she'd ever burst yere, sonny, ye'd never know what drowned ye. Look at that gulch!"

The water had now drained from the hill entirely. It could be seen that most of the surface earth had been washed away, leaving the skeleton of the mountain bare. Some of the more slightly rooted trees had fallen, or clung precariously to the earth with bony fingers. But the gulch itself was terrible. The mountain laurel, the elders, the sarvis bushes, the wild roses which, a few days before, had been fragrant and beautiful with blossom and leaf and musical with birds, had disappeared. In their stead rolled an angry brown flood whirling in almost unbroken surface from bank to bank. Several oaks, submerged to their branches, raised their arms helplessly. As Bennington looked, one of these bent slowly and sank from sight. A moment later it shot with great suddenness half its length into the air, was seized by the eager waters, and whisked away as lightly as though it had been a tree of straw. Dark objects began to come down with the stream. They seemed to be trying to preserve a semblance of dignity in their stately bobbing up and down, but apparently found the attempt difficult. The roar was almost deafening, but even above it a strangely deliberate grinding noise was audible. Old Mizzou said it was the grating of boulders as they were rolled along the bed of the stream. The yellow glow had disappeared from the air, and the gloom of rain had taken its place.

A fine mist began to fall. Bennington for the first time realized he was wet and shivering, and so he turned inside to change his clothes.

"It'll all be over in a few hours," remarked Arthur. "I reckon them Spanish Gulch people'll wish they lived up-stream."

Bennington paused at the doorway.

"That's so," he commented. "How about Spanish Gulch? Will it all be drowned out?"

"No, I reckon not," replied Arthur. "They'll get wet down a lot, and have wet blankets to sleep in to-night, that's all. You see the gulch spraddles out down there, an' then too all this timber'll jam down this gulch a-ways. That'll back up th' water some, and so she won't come all of a rush."

"I see," said Bennington.

The afternoon was well enough occupied in repairing to some extent the ravages of the brief storm. A length of the corral had succumbed to the flood, many valuable tools in the blacksmith shop were in danger of rust from the dampness, and Arthur and his wife had been completely washed out. All three men worked hard setting things to rights. The twilight caught them before their work was done.

Bennington found himself too weary to attempt an unknown, *débris*-covered road by dark. He played cribbage with Old Mizzou and won.

About half past nine he pushed back his chair and went outside. The stars had come out by the thousand, and a solitary cricket, which had in some way escaped the deluge, was chirping in the middle distance. With a sudden uplift of the heart he realized that he would see "her" on the morrow. He learned that no matter how philosophically we may have borne a separation, the prospect of its near end shows us how strong the repression has been; the lifting of the bonds makes evident how much they have galled.

CHAPTER X

THE WORLD MADE YOUNG

The morning fulfilled the promise of the night before. Bennington de Laney awoke to a sun-bright world, fresh with the early breezes. A multitude of birds outside the window bubbled and warbled and carolled away with all their little mights, either in joy at the return of peace, or in sorrow at the loss of their new-built houses. Sorrow and joy sound much alike as nature tells them. The farther ridges and the prairies were once more in view, but now, oh, wonder! the great plain had cast aside its robes of monk brown, and had stepped forth in jolly green-o'Lincoln. The air was full of tingling life. Altogether a morning to cry one to leap eagerly from bed, to rush to the window, to drink in deep draughts of electric balmy ozone, and to thank heaven for the grace of mere existence.

That at least is what Bennington did. And he did more. He despatched a hasty breakfast, and went forth and saddled his steed, and rode away down the gulch, with never a thought of sample tests, and never a care whether the day's work were done or not. For this was springtime, and the air was snapping with it. Near the chickens' shelter the burnished old gobbler spread his tail and dragged his wings and puffed his feathers and swelled himself red in the face, to the great admiration of a demure gray-brown little turkey hen. Overhead wheeled two small hawks screaming. They clashed, and light feathers came floating down from the encounter; yet presently they flew away together to a hole in a dead tree. Three song sparrows dashed almost to his very feet, so busily fighting that they hardly escaped the pony's hoofs. Everywhere love songs trilled from the underbrush; and Bennington de Laney, as young, as full of life, as unmated as they, rode slowly along thinking of his lady love, and---

"Hullo! Where are you going?" cried she.

He looked up with eager joy, to find that they had met in the middle of what used to be the road. The gulch had been swept bare by the flood, not only of every representative of the vegetable world, but also of the very earth in which it had grown. From the remains of the roadbed projected sharp flints and rocks, among which the broncos picked their way.

"Good-morning, Mary," he cried. "I was just coming to see you. Wasn't it a great rain?"

"And isn't the gulch awful? Down near our way the timber began to jam, and it is all choked up; but up here it is desolate."

He turned his horse about, and they paced slowly along together, telling each other their respective experiences in the storm. It seemed that the Lawtons had known nothing of the cloud-burst itself, except from its effects in filling up the ravine. Rumours of the drowning of a miner were about.

It soon became evident that the brightness of the morning was reflected from the girl's mood. She fairly sparkled with gaiety and high spirits. The two got along famously.

"Where are you going?" asked Bennington at last.

"On the picnic, of course," she rejoined promptly. "Weren't you invited? I thought you were."

"I thought it would be too wet," he averred in explanation.

"Not a bit! The rain dries quickly in the hills, and the cloud-burst only came into this gulch. I have here," she went on, twisting around in her saddle to inspect a large bundle and a pair of well-stuffed saddle bags, "I have here a coffee pot, a frying pan, a little kettle, two tin cups, and various sorts of grub. I am fixed for a scout sure. Now when we get near your camp you must run up and get an axe and some matches."

Bennington observed with approval the corpulency of the bundle and the skilful manner with which it was tied on. He noted, with perhaps more approval, her lithe figure in its old-fashioned

painter's blouse and rough skirt, and the rosiness of her cheeks under a cloth cap caught on awry. As the ponies sought a path at a snail's pace through the sharp flints, she showed in a thousand ways how high the gaiety of her animal spirits had mounted. She sang airy little pieces of songs. She uttered single clear notes. She mocked, with a ludicrously feminine croak, the hoarse voice of a crow sailing over them. She rallied Bennington mercilessly on his corduroys, his yellow flapped pistol holster, his laced boots. She went over in ridiculous pantomime the scene of the mock lynching, until Bennington rolled in his saddle with light-hearted laughter, and wondered how it was possible he had ever taken the affair seriously. When he returned with the axe she was hugely alarmed lest he harm himself by his awkward way of carrying it, and gave him much wholesome advice in her most maternal manner. After all of which she would catch his eye, and they would both laugh to startle the birds.

Blue Lead proved to be some distance away, for which fact Bennington was not sorry. At length they surmounted a little ridge. Over its summit there started into being a long cool "draw," broad and shallow near the top, but deepening by insensible degrees into a cañon filled already with broad-leaved shrubs, and thickly grown with saplings of beech and ash. Through the screen of slender trunks could be seen miniature open parks carpeted with a soft tiny fern, not high enough to conceal the ears of a rabbit, or to quench the flame of the tiger lily that grew there. Soon a little brook sprang from nowhere, and crept timidly through and under thick mosses. After a time it increased in size, and when it had become large enough to bubble over clear gravel, Mary called a halt.

"We'll have our picnic here," she decided.

The ravine at this point received another little gulch into itself, and where the two came together the bottom widened out into almost parklike proportions. On one side was a grass-plot encroached upon by numerous raspberry vines. On the other was the brook, flowing noisily in the shade of saplings and of ferns.

Bennington unsaddled the horses and led them over to the grass-plot, where he picketed them securely in such a manner that they could not become entangled. When he returned to the brookside he found that Mary had undone her bundle and spread out its contents. There were various utensils, some corn meal, coffee, two slices of ham, raw potatoes, a small bottle of milk, some eggs wonderfully preserved by moss inside the pail, and some bread and cake. Bennington eyed all this in dismay. She caught his look and laughed.

"Can't you cook? Well, I can; you just obey orders."

"We won't get anything to eat before night," objected Bennington dolefully as he looked over the decidedly raw material.

"And he's *so* hungry!" she teased. "Never mind, you build a fire."

Bennington brightened. He had one outdoor knack—that of lighting matches in a wind and inducing refractory wood to burn. His skill had often been called into requisition in the igniting of beach fires, and the so-called "camp fires" of girls. He collected dry twigs from the sunny places, cut slivers with his knife, built over the whole a wigwam-shaped pyramid of heavier twigs, against which he leaned his firewood. Then he touched off the combination. The slivers ignited the twigs, the twigs set fire to the wigwam, the wigwam started the firewood. Bennington's honour was vindicated. He felt proud.

Mary, who had been filling the coffee pot at the creek, approached and viewed the triumph. She cast upon it the glance of scorn.

"That's no cooking fire," said she.

So Bennington, under her directions, placed together the two parallel logs with the hewn sides and built the small bright fire between them.

"Now you see," she explained, "I can put my frying pan, and coffee pot, and kettle across the two logs. I can get at them easy, and don't burn my fingers. Now you may peel the potatoes."

The Easterner peeled potatoes under constant laughing amendment as to method. Then the small cook collected her materials about her, in grand preparation for the final rites. She turned back the loose sleeves of her blouse to the elbow.

This drew an exclamation from Bennington.

"Why, Mary, how white your arms are!" he cried, astonished.

She surveyed her forearm with a little blush, turning it back and forth.

"I *am* pretty tanned," she agreed.

The coffee pot was filled and placed across the logs at one end, and left to its own devices a little removed from the hottest of the fire. The kettle stood next, half filled with salted water, in which nestled the potatoes like so many nested eggs. Mary mixed a mysterious concoction of corn meal, eggs, butter, and some white powder, mashing the whole up with milk and water. The mixture she spread evenly in the bottom of the frying pan, which she set in a warm place.

"It isn't much of a baking tin," she commented, eyeing it critically, "but it'll do."

Under her direction Bennington impaled the two slices of ham on long green switches, and stuck these upright in the ground in such a position that the warmth from the flames could just reach them.

"They'll never cook there," he objected.

"Didn't expect they would," she retorted briefly. Then relenting, "They finish better if they're warmed through first," she explained.

By this time the potatoes were bubbling energetically and the coffee was sending out a fragrant steam. Mary stabbed experimentally at the vegetables with a sharpened sliver. Apparently satisfied, she drew back with a happy sigh. She shook her hair from her eyes and smiled across at Bennington.

"Ready! Go!" cried she.

The frying pan was covered with a tin plate on which were heaped live coals. More coals were poked from between the logs on to a flat place, were spread out thin, and were crowned by the frying pan and its glowing freight. Bennington held over the fire a switch of ham in each hand, taking care, according to directions, not to approach the actual blaze. Mary borrowed his hunting knife and disappeared into the thicket. In a moment she returned with a kettle-lifter, improvised very simply from a forked branch of a sapling. One of the forks was left long for the hand, the other was cut short. The result was like an Esquimaux fishhook. She then relieved Bennington of his task, while that young man lifted the kettle from the fire and carefully drained away the water.

"Dinner!" she called gaily.

Bennington looked up surprised. He had been so absorbed in the spells wrought by this dainty woods fairy that he had forgotten the flight of time. It was enough for him to watch the turn of her wrist, the swift certainty of her movements, to catch the glow lit in her face by the fire over which she bent. Then he suddenly remembered that her movements had all along tended toward dinner, and were not got up simply and merely that he might discover new charms in the small housekeeper.

He found himself seated on a rock with a tin plate in his lap, a tin cup at his side, and an eager little lady in front of him, anxious that he should taste all her dishes and deliver an opinion forthwith.

The coffee he pronounced nectar; the ham and mealy potatoes, delicious; the "johnny-cake" of a yellow golden crispness which the originator of johnny-cake might envy; and the bread and cake and butter and sugar only the less meritorious that they had not been prepared by her own hands and on the spot.

"And see!" she cried, clapping her hands, "the sun is still directly over us. It is not night yet, silly boy!"

CHAPTER XI

AND HE DID EAT

After the meal he wanted to lie down in the grasses and watch the clouds sail by, but she would have none of it. She haled him away to the brookside. There she showed him how to wash dishes by filling them half full of water in which fine gravel has been mixed, and then whirling the whole rapidly until the tin is rubbed quite clean. Never was prosaic task more delightful. They knelt side by side on the bank, under the dense leaves, and dabbled in the water happily. The ferns were fresh and cool. Once a redbird shot confidently down from above on half-closed wing, caught sight of these intruders, brought up with a swish of feathers, and eyed them gravely for some time from a neighbouring treelet. Apparently he was satisfied with his inspection, for after a few minutes he paid no further attention to them, but went about his business quietly. When the dishes had been washed, Mary stood over Bennington while he packed them in the bundle and strapped them on the saddle.

"Now," said she at last, "we have nothing more to think of until we go home."

She was like a child, playing with exhaustless spirits at the most trivial games. Not for a moment would she listen to anything of a serious nature. Bennington, with the heavier pertinacity of men when they have struck a congenial vein, tried to repeat to some extent the experience of the last afternoon at the rock. Mary laughed his sentiment to ridicule and his poetics to scorn. Everything he said she twisted into something funny or ridiculous. He wanted to sit down and enjoy the calm peace of the little ravine in which they had pitched their temporary camp, but she made a quiet life miserable to him. At last in sheer desperation he arose to pursue, whereupon she vanished lightly into the underbrush. A moment later he heard her clear laugh mocking him from some elder thickets a hundred yards away. Bennington pursued with ardour. It was as though a slow-turning ocean liner were to try to run down a lively little yacht.

Bennington had always considered girls as weak creatures, incapable of swift motion, and needing assistance whenever the country departed from the artificial level of macadam. He had also thought himself fairly active. He revised these ideas. This girl could travel through the thin brush of the creek bottom two feet to his one, because she ran more lightly and surely, and her endurance was not a matter for discussion. The question of second wind did not concern her any more than it does a child, whose ordinary mode of progression is heartbreaking. Bennington found that he was engaged in the most delightful play of his life. He shouted aloud with the fun of it. He had the feeling that he was grasping at a sunbeam, or a mist-shape that always eluded him.

He would lose her utterly, and would stand quite motionless, listening, for a long time. Suddenly, without warning, an exaggerated leaf crown would fall about his neck, and he would be overwhelmed with ridicule at the outrageous figure he presented. Then for a time she seemed everywhere at once. The mottled sunlight under the trees danced and quivered after her, smiling and darkening as she dimpled or was grave. The little whirlwinds of the gulches seized the leaves and danced with her too, the birches and aspens tossed their hands, and rising ever higher and wilder and more elf-like came the mocking cadences of her laughter.

After a time she disappeared again. Bennington stood still, waiting for some new prank, but he waited in vain. He instituted a search, but the search was fruitless. He called, but received no reply. At last he made his way again to the dell in which they had lunched, and there he found her, flat on her back, looking at the little summer clouds through wide-open eyes.

Her mood appeared to have changed. Indeed that seemed to be characteristic of her; that her lightness was not so much the lightness of thistle down, which is ever airy, the sport of every wind, but rather that of the rose vine, mobile and swaying in every breeze, yet at the same time rooted well in the wholesome garden earth. She cared now to be silent. In a little while Bennington saw that she had fallen asleep. For the first time he looked upon her face in absolute repose.

Feature by feature, line by line, he went over it, and into his heart crept that peculiar yearning which seems, on analysis, half pity for what has past and half fear for what may come. It is bestowed on little children, and on those whose natures, in spite of their years, are essentially childlike. For this girl's face was so pathetically young. Its sensitive lips pouted with a child's pout, its pointed chin was delicate with the delicacy that is lost when the teeth have had often to be clenched in resolve; its cheek was curved so softly, its long eyelashes shaded that cheek so purely. Yet somewhere, like an intangible spirit which dwelt in it, unseen except through its littlest effects, Bennington seemed to trace that subtle sadness, or still more subtle mystery, which at times showed so strongly in her eyes. He caught himself puzzling over it, trying to seize it. It was most like a sorrow, and yet like a sorrow which had been outlived. Or, if a mystery, it was as a mystery which was such only to others, no longer to herself. The whole line of thought was too fine-drawn for Bennington's untrained perceptions. Yet again, all at once, he realized that this very fact was one of the girl's charms to him; that her mere presence stirred in him perceptions, intuitions, thoughts—yes, even powers—which he had never known before. He felt that she developed him. He found that instead of being weak he was merely latent; that now the latent perceptions were unfolding. Since he had known her he had felt himself more of a man, more ready to grapple with facts and conditions on his own behalf, more inclined to take his own view of the world and to act on it. She had given him independence, for she had made him believe in himself, and belief in one's self is the first principle of independence. Bennington de Laney looked back on his old New York self as on a being infinitely remote.

She awoke and opened her eyes slowly, and looked at him without blinking. The sun had gone nearly to the ridge top, and a Wilson's thrush was celebrating with his hollow notes the artificial twilight of its shadow.

She smiled at him a little vaguely, the mists of sleep clouding her eyes. It is the unguarded moment, the instant of awakening. At such an instant the mask falls from before the features of the soul. I do not know what Bennington saw.

"Mary, Mary!" he cried uncontrolledly, "I love you! I love you, girl."

He had never before seen any one so vexed. She sat up at once.

"Oh, *why* did you have to say that!" she cried angrily. "Why did you have to spoil things! Why couldn't you have let it go along as it was without bringing *that* into it!"

She arose and began to walk angrily up and down, kicking aside the sticks and stones as she encountered them.

"I was just beginning to like you, and now you do this. *Oh*, I am so angry!" She stamped her little foot. "I thought I had found a man for once who could be a good friend to me, whom I could meet unguardedly, and behold! the third day he tells me this!"

"I am sorry," stammered Bennington, his new tenderness fleeing, frightened, into the inner recesses of his being. "I beg your pardon, I didn't know—*Don't!* I won't say it again. Please!"

The declaration had been manly. This was ridiculously boyish. The girl frowned at him in two minds as to what to do.

"Really, truly," he assured her.

She laughed a little, scornfully. "Very well, I'll give you one more chance. I like you too well to drop you entirely." (What an air of autocracy she took, to be sure!) "You mustn't speak of that again. And you must forget it entirely." She lowered at him, a delicious picture of wrath.

They saddled the horses and took their way homeward in silence. The tenderness put out its flower head from the inner sanctuary. Apparently the coast was clear. It ventured a little further. The evening was very shadowy and sweet and musical with birds. The tenderness boldly invaded Bennington's eyes, and spoke, oh, so timidly, from his lips.

"I will do just as you say," it hesitated, "and I'll be very, very good indeed. But am I to have no hope at all?"

"Why can't you keep off that standpoint entirely?"

"Just that one question; then I will."

"Well," grudgingly, "I suppose nothing on earth could keep the average mortal from hoping; but I can't answer that there is any ground for it."

"When can I speak of it again?"

"I don't know—after the Pioneer's Picnic."

"That is when you cease to be a mystery, isn't it?"

She sighed. "That is when I become a greater mystery—even to myself, I fear," she added in a murmur too low for him to catch.

They rode on in silence for a little space more. The night shadows were flowing down between the trees like vapour. The girl of her own accord returned to the subject.

"You are greatly to be envied," she said a little sadly, "for you are really young. I am old, oh, very, very old! You have trust and confidence. I have not. I can sympathize; I can understand. But that is all. There is something within me that binds all my emotions so fast that I can not give way to them. I want to. I wish I could. But it is getting harder and harder for me to think of absolutely trusting, in the sense of giving out the self that is my own. Ah, but you are to be envied! You have saved up and accumulated the beautiful in your nature. I have wasted mine, and now I sit by the roadside and cry for it. My only hope and prayer is that a higher and better something will be given me in place of the wasted, and yet I have no right to expect it. Silly, isn't it?" she concluded bitterly.

Bennington made no reply.

They drew near the gulch, and could hear the mellow sound of bells as the town herd defiled slowly down it toward town.

"We part here," the young man broke the long silence. "When do I see you again?"

"I do not know."

"To-morrow?"

"No."

"Day after?"

The girl shook herself from a reverie. "If you want me to believe you, come every afternoon to the Rock, and wait. Some day I will meet you there."

She was gone.

CHAPTER XII

OLD MIZZOU RESIGNS

Bennington went faithfully to the Rock for four days. During whole afternoons he sat there looking out over the Bad Lands. At sunset he returned to camp. *Aliris: A Romance of all Time* gathered dust. Letters home remained unwritten. Prospecting was left to the capable hands of Old Mizzou until, much to Bennington's surprise, that individual resigned his position.

The samples lay in neatly tied coffee sacks just outside the door. The tabulations and statistics only needed copying to prepare them for the capitalist's eye. The information necessary to the understanding of them reposed in a grimy notebook, requiring merely throwing into shape as a letter to make them valuable to the Eastern owner of the property. Anybody could do that.

Old Mizzou explained these things to Bennington.

"You-all does this jes's well's I," he said. "You expresses them samples East, so as they kin assay 'em; an' you sends them notes and statistics. Then all they is to do is to pay th' rest of the boys when th' money rolls in. That ain't none of my funeral."

"But there's the assessment work," Bennington objected.

"That comes along all right. I aims to live yere in the camp jest th' same as usual; and I'll help yo' git started when you-all aims to do th' work."

"What do you want to quit for, then? If you live here, you may as well draw your pay."

"No, sonny, that ain't my way. I has some prospectin' of my own to do, an' as long as I is a employay of Bishop, I don't like to take his time fer my work."

Bennington thought this very high-minded on the part of Old Mizzou.

"Very well," he agreed, "I'll write Bishop."

"Oh, no," put in the miner hastily, "no need to trouble. I resigns in writin', of course; an' I sees to it myself."

"Well, then, if you'll help me with the assessment work, when shall we begin?"

"C'yant jest now," reflected Old Mizzou, "'cause, as I tells you, I wants to do some work of my own. A'ter th' Pioneer's Picnic, I reckons."

The Pioneer's Picnic seemed to limit many things.

Bennington shipped the ore East, tabulated the statistics, and wrote his report. About two weeks later he received a letter from Bishop saying that the assay of the samples had been very poor—not at all up to expectations—and asking some further information. As to the latter, Bennington consulted Old Mizzou. The miner said, "I told you so," and helped on the answer. After this the young man heard nothing further from his employer. As no more checks came from the East, he found himself with nothing to do.

For four afternoons, as has been said, he fruitlessly haunted the Rock. On the fifth morning he met the girl on horseback. She was quite the same as at first, and they resumed their old relations as if the fatal picnic had never taken place. In a very few days they were as intimate as though they had known each other for years.

Bennington read to her certain rewritten parts of *Aliris: A Romance of all Time*, which would have been ridiculous to any but these two. They saw it through the glamour of youth; for, in spite of her assertions of great age, the girl, too, felt the whirl of that elixir in her veins. You see, she was twenty-one and she was twenty: magic years, more venerable than threescore and ten. She gave him sympathy, which was just what he needed for the sake of his self-confidence and development, just the right thing for him in that effervescent period which is so necessary a concomitant of growth. The young business man indulges in a hundred wild schemes, to be corrected by older heads. The young artist paints strange impressionism, stranger symbolism, and perhaps a strangest other-ism, before at last he reaches the medium of his individual genius. The young writer thinks deep and philosophical thoughts which he expresses in measured polysyllabic language; he dreams wild dreams of ideal motive, which he sets forth in beautiful allegorical tales full of imagery; and he delights in Rhetoric—flower-crowned, flashing-eyed, deep-voiced Rhetoric, whom he clasps to his heart and believes to be true, although the whole world declares her to be false; and then, after a time, he decides not to introduce a new system of metaphysics, but to tell a plain story plainly. Ah, it is a beautiful time to those who dwell in it, and such a funny time to those who do not!

They came to possess an influence over each other. She decided how they should meet; he, how they should act. She had only to be gay, and he was gay; to be sad, and he was sad; to show her preference for serious discourse, and he talked quietly of serious things; to sigh for dreams, and he would rhapsodize. It sometimes terrified her almost when she saw how much his mood depended on hers. But once the mood was established, her dominance ceased and his began. If they were sad or gay or thoughtful or poetic, it was in his way and not in hers. He took the lead masterfully, and perhaps the more effectually in that it was done unconsciously. And in a way which every reader will understand, but which genius alone could put into words, this mutual psychical dependence made them feel the need of each other more strongly than any merely physical dependence ever could.

There is much to do in a new and romantic country, where the imminence of a sordid, dreary future, when the soil will raise its own people and the crop will be poor, is mercifully veiled. The future then counts little in the face of the Past—the Past with its bearded strong men of other lands, bringing their power and vigour here to be moulded and directed by the influences of the frontier. Its shadow still lies over the land.

They did it all. The Rock was still the favourite place to read or talk—crossbars nailed on firmly made "shinning" unnecessary now—but it was often deserted for days while they explored. Bennington had bought the little bronco, and together they extended their investigations of the country in all directions. They rode to Spring Creek Valley. They passed the Range over into Custer Valley. Once they climbed Harney by way of Grizzly Gulch.

Thus they grew to know the Hills intimately. From the summit of the Rock they would often look abroad over the tangle of valleys and ridges, selecting the objective points for their next expedition. Many surprises awaited them, for they found that here, as everywhere, a seemingly uniform exterior covered an almost infinite variety.

Or again, the horses were given a rest. The sarvis-berries ripened, and they picked hatfuls. Then followed the raspberries on the stony hills. They walked four unnecessary miles to see a forest fire, and six to buy buckskin work from a band of Sioux who had come up into the timber for their annual supply of tepee poles. They taught their ponies tricks. They even went wading together, like two small children, in a pool of Battle Creek.

Bennington was deliciously, carelessly, forgetfully happy. Only there was Jim Fay. That individual was as much of a persecution as ever, and he seemed to enjoy a greater intimacy with the girl than did the Easterner. He did not see her as often as did the latter, but he appeared to be more in her confidence. Bennington hated Jim Fay.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SPIRES OF STONE

One afternoon they had pushed over back of Harney, up a very steep little trail in a very tiny cleft-like cañon, verdant and cool. All at once the trail had stood straight on end. The ponies scrambled up somehow, and they found themselves on a narrow open *mesa* splashed with green moss and matted with an aromatic covering of pine needles.

Beyond the easternmost edge of the plateau stood great spires of stone, a dozen in all, several hundred feet high, and of solid granite. They soared up grandly into the open blue, like so many cathedral spires, drawing about them that air of solitude and stillness which accompanies always the sublime in Nature. Even boundless space was amplified at the bidding of their solemn uplifted fingers. The girl reined in her horse.

"Oh!" she murmured in a hushed voice, "I feel impertinent—as though I were intruding."

A squirrel many hundreds of feet below could be heard faintly barking.

"There *is* something solemn about them," the boy agreed in the same tone, "but, after all, we are nothing to them. They are thinking their own thoughts, far above everything in the world."

She slipped from her horse.

"Let's sit here and watch them," she said. "I want to look at them, and *feel* them."

They sat on the moss, and stared solemnly across at the great spires of stone.

"They are waiting for something there," she observed; "for something that has not come to pass, and they are looking for it always toward the East. Don't you see how they are waiting?"

"Yes, like Indian warriors wrapped each in his blanket. They might be the Manitous. They say there are lots of them in the Hills."

"Yes, of course!" she cried, on fire with the idea. "They are the Gods of the people, and they are waiting for something that is coming—something from the East. What is it?"

"Civilization," he suggested.

"Yes! And when this something, this Civilization, comes, then the Indians are to be destroyed, and so their Gods are always watching for it toward the East."

"And," he went on, "when it comes at last, then the Manitous will have to die, and so the Indians know that their hour has struck when these great stone needles fall."

"Why, we have made a legend," she exclaimed with wonder.

They stretched out on their backs along the slope, and stared up at the newly dignified Manitous in delicious silence.

"There was a legend once, you remember?" he began hesitatingly, "the first day we were on the Rock together. It was about a Spirit Mountain."

"Yes, I remember, the day we saw the Shadow."

"You said you'd tell it to me some time."

"Did I?"

"Don't you think now is a good time?"

She considered a moment idly.

"Why, yes, I suppose so," she assented, after a pause. "It isn't much of a legend though." She clasped her hands back of her head. "It goes like this," she began comfortably:

"Once upon a time, when the world was very young, there was an evil Manitou named *Ne-naw-bo-shoo*. He was a very wicked Manitou, but he was also very accomplished, for he could change himself into any shape he wished to assume, and he could travel swifter than the wind. But he

was also very wicked. In old times the centres of all the trees were fat, and people could get food from them, but *Ne-naw-bo-shoo* walked through the forest and pushed his staff down through the middle of the trunks, and that is why the cores of the trees are dark-coloured. Maple sap used to be pure sirup once, too, but *Ne-naw-bo-shoo* diluted it with rain water just out of spite. But there was one peculiar thing about *Ne-naw-bo-shoo*. He could not cross a vein of gold or of silver. There was some sort of magic in them that turned him back—repelled him.

"Now, one day two lovers were wandering about on the prairie away east of here. One of them was named *Mon-e-dowa*, or the Bird Lover, and the other was *Muj-e-ah-je-wan*, or Rippling Water. And as these two walked over the plains talking together, along came the evil spirit, *Ne-naw-bo-shoo*, and as soon as he saw them he chased them, intending to kill them and drink their blood, as was his custom.

"They fled far over the prairie. Everywhere that *Muj-e-ah-je-wan* stepped, prairie violets grew up; and everywhere that *Mon-e-dowa* stepped, a lark sprang up and began to sing. But the wicked *Ne-naw-bo-shoo* gained on them fast, for he could run very swiftly.

"Then suddenly they saw in front of them a great mountain, grown with pines and seamed with fissures. This astonished them greatly, for they knew there were no mountains in the prairie country at all; but they had no time to spare, so they climbed quickly up a broad cañon and concealed themselves.

"Now, when the wicked Manitou came along he tried to enter the cañon too, but he had to stop, because down in the depths of the mountain were veins of gold and silver which he could not cross. For many days he raged back and forth, but in vain. At last he got tired and went away.

"Then *Mon-e-dowa* and *Muj-e-ah-je-wan*, who had been living quite peacefully on the game with which the mountain swarmed, came out of the cañon and turned toward home. But as soon as they had set foot on the level prairie again, the mountain vanished like a cloud, and then they knew they had been aided by *Man-a-boo-sho*, the good Manitou."

The girl arose and shook her skirt free of the pine needles that clung to it.

"Ever since then," she went on, eyeing Bennington saucily sideways, "the mountain has been invisible except to a very few. The legend says that when a maid and a warrior see it together they will be---"

"What?" asked Bennington as she paused.

"Dead within the year!" she cried gaily, and ran lightly to her pony.

"Did you like my legend?" she asked, as the ponies, foot-bunched, minced down the steepest of the trail.

"Very much; all but the moral."

"Don't you want to die?"

"Not a bit."

"Then I'll have to."

"That would be the same thing."

And Bennington dared talk in this way, for the next day began the Pioneer's Picnic, and lately she had been very kind.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PIONEER'S PICNIC

The Lawtons were not going to the picnic. Bennington was to take Mary down to Rapid, where the girl was to stay with a certain Dr. McPherson of the School of Mines.

An early start was accomplished. They rode down the gulch through the dwarf oaks, past the farthest point, and so out into the hard level dirt road of Battle Creek cañon. Beyond were the pines, and a rugged road, flint-edged, full of dips and rises, turns and twists, hovering on edges, or bosoming itself in deep rock-strewn cuts. Mary's little pony cantered recklessly through it all, scampering along like a playful dog after a stone, leading Bennington's larger animal by several feet. He had full leisure to notice the regular flop of the Tam o'Shanter over the lighter dance of the hair, the increasing rosiness of the cheeks dimpled into almost continual laughter, to catch stray snatches of gay little remarks thrown out at random as they tore along. After a time they drew out from the shadow of the pines into the clearing at Rockerville, where the hydraulic "giants" had eaten away the hill-sides, and left in them ugly unhealed sores. Then more rough pine-shadowed roads, from which occasionally would open for a moment broad vistas of endless glades, clear as parks, breathless descents, or sharp steep cuts at the bottom of which Spring Creek, or as much of it as was not turned into the Rockerville sluices, brawled or idled along. It

was time for lunch, so they dismounted near a deep still pool and ate. The ponies cropped the sparse grasses, or twisted on their backs, all four legs in the air. Squirrels chattered and scolded overhead. Some of the indigo-coloured jays of the lowlands shot in long level flight between the trees. The girl and the boy helped each other, hindered each other, playing here and there near the Question, but swerving always deliciously just in time.

After lunch, more riding through more pines. The road dipped strongly once, then again; and then abruptly the forest ceased, and they found themselves cantering over broad rolling meadows knee-high with grasses, from which meadow larks rose in all directions like grasshoppers. Soon after they passed the canvas "schooners" of some who had started the evening before. Down the next long slope the ponies dropped cautiously with bunched feet and tentative steps. Spring Creek was forded for the last time, another steep grassy hill was surmounted, and they looked abroad into Rapid Valley and over to the prairie beyond.

Behind them the Hills lay, dark with the everlasting greenery of the North—even, low, with only sun-browned Harney to raise its cliff-like front above the rest of the range. As though by a common impulse they reined in their horses and looked back.

"I wonder just where the Rock is?" she mused.

They tried to guess at its location.

The treeless ridge on which they were now standing ran like a belt outside the Hills. They journeyed along its summit until late in the afternoon, and then all at once found the city of Rapid lying below them at the mouth of a mighty cañon, like a toy village on fine velvet brown.

In the city they separated, Mary going to the McPhersons', Bennington to the hotel. It was now near to sunset, so it was agreed that Bennington was to come round the following morning to get her. At the hotel Bennington spent an interesting evening viewing the pioneers with their variety of costume, manners, and speech. He heard many good stories, humorous and blood-curdling, and it was very late before he finally got to bed.

The immediate consequence was that he was equally late to breakfast. He hurried through that meal and stepped out into the street, with the intention of hastening to Dr. McPherson's for Mary, but this he found to be impossible because of the overcrowded condition of the streets. The sports of the day had already begun. From curb to curb the way was jammed with a dense mass of men, women, and children, through whom he had to worm his way. After ten feet of this, he heard his name called, and looking up, caught sight of Mary herself, perched on a dry-goods box, frantically waving a handkerchief in his direction.

"You're a nice one!" she cried in mock reproach as he struggled toward her. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks flew red signals of enjoyment.

Bennington explained.

"I know. Well, it didn't matter, any way. I just captured this box. Climb up. There's room. I've lost the doctor and Mrs. McPherson already."

Two mounted men, decorated with huge tin marshals' badges, rode slowly along forcing the crowd back to the right and to the left. The first horse race was on. Suddenly there was an eager scramble, a cloud of dust, a swift impression of dim ghostlike figures. It was over. The crowd flowed into the street again.

The two pressed together, hand in hand, on the top of the dry-goods box. They laughed at each other and everything. Something beautiful was very near to them, for this was the Pioneer's Picnic, and both remembered that the Pioneer's Picnic marked the limit of many things.

"What's next? What's next?" she called excitedly to a tall young cattleman.

The cowboy looked up at her, and his face relaxed into a pleased smile.

"Why, it's a drillin' match over in the next street, miss," he answered politely. "You'd better run right along over and get a good place." He glanced at de Laney, smiled again, and turned away, apparently to follow his own advice.

"Come on, we'll follow him," cried Mary, jumping down.

"And abandon our box?" objected Bennington. But she was already in full pursuit of the tall cowboy.

The ring around the large boulder—dragged by mule team from the hills—had just begun to form when they arrived, so they were enabled to secure good places near the front rank, where they knelt on their handkerchiefs, and the crowd hemmed them in at the back. The drilling match was to determine which pair of contestants could in a given time, with sledge and drill, cut the deepest hole in a granite boulder. To one who stood apart, the sight must have been picturesque in the extreme. The white dust, stirred by restless feet, rose lazily across the heated air. The sun shone down clear and hot with a certain wide-eyed glare that is seen only in the rarefied atmosphere of the West. Around the outer edge of the ring hovered a few anxious small boys, agonized that they were missing part of the show. Stolidly indifferent Indians, wrapped close in their blankets, smoked silently, awaiting the next pony race, the riders of which were skylarking about trying to pull each other from their horses' backs.

When the last pair had finished, the judges measured the depths of the holes drilled, and announced the victors.

The crowd shouted and broke for the saloons. The latter had been plying a brisk business, so that men were about ready to embrace in brotherhood or in battle with equal alacrity.

Suddenly it was the dinner hour. The crowd broke. Bennington and Mary realized they had been wandering about hand in hand. They directed their steps toward the McPhersons with the greatest propriety. It was a glorious picnic.

The house was gratefully cool and dark after the summer heat out of doors. The little doctor sat in the darkest room and dissertated cannily on the strange variety of subjects which a Scotchman can always bring up on the most ordinary occasions.

The doctor was not only a learned man, as was evidenced by his position in the School of Mines and his wonderful collections, but was a scout of long standing, a physician of merit, and an Indian authority of acknowledged weight. Withal he was so modest that these things became known only by implication or hearsay, never by direct evidence. Mrs. McPherson was not Scotch at all, but plain comfortable American, redolent of wholesome cleanliness and good temper, and beaming with kindness and round spectacles. Never was such a doctor; never was such a Mrs. McPherson; never was such a dinner! And they brought in after-dinner coffee in small cups.

"Ah, ha! Mr. de Laney," laughed the doctor, who had been watching him with quizzical eye. "We're pretty bad, but we aren't got quite to savagery yet."

Bennington hastened to disavow.

"That's all right," the doctor reassured him; "that's all right. I didn't wonder at ye in this country, but Mrs. McPherson and mysel' jest take a wee trip occasionally to keep our wits bright. Isn't it so, Mrs. Mac?"

"It is that," said she with a doubtful inner thought as to the propriety of offering cream.

"And as for you," went on the doctor dissertatively, "I suppose ye're getting to be somewhat of a miner yourself. I mind me we did a bit of assay work for your people the other day—the Crazy Horse, wasn't it? A good claim I should judge, from the sample, and so I wrote Davidson."

"When was this?" asked the Easterner, puzzled.

"The last week."

"I didn't know he had had any assaying done."

"O weel," said the doctor comfortably, "it may not have occurred to him to report yet. It was rich."

"Mrs. McPherson, let's talk about dresses," called Mary across the table. "Here we've come down for a *holiday* and they insist on talking mining."

And so the subject was dropped, but Bennington could not get it out of his mind. Why should Mizzou have had the Crazy Horse assayed without saying anything about it to him? Why had he not reported the result? How did it happen that the doctor's assistants had found the ore rich when the company's assayers East had proved it poor? Why should Mizzou have it assayed at all, since he was no longer connected with the company? But, above all, supposing he had done this with the intention of keeping it secret from Bennington, what possible benefit or advantage could the old man derive from such an action?

He puzzled over this. It seemed to still the effervescence of his joy. He realized suddenly that he had been very careless in a great many respects. The work had all been trusted to Davidson, while he, often, had never even seen it. He had been entirely occupied with the girl. He experienced that sudden sinking feeling which always comes to a man whom neglected duty wakes from pleasure.

What was Davidson's object? Could it be that he hoped to "buy in" a rich claim at a low figure, and to that end had sent poor samples East? The more he thought of this the more reasonable it seemed. His resignation was for the purpose of putting him in the position of outside purchaser.

He resolved to carry through the affair diplomatically. During the afternoon he ruminated on how this was to be done. Mary could not understand his preoccupation. It piqued her. A slight strangeness sprang up between them which he was too *distract* to notice. Finally, as he tumbled into bed that night, an idea so brilliant came to him that he sat bolt upright in sheer delight at his own astuteness.

He would ask Dr. McPherson for a copy of the assays. If his suspicions were correct, these assays would represent the richest samples. He would send them at once to Bishop with a statement of the case, in that manner putting the capitalist on his guard. There was something exquisitely humorous to him in the idea of thus turning to his own use the information which Davidson had accumulated for his fraudulent purposes. He went to sleep chuckling over it.

CHAPTER XV

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

The next morning the young man had quite regained his good spirits. The girl, on the other hand, was rather quiet.

Dr. McPherson made no objections to furnishing a copy of the assays. The records, however, were at the School of Mines. He drove down to get them, and in the interim the two young people, at Mrs. McPherson's suggestion, went to see the train come in.

The platform of the station was filled to suffocation. Assuming that the crowd's intention was to view the unaccustomed locomotive, it was strange it did not occur to them that the opposite side of the track or the adjacent prairie would afford more elbow room. They huddled together on the boards of the platform as though the appearance of the spectacle depended on every last individual's keeping his feet from the naked earth. They pushed good-naturedly here and there, expostulating, calling to one another facetiously, looking anxiously down the straight, dwindling track for the first glimpse of the locomotive.

Mary and Bennington found themselves caught up at once into the vortex. After a few moments of desperate clinging together, they were forced into the front row, where they stood on the very edge, braced back against the pressure, half laughing, half vexed.

The train drew in with a grinding rush. From the step swung the conductor. Faces looked from the open windows.

On the platform of one of the last cars stood a young girl and three men. One of the men was elderly, with white hair and side whiskers. The other two were young and well dressed. The girl was of our best patrician type—the type that may know little, think little, say little, and generally amount to little, and yet carry its negative qualities with so used an air of polite society as to raise them by sheer force to the dignity of positive virtues. From head to foot she was faultlessly groomed. From eye to attitude she was languidly superior—the impolitic would say bored. Yet every feature of her appearance and bearing, even to the very tips of her enamelled and sensibly thick boots, implied that she was of a different class from the ordinary, and satisfied on "common people" that impulse which attracts her lesser sisters to the vulgar menagerie. She belonged to the proper street—at the proper time of day. Any one acquainted with the species would have known at once that this private-car trip to Deadwood was to please the prosperous-looking gentleman with the side whiskers, and that it was made bearable only by the two smooth-shaven individuals in the background.

She caught sight of the pair directly in front of her, and raised her lorgnette with a languid wrist.

Her stare was from the outside-the-menagerie standpoint. Bennington was not used to it. For the moment he had the Fifth Avenue feeling, and knew that he was not properly dressed. Therefore, naturally, he was confused. He lowered his head and blushed a little. Then he became conscious that Mary's clear eyes were examining him in a very troubled fashion.

Three hours and a half afterward it suddenly occurred to him that she might have thought he had blushed and lowered his head because he was ashamed to be seen by this other girl in her company; but it was then too late.

The train pulled out. The Westerners at once scattered in all directions. Half an hour later the choking cloud dusts rose like smoke from the different trails that led north or south or west to the heart of the Hills.

"The picnic is over," he suggested gently at their noon camping place.

"Yes, thank Heaven!"

"You remember your promise?"

"What promise?"

"That you would explain your 'mystery.'"

"I've changed my mind."

A leaf floated slowly down the wind. A raven croaked. The breeze made the sunbeams waver.

"Mary, the picnic is over," he repeated again very gently.

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"I love you, Mary."

The raven spread his wings and flew away.

"Do you love me?" he insisted gently.

"I want you to come to dinner at our house to-morrow noon."

"That is a strange answer, Mary."

"It is all the answer you'll get to-day."

"Why are you so cross? Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing."

"I love you, Mary. I love you, girl. At least I can say that now."

"Yes, you can say it—now."

CHAPTER XVI

A NOON DINNER

Bennington did not know what to make of his invitation. At one moment he told himself it must mean that Mary loved him, and that she wished him to meet her parents on that account. At the next he tormented himself with the conviction that she thus merely avoided the issue. Between these moods he alternated, without being able to abide in either. He forgot all about Old Mizzou.

Promptly at noon the following day he turned up the little right-hand trail for the first time.

The Lawton house he found, first of all, to be scrupulously neat. It stood on a knoll, as do most gulch cabins, in order that occasional freshets might pass below, and the knoll looked as though it had been clipped with a pair of scissors. Not a crooked little juniper bush was allowed to intrude its plebeian sprawl among the dignified pines and the gracefully infrequent bushes. In front of the cabin itself was a "rockery" of pink quartz, on which were piled elk antlers. The building was L-shaped, of two low stories, had a veranda with a railing, and possessed various ornamental wood edgings, all of which were painted. The whole affair was mathematically squared and correspondingly neat. Some boxes and pots of flowers adorned the window ledges.

Bennington's knock was answered by an elderly woman, who introduced herself at once as Mrs. Lawton. She commenced a voluble and slightly embarrassed explanation of how "she" would be down in a moment or so, at the same time leading the way into the parlour. While this explanation was going forward, Bennington had a good chance to examine his hostess and her surroundings.

Mrs. Lawton was of the fat but energetic variety. She fairly shone with cleanliness and with an insistent determination to keep busy. You could see that all the time her tongue was uttering polite platitudes concerning the weather, her mind was hovering like a dragon fly over this or that flower of domestic economy. She was one of the women who carry their housekeeping to a perfection uncomfortable both to herself and everybody else, and then delude themselves into the martyrlike belief that she is doing it all entirely for others. As a consequence, she exhibited much of the time an aggrieved air that comported but ludicrously with her tendency to bustle. And it must be confessed that in other ways Mrs. Lawton was ludicrous. Her dumpy little form was dressed in the loudest of prints, the figures of which turned her into a huge flower bed of brilliant cabbage-like blooms. Over this chaos of colours peered her round little face with its snapping eyes. She discoursed in sentences which began coherently, but frayed out soon into nothingness under the stress of inner thought. "I don't see where that husban' of mine is. I reckon you'll think we're just awful rude, Mr. de Laney, and that gal, an' Maude. I declare it's jest enough to try any one's patience, it surely is. You've no idea, Mr. de Laney, what with the hens settin', and this mis'able dry spell that sends th' dust all over everything and every one 'way behin' hand on everythin'----" Her eye was becoming vacant as she wondered about certain biscuits.

"I'm sure it must be," agreed Bennington uncomfortably.

"What was I a-sayin'? You must excuse me, Mr. de Laney, but you, being a man, can have no idea of the life us poor women folks lead, slavin' our very lives away to keep things runnin', and then no thanks for it a'ter all. I'd just like t' see Bill Lawton try it *fer jest one week*. He'd be a ravin' lunatic, an' thet I tell him often. This country's jest awful, too. I tell him he must get out sometimes, and I 'spect he will, when he's made his pile, poor man, an' then we'll have a chanst to go back East again. When we lived East, Mr. de Laney, we had a house—not like this little shack; a good house with nigh on to a dozen rooms, and I had a gal to help me and some chanst to buy things once in a while, but now that Bill Lawton's moved West, what's goin' to become o' me I don't know. I'm nigh wore out with it all."

"Then you lived East once?" asked Bennington.

"Law, yes! We lived in Illinoy once, and th' Lord only knows I wisht we lived there yet, though the farmin' was a sight of work and no pay sometimes." The inner doubts as to the biscuits proved too much for her. "Heaven knows, you ain't t' git much to eat," she cried, jumping up, "but you ain't goin' to git anythin' a tall if I don't run right off and tend to them biscuit."

She bustled out. Bennington had time then to notice the decorations of the "parlour." They offered to the eye a strange mixture of the East and West—reminiscences of the old home in "Illinoy" and trophies of the new camping-out on the frontier. From the ceiling hung a heavy lamp with prismatic danglers, surrounded by a globe on which were depicted stags in the act of

leaping six-barred gates. By way of complement to this gorgeous centrepiece, the paper on the walls showed, in infinitely recurring duplicate, a huntress in green habit and big hat carrying on a desperate flirtation with a young man in the habiliments of the fifteenth century, while across the background a huddle of dogs pursued a mammoth deer. Mathematically beneath the lamp stood a table covered with a red-figured spread. On the table was a glass bell, underneath which were wax flowers and a poorly-stuffed robin. In one angle of the room austere huddled a three-cornered "whatnot" of four shelves. Two china pugs and a statuette of a simpering pair of children under a massive umbrella adorned this article of furniture. On the wall ticked an old-fashioned square wooden clock. The floor was concealed by a rag carpet. So much for the East. The West contributed brilliant green copper ore, flaky white tin ore, glittering white quartz ore, shining pyrites, and one or two businesslike specimens of oxygenated quartz, all of which occupied points of exhibit on the "whatnot." Over the carpet were spread a deer skin, and a rug made from the hide of a timber wolf. Bennington found all this interesting but depressing. He was glad when Mrs. Lawton returned and took up her voluble discourse.

In the midst of a dissertation on the relation of corn meal to eggs the door opened, and Mr. Lawton sidled in.

"Oh, here y' are at last!" observed his spouse scornfully, and rattled on. Lawton nodded awkwardly, and perched himself on the edge of a chair. He had assumed an ill-fitting suit of store clothes, in which he unaccustomedly writhed, and evidently, to judge from the sleekness of his hair, had recently plunged his head in a pail of water. He said nothing, but whenever Mrs. Lawton was not looking he winked elaborately and solemnly at Bennington as though to imply that circumstances alone prevented any more open show of cordiality. At last, catching the young man's eye at a more than usually propitious moment, he went through the pantomime of opening a bottle, then furtively arose and disappeared. Mrs. Lawton, remembering her cakes, ran out. Bennington was left alone again. He had not spoken six words.

The door slowly opened, and another member of the family sidled in. Bennington owned a helpless feeling that this was a sort of show, and that these various actors in it were parading their entrances and their exits before him. Or that he himself were the object of inspection on whom the others were satisfying their own curiosity.

The newcomer was a child, a little girl about eight or ten years old. Bennington liked children as a usual thing. No one on earth could have become possessed in this one's favour. She was a creature of regular but mean features, extreme gravity, and evidently of an inquiring disposition. On seeing her for the first time, one sophisticated would have expected a deluge of questions. Bennington did. But she merely stood and stared without winking.

"Hullo, little girl!" Bennington greeted her uneasily.

The creature only stared the harder.

"My doll's name is Garnet M-a-ay," she observed suddenly, with a long-drawn nasal accent.

After this interesting bit of information another silence fell.

"What is your name, little girl?" Bennington asked desperately at last.

"Maude," remarked the phenomenon briefly.

This statement she delivered in that whining tone which the extremely self-conscious infant imagines to indicate playful childishness. She approached.

"D' you want t' see my picters?" she whimpered confidingly.

Bennington expressed his delight.

For seven geological ages did he gaze upon cheap and horrible woodcuts of gentlemen in fashionable raiment trying to lean against conspicuously inadequate rustic gates; equally fashionable ladies, with flat chests, and rat's nest hair; and animals whose attitudes denoted playful sportiveness of disposition. Each of these pictures was explained in minute detail. Bennington's distress became apathy. Mrs. Lawton returned from the cakes presently, yet her voice seemed to break in on the duration of centuries.

"Now, Maude!" she exclaimed, with a proper maternal pride, "you mustn't be botherin' the gentleman." She paused to receive the expected disclaimer. It was made, albeit a little weakly. "Maude is very good with her Book," she explained. "Miss Brown, that's the school teacher that comes over from Hill Town summers, she says Maude reads a sight better than lots as is two or three years older. Now how old would you think she was, Mr. de Laney?"

Mr. de Laney tried to appraise, while the object hung her head self-consciously and twisted her feet. He had no idea of children's ages.

"About eleven," he guessed, with an air of wisdom.

"Jest eight an' a half!" cried the dame, folding her hands triumphantly. She let her fond maternal gaze rest on the prodigy. Suddenly she darted forward with extraordinary agility for one so well endowed with flesh, and seized her offspring in relentless grasp.

"I do declare, Maude Eliza!" she exclaimed in horror-stricken tones, "you ain't washed your ears! You come with me!"

They disappeared in a blue mist of wails.

As though this were his cue, the crafty features of Lawton appeared cautiously in the doorway, bestowed a furtive and searching inspection on the room, and finally winked solemnly at its only occupant. A hand was inserted. The forefinger beckoned. Bennington arose wearily and went out.

Lawton led the way to a little oat shed standing at some distance from the house. Behind this he paused. From beneath his coat he drew a round bottle and two glass tumblers.

"No joke skippin' th' ole lady," he chuckled in an undertone. He poured out a liberal portion for himself, and passed the bottle along. Bennington was unwilling to hurt the old fellow's feelings after he had taken so much trouble on his account, but he was equally unwilling to drink the whisky. So he threw it away when Lawton was not looking.

They walked leisurely toward the house, Lawton explaining various improvements in a loud tone of voice, intended more to lull his wife's suspicions than to edify the young man. The lady looked on them sternly, and announced dinner. At the table Bennington found Mary already seated.

The Easterner was placed next to Mrs. Lawton. At his other hand was Maude Eliza. Mary sat opposite. Throughout the meal she said little, and only looked up from her plate when Bennington's attention was called another way.

Her mere presence, however, seemed to open to the young man a different point of view. He found Mrs. Lawton's lengthy dissertations amusing; he considered Mr. Lawton in the light of a unique character, and Maude Eliza, while as disagreeable as ever, came in for various excuses and explanations on her own behalf in the young man's mind. He became more responsive. He told a number of very good stories, at which the others laughed. He detailed some experiences of his own at places in the world far remote, selected, it must be confessed, with some slight reference to their dazzling effect on the company. Without actually "showing off," he managed to get the effect of it. The result of his efforts was to harmonize to some extent these diverse elements. Mrs. Lawton became more coherent, Mr. Lawton more communicative; Maude Eliza stopped whining—occasionally and temporarily. Bennington had rarely been in such high spirits. He was surprised himself, but then was not that day of moment to him, and would he not have been a strange sort of individual to have seen in the world aught but brightness?

But Mary responded not at all. Rather, as Bennington arose, she fell, until at last she hardly even moved in her place.

"Chirk up, chirk up!" cried Mrs. Lawton gaily, for her. "I know some one who ought to be happy, anyhow." She glanced meaningly from one to the other and laughed heartily.

Bennington felt a momentary disgust at her tactlessness, but covered it with some laughing sally of his own. The meal broke up in great good humour. Mrs. Lawton and Maude Eliza remained to clear away the dishes. Mr. Lawton remarked that he must get back to work, and shook hands in farewell most elaborately. Bennington laughingly promised them all that he would surely come again. Then he escaped, and followed Mary up the hill, surmising truly enough that she had gone on toward the Rock. He thought he caught a glimpse of her through the elders. He hastened his footsteps. At this he stumbled slightly. From his pocket fell a letter he had received that morning. He picked it up and looked at it idly.

It was from his mother and covered a number of closely-written pages. As he was about to thrust it back into his pocket a single sentence caught his eye. It read: "Sally Ogletree gave a supper last week, which was a very pretty affair."

He stopped short on the trail, and the world seemed to go black around him. He almost fell. Then resumed his way, but step now was hesitating and slow, and he walked with his eyes bent thoughtfully on the ground.

CHAPTER XVII

NOBLESSE OBLIGE

The thought which caused Bennington de Lane so suddenly look grave was suggested by the sentence in his mother's letter. For the first time he realized that these people, up to now so amusing, were possibly destined to come into intimate relations with himself. Old Bill Lawton was Mary's father; while Mrs. Lawton was Mary's mother; Maude was Mary's sister.

The next instant a great rush of love into his heart drove this feeling from it. What matter anything, provided she loved him and he loved her? Generous sentiment so filled him that there was room for nothing else. He even experienced dimly in the depths of his consciousness, a faint pale joy that in thus accepting what was disagreeable to his finer sensibilities, he was proving more truly to his own self the boundlessness of his love. For the moment he was exalted by this instant revulsion against anything calculating in his passion. And then slowly, one by one, the objections stole back, like a flock of noisome sombre creatures put to flight by a sudden movement, but now returning to their old nesting places. The very unassuming method of their

recurrence lent them an added influence. Almost before Bennington knew it they had established a case, and he found himself face to face with a very ugly problem.

Perhaps it will be a little difficult for the average and democratic reader to realize fully the terrible proportions of this problem. We whose lives assume little, require little of them. Intangible objections to the desires of our hearts do not count for much against their realization; there needs the rough attrition of reality to turn back our calm, complacent acquisition of that which we see to be for our best interest in the emotional world. Claims of ancestry mean nothing. Claims of society mean not much more. Claims of wealth are considered as evanescent among a class of men who, by their efforts and genius, are able to render absolute wealth itself an evanescent quality. When one of us loves, he questions the worth of the object of his passion. That established, nothing else is of great importance. There is a grand and noble quality in this, but it misses much. About the other state of affairs—wherein the woman's appurtenances of all kinds, as well as the woman herself, are significant—is a delicate and subtle aura of the higher refinement—the long refinement of the spirit through many generations—which, to an eye accustomed to look for gradations of moral beauty, possesses a peach-blow iridescence of its own. From one point of view, the old-fashioned forms of thought and courtesy are stilted and useless. From another they retain still the lofty dignity of *noblesse oblige*.

So we would have none set down Bennington de Laney as a prig or a snob because he did not at once decide for his heart as against his aristocratic instincts. Not only all his early education, but the life lessons of many generations of ancestors had taught him to set a fictitious value on social position. He was a de Laney on both sides. He had never been allowed to forget it. A long line of forefathers, proud-eyed in their gilded frames, mutely gazed their sense of the obligations they had bequeathed to this last representative of their race. When one belongs to a great family he can not live entirely for himself. His disgrace or failure reflects not alone on his own reputation, but it sullies the fair fame of men long dead and buried; and this is a dreadful thing. For all these old Puritans and Cavaliers, these knights and barons, these king's councillors and scholars, have perchance lived out the long years of their lives with all good intent and purpose and with all earnestness of execution, merely that they might build and send down to posterity this same fair fame. It is a bold man, or a wicked man, who will dare lightly to bring the efforts of so many lives to naught! In the thought of these centuries of endeavour, the sacrifice of mere personal happiness does not seem so great an affair after all. The Family Name has taken to itself a soul. It is a living thing. It may be worked for, it may be nourished by affection, it may even be worshipped. Men may give their lives to it with as great a devotion, with as exalted a sense of renunciation, and as lofty a joy in that renunciation, as those who vow allegiance to St. Francis or St. Dominic. The tearing of the heart from the bosom often proves to be a mortal hurt when there is nothing to put in the gap of its emptiness. Not so when a tradition like this may partly take its place.

These, and more subtle considerations, were the noblest elements of Bennington de Laney's doubts. But perhaps they were no more potent than some others which rushed through the breach made for them in the young man's decision.

He had always lived so much at home that he had come to accept the home point of view without question. That is to say, he never examined the value of his parent's ideas, because it never occurred to him to doubt them. He had no perspective.

In a way, then, he accepted as axioms the social tenets held by his mother, or the business methods practised by his father. He believed that elderly men should speak precisely, and in grammatical, but colourless English. He believed also that people should, in society, conduct themselves according to the fashion-plate pattern designed by Mrs. de Laney. He believed these things, not because he was a fool, or shallow, or lacking in humour, or snobbish, but because nothing had ever happened to cause him to examine his beliefs closely, that he might appreciate what they really were. One of these views was, that cultured people were of a class in themselves, and could not and should not mix with other classes. Mrs. de Laney entertained a horror of vulgarity. So deep-rooted was this horror that a remote taint of it was sufficient to thrust forever outside the pale of her approbation any unfortunate who exhibited it. She preferred stupidity to common sense, when the former was allied with good form, and the latter only with plain kindness. This was partly instinct and partly the result of cultivation. She would shrink, with uncontrollable disgust, from any of the lower classes with whom she came unavoidably in contact. A slight breach of the conventions earned her distrust of one of her own caste. As this personal idiosyncrasy fell in line with the de Laney pride, it was approved by the head of the family. Under encouragement it became almost a monomania.

Bennington pictured to himself only too vividly the effect of the Lawtons on this lady's aristocratic prejudices. He knew, only too well, that Bill Lawton's table manners would not be allowed even in her kitchen. He could imagine Mrs. Lawton's fatuous conversation in the de Laney's drawing-room, or Maude Eliza's dressed-up self-consciousness. The experience of having the three Westerners to dinner just once would, Bennington knew, drive his lady mother to the verge of nervous prostration—he remembered his father's one and only experience in bringing business connections home to lunch—; his imagination failed to picture the effect of her having to endure them as actual members of the family! As if this were not bad enough, his restless fancy carried him a step farther. He perceived the agonies of shame and mortification, real even though they were conventional, she would have to endure in the face of society. That the de Laney's, social leaders, rigid in respectability, should be forced to the humiliation of acknowledging a misalliance, should be forced to the added humiliation of confessing that this

marriage was not only with a family of inferior social standing, but with one actually unlettered and vulgar! Bennington knew only too well the temper of his mother—and of society.

It would not be difficult to expand these doubts, to amplify these reasons, and even to adduce others which occurred to the unhappy young man as he climbed the hill. But enough has been said. Surely the reader, no matter how removed in sympathy from that line of argument, must be able now at least to sympathize, to perceive that Bennington de Laney had some reason for thought, some excuse for the tardiness of his steps as they carried him to a meeting with the girl he loved.

For he did love her, perhaps the more tenderly that doubts must, perforce, arise. All these considerations affected not at all his thought of her. But now, for the first time, Bennington de Laney was weighing the relative claims of duty and happiness. His happiness depended upon his love. That his duty to his race, his parents, his caste had some reality in fact, and a very solid reality in his own estimation, the author hopes he has shown. If not, several pages have been written in vain.

The conflict in his mind had carried him to the Rock. Here, as he expected, he found Mary already arrived. He ascended to the little plateau and dropped wearily to the moss. His face had gone very white in the last quarter of an hour.

"You see now why I asked you to come to-day," she said without preliminary. "Now you have seen them, and there is nothing more to conceal."

"I know, I know," he replied dully. "I am trying to think it out. I can't see it yet."

They took entirely for granted that each knew the subject of the other's thoughts. The girl seemed much the more self-possessed of the two.

"We may as well understand each other," she said quietly, without emotion. "You have told me a certain thing, and have asked me for a certain answer. I could not give it to you before without deceiving you. Now the answer depends on you. I have deceived you in a way," she went on more earnestly, "but I did not mean to. I did not realize the difference, truly I didn't, until I saw the girl on the train. Then I knew the difference between her and me, and between her's and mine. And when you turned away, I saw that you were her kind, and I saw, too, that you ought to know everything there was about me. Then you spoke."

"I meant what I said, too," he interrupted. "You must believe that, Mary, whatever comes."

"I was sorry you did," she went on, as though she had not heard him. Then with just a touch of impatience tingeing the even calm of her voice, "Oh, why will men insist on saying those things!" she cried. "The way to win a girl is not thus. He should see her often, without speaking of love, being everything to her, until at last she finds she can not live without him."

"Have I been that to you, Mary? Has it come to that with me?" he asked wistfully.

"Heaven help me, I am afraid it has!" she cried, burying her face in her hands.

A great gladness leaped up into his face, and died as the blaze of a fire leaps up and expires.

"That makes it easier—and harder," he said. "It is bad enough as it is. I don't know how I can make you understand, dear."

"I understand more than you think," she replied, becoming calm again, and letting her hands fall into her lap. "I am going to speak quite plainly. You love me, Ben—ah, don't I know it!" she cried, with a sudden burst of passion. "I have seen it in your eyes these many days. I have heard it in your voice. I have felt it welling out from your great heart. It has been sweet to me—so sweet! You can not know, no man ever could know, how that love of yours has filled my soul and my heart until there was room for nothing else in the whole wide world!"

"You love me!" he said wonderingly.

"If I had not known that, do you think I would have endured a moment's hesitation after you had seen the objectionable features of my life? Do you think that if I had the slightest doubts of your love, I could now understand *why* you hesitate? But I do, and I honour you for it."

"You love me!" he repeated.

"Yes, yes, Ben dear, I *do* love you. I love you as I never thought to be permitted to love. Do you want to know what I did that second day on the Rock—the day you first showed me what you really were? The day you told me of your old home and the great tree? It was all so peaceful, and tender, and comforting, so sweet and pure, that it rested me. I felt, here is a man at last who could not misunderstand me, could not be abrupt, and harsh, and cruel. I said to myself, 'He is not perfect nor does he expect perfection.' I shut my eyes, and then something choked me, and the tears came. I cried out loud, 'Oh, to be what I was, to give again what I have not! O God, give me back my heart as it once was, and let me love!' Yes, Ben dear, I said 'love.' And then I was not happy any more all day. But God answered that prayer, Ben dear, and we do love one another now, and that is why we can look at things together, and see what is best for us both."

"You love me!" he exclaimed for the third time.

"And now, dear, we must talk plainly and calmly. You have seen what my family is."

"I don't know, Mary, that I can make you understand at all," began Bennington helplessly. "I can't express it even to myself. Our people are so different. My training has been so different. All this sort of thing means so much to us, and so little to you."

"I know exactly," she interrupted. "I have read, and I have lived East. I can appreciate just how it is. See if I can not read your thoughts. My family is uneducated. If it becomes your family, your own parents will be more than grieved, and your friends will have little to do with you. You have also duties toward your family, *as a family*. Is that it?"

"Yes, that *is* it," answered he, "but there are so many things it does not say. It seems to me it has come to be a horrible dilemma with me. If I do what I am afraid is my duty to my family and my people, I will be unhappy without you forever. And if I follow my heart, then it seems to me I will wrong myself, and will be unhappy that way. It seems a choice of just in what manner I will be miserable!" he ended with a ghastly laugh.

"And which is the most worth while?" she asked in a still voice.

"I don't know, I don't know!" he cried miserably. "I must think."

He looked out straight ahead of him for some time. "Whichever way I decide," he said after a little, "I want you to know this, Mary: I love you, and I always will love you, and the fact that I choose my duty, if I do, is only that if I did not, I would not consider myself worthy even to look at you." A silence fell on them again.

"I can not live West," said he again, as though he had been arguing this point in his mind and had just reached the conclusion of it. "My life is East; I never knew it until now." He hesitated. "Would you—that is, could you—I mean, would your family have to live East too?"

She caught his meaning and drew herself up, with a little pride in the movement.

"Wherever I go, whatever I do, my people must be free to go or do. You have your duty to your family. I have my duty to mine!"

He bowed his head quietly in assent. She looked at the struggle depicted in the lines of his face with eyes in which, strangely enough, was much pity, but no unhappiness or doubt. Could it be that she was so sure of the result?

At last he raised his head slowly and turned to her with an air of decision.

"Mary----" he began.

At that moment there became audible a sudden rattle of stones below the Rock, and at the same instant a harsh voice broke in rudely upon their conversation.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CLAIM JUMPERS

Bennington instinctively put his finger on his lips to enjoin silence, and peered cautiously over the edge of the dike. Perhaps he was glad that this diversion had occurred to postpone even for a short time the announcement of a decision it had cost him so much to make. Perhaps he recognised the voice.

Three men were clambering a trifle laboriously over the broken rocks at the foot of the dike, swearing a little at their unstable footing, but all apparently much in earnest in their conversation. Even as Bennington looked they came to a halt, and then sank down each on a convenient rock, talking interestedly. One was Old Mizzou, one was the man Arthur, the third was a stranger whom Bennington had never seen.

The latter had hardly the air of the country.

He was a dapper little man dressed in a dark gray bob-tailed cutaway, and a brown derby hat, which was pushed far back on his head. His face, however, was keen and alert and brown, all of which characteristics indicated an active Western life at no very remote day. The words which had so powerfully arrested Bennington de Laney's attention were delivered by Old Mizzou to this stranger.

"Thar!" the old man had said, "ain't that Crazy Hoss Lode 'bout as good-lookin' a lead as they make 'em?"

"So, so; so, so;" replied the man in the derby in a high voice. "Your vein is a fissure vein all right enough, and you've got a good wide lead. If it holds up in quality, I don't know but what you're right."

"I shows you them assays of McPherson's, don't I?" argued Mizzou, "an' any quartz in this kentry that assays twenty-four dollars ain't no ways cheap."

This speech was so significantly in line with Bennington's surmise that he caught his breath

and drew back cautiously out of sight, but still in such a position that he could hear plainly every word uttered by the group below. The girl was watching him with bright, interested eyes.

"Listen carefully!" he whispered, bringing his mouth close to her ear. "I think there's some sort of plot here."

She nodded ready comprehension, and they settled themselves to hear the following conversation:

"I saw the assay," replied the stranger's voice to Mizzou's last statement, "but who's this McPherson? How do I know the assays are all right?"

"Why, he's that thar professor at th' School of Mines," expostulated Mizzou.

"Oh, yes!" cried the stranger, as though suddenly enlightened. "If those are his assays, they're all right. Let's see them again."

There followed a rustling of papers.

"Well, I've looked over your layout," went on the stranger after a moment, "and pretty thoroughly in the last few days. I know what you've got here. Now what's your proposition?"

There was a pause.

"I knows you a good while, Slayton----" began Mizzou, but was interrupted almost immediately by a third voice, that of Arthur. "The point is this," said the latter sharply, "Davidson here is in a position to give you possession of this group o' claims, but he ain't in a position to appear in th' transaction. How are you goin' to pertect him an' me so we gets something out of it?"

"Wait a minute," put in the stranger, "I want to ask a few questions myself. These claims belong to the Holy Smoke Company now, don't they?"

"Well, that's the idea."

"Are either of you the agent of that Company?"

"Not directly, perhaps."

"Are you indirectly?"

"Seems to me you haven't got any call t' look into that, if we guarantee t' give you good title."

"How do I know you can give me good title?"

"Ain't I tellin' you so?"

"Yes, but why should I believe you?"

"You shouldn't, unless you've got sense enough to see that we ain't gettin' you 'way up here, an' we ain't living round these parts a couple of years on a busted proposition."

The stranger evidently debated this.

"How would it be if you took equal shares with me on the claims, your shares to be paid from the earnings? That would be fair all round. You would get nothing unless the title was good. I would risk no more than you did," he suggested.

"Isn't I tellin' yo' I don't appear a tall in this yere transaction?" objected Mizzou.

The stranger laughed a little.

"I can see through a millstone," he said. "Why don't you old turtlebacks come out of your shells and play square? You've got some shady game on here that you're working underhand. Spin your yarn and I'll tell you what I think of it."

"How do I know you don't leave us out a'ter we tells you," objected Mizzou, returning to his original idea.

"You don't!" answered the stranger impatiently, "you don't! But it seems to me if you expect to get anything out of a shady transaction, you've got to risk something."

"That's right," put in Arthur, "that's right! 'Nuff said! Now, Slayton, we'll agree to git you full legal control of these yere claims if you'll develop them at your expense, an' gin Davidson and me a third interest between us fer our influence. That's our proposition, an' that goes. If you don't play squar', I knows how t' make ye."

"Spin your yarn," repeated the stranger quietly. "I'll agree to give you and Davidson a third interest, *provided* I take hold of the thing at all."

"An' Jack Slayton," put in Mizzou threateningly, "if you don't play us squar', I swar I'll shoot ye like a dog!"

"Oh, stow that, Davidson," rejoined the stranger in an irritated voice; "that rot don't do any good. I know you, and you know me. I never went back on a game yet, and you know it."

"I does know it, Jack!" came up Davidson's voice repentantly, "but this is a big deal, an' y' can't

be too careful!"

"All right, all right," the stranger responded "Now tell us your scheme. How can you get hold of the property?"

"By jumping the claims," replied Arthur calmly. There ensued a short pause. Then:

"Don't be a fool," exclaimed Slayton with contempt; "this is no hold-up country. You can't drive a man off his property with a gun."

"I knows that. These claims can be 'jumped' quiet and legal."

"How?"

"They ain't be'n a stroke of assessment work done on 'em since we came. Th' Company's title's gone long ago. They lost their job last January. Them claims is open to any one who cares to have 'em."

The stranger uttered a long whistle. Old Mizzou chuckled cunningly. "I has charge of them claims from th' time they quits work on 'em 'till now. They ain't be'n a pick raised on 'em. Anybody could a-jumped 'em any time since las' January."

"But how about the Company?" asked Slayton. "How did you fool them?"

"Oh, I sends 'em bills fer work reg'lar enough! And I didn't throw away th' money neither!"

"Yes, that'd be easy enough. But how about the people around here? Why haven't they jumped the claims long ago?"

"Wall, I argues about this a-way. These yere gents sees I has charge, an' they says to themselves, 'Ole Davidson takes care of them assessment works all right,' an' so they never thinks it's worth while t' see whether it is done or not."

"You trusted to their thinking you were performing your duties?"

"Thet's it."

"Well, it was a pretty big risk!"

"Ev'rything t' gain an' nothin' t' lose," quoted Old Mizzou comfortably.

"How about this new man the Company has out here—de Laney? Is he in this deal too?"

"Oh, him!" said Davidson with vast contempt. "He don' know enough t' dodge a brick! I tells him th' assessment work is all done. He believes it, an' never looks t' see. I gets him fooled so easy it's shore funny."

"Hold on!" put in Slayton sharply. "I'm not so sure you aren't liable there somewhere. Of course your failure to do the assessment work while you were alone here was negligence, but that is all. The Company could fire you for failing to do your duty, but they couldn't prove any fraud against you. But when this de Laney came along it changed things."

"How is that?"

"Well, you told him the assessment work had been done, in so many words, didn't you? The Company can prove that you were using your official information to deceive him for the purposes of fraud. In other words, you were an officer of the Company, and you deceived another officer in your official capacity. I don't know but you'd be liable to a criminal action."

"Not on your tin-type," said Old Mizzou with confidence.

"Have you looked it up?"

"I does better than that. At that point I shore becomes subtle. *I resigns from th' Company!* A'ter that I talks assessment work. I tells him advice, jest as a friend. If he believes th' same, an' it ain't so, why thet's unfort'nit, but they can't do anythin' t' me. I'm jest an outsider. He is responsible to th' Company, an' if he wants information, he ought to go to th' books, and not to frien's who may deceive him."

"Davidson, you're a genius!" exclaimed the stranger heartily.

"I tells you I becomes subtle," acknowledged the old man with just pride. "But now you sees it ain't delikit that my name appears in th' case a tall. Folks is so suspicious these yere days, that if I has a share, and Arthur yere has a share, they says p'rhaps we has this yere scheme in view right along. But if Slayton gets them lapsed claims by hisself, Slayton bein' a stranger, they thinks how fortinit that Slayton is t' git onto it, and they puts pore Ole Mizzou down as becomin' fergitful in his old age."

The stranger laughed.

"It's easy," he remarked. "We get them for nothing, and you can bet your sweet life I'll push 'em through for all there is in it. Why, boys, you're rich! You won't have anything more to do the rest of your mortal days, unless you want to."

"I ain't seekin' no manual employment," observed Mizzou.

"I'm willin' to quit work," agreed Arthur.

"Well, you'll have a chance. Now we better hustle this thing through lively. We've got to make our discoveries on the quiet so no one will get on to us."

"It ain't goin' t' take us long t' tack up them notices, now 't we've agreed. We kin do th' most on it this evenin'. Jest lay low, that's all."

"Ain't de Laney going to get onto us sasshaying off with a lot of notices?"

"If he does," remarked Old Mizzou grimly, "I knows a dark hole whar we retires that young man for th' day! If it comes t' that, though, you got t' tend to it, Slayton. I ain't showin' in this deal y' know."

The stranger laughed unpleasantly.

"You show me the hole and I'll take care of Mr. man," he agreed. He laughed again. "By the way, it strikes me that fellow's going to run up against a good deal of tribulation before he gets through."

"Wall, thet thar Comp'ny ain't goin' to raise his pay when they finds it out," agreed Mizzou. "Thet Bishop, he gets tolerable anxious 'bout them assessment works now, and writes frequent. I got a whole bunch of his letters up t' camp that I keeps for th' good of his health. Ain't no wise healthy t' worry 'bout business, you know."

"Wonder th' little idiot didn't miss his mail," growled Arthur.

"Oh, I coaxes him on with th' letters from his mammy and pappy. They's harmless enough."

The three men fell into a discussion of various specimens of quartz which they took from their pockets, and, after what seemed to be an interminable time, arose and moved slowly down the hill.

The girl looked at her companion with wide-open eyes. "Ben!" she gasped, "what have you done?"

"Made a fool of myself," he responded curtly.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know."

He knit his brows deeply. She cast about for an expedient.

"I wish I knew more about mining!" she cried. "I know there is some way to get legal possession of a claim by patenting it, but I don't know how you do it."

He did not reply.

"There must be some way out of this," she went on, all alert. "They haven't done anything yet. Why don't you go down to camp and inquire?"

"Every man would be in the hills in less than an hour. I couldn't trust them," he replied brusquely.

"Oh, I know!" she cried with relief. "You must hunt up Jim. He knows all about those things, and you could rely on him."

"Jim? What Jim?"

"Jim Fay. Oh, that's just it! Run, Ben; go at once; don't wait a minute!"

"I want nothing whatever to do with that man," he said deliberately. "He has insulted me at every opportunity. He has treated me in a manner that was even more than insulting every time we have met. If I were dying, and he had but to turn his head toward me to save me, I would not ask him to do so!"

"Oh, don't be foolish, Ben!" cried she, wringing her hands in despair. "Don't let your pride stand in your way! Do you not realize the disgrace this will be to you—to lose all these rich claims just by carelessness? Do you realize that it means something to me, for I have been the reason of that carelessness. I know it! Just this once, forget all he has done to you. You can trust him. Don't be afraid of that. Tell him that I sent you, if you don't want to trust him on your own account----" she broke off. "Where are you going?" she asked anxiously.

"To do something," he answered, shutting his teeth together with a snap.

"Will you see Jim?" she begged, following him to the edge of the Rock as he swung himself down the tree.

"No!" he said, without looking back.

After he disappeared—in the direction of the Holy Smoke camp, as she noticed—she descended rapidly to the ground and hurried, sobbing excitedly, away toward Spanish Gulch. She was all alive with distress. She had never realized until the moment of his failure how much she had loved this man. Near the village she paused, bathed her eyes in the brook, and, assuming an air

of deliberation and calmness, began making inquiries as to the whereabouts of Jim Fay.

CHAPTER XIX

BENNINGTON PROVES GAME

Bennington de Laney sat on the pile of rocks at the entrance to the Holy Smoke shaft. Across his knees lay the thirty-calibre rifle. His face was very white and set. Perhaps he was thinking of his return to New York in disgrace, of his interview with Bishop, of his inevitable meeting with a multitude of friends, who would read in the daily papers the accounts of his incompetence—criminal incompetence, they would call it. The shadows were beginning to lengthen across the slope of the hill. Up the gulch cow bells tinkled, up the hill birds sang, and through the little hollows twilight flowed like a vapour. The wild roses on the hillside were blooming—late in this high altitude. The pines were singing their endless song. But Bennington de Laney was looking upon none of these softer beauties of the Hills. Rather he watched intently the lower gulch with its flood-wracked, water-twisted skeleton laid bare. Could it be that in the destruction there figured forth he caught the symbol of his own condition? That the dreary gloom of that ruin typified the chaos of sombre thoughts that occupied his own remorseful mind? If so, the fancy must have absorbed him. The moments slipped by one by one, the shadows grew longer, the bird songs louder, and still the figure with the rifle sat motionless, his face white and still, watching the lower gulch.

Or could it be that Bennington de Laney waited for some one, and that therefore his gaze was so fixed? It would seem so. For when the beat of hoofs became audible, the white face quickened into alertness, and the motionless figure stirred somewhat.

The rider came in sight, rising and falling in a steady, unhesitating lope. He swung rapidly to the left, and ascended the knoll. Opposite the shaft of the Holy Smoke lode he reined in his bronco and dismounted. The rider was Jim Fay.

Bennington de Laney did not move. He looked up at the newcomer with dull resignation. "He takes it hard, poor fellow!" thought Fay.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked the Easterner in a strained voice. "I suppose you know all about it, or you wouldn't be here."

"Yes, I know all about it," said Fay gently. "You mustn't take it so hard. Perhaps we can do something. We'll be able to save one or two claims, any way, if we're quick about it."

"I've heard something about patenting claims," went on de Laney in the same strange, dull tones; "could that be done?"

"No. You have to do five hundred dollars' worth of work, and advertise for sixty days. There isn't time."

"That settles it. I don't know what we can do then."

"Well, that depends. I've come to help do something. We've got to get an everlasting hustle on us, that's all; and I'm afraid we are beginning a little behindhand in the race. You ought to have hunted me up at once."

"I don't see what there is to do," repeated Bennington thickly.

"Don't you? The assessment work hasn't been done—that's the idea, isn't it?—and so the claims have reverted to the Government. They are therefore open to location, as in the beginning, and that is just what Davidson and that crowd are going to do to them. Well, they're just as much open to us. We'll just *jump our own claims!*"

"What!" cried the Easterner, excited.

"Well, relocate them ourselves, if that suits you better."

Bennington's dull eyes began to light up.

"So get a move on you," went on Fay; "hustle out some paper so we can make location notices. Under the terms of a relocation, we can use the old stakes and 'discovery,' so all we have to do is to tack up a new notice all round. That's the trouble. That gang's got their notices all written, and I'm afraid they've got ahead of us. Come on!"

Bennington, who had up to this time remained seated on the pile of stones, seemed filled with a new and great excitement. He tottered to his feet, throwing his hands aloft.

"Thank God! Thank God!" he cried, catching his breath convulsively.

Fay turned to look at him curiously. "We aren't that much out of the woods," he remarked; "the other gang'll get in their work, don't you fret."

"They never will, they never will!" cried the Easterner exultantly. "They can't. We'll locate 'em

all!" The tears welled over his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

"What do you mean?" asked Fay, beginning to fear the excitement had unsettled his companion's wits.

"Because they're there!" cried Bennington, pointing to the mouth of the shaft near which he had been sitting. "Davidson, Slayton, Arthur—they're all there, and they can't get away! I didn't know what else to do. I had to do something!"

Fay cast an understanding glance at the young man's rifle, and sprang to the entrance of the shaft. As though in direct corroboration of his speech, Fay could perceive, just emerging from the shadow, the sinister figure of the man Arthur creeping cautiously up the ladder, evidently encouraged to an attempt to escape by the sound of the conversation above. The Westerner snatched his pistol from his holster and presented it down the shaft.

"Kindly return!" he commanded in a soft voice. The upward motion of the dim figure ceased, and in a moment it had faded from view in the descent. Fay waited a moment. "In five minutes," he announced in louder tones, "I'm going to let loose this six-shooter down that shaft. I should advise you gentlemen to retire to the tunnel." He peered down again intently. A sudden clatter and thud behind him startled him. He looked around. Bennington had fallen at full length across the stones, and his rifle, falling, had clashed against the broken ore.

Fay, with a slight shrug of contempt at such womanish weakness, ran to his assistance. He straightened the Easterner out and placed his folded coat under his head. "He'll come around in a minute," he muttered. He glanced toward the gulch and then back to the shaft. "Can't leave that lay-out," he went on. He bent over the prostrate figure and began to loosen the band of his shirt. Something about the boy's clothing attracted his attention, so, drawing his knife, he deftly and gently ripped away the coat and shirt. Then he arose softly to his feet and bared his head.

"I apologize to you," said he, addressing the recumbent form; "you are game."

In the fleshy part of the naked shoulder was a small round hole, clotted and smeared with blood.

Jim Fay stooped and examined the wound closely. The bullet had entered near the point of the shoulder, but a little below, so that it had merely cut a secant through the curve of the muscle. If it had struck a quarter of an inch to the left it would have gouged a furrow; a quarter of an inch beyond that would have caused it to miss entirely. Fay saw that the hurt itself was slight, and that the Easterner had fainted more because of loss of blood than from the shock. This determined to his satisfaction, he moved quickly to the mouth of the shaft. "Way below!" he cried in a sharp voice, and discharged his revolver twice down the opening. Then he stole noiselessly away, and ran at speed to the kitchen of the shack, whence he immediately returned with a pail of water and a number of towels. He set these down, and again peered down the shaft. "Way below!" he repeated, and dropped down a sizable chunk of ore. Apparently satisfied that the prisoners were well warned, he gave his whole attention to his patient.

He washed the wound carefully. Then he made a compress of one of the towels, and bound it with the other two. Looking up, he discovered Bennington watching him intently.

"It's all right!" he assured the latter in answer to the question in his eyes. "Nothing but a scratch. Lie still a minute till I get this fastened, and you can sit up and watch the rat hole while I get you some clothes."

In another moment or so the young man was propped up against an empty ore "bucket," his shoulder bound, and his hand slung comfortably in a sling from his neck.

"There you are," said Jim cheerily. "Now you take my six-shooter and watch that aggregation till I get back. They won't come out any, but you may as well be sure."

He handed Bennington his revolver, and moved off in the direction of the cabin, whistling cheerfully. The young man looked after him thoughtfully. Nothing could have been more considerate than the Westerner's manner, nothing could have been kinder than his prompt action—Bennington saw that his pony, now cropping the brush near at hand, was black with sweat—nothing could have been more straightforward than his assistance in the matter of the claims. And yet Bennington de Laney was not satisfied. He felt he owed the sudden change of front to a word spoken in his behalf by the girl. This was a strange influence she possessed, thus to alter a man's attitude entirely by the mere voicing of a wish.

The Westerner returned carrying a loose shirt and a coat, which he drew entire over the injured shoulder, which left one sleeve empty.

"I guess that fixes you," said he with satisfaction.

"Look here," put in Bennington suddenly, "you've been mighty good to me in all this. If you hadn't come along as you did, these fellows would have nabbed me sooner or later, and probably I'd have lost the claims any way. I feel I owe you a lot. But I want you to know before you go any further that that don't square us. You've had it in for me ever since I came out here, and you've made it mighty unpleasant for me. I can't forget that all at once. I want to tell you plainly that, although I am grateful enough, I know just why you have done all this. It is because *she* asked you to. And knowing that, I can't accept what you do for me as from a friend, for I don't feel

friendly toward you in the least." His face flushed painfully. "I'm not trying to insult you or be boorish," he said; "I just want you to understand how I feel about it. And now that you know, I suppose you'd better let the matter go, although I'm much obliged to you for fixing me up."

He glanced at his shoulder.

Fay listened to this speech quietly and with patience. "What do you intend to do?" he asked, when the other had quite finished.

"I don't know yet. If you'll say nothing down below—and I'm sure you will not—I'll contrive some way of keeping this procession down the hole, and of feeding them, and then I'll relocate the claims myself."

"With one arm?"

"Yes, with one arm!" cried Bennington fiercely; "with no arms at all, if need be!" he broke off suddenly, with the New Yorker's ingrained instinct of repression. "I beg your pardon. I mean I'll do as well as I can, of course."

"How about the woman—Arthur's wife? She'll give you trouble."

"She has locked herself in her cabin already. I will assist her to continue the imprisonment."

Fay laughed outright. "And you expect, with one arm and wounded, to feed four people, keep them in confinement, and at the same time to relocate eighteen claims lying scattered all over the hills! Well, you're optimistic, to say the least."

"I'll do the best I can," repeated Bennington doggedly.

"And you won't ask help of a friend ready to give it?"

"Not as a friend."

"Well," Fay chuckled, apparently not displeased, "you're an obstinate young man, or rather a pig-headed young man, but I don't know as that counts against you. I'll help you out, anyway—if not as a friend, then as an enemy. You see, I have my marching orders from someone else, and you haven't anything to do with it."

Bennington bowed coldly, but his immense relief flickered into his face in spite of himself. "What should we do first?" he asked formally.

"Sit here and wait for the kids," responded Jim.

"Who are the kids?"

"Friends of mine—trustworthy."

Jim rearranged Bennington's coverings and lit a pipe. "Tell us about it," said he.

"There isn't much to tell. I knew I had to do something, so I just held them up and made them get down the shaft. I didn't know what I was going to do next, but I was glad to have them out of the way to get time to think."

"Who plugged you?" inquired Fay, motioning with the mouthpiece of his pipe toward the wounded shoulder.

"That was Arthur. He had a little gun in his coat pocket and he shot from inside the pocket. I'd made them drop all the guns they had, I thought."

"Did you take a crack at him then?" asked Fay, interested.

"Oh, no. I just covered him and made him shell out. As a matter of fact I don't believe any one of them knew I was hit."

Fay smoked on in silence, glancing from time to time with satisfaction at the youth opposite. During the passage of these events the day had not far advanced. The shadow of Harney had not yet reached out to the edge of the hills.

"Hullo! The kids!" said Fay suddenly.

Two pedestrians emerged from the lower gulch and bent their steps toward the camp. As they came nearer, Bennington, with a gasp of surprise, recognised the Leslies.

The sprightly youths were dressed just alike, in knickerbockers and Norfolk jackets of dark brown plaid, and small college caps to match—an outfit which Bennington had always believed would attract too vivid attention in this country. As they came nearer he saw that the jackets were fitted with pockets of great size. In the pockets were sketch books and bulging articles. They caught sight of the two figures on the ore heap simultaneously.

"Behold our attentive host!" cried Jeems. "He is now in the act of receiving us with all honour!"

Bennington's face fairly shone with pleasure at the encounter. "Hullo fellows! Hullo there!" he cried out delightedly again and again, and rose slowly to his feet. This disclosed the fact of his injury, and the brothers ran forward, with real sympathy and concern expressed on their lively countenances. There ensued a rapid fire of questions and answers. The Leslies proved to be

already familiar with the details of the attempt to jump the claims, and understood at once Fay's brief account of the present situation, over which they rejoiced in the well-known Leslie fashion. They exploded in genuine admiration of Bennington's adventure, and praised that young man enthusiastically. Bennington could feel, even before this, that he stood on a different footing than formerly with these self-reliant young men. They treated him as familiarly as ever, but with a new respect. The truth is, their astuteness in reading character, which is as essentially an attribute of the artistic temperament in black and white as in words and phrases, had shown them already that their old acquaintance had grown from boy to man since last they had met. They knew this even before they learned of its manifestation. So astounding was the change that they gave it credit, perhaps, for being more thorough than it was. After the situation had been made plain, Bennington reverted to the unexpectedness of their appearance.

"But you haven't told me yet how you happen to be here," he suggested. "I'd as soon have expected to see Ethel Henry coming up the gulch!"

"Didn't you get our letters?" cried Bert in astonishment.

"No, I haven't received any letters. Did you write?"

"Did we write! Well, I should think so! We wrote three times, telling you we were coming and when to expect us. Jeems and I wondered why you didn't meet us. That explains it. Seems funny you didn't get any of those letters!"

"No, I don't believe it is so funny after all," responded Bennington, who had been thinking it over. "I remember now that Davidson told the others he had been intercepting my letters from the Company, and I suppose he got yours too."

"That's it, of course. I'll have to interview that Davidson later. Well, we used to train around here off and on, as I told you once, and this year Jeems and I thought we'd do our summer sketching here, and sort of revive old times. So we packed up and came."

"I'm mighty glad you came, anyway," replied Bennington fervently.

"So'm I. We're just in time to help foil the villain. As foilers Jeems and I are an artistic success. We have studied foiling under the best masters in the Bowery and Sixth Avenue theatres."

"Where's Bill?" asked Jim suddenly.

"Will be around in the morning. You're to report progress at once. Didn't dare to come up until after the row. Dreadful anxious though. Would have come if Jeems and I hadn't forbidden it."

Bennington wondered vaguely who Bill might be, but he was beginning to feel a little tired from the excitement and his wound, so he said nothing.

"The next thing is grub," remarked Fay, rising and gathering his pony's reins. "I'll mosey up to the shack and see about supper. You fellows can sit around and talk until I get organized."

He turned to move away, leading his horse.

"Hold on a minute, Jim," called Bert. "You might lend me your bronc, and I'll lope down and set Bill's mind easy. It won't take long."

"Good scheme!" approved Jim heartily. "That's thoughtful of you, Bertie!"

He dropped the reins where he stood, and the pony, with the usual well-trained Western docility, hung his head and halted. Bert arose and looked down the shaft.

"Supper will be served shortly, gentlemen," he observed suavely. He turned toward the pony.

"Bert," called Bennington in a different voice, "did you say you were going down the gulch?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to do something for me?"

"Why, surely. What is it?"

"Would you just as soon stop at the Lawtons' and tell Miss Lawton for me that it's all right! You'll find the Lawton house----"

"Yes, I know where the Lawton house is," interrupted Bert, "but Miss Lawton, you said?"

"Don't you remember, Bert," put in James, "there is a kid there—Maude, or something of that sort?"

"No, no, not Maude," persisted Bennington, still more bashfully. "I mean Miss Lawton, the young lady."

He felt that both the youths were looking keenly at him with dawning wonder and delight. "Hold on, Bert," interposed James, as the other was about to exclaim, "do you mean, Ben, the one you've been giving such a rush for the last two months?"

"Miss Lawton and I are very good friends," replied Bennington with dignity, wondering whence James had his information.

Bert drew in his breath sharply, and opened his mouth to speak.

"Hold on, Bert," interposed James again. "There are possibilities in this. Don't destroy artistic development by undue haste. What did you call the young lady, Ben?"

"Miss Lawton, of course!"

"Daughter of Bill Lawton?"

"Why, yes."

"Oh, my eye!" ejaculated James.

"And you have eyes in your head!" he cried after a moment. "You have ears in your head! Blamed if you haven't everything in your head but brains! She's a good one! I didn't appreciate the subtlety of that woman before. Ben, you everlasting idiot, do you mean to tell me that you've seen that girl every day for the last two months, and don't know yet that she's too good to belong to Bill Lawton?"

Bert began to laugh hysterically.

"What do you mean!" cried Bennington.

"What I say. *She* isn't Bill Lawton's daughter. Her name isn't Lawton at all. O glory! He don't even know her name!" James in his turn went into a fit of laughing. In uncontrollable excitement Bennington seized him with his sound hand.

"What is it? Tell me! What is her name, then?"

"O Lord! Don't squeeze so! I'll tell you! Letup!"

James dashed the back of his hand across his eyes.

"What is her name?" repeated Bennington fiercely.

"Wilhelmina Fay. We call her Bill for short."

"And Jim Fay?"

"Is her brother."

"And the Lawtons?"

"They board there."

Across Bennington's mind flashed vaguely a suspicion that turned him faint with mortification.

"Who is this Jim Fay?" he asked.

"He's Jim Fay—James Leicester Fay, of Boston."

"Not---"

"Yes, exactly. The Boston Fays."

Bert swung himself into the saddle. "Better not say anything to Bill about the young 'un's shoulder," called after him the ever-thoughtful James.

CHAPTER XX

MASKS OFF

Now that it was all explained, it seemed to Bennington de Laney to be ridiculously simple. He wondered how he could have been so blind. For the moment, however, all other emotions were swallowed up in intense mortification over the density he had displayed, and the ridiculous light in which he must have appeared to all the actors in the comedy. His companion perceived this, and kindly hastened to relieve it.

"You're wondering how it all happened," said he, "but you don't want to ask about it. I'm going to tell you the story of your life. You see, Bert and I knew the Fays very well in Boston, and we knew also that they were out here in the Hills. That's what tickled us so when you said you were coming out to this very place. You know yourself, Ben, that you were pretty green when you were in New York—you must know it, because you have got over it so nicely since—and it struck us, after you talked so much about the 'Wild West,' that it would be a shame if you didn't get some of it. So we wrote Jim that you were coming, and to see to it that you had a time."

Jim chuckled a little. "From his letters, I guess you had it. He wrote about that horse he sprung on you, and the time they lynched you, and all the rest of it, and we thought we had done pretty well, especially since Jim wrote he thought you weren't half bad, and had come through in good shape. He wrote, too, that you had run against Bill, and that Bill was fooling you up in some way—way unspecified. He seemed to be a little afraid that Bill was trifling with your young affections

—how is it Ben, anyway?—but he said that Bill was very haughty on the subject, and as he'd never been able to do anything with her before, he didn't believe he'd have much success if he should try now. I suggested that Bill might get in a little deep herself," went on James, watching his listener's face keenly, "but Bert seemed inclined to the opinion that any one as experienced as Bill was perfectly able to take care of herself anywhere. She's a mighty fine girl, Ben, old man," suddenly concluded this startling youth, holding out his hand, "and I wish you every success in the world in getting her!"

"Thank you, Jeems," replied Bennington simply, without attempting to deny the state of affairs. "I'm sure I'm glad of your good wishes, but I'm afraid I haven't any show now." He sighed deeply.

"I'll give an opinion on that after I see Bill again," observed the artist sagely.

"It always struck me as being queer that two of the most refined people about here should happen to be living in the same house," commented Bennington, only just aware that it had so struck him.

"Did it, indeed?" said Leslie drolly. "You're just bursting with sagacity now, aren't you? And your Sherlock-Holmes intellect is seething with conjecture. The lover's soul is far above the sordid earthly considerations which interest us ordinary mortals, but I'll bet a hat you are wondering how it comes that a Boston girl is out here without any more restraint on her actions than a careless brother who doesn't bother himself, and why she's out here at all, and a few things like that. 'Fess up."

"Well," acknowledged Bennington a trifle reluctantly, "of course it is a little out of the ordinary, but then it's all right, somehow, I'll swear."

"All right! Of course it's all right! They haven't any father or mother, you know, and they are independent of action, as you've no doubt noticed. Bill kept house for Jim for some time—and they used to keep a great house, I tell you," said James, smacking his lips in recollection. "Bert and I used to visit there a good deal. That's why they call me Jeems—to distinguish me from Jim. Then Jim got tired of doing nothing—they possess everlasting rocks—you know their lamented dad was a sort of amateur Croesus—and he decided to monkey with mines. Bert and I were here one summer, so Bill and Jim just pulled up stakes and came along too. They have been here ever since. They're both true sports and like the life, and all that; and, besides, Jim has kept busy monkeying with mining speculation. They're the salt of the earth, that pair, if they *do* worry poor old Boston to death with their ways of doing things. That's one reason I like 'em so much. Society has fits over their doings, but it can't get along without them."

"The Fays are a pretty good family, aren't they?" inquired Bennington. He was irresistibly impelled to ask this question.

"Best going. Mayflower, William the Conqueror, and all that rot. You must know of the Boston Fays."

"I do. That is, I've heard of them; but I didn't know whether they were the same."

Jeems perceived that the topic interested the young fellow, so he descanted at length concerning the Fays, their belongings, and their doings. Time passed rapidly. Bennington was surprised to see Jim coming down to them through the afterglow of sunset announcing vociferously that the meal was at last prepared.

"I've fed the old lady," he announced, "and unlocked her. She doesn't know what's up anyway. She just sits there like a graven image, scared to death. She doesn't know a relocation from a telegraph pole. I told her to get a move on her and fix us up some bunks, and I guess she's at it now."

They consulted as to the best means of guarding the prisoners. It was finally agreed that Leslie should stand sentinel until the others had finished supper.

"I want to watch the effect of this light on the hills," he announced positively, "and I'm not hungry, and Jim ought to cool off before coming out into the air, and Ben's shoulder ought to be taken care of. Get along with ye!"

Bennington accompanied Jim to the meal very cheerfully. The facts as to the latter's persecutions remained the same, but in some way they did not hold the same proportions as heretofore. The mere item that Jim Fay was Mary's brother, instead of her lover, made all the difference in the world. He chattered in a lively fashion concerning the method of work to be adopted. Suddenly he pulled himself up short.

"I think I must beg your pardon," he said. "I heard about it all from Jim Leslie. I have been very green, and you were quite right. If you still want to do so, let's go into this together as friends."

"No pardon coming to me," responded Fay heartily. "I've been a little tough on you occasionally, that I'll admit, and if I've done too much, I'm sure I beg *your* pardon. I saw you had the right stuff in you that day when you stuck to the horse until you rode him, and I've always liked you first-rate since then. And I wouldn't worry about this last matter. You were green to the country, and were put down here without definite instructions. You trusted Davidson, of course, and got fooled in it; but then you just followed Bishop's lead in that. He'd been trusting Davidson before you got here, and if he hadn't trusted him right along, you can bet you'd have had your

directions from A to Z. He was as much to blame as you were, and you'll find that he knows it."

"I'm afraid you can't make me feel any better about that," objected Bennington, shaking his head despondently.

"Well, you'll feel better after a time, and anyway there's no actual harm done."

At this moment Bert Leslie entered.

"Bill's tickled to death," he announced. "She says she's coming up first thing in the morning. She wanted to come right off and cook supper, but I wouldn't let her. She couldn't very well stay here all night, and it's pretty late now. What you got here? Pork? Coffee? Murphies?"

He sat down and began to eat hungrily. Jim arose to relieve the sentinel at the mouth of the shaft, at the same time advising de Laney to go to bed as soon as possible.

"You're tired," he said, "and need rest. Wet that compress well with Pond's Extract, and we'll dress it again in the morning."

In the kitchen he found the strange sombre woman sitting bolt upright in silence, her arms folded rigidly across her flat bosom. She looked straight in front of her, and rocked slowly to and fro on her chair.

"You mustn't worry, Mrs. Arthur," consoled Fay kindly, pausing for a moment. "There isn't going to be any trouble. It's just a little matter of mining law. We'll have to keep your husband locked up for a few days, but he won't be harmed."

The woman made no reply. Fay looked at her sharply again, and passed out.

"Jeems," he directed that individual at the mouth of the shaft, "go get your grub. Send the kid to bed right off, and then you and Bert come down here and we'll fix up these prairie dogs of ours down the hole."

Jeems and his brother therefore helped the wounded hero to bed, and left him to a much-needed slumber; after which they returned to the spot of light in the darkness which marked the glow of Fay's pipe. That capable individual issued directions. First of all they lowered, by means of a light cord, food and water to their prisoners. The latter maintained a sullen silence, and it was only by the lightening of the burden at the end of the line that those above knew their provisions had been appropriated. Then followed blankets. The Leslies were strongly in favour of as uncomfortable a confinement as possible, and so disapproved of blankets, but Fay insisted. After that the brothers manned the windlass and let Jim down in a bowline about twenty feet, while he detached and removed two lengths of the shaft ladder. This left no means of ascent, as the walls of the shaft were smoothly timbered; but, to make matters sure, they covered the mouth with inch thick boards on which they piled large chunks of ore.

"You don't suppose they'll smother?" suggested Bert.

"Not much! There's only three of them, and often men drilling will stay down ten or twelve hours at a time without using up the air."

"Sweet dreams, gentlemen!" called the irrepressible Jeems in farewell.

"There's one other thing," said Jim, "and then we can crawl in."

He approached the cabin in which Arthur and his wife were accustomed to sleep, and listened until he had satisfied himself that Mrs. Arthur was inside. Then he softly locked the door, the key of which he had appropriated immediately after supper, and propped shut the heavy wooden shutter of the window.

"No dramatic escapes in ours, thank you!" he muttered. He drew back and surveyed his work with satisfaction. "Come on, boys, let's turn in. To-morrow we slave."

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAND OF VISIONS

Although he had retired so early, and in so exhausted a condition, Bennington de Laney could not sleep. He had taken a slight fever, and the wound in his shoulder was stiff and painful. For hours on end he lay flat on his back, staring at the dim illuminations of the windows and listening to the faint out-of-door noises or the sharper borings of insects in the logs of the structure. His mind was not active. He lay in a semi-torpor, whose most vivid consciousness was that of mental discomfort and the interminability of time.

The events of the day rose up before him, but he seemed to loathe them merely because they had been of so active a character, and now he could not bear to have his brain teased even with their impalpable shadow.

Strangely enough, this altitude seemed to create a certain dead polarity between him and

them. They lay sullenly outside his brain, repelled by this dead polarity, and he looked at them languidly, against the dim illumination of the window, with a dull joy that they could not come near him and enter the realm of his thoughts. All this was the fever.

In a little time these events became endowed with more palpable bodies which moved. The square of semilucid window faded into something indescribable, and that into something indescribable, and that into something else, still indescribable.

They moved swiftly, and things happened. He found himself suddenly in a long gallery, half in the dusk, half in the lamplight, pacing slowly back and forth, waiting for something, he knew not what. To him came a bustling motherly old woman with a maid's cap on, who said, "Sure, Master Ben, the moon is shining, and, let me tell ye, at the end of the hall is a balcony of iron, and Miss Mary will be glad you know that same." And at that he seemed to himself to be hunting for a coin with which to tip her. He discovered it turned to lead between his fingers, whereupon the old woman laughed shrilly and disappeared, and he found himself alone on the prairie at midnight.

His mind seemed to be filled with great thoughts which would make him famous. Over and over again he said to himself: "The rain pours and the people down below chuckle as they move about each under his little umbrella of self-conceit. They look up to the mountain, saying, 'The fool! Why looks he so high? He is lost in the mists up there, and he might be safe and dry with us.' But the mountain has over him the arch of the universe, and sleeps calmly in the sun of truth. Little reckes he of the clouds below, and knows not at all the little self-satisfied fools who pity him," and he thought this was the sum of all wisdom, and that with it would come immortality.

Then a bell began to boom, a deep-toned bell, whose tolling was inexpressibly solemn, and poured into his heart a sadness too deep for sorrow. As though there dwelt an enchantment in the very sound itself, the dark prairies shifted like a scene, and in their stead he saw, in a cold gray twilight, a high doorway built of a cold gray stone, rough-hewed and heavy. Through its arch passed then a file of gray-cowled monks, their faces concealed. Each carried a torch, whose flickering, wavering light cast weird cowled figures on the gray stone, and in their midst was borne a bier, covered with white. And as the deep bell boomed on through all the vision, like a subtle thrilling presence, Bennington seemed to himself to stand, finger on lip, the eternal custodian of the Secret of it all—the secret that each of these cowled figures was a Man—a divine soul and a body, with ears, and eyes, and a brain; that he had thoughts, and his life that is and is to come was of these thoughts; that there beat hearts beneath that gray, and that their voices must not be heeded; that in the morning these wearied eyes awaited but the eve, and that the evening brought no hope for a new day; that these silent, awesome beings lived within the heavy stones alone with monotony, until the bell tolled, as now, and they were carried through the arched doorway into the night; and, above all, that to each there were sixty minutes in the hour, and twenty-four hours in the day, and years and years of these days. This was the Secret, and he was its custodian. None of the others knew of it; but its awfulness made him sad and stern. He checked the days, he numbered the hours, he counted the minutes rigorously lest one escape. One did escape, and he turned back to catch it, and pursued it far away from the stone doorway and the dull twilight, and even the sound of the bell, off into a land where there were many hills and valleys, among which the fugitive Minute hid elusively. And he pursued the Minute, calling upon it to come to him, and the name by which he called it was Mary. Then he saw that the square of the window had become yellow with the sun, and that through it he could hear plainly the voices of the Leslies talking in high tones.

His brain was very clear, more so than usual, and he not only received many impressions, and ordered them with ease and despatch, but his very senses seemed more than ordinarily acute. He could distinguish even by day, when the night stillness had withdrawn its favouring conditions, the borings of the sawdust insects in the logs of the cabin. Only he was very tired. His hands seemed a long distance away, as though it would require an extraordinary effort of the will to lift them. So he lay quiet and listened.

The conversation, of which he was the eavesdropper, was carried on by fits and starts. First a sentence would be delivered by one of the Leslies; then would ensue a pause as though for a reply, inaudible to any but the interlocutors themselves; then another sentence; and so on, like a man at a telephone. After a moment's puzzling over it, Bennington understood that Jim Leslie was talking to one of the prisoners down the shaft.

"You have the true sporting spirit, sir," cried the voice of Jeems. "I honour you for it. But so philosophical a resignation, while it inclines our souls to know more of you personally, nevertheless renders you much less interesting in such a juncture as the present. I would like to hear from Mr. Davidson."

Pause.

"That was a performance, Mr. Davidson, which I can not entirely commend. It is fluent, to be sure, but it lacks variety. A true artist would have interspersed those finer shades and gradations of meaning which go to express the numerous and clashing emotions which must necessarily agitate your venerable bosom. You surely mean more than *damn*. *Damn* is expressive and forceful, because capable of being enunciated at one explosive effort of the breath, but it is monotonous when too freely employed. To be sure, you might with some justice reply that you had qualified said adjective strongly—but the qualification was trite though blasphemous. And you limited it very nicely—but the limitation to myself is unjust, as it overlooks my brother's equitable claims to notice."

Pause.

"I *beg* pardon! Kindly repeat!"

Pause.

"Delicious! Mr. Davidson, you have redeemed yourself. Bertie, did you hear Mr. Davidson's last remark?"

"No!" replied another voice. "Couldn't be bothered. What was it?"

"Mr. Davidson, with a polished sarcasm that amounted to genius, advised me in his picturesque vernacular 't' set the jaw of mine goin', and then go away an' leave it!"

Pause.

"I beg you, Mr. Slayton, do not think of such a thing. I would not have him repressed for anything in the world. As you value our future acquaintanceship, do not end our interview. Thank you! I appreciate your compliment, and in return will repeat that, though in a pretty sharp game, you are a true sport. Our friend Arthur is strangely silent. I have never met Mr. Arthur. I have heard that either his face or his hat looks like a fried egg, but I forget for the moment which was so characterized."

Pause.

"Fie, fie! Mr. Arthur. Addison, in his most intoxicated moments, would never have used such language."

And then the man in the cabin, lying on the bed, began to laugh in a low tone. His laugh was not pleasant to hear. He was realizing how funny things were to other people—things that had not been funny to him at all. For the first time he caught a focus on his father, with his pompous pride and his stilted diction; on his mother's social creed. He cared as much for them as ever and his respect was as great, but now he realized that outsiders could never understand them as he did, and that always to others they must appear ridiculous. So he laughed. And, too, he perceived that the world would see something grimly humorous in his insistence on the girl's parentage, when all the time, in the home to which he was to bring her, dwelt these unlovable, snobbish old parents of his own. So he laughed. And he thought of how he had been fooled, and played with, and duped, and cheated, and all but disgraced by the very people on whom he had looked down from a fancied superiority. And so he laughed. And as he laughed his hands swelled up to the size of pillows, and he thought that he was dressed in a loose garment spotted all over with great spots, and that he was standing on a stage before these grave, silent hillmen. The light came in through a golden-yellow square just behind them. In the front row sat Mary, looking at him with wide-open, trusting eyes. And he was revolving these hands like pillows around each other, trying to make the sombre men and the wistful girl laugh with him, while over and over certain words slipped in between his cachinnations, like stray bird-notes through a rattle of drums.

"I have no fresh motley for my lady's amusement," he was saying to her, "no new philosophies to spread out for my lady's inspection, no bright pictures to display for my lady's pleasure, and so I, like a poor poverty-stricken minstrel whose harp has been broken, yet dare beg at the castle gate for a crumb of my lady's bounty." At which he would have wept, but could only laugh louder and louder.

Then dimly he knew again he was in his own room, and he felt that several people were moving back and forth quickly. He tried to rise, but could not, and he knew that he was slipping back to the hall and the solemn crowd of men. He did not want to go. He grasped convulsively at the blanket with his sound hand, and shrieked aloud.

"I am sick! I am sick! I am sick!" he cried louder and louder.

Some one laid a cool hand on his forehead, and he lay quiet and smiled contentedly. The room and the people became wraithlike. He saw them still, but he saw through them to a reality of soft meadows and summer skies, from which Mary leaned, resting her hand on his brow. Voices spoke, but muffled, as though by many veils. They talked of various things.

"It's the mountain fever," he heard one say. "It's a wonder he escaped it so long."

Then the cool hand was withdrawn from his brow, and inexorably he was hurried back into the land of visions.

CHAPTER XXII

FLOWER O' THE WORLD

Bennington de Laney found himself lying comfortably in bed, listening with closed eyes to a number of sounds. Of these there most impressed him two. They were a certain rhythmical muffled beat, punctuated at intervals by a slight rustling of paper; and a series of metallic clicks, softened somewhat by distance. After a time it occurred to him to open his eyes. At once he

noticed two things more—that he had some way acquired fresh white sheets for his bed, and that on a little table near the foot of his bunk stood a vase of flowers. These two new impressions satisfied him for some time. He brooded over them slowly, for his brain was weak. Then he allowed his gaze to wander to the window. From above its upper sash depended two long white curtains of some lacelike material, freshly starched and with deep edges, ruffled slightly in a pleasing fashion. They stirred slowly in the warm air from the window. Bennington watched them lazily, breathing with pleasure the balmy smell of pine, and listening to the sounds. The clinking noises came through the open window. He knew now that they meant the impact of sledge on drill. Some one was drilling somewhere. His glance roved on, and rested without surprise on a girl in a rocking chair swaying softly to and fro, and reading a book, the turning of whose leaves had caused the rustling of paper which he had noticed first.

For a long time he lay silent and contented. Her fine brown hair had been drawn back smoothly away from her forehead into a loose knot. She was dressed in a simple gown of white—soft, and resting on the curves of her slender figure as lightly as down on the surface of the warm meadows. From beneath the full skirt peeped a little slippered foot, which tapped the floor rhythmically as the chair rocked to and fro. Finally she glanced up and discovered him looking at her. She arose and came to the bedside, her finger on her lips.

"You mustn't talk," she said sweetly, a great joy in her eyes. "I'm so glad you're better."

She left the room, and returned in a little time with a bowl of chicken broth, which she fed him with a spoon. It tasted very good to him, and he felt the stronger for it, but as yet his voice seemed a long distance away. When she turned to leave the room, however, he murmured inarticulately and attempted to stir. She came back to the bed at once.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said gently, but seeing some look of pleading in his eyes, she put the empty bowl and spoon on the little table and sat down on the floor near the bed. He smiled, and then, closing his eyes, fell asleep—outside the borders of the land of visions, and with the music of a woman's voice haunting the last moments of his consciousness.

After the fever had once broken, his return to strength was rapid. Although accompanied by delirium, and though running its full course of weeks, the "mountain fever" is not as intense as typhoid. The exhaustion of the vital forces is not as great, and recuperation is easier. In two days Bennington was sitting up in bed, possessed of an appetite that threatened to depopulate entirely the little log chicken coop. He found that the tenancy of the camp had materially changed. Mrs. Lawton and Miss Fay had moved in, bag and baggage—but without the inquisitive Maude, Bennington was glad to observe.

Mrs. Lawton, in the presence of an emergency, turned out to be helpful in every way. She knew all about mountain fevers for one thing, and as the country was not yet blessed with a doctor, this was not an unimportant item. Then, too, she was a most capable housekeeper—she cooked, marketed, swept, dusted, and tyrannized over the mere men in a manner to be envied even by a New England dame. Fay and the Leslies had also taken up their quarters in the camp. Old Mizzou and the Arthurs had gone. The old "bunk house" now accommodated a good-sized gang of miners, who had been engaged by Fay to do the necessary assessment work. Altogether the camp was very populous and lively.

After a little Bennington learned of everything that had happened during the three weeks of his sickness. It all came out in a series of charming conversations, when, in the evening twilight, they gathered in the room where the sick man lay. Mary—as Bennington still liked to name her—occupied the rocking chair, and the three young men distributed themselves as best suited them. It was most homelike and resting. Bennington had never before experienced the delight of seeing a young girl about a house, and he enjoyed to the utmost the deft little touches by which is imparted that airily feminine appearance to a room; or, more subtly, the mere spirit of daintiness which breathes always from a woman of the right sort. He felt there was added a newer and calmer element of joy to his love.

During the first period of his illness, then, Jim Fay and the Leslie brothers had worked energetically relocating the claims, while Mrs. Lawton and Miss Fay had taken charge of the house. By the end of the first day the job was finished. The question then came up as to the disposition of the prisoners.

"We didn't want the nuisance of a prosecution," said Fay, "because that would mean that these mossbacks could drag us off to Rapid City any old time as witnesses, and keep us there indefinitely. Neither did we want to let them off scot-free. They'd made us altogether too much trouble for that! Bert here suggested a very simple way out. I went down to Spanish Gulch and told the boys the whole story from start to finish. Well, it isn't hard to handle a Western crowd if you go at it right. The boys always thought you had good stuff in you since you rode the horse and smashed Leary's face that night. It would have been easy to have cooked up all kinds of trouble for our precious gang, but I managed to get the boys in a frivolous mood, so they merely came up and had fun."

"I should say they did!" Bert interjected. "They dragged the crowd out of the shaft—and they were a tough-looking proposition, I can tell you!—and stood them up in a row. They shaved half of Davidson's head and half his beard, on opposite sides. They left tufts of hair all over Arthur. They made a six-pointed star on the top of Slayton's crown. Then they put the men's clothes on wrong side before, and tied them facing the rear on three scrubby little burros. Then the whole outfit

was started toward Deadwood. The boys took them as far as Blue Lead, where they delivered them over to the gang there, with instructions to pass them along. They probably got to Deadwood. I don't know what's become of them since."

"I think it was cruel!" put in Miss Fay decidedly.

"Perhaps. But it was better than hanging them."

"What became of Mrs. Arthur?" asked the invalid.

"I shipped her to Deadwood with a little money. Poor creature! It would be a good thing for her if her husband never did show up. She'd get along better without him."

The claims located and the sharpers got rid of, Fay proceeded at once to put the assessment work under way. In this, his long Western experience, and his intimate acquaintance with the men, stood him in such good stead that he was enabled to contract the work at a cheaper rate than Bishop's estimate.

"I wrote to Bishop," he said, "and told him all about it. In his answer, which I'll show you, he took all the blame to himself, just as I anticipated he would, and he's so tickled to death over the showing made by the assays that he's coming out here himself to see about development. So I'm afraid you're going to lose your job."

"I'm not sorry to go home. But I'm sorry to leave the Hills." He looked wistfully through the twilight toward Mary's slender figure, outlined against the window. The three men caught the glance, and began at once to talk in low tones to each other. In a moment they went out. Somehow, on returning from the land of visions, Ben found that the world had moved, and that one of the results of the movement was that many things were taken for granted by the little community of four who surrounded him. It was as though the tangle had unravelled quietly while he slept. She leaned toward him shyly, and whispered something to his ear. He smiled contentedly.

They talked then long and comfortably in the dusk—about how the Leslies had written the letter, how much trouble she had taken to conceal her real identity, and all the rest.

"I sent Bill Lawton up to warn your camp the first day I met you," said she.

"Why, I remember!" he cried. "He was there when I got back."

And they talked on of their many experiences, in the fashion of lovers, and how they had come to care for each other, and when.

"I made up my mind it was so foolish a joke," she confessed, "that I determined to tell you all about it. You remember I had something to tell you at the Pioneer's Picnic? That was it. But then you remember the girl in the train, and how, when she looked at us, you turned away?"

"I remember that well enough," replied Bennington. "But what has that to do with it?"

"It was a perfectly natural thing to do, dearest. I see that plainly enough now. But it hurt me a little that you should be ashamed of me as a Western girl, and I made up my mind to test you."

"Why, I wasn't thinking of that at all," cried Bennington. "I was just ashamed of my clothes. I never thought of you!"

She reached out and patted his hand. "I'm glad to hear that, Ben dear, after all. It did hurt. And I was so foolish. I thought if you were ashamed of me, you would never stand the thought of the Lawtons. So I did not tell you the truth then, but resolved to test you in that way."

"Foolish little girl!" said he tenderly. "But it came out all right, didn't it?"

"Yes," she sighed, with a happy gesture of the hands. They fell silent.

"I want you to tell me something, dear," said Bennington after a while. "You needn't unless you want to, but I've thought about it a great deal."

"I will tell you, Ben, anything in the world. We ought to be frank with each other now, don't you think so?"

"I don't know as I ought to say anything about it, after all," he hesitated, evidently embarrassed. "But, Mary, you know you have hinted a little at it yourself. You remember you said something once about losing faith, and being made hard, and---"

She took both his hands in hers and drew them closely to her breast. Although he could not see her eyes against the dusk, he knew that she was looking at him steadily.

"Listen quietly, Ben dear, and I will tell you. Before I came out here I thought I loved a man, and he—well, he did not treat me well. I had trusted him and every one else implicitly until the very moment when---I felt it very much, and I came West with Jim to get away from the old scenes. Now I know that it was only fascination, but it was very real then. You do not like that, Ben, do you? The memory is not pleasant to me, and yet," she said, with a wistful little break of the voice, "if it hadn't been for that I would not have been the woman I am, and I could not love you, dearest, as I do. It is never in the same way twice, but each time something better and higher is added to it. Oh, my darling, I *do* love you, I do love you so much, and you must be

always my generous, poetic *boy*, as you are now."

She strained his hands to her as though afraid he would slip from her clasp. "All that is ideal so soon hardens. I can not bear to think of your changing."

Bennington leaned forward and their lips met. "We will forgive him," he murmured.

And what that remark had to do with it only our gentler readers will be able to say.

Ah, the delicious throbbing silence after the first kiss!

"What was your decision that afternoon on the Rock, Ben? You never told me." She asked presently, in a lighter tone, "Would you have taken me in spite of my family?"

He laughed with faint mischief.

"Before I tell you, I want to ask *you* something," he said in his turn. "Supposing I had decided that, even though I loved you, I must give you up because of my duty to my family—suppose that, I say—what would *you* have done? Would your love for me have been so strong that you would have finally confessed to me the fact that the Lawtons were not your parents? Or would you have thrown me over entirely because you thought I did not love you enough to take you for yourself?"

She considered the matter seriously for some little time.

"Ben, I don't know," she confessed at last frankly. "I can't tell."

"No more can I, sweetheart. I hadn't decided."

She puckered her brows in the darkness with genuine distress. Women worry more than men over past intangibilities. He smiled comfortably to himself, for in his grasp he held, unresisting, the dearest little hand in the world. Outside, the ever-charming, ever-mysterious night of the Hills was stealing here and there in sighs and silences. From the darkness came the high sweet tenor of Bert Leslie's voice in the words of a song:

"A Sailor to the Sea, a Hunter to the Pines,

And Sea and Pines alike to joy the Rover,

The Wood-smells to the nostrils of the Lover of the Trail,

And Hearts to Hearts the whole World over!"

Through and through the words of the song, like a fine silver wire through richer cloth of gold, twined the long-drawn, tremulous notes of the white-throated sparrow, the nightingale of the North.

"The dear old Hills," he murmured tenderly. "We must come back to them often, sweetheart."

"I wish, I *wish* I knew!" she cried, holding his hand tighter.

"Knew what?" he asked, surprised.

"What you'd have done, and what I'd have done!"

"Well," he replied, with a happy sigh, "I know what I'm *going* to do, and that's quite enough for me."

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CLAIM JUMPERS: A ROMANCE ***

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