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"Under the Hat Brim Drawn Forward to His Line of Vision
His Eyes ... Gazed Forth Keen and Observant"

THE IRON FURROW

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FRONTISPIECE BY

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CHAPTER I

The Ventisquero Range stretches across the circumference of one's vision in a procession of mountains that come tall and blue out of the distant north and seemingly march past to vanish in the remote south like azure phantoms. The mountains wall the horizon and dominate the mesa, their black forest-clad flanks crumpled and broken and gashed by cañons, lifting above timber-line peaks of bare brown rock that pierce the clouds floating along the range. At sunrise they cast immense shadows upon the mesa spreading westward from their base; and at sunset they reflect golden and purple glows upon the plain until the earth appears swimming in some iridescent sea of ether; while over them from dawn till dusk, traversed by a few fleecy clouds, lies the turquoise sky of New Mexico.

At a certain point in the range a small cañon opens upon the mesa with a gush of gravel and sand that flows a short way into the sagebrush and forms a creek bed. Tucked back in the little cañon there is a considerable growth of bushes and trees, cool and fresh-looking in the shadow of the gorge during the summer season, a splash of vivid green there at the bottom of the dusty gray mountain, but at the cañon's mouth this verdure ceases.

Only an insignificant stream of water ran, one day, in the stony creek bed that meandered out upon the mesa, and it appeared under the hot July sun and among the hot stones for all the world like a rivulet of liquid glass. That was all the mesa had to show, only its endless gray sagebrush and the creek bed almost dry—unless one should reckon the three parched cottonwood trees beside the stream, a little way down from the cañon, and the flat-roofed adobe house near by, and the empty corral behind built of aspen poles. In that immensity of mountain and mesa the house looked like a brick of sun-baked mud, the corral like a child's device of straws, the three cottonwoods like three twigs stuck in the earth. Or, at any rate, that is how they appeared to a horseman regarding them from the main mesa trail a mile away.

The rider, a slender tanned young fellow of about twenty-eight, sat in the saddle with the relaxed ease of habit which allowed his body to accommodate itself to the steady jogging trot of his horse. A roll comprising clothes wrapped in a black rubber coat was tied behind the cantle. His Stetson hat was tilted up at the rear and down in front almost on his nose—a thin, bony nose, slightly curved and with the suggestion of a hook in the tip, just the sort of nose to accord with his lean, sunburnt cheeks and clean-cut chin and straight-lipped mouth. Under the hat brim drawn forward to his line of vision his eyes, notwithstanding his air of lounging indolence, gazed forth keen and observant. He had the appearance of a man who might be seeking a few stray cattle, or riding to town for mail, and in no particular hurry about it, either, this hot afternoon; but, for all that, Lee Bryant was proceeding on important business—important for him, anyhow. When everything one possesses is about to be risked on a venture, the matter is naturally vital; and at this moment he was moving straight to the initiative of his enterprise.

Where the road crossed the creek bed to continue northward, a trail branched off and followed up the stream to the little ranch house by the three cottonwood trees. Here the creek had not yet begun to cut an arroyo and had washed merely a course five or six feet deep and some fifty feet wide through the mesa, so that from a distance the shallow gash was invisible and the ground

appeared unbroken. It was because of the flat character of the mesa, too, that Bryant on reaching the bank of the stream was able to see on the opposite side two persons a quarter of a mile off riding toward him; women, he perceived. Far north of them on the road, a black spot in a haze of dust, seemingly motionless but as one could guess advancing rapidly, was an automobile.

Bryant rode his horse down into the creek bed and turned him aside to a small pool on the upper side of the crossing, under the cut-bank, where the horse thrust his muzzle into the water and drank greedily. The rider swung himself out of the saddle, knelt a pace beyond, where the rivulet trickled into the pool, and also drank.

"Wet anyway, even if warm, eh, Dick?" he remarked, when done. "Don't drink it all, old scout; leave a swallow for the ladies." Still on his knees he looked appraisingly down the creek and then up it, and added derisively, "Some stream, this Perro, some stream!"

After rolling and lighting a cigarette, he meditated for a time in the same kneeling position. His horse finished drinking and moved a step nearer his master, where he stood with head lowered, water dripping from his lip, body inert. But presently he pricked his ears and turning his head toward the other bank gave a low whinny. Bryant got to his feet.

The two women he had beheld at a distance had now reached the ford. Their ponies snuffing water immediately dipped into the creek bed and crossed its sandy bottom with quickened steps. Young women the riders were, scarcely more than girls, it seemed to Bryant; wearing divided khaki skirts and white shirt waists and wide-brimmed straw hats tied with thongs under their chins. In this region where white men were none too numerous, and women of their own kind scarcer yet, and girls scarcest of all, the presence here of the pair aroused in the young fellow a lively interest.

He led Dick aside that their ponies might approach the pool.

"Thank you; they are very thirsty," said the nearer girl, with a nod. The ponies plunged forefeet into the water and stood thus with noses buried, drinking with eager gulps. "The afternoon is so hot and the road so dusty," the speaker continued, "that the poor things were almost choked."

She was the smaller of the pair, of medium height and having a graceful, well-molded figure, with frank gray eyes, a nose showing a few freckles, smooth soft cheeks slightly reddened by sun, and an expressive mouth. Bryant judged that she had small, firm hands, but could not see them as she wore gauntlets. He further decided that she was neither plain nor pretty: just average good-looking, one might say. An air of friendliness was in her favour, though what might or might not be a prepossessing trait, depending on circumstances, was the suggested obstinacy in her round chin.

"Don't you yourselves wish a drink? You must be thirsty, too," Bryant addressed the young ladies. "If your ponies won't stand, I'll look after them."

"Oh, they'll not run off, unless we forget to let the reins hang, as has happened once or twice," said the girl who previously had spoken. "For they're regular cow-ponies. At first we had a hard time remembering just to drop the lines when we dismounted instead of tying them to a post somewhere; and for a while we had a feeling that they certainly would gallop off if we did let the reins hang, as we'd been instructed. But they never did." She turned to her companion. "Imo, aren't you thirsty? I'm going to get down and have a drink." With which she swung herself down from her saddle upon the sand.

The second girl was tall and thin, lacking both the spirits and stamina of the other; a crown of fluffy golden hair was hinted by the little of it the young fellow could see under the brim of her big hat; her eyes were of a soft blue colour, probably weak; while her face, the skin of which was exceedingly white with but a tinge of the sun's fiery burn, was regular of feature and delicately formed.

She walked to the rill languidly, where stooping she drank from her palm. Most of the water that she dipped escaped before reaching her lips; and Bryant doubted if she were really successful in quenching her thirst. The heat, the dust, and the ride appeared to have been almost too much for her strength, exhausting her slender store of vitality. The other girl, who had coiled herself down by the trickling stream and bent forward resting her hands in the water, drank directly from the rivulet.

"There, that's the way to do it, Imo," she declared, when she had straightened up, hat-brim, nose, chin, all dripping. "Like the ponies! I hope I haven't lost my handkerchief." And she began to search about her waist.

"I'd fall flat in the water if I tried it, as sure as the world," the taller girl responded.

They rose to their feet and joined Bryant.

"You're the young ladies who are homesteading just south of here, aren't you?" he inquired, politely.

"Yes, two miles south on Sarita Creek," the smaller answered. Then after an appraising regard of him she continued, "We took our claims only last April. And they're not very good claims, either, we're beginning to fear; the creek goes dry about this time. That's why no one had filed on the locations before. Have you a ranch somewhere near?"

"No. That is, not yet. I'm a civil engineer, but I'm thinking strongly of settling down here. If I do, we shall be neighbours. My name is Lee Bryant; this is my horse Dick; and I've a dog called Mike, which stopped aways back on the road to investigate a prairie dog hole. Now you know

who we are," he concluded, with a smile.

The girl thereupon told him her name was Ruth Gardner and that of her companion Imogene Martin.

"We'll be very glad to have you call at our little ranch when you're riding by," Ruth Gardner said, graciously. "Aside from Imogene's uncle and aunt, who live in Kennard and who've come to see us several times, we've not had a single visitor in the three months and a half we've been there, except once an old Mexican who was herding sheep near by and came to ask for matches. Of course, not many people know we're there, I imagine. From the road one can't see our cabins —we had to have two, you know, one for each claim, and they sit side by side—because they're in the mouth of the cañon among the trees. It's really cool and pleasant there during the heat of the day. Any time you come, you'll be welcome."

"Yes, Mr. Bryant," Imogene Martin affirmed. "A man now and then in the scenery will help out wonderfully."

"I'll stop the first time I'm passing," he stated.

Lee Bryant understood the significance of the invitation: they were starved for company and would be grateful for the society of a person they believed respectable. He had seen a good deal of homesteading conditions in the West; he knew the hardships involved in "holding down" claims, of which the dreary monotony and loneliness of the life were not the least. One earned ten times over every bit one got of a free government homestead. For men it was bad enough; but for woman, for girls like these, who had probably come from the East in trustful ignorance and with rosy visions, the homestead venture impressed him not only as pitiful but as tragic.

"I'll certainly ride down to see you," he assured them again.

"And perhaps, being an engineer, you'll show us why the water doesn't run downhill in our bean patch, as it ought to do," Imogene Martin remarked.

Bryant laughed and nodded agreement.

"You'll find that it's your eyes, and not the water, that have been playing tricks," he said. "Ground levels and ditch grades are deceiving things close to the mountains, because the latter tilt one's natural line of vision. That's why water seems to run uphill when you look toward the range. I'll soon fix your ditch line when I set an instrument in your bean patch and sight through it once or twice. The water will behave after that, I promise you."

They continued to chat of this and of the failing of Sarita Creek, until the automobile that Bryant had earlier sighted shot into view on the northern bank of the creek, whence at decreased speed it descended into the bottom and ground its way across through sand and gravel. Driving the hooded car was a man of about thirty years, of slim figure and with a pale olive skin that betrayed an admixture of American and Mexican blood. Beside him in the front seat sat a girl whose clear pink complexion made plain that in her was no mingling of races; her hat held by a streaming blue veil and her form incased in a silk dust coat. The tonneau was occupied by two men: one an American with a van dyke beard sprinkled with gray, the other a short, stout, swarthy Mexican, whose sweeping white moustache was in marked contrast to his coffee-coloured face.

The car, with radiator steaming and hissing, was stopped at a spot close to where Lee Bryant and his companions stood. The young man at the wheel, unlatching the door, stepped out.

"I'll bet the stop-cock of the radiator is open," he addressed the girl with the blue veil, "or the engine wouldn't be so hot." After making an examination of the faucet, he returned to the door and procured a folding canvas bucket, saying, "That's the trouble, and the radiator is empty."

But the young lady scarcely heeded him. She had loosened the blue veil knotted at her throat and pushed it back from her cheeks to free them to the air; she sat regarding with interested eyes the group of three standing a few paces off by the horses. In her gaze, too, there was a faint curiosity, as if she wondered who the persons might be, and what they were doing here, and of what they had been conversing when interrupted. An exceedingly lovely girl she was, as the engineer had instantly perceived; her features molded in soft lines and curves that enchanted, a tint like that of peach petals in her cheeks, with warm, sensitive lips and brown, shining eyes—a radiant, intelligent face. Against the background of the place, the creek bed of sand and stones and the banks fringed with dusty sagebrush, she glowed with the freshness of a desert rose.

The driver of the car took a step toward Bryant, extending the bucket.

"Dip me some water out of that hole while I look at my tires, will you?" he said.

At the words, which were rather more of a command than a request, the engineer regarded him fixedly while the blood stirred beneath his tan, but finally took the bucket. The other turned back to the car, where he made a pretense of inspecting a front wheel and then, with a foot on the running-board and elbow resting on knee, twisting indolently a point of his small moustache, he began to converse with his companion of the blue veil.

Bryant filled the radiator. Two trips to the pool were necessary to obtain enough water for that purpose, but he finished the job with the same thoroughness that he went through with any business once undertaken, whether pleasant or otherwise. As he poured the contents of the bucket into the radiator's spout, he took stock of the automobile party. His face hardened with a slight contempt when he considered the effeminate-appearing young Mexican who had bade him bring water and the girl talking with him; which she must have noticed and taken to herself, for

when their eyes met he saw that a flush dyed her cheeks and that she bit her lip nervously.

He snapped the radiator cap shut. At the click the man stopped fingering his moustache, ended his talk, mounted to his seat, and started the engine. Bryant handed him the bucket, folded flat again, which the recipient tossed down by his feet.

"Here, my man," said the olive-skinned young fellow at the wheel, with a forefinger and thumb searching a waistcoat pocket as the car began slowly to move forward.

He tossed a quarter to the engineer. Bryant instinctively caught it, as one catches any suddenly thrown object. For an instant he remained transfixed, incredulous, astounded, then the blood flamed in his face and he cast the coin back at its donor.

"No Mexican can throw money to me!" he exclaimed.

For answer he received an angry look and snarled word from the driver. Beyond the man Bryant beheld the startled, embarrassed, and yet interested face of the girl with the veil, her lips a little parted, her eyes intent on him. Then the car lurched out of the sand, splashed through the rivulet, ascended the inclined roadway of the creek bank, and sped from view.

The sudden spark of antagonism flashing between the engineer and the young Mexican made the two girls by the ponies acutely aware that the horseman after all was a stranger, a man of whom they knew nothing, an unknown quantity. And so the two exchanged a glance and drew on their gauntlets and said they must be riding home. Thereupon Bryant assisted them to mount.

As he separated from them to follow the trail up the creek to the ranch house by the three cottonwoods, Ruth Gardner called to him not to forget his promised visit to their cabins. He assured them he should remember. When the girls were some distance off, they waved across the sagebrush at him and he swung his hat in reply. Off then the pair went at a gallop, with the automobile on the road far south of them leaving a hazy streamer of dust above the earth; the riders going farther and farther away, becoming smaller and smaller on the mesa, until at last they were but bobbing specks in the golden sunshine.

CHAPTER II

ToC

As Lee Bryant reined his horse to a stop before the small ranch house, a man seated on a stool just within the open doorway rose and came out to join him. He was a man of thin, stooped body; his sandy hair streaked with gray formed a fringe about his bald crown; and on his lined, sunburnt face there rested a shadow of worry that appeared to be habitual. Bryant dismounted and shook hands with the ranchman.

"Well, how are you making it, Mr. Stevenson?" he greeted. "As I promised if I should be riding by this way again, I've stopped to say 'howdy.' Doesn't seem a month has passed since I stayed over night with you? How's Mrs. Stevenson? Hope you're both well."

"Just feeling fair, just fair. Glad you stopped, Bryant," was the answer. "My wife was wondering only the other day what had become of you. Bring your horse around to the corral."

They went behind the house, where the young man removed saddle and bridle from Dick and turned him into the enclosure. Stevenson gathered an armful of hay from a small heap near by and tossed it over the fence to the horse, which began to eat eagerly. Lee glanced about, gave a sharp whistle; from the trail by the creek a bark answered him. Then an Airedale came racing through the sagebrush, now and again leaping high to gain a view of his master and finally breaking out upon the clear ground about the ranch house.

"Mike, you're too inquisitive about other animals' dwellings," Lee addressed him as he arrived, wet from an immersion in the creek and panting from his run. "Some day a rattler in a hole you're digging into will nip you on the nose and you'll wish you'd been more polite. Come along now and be good."

He walked with Stevenson back to the house, where leaving the dog to drop in the shade outside they entered. The interior was cool and dim after the hot, glaring sunshine; and Bryant, having greeted Mrs. Stevenson, sat down gratefully in a rocking-chair, glad to avail himself of the room's comfort. Crude as an adobe house is both in appearance and in construction, it is admirably adapted to the climate of the arid Southwest; its flat dirt roof and thick walls built of sun-baked mud bricks, plastered within and smoothly surfaced without, defying alike the heat of midsummer and the icy blasts of winter and lasting in that dry clime half a century. This ranch house of the Stevensons', originally built by some Mexican, as Bryant judged, had been standing twenty-five or thirty years and was still tight and staunch.

"Your creek's pretty dry, I see," the young fellow remarked afteratime, when they had exchanged news.

"By August there won't be any water in it at all," Stevenson said, "except a little that always runs in the cañon. I'll have to haul it from there then. You see now why I can't keep stock here."

His wife stopped the needle with which she mended an apron while they talked, and looked out of a window. On her face was the same tired, anxious expression that marked her husband's countenance.

"I've barely kept our garden alive," she said, "but it won't be for much longer."

"That's too bad, Mrs. Stevenson," Lee Bryant replied. "However, one can't do anything without water. Still, your sheep are doing well, I suppose; the grass is good on the mountains this summer."

An answer was not immediately forthcoming from the rancher; he sat staring absently at the backs of his roughened hands, now and again rubbing one or the other, and enveloped in a gloom that Bryant could both see and feel. Then all at once Stevenson began to talk, in a voice querulous and morose.

"We're going to quit here, sell the sheep, and go back East. I was swindled when I bought this ranch, and I want to get away before I lose my last cent. Came out to this country five years ago from Illinois with forty thousand dollars, and now we're going back with what I can sell my sheep for, maybe twenty-five hundred cash. Menocal robbed me right at the start, selling me this place for twenty-five thousand—twenty thousand down and a mortgage for the remaining five thousand—when the place was just five thousand acres of sagebrush, with no more water than runs in this creek. I was a tenderfoot all right! The land agent at Kennard showed it to me in June when the Perro was booming, and I believed him when he said it ran that way all the year around. Look at it now! I didn't have sense enough to inquire and learn about it, being in a hurry to get into the sheep business and thinking I should be rich in no time. That agent sold it to me for irrigated land, and a bargain at five dollars an acre. Menocal, who owned it and deeded it to me, pretends he isn't responsible for what the man said. Five dollars an acre! It's worth about fifty cents for winter range, and no more."

"If it could be irrigated, it would be a bargain sure enough at five dollars," Lee stated. "And there's another water right for the place you said when I was here before."

"Yes, there is—on paper. Water was appropriated out of the Pinas River, but that's eight miles north of here, and it would cost a hundred thousand dollars, if not more, to build a dam and a canal along the mountain side. No, sir; that appropriation was just some more of Menocal's tricky work! He jammed it through the land office thirty years ago and, they say, never did any more to comply with the law requiring delivery of the water on this ground than to have a man drive around pouring a bucketful out of a barrel upon each quarter section."

"Some pretty shady transactions were put across in those early days," Bryant commented.

"Well, ain't matters just as bad now?" Stevenson asked, quickly. "He still has the appropriation, or rather I'm supposed to have it with this ranch. Because Menocal controls the Mexican vote hereabouts, which is about all the vote there is, why, nobody has ever disturbed him about that water right. And he's using that water, belonging to me, to irrigate a lot of bottom farms along the river, for which no water can be appropriated, the Pinas not carrying enough. I rode over one day and looked at those farms—all grain and alfalfa. Well, he'll get this ranch back, anyway. The mortgage he holds on it is due next week and I can't pay it. Wouldn't even if I had the money. We're going to pull up stakes and leave."

Bryant silently regarded the other's haggard face and stooped figure, whose expression and resigned attitude revealed clearly Stevenson's surrender. He was a man discouraged, disheartened, whipped.

"What's wrong with the sheep?" he questioned, at length.

"Not much that isn't wrong. When I started five years ago, I invested in three thousand head. One time I had them increased to fifty-five hundred—three bands. Thought I was doing first rate; and I was then. But everything began to go against me. It seemed as if I always got the worst herders; and not having any water to raise alfalfa I had to buy winter feed, which was expensive; and a lot of them got the scab and died; and last year I lost nearly all my lambs at lambing time, the band being caught out in a storm and being in the wrong place. Just one thing after another, to break my back. Had trouble about the range, too. When I started them off this spring, they were down to seven hundred; and I've been losing some right along from one cause or another. No lambs, either, this spring, except dead ones. I thought I could hang on till my luck changed, but losing a hundred head two weeks ago was the last straw. I'm done now."

"What happened, Stevenson?"

"One of Menocal's herders mixed his flock with my six hundred, did it deliberately, I'm convinced; there were three thousand head of his. Billy was tending ours—and Billy is only fourteen, you know. I had come down here for some supplies and when I returned, I found him crying. The Mexican had separated the sheep and we were a hundred short, gone with his, and he would pay no attention to Billy, swearing he had only his own band. And he drove them away. I went to Menocal, who was very polite, but he said I must be mistaken as his herders were all honest men; and I've not got my sheep back, and I'm not likely to. For that band is now thirty miles away somewhere. No use to go to court—Menocal owns everything and everybody around here. So I'm quitting."

"The sheep business isn't all roses, that's certain," Lee Bryant remarked. "It's hard luck that

your band ran down just when the price of mutton and wool is going up. So you're letting the ranch slide?"

"Yes, I can't pay the mortgage; Menocal would foreclose at once if I tried to stay. Last time I was in town he asked me about paying it off and when I told him I shouldn't be able to do that, he said he'd have me deed it back to him to save foreclosure proceedings. And he was smiling, too. He knew all the time that he'd get the ranch back; and when he does, he'll sell it to some other sucker."

"Both of us have wished a hundred times that we'd never sold our Illinois farm to come here," Mrs. Stevenson said, plaintively. "I don't know what we'll do when we go back, for that matter. Just rent a place, I guess. Land is so high-priced there that we'll never be able to buy a farm again."

"Renting there is better than starving here," her husband declared. "We'll have a better home, too. When we first came to this place, we planned on building a fine house, but I never had the money loose, and we've just kept on from year to year living in this 'dobe hole. Good thing I didn't have the money, however, for we'd lose the house along with the ranch if we had built. Well, we're going back East, anyhow, as soon as I sell the sheep. Graham, who has the big ranch on Diamond Creek, south of where those girls are homesteading, is coming up in a day or two to look at them, maybe buy them. You can see Graham's big white house from the Kennard trail."

Bryant nodded. "I know the place, saw it when passing," said he. Then he went on, "When I was at the ford watering my horse before coming here, an auto crossed the creek. In the rear seat were a fat Mexican, whom I took to be Menocal, and a white man with a pointed beard. The latter perhaps was Graham?"

"Yes, that must have been him. Which way were they driving?"

"South."

"Going to the Graham ranch, I s'pose."

"There was a slim young fellow driving the car—some Mexican blood in him," Lee stated.

"Menocal's son, Charlie, a half-breed snippet who puts on airs because his father's rich," Stevenson said, in a disgusted tone. "A white woman married Menocal, you know."

"In the front seat with the young fellow was a girl, rather pretty," Bryant appended.

"That's Louise, I imagine," Mrs. Stevenson said, reflectively. "Yes, it must have been her. She's Mr. Graham's daughter. A nice girl, too. That Menocal boy is crazy to marry her, the talk is."

"And is she crazy to marry him?" Lee inquired, amused by this gossip.

"Well, not exactly crazy, I'd say; I don't see how she could be. But he'll be worth a lot of money some day, and she may overlook considerable on that account. Menocal's boy has been to college; besides, the family goes everywhere with white folks. I guess a Mexican is supposed to be really white, isn't he?"

"Those having pure Spanish blood," the engineer explained. "Nearly all the ones around here that I've seen have more Indian in them than anything else, however, with a dash of other races perhaps. From the glimpse I had of Menocal, I'll venture to say he has Red men among his ancestors."

"Mexican or Indian or whatever he is, he can squeeze money out of nothing, like a Jew," Stevenson complained. "Look how much he has made out of this ranch; look at what he has made out of me! And it's just that way with everything he holds. The Mexicans all around this section sell him their stuff cheap and take what he pays, because they don't know any better and because he's their leader. He has the big store at Bartolo, which you've seen, and owns the bank there, and has any number of farms up and down the Pinas River, and runs I don't know how many bands of sheep; and besides, he elects the county officers, and fixes the taxes to suit himself, and recommends the water inspector for this district, and—and—well, what chance has an ordinary man to get ahead here?"

Lee Bryant let a pause ensue. He rolled a cigarette and struck a light and carefully got the tobacco to burning.

"You say you're going to let the ranch go back to Menocal," he stated, abruptly. "You've made up your mind that you won't keep it, anyway. All right. Now I've a proposition to make you."

Stevenson looked at him with curiosity.

"A proposition? What is it?" he asked.

"It's this: I've a farm of eighty acres in Nebraska that I'll trade you for it. I could offer you less, but I won't; you have an equity here of value, and I'm not the kind of man to beat you down to nothing. If we deal, you shall have something in return for your interest. This eighty of mine is worth a hundred dollars an acre—eight thousand; it's mortgaged for five thousand, which leaves an equity of three thousand; on it are good buildings and it's rented until next March. You could then take possession. It's a good farm, and with the money you'll have from the sale of your sheep you can make a good start on the place, which is in the corn and wheat section. My equity of three thousand isn't worth, to be sure, anything like what you paid Menocal for this ranch, but it's something—and all that I can afford to give."

The rancher stared at Lee as if he could not credit his ears.

"Are you in earnest?" he demanded, at last. "Why I've just told you there's no water here. A man can't make a living on the place, and the mortgage is due next week."

"I'll pay off the mortgage; I've enough money saved up to do that."

"But, man, without water——"

"Listen, Stevenson, I know exactly what I'm about," the engineer interrupted. "This thing's a gamble with me, I admit, but you needn't do any worrying on that score. I'm going in with my eyes open; I know the risks and am willing to take them. What about my offer?"

Stevenson, still gazing at his visitor in wonderment, was at a loss; he rubbed his knuckles doubtfully, hitched about on his chair and knit his brows, perplexed, hesitating, as was his manner when presented with any new affair, even with one palpably to his advantage. It was clear that in this lack of quick decision lay much of the reason for his failure.

His wife exclaimed in appeal, "Oh, John, if Mr. Bryant really means it, why don't you say yes? I can't understand why he makes us such a fine offer, but he is making it. We can start again; we'll be back in a farming country like what we're used to, even if it isn't in Illinois; we'll have a farm of our own, a home of our own, and will not have to rent. Oh, why don't you say yes?"

The rancher looked from his wife to Bryant and back again, pursing his lips.

"But I don't understand this," he said.

"You heard what he explained," she replied, anxiously. "He expects to pay off the mortgage and be rid of Mr. Menocal. Perhaps he knows the sheep business better than you do; you never did learn it well, John, and you ought never to have stopped farming. You were a good farmer; you will be again. We can go on this place in Nebraska and raise corn and wheat and hogs, and I'll have chickens to help clear the debt. Why, it's a chance for us to be independent again, and have a home, and neighbours, and attend church, and—and be happy, John!"

"That's so," her husband agreed.

"We are going to leave here anyway," she continued to urge. "We wouldn't have had anything but the money from the sheep, but now you'll be getting a farm, too. I'd think you'd jump at Mr. Bryant's offer."

"But maybe, after all, the ranch is worth more than I thought," Stevenson speculated.

His wife sank back in her seat, picked up her sewing, and tried to resume her task, but her fingers trembled and her lashes were winking fast. Lee gazed at her sympathetically. Then he lifted his hat from the floor and stood up.

"Well, there are other places I can trade for," he remarked. "I thought I was doing you a good turn in proposing the exchange, especially as you're about to lose your place. I wouldn't be beating you out of anything, certainly, and as your wife says, you'd really be getting something for nothing. The mortgage is due next week, you must remember."

Stevenson's mind, however, was running in another channel.

"I'll tell you how we can deal," he said, with an assumption of shrewdness. "You pay me the five thousand you plan to pay off the mortgage with, and get Menocal to renew the loan. Five thousand—why, my equity is worth more than that! Besides, you've some scheme for making money out of this ranch."

"What if I have?"

"That makes a difference when it comes to a deal."

"Not with me," the engineer stated, curtly. "If that's your attitude, we'll drop the matter. Probably you yourself can arrange an extension of the mortgage or a renewal, if you're minded to remain."

"You know, John, that you can't; Mr. Menocal has already refused," Mrs. Stevenson said, in a low voice.

"I ought to have cash in addition to your farm," her husband insisted.

"You get none," Lee replied. "Well, this trade is what I came to see you about. From the way you talked when I was here last I supposed you might consider my offer favourably, but I guess we can't do business. I'll ride on to Bartolo."

At this statement Mrs. Stevenson wiped her eyes, rose and went into the inner room, closing the door after her. The engineer moved as if to depart.

"Now, wait a minute," Stevenson exclaimed.

"Well?"

"I'll take—let me figure a minute."

Bryant tossed his hat on the table in disgust and relighted his cigarette.

"Stevenson, listen," he began. "You're an older man than I am, but just the same I'm going to say a few things that you need to hear. I couldn't say them and wouldn't say them before your wife, but now I'm going to turn loose. You can do as you damn please about trading, take my offer or leave it; if you refuse, though, you'll lose both ranch and farm. The trouble with you is that you can't see the difference between a good proposition and a bad one. That's why you bought this ranch on say-so. That's why now you're turning down my offer. You either jump without first

looking, or you wait until it's too late. You don't pay attention strictly to what's immediately under your hand, but waste your energy wondering if you can't get rich from something out of your reach. That's what has been the trouble with you in the sheep business, I imagine. Here when I offer you a farm for a ranch that's slipping through your fingers, you at once get greedy. Most of the time you don't know your own mind; you hesitate and speculate and vacillate and worry. Why, you deserve to lose your ranch and your sheep and everything else. And your wife suffers for your faults! You're a failure, and you've dragged her down with you. If you're not a failure, and a fool, too, go bring her back into this room and tell her you're going to make this trade, so you two will have a farm and the home she wants and so her mind will be easy once more. You've been thinking of only yourself long enough; now begin to think of her comfort and happiness."

Stevenson came angrily to his feet.

"No man ever talked to me like that before, I'll have you know!" he cried.

The engineer kept his place, with no change of countenance.

"Well, one has talked to you like that now and I'm the man," he said. "And I don't retract a word. It's the truth straight from the shoulder. What are you going to do about it? Why, nothing, just nothing. Because I've talked cold, hard facts, and you know it."

The momentary fire died from Stevenson's eyes. He shuffled his feet for a little, looked about the room with the worried aspect he usually showed, brushed his lips with the back of his hand.

"You're pretty rough——" he began.

"Don't stand there talking; go get your wife," Bryant said, sharply.

Stevenson turned and walked slowly to the closed door. He cleared his throat, stared at the panels for a moment, and at last pushed it open.

"Come out, Sarah, we're going to trade," he announced.

The woman came forth. About her eyes was a slight redness, but on her lips there was a tremulous smile.

"I'm glad," she said, "I'm glad, John."

"Yes, I decided it was a good trade to make," her husband assured her. "No need to think it over longer."

They came to where Bryant stood, unconcealed pleasure showing on Mrs. Stevenson's face.

"You may like to see these kodak pictures of the farm and its house," the young man said, producing an envelope from a pocket. "Take a chair here by the window, Mrs. Stevenson, where you'll have the light. See, this one shows the house, with the trees and lilac bushes in front, and gives you a glimpse of the flower garden. Pretty, don't you think?"

She readjusted her spectacles. After a time she gazed from the pictures through the window at the stretch of sagebrush.

"And I'll have neighbours, too," she said, in an unsteady voice. "The loneliness here was killing me."

Stevenson considered the backs of his hands in awkward silence.

"Neighbours, lots of them," Bryant affirmed.

"I kind of pity you having to stay," she said, looking up at him with a smile.

The engineer laughed.

"Why, this country suits me right down to the ground," he replied. "I've been in the West ten years, wouldn't live anywhere else. And I don't expect to be lonely; Menocal will probably attend to that. Besides, there are two good-looking young ladies just south of here, on Sarita Creek."

"That's so," she said, laughing also.

"First thing we hear, you'll be married," Stevenson remarked, with a quick grin.

"Oh, I'm safe—there are two of them," Bryant returned, clapping the rancher on the shoulder.

CHAPTER III

ToC

The town of Bartolo slumbered in the July sunshine. Nothing stirred on its one long street, lined with scarcely a break on either side by mud-plastered houses that made a continuous brown wall, marked at intervals by a door or pierced by a window; nothing stirred, neither in front of Menocal's large frame store at the upper end of it, with the little bank adjoining, nor before the

small courthouse grounds across the way, where the huge old cottonwoods spread their shade, nor along the entire length of the beaten street down to Gomez's blacksmith shop and Martinez's saloon across from each other at the lower end; nothing, not even the pair of burros drowsing in the shade of the wall, or the dogs lying before doors, or the goats a-kneel by the saloon, or the fowls nested down in the dust. Only the Pinas River, issuing from the black cañon a mile or so above, was in motion; and, indeed, it appeared to partake of the general somnolence, barely rippling along its gravelly bed, shallow and shrunken, and giving forth but an indolent glitter as it flowed past the town. The day was hot and it was the hour of the siesta, therefore everything slept—everything, man, beast and fowl, from Menocal, who was snoring in his hammock on the vine-clad veranda of his big stuccoed house just beyond the store at the head of the street, to the goats at the foot of it by the silent saloon.

Bryant, descending from the mesa into the river bottom and riding into the street, had he not known otherwise, might have supposed the population vanished in a body. But he was aware that it only slept; and he had no consideration for a siesta that retarded his affairs. He dismounted before the courthouse and entered the building, whose corridor and chambers appeared as silent, as lifeless, as forsaken as the street itself. Coming into the Recorder's office, he halted for a look about, then pushed through the wicket of the counter and stepped into an inner room, where he stirred by a thumb in the ribs a thin, dusky-skinned youth reclining in a swivel chair with feet in repose on a window-sill, who slept with head fallen back, arms hanging, and mouth open.

"Come, *amigo*, your dinner's settled by this time," the engineer stated. "Grab a pen and record this deed."

The clerk sleepily shifted his feet into a more comfortable position.

"We're behind in our work," said he. "Just leave your deed, and the fee, and we'll get around to it in a few days."

"So you're too busy now, eh?"

"Yes. We've had a good many papers to record this month."

"Where's the Recorder?"

"Not back from dinner yet," was the answer.

The speaker once again prepared to rest. From the outer office the slow ticking of a clock sounded with lulling effect, while the grassy yard beyond the window, shaded by the boughs of the cottonwoods, diffused peace and drowsiness. The clerk closed his eyes.

"Just leave the deed and fee on the desk here," he murmured.

"And tip-toe out, too, I suppose."

"If you feel like it," the young Mexican remarked, with a faint insolence in his voice, the insolence of a subordinate who believes himself protected by his place.

Bryant's hand shot swiftly out to the speaker's shoulder. With a snap that brought him up standing the clerk was jerked from his seat, and before his startled wits gathered what was happening he was propelled into the outer office.

"Record this deed, you forty-dollar-a-month penpusher, before I grow peevish and rearrange your face," Bryant ordered, with his fingers tightening their grasp on the youth's collar. "You're receiving your pay from the county, and are presumed to give value received. Anyway, value received is what I'm going to have now."

"Let go my neck!"

"Let go nothing. When I see you settle down to this big book, then I let go. No '*mañana*' with me, boy; right here and now you're going to give me an exhibition of rapid penmanship. Savey? Take up your pen; that's the stuff. Now dip deep in the ink and draw a full breath and go to it."

Bryant released his hold on the cowed clerk, but remained by his side, where his presence exerted an amazingly energizing effect upon the scribe. The pen scratched industriously to and fro across the page, over which the youth humped himself as if enamoured of the tome, only at intervals risking a glance at the lean-faced, vigilant American. When he had finished the transcription, stamped the deed and closed the book, Bryant handed him the amount of the fee.

"Thank you," the clerk said, with an excess of politeness.

He was still nervous. He furtively observed his visitor stowing the deed in a pocket, as if expecting Bryant to initiate some new violence, and resolved on flight if he should.

"There, my friend, that's all you can do for me just now," the engineer remarked. "But I shall return soon, so keep awake and ready. When you see me entering, advance *pronto*. If anything annoys me, it's being kept waiting by a Mexican boy-clerk. Do you get that clearly?"

"*Si, señor*," the other replied, unconsciously lapsing into his native tongue.

"*Muy bueno*—and bear it in mind. Now I advise you to get to work on the documents you've allowed to accumulate; it's half-past two and you've had enough of a siesta for one noon." With which Bryant took his departure.

Outside he led his horse across the street to the frame store. Beside the latter stood Menocal's house, with its smooth green lawn and its beds of poppies, its trees, its fence massed with sweet peas, and its vine-covered veranda, where the engineer had a glimpse of a corpulent figure in a hammock. The only sound from the place was the musical gurgle of water in a little irrigation

ditch bordering the lawn.

Inside the long store Bryant aroused the only man in sight, a Mexican who slept on the counter with his head pillowed on a pile of overalls.

"Go tell Menocal there's a man here to see him on business," Lee said.

The awakened sleeper slid off his perch, rubbed his eyes, yawned, stretched himself, and then shook his head with great gravity.

"Mr. Menocal takes his siesta till three o'clock; you can see him at that time," he said, in English.

"I'll see him now."

"Impossible! He is very angry when awakened for a small matter."

Bryant went a step nearer to the speaker.

"Where do you get the authority to decide that my business is a small matter?" he demanded, with a menace of manner that caused the other to retreat in haste. "Go bring him and make me no more trouble."

The man went. Bryant lighted a cigarette and fell to surveying the store's merchandise. Several minutes passed before a murmur of voices apprised him of the coming of the men. Menocal entered the side door first, approaching heavily and sleepily the spot where the engineer waited. He had not put on coat or collar; his short figure appeared more than ever obese; his sweeping white moustache divided his plump, shiny brown face; and his air was that of one who must put up with vexatious interruptions because of the important position he filled.

"You wish to speak with me?" he asked, shortly.

"That's why I'm here," Bryant returned.

Menocal gazed at him owlishly for a time.

"You're the man who threw my son's money back at the ford day before yesterday, aren't you?" he questioned.

"The same."

"Why did you throw it back?"

"Why did he throw it at me in the first place? You should train him to use better judgment. You yourself wouldn't have done it."

"No," Menocal said. Then, as if the subject were dismissed, he asked, "What do you wish to see me about?"

"About the mortgage on the Stevenson place: I've bought the ranch. Stevenson moves off in a few days."

Menocal's brows lifted and remained so, as if fixed in their new elevation. He slowly rubbed the end of his nose with his forefinger. The sleepiness had wholly vanished from his countenance.

"Come into the bank," he said, finally; and moved toward the front door.

The engineer accompanied him. In a space railed off from the cashier's grille in the little building next door they sat down. The teller was visible in the cage, where now he appeared very busy though he had undoubtedly been drowsing when they entered.

"So you've bought the Stevenson ranch," Menocal said.

"Yes. I've just had the deed recorded."

"The mortgage is due in a few days; I told him it wouldn't be renewed by me."

"Perhaps now that I have the place——"

"No; I've carried that loan long enough. If it isn't paid when due, I'll start foreclosure proceedings immediately."

Bryant nodded.

"Well, I merely asked out of curiosity," said he. "It's your right to demand payment—and I'm on hand with the money. Make out a release so that I can clear the record. Here's a Denver draft for six thousand dollars—I figure principal and interest at five thousand four hundred and you can have the balance placed to my credit in the bank. I shouldn't continue the loan at its present rate of interest in any case; eight per cent. is too much for money. Besides, I want the ranch clear of incumbrance."

With an expressionless face Menocal gazed at the draft, turned it over, examined the back, then at last laid it down on his desk.

"Isidro," he called to the teller, "make out a mortgage release for the Stevenson place. Copy the description from the mortgage in my file in the vault. Afterward credit six hundred dollars to—What is your name?"

"Lee Bryant."

"Six hundred dollars to Lee Bryant, Isidro. Mr. Bryant will give you his signature." Again facing his visitor, he said, "Do you know that that ranch has no water to speak of? I'm afraid you may not find the property what you expect."

"It has a good appropriation from the Pinas River here."

"Ah, but it can't be used," Menocal exclaimed, with a bland smile.

"I propose to use it."

"What!"

Bryant kept his eyes fixed on the amazed banker's orbs.

"Didn't I speak clearly?" he inquired. "I own one hundred and twenty-five second feet of water in this river and it's my intention to apply it. I'm going to make a real ranch down there."

A shadow seemed to settle on Menocal's face, leaving it altered, less placid, more purposeful.

"Considerable capital will be required to build a canal there," he remarked. "You're certainly not going into this thing on your own account, are you? Who is putting up the money? Eastern people?"

Bryant smiled, but made no answer. His smile and his silence provoked an angry gleam from the banker's eyes.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Menocal continued. "But you're going to discover that you haven't this water right, after all."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because it was never used, because no real canal was ever built, only a little ditch that doesn't exist now. The right will be cancelled, and the water will be reappropriated for lands along the river."

"For farms on which you're now using it, you mean?"

"I'm not saying where."

Bryant leaned forward and tapped the banker's desk with a finger-tip.

"Mr. Menocal, don't try to start any trouble with me," he said, with jaw a little outthrust.

"*Dios!* You dare talk that way to me?"

"I repeat it, don't attempt to keep something that doesn't belong to you. You may want to—but don't try it. I know all about the water appropriation for the ranch I've bought; all about your sworn affidavit filed thirty years ago, with an accompanying map, certifying that a canal was built and water delivered to the land. It's a matter of record. Now you seek to reappropriate this water, or to have the right cancelled, and see where you wind up. Thirty years ago men winked at false affidavits, but it's different to-day."

The Mexican's white moustache drew up tight under his thick nose, disclosing his teeth in a snarl.

"You threaten me—me!"

"I'm not threatening, only warning you. Or if you wish a still milder word, let me say advising," Bryant rejoined.

The banker's eyes, however, continued to flash at the engineer, as if alive in their sockets and hunting a mark to strike.

"You accuse me of dishonour!" he exclaimed. "I don't know why I should pay attention to your charge, which is false. A ditch was built to the ranch—"

"Mighty small one, then. No trace of it remains."

"One was built, one was built!"

"Very well, Mr. Menocal, grant that it was. It but strengthens my position. But let us pass to recent times; five years ago you passed title to Stevenson with the water right as a reality when you sold him the ranch; your son is water inspector for this district, or was until a year ago, anyway, making reports to the state. Did he say anything in them about this canal or water right having ceased to exist? No."

"His reports were largely routine," the other stated, regaining his composure.

"Still they were official. I'm simply pointing out to you, Mr. Menocal, why it will be unwise for you to endeavour to have this water appropriation cancelled. You sold it to Stevenson as a live right—the deed proves that; and now that I have the property I shall make it such in fact. You've been using the water for other land, which possibly will suffer afterward, but that doesn't affect the case in the least. That water is a valuable property; when it's delivered on my ranch, the land will be worth fifty dollars an acre. You may have calculated that no one who got hold of the Perro Creek ranch ever would or could use the water, but in that you were in error: I can and will use it, and you must understand that fact."

Menocal fell into consideration. He folded his hands across his stomach and remained thus, pondering, occasionally lifting his lids for a scrutiny of Bryant's face.

"I'll give you ten thousand cash for the place as it stands and hand you my check now," he said, at length.

"Not to-day, thank you," the engineer replied.

"What is your price?"

"The ranch isn't for sale. It'll be worth a quarter of a million when it's watered. No, it's not on the market at present."

A deep sigh issued from the banker's lips; he blinked slowly several times before speaking, with a resigned countenance.

"I see you've some capitalists behind you," said he, "for it will take money to build a dam and a canal. If they saw a reasonable profit without the trouble of construction, no doubt they would be willing to sell."

"Put your mind at rest, Mr. Menocal; you have only me to deal with; there are no capitalists running this show yet. But the water system will be built, never fear."

Menocal's eyebrows went up. "Ah, so?" he asked, softly.

Then his face smoothed itself out; and Bryant realized that he had been led into a betrayal of importance.

"You would do well to name a price, Mr. Bryant."

"No; I propose to develop the ranch," the engineer answered, curtly. "Is the release made out? If it is, I'll be on my way."

"It's too bad you refuse, too bad," Menocal said, with a lugubrious shake of his head.

He called Isidro. The clerk placed a card before Bryant for his signature and gave him a check book. Then he laid the mortgage release in front of Menocal, who signed and passed it to the engineer.

"You'll find it correct," the Mexican stated. "Isidro is a notary and has filled out the acknowledgment."

Nevertheless, the visitor took care to read the paper and compare it with his deed before he rose.

"Well, that ends my business for the afternoon," said he, "and I'll take no more of your time. You understand where I stand, Mr. Menocal."

The latter gave a number of slow nods saying, "I understand, I understand. Good day, Mr. Bryant. And remember that you have an account with us and that the bank will be pleased to render you any service possible."

Sleepily the banker, watching through the bank window, saw the young man lead his horse across the street and once more disappear within the courthouse. Then for some minutes he continued in somnolent contemplation of the courthouse front. At last he called:

"Isidro, Isidro! Go find Joe García and tell him I wish to speak with him in half an hour in my garden. Look for him at home and in the saloon, but find him wherever he is. That man who just went out now, Isidro,——"

"Yes," answered Isidro.

"He's one of those hard, obstinate Americans, Isidro—and his eyes, they are bad eyes, I don't like them."

"Yes," Isidro concurred, who had not noticed the eyes at all.

CHAPTER IV

ToC

Charlie Menocal, who after his sleep had read a few chapters in a novel, went out of the shaded room where he had reposed and into the garden. There he discovered his father in talk with Joe García.

"What's going on?" he exclaimed. "Lost a horse, or a wife or something, Joe?"

"No, Charlie; this is business," García said, with a grin.

Menocal continued to give his instructions to the latter. They had to do with bringing a few hundred sheep from one of the bands feeding in the hills. They were to be driven down on the mesa to graze, and kept moving about near the Stevenson ranch house; García was to observe what the young man there did, all he did, whom he saw, and as far as possible where he went. Particularly was he to note if surveyors came and set to work anywhere. If the young man appeared to be engaged at any task on the mountain side, Joe was to approach with his sheep. And he was to report everything he learned.

Charlie's attention became more lively as he listened to his father's directions to the man, and when García had departed he asked, "Who are you after? Who's this young fellow you speak of as

being at the Perro Creek ranch? Didn't Stevenson deed the place back?"

Menocal senior twisted an end of his flaring moustache.

"May a thousand damnations fall on him! No, he didn't," he responded, wrathfully.

"But that only means you'll have to foreclose the mortgage. It will take longer, that's all."

Charlie was vice-president of his father's bank—his name was so printed on the stationery, at least—and was familiar with his parent's affairs, though he was averse to anything like industry. He much preferred the pursuit of pleasure to work, and his automobile to the grille of the bank. He was accurately aware, too, of his father's weakness for him, an only child, and of his father's inclination to indulge his desires; and shrewdly played upon the fact. Nevertheless, in matters of business he possessed a certain sharpness.

"Stevenson sold the ranch to this young man Bryant, who just now paid off the mortgage," Menocal explained.

"Then he was stung," Charlie averred.

"Wait, you don't know all, my son. He plans to build a dam and a canal and use that old water right out of the Pinas, taking the water with which we irrigate the farms down at Rosita. It will leave them dry; the alfalfa will die; no more grain or peas or beans will be raised on them; they won't have even good pasturage; they will go back to sagebrush and cactus—all those farms, all those beautiful ranches! Altogether four or five thousand acres! They are worth two hundred thousand dollars now—to-morrow worth nothing! Half my winter hay comes from them; half my peas for fattening lambs. I shall have to sell part of my sheep. I'm a millionaire now, but I'll be reduced, I'll be less than a millionaire, and so almost poor again. It's very bad; it mustn't be; I must stop him using the water."

Even Charlie became solemn at the prospect of losing two hundred thousand dollars and being less than a millionaire.

"The right hasn't been used; we'll have it cancelled," he said, with sudden confidence.

"He refused to sell the place to me for ten thousand dollars cash," the father stated. "He's no fool—and he's a bad customer, Charlie; he said he would send me to prison for perjury if I tried to cancel the right."

"Perjury, pouf!" Charlie sneered.

"He couldn't send me to prison, of course, for I have too much money, but he might make it unpleasant for me, very unpleasant. Politics are to be considered; I mustn't get a bad name in the party and in the state. I must be careful. The records show that the ranch has had the water, and while in my possession. As he says, that would be difficult for me to explain if I entered court against him. The matter mustn't get into court or into the land office. Later we can have the water right cancelled and reappropriated—later, when he has gone away, when no dust can be raised about it."

"Is he going away?"

"Don't be stupid, Charlie. He must go away; that is necessary: I'm considering plans. He must be pursuaded—or——"

"Or forced," said his son, with reckless bright eyes.

"Men generally depart from a locality when public opinion is brought to bear on them," the elder remarked. "He can be made unpopular until he desires to leave."

"We'll run him out, just leave that part to me."

"Charlie, nothing rash must be done, remember that, and nothing illegal. I shall think of some plan soon."

"Nothing rash, but nothing uncertain, father. Two hundred thousand is a lot of money. I, too, shall plan."

The prospect of ousting an intruder who had challenged his family's right to control what it wished here, who indeed had the audacity to attempt to robe the effort under a claim of legality, appealed to young Menocal as an undertaking most attractive. The fact that all the advantage was on his side, of influence, of wealth, of race, of power that might be exerted through ignorant Mexicans in a hundred subtle and vindictive ways, made the enterprise all the more alluring. The Indian strain in his blood—a strain which accounts for much that sets American and Mexican apart, unconsciously in his case gave a tinge of cruelty to his anticipation. Aspiring himself to pass as an American, it never failed to please him when he could slight or humiliate an American; and he lacked his father's restraint of impulses, as he came short of his sagacity and perseverance. Indeed, secretly the son believed his father too conservative, too cautious, too old-fashioned and slow; and at times was exceedingly impatient with methods that he was confident he could immensely improve.

His father considered him for a time.

"Charlie, you leave this matter alone," he said. "You keep out of it. Whatever's to be done, I'll do. You would go too far. You can give your attention to seeing that the crops are watered and the hay cut on time; you should be down at Rosita now looking after things."

"I'll run down in the car this evening," was the answer. "To-morrow I'm going to Kennard, where I haven't been for two weeks. The wool in the warehouse there should be sold, and a buyer

from Boston wrote, you know, that he would be there this week. And I think we can get our price."

Kennard was the nearest railroad point and forty miles south. It was a pleasant little city, with some of the attractions of larger places. Of these Charlie was thinking rather than of the wool. He would attend to the wool business, of course, but it was an excuse instead of a reason for the projected visit on the morrow.

"Very well, it's time the wool is sold; the price is good at present," his father agreed.

Charlie recurred to the matter of the Stevenson ranch.

"What's this fellow's name who bought out Stevenson?"

"Lee Bryant. A young man. And I don't like him; I'm afraid he's a trouble-maker. You should remember him, Charlie, for he's the fellow who filled the radiator of the car at the ford on Perro Creek and who threw your money back in your face."

Young Menocal's thin figure stiffened, while his small black moustache rose in two points of ire.

"Him! That scoundrel who insulted me before Louise! That lamb-stealer!" he shrilled.

"That is the man," his father affirmed.

Charlie spat forth a string of Spanish curses. When he had recovered from his outburst of passion, he said:

"Well, I'm glad he's the man. He'll pay for that. Louise said nothing, but she heard him. And now he's trying to steal our water, too! I'd like to tie him down on a cactus-bed and run a band of sheep over him."

"Charlie, Charlie, control yourself. Don't exhaust your strength by being angry; it's bad for you in this heat; sunstrokes are sometimes brought on that way. Besides, such talk as you uttered is foolish and dangerous."

"Bah, I'm not afraid of a sunstroke."

"Anyway, it's unwise to be angry," his father warned. "When you're in a temper, you talk loud; and people may hear it and repeat it, making trouble. Now I must return to the bank. But remember what I say: you're not to meddle in this Perro Creek matter. Do you hear?"

"Oh, yes, I hear," said Charlie.

His face as his father walked away did not, however, indicate acquiescence in this tame course. His heart was full of rancour for the insulting stranger of the ford; and where the fires of his hatred blew, his feet would follow.

CHAPTER V

ToC

Though Lee Bryant, during his colloquy with Menocal, had spoken confidently of his ability to obtain money wherewith to construct a canal system linking the Pinas River and the Perro Creek ranch, he had no definite promise of funds from any source. Nor would the project be ripe for financing before he had completed his surveys and made his cost estimates.

He had become interested in the undertaking in this way. Staying over night with the Stevensons by chance a month previous, a stranger, his speculation was aroused when through questions about the ranch he learned of the unused Pinas River water right, a right valid but apparently impracticable. Was it indeed impracticable? Would the cost of bringing water to the land be, after all, prohibitive? In fact, had a competent engineer ever gone into the matter? He doubted it. The history of the property, so far as he could glean from Stevenson, disclosed on the part of no one any serious effort ever to develop the ranch. In the beginning Menocal had probably had some faint notion of carrying out the scheme, but if so, had afterward abandoned the enterprise. The tract of five thousand acres of land had originally been a small Mexican grant; it lay in the midst of government land; and when Menocal came into possession of the ranch, some conception of utilizing water from the Pinas must have inspired him to acquire the appropriation of one hundred and twenty-five second feet. Well, the land, theoretically at any rate, had water; and if water actually could be delivered, an extraordinary value would accrue to the now nearly worthless tract. It was a problem for engineers; it was one of the possibilities that if seized might be converted into a fact. Bryant was an engineer, and he was just then foot-loose.

From the worried ranchman, Stevenson, who appeared glad to talk of his affairs to someone, he learned that the man was both dissatisfied with the country and straitened in circumstances. Bryant judged that his host would consider any offer which would enable him to realize something on the ranch and to depart; so that particular aspect of the matter if undertaken,

namely, securing title to the land and water right, seemed favourable. If no insurmountable obstacle stood in the way of building a dam and a canal, arising from construction elements, it assuredly looked as if money was to be made out of the project.

With his mind kindling to the idea Bryant rode northward next morning along the base of the mountains, studying the hillsides where a canal naturally should run, all the way up to the Pinas River. Afterward he reconnoitered the mesa, hitting at last on a slight elevation, hardly to be called a ridge, that projected from a hillside a mile below Bartolo and curved in a gentle crescent for about three miles from the range of mountains down the mesa, again bending in toward the hills close to the north line of the Perro Creek ranch.

Next, he absented himself for a week at the state capital, where he industriously studied the water and land records pertaining to the district. When he returned, he brought with him a surveying instrument and a boy for helper. He pitched a tent out of sight in a hollow at the foot of a hill, worked early and late running his lines, establishing a dam site, and surveying the river bottom near the mouth of Pinas Cañon, and remained practically unseen except by a few incurious Mexicans. His instrument proved the correctness of his conclusion regarding the crescent-shaped elevation as a practical grade for a canal, which though necessitating a longer course would nevertheless immensely lessen the time, expense, and difficulties of digging when compared with a line along the mountains' flanks with its danger of washouts and earth slides. Nor did he stop there. He made rapid but reliable topographical measurements, on a general scale, of the mesa for five miles out from the mountains, between Bartolo and Perro Creek, locating among other things a large depression in the plain, three miles southwest of the town, which might by diking be converted into a flood water reservoir. Then he folded his tent and again disappeared for a week. When, finally, he rode to Stevenson's ranch house that hot July afternoon and made a trade for the five thousand acres of land, he was the possessor of considerably more knowledge of the locality and its possibilities than any one would have guessed.

And now he was owner of the ranch and committed to the enterprise.

A few days after Bryant's visit to Bartolo Stevenson disposed of his sheep to Graham, the owner of the large ranch on Diamond Creek, loaded his household goods, except the stove and some of the furniture which the engineer bought, and with his wife and boy drove away in his sheep wagon for Kennard and for the new farm in Nebraska. Bryant's own effects—trunk, bedding, provisions, surveying instruments, draughting-board, and the like, came up from the railroad town by wagon, and with them the fourteen-year-old lad, Dave Morris, a gangling, long-legged boy extremely dependable and extraordinarily serious, who had carried rod for the engineer during the week of preliminary surveying.

The man and boy now attacked the canal line in earnest, with Bryant intent on establishing its course, location, and displacement exactly, so that he could make necessary blueprints and compile construction estimates. It was while they were working along the first mile of the line, where it ran from the Pinas River along the base of a hill to the low ridge that bore out upon the mesa, that they received their first interruption. The worst and most expensive part of the canal to build would be this section, and the engineer was therefore taking especial care in its surveying; near the river the line traversed several fenced tracts of ground extending part way up the hillside, fields owned by natives; and it was one of these Mexicans who slouched forward to the spot where Bryant and Dave worked and ordered them to get out of his field.

Bryant straightened up from sighting through his transit, and asked, "What's on your mind? What's disturbing your brain, *hombre*?"

"You get off," was the unkempt fellow's answer.

"Why?"

"You can't come on my ranch; get off."

The engineer pulled a map from his hip pocket—a copy made from one filed in the land commissioner's office thirty years previous. He spread it open before the Mexican.

"See this? Here is Bartolo, here is the river, here is your field," he said, pointing with a finger. "Now look at that line; it runs across this field right where we stand. That's the Perro Creek Canal, extending down to Perro Creek."

The man stared at the earth under his feet.

"No, I see no canal," he stated, now looking right and left as if to make sure. "There is no canal."

"Yes, there is. But it needs cleaning badly. I'm surveying its banks again and then I shall clean out the dirt. You can see that it needs cleaning, because you can scarcely see it at all. Menocal, the banker, didn't take very good care of the canal after he built it; that's the trouble. Hello, does that surprise you? Yes, Mr. Menocal got the water right and dug the ditch in the first place; and he also secured a right of way across these fields, sixty feet wide, by buying it from whoever owned the ground at that time, and the right of way is certified to the state. Now, I own Perro Creek ranch and the Perro Creek canal and likewise the right of way. So you see, José, or whatever your name is, we're standing on my ground and not yours; I could even make you take down your fence where it crosses my right of way."

The Mexican blinked stupidly.

"I was born here; my father was born here; my grandfather lived here," he said. "There have

been little ditches, many of them, but never a big canal in this field. You must get off."

"No; you're mistaken. Go see Mr. Menocal and he will set you right."

"I saw Charlie Menocal, who said to drive strangers off."

"Well, Charlie had best keep his fingers out of this dish, or he may find it full of pepper, and you tell him so next time you talk with him."

Bryant folded his map and restored it to his pocket, while the Mexican went away to his house.

That day the engineer worked until darkness shut down. At three o'clock next morning he routed his young assistant out of bed and by dawn they were in the fields again. Knowing that the Menocals had set about impeding and if possible altogether obstructing him, he proposed to be done, as quickly as careful surveying allowed, with the fenced part of the hillside where plausible controversies could be invented.

Toward the end of the second day he had progressed into the last tract of owned ground. He breathed more freely. In his statement to the Mexican concerning the right of way he had been exactly right; and he was following to a dot the original course taken by the early ditch. He could have improved upon this section of the canal by another survey, but that would have involved him in a host of troubles, very likely unsolvable ones, in securing title to another strip of ground across the fields. Without question Menocal's influence would prevent the owners from selling, even if Bryant had the money with which to buy a second right of way, which he had not. Dollar for dollar it would be cheaper in the long run to use the old line. Well, Dave was already across the last fence with his rod; they would soon be working entirely on government land; and with that, it did not matter for the present what the Mexican landowners thought or did.

Bryant had walked fifty yards or so away from his transit to call something to Dave, when the crack of a rifle sounded from the hillside and a bullet whined near by. The engineer pivoted about. Another shot followed, and he beheld a spurt of dust close by his instrument. The hidden rifleman was not seeking to murder him, but to destroy his tools.

There were no more shots and he resumed work. Later on, as he neared the fence and was establishing his last points within the field, a horseman with a gray moustache came galloping up along the stretch of barb wire. He nodded, inquired if the engineer was named Bryant, and announced that he had half a dozen injunctions to serve.

"I expected something like this; glad you didn't arrive any sooner," Lee remarked.

"Well, I was away from town, or I'd have been here by noon," the horseman, an American, stated. "The injunctions cover all these places between here and the river. You and any one you hire must keep off the tracts specified until the cases come up before the judge."

"All right, sheriff. Wait till I take a last squint or two and I'll vacate."

The horseman idly watched the engineer make his final measurements, then when Bryant had lifted his tripod over the wire and told his assistant Dave they would call it a day and stop, he dismounted and sat down for a smoke with the man on whom he had served his papers.

"Looks as if you've stirred up some interest in your doings," he remarked, expelling a thread of smoke. "All the Mexicans from here down to Rosita are gabbling about your canal. Don't seem pleased with you."

"There's one who doesn't, in any case," was the response. "He took a couple of shots at my instrument a while ago from up yonder in the sagebrush when I had stepped aside for a moment."

The sheriff gazed at the hillside.

"A few *hombres* around here will bear watching," said he. For a little he meditated, then went on, "You're a white man and so am I; they don't like our colour any too well, at bottom. I s'pose you know that."

"Yes. But they needn't express their feelings with rifles. As far as these injunctions are concerned, they'll be dismissed eventually, for there's no question about my right of way through here. Menocal secured it himself and it's all a matter of record—the deeds, the certificate to the state, and the rest."

"Menocal got it, you say?"

"Nobody else. Some time or other he must have expected to water Perro Creek ranch, which he owned until he sold it to Stevenson."

"I knew he had that place," said the visitor, "but I didn't know it carried a water right from the Pinas. Where does this move of yours hit Menocal?"

"In his ranches down the river; he's been using this water for them," Bryant explained. "I suppose it's been taken for granted by nearly everyone that the water belonged to those farms down there, but it doesn't."

"How much water in this right?"

"Hundred and twenty-five second feet."

"Whew! That takes a chunk out of the Pinas. And I presume that by this time Menocal knows what you're doing?"

"Oh, yes; I told him. He doesn't like it, of course."

The sheriff turned for a full view of Bryant's face. In respect to features the two men were not

unlike: both had the same thin curving nose and level eyes and cut of jaw.

"Well, let me say as between man and man," the elder spoke, "that Menocal won't let you take away that much water from him if he can help it. And I'll drop you some more news, in addition: several Mexicans are going to file on homesteads or desert claims along the base of the hills south of here, scattered along like and running part way up the mountain sides. I don't know where your canal to Perro Creek will go, but if its line follows the foot of the range, as may be likely, it might happen to find those claims in the way."

"Any idea in your mind where those fellows may locate their filings?"

"No; I can't say definitely. Shouldn't be surprised if they began stringing them along a couple of miles south of here till they reached Perro Creek."

Bryant gazed at the flank of the mountain. The gentle ridge where his ditch line left the hillside was but half a mile away. Beyond that the Mexicans could file to their hearts' content, for they would be left on one side by the canal. But in all this he perceived Menocal's cunning hand.

"Much obliged to you, sheriff," said he. "I'll see if I can't find some way to satisfy those chaps when the time comes."

His visitor rose and put foot in stirrup.

"If any of these Mexicans grow ugly, let me know," he remarked. "I'll tell them where to head in. Drop in at my office at the courthouse when you're in town; Winship's my name. I brought these notices over myself in order to look at you, for they were saying you are a trouble-maker, but that's what these natives frequently state when they want to fix an alibi for themselves before they start something. I'll see if I can learn anything of the fellow who was up yonder shooting. These *hombres* are altogether too free with firearms, anyway. Better feed that lad there with you a few more meals a day; looks as if he could use them."

Bryant laughed.

"Dave's a little lean, but he's all there. Looks don't count, do they, partner?"

"I do the best I can," Dave responded, solemnly.

"Not at meal-time, I reckon," the sheriff said. "Feed up and get fat. A kid like you has no business having so many joints and bones sticking out."

"I been through a hard winter last winter, and this spring, too, till Mr. Bryant picked me up."

"How's that?" the horseman inquired.

"My mother died at Kennard. I didn't get on very well after that; not much there for a boy to work at. And I hadn't any folks."

"Hump. What's your last name?"

"Morris."

"Any relation to Jack Morris?"

"He was my father."

The sheriff nodded. "Knew him well; he died four years ago. And your mother died last winter? Little woman, I recall."

"Little, but a lot better than plenty of bigger ones I know of," Dave asserted, stoutly. "She died of pneumonia."

"Boy, I've held you on my knee when you were about as high as my hand. But I guess you don't remember that, and I'm mighty sorry to learn your mother's gone. Dave—is that your name? Well, now, Dave, fight your grub harder from now on."

The speaker gathered his reins, nodded, and rode away along the barb wire fence.

CHAPTER VI

ToC

"When gentlemen of a dark and sinister cast of mind deliberately set out to frustrate one's legitimate efforts under a misapprehension as to the course to be pursued, the proper diplomacy in such a case is to foster the delusion circulating in their craniums as long as possible and thus divert their attention from the real purpose. Don't you agree with me, David?" Lee Bryant gravely inquired of his young companion, as they were about to set forth next morning.

"Yes, sir," Dave affirmed, to whom the statement was so much Greek.

"Then since the vote is unanimous, we'll proceed to run a line along the mountain side where it

will collide with these new homesteads."

The engineer shouldered tripod and rod, whistled Mike to heel, and with Dave started forward. Half way to Bartolo they perceived three men busy on the hillside, so Bryant swung up to a point a quarter of a mile off and began surveying. When he approached the workmen, Mexicans naturally, he saw that they were engaged in setting fence posts, of which a row was already in line part way up the hill.

The men dropped their tools and confronted him as he drew near.

"This is my land; you keep away," one exclaimed, with waving arms, while the other backed him up in a show of force.

"How can I build a canal here if you won't let me go through?" Bryant demanded.

"No go through, no canal on my claim!"

"Well, just let me run a line, anyhow."

"No. Keep off, keep off," was the obstinate answer.

The engineer continued to argue, now as if in anger and now with a conciliatory mien, all the while protesting that the homesteader must not prevent the construction of the canal. But he received only shakes of the head, short replies, and malicious looks. So at length, with every pretense of disappointment and dejection, he went down the hillside.

A mile farther along, where he found two more men occupied at similar labour, he likewise dissembled his purpose, with the same opposition, controversy, and retreat. He thereupon led Dave back to the ranch house, where he prepared and ate dinner with satisfaction. Very likely Menocal would receive reports that evening faithfully depicting his chagrin and despair, or whatever were the Mexican equivalents.

Yet while he deluded the banker, he must secretly carry on his actual surveying on the mesa. Since the men setting fence posts had a fairly wide view of the plain, he determined to work in the open only for two or three hours at daybreak before the Mexicans were about. For Menocal, or any one else, must have no suspicion of his real ditch line until an application for construction of the project had been filed in the state engineer's office.

Signs that the banker had taken measures to keep him under surveillance were not wanting.

"Dave," he said, "have you noticed a sheepherder with a bunch of sheep hanging around here, when he should be up in the mountains where the range is good?"

"Yes, I've seen him. And he hasn't a full band, either."

"Looks as if he's grazing down here on the mesa so as to watch us," Bryant mused. "When we went north, he and his sheep drifted in that direction; when we were over on the mountain side, they followed there. What shall we do about it?"

"I don't see that we can do anything except to watch him, too, and fool him." The lad took thought for a moment, and then proceeded, "Somebody was around here yesterday while we were away, for I saw a brown paper cigarette stub on the ground in front of the door this morning. You use white papers; it's mostly Mexicans who have those straw papers."

"Then we had better put an extra nail or two in the windows as a precaution," Lee stated, "before we go down to Sarita Creek. And I'll leave Mike here also. If anybody comes fooling around, he'll take a piece out of the fellow's leg."

In addition to nailing the windows and leaving Mike at the door, much to his dissatisfaction, Bryant secreted his papers, note-books, and maps, the theft of which would be an extremely serious loss. Menocal probably would not instigate open lawlessness, but his hirelings might break into the house on their own initiative. And this was not unlikely since a bitter feeling was systematically being aroused against Bryant and his project among the preponderate Mexican inhabitants.

But for the time being he dismissed this matter from his thoughts, when with tripod and rod and a bundle of stakes on Dick's saddle he and Dave set out for Sarita Creek, leading the horse. Bryant had postponed, under pressure of work, the business of fixing the feminine homesteaders' garden ditch, until his conscience began to prick him on the subject. He had neither seen nor had news of them since the chance meeting at the ford; but now, as he could survey his canal line on the mesa only during the early hours, he planned to make frequent visits to the girls.

That they already had a caller this afternoon he discovered on arriving at the two little cabins built of boards, peeping forth from among the trees in the mouth of the cañon. The place was indeed charming, with its grass and shade, with its brook flowing close by the dwellings, with walls of rock rising behind. Just now an automobile rested before the trees; and the engineer saw a man sitting on the grass with Ruth Gardner and Imogene Martin, the three chatting and laughing gaily. When Bryant got a good look at the other visitor he gave vent to an ejaculation in which was blended surprise and contempt. "That magpie! Of all damn impudence!" For the cavalier so debonairly entertaining the young ladies was none other than the olive-skinned Charlie Menocal.

A sense of pique was Bryant's succeeding feeling. He would have disdainfully denied that he was moved by a pang of jealousy. But he had anticipated finding the girls alone and having a pleasant chat with them, enjoying their companionship, relaxing from the strain of arduous work, harkening to their badinage. Indeed, if the interloper had been someone else, some other man, at

least, he would have experienced a turn of disappointment—but that the individual should be this tricky, coddled, egotistical Charlie Menocal! Well, he should align the girls' irrigating ditch and then go about his business.

"I've been delayed in coming to correct your water flow," he remarked, when the fair homesteaders had given him greeting, "but I'm on hand at last."

Ruth Gardner, looking prettier and fuller of spirits than ever, assured him the ditch was behaving no better than before. Her next words, however, left him with an impression that he and not Charlie Menocal was the intruder, which hardened his annoyance into a desire to have done with the matter.

"I wish you had come some other day, for we're just about to depart," she exclaimed. "Mr. Menocal is very kindly taking Imo and me in his car to see the old ruins of a pueblo somewhere over west. We'll be gone probably all the rest of the afternoon, and there'll be no one to show you the ditch and what's wrong with it."

"Oh, I'll find out what's wrong and straighten out the trouble," the engineer replied. "You've a spade or shovel, I suppose? Go right ahead with your exploring expedition and don't worry about me; the ditch will be working properly when you return."

"Well, if you don't really need us——"

"Not in the least," was his assurance.

She still hesitated, while her look travelled from Bryant to Menocal and back again. To the engineer that inclusive regard indicated that her mind was less concerned with the garden ditch than with a comparison of her two visitors; and with a sudden feeling of warmth about his neck Bryant admitted to himself that he presented no attractions. He wore laced boots, soiled khaki trousers and flannel shirt, with his hat pulled over one eye against the sun; Menocal was dressed in light gray clothes, thin and cool, low white shoes, a pale pink silk shirt (trust a Mexican for colour somewhere!) a vivid rose-hued scarf, and a white cap. To further emphasize the contrast, Bryant led a loaded horse and a gangling boy, while Charlie Menocal leaned at ease against his twin-six. Quite a difference, for a fact. And it was plain that Ruth Gardner noted it with discrimination.

Imogene Martin now spoke.

"I don't think I'll go, Ruth. I've not been feeling well the last day or two, as you know, and I'm afraid to risk the sun."

"Oh, come on, Imo. The ride will do you good," her friend replied, with a trace of impatience.

"No, I told Mr. Menocal when he proposed the expedition that I doubted if I should go."

"Too bad not to come, Miss Martin," that worthy remarked, without enthusiasm. Clearly his interest in what company he should have did not point toward her.

"I'm going, at any rate," Ruth Gardner said. And then, "Oh, dear! I overlooked altogether introducing you you two gentlemen."

Bryant was human; the opportunity was one he could not let pass. So smiling broadly he said:

"We've met before, haven't we, Menocal? At Perro Creek ford." And receiving no response but a scowl, he spoke at large, "Well, I must get busy if I'm to save those beans."

He led Dick, with Dave at his side, toward the garden on open ground below the trees, where the bean vines were already turning yellow for lack of water. He chuckled as he went, for the disappearance of Charlie Menocal's patronizing air and the sudden thundercloud hanging on his visage attested that the charge had gone home.

Ten minutes later the automobile passed the garden, but Bryant, who had set up his tripod and stationed Dave with his rod some distance off, did not see the hand Ruth Gardner waved. His eye was where an engineer's eye should be, at his transit.

"She waved at you," Dave called.

"Who?"

"That girl with the Mexican."

"Well, what of it?"

When Bryant used that tone, Dave recognized the wisdom of silence. He pretended that he had not heard. Even his employer, whom he worshipped, had strange, mysterious moods.

CHAPTER VII

ToC

The defect in the ditch proved to be one of minor character, which Bryant corrected after a few observations and half an hour's work with a shovel. While he was thus engaged, Imogene Martin, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, strolled out to watch his operations. She was in a friendly and talkative mood, and asked questions concerning ditches and irrigation and surveying, and about Dave, and speculated on the ruins of the pueblo whither Ruth and Charlie Menocal had gone, and said she was glad Bryant had bought the ranch just north of their claims and would be their neighbour. Only, she added, she was sorry to learn that he was having trouble with the people about; Mr. Menocal had stated such to be a fact, though what he had further hinted of Bryant's endeavour to gain property to which he had no title and of the engineer's being a trouble-maker, she did not for one instant believe.

"I'll be a trouble-maker for Charlie and his dad if they continue their present policy," Lee vouchsafed, tossing aside a shovelful of earth.

Imogene Martin carefully flattened a hill of bean plants for a seat, sat down, and locked her hands over her knees.

"I think you're to be trusted, so I'll tell you a secret," she remarked, smiling. "Charlie Menocal doesn't make a 'hit' with me, either. When you referred to the ford, I could scarcely keep my face straight; and my feeling ill this afternoon, though partly true, was also partly manufactured, because I didn't want to go to those old ruins with him. I don't care for men like him especially. I share the feeling of my uncle in Kennard—"

"You have an uncle there? I thought you were from the East."

"I am; from Ohio. But I've an uncle and aunt living in Kennard, which is the reason Ruth and I came to this section for homesteads. Ruth was crazy to take up a claim, having read how easily one is acquired, while my health was not very good and the doctor at home thought it would be improved by being in the open in a high altitude. Uncle said I'd better stay with him and aunt, but I knew how terribly disappointed Ruth would be if I did, because she couldn't homestead alone. So uncle declared that if homesteaders we had to be, then we must locate near him where he could have me under his eye, so to speak. I myself am not taking this claim business very seriously. And now uncle, who once had some controversy with the elder Menocal, wouldn't be very well pleased if he knew the son was making calls on us."

"So others besides myself have trouble with the Menocals," Bryant stated.

"Apparently. I don't know what this particular difficulty was about, but uncle is president of a bank in Kennard and so it may have been some financial matter. Or it may have been over politics; both of them mix in that. Anyway, he doesn't think highly of the elder Menocal, and has no use at all for the younger; so I know he would be vexed at Ruth and me for receiving this Charlie."

"You didn't know him that day he and I clashed at the ford," Lee suggested.

"Oh, no. Our meeting came about one afternoon about a week afterward. He overtook us on the road a mile or so away from here and politely offered to bring us home in his car; we were walking and couldn't very well refuse his courtesy, and then he asked to call and Ruth at once gave him permission, and that's the way it came about. But I thought it wise to draw the line at going off miles and miles with him to see ruins. Of course, Ruth hasn't any uncle to consider, but uncle or no uncle I should have drawn the line just the same."

"A colour line, eh?" Lee asked, with a lift of his brows.

"Yes, that's it, though I hesitated to put it in just those words," she agreed, with a nod, while both her lips and her blue eyes smiled at him in amusement. "Really, Mexicans are of different blood and race, you know, and I feel the—gulf. That probably sounds foolish and ridiculous, still I can't help the feeling. When I look at a man like Charlie Menocal, I see the Mexican strain uppermost even if his mother was white; and I think what strange, savage, unguessed traits may lurk in his blood from a long time back; and I shiver. One dare not say they have ceased. There may be forces at work in his soul that are inherited from the very tribesmen who dwelt in that pueblo ages ago, whose ruins he and Ruth have gone to see. Who knows? And I'm never able to rid myself of the feeling that such forces exist in him and his kind."

The engineer thrust his shovel into the earth and seated himself beside the girl.

"Nor I," said he. "And I suppose that feeling will remain between persons of different races as long as the races themselves last. Those who ignore or deny it are simply blind. Why, look, there's antipathy between even white men of different nationalities! So what else is to be expected when the question is one of race and colour? Nor will one or two generations change what is infused in blood and sinew."

"Now, that's what uncle says," Imogene Martin declared, "and asserts that's the reason why Mexicans born and raised here are in sympathy with those across the border in any trouble Mexico has with our country." Her face all at once became amused. "He says craniums were shaped long before governments."

Bryant laughed on hearing that concise summing up of the case. And then they continued to talk of this and other subjects, while Dave Morris drew near and silently drank in the conversation, most of which passed above his head. As for the engineer, he found in his companion a peculiar charm that he never would have suspected from their first meeting at the ford; a pleasure begotten of a quick intelligence and a keen, trained mind.

"I've delayed you in your work," she exclaimed, at length.

"Except to throw out a few shovelfuls of dirt, and that will take but a moment. I was done. I didn't sit down until it was practically put in shape. I hope we shall have another talk soon; this one has been a great treat for me. Let me help you up."

When he had cleaned the last clods from the ditch, he set off with tripod and shovel on shoulder to walk with her to the cabins, while Dave followed with Dick. At the houses Bryant cast an appraising look at the scanty heap of chopped wood and wound up his visit by seizing the axe and attacking the store of dry poles hauled from the cañon by the man who had built the cabins.

"There, that will keep you going for awhile," he stated, when he had produced a large pile of sticks. "I don't believe you're strong enough to handle an axe, Miss Martin; and it would grieve me deeply to learn you had removed a toe in the attempt. Really, this homesteading game isn't for women and girls."

"Oh, we've made out fairly well."

"Your spirit is admirable, but I can't say as much for your judgment in the matter," he returned, good-naturedly. "Still, we all go hunting trouble in our own individual fashion; if not in one way, why, then in another."

It was after five o'clock when Lee Bryant and Dave, once more leading the loaded horse, took their departure and followed Sarita Creek down to the mesa trail. When they had struck into the latter and travelled it for half a mile, they saw a long distance ahead someone walking toward them, also leading a horse. In a land where men saddle a mount to ride a few hundred yards, the singular coincidence excited their curiosity. They wondered why the fellow walked, as doubtless he was wondering the same thing of them. But as they drew nearer they perceived the pedestrian to be not a man but a woman; and when they met Bryant recognized in her the girl who had sat by Charlie Menocal in his automobile at the ford. Her gray corded riding habit was dusty; she appeared both hot and tired; and her countenance showed a deep dejection. The horse she led was limping.

Bryant raised his hat and addressed her.

"Your horse has gone lame, I see. Can I be of any service to you?"

"I'm afraid not; he acts as if he had strained a tendon," she replied. "So I'm leading him home. Our ranch is on Diamond Creek."

"But you had a fall! There's blood on your glove."

"No, it's not from that," she said, with a shake of her head.

Bryant again remarked the exquisite molding of her face as he had noted it at their first meeting, and her wide brow and clear brown eyes and the fineness of her skin, and her warm, sensitive lips, at this instant moving in the barest tremble imaginable. She was gazing at him with a curious, troubled look.

"Bring Dick here," Lee bade Dave.

He swiftly untied the ropes and removed tripod, rod, and saddle. Then he unfastened the hitch of the saddle of the horse the girl led.

"Why, what are you doing?" she exclaimed.

"Giving you a fresh horse. You can ride mine home and send him back to me to-morrow; I live just ahead on Perro Creek at the Stevenson place."

"I wondered if you weren't the new owner, for I had learned that the ranch had been sold by Mr. Stevenson. Father bought his sheep. You are Mr. Bryant, aren't you? This is most kind to lend me your horse."

"You'll find Dick gentle; and you can lead your own mount. Walking appears to have exhausted you."

Again she shook her head, with an odd expression growing upon her face—anxiety, distress, just what Lee could not exactly decide. But as she made no explanation, he gave her a hand and swung her upon Dick, after which he handed her the reins and advanced the hope that she should arrive home without further misadventure.

She made no move to depart, however, but sat regarding the engineer.

"I was at your house," she stated, finally.

"To see me?"

"To find you, or someone, who could help me. When my horse went lame near the ford, I found that he had picked up a stone which I couldn't remove. So I led him to your house, seeking assistance. When I reached there——"

She stopped in her recital, compressing her lips and gazing off across the sagebrush.

"Well?" the engineer encouraged.

"When I reached there, I heard a dog whining."

Bryant stiffened.

"I left my dog Mike behind," said he.

"The sound was really more like a moaning," she went on. "At first I could see nothing, but when I looked everywhere I found that it came from one of the three cottonwood trees.

Somebody had hurt him, and the poor creature was suffering terribly. I—I can hardly tell what had been done to him!" And she shuddered.

"Mike! They've killed my dog Mike!"

"They nailed him to a cottonwood tree. A nail through each leg. A nail through his throat. Nails through his body. They had crucified him. And, oh, his pitiful eyes!"

Lee Bryant stood perfectly still and quiet. Dave was frozen and horrified. Both gazed fixedly across the mesa to where the cottonwoods could be seen.

"Is Mike alive yet?" Bryant asked presently, in an unsteady voice.

"No; not now. I found a piece of iron and hammered the nails free. Then I lifted him down and carried him to the creek and washed his wounds. But he died. I see his eyes yet, looking up at me." For a little she was overcome. Then she resumed, "When he was dead, I carried him up to your door, for I knew you must have loved him."

Bryant glanced up at her.

"Mike would know you were a friend," he said.

She nodded and reined Dick about. Leading the other horse, she rode away through the sunshine that burnished the mesa.

CHAPTER VIII

ToC

July passed. Followed August, with days likewise hot and unvarying except for a scarcely appreciable retardation of dawn. Perro Creek now showed no water at all in its shallow bed; the garden planted by the Stevensons was long dried up; the sagebrush was dustier than ever; and Bryant and Dave were hauling in a barrel on a sledge water for their use from a pool in the cañon.

From daybreak until about eight o'clock in the morning the engineer and his assistant worked on the canal line. Bryant had run a fictitious survey along the mountain side, staking it out conspicuously for any one to see, to the first of the fenced claims of the Mexican homesteaders, where it ended as if blocked; but his real line on the mesa remained unstaked.

To the low ridge, or spur of ground, projecting from the mountain's base at a point half a mile south of his right of way through the fields, where the canal began its sweep out upon the plain, he gave considerable time. The fall of this at first was sharp, and concrete drops would have to be constructed at intervals for a distance of a mile or so in order to lower the water. When this section was left behind, he advanced rapidly along the line, for the surface of the gentle crescent swell was smooth, its grade fairly regular, and its contour fixed by nature. Essential points he marked by stones, with merely their surfaces exposed, so that if noticed they would be considered scattered pieces of rock from the hills. At the proper time they would constitute guides for later staking.

Evenings Bryant spent in developing his notes and in making tracings of the canal sections covered. During the day hours, when he knew watchful eyes were on him, he made a topographical survey of his ranch; work that he could carry on openly. The five thousand acres comprising the tract had a general direction of east and west, being about four miles long and two miles wide, which for the most part lay equally on each side of Perro Creek. By using the water of this stream during the flood season, a period of some weeks in spring and early summer, Bryant would be able very considerably to augment the supply from the Pinas. It was necessary to join the two sources in a unified system of laterals that would efficiently serve the tract; and therefore the whole enterprise required study, innumerable measurements, calculations of dirt moving, of water distribution, of dam, weir, and gate construction, of soil analysis—a coördination of the thousand and one matters concerned in an irrigation project that are preliminary to breaking ground. So early and late he toiled, and with him Dave Morris.

The boy indeed did enough for a man. And Bryant would sometimes arise from his drawing board where he worked after supper until midnight, to go and affectionately gaze at Dave sleeping the sleep of exhaustion.

One afternoon, when the pair were at work near the southern boundary of the ranch, Ruth Gardner came through the sagebrush to the spot, a mile from Sarita Creek.

"I could see you, just black specks, from our cabins; and since you don't visit us, I made up my mind to visit you," she announced. "I've noticed you down here for two days past. Days and days have gone by without you coming to pay another call."

"Well, we've been sticking pretty steadily at our job," Bryant replied. "Won't you use this bag of

stakes for a seat? It will keep you off the ground."

Ruth accepted the proffered resting place and loosened the thongs of her hat, inspected her face in a tiny mirror produced from somewhere, rubbed her nose with a handkerchief, and then gave her attention to her companions.

"Our garden has grown splendidly since you fixed the ditch," she said. "Thanks to you. How is yours?"

"It has expired."

"Then you shall have things out of ours—if you'll come get them. See, I'm using that to decoy you. There are beans, peas, lettuce, radishes, and new potatoes, not very large yet, of course. I know just what you're doing: working hard, eating only canned stuff, skimping your food, and ruining your digestion."

Bryant laughed. Her tone had expressed indignation, while her face was directly accusatory.

"We seem to have fair health, don't we, Dave?" he remarked.

"You look positively thin," said she. "And as for this poor starved shadow that you call Dave! Well, I won't say my thoughts. For a penny I'd invite myself to dinner at your house just to see what you do have."

At this possibility both the engineer and his young assistant displayed signs of consternation. Under pressure of work housekeeping had been an unimportant trifle frequently postponed; last meal's dishes were washed while the next meal was preparing; clothes were left where they were carelessly flung; and surveying tools, maps, and papers littered the rooms. No, it was not a dwelling in which to entertain a feminine guest.

"Maybe I had better go there and clear up things some," Dave stated, uneasily. And without awaiting a reply from Bryant, he set off through the sagebrush for the house.

Ruth began to laugh, resting her cheeks in her hands.

"That poor solemn boy, he took me seriously!" she exclaimed. "I shouldn't come alone, of course; it wouldn't be proper—and Imo would be horrified. Well, you may as well sit down and talk to me, Mr. Bryant, for you can't work alone, and I've come to stay awhile. Imogene told me what a nice talk she had with you the afternoon I went to the ruins, and I hoped you'd come soon again, but you never did."

"Perhaps I haven't been exactly neighbourly."

He lowered himself to the ground and sat cross-legged, considering her.

"I thought that possibly I had offended you in going off so abruptly with Charlie Menocal," she said, with eyes fastened on his. "You and he aren't very good friends. I know——"

"We're not friends at all; we're enemies."

"That need not keep you away from us. He has been very civil and kind, but neither Imogene nor I have any particular fancy for the man. Besides, I think his chief interest in life centres around a girl living on Diamond Creek, named Louise Graham; he hinted that they were as good as engaged. Very likely we shall see little more of him. So if your dislike at meeting him is the reason for your staying away, you haven't a good reason at all. Don't you think Imo and I ever tire of listening to each other? Any two girls would, living alone by themselves. After your promise at the ford we were delighted—and how many calls have we had from you? Just one. With me away, too!"

"To-morrow will be Sunday; I'll stop work at noon and come," he declared.

She pointed a forefinger at him and wiggled her thumb, in imitation of a pistol.

"Hold up your right hand and swear it," she commanded, "or I'll shoot." She continued to menace Bryant while he obeyed. "There, now you're safe. And bring that hungry boy and we'll feed you both; this is a dinner invitation, understand. Now, tell me about everything."

"Everything?"

"All you're doing with that three-legged telescope and these stakes."

She smoothed her dress and manifested an expectant interest. The impression Bryant had gained at the first accidental meeting at Perro Creek, of her good looks, of her vitality and irrepressible spirits, was heightened. As he recollected his feeling of pique at her visit with Charlie Menocal to the ruined pueblo, he realized that he had indulged in a bit of senseless, unwarranted umbrage; and now had, in consequence, a quick desire to make amends. It was as if he must reëstablish himself in her good opinion and his own.

Their talk ran on from topic to topic. The gaiety of her comments pleased him; the youthfulness of her was irresistible; and he found himself observing the changing curves of her throat and cheek as she turned her head a little aside or raised her chin; found himself watching for certain unconscious attitudes; awaiting the lift of her eyes to his, harkening for particular tones of her voice. And Bryant, who, though he knew it not, was also athirst for companionship, more and more yielded to her subtle feminine attraction. "She's even prettier than I supposed," he thought. Her lips, her nose, her eyes of deep gray with their wonderfully long lashes—each had a particular charm of its own. He admired the grace of her figure. He felt an odd surprise at her apparent soft and pliant strength, as at a discovery. His mind thrilled with delight at her laughter.

"Look where the sun is!" she exclaimed, all at once. "Straight over our heads—noon. Your David will be wondering where you are, while Imogene will imagine I'm lost. Let me pick a flower to stick in the ribbon of your hat and then I'll go."

"Your fingers will suffer; I'll get some," Lee said, quickly. From a spreading bed of prickly-pear he plucked a dozen of the cactus blossoms, ranging in colour from a delicate lemon to a deep orange. He turned to her.

"First I'll decorate you," he said. "Please assume an angelic expression and gaze straight at the camera."

She tilted her chin upward and thrust her arms downward with all five fingers of each hand stretched apart. But immediately she began to laugh. Lee gave her a reproving tap on the uplifted chin and then fastened the flowers in her hat-band. A thrill like fire ran through his body at the proximity of that soft, round chin, those red lips, her eyes gleaming with merriment.

"Now, beauty!" he said, stepping back.

The yellow blossoms made a garland about her hat.

"Do you like them thus?" she asked, delighted.

"Immensely."

"Then they shall stay there. And Imo will die of envy when I tell her they're yours."

"Nobody ever died of that."

"Perhaps not. But she will suffer extremely. You didn't even put bean plants in her hat."

Lee was highly amused at this raillery. He began to walk forward by her side as she moved away from the spot, now addressing her, now listening to her words, in a desire to stretch the last minute to the uttermost. Her head came just even with his shoulder, so that she had to raise her face to gaze at him when he spoke, and in the act there was something simple, winning, blithe, as likewise in the swing of her lissom figure beside his own there was an inimitable jauntiness and cheer. He divined her eager, ardent spirit; and the closeness of her, this comradeship, set his blood humming.

Abruptly he halted, laying a finger on her arm.

"I mustn't go the whole way, you know," he said, "though I should like to. For, by heavens, you've opened my eyes! Didn't realize how satiated with myself I'd become. But I'll make up for that now, Miss Ruth, and it won't be very long before you and your friend will be planning how to rid yourselves of me."

"Just try us and see," she exclaimed.

"Well, I shall. Till to-morrow, then."

"Till to-morrow, yes." She moved forward some paces and wheeled about, pointing her forefinger at his head and working her thumb. "Beware—and don't forget!" Then after another advance and face about she concluded by blowing him a kiss off the palm of her hand, with which performance she did actually start for home, weaving her way through the sagebrush and going farther and farther off.

"What a pretty little witch she is!" thought Lee; and he, too, made his way from the spot.

Dave's hot, harassed face greeted him at the door.

"Where is she? Didn't she come?" he cried, peering about everywhere. "Well, thank goodness for that! But if that isn't the way with a girl—and after I'd swept up and made the beds and scraped all the skillets, too!"

CHAPTER IX

ToC

That Sunday afternoon at Sarita Creek! The dinner, so savoury, so delectable; the two girls, arrayed in cool white lawn, rosy-cheeked, beaming; the gay talk and banter and laughter; the blissful hours together on the grass beneath the trees, with the wide mesa diffusing an immense languor, with the mountains bestowing a vast peace, with the brook at their feet murmuring an accompaniment to their words—hours to treasure, hours of pure gold: Little wonder that Dave, lying full length and gazing upward through the boughs at the blue vault, allowed his eyelids to sink and at last to close. Little wonder the girls' faces grew dreamy and their voices gentle. And none, none at all, that Lee succumbed to the spell.

He was still under the enchantment when toward sunset Ruth suggested they go up the cañon. But Imogene, arousing herself, declared that she had letters to write; and Dave, still fast asleep,

was already on roamings of his own. Ruth and Lee therefore went alone up the path through the trees and underbrush, until they emerged in the cool, dusky gorge formed by the contracting of the rocky walls. The brook rippled by over stones and moss. A few insects hovered over the stream with their tiny bodies shining like bronze. From somewhere came a sweet, honeyed smell of flowers.

"Imo writes letters regularly," Ruth explained concerning her friend, "to an instructor in a university in the East. I don't think they're exactly affianced, but expect to be. Waiting, apparently. Waiting until he's a professor—and until her health is better, too, I imagine. An agreement to let things rest as they are for the present, one might say. Imogene talks very little about it, and of course I ask no questions."

She sat down on a fallen tree, patting its trunk to signify a place for him at her side. Pointing at crevises in the cañon wall, she began to tell him the names she and Imogene had given them—Bandit's Stair, Devil's Crack, Bear's Hole, and to enumerate those assigned the jutting points and knobs along the rim that by a stretch of the imagination bore a resemblance to animals or human heads.

As she talked, with her gray eyes at times turning to his to learn if he was interested, he felt anew the charm of her youthfulness, of her vivid personality. It dwelt in her small, firm hands pointing now here, now there, in her slender, rounded form faced toward him, in her red lips, her soft smooth cheek, her brow, in her glances and her animated words. He noted again, as a quality altogether delicious, the air of unconscious friendliness that he had perceived at their very first encounter. It quite offset the slight touch of obstinacy in her chin—but, in truth, did the latter require an offset? He had earlier thought that with such a trait one could not foretell where its possessor might go, or what do, or what exact, under stress of feeling. He smiled at that now. How ridiculous the notion! Why shouldn't a girl have a bit of determination in her make-up? Well, she should. It gave force to her character. It made her more individual, more attractive. It coloured a nature so essentially feminine as Ruth Gardner's with elusive and delightful possibilities.

"See, up yonder at the top!" she exclaimed. "That piece of rock like a man's head and shoulders I named Lee Bryant, after you."

"Do I look as block-headed as that?"

"No. It was not because of any resemblance, but because you kept your back so long toward us. Now, however, since you've repented and ceased to neglect us, I shall call it after someone else. Perhaps after the stage-driver who takes our letters down to Kennard; he sits hunched up like that. I'll seek a much nicer rock to represent you."

"That's wholly unnecessary, for I intend to keep before your eyes in person."

"Which will be the nicest of all," said she, smiling.

He continued to gaze at her, to listen to her voice, with a pleasure he made no effort to conceal. And she, on her part, seemed to surrender herself to the enjoyment of the moment; her eyes remaining longer on his, her tones softening to a slow, tender utterance almost carrying a caress, her face keeping its languorous smile; as if the honey-sweet fragrance from the unseen flowers had invaded her spirit.

A pause came in their talk. They sat unmoving, without stir of hand or head, quiescent. Then Lee all at once experienced a feeling of profound compassion for Ruth as he regarded her, a poignant stab in his breast like pain. Sitting there without movement, with her hands idle upon her lap, with her face a little lifted and her eyes wistfully bent on the great wall opposite, she seemed so young and small to be dwelling at such a place, so helpless, so solitary, that her presence appeared a cruel irony of fate. Her homesteading was a desperate clutch at security; and her situation was utterly different from that of her friend, Imogene Martin, who viewed the matter as in the nature of a health-seeking holiday, and who was sustained by the knowledge that she had wealthy relations at Kennard to whom she could return. Far different, indeed. At the thought of the homesickness that at times Ruth must know, of the lonesomeness of mountain and mesa from which she must suffer, of the deprivations, the hard bareness of the life, the moments of despair, he had a sensation of the bitter unfairness of things and a desire to snatch her safe away from the harsh pass in which she stood. It would be only right, it would be only just.

When presently she looked about and found his eyes rapt on her face, a quick blush spread over her throat and cheeks.

"I think—think we should go home now," she said, with a catch of her breath.

"Yes," said he, rising.

He leaped the log on which they had been sitting and then put up a hand to help her mount. Holding his fingers she raised herself upon the tree trunk. But suddenly the bark gave way; she slipped, lost her balance, and pitched forward. Lee caught her in his arms.

For an instant she rested there in his clasp, her surprised eyes gazing into his. A quiver passed over her form. Her lips were parted, but she had ceased to breathe. Likewise in Bryant's breast the breath had stopped. A fierce passion swept him to hold her always thus, warm and close and secure. His arms trembled at the thought; at which her eyelashes began to flutter and her breath to come once more, as hurried as the beat of her heart. And then, yielding utterly to the swirl of mad impulse, he kissed her—once, twice, and twice again.

Afterward he set her on her feet.

"I guess that ends our friendship," he said, with a wavering smile. "Lost my head altogether. Couldn't help it. I looked at you and—and it just happened. All my will and sense vanished in an instant. Bewitched!"

The colour was still in her face, and her air was uncertain, disturbed. But at his words, so palpably sincere and self condemnatory, she began to smile.

"Perhaps—if we just forget——"

The smouldering fire in his eyes flared suddenly.

"Forget? I'll never forget that minute, those kisses," he exclaimed. "Hanged if I want to, or will!"

"If, then, we don't repeat them, and are more circumspect, why, I'll overlook it," she said, a little confusedly. "I know you meant no discourtesy." He gave a savage shake of his head. "And Imogene and I both prize your friendship."

"Thank you, Ruth. You take an awful load off my heart."

She glanced up at him, now once more composed. Her eyes gleamed with a veiled impishness.

"No girl ever died from being kissed. But what a splendid lover you would make!" Away she darted a few steps, to whirl and point and waggle a finger at the dumfounded youth. "Are you coming? Because I don't consider this a wise place to be with a flighty, irresponsible man, first name Lee. Besides, it's beginning to grow dark in here."

Bryant joined her. The glow was still in his eyes, but in all other respects he was his usual self, calm, collected. Together they went down the cool, dim cañon, with its honey scent of flowers drifting with them; and though they talked lightly of things of no importance, there was a little smile on the lips of each and sometimes their eyes met, as if sharing a new, sweet intimacy.

Thereafter, frequent as were Lee's calls at Sarita Creek of evenings, he seldom had Ruth to himself and on more than one occasion had to share her company with Charlie Menocal, much to his impatience. When Imogene sometimes succeeded in detaining the fellow at her side, Bryant silently gave her unutterable thanks. And Ruth seemed day by day more receptive to his passion.

"I think of only two things, my canal and you," he declared to her one night.

"When you put me first and the canal second, why, who knows what I may think then?" she said, tantalizingly. "But to esteem an irrigation ditch before me, the idea! What if you had to choose between us?" And she continued thus to tease him, fanning the fires hotter in his breast.

By the end of August Bryant had completed the survey of the canal line down to a point where it touched the northern boundary of the ranch, tapping the latter's system of distributing ditches. Pinas River, Perro Creek, and the tract to be watered were thus united. Though later, doubtless, it would be necessary to make minor corrections, as always, the surveying was finished. One tracing showed the entire irrigation scheme from the dam on the Pinas to the tips of the laterals branching out in a gridiron over the land. There were other tracings, too, on a larger scale and of successive sections, ready to be taken to Kennard in order to make blueprints.

"Town for us to-morrow, Dave," Lee exclaimed one day, as he rolled and tied his maps in a waterproof canvas. "We're due for a rest; our job is done for the present. We'll leave the instruments and note-books with the girls at Sarita Creek, who've agreed to keep them until we return. The Mexicans are still hanging around."

Toward the middle of the afternoon they appeared at the cabins, where they disengaged Dick from his burden of freight and turned him out to graze. Imogene was nursing an obstinate headache in her darkened bedroom, and Dave immediately settled himself under a tree with a novel of the girls'. So Ruth and Lee were left to themselves.

"I'm going up the creek to gather raspberries, and you came just in time to carry the basket," said she. "I discovered a large thicket of them half way up the cañon; the more you pick, the more you'll have for supper to-night. And if you don't bring Imo and me a box of chocolates, and a big box, when you come back from wherever you're going to-morrow, you need never show your lean brown face again at our doors! I'm dying for some. Oh, Lee, I really am. They help so when one's lonely."

The pathetic tone in which she uttered the final words sent Bryant off in a fit of laughter.

"You may count on them," he said, at length.

"Your heart's of stone to laugh like that. Bonbons *do* help when one is low-spirited."

Nevertheless, her spirits were high enough on this afternoon. All the while that they were gathering raspberries she kept up a lively chatter, and when Lee suggested, now that the basket was full, leaving it at the spot and making an excursion to the head of the gorge, she readily assented. The sun was still far from setting; the air between the rocky walls was pleasant; and the cañon held forth a fresh enticement. They walked for an hour, and though they failed to gain the end of the long mountain crevice they ascended to where the springs that fed the brook had their source, and where the rivulet trickled over ledges and among boulders, finding themselves in the heavy timber that forested the upper mountains. There they sat on a rock, Ruth holding the wild flowers she had plucked on the way, and talked.

"Does your going now have to do with your project?" she questioned.

"Yes; I've finished the preliminary work."

"But Charlie Menocal said you were making no progress, that you were blocked."

"What Charlie doesn't know would fill lots of space," Lee said. "In spite of the Menocals' opposition and tricks, I've established my survey—but don't breathe it yet! And now I'm ready for the financing of the scheme. When that's done, I'll begin actual work."

Ruth considered him with shining eyes.

"I'm glad you succeeded; I knew you would succeed," she exclaimed. "You've worked so hard. And I hope that it makes you famous and wealthy."

"So do I," he laughed. "I need the money."

She nodded.

"One needs money to be happy in this world."

"Oh, I don't know about that," he responded, thoughtfully. "I've probably been as happy while hammering out this survey as I'll ever be, that is, happy in my work. Of course, money means comforts and luxuries. But I doubt if it really ever brings contentment."

The obstinate touch grew in her chin.

"If I had plenty of money I'd have the contentment, or I'd soon find it," she declared. "Pretty clothes, and fine furniture, and automobiles, and servants, and parties, and so on, are things—at least with women—that go a long way toward satisfaction. I sometimes don't blame girls who marry rich old men; they can put up with them for the pleasures their money will procure."

"Ruth, Ruth, don't utter such nonsense! At any rate, you've too much common sense ever to waste yourself on a doddering money bags."

"I'll never have the chance," said she. "But if I had, I'd think it over carefully. A young man with money I could be especially nice to, and I might even set out to catch him. You see, I'm quite frank and open about it."

"Nonsense," he repeated. "You'd marry no one just for his money."

"That depends whether or not he caught me at a moment when I was feeling sick of everything and reckless. Look at my hands, all calloused from work. If I have to work, I shall do it for myself; not marry to work."

Bryant lifted her hands and regarded them.

"They please me immensely as they are; they're lovely hands," he asserted.

"Then your vision is poor."

"It's clear enough when I look at you, Ruth. And when you talk as you have, I become impatient because I know you don't mean it. But nonetheless, you deserve the best that any man can give, and you ought to have all the comforts and pretty things any woman has, for you're too sweet and good for a bare, commonplace life." He pressed gently the fingers he yet retained. "I told you once that you had bewitched me. It was true; I am bewitched, have been ever since I touched your dear lips. And I love you. It hurts my heart to think of you at this homesteading business—"

"What else was there for me?" she asked. "I've had no business training, nothing but two years in a college, no knowledge of anything that a girl needs to hold a position. And I'm not even a good homesteader." Her tone rang with a trace of bitterness.

"You ought not to have to do it—and you shall not, Ruth, if I have my way. I want to save you from it, and make life pleasant and happy for you. The money I have now is little, but I'm going ahead; I'm going ahead, and nothing shall stop me, I tell you. Soon I shall have ample means. Within a year or two. Already I've told you I love you, though this you must have known, for I've made no effort to conceal my love. To me you're the dearest, sweetest girl in the world; and all I ask is the chance to strive and toil for you, and make a home for you, and relieve you of anxiety and care, and have you for a joyous companion and mate."

Ruth closed her hands on his, while her eyes grew wet.

"You mean it, Lee?"

"Ah, I do, I do! I love you; I hold you dearer than anything in the world."

The smile she gave was tender, trustful.

"I believe you," she said.

She yielded to his arms. Her head fell back upon his shoulder and her look lifted to his blissfully. When he kissed her a thrill of passionate desire answered, as when on that fragrant evening in the cañon he first had fiercely pressed her lips. This was happiness—happiness. If it could but last forever!

"And my love is yours, too, Lee," she exclaimed, so earnestly that he felt his heart quiver. "I want to be happy; I want to be loved; I don't want to live a life of just dreary commonplaceness, alone, uncared for, with no outlook, with no prospect of joys. I want the most there is in happiness—every girl wants that; and this monotonous existence has been robbing me, stifling me, until sometimes I've been wild enough to leap off a high rock. But now!"

Bryant's arms went closer about her.

"It shall be different now," he murmured.

"Yes, yes; it must, it shall. There's no sense in people not being happy when the world was made for that very purpose."

"Whenever you say, we'll be married," Lee stated.

Ruth was silent for a time, considering this. It, indeed, left her a little startled.

"But it mustn't be too soon," she replied, at last. "We had best go on as we are while your project is being started, for I wouldn't be so selfish as to make a command on your time at a critical moment, Lee dear. And I must plan clothes and things. Knowing that happiness is ahead of us, oh, homesteading then will be only a lark! I'll never need follow it up, but just abandon it when we're ready. Kiss me again, Lee, and then we must start back."

They retraced their steps down the cañon, obtaining the basket of berries on the way. Once, as they neared the cabins, Ruth paused, gazing at her lover.

"I had actually come to hate these claims," she said. "I felt chained to the spot, as if something would keep me in the miserable place for the rest of my life. Had I known how lonely I should be here, I never would have come."

"But that's over now, Ruth. A little while longer, that's all."

She gazed at him with an odd, intent, anxious expression upon her countenance.

"You'll not let your irrigation project keep you here always?" she asked. "Or live in other places like it? These mountains and this desolate mesa get on my nerves. If I thought you were going to stay away from other people, foregoing all the pleasures of cities and the like, I think I should lose my courage and not be able to love you enough to stand it. I want you most of all, but shall want other things, too."

He smiled indulgently.

"A few years perhaps," he replied. "Till I'm solid on my feet—till I get going well—we're both young—and then——" He dismissed the matter with a wave of the hand.

But that evening, when Lee and Dave had gone, when Imogene was asleep, when the soft darkness was thickening over the mesa, Ruth walked forth to the edge of the sagebrush.

"I wonder," she murmured, leaving her thought unfinished.

The hush of the mountains, the silence of the plain, the vastness, the emptiness, the seeming purposelessness of it all, irritated and oppressed her spirit. And she so yearned to be where the world was alive and throbbing!

"I wonder if I really love him enough, or if I made a little fool of myself this afternoon?" she muttered to herself. "I wonder!"

CHAPTER X

ToC

Charlie Menocal's object in calling upon the young ladies at Sarita Creek was merely diversion. He was fond of girls, especially lively ones, and knew a good many here and there within reach of his motor car, including a number of pretty Mexican maidens of humble parentage. But his serious attentions centred about Louise Graham of whom in secret he was very jealous. Whenever he could find an excuse, and frequently when not, he went to the Graham ranch on Diamond Creek, five miles south of the girls' claims, where his figure was as familiar (and of about as much interest) as the magpies in the pasture. He fully meant to marry Louise, whose beauty and gracious manner even to the smallest bare-legged Mexican boy on the ranch captivated him and stirred in his breast a maddening desire for possession, so that he might cut off the rest of the world from her sweetness, so that it might alone feed his passion. Yes, he meant to have Louise.

When he was with her his black eyes would shine and a ruddy tinge appear in his dusky cheeks that were as soft and smooth as a Mexican girl's, and he would restlessly finger a point of his little, silky, black moustache and feel unutterable agitations proceeding in his heart. Louise Graham did not allow him to declare his adoration, which he would have done every moment they were together; when he tried, she walked away. But Charlie counted on his good looks and his father's wealth to win her in the end. One fear alone lurked in his heart, that some young American might come along who would win her interest; and earlier in the summer he had a decided uneasiness lest Bryant prove to be the man. The scoundrelly engineer, however, had fallen head over heels in love with Ruth Gardner, so that Charlie's mind was relieved on that point. To his knowledge, Louise and Bryant had never met—which was as it should be.

Charlie, having stopped about ten o'clock in the morning at the Graham ranch for a chat with Louise while on his way to Kennard, was considerably surprised and exceedingly nettled at

beholding the engineer, with Dave behind him on the horse, presently riding up the lane between the rows of cottonwoods. Young Menocal had persuaded Louise to leave her household duties for the moment to sit on the veranda and talk with him. But now had come this impudent upstart! Charlie's warning of someone at hand was when Louise ceased to speak and gazed intently along the lane. His annoyance at the interruption changed to a quick jealousy as his companion rose, descended the steps, bade the engineer welcome, and extended her hand in greeting.

Bryant explained that he was dropping Dave here to take the stage for Kennard when it came along after dinner. He himself was riding on.

"He'll eat dinner with us, of course, and I'll put him aboard the stage myself," she exclaimed, with a pat on the shoulder of the boy who had now dismounted. "Won't you stop for a moment, Mr. Bryant? I'll give you a glass of fresh buttermilk to speed you on your way; a stirrup cup, we'll call it. The woman has just finished churning."

Lee declared that he would drink a glass with very great pleasure. He was thirsty, he said, and in addition was fond of buttermilk.

Menocal listened and watched him dismount and ground his teeth. Louise knew the thief, after all. Where the devil had they become acquainted? It was but one more instance of the engineer's pushing in where he wasn't wanted. And she had not invited him, Charlie, to partake of buttermilk, though, to be sure, she knew he did not like it. He felt slighted.

When Bryant and Louise ascended the veranda, Dave loitering below, the engineer said nonchalantly, "Hello, Charlie, how are tricks? Anything new up your sleeve?"—in a way that set the other's blood boiling; and when he carelessly added, "What about that story the stage-driver's telling of you and a señorita going into a ditch with your car at Rosita the other night?" he was quite ready to murder both Bryant and the stage-driver.

So upset was Charlie that he was unable to share in the conversation. He curtly refused a glass when Louise brought a pitcher of buttermilk, then changed his mind, and ended by choking over the wretched stuff. The situation was intolerable; his pride was smarting; the others talked on with unperturbed countenances, ignoring his silence; and his self-respect required some action in the face of the affront. He abruptly stood up and announced that he was departing.

In Louise's manner at this news there was no repining that he could observe. She did not protest. Her words were impersonally pleasant as ever, but vague; and he perceived that she only half heeded his going; and that her eyes brightened when once more she turned to her visitor. This was the final stab. With hatred in his heart and a wicked glitter in his eyes, Charlie Menocal went down the steps to his automobile, feeling the need of a victim, preferably the engineer. Bryant had insulted him at the ford; he was attempting to rob him and his father; he had insolently threatened the elder Menocal; he stopped at nothing; and now he was intruding here and deceiving Louise with his arrogant pretentions. He came on Dave, standing beside the car and examining the latch of a door.

"Keep your hands off that!" he snapped. At the same time he gave the boy a cuff that sent him sprawling. "That will teach you!"

In two bounds Lee Bryant was at the spot. He caught the still-extended hand in an iron grip.

"You miserable coward! Striking a boy!" he said, harshly. "Feeling that you must vent your spite on someone, you pick on this unoffending lad. If you ever raise so much as a finger against him again——"

"Let him keep away from my machine! And drop my wrist!" Charlie Menocal snarled.

"And you leave him alone hereafter, in any case," Lee warned, shoving the speaker away in disgust. Then he helped Dave to rise.

Charlie straightened his disarranged tie and coat with trembling fingers. He could scarcely retain his rage; his body shook all over; his foot slipped twice when he sought to mount into his car. Leaning forward from his seat, he shook a finger in Bryant's face, exclaiming, "You'll get what's coming to you! Like your damned dog!" His face was entirely viperish. His finger came within an inch of the engineer's nose. His words carried a furious hiss.

Then he whirled his car about and went tearing down the lane with exhaust wide open and roaring.

When Bryant, leading Dave, rejoined Louise Graham, a flush of embarrassment dyed his face. She had sprung up at Menocal's blow knocking the boy over and remained standing, an indignant observer of the scene. When Menocal had departed, the engineer recalled suddenly what Ruth had said concerning Charlie and Louise Graham being practically engaged; and as he now saw her rigid figure and displeased countenance, he imagined he had lost her friendship. Still, he could not have acted otherwise.

"I'm very sorry for this occurrence, Miss Graham," he said, contritely. "Especially as I understand Charlie Menocal is very high in your esteem."

"Who dares say that!"

"Well, Charlie himself is the authority, I believe," Lee responded, with a slight smile.

Her eyes flashed at that.

"Well, it's not the case; and if it had been, this exhibition of bad manners and bad nature on his part would have changed it. Father and I consider him—well, a nuisance. There, I'm giving you a

confidence. We've tolerated him because Mr. Menocal senior is a gentleman, and a friend. Now I hope you'll not think me too talkative, but an explanation was necessary; and as far as Charlie Menocal is concerned, I'd be pleased if I never saw his face again. To knock your young friend over so heartlessly! You treated him with altogether too much leniency, Mr. Bryant."

"I never do my fighting in the presence of ladies," Lee remarked, with a grin. "In fact, I try to confine my combats to those of wits."

She nodded.

"Of course," said she; and continued, "this is the second time he has acted disgracefully to you when I've been by. The first occasion was at Perro Creek ford. I could have sunk into the earth for shame of him when he knew no better than to fling you money after you had filled his radiator; it was pure insolence, to begin with, to ask you to do it when he should have attended to the matter himself. I admired your conduct and self-control under the circumstances, Mr. Bryant." And addressing Dave, she asked, "Will you drink another glass of buttermilk if I pour it?"

Dave could and did, an example Lee followed. The subject of Menocal was dismissed, and the man and the girl fell into a conversation of general matters. She assured the engineer, when he inquired, that he was not detaining her from household affairs; and urged him, on learning of his prospective absence, to leave Dick at Diamond Creek and he himself to proceed to Kennard by stage. She owed Dick a return for the favour of carrying her home that day her own horse went lame; he could run in the pasture with the other horses, where Bryant would know he was safe. The plan included Bryant's remaining for dinner, naturally.

"Have I your permission, Dave?" Lee asked. "Or do you refuse to share this pleasure with me?"

Dave looked at Louise and blushed furiously.

"I guess you've made your mind up," he said, to Bryant.

"I guess I have," Lee admitted.

Toward noon Mr. Graham joined them and laughingly stated that he was glad to make the acquaintance of the man who was causing such a furor among the Mexicans along the Pinas. He asked a number of questions and listened with interest to the engineer's brief exposition of the plan to unite the water rights of the Pinas River and of Perro Creek in a common system, though Bryant disclosed nothing of his survey on the mesa. Of the opposition Lee had met or might yet encounter the rancher was aware, for he remarked, "You have a fight on your hands." But that was his only comment.

After dinner they all continued to talk while the men were smoking cigars. Graham suggested that if Bryant should need an attorney it would be well to employ one from Kennard, as those in Bartolo were nearly all Mexicans. The engineer jotted down the name of one the rancher recommended, saying that he had his injunction suits to meet in the September term of court.

"Winship, the sheriff, appears to be one man in Bartolo who's all right," Lee stated.

"Yes, he's a good man," Graham replied. "Can't be influenced or bought; and is perfectly square and impartial in the execution of the duties of his office. He has served twenty years, with exception of one term when he and Menocal had a disagreement. Menocal controls the votes in this county, you know; that's general knowledge. But things became so lax under the Mexican sheriff who displaced him that he was put back in office. Menocal ordered it; he has much property and believes in law and order; and there's little or no stealing with Winship in the sheriff's saddle. I've heard that he first required the banker to support him unconditionally before resuming the place."

"I can believe that after a look at Winship," Lee said, smiling.

Mr. Graham presently went away to a field where his men were cutting and stacking alfalfa, after thanking Bryant for rendering assistance to his daughter on the road and inviting him to call again. Louise then showed him her flower garden, ablaze with poppies, nasturtiums, sweet peas, and other blossoms he could not name; and the orchard where apples and pears and plums weighed the branches. She was remarkably beautiful, he thought; and was quite sure the roses in the garden had no petals pinker or softer than her cheeks, and was sure the water rippling in the little, grassy orchard canals was no clearer than her brown eyes, or the sky more serene than her brow. She was not in the least proud or vain or haughty, as he imagined when he first beheld her at the ford. He had had doubts of that after her kindly treatment of his dying dog Mike. And now to-day he knew that such an opinion did her an injustice, was absurd.

Louise, too, was thinking as they strolled about. Which of the two girls on Sarita Creek did he love? For Charlie Menocal had said that he was infatuated with one. Charlie Menocal! Her cheeks grew warm. What he had boasted in regard to herself, and doubtless Mr. Bryant had softened the truth, filled her with anger. She would treat the insufferable wretch differently hereafter. And very likely his gossip of the engineer's feelings for one of the homesteaders was likewise a falsehood, though there was no reason in the world why Mr. Bryant shouldn't love one of them if he chose. She had never met them. They were very nice girls, she imagined. She had intended to call, but something had always prevented. As for Mr. Bryant, he seemed a very estimable young man, and good company, and an engineer of ability and will.

She continued to speculate after he and Dave had departed on the stage, with a vague sense of missing them. That, she reasoned, was because Lee Bryant had "personality." And presently her thoughts followed him. Lee's mind, however, was ranging back to Sarita Creek; but Dave's was loyally with the lady of Diamond Creek ranch, as was manifest when he murmured thickly, having

fallen asleep during the warm ride:

"No more chicken, thank you—or jelly—or apple pie."

CHAPTER XI

ToC

In Kennard next morning Lee Bryant betook himself to a civil engineering firm, which he engaged to print a number of sets of blue-prints from his tracings, one set to be ready for delivery early that afternoon. Then while his suit of gray clothes, from out of his suit-case, was being pressed, he and Dave visited a florist, purchased a wreath of lilies-of-the-valley that Dave chose, and went to the cemetery to place it on the grave of the lad's mother. After that they proceeded to a clothier's, where the boy was fitted out with a new suit, a hat, shirts, underwear, and a tie. All of this caused Dave to swallow hard—but he swallowed hardest of all when Lee led him to a horse dealer's and helped him pick out a pony for trial, a gift from Bryant. He hadn't expected all this. He was too overcome to speak. "By golly, Lee, I—I——" he stammered; and stopped, and furtively wiped the moisture from his eyes. Finally they visited a savings-bank, where the engineer deposited a check to Dave's credit, his wages for a month and a half, forty-five dollars, to start an account, and the boy received a small yellow book whose one entry he thereafter studied at frequent intervals, for it was earning according to Bryant's statement four per cent a year, though Dave had not the remotest idea of how it did the earning. Then with all this business transacted they returned to the hotel, bathed, dressed in their fresh clothes, and went into luncheon.

"Luncheon, what do they call dinner that for?" Dave whispered to Lee across the table.

Along in the afternoon Bryant, having obtained a set of blue-prints and sent his young companion to a "movie" show, called upon the man that he all the while had had in view, Imogene Martin's uncle. A large, strong-bodied man, with a deeply lined, determined face, the latter swept his visitor with a quick, appraising look, invited him to take a seat, and to state his business.

"In five minutes you can tell," said Lee, "whether or not you wish to listen longer to my proposition."

"Yes."

"I now own the Perro Creek ranch, of five thousand acres. It was originally owned by Mr. Menocal, of Bartolo, but recently by a man named Stevenson, from whom I bought it."

"I know the place, Mr. Bryant. Proceed."

"It's worth possibly three dollars an acre as it stands, or a total of fifteen thousand dollars," Lee continued. "But it has an unused water right of one hundred and twenty-five second feet from the Pinas River, sufficient to water the whole tract. How much will the ranch be worth when water is actually delivered?"

"A good deal more than fifteen thousand dollars."

"Rather," said the engineer, smiling. "The appropriation was secured from the state by Mr. Menocal thirty years ago; it's never been cancelled, and is good to-day. He, however, has been using the water on ranches he owns down the river. A canal from the Pinas along the mountain sides to Perro Creek would be expensive to construct, possibly prohibitive; it appears the natural line; and I suppose this deterred him. I've located a new and practical course for a ditch on the mesa, have surveyed and mapped it in detail, calculated the cost, and compiled a statement of estimates, and can build the project for sixty thousand dollars. The tract of five thousand acres can then be sold for fifty dollars an acre, or two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Shall I stop, or do you wish to hear more?"

Now it was the banker's turn to smile. This visitor knew how to make a point.

"Go ahead," he said.

"All right. A Mexican dam across the Pinas, a mile and a half of hillside canal, some concrete drops, twelve miles of curving mesa ditch, and the ranch is reached. In addition, the flood water of Perro Creek can be utilized; I've worked this out, as well as the entire system of laterals for the land. As stated, the cost of the whole project will be about sixty thousand dollars, present price of material and labour. I'm on my way now to the capital to file application for a change in the present canal line, which, since it involves only government land, will naturally be allowed. Of course Mr. Menocal isn't taking kindly to my proposed use of this water." And Lee paused.

"What has he done? Anything yet?"

"Not much so far, except a little futile skirmishing," the engineer remarked, with twinkling eyes. "When I paid off his mortgage on the land, I advised him that I should use the water: and he

threatened to have the water right cancelled. But he backed up on that line when I promised to lodge him in jail for making false affidavits if he tried those tactics. Thought I'd head him off in that direction at the start. I got the jump on him there. Well, now, he's using indirect means to keep control of the water, sending half a dozen Mexicans to file claims at the base of the mountains where he imagines the canal will have to go. He thinks these have blocked me; and I didn't undeceive him. He knows nothing about my actual line of survey on the mesa. Of course, the loss of this water that he fancied he had hits him where it hurts, but from what I can gather Mr. Menocal isn't a man to resort to illegal methods. He's wily, that's about all. So that's the situation."

The banker regarded Bryant for a time with a noncommittal face.

"State your proposition now," said he.

"This is it," Bryant went on. "I propose to bond the ranch and water right for enough to build the project, then construct it, then market the land in farms at fifty dollars an acre. The canal system can be completed easily next year, and sales and colonization proceed immediately when done. Naturally, as a sale is made, the mortgage and notes will be put up behind the bonds to secure the latter. The purchasers will pay down some cash, say, ten dollars an acre; that makes fifty thousand cash and two hundred thousand dollars in notes against sixty thousand dollars in bonds. A visible profit of one hundred and ninety thousand. That amount will be covered by a stock issue. I shall set aside sixty thousand of it as a bonus to whoever purchases the bonds. Thirty thousand more shall go to whoever markets the bonds, as a commission. The remaining hundred thousand of stock——"

"Goes to you, I presume."

"Yes; I keep that. It's payment for the ranch and water right, for my developing the scheme and building the project. What I need is someone to sell the bonds; I'll take care of everything else. And because you, Mr. McDonnell, know the character of the land hereabouts and know water rights, the fertility of the soil when watered, and the soundness of a proper irrigation project as an investment, I've come first to you. Millions aren't involved; it's a small project; the cost is uncommonly cheap and the security therefore exceptional; you know the property personally; I, as builder, and having everything at stake, would see that the construction is right. So small an issue of bonds should be quickly placed in the East. And the commission isn't to be sneezed at."

Mr. McDonnell's features relaxed into a smile.

"I never saw an irrigation scheme yet that didn't look a money-maker on paper," he stated, "nevertheless, seventy-five per cent. of them wind up in the hands of a receiver."

"Because of faulty estimates and wasteful construction, yes. Because they're generally too big, and the interest eats them up before the land is sold. Because some start building on a shoestring. Or because of changes in the projects that are costly, or rows in the management, or insufficient water, or bad land titles—I know, I know. I've studied and analyzed their troubles. And I propose that this Perro Creek scheme of mine shall be one irrigation project that shall succeed."

"And you think you've taken all precautions?"

"Yes."

"With Mr. Menocal, even?"

"Even with Mr. Menocal, yes. Once my application for changes has been approved and I have the money to build, what can he do?"

"You seem quite sure of yourself."

"I'm sure of this irrigation project, anyway. I'm going to build it." Conviction absolutely dominated his lean brown face; and the banker looking at the speaker's chin, his firm mouth, curving nose, and gray eyes full of purpose, wondered if Menocal had met his match.

"Well, suppose you leave your maps and estimates for me to look over," he said. "When do you go to the capital?"

"This evening."

"See me again on your return. My attorney will examine your title to the land and the water right. How are the young ladies on Perro Creek getting along?"

"They have plenty of fresh air and scenery," Lee responded, relaxing from the tension under which he had been.

"It was rather a wild notion, their taking claims, but they wanted the experience. I hope my niece is benefited in respect to her health. My wife and I run up once in a while to see if they're comfortable." Then he added, "Perhaps I had best confess that Imogene had told me of what you were at up there, and of your involvement with Mr. Menocal. So this thing isn't wholly new to me."

Bryant returned to the hotel, well satisfied with the progress he had made. In the lobby of the hotel he ran across Charlie Menocal, who gave him a venomous look and passed into the bar without speaking. What the young fellow might feel or think gave Lee no concern, though he might have taken warning from that hostile regard. For it was by Charlie's instructions that a short, stout, swart Mexican went from a native saloon to the depot that evening, where he presently identified Bryant and lounged nearer the spot. Dave at length noticed him and called

Lee's attention to the fellow, whose face had a particularly sinister cast and whose eyes were fixed upon the engineer in a stony, unblinking stare. That look gave one the sensation of being gazed at by something poisonous in a clump of sagebrush. But the feeling was forgotten when the train came in on which they were departing and Bryant and Dave mounted the steps of a coach.

The Mexican, on his part, returned to the saloon, where eventually he was joined by Charlie Menocal. Charlie's face was flushed and his breath alcoholic; he was a little drunk. At a corner table they conferred, drinking whisky.

"You will know him now, the snake!" Charlie asked.

"I would know him in the dark, señor," was the reply.

They spoke in Spanish, since young Menocal's companion knew no other tongue. The latter was a newcomer to Kennard, of the name of Alvarez. He had come up from across the line, where he had been first with Carranza, and then with Zapata in his black troop, and then with Pancho Villa. He already had considerable reputation in the low Mexican quarter of the town: he had participated in many fights and raids "down there"; he was fearless; he could use a gun; he had many killings to his credit. When earlier in the day Charlie had made private inquiry of the saloon-keeper, an old friend, concerning a man of nerve that he could engage who would ask no questions, Alvarez was pointed out to him.

Presently an agreement was reached between them and Charlie produced his check-book and a fountain-pen.

"Here's a check for one hundred dollars," he said, writing. "Come to Bartolo, get you some blankets and food, and camp somewhere near. From time to time we'll meet and I'll tell you what's to be done. There's a saloon at Bartolo, if you get thirsty. Another hundred dollars will be yours when the job is finished, perhaps more. Meantime, you will act before others as if you did not know me. Here's the check."

Alvarez rose and walked to the bar.

"Is this money; a hundred dollars?" he inquired of the Mexican proprietor of the saloon.

"One hundred dollars, yes," said the latter, with an assuring smile. "Made payable to you, Alvarez. Good? Good at any bank, good here at my saloon, good as gold. Better than gold, Alvarez, because easier to carry. Do you wish the money for it?"

The Mexican ex-bandit jingled some dollars in his trousers' pockets.

"I have enough to eat and drink," said he. "If the paper is good, if you will give me gold for it, then I will wait until I return. As you say, it's not so heavy to carry."

"Bring it to me when you return. Mr. Menocal is very wealthy, very rich. He has much land and many sheep. Besides, he owns a bank full of gold and silver. The paper is good."

Alvarez was impressed. He stood in thought.

"Those sheep and that bank full of money! In Mexico we would form a company of revolutionists and help ourselves," he said.

"That isn't the custom here," was the reply.

Alvarez again stared at the check, then folded it, bit the edge with his teeth, placed it in a small leather bag suspended under his shirt by a cord about his neck, and returned to the table where Charlie Menocal waited.

"I will go up yonder in a few days, señor," he stated. "There are girls there, are there not?"

One day a week later, after Bryant and Dave had returned to Kennard, and after numerous conferences with Mr. McDonnell, his attorney and an engineer called in for consultation, Lee exclaimed to his companion, "We win. McDonnell will take hold of it. Bully for him!" And he went about clearing up the odds and ends of business at a great rate.

Moreover, McDonnell believed he could dispose of the bonds within a fortnight, by the middle of September. That would enable Bryant to make good headway with the dam on the Pinas River while the water was low and before cold weather set in. The attorney would look after the incorporation of the company and the stock and bond issues. Lee could at once engage a staff of assistant engineers and arrange to let the building contract. In the matter of the canal line, he had received ample assurance from members of the Land and Water Board at Santa Fé that the changes he asked would be granted. Everything was propitious, everything exactly as he would wish.

"Out of those town duds, Dave," he exclaimed. "You can't be a sport any longer. Back to Perro Creek for us and your new spotted pony. And it's high time, too, for I saw you making eyes at that girl with yellow hair and angel blue eyes, whose mamma——"

"You never did!" Dave yelled, crimson with ire.

CHAPTER XII

ToC

October. And the last golden leaves twirling down from cottonwood and aspen and mountain maple; the lofty brown peaks fresh powdered with snow; the air dazzling, keen, heady like wine; frost a-sparkle of mornings on stone, fence-post, roof, with a rainbow coruscation of diamonds; clear, high moons; marvellous, moonlit nights.

It was the middle of the month. Three weeks previous, with the bonds sold and the injunction suits dismissed, the contractor employed had unloaded his outfit at Kennard, moved up the Pinas River, raised in a day his camp at the mouth of the cañon above Bartolo, and begun his task. This man, Pat Carrigan, had been in Bryant's mind from the first: a Pueblo contractor of Irish extraction, born in a railroad camp, trained on a dump, and now grizzled and aging but unequalled in handling men, in keeping them satisfied, in moving dirt. In his time he had turned off jobs from Maine to California, from Wisconsin to Texas. Already along the hillside a yellow gash was deepening from the dam site through the fenced fields where ran the right of way; while in the Pinas, low at this season, the traverse section of the river bed had been cleaned out and the base of the dam was building of stones and brush.

Late on a certain afternoon Ruth Gardner and Imogene Martin stood waiting by a gray runabout at the edge of the camp. A storm was sweeping up the Ventisquero Range from the south, one of the autumn storms that marked the change of seasons, enveloping, as it advanced, the gray peaks one after another in its fog and trailing over the mesa gauzy brown streamers of rain. In the west the sun still shone unobscured, but with its light failing to a chill saffron glare as the cloud expanded over the sky.

Bryant and another man, a newcomer in the last few days, an engineer from the East representing the bondholders, were walking toward the girl from the dam. As the men walked, they engaged in rather spirited argument.

"You'd better hurry, you two," Ruth called. "Don't you see that rain coming? Imo and I want to reach home, Mr. Gretzinger, without being soaked."

Bryant's companion waved an assuring hand without ceasing his rapid and forceful statement addressed to his fellow. Half a head shorter than Lee, he was of stockier build, a man somewhere near thirty-five or six years of age, with hair tinged with gray above his ears. Both in manner and speech he exhibited by turns superficial gayety, latent cynicism, and an egregious assumption. When Lee had introduced him to the young ladies at Sarita Creek, he had made himself at home in three minutes. He had the latest witticisms of restaurants and theatres, the newest stories, the most recent slang; his clothes were of the autumn's extreme mode; he was intelligent if frankly materialistic; and he interested, amused, and diverted the two girls. From his gay and airy talk they gathered that he had been married and divorced, that the West might have the scenery but New York had the bright lights; that money could buy anything from food to fame; and that "movies" were a bore. To the girls he was like a breath from the metropolis itself, that hard, throbbing, restless, glaring, convivial, avid, fascinating city in which is centred everything of wealth and misery, everything intense and abnormal, and everything to satisfy the desires. But the effect upon the girls was different. Imogene, though entertained, continued calm, unimpressed, unenvious; Ruth, however, as she listened and asked questions, the better they became acquainted, was bright-eyed and excited. "Don't you think him a remarkable man?" she had exclaimed to Imogene. "So experienced, so polished, so—well, everything." This was after his second visit, which he made without Bryant, stopping on his way from the dam camp to Kennard where he made the chief hotel his headquarters. Imogene had replied, "Oh, he's amusing company, and he can't be accused of being diffident, at least. But I wonder if he would wear well. His divorced wife's opinion would be valuable on that point, I fancy." That had caused Ruth to sniff. She said, "You heard his explanation; they didn't agree and so they just separated. That was sensible. When two people find they're not compatible, they shouldn't live together a minute. And I shouldn't be surprised if she was a cat."

Gretzinger's speech as he and Bryant advanced toward the girls and the gray runabout was quick, determined, and uncompromising. His fleshy, aggressive face, that lacked the tan of his companion's, was fixed in dogmatic lines. From time to time he switched his gauntlets against the skirt of his fashionably cut ulster with lively impatience.

"I certainly demand that these changes be made and shall recommend to the bondholders," he was saying, "that they also insist on them."

"Can't help it if you do," was Lee Bryant's reply. "I know what I'm talking about: concrete is necessary. No irrigation engineer to-day who knows his business would think of anything else. Mr. McDonnell's man approved its use, the state engineer likewise. The latter wouldn't allow the change even should I ask it."

"Pah! He'd not concern himself either way. I know how these state officers run things. Leave it to me; I'll arrange the matter."

"Not with my consent. And he'll never grant the change over my opposition."

Gretzinger gave his knee an angry slap.

"I tell you it must be different, Bryant. In addition to the bonds my men have their share of stock. They consider this stock bonus as part of their investment. It is. And they intend to see that that stock earns every dollar—every dollar, do you understand?—that's to be made out of the project. I'm here to protect their interests, and shall do it."

"Well?"

"Now, Bryant, be reasonable. It means more profit in your own pocket, too. You're no philanthropist pure and simple, I take it, and want to make money out of this thing. So agree to this change. You'll make a saving both in time and cash. Carrigan's contract doesn't include the building of these drops; you plan to do that yourself; and if you substitute wood for concrete in these drops and in the gate-frames, it would lessen the labour cost, the material cost, the freighting cost, the——"

"And in five years the wood will have rotted and then concrete will have to be put in after all," Lee interrupted. "More than that, the water will undercut wooden drops, then rip the devil out of the canal along the ridge, making the cost of rebuilding ten times what it is now and very likely causing a water shortage in the middle of an irrigating season so that the farmers' crops will be a dead loss. Fine! I suppose you didn't allow yourself to think that far."

"Why should I?" Gretzinger retorted. "It's not our business to figure on all the calamities that may occur in the next fifty years, or the next ten, or the next five. We build the canal, then it's up to the farmers to keep it in shape after we turn it over to them. If anything happens, that's their lookout and the lookout of the engineer in charge."

The two had come to a halt just out of earshot of the runabout. Bryant could discover on the speaker's face no other expression than a fixed intent to maintain his view.

"Leaving out the injustice of such a course——"

"Injustice, nothing!" the New Yorker derided. "This is cold business. The project must be built as cheaply as possible in order to give the investors the largest return. My father is one of them, and when he puts money into a thing he wants all out of it that's coming to him. So do his associates."

"Let me finish what I started to say," Lee remarked. "Aside from what purchasers of land under this canal scheme have the right to expect, and what they would suffer from a disaster, it hits our own pockets in the end. Poor construction always turns out to be expensive construction. Aside from the initial cash payments from buyers, all we have from them will be notes—mortgage notes that can be paid only by crops from the land. The water insures these crops. Let the canal system go smash, and where are these notes? Nowhere. I don't propose to lose fifty or sixty thousand dollars for a short-sighted gain of ten."

Gretzinger laughed, then tapped the other's shoulder with a forefinger.

"Do you imagine for a minute we'll keep the paper?" he inquired. "Well, I should say not! We'll discount it ten, and if necessary twenty, per cent. to make a quick clean-up and be out. A mortgage company in the East will attend to that part of the business. These mortgages run for ten years; you certainly don't think we'll sit around that long waiting for our money and profits. The discount will make the paper attractive to small investors, among whom it will be peddled and who want long-time securities. And you'll profit from that along with the rest of us; we couldn't leave you out if we wished."

"No, you can't leave me out of your calculations," said Bryant, grimly.

"You see now, I hope, why it's to your interest as well as ours to make the change I suggest," Gretzinger continued. "It will equal the amount of the discount. In a year or so we'll all be out from under with bonds and stock liquidated dollar for dollar. In other words, with our profits in cash in the bank instead of in notes."

"And somebody else holding the sack, eh?" Bryant's aquiline nose came down a little as he asked the question. "No, Gretzinger, you haven't persuaded me, and you never will by that argument. A pretty rotten scheme, that of yours. I shall go right ahead and use concrete."

"Then you don't intend to consider bondholders as having a voice in matters?"

"No."

"Well, they're stockholders as well."

"Minority stockholders, that's all," Lee stated, coolly. "You've said this is a matter of cold business. Very well; I'm the majority stockholder and have the control. I consider it cold business to build the drops of concrete as planned. I consider it cold business and good business to provide the farmers with a safe system. And I shall do that."

Again came Ruth's call, urging Gretzinger to hurry. He answered and spoke a last word to Bryant, with a suddenly altered mien.

"You're an obstinate devil, Lee," he exclaimed, cheerfully. "I'll have to think up some new arguments to get you over, I find. Now I must run along, or the ladies will be up in arms—and not my arms, either."

Bryant helped him to button the curtains on the hood of the car, found an instant when he

could press Ruth's hand unobserved and murmur a word in her ear, and stated that if the rain did not last he would run down (he had picked up a second-hand Ford in Kennard) to Sarita Creek after supper.

"I don't see half enough of you," Ruth said, giving him a pat on the cheek with the gloved finger that now wore a diamond solitaire. To Mr. Gretzinger she continued, "If you get us home without a wetting, you may stay and eat with us; but if you don't, why, you can go straight on to town."

Off the car sped down the trail toward Bartolo where it would gain the well-travelled mesa road, a hand thrust through the curtains waving back at Bryant.

The engineer did not go to Sarita Creek that night, for the rain settled into a steady drizzle that lasted until well toward morning. After supper he went, however, to the adobe dwelling of the Mexican who once had warned him from his field. The man's seven-year-old boy had fallen from a horse the day previous and fractured a leg; half fearfully, half recklessly, the parent had come running to camp for medical aid; and Lee had despatched the camp doctor, a young fellow recently graduated, to treat the injury. Bryant was admitted into the house. The youngster, he learned, was resting comfortably and had been visited by the doctor that afternoon. Lee was even conducted to the bedside, where the boy's leg thick with splints and wrappings was exhibited for his benefit.

"The doctor, he said I was to speak to you about his pay," the Mexican stated after a time, when he and Bryant had talked awhile in Spanish.

Bryant waved the words aside.

"There's no charge, nothing," said he. "I was delighted to send the doctor. I hope your son improves rapidly. The physician will continue to pay you calls until the boy no longer requires them. Those are very pretty geraniums you have in the window, señora. Are they fragrant?" Lee crossed the room and bent his face above them.

The man's wife rubbed her hands together under her apron with much pleasure. Thus politely for him to notice and praise her flowers! In her heart, as in the heart of her husband, there formerly had been resentment at this white canal-builder for cutting their field with a big ditch, an occurrence which the county judge somehow had stupidly permitted. But now she did not know what to feel. Yesterday he had sent them a doctor for nothing, and this evening was smelling her flowers admiringly. He could not be exactly a monster. Removing one hand from beneath her apron, she inserted a finger-nail in her black hair and scratched her scalp, considering the subject. Winter was coming, too. Food would be needed—and besides, she long had desired one of those loud phonographs at Menocal's store, and also needed a new stove. She perceived that her husband was staring at Bryant's back with a thoughtful air. Undoubtedly he was thinking the same thing as she.

"You yet want men and teams for your work, señor?" she inquired.

"All I can get."

"If a man falls sick while at work, would he have the services of the doctor?"

"Yes, without charge. There will be work on the dam most of the winter, where the building is only a matter of stone and brush. I can use all who want employment. Then in the spring there will be the digging of the ditch on the mesa."

"Five dollars for a man and his team, is it not so?" the Mexican inquired.

"Yes."

"What if a man's wife or children fall sick?" the woman asked.

Bryant hid a smile at this shrewd bargaining. Yet he was perceiving an opportunity. There were no Mexicans at work on the project; one and all they had held off. Likewise they refused to sell him grain and hay, which necessitated the hauling of feed from a distance. But now this accident to the boy might prove a heaven-sent chance to break Menocal's monopoly of influence.

"In case of sickness in the man's family, the doctor shall attend free," he stated.

The woman took thought afresh.

"And if the man's horses are taken sick?"

"Nay, he's not a horse doctor," said Lee, smiling. And even the woman smiled.

"But there's another matter. I fear it prevents," the man remarked. "It is a note for fifty dollars that the bank holds against me. If I work, Menocal will make trouble about that. I think we had best talk no more of employment."

"Suppose I advance the amount in case he does, letting you work out the debt. I could keep, say, two dollars out of each day's five until you owed nothing."

"That would be agreeable to me, señor. But what if he then refuses to sell me goods from his store?"

"You can buy at the commissary," Lee said. "Why should you lose five dollars a day because of Menocal's bad feeling for me? You remain idle—but does he pay you, or feed you? And the wages I offer you, and the doctor's services, and the other accommodations, I also offer to other Mexicans who will work. You may tell them so. Remember, there will be teaming on the ditch until it freezes up, then work on the dam throughout the winter, then scraper work on the mesa in the spring. Five dollars a day coming in the door! You can buy meat and flour and clothes and

tobacco and candy for the children and a new wagon and pictures of the Madonna, yes, all. But now I must go."

"But Menocal would be very angry," said the man, with a shake of his head.

Bryant bade them good-night and departed. He went up the muddy road through the wet darkness to the camp. Domination of the native mind by Menocal appeared too strong for him to break.

But to his surprise next morning the Mexican came driving his team into the camp. Lee sent him to Pat Carrigan, who gave him a scraper and set him to work on the ditch. Toward noon the engineer encountered him moving dirt from the deepening excavation; the sight had an amusing feature. The man, Pedro Saurez, laboured in his own field building the canal at about the spot where he had warned Bryant away when surveying.

When Saurez beheld Lee, he grinned and removed the cigarette from his lips.

"It will be a fine ditch, this," was his remark.

CHAPTER XIII

ToC

Work on the canal section near the river advanced without incident until, one morning early in November, the plows unexpectedly uncovered a forty-foot-wide body of granite just beneath the surface. This particular difficulty was not serious, and was the contractor's; but Pat Carrigan was no more pleased than any other contractor would have been at finding rock, even a small amount, when he had figured his excavation costs on a dirt basis.

"That wipes out a piece of my profits," he remarked to Bryant, after a first profane explosion. "I'll send out for some dynamite and shoot it. If it wasn't for damned troubles like this, I'd been a retired man and fat and rich long ago. Don't grin, you heartless blackguard! You'll have miseries of your own before we're done."

Pat Carrigan was a true prophet. A blow of fatal nature, indeed, was preparing at the moment and fell within a week. From the state engineer Lee received a letter advising him that an application for use of the water appropriated to Perro Creek ranch had been made by a man of the name of Rodriguez, of Rosita, under an old statute long forgotten. This law was mandatory upon the Land and Water Board. It required the latter to cancel rights and to reappropriate water elsewhere to the amount in excess of what a canal actually carried, or what a canal had failed to carry for five successive years if it were not shown within ninety days after a filing for reappropriation that the said canal had been enlarged to a capacity to carry the original appropriation, and proof given of the owner's intention to employ said appropriation.

Menocal once more! He had been very quiet all this while; he apparently had made no effort to dissuade the Mexicans who, following Saurez's lead, had come in increasing number to work on the canal or the dam; the man had almost passed from the engineer's mind. But he had not been idle. He had had shrewd legal talent seeking a deadly weapon for him among the musty statutes, with which he could deal the irrigation project a *coup de grâce*. And as the import of the letter penetrated Bryant's brain, his heart seemed to turn to ice. Ninety days—finish dam and canal in ninety days! As well fix a limit of ninety hours!

Finally he rushed off to Pat Carrigan superintending scraper work and dragged him aside.

"For God's sake, read that, Pat!" he cried. "Read what the Land and Water Board are going to do. They're going to cut the heart right out of us! Kill the project! All for a law nobody ever heard of! Read it!"

Pat knit his brows and slowly extracted the meaning from the state engineer's formal, involved announcement. That something serious had occurred he guessed before Bryant had opened his lips. He had never seen the engineer so wrought up, so white, so agitated.

"Let me get this right," the old contractor said, at length. "They're going to cancel your water right."

"Yes."

"But not at once. You've ninety days to——"

"Ninety days! We can't do a year's work in ninety days, and in winter time at that!" Lee cried.

"Of course not," was the answer. "But it gives you time to argue with 'em and fight this thing. My advice is to go see this Board at once. Maybe if you explain the situation, they'll call off this fellow Rodriguez."

Bryant, however, remained depressed. Clearly the officials had no liberty of action in the

matter.

"I don't know that it will do any good," he said, "but it's all that's left to do. Pack your grip, Pat; I want you to go with me. Leave Morgan in charge. Can you start in half an hour?"

The ride to Kennard was made at high speed, and on the way the men did little talking. Both wanted to weigh the disaster confronting the project. In town they sought out McDonnell, who promised to have his attorney go into the matter at once and who appeared very grave at the news. Then they returned to the hotel to await their train.

Here Lee was surprised to encounter Ruth in company of Gretzinger, Charlie Menocal, and a Kennard girl with whom he was not acquainted. Ruth and Imogene, he learned, had come down the day before with the New Yorker and were staying at the McDonnell home.

"We're just roaming around and amusing ourselves," Ruth said, slipping her arm within Lee's. "Come on and join us."

Lee smilingly shook his head.

"Can't possibly do it," said he. "I'm leaving for the capital soon."

Ruth drew him aside.

"But give me ten minutes of your time before you go, will you, dear?" she asked. "Come, we can go into one of the parlours where we'll be alone." And when they were seated there, she continued, "I know why you're going to Santa Fé. Charlie said he understood you were involved in some new legal trouble and that you might lose your whole project. Mr. Gretzinger laughed at him and so did I, for we knew it couldn't be true. But it's bothering you, I see; your face is anxious. I hope you'll clear up the horrid matter, whatever it is, while you're gone." Then after a pause, she remarked, "Perhaps Mr. Gretzinger could be of assistance to you."

"Not in this matter," said Lee.

"He has a great deal of influence, especially in the East."

"But this is the West—and I don't care much for Gretzinger, besides," he stated.

"So he says. More than once he has wished you would be more friendly. Isn't it a little inconsiderate of you, Lee, to hold him off at arm's length, especially when he's here as representative of the bondholders? He has a vital interest in the canal and its success. Really, I think he might be of great help if you'd permit. And it would be of great advantage to us in the future, his friendship and that of the men behind him, for they are wealthy and influential. That's one reason why you ought to cultivate him, Lee."

"Go on," said he, as she paused.

"Well, I thought we should discuss the matter. I'm of the opinion that you misunderstand him. You'll not deny that he's a man of ability."

"No—though I know little of him."

"He is, though, Lee. And an engineer of high standing, too, and of experience. Wouldn't it be wise to consult him a little more than you do? He has talked to me at times about the project and has, I believe, ideas you could use. For instance, he says that if you made certain changes in the canal there would be a considerable saving of money, by which the stockholders would benefit, you among them. He says that if in certain places wood were used instead of concrete it would mean thousands of dollars in your pocket."

"It would, but it would also endanger the canal."

"Mr. Gretzinger said you asserted that as your reason," she proceeded, "but he claims there's no more prospect of danger from that source than from a fly. And anyway, isn't it a matter that concerns only the buyers afterward? He says so. I don't know much about such matters, of course, but you really must look after your own best interest first—and mine. I say mine because mine will be yours after we're married. Mr. Gretzinger says your share of the saving would be at least five thousand dollars and possibly more. Lee, do this for me."

"What he proposes is dishonest, Ruth."

"But why? He says the state board would grant the change if proper representations were made. If the officials allowed it, I can't see where it would be dishonest."

"The officials would have to be deceived to gain their consent to such a change," Lee said, patiently. "But the real point at issue is the permanency of the water system, Ruth. The poor devils who buy the land and who toil for years to pay for it are to be considered. If the canal is too cheaply constructed, they'll probably lose their crops; and losing their crops means ruin. As far as possible an engineer must insure against this danger when he builds the canal; then if any accident happens later, his conscience, at any rate, is clear."

"But he says you over-estimate the risk, that wood is perfectly safe. And he's an expert engineer, too. More experienced than you, Lee."

"You seem to have discussed this thing with him at great length," Bryant remarked, dryly.

"I have, indeed I have, because I have your success so greatly at heart, dear. I want to see you receive every penny that you earn and all the credit you deserve; I want you to go ahead in your profession and become both wealthy and famous; but sometimes I think that you're so absorbed in the engineering part of the work that you're careless of the future. One has to be practical, too.

One has to look out for one's own interests. And I don't see why your responsibility for the project doesn't end when you've built the canal, sold the land, and turned the system over to the farmers. You can't go on looking out for them after that; you're not answerable to the 'hay-seeds' who settle here for what may or may not happen. And we shall need the money that would be saved by using wood instead of concrete, Lee. When you're through here, we shall want to live in New York at least part of the time. With Mr. Gretzinger's friendship you could perhaps form a connection so that you could be there all the while, and make a big fortune. You will do this for me, won't you, Lee? It means just that much more happiness for us."

She slipped her arms about his neck and kissed him impulsively, eagerly. Lee felt himself tremble at that clasp, at that kiss. Words seemed futile. His anxiety over the fate of his project gave way to a profound sickness of soul. That Ruth should thus reveal such a cloudiness of spiritual vision, such an inability to distinguish between moral values, such a ready acceptance of Gretzinger's vicious philosophy, was the final drop in his bitter cup this day.

"It's not a question of either wood or concrete just at present," he said, rising. "It's whether I'm to have a project at all. I'll not go with you, Ruth, to your friends; I must think over what I'm to do and say at Santa Fé to-morrow."

As he rode thither with Carrigan that night it seemed as if he now was at grapple with forces, invisible, powerful, malevolent, that strove to dispossess him of everything that was dear. His project! What means, what help, what law was there of which he could make use to ward off this deadly assault on it? And Ruth! How should he save her—save her from herself, clear the mist from her eyes, arouse her drowsing soul? All that he had aimed at and all that he had striven for hung on finding answers to those questions.

CHAPTER XIV

ToC

By noon Bryant and Carrigan had concluded their interviews with members of the Land and Water Board. All of them had listened, asked questions, expressed their regret at the situation in which Perro Creek project found itself, but stated that the Board had no course other than that of executing the law evoked in the case. They suggested that Bryant bring an action in the courts to test the law; they admitted that his company might be forced into the hands of a receiver; they inquired concerning the possibility of gaining the consent of the adverse party to a withdrawal of his application. Their hands, however, said one and all, were tied in the matter.

The engineer and the contractor went down the steps of the state house and found a seat on a bench at a shady spot of the grounds.

"Just as I expected it would be," Bryant said, grimly.

He sat humped over, his elbows on his knees and his cheeks between his fists. His eyes were dull, heavy; he had not closed them during the previous night. He wore the mud-caked lace boots and stained khaki, as did Carrigan, in which he had departed from camp.

"Well, we haven't quit breathing yet," Pat remarked, licking the wrapper on the cigar he was about to light.

Lee sat silent for several minutes.

"Anyway, I'll see you don't lose, Pat," he said. "You can figure out what profit you would have made on your contract if the ditch had been built and I'll pay you that. Then you can call off your crew."

"Oh, I'll let you down easy, Lee. That wasn't worrying me any," was the rejoinder. "I was just thinking——" But his words broke off there, and he again gave his attention to the cigar wrapper that persisted in coming loose.

Bryant continued his gloomy cogitation. The muscles of his cheeks moved in hard lumps beneath his fists as if he were champing some resistant substance. Over his eyes his lids from time to time drooped sleepily. But all at once he leaped up.

"If I but had something I could take hold of, Pat!" he exclaimed. "Something I could lay hands on and move, like that bed of rock you uncovered! So I could go ahead! A law is so damned immaterial that one has nothing to work against. It leaves a man nowhere, helpless. It lifts him off the ground and holds him kicking futilely in the air. Just that. By God, I'm desperate enough to try anything—to try building the ditch—try whipping Menocal even under this moth-eaten law he's dug up!"

Pat shut one eye against the smoke curling into it.

"I was speculating a little along the same line," said he, slowly.

"But twelve miles of ditch in ninety days! The whole mesa line! We'd be crazy to think of it. Let's talk of something else."

Lee's mouth, nevertheless, was twitching, while gleams like light came and went on his face.

"I always had a weakness for the bad bets," said Pat.

"But twelve miles of ditch!"

"And the nights freezing harder every week," the old contractor added.

"And the days short."

"Yes, and nerve shorter yet," said Pat.

The remark was airily given, but the inference was plain. Lee took a step aside and stood staring across the capitol grounds, with brows knit, with lips compressed, the prey of struggling hopes and doubts.

"Pat," he said, turning.

"Well?"

"Do you think we could do it?"

"God knows; I don't. But we could give the job an awful whirl," the contractor stated.

"The thing looks impossible, preposterous, but if you see the slightest chance of success I want you to say so. Dirt moving is your game, not mine. Ninety days; that's thirteen weeks. Almost a mile a week. Can it be done? Can you do it?"

Pat at last threw away the cigar that refused to draw.

"With men and teams enough I could build a ditch to tide-water in that time," said he, with sudden energy. "Men and scrapers, scrapers and men—that's all. You can rip the insides out of any dirt job on earth if you have the crews. Of course, it takes money, big wages, to get and hold them."

"Money! What do I care for that if we build the canal? How much more will it take? How much will you need?"

"Say twenty thousand more."

"Get out your pencil and begin figuring it."

"I don't need a pencil," Carrigan answered. "I haven't been moving dirt for fifty years without figures sticking to my hair. I've digested your blue-prints and know what's to come out of the ground. Now I'll tell you what it would be if there was no frost in the ground, as in summer—and we'll afterward allow for the frost; and what's necessary in men, horses, fresnos, shacks, horsefeed, food, clothes, and general supplies."

And thereupon Carrigan began to pour forth a stream of data so exact, so comprehensive, so full, that Bryant listened in astonishment. All carried in his head, ready for use!

"I hope I know my business at your age as you know yours," Lee exclaimed.

"You will, or ought to. I've paid for what I know in mistakes and miscalculated jobs, as does every man some time or other—paid in hard cash. What he learns is all he gets out of losses. Now, the figures I gave were for summer work; winter dirt moving is another kind of animal. Work is slower, men are harder to keep, weather is generally bad."

"This autumn has been later than usual, and it may last," said Lee.

"And it may not," Carrigan stated, emphatically. "It's that that worries me about this thing. As it is, the ground freezes on top every night. Let the thermometer make a low drop, and we won't be able to stick a plow-point into it anywhere."

"There's no moisture to speak of in the soil of the mesa."

"Enough to freeze the dirt, just the same," said Pat.

"We can leave the dam out of consideration."

"Yes; no trouble about finishing that. And your concrete work, Lee, won't lose you any sleep. A carload of cement from here, gravel from the river, and a dozen Kennard carpenters to knock together gate and drop frames—no trick to crack that nut. Frost, lad, frost! It's the thing to set us groaning."

Bryant sat down and put his hand on the speaker's knee.

"Pat, if we go into this thing and put it through, there will be a good fat bonus for you."

"Maybe there will be and maybe there won't. Maybe you'll have some money left when we're done and maybe you'll not have a red cent. In any case, the old man is with you, Lee, to the end of the scrap—if you go ahead. What about your bondholders? Will they stand for risking what's not yet spent? They will save considerable by your stopping now; they'll lose all if we fail."

"What do you——"

Pat's raised hand halted him.

"Ask me nothing," said he. "That's for you alone to settle. If you spend their money and win, they'll say 'Thank you'—maybe; and if you go under, they'll damn you up one side and down the other and probably try to send you to the pen. You're the chief; you have to decide; you can't

share the responsibility—anyway, not with me. And if you're inquiring, I'll remark that its considerable responsibility. Go off yonder by yourself and think it over a bit."

Bryant left the old contractor lighting a fresh cigar. He walked to another bench a short distance away, where he sat down. In his first exultation at perceiving a fighting chance to save the project he had seen only the opportunity, but Carrigan's unexpected turn of the subject had brought him back to earth. He was guardian, as well as dispenser, of company funds. He had obligations to the bondholders. Therefore, would he be justified in risking the money on such a desperate venture? His soul sank.

But his mind would not cease to revolve about the undertaking, for he could not at once relinquish his long-cherished dream. The thought of tame surrender was as wormwood in his mouth. To stand by acquiescent while the project collapsed! That prospect he could not endure. Never again, if he capitulated now, would he be able to strike out with the same courage as in this project; never with the same courage, or spirit, or faith. The project was his creation! The thing of his brain and will! Part of himself! And how confidently he had made his plans and acquired the property and started work! No doubts of his ability to carry it through! No question of his right to go ahead! No fear of the task!

The engineer came suddenly to his feet.

Builders throughout the world took equal risks and overcame as great obstacles every day; it was the measure of their genius and will. Engineers elsewhere crushed a way through earth and rock to their goals, and under adverse circumstances, with no thought of failure. Were there not men who would unhesitatingly take hold of this project now and complete it in the time allotted? Yes, any number. For the very same reason that he had launched the scheme. Because they had the ability, because they had the will, because, most of all, they had faith—faith in their own powers.

Lee went back to Pat Carrigan.

"We shall build it," said he. "And in ninety days."

The contractor rose.

"You talk like a real 'chief' now, Bryant," he replied. "I was waiting for that. Come along; we'll start burning the wires."

CHAPTER XV

ToC

Louise Graham, entering the dining car for breakfast, received a surprise at beholding Lee Bryant half way along the aisle at one of the smaller tables. He laid down the spoon with which he was delving into a half of a cantaloupe and got quickly to his feet to greet her.

"So you're home again," he said, after shaking hands. "Your father told me when I met him that you were in the East. Will you share my table?"

"I use 'shopping' as a pretext for a jaunt now and then," she laughed, when they were seated. "Once in a while the lure of city dissipations seizes me; I had a week in Washington and three in New York with friends, which will satisfy me for a few months. You were just starting work on your project when I went away. Are you making good progress?"

"Very. But I'll make still better from now on. It's a case with me of do or be 'done', of dig out or be buried. I may as well be open about it, for everyone will know presently, anyway. The project must be completed in ninety days."

"Ninety days? Great heavens!"

"That's what I said, too," Lee stated, with a smile. "Several times, in fact. There is an old law, it seems, that enables interested parties to hold a stop-watch on me."

"And what's the penalty if you fail to finish the work in those three months?"

"Cancellation of my water right."

"Cancellation? Surely not."

"I tried to convince the Land and Water Board of that in Santa Fé, but made no headway."

"How outrageous!" she exclaimed.

The waiter at her elbow recalled her to the requirements of the moment. Still with a trace of colour in her cheeks, the result of her indignation, she scanned the menu and wrote out her order.

"The thing is so utterably unreasonable," she resumed, more calmly. "Why did they let you start

if they proposed afterward to hang a sword above your head?"

"The Board was ignorant of this law, as was everybody else, until it was brought to light by the applicant for cancellation," said Lee, "a certain Rodriguez, of Rosita."

"Who is he?"

Bryant shook his head.

"Don't ask me. No friend, at any rate."

She regarded him steadily for a moment.

"Probably a man put forward by Mr. Menocal."

"I suppose so," said he.

"But the idea of expecting you to build all those miles of ditch in ninety days and in the winter time! I wonder that you can be so calm."

"Why shouldn't I be calm? My mind's made up. I'm going to complete the project on time."

The words were uttered in a matter-of-fact tone that impressed Louise Graham far more than would any vehement assertion. As he had stated, his mind was made up, quite made up on the point. Others might think what they pleased: it carried no weight with him. The thing was certain.

She examined the engineer with a new interest. There was a difference in him, what would be hard to say. One couldn't exactly put finger on it. Something in his gray eyes, perhaps; something in the sharper stamp of his aquiline nose, of his lips, of his bronzed jaw; something in his whole bearing. It went deeper than features, too; she sensed a change in the spirit of the man from what it had been that day of his going down to Kennard, when he strolled with her in her garden. He was less bouyant, less manifest, less elated, but more poised and sure. A change, yes.

Then her thoughts reverted to his tremendous undertaking.

"How long have you known this?" she inquired.

"Since the day before yesterday. Pat Carrigan, my contractor, and I came to the capital at once to discuss the affair with the Board. The news was—well, a good deal of a facer."

She nodded.

"It would be," were her words. "You'll need more workmen and horses, of course."

"All I can get. Pat went to Denver last night, and the labour agencies there and at Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Santa Fé, El Paso, and places farther east doubtless by now are rounding up men. We picked up an idle grading outfit yesterday in Santa Fé; it will be loaded and started by to-night."

Her face became a little rueful.

"That all sounds so big that I hesitate to make the offer I had in mind when I asked," she said.

"What was it, Miss Graham?"

"Father has twelve or fifteen teams and some scrapers used on the ranch. The horses aren't working at this season. He would be glad to let you have them, I know, if he thought they would be of any aid. But with what you'll have, perhaps you——"

"I want them; I'll be more than grateful for them. I need every man and horse available. I can't get too many. Each labourer and each horse counts just that much more. It's a great kindness on your part to suggest their use to me, and I'll stop on the way to camp to see your father."

"He'll consent to your employing them," said she, confidently. "Dad likes a man who puts up a good fight, and you're doing that. A fight against great odds."

Bryant's face lightened with a smile almost sunny.

"By heavens, it's comforting to have a friend like you," he exclaimed, "when one's in a tight place!"

The waiter began to place her meal, and he turned his head to look out of the window while his mind recalled his talk with Ruth in the hotel parlour at Kennard. Little comfort he had had from her then. Her interest in the project, in fact, as he reviewed the summer, had been slight, always casual, concerned only with its financial factor, never particularly sympathetic, never warm, never eager. The thought struck him unpleasantly. It had never occurred to him before. He wondered if this indifference would continue when they were married, if in ten years—when he was about forty, say—she would be even less inclined to know his work, like the wives of some men he could name who had their own separate interests, who gave their husbands no sympathy at their tasks, nor courage, nor heart, and whose single cognizance of it had to do with the size of the income.

But he drove this depressing and disloyal speculation from his mind. Ruth was young and perhaps restless, but she was sweet and full of promise. Time would round out her character; and when she had matured, she would be one in a million—a mate who cheered and inspired. Every bit of that! She would presently see the real values of things; Charlie Menocal's monkey tricks would no longer amuse her, and she would perceive what a shallow harlequin he was, while she would comprehend Gretzinger's vicious, unprincipled sophistry and turn in disgust from the man. She was inexperienced, that was all.

"It will be good to be back once more where one has plenty of room," Louise Graham remarked. "In that liking, you see, I'm a genuine Westerner. That's what I missed most when at school in the East, at Bryn Mawr—space. I wanted my big mountains and wide mesa and long, restful views. And how I galloped on my pony through the sagebrush when I came back during summer vacations!"

The recollection set her eyes glistening.

"You still do it when you return from a trip, I'll venture to say," Lee stated, marking the glow of her face.

"Yes, I do. Almost the very first thing. It clears my brain of city noise and sights and grime. It soothes my nerves. Nothing does that like our keen air with its scent of sagebrush."

"Then I should see you riding up my way soon."

"Oh, I'll certainly want to follow the progress of your work, Mr. Bryant. With father's teams working for you, I'll feel as if we had a part in the race." After a pause she proceeded, "The contractor's outfit went up and you were just starting the dam and excavation about the time I went East. Father mentioned in a letter to me that he had dropped in at your camp once or twice when at Bartolo."

"Yes, I showed him what we were doing. We've had other visitors occasionally. Miss Gardner and Miss Martin—at Sarita Creek, you remember—come at times. Miss Martin is a niece of Mr. McDonnell, of Kennard."

"So Mrs. McDonnell told me. Just before I left I called at their cabins again. But I had no more luck that time than the first; they were away somewhere. Well," she concluded, with a smile, "perhaps the third time will win; that's the rule. I'll go another time soon."

"You'll like them, I'm sure. They're both charming, I think. Unusual girls."

"I'll go soon," she repeated.

"My desire possibly will be understood by you," said he, after a slight hesitation, "when I say that Miss Gardner and I are engaged to be married. So it would please me immensely if you two became good friends."

Louise Graham showed some surprise. But this immediately changed to smiling interest.

"Accept my congratulations, Mr. Bryant," she said. "You may count on our being friends. Hereafter she and Miss Martin must come to our ranch whenever they will. I suppose they ride up where you are nearly every day; Miss Gardner, in particular, must be tremendously devoted to your project and now tremendously excited, too, over your race against time. Who wouldn't be, in her place!"

"Naturally," said Lee, with all the heartiness he could muster in his voice. But to himself, at least, his tone rang hollow.

When an hour or so after they had finished their meal they alighted from their Pullmans at Kennard, the echo of his forced reply still sounded in his mind with persistent irony. He was glad he had an interview with McDonnell before him that would silence it, the negotiating of a large private loan.

CHAPTER XVI

ToC

For Bryant there now began a period of activity compared to which his earlier efforts were mere play. Headquarters were moved down to Perro Creek, ten miles nearer Kennard. In an endless procession streamed northward automobiles crammed with labourers, wagons heaped with lumber, cement, implements, food, tents, forage, and long lines of fresnos. From distant Mexican settlements came natives in ramshackle wagons and driving half-wild ponies. Out of the hills came sheep-herders and prospectors. The word of big wages ran everywhere. The drive was on.

By the dam and on the tongue of ground extending from the mountain side where the canal would swing out upon the mesa, excavation for the intake gate and weir and the drops was in progress, with a crew of carpenters swiftly erecting wooden forms to receive the concrete when the diggers finished and retired. On the mesa half a dozen young engineers, using Bryant's notes and fixed points, ran anew the ditch line and set grade stakes. North of Perro Creek white tents gleamed in the sunshine; and beyond these a swarm of men and horses gashed a yellow streak in the mesa, ever extending as the days passed—cutting sagebrush, ripping through sod, flinging up earth with plow and scraper.

Yes, the fight was on. The fight to secure and keep horses, to get and hold workmen, to feed

and use them both mercilessly, to press them ahead like a shaft of steel, to drive them forward under lash, mile by mile, rod by rod, foot by foot, forcing a channel through the resistant earth and across the mesa—a fight to outwit frost, to outstrip time, to outreach and overcome the impossible.

Bryant himself was everywhere, now at the dam, now with the carpenters, now at Perro Creek. Morgan, in charge of the north camp, succumbed to Bryant's own restless energy and matched it. The gang, now beginning to pour concrete behind the carpenters, caught the infection of his ardor. Foreman and crew on the hillside section, at his word that they had the most difficult part of the dirt work, toiled the harder. The other engineers promised to give him their best and gave him more. And in the main camp at Perro Creek Pat Carrigan extracted the last ounce of effort from man and beast.

In Kennard Bryant had said to McDonnell, "Give me a good man for this end, one who can work twenty hours a day." And the banker had given him such an one: a short, bow-legged clerk with a pugnacious jaw, who took the typewritten list of Bryant's immediate requirements, read it, jerked on his hat, and bolted out of the door. He it was who kept the road north from Kennard a-jiggle with freight wagons.

The fierce struggle against time became generally known. Ranchers visited the mesa for a sight of the toiling camps. Wagonloads of Mexican families, curious, observant, came and went. Automobile parties from Kennard and elsewhere made inspection trips to the spot. Even a journalist representing a Denver paper appeared, made photographs, and obtained an interview from Bryant consisting of "Finish it on time? Certainly. Can't talk any longer." Which, together with the pictures and the special writer's account, filled a page of a Sunday issue.

The anxiety ever in Bryant's and Carrigan's minds was of that grim and implacable enemy, cold. Autumn had lasted amazingly; November yielded to December, with the days still fine; but who could tell when the white spectre, Winter, would lay his icy hand upon the earth? The peaks and upper slopes of the mountains were already mantled with snow. Each morning the engineer and the contractor marked with care the fall of the thermometer during the night, examined the frost upon the grass and tested its depth in the soil. They watched the barometer like hawks. They observed every cloud along the Ventisquero Range. They studied the wind, the sun, the sky. But the weather held fair. So calm was the air that at times sounds of the dynamite blasts at the granite outshoot, where a pair of miners were clearing a path for the canal, came travelling down to Perro Creek.

"The Lord surely has his arms around us," said Pat, one morning.

Bryant nodded, but Dave spoke up, "A cattleman who went by here yesterday, an old-timer, said: 'When December's clear, then January's drear.'"

"And an old-timer once told me that same thing when I was building a railroad grade in Kansas," Pat remarked, "and I had to ship in palm-leaf fans and ice to keep my 'paddies' from fainting with the January heat." A slight exaggeration, to be sure, but showing the old contractor's contempt for wise saws pertaining to weather. Yet no one understood more than he the law of probabilities, or the balance of seasons. Some time cold must follow warmth, foul follow fair, to work the inevitable mean. And it was too much to hope that this natural law would be suspended for them until the middle of February.

In fact, the nights while remaining clear were hardening. The mercury in the tube sank by possibly a degree every two nights, at last touching zero; and it correspondingly failed to arise by as much at noon. The days were cruelly short. Darkness lasted until eight in the morning; it dropped down again at five. The frost crept deeper into the earth.

But construction advanced. The dam of brush and uncemented smooth brown stones, stretching across the Pinas, was gradually rising. The hillside section of ditch through the fields was finished and only the miners continued at the granite reef, the ring of their hammers on drills going steadily and the roar of the shots now and again booming out at nightfall. Excavation went forward in the spaces between the drops on the ridge leading forth upon the mesa. The carpenters had finished and returned to Kennard. The concrete gang had moved their mixer from the dam to the drops, for the intake gate and its accompanying flood weir were made, and Bryant had had their wooden frames knocked off so that the structures stood white and imposing beside the dam, like pillars of accomplishment. From Perro Creek the main camp had moved toward the northwest on the arc it must pursue, until its tents touched the horizon and the clean yellow trench, fifteen feet wide at the bottom, thirty feet wide at the top, and five feet deep, with its flanking embankments, alone was left behind, a forced and undeviating course through the sagebrush, the water way driven by a determined man.

CHAPTER XVII

ToC

Meanwhile Lee, under relentless pressure of work, saw less and less of Ruth. She had come a number of times at the beginning of the drive, sometimes with Gretzinger, sometimes with Imogene, to watch the feverish spectacle on the mesa; as had Louise Graham, her father, and at rare intervals Mr. McDonnell. Bryant, on his part, had gone evenings to Sarita Creek when he could spare an hour, and, for that matter, when he could not. But the meetings with her were infrequent, and always left him with a sense of inadequacy, of dissatisfaction, because partly Ruth and he seemed to have no common interests and partly that she now let her affection go for granted. Her talk was not of the subjects usually discussed by an engaged couple—of their coming marriage (though no date had been fixed) and a home and prospective joys together; it dealt wholly with amusements, dances, friends at Kennard. And though her own eyes glistened at the recital, Lee's lost their light and his speech was quenched. For his was the rôle of an outsider.

Certain friendships that she maintained, moreover, were exceedingly distasteful to him.

"Ruth, I've nothing against your going around so much with Gretzinger," he said one evening, "except that I don't like the fellow and believe he's crooked, and it may, under the circumstances, create gossip."

"Nonsense, Lee, don't be jealous. Gretzie never takes me anywhere except in a crowd. And don't say he's crooked, or I shall be angry."

"Well, let him pass," he went on. "It's Charlie Menocal I've more in mind. He talks openly against my project; he calls me a thief and a ruffian; he's an avowed enemy. Yet you run around with him as if that were of no importance, as if it made no difference. The scoundrel no doubt counts it a brilliant bit of smartness to carry about in his car the fiancée of the man he hates, and brags of it. It reflects on us both, Ruth. I ask you to consider my feelings at least that far."

She regarded him speculatively for a time. Then the touch of obstinacy hardened her chin and pushed up her under lip the barest trifle. But there was no resentment in her voice when she answered and, indeed, her tone was too casual.

"Oh, nobody pays any particular attention to what Charlie says," she remarked. "You surely don't really believe what you've just stated about his bragging? I don't. Of course, he hasn't brains like Mr. Gretzinger, but he's gentlemanly. And he's very kind. And so is Mr. Menocal, his father. I've eaten dinner with a party of young folks at their house twice. Your ideas of them are altogether wrong, for they've been at pains to tell me that a business difference like that with you shouldn't affect personal relations. I think the same. But that isn't all. You never take me anywhere, you won't go to the parties and shows and things. Am I to sit here every day and every night at Sarita Creek until your canal is built?" By now her words were not only casual but carried a trace of disdainfulness.

"No, Ruth," said he. "I want you to have a good time and derive every pleasure that you rightly can. My greatest regret is that I can't take you and share the fun. But it goes without saying that I can't. Only, Charlie Menocal——"

"Lee, what's got into you to-night? If it were not for Mr. Gretzinger's and Charlie's thoughtfulness, I'd have died of lonesomeness long before this. You know how I hate this life, this homestead business. You know I'm only waiting until you've finished and we can be married and go away where there is something worth while. Now be reasonable. You work too hard, so that every little speck looks like a mountain. And it's making you narrow, too, or will if you don't watch out. I have to kill time somehow till we can be married and so you ought not to find fault with my doing it. Run along over and talk to Imo in her cabin now, Lee; that's a good boy. I didn't get back home from town last night until after midnight, and I'm sleepy."

He did not go to Imo's cabin, but to camp instead. For the bitterness of his disappointment at his failure to move her made him desire the darkness and solitude of the ride home. With her, it seemed, he was in a worse predicament than he had been when faced with the problem of his ditch; for that he had found an answer, found something to take hold of. But she was not like the mesa, to be mastered by sheer will and incessant labour. Character is intangible, and he found himself balked. One cannot lay hands on the desires in a heart and pluck them out, or on the spirit and twist it straight.

His bitterness became acute when some time later Charlie Menocal came driving with Ruth along the rutted trail by the canal to where he stood inspecting a new drop.

"You wait, Charlie; I'll not be long," she said, as she alighted. "Come with me out of earshot, will you, Lee?"

They moved to a spot that satisfied her.

"I heard you were doing this and I asked Charlie to bring me here," she began. "I wanted to see for myself. And it's true. You're going ahead and make these things out of concrete. I'm indignant, I'm hurt. After you led me to rely——"

Bryant stopped her sharply.

"No, Ruth, not that. I'm sorry that you gained the impression I should use wood instead of concrete; and it never was in my mind to do so, to use wood. My decision was fully made when you raised the matter in the hotel parlour at Kennard, and I explained my reasons for the decision. I didn't tell you bluntly, perhaps. I waited, trusting that you would come round to my way of thinking and realize that I could only follow my own best judgment."

"I haven't changed my mind not one particle," she exclaimed, vehemently.

"But, Ruth——"

"I think you're throwing away good money, deliberately. That is, if you really ever make any money on your project. You may lose everything."

"I may not, also. But if I should, the father of the fellow sitting in the car yonder waiting for you would be responsible. As for these drops, Ruth, Gretzinger was wrong and I was right, and so they're being built of concrete. Now please forget all about it."

"And that you refused my request, I suppose."

"Yes."

"Well, I can't do that; it's too much to ask." An angry gleam shot from her eyes. "You might have thought more of me and less of yourself. You put your old canal first and me second." With which she swung about and marched off to the car, and it went away, rocking and lurching down the uneven trail.

Lee stood looking after it. Her last words brought up the memory of the occasion when she had playfully uttered the like, one night in August, with the added inquiry, "What if you had to choose between us?" Were things drifting to such an issue? Would she at last force upon him that hard choice? He flung up a hand in a gesture of despair. Some metamorphosis had occurred in her; she was not the simple and loving Ruth to whom he had offered himself that day they picked berries in the cañon. Or was it that only now her real self was revealed? Was it that she was capable of loving only selfishly? Did she love him at all?

The questions bit like acid into his heart. And a new one, that startled and dismayed his soul: Did he love her? Yes—the Ruth she yet was. But he could never love the woman she seemed on the way to become, breathing an exciting and unhealthy atmosphere, seeking purely personal gain, indifferent to worthy objects, selfish, hard, mercenary, worldly. No, that kind of Ruth would kill love.

He still stood there when Morgan, who had been on an errand to headquarters, came galloping back on his way to the dam.

"Accident down below," he said. "Man hurt in the mixer. Arm crushed."

Bryant jerked his head about to look at the drop two hundred yards farther down the ridge. He saw the workmen grouped together. The huge cylindrical machine was motionless.

"I'll see," he exclaimed, hurrying to his runabout.

He drove recklessly to where the injured man lay, helped lift him into the car, and bidding the foreman stand on the running board and support the unconscious labourer, set off for headquarters at such speed as was possible. Into the low shack used for hospital purposes the two carried their charge, and as the doctor was absent Bryant began a search to find him. He ran down the camp street shouting the doctor's name and along the ditch where the teams moved, until he encountered Carrigan.

"Doc ain't here. Who's hurt?" Pat asked. For a call for the doctor could mean but one thing.

Bryant described the nature of the accident and both men hastened back to the hospital. The door was now closed. Before it, stood the foreman of the concrete gang, who was narrating for the benefit of a group of cooks and freighters details of the mishap.

Bryant turned the knob, but the door was locked.

"He stationed me here to keep men out," the foreman said.

"Then he's in there."

"Yes, came a-running. Was loafing out there in the brush and having a smoke. Said he was going to operate at once, then locked the door."

"Not alone!" Lee exclaimed.

"No, he has help. One of the engineers from the office, who had come trotting over to see what was wrong, and a girl."

"A girl! What girl?"

The foreman shook his head.

"Don't know who she is. She came riding in from the south. When she saw us hustling round, she asked what had happened and jumped off her horse and inquired of the Doc whether she could be of any help. He looked at her, then said yes. She's in there now. One of the men is caring for her horse."

"A bay horse?"

"Yes. And a pretty girl, too. I'd almost lose an arm to have a good-looker like her hovering over me."

"All right, Jenks. You can go back now. Get another man for your crew from Morgan. I'll obtain this fellow's name and his address, if he has any, from the time-keeper, in case he passes in his checks."

The foreman started away. The group before the door disintegrated and presently disappeared. Pat glanced at the sun, lighted a cigar, and asked:

"Do we start a night shift?"

"Yes; whenever you can bring in the men."

"Then I'll wire for some right away. The thermometer was five below this morning, and only twenty-two above this noon. She's cold at last."

"Go to it, Pat. I'll stay here till Doc is through."

When Carrigan had left him, Bryant sat down on a discarded oil tin lying on the ground—one of the square ten-gallon cans common about camps. He gazed at the door of the hospital shack. He could hear faint sounds from within, a footfall on the board floor, an indistinct word or murmur. Behind him and farther down the street, in the big cook tents where the crews ate, was the rattle of pans and an occasional oath or burst of laughter. There the cooks were peeling potatoes and mixing great pans of biscuit dough and exchanging jests, while here in the shack a fight was going on for a life.

Bryant saw again that unshaven, heavy-faced workman, with the terribly mangled arm, whom he had brought hither. Poor devil! Some oversight, some carelessness, some mistake on the part of himself or another; and if not a dead man, then one-armed for the rest of his days. He, Bryant, could not consider these accidents with Pat Carrigan's philosophic calm—a calm acquired from decades of camp tragedies and disasters. They harrowed his spirit. Though they appeared inevitable where men delved or builded or flung forth great spans, they made the cost of constructive works seem too great. They took the glamor from projects and left them hard, grim, uninspiring tasks.

Lee felt a weariness like that of age. The strain under which he laboured, the sustained effort of driving this furrow through earth that was like iron, his unavailing endeavours to reclaim Ruth, afflictions such as this of the past hour, the uncertainty of everything—all sapped his energy and shook his faith. Yet before him there were weeks of the same, or worse. He had put his hand to the plow; he could not turn back.

All at once the door of the shack opened. Louise Graham came out, without hat, garbed in a great white surgical apron. Her knees seemed about to give way. Her eyes were half shut. Her face was without colour, drawn, dazed. With her from the interior came a reek of chloroform.

She had been the girl in there! Bryant had guessed it, feared it. He ran forward and put an arm about her shoulders and led her to the tin oil canister on which he urged her to be seated.

"No, I won't faint," she said, weakly. He knelt beside her and supported her form. "I just feel dizzy and a little sick," she went on. "Better in a moment." Lee observed her shudder. Presently she murmured, "Stuck it out, anyway. Dad says—dad says, 'Never be a quitter.' And I wasn't one."

CHAPTER XVIII

ToC

Rymer, a sandy-haired, blue-eyed young fellow, one of Bryant's staff, walked out of the shack, pulling on his coat. He had a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, at which he was sucking rapidly. In spite of its dark lacquer of tan his face had a grayish tinge.

"Sick?" he asked of Bryant, jerking a nod toward Louise Graham.

"A bit. Have Doc give you a little brandy in a glass. And bring out her things, too."

Rymer went back into the shack, presently returning with the liquor and accompanied by the young doctor, who still had his sleeves rolled up. Louise swallowed the fiery dram.

"That—that would raise the dead!" she gasped, wiping sudden tears from her eyes. She sat up, pushed back the hair from her brow, and began to glance about.

"How's your man?" Bryant asked the doctor.

"Right as a trivet—if no complications set in. Have him stowed on a cot in the inner room. Bring on your next."

"You ought to be the next," said Lee, darkly.

"Because I grabbed her? Well, I'll use her another time if she's about. Steady as a pin. No wasted motion, either. Passed me instruments and things like a veteran nurse. I just gave a nod or glance and she had the right tray. I wanted to pat her on the shoulder. Can't give people that thing; it's a born knack. Knowing exactly what's wanted at the instant. She has it, has it to the tips of her fingers."

Lee said no more. The young doctor was still labouring under the excitement of the past hour and swimming in exultation at performing an operation that would have taxed the skill of an

experienced surgeon. It had been one of those wicked cases—arm crushed to the shoulder, everything gone into a hodge-podge of flesh and arteries and splintered bone, a case for fast work and at the same time for delicate closure of the stump. This had been thrust at Higginson like a flash, he out of a medical school but a year and a half, still coaxing a moustache, so to speak. Lee perceived it all. The matter for Higginson had been like the ditch with Bryant: something tremendous, something to be met with the means at hand, something to be accomplished at all costs. And now his brain was ringing with triumph. He was superior to anything Bryant might think or say or do. For the moment he was quite ecstatic. One in his exalted state could conceive nothing unmeet in having haled a strange, sensitive girl into the ghastly business for an assistant.

"I'll conduct Miss Graham to my office, where she can remain until she's wholly herself," Bryant said. "This air is too sharp. You have everything, Rymer—cap, coat, gauntlets? Bring them along."

"But I'm feeling better now," Louise protested.

"You're not yet fit to start home. Over there it's warm and quiet." He rose to help her remove the great apron.

In the shack at the head of the street where he led her, he made her comfortable in an old arm-chair from his ranch house with a Navajo rug over her lap. As he stirred up the fire, she gazed about at the room. In one corner was a desk knocked together of boards, littered with papers; near it on the floor were boxes stuffed with rolls of blue-prints; the wall spaces between windows were filled with statements and reports; bulging card-board files rested on a shelf; from nails hung an old coat and a camera; in another corner leaned a tripod, rod, and a six-foot brass-edged measure specked with clay; and piled in a heap beyond the stove were a saddle, a pair of boots, chunks of piñon pine, and a discarded flannel shirt on which lay a gray cat nursing a kitten. Through the inner door, standing open, she had a glimpse of two cots with tumbled blankets. The place was the office and temporary home of a busy man, a rough board-and-tar-paper habitation that went forward on skids as the camp went forward, the workshop and living-quarters of a director who was stripped down to the hard essentials of toil and whose brain was the nerve centre of a desperate effort by a host of horses and men.

"You have companions, I see," Louise remarked, indicating the mother cat and kitten.

"Dave's," was his reply, as he finished at the stove. "He found them somewhere. There were four kittens to begin with, but only one is left. It's a hard game for cats to survive in a camp like this."

"Poor little things!"

"Dave says he'll save this kitten, or know why."

"What about Dave himself with all these rough men?"

"It leaves him untouched," Lee said. "Doesn't hurt a boy when he's made of the right stuff. He'll be better for it, in fact. Many a grown man would be more competent with the knowledge Dave's picking up here, young as he is. He's learning what work means and what men are and what's what generally. When this job is done, I'm going to send him off to school; and he'll eat up his studies. Just watch and see." Bryant laughed. "He's aching to become an engineer. He has his mark already fixed, which not one boy in a thousand at his age has. And all this is priming him to go to his mark like a shot."

"I hadn't thought of that," she stated.

"Actually he's soaking up more arithmetic, geology, physics, veterinary knowledge, and so on, by pumping Pat Carrigan, the engineers, and the men, than I supposed his head could hold," Lee continued. "When he gets at his books, they won't be meaningless things to him. Not much! He'll understand what prompted them and what they open up. Well, now, are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I think so." Then she said, "But I'm keeping you away from your work. You go, and when I'm—"

"Wouldn't think of it. Nothing pressing." And Bryant began to move about thoughtfully, now going to gaze out a window and now returning to stand and fix his eyes upon her intently.

"That was a distressing experience for you," he went on, presently. "I feel all upset at your being in there. Higginson was desperate, I suppose, and grasped at you because you happened to be there and he could not wait."

She put out a hand toward Lee.

"Don't scold him please," she said.

"Little good it would do now," he replied. "He'll be so cocky that he'll dare me to fire him if I say a word, and grin in my face, for he knows now that he's a good man and that I know it and will never let him go."

"Higginson, is that his name?" Louise asked. "Well, he is a good man. When he started the engineer using the chloroform and me arranging things, he was swallowing hard. I saw he was terribly nervous and keyed up. But he went right at the operation without faltering and with a sort of doggedness. As if nothing should stop him. I myself was doing rather mistily what he wanted. The chloroform, the smell of antiseptics, the shiny instruments, the cutting, the nipping of blood-vessels with forceps and tying them, the clipping with scissors, the sewing—all went to my head. And I constantly had to tell myself, 'Don't be silly! You're not going to faint. He might fail if you did. That tray, those forceps, those sponges, that thread, that's what he wants now.

Keep your head. Don't be a quitter.' And so on through eternity—it seemed an eternity, anyway. I think the young engineer with me thought so, too. He turned quite green once or twice. But then I must have looked that way throughout. All at once it was over, suddenly. Quite unexpectedly, too. I had come to believe that it would go on and on forever. But, as I say, all at once it was done and the men were wheeling the bandaged fellow into the other room. Then the doctor called over his shoulder at me, 'Open the door, girl; let in some air.' So I opened it as he wanted, and came out."

Bryant was greatly affected by that simple recital. He began to walk back and forth beside Louise, restlessly thrusting his hands in his coat pockets but immediately pulling them out as if there were no satisfaction in the action, and casting troubled glances at her from under close-drawn brows. His disquietude moved her to speak.

"You're worrying about me, Mr. Bryant; you mustn't do that. In a few minutes more I'll be entirely recovered. I should be foolish to pretend that the happening wasn't a shock to me, but I'm not a weakling—I've health and strength. I'll not permit the thought of the operation to depress my spirits. Indeed, I know I'll be very proud of what I did this afternoon, for it was a chance to do a real, disinterested service. And I can guess what father will say when he learns of it—'Louise, you did just right. Exactly what you should do under the circumstances.'"

Already the colour had reappeared in her cheeks. A resilience of nature was indeed hers, he perceived, that enabled her to undergo ordeals that would prostrate many women. It came, undoubtedly, from the same springs out of which rose her splendid courage, her fine sympathy. Ah, that golden quality of sympathy! Because of it her duty that day had seemed plain and clear.

"Louise—may I not use that name, for we're friends?—Louise, you're the bravest, kindest girl I have ever known. I mean it, really. I've never forgotten your generous act that day when someone so brutally killed my dog Mike, how you tried to save him. I didn't know you then, but that made no difference to you. And now when you find an opportunity to help save a man's life, you never flinch."

"Why, it's the natural thing to do."

"Is it? I was beginning to think selfishness was the natural thing," he said, with a hard, twisted smile.

She rested her hand on his sleeve for an instant. A smile and a shake of her head accompanied the action.

"I know better than that, Lee Bryant," she rejoined. "You're not selfish yourself and will never arrive at a time when you'll believe what you said."

"But there are selfish people, many of them."

"Yes. Of course."

"And one can't change them, and they cause infinite anxiety in others——"

"Yes; that, too. Has Mr. Menocal been troubling you in some new way?"

Lee rose hastily. "I wasn't thinking of him," said he; and he went to a window and stared out at the engineers' shack across the street. Her touch on his arm, her tone, her solicitude, agitated him more than he dared let her see. Why in the name of heaven couldn't he have a Ruth who was like her? A Ruth who was a Louise, with all of her lovable qualities and splendid courage and fine nobility of heart?

He swung about to gaze at her. She yet sat half turned in her seat so that her clear profile was before his eyes. Her soft chestnut hair glinted with gleams of the fire that escaped through a crack in the door. Her features were in repose. Something in her attitude, in her face, gave her a girlish appearance, as she might have looked when sixteen—an infinite candor, an innocence and simplicity, that alone comes from a serene spirit.

Presently he discovered that she had moved her head about, that she was looking straight at him. Bryant experienced a singular emotion.

"Some serious trouble is disturbing you," she said.

Her eyes continued fixed upon his, increasing his uneasiness. He felt himself flushing. He made a gesture as if whatever it was might be disregarded, then said, "Yes."

"You're not still anxious concerning me? I'm rested—see!"

She sprang up, casting off the rug and spreading her arms wide for his scrutiny. The heat of the fire had put the glow into her cheeks again; a smile rested on her lips; she seemed poised for an upward flight.

"I'll take you home," he said, abruptly.

"Oh, no. I can ride——"

"One of the boys will bring your horse to you in the morning," he continued, as if she had not spoken. "It would be dark before you reached home; dusk is already at the windows. And you would be chilled through. You've no business to be riding after what you've been through. I'll bring my car to the door while you're putting on your things."

A vague fear sent him out of the door quickly. Ruth in his mind was like a figure projected far off in the landscape, occupied, distant, facing away; but Louise Graham was by, and despite his wish or will, or her knowledge, drawing his heart. What he had sought in Ruth was in her

possession, the possibility of happiness. Life had deluded him and seemed about to crush him in a savage clutch. As he moved along the street, this apprehension lay cold in his breast; he could not dismiss it; it persisted like a dull throb of pain. A sudden fury swept him. The place was becoming intolerable, the mesa a hell. He burned to chuck the whole wretched business.

When he returned with the car he was at least outwardly calm. He helped Louise into the seat.

"I'll have you home in no time," said he.

"And you must stay for supper."

"Yes; why not. Might as well."

"And we'll pick up the girls; all of us can crowd in here somewhere."

The slightest pause followed before his answer.

"Certainly," he said. "We can all ride."

Imogene's cabin, however, was the only one showing a light when they stopped before the pair of little houses, and only Imogene was at home. She was delighted to go with Lee and Louise. Ruth had driven with Charlie Menocal to Kennard earlier in the afternoon, she briefly stated. Then she remarked:

"Aren't you dissipating frightfully to-night, Lee?"

"Like a regular devil," was the response.

CHAPTER XIX

ToC

Imogene had been startled by a note in Lee's answer to her bantering question that she never before had heard him use. Though his words were uttered lightly, there nevertheless was a hard ring to them, a grate, as if his teeth were on edge. Something had happened. Ruth had driven during the afternoon to see him and returned exceedingly put out. If anything had occurred, Imogene hoped it was—well, one certain thing.

When Bryant brought her home that evening, he went with her into her cabin. In silence he built up the fire, fussed for a time with the lamp-wick, lighted a cigarette, took a turn across the cabin, inspected thoughtfully the back of one hand, and then lifted his gaze to Imogene. She had been waiting, with a vague alarm. And this his stern visage and burning eyes increased.

"Will Ruth marry me at once, do you think?" he questioned. "To-morrow—or the next day?" His tone was calm. He might have been speaking of the cabin, asking if it kept out the wind.

Imogene was dumbfounded by that voice and that inquiry. She had expected anything but either.

"Not then; not so soon, I suspect," she said, at length.

"When? At the end of a week, the end of a fortnight?"

"I can't say," she replied with a sensation now of being harried. This would not do; she must get herself in hand. "The fact is, Lee, I'm not in Ruth's confidence. Haven't been for some considerable time. We've drifted a little apart."

"Only a little?"

"Only a little—I hope."

The cigarette Bryant held had gone out. Presently he glanced at it, then crushed it in his palm and dropped it into a coat pocket.

"Don't fence with me, Imogene," he said. "Give me the truth."

The truth—well, why not? He was entitled to it. Besides, since he had eyes and a brain with which to reason he was not ignorant of the girls' waning friendship. Pretense was foolish. Imogene leaned forward in her seat and rested her crossed arms upon her knees, directing her look at the floor. Her fluffy golden hair had been slightly disarranged when she removed her hat and so remained. Her face was thinner than in the summer, with a pinched aspect about her lips.

"The situation is this," she began, slowly. "Ruth and I are not really on good terms and we've been perilously near a break several times. But I've restrained my temper and my tongue to avoid one, because I feel I must remain as long as she does. No, I can't leave her here alone—that would be brutal. And ruinous for her, too. I've thought it all out pretty carefully. You see, we both agreed to stay when we came, until we agreed to go or had proved up on our claims. Probably I don't make myself very clear to you. I think now that I made a mistake and that neither of us ought ever to have attempted homesteading. So much has happened that is different from what I

anticipated. Not the existence itself; I don't mean that. Other things. Ruth's change, chiefly. See, Lee, I speak frankly, for we've usually been frank toward each other. You two are engaged, but"—she straightened up in order to meet his eyes—"she's treating you abominably and shamelessly. Ordinarily, I would hold my peace, I've held it hitherto, but I can no longer. Why, I choke sometimes! Going constantly with Gretzinger, who's so despicable that he tries to use her as a tool to reach and corrupt you, or Charlie Menocal, who's your out-and-out enemy, it's too much for me, Lee. And uncle and aunt are furious with me for staying. She listen to me? Ruth listens neither to me nor any one." She rose and came close to Bryant. "You're right to marry her immediately. If you two love each other, that is." Her look was penetrating, questioning. "For she needs a restraining influence. People in Kennard are talking——"

"My God!" Bryant cried, hoarsely. "No, no; not Ruth! She couldn't do anything wrong!"

"No, there's nothing bad. But she has given grounds for gossip, she and some other girls. She sees too much of this Gretzinger and Charlie Menocal and men like them; and the time may come when I'll tremble. I've begged her to be discreet and considerate of your good opinion and love, but she always declares that she's acting eminently proper. Lee."

"Yes."

"There's something more. Gretzinger's not only finding amusement in her company, he's in love with her. After the women he's been accustomed to in New York, the rouged and jaded type he naturally would know, her freshness and spirits appeal to him. But you know what sort of man he is—cynical, unscrupulous, without principles."

A long time passed before Bryant made a response. He stood knitting his brows, as if preoccupied. Imogene wondered if he had been following her at the last.

"I'll speak to him about his principles in connection with Ruth," he said. The utterance was amazingly dispassionate. Then quite unexpectedly he remarked, "I've never yet had to kill a man, never as yet."

Imogene shuddered, and she was terrified. It was as if a curtain had been jerked aside disclosing figures grouped for tragedy.

"It must never come to that," she breathed.

Bryant stirred, then began to look about the room. He grew observant.

"This is bad for you, Imogene," he said, presently. "Impossible! Your uncle is right. This wretched cabin doesn't keep out cold or wind; you have to chop wood and carry water, tasks beyond your strength; you're lonely, you're ill at times—"

"And Ruth?"

"Well?"

"You know her situation. Financial, I mean."

"I less than any one know it. Extraordinary, too, now that I think of it," he said, reflectively. "What is her situation?" Immediately he added, "Of course, I guess that she has no great means and she has said that she lacks training to earn a livelihood. But her family?"

"She lived with an aunt until she came here, Lee."

"So she mentioned."

"They didn't get on well together after Ruth went to stay with her on her parents' death," Imogene explained. "The woman was narrow-minded and exacting, especially in matters of amusements and religion. You know the type." Bryant nodded. "And Ruth was young, exuberant, and, as I now see, wilful. Their clashes were the cause of her desire to come West. We had been good friends, but not intimates; and I marvel at myself now at having gone so rashly into a thing like this, without inquiring whether our habits, tastes, desires, natures, everything, fitted us for prolonged companionship. Yes, I marvel." She sat motionless, staring at the lamp fixedly. "However, I'm in it now up to my neck. Ruth declares that she will never return to her aunt."

"And she can't earn a living."

"Nor would if she could, I fear," Imogene added, a little sadly. "At least, now. It would be too dull."

"Then I must marry her at once."

Imogene gave him a strange look.

"She is waiting," said she.

"For marriage?"

"No, to see how you succeed. Oh, to have to say these things is dreadful, Lee!" she exclaimed. But Bryant brushed this aside with a gesture almost august in its indifference. "If you finish your project on time, she will be ready for the ceremony," the girl went on. "If you fail, she'll postpone it until you're able to provide more than just a roof, a chair, and a broom. Her very words! Love must not prevent people from being practical, from her viewpoint. So, as I say, she's waiting to discover the outcome." A corner of her mouth twisted up while she paused. Then she concluded in a low voice, "And probably something else."

Bryant had again fallen into study. Imogene doubted if he had heard her added remark, and she could not divine from his countenance how fierce or in what direction his covered passion was

beating.

"It will be too late," said he, suddenly and, as it seemed to her, irrelevantly.

Then she thought that she understood.

"He's going home in a few days, for the Christmas holidays," she stated. "Possibly then Ruth will—I'm planning for us all to be at uncle's, you with us."

"Gretzinger wasn't in my mind."

"You said 'too late'," she pursued. "Naturally I supposed your reference to be of them."

The gravity of his face deepened.

"I was thinking of myself," said he, turning his eyes upon her. "If we're not married soon, very soon, it will be too late. I mean that it would be a mockery. For me, at any rate. One may wish to go one way, and be swept another, especially when the mooring line is slack." His breast rose and fell at a quick, agitated breath. "But promise me that you'll not speak of this to Ruth."

"The very thing to bring her round, perhaps."

"More likely to fill her with despair."

This was something Imogene could not grasp. It was so inexplicable, so extravagant, so perverse, that her cheeks grew hot.

"I can't follow you at all," she cried, indignantly. "Ruth alarmed, jealous, in doubt—yes, I can credit her with any one of those feelings. But despair! She lays her plans too far ahead to be led into despair."

"Even if she knew I had ceased to love her? When she understood our marriage would be a hollow ceremony?"

"Would it be that if you succeed with your project?"

Bryant's eyes blazed suddenly.

"Great God, you talk as if she were to marry the canal!" he exclaimed. He glowered for a time. "I see now what you mean. You believe she would marry me if I win out with the ditch. Being practical, she would accept money as a substitute for love. That reminds me: she herself once declared that if circumstances necessitated she could take a rich man for his riches." Bryant uttered a harsh laugh. "My Lord, I was frightened lest in a fit of anguish at losing my love she should go to the devil!" Again he yielded to an outburst of laughter that made Imogene shudder. "I fancied that at finding herself out of money, unable to work, disinclined to work, unloved, miserable, she would recklessly hurl herself into perdition. And I was going to save her from that, marry her at once, sacrifice myself! Like an egotistical fool! When all the while there was never the slightest danger or need, when all the while she held the string, not I. And love isn't a consideration whatever. And she will marry me when I've completed the project. And complete it I must, of course. Not a way out, not a single loop-hole. Oh, my Lord, my Lord, Imogene, did you ever know of anything so devilishly laughable!" And his bitter, sardonic merriment broke forth anew.

The girl was appalled. All she could do was to gasp, "Oh, Lee, Lee! Don't laugh like that, don't think of it like that. You make it out worse than it is."

He stopped short. By his look he might have detested her.

"I state it as it is," he said. "Wherein is the actual situation better?"

"You could break your engagement; certainly she has given you sufficient cause."

"Yes, break with her, as might you. Why don't you?"

Imogene put out a hand in protest.

"You know why, Lee; I've told you," she said, earnestly.

"No more can I, for the same reason," was his reply. He turned and lifted his hat and gloves from the table. "I will have no act of mine cut her adrift and push her under. Much better to stand the gaff. I suppose one hardens to anything in time." His look wandered about the room. "And the diabolic part of it all is that this squeamish feeling of responsibility for another may achieve as much harm in the long run as its lack. Who knows?"

He glanced at her as if expecting an answer. Imogene remained silent; indeed, nothing need be said to so evident an enigma. For that matter, nothing more said at all. Bryant drew on his gloves and bade her good-night. At the door he remarked, quite in his accustomed manner:

"I'll send Dave over in the morning with more blankets and have him chop some wood. There's a drop in the temperature coming."

CHAPTER XX

ToC

The predicted cold weather came, bringing winter in earnest. The frost went deeper into the ground and construction grew slower, but the days continued fine and without gales, those fierce and implacable winds that sometimes rage over the frozen mesa hours at a time under a dull, saffron sun, sharp as knives, shrieking like demons, and driving man and beast to cover. They had not yet been unleashed.

Night work was begun, amid a flare of gasolene torches that gave a weird aspect to the plain. The yellow lights; the moving, shadowy forms of the workmen and horses; the cries and shouts—all made a scene gnome-like in character. Frost gleamed upon the earth in a silvery sheen under the torches' smoky flames. The headquarters building and the mess tents now glowed from dusk until dawn. Fires where workmen could warm their cheeks and hands were burning continually, fed from the great piles of wood brought from the mountains. And so by day and by night, without halt and despite cold, the restless life was maintained and the toil kept going and the hard furrow driven ahead.

With the approach of Christmas the advance of the project was marked. The dam was nearing completion, with its long, gently inclined, upstream face constructed of smooth cobbles—a slope up which any vast and sudden rush of cloudburst water would slide unchecked to the crest and harmlessly pass over. All of the drops, as well as the head-gate and flood weirs, were finished, standing as if hewn out of solid white stone. The miners had blasted out a channel through the reef of rock, and gone. From the dam the canal section all along the hillside and following the ridge, from drop to drop, and out to a point on the mesa a mile beyond, was excavated, a great clean ditch; while from Perro Creek the canal ran northward for six miles to the main camp, curving in the great arc that constituted its line. Three and a half miles, and complements, constructed at one end; six miles at the other. Between, five miles of unbroken mesa. Seven weeks remained for the small camp working down from the north and the great camp pushing from the south to dig through those miles and meet—seven weeks; but in the most bitter season of the year.

It seemed that it was with infinitely greater effort that the two sections of the canals were forced ahead each day. The surface of the ground was like stone, only by repeated attempts pierced by plows and torn apart; while the subsoil immediately froze if left unworked. The weaker labourers began to break: the scrawny Mexicans, the debilitated white men, the drifters and the dissatisfied; and they left the camps. These the labour agencies found it harder and harder to replace as the cold weather persisted, so that the force showed a considerable diminishment.

A few days before Christmas Gretzinger paid Bryant a visit. He had not been to camp for a week and therefore on this occasion examined the progress of work with care, studying the rate of excavation and calculating the result.

"You'll just about make it through, Bryant, if nothing happens to put a crimp in your advance," he stated when he was about to take his departure from the office, where he and Lee conferred.

"Yes," said Bryant.

"And if anything should happen, then good-bye canal."

"That doesn't necessarily follow," said Lee, calmly.

Gretzinger ignored this reply. He thrust an arm into his fur-lined overcoat and began to draw it on. That evening he was leaving Kennard for New York, and now was desirous of returning to town by noon, where he had a luncheon engagement with Ruth Gardner. He had casually mentioned to Bryant that the girls had gone the day before to the McDonnells for the holidays.

"My people were certainly handed a phony deal here," he remarked shortly, as he buttoned the coat collar about his throat. "Questionable title to the water! Extravagance and poor management! Rotten project all through! If I had lined this thing up, I should have learned what I actually had before a cent was expended. But of course if the thing goes smash, we in the East have to stand the loss; you're losing no cash, you have nothing in it but a shoestring. Well, I'm expecting you to put your back into the job and do no loafing and pull us out of the hole you've got us into."

Bryant's face remained impassive.

"I'll attend to my end," said he, "if the bondholders take care of theirs. They'll have to dig up more cash."

"What's that!"

"More money, I said."

"They'll see you in hell before they do."

"Then that's where they'll look for payment of their bonds. You're not fool enough, are you, to imagine a system can be built in winter and under high pressure for what it could be constructed in summer and not in haste? Strange the idea never occurred to you before—you, Gretzinger, irrigation expert, though you never saw an irrigation ditch till you came West. The sixty thousand dollars from bonds and twenty thousand more I've put with it will be gone sometime next month. Possibly I can stretch it out to the first of February. After that, the bondholders will have to come

forward to save their investment."

Gretzinger unbuttoned his overcoat and sought his cigarette case. His scowl as he struck a match was lighted by vicious gleams from his eyes.

"Why didn't you stop work when you received notification from the state engineer of the Land and Water Board's action?" he demanded. "When you yet had the bulk of the money?"

"I preferred to continue."

"And now you're sinking it all."

"It costs money to move frozen dirt," said Bryant.

"Well, I tell you the bondholders won't put up another penny unless——" The Easterner paused, growing thoughtful. Some minutes passed before he resumed: "There's one condition on which they'll do it, and I'll guarantee their support."

"And the condition?"

"That you surrender your stock to them."

"For the twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars more that will be needed? My shares representing a hundred thousand? And I presume I should have to withdraw altogether."

"Naturally," Gretzinger responded. "I should then take charge."

Bryant's expression exhibited a certain amount of curiosity.

"Do you really think you could finish the ditch on time?" he inquired.

A slight sneer was the answer. Gretzinger was one not given to wasting time with men of Bryant's type.

"How about it? Am I to take back to New York with me your agreement to this?" he asked, curtly.

The other spread his feet apart and hooked his thumbs in his coat pockets and directed his full regard at the speaker.

"You think you have me in a hole, Gretzinger," he said. "You propose to take me by the throat and shake everything out of my pockets and then throw me aside. Well, I'm in a hole, no use denying that. But you haven't me by the throat and you're not going to loot me. If I go broke, it won't be through handing over what I have to you and your gang of pirates, just make up your mind to that."

"Then you intend to wreck this project. A court action will stop that, I fancy."

"The only court action you can demand is a receivership for the company, and not until my money-bag is empty at that," Lee rejoined, coolly. "And the time will expire and the company be a shell before it's granted, at the rate courts move."

The New Yorker considered. Finally he began to re-button his overcoat.

"I'll leave the offer open," said he. "I was uncertain before about returning, but I'll probably do so now. You'll find as the pinch comes that my proposition will look better—and we might pay you two or three thousand so you'll not go out strapped. Besides, if we took over and completed the project, it would save your face; you wouldn't be wholly discredited; you would be able to get a job somewhere afterward. Might as well make the most you can for yourself out of a bad mess. Think it over, Bryant." He set his cap on his head with a conclusive air.

Lee pointed at a chair by the table.

"Sit down for a moment; there's another matter." He crossed to his desk, put his hand in a drawer for something, and came back. "Look at that," he said, tossing a revolver cartridge on the table before Gretzinger.

The man picked it up and turned it over between thumb and finger, examining it with mingled surprise and curiosity.

"What about it?" he questioned.

"I understand you're interested in a certain young lady," Bryant stated, smoothly.

Gretzinger straightened on his seat, flashing his look up to the other's. A sudden tightening of his lips accompanied the action and he ceased to revolve the cartridge he held.

"I'll not discuss my personal affairs with you or——"

"When they touch mine, you will," was the answer.

"Are you jealous?" Gretzinger asked after a pause, with a trace of insolence. "Believe you are. I thought, along with your other shortcomings, you weren't capable of even that. Now that we're talking, I'll say that I've taken Ruth round and found her entertaining. What about it? And I've given her my opinion of the way you've run this work, because she asked for it. I told her that you had botched the business from the beginning. I told her you were unpractical, incompetent, small-gauged, and lightweight, and would make a failure of everything you touched. There you have it all. Well?"

Bryant's brows twitched for an instant.

"I guessed as much." He stood staring in silence at the table, but presently brought himself to attention. "Honour is something you don't understand. So I thought that bullet might focus your

mind on possible consequences."

"What's all this rot!"

Lee leaned forward with his fists resting on the table and his eyes probing Gretzinger's.

"If any harm comes to Ruth through you, that bullet will pay it out," he said, harshly. "You've felt its weight. It's forty-four calibre, plenty heavy enough to do the business. I can smash a potato at thirty paces. One shot is all I shall ask. I won't do any hemming and hawing over the matter, or——"

Gretzinger sprang up.

"See here, Bryant!" he cried.

"Or advertising in the newspapers," the other went on, in a level tone. "I'll attend to your case, quickly and quietly. Here, or in New York, or wherever you are. That's all."

Gretzinger had gone a little pale. He was nervously drawing on his cap.

"Listen to me for a moment——"

"I said that's all. Get out." And Bryant's mien brooked no temporizing.

It was of Lee's nature not to brood on such matters. He had given the warning and must await the issue. Meanwhile, the burden of work and the needs of the project would afford sufficient occupation for his mind.

Christmas came. Bryant had ordered that labour cease for twenty-four hours, as the gruelling fight of weeks had worn down the spirit of the men. A holiday would rest them, while a big turkey dinner and unlimited cigars and pails of candy would put them in a good humour. At dark on the afternoon before the day shift at both camps ceased work, the horses were stabled, the torches left unlighted, the fires along the ditch allowed to die down, and the project was idle. A light skift of snow had fallen during the morning, whitening the earth, but the clouds had passed away, so that the still air and clear sky gave promise of a fine morrow.

Christmas Eve, however, did not lapse without a disturbing incident. About supper time Dave came running to Bryant and Pat Carrigan in Lee's shack. He had seen workmen going furtively into a tent in numbers that aroused his curiosity, and had crept unseen under the lee of the canvas shelter, where, lifting the flap, he beheld in the interior a keg on the ground and a Mexican, by light of a candle, serving labourers whisky in tin cups.

"Whisky in camp!" Lee roared. "Come with me, Pat." The two men, guided by Dave, strode down the street. Before the tent indicated they halted to listen. The shelter glowed dimly; formless shadows stirred on its canvas walls; and from within came low, guarded voices and once a muffled laugh.

Jerking the flaps apart Bryant entered, followed by the contractor. He forced an opening through the group of workmen by a savage sweep of his arms and came to the keg, where the Mexican at the moment was bending down and holding a cup under the spigot. When the man perceived the engineer, he leaped up. The fellow's short, squat figure and stony expression had for Bryant a vague familiarity—that face especially, brown, stolid, brutal, with a fixed, snake-like gaze.

But Lee had no time to speculate on the Mexican's identity. The liquor was the important thing. The man stood motionless, holding in his left hand the half-filled cup that gave off a pungent, sickening smell of whisky; his eyes were intent on the engineer. Behind Lee, Carrigan was already herding the others from the tent.

"Where did you get that stuff?" Bryant demanded. But as the Mexican only shook his head, he changed to Spanish. "Trying to start a big drunk here?"

"To-morrow is a fête day, señor," was the reply. "A friend made me a present; I share it with the others. Besides, in cold weather it keeps one warm."

"How long have you worked here?"

"Three days."

"There's a camp order: 'No liquor allowed in camp.' You can't say that you don't know it, for it's posted everywhere on placards in English and in Spanish."

He received no response. A faint shrug of the shoulders, perhaps. The Mexican's glistening, sinister eyes, on the other hand, continued as rigid as orbs of polished agate, and his face as expressionless.

"Well, we'll lock you up and see if we can learn who your 'friend' is that sent this barrel in," Lee stated.

There was a slight movement of the man's elbow.

"Watch him—his right hand!" Pat cried, sharply.

The hand had darted swiftly to the fellow's hip, but Bryant's fist was as quick. It shot up, catching the man's jaw and hoisting him off his feet. Next instant the engineer had disarmed the prostrate ruffian.

"The Kennard jail for you," said he, in English. "A bad *hombre*, eh! Up with you, quick."

But what followed neither the engineer nor the contractor anticipated. With a lightning-like roll

of his body the man vanished under the side of the tent. When the others rushed out in search of him he had made good his escape; and a search through the dark camp would be useless. They therefore emptied the keg upon the ground, extinguished the lamp, and returned to Lee's office. Though the Mexican had got away, they nevertheless had put a foot on the malicious scheme.

All at once Dave, who was walking at Bryant's and Pat's heels up the street, exclaimed:

"I've got that greaser's number now! We saw him once at the depot in Kennard, Lee. He was watching you, remember?"

"I guess you're right; I recall him."

"Bet that old devil in Bartolo put him up to this." Dave asserted.

"Tut, tut, kid! Language like that on Christmas Eve! Charlie might—but not his father, I imagine."

Dave, however, was not altogether to be suppressed.

"Well, I don't put anything past either of them," he sniffed.

CHAPTER XXI

ToC

On Christmas morning the thought occurred to Lee that he had heard nothing more from Imogene of the plan for him to spend the day at the McDonnells', which she had mentioned the night of their talk. Rather strangely, too, he had not received from either of the girls even a note of holiday greeting; to Imogene he had had sent from Denver an edition of Ibsen's plays, and to Ruth a splendid set of furs, both in care of Mrs. McDonnell, who had promised they should be delivered when Santa Claus came down the chimney. Odd, the girls' silence.

He was at work on his accounts at the moment, but now he remained biting the end of his pen-holder and staring through the window. From somewhere in the sagebrush came the sound of shots: Dave potting tin cans with the .22 rifle that had been Lee's gift to him. In the room was only the snapping of the fire. Presently the telephone rang.

"Imo now," he exclaimed. "I'll be hanged if I go down and carry out the farce before the McDonnells."

But the person proved to be Louise Graham.

"I wondered—well, several things," she said, when he had answered. "First, if you had gone away anywhere; next, in case you hadn't, whether you were working; and last, should the camp be resting to-day, if you wouldn't come to Christmas dinner with father and me."

"No work's going on."

"Then we'll be delighted to have you come—and Dave also, of course. There's an especially fattened turkey ready to slide into the oven now. Father has just said, too, to tell you that there's going to be something else—Tom and Jerry. How does that sound?"

"Like a man and a boy coming down the road toward Diamond Creek," Lee answered, with a laugh. "Thank you for your thoughtfulness in remembering us."

"I'll judge how sincere you are by the amount of turkey you eat," she said. "Dinner will be about one o'clock."

"We shall be prompt."

Lee hung up the receiver, then glanced at his watch. It was ten. He reseated himself at his desk and endeavoured to fasten his thoughts upon the entries in the book before him, but at last he exclaimed, throwing down his pen: "Damned if I can or will!" and jumped up, and went to tramping about the office, and when Dave's cat and kitten presented themselves to be stroked, unfeelingly thrust them aside with his boot as he tramped. And when Dave came in, about half-past eleven, the boy found him part way into a clean white shirt, with the cat and the kitten eying him resentfully, and received the order: "Get a move on you; we're going to the Grahams' for dinner. See that you scrub your face, too—and ears!" Which left Dave quite as indignant as the cat, for he always washed his ears.

They arrived at the Graham ranch house shortly after noon, where wreaths of holly, strings of evergreen, and red paper bells created a Christmas atmosphere. Coming from their cold ride into these cheerful rooms and to a warm welcome, the hearts of both man and boy glowed with unaccustomed feeling. And throughout the dinner that followed betimes—during which Mr. Graham's pleasantries and Louise's gay spirits and mirth evoked in Lee a blitheness to which he long had been a stranger and in Dave a state of joyous bliss—they luxuriated in halcyon well-being. After the meal Louise, at her father's suggestion, went to the piano and sang while the

men were smoking their cigars. And then followed an hour at cards, High Five, at which Mr. Graham and Dave won the most games; and then a maid, a Mexican girl, Rosita, brought in a bowl of nuts and raisins for the rancher and the boy who settled themselves for a match at checkers, and Lee and Louise strolled to a window seat at the other end of the long living room.

A delicate pink was in the girl's cheeks. Her eyes were tender under their long lashes; a smile still lingered on her lips. It was as if her countenance, her mind, her spirit, were suffused with the happiness and peace of the hour, of the day.

"My poor one-armed man, how is he?" she asked. "I intended to go see him, but the cold has been so steady that I gave it up. You said over the telephone several days ago that he was doing as well as could be expected."

"Quite out of danger now," Lee replied. "The doctor told him a lady assisted at the operation and now he's full of curiosity regarding you."

"I'll surprise him some day by just walking up to his cot and saying: 'Good morning, how's my patient?' The day I'm going to pick is the next one you move camp: I want to see how all those tents and shacks and everything rise up on their feet and travel."

"You shall," he stated, with a laugh. "I'll notify you of the date. About New Year's Day the next migration will occur. You've had your turn at hospital work and now perhaps you wish to try your hand at transportation. I wager you'd make a good camp manager if you took hold of the job."

"Would you revive me a second time if I threatened to faint?" she queried, gayly. "You and Imogene Martin gave me just the right treatment that evening, for you kept my thoughts off the ordeal I'd been through. Next day I was myself, as I told you when you called up."

"I haven't seen you since that day," Lee remarked. "I was really worried that afternoon, you know." And an echo of the anxiety he had suffered sounded in his voice.

Her face showed that she noted it, and it softened.

"And you have so many anxieties, too," said she.

He stirred, then withdrew his gaze from her and directed it out a window. The emotion he had experienced that afternoon when she sat before his fire, when she sat there so frank and so simple-hearted, was rising in his breast again. The breath trembled a little upon his lips. But after a time he felt himself grow calmer.

"I have anxieties, yes," he said, "but so, I suppose, has every man and woman, of his or her own kind and degree. And they aren't the important thing, after all. What has happened in the past, not what may occur in the future, is what really matters. One can't change the past, what's done; especially by one's own act. And if the act was a serious mistake. That's fatal! I see now that failure to accomplish what one sets out to do, as for instance in the building of my canal, may not be ruinous to a man. A man may fail and be quite as able a man as ever, as those who succeed; for human beings can do only so much and no more. Nothing that he has done or not done would alter the result. And he need not take the failure greatly to heart. But voluntary and heedless acts of folly, precipitate and unconsidered leaps in the dark, these indeed are ruinous. Oh, yes, they do the business. They become balls and chains. Leave him no choice or action. If it were only so simple as the game of checkers your father and Dave are playing! When one game is over, they can start another. But there's only one game to life."

"But it is a long one, and changes," Louise said.

She glanced at him. He intended that his words should be taken, she perceived, in a general sense. But the mind always seeks the specific: hers instinctively seized on the particular thorn that had prompted his utterance. Of Ruth Gardner's extraordinary and inexplicable behaviour she had become informed, like everyone else; it at first amazed, then shocked, and finally outraged her sense of decency. It repelled her—but, then, her early attempts at friendship with the other had never advanced. The girl had always been absorbed in her own doings, immersed in pleasure or in plans for pleasure, concerned entirely with the friends she had, and, unlike Imogene, received Louise's calls and approaches at cordiality with an indifference that withered all feeling. With the passing of time Louise had considered Lee's course in relation to the girl as a cause for wonder. The engineer was singularly patient, or incredibly obtuse, or marvellously in love. Whichever it was, her heart stirred with pity. He deserved better, he deserved the best. As for Ruth Gardner, she could now only think of her with a hot resentment that set her lips quivering; and she was moved at moments by a profound desire to express her sympathy to him and to give that warm encouragement his spirit on occasion must need. But she must refrain.

At his speech her conclusions, but not her feelings, underwent a sharp revision. The revelation startled her. He had not been obtuse. He no longer was marvellously in love with Ruth Gardner, nor in love with her at all. Relief followed surprise in her mind, the relief that comes at a fear unrealized, a disaster avoided. Disaster had been precisely what she had sensed if not thought, since a union of two persons whose natures were as utterly different, as essentially opposed, as Lee's and Ruth's would inevitably lead to disillusionment, antagonism, sorrow, havoc. That his eyes at last were open was a blessing.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked, all at once.

She found his eyes full upon her.

"Of what you had said," she responded. "And at this minute I'm speculating on whether anything—one's decisions, or acts, or sentiments—are ever quite conclusive or final. Or fatal, too,

as you said. We might possibly except murder and suicide." She smiled as she mentioned this reservation.

Lee shifted his position with a trace of impatience.

"I'm not a pessimist," he exclaimed.

"No, you're too active to be. Pessimism is at bottom a kind of mental indolence, I'd say—an unpleasant kind."

"Some matters are not solved by action," said he. "That is, when they are out of one's hands and in another's."

Her attention was caught by those words, and she hung on them for a little. They distressed her; they caused her to understand the forced immobility of his face as he spoke, and wish that he would give way to his feeling. The phrase "out of one's hands and in another's" referred undoubtedly to Ruth Gardner. She did not trust herself to speak.

"What became of all those flowers that were in your garden last summer?" he asked, suddenly. "Do you dig up the roots, or cover them, or let them freeze? You have no idea how many times these cold days the recollection of that hour with you last summer when we walked among them recurs to me. It seems ages ago, however. That was one of the happy days, Louise."

A delicate tint of pink stole into her face. For to her also the day had been one of happiness, as clear-cut in her memory as a cameo. The thought that it and she had been dwelling in his mind produced in her breast an unaccountable agitation. The coral pink in her cheeks deepened to a flush; she lowered her eye-lashes and averted her look.

"The flowers are banked with straw, the perennials," she said, to prevent a silence.

"I shall come and see them when they're blooming again," he stated. "The more I recall them, the more beautiful it seems they were—yes, and the orchard, too, and the grassy canals, and the sunshine that day. And you in the picture—the centre of the picture, Louise. The impressions one retains that stand out vividly in the mind are few: that is one of the number for me. But perhaps not for you."

"Oh, for me also," she exclaimed.

Bryant stared at her round forearms and hands lying on her lap, but without observing them. He had marked the quick sincerity of her response. It affected him as would her soft hand-clasp. He began to glance restlessly about the room.

The dusk of the early winter night was at hand. It had thickened in the corners and over where Mr. Graham and Dave were meditating their game in silence. The flames crackling in the fireplace intensified the forming shadows. Lee recognized that it was time to be going. Nevertheless, he continued to linger for a while, with his eyes sometimes resting on his companion in enjoyment of her face, engaged in thought, experiencing a contentment in merely being in her presence.

"This will be another of those days," he at length remarked, in a musing tone.

His words aroused her from her own reflections.

"One for winter as well as for summer," she said, raising her look. "Did I seem to be dreaming when you spoke? I was doing scarcely that; my mind was lulled; the quiet—the twilight—Christmas Day—they bring a soothing mood."

"Something that in a world of money, money can't buy," Lee said. He appeared about to make a further remark, but failed to do so. His thoughts, however, had gone off somewhere, Louise observed. Then he inquired in a matter-of-fact way: "When will you ride up to camp again?"

"Not until it grows warmer. Twelve miles or more is rather too far for a canter on a sharp day."

He cast his eyes about at the strings of evergreen and the suspended red bells and holly wreaths.

"I'll run down again, if I may, before the holidays are over," said he. "If only for another look at those things. They give a fellow a pull—out of the ditch, so to speak." And he rose.

"Come, by all means," Louise replied, with a nod.

CHAPTER XXII

ToC

A week of twenty-below-zero weather opened the month of January and halted work on the mesa. At that time four miles of canal remained to be dug. Bryant and Pat Carrigan sat by the stove in Lee's shack and waited, as the whole camp waited, for the thermometer to rise. On one

of these mornings, when Dave had gone across the street to the engineers' building, Lee informed the contractor that company funds were not far from exhausted and related his talk with Gretzinger before the latter's departure for New York.

"So he would squeeze you out," Pat remarked. "What you might expect from him, nothing more! I've had the notion for some time that your cash was getting low, from the way the money has gone."

"I've spent five thousand on engineering, medical, and general accounts," Lee stated, "twenty thousand on concrete work, and paid you forty thousand. I've fifteen thousand left from the sale of bonds and a personal loan I obtained from McDonnell. That will pay for about two weeks' work. And I think we've made every dollar go as far as it would under the circumstances."

"My word for that."

"It's this little trick of Menocal's that's burning up good coin. Sixty thousand would have built the project ordinarily; my estimates were correct enough. But having to do the job in this infernal weather is what's raising the cost forty thousand more. I feel like entering in the ledger 'To account of frost—$40,000.00.' Like that." Lee scribbled the line on a sheet of paper and handed it to Pat. "But there's one thing sure, I'll sink the last cent I have in the ground before I quit and let those Eastern pirates get their claws into me. I'll have you cut down your force if necessary and string the last dollar and last day's work out till my three months' grace is up."

"Might try McDonnell for another loan," Carrigan suggested.

"I hate doing that worse than anything I know. He, not the bank, let me have that twenty thousand on my unsecured note. I had nothing to offer but my stock in this company, and until the project's finished that's no better than so much blank paper. Loaned it to me because of my nerve, he said. And at the time I told him it would be enough money to carry me through, which I believed. Now to go back to him again——" Lee stopped, with an expression of deep chagrin upon his face.

Pat tapped the dottle from his pipe and refilled the bowl. He glanced once or twice at the engineer during the act.

"You can make a better showing now than before," said he. "Four miles more and you'll be to the good. One of the excitements of construction enterprises, and of irrigation projects in particular, I've observed, is the financing. The more often a man can go and pull his backers' legs for cash, the better financier he is. It seems to be largely a matter of keeping at them, talking them to death, wearing them out, until they weaken and hand over the money. More than one railroad was built that way. Try it on McDonnell."

"You come with me."

"No, thank you," said Pat, with vigour.

"I thought you wouldn't," said Lee.

He took Carrigan's suggestion, however, and went down through the bitter cold to see the banker. But the visit was fruitless. The bank could not make the loan, and money being tight because of first of the year settlements, McDonnell was not in shape to make it personally, nor would be in time to render any assistance. He was perfectly willing, he said, to gamble another twenty thousand on Bryant's ability to win through, but he did not have the cash. Then he went on to say that Imogene had been suffering from a slight cold, and that Ruth Gardner was visiting at present with other friends in Kennard.

Lee had had a telephone call from each of them the morning after Christmas, thanking him for his gift, and later a letter from Imogene again expressing her appreciation, with a line that a change in Mrs. McDonnell's plans had prevented having him with them on Christmas.

Nothing from either since. He now asked the banker to convey to Imogene his wishes for a quick recovery, then set out for camp. Ruth—he did not even know where in town to look for Ruth, had he been so inclined. Engaged! The thing would have been amusing if it was not so horrible.

"No luck," he said to Pat, briefly, when in his shack warming his chilled body at the fire. "Your system may work in summer, but all the money is froze up at this time of year, like everything else."

At the end of the week the winter's frigid grip on the earth relaxed and a period of mild, almost balmy days followed. Under the noon-day sun the top ground even softened a little. The camps awoke, the rested men and horses fell upon their task with new spirit, and excavation went ahead steadily. If there had been a full force, as Carrigan pointed out, he could have moved at the rate of a mile in six days instead of in eight. Still the canal was being built, yard by yard, rod by rod, until by the middle of January another mile of the total was finished. The two camps were now easily within sight of each other, the larger in the south, the smaller in the north, and but three miles apart across the sagebrush. Moreover, the last stones of the dam had been laid; it stood completed; and the men who had been engaged there moved down to add their strength to the north camp.

One day toward noon Lee entered his office and to his amazement found Ruth seated there, glancing over an old magazine and toasting her feet at the stove. The furs he had given her reposed on his desk, where she had laid them aside. At his entrance she sprang up, uttered a delighted exclamation, and rushing forward clasped her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"Lee, how good it seems to see you!" she said. "After so long! And I can't thank you enough for those darling furs! I've thought of you so much, working up here in the cold and alone with just men. My, your face is like ice! Come to the fire. Poor thing, you look so thin and tired! I hope that soon you'll be able to rest; I'll make it a point to see that you do take a long vacation and rest, for you need it." She concluded with a hug and another kiss.

"Go easy with my ears, Ruth," he said, disengaging her arms. "They were nipped the other night and are still tender. How did you get here? I thought you were in Kennard."

He led her back to her seat and began to remove his cap and long sheep-lined overcoat, saying in an undertone that the weather was really too warm for the things. Afterward he posted himself by the stove near her, where he stuffed his pipe with tobacco and began to smoke, while his eyes considered her face.

"Imo and I returned to Sarita Creek yesterday," she remarked, with an air of satisfaction. "It was good to be back, too. There has been so much going on at Kennard that I felt quite worn out; one becomes weary of too much buzzing around. I don't want any more of it for some time. And I missed you dreadfully, Lee!" She flashed up a smile at him, caught his hand for an instant, and gave it a squeeze. A thin stream of smoke issued from one corner of Bryant's mouth at the action. "The people were proving somewhat tiresome also. So as the weather had moderated Imogene and I decided to return to our cabins."

"Has she recovered from her cold?" Lee inquired, raising his look to the ceiling.

"Oh, yes; entirely. And we're quite comfortable. We had even thought of having our ponies brought from the stable at Bartolo, so that we could ride if it grew still milder."

"Risky."

"Well, you're probably right." She paused and scrutinized her toes to see that they were not scorching. "Charlie brought Imo and me here on his way home; you can take us back to our cabins when we're ready to go."

"Imo here?" Bryant's eyebrows lifted.

"Over in the shack Dave called 'the hospital.' Dave was here when we came and Imo asked him to take her to the place; she had heard something of an injured man from Louise Graham. Did Louise really help during an operation?" Lee nodded. "Well, she's odd in many ways. Must be—what shall I say?—a little thick-skinned not to mind blood and all the rest of it. And she doesn't go about much; not at all with the real crowd at Kennard, only with a slow one when she does go. With her father well off, I'd think she would want to be doing something worth while. Charlie's still mad for her, but Gretzie thought after he met her at our cabins that she was too self-conceited. When he asked her if the men of New York, compared with Western men, didn't impress her with superiority and smartness of dress, she said, 'Not those of my acquaintance; they don't try to impress one; it isn't done in their circle, you know. That's one of the differences in manners, I suppose, that distinguishes Fifth Avenue from Broadway.' Gretzie was furious. He had been speaking of Broadway shows and restaurants and things at the time. He declared later that a little attention had turned her head, and that what she had said was all rot. I don't care for her, either. But let us talk of ourselves, Lee."

"Yes, that's more interesting," he remarked, with an accent of irony that escaped her.

He was curious to learn what this talk was leading to. His curiosity outweighed the irritation he felt at her calm ignoring of the past weeks, at her complacent assumption of his love, at the kiss and the caress she had bestowed, indeed, at her very presence in the room.

"Tell me everything about your work and about yourself," she said, folding her hands and gazing up at him. "I'm so impatient to hear."

"Nothing worth relating has occurred," he replied.

"You've been well?"

"Oh, quite. This is a regular health resort."

"And you're not working too hard?"

"For a whole week I scarcely stirred from the stove," said he.

"I'm so glad. You had earned a rest. You don't seem worried about anything, either."

"Worried?" His intonation was that of surprise. Then he added, as if by after-thought, "Oh, no."

"How relieved I am! I feared you might be worrying your head off about difficulties—cold weather, the time limit set, perhaps money matters. I gained the impression somewhere that you might run short before you finished; I can't just say where I got it. From Imo, perhaps. Nothing definite, you know. But it's so nice to know that you're no longer anxious. That means you're sure you'll build the ditch. How much more is there to do?"

"You can see the north camp out of that window."

Ruth rose and went to the window indicated, where she stood surveying the men and teams at work beyond the camp and the stretch of sagebrush extending to the white specks of tents in the distance.

"That's all that's left to do, Lee?"

"That's all. Three miles."

"Charlie Menocal hasn't said anything about it lately."

"Knowing Charlie, I'm amazed," he commented.

Ruth resumed her seat and proceeded to toast her toes anew. Her glances from time to time were directed at Lee's countenance somewhat speculatively. Several times she smoothed her dress with slow attention. Lee continued his deliberate smoking.

"Well, it's a great comfort to know that you're well and that everything is proceeding so brightly," she stated, at length. "You must take time to run down and see me, now that I'm back. I'm not going to be satisfied with anything less than almost every evening with you. Bring along one of those nice engineer boys for Imogene while we talk."

Lee gave a shake of his head.

"Don't count on me," he said. "We're doing night work as well as day. We're near the end. Have to push the job. Little time to spare." He jerked the phrases forth shortly, one after another.

"Do try to come once in a while, though," she responded, gazing about the room in a way that gave her speech a perfunctory character. That, at any rate, was the impression made upon Lee; and he continued to puzzle his brain as to what underlay it all—what motive, what object. At the same time he was sickened by the suave interest she pretended, by her shallow insincerity. "I've wondered if I could be of any help here to you," she went on. But a sharp movement on his part caused her to say, "Still, I know a man doesn't like a girl messing up his work. That's one reason I've been careful not to propose it before, or even to make the demands on your time that some girls would have made. I'll be glad when the project is out of the way; then we can begin to plan for ourselves." She cast her eyes upward at space. "There are lots of things to decide—where to live, and so on. You come soon and we'll set some of them down on paper for consideration."

Lee could not escape that feeling of perfunctoriness in her twitter of talk. It went no further than that, however; he had no chagrin or repugnance or anger at the thin duplicity, not even at her complacent confidence in his stupidity and infatuation. For to count on his being blind to the past and deluded by her words, she could only believe him both stupid and infatuated. He was quite calm. His actual state of mind was, more than anything else, one of detachment. He imagined that he had come to a point where she was incapable of arousing in him any kind of sentiment or passion.

Presently she took up her furs and walked humming about the office as she adjusted them.

"I'd like to stay all day, but must be going," she said. "Imo and I were wondering, by the way, if you could send us a man with some tar-paper to line our cabins."

"Of course. I'll send him after dinner. And he can chop you some wood and bring your water."

She stood for a little examining a blue-print tacked on the wall.

"That's like the one Mr. Gretzinger sometimes carries," she remarked. "I suppose he'll be returning one of these days. Not that it matters; he was tiresome at times, like Charlie Menocal." She studied the lines of the map attentively. "He appeared anxious to get to New York. Said something about a sweetheart there. You'll be glad if he doesn't come back to bother you again, won't you, Lee dear?" She swung about, laughing.

"Oh, he'll show up."

"I wasn't sure; he said he thought not."

Lee emptied and put away his pipe.

"He'll come," was his assured reply.

"Then he must have been 'kidding' me."

Her thoughtful air returned. She picked a raveling from her sleeve, and stroked her fur, and inspected the tips of her gloves, and untied and retied the strings of her cap—all with an inscrutable face. Then suddenly her mind appeared to be made up.

"Well, dear, run and bring your car and we'll pick up Imogene," she said, giving him a quick pat on the cheek.

Lee experienced an inward and involuntary shrinking at that touch. He no more could have returned the caress than he could have risen off the ground into the air, like those floating figures depicted in sacred paintings. After all, she was quite capable of stirring a sentiment in his heart—a sentiment of aversion.

"Go join Imo," he replied. "One of the boys will bring the car to the hospital and take you home. Impossible for me to drive you there to-day."

That was it—impossible, literally impossible, for his whole being was in revolt. The threshold of the door might have been a dead-line; he was unable to cross it, at any rate. With a stony aspect he watched her depart and wave a hand back at him from a distance and at last disappear. Then he closed the door and leaned his head against it, with his features drawn in an expression of pain and desperation. His position was diabolical. She meant to hold him to his word; she believed he loved her; and, anyway, she had him fast in a coil. Yes, she had him fast. And he did not love her, not at all. On the contrary, he detested her—detested her with all his heart, almost to hatred, utterly.

CHAPTER XXIII

ToC

"Will you be so kind as to come here?" Mr. Menocal inquired of Bryant.

It was an afternoon in late January, and the banker, bundled in a great overcoat and numerous rugs, had reined his team to a halt at the spot where he found the engineer. The air was cutting. Steam in sharp jets came from the nostrils of his pair of bays, as from those of the horses straining at the plows and scrapers in the stretch of partially excavated canal near by.

Lee went forward to the buggy, slapping his gloved hands together to quicken their circulation.

"What do you want of me, Mr. Menocal?" he asked. "You're picking a frosty day to look at the scenery."

"Well, there's a matter that's been troubling my mind for some time and I decided to let it go no longer. We have our differences, Mr. Bryant, but I wouldn't wish you to believe me responsible for a number of annoyances to which you've been put. I am a gentleman; I fight fair. For instance, I was quite within my rights in suggesting those men take homesteads down yonder along the base of the mountains, though I was wrong in my guess. Also, in taking advantage of the law under which you were limited by the Land and Water Board, I wasn't stepping out of bounds. But I've learned that some time ago a man introduced whisky into camp against your rules, and I wish to tell you that I knew nothing of it at the time and would countenance no sort of disgraceful act like that."

"I judged that you wouldn't," said Lee.

"Then again last summer someone killed your dog, I understand. That was a bad deed. I am fond of dogs, and had I been able to learn who did it I should have informed you so that you could have had Winship arrest him. Since that time, too, there have been other things, many of them—men cutting your telephone wire, removing your survey stakes, and the like. All making you angry. Well, I was angry when I heard that those things were being done. Resorting to questionable and criminal tactics against any man is the worst possible course a person can follow. I do not do it in your case; I will prevent any one else from doing it if I can. You have the right to work undisturbed."

"I never connected you with these underhanded acts," the engineer stated.

"Thank you, Mr. Bryant. It pleases me to hear you say that. I should like to see you lose your water right, of course; it would mean much money in my pocket; but I'll not do contemptible things or crooked things to get possession of it."

Lee glanced at the speaker's face. It was sincere, earnest, and now relieved. He felt an increase of respect for the man, opponent though he was. Menocal appeared, to be sure, unable to comprehend the ethics involved in seeking to thwart Bryant, but he was scrupulous and honourable within his understanding. Far more so than Gretzinger, for instance. Or Charlie Menocal. The thought of the banker's son pulled Bryant up. Should he mention his conviction that Charlie was the instigator of the mischief discussed? As he was still in doubt when his visitor turned the subject, he let it rest.

"The way you're going ahead with your canal, I'm afraid that my chance of retaining the water is poor, very poor," Menocal said, with a lugubrious sigh. He drew his fat chin deeper into his coat collar, tugged at the ice on his big white moustache, and ran his eyes up and down the long line of moving teams. "And it will cost me a lot of money." Again the sigh. "I didn't think you could do it; I didn't think any man in the world could do it. In cold weather, in ninety days! I said it was impossible. Charlie said it was impossible. Everyone said it was impossible."

"Everyone except my contractor and me," Lee interjected, smiling a tight smile.

The other nodded. "Except you, yes. And you're showing us that after all it's not impossible. I shall never say again that anything is impossible. If I ever have a big ditch to build, I shall insist, Mr. Bryant, that you take charge. Then I would say, 'I should like to have it built so and so, and by such a time,' and sit down at my desk and think no more of it, knowing it would be built."

Bryant laughed softly. He could not help doing so. That naïve avowal from the one whom he considered his chief enemy tickled his fancy. And presently Menocal, catching the humour of it, himself began to smile.

"I shouldn't be surprised if we have had a misconception of each other," Lee stated.

"Ah, *cielos!* That is nothing less than the truth. What a pity, too, my young friend, that we could not have found it out earlier. Our affair, perhaps—we might have reached a satisfactory agreement. This winter work, it is costing you something."

"A good many extra thousand."

"And, alas, costing me even more! But it is too late now." He made a tragic gesture. "It has gone too far. Within two or three weeks it will be settled one way or the other. For you if the weather remains good; for me if the weather becomes stormy." He again studied the moving horses along the canal. "For me then—perhaps. You might not allow even a great storm to stop you, in some way. This winter is remarkable; there seem to be no storms to happen. You're very lucky."

"Yes, I am in that respect."

"Well, I've done all that I shall do in the matter. I've become quite calm, fatalistic. There's nothing else to be." He gathered up his reins.

"That's a good team you have," Lee remarked.

"Of the very best. I disliked to use them in this cold, but Charlie had gone with the car to Kennard. Va! He is never at home any more. It would be well if I made him drive a team on your ditch."

"Send him along; I'll give him a job," Lee said.

The banker shook his head.

"He would say I was crazy and he wouldn't come. He doesn't even attend to matters that require attention. This winter he has been running too much with idle men in town and spending money as if it took no effort to get it, as if it could be picked off of weeds. It's very perplexing. I am too easy with Charlie, I let him have his way too much. I should put him in a pair of overalls for a while and say, 'You are going out with a band of sheep; you have to work.' Several times I've made up my mind to do that, but when the moment came I couldn't say it. He isn't robust, he has always had the best of everything, and he's been educated in a college."

"Cut off his allowance and take away his automobile. He would stay at home and attend to business then," Lee offered.

"But it would shame him. He isn't a little boy any longer; he's thirty years old. The trouble is that he isn't like me, particular and careful; he's wild and impatient and reckless. His mother wasn't that way, I am not that way—I don't know where he got that nature."

Menocal senior drove off and Bryant turned back to his work. The pity of the thing was, as the banker had stated, that they had been hasty in the beginning, that they had not sought to come to an understanding, some arrangement. It was another mistake. To Lee his whole past here was beginning to appear a record of oversights, incredible misjudgements, blinded blunders, and ghastly mistakes.

CHAPTER XXIV

ToC

Ghastly mistakes! Some cynic has said the only mistake in life a man can make is "to go broke." Bryant did not realize until afterward the irony lurking in the penumbra of the talk with Menocal. He was broke, unable to proceed, even while he listened to the banker's commendation. The workmen were busy, it was true, and the horses were pulling loaded fresnos, and plows were cutting the trench deeper; but that was an expiring motion, a last falling gesture. Only a few wretched dollars lay at the bottom of the money chest. A day more, and Menocal would have won.

That evening Lee climbed in his car and drove away from camp. Carrigan had said nothing, but he as well as Bryant knew the company's bank account was drained; he would expect a settlement and when it was made, discharge the crews, pull up stakes, and move his property to Kennard. At Sarita Creek Bryant alighted.

"I wish to see Ruth," he told Imogene. "Is she away? Her cabin is dark and I obtained no answer to my knock."

"She's gone to town."

"Well, I wanted to tell her I've failed. Work stops to-morrow. Out of money. And less than two miles to build!"

Imogene's face became a picture of dismay.

"Oh, no, Lee! There must be some way to go on, some place to obtain money," she cried.

"None. I've tried, but have reached the end of my rope. Only twenty thousand more needed, or maybe twenty-five. Just enough to hammer through during the next two weeks. But it might as well be a million. I decided to inform Ruth at once; she might consider it important."

"She would," said she, positively.

"I haven't been to Sarita Creek before since you returned. You can guess why."

"Yes."

"Does Ruth suspect that I've ceased to love her?" he asked, frowning.

"I think not. There was considerable talk on her part about being bored with Kennard and how happy she would be when she was married, but it was on the surface. She's really waiting for something I'm not able to divine. I'm reminded when I observe her of a card-player studying a hand before the cards begin to fall."

"Where is she to-night? With Charlie Menocal?"

"With Gretzinger."

"Gretzinger back?"

"Arrived in Kennard this morning. Two days ago Ruth received a letter with a New York post-mark and became very animated. I'm sure she has had none before. Then late this afternoon the man himself appeared here, ate supper with us, and took Ruth off to a concert in town. He said he had business in camp with you to-morrow."

"Ruth's spirits have revived and her retirement has ended," Lee remarked, with sarcasm. "Well, don't say anything about this now to either of them."

"Oh, I'll be long asleep when they return, and I'll not speak of it to Ruth in the morning. She'll not rise before noon, I suspect, as it will be one or two o'clock before they're home. Or she may stay with one of the girls she's chummy with and come up with him to-morrow. Probably that."

Lee made ready to go. He gave Imogene a sardonic smile.

"May the music she hears to-night strengthen her soul for the morrow's smash," he said; and went out.

Where the trail from the cabins debouched upon the main mesa road he slowed the car to a stop and sat for a time in thought, with the engine humming softly and the freezing night air biting at his cheeks. It seemed to make little difference where he went, or if he went at all. Nothing worth while was at the end of any road. His inclination, however, was working and at last he set out for the Graham ranch.

Since his Christmas visit he had made a number of calls there, a rather large number, indeed, considering everything. He had schooled his face and words on those occasions to a passivity he was far from feeling, and had left Louise's presence each time with a greater torment of mind. Now this was the end—of her as of everything so far as he was concerned. To-morrow the project came down in wreckage. Then he should go from Perro Creek, poorer in purse, poorer in spirit, poorer in faith, sore, and bitterly disillusionized.

Louise Graham observed a shadow upon his countenance as she invited him to a seat before the fireplace. Her father was absent and she had been reading a book when Bryant's knock came. She had been wondering, too, if the engineer might not choose this night to call again. How much these calls of his now meant to her she did not dare consider.

"What's wrong, Lee?" she asked at once, anxiously. "I see something has happened."

He moved round on the divan that he might fully face her.

"Everything so far as my affairs go," he replied. "Work stops on the canal to-morrow. That will result, of course, in the water right lapsing and in the ditch never being finished or used, except under the circumstance of my handing over my interest gratis to Gretzinger and the bondholders. If I did that even, I don't believe Gretzinger could finish it on time, for neither Carrigan nor the men would exert themselves for him as they have for me, and they would be sure of their pay in any case. The trouble is, I've used up all the money and can borrow no more. I'm through. And I can't bring myself to the point of surrendering my interest in the company to the bondholders merely to pull them out. They're trying to strangle me in order that they may profit; they could put up the cash needed easily enough if they would; but they count on my yielding. I shall not do so. And so the project fails. Those New Yorkers will wait too long if ever they do put up the funds; and I can do nothing myself. The uncompleted ditch will remain simply a scar on the mesa."

"I never dreamed you were in this strait!"

"No, probably not. One always hopes to the last that somehow—by a credulous belief in one's own letter of credit with Providence, I presume—one will pull through. So I delayed telling you of what was impending."

"If—perhaps father——"

"Your father? No. Above all persons, no. That's a suggestion I can't consider for an instant."

"But what will you do?" she exclaimed, nervously.

Lee glanced at her, then compressed his lips.

"I'm going away; I couldn't stay here on the scene of this disaster. It would be intolerable. Before long people will be describing the unfinished project by the name of 'Bryant's Folly', or the like. Haven't you seen old, windowless structures that were never completed, or grass-grown railroad enbankments never ironed, or rusting mine machinery never assembled? Men's failures, men's 'follies'."

"Lee, Lee! It never will be so!" she cried. "Nor will your project be a failure to me who have

known how you've striven and sacrificed."

Bryant looked past her and about the room, but his eyes in the end came back to hers.

"You have always been generous in your thoughts of me," he said, in an unsteady voice.

"No more than you deserved."

"Listen, Louise," he went on, after a pause. "This is the last time I shall see you for a long time, possibly for all time, and it's of your kindness I wish to speak—and of another matter. Of course, I shouldn't be quite human if I hadn't complained a bit about this blow, but my complaints are done now. I'll possibly do some grimacing to myself hereafter, though. What I came to say is that wherever I go in the future I'll always carry with me as a treasure the memory of your goodness and of your face."

Louise's lips had parted, while the colour slowly receded from her cheeks.

"But we shall see each other," she gasped. "We'll meet, we can keep in touch." After a silence there came in a whisper, "Friends should."

Bryant began to tremble. He turned away from her in order to gaze into the fire. Her low utterance had wrung the chords of his heart; he dared not allow his eyes to continue to dwell upon her face.

"What good in that?" he asked. Then he gave a passionate shake of his head. "The risk for me is too great. I shall seek an engineering billet altogether out of the country, in South America, in Asia, wherever one is open. A job without responsibility, preferably. No, no; I can't remain and play with fire—any longer."

An intense stillness rested in the room after these words. He doubted if Louise even breathed.

"Would it be that?" she asked, at last.

"Of course. Haven't you seen?"

"I—I——" Her voice failed her.

"I could no more help loving you, Louise, after I came to know you, than can the earth its blooming under a summer sun. The thing was inevitable." He was speaking now in a slow, fixed attempt at restraint. "And this love coming when it did, after I was betrothed to Ruth Gardner, is the capping madness of the whole nightmarish situation in which I find myself. 'Nightmarish' isn't an exaggeration, honestly. By all the empty, senseless conventions I ought to seal my lips on my love and to go dumbly away, because I'm engaged to Ruth Gardner." He turned abruptly to her. "Do you think I should?"

Her hands were locked together in a clasp that expelled the blood and left them white. Her regard had the intentness of a stare.

"If you love me, if you're going away—" She suddenly became agitated. "Oh, I am unhappy!" And with a quick movement she bent her head aside.

"Louise, forgive me for causing this distress," he exclaimed.

Without looking about she put out a hand, touched and pressed his. The unexpected act filled Bryant with amazement. He sat gazing stupidly at the hand until she withdrew it. Then he found an explanation.

"You feel compassion for me," he said. "You would." A sound, low, inarticulate, reached him. "It's your kind nature to make some return for my love even if it's not love you can give. Or ought to give! I'm expecting nothing, can expect nothing. That is out of the question. If I were entirely calm and rational, I should doubtless be asking myself why I should speak of my passion instead of trying to tear it out of my heart. But, of course, being in love I'm neither the one nor the other. The only explanation for the impulse to pour out a confession like this is overcharged nerves. Or, after all, is it just unconscious egotism?" His composure had slipped off and his tone had grown savage.

"Don't, don't, Lee! Don't cut at yourself!"

"What was it I had started to say? Oh, yes. I had said I felt no compunction in brushing aside the usual conventions of duty as proscribed for an engaged man. Cobwebs in my case! Why pretend lies? No honour is involved that I can discover. I don't love Ruth, and I think she's incapable of loving me or any one else. She never felt half the affection I did for her, and mine withered quickly, God knows! A dash of passion on my part, and lonesomeness and the belief I should have wealth on her side—there's the salad."

Louise leaned forward a little breathlessly.

"And if she believes you're ruined?" she asked.

"She'll hold me if she thinks she can't do better," Lee responded, bitterly. "I at least beat homesteading."

"Lee!"

Louise had risen. The pallor of her face startled him. Her hands were fast clenched.

"What is it?" he asked, fearfully.

"I can bear this. To have you love me—love me and go away! It will break my heart. To stay here alone!"

The words struck his brain as if they were cast in a fierce glare of light. The suddenness of the knowledge they gave, the revelation they made, left him speechless. Louise loved him in return. The first effect upon his mind was to produce a blank incredulity; he stared at her as if to ascertain whether or not this was in truth she; for though he well knew he possessed her friendship, he had never conceived so fantastic a possibility as that of winning her love. Then a swift exaltation succeeded. He swam in a kind of spiritual ether.

"Louise, Louise, my dear beloved!" he murmured.

He caught her hand, pressed it. She glanced at him without replying, looked away, back again. Her bosom rose and fell with a slow and tremulous movement, as though stirring with deep, soundless sighs. A little smile hovered on her lips, tender, rapturous.

But at length she withdrew her hand, while the soft gladness passed from her face.

"It cannot be; you must go, Lee," she said.

Bryant remembered—and felt the ice forming about his heart. He shivered slightly. The full cruelty of the situation was reached. Ruth Gardner not only held him, but he held her as well by a thread to which she could cling for safety against the blandishments of scoundrels, and her own desires, and the dark uncertainty of the future. And much as he loved Louise Graham, he could not snap that thread; much as he detested Ruth, he lacked the flintiness of heart to let her slip into the abyss. Nor would Louise have it otherwise.

She was seeking his eyes, questioning them.

"Well, this hour is worth it all to me," he said, calmly. "All of the unhappiness of the past, and all the loneliness of the future! I am poor now; in that fact lies what hope I have."

A gentle inclination of her head answered him.

"I am happy to-night, anyway," said she.

"The only thing for me to do is to remain away from you," he answered. "Heaven knows I shall be miserable enough then, but I should grow desperate if I were near."

"I know. We mustn't see each other, Lee dear."

He walked to where his storm coat and cap lay on a chair by the door. In silence he drew on and buttoned the former. She had accompanied him to the spot and watched with moisture on her lashes his preparation for departure. His eyes were lowered while his fingers were engaged with the buttons.

"You should understand about this," he said, grimly. "That man Gretzinger is after her. She has no money, no training to earn money, is crazy for pleasure and attention and clothes. I ought in all decency to break our engagement. She has given me grounds enough. But it's keeping her straight. If I broke it"—his hand dropped to his side and he stood for a moment quite still—"he drags her under." His gaze rose to hers.

"I guessed it long ago," she said, in a choked voice. "And loved you for it." Next instant she leaned forward, took his temples between her hands, and lightly touched his brow with her lips. "Go, go!" she exclaimed, with an accent of despair.

She herself turned and went quickly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV

ToC

Bryant had asked Carrigan to come to the office at two o'clock, stating that the company was insolvent and but enough money remained to square accounts with the contractor. Pat had cast a shrewd glance at Lee and nodded. This was during the morning. Afterward the engineer had gone for a visit to the dam, the drops, and the canal line, a last view of the project as a whole; and the ride was pursued in that peculiar melancholy of spirit which appertains to mortuary events. To him, indeed, the ride marked a burial, a burial of high hopes and ambition, and of his youth, with the partially excavated canal providing their pit and the concrete work standing as a headstone.

He came back to camp somewhat late for his appointment and found Pat waiting in the office, but not alone. Gretzinger stood, back to the stove, smoking a Turkish cigarette.

"Well, Bryant, I've returned to discuss our little business transaction," he greeted. "Judged this to be about the right time. How's the exchequer?"

"Little in it," said Lee, hanging his coat and cap on a hook. "But I made sure it was locked before leaving here; you might come any moment."

"Oh, I don't waste time on an empty box," was the light answer. "Mind if Carrigan hears what we say? Don't, eh? Neither do I. He knows, or ought to know, you're through. And besides, I'll want to discuss construction matters with him when you and I are done."

"Perhaps Bryant can yet secure a loan somewhere," the contractor remarked, mildly.

"From Menocal, possibly," Gretzinger suggested, cocking his eyebrows at Carrigan with mock enthusiasm. "If Bryant could have secured a loan, he would have had it in his pocket before this. I made inquiry of McDonnell when I reached Kennard concerning the company's cash account and discovered that it looked awful sick. No, he can't get money for the company except through me."

"I see," said Pat.

Gretzinger turned to Bryant.

"Now, Lee, let's get down to brass tacks. You're played out as manager and engineer-in-chief, so it's time for you to step out and give the men who are able a chance to complete the work. I made you one offer; I'm prepared to-day to make even a better one. The bondholders went thoroughly into the subject with me of what they could afford to pay you for your stock and a decision was finally reached to give you ten thousand dollars for your interest in the company. Considering everything, that's exceedingly liberal. I'm authorized to draw a check for that amount to your order when you've assigned the shares."

"Not enough," Lee replied. He sat down at his desk, lifted his feet to a window ledge, and held a match to his pipe.

"That's the limit."

"It's not enough; I need more."

"What you need and what you'll take are two different things," the other stated, sarcastically.

"Go higher," Lee said, with his gaze upon the window.

"Not a cent!"

"I owe McDonnell twenty thousand that has gone into the canal. I've put in my ranch, and land I traded for it, and months of work and organization—value twenty thousand; and I figure my present control of things worth twenty thousand more. But let us say fifty thousand. I'll sell for fifty thousand; that gives you my stock at fifty cents on the dollar. Exceedingly liberal, I call it."

The look the other directed at him was heavy with contempt.

"Ten thousand is all—and make up your mind to that," said he. Then he faced round toward Carrigan, whom he addressed. "I want you to increase the force to double its strength at once, so that the work—"

"What are you paying a yard for moving dirt?"

"The same as before."

"Not to me," Pat responded, complacently.

"What do you mean?" Gretzinger demanded, angrily.

"It's not enough."

"Not enough! You seem to imagine your contract doesn't bind you."

Pat slowly uncrossed his knees and stared at the speaker with a countenance of bewilderment.

"Now what in the world is the man talking about! Contract? The only contract I had with Bryant was an oral agreement to build the dam and move dirt at a certain day rate per man and per team, terminable at his option. Oh, you mean the first contract to construct the ditch in a year! We tore that up after he got notice from the Land and Water Board."

"Well, we'll continue the oral arrangement."

"Not any more," said Pat.

Gretzinger inspected the coal of his cigarette, replaced the latter between his lips, and glanced at Bryant. But the engineer was maintaining his consideration of objects on the outside of the window.

"So you're trying to hold me up," was Gretzinger's remark.

"You're slicing the fat off Bryant, and therefore I'll trim a bit off you," Carrigan replied. "You're not the only one who can work a knife. Once I used to sit back and let others keep all the easy money, but I don't any more, not any more." With considerable relish he rolled the words upon his tongue and nodded at Gretzinger.

The latter scowled.

"How much do you want?" he demanded.

Pat spat, then remained pursing his lips while he engaged in calculation. Once he shook his head and muttered, "Not enough," and again after a time repeated the words. The man by the stove glared at the seated contractor during the prolonged period of study as if he hoped his look would consume him.

"How much?" he questioned a second time, impatiently.

Pat looked up at Gretzinger from under his bushy eyebrows with a steely glint showing. The

lines of his weather-beaten face had hardened.

"I don't like you," he stated. "I don't like you at all. When I work for people I don't like, it costs them money. I like you less and less all the time. If I go ahead and finish the ditch, I'll be liking you so little that I'll be hating myself. And when I don't like any one that much, I don't do it cheap. The job will cost you one hundred thousand dollars."

"You—you——" Gretzinger choked.

"Cash down before I move a wheel," Pat added, calmly.

The other was white with rage. He cast his cigarette upon the floor and ground it under his heel. His lips worked and twisted in a vicious snarl. Carrigan observed him unmoved; and Bryant had turned his head about to see.

"You grafters, you infernal thieves, you pair of rotten crooks!" he shouted, shooting murderous glances from one to the other. "You've 'framed' me! Arranged it between you. Been waiting for me to come back so you could spring your game! If there's any law in this state, I'll have you both where you belong for deliberately wrecking this company—in a cell!"

His raving outburst continued for a while in this strain. His voice had the high and squealing pitch of a wild pig caught fast by a foot; on his pink, fleshy face, now distended with anger, was a look, too, of porcine hate and fury. The cynical and patronizing manner he usually affected had dropped off, leaving revealed his actual coarse, spiteful, greedy, craven spirit—a creature of infinite meanness. At length, however, Gretzinger's torrent of abuse diminished until it ended in a last muddy dripping of threats and curses. With an effort he strove to pull himself together and assume a composure his eyes belied, while he lighted another of his offensive Turkish cigarettes.

After a time he said shortly:

"You can't bluff me. When you fellows get down to my figures, then we'll do business."

"Look out! Your coat is scorching—or is it only that tobacco?" Bryant rejoined.

Gretzinger stepped hastily aside and felt behind him, where his hand moved about on the hot cloth fabric with searching movements. The solicitude for his garment thus quickened seemed to effect the final dispersion of his inward heat.

"Well, are we going to get together on an arrangement?" he questioned, when assured his coat was uninjured.

"I stated my terms—fifty thousand," Lee said. "That or nothing."

"You won't get it."

"Then there's the alternative of the bondholders putting up money enough to finish the work."

"That, neither."

"All right, Gretzinger," Bryant stated, rising. "You have an idea that I'll give in——"

"Yes, I have. You'll grab this ten thousand I offer, grab it quick by to-morrow night, which is the limit I set for it to remain open. I've seen men before in a tight hole who swore they wouldn't take the terms handed them, but they always did in the end, and so will you. Only a fool wouldn't. And I fancy Carrigan won't sacrifice a good piece of work in a dull season and pull off his men and teams."

Pat hoisted himself off his seat stiffly.

"Why don't your outfit sell instead of trying to buy?" he asked, crossing to Lee's desk and obtaining a can of tobacco sitting there. "I suppose they'll sell." He began to stuff his pipe, pressing the tobacco into the bowl with a brown forefinger.

"Certainly; they would unload what they have in this rotten project so fast that the bonds would smoke. But who in the devil would touch them?"

"I might."

"You?" Gretzinger began to laugh. "What have you besides your outfit? They're not taking worn-out fresnos in exchange to-day, thank you."

"And what are the three bondholders you represent worth?" Pat inquired, in a nettled tone.

"Half a million each, or more."

Carrigan's brows rose contemptuously.

"Is that all?" he exclaimed. "Why, from the way you talked, I thought they were real financiers! And they're only piffling tin-horns, after all. What d'you know about that, Lee?" Pat turned to the engineer with an amazed air.

Gretzinger's anger surged up anew.

"You never saw half a million in your life," he sneered.

"I could buy out all three of them with what I have in one trust company in Chicago alone," was the unperturbed reply. "It's cheap sports like you that make a real man sick. How much for the bonds? You want to unload. Speak up; how much?"

Despite his anger, the other's brain perceived that the contractor was in earnest.

"The amount of the face of both bonds and stock, with interest on the former to date," he answered quickly.

"I buy only bargains," was Carrigan's dry statement.

"One hundred thousand then."

"You're still sailing way up in the clouds. The stock was a bonus, Gretzinger; it cost your parties nothing. So it's only the bonds that count. And the project is rotten, it may not be finished on time, be a dead loss; your men want to get out from under; they'll jump at the chance to sell, you say. All right. They can unload on me. Wire them to deposit the bonds and stock in any New York bank and draw on McDonnell for forty thousand dollars. That's what I'll give."

Gretzinger walked to the wall, where he reached down his overcoat and put it on.

"The ditch will go to weeds first," he said.

"The offer's open until to-morrow night," said Pat.

"You bloodsuckers can't put anything over on me," was the Easterner's departing declaration, as he opened the door. "I'm on to you, Carrigan. You're backing Bryant and will finish the ditch. We'll just sit tight on our bonds and stock."

Pat watched him go.

"I hate to make money for men like them," he remarked to the engineer, "but I guess I can't help it, because I'll not let you down, Lee, for a matter of cash payment. I'll advance what's necessary and take a company note. Maybe you're wondering why I let you sweat all this time? Because you needed the experience. You laid down too easy. All the time that you were thinking the game was up, I was waiting for you to grab my leg and begin to pull. But you never did."

"You had done too much for me already, Pat; and though I supposed you were well-fixed I had no idea you were wealthy. The thought you might risk twenty thousand dollars——"

"Why not? I know this project better than any banker; it's sound, it's about completed," the old man interrupted. "All that's necessary is to take a long breath and push hard for three weeks more. Sometimes I think you have the making of a fair engineer, Lee, but you discourage me dreadfully when I try to picture you as a financier. I'm afraid you'll wind up like one of these bondholders of Gretzingers, just piffling."

Lee went to stand at the window, so that Carrigan could not see his face. Emotion had unmanned him. He would not have even Pat know how strongly he was moved by this act of magnanimity.

"Well, I better be getting back to the ditch," said the contractor, presently.

CHAPTER XXVI

ToC

A week later the long-belated big storm appeared at hand. McDonnell telephoned Bryant one morning, a morning in February now, that the weather forecast predicted blizzard conditions sweeping down the Rocky Mountain region from the Northwest. A mile of excavation yet remained to do. Lee at once sent Saurez and other Mexicans abroad in the native settlements with offers of double wages and this drew the most indolent back to camp again. They were flung into the night shift, which toiled with increased vigour at news of the impending storm. For two days and nights the desperate effort was pushed while the sky continued clear, with the crews of both camps attacking the iron earth and steadily forging closer.

Bryant scarcely slept during that time, or ate. Toward morning, when the night shift went off, he would cast himself down fully dressed and drawing the blankets to his chin sleep restlessly for two or three hours, then again rise to drive the work. The third day came sunny and quiet, but with heavy warmth in the air wholly strange to the season. During the night both Lee and Pat had continually and anxiously watched the peaks of the Ventisquero Range for portent of the change imminent in the weather; and now on this morning they beheld about the crests long, low-lying layers of gray cloud.

Again McDonnell telephoned, but now with particulars of the storm. It was general in character, covering the states from the Canadian line southward, with very low temperatures and raging furiously, destroying wire communications and blocking railroads, and at the moment was bearing down across Utah, Colorado, and Kansas. The entire region from the Pacific coast to the Mississippi was in its grasp.

"Ten days is all that's left of our time," Lee said to the contractor, with a heavy heart. "And no one can tell how long this weather spree will last."

"It's not a mile we've got to go any more, any way. With what we'll do to-day it will be half a mile of dirt moved in three days. That leaves but half a mile. This storm may be played out when

it reaches us." But the worry on his face showed that he put little faith in this possibility.

What he stated in regard to the ditch was true. The work of night and day had eaten well into the remaining mile between the two camps. To be sure, it had been rushed work: the sides of the ditch were gouged and ragged, the bottom uneven and rutted, and the removed dirt was piled anywhere along its banks. But nevertheless there was a canal, dug on grade and to measurement, and capable of carrying water.

During the afternoon a pair of men drove two lines of waist-high stakes to mark the survey of the short section of ground yet untouched, doing this under Carrigan's supervision. In case snow came, he told Lee, he wanted something he could see. "Nine hundred yards of unbuilt ditch will be lying buried," he added, "and I don't propose to paw up the whole mesa finding this section."

About four o'clock Bryant rejoined him.

"Still lovely," said Pat with a grin. "I've just set some plows tearing up the scalp on another two hundred yards. If this storm will just hang off for three or four days longer, it can come and welcome. I'll have my fresnos stacked and waiting to go down to Kennard."

"Take a look at the northwest," said Bryant, significantly.

A smoky haze lay along the horizon.

"Aye, I see. That's her hair blowing out ahead. There will be plenty of wind after awhile, I'm thinking. Get word to the men in camp, will you, to make all the tents tight."

At sundown the haze in the west had thickened somewhat. The air, however, remained warm, almost oppressive, and the sharp cold that usually fell at night was wanting. The Ventisquero Peaks were hidden by a mass of cloud. At seven o'clock the night crew began work, as ordinarily; no wind was stirring and the steam that came from the horses' nostrils was light.

"I'm taking a little time to skip down to Sarita Creek and see if those girls are still there. If they took a notion to stick, they'd try to do it, whether McDonnell sent after them or not. But I'll pry them out. If the storm breaks in a hurry, get the men and teams into camp at once. Don't take any chances, Pat." Thus spoke Bryant.

"Aye, I've seen blizzards before," was the reply.

Lee sped rapidly toward Sarita Creek, with the headlights of his car casting their glow before him upon the dark road. The silence of the night was broken only by the steady humming of his engine. The mesa seemed very hushed, unstirring, unnatural.

When he reached the girls' cabins, he saw that the windows of each were lighted. The girls were there. What incredible folly! Then his lamps brought into view an automobile. He breathed relief. Someone had come for them. Alighting he walked forward and knocked on Ruth's door. When it was opened by Ruth, he discovered Gretzinger seated within.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Well, come in," Ruth said.

She wore a pink party gown, with her throat and smooth, round arms showing through some filmy stuff that was part of the creation. Bryant had never seen her so dressed; she looked very youthful and charming, almost beautiful.

"There's a party at Kennard to-night," said she, before Lee could open his mouth to make an explanation of his presence, "and Mr. Gretzinger's taking me. He just came. Sorry you chose to-night to call, Lee. And we're starting immediately." She reached forth and gave Lee a pat on the cheek, at the same time smiling.

Bryant continued stony under the touch, under the smile, under the false affection. He gazed at her and detected beneath her apparent good spirits and loveliness a suppressed excitement. His glance went to Gretzinger; the man was observing them with a restless, frowning face. On the instant the truth flashed into Bryant's brain. She was cunningly playing him off against the New Yorker, using him as a lay figure in her despicable game, bestowing endearments to anger Gretzinger and arouse his jealousy.

"I came to tell you a big storm is brewing," he said quickly. "You and Imogene must plan to stay in Kennard for some time. If a heavy fall of snow occurs, the mesa will be closed for ten days or two weeks with the temperature very low."

"Then I'll pack my things in my suit-case so that I can remain that long," Ruth exclaimed. "I'll stay with Mabel Seybolt. Imogene's uncle sent up his car this morning, but I didn't imagine there was any really bad storm coming and sent it back. I doubt if the snow amounts to much, anyway. The weather's too warm." Nevertheless, she began to fill a suit-case.

"I'll tell Imogene also," Lee said.

Ruth's eyes turned toward Gretzinger with an inquiring look.

"There won't be room for three of us, will there?"

"No," he answered.

Her regard still continued directed at him.

"I'm sure there won't be," she said, with conviction. "It probably won't storm before to-morrow, in any case. I'll tell Mr. McDonnell in the morning and he can send up his big car for her."

"Or you can take her to town yourself," Gretzinger added in an indifferent tone.

"I can't spare the time," Lee said.

"But dearie, I'll be done packing in two minutes, while it will take Imogene half an hour," Ruth replied. "She's too slow to wait for. And she has one of her eternal headaches, too."

Ruth was hurriedly removing articles from her trunk to the suit-case.

"Listen, please," Lee said, addressing her. "If Imo remains she may become snowbound, and if snowbound, freeze. I can't go, I can't possibly go. With this storm coming, I must stay at camp. As things are, a blizzard may put me out of business."

Ruth straightened up to confront him.

"You mean the work would stop, that you couldn't finish it on time?"

"That's just what I mean."

"Why?" Gretzinger spoke. "You have ten days left."

"Yes, and what are ten days with two feet of snow on the ground and the mercury forty below zero?" Bryant retorted.

Gretzinger stood up, glanced at his watch, and buttoned his overcoat. He then bent down and set to work buckling the straps of the suit-case Ruth had closed.

"You do seem to get into every possible kind of trouble, Lee," the girl said.

"Perhaps I do. But the point now is about Imogene. Will you take her with you, or not?"

"Mr. McDonnell can send for her to-morrow; that will be soon enough."

"My God, you leave her! With a blizzard coming!"

"I don't think there'll be a blizzard. Or if there is, she can get along comfortably till her uncle comes."

"Are you ready, Ruth?" Gretzinger asked, impatiently.

"Yes, as soon as I fasten my gloves. Anyway, Lee, you can take her to Kennard if you want to. It's because you're just obstinate. Besides, she didn't have to come up here; I told her so; I could have got along without her—much better, probably, for she's always finding fault; she came on her own responsibility and so can look out for herself; and if you're so anxious for fear she'll freeze, why, take her. It won't make any difference about your ditch that I can see, for you say you'll very likely lose it, anyway. Now you'll have to excuse us; we're going. Blow out the light, please, and lock the door, our hands are full. Give the key to Imo to keep."

Two minutes later Gretzinger's car was gone with a swirl of the headlights as it circled and with a sudden roar of its exhaust. Lee extinguished the light and closed the cabin. To him that little house seemed poignant with tragedy; and he knew, whatever came, his foot would never be set in it again.

He found Imogene sitting beside her sheet-iron stove, wrapped in a quilt and coughing.

"I heard your car come after his; I knew it was you," she greeted him.

Lee regarded her closely.

"You're sick," he said. "You ought to be in bed. Ruth stated that you had a headache and now I discover you in a coughing fit bad enough to take off your head. Is your throat sore?"

"A little."

"Why in the name of all that's sensible haven't you gone to your uncle's? I begin to think you're unbalanced."

"I explained my reasons once, Lee." She coughed again, then continued, "Ruth and I quarrelled Christmas because of actions of hers and aunt said she must leave the house. That's why you were not asked then. But she made it up afterward and so I came when she did, for she was determined to live here where she could be free. I just had to come."

"And now she's leaving you in the face of the worst storm this winter, the ingrate!" Bryant exclaimed. "To-night's work finishes her with me. She may go to eternal damnation so far as I'm concerned. I'm done! She refused, she would have left you here to freeze, she set your life against her convenience! And after you had sacrificed your comfort and undergone hardships to save her good name! There's no limit to her selfishness and miserable hypocrisy. Our efforts and consideration haven't restrained her a particle, and she will tread the road she chooses irrespective of our desires or feelings. What fools we've been! You and I, Imogene Martin, aren't going to chase a will-o'-the-wisp any longer. We've wasted enough time on this delusion of saving Ruth Gardner; if she's to be saved, she must save herself—and if she will not do that, then the whole world together is of no avail. You're never going to come here again, or have anything to do with her, or let her have a part in your life. Nor am I. She walks out of our book, and we draw a pen across the bottom of the page."

Imogene had covered her face with her hands during his terrible denunciation and was weeping softly. She knew it was true. She knew that Ruth had gone out of her life, for such baseness as her one-time friend had shown was not to be forgiven.

"You're right—I can't go on here longer," she sobbed. "I'm sick, I'm really sick. I've been barely crawling about for the last two days. And she knew it and left me! Oh, Ruth, Ruth!"

"And would have left you, storm or no storm, and whether I came or not! In order to be alone with Gretzinger!" Her heart-breaking sobs went on. "Don't weep, Imogene. Put her out of your

mind." He gently placed an arm about her shoulders. "Come, I will take you to Louise."

That she had been "crawling about the last two days" was apparent when she attempted to rise. Her strength suddenly vanished, her knees gave way. Bryant secured her coat and cap, wrapped her in blankets from the bed, and carried her out to the car. Then he put out her lamp and locked the door.

And that turning of the lock, Lee felt, terminated a painful chapter of his life.

CHAPTER XXVII

ToC

As by the girls' cabins, so before the Graham house, Lee perceived a motor car. He brought his own machine to a stop near it and cut off his engine. At the same instant the door opened in the house, where by the light shining through the portal he saw Louise's and Charlie Menocal's figures. Menocal stepped forth.

"You will please go now," Louise was saying. "When you telephoned I told you then that I shouldn't go with you, or go to the dance at all."

Bryant had alighted and was arranging the blankets about Imogene. Charlie's voice spoke, rather truculently:

"I told you I was coming for you, didn't I? Now see what a position that leaves me in! People think you're coming. I promised to bring you."

"Then you were too presumptuous," Louise said. "Now go. You're only making a bad matter worse."

"See here, Louise——"

"You had my refusal and I've repeated it a dozen times," she interrupted, indignantly. "Must I shut the door in your face to silence you? And here's another car. Have some regard for my personal feelings, sir."

Lee by now had lifted Imogene into his arms and started toward the speakers.

"Be a good sport, Louise," Menocal pursued, in a tone intended to be wheedling. "Run upstairs and put on a party dress while I wait for you. You don't understand how much I want you to come along to this dance." His words were a little thick and stumbling.

"Hush! Don't you see someone has come? You've been drinking; and you're sickening to me."

"I don't care if someone is there! Let 'em hear, Louise. Let all the world hear, let your father hear, let anybody hear! Because I love you, and so you must come to the dance." Suddenly his tone changed to an angry hiss. "You've been treating me like a cur, refusing to see me or go with me, and not letting me come here. I came to-night! I've stood for enough from you; you can't play me for a fool any longer. And you're going to marry me, too."

Bryant perceived by the lamplight of the doorway that the fellow had snatched her hand, that the two were struggling. Burdened with Imogene as he was, Lee was helpless to enterfere. But he went hastily up the steps toward them. Louise tugged herself free.

"Oh, you contemptible creature!" she cried, in a voice of quivering passion. "It's only because you know father is out caring for stock that you dare stay here to insult me." Then looking past Menocal, she exclaimed, "Who is that?"

"I, Bryant," said Lee. "With Imogene. She's ill, she needs to be put to bed. There was no time to ask your permission to bring her, but I knew——"

"Of course! If this beast will stop making a scene and go!"

Charlie Menocal was pulling on his fur cap.

"So here's our swell-headed crook of an engineer butting in again," he sneered. "You better be hunting up your own chicken, or Gretzinger will have her. Who y' say you got there?"

"Stand aside!"

Bryant's voice struck the other like the lash of a whip, and the half-drunken youth instinctively fell back a pace, so that Lee could pass with his charge into the house. But as Louise was about to follow Menocal seized her arm.

"Girlie, you're not going to throw me down? You'll be good to me and come——"

Louise shook off his hand, darted through the doorway, and quickly closing the door turned the key in the lock. Then still grasping the door-knob she leaned with her head against the panels, face white, lips trembling, and her breast rising and falling stormily.

"Oh, Lee! For you to be forced to see and hear that!" she said, in a tone of anguish.

"I think nothing of it; you could not avoid him."

After a moment she recovered herself and said, "Wait until I call Rosita."

When she returned with the Mexican girl, she conducted Bryant to an upper chamber where he placed Imogene upon a bed, pressed the latter's hand assuringly, and then left her in charge of the other two while he went below to telephone to her uncle. McDonnell had already set out for Sarita Creek, his wife informed Lee. He had started about half an hour before. Bryant went out of the house and entering his car drove down the lane to the main road, where he stopped.

Soon far away in the south there was a flash of light, repeated at intervals, until at length it grew into a steady, powerful glare that threw his own machine into strong relief, that dazzled and blinded him. Finally the other car stopped near by.

"What's the trouble, Jack?" McDonnell's voice came, addressed to his chauffeur.

Bryant went forward to the banker, who was leaning out of the limousine. He gave the information that neither of the girls was at Sarita Creek and explained that Imogene was at the Graham house, comfortable though ill.

"She's too sick to be removed and will probably need a nurse for a time," he concluded. "I brought her here as soon as I learned her condition. Miss Graham put her to bed."

"All right; I'll run in and see her. Much obliged to you, Bryant," was the answer. Then in a vexed strain he went on, "What I expected to happen has happened. Advice, pleadings, commands haven't prevented her from following out this crazy affair. You may not believe it, but she's as stubborn as a mule when she wants to be. My wife has been almost distracted all winter. Well, I'll send up a doctor and a nurse both as soon as I return to Kennard, if there's time before this storm. Still at work?"

"Still digging. Will keep at it till the last minute."

"Supposed you would. That's the lane there, isn't it?"

Next minute the big car had passed Lee's and was moving up the roadway between the rows of cottonwoods toward the house. But Bryant did not at once start for camp. His mind was busy with pictures—pictures of the two girls as he first had seen them at Perro Creek, and at their cabins afterward, and finally to-night: Imogene, weak and racked by a cough and huddling in a quilt beside her sheet-iron stove, and Ruth in her own cabin, standing in the lamplight in her pink party dress with round arms and throat showing through its filmy gauze, unconcerned and intent upon her own ends.

At last he glanced up at the impenetrable sky. Something soft and wet had floated against his cheek. Then he saw here and there in the funnel of light projected by his car lamps what looked like solitary bits of white down sinking through the radiance. Snow!

CHAPTER XXVIII

ToC

The first flakes were but the precursors of a heavy fall of snow that almost immediately began, soundless, without wind, filling the air and whitening the earth, and that was still continuing unabated two hours later. It mantled the shoulders of the workmen and the withers of the horses; it clogged the wheels of the fresnos so that dirt was moved with ever-increasing difficulty; it veiled the flaring gasolene torches and choked the night. Where a plow ran or a scraper scooped earth, snow speedily obliterated the mark, and with the passing of time both men and animals found it necessary to struggle more and more desperately in the dirt cut against mud and snow and gloom.

Carrigan contracted his working line, placing the torches at shorter intervals and keeping the scrapers in close succession. The foremen informed him frequently that the men were growing exhausted and rebellious, but he ordered them to hold the crews at the task. He and Bryant moved to and fro constantly, giving encouragement or lending a hand to help start a stalled fresno. By sheer power of their wills they were combatting the snow, forcing the work ahead, deepening the stretch of excavation that had been opened that afternoon; by iron determination they were wrenching out the last spadeful of earth possible and exacting the final ounce of man power before the snow had its way.

The strange warmth continued. The temperature was not even down to freezing and the men, muddied and wet to the knees, dripped with perspiration, while the horses' flanks were soaked with both sweat and melted snow. It was difficult to breathe, what with the heavy, oppressive air and what with the fall of suffocating snow, constantly growing thicker. Horses slipped and went down, but were raised again; fresnos were mired, but freed once more; men gave out and were

sent to their camp. And the fight kept on.

But about eleven o'clock Bryant felt a cool puff of air on his cheeks, light and of brief duration. It was followed by a second, this time quicker and stronger, blowing from the northwest and sending the snow a-scurry in a slanting fog of flakes past the flames of the torches. He studied this change for a moment, then sought out Carrigan.

"Time to make a break for cover," he announced. "Wind is coming and the devil will be to pay when once it picks up all this loose snow."

"Well, we're about at a standstill, anyway," was the reply. "I'll have the crews draw the scrapers and plows off at one side where we can get at them. I had a spare horse tent put at the disposal of the Mexicans, and have had men in both camps piling baled hay all evening around the big tents for windbreaks. We'll issue extra blankets and crowd the crews into the shacks and mess quarters where there are stoves."

"What about water if our pipe freezes?"

"Then the horses will eat snow like the range ponies, I guess—and the rest of us, too."

At that he went off to order the work stopped, as did Bryant. For some time the wind blew only in those fitful puffs Lee had noted or died down entirely for short periods; and of this fact the night shift took advantage to assemble the fresnos and plows beside the canal and to drive their horses to shelter. The crews of the north camp, being fewer, got away first; and thither Bryant plowed through the snow with them to see all made safe. When he returned, Carrigan was just herding the last man and team toward the main camp. Together the contractor and the engineer extinguished the torches, then made their way, carrying a flare with them, toward the glow showing at the edge of the camp, where an oil-soaked bale of hay burned as a guide. At their backs the wind and snow blew with gradually increasing strength.

They made the rounds of the horse tents packed with animals, the mess tents packed with workmen—with those men only come and those newly aroused from sleep and gathered here—of the shacks, the hospital, the engineers' headquarters and the big commissary tent, all crowded with white men and Mexicans, steaming with moisture, smoking cigarettes and pipes, giving off a rank smell of clay and human bodies and wet clothes and horses, who talked and laughed and waited restlessly. The pair waded around examining guy-ropes, stakes, the protective walls raised of hay bales. They took advantage of a sudden dropping of the wind to go among the small tents, thrusting their flares within each and having a look, to make certain no sleeper of the day shift had been overlooked. Then at last they stumbled up the street to Bryant's shack.

The wind now had utterly died away. The snow had resumed its thick, silent fall straight to earth. Carrigan was kicking his boots clean against the door-sill when Lee exclaimed, "Listen to that, Pat!"

Carrigan wiped the moisture from his ears and harkened.

"That's the Limited coming, and making no stops," he remarked. "Get in!"

They entered the little building. The office contained the engineering staff and several others. Tobacco smoke lay thick in the room.

Outside, the faint whining sound was growing steadily in volume until at last it deepened into a roar very like that of an approaching express train, as Pat had suggested. Followed a smart blow on the shack. Then it reeled and the night was filled with a howling tumult that deafened the men inside; the blizzard had burst upon the mesa. Through the windows one could see nothing, for the air had become a black maelstrom of whirling snow and darkness where a choked roar persisted as steadily as the bass thunder of Niagara. The warmth had vanished; a cutting cold, as if striking direct from arctic ice, minute by minute drove the mercury in the thermometer on Bryant's wall downward with unbelievable swiftness. If anything, the fury of the storm seemed to increase as time passed, swelling to such terrible violence that one imagined nothing could withstand its force, its mad blasts, its deadliness.

"Those mess tents and horse tents," Lee said to Carrigan, anxiously.

"They're safer under their lee of hay than is this little paper box we're sitting in," the contractor replied. "I've been through blizzards before, and know how to meet them."

From by the stove one of the engineers spoke.

"But we'll never see some of those little tents any more. There are several travelling toward Mexico by now."

"And my new flannel shirt!" cried another, suddenly. "Washed it this noon and hung it out on a line and forgot all about it. Oh, Lord, where is it now?"

"Good-bye, little shirt, we'll never see you more!" said the first, sentimentally. "You'll be hanging on the Equator by morning."

"While we're left here in the drifts," said a third. "Oh, the lovely, big, white drifts there'll be to-morrow!"

Toward one o'clock the first furious rush of the storm had passed and it had settled into a fifty-mile-an-hour wind, bitterly cold, with snow that drove against the building in fine particles. Freezing air never ceased to enter the thin walls of boards and tar paper. It was necessary to keep the cast-iron stove red-hot to secure anything like comfort.

And to this dreadful cold and snow, thought Lee, Imogene would have been left deliberately by

Ruth Gardner and Gretzinger!

Carrigan bade the others roll up in their blankets and get what sleep they could while he and Bryant tended the fire. Lee saw that Dave was warm and well-wrapped. The men, worn out by prolonged exertions, made themselves beds on the floor or stretched themselves out on their seats, drew their coverings closer, closed their eyes, slept.

The contractor and the engineer, together before the fire, continued to talk in low tones.

"Haven't told you yet," said Pat, presently, "but we picked up that Mexican this evening who was trying to start a drunk Christmas Eve. It was while you were at Sarita Creek. Saurez told me he had sneaked into camp and meant mischief. Some of us caught him behind the commissary tent with a can of oil, just ready to fire the camp."

"A fine night for us all to have been left without shelter," Lee remarked. "Where is he?"

"In the hospital tied up, with a trusty man to watch him. Here's what I found on him. Look inside." And Pat handed over a dirty leather bag with a long string. "Found this around his neck."

Lee extracted four pieces of paper from the sack—all checks drawn to the order of F. Alvarez. Besides these there were two twenty-dollar gold pieces, three rings, and several unset turquoises.

"Well, we can make use of these checks," he said, after thought. "I'll talk to the fellow to-morrow." He restored the miscellaneous collection of property to the sack.

On the panes of the small windows the snow beat and the wind hammered. Carrigan stuffed the stove with pine knots. Afterward he refilled his pipe, cast a sharp glance about at the sleeping occupants of the room, and said:

"You've got what you need now to mix medicine with the banker." He confirmed his words with several satisfied nods.

"Yes," said Bryant.

Carrigan proceeded to meditate.

"Awhile back I sent for some more dynamite," he stated, breaking the silence. "Didn't say anything to you about it at the time. It was there in the commissary tent under a stack of cases of peaches and bags of coffee. If this Alvarez had got his oil on that canvas and a fire going, there sure would have been some fire-works. You would have had a reservoir blown right in the middle of your project, I'm thinking."

"What in the name of heaven do you want with dynamite!"

"Well, my boy, there's a lot of ground that can't be dug, but I never saw any that nitro wouldn't move. What I got is dirt-blowing dynamite, the kind powder companies sell for making drainage ditches and blowing stumps and so on. I didn't know whether I should have to use it, but I always like to have a trick up my sleeve. Powder is ordinarily too expensive to employ when fresnos can work, yet it's just the thing in a pinch. We're in an emergency now. If it should set in and snow right along, with one storm on top of another, as may happen after so long a mild season, powder even may not help us out. These last eight hundred yards are going to make us weep before we're through, I'm guessing. But just the same, I'm counting on this dynamite. It can't blow like this forever, and the minute it quits we'll grab hold."

Lee twisted about to look at a window. The particles of snow were biting at the glass relentlessly, while the howl of the gale told only too plainly how the drifts were being heaped on the dark mesa.

"We'll finish this ditch on time even if hell freezes over," he said, slowly. "I'm not going to be beaten at this late day."

He continued to sit gazing at the frosted panes and harkening to the roaring blasts. On the floor and in the chairs the blanketed men slept heavily. Pat fed the fire anew. But through the cracks of the walls the cold sifted more and more intense, while along the edges of the boards there formed thick fringes of glistening frost.

CHAPTER XXIX

ToC

For four days the bitter cold and fierce wind held the camps in thrall, then the latter blew itself out. The cold, however, still endured though the sun shone. When one looked forth from camp, all that could be seen was a snowbound earth; mesa and mountains were as white and silent as some polar region; nothing moved; nothing seemed to live out yonder. It was like a dazzling, frigid, extinct world.

The main mesa road was blocked and telephone wires were down. What went on outside the limits of the camp's snow-drifted horizon its dwellers knew not—nor for the moment cared. Work was the only thought. With hastily constructed snow-plows roads had been broken among the tents and shacks as soon as the weather allowed, and afterward broad paths made to the working ground. The section of undug canal was now scraped bare. There, sheltered by tents and warmed by sagebrush fires, men bored in the iron-like earth powder-holes in rows that exactly aligned the canal. On the morning of the fifth day a first stretch of fifty yards was blown out, whereupon teams and scrapers were rushed into the ragged cavity to deepen and clear the ditch before the soil froze anew. This was at the north end. In the afternoon one hundred yards at the south end went up in a blast and crews from the main camp fell upon this area.

That night the sky clouded over again. All the next day snow came down steadily. The workmen played cards in the mess tents and waited. Carrigan busied himself at accounts and waited. Bryant waited, with impatience and anxiety gnawing at his heart. There were six hundred yards and more unexcavated, and but three days of his time remained.

The snow ceased at nightfall and work was instantly resumed by aid of the torches; again the desperate scraping of snow, bundled men at fires and sheltered by windbreaks, the drilling of holes in the frozen ground, the reliefs every two hours, the thawing of nipped fingers and toes and noses. All night hot food and boiling coffee were served at intervals to the cold and hungry labourers. At nine o'clock next morning two hundred yards of dirt went spraying into the air, with the subsequent struggle in the long hole: fresnos bearing forth what earth was loose and what the plows broke out; the horses, blinded by the glare of snow, staggering forward under curse and lash; the men toiling in a sort of grim fury. A maximum of effort finished one hundred and fifty yards more by eleven o'clock. Carrigan ordered all work to stop until nine next morning.

"The men are 'all in'," he told Lee. "We'll crack this last nut to-morrow."

"But what if it sets in to snow? More than two hundred and fifty yards left to do, and only to-morrow and the day after to work."

"We'll have to risk it."

"Will your powder hold out?"

"Yes." He regarded Bryant keenly. "Say, what you need isn't information but sleep. You worked all day yesterday, and all last night, and to-day again, and here it is going on midnight. I'm going to tell you the schedule for to-morrow to calm your mind, then you roll into your blankets. At nine o'clock in the morning all hands except the cooks go at the drills and stay by them till the stretch is holed. Whenever that's done, which should be about evening, we shoot the chunk. And after that we hit the bottom with every scraper and fresno and horse and man, with the cooks fighting the coffee-boilers, and never come out of the ditch till the last lump of dirt is moved. That's the programme. I figure it will be about midnight when the last card's turned, maybe an hour or so after. I promised the men double wages and a box of cigars apiece out of the store and a few other things perhaps—I don't remember. So you get your sleep, for there's a big day ahead to-morrow. That dirt all goes out before you'll have another chance to hit the hay."

Bryant arose next morning at seven. The sky was overcast and the thermometer was sixteen below zero when he examined it. Across the snow he could see the north camp stirring to life, awakening in the frosty, pallid light of dawn. Stretching thither ran uneven snowy ridges, save at one place where they lay bare and brown—the banks of the canal. When the small interval still undug was moved, the ditch would be finished from river to ranch, from the Pinas down to Perro. And this was to be the last day of toil! To-day the camps were to hurl themselves at that short remaining strip of earth and tear it out; the furrow so long pressed ahead through the iron ground was to be brought to an end; the enemy, frost, was to be conquered at last. When he thought of the inexorable labour done under heart-breaking conditions, in spite of cold and wind and snow, and with sufferings and deprivations little considered. Bryant felt for the workmen, rough though they were, a strong affection. They had done the bitter work.

"Out goes the chunk to-day," was Pat's greeting that morning.

A spirit of eagerness, almost of enthusiasm, pervaded the crews that first went forth in the cold to work at the drills. It was the final attack, and they went from their steaming breakfast with jests and laughter that rang back over the snow. Sixteen below zero, and they laughed! Bryant had a sudden conviction that nothing could stop such men—neither weather, nor elements, nor fate itself. They were heroes not to be daunted. They swung the hammer of Thor against the earth and were worthy of an epic.

Toward the middle of the afternoon of that day Carrigan said to the engineer:

"We're making better time than I calculated. The holes will all be drilled by five o'clock; we're loading them as they're done and we'll shoot at five-thirty."

"What about supper?"

"Supper at five. Then the men will be back and ready to jump in the ditch when the shot's fired."

"And be done twenty-four hours before the hour set by the Land and Water Board," said Lee.

"That's cutting it fine enough as it is. Who's that waving yonder toward camp?" And Carrigan pointed a mittened hand at a figure swinging an arm and shouting Bryant's name.

The engineer stared for a time.

"Charlie Menocal," he said, finally. "Morgan—Morgan, come here!" he called. And as Morgan came to join him, Lee addressed Pat, "I'll just run over to Bartolo with this young scoundrel. The road's open and I'll be back by dark. Want Morgan to come along to look after him and Alvarez, the man you caught."

"Better start back in plenty of time. The sky's thickening again. More snow in sight, Lee."

"I shall."

"You might invite old man Menocal to return with you," Pat remarked, with a grin, "and see us put the kibosh on his dream of owning the Pinas River. What are you going to do with this boy of his? Send him over the road?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"That's where he ought to go, after trying to burn us out the night of the blizzard." He turned away to the work.

"You're not to let this fellow over there waiting for us get away, Morgan," Lee stated.

"I'll freeze on to him."

They went along the snowy path toward camp, coming up with Menocal, who waited until they arrived and then accompanied them toward Bryant's office.

"Have a letter for you from Ruth," he said. "Had a terrible time getting up from Kennard. Road isn't half opened, but I found a man to drive me home. Promised Ruth to deliver this to you."

He drew the letter from an inner pocket and handed it to the engineer, who glanced at the writing on the envelope, his own name, and shoved the epistle into his glove. When they gained camp, Lee said:

"Morgan and I are going to Bartolo with you, and also a friend of yours called Alvarez. We nabbed him as he was trying to burn our camp about two hours before the blizzard. Take this man to headquarters, Morgan, and keep him till I come over."

Menocal's face became livid with anger and alarm.

"Let me go, damn you!" he shouted, shrilly.

Bryant waved a hand towards the engineers' shack and thither Charlie was propelled, cursing and struggling, in Morgan's firm grasp. Entering his office, Lee closed the door, walked to the stove, and standing there produced the letter. It was the first and only missive he had ever received from Ruth. He gazed at the envelope and the scrawled writing on it with an impression of strangeness, but this gave way to a curiosity as to the contents. He had a strong suspicion of the letter's purport. Ruth would have reviewed her conduct that night at Sarita Creek, and, with her instinctive cunning, perceived it would alienate Lee. The message doubtless carried an adroit explanation and excuse, ending up with numerous declarations of her affection and hypocritical assertions of her anxiety on his account. Disgust overwhelmed him. He was minded to cast the thing into the stove unread. At last, however, muttering to himself, he thrust a forefinger under the flap and ripped the envelope open. A newspaper clipping that had been enclosed in the letter dropped to the floor. He read:

DEAR LEE:

After thinking the matter over very carefully, I've decided to release you from our engagement. If this pains you, as I fear it will, I'm extremely sorry, but I've discovered that we're not temperamentally suited to each other. You've failed, besides, so I understand, which further convinces me of that. And in addition, I've learned of late that I love another, who loves me. Therefore it's much better that I take this step, much better and much wiser—don't you think so? However, Lee, I shall always be your friend.

It may interest you to know that this evening Mr. Gretzinger and I are to be married. Privately, with only a few close friends. We depart immediately after the ceremony for New York. Mr. Menocal is to pack my things at Sarita Creek, so you need not bother about them. I understand Imogene is visiting at the Graham ranch; I'm dropping her a note there telling her the news.

With best wishes,
RUTH.

Bryant lifted from the floor and read the clipping. It was a short announcement, evidently from a Kennard paper, of the prospective wedding that night of Miss Ruth Gardner, of Sarita Creek, and Mr. J. Senton Gretzinger, of New York.

When he had read this, Lee gently tilted and shook the envelope. But no diamond solitaire dropped out.

CHAPTER XXX

ToC

They were waiting in the sheriff's office in the court house in Bartolo. They were waiting for Mr. Menocal. Winship had sent a messenger for him. At one place in the room, handcuffed and tied, sat the evil-eyed Alvarez; at another sat Charlie Menocal, silent and apprehensive and with a sickly pallor showing under his dusky skin; and between them lounged Morgan. The sheriff and Bryant stood across the room conversing of the storm.

"I thought your goose was cooked when that blizzard hit us," Winship was saying.

"Froze, you mean," was Lee's smiling reply. "I thought so myself for a while. We've hammered along, however. To-night the last dirt goes out."

"That was an idea now—powder."

"It was Carrigan's, not mine. It saved us. The old man has forgotten more than I ever knew. Here's the banker now."

The door swung open, admitting Menocal, blinking from the snow's sheen. He bade the sheriff and the engineer good day, glanced sharply at them and then at the others. When his look encountered his son, his eyebrows went up.

"So you're home finally," he addressed him. "After two weeks' time!" His regard moved about from one to another of the trio. "What does this mean, Charlie? Who is that fellow wearing handcuffs?" He paused, staring steadily at his son. "What have you been doing to bring you into Winship's office?" As Charlie continued to sit silent, he turned to the sheriff.

"I'll explain, Mr. Menocal, but what I have to say won't be pleasant hearing for you," Lee stated, at a nod from Winship. "Take this chair, if you please."

The banker sat down, heavily. He sighed, while his fat cheeks shook with a slight tremble.

"What has he done?" he asked, with his eyes fixed on an ink-well on the sheriff's desk.

Briefly and without temper Bryant related the circumstance of seeing Alvarez in Kennard one day during the previous summer, when the man appeared to be watching him. Charlie was also in town on that day. Alvarez was the man who had attempted to make the workmen drunk in camp on Christmas Eve, but he had escaped on that occasion. He had stolen into camp again on the afternoon preceding the blizzard and two hours after sundown had been captured seeking to fire the commissary tent. When made a prisoner, he had been searched. On his person were found several checks for sums ranging from fifty to one hundred dollars. Bryant drew the leather sack from his pocket, extracted the checks, and handed them to the banker.

"You see they are given by your son," said he. "I've questioned this Alvarez and he has finally admitted that he was employed by Charlie and instructed by him what to do. Your son, therefore, is the instigator of the attempted crime, and Alvarez, an ignorant and brutal outlaw from Mexico, was merely his tool. I pass over the matter of the whisky and the petty inconveniences earlier caused me and my men. But here is an act of a different character, Mr. Menocal. The man's endeavour to fire our camp, had it been successful, would perhaps have resulted in the death of scores of men, as the storm broke shortly after and they would have been without shelter."

Charlie Menocal sprang to his feet.

"Before God, I didn't know he would choose that night!" he cried, passionately. "I meant only to stop their work!"

His father shook his head sadly.

"That makes no difference, my son; you planned a wicked deed," he said, in a barely audible voice.

Morgan pushed the young man back upon his chair and Bryant went on. As he proceeded, he had found it harder and harder to address the parent; and his task was no easier now. The eyes of the father had gone to the slender, sagging figure of his son and seemed to be the eyes of an expiring man; his plump cheeks were working under an excess of emotion; then his head went down suddenly as under the blow of a club.

"Because of the character of the act," Lee said, "it wasn't only a stroke at me but at every animal and man in the entire south camp. I want to make this clear in order to show how black and dastardly the thing was. Whether Charlie understood or intended the destruction of all the lives and property there is no excuse; it was a deed that would have carried terrible results in its train. I don't even let my mind conceive them. All this has followed, Mr. Menocal, from the single fact that your son disliked me in the beginning. To that may be added an idea that I was depriving you of something to which I had no right, namely, the title to the Perro Creek canal appropriation. And there, I think, responsibility for his course touches you."

He paused to gaze at the Mexican, whose face had become drained of colour.

"Mr. Menocal, the water is mine," he continued, "and to-night some time it will be mine beyond all dispute, for then the ditch will be finished. So much for that. Some days ago we had a talk that, I believe, led us each to a better opinion of the other. I think that as a leader here in Bartolo and around about you're a force for good; you believe in law, order, and education; and I know, from what I've learned, that you carry many of the people on store accounts for long periods when crops are bad or when they are distressed by sickness. I'm confident you're endeavouring to elevate them so far as possible; and I admit frankly that I've modified very greatly my first estimation of you. That weighs in the scale against Charlie's actions.

"Then there's one kindness Charlie himself has done me, though he may not be aware of the fact. I'll not say what it is; let it suffice that it is the case. A very great kindness it was, indeed! I count that likewise in the opposite scale. And then there are other things to consider, one among them that after all no harm has come to me. The enmity he's held for me has simply recoiled upon his own head. All he has to show for it after months of hating and contriving is his position here in this room to-day—and a dead dog. Surely it must make plain to him that his course has been not only futile but foolish."

The engineer glanced at the young fellow. He sat in an attitude of despair that almost equalled his father's.

"Well, that brings me to the point," Bryant said. "You've been too indulgent with Charlie, Mr. Menocal, as you once acknowledged to me. You've given him too much money, too much admiration, too much head, and it has led him up against the bars of the state prison. The question is whether or not I shall open the gate and push him in, as at first I determined to do on securing the proof in this leather sack. If I thought he would keep on along his present line, I should say yes, merely as a matter of public policy, but I've had several days to think the thing over and have come to the conclusion he'll soon realize his folly, if he doesn't now. And another restraint should be the good name and the happiness of his father. I'm not vindictive, Mr. Menocal, and less on this day than I've ever been. I don't believe in causing people misery merely for the pleasure of inflicting it or because I happen to have the power. We all have enough to contend with, as it is. I don't propose to ruin your position here, and end your influence, and blast your life, by sending your son to the penitentiary. That would make me no happier, and would make a number of people infinitely wretched, while perhaps starting Charlie on the road to hell. Very likely so. I much prefer to see everyone cheerful and at work. Suppose we ship this fellow yonder back to Mexico—Winship can arrange that—and destroy the checks, and tear up this sheet of Charlie's record, so to speak. Only one or two persons besides ourselves know of the matter and I'll ask them to forget it."

Lee struck a match and ignited the checks, holding them while they burned until at last he dropped them on the floor, where they blazed, curled up in strips of black ash, and were no more. He glanced about at the others. Winship was picking his teeth with a quill toothpick, with his mind apparently far away on other matters. Morgan stolidly chewed tobacco and kept a wary eye on the bandit, Alvarez. Charlie sat pale, limp, gazing at nothing. The elder Menocal had lifted his eyes to Bryant, at whom he looked mistily; he appeared to have aged astonishingly, his cheeks having gone flabby, slack, and gray, while a slight tremour shook his head.

"That's all, I guess," Bryant said, briskly. "We'll just consider our relations established on the same footing they were before this occurrence."

He put out a hand, smiling. The banker struggled to his feet and clasped it in both of his.

"They shall not be on the same footing, but on a better one, Mr. Bryant, if it's in my power to make them so," he exclaimed, in a choked voice.

"That suits me right down to the ground, Mr. Menocal."

The Mexican was silent. His lips parted, quivered, and shut again. His hold on the engineer's hand tightened.

"I—I can't talk now, can't say what I wish to say," he said, mastered by feeling. "When I'm more myself, when I can talk—another time——" He ceased, but presently finished, "Another time I'll tell the gratitude in my heart. Now my shame for my son and for myself——Come, Charlie, take me home."

They went out. Winship came to life and crossing the room dragged the outlaw Mexican to his feet, then pushed him over the floor and into the hall on his way to the cells in the basement. Morgan pulled on his hat. Bryant glanced at the paper ashes on the floor, then did likewise. It was time to get back to camp.

CHAPTER XXXI

ToC

The first snowflakes of another storm were beginning to flutter down by the time the two men reached camp, and dusk had set in. On the drifted road from Bartolo, over which but few wagons had passed, travel was slow and they had consumed an hour and a half on their return. The torches were burning along the canal, appearing at a distance like winter fireflies, but the crews of workmen had gone to supper. Bryant and Morgan, when they drove down the street in camp, could hear them at their meal in the glowing mess tents—a subdued hubbub of plates and knives and voices.

Half an hour later they were pouring forth toward the horse tents, while the engineers were

making their way along the torch-lit path to the stretch of undug canal.

"We'll allow fifteen minutes for them to get the teams out, then shoot," Carrigan said to Lee, as they moved along. "All the shots are in and double-fused. Doesn't appear to be any wind behind this snow."

The air, though cold, was still. The flakes were not yet falling heavily and they lay on the hard crust of snow as light as silk fluff. What might be coming down in another hour from the darkness overhead, however, could not be foretold, while if both a gale and a great fall of snow occurred the labour of the night would be increased a hundred-fold.

Bryant's anxiety was no longer on account of the time limit fixed by the Land and Water Board. He knew that since the revelations made in the sheriff's office the claimant Rodriguez would never press his case, even were the canal never completed. But he had the keen desire of a tired man to clean up the job and be done, and a pride in keeping faith with himself in accomplishing what he had sworn he should do, build the project in ninety days. He would never have it said by any one that he had failed in that. By Gretzinger, for example. Ruth in particular! She believed that he had already failed when she wrote her letter.

By the end of the quarter of an hour prescribed by Carrigan teams and workmen were coming along the snowy road in a long line. From the north camp also a string of animals in pairs was advancing by light of the torches. A warning shout sounded from the ditch section. Men retreated. Then a roaring boom burst upon the night, with other thunderous reports following in rapid succession, until it seemed that the mined earth cascading upward in the darkness was the bombardment of scores of cannon. The flames of the torches and the falling snow tossed and whirled at the percussion of air. Showers of clay rained upon the earth. Vibrations jarred the ground.

Then the companies of horses and men, fastening upon scrapers, hastened into the trench. The remaining strip that joined the two sections of canal had been blown out and now this was the final, culminating assault. When this two hundred and fifty yards of ditch line had been widened and deepened to correspond to the rest, water would flow of summers in a small river from the dam down to the broad acres of Perro Creek ranch.

Hour after hour the steady labour proceeded—plows ran; flat scrapers and wheeled fresnos followed, scooped up the earth, bore it to the banks above; horses tugged and strained; men toiled, pausing only to thaw their feet and hands at fires burning by the ditch or to drain great tin-cups of the scalding coffee that the cooks dipped from cans. And steadily the excavation widened and deepened hour by hour, the slope of the sides becoming apparent, the banks rising higher and the ditch assuming its desired shape and size. At eleven o'clock the cooks wheeled immense canisters of sliced beef and bread among the workmen, who seized the food and ate it as they worked. At midnight the plows were cutting near the bottom, and the work was going faster, as the frost did not strike this deep into the soil. At one o'clock in the morning, amid thickening snow, the last scraperfuls of dirt were going out, while the engineers, with their long rules, were checking depths and slopes.

"By golly, she's about done!" exclaimed Dave, who had been permitted to remain up on this eventful night and who had been moving about, here, there, and everywhere, in a great state of excitement. "By golly, she is, Lee!"

"Yes, by golly; the ditch you helped me survey, too."

"By golly, yes!" He had forgotten that.

The last dirt moved with a rush. Then, even as the teams were dragging the loads from the excavation, Carrigan passed to a foreman the word that announced the end of work. It ran along the canal from mouth to mouth, at first in a call but finally in a shout that swelled to a roar of exultation. That roar rang over the snow and through the night like the cry of an army which has gained a walled city.

"Done!" said Bryant, to himself.

Back to the camps trooped the teams and men by the flare of the torches they carried in jubilation. Not a soul in all that company but felt the triumph beating in Lee's heart. Finished, built! Despite frost and snow they had driven the iron furrow through to the end, and on time. Toil-weary though they were, their spirits were light. They knew themselves fellow-workers in a redoubtable achievement.

Carrigan and Bryant were among the last to go. To the latter there was in the fact of completion a sense of unreality. As he took a final view of the ditch before setting out for camp, events raced through his mind—his coming, his first labours, the confused interplay of his life with those of the Menocals, McDonnell, Gretzinger, Carrigan, Imogene, Ruth, and Louise; the months of incessant toil; of brain-racking and body-wearing endeavour to force the canal forward; of unresting strife with frost and snow and earth, of being under a pitiless hammer. He could not easily realize that he was now free of all this.

"I have an empty feeling," he remarked to Carrigan.

"One always has a 'let-down' after a hard job," was Pat's sage rejoinder. "You'll feel restless for maybe a week now."

They went from the spot up the snowy road and turned in at Pat's shack for a smoke. Late as it was, neither felt the need of sleep as yet.

"Well, it's a comfort to know that we don't have to plug again at that ground in the morning," Lee remarked, with a sigh of satisfaction. He had his feet on the table, his body relaxed, and his pipe going.

"Yeah. The only disappointment I have," Pat said, "is not having lifted the bonds and stocks out of Gretzinger. If we hadn't been so pressed for time, we might have played him a little till he took the hook. I don't like his kind at all."

Bryant laughed.

"Why, he's the best friend I have," he exclaimed. "What do you think he did for me?"

"Well, what? Besides trying to shake you down?"

"Pat, he carried off and married my girl."

The contractor lowered his feet, placed his hands upon his knees, and gazed at Bryant, with brows down-drawn and under lip up-thrust.

"That good-for-nothing Ruth what's-her-name?" he demanded. In all the months of their association it was the first time he had ever spoken of her to Bryant.

"Ruth Gardner, yes."

Carrigan rose, gave Lee a long and solemn look, then went to a trunk in the corner of the room. This he unlocked and opened. From its interior he produced a black bottle.

"I don't take a drink very often," he announced, coming forward and setting the bottle on the table, "but this is one of the times. We'll take one to celebrate your luck."

CHAPTER XXXII

ToC

About the middle of the next afternoon Lee Bryant was riding southward from camp on the main mesa trail. The road was difficult and his horse Dick made slow time along the snowy path broken by wagons through the drifts, but the rider let the animal choose his own gait, as he had done that hot July day when coming up from the south to buy the Perro Creek ranch. On reaching the ford Lee pulled rein. How different now the creek from on that burning afternoon of his encounter with Ruth Gardner and Imogene Martin! Snow covered its bed; the sands where he had knelt, the little pool, the foot-prints, lay hidden from sight. How much had happened since! And how different was his life! He had suffered much and learned much since that hour of meeting; and he should never henceforth view this spot without a little feeling of melancholy. The youth and two girls who drank there at the rill were no more: they had become other persons.

Presently he dismissed thoughts of this and set Dick wading across the ford. Yonder he now could see the three bare cottonwoods, with the low adobe house near by where he and Dave had lived and laboured at the surveys for the project. The bones of his dog Mike, too, rested there under the ground. This brought to mind the meeting with Louise upon the road—and it was Louise to whom at this moment he was going. He began to urge Dick to greater efforts. Once on a stretch of road, bare and wind-swept, he pushed him into a gallop. It seemed interminable, this snow-bound trail. But at last he crossed Sarita Creek (with but a single glance at the cañon's mouth where the two cabins stood untenanted and abandoned among the naked trees) and then covered the long miles to Diamond Creek, and rode up the lane between the rows of cottonwoods to the house, where Louise, who had perceived his approach from a window, appeared at the door to greet him.

"We were terribly alarmed for your safety the night of the blizzard," she said, "but the mail-man finally made his trip to Bartolo and back, and said you were still there and not blown away. And he also stated that you were working night and day."

"Not any more," said Lee, swinging from the saddle.

"You have finished! I can read it on your face!" she cried, joyfully.

"Yes; we threw out the last clod at one o'clock this morning."

"I needn't tell you that I'm proud and happy; you know that, Lee. Even happier than when I learned you were able to continue, at the time you supposed you were unable. Put up your horse and come in. You're half frozen."

Bryant endeavoured to discover from her face what he wished to know, but did not succeed. So he asked:

"Have you had your mail lately?"

"Not for three days. The mail-man made one trip and then the next snow closed the road again

to Kennard."

Lee went off to stable Dick. On his return he found Louise at the door still waiting, and she helped him to remove his overcoat and scarf when they passed in to the fire. Then they pushed a divan forward and she bade him spread out his hands before the blaze.

"It wasn't so long ago that we agreed we mustn't see each other again, and here we are together," he stated, with a pretense of solemnity. He extended his hands to the heat and moved his fingers about to expel their numbness. "I don't know what your father would say if he knew all the circumstances."

"I—I don't know, either," Louise stammered, in dismay at the thought.

"How's Imogene?" he inquired.

"Improving slowly. All she needed was to get away from that horrid cabin and horrid—well, surroundings."

"And your father's here?"

"At one of the feed corrals, I think. He had all the cattle rounded up before the blizzard and held here and fed. A big task, with several thousand head."

"Then we're safe," said Lee.

Louise looked at him doubtfully. She knew not what to make of this talk and his portentous air, and felt a new apprehension rising in her mind.

"What is it? What has happened now, Lee?" she whispered.

But all at once he began to laugh. He caught her hand and holding it gazed, smiling, into her eyes. Then he drew from his pocket an envelope, which (still keeping prisoner the hand he had captured) he waved to and fro before her eyes.

"If I didn't know you well, I'd think you had lost your wits," she cried.

"I have—wits and heart both. With joy! Wait, I'll take the letter out so that you can read it. The only blessed thing I ever knew her to do! I bless her for it, at any rate." He pulled the letter and the clipping from their cover and laid them in Louise's hand. "Read, read the tidings!"

The girl's fingers began to tremble as her eyes flitted along the lines. But she read no more than the first part of the letter. She turned to him with her eyes misty, her face radiant.

"I could weep for happiness—but I'm not going to." She made a little dab with her handkerchief at her lashes. "Oh, Lee, to think you're free! And that now we may love each other!"

"I thought we did."

"Of course we did—but you know what I mean."

"You didn't read it all," said he. "You don't know yet the poor opinion she has of me."

Louise crumpled the letter in her hand and cast it into the flames.

"Nor do I want to know it," she exclaimed. "All I care about is my own opinion of you, and our love. That's enough. Perhaps we shall be all the happier for the little misery she caused us."

Her eyes dwelt proudly upon him, upon his face that showed new lines of strength, that was clear and calm, that revealed a spirit come to full manhood, that was luminous with the love she inspired. He had taken her hands and was regarding her tenderly.

"Ruth rendered me one service," said he. "She taught me that there's an appearance which may be mistaken for the substance. That shall be to her credit." He sat silent, smiling thoughtfully for a moment. Then he raised his eyes and drew Louise toward him. "But you, Louise, awoke real love."

His arms enclosed her fast and their lips met in a first kiss.

"We shall walk among the flowers and in the orchard again, Lee dear," she murmured, "as we did once before. And I shall bring you buttermilk as I did that morning—but there will be no Charlie Menocal."

"No. Charlie won't annoy us in the future."

"And when the snow is gone we'll ride along your canal——"

"Our canal now, sweetheart."

"Along our canal and see where you worked so hard and struggled and won, and I'll listen while you point here and there and tell of the obstacles overcome, and of all you did. We shall be gay and happy."

"As I'm happy now," he said, softly. "Do you know what I see there in the firelight? A building, a house—our home."

Louise's face lifted to his, all sweetness and trust.

"I see it, too," she murmured.

"On Perro Creek ranch," Lee continued, "with the sagebrush gone and in its place fields of grain and alfalfa spreading out to the horizon, with water rippling along in little canals and fat cows standing about, and contented farmers at work, and perhaps a railroad somewhere in the background, and ourselves in the foreground by our new home, where flowers are growing, too,

and—and——"

Louise's arms slipped up and about his neck, until her cheek rested against his.

"You dream and then you build—you dream and make your dreams come true," she said. "You're my dreamer-builder."

Lee was smiling. The caress in her words, the warm touch of her cheek, her heart beating against his, all made his happiness complete.

"And your lover," he whispered.

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Typographical errors corrected in text:

page	19:	mortage replaced by mortgage
page	62:	Monocal replaced by Menocal
page	63:	Monocal replaced by Menocal
page	66:	dissappointed replaced by disappointed
page	130:	Sante replaced by Santa

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