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[Frontispiece: Sometimes, in these days, she went to a crest from which the view reached far off for leagues over the valley.]

A PAGAN OF THE HILLS

BY

CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

AUTHOR OF
"THE CALL OF THE CUMBERLANDS,"
"THE BATTLE CRY,"
"WHEN BEARCAT WENT DRY," ETC., ETC.

Frontispiece by
GEORGE W. GAGE

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I	CHAPTER II	CHAPTER III	CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V	CHAPTER VI	CHAPTER VII	CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX	CHAPTER X	CHAPTER XI	CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII	CHAPTER XIV	CHAPTER XV	CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII	CHAPTER XVIII	CHAPTER XIX	

A PAGAN OF THE HILLS

CHAPTER I

"It's plum amazin' ter heer ye norate thet ye've done been tradin' and hagglin' with old man McGivins long enough ter buy his logs offen him and yit ye hain't never met up with Alexander. I kain't hardly fathom hit nowadays."

The shambling mountaineer stretched himself to his lean length of six feet two, and wagged an incredulous head. Out of pale eyes he studied the man before him until the newcomer from "down-below" felt that, in the attitude, lay almost the force of rebuke. It was as though he stood self-convicted of having visited Naples without seeing Vesuvius.

"But I haven't been haggling with Mr. McGivins," he hastened to remonstrate. "On the contrary we have done business most amicably."

The native of the tangled hills casually waved aside the distinction of terms as a triviality and went on: "I hain't nuver heered tell of no man's tradin' in these hyar Kentucky mountains without he haggled considerable. Why thet's what tradin' denotes. Howsomer what flabbergasts me air thet ye hain't met up with Alexander. Stranger, ye don't know nothin' about this neck o' the woods a-tall!"

Parson Acup, so called for the funereal gravity of his bearing and expression, and Brent the timber-buyer, stood looking down from beetling cliffs rigidly bestowed with colossal and dripping icicles. To their ears came a babel of shouts, the grating of trees, long sleet-bound but stirring now to the thaw—the roar of blasting powder and the rending of solid rock.

Brent laughed. "Now, that you've fathomed the density of my ignorance," he suggested, "proceed to enlighten me. Upon what does this Alexander rest his fame? What character of man is he?"

"Wa'al, stranger, I've done always held ther notion thet we folks up hyar in these benighted hills of old Kaintuck, war erbout the ign'rantest human mortals God ever suffered ter live—but even us knows erbout Alexander. Fust place he hain't no man at all. He's a gal—leastwise, Alexander was borned female but she's done lived a plum he-life, ever since."

"A woman—but the name——"

"Oh, pshaw! Thar hain't nuthin' jedgmatic in a name. Old man McGivins he jest disgusts gals and so he up and named his fust born Alexander an' he's done reared her accordin'."

Brent arched his brows as his informant continued, gathering headway in the interest of his narrative. "Old man McGivins he's done read a lavish heap of books an' he talks a passel of printed wisdom. He 'lowed thet Alexander wa'nt no common man's name but thet hit signified a hell-bustin' survigrous feller. By his tellin', ther fust Alexander whaled blazes outen all creation an' then sot down an' cried like a baby because ther job he'd done went an' petered out on him. Ter me, thet norration savers right strong of a damn lie."

Brent nodded as he smilingly replied, "I've read of that first Alexander, but he's been dead a good many centuries."

"Long enough ter leave him lay an' fergit about him, I reckon," drily observed the parson. "Anyhow atter a spell Old Man McGivins had another bornin' at his dwellin-house an' thet time hit proved out to be a boy. His woman sought ter rechristen ther gal Lizzie or Lake Erie or somethin' else befittin petticoats. She 'lowed thet no godly man wouldn't hardly seek a woman in wedlock, ner crave fer her to be ther mother of his children with a name hung on her like Alexander Macedonia McGivins."

Brent's eye twinkled as he watched the unbending gravity of the other's face and since comment seemed expected he conceded, "There seems to be a germ of reason in that."

"Then ther boy commenced growin' up, lazy-like an' shiftless," enlightened the parson. "Ther old man 'lowed thet hit wouldn't hardly be no fallacy ter name him Lizzie or Lake Erie, but he swore on a hull stack of Bibles thet he aimed ter make a man of ther gal."

Suddenly the speaker broke off and his brow clouded. Following the apprehensive direction of the frowning eyes as one might follow a dotted line the man from the city saw a young mountaineer surreptitiously tilting a flask to his lips in the lee of a huge boulder. Palpably the drinker believed himself screened from view, and when he had wiped the neck of the flask with the palm of his hand and stowed it away again in his breast pocket he looked furtively about him—and that furtiveness was unusual enough to elicit surprise in this land where men drank openly and made moonshine whiskey and even gave it to their small children.

"Since ther time of corn drappin' an' kiverin'," said the Parson, slowly, "Bud Sellers hain't teched a dram afore now. Hit don't pleasure me none ter see him startin' in afresh."

"He's been working hard," suggested the timber buyer tolerantly. "I've watched him and he

never seems to tire. Maybe he felt the need of a stimulant."

But Acup growled. "When Bud leaves licker alone thar hain't no better boy nowhars. When he follers drinking he gits p'izen mean right down to ther marrer in his insidest bone. Folks calls him ther mad-dog then. Ef these men finds out he's drinkin', they'll quit work an' scatter like pa'tridges does when they sees a hawk flutterin' overhead."

The loose-jointed giant turned on his heel and left Brent standing alone. Snow after snow had fallen this winter and frozen tight, heaped high by blizzard after blizzard until all the legendary "old fashioned winters" had been outdone and put to shame. Then without warning had come some warm breath across the peaks bringing January rains on the heels of zero fridity and thaws of unprecedented swiftness. While the "spring-tide" was to have been an agency of safe delivery for the felled timber this premature flood threatened to be a lawless one of devastation. Brent had rushed up here from the city driven by anxiety as to the logs he had contracted to buy—logs which the oncoming flood threatened to ravish into scattered and racing drift. He had found old man McGivins toiling without sleep or rest; racing against the gathering cohorts of a Nature turned vandal, and into the fight and stress he had thrown himself and all his energies.

That there was even the slimmest of chances to save the poplar, was a fact due to a peculiar conformation of the levels there, and to exceptional circumstances.

"Gin'rally we just rolls ther logs down hill when we cuts 'em an' lets 'em lay thar whar they falls in ther creek beds," McGivins had explained. "Afore ther spring tide comes on with ther thaws an' rains, we builds a splash dam back of 'em an' when we're ready we blows her out an' lets 'em float on down ter ther nighest boom fer raftin'. Ef a flood like this comes on they gits scattered, an' we jest kisses 'em good-bye. Thet's happenin' right now all along these numerous small creeks."

But McGivins had cut his timber near a river that could float not only loose logs but rafts, and in a small lake-like basin hemmed in by cliffs and separated by a gorge from the river he had gathered them and bound them into three large rafts. Only such a stage as came with the "tide" would convert the gorge into a water-way out, and only then wen the great dam built across it had been dynamited.

Now came this flood, infinitely more powerful than the ordinary rise of spring. The dam was threatened and must be strengthened and raised higher. If it gave way, he too must "kiss his logs good-bye."

As the city man speculated on the odds against him Old Man McGivins himself materialized at his elbow. His lips were tight-set and his brow was furrowed. For him the situation savored of impending tragedy. These trees had been reluctantly felled from a virgin tract of forest heretofore unscarred by the axe, and they had been his long-hoarded treasure. He had held on to them much as a miser holds to his savings because he loved them. Even when Brent had offered a good price, running well into thousands, he had wrestled with himself. When the axes had rung and the saws whined through the scarlet and golden autumn, it had almost seemed to him that he was executing living and beloved friends. Now an inimical force of Nature threatened to rob him of them and of his remuneration as well. Yet as he stood there, with the sweat and grime of his labor drying on his forehead, his brooding eyes held a patriarchal dignity of uncomplaining courage.

"All these hyar men air my neighbors, Mr. Brent," he said with a manner of instinctive courtesy. "They hain't a-workin' fer wages but jest ter kinderly convenience me—I reckon we're both of us right smart beholden to 'em."

The city man acquiescently nodded his head but he was thinking chiefly of the calm patience and the tireless strenuousity with which McGivins, himself, was battling against calamity.

"They are friends of yours," he answered. "They realize that your loss will be heavy if—" He broke off there and the other went on.

"Hit'll mighty nigh cripple me ef we don't save 'em. I've done held on ter thet timber fer a long spell of years an' I sorrers ter part with hit now. But thar's a right weighty mortgage on my land an' hit's held by a man thet don't squander no love on me at best."

Brent gritted his teeth. He had heretofore known only in the indirectness of theory the sudden capriciousness of mountain weather; storms that burst and cannonade without warning; trickling waters that leap overnight into maddened freshets. Now he was seeing in its blood-raw ferocity the primal combat between man and the elements.

With a troubled brow Parson Acup returned and addressed McGivins. "Aaron," he said bluntly, "right numerous fellers air threatenin' ter quit us and we kain't spare a single hand."

The old man flinched as if under a blow from a trusted hand. "What fer does they aim ter quit?" he demanded.

"Bud Sellers has started in drinkin' licker, an' a'ready he's gittin' malignant. Ther Martin boys an' ther Copelands an' others beside 'em, 'lows thet they ain't seekin' no heedless trouble and

hit's more heedful-like fer 'em ter go on home an' avoid an affray. Ef they stays on hit's right apt to end in blood-lettin'."

McGivins drew himself to a more rigid erectness. "Go back an' tell them boys that I needs 'em," he ordered. "Tell 'em ef they don't stand by me now, I'm ruint. I'll send Bud away ef thet's all thet's frettin' 'em."

"I wouldn't counsel ye ter cross Bud jest now," advised Acup, but the other laughed under his long beard, a low angry laugh, as he turned on his heel and, with the man from the city following him, started in search of the troublemaker.

Bud was found at last behind the great hump of towering rock. The place, walled in by beetling precipice, was beginning to darken into cloister-dim shadows. Bud's back was turned and he did not hear the footfall of the two men who had come upon him there. He knew that when once he succumbed to the thirst it meant a parting with reason and a frenzy of violence. But when the first savor of the fiery moonshine stuff had teased his palate and the first warmth had glowed in his stomach it meant surrender to debauch—and already he had gone too far to fight the appetite which was his ruin.

Now he stood with the flask to his lips and his head bent back, but when he had drunk deep he turned and saw the two figures that were silently observing him.

His eyes were already blood-shot and his cheeks reddened. The motions of his lithe body were unsteady. With a shamefaced gesture the young man sought to conceal the flask under his coat, then a fickle change came to his mood. His head bent down low like a bull's and his shoulders hulked in a stiffening defiance.

"Spyin' on me, air ye?" The question rasped savagely from his thickened lips. "Well, damn ther pair of ye, spies deserves what they gits! I'm a free man an' I don't suffer no bull-dozin' from nobody."

He lurched forward with so threatening an air that Brent stepped a little to the side and instinctively his hand went to the coat pocket where he carried a pistol. But Bud ignored him, focussing his attention upon the mountain man to whom he had come in friendship and service for the stemming of a disaster. He came with a chin out-thrust close to the older and bearded face. Truculence and reckless bravado proclaimed themselves in the pose, as he bulked there. "Wa'al," he snarled, "ye heered me, didn't ye?"

But McGivins had not altered his attitude. He had not given back a stride nor moved his arms. Now he spoke quietly.

"I'm sore grieved to see you comin' ter this pass, Bud," he said. "We all knows what hit means every time. I'm obleeged ter ye fer what ye've already done—an' I'll ask ye, now, ter go on home afore ye drinks any more whiskey—or starts any ruction amongst my neighbors."

"So thet's hit, air hit?" Bud rocked a little on his feet as he stood confronting the steady challenge of Aaron McGivins. "So ye lets a man work slavish fer ye all day, and then starts in faultin' him ef he takes a drink at sun-down. Well damn ye, I don't aim ter go nowhars tell I'm ready an' ambitious ter go—does ye hear thet or does I hev ter tell ye again?"

With a very deliberate motion McGivins lifted one arm and pointed it towards the west—that way lay the nearest boundary of his tract.

"I've done asked ye plum civil ter go, because ef you don't go other fellers will—fellers thet's wuth somethin'. Now I orders ye ter get offen my land. Begone!"

What happened next was such a tumult of abruptness that Brent found himself standing inactive, not fully grasping the meaning of the situation. From Bud came a roar of anger as he lunged and grappled with the bearded elder, carrying him back in the onslaught. With a belated realization, Brent threw himself forward but just as his hand fell on the shoulder of Bud Sellers he heard a report, muffled because it was fired between two savagely embraced bodies. The lumber buyer had seen no weapon drawn. That had been the instinctive legerdemain of mountain quickness, which even drink had not blunted. As he wrenched Bud back, the wounded figure stood for a moment swaying on legs that slowly and grotesquely buckled into collapse at the knees until Aaron McGivins crumpled down in a shapeless heap.

Bud Sellers wrenched himself free with a muscular power that almost hurled Brent to the ground, and the pistol fell from his hand. For a moment the young assailant stood there with an expression of dismayed shock, as though, in his sleep, he had committed a crime and had awakened into an appalled realization. Then, ignoring Brent, he wheeled and lunged madly into the laurel.

Figures came running in response to the alarm of pistol report and shouting, but old man McGivins, whom they carried to the nearest bonfire, feebly nodded his head. Parson Acup was bending over him and when he rose it was with a dubious face.

"I fears me thet wound's mighty liable ter be a deadener," he said.

Then the wounded man lifted a trembling hand. "Git me over home," he directed shortly, "An' fer God's sake, boys, go forward with this work till hit's finished."

CHAPTER II

Through the tree tops came a confusion of voices, but none of them human. A wind was racing to almost gale-like violence and with it came the inrush of warm air to peaks and valleys that had been tight-frozen. Between precipices echoed the crash of ice sliding loose and splintering as it fell in ponderous masses. Men sweating in the glare of colossal bonfires toiled at the work of re-inforcing the dam.

They had been faithful; they were still faithful, but the stress of exhaustion was beginning to sap their morale; to drive them into irritability so that, under the strain of almost superhuman exertion, they threatened to break. Brent was not of their blood and knew little of how to handle them, and though Parson Acup was indefatigable, his face became more and more apprehensive.

"Ef we kin hold 'em at hit till ther crack of day, we've got a right gay chanst ter save them big sticks," he announced bluntly to Brent near midnight. "But hit hain't in reason ter expect men ter plum kill themselves off fer ther profit of somebody else—an' him likely ter be dead by termorrer."

"Could McGivins have kept them in line himself?" demanded Brent and the Parson scratched his head. "Wa'al he mout. Thar's somethin' masterful in thet breed thet kinderly drives men on. I don't know es I could name what it air though."

Then even as he spoke a group of humanity detached itself from the force on the dam and moved away as men do who are through with their jobs. They halted before Acup and one of them spoke somewhat shame-facedly: "I disgusts ter quit on a man in sore need, Parson, but us fellers kain't hold up no longer. We're plum fagged ter death—mebby termorrer mornin'—"

He broke off and Acup answered in a heavy-hearted voice: "So fur as this hyar job's consarned most likely thar won't be no termorrer. Old man McGivins lays over thar, mebby a-dyin' an' this means a master lot to him—"

"If it's a matter of pay," began Brent and left his suggestion unfinished. A quick glance of warning from Acup cautioned him that this was a tactless line and one of the men answered shortly, "Pay hain't skeercely ergoin' ter hold a man up on his legs when them legs gives out under him, stranger."

"No, Lige, pay won't do it, but upstandin' nerve *will*—an' I knows ye've got hit. Ef anybody quits now, they're all right apt ter foller suit."

At the sound of the first words, Brent had pivoted as suddenly as though a bolt had struck him. They came in a voice so out of keeping with the surroundings, so totally different from any he had heard that day, that it was a paradox of sound. In the first place it was a woman's voice and here were only sweating men. In the second, although full and clear as if struck from well cast bell metal, it had a rich sweetness and just now the thrill of deep emotion.

In the red flare of the bonfire that sent up a shower of sparks into the wet darkness, he saw a figure that brought fresh astonishment.

The woman stood there with a long rubber slicker tight-buttoned from collar to hem. Below that Brent saw rubber boots. She stood with a lance-like straightness, very tall, very pliant, and as he stared with a fixity which would have amounted to impertinence had it not been disarmed by amazement she looked past him and through him as if he were himself without substance.

Then she took off the heavy Nor'wester that had shaded her face, and the firelight fell on masses of hair deeply and redly gold; upon features exquisitely modeled, in no wise masculine or heavy, yet full of dominance. Duskiy-lashed eyes of dark violet were brimming with a contagious energy and her rounded chin was splendidly atilt. A sculptor might have modeled her as she stood, and entitled his bronze "Victory."

Her coloring too was rich, almost dazzling, and Brent thought that he had never seen such arresting beauty or such an unusual though harmonious blending of feminine allurements—and masculine spirit. Though in height she approached the heroic of scale, the first summary of impression which he drew from feature and coloring was "delicately gorgeous."

The girl vouchsafed him no attention of any kind but remained silent for a moment with her eyes raining so resolute a fire that those of the exhausted workers kindled into faint

responsiveness.

Then the vibrant clarity of the voice sounded again—and the voice too had that strangely hypnotic quality that one felt in the glance. "You boys have all worked here hour on hour, till ye're nigh dead. My paw an' me are already powerful beholden to ye all but—" She paused and under just such an emotion the ordinary woman's throat would have caught with a sob and her eyes would have filled with tears. It was not so with Alexander. Her note only softened into a deeper gravity. "But he lays over thar an' I mistrusts he's a-dyin' ternight. He wouldn't suffer me ter tarry by his bed-side because he 'lowed that you boys needed a man ter work along with ye in his place. If ye quits now all the labor ye've done spent goes fer naught." She paused a moment and then impulsively she broke out: "An' I couldn't hardly endure ter go back thar an' tell him that we'd failed."

As she paused the hollow-eyed men shuffled their feet but none of them spoke. They had given generously, prodigally even, of their effort and it had not been for hire. Yet under the burning appeal of her eyes they flushed as though they had been self-confessed malingerers.

"But as fer me," went on Alexander, "I've got ter git ter work."

She unbuttoned and cast off the long rubber coat and Brent felt as if he had seen the unveiling of a sculptured figure which transcended mediocrity. A flannel shirt, open on a splendidly rounded throat, emphasized shoulders that fell straight and, for a woman unusually broad, though not too broad for grace. She was an Amazon in physique yet so nicely balanced of proportion that one felt more conscious of delicate liteness than of size. As her breath came fast with excitement the fine arch of her heaving bosom was that of a Diana. Belted about a waist that had never known the cramp of stays, she wore a pair of trousers thrust into her boot tops and no man there was more unself-conscious.

The exhausted men stirred restlessly as they watched her go down to the dam, and one of those who had dropped to a sitting posture came lumberingly to his feet again.

"I reckon I've got my second wind now," he lamely announced. "Mebby thar's a leetle mite more work left in me yit atter all," and he started back, stumbling with the ache of tired bones, to the task he had renounced, while his fellows grumbled a little and followed his lead.

Throughout the day Brent had felt himself an ineffective. He had done what he could but his activities had always seemed to be on the less strenuous fringe of things like a bee who works on the edge of a honey comb.

Now as the replenished fire leaped high and the hills resounded to an occasional peal of unseasonable thunder the figure of the woman who had assumed a man's responsibility became a pattern of action. In the flare and the shadow he watched it, fascinated. It was always in the forefront, frequently in actual but unconsidered peril, leading like the white plume of Navarre.

It was all as lurid and as turgid a picture as things seen in nightmare or remembered from mythology—this turmoil of emergency effort through a fire-lit night of storm and flood; figures thrown into exaggeration as the flames leaped or dwindled—faces haggard with weariness.

To Brent came a new and keener spirit of combat. The outskirts of action no longer sufficed, but with an elemental ardor and elation his blood glowed in his veins.

When at last all that could be done had been done, the east was beginning to take on a sort of ashen light—the forerunner of dawn. Alexander had held to the sticking-point the quailing energies of spent men for more than six agonized hours. Below them the river bed that had been almost dry forty-eight hours ago was a madly howling torrent.

Men with faces gray and hollow-eyed laid down their crow-bars and pike-poles. Brent, reeling unsteadily as he walked, looked about him in a dazed fashion out of giddy eyes. He saw Alexander wiping the steaming moisture from her brow with the sleeve of her shirt and heard her speak through a confused pounding upon eardrums that still seemed full of cumulative din.

"Unless ther flood carries ther river five foot higher then hit's ever gone afore, we've done saved that timber," she said slowly. "An' no men ever worked more plum slavish ner faithful then what you men have ternight."

"That hain't nothin' more left ter do now," said Parson Acup, "unless hit be ter go home an' pray."

But Alexander shook her head with a vigorous and masculine determination.

"No, thar's still one thing more ter do. I want that when you men goes home ye send me back a few others—fresh men. I'm goin' back ter see how my daddy's farin' an' whether he's got a chanst ter live, but—" she paused abruptly and her voice fell, "thar's a spring-branch over thar by my house. Ye kin mighty nigh gauge how ther water's risin' or fallin' hyar by notin' ther way hit comes up or goes down over yon. I aims ter keep a watchin' hit, whilst I'm over thar."

The parson nodded his head. "That's a right good idee, Alexander, but wharfore does ye seek

ter hev us send more men over hyar? All thet kin be done, has been done."

The girl's eyes snapped. In them were violet fires, quick-leaping and hot.

"I hain't gone this fur only ter quit now," she passionately declared. "Them logs is rafted. Ef they goes out on this flood-tide, I aims ter ride 'em down-stream 'twell I kin land 'em in a safe boom."

"But my God Almighty, gal," Parson Acup, wrenched out of his usual placidity by the effrontery of the project, spoke vehemently. "Any tide thet would bust thet dam would sartain shore rip them rafts inter fragments. Ef they goes out a-tall they goes out ter destruction and splinters an' sure death, I fears me. Hit's like ridin' a runaway hoss without no bit in his mouth."

"Thet's a thing I've done afore now," the girl assured him. "An' I aims ter undertake hit ergin."

She turned and, taking the rubber coat from a tree crotch, went striding away with her face toward the pale east and despite fatigue she went high-headed and with elasticity in her step.

CHAPTER III

The two-storied house of Aaron McGivins stood on a hill-side overlooking a stretch of cleared acreage. It was a dwelling place of unusual pretentiousness for that land of "Do-without," where inexorable meagerness is the rule of life. Just now in a room whose hearth was wide, upon a four-poster bed, lay the master of the place gazing upwards at the rafters with eyes harassed, yet uncomplaining.

Aaron McGivins had just cause for troubled meditation as he stretched there under the faded coverlet and under the impending threat of death, as well. His life had been one of scant ease and of unmitigated warfare with the hostile forces of Nature. Yet he had built up a modest competency after a life time of struggle. With a few more years of industry he might have claimed material victory. In the homely parlance of his kind he had things "hung-up," which signified such prosperity had come to him as came to the pioneer woodsmen who faced the famine times of winter with smoked hams hanging from their nails, and tobacco and pepper and herbs strung along the ceiling rafters.

Aaron McGivins had not progressed to this modestly enviable estate without the driving of shrewd bargains and the taking of bold chances. It followed that men called him hard, though few men called him other than just. To his door came disputants who preferred his arbitration on tangled issues to the dubious chances of litigation, for he was also accounted wise.

His repute among his neighbors was that of a man devoted to peace, but one upon whom it was unsafe to impose. Those few who had stirred his slow anger into eruption, had found him one as distinctly to be feared as trusted.

Had political aspiration been in the pattern of Aaron's thought he might have gone down to the world below to sit in the state assembly. From there in due time he might have gained promotion to the augmented dignities of Congress, but he had persistently waved aside the whispers of such temptation. "He hain't a wishful feller nohow," the stranger was always told, "despite thet he knows hist'ry an' sich like lore in an' out an' back'ards an' forrards."

Now Aaron lay wounded with a pistol ball, and many problems of vital interest to himself remained unsolved. Whether he would live or die was guess work—a gamble. Whether the timber which he had felled would free him from his last debt and leave his two children independent, or be ravished from him by the insatiable appetite of the flood was a question likewise unanswered. Whether or not the daughter, who was the man of the family after himself, would return in time to comfort his last moments was a doubt which troubled him most of all. He had sent her away as unequivocally as a stricken captain sends his first officer to the bridge, but he wanted her as a man, shipwrecked and starving, wants the sight of a sail or of a smoke-stack on an empty horizon.

And his boy—the boy who had given him small strength upon which to lean, was absent. He had gone idly and thoughtlessly before the emergency arose, and the man lying on the four-poster bed tried to argue for him, in extenuation, that he would have returned had he known the need. But in his bruised and doubting heart he knew that had it been Alexander, she would have read the warning in the first brook that she saw creeping into an augmented stream, and would have hastened home.

About the room moved the self-taught doctor, who was also the local Evangelist. Two neighbor women were there too, called from adjacent cabins to take the place of the daughter he had sent away. They were ignorant women, hollow-chested and wrinkled like witches because they had spent lives against dun-colored backgrounds, but they were wise in the matter of

"yarbs" and simple nursing.

All night Aaron McGivins had lain there, restive and unable to sleep. With him had been those matters which obtrude themselves, with confusing multiplicity, upon the mind of a man who was yesterday strong and unthreatened and who to-day faces the requirement of readjusting all his scheme from the clear and lighted ways of life to the gathering mists of death. He had seen through a high-placed window the gray of dawn grow into a clearer light, making visible rag-like streamers of wet and scudding clouds. He had a glimpse of mountain-sides sodden with thaw—the thaw to which he owed his whole sum of sudden perplexities.

Then the door swung open.

Eagerly the bed-ridden man turned his eyes towards it; eagerly, too, the doctor's gaze went that way, but the two women, glancing sidewise, sniffed dubiously and stiffened a little. To them the anxiously awaited daughter was an unsexed creature whom they could neither understand nor approve. They had lived hard and intolerent lives, accepting drudgery and perennial child-bearing as unquestioned mandates of destiny. Accustomed to the curt word and to servile obedience they had no understanding for a woman who asserted herself in positive terms of personality. To them a "he-woman" who "wore pants" and admitted no sex inferiority was at best a "hussy without shame." If such a woman chanced also to be beautiful beyond comparison with her less favored sisters, the conclusion was inescapable. They could read in her self-claimed emancipation only the wildness of a filly turned out to pasture without halter or hobble; the wildness of one who scorns respectability; for primitive morality is pathetically narrow. It may sing piously about the pyre of a burning witch, but it can hardly grasp the pagan chastity of a Diana.

And it was a Diana both chaste and vital who stood in this wide-flung door. Behind her far radiant background was the full light of a young day. For an instant the scowl of storm-laden skies broke into a smile of sunlight as though she had brought the brightness with her. But she stood poised in an attitude of arrested action—halted by the curb of anxiety. The whole vitality and clean vigor of her seemed breathless and questioning. Fear had spurred her into fleetness as she had crossed the hills, yet now she hesitated on the threshold. At first her eyes could make little of the inner murk, where both lamp and fire had guttered low and gray shadows held dominance.

But she herself stood illumined by that transitory flash of morning sun. It played in an aura about the coppery coils of her hair and kindled into vivid color the lips parted in suspense.

After a moment her eyes had reaccommodated themselves to the dispiriting darkness and her bosom heaved to a sigh of relief; of thanksgiving. Under the heaped coverlets of the bed she had seen the movement of feeble hand stirred in a gesture of welcome.

The neighbor women, bent on a mission of charity, yet unable to lay aside their hard convictions, gazed non-committally on, as though they would draw aside their skirts from contamination, yet sought to do so with the least possible measure of ostentation or offense.

That attitude Alexander did not fail to comprehend but she ignored it, giving back to the smouldering eyes of disapproval level look for look. Then she said quietly: "Brother Sanders, kin I hev speech with him—or must he lay plum quiet?"

The man of healing passed a bewildered hand across his tousled forehead, and with thin fingers combed his long beard.

"He ought, properly speakin', ter stay quiet—but yit—he's frettin' fer ye so thet hit mought harm him wuss ter deny him."

"I'll aim ter keep him es placid es I kin," said the girl, and in obedience to her gesture the others left the room.

Then Alexander dropped to her knees and her hands closed tightly over the thin one that the wounded man thrust weakly up to her. Even now there was no woman-surrender to tears; only wide eyes agonized with apprehension while her shoulders shook as a man's may shake with inward sobs that leave the eyes dry.

In a low voice she made her report. "Ther dam's finished. Without ther flood overtops ther highest mark on record, them logs is saved."

Old Aaron nodded gratefully and gazed in silence at the rafters overhead, realizing that he must conserve his slender strength and that there was much to say. The girl, too, waited until at length he made a fresh beginning.

"Afore ye came, Alexander, me an' yore maw hed done prayed mighty fervent fer a man child."

"I knows thet," she interrupted. "I knows hit full well, an' I've sought deespite how I was borned ter be a man."

"Ye hain't only tried—ye've done succeeded," he assured her, then after a long drawn breath he went on. "Most folks 'lowed hit was like faultin' ther Almighty ter feel thet-a-way. They said hit war plum rebellious."

The girl whose cheeks had gone pallid and whose lips were tight drawn spoke defiantly. "I reckon we hain't keerin' overly much what other folks thinks."

"An' yit," the father made slow answer, "what folks agrees ter think makes ther laws of life whether hit be right or wrong—I'd hev been willin' ter raise ye up like a gal ef hit hadn't been thet Joe—"

He faltered there with Love's unwillingness to criticise his son and the girl only nodded, saying nothing.

"Joe's a good boy, with a sweet nature," went on the father at last. "He favors his maw—an' she was always gentle. Yes, he's a good boy—an' in a country whar a feller kin live without fightin', I reckon he'd be accounted smart beyond ther commonality."

Again the mountaineer's face was contorted into a spasm of pain and his labored breathing demanded a respite of silence. Then slowly he declared with the unvarnished candor of the backwoods: "Joe's got all a man needs—but—jest—guts!"

The kneeling figure reluctantly nodded her assent. These admissions as to one's nearest and dearest must at times be made between men who face facts.

"Ef I passes out, I wants ye ter kinderly look atter him like he ought ter look atter you."

A stray lock of heavy hair had fallen across the girl's violet eyes, and with an impatient gesture at the reminder of her sex, Alexander tossed it back. "I gives ye my pledge," she said simply.

Then she rose from her knees and stood looking off through the window with a fixity that argued a deep dedication of purpose. "An' I pledges ye somethin' else too," she broke out in a voice suddenly savage. "Ef ye dies Bud Sellers belongs ter me ter kill—an' I won't nowise fail."

But at that the wounded man raised a deter rent hand shaken with palsied anxiety.

"No—no!" he gasped. "Thet's ther sperit I've done sought ter combat all my life—ther shot from ther la'rel—ther lay-wayin' of enemies. I couldn't rest easy ef ye denied me that pledge."

Alexander's hands clenched themselves, and her lips were compressed.

"I don't aim ter lay-way him," she declared with an ominous quiet. "I aims ter reckon with him es man ter man."

"Alexander." He spoke with slow difficulty but she knew that the words came earnestly from his heart. "I hain't skeercely got ther strength ter argyfy with ye, but without ye seeks ter hinder me from layin' peaceful in my last sleep ye'll bide by my command. Ther boy wasn't hisself when he harmed me. He war plum crazed. No man loves me better than what he does when he's in his right mind. No man wucked harder down thar. I fergives him full free. I wants ye ter act ther same an' ter make Joe do likewise."

The girl covered her face with her hands and turned from the bed. She went for a moment to the door and flung it open. There was no longer any sunshine—only a dome of leaden heaviness and the wail of dismal wind through the timber. To the father's eyes, despite her masculine attire she was all feminine as she stood there and his face grew tender as he watched the curls stirring at her temples.

Finally she wheeled and with a military stiffness marched back. Slowly she nodded her head. "I gives ye thet pledge too;" she said, "since ye wants hit—but I gives hit with a right heavy sperit."

He reached up and took her hand, drawing her down to the bed by his side.

"Alexander," he said softly, "mebby I hain't played quite fa'r with ye my own self. I've done tried ter raise ye up like a man because I could always kinderly lean on ye—but ye've done been both a son an' a daughter ter me. Maybe though when I'm gone ther woman in ye'll come uppermost an' ye'll think hardly of me fer what I did."

"Think hard of ye fer tryin' ter make a man of me!" Her voice was as full of scornful protest as though a soldier had said, "Think hard of you because you taught me valor!"

He smiled before he spoke again. "I've done warned young men off from co'tin' ye on pain of harm an' death—an' when I'm dead they'll come in lavish numbers seekin' ter make up fer lost time."

"I reckon I kin warn 'em off too," she protested, "an' by ther same means."

Once more a smile flickered in the wearied eyes that looked up from the pillow. "Thet's fer ye ter decide yore own self, but ef ther day ever comes when ye'd ruther welcome a lover then ter drive him off, I don't want ye ter feel thet my memory's standin' in ther way of your happiness."

"Thet day won't never come," she vehemently declared, and her father nodded indulgently.

"Let thet matter lay over fer ther future ter decide," he suggested. "Only ef ye does sometime alter yore way of thinkin' I wants thet men children shell come atter me, bearin' my own name. Joe's children are apt ter take atter him. I don't see how ye kin compass hit, but I wishes thet ef ye ever did wed, yore babies could still be McGivinses."

Despite her announcement of a masculinity which should not mantle into a flooding of the temples and cheeks with blushes of modesty, Alexander turned pink to the roots of her hair. Her voice was a little strained.

"A feller kain't promise thet he won't go crazy," she declared. "But ef ever I does go so crazy es ter wed with a man, thet man'll tek my surname an' our children 'll tek hit too, an' w'ar hit 'twell they dies."

CHAPTER IV

Brent had wondered how the Parson and his exhausted companions would, in the short time at their disposal, be able to call out a new force of volunteers. If the dam gave way and the rafts were swept out the thing would probably happen by noon and there were few telephones in this sparsely peopled community. Yet the device was simple and one of pioneer directness. In many of those households to which the tired workers returned, there were brothers or sons who had heretofore stayed at home. Those who had responded to the first call were all men who were not afraid of toil, but those who might answer the second would be men who courted the hazards of adventure. Sheer dare-deviltry would arouse in them a responsiveness which had remained numb to the call of industry. Down the yellow and turgid path of swollen waters each spring went huge rafted masses of logs manned by brawny fellows who at other times never saw the world that lay "down below." Hastily reared shacks rose on the floating timber islands and bonfires glowed redly. The crews sang wild songs and strummed ancient tunes on banjo and "dulcimore." They fortified themselves against the bite of the chill night air from the jugs which they never forgot. Sometimes they flared into passion and fought to the death, but oftener they caroused good-naturedly as they watched the world flatten and the rivers broaden to the lowlands. After the "tide" took them there was no putting into harbor, no turning back. They were as much at the mercy of the onswEEPing waters as is a man who clings to driftwood.

Rafting on the "spring-tide" called out the wilder and more venturesome element; but even that differed vastly from the present situation. It differed just as riding a spirited horse does from trusting oneself, without stirrup leather or bridle rein, to the pell-mell vagaries of a frenzied runaway.

"Ye says Alexander aims ter ride one of them rafts, ef hit gets carried out o' thar?" inquired a tall young man, whose eyes were reckless and dissipated, as a wearied kinsman stumbled into a cabin and threw himself down limply in a chair.

The tall young man was accounted handsome in a crude, back-country way and fancied himself the devil of a fellow with the ladies. "Wa'al," he drawled, "I reckon ef a gal kin undertake hit, I hain't none more timorous then what she air." And to that frankly spoken sentiment he added an inward after-word. "Folks 'lows thet she hain't got no time o' day fer men—but when we ends up this hyar trip, I'll know more erbout thet fer myself." He turned and began making his rough preparations for the voyage.

And as Jase Mallows rose to the bait of that unusual call, so others like him rose and each of them was a man conspicuous for recklessness and wildness among a people where these qualities do not elicit comment until they become extreme.

An hour or two later Brent, eying the fresh arrivals, frowned a bit dubiously as he compared them with the human beavers who had moiled there through the night. It was, he reflected, as though the sheep had gone and the goats had come in their stead.

Then as the newcomers fell to their task of throwing up rough shanties for shelter upon the rafts it seemed to Will Brent as safe a proposition to embark with them as to be shipwrecked with a crew of pirates.

He had himself entertained no intention of boarding any of these three rafts, but he was not craven, and if a girl was going to trust herself to those chances of flood and human passion he

told himself that he could do no less than stand by.

The river was already creeping above the gnarled sycamore roots that jutted out of the precipice, marking the highest stage of previous flood tides.

The two neighbor women had come back into the room where Aaron McGivins lay wounded. The man himself, reassured by the presence of his daughter, had fallen at last into an undisturbed sleep and the doctor delivered himself of the first encouragement that had crossed his sternly honest lips. "I reckon now he's got a right even chanst ter git well ef he kin contrive ter rest a-plenty."

The girl's head came back, with a spasmodic jerk. It was the sudden relaxing of nerves that had been held taut to the snapping point. With a step suddenly grown unsteady she made her way to a chair by the hearth and sat gazing fixedly at the dying embers.

She had not let herself hope too much, and now a sudden rush of repressed tears threatened a flood like the one which had come outdoors from the broken tightness of the ice.

But she felt upon her the critical eyes of the neighbor women and refused to surrender to emotion. After a little period of respite she let herself out of the door into the rain that had begun falling with a sobbing fitfulness, and went through the starkness of the woods.

Back of the house was the "spring-branch" of which she had spoken as a gauge to the stage of the flood. By some freakish law of co-ordination, which no one had ever been able to explain, that small stream gave a reading of conditions across the ridge, as a pulse-beat gives the tempo of the blood's current. One could look at it and estimate with fair accuracy how fast and how high the river was rising. When a rotting stump beside the basin of the spring had water around its roots it meant that the arteries of the hills were booming into torrential fury. When the basin overflowed, the previous maximum of the river's rise had been equaled. It was overflowing now.

Alexander stood for a moment gazing with widened and terrified eyes. She had now no time to lose. The lapping waters of a tiny brook were calling her to prompt and hazardous action. She fell to her knees and clasped her hands in a clutch of desperation. "God, give me strength right now ter ack like a man," she prayed. "Hit seems like ther fust time I'm called on, I'm turnin' plum woman-weak."

Then she rose and pressed her pounding temples. It was not the fear of a runaway river that held her in a tormenting suspense of indecision, but the hard choice between leaving her father or fulfilling a duty to which he had assigned her in his stead.

When she opened the door of the house again she saw an agitated figure kneeling beside the bed. For all its breadth of shoulder and six feet of height; for all its inherited stoicism that had stood through generations, it was shaking with sobs.

As Alexander came into the room her brother rose from his knees with pallid cheeks and woebegone eyes.

"Who shot him?" he demanded in a tense voice. "These hyar folks won't tell me nuthin'."

The girl repressed an impulse of satirical laughter. She knew that Joe McGivins would storm and swear vengeance upon the hand that had been raised to strike his father down and that beyond hysterical vehemence his indignation would come to nothing. He would believe himself sincere and in the end his resolution would waste away into procrastination and specious excuses.

"Whoever shot him, Joe," she replied, maintaining the complimentary fiction that she must temporize with his just wrath, "Paw he's done exacted a pledge thet neither of us won't seek ter avenge ther deed. Hit's a pledge thet binds us both."

Even while his temples were still hot with his first wave of passionate indignation, Joe McGivins felt that a bitter cup had passed from him.

"Joe," said the girl in a low voice, "I wants thet ye heeds me clost. Ef we fails ter save this timber hit'll jest erbout kill Paw. Ef ther dam busts loose, somebody's got ter ride them rafts."

The boy's face paled abruptly. He was a handsome youth, outwardly cut to as fine a pattern of physical fitness as his sister exemplified, but in his eyes one found none of her dauntlessness of spirit. Hurriedly Alexander swept on.

"I aims ter go back over thar right now. He's got ter be kept quiet an' so I dastn't tell him what I seeks ter do. I hain't fearsome of leavin' ye ter watch after him. I knows ye kin gentle him an' comfort him even better'n I could do hit myself."

She thrust out her hand, boy fashion, and her brother clasped it. Five minutes later she stood looking down on her father's closed eyes, listening to the easy breathing of the man in the bed.

On the floor at her feet lay the pack which she meant to take with her, a rifle leaned against a chair and a pistol was slung in a holster under her left arm-pit—Alexander was accounted for her venture.

Brent watched her swinging down the slope with an easy, space-devouring stride. He had begun to think she would be too late; more than half to hope she would be too late. If she arrived on time there was, of course, no turning back. It should be recorded to his credit that no man had guessed at his inner trepidation. But the sullen swell of the thundering waters had beaten not only on his ears but on his heart as well—and dread had settled over him like a pall.

Immeasurable power was lashing itself into a merciless fury. Boundless might was loosening into frenzy. He had seen the misshapen wreckage of houses and barns ride by, bobbing like bits of cork. He had seen the swirl of foam that was like the froth of a vast hydrophobia.

The men who had volunteered stood braced and ready at the long sweeps with which, fore and aft, they would seek to hold the course.

Alexander leaped from the shore to the last of the three rafts, and looked about her. Perhaps she had no eye just now for a thing that Brent had noted as significant; the gleam in the eyes that bent upon her arrival.

"Does ye aim ter ride with us, Mr. Brent?" she inquired and when he nodded his assent she said deliberately: "Ye comes from ther city—an' this hyar's liable ter be a rough trip. I reckon I ought ter warn ye whilst thar's still time ter turn back. We've got ter go out on a whirl-pool betwixt them walls of rock an' thar may not be nothin' left but kindlin' wood."

"Thank you," was the somewhat curt response. "I'm taking no greater chances than the rest of you."

No longer was it possible to hope that the dam would hold against the rising crescendo of that battering from beyond and the insidious tongues that licked at its foundations.

It was now only a matter of time, and the hour which followed was a period of dire suspense. Through small breaks already gushed minor cataracts—all growing. No man offered to turn aside but some had recourse to the steadying influence of the pocket flask. Between the gorge's sides they had swift glimpses of racing flotsam that had yesterday been dwelling houses and they waited, nerve-stretched, for the crash that would launch them into the same precarious channel. Their out-going would be as violent and eruptive as that of lava from a crater.

Then the dam broke.

It gave way with a rending such as must have been sounded in the days when a molten globe was cooling. From the base of the dam sucking tongues had licked out boulders that upheld the formation as a keystone holds an arch. It went into collapse with an explosive splintering and left fang-like reefs still standing. Through the breach fell the ponderous weight of a river left unsupported.

First, the inrush flung the rafts backwards against the banks, and then the churning whirlpool which was developed sent them spinning madly outward. The rafts jammed together and trembled with a groaning shudder. They wavered and undulated like cloth and that nearest the gorge lunged outward, dashed against one wall of precipice, caromed off and ground against the other. About the edges, it had gone to splinters but the core still held. The second raft, by some miracle, rode through without collision to ride tilting about the curve into the channel proper. Brent saw, through dazed and uncertain eyes, figures bending to long poles. He felt such a sickening sensation as a man in a barrel may experience at the moment of going over the crest of Niagra. Through it all he felt rather than saw the figure of a girl in man's clothing standing at the center of the raft, poised with bent knees against shock; and with a Valkyrie fire in her eyes.

A half hour later the man from town drew a freer breath. It was still a wild enough ride, but after the lurching dash out of the cauldron, it seemed a peaceful voyage. Now down the center of the river they swept at tide-speed. At either end of each raft men bent to the sweeps in the task of their crude piloting. Tree tops brushed under them as they went and far out on either side were wide-reaching lagoons that had been high ground three days ago.

Alexander herself was standing a little apart and Brent was of a mind to draw her into conversation but as he approached her he decided that this was not the time to improve acquaintanceship. Her air of detachment amounted to aloofness and Brent remembered that she had, weighing upon her, the anxiety of her father's condition.

Jase Mallows, however, just then relieved from duty at the steering sweep, was less subtle of deduction. With his eye on Alexander, whose back was turned to him, he jauntily straightened his shoulders and gave his long mustache a twirl. Brent thought of the turkey-gobbler's strut as, with amused eyes, he watched the backwoods lady-killer. Jase had heard many of the old wives' tales of Alexander and thought of her as one, ambitious of amorous conquest, may think of a famous and much discussed beauty. Had she been another woman, Jase would before now have gone

over to the house on a "sparking" expedition, but Old Man McGivins had discouraged such aspirations—and his daughter had been no less definite of attitude. Here, however, he had the girl on neutral ground and meant to seize his opportunity.

So he strolled over to her with an ingratiating smile.

"Aleck," he began in the drawling voice which he himself rather fancied, "we hed a right norror squeak of hit back thar didn't we?"

There should have been discouragement in the coolness of the glance that she turned upon him, but Jase had the blessing of self-confidence.

"Ye war thar yerself—ye ought ter know," said Alexander curtly. Then she added, "An' don't call me Aleck—my name's Alexander."

Jase Mallows reddened to his temples. There had been moments, even in the straining activity of these hours, for him to boast to his fellows that it would be interesting to watch the progress of his campaign for the affections of Alexander. Now they were watching.

So Jase laughed awkwardly. "Wa'al, that's reasonable enough," he handsomely conceded. "A gal's got a rather es ter what name she's ter be called by an' ef she's es purty es you be she kin afford ter be high-headed too."

Alexander stood looking the man over from head to foot as though studying a new species—possibly a species of insect-life. Under that embarrassing scrutiny Jase fidgeted his hands. Eventually he drew out a flask and having uncorked it he ceremoniously wiped the bottle's mouth with the palm of his hand. "Let's take a leetle dram ter better acquaintances," he suggested. "Thet thar's licker I wouldn't offer ter nobody but a reg'lar man. Hit's got a kick like a bob-tailed mule."

With features that had not altered their expression, the girl reached out her hand and accepted the bottle.

She held the thing before her, looking at it for a moment, then with a swift gesture tossed it sidewise into the river.

Jase Mallows bent forward and his face flamed, but his anger seemed a tame and little thing to the wrath that leaped from calm to blazing eruption in the woman's eyes.

"Whilst we're aboard this hyar raft," Alexander announced with an utterance that cut like a zero wind, "I'm boss an' I aims fer men ter stay sober. Ef thet don't suit you—go ashore."

"How?" inquired Jase with a heavy irony and Alexander replied shortly, "Thet's yore business."

She turned on her heel and walked away leaving the discomfited Lothario staring after her with so malign an anger that the men within ear-shot stifled their twitters of amusement and pretended to have overheard nothing.

CHAPTER V

As Alexander passed him, Brent did not miss the suppressed fury in her eyes or the disdainful tilt of her chin. Her bearing was that of a barbaric princess, and a princess of meteorically vivid beauty. There had been a deliberate purpose in the clear carrying tones with which she had repulsed Jase Mallows. He had been the first man to make advances, because he was the boldest, but for all her guise of unconsciousness she had seen the passion smoulder in the eyes about her and later others might become emboldened unless they were discouraged by a clear precedent. Heretofore her father's stern repute had safeguarded her. Now she was dependent upon herself alone.

Down the yellow river swept the two uninjured rafts and the one that carried a fringe of raggedness. For the most part the men were busy with sweep and pike-pole fending off the cumbering drift and clearing the whirlpools where hidden reefs threatened destruction. There were sharp turns and angles too, where the yellow water roared into fretful and vehement menace. With night-fall the heights seemed to draw in and huddle close and the dirge of flood and wind mounted into a heavier timbre.

Fires leaped into fitful radiance. Banjos and "dulcimorees" came out of hiding and sounded plaintively over the waste of waters. Scraps of almost mediaeval life showed out in thumb-nail sketches between the sooty shadow world and the red flare of the bonfires. Voices were lifted into weird minors and lugubrious tunes, recitative, of sad love themes—and these were, of

course, addressed to Alexander. She joined no group, but sat with her hands clasped about her updrawn knees and her gaze ranging off into distance. The carmine and orange illumination played upon her color of cheek and hair and eyes and when, unconsciously her face fell into a reflective quiet and her lips drooped with a touch of wistfulness, the allurements of her beauty was arresting and undeniable. Brent fell to wondering what life could hold for her.

The time must come, he thought, when a beauty like that in a land of plain and drudgery-enslaved women, must bring for her something like a crisis. She was twenty-one and unawakened, but that the men about her should long allow her to remain so was as unlikely as that a pirate-crew would leave treasure unfought for. A rising tide of human passion about her seemed as inevitable as this actual flood had been—and perhaps as swift of coming.

But if the amorous selections of that crude minstrelsy made any impression upon her, she gave no indication. Before the songs ended she withdrew to the rude shelter that had been fashioned for her and wrapped herself in her blanket. But the pistol holster lay close to her hand. When she rose at day-break they had turned out of the stream upon which they had embarked into the broader river that it fed and about them floated a wavering mass of ice from broken gorges above.

Brent shivered and dabbed grudgingly with cold water at the face upon which a stubble of beard had begun to bristle. But the girl carried an icy bucket into her shack and reinforced its forward wall with blanket and rubber coat, not as a protection against the knife-edged sharpness of the air but against prying eyes. Then she bathed unhurriedly and fastidiously.

When she emerged the bloom of her cheeks and the luster of her thick hair would have been the envy of a boudoir where beauty-doctors have done their utmost. And that day too, save for the smouldering eyes of the discomfited Jase Mallows, the wolf-like pack treated her with a cautious deference of bearing.

When at the end of two days the water was dropping as rapidly as it had risen, Alexander announced, "I reckon we've got a right gay chanst now ter put in at ther Coal City boom, hain't we?" And several heads nodded assent. Brent noticed that Jase Mallows' face wore a smile which did not altogether escape malignity, and at the first opportunity he inquired: "What were you smiling about, Mr. Mallows, when they spoke of Coal City?"

The backwoods dandy scowled and gave back the churl's response, "Thet's my business."

"Certainly," Brent acceded coolly. "You don't have to answer me. I didn't suppose it was a matter you were ashamed to talk about."

Mallows bent with a truculent narrowing of his lids and an outthrust chin, but observing that the city man was in no wise cowed by his scowls he amended his attitude. Two days before Brent would have been more cautious of offending this man, whose exploits had run, sometimes, to violence, but a subtle transformation had begun in him. A new disdain for personal risks had caught fire from that flaming quality in the woman.

"Hev ye ever seed Coal City?" inquired Mallows, and when the other shook his head, he continued in a lowered voice. "Wa'al hit's a right rough sort of place. Hit's a coal minin' town with only one tavern—an' things goes forward thar right sensibly similar ter hell on a hot night. With ther flood holdin' up ther mines hit's apt ter kinderly out-do himself jest now." He paused a moment then capped his prediction with an added detail.

"Thar'll be plentiful drunkenness an' harlotry thar. Alexander couldn't speak civil ter me, but I war jest a studyin' erbout how well she's goin' ter like Coal City."

When the rafts were safe in the boom. Brent looked about for Mallows, but Mallows was already gone. Alexander herself was among the last to start along the ill-lighted and twisting street that climbed along, the broken levels of the town toward the tavern. It was, at best, a squalid village and a tawdry one. Now it was to boot a wholly demoralized town, cut off from the other world by inundated highways and the washing out of its railroad bridge. The kerosene street lamps burned dully and at long intervals and high up the black slopes a few coke furnaces still burned in red patches of inflamed and sullen glare.

Brent had dropped out of sight, meaning to follow the girl as an unofficial body guard. Knowing her impatience at gratuitous services of protection he made no announcement of his purpose, but fell in behind the light of the lantern she carried and followed her in the shadows. When he had gone only a little way, he had the vague feeling that someone else was following him so he halted and wheeled suddenly. After peering vainly through the murk, he told himself that he was letting his imagination play him tricks but the disquieting impression of soft footsteps padding along behind him he could not dispel.

Before they had readied the main street and the disreputable pile which was the tavern, sounds of lewd and raucous voices floated out—a chorus of profane and blatant roistering.

The houses along the way presented faces utterly blank and devoid of life. Brent would have

wondered at that, had he not had his brief talk with Mallows. Now he understood. Respectable folks had withdrawn to shelter behind barred doors and tightly shuttered windows until such time as the unleashed element of outlawry should evacuate the town. The law-abiding were, in effect, undergoing a siege and avoiding the ill-lighted streets.

But the light at the court-house square was relatively bright and as Brent crossed in front of the squat and shadowy bulk of the old jail-house—empty now, though it should have been full—he made out a figure hastening about him in a circuitous fashion at a dog trot as though bent on arriving at the hostelry first. That, then, must have been the presence he had felt at his back, and a fresh alarm assailed him. It was the figure of Bud Sellers.

When at last Alexander had gone up the several steps that led to the closed door of the tavern, and stood for a moment, evidently hesitating with disgust for the babel within, Brent drew back into a convenient shadow and looked anxiously about for the other figure. It had disappeared.

That hostelry was the property of one D. W. Kelly, a huge and unclean lout of a man and the establishment was as wholesome a place as a bear pit, and no more so.

It was not with complacency that the landlord saw his house given over to the destructive caprices of a drunken and uncontrollable mob. He had no means of freeing himself of his guests. When his slatternly wife had complained: "Them miners an' loggers jest louzes up a body's house," he had wagged his head dejectedly and spread his great black-nailed hands. "If that's ther wu'st thing they does hit'll be a plum God's blessin'," he replied. "Ther law p'intedly fo'ces a tavern-keeper ter sleep an' eat man an' beast—ef so be they kin pay."

Now the motley crew was in unchallenged possession—and would remain in possession until the river went down and fords were once more passable. That a reign of terror would prevail so long as they tarried in town, in no wise dampened their own exuberance of spirit.

Two or three traveling salesmen had been marooned here, but since the beginning of this saturnalia they had not been in evidence beyond the thresholds of their own rooms.

There was no bar at D. W. Kelly's tavern and none was needed, since every man was duly and individually provisioned and since even in these flood times a dollar left unwatched on a certain stump up the mountain side would cause a jug to appear mysteriously in its place.

But since there was no bar, the great room whose door opened directly upon the porch had been commandeered as a wassailing hall. Here the entering guest must run the gantlet of the rollicking horde before he could attain the more peaceful harbor of his own quarters.

About a red hot stove hung a crew of as dirty and disorderly men as ever came out of coal mine or lumber camp. Those who remained sober remained also somewhat aloof against the walls and kept their mouths shut. From the ceiling downward hung the thick, stale cloud of smoke from many strong pipes and the rancid poison of air discharged from many lungs had become a stench in the nostrils. Occasional figures walked with an unsteady lurch, while through the whole chaotic pandemonium others slept heavily in their chairs—or even on the floor.

But just before Alexander reached the porch and hesitated on the threshold Jase Mallows had been there. Now he was gone but he had first imparted the information that the "'he-woman' from ther head of Shoulderblade branch" was coming hither. So it was likely that she would have a noisy welcome. On the outskirts of the crowd sat a giant who seemed a shade rougher of guise than those about him. When he stood, this man topped six feet by as many inches. His shoulders had such a spread that one thought of them as of an eagle's wings—from tip to tip. His face, now bristling with dark stubble, was none the less clear-chiseled and arrestingly featured. At first sight a stranger would be apt to exclaim, "What a magnificent figure of a man he would make, if he were only clean-shaven and well dressed." This fellow was not drinking but looking on from a table at which no one ventured to challenge his sole occupancy or his evident preference for his own society.

A somewhat amused and indulgent gleam dwelt in his eye, tinged, it is true, with a certain unveiled contempt—but it was not the disgust that might have been expected in a sober man looking on at such a loathsomeness of debauchery.

There were women present too,—coarse and vicious creatures who lacked even the sort of tawdry finery that their sisters in western mining camps affect. There was here no shimmer of even the slaziest satin. In dress as in character they were drab.

So was the stage set when the door opened and Alexander stepped in, dropping her pack to the floor and standing speechless for a moment or two as her amazed eyes took in the composition of the picture. Alexander had never seen such a spectacle before, and as she looked about for someone who appeared to have authority here, her fine eyes and lips fell into an unmasked scorn.

She had not closed the door and through it, close on her heels, slipped Brent. For, a little

space the confusion took no account of her coming but the city man was standing directly behind her and he saw the pliancy of her attitude stiffen and then across her shoulder he recognized in a rear door the tense figure of Bud Sellers.

Sellers stood looking through a lane which chance had left open and Brent thought that his posture was the electrically expectant one of a man poised for instant action. He remembered that when Bud went on a spree he was known as the "mad dog."

That same insanity which had attacked the father might now even forget that the daughter's assumption of being a man was only a pretense. He might act as though she were a man bent on avenging a mortal injury. There was no leisure then to speculate on how Bud had gotten here—that he was here with his gaze fixed in that galvanized fashion on the girl was a sufficient cause for apprehension.

Then the eyes of the many began following the eyes of the few, until a brief lull settled down on the dissonance, and everyone was staring at the girl who stood inside the door, dressed as a man, but holding their gaze with the lodestone of her womanly beauty.

A hoarse shout went up from the rear. "A gal in pants! Hit's ther he-woman!"

"I wants ter see ther tavern-keeper. Whar's he at?" demanded Alexander in a clear voice that went through the place like the note of a xylophone. She stood out, a picture of serene beauty drawn against an infernally evil and confused background.

Two of the wretched women came forward and bent upon her the full battery of their brazen and leering curiosity.

"Pants!" exclaimed one of them satirically.

"Ther wench hain't got no shame!" The second used an even uglier word.

But Alexander ignored that criticism.

"Whar's ther landlord at?" she repeated and a chorus of laughter ensued.

Then a bewhiskered fellow, red-eyed and dirty, to whom Jase Mallows had previously spoken, came to the front with a burlesqued attempt at a low bow.

"Don't heed these hyar fool women, sweetheart," he said. "They hain't nothin' but low-down trash nohow— They're jealous, but thar's some right upstandin' men-folks hyar fer ye ter keep company with. I reckon fust off ye needs a leetle dram—hits's right chilly outside."

As he proffered a flask, Brent caught the glitter of his eye, and knew that this time it would not be easy to decline. The crowd was drifting forward, and through the closing lane of humanity, Bud Sellers glided rapidly to a place near its front. His hand was inside his coat now—where the holster lay.

"A leetle dram won't do ye no harm," insisted the man of the blood-shot eyes and then as he caught the quiet contempt on the girl's face, his manner changed to truculent bullying. "Folks says ye wants ter be treated ther same as a man—an' any man thet holds I hain't good enough ter drink with—thet man's my enemy."

Brent hesitated to draw his weapon lest in such a situation it should provoke a holocaust. Yet he felt that in a moment he might need it. Then as he stood, still uncertain, he saw the giant who had until now looked on with detached emotionlessness come elbowing his way through the press, much as an elephant goes through small timber, uprooting obstacles and tossing them aside as he moves.

But Alexander had gone dead white with the pallor of outraged wrath. Her lips had tightened and her eyes taken on a quality like the blue flame which is the hottest fire that burns.

Then suddenly she moved with a swiftness that was electric and stood, before her purpose could be guessed, with a heavy-calibered revolver outthrust into the face of the man whose pistol hand had held the whiskey bottle. The flask crashed into splinters from an abruptly relaxed grip.

"I don't drink—without hit pleasures me ter drink," said the girl with an inflexible coldness and levelness of voice, yet one no more unflinchingly firm than the hand which held the gun. "Hit won't never pleasure me ter drink with a man I wouldn't wipe my feet on. Ye hain't a man nohow—ye're jest a pole-cat."

The bearded jaw dropped in amazement, and a sense of the nearness of death intruded itself upon Lute Brown's thoughts. Still since even such a situation called for a retort he essayed one in a falter that travestied the boldness of his words.

"When a man names me thet name—I wants him ter come *towards* me. Of course ye hain't no man though."

"I'm man enough ter take yore measure," she flung back at him, "an' I'm comin' towards ye

right now. Ef yore hands ain't high when I git's thar, I aims ter kill ye."

She moved forward and the bully gave grudgingly back, but at that instant the gigantic on-looker casually laid hand upon him by one shoulder and flung him sidewise as casually as a terrier tosses a rat. His manner was precisely that of a man who removes a chair which obstructs his path.

"Stranger," said the titanic fellow in a pleasantly drawling intonation, "I think I heered ye say ye wanted ther landlord. Ef ye'll come with me I'll find him fer ye. A decent feller wouldn't hardly relish this company nohow."

There had been in his form of address no masculine patronage proffering rescue to the beset feminine, and looking up into a face which was smiling with an engaging radiance of white teeth, Alexander nodded and said only, "I'd be right obleeged ter ye."

Through a path that opened itself in silence for them, they went out of a back door, but when they had gone, Brent saw in astonishment that Bud Sellers was crouching with defiant eyes over Lute Brown as he slowly regained his feet.

"Hev ye done hed enough?" demanded Bud in a voice of deadly calm and absolute sobriety. "Because ef ye hain't, I'm hyar ter finish hit up with ye."

"Air ye one of her beaus, too?" came the surly question and Bud answered deliberately. "She don't tolerate no sweet-heartin', but whilst I was crazed with licker I hurt her paw—an' I reckon I owes her somethin'."

When the giant had returned he went nonchalantly back to his table as though nothing had occurred, but Brent followed and joined him there.

"How did you come to be here, Halloway?" asked the city man in a guarded and incredulous voice.

The tall man looked about him and then, since the drone of voices was again gathering volume he replied: "Oh, ye're right liable ter meet up with a driftin' lumberjack anywhar's at all."

After filling a disreputable pipe with tobacco crumbs he leaned a little forward, then in lowered tones, from which every trace of mountain dialect had abruptly departed he said:

"By gad, Brent, an episode that gives a man a new sensation—a new thrill, in a world of threadbare ones—is worth a king's ransom. I've seen the beauties of Occident and Orient but until now——"

A figure drifted near enough to overhear, and rising slowly Halloway finish up:

"Wa'al, stranger, hit's mighty nigh my bed time. I reckon I'll santer up ter my room and lay down. I hopes ye git's took keer of yourself, but ef ye don't ye're right welcome ter bunk in with me."

"I'll go with you now," declared the timber buyer.

CHAPTER VI

In a squalid room above stairs, Halloway sat, coatless, with his flannel shirt open on a throat that rose from the swell of his chest as a tower rises from a hill. His hair was rumpled; his whole aspect disheveled; but when he grinned there was the flash of strong teeth as white as a hound's and as even as a professional beauty's.

"Now tell me," he demanded with prompt interest, "who is this barbaric and regal creature in whose train I find you? Do you assert any claim of copyright—or prior discovery, or is it a clear field and no favor?"

When Brent answered, it was with challenging decisiveness. "A clear field, yes—but certainly no favor for either of us. She is primitive enough to hold fast to a wholesome code. I wouldn't advise any philandering."

Halloway bent his head backward and gazed meditatively at the cloud of smoke which he sent ceiling-ward.

"So the faithful and chivalrous friend is giving me the benefit of his experience touching the stern virtue of an almost Druid life," he commented. "Yet I know these people as few outsiders do."

"Nevertheless, you *are* an outsider, Jack. When we last sat quarreling in your rooms, your windows gave off over the rhododendron of Central Park—and the bronze horseman in the Plaza. Here the rhododendron has other uses than the decorative. She could be only a reckless adventure in your life—and in all likelihood, a fatal one."

With quiet amusement in the eyes that still gazed upward, Halloway received this gratuitous counsel.

"I begin to think that, as an adventure, she'd be worth fatality," he said.

With the license of old acquaintance, Brent went on with his berating.

"I happen to know you in real life as well as in masquerade. Whether your whim calls for this fantastic and shaggy disguise or for the impeccability of evening dress, you are still only a handsome beast of prey. You are so incorrigible and so devoid of conventional morality that, in being fond of you, I wonder at myself."

"Conventional morality be damned! I repudiate it utterly," declared the giant calmly. "But tell me about this girl."

"I never saw her until a few days back," Brent enlightened his inquisitor. "Her beauty and her dauntlessness have laid a sort of spell on me and I'm a fairly conservative man. You are not—you're a plunger—a gambler in emotions. That's why I'm hanging out a warning signal."

The big man laughed with the full-chested mirth of a Viking.

"Why, my dear fellow, you would like me less if I were changed from what you call the beast of prey to such a house-dog as are most of your acquaintances. I refresh you in a life of drab monotony, because of my outspoken repudiation of things that life's copy-cats accept without thought or demurrer. I interest you because, though I am educated and disreputably rich, I remain at heart a savage—because I like to break away from the tawdry glitter of social pretense and run baying joyously at the head of the wild pack. And, in fairness, you must admit that when I revert to feral instincts I don't have to ask odds as an amateur."

The great fellow came abruptly to his feet, not with the ponderousness of most giants, but with a panther-like agility and smoothness.

"I am idle—yes—so far as it is idle for a man to refuse to go on despoiling weaker men for gain—but why not? I can spend a fortune every year for a long life-span, and still leave loot aplenty behind my taking off. Yet, my idling is not mere slothfulness. I know the Orient, not as the ordinary white man knows it, but as one who has become a brother to the yellow and brown. I know these hills. No man in this town to-night, save yourself, suspects that I am not native—or even that I have ever participated in any other life."

"All of which I admit. The wolf may be more interesting than the collie—but for the sheepfold the collie is safer. I'm thinking of Alexander."

Halloway reflectively knocked the nub of ash from his pipe, and went on more slowly. "Civilization stifles me," he said seriously. "But when I turn my back on its dusty theologues and dogmatists, I still hold tight to the poets. To me feeling means much, but cold thought is like a fireless hearth."

The speaker was standing before the frame of the dark window. The wild capriciousness of the weather had brought rain and flashes of untimely lightning flared now and again into momentary whiteness. Brent looked at the mighty proportion of his companion and thought of the girl who slept in another tawdry room opening on the same narrow hallway. Each of them was unusual; each of them insurgent; each without fear. If their two natures should strike the spark of attraction, he trembled to think of what a conflagration might blaze from the kindling.

"I'm not discussing theories," he said a bit shortly. "I'm talking about a mountain girl whom I take it you would never marry—and if not——" He spread his hands and left the sentence unfinished.

"And if not?" Halloway caught him up. "What has marriage necessarily to do with love? There is more honesty and stimulation in the life-story of any *grande amoureuse* than a dozen of your stodgy fraus."

"I'm going to bed," declared Will Brent. "But—leave Alexander alone. I don't think she'd see eye to eye with you on the subject of the *grande amoureuse*."

"That only foreshadows a duel of wills—conflict—drama."

Halloway paused and laughed, and after that he went on with eyes that glowed admiringly.

"I dare say she never heard of an Amazon—and she's a splendid one. She dares to live a man's life in a country where other women tamely accept thralldom! Perhaps it is a great adventure. I have seen a meteor and I shall stay."

"Of course you know," Brent reminded him evenly, "the first hint that you are a millionaire masquerading as a native will engulf you in local suspicion."

"I don't mean that they shall learn that." Suddenly Halloway's head bent forward a little and his brows contracted. "They *can't* learn it except through you."

"Precisely," said the smaller man, with dry brevity. If the short answer brought a cloud to Halloway's face it was one that cleared immediately into laughter.

"We haven't reached that bridge yet," he announced, "and we needn't open up a Brent-Halloway feud until we get there."

There was a moment's pause, after which the big fellow continued.

"Since seeing the helpless maid, whom you seek to protect, holding back that bunch of desperadoes, it occurs to me that she can give a fairly good account of herself. Gad, it was epic!"

"Then why did you intervene?"

Halloway slowly turned his head and lifted his brows in frank amazement.

"Do you seriously ask? Did you suppose it was because I feared for her? Why, man, the blue flame in her eyes would have licked that crew without the aid of the gun. I intervened because when opportunity knocks, I open. I had enough dramatic sense to recognise my cue for a telling entrance; and I entered."

"Jack," inquired Brent, "how did you ever happen to know this remote life well enough to pass as a native?"

"Born here," was the laconic reply. But the other pressed him for fuller detail and he proceeded cheerfully. "The Halloway millions didn't come to us on a tray borne by angels. My father made his pile, and much of it he made in coal and iron—here and there in the Appalachians. He trained me up in that business. Why, I even worked during school vacations as a telegraph operator in the office of the local railroad station." He smiled again as he added, "Add that item to my versatile summary. I'm as good a key tickler as you would be apt to find in a day's journey."

"At all events you are a surprising reprobate," admitted the lumberman with a yawn. "Someday, though, I'll challenge you to a sending and receiving tourney. I began in a broker's office, and I'm fairly good myself."

But after Halloway had thrown himself down on his bed and his regular breathing attested his sound sleep, Brent slipped noiselessly out into the corridor. Halloway might feel certain of the girl's ability to fend for herself but with this crowd here to-night, running its wild gamut of dissipation, the less primitive man thought it as well to keep an eye on her safety.

Down the hall, dimly lighted by a single smoking lamp, he saw a figure which had been standing before Alexander's door, draw furtively back around the angle of a wall. From below stairs still came the din of wassailing.

Yet instead of alarm, a smile came to Brent's eyes, for he had recognized Bud Sellers and he no longer distrusted the boy's purposes.

In Alexander's room the lamp had long been blown out but to the eyes of the girl sleep did not come at once. She gazed at the window where occasional flashes of lightning woke and died. She was wondering what had happened back there at the house where her father lay wounded. Of Bud Sellers she thought only as of a man she had promised not to kill, though against him, as an instrumentality of her grief, resentment burned hot. She could not guess that he stood at that moment in the hallway, guarding her door and nursing in his contrite heart an unexpressed and hopeless worship of her.

For Bud, save when the liquor conquered him, was a kindly soul; even lovable as a faithful dog might be, though of that canine virtue people thought less than of his occasional rabies.

He had talked with Alexander—always impersonally—a scant half dozen times in his life—but since boyhood he had dreamed of her as a peasant may dream of exalted nobility—and his life had never known any other dream.

But if Alexander thought of Bud only as the author of her present anxiety, her thoughts strayed before she fell asleep, to another man.

The face and figure of that Colossus who had swung men right and left, rose before her and her worship of masculine strength and courage paid smiling tribute.

"I reckon he don't never hev ter use more'n half ther strength he's got in them arms an' shoulders of his'n," she told herself. It did not enter troublesomely into her reflections that she had marked also the infectious quality of his smile and the clear brightness of his eye with an interest that was purely feminine.

As her lids finally grew heavy she murmured to herself: "Ef I was like other gals I reckon I'd git sort of crazy erbout thet big feller. He's like a pine tree standin' up amongst saplin's—but I don't reckon a body could hardly ever git him clean, even ef they soaked him in hot suds fer a week of Sundays."

With that reflection—also fastidiously feminine—she turned on her side and slept.

It was into a room below that Lute Johnson stumbled long after midnight on most unsteady legs. Lute was not satisfied with his evening. He had been actuated in his attempted hazing of Alexander by Jase Mallows, who thought her pride should be humbled, yet sought to accomplish that end vicariously in order that the doors of future conquest might not be closed against himself. Lute's undertaking had not been a success and he sought his bed, sodden and bloodshot of eye. He was nursing grudges of varying degrees against Jase Mallows, Alexander, Halloway and finally against Bud Sellers.

He kicked off his brogans and as he leaned to blow out the light, he stumbled, sprawling headlong and carrying the lamp down with him. For a moment he lay where he had fallen, too dazed and befuddled to rise, but presently he clambered up, his eyes wide and terrified, for his rising was Phoenix-like—mantled in flame. With incredible swiftness the flimsy coverings of his bed had burst into a crimson glare and even his clothing was afire.

Beating out the flame that licked his shirt, he abandoned the rest and fled, howling like a madman. The thing which D. W. Kelly had feared had come to pass and the frame building was doomed to its gutting.

So frequently of late had ungodly bellowings and outcries broken the fitful rest of this house, that for a brief space, Lute's howls of alarm failed to carry their true significance. Some guests, startled out of their sleep, had the impulse rather to keep their doors tight shut than to open them, and through the tinder-like dryness of the place the flames roared up the boxed-in stairway as through a flue.

Bud Sellers heard the yells of the fugitive Lute, and before he had time to investigate, saw the stairhead vomiting smoke and fire. As he dashed for Alexander's room, another door opened through which Halloway and Brent ran out, carrying their shoes and coats.

"Let me in," shouted Bud, hammering on the panels. "Ther house is burnin' down an' ther steps is cut off."

At first there was no response, but at last the door swung in. It framed Alexander, clothed in shirt and trousers—but barefooted, and holding a pistol in her hand.

At the sight of Bud Sellers her face grew pallid.

"You!" she exclaimed with white-hot anger. "My paw lays over thar with yore bullet in his breast—an' ye comes runnin' hyar ter me fer a way ter git outen danger!"

The three men were crowding to the door but she stood barring it and she did not give back an inch. In deliberation she went on. "He laid a pledge on me not ter avenge him. Ef hit warn't fer thet, I'd kill ye whar ye stands."

"Fer God's sake, Alexander!" The mountaineer's voice was shrill with excitement. "Kill me if ye likes—but don't tarry. I come ter warn ye. Ther winder's ther only way out—an' thar hain't no time ter lose."

As if in corroboration, the first puff of brown smoke eddied through the open door. At first it came idly, driftingly, as if it had nothing to do with haste. Halloway pushed both Sellers and Brent ahead of him, and followed them in, slamming the door behind him.

"Talk outside," he commanded sharply. "Don't waste life-and-death minutes in this hell-trap!"

Alexander gazed absently as though unable to readjust her trend of thought so swiftly, then she said, quietly enough: "Thar's ther winder. Go through hit ef ye likes."

As for herself she turned to the task of tying up her pack of belongings with what seemed to the frenzied men insufferable deliberation.

"This is the third floor," snapped Halloway whose head was already thrust out of the window gauging possibilities of escape. "We'll have to tear up sheets and make a rope of them."

Brent leaped promptly to the task but Alexander looked at the huge body which blocked the window frame and a smile curled her lips. "You on a rope o' sheets!" She even laughed. "Ye mout es well entrust yourself ter a strand of flax thread!"

Through the floor licked a tongue of flame.

"Kain't you men jump—an' catch ther limb of thet thar sycamore," she added. "Hit hain't fur away—an' thet's how I'm aimin' ter leave myself."

Halloway turned an eager gaze upon the girl and even in the press of moments he remembered the role he was playing. "I reckon," he suggested, "I'd better lead off—ef thet flyin' limb holds me, it'll hold ther balance of ye."

What was genuinely in his mind was to be there to catch her if she missed her grip, but to forestall objection he thrust his body through the opening, measured the distance with a brief glance and launched himself outward. To use that fire escape one must catch the branch, and hold it without slipping, while he swung and groped with his feet for another limb below.

For Halloway the matter was done without doubt or wavering. It must be so done or result in a three-storied drop, but when he turned and looked back, bracing himself to catch Alexander, he saw her turn again into the room, out of his range of vision. He could see Brent and Bud vociferously arguing with her and then she reappeared and lifted her pack and rifle over the sill. As she played out the improvised line of bedding her eyes were angry and Halloway guessed that it was because the two men had refused to leave without waiting for her. Eventually when the room showed red beyond the frame she slipped through, poised herself as the man had done, and came outward as smoothly as an exhibition diver. She landed so close to Halloway that her hands clasped over his own and her breath fluttered against his cheek. For a fraction of an instant, he thought she might fail to hold her grip and one arm swept around her pressing her close to him. Even when he knew that she was safe he did not release her and his veins were pounding with the wild exaltation of contact.

Somewhat pantingly but coolly she commanded: "Move back. Give me room ter stand on—them others kain't foller whilst we're blockin' ther way."

Halloway had forgotten the others, and when Bud Sellers jumped, the last of all, it was only just in time. A shower of sparks puffed out of the window and inside sounded a crash of collapsing timbers.

"Well, where do we go now?" inquired Brent a quarter of an hour later and the girl turned on her heel. "As fer me," she replied, "I'm goin' back ter my rafts of timber. I've done had a lavish of this town."

"May we go too?" inquired Halloway. "We hain't got no roof over us neither—now."

"I reckon ye kin all come save only——" she paused a moment and added in hardened voice, "save only ther man thet sought ter slay my paw."

Bud's head drooped. He was still sweating, for when he left the sill, the place had been a furnace, but he said nothing, and instantly Alexander wheeled again and spoke impulsively.

"I've got ter crave yore pardon, Bud," she exclaimed. "Paw said he didn't hold no grudge ergin you nohow. An' I reckon ye've done sought right slavish ter make amends ternight."

CHAPTER VII

From down there at the boom as the blackest hours of the night passed, Halloway and Brent sat rubber-coated on the raft watching the inflamed redness that was wiping out all that end of the village. The age-seasoned frame houses there huddled close enough for the hot contagion to sweep them with typhoon speed and they went up in spurts like pitch barrels. The wind was high enough to romp ruthlessly with spark and blaze, until even the effort at fire-fighting had been abandoned. Happily the bluster had settled to a constant gale out of the south-west and the fire-tide rolled with it to the edge and not the core of the town and when it lapped at the reeking woods it hissed out in defeat.

Alexander had withdrawn to her improvised shack and wrapped herself in her blanket. Brent gazed with a sort of hypnotized intentness on the wildness of the picture before him—an orgy of fire, wind and water. Through the wet mountains the wind shrieked and buffeted until ancient trees, made brittle by long freezing, went down. At his back, beyond the boom, sounded the dirge of the swollen waters running out. That was like the wail of a maniac exhausted by his ravings. The stage was dropping as rapidly as it had risen. Ahead, tossing a mane of smoke and a spume of spark, reveled the demoniac spirit of Fire. Brent shuddered but Halloway struck a match just then for his dead pipe under the protection of his coat lapel and in the brief flare Brent saw that his eyes were a gleam, feral and animal-like, and that his lips were wolfishly drawn back from his teeth.

"This is elemental!" Halloway burst out suddenly. "I glory in it. I've been sitting here drunker than any moonshine guzzler back there at that tavern to-night. Drunk on the wild wine of the elements—drunk from the skulls of Valhalla. Great God, I love it!"

Brent rose at last and sought refuge under the insufficient roof of one of the shacks, for a

down-pour had come with the wind and in key with all the extravagance of the night's mood, it was a cloud-burst.

The city man tossed restlessly and once looking out across the stretch of the rafted logs, he saw a single figure stripped to the skin in the sheeted down-pour of cold rain. He saw it only when the lightning flashed with the spectral effect of beauty. It stood straight with back-flung shoulders and head upturned into the rain like some wild high-priest of storm worship. When a flare, brighter than the others limned the whole prospect into a dazzling instant, the features burst into clarity with eyes glowing like madness, and lips parted in wild exaltation.

"He'll have a chill before morning," growled Brent, but his astonishment at the hardihood of such a shower-bath would have been more severely taxed had he been able to see behind the screening walls of Alexander's shack.

For if the colossal man standing there as God made him, reveling in the sluicing of icy sheets of water, was a picture for a painter's delight, the figure of the woman, sheltered from any eye, but likewise stripped to the flesh was one almost as heroic and far lovelier. Alexander too, was availing herself of that strong tonic which would have brought collapse to a weakling. She stood tall, beautiful, a Diana with her wet and flowing hair loosed about her white shoulders and her bosom rising and falling to the elation of the storm-bath.

The hurricane passed in the forenoon of that day leaving the ridges wet and inert, with the dejection of spent violence, but from gray clouds that hung in trailing wisps along the upper slopes a steady rain sobbed down. After breakfast Bud Sellers who had after all not availed himself of Alexander's permission to spend the night on the raft, came aboard and diffidently approached the girl.

He wore a hang-dog air but in his eyes was that same wistfulness of unspoken worship. Brent knew that he was trying to explain to Alexander his torture of self accusation because of the disaster born of his moment of drunken frenzy.

The girl stood looking at him, entirely oblivious to the devotion that was clear-writ in his eyes. While he talked she accorded him a hearing, but with lips tight pressed and the unforgettable picture in her mind of the stricken man who might even now be dead. He might have passed, with the pain of uncertainty clouding his last moments as to the success or failure of her venture.

With that burden on her heart it was difficult to listen to apologies and explanations. She knew that Bud would have burned his body to a crisp last night if need be in the effort to save her from a similar fate, but that only irritated her. She had not called for help. She had not needed help and this rush of volunteers to her rescue was, after all, only a denial of the principle for which she so militantly fought; the postulate that when she played a man's game she wished to be treated as a man, asking no favors.

Brent and Halloway overheard a little of what was said, for the two voices rose in inflection, under the urge of his earnestness and her feeling.

"I don't act pi'zen mean when I'm sober, Alexander—an' I strives not ter drink, knowin' full well thet hit plum crazes me— Hit don't seem like no common thirst— Hit comes on me like a plague and hit masters me ther same as spells or fits—. God, He knows I'd es lief hev raised my hand ergin my own daddy, ef I hed one, es erginst yore paw—I war frenzied."

"I don't know what made ye do hit, but I knows what ye done, Bud," said Alexander and her rich voice trembled under the tautness of her effort at control. "Ef a man kain't help goin' mad like a dog—an' seekin' ter slay folks, I reckon he—" It was on her tongue to say that he ought to pay the mad-dog's penalty but she checked herself shortly and went on with less cruelty, "I reckon he's a right dangerous sort of feller ter hev 'round."

"All I asks, Alexander," he pleaded, "air thet ye gives me ther chanst ter make amends. Ef I feels ther cravin' masterin' me ergin, I'll go ter town an' git ther police ter lock me up in ther jail-house an' keep me thar, tell I comes back ter my senses."

"Hit hain't a thing ye kin handily make amends fer," she reminded him, "but I've done pledged myself ter let hit go unavenged and I knows too, thet I'm beholden ter ye fer last night. None-the-less—" The color paled from her cheeks and she shook her head. "None-the-less until I gits back home—an' knows whether my paw is livin' or dead—" her words came very slowly and with an effort, "I kain't say thet thar won't be black hatred in my heart erginst ye."

He nodded somewhat miserably. "No, I don't hardly reckon ye kin tutor yore feelin's no different," he acknowledged as he turned away, but from that moment he had dedicated himself to a vasselage out of which he hoped to salvage no personal reward.

When she had watched him tramp up the muddy slope from the bank to the street, Alexander lifted her chin and tossed her head, as if to shake away some cobwebbing thought from the brain. Then with an energetic step she came over and without preamble announced, "Mr. Brent, I don't aim ter tarry hyar no longer then ther soonest time I kin git out. Let's me an' you talk business."

Brent nodded. "Is it confidential? Do you want me to send this man away?" he inquired, with

a mischievous glance at the giant whose eyes, save when they dropped before her own, remained fixed on the girl with a devouring intentness.

Alexander shook her head. "What fer?" she demanded. "I reckon we hain't got no need of whisperin' erbout our transactions."

She paused for an instant and went on. "Paw an' you measured up that timber back yon, didn't ye? An' ye agreed on ther price too, didn't ye?"

"We settled both points. I have a memorandum, but——"

"I knows what ye aims ter say," interrupted Alexander. "Ye means ter name hit ter me thet them logs hain't all hyar because some of 'em busted loose comin' through ther gorge. What I wanted ter ask ye is thet you an' me should measure up thet raft now an' figger out what's gone, so thet I kin tell paw——" She halted as abruptly as though a blow on the mouth had broken off the utterance and a paroxysm of pain crossed her face. The ever present dread had struck back that there might be no father to whom she could report. With a swift recovery, though, she finished. "So thet I kin fotch tidin's back home es ter how much we gits."

When these reckonings had been made Brent inquired: "Do you understand the terms of this contract between your father and myself?"

Her reply was guarded. "We've done talked hit over."

"It was agreed," the buyer told her, "that I was to accept this stuff and pay for it at some point from which I could deliver it in the Bluegrass either by rail or navigable water. If you like, I'm ready to pay now."

He had seen Alexander under some trying circumstances and never with any hint of breakdown, yet just now he wondered if unexpected good tidings were not about to accomplish what bad news could not—carry out the dam of her own hard-schooled repression on a flood of tears. Her eyes became suddenly misty and her lips trembled. She started to speak, then gulped and remained silent. But gradually the color flowed back into her cheeks, as pink as the laurel blossom's deep center, and once more she gave her head that characteristic toss as though in contempt for her moment of weakness.

"Mr. Brent, I hain't seekin' no favors an' I don't want nothin' but my dues. I didn't know ye stood obleeged ter pay us 'twell ther logs went down ter ther lowlands, but——" Though her words were slowly, even tediously enunciated they seemed to come with difficulty. "But ef I could take thet money back thar—an' tell him hit war all settled up——" The fullness of what that meant to her gained in force because she got no further with her explanation and Brent said with a brusqueness, affected to veil his own sympathy: "Come on, let's go to the bank."

The bank at Coal City is a small box of brick, with two rooms. At the front the cashier's grating stands. At the rear is a bare chamber furnished with a small stove, a deal table and a few hickory-witthed chairs. It is here that directors meet and hinterland financiers negotiate. Into this sanctum Brent led Alexander Macedonia McGivins, and for no particular reason, save that no one had forbidden it, Holloway accompanied them.

The timber buyer scribbled his calculations on the back of an envelope and submitted the results to the girl, who gravely nodded her satisfaction.

"Then," said Brent with an air of relief, "there remain only two things more. I shall now draw you a check for four thousand and ninety-one dollars and fifty cents, and you will sign a receipt."

Holloway was sitting in the background where he could indulge in all the staring he liked, and since Alexander had swum into his ken, that had become a large order. As Brent finished, the girl who had been sitting at the table with a pen in her hand, suddenly pushed back her chair and into her eyes came an amazed disappointment—a keen anxiety. For a moment she looked blankly at the man who was opening his check book. She suddenly felt that she had been confronted with a financial problem that lay beyond her experience and one which she deeply distrusted. It was as though affairs hitherto simple, except for physical dangers, had run into a channel of subtler and therefore more alarming complication.

None of this escaped Holloway's lynx-like gaze but to Brent who was smoothing out the folded check, it went unobserved.

Suddenly Alexander bent forward, her cheeks coloring with embarrassment and caught at the signer's wrist as spasmodically as though it were a death warrant to which he meant to set his signature.

"Don't write me no check!" she exclaimed somewhat desperately, then, covered with confusion she added, "I don't aim ter insult ye none—but I don't know much erbout fatched-on ways. I wants ter tote thet thar payment back home—in real money."

Except with Brent, Holloway had never thus far broken out of character. Having assumed to be a mountain lumberman, he had consistently talked as one—acted as one.

Now he came out of his chair as though a mighty spring had uncurled under him, and slapped an outspread hand to his forehead.

"Great jumping Jehosaphat!" he exclaimed, and turning in her chair, the young woman studied him in perplexity. But Halloway's slip was brief and his recovery instant. Since Brent sat there staring in speechless bewilderment at Alexander, the giant launched himself into the breach.

"Tote four thousand dollars in silver an' paper an' gold across them trails in saddle bags!" His voice suddenly mounted into domineering vehemence. "Tote hit over wild an' la'relly mountings with this hyar country full of drunken scalawags thet would do murder for a ten dollar bill! Hev ye done gone plum bereft of reason?"

Alexander's first confusion of manner had come from the fear that her refusal of a check might seem tainted with the discourtesy of suspicion. Now in the face of actual opposition it stiffened instantly into hostility. The perplexity died from her face and her eyes blazed. For a moment she met the excited gaze of the man who towered over her and then in a coldly scornful voice she spoke, not to him, but to Brent. "I reckon ye war right, Mr. Brent, when ye asked me whether I wanted this man sent way. Thar hain't no need of his tarryin' hyar."

"Just a moment, Alexander," smiled Brent, enjoying in spite of himself his friend's discomfiture. "We'll pack him off, if you say so, but first hear what we both have to say. He's right. With this gang of scoundrels in and about town it would be madness to carry that much money. The size of this deal will set tongues wagging. When you start out everyone will know it. You'd never get home alive."

"I don't know nothin' about checks an' sometimes banks bust," she obdurately insisted. "I wants ter show my paw cash money. Ef he 'lows I'm man enough ter do his business thet's enough, hain't it?"

"A rifle-gun in ther la'rel hes done overcome plenty of men afore ye," asserted Halloway with the deep boom of sullenness in his voice. "Ye hain't no army of men, I reckon."

They wrestled with her in argument for the better part of an hour but she was as immovable as the bed-rock of her mountains.

Brent even raised the point, despite the withering contempt with which he knew she would greet it, that he might decline to recognize her authority to act for her father but from a hip pocket of her trousers she produced a worn wallet and from the wallet she extracted a general and properly attested power of attorney to transact all business.

"I hed ter hev thet," she announced coolly, "because so many damn fool men 'lowed thet a woman couldn't do business."

The end of it was that Brent himself cashed his check, and counted out in specie and currency a sum large enough to become in effect a price on her head. When the money had been done up in heavy paper, sealed by the cashier with wax, and identified with her own signature, she consented to permit it to lie in the safe overnight since the roads were not yet passable, though even then she cannily inquired of the bank employe: "I reckon ye hain't got no objection ter my countin' hit up afresh afore I sets out, hev ye?"

Later that day Lute Brown, who it may be said in passing, had served a term in state prison for house-breaking, dropped casually into the bank and asked the cashier to "back a letter" for him, since writing was not one of his own strong points. The cashier was obliging, and in as much as gossip was usually sparse in that community went on the while chatting with the president of the institution, who had just come in.

"True as text," said the cashier, while Lute Brown waited. "She wouldn't take no check. She was plum resolved to have her money in cash—and she aims to hire a mule and start out soon tomorrow morning toting it along with her."

"I'd hate to undertake it," said the president briefly and the cashier agreed: "Me an' you both. Why she wouldn't even hear of takin' no bodyguard along with her."

Later in the day Lute Brown addressed a caucus attended by a half dozen men, including Jase Mallows.

That meeting took place behind closed doors and though a general accord of purpose prevailed there was some dissension as to detail.

"We kain't skeercely shoot her outen hand es she rides along," demurred a conscientious objector, who, however, fully endorsed the plan of lightening her financial burden. "She's a woman, fer all her brashness in her callin' herself a man."

The virtuous sentiment was not popularly received. It might even have been scoffed into limbo had not Jase Mallows leaned forward, twirling his mustache, and made himself heard.

"Ye're damn right hit won't do ter kill her. I aims ter wed that gal some day, an' afore I'd see her lay-wayed an' kilt, I'd tell this hull story ter ther town marshall."

An ominous growl went up at that but Jase continued staunchly.

"Howsomever we needn't hev no fallin' out over that. I've got a plan wharby she kin be robbed without hurtin' her an' wharby atter ye've done got ther money, I kin 'pear ter rescue her an' tek her offen yore hands."

As he outlined his guileful proposition the scowls of his listeners gave way to grins of full approval and admiration.

"Who's goin' ter diskiver what route she rides?" demanded one of those annoyingly exact persons who mar all great dreams by the injection of practicalities.

Again Jase laughed. "Thar hain't but one way she kin go—hit'll be days afore any other route's fordable. She's got ter fare past Crabapple post office an' through Wolf-pen gap."

That afternoon Brent went to the telegraph office. He wanted to wire his concern that the timber was safe and the deal closed, but while still a short distance from the railroad station, which was also the telegrapher's office, he saw Lute Brown go into the place and fell to wondering what business carried him hither. So he timed his entrance and sauntered in just as the fellow was turning away from the operator's chair.

Brent himself lounged about idly, because the man at the table had opened his key and begun sending. Neither Brown nor the operator gave any indication of interest in the arrival of a third person.

To neither of them did it occur that Brent was versed in the Morse code, and Brent volunteered no information on the subject.

None the less he was listening and as the dots and dashes fell into letters and the letters into words, he read, as if from a book, this message:

"Woman starts out in morning with bundle by way of Crabapple post office. Lute."

Brent filed his own message and passed the time of day with the operator, but when he was outside he cursed the need of slow walking as he made his way to the rafts. Alexander was not there. No one had seen her for two hours and, from her shack, both pack and rifle had been removed.

Halloway's face when Brent found him and told him his story, first blackened into the thunder cloud darkness, then as suddenly paled into dread.

"By God, Brent," he whispered hoarsely, catching the other's arm in a grip that almost broke it, "what if she suspects us too—and has already set out to give us the slip? She hasn't a chance to get through before these outlaws intercept her. She'd have to stop—somewhere this side the gap—and go on in the morning."

"Come on," snorted Brent, "we've got to go to the livery stable and see if she's hired a mule."

"If she's seeking to give us the slip, she's probably changed that plan too—and set out on foot. It's a safe bet, though, that she didn't go without her precious money. Let's try the bank."

They went, Brent needing to strike a sort of dog-trot to hold the long striding pace of the other.

The bank was closed for the day.

CHAPTER VIII

"Well, what next?" inquired Brent blankly.

"We might manage to seize and make a hostage of Lute Brown—and even the telegraph operator," began Halloway, somewhat haltingly. "But their disappearance would prove a sort of warning and they may not be the leading spirits. Did you gather from that telegram where they mean to hold her up?"

"No—nor even to whom the message went. He'd begun sending when I got in."

"Of course we couldn't prove that the operator understood the portent of the message but I know the fellow—his name is Wicks, and I think he's a bad egg."

"Where does the bank cashier live?" inquired Brent.

"Three miles out along Deephole Branch—and he has no telephone," growled the Titan. Suddenly through the baffled perplexity of his eyes broke the light of dawning idea, and he spoke with a greater certitude.

"If these high-binders have used the wire once they may do it again," he exclaimed. "At all events that's the point to watch at present."

"I suppose you mean I must loaf around there and eavesdrop—for anything that may come over." Brent's tone was unenthusiastic. "It's logical enough too—but if the girl's started out alone, time is precious."

Halloway had straightened out of his doleful uncertainty. Plans were swiftly taking shape in his mind.

"No. You've been there once. If you went back it's just possible that into the fellow's dull mind might steal a ghost of suspicion. I'm ready to take my turn now, though I hate the damned inactivity. I am a presumed illiterate. I struggle over the printed page—and with me loafing in his office he would chat away over his wire undisturbed."

"And what shall I be doing?"

"There'll be enough to keep you busy, I should say. Get in touch with any of the bank employes you can locate. Try to learn whether or not Alexander has actually started. Have Lute watched and see with whom he talks. Get together a dozen men we can trust at a pinch. Have them ready, if necessary, to take the saddle on a moment's notice. It may come down to a race over the trail."

Brent's face fell.

"With my limited acquaintance," he objected, "how in God's name am I to pick such men?"

"No man who looked into the dog-like eyes of young Bud Sellers," asserted Halloway, "could doubt that he'd give his life for that girl. He can also keep his mouth tight. Tell him the whole story and take his orders. I'm off now to sit on my shoulder blades in the telegraph office."

About the post office loitered a small crowd drawn together by the instinct for companionship and to that gathering place Brent turned first in search of Bud.

It proved a happy choice and when he had, with a seeming of casualness, led his man into a quieter spot he demanded, "What has become of Alexander?"

He thought that the young mountaineer stiffened a bit and that his face became mask-like. But this may have been the jealous tendency of a hopeless passion, and when Brent swiftly narrated all that he and Halloway had learned, the secretiveness of guise fell away from the listening face and the body trembled as if stricken with a chill, but a chill of rage and indignation which had no kinship with timorousness.

"Hit looks like hit would hev been safer an' handier fer Alexander jest ter ride on back home with ther same crowd thet come down-river with her—they're all got ter make ther same journey," was his first comment, but after a moment he shook his head. "Howsomever, I reckon thet they don't aim ter hasten back so damn fast. They hain't been in a town fer a long spell an' they seeks ter tarry—an' quite several of 'em air fellers I mistrusts anyhow."

"Can't you pick out enough dependable men for an immediate start if need be?"

Bud laughed shortly. "Did ye 'low, atter hearin' what ye jest narrated that I'd be liable ter stand hitched fer long? I'll pick 'em out all right—an' speedily."

Into his suddenly narrowing eye shot a menacing gleam. "An' ef them fellers undertakes ter harm her, afore God, thar's goin' ter be some shovelin' of grave-yard dirt, too."

Brent sought out the bank president who lived in town and put his terse question as to whether Alexander had withdrawn from the safe, her package of money.

"She hadn't been there again up to the time of my leaving," the banker replied, "but, I came away before closing."

The telegraph office in the railway station was a dingy place of cobwebbed murk. It was also the express office, and in helter-skelter disarray lay a litter of uncalled-for plow-shares and such articles as go from the end of the rails into that hinterland where lies an isolated world of crag and loneliness.

Except for the operator—who was also ticket-agent and general factotum—it was now empty

and dull of light with its smeared window glasses between its interior and the dispirited grayness of the outer skies. The dust-covered papers and miscellany which cumbered the table long undisturbed, spoke of an idle office and of hours unedged with interest.

As Halloway's great bulk shadowed the door, Wicks glanced up, and nodded with a somewhat surly unwelcome.

"Did ye want anything," he asked shortly.

"No, just loafin' 'round," drawled the visitor as he settled indolently into a chair which creaked its complaint under his weight.

For a short while the two kept up a perfunctory semblance of conversation, but between these interchanges of comment, lengthening intervals elapsed.

Wicks sat inertly gazing at those familiar stains on the wall which long familiarity had made hateful to him. His expression was moody and only occasionally did he turn to glance at his unbidden guest.

Halloway's head had fallen forward on his chest and soon his heavy breathing became that of a man who is napping.

Finally the other opened his key and sounded the call for Viper, a hamlet ten miles away, though in practical effect it was more distant since the road between twisted painfully over ridge and through gorge. It was on an infrequently used freight spur but it boasted communication with the world by wire—and it was important now because it was a town through which Alexander must pass on her way from Coal City to the mouth of Shoulder-blade Creek.

The metallic voice of the telegraph key subsided, and shortly came the response. Halloway still breathed heavily on—a sleeping giant whose ears were very much awake. This was no official message paying toll, but a private conversation between operators bent on whiling away dull moments. Moreover it was evidently the continuation of talk previously commenced so that to the eavesdropper it was like a continued story of which he had missed the opening chapters.

"Upward of four thousand dollars," tapped out Wicks. "That's big money, but the more men that split it the less each feller gets, so they don't want too many from Viper."

Halloway realized at once that this lantern-jawed operator had a swift and sure sending finger, and when the answer came it was, in contrast, labored and ragged. It was as if two men talked, one in rapid and clear-clipped syllables—the other in a stutter.

Said Viper, "There might be neck-stretching too if too many tongues make talk. Jess will have the boys ready at the place soon in the morning. They will wait for orders there."

"At the place!" Halloway in his counterfeited sleep cursed to himself. If instead of those indefinite words the point had been named he would have gained something tangible. He knew now however beyond a doubt that both operators were conspirators and he had gleaned one comforting assurance—the plans contemplated no joining of forces until to-morrow. Those at the far end were still uninstructed. If it came to a race to-night that gave a better chance.

Then Viper cut off and Wicks, with a sigh of boredom, settled back in his chair once more and gave himself over to silence.

Finally Halloway stirred out of his slumber and stretched himself.

"I reckon," he admitted shamefacedly, "I must hev fell asleep. That damn fire broke up my rest last night." With which comment he slouched, still sleepily, out of the place, rubbing his eyes as he went, with ham-like fists.

At the rafts he found Bud Sellers, and a round dozen men of Bud's selection. Looking them over, Halloway privately approved. There was not an eye in the number that was not hawk-clear; or a figure that was not nail-hard. These were fellows cut to a pattern of action, but even in their excellent average, one stood out with an individualism which immediately struck the observer.

He was introduced as Jerry O'Keefe, but Halloway would not have needed the name, once he had seen the lazy challenging twinkle in the gray-blue eyes, to spot him as a man of Irish blood. O'Keefe had need to look up to meet the glance of the giant, but that was for him unusual. Into most eyes he looked down, for when he stood in his socks he was six feet two inches of hard-bitten sinew and man-flesh.

"Where's Brent?" asked Halloway, and Bud Sellers, whose manner had fallen into the stillness of one chafing against delay, replied tersely, "He hain't come back yit."

Soon, though, he arrived, and by now the west was reddening toward sunset.

In a situation calling for absolute parsimony in the economy of time it would have meant moments salvaged for the trio of men, who must act as commanders of the rest, to have gone at once into a discussion of the results of their several investigations. Yet that was impossible, since

for Halloway to tell his story to both would mean revealing his knowledge of telegraphy. So while he and Brent talked first alone, Bud Sellers stood apart, and into that fertile soil of mountain suspicion crept a vague questioning as to why full confidence was denied him—a suspicion which was later to bear fruit.

When he had been told all, save of Halloway's eavesdropping, he made his own report.

"Myself, I hain't found out much, save thet I've got the men ready, an' thet I seed Lute Brown talkin' with Jase Mallows a spell back."

It was arranged that half of the force should proceed at top speed to Crabapple post office and mobilize there; that Halloway himself should push through to Viper and eavesdrop on the telegraph key, and that the others should loaf about Coal City watching the suspects and gleaning what information they could. The men of the last named contingent were to play hounds on the heels of the plotters and seek to follow them without being discovered.

While the three were still in council at one end of the raft, Bud came suddenly to his feet and his jaw dropped in amazement. There striding down the bank to the boom, with a face as freshly pink as a wild rose, was Alexander herself, with her pack on her back.

She saw the gathering of men, some with faces that were unfamiliar to her, and halted to inspect them. Into her eyes came something like a smoulder as though in resentment of unwarranted trespassing, then seeing Bud and Halloway and Brent she came aboard and demanded curtly, "What be all these men doin' hyar?"

For an instant no one responded to her question. The reaction of unexpected relief from driving anxiety left them wordless. Finally Brent laughed nervously.

"It would appear that they are here for no reason whatsoever," he said, "though a few minutes ago we thought it a matter of life and death." Her nonplussed expression was sufficiently full of interrogation to cue a fuller explanation and Brent embarked upon the summarized recital of what they had discovered.

Alexander's eyes widened into amazement, and she caught one lip between her white teeth. She stood very straight and indignant, and the men acknowledged to themselves that she had never seemed so beautiful before, nor so militant.

"So they aimed ter lay-way me," she murmured incredulously and Halloway made prompt answer. "Yes, and ye mighty nigh walked right into th'ar dead-fall. Don't ye see now how plum reckless yore plan is? Whar was ye at anyhow?"

The girl impatiently tossed her head. "I fared out a leetle way ter see how ther roads looked," she said. "I wanted ter mek sure that I could get a daybreak start in the morning. I hain't nobody's sugar ner salt that I kain't stir abroad without meltin', be I?"

"We saw that your pack was gone too—and we 'lowed—" began Halloway, but she interrupted him with a curt explanation. "Thet shack war leakin' like a sieve. I didn't aim ter hev all my belongin's mildewed an' rusted—so I left 'em at ther store."

"This crowd kin see ye through without mishap, I reckon. We've done planned hit all out." That contribution came from the giant who seemed to have become general spokesman but the young woman stood silent and absorbed; a delicate pucker between her brows, and the violet pools of her eyes cloud-riffled. At last she announced firmly, "I'm beholden ter all of ye but I've got ter study this matter out by myself. I'll come back hyar in a little spell an' tell ye what decision I've done reached."

"As for getting a daybreak start," Brent observed as she turned away, "You can't get into the bank until it opens."

Once more she had overlooked the unfamiliar complications of financial usage.

Jerry O'Keefe had been lounging with the other recruits of Bud's gathering, looking riverward until the sound of voices, whose words he could not distinguish, brought him lazily around. As he stood when the first view of Alexander broke on his vision, so he remained—immovable. The low and bantering laughter of his companions for his rapt statuesqueness, fell on deaf ears. His lips parted and his eyes held as under hypnotism.

Jerry stared with a craned neck at Alexander McGivins until slowly his body came round to an easier posture, but upon his steady and unmoving fixity of eye, the rest of him moved as upon an axis. Into the gray-blue irises came a live kindling and with seeming unconsciousness of those about him, he said solemnly, "Afore God, I aims ter wed with thet gal!"

Alexander had strolled outward along a bluff, leaving the town at her back, because she wanted to think without interruption. In her home over yonder across the broken ridges her father might be lying, anxiety ridden—or he might be already dead. An obsession of haste

spurred her with the roweling of suspense and with the companionship of her troubled thoughts she walked on and on.

When at length she turned she had decided certain matters, and in the growing dusk she met a man who smilingly accosted her and halted in her path. It was Jase Mallows and she confronted him with a high head and, in remembrance of his swaggering impertinence, spoke imperiously.

"I don't want ter hev no speech with ye, Jase, now ner never, but I owes ye wages fer ther wuck ye done on them rafts. Come ter ther bank termorrer at openin' time and I'll pay ye off."

The mountaineer's face fell into a scowl of resentment. To be rebuffed was galling enough. To be relegated to a servile status was unendurable, yet he refashioned his expression at once into a smile.

"Thar hain't no tormentin' haste, Alexander," he assured her evenly. "Any time'll do—any time at all, but I'm leavin' town ternight."

"Suit yerself," she answered with calculated curtness and would have gone on but he fell into step with her and dropped his voice into so earnest a *timbre* that despite her dislike for him she listened.

"Alexander—hit hain't none of my business—an' I knows ye're mad at me but yore paw an' me dwells neighbors—an' I'm goin' ter forewarn ye about somethin'."

"Alright," the voice was frigid. "Go ahead. Everybody's forewarnin' me right now."

"I've done heered thet this Brent party air a mighty slick customer. Don't give him no undue lee-way ter fleece ye. Ther man Halloway, thet's hangin' around him's a pretty desperate sort too, by ther repute folks gives him. When ye settled up accounts with thet outfit, ye kain't skeercely be too heedful. I'd either make 'em give me cash money—or else hev a lawyer 'round ter see thet everythin's alright."

"My paw," declared the girl indignantly, "he's got full trust in Mr. Brent an' so hev I." She dismissed him with a glance under which his own bravado wilted and he made no further effort to walk at her side. But in the gathering dusk, the wet desolation about her seemed to creep into Alexander's heart. With so many charges of foul play floating about, of whom could she feel certain? Then the answer came. There was, perhaps, only one. So long as he remained sober, Bud Sellers would remain dependable. From the bank overlooking the boom she called his name and when he had leaped to respond, she led him out of hearing.

"Bud," she said tensely. "Ye knows how heavy-hearted with dread I be about my paw. Ye knows thet when I left him I wasn't no ways sure I'd ever lay eyes on his livin' face ergin. I ain't sure now." Her voice threatened to break and to control it she pitched it into a harder tone. "Ye knows, too, who's fault thet air."

He answered very low and very miserably. "Yes, I knows full well—an' I've done been in torment—ever since."

"Ef he's still alive an' gits well——" she went on, "thar won't be no grudge atween us. Ye says ye seeks ter make amends. Ye knows what hit means ter him whether I gits thet money back safe or not."

"Yes, I knows thet too."

Alexander laughed a little bitterly. "I've jest been forewarned thet I kain't trust nuther Brent ner Halloway. I hain't sayin' I believes hit; I reckon hit's sheer slander—but——" All unconsciously a note of pathos crept into her voice, the pathos of one who must fight alone against unseen forces. "But, how am I goin' ter tell, fer dead sure, who I kin trust?"

Sellers remembered that all he knew of the robbery plot was hearsay—that his informants had excluded him from a part of their consultations. An ugly possibility took vague shape in his mind, but his answer was brief.

"Ye kin trust me 'twell hell freezes."

Alexander nodded. "Ye're ther one man I ought ter hev a blood-hatred erginst—an' yit, so long es ye stays sober, I knows what ye says air true."

Suddenly she laid both her hands on his shoulders and under her touch a tremor raced through his arteries. The mountains seemed to grow unsteady. "Ye're ther only man hyar I kin plum, teetotally depend on. When the bank opens termorrer, I wants ye ter be thar. I don't want ye ter go with me on ther trip back home. I hain't goin' ter suffer nobody ter do that—but thar's a thing I may need ye ter do."

"Es God's lookin' down on us, ef a man kin do hit——" he swore in an emotion-shaken voice, "hit'll be done."

Later that evening Alexander announced her decision and from it she refused to depart. As

soon as she could transact business at the bank the next day she would set out on a hired mule, with the money in her saddle-bags. She would tolerate no escort, because one person could travel secretly where several could not. However when she had progressed a certain distance she would turn the mule back. The only reason for its use, at all, would be to make it appear that she was going by the route which the robbers assumed.

Then, depending upon a woodcraft which she trusted, she would swing out at a circle on foot, holding to the laurel thickets and pass, not through but around and above the Gap, which seemed the logical place for a holdup. She consented that her assembled body-guard should, if they insisted, push on and mobilize at Viper, where if suspicious circumstances warranted, they might be near enough to take emergency action. If she came through safely to Perry Center, she would be secure in the house of a kinsman and from there on would have little to fear.

At ten o'clock the next morning Alexander came out of the bank, followed by Bud Sellers, who carried his own saddle-bags over his arm, as if he too contemplated a journey. Brent, in order to avoid the appearance of too close a participation in her affairs, did not accompany her—nor was Holloway anywhere in evidence.

As the girl went out to where her hired mule stood hitched, various observers along the ragged street noted that her rifle was strapped under the saddle skirt in such a way that it could not be speedily loosened. They also watched as, with no pretense of concealment, she stuffed into her saddle-bags a parcel done up in heavy brown paper, and made conspicuous by the bank's red sealing wax. Then, still scornful of evasion, she mounted and rode away as straight-shouldered and militant a figure as Jeanne d'Arc herself.

Bud Sellers, looking after her from the door of the bank, was gloomy of countenance beyond his wont.

CHAPTER IX

As the mule ambled along the mired streets of the wretched hamlet there were eyes following its course that masked an interest beyond the usual. If certain men who had attended yesterday's caucus still loafed inactively about the sidewalks, it was not because they were indifferent to possible developments, but in obedience to a settled plan. Last night a party had set forth ahead. Its members were now stationed at appointed posts in spots so lonely and so silent that one might have passed them at a stone's throw without suspecting their presence. They had gone singly and by different ways—at the start. Others had come to cooperate from Viper and the net was spread with meticulous care and completeness. For communication and signaling the voices of forest things were available; the caw of the crow in the timber, the bark of the fox in the thicket, the note of those birds that the winter had not driven south.

Alexander's journey would not have been easy, had she ridden with no prize to safeguard. There were washouts and quicksands; treacherous fords and shelving precipices to be encountered, but here was a fortune guarded only by a woman whose recklessness led her toward disaster.

"She's plum askin' fer hit—beggin' fer hit," grinned Lute Brown who with a single companion strode along a wet and tangled trail shortly after sunrise. "An' I reckon she'll get hit."

Soon after Alexander had taken her departure those interested in town also began drifting toward the outbound trail. There must be, for every campaign, a rear-guard as well as an advance.

But the three to whose earnest advice the young woman from Shoulder-blade had turned a deaf ear, had not been content to accept dismissal—or inactivity. Holloway and Sellers knew that the dangers of which she made little could not be blinked at and they dared not trust to luck nor rely solely upon her dauntlessness to see her through.

As for Holloway he had left Coal City under cover of the dawn's twilight, while the white fog of mountain mornings still veiled the world. He had gone on foot since, with his tireless strength, he could so travel across the "roughs" at better than a mounted pace and be less cumbered. His destination was the telegraph office at Viper. Jerry O'Keefe and a handful of others were to mobilize inconspicuously there—though they were to remain seemingly disconnected and await his instructions. Brent was to come on later and in his command, though not in his immediate company, were to be Bud Sellers and several more.

The chief difficulty, of course, lay in communication. It was rather a matter of groping in the dark, and the only plan which had seemed feasible had been to divide the intervening country into zones and to arrange outwardly innocent signals which should designate the locality in which it might become imperative to gather and strike. Telephones were few, and those that

existed purely local in radius, but since mining properties were dotted over the terrain there were, here and there, scattered "talkin' boxes."

By neither telegraph nor 'phone would it be practicable to talk frankly, but Holloway meant to learn what he could, and Brent was to call him up from time to time—if he could. His inquiries would be couched in questions as to possible purchases of timber for next season's cutting and the germ of the reply would be suggestions of locations—which he would understand.

Alexander rode on alone and the ways were, at first, as deserted as though they had never been fashioned for human usage. Between Coal City and Viper lay a distance of ten miles but they were zig-zag and semi-perpendicular miles with torrential waters to be forded. She meant to ride only about four of them before abandoning her mule for the detour on foot. But when she had left the town only a little way two horsemen came up behind her. She knew neither of them, and they were immature boys, with the empty and vacuous faces of almost degenerate illiteracy. They seemed unarmed but since it was vital to Alexander's scheme to ride unwatched it became important to have them either go ahead or to distance them. Accordingly she urged her mule into a lumbering canter and when a turn of the road had been reached slowed down only to discover with a backward glance that the others had galloped too, and were still close in her rear. Crossing a brook, she paused to let her mule drink and they passed her slowly, staring with the unabashed fixity and hanging jaws at the unaccustomed sight of a woman riding astride in the clothing of a man. Then they went forward at a snail's pace.

Alexander could feel no degree of security until the timber masked her course and whether by intent or accident, these chance fellow wayfarers had become a definite menace. So, fretting at the delay, she waited there for some time, and when she made the next turning, she saw them waiting with no apparent purpose in life save to pass and repass her.

She rode by again, this time with an angry coloring of her cheeks and shook her lazy beast into a trot. Behind her trotted the two.

Eventually the girl drew rein, squarely and belligerently confronting the troublesome though inoffensive looking pair.

"Hain't I got a license ter travel ther highway without bein' follered an' bedeviled," she demanded angrily, and the two youths seemed at first too abashed for speech. One of them, who was an almost albino blond, flushed to the roots of his pale hair.

"I reckon hit jest chanced thet-a-way," he stammered. "We kinderly happens ter be travelin' ther same direction, an' goin' ther same rate, thet's all."

"Well don't let hit chanst thet way no more!" Her eyes were flaming now with a blue light like burning alcohol. "You choose yore gait an' let me choose mine. Take ther road or give hit, either way."

The second lad had found his tongue by this time and he elected to use it truculently.

"This high-road's public property, I reckon," he announced. "A man kin ride as he sees fit."

Alexander could not afford to parley and the suspicion was strong upon her that the twain were less guileless than their seeming. She flashed out a revolver and issued an ultimatum. "I warns ye both now. I'm agoin' ter stand right hyar long enough ter count a hundred. If either one of ye's in sight at ther end of thet time, I'm ergoin' ter begin shootin'. Ef I sees ye ergin naggin' round me from now on, I'm goin' ter begin shootin' too,—an' shoot ter kill."

She meant it, and after a questioning glance they knew that she meant it. With some grumbled incoherence, they went on. They even went at a gallop, and Alexander saw them no more. But perhaps even after that they saw her.

Holloway came early into the hamlet of Viper, bedraggled with travel. He knew that among the men about him must be at least several accomplices to the conspiracy which he sought to defeat. He had been in Coal City for only a few days past and never in Viper until now; so until someone drifted in who remembered his interference at the tavern he would not necessarily be recognized as having any connection with Alexander's affairs. Indeed he had been seen with her so little that he might altogether escape association with her in the minds of these fellows. On the other hand any stranger would in all probability be held under unremitting surveillance and he must therefore proceed with extreme caution.

Jerry O'Keefe was lounging about the streets, gossiping with acquaintances, but when Holloway passed him and brushed his shoulders, neither gave any sign of recognition and Holloway brought up at last, though with seeming aimlessness, at the telegraph office.

There, besides the man who sat at the key, he discovered three others, all of unfamiliar mien, but he gathered from the scowls which they bent on him that he was something less than welcome. Palpably the present occupants of that small room preferred to remain uninterrupted in the discussion of such matters as might arise, yet they did not wish to manifest open or undue

anxiety to a stranger.

"Howdy, men," began the new arrival affably as he stood towering over the telegraph operator. Then looking down at that person he added with awkward, back-country diffidence: "Stranger, be ye ther feller thet works thet thar telegraph?"

The seated man looked up and nodded.

"I promised a man by ther name of Brent back thar in Coal City ter kinderly see ef anybody along ther road I come hed any timber they sought ter sell." The giant still spoke with a hulking shyness. "I hain't l'arned nothin', because I come through soon in ther mornin' an' ther roads was empty, but I reckon I'd better send him a message ter thet effect."

Halloway noticed that, as he talked, the other men watched him narrowly though, as he glanced in their direction, they fell at once into a semblance of carelessness. The operator grunted, as he shoved forward a blank with the instructions, "write out your telegram."

Halloway modestly thrust back the paper.

"I kin write—some——" he said, "but not skeercely good enough fer thet. I 'lowed I'd get ye ter do hit fer me. Just say I haven't heered of no timber fer sale. His name's Will Brent an' mine's Jack Halloway."

As the seated man grudgingly scribbled, the newcomer lounged lazily nearby, but just as the man at the key was about to begin sending, his instrument fell into a frenzied activity. Halloway thought that the other loiterers, who were really no more genuinely loitering than himself, made a poor showing of indifference, and that their attitudes betrayed their eagerness of waiting for whatever was coming over.

Finally the electric chatter ended. The seated man had cut in once or twice with questions, and at the end he rose from his chair, not with a regularly transcribed message, but with a few hastily jotted notes on a sheet of paper in his hand.

Impulse had brought him to his feet but he stood hesitant, bethinking himself of the presence of the interloper, and Halloway broke in with a drawing inquiry pitched to a stupid inflection.

"Did ye send my message, Stranger? Did they say he war there?"

The operator flung him a churlish glance and a short answer. "Thet office was busy," he said. "They didn't hev no time ter take your talk jest now." Then with exaggerated carelessness he turned to one of the other loungers. "Joe, ef ye'll come inter ther baggage room, I'll see ef thet express parcel o' yourn's in thar. I think hit came afore ther high-water."

"I reckon," murmured Halloway disappointedly, "I'll hev ter wait a spell an' see kin I git my man later on," and making that observation he settled into his chair with a seeming of permanent intent.

Meanwhile, in the privacy of the baggage room, the station-agent was whispering excitedly to his companion. The man in his chair beyond the door could of course hear no word of that hurried conference, but after all he had no need to do so. He had read its essence at first hand from the wire and it had run about like this:

"She driv two of our fellows back with a pistol when they sought to follow her, but she left her mule and turned into the timber five miles this side of Coal City."

Halloway had congratulated himself that to this extent at least Alexander had succeeded, but his pleasure had been short-lived for the operator here at Viper had flashed back the interrogation, "What then," and the other—who Halloway figured must be cutting in from Wolf-Pen Gap—rapped out the disquieting reply:

"They're combin' ther timber fer her. Have your boys there head her off at the mouth of Chimney-pot Fork in case she circles round the Gap."

A detail which might prove important struck Halloway as he listened. He had recognized the sending from the other end as a man may recognize a speaking voice.

It had been years since he had himself operated a key; but like many adept telegraphers he could distinguish not only the dots and dashes of the code, but also the individual peculiarities of their rapping out. Now he would have been willing to take oath that the hand which had sent this news was the same quick, sure hand that he had watched at work yesterday.

That would indicate that Wicks had either deserted his post at Coal City, or left it in charge of a relief man, and that he had come to Wolf-Pen to operate a disused key nearer the scene of action.

Through the open door of the telegraph office Halloway, now burning with impatience, could see Jerry O'Keefe strolling aimlessly along the sidewalk a half a block away. Jerry too was waiting for instructions and ready, once he had received them, to lead his own force out, with that light in

his eye that had dwelt there when he first saw Alexander.

Halloway rose, yawned, and stretched himself. As he did so his hands almost brushed the ceiling.

"I reckon," he asserted, "I won't tarry no longer. Mebby I'll come back again." But before he had reached the threshold the operator and his companion stood looking on from the baggage room door. Even unlettered Machiavellis must have their flashes of inspiration, premonition, "hunch," or whatever you may choose to call it. Suddenly, into the telegrapher's consciousness flashed the suspicion that in the departure of this unknown observer lurked some hidden menace. In what that danger lay he was all at sea but it was a thing he felt and upon which he acted. The knight of the ticker jerked his head and raised a hand, and before Halloway's own arms had descended from the heights to which his yawn had stretched them, he found two pistols squarely presented to his broad chest, and heard a voice instruct with unmistakable finality, "Keep them hands up!"

Keeping them up, Halloway could still see across the shoulders of his captors the distant figure of Jerry O'Keefe but with him he could not communicate.

As he stood, rapidly thinking, it occurred to him that his strength and agility might perhaps even yet avail him. With a lunge he might carry down the two armed figures and escape, but before undertaking that he turned his head for a backward glance and decided against the experiment. Besides the Station Agent stood the third fellow, also with a drawn and leveled weapon.

The Operator spoke again somewhat nervously. He had acted so strenuously on pure impulse and not without a certain misgiving. Now he felt the need of some explanation.

"Boys, when that instrument ticked a while back," he mendaciously asserted, "hit was ther town marshal at Coal City talkin'. He described this man an' said he was wanted thar fer settin' ther hotel on fire before yesterday. We hain't got no choice but ter hold him."

Going to the drawer of his desk the speaker produced a pair of handcuffs and rattled them as he explained, "Ther revenue man left these hyar. Put 'em on him, Joe."

With the two pistols still pressed close Halloway slowly lowered his wrists and submitted to the indignity of their shackling. Had any human possibility of a break for freedom presented itself he would have embraced it, but the three guns had the look of business and the three faces back of them were flinty with purpose.

As the locks snapped into the grooves of the bracelets the telegrapher commented in sardonic afterthought.

"Ther revenuer fergot ter leave ther key. I don't know how we'll ever git them things loose ergin."

They led him at once back into a dark corner of the baggage room and bestowed him there in a chair, where with a revolver against his temple, they gagged him and lashed him by waist and legs. His hands being sufficiently manacled they did not bind further.

Alexander had, when she came to a place which was rocky enough to leave no footprints, slipped from her saddle, taken her rifle and saddle-bags from their fastenings and disappeared into the timber. The mule she knew would sooner or later be recognized and returned to the stable, but she did not want it recognized too promptly so she led it with her into the woods and turned it loose well up on the mountain side. From that moment she disappeared with a completeness which attested her woodcraft. It was as though she had been and then had ceased to be. The way she elected to go followed the crests, since it is better when "hiding-out" to look down than to be looked down upon.

The sodden woods gave a quieter footing than had they been frosty and brittle underfoot, but even had it been otherwise she had the art of silent movement.

She knew that sooner or later her ruse would be discovered by the watchers of the conspiracy, but she asked only two hours of freedom. After that she would be as difficult to find as the rabbit that has gained the heart of the briar patch.

Once lying high up on a sheer and poroused precipice, she had seen a party of horsemen ride by, far below, and she laughed inwardly to herself, guessing at their purpose and object.

She came eventually to the sharp spur where that particular stretch of ridge ended in a precipitous break. That meant that she must for awhile go down to lower and more perilous levels. This was the final, dubious stage of her journey and with it behind her, she would feel that she had won through to security.

Because she was young and strong enough to laugh at fatigue and bold enough to find a

certain joy in recklessness, her spirits began to mount. There are huntsmen who will tell you that the wily and experienced fox comes to relish the chase more keenly than the pack which courses him. Alexander went on with a smile in her eyes.

But when she had gone down into the cloistered shadows of the valley her spirits descended too and when she slipped through the thickets and reached a certain point, something like despair tightened about her heart. Across the line of her march boiled a freshet which might as well have been a river. To swim it with her impediments was impossible and though it might carry her dangerously close to the road which she sought to avoid, she had no choice. She must follow it until a crossing developed.

As a woodsman, Alexander acknowledged few peers but this was to her, unfamiliar country. She was moreover pitting her skill against one who was her equal if not her superior, and who knew every trail and by-way hereabouts. He was a youth with a vacuous, almost idiotic face, whom she had that same day encountered. He had left her sight, but had never been too remote to follow or gauge her course and what he learned he relayed to others. In due time he had known without going further just where she must bring up—for he knew the condition of that stream—and its crossings.

The girl came, in due course, upon a broken litter of giant boulders, each the size of a small house, which lay scattered where at last the water grew shallow. She could even make out a point where one might cross dryshod by leaping from rock to rock.

It was in a fashion a place of mystery and foreboding, for each of those titanic rocks, with its age-long smoothness and greenness was a screen whose other side might harbor things only to be guessed. There one must risk an ambushade, trusting to one's star, and Alexander loosened her pistol and shifted her saddle-bags to her left shoulder and her rifle to her left hand.

Then she started forward—and one by one left the boulders behind her until she came to the last. As she rounded the final shoulder of sandstone her hand was knocked up and her pistol fell clattering.

Her ambushaders had known a thing which she had not—that for all the roomy freedom of the woods she must come out at last through this one passage—as wine must come out through the neck of the bottle.

About her closed a tightly grouped handful of men whose faces were masked and whose bodies were covered by the uniformity of black rubber coats.

Alexander did not surrender tamely. With the strength and the desperation of a tigress she gave them battle, until the sheer force of their numbers had smothered her into helplessness. Her coat was ripped and her shirt hung in tatters from one curved shoulder before they pinioned her and silenced her lips with a bandage.

After that they blind-folded her and carried her up and down hill, twisting beyond all chance of guessing the course, to a place where the air was cool with that freshness of quality that characterizes a cavern. There they stood her upright and removed the bandage.

About her was a flare of torches and the grotesque play of shadows between the grotto-like walls of an abandoned coal mine. About her too ranged in the spectral formality of masked faces and black rubber coats; of peaked hats with low turned brims, stood the circle of her captors.

"Now, Alexander McGivins," proclaimed a deep and solemnly pitched voice, "ye stands before ther dread an' awful conclave of ther order of ther Ku-Klux; ther regulators of sich as defies proper an' decorous livin'. We charges ye with unwomanly shamelessness an' with ther practicin' of witchcraft."

CHAPTER X

For a moment as she turned observant eyes about the walls of the place to which she had been brought, Alexander almost hoped that the astonishing statement of the spokesman was a true one—that in store for her, instead of robbery and possible outrage, lay only the judgment of the punitive clan. Such punishment might be brutally severe but she could face it in such fashion as would vindicate her claim of playing a man's game in a man's way.

So she stood there meeting the eyes that glared at her through the slit masks with a splendid assumption of scorn and defiance. She was keyed to that mood which makes it possible for martyrs to acquit themselves, even at the stake, with a victorious disdain.

Through this section of the mountains there had never been, since reconstruction days, any survival of the Ku-Klux in a true sense, but now and then, as in all wild and violent countries,

sporadic "regulations" occurred in which masked men took a faltering law into their own less faltering hands. Sometimes it was a bastard Ku-Klux in the original meaning of the term, a Vigilance Committee operating against abuses which the law failed to check. Oftener it was a masquerade behind which moved designs of personal hatred and vengeance. Sometimes the wife-beater or the harlot was punished. Sometimes the stronger enemy persecuted the weaker.

While Alexander waited for the next development, her captors prolonged the silence in order that the suspense of unguessed things should sap her courage.

The entrance through which they had come showed only as a darker spot in the shadowed vagueness of a far wall of rock, but there was a squareness about it which suggested a mineshaft. The walls themselves were streaked with black seams of coal and dug into tunnels that led in unknown directions.

The place was lighted by several lanterns of feeble power and a number of pine torches, and between the spot where they had stationed her and the crescent of dark figures that stood as silent accusers and judges, ran a trickling rivulet of water. At that detail Alexander smiled, for she knew that it was part and parcel of the absurdity contained in the allegation of witchcraft. The black art is powerless, by mountain tradition, to cross running water.

A bat fluttered zig-zag about the place brushing her cheek, but Alexander was not the sort of woman to be frightened by a bat.

When the calculated silence had held for perhaps five full minutes, the standing men meanwhile remaining as motionless as though they were themselves carved from coal, Alexander spoke.

"Why don't ye say somethin'," she demanded. "I've got friends thet'll be s'archin' these hills fer me right vigorous ef I don't git ter Viper in good time."

It was a bold and provocative speech, but it failed to tempt the silent men out of the pose they had assumed. They knew the effect of protracted silence and impending danger to sap even an assertive courage and for five other minutes they stood wordless and motionless. Only their shadows moved under the torch-light, wavering fitfully from small to large, from light to dark like draperies in a wind.

Finally the man at the center who appeared to exercise a sort of command moved a step forward and raised both hands. The others lifted high their right arms and in a sepulchral voice the spokesman demanded, "Does ye all solemnly sw'ar, by ther dreadful oath ye've done tuck, with yore lives forfeit fer disloyalty or disobedience, ter try this wench on ther charge of outragin' decorum—an' practicin' ther foul charms of witchcraft? Does ye all sw'ar ter deal with her in full an' unmitigated jestic despite thet she s'arves Satan with a comely face and a comely body? Does ye all sw'ar?"

The raised hands, with a unanimous and solemn gesture, fell over the hearts of the questioned and then came aloft once more, still as if with a single nerve impulse. In a unison out of which no separate voice emerged sounded the reply: "We does!"

Alexander laughed, but it must be confessed that that was pure bravado. She knew that on the backwaters of many creeks were cabins where simple folks invoked charms against witchcraft and did so with genuine dread. She knew that many others, less candid, laughed at old superstitions yet acknowledged them in their hearts. In her case the witchcraft charge was of course a cloak for subterfuge, but it was a jest which might bear bitterly serious results.

"Alexander McGivins," began the spokesman afresh, "we charges ye with these weighty matters; thet ye glories in callin' yoreself a he-woman—refusin' ter accept God's mandate an' castin' mortification on yore own sex by holdin' on ter shameless notions. We charges ye with settin' ther example of unwomanly behavior before ther eyes of young gals, an' we aims ter make a sample of ye.

"We furthermore charges ye with practicin' witchcraft; with castin' spells an' performin' devil's work." He wheeled and demanded suddenly; "Number Thirteen, I calls on ye ter step forward an' testify. How does witches gain thar black powers?"

The answering voice, was plainly disguised, and it came with the lugubrious quality of calculated awesomeness.

"By compact with Satan."

"Number Thirteen, how is sich-like compacts made?"

"Thar's ways an' ways. A body kin go up ter a mounting top fer nine nights an' shoot through a kerchief at ther moon, cussin' ther Almighty each separate time, an' ownin' Satan fer master."

"Number Thirteen, what powers does Satan give these hyar sarvants of his'n?"

"They gains ther baleful power ter kill folks with witch balls, rolled tight outen ther hair of a

cow or a varmint. By runnin' a hand over a rifle gun they kin make hit shoot crooked. They kin spell a houn' dog so thet he back-tracks 'stid of trailin' for'ards. They kin bring on all manner of pestilence an' make cows go dry an' hosses fling their riders. They kin——"

"Thet's enough, Number Thirteen," announced the spokesman. "Thet's a lavish of evil. How kin they be hindered from this deviltry?"

"Thar's means of liftin' spells, but nothin' save death hitself cures ther witches."

"Number Thirteen, how does ye go about hit, ter slay a witch?"

"By shootin' with a silver bullet run outen a mould thet's done been rubbed with willow-sprigs."

"Number Thirteen, in the event of need, hev ye got sich a bullet hyar?"

"Each one of us hes got one."

Once more the apparent head of the clan turned to the girl. "Woman, air ye guilty or not guilty?"

"I reckon," suggested Alexander coolly, "ye'd better ask Number Thirteen. He 'pears ter know 'most everything."

But the spokesman declined to be lured by frivolous taunt from his vantage ground of solemnity. He turned his head and gravely inquired: "Number Thirteen, how does ye det'armine ther guilt of a witch?"

"Ef a preacher comes nigh, she kain't help turnin' her back."

"I reckon we hain't skeercely got no preacher handy ter test her with," interrupted the master of ceremonies drily, and the other went on.

"Ef she stays hyar 'twell midnight a sperit in ther guise of a black cat'll appear ter do her biddin'."

On the ground lay the saddle-bags and the rifle; as yet unmolested. Before they had loosened the blindfold from her eyes she had been subjected to the needless indignity of bound wrists and now she was entirely helpless.

Her coat hung on her tattered during the struggle and her flannel shirt had been rent until both garments sagged from her shoulders, leaving bare the white curves of their flesh. The circle had fallen silent again. It remained silent for a half hour, then the man who had acted as chief inquisitor drew aside that other whom Alexander knew only as Number Thirteen, and, apart, they conferred in lowered voices. In the manner of these two, the captive recognized indications of anxiety. Palpably some detail of their plans had gone awry and that miscarriage, whatever its nature, was troubling their peace of mind. Had she understood more fully it would likewise have troubled her.

The conventional and successful course of highway robbery runs in the channel of a swift accomplishment and a rapid getaway. Yet this crew, leaving the saddle-bags uninvestigated at their feet, were solemnly playing out their farce at the expense of valuable time—time which should have stood for miles put between themselves and pursuit.

Was the difficulty that of disposing of her? If so, she stood face to face with a stark and grim extremity. Murder and concealment of a lifeless body, here, would be easy enough. These men were desperadoes, and if dire enough need pressed them they would not, she thought, balk overlong at the idea of killing a woman.

Yet the leader, studiously maintaining his Ku-Klux masquerade, parleyed with his underlings and consulted a heavy nickel-cased watch. His gesture showed a petulant impatience. The men in the silent circle stirred uneasily and from time to time low growls broke from their muffled lips. Obviously they were awaiting some development which though overdue had not materialized.

The half hour became an hour, then doubled itself to a full two—in oppressive silence.

"What be ye awaitin' fer?" Alexander demanded in a taunting voice, though inwardly she felt that the peril was pregnant and immediate. The only satisfaction she could deny them now was that of any confessed fear.

This time the speaker snarled his answer back at her angrily, without any consistent attempt at holding the ritualistic impressiveness of manner.

"Mebby we're waitin' fer midnight—twell ther black cat comes."

Alexander could not guess that all these malefactors were on tenterhooks of misgiving because the arrangement entered into as a concession to the vanity of Jase Mallows had failed; the fictitious rescue which was to re-establish him in the eyes of the girl and give to them the

chance to practice highway robbery, still stopping short of murder. The whole scheme had been cut to that pattern and it was now too late to evolve a new strategy. The trial was to have seemed genuine. It was to have been followed by a fictitious battle in which the alleged regulators were to have been put to flight by the victorious entry of Jase himself with his underlings. The girl, snatched from the jaws of death by his valor would henceforth rest under such obligations as could be recompensed only by her favor—but in the melee, her money would disappear.

Jase had not come—and the captive whom he was to take off their hands must either be done to death or liberated with a wagging tongue.

Eventually the masked head-highwayman led two of his men aside. He recognized that having compacted with Jase they could not ignore him. In a whisper he ventured the suggestion, "Mebby Jase hes done come ter grief. Mebby we'd better kill ther gal atter all an' git away. But if we does we've got ter git Jase afore he has time ter blab an' hang us all."

Halloway spending a long and dreary day bound to his chair in the baggage-room at Viper had succeeded in wriggling his lips free of the bandage. As yet that was only an academic victory. Unless there stood in the room where the instrument ticked a sufficiently strong force of his friends to wage a successful battle, any sound from his lips would mean only death for them and himself—without material advantage to his cause.

Twice during his long inactivity the raucous sound of a telephone bell jangled and he heard a voice replying to some inquiry, "No, he hain't been here." The question so answered, he guessed, had come from Brent seeking to locate him and confer with him as he came along the road between Coal City and Viper. He thought very grimly and with bitter futility of the force waiting so near and so eagerly keyed to action under O'Keefe, which one minute of private speech would launch into a hurricane effectiveness. In mad moments he had even tried to break the chain between the steel bracelets that bit into his wrists. His Samson strength had strained until the arteries swelled in his temples and it has been almost enough—but not quite. A link had stretched a bit, but the wrists had been so lacerated that the effort had to be abandoned.

Then when the day was spent towards late afternoon he caught the chatter of the key again, somewhat confused by the intervening wall, but though he missed part of the message he caught a few words which were pregnant with meaning ... "got her ... in mine shaft ... back of Gap."

Now, Halloway told himself, as tortured sweat of suspense dripped down his face, he must somehow convey word to Jerry O'Keefe—but how? He had the facts—the location—the certainty and he could use none of his vital information.

He twisted his two gyved hands around and got one of them into his coat pocket. He brought out the pipe which he could neither fill nor light, but there was a certain steadying comfort in feeling its cool stem between his teeth.

During the captive's leisure for reflection he had been pondering one point which had puzzled him. From what telegraph office out there in the wilds was Wicks acting as intelligence bureau? Obviously he must be near the Gap itself as the station wire followed the railroad.

Then he remembered a device that he had seen used about mining properties and laughed at his own stupidity in remaining as long baffled. The few telephones hereabouts were party lines where all conversation could be overheard and so, for the use of highwaymen, they were unavailable. Wicks had merely brought a key, a battery and a ground wire with him and he had cut in on a telephone line. There were, he remembered now, two instruments on the operator's table here. One was the twin to the thing upon which the resourceful Wicks was playing.

Brent and Bud Sellers had ridden with spirits rapidly sinking since they had drawn near to that territory which lay adjacent to Wolf-Pen Gap. The failure to reach Halloway by 'phone at Viper was a bad augury, since it left them in the position of an army whose intelligence bureau has collapsed.

The two horsemen had ridden through wintry forests along steep and difficult roads where it seemed that they alone represented humanity. Of course Alexander, herself, might be traveling as uneventfully as themselves, but they could feel no great confidence in that hope and now there was nothing to do but to push on to Viper, perhaps passing by spots where they were sorely needed, as they went, and to try to find Halloway, whose silence left them groping in the dark.

Will Brent was, in the sense of present requirements, no woodsman. He knew the forests as a lumber expert knows them, but the seemingly trivial and minute indications that another might have read, carried for him no meaning.

However, he put his dependence in Bud Sellers whose knowledge of such lore amounted to wizardry, and at one point Bud halted abruptly gazing down with absorption from his saddle.

"Right hyar," he said shortly, "Alexander stopped an' hed speech with two horsemen. Ther

looks of hit don't pleasure me none nuther."

"Why?" inquired Brent, and the mountaineer drew his brow into an apprehensive furrow. "Fer a spell back, I've been watchin' these signs with forebodin's. Alexander wasn't ridin' at no stiddy gait. She'd walk her mule, then gallop him—then she'd pull down an' halt. These other two riders did jest what she did—kain't ye read ther story writ out in ther marks of them mule-irons on ther mud?"

Brent shook his head in bewilderment.

"Well, hit's all too damn plain an' hit would 'pear ter signify that Alexander sought ter shake off two fellers thet didn't low ter be shook off. Right hyar they all stopped, an' parleyed some."

"Why?"

"Because three mules stood hyar fer a leetle spell—ye kin see whar they stomped, an' movin' mules don't stomp twice or thrice over ther same spot. Then two of 'em went on gallopin'—and one went on walkin'. Yes this is whar she got rid of 'em, but I misdoubts ef they lost sight of her."

A little further Bud showed Brent where the two mules had turned aside to the right and, a mile further on, where Alexander had also abandoned the main road and gone to the left.

"She held ter ther highway a mile further then she 'lowed ter," growled Sellers. "Thar's jest one reasonable cause fer thet. She knowed she war bein' spied on, an' she aimed ter shake 'em off. I wonder *did* she shake 'em off."

When they had almost reached the Gap itself and were proceeding warily they came to a narrow ford at whose edge Bud drew rein.

"Let's pause an' study this hyar proposition out afore we rides on any further," he suggested.

It was a particularly wild and desolate spot where the road bent so sharply that they had turned a corner and come upon the crossing of the water without a previous view. They had been riding toward what had seemed a sheer wall of bluff, and that abrupt angle had brought them to a point where the road dipped sharply down and lost itself in the rapidly running waters of a narrow creek. On the opposite shore the road came out again with a right-angle turn to thread its course along a shelf of higher ground as a narrow cornice might run along a wall. Below was a drop to the creek; above the perpendicular uplift of the precipice.

"This hyar's ther commencement of Wolf-Pen Gap," Bud Sellers enlightened his companion. "This is just erbout whar they aimed ter lay-way her at. I shouldn't marvel none ef some of 'em's watchin' us from them thickets up on thet bluff right now."

"Then let's hurry across," Brent nervously suggested. "Once we get over the stream the cliff itself will shield us. They can't shoot straight down."

"Oh, I reckon they don't hardly aim ter harm us," reassured Bud. "An' anyhow we've got ter tutor this matter jest right. Thet creek's norrer but hit's deep beyond fordin'. We needs must swim our mules acros't."

Brent shuddered at the sight of the chill water but Bud went on inexorably. "Now, ye've got ter start as fur up es ye handily kin—because ther current's swift—an' if hit carries yer beyond thet small bend ye comes out in quicksand. Jest foller me. I'll go fust."

Brent had faced a number of adventures of late, but for this newest one he had little stomach. Nevertheless, he gritted his teeth and prepared to go ahead and follow his companion's lead, since need left no alternative.

As Bud's mule thrust its fore-feet into the creek's edge the creature balked and the young man kicked him viciously. Brent was waiting with bated breath when abruptly from overhead came the clean, sharp bark of a rifle. Brent's hat went spinning from his head and he felt the light sting of a grazing wound along his scalp. It seemed to be in the same instant that he heard Bud's revolver barking its retort towards the point from which the flash had gleamed. There followed a second report and the zip of a bullet burying itself in wood, and then he heard Bud yelling, "Go on!"

Realizing that once across the narrow stream he would be under shelter, he kicked and belabored his mule to the take-off. There was a downward plunge, a floundering in the icy water, and then an unsteady sensation as the beast struck out to swim. The current had taken its effect so that mule and rider were being carried down channel faster than they were gaining across, but Brent instinctively turned his head to see what had become of his guide.

He saw an unbelievable thing. The mountaineer upon whose coolness and courage he had absolutely relied had not ventured the crossing at all! He had wheeled after firing and kicked his mount into wild flight, making for the protection of the turn about which they had come. Twice before he gained safety the rifle above spat out venomously, but missed the fleeing target.

Such a confusion seized upon Brent that he never knew how he got across that creek. Ahead

had lain quicksand, above a rifle in the laurel and in his own entrails an overpowering nausea of betrayed confidence. His comrade had deserted him—had run away!

Somehow, his own mount had won across and was plodding up to solid roadway once more and there safe, for the moment at least, he halted and looked back.

Hoping against hope, Brent waited for five minutes with a clammy sweat on his forehead, but there was still no sign of a returning Bud Sellers. Then Brent unwillingly admitted that it was a pure and unmitigated case of desertion under fire.

"My God," he groaned. "He quit me cold—quit like a dog! He simply cut and ran!"

With a sickened heart he rode on. His head ached from the near touch of the assassin's bullet. He was not even watching for a second ambushade, and fortunately for him, there was none. But with dulled observation he passed by a place where, close to the road, a shaft ran back into an abandoned coal mine and he followed his dejected course without suspecting that at that moment Alexander was being held a prisoner in the cavern to which that shaft gave access.

CHAPTER XI

The men who had come into town for the purpose of co-operating with Jerry O'Keefe and with Halloway had of course drifted in singly and with no seeming of cohesion. It was vital that they should avoid any manifest community of purpose, yet they were armed, ready and alert, awaiting only a signal to gather out of scattered elements into a close-knit force with heavy striking-power.

As they waited through the day for the call which did not come they began to feel the dispirited gloom of men keyed to action and kept interminably waiting—but none of them dropped away.

It was close to sundown when Brent himself arrived, and since he failed to encounter Jerry O'Keefe on the streets he did not pause to search for him, but went direct to the telegraph office. It had not been disclosed to O'Keefe how close to the heart of the conspiracy was the operator and the young man with the Irish eyes had not been stirred to any deep suspicion in that quarter.

Brent himself had not considered it a reasonable assumption that to such a powerful fellow as Halloway harm could come in so public a place. Yet Halloway had meant to make that office his headquarters and now Brent made it his first destination.

Through the open door and the smeared window spilled out a yellow and sickly light.

Inside sat two men, but a glance told Brent that neither of them worked the key. The pair were gaunt and sinister of aspect and they were not town folk but creek-dwellers. One was evil-visaged to a point of gargoyle hideousness. The other was little better, and he raised a face to inspect the man in the door which some malignant sculptor might have modeled in pure spite, pinching it viciously here and there into sharp angles of grotesqueness. Yet in the eyes Brent recognized keenness and determination.

The newcomer casually inquired for the station agent and one of the fellows stared at him morosely, making no reply. The other however, supplied the curt information: "He's done gone out ter git him a snack ter eat."

"I'm looking for a man named Halloway," said Brent. "A big upstandin' fellow. Maybe you men know him?"

To the mountaineers who walk softly and speak low by custom it seemed that the city man spoke with a volume and resonance quite needless in such narrow confines.

"I knows him when I sees him," admitted the man who had answered the first question. The other remained dumb.

"Has he been about here to-day?"

"No."

"I'll wait till the operator gets back," announced Brent with a nonchalance difficult to maintain.

He did not take a seat but stood, studiously appraising the place while he seemed to see little. After the depression attendant upon Bud's desertion had followed an almost electric keenness; every gesture was guarded and every nerve set now against any self-betrayal, for he felt himself fencing in the dark with wily adversaries.

He sauntered idly over near the door to the baggage-room and beyond its panels he could hear the scurry of rats at play among loose piles of boxes and litter.

"Sounds like the rats are having a party in there," he suggested as though laudibly resolved upon making conversation in a taciturn circle.

"Mebby they be." Still only one of the countrymen had spoken a syllable.

"I'd like to put a good rat-dog in there and watch him work," laughed Brent, turning again to face the door as though he found fascination in the thought. Then idly he laid his hand on the knob as though to try its opening, but he went no further. Just at the side of the lintel hung a broken and extremely dirty mirror and a quick glance into its revealing surface told him a full story. He saw the man with the pinched features reach swiftly back of him and slide a rifle away from its concealed place against the wall. He saw the other's hand go flash-like under his coat and under his left arm-pit. He caught in both faces a sudden and black malignity which told him, beyond question, that they would not play but would kill.

Of course too he knew why and he made a point of standing there with every evidence of having seen nothing or suspected nothing.

After that first glance he also carefully avoided the mirror which might work revelation to them as well as to himself. Eventually he turned, not directly toward them but toward the other end of the room and carelessly walked its length that he might give emphasis to his unhurried seeming before he came slowly about.

When he did so the two men sat as before. The rifle had already disappeared. The hand that had swept holster-ward had swept out again. Both faces were blankly unconcerned.

Brent dropped into a chair near the door and listened as the clatter inside increased. The rats scrambled about with a multiplicity of light gnawing sounds and the clicking of some trifles unstably balanced. Then slowly the clicking ceased to be random.

It differed from the other little noises only to the practiced ears of Brent himself. That was not because his ears were keener than the other pairs, but because to others there was no comprehensible connection between a faint tapping and the sequence of raps that spells words in the Morse code.

It was strange that from rats at play should issue the coherent sense of consecutive telegraphy.

Brent had been on the *qui-vive*, steadied against any self-betrayal, yet now he struggled against the impulse to tremble with excitement. His fingers gripping the chair arms threatened to betray him by their tautness and he could feel cold perspiration dripping down his body.

He crossed his legs and slouched more indolently into his chair in the attitude of a bored and vacant-minded man—but as he sat his brain was focussed on the clicking.

"Am tied ... up ... here," spelled out the dots and dashes from the baggage-room. "If you understand, scrape chair on floor." Brent shifted his seat noisily.

"She ... is ... caught...." There was a pause there.

"In God's name, how is he doing it?" Brent questioned himself, while inside, bound to his chair, with cuffed wrists, Halloway went on sending—rapping with a pipe stem between parted rows of strong teeth.

"She is held ... in mine-shaft ... back of Gap...."

The pressure of concentrating on that faint, but infinitely important sound, and the need of maintaining a semblance of weary dullness was trying Brent's soul. He thanked Heaven for the taciturnity of his companions.

"Get there ... with all men possible ... as for me—"

Brent came suddenly and noisily to his feet for just then the operator appeared in the doorway and it would not do for these sounds to continue after his coming.

"Well, here comes the man I've been waiting for," he announced loudly, and once more the clatter in the baggage-room became the random of rats at play. "I wanted to ask you if you had any message for William Brent, from a man named Halloway," he inquired, still speaking as if against the wind, and, receiving a brief negative, he turned toward the outer door.

An exit under such circumstances is always difficult. To curb the urge of haste, to remain casual under lynx-like eyes, these are not untrying tasks. Any slip now and he might be in the same durance as Halloway himself—and when he breathed the outer air it was with a deep-drawn sigh of relief for delivery out of peril.

When he had established connection with O'Keefe and had given him the main facts,

withholding, however, his sources of information, he said: "We must get Halloway free before we start."

"Like hell we must!" exploded Jerry. "So long es he lays thar they'll figger they've done fooled us an' beat us. Ef we take him out, thar'll be men in ther la'rel all the way we've got ter go, pickin' us off in ther dark."

"You're right," assented Brent, "but he's been there all day, I guess."

"Wa'al then a leetle more hain't goin' ter hurt him none."

Fifteen minutes later, leaving separately but timed to come to a rendezvous near the point of attack a good dozen men were on the trail to the Gap.

Through wet and chilly thickets O'Keefe led Brent at a gait that made his heart pound. There was a battle-joy in the mountaineer's eyes and in them too, was something else inspired by certain dreams of the girl he had seen only once and whom he had told himself he meant to marry.

Over broken gulches, along precipitous paths he led the way buoyantly and now and then he broke into low almost inaudible crooning of an ancient love song.

Vainly the crew of highwaymen in the mine awaited the arrival of the seeming rescuer who was to take their captive off their hands and relieve them of the necessity of murder. It had been understood that Jase was to employ only a few attackers in the accomplishment of this knightly deed. Few men could be spared from other duties, and the smaller the force which he led to victory the more lustrous would be his glory of achievement. There was to be a great deal of shooting and shouting through the narrow entrance to the place—and the exaggerating echoes of the rocky confines would multiply it into a convincing din of battle.

The alleged Ku-Klux clansmen would fight their way out, leaving their prisoner behind—and in the confusion—but not until then—the saddle-bags would disappear.

It was all very simple, and prettily adjusted, but the difficulty was that Jase had failed to arrive and the act was lagging without its climax.

He failed because of unforeseen events. Pending the cue for his entrance he and his fellow heroes were being employed as sentries guarding the approaches to the place against invasion by outsiders.

Jase himself had for several hours been lying as flat as a lizard under a matted clump of laurel on the edge of a cliff, overlooking a ford which could not be rapidly crossed. His function was to see to it that no one passed there whose coming might prove an embarrassment.

The rawness of the air caused his bones to ache and his muscles to cramp, but he had been steadfast. He was playing for high stakes. Finally two horsemen had appeared—and they were two who must not pass. One of them was Brent and the other was Bud Sellers.

So Jase had opened fire and Bud had returned it—returned it and fled.

That left the sentinel with a result half successful and half disastrous, and made it necessary for him to make a hurried short-cut to another point past which Brent must shortly ride. There he would finish the matter of disputing the road.

Mallows drew himself out of his cramped ambush and started for his new point, to the completion of his business—but before he had taken many steps a sudden and violent distress assailed him. He pressed his hand to his side with a feeling of vague surprise and it came away blood-covered. He stopped and took account of his condition—and found himself shot in the chest. In the excitement of the moment he had not felt the sting, but now he was becoming rapidly and alarmingly weak. He stumbled on, but several times he fell, and each time it was with a greater burden of effort that he regained his feet. He clamped his teeth and pressed doggedly forward, but the ranges began to swim in giddy circles and a thickening fog clouded his eyes. When he dropped down next time he did not rise again.

As night fell in the mine the temper of the men there became increasingly ugly. Some had recourse to the flasks that they carried in their pockets, and as their blood warmed into an alcoholic glow, their eyes, through the slits in their masks, began dwelling on Alexander's beauty of figure and face with a menacing and predatory greed.

Alexander McGivins was in the most actual and imminent of conceivable perils.

The girl's hands were no longer bound. When the commander of the group had realized that her imprisonment was not to terminate so shortly as had been planned he had been magnanimous to the extent of freeing her wrists, but he had granted her no further extension of freedom.

The girl had given them no satisfaction of weakening nerve, but in her heart she kept hidden a qualm as the time lengthened and a number of the men went on drinking their fiery moonshine.

The pack was growing restive, openly restive now, and after yet another council among the more important bandits, the leader came over and made an announcement.

"Ther Clan aims now ter discuss yore case amongst themselves. We air goin' ter leave four men hyar ter keep watch over ye whilst we're away—an' them four has orders ter kill ye if ye seeks ter escape."

He raised his hand above his head, and wheeling, marched out through the shaft's opening, while behind him, trailing in single file and dead silence, trooped all the henchmen save the four left on guard. Alexander noted with a certain degree of satisfaction that the saddle-bags were not removed by those who departed.

The blazing pine torches went out with the small procession, leaving the cavern gloomily shadowed. The only light came now from two lanterns—and the girl sickened with the realization that at least one of her jailers was drunk.

As soon as the withdrawal of the chieftain brought a laxening of discipline, he lurched over toward her and, crossing the trickle of running water, bent forward, staring brazenly into her face.

Only his eyes were visible, but they were bestial and lecherous. After a little he thrust out a hand and stroked the white shoulder which the torn clothing had left bare. Instantly, in a transport of white-hot fury, the girl sprang sidewise and sought to drag the mask from his face. But sodden as he was, the fellow still held to his instincts of self protection. He twisted and seized her in a violent grip, pinioning her arms at her sides.

In Alexander's lithe body dwelt a strength quite equal to a fair fight and had it been a fair fight she would probably have made short work of him. Now caught unexpectedly into helplessness she still writhed and twisted, fighting with savage knee-blows until she had freed her right hand and then she struck out with no feminine uncertainty. The fellow reeled back, and Alexander followed him up with lightning speed.

She had become a fury animated by a single purpose. She meant to unmask her assailant and register his face for a future reprisal of death. The man, recognizing that at all costs he must defeat that recognition, was compelled to throw both elbows across his face and to bear without further retaliation the blows she rained upon him—all blows that were soundly effective.

The thing happened quickly and for an instant the other three stood looking on in astonishment—even, at first, with amusement. But as the fellow backed across the tiny brook he tripped and he fell sprawling and his out-thrown hand carried down and extinguished one of the lanterns from its precarious niche on a small shelf of rock.

Alexander, making most of her brief moment, leaped across the body that had gone down and recovered from its place on top of the saddle-bags the pistol that had been taken from her at the time of her capture.

The three who had so far remained non-combatants could maintain that role no longer.

"Drop thet gun," yelled one as their own weapons leaped out. But Alexander had thrown herself to the ground and at the same instant she fired a single shot—not at any one of her jailers, but at the sole remaining lantern, which was only ten feet distant.

Then as the place went black she came to her feet and plunged through the darkness to the opposite wall where she had marked a pulpit-like rock that would give her temporary shelter.

She guessed rightly that now for a while at least since she was known to be armed, there would be a hesitation in the relighting of lanterns or even in the striking of matches. That caution, in a situation which had abruptly undergone a change of complexion, went farther. There was even no sound of voices or of movement.

Alexander herself was groping warily for the rock, setting down each foot with extreme and noiseless caution. At last she gained the protection which she sought and waited. She wished she might have regained her rifle but that had not been lying within reach when she made her hurricane entrance into action.

There were remaining to her five cartridges in the revolver, and somewhere there in the inky blackness about her were four men, presumably ammunitioned without stint. Also their confederates would shortly return, bearing flambeaux—and then her little moment of advantage would end. Even if every cartridge at her command went fatally home, the supply was inadequate to cope with such numbers.

The silence hung with a suspense that was well nigh unendurable and when the filthy wings

of a bat brushed her cheek again she had to bite the blood out of her lips to stifle an outcry.

As black and seemingly as lifeless as the coal which men had sought there was the cavern where she crouched. Alexander wondered why the sound of her pistol, which must have thundered in ragged echoes through the shaft, had not brought back the others. Now she was trapped and there was no conceivable possibility of escape. At the touch of unclean fingers she had seen red and struck out—and the rest had followed as an avalanche follows a slipping stone.

At last when the breathless stillness could no longer be borne, she cautiously stooped and raked her hand back and forth until it came in contact with a loose stone. She must force those silent antagonists to some sort of action so she tossed the missile outward and as it struck with a light clatter, a waiting pistol barked and Alexander's own roared back at the tiny spurt of flame.

Instantly, too, three others spoke, aimed at her flash and she heard the spatter of lead against stone nearby. In the confined space the fusillade bellowed blatantly, and slowly diminishing echoes lingered after the firing itself ceased. Then once more the silence which was more trying than gunnery settled.

Slowly an idea dawned in the girl's mind, and strengthened into conviction. If the main group who had trailed out with torches had been anywhere nearby, that crescendo of noise must have recalled them in hot haste. That they had not come back must indicate that they had never meant to return. They had permanently departed, leaving her in the hands of a quartette selected as a robbing party, and an execution squad. With that realization the matter resolved itself into a new phase. She would eventually be murdered here in this rat-hole unless she could, one by one, shoot to death the four unseen men who were her companions there. Four enemies stood between herself and freedom—and four cartridges were left in her weapon.

At last she crept cautiously out and made her tedious way to the center of the place again. She must do something and the audacious plan born of necessity involved the need of a light. If her hand felt flesh instead, her pistol was ready.

But after much noiseless groping she came upon the overturned lantern and she had encountered nothing else.

Back in the lee of the rock she boldly struck a match, kindled the wick—and still as she reached up and set the thing on the boulder's top the unbroken silence held.

She had hoped to draw their fire and account for some of them at least, but now as she peeped cautiously out she found to her astonishment that except for herself the cavern was empty.

She also became sure of another thing. Her saddle-bags were gone.

She came out then and having repossessed herself of her rifle took up a position well to one side of the shaft's opening where anyone who entered must pass her muzzle, but she did not venture into the passage itself because she was sure that that way lay an ambushade.

Then, beside the sickly illumination within, she recognized a new waver of kerosene rays from beyond the entrance.

There was no sound, except that of very stealthy feet, and the light came slowly.

Alexander hastened back to her rock, holding close to the walls of the cavern as she went, then ensconcing herself there, almost invisible in the shadow, she waited with parted lips and a cocked rifle.

CHAPTER XII

Time had hung heavy on Jack Halloway's hands after he had heard Brent announce his departure. The chair scraped on the floor, had been his only assurance that the other had understood him and that might, within possibility, have been a coincidence. Still Brent's promptness in cutting him off on the arrival of the operator had seemed a hopeful sign indicating team-work.

Halloway had declared himself a man who took joy in the savage strain which that civilization had failed to quench out of his nature. Now that strain was mounting into volcano stirrings presaging an eruption. If he could free himself there would ensue a tempest of wreckage about that railroad station such as Samson brought down between the pillars of the temple—but no chances had been taken in his binding.

He did not relish the thought of being left there over night, yet he strongly doubted whether

they would venture to take him out on the streets in the sight of possible friends.

He fell to wondering what they would do with him. Except in extremity, they would hardly murder him out of hand, and yet to explain to him why they had treated him so hardly, would be a delicate matter. But the answer lay in the operator's total freedom from suspicion that his captive had read the wire. So far as that backwoods Machiavelli divined, there was no link establishing himself with the conspiracy to rob, and when the time came he thought he could clear his skirts by a simple means.

Night had fallen when at last the prisoner heard the door open and saw the Agent enter, accompanied by the two gunmen who had been his companions that morning. They came with a lantern and the telegraph man held a heavy rasp in his hand. Halting before the bound figure, he spoke slowly and with a somewhat shamefaced note of apology.

"I reckon I've got ter pray yore forgiveness, Stranger," he began. "A right mean sort of mistake 'pears ter hev took place—but hit war one I couldn't help without I defied ther law."

"How's thet?" demanded Holloway shortly, and his informant went on.

"When thet message come from ther town marshal at Coal City, he warned us 'Violent man—take no chances.' Thet's why we fell on ye so severe an' tied ye up so tight."

"Wa'al," Holloway was schooling his demeanor warily into the middle course between a too ready forgiveness and a too bellicose resentment, "wa'al what air ye cravin' my pardon fer, then?"

"We've done heered ergin from Coal City—an' ther town marshal says thet hit war all a fool mistake—thar hain't no sufficient grounds ter hold ye on. He bids me set ye free forthwith."

"Go on, then, and do hit. I've done hed a belly-full of settin' here strapped ter this cheer."

But the operator hesitated.

"Afore I turns ye loose, I'd like ter feel plum sartin thet ye hain't holdin' no grudge."

Holloway knew that, should he seem easily placated, he would not be believed, so he spoke with a voice of stern yet just determination.

"So holp me God, I aims ter demand full payment fer this hyar day—but I aims ter punish ther right man. Ye says ye only acted on orders from an officer, don't ye?"

"Thet's true es text."

"All right then, ye hain't ther man I'm atter, ef that's so. Mistakes will happen. As ter ther other feller, I kin bide my time fer a spell. I reckon my wrath won't cool none."

The Station Agent heaved a sigh of relief. "Hit's a right unfortunate thing," he declared sympathetically. "I've been studyin' erbout hit an' I said ter myself, 'what ef some enemy of his'n sent both them messages?'"

This seemingly innocent suggestion was by way of discounting the future when Holloway learned that the town marshal knew nothing of the matter.

The operator bent and unfastened the binders about the ankles and waist. That left only the handcuffs, and when he came to them once more a note of apologetic anxiety crept into his voice.

"Ther key ter them things is lost," he deprecated. "Ther best I kin do fer ye air ter file ther chain. Ye kin stick yore hands in yore pockets, though, an' nobody won't see 'em."

"Thet's good enough fer ther present time," assented Holloway. "Ef ye'll loan me thet file, I'll git 'em off myself—later on."

So while the giant stood with outstretched hands, the other filed through a link at the middle of the chain, and together the four men left the baggage room and went into the outer office. Its door was closed but Holloway, who walked ahead, laid a hand on the knob and paused to inquire, without rancor, "I reckon ye aims ter give me back my gun, don't ye?"

The operator promptly produced the weapon from the drawer of his table and Holloway made no examination to see whether it came back to him full-chambered or empty.

He had his own guess on that score, but he wished to appear unsuspecting just now, so he thrust the thing into its holster.

Then deliberately he turned the key in the door and that was, for a time, his last deliberate act. Seizing the fellow who stood nearest him, he swung him forward and held him as a partial shield before his own body.

"Thar's three of ye hyar," he announced in an abruptly ominous voice, "and one of me. Ef any man makes a move ter draw a gun, I aims straightway ter break this feller's neck. Don't let no

man move from where he stands at!"

Astonishment enforced a momentary obedience, save that the man upon whose shoulders the gigantic hands lay—not as yet heavily—attempted to squirm away. Iron-like fingers bit into his flesh and, wincing with a smothered yell of pain, he stood trembling. Halloway passed one hand over his hostage's shoulder and drew the pistol from its holster—then he sent the fellow spinning from him like a top, and covered the others, who huddled close together. "Yore guns—grip-fust—an' speedily," he directed, in that still voice that carried terror, and brought immediate obedience.

"Ye promised us—thet ye wouldn't hold us accountable," whined the operator, and Halloway laughed, as he unloaded the captured pistols and tossed them into a corner.

"What I promised war not ter visit no revengeance on ther wrong fellers," he corrected. "Never mind how I knows hit—but I does know thet no message ever come from ther Coal City town marshal. Ther one that did come told about a plot ter lay-way an' rob a woman—an' ther three of ye war in on hit."

The terror of the unaccountable and wholly mystifying situation held them now in its paralysis. In no conceivable way could he have learned these things—yet he knew them and fears crowded as they wondered what else he might know as well.

But Halloway allowed them little leisure for abstract reflection.

"I've done throwed away them guns. I reckon ye knows whether mine's loaded or not—I don't. Now ther four of us air going ter hev a leetle frolic, right hyar an' now—a leetle four-cornered fight—jest fist an' skull fashion."

He walked across and locked the baggage-room door, though it was shuttered from the outside, and dropped the key within his pocket.

"Come on boys, let's start right in," he invited. "Fer yore own sakes hit's kinderly a pity ye couldn't git these irons offen me ... they're right apt ter scar somebody up."

They knew that to get out they must fight their way out—and after all there were three of them. Flinging a heavy chair above his head, the quickest-witted of the trio hurled himself forward to the attack.

From Halloway's eyes shot bolts of Berserker battle-lust, and from under the down-sweep of the clubbed missile he glided as a trout slips away from a startling shadow. Before that assailant had recovered his equilibrium, Halloway had seized him up as a grown man might seize a small child and hurled him headlong at the operator, so that the two went down in a tangle of writhing bodies.

The third had not been idle and as Halloway straightened and wheeled, he met the cyclonic lunge of a snarling adversary with a lifted and wickedly gleaming dirk.

As the knife flashed down, the dodging Goliath felt its sting in his left shoulder—but only with a glancing blow which had been aimed at his throat. Blood was let but no great hurt done save that it roused him to a demoniac fury. The embrace in which the wielder of the blade was folded was like the snapping of a bear-trap and, not slowly but almost instantly, its victim dropped his weapon and hung gasping with broken ribs and stifled lungs.

Halloway cast him aside and wheeled again with lowered head, for two men were at him afresh with whatever things of weight came to their hands. Neither dared pause and desperation had endowed them with a strength as unwonted and exaggerated as that which his frenzy brings to a maniac.

The fallen figure lay quiet enough, but the remaining three swept in tempestuous chaos about the place. The table was wrecked—the furniture shattered—all were bleeding and panting in sob-like brokenness of breath.

Two bore the brand-like marks of handcuffs; the other a great welt across the forehead, left there by the large file, but at the end one figure straightened up—his task ended—and behind him lay three that would not soon be ready to fight again. Then, unlocking the door, Halloway let himself out into the night.

He paused on the platform and drew a long breath and after that, plunging his hands deep into his pockets, he strolled along whistling. But when he had come to the edge of the town and the road toward Wolf-Pen Gap, he broke into a run.

Alexander had stood waiting for a while at the edge of the rock, wondering who these men might be who were approaching with such an extremity of caution. Once more she was called on to endure the heart-chill of suspense, but when finally two figures slipped through the shaft-mouth with cocked rifles thrust out before them that tautness of nerve eased into relaxation. One

of them—palpably nervous—was Will Brent. The other, with eyes a gleam and an eagerness keyed for battle, was Jerry O'Keefe.

Yet as both took in the narrow and seemingly deserted area between the coal-seamed walls, their faces became heavy with disappointment. Other men followed them until eight or ten had crowded into the cavern, and very dejectedly Brent said, "We're too late. They've been here and gone."

Alexander, peering silently over the top of her rock, missed the face of Bud Sellers, the one man she had wholly trusted. She told herself that to suspect Brent or O'Keefe was ungenerous, yet out of her recent vicissitudes an exaggerated instinct of caution had been born, and she waited to judge the complexion of affairs before she revealed herself.

Jerry's engaging face grew vengefully dark as he turned toward Brent and spoke apprehensively.

"Ther place stinks with burnt gun-powder! Does ye reckon she showed fight—and they hurt her? Afore God, men, ef thet's true, I aims ter do some killin' my own self—I hain't niver seed her but oncet—but I aims ter wed with thet gal!"

Then with a laugh that pealed through the place and brought them all around startled, Alexander emerged from her concealment.

"I almost feels sorry thet they didn't finish me—ef thet's ther fate thet's in store fer me," she announced.

Her eyes squarely met those of Jerry O'Keefe, and he reddened furiously, but at once Brent began asking and answering questions and in that diversion of attention the young mountaineer found escape from his discomfiture. The rescue party had encountered none of the men who had so recently vacated the mine. Outside the woods were "masterly wild and la'relly" and poroused with cavernous crags. The conspirators had evidently scattered and melted from sight as bees melt into a honeycomb.

But Alexander's face grew again serious and pained as she gave her most important information. "You men come a leetle too late. I driv 'em off—but them thet went last tuck my saddle-bags away with 'em."

Brent's only response to that was a brief gesture of despair. So after all the plotting, the counterplotting, the dangers and hardships; after all her own gallant efforts, the girl had lost the game.

He looked at her as she stood there repressing under a stoical blankness of expression, emotions which he thought must sum up to a worm-wood bitterness of spirit.

"We're wasting time here," he announced after a brief and painful pause. "They can't have gone far—we must comb these woods."

But Alexander shrugged her shoulders.

"Thar hain't no possible way of runnin' 'em down ternight," she said. "They've scattered like a hover of pa'tridges thet's been shot at, an' whichever one's got them saddle-bags is in safe hidin' afore now. I've got one more plan yit, but hit's fer termorrer. Let's go back thar an' sot thet Halloway feller free."

But halfway back they met a gigantic figure whose wrists jangled with the clink of steel chains as he swung his long arms. He was calm—even cheerful—of mood, now that he had appeased his wrath, nor did he seem concerned as to what might be the fate of the trio he had left behind him.

The skies had cleared and a moon had risen. No longer refusing the attendance of her bodyguard, Alexander insisted upon pushing on through Viper to her kinsman's house at Perry Center. It was as well that her foes should imagine her forces in full flight.

Though they had all spent arduous days and nights they made the last stage of the trip at an excellent rate of speed. After Wolf-Pen Gap and its vicinity had been left behind, the unspeakable wildness of the country gave way abruptly, as it so often does in Appalachia, to higher grounds where for a little way the roads run through almost parklike stretches, now silver and cobalt under a high moon.

Jerry O'Keefe had friends at Perry Center whose doors would open to him and his companions even at this inhospitable hour between midnight and dawn, and when they left Alexander at her threshold, she paused for a moment and turned with the moonlight on her face.

"Boys," she said softly, "I'm beholden ter every one of ye! Even ef we fails 'atter all, hit hain't because we didn't try hard and we hain't done yit."

Two of the men to whom she spoke were gazing at her with rapt eyes. O'Keefe was riding on that moonlit night at the gallop of bold dreams, and in his mind were visions of wedding and infare. Halloway's thoughts would perhaps have suffered by comparison, but in desire and the wild dream they were no less strong, and later when he and Brent lay on the same palet, in the cock-loft of a log house, he heaved a deep sigh and gave rein to his fancy.

"I'm going away from here," he announced, "and God knows I shall miss her as a man misses the brilliance of tropic seas and the luster of tropic skies."

"I thought you boasted that you meant to stay," commented Brent drowsily, but Halloway went on and soon he was talking to an unhearing and unconscious bed-fellow.

"I did—but I'm not a sheer fool. I told you that I had gauged my entrance with a nicety of judgment for dramatic values. I shall regulate my exit with the same sense. She likes to think herself a man, which means that she hasn't waked up yet, but some day she will."

He paused and his own voice became heavy with coming sleep. "She's had adventures that she won't forget—if I go away—her imagination will be at work. Later when Spring comes and the sap rises—and the birds—the birds—" There the voice trailed off into the incoherence of slumber.

Jase Mallows was sleeping, too, at that hour, and it was only by a lucky chance that it wasn't his final sleep. The terrain over which the group of highwaymen had been operating had centered about the mine shaft just back of the Wolf-Pen Gap. The distances between all the points involved had been short of radius save as prolonged by the broken formation of mountain and chasm, of precipice and gorge. There were caves and thickets and the Gap itself was what local parlance termed a "master shut-in."

When the chief body of alleged Ku-Klux operators had trailed out of the mine shaft, they had removed their masks and scattered into the raggedness. They could, if need exacted, have remained there for days, safe from discovery, each in his separate hiding place. One unfamiliar with this country of eyrie and lair, wonders at the stories of men hiding out successfully, but one who knows it marvels only that any man who has taken to the wilds is ever captured.

One of the last contingent to leave had stumbled on an inert and prostrate body in the dark as he crossed a ridge not far away. Cautiously he had investigated and had recognized Jase, who was unconscious and had lost much blood. His confederate paused for a time in a quandary as to what disposition to make of him. When to-morrow's news leaked out, wounded men would be suspected men, and those who accompanied them might share in that suspicion.

Yet to desert a comrade in that fashion was abhorrent even to the slack conscience of this desperado. So he grudgingly hefted the burden of the senseless figure and plodded under its weight to the nearest cabin.

There he told a story of how he had stumbled on his grewsome find in the open high-road—which was a lie—and his mystification of manner was so great as to constitute for himself a practical alibi.

Early the next morning, Brent, Halloway and O'Keefe went to consult with Alexander as to the next step. None of them meant to give up after going this far and the men fretted for immediate action, but Alexander to their mystification shook her head. "Not yit," she ruled. "I'm waitin' hyar now fer tidin's thet may help us."

While they stood in the yard of the log house, a figure appeared plodding slowly along the roadway, and the girl's eyes were bent on it with a fixed anxiety. It came with such a weary lagging, with such a painful shuffling of feet and such an exhausted hanging of head that Brent at first failed to recognize Bud Sellers. The left arm hung with that limpness which denotes a broken bone.

"Good God," exclaimed the timber buyer under his breath, "I should hardly think he'd have the nerve to show himself here!"

But Bud looked only at the girl. He was on foot now but over his shoulders hung his saddlebags. He halted and threw them at Alexander's feet.

"My mule got shot out from under me," he informed her quite simply, "an' I busted an arm—hit war a right slavish trip. Open them bags."

Alexander obeyed—and drew out a parcel bound in brown paper, bearing the bright red spots of the bank's sealing wax.

"I reckon, men," she said quietly, "we won't hev ter sot out afresh."

Brent, Halloway and O'Keefe gazed stupidly each on each. Incredulous amazement and perplexity tied their tongues. Finally Halloway found his voice to stammer, "What's done

happened? How did Sellers git hit."

Then only Alexander threw back her head and let her laughter peel out.

"He's done hed hit all ther time," she announced. "You fellers hes done been staunch friends ter me—and I've got ter crave yore forgiveness ef I hain't trusted ye full free from then start." She paused and added solicitously, "But ye sees, ye forewarned me erginst them real robbers—an' Jase Mallows forewarned me erginst *you*. I 'lowed he war lyin'—but I couldn't take no chances. Thar war jest one feller I knowed I could trust without question, an' thet feller was Bud. So he tuck ther money an' thet bundle I rid away from bank with was jest make believe. I aimed ter lead 'em over a false trail."

"Outwitted ther pack of us," bellowed Halloway gleefully. "Afore God, I takes my hat off ter ye—but why didn't ye suffer some man ter tote ther dummy bundle?"

"Ef airy man had undertook hit," she responded gravely, "they'd most likely hev kilt him first—an' s'arched him 'atterwards."

Bud had dropped down on a step of the stile that led from the road to the yard. His heavy lidded eyes were full of weariness and pain. His limp arm sagged but he said slowly:

"Thet's why I run away, Mr. Brent. I had to. Two of us couldn't cross thar without goin' slow—and I couldn't let them saddle-bags git lost."

"So ye couldn't be quite sure who you could trust," repeated Halloway. "I hopes ye knows now."

But Brent, watching the light in the great fellow's eyes did not miss their hungry gleam and in a low voice he said, "Jack, *I'm* not sure yet."

CHAPTER XIII

The conspiracy fathered by Lute Brown and Jase Mallows had its inception in a small coterie whose ambitions had been stirred to avarice by the bait of sharing among them a sum of over four thousand dollars. Ramifications of detail had necessitated the use of a larger force; a force so large, indeed, that anything like an equal distribution of booty would have intolerably eaten into the profits of the principals. Therefore the rank and file of employes were merely mercenaries, working for a flat wage.

But in such an enterprise the danger of mutiny always looms large and the bludgeon of blackmail lies ready to the hand of the mutineer. Therefore the actual handling of the money had been a matter of extreme care to Lute and those in his closest confidence. When the leader had taken most of his men out of the mine he had led away those of whom he had felt least sure—and had left the saddle-bags to the custody of the supposedly reliable minority. His estimate had been seventy-five per cent accurate. One only of the four was untrustworthy.

Lute himself had designated the custodian of the treasure and had fixed a rendezvous at a long abandoned and decaying cabin in a remote and thicketed locality. Shortly before dawn Lute arrived there, unaccompanied and expecting to find his man awaiting him. But complications had developed. When the quartette that left the mine last held a hurried conference outside, the squad leader explained that the very essence of precaution now lay in their separating and seeking individual cover.

Two of them concurred but the fellow who had attacked Alexander had become insurgent through drink, chagrin and cupidity.

"Boys," he darkly suggested, "we warn't hired ter go thro no sich rough times es we've done encountered. I reckon these fellers owes us right smart more then what they agreed ter pay fust oft—moreover what sartainty hev we got thet we're goin' ter get anything a-tall?"

They argued with him but his obduracy stood unaffected.

"Thet small sheer thet I agreed ter tek hain't ergoin' ter satisfy me now," he truculently protested. "I aims ter go along with ther money hitself and git paid off without no sort of dalliance. I aims ter get my own price, too."

Finally, since they could not overlook the menace of disaffection, the leader agreed to take this man with him to Lute Brown for adjustment of the dispute, and the two set off together, while the other two left them at a fork of the trail. On the way to the cabin, the disgruntled one drank more moonshine liquor than was good for him and when they arrived there the place was seemingly empty, for Lute, watching with hawk-like vigilance, had made out that instead of one

man two were approaching and he had slipped out through a back door into the void of the darkness. A lantern without a chimney burned in the deserted room and cabin and that was safe enough in a place so screened, but it showed the two newcomers that there was no one waiting there. To the inflamed and suspicious brother this seemed an indication of broken faith. Perhaps after all he had been lured here to be paid off with treachery and murder!

"So ye lied ter me!" he bellowed in passion. "Hit war jest like I thought. Now I aims ter tek hit all myself!" And snatching out a knife he hurled himself on his comrade of an hour ago.

That one dropped the saddle-bags and fumbled for his pistol, but before it cleared the holster they had grappled and were stumbling about the room. Lute, watching from without, considered this the moment for intervention and he appeared in the door with drawn revolver shouting out for an end to the struggle.

Unfortunately it was only his loyal adherent who heeded his voice, and the other, freed from the grip that had so far held him in chancery stabbed twice before the object of his attack collapsed. Then only, Lute fired. Before that moment he must have fired through his loyal man to reach his traitor. The hesitation was fatal, for the shot missed its target and in a moment more, Lute, too fell under the knife.

The traitorous survivor stood for a moment, panting heavily, then, still unsteady of step from his homicidal exertions, picked up the saddle-bags, ransacked them with frenzied haste and plunged out of the door with the package that bore the spots of red sealing wax.

At any time the others might come to investigate and they would find a scene of double murder.

He did not stop to open the package. That could await a more opportune moment. Just now the vital thing was flight.

When, at the end of much panic-stricken haste and the spurring of terror he judged it safe to strike a match, he ripped open the bundle, over which so many men and one woman had fought—and in it discovered only tightly packed newspapers and a few small pieces of broken brick—added to give it the plausibility of weight.

Halloway in accordance with his plan of leaving the stage before his presence lost dramatic effect, did not offer to go all the way back to Shoulder-blade Creek with Alexander. He accompanied her only to a point where there was no longer danger, and then said farewell to her, leaving her still under the escort of Brent, Bud Sellers and O'Keefe.

"I reckon," he announced abruptly when they stood on the crest of a steep hill, "I'll turn back hyar. I don't dwell over yore way an' thar hain't no use fer me ter fare further. I'll bid ye farewell—an' mebbly some day all us fellers'll meet up again."

Alexander was surprised, and a sharp little pang of disappointment shot through her breast. She did not analyze the emotion, but, just then and with no reason that emerged out of the subconscious, she remembered the instant when she had hung to the sycamore branch and he had swept her in and pressed her close. She only nodded her head and spoke gravely. "I reckon we'll all miss ye when ye're gone, but thet hain't no reason fer takin' ye no further offen yore course."

Then for the first time Halloway said anything that might have been construed as a compliment to the girl and he disarmed it of too great significance with a quizzical smile.

"I reckon, Alexander, thar hain't nothin' better then a good man—an' ye've done proved yoreself one—but afore God thar's a mighty outstandin' woman wasted when ye does hit."

Alexander flushed. Perhaps the germ of the awakening that Halloway had predicted was already stirring into unrecognized life, but she was ashamed of the blush and in order to cover it made a retort which was not by any stretch of the imagination a compliment.

"Thar's gals aplenty, Jack"—the people of the hills fall very naturally into the use of the first name—"A feller like you mout find hisself one ef he tried hard enough—an' I'll give ye some mighty good counsel, because atter all I was *borned* female an' I knows thet much erbout 'em."

"Wa'al?" Halloway smiled inquiringly, and the girl went on.

"Ye won't nuver make no headway with none of 'em whilst ye goes round lookin' es bristly an' es dirty es a razor-back hog thet's done been wallowin' in ther mire. Ef ye ever got clean once hit mout be right diff'rent."

The big fellow roared with laughter as he turned to Brent.

"Kin ye beat thet now, Mr. Brent? Kin ye figger me in a b'iled shirt, with a citified shave an' perfume on me a-settin' out sparkin'."

None of the rest knew why Brent laughed so hard. He was trying to picture the expression that would have come to Alexander's face had she seen Jack Halloway as he himself had seen him, groomed to perfection, with pretty heads turning in the theater foyer and at restaurant tables, to gaze at his clean chiseled features and god-like physique.

Bud had little to say and after the parting the girl traveled in a greater silence than before. Both were thinking of the time, now drawing near, when they should reach the house of Aaron McGivins and learn whether or not it was a house of death. Both too were thinking of the man who had turned back, but their thoughts there were widely different.

Then they came to the road that ran by the big house, and before they had reached it Joe McGivins, who sighted them from afar came to meet them. When Alexander saw her brother she found suddenly that she could not walk. She halted and stood there with her knees weak under her and her cheeks pallid. The moment of hearing the life-and-death verdict was at hand and the sorely-tried strength that had carried her so far forsook her.

But Joe, however weak, was considerate and when still at a distance he saw her raise a hand weakly in a gesture of questioning and insufferable suspense and he shouted out his news: "He's gittin' well."

Then the girl groped blindly out with her hands and but for Jerry O'Keefe who caught her elbow, she would have fallen. The taut nerves had loosened to that unspeakable relief—but for the moment it was collapse.

Brent had left the mountains a week after Alexander's safe return, but within two months he had occasion to return and he rode over to the mouth of Shoulder-blade. He had been told that Aaron McGivins, though he had made a swift and complete recovery from his wound, had after all only been reprieved. He had recently taken to his bed with a heart attack—locally they called it "smotherin' spells," and no hope was held out for his recovery.

As Brent rode on from the railroad toward the house he gained later tidings. The old man was dead.

He dismounted at the stile to find ministering neighbors gathered there and, as never before, the unrelieved and almost biblical antiquity of this life impressed itself on his realization. Here was no undertaker, treading softly with skilled and considerately silent helpers. No mourning wreath hung on the door. The rasping whine of the saw and clatter of the hammer were in no wise muted as men who lived nearby fashioned from undressed boards the box which was to be old Aaron's casket. Noisy sympathy ran in a high tide where doubtless the bereaved sought only privacy.

Alexander's face, as she met Brent at the door, was pale with the waxen softness of a magnolia petal and though the vividness of her lips and eyes were emphasized by contrast, suffering seemed to have endowed her remarkable beauty with a sort of nobility—an exquisite delicacy that was a paradox for one so tall and strong.

The appeal of her wistfully sad eyes struck at his heart as she greeted him in a still voice.

"I heard—and I wanted to come over," he said and her reply was simple. "I'm obleeged ter ye. I wants ye ter look at him. He war a godly man an' a right noble one. Somehow his face——" she spoke slowly and with an effort, "looks like he'd done already talked with God—an' war at rest."

At once she led him into the room where, upon the four-poster bed lay the sheeted figure, and with a deeply reverent hand, lifted the covering.

To Brent it seemed that he was looking into features exemplifying all the wholesome virtues of those men who built the Republic. It was a face of rugged strength and unassuming simplicity. Its lines bespoke perils faced without fear and privations endured without complaint. Here in a pocket of wilderness which the nation had forgotten survived many others of those unaltered pioneers. But in the expression that death had made fixed, as well as in facial pattern, Brent recognized that simple kindness to which courtesy had been a matter of instinct and not of ceremony and the rude nobility of the man to whom others had brought their tangled disputes, in all confidence, for adjustment.

"I understand what you mean," he declared as his eyes traveled from the father to the daughter, "and I'm glad you let me see him."

Moving unobtrusively about, engaged in many small matters of consideration, Brent recognized Bud Sellers and Jerry O'Keefe. He himself remained until the burial had taken place, and was one of those who lowered the coffin into the grave. But when those rites had been concluded and another day had come Brent sought for Alexander to make his adieus.

She was nowhere about the house and he went in search of her. He could not bear to remain longer where he must endure the pain of her stricken face. Of all the women he had ever known she stood forth as the most unique—and in some ways the most impressive. She was undoubtedly the most beautiful. He realized now that, though they were of different and irreconcilable planes of life, there had never been a moment since he had first seen her when he would not, save for

his dragging on the steady curb of reason, have fallen into a headlong infatuation. Now he wished only to prove himself a serviceable friend.

When he had vainly sought her about the farm, it occurred to him to go to the ragged "buryin' ground" and though he found her there he did not obtrude upon her solitary vigil.

For Alexander was abandoning herself to one of those wild and nerve-wracking tempests of weeping that come occasionally in a lifetime to those who weep little. She had thrown herself face-down on the ground beneath which Aaron McGivins slept, with arms outflung as though seeking to reach into the grave and embrace him. As she had been both son and daughter to him, he had been, to her, both father and mother. Spasmodically her hands clenched and unclenched, and her fingers dug wildly into the earth.

Brent turned away and left her there and it was a full two hours later before he met her and led her, passive enough now, to a place from which they overlooked that river that, not long ago, they had ridden together. Under his gently diplomatic prompting she found relief in unbosoming herself.

"He war all I hed——" she rebelliously declared. "An' whilst he lived thet war enough—but now I hain't got nothin' left."

After a little she broke out again. "I hain't a woman—an' hain't a man. I hain't nuthin'."

"Alexander," said Brent gently, "when I looked at your father's face in there, I was thinking of what Parson Acup once told me. He said that if your father had been a wishful man,—he used the hill phrase for ambition quite unconsciously, "he could have gone to the Legislature. Perhaps to Congress."

"I reckon he mout ef hed any honors he craved," she replied. "Folks was always pesterin' him ter run fer office."

The man looked off across the valley which was so desolate now and which would soon be so tenderly green; so tuneful with leaf and blossom.

His eyes were seeing a vision and some of it he tried to voice.

"Suppose, Alexander, he *had* gone. Suppose he had taken his seat in Congress, instead of staying here. He would have become a figure trusted there, too—but how different your life would have been. There would have been schools and—well, many things that you have never known."

"I hain't hankerin' fer none of them things," she said. Then with a sudden paroxysm of sobs that shook her afresh, she added, "All I wants is ter hev him back ergin!"

But Brent was thinking of things that could mean little to her because she lacked the background of contrast and comparison. He was seeing that beauty and that personality in the social life of official Washington; seeing the triumph that would have been hers—and wondering what it would have meant to her in the balance of contentment or unhappiness.

Of course had Aaron McGivins begun his political career young enough, every trace of mountain illiteracy would long ago have been shed away by the growing girl. As for her blood, there is in all America no other so purely Anglo-Saxon.

"I rather think it's a pity he didn't go," Brent mused aloud. Then he added, "Now that he's—not with you any more—Alexander, there is something you must let me say. You've never thought about it much, but you have such a beauty as would make you famous in any city of the world. Men will come—and they won't be turned back."

For the first time since Aaron's death the old militant fire leaped into her eyes and her chin came up as she flared into vehemence.

"Like hell they won't be turned back!"

But Brent smiled. "You think that now, but Alexander, nature is nature and there must be something in your life. You've played at being a man and done it better than many men—but men can marry women, and you can't. Along that road lies a heart-breaking loneliness. Sometime you'll see that, since you can't be a man, you'll want to be a man's mate."

She shook her head with unconvinced obduracy.

"I knows ye aims ter give me kindly counsel, Mr. Brent, but ye're plum wastin' yore breath."

The man rose. "After all, I only came to say good-bye," he told her. "You aren't going to keep men from loving you. I know because I've tried to keep myself from doing it—and I've failed. But this is really my message. If you do change your ideas, for God's sake choose your man carefully—and if you ever reach a point where you need counsel, send for me."

Along Fifth Avenue from Washington Arch to the Plaza, Spring was in the air. Trees were putting out that first green which, in its tenderness of beauty, is all hope and confidence. With the tide of humanity drifted Will Brent, whom business had brought from Kentucky to New York, but his thoughts were back there in the hills where the almost illiterate Diana, who knew nothing of life's nuances of refinement and who yet had all of life's allurements, was facing her new loneliness.

He reached a bookstore and turned in, idly looking through volumes of verse, while he killed the hour before his appointment. His hand fell upon a small volume bearing the name of G. K. Chesterton, and opening it at random he read those lines descriptive of the illuminated breviary from which Alfred the Great, as a boy, learned his spiritual primer at his mother's knee:

"It was wrought in the monk's slow manner of silver
and sanguine shell,
And its pictures were little and terrible keyholes of
Heaven and Hell."

Brent closed the covers with a snap. "That's what my memories of it all come to," he mused, "—little and terrible keyholes of Heaven and Hell."

But that evening he went to dine with Jack Halloway at his club which looked out across the Avenue and the Park. He had written to Halloway in advance of his coming and by wire had received an invitation couched in terms of urgency not to be denied.

This was not Appalachia but Manhattan yet, when Halloway met him, Brent could but smile at life's contrasts. The huge fellow rose from his chair to greet him, as splendid a physical thing as human eyes could look upon. There was no stubble now on the face that seemed cast in smooth bronze. In lieu of that calculatedly slovenly disguise which he had affected in the hinterland, he was immaculate in the fineness of his linen and the tailoring of his evening clothes. But as he held out his hand, he drawled, "Wa'al, stranger, how fares matters back thar on Shoulderblade?"

Brent sketched briefly the occurrences that had taken place there; the death of Old Aaron and the fact that Jerry O'Keefe had been trying to sell his farm near Coal City in order, he surmised, that he might take up his abode nearer the McGivins' place.

Talk ran idly for a time, then Halloway rose and stood towering in the Fifth Avenue window. Across Park and Plaza the sky was still rosy with the last of the afterglow. Under the loftily broken roof-lines of the great hotel multitudinous window panes were gleaming. Over it all was the warm breath of spring.

The big man's hands, idly clasped behind his back, began to twitch and finally settled into a hard grip. His shoulders heaved and when he spoke there was a queer note in his voice.

"See the rhododendron over there in the park? Soon now it will be in flower—not only *that* rhododendron but—" He ended it abruptly, and then broke out, low-voiced but tense. "This atmosphere is stifling me—God! It's horrible—"

"Send your path be straight before you,
When the old spring fret comes o'er you,
And the Red Gods call to you."

Into Brent's tone came something almost savage.

"I know what you're thinking. Quit it. It won't do!"

Slowly Halloway turned. For a moment his fine face was drawn with actual suffering. Then he added:

"You're quite right, Will, it won't do. But it's hard to forget—when one has seen a comet. Touch that button if you don't mind. It's time for the cocktails."

CHAPTER XIV

Have you seen Spring come to the mountains? Have you felt the subtle power on the human heart, of trance-drugged impulses awakening in plant, in animal, in humanity; in the deep hard arteries of the ancient hills themselves? Winter there is grim and bleak beyond the telling. In far separated cabins, held in the quarantine of mired roads, men and women have lived, from hand

to mouth, sinking into a dour and melancholy apathy.

But when Spring comes, the gray and chocolate humps of raggedness are softly veiled again with tender verdure and a song runs with the caress of the breeze. It is a song relayed on the throats of birds. The color of new flower and leaf and of skies washed clean of brooding finds an echo in man and womankind. When the dogwood blossom, everywhere, breaks into white foam upon the soft billows of woodland green, and the sap stirs—then the old and crabbed bitterness of life stands aside for the coming of Love.

If one be young and free, one feels, admittedly or subconsciously, the deep tides that sing to sentiment and the undertows that pull to passion.

About the lonely house of Alexander McGivins the woods were burgeoning and tuneful. Stark contours of landscape had become lovely and Alexander, preparing for the activities of "drappin' and kiverin'" in the steep corn-fields, felt the surge of vague influences in her bosom.

Joe McGivins had carried a stricken face since Old Aaron's death. He looked to his sister, as he had looked to his father, for direction and guidance and though he worked it was as a hired man might have worked, patiently rather than keenly and without initiative.

But keeping busy failed to comfort the empty ache in Alexander's heart because in the grave over yonder lay all that had filled her world, and though she would have fought the man who suggested it, there were times when her lovely lips fell into lines of irony, and when she half-consciously felt that her playing at being a man had been a bitter and empty jest. She had only forfeited her woman's rights in life, and had failed to gain the compensation of man's.

Once or twice when on the high road, she passed youthful couples, love-engrossed, she went on with a wistfulness in her eyes. For such as these, life held something, but for her, she was sure in her obduracy of inexperience, there was no objective.

If the truth be told, the "spring-tide" was welling in the channels of her being, as well as in the rivulets of the hills, and the changes that had come to her were near to bearing fruit.

That space of little more than a week, when she had left her home—a home which had also been a world with its own laws and environment—had brought her into contact with other views. Her father's death had left the house no longer the same. Two independent souls, with strong views, may succeed in fashioning their own world, and she and her father had been two such.

One left unsupported may fail, and now she was alone—for Joe hardly counted.

Ever since she had been old enough to think at all, she had been inordinately proud of "being a man," and profoundly contemptuous of the women about her whose colorless lives spelled thralldom and hard servitude.

That long fostered and passionately held creed would die hard. She would fight herself and whomsoever else challenged its acceptance—but insidious doubts were assailing her.

So to all outward seeming Alexander McGivins was more the "he-woman" than ever before, but in her inner heart the leaven of change was at its yeasty work.

"I've got ter be a man," she told Joe, who mildly objected, even while he leaned on her strength. "Now thet paw's gone, I hev greater need then ever ter stand squ'ar on my own two feet."

The youth nodded. "I reckon ye're right," he acknowledged, "but folks talks a heap. I'm always figgerin' thet I'm goin' ter hev ter lick somebody erbout ye. I wouldn't suffer nobody ter speak ill of ye when I war present."

Alexander looked steadily at the boy. "I'm obleeged ter ye, but I'll do my own fightin', Joe," she told him calmly. "I'll even make shift ter do some o' your'n, an' yit—" She paused a moment and he inquired, "Wa'al, what's on yore mind, Alexander?"

"An' yit," she went on more slowly and thoughtfully, "I'd be mighty nigh willin' ter prove ther cause of ye gittin' in one or two good fights—ef hit couldn't be brought ter pass no other way."

"Paw always counseled peace, ef a feller warn't pushed too fur," he alleged in defense of his pacific attitude.

"So does I. But Joe, hit's jest on yore own account thet I'd like ter see ye show more sperit. Folks talks erbout *you* too. I know what blood ye've got, commandin' blood—an' ef ye got roused up onc't hit'd mek a more upstandin' man of ye. I knows hit's a lie, but I've heered ye called ther disablest feller on Shoulder-blade!"

A touch of contempt stole into her voice as she added, "An' yore paw's only son!"

He went away somewhat sulkily, but she had ignited in him a spark of needed torture. Bred of a fighting line, the acid of self-scorn began eating into his pride, and when a few days later he halted at a wayside smithy, which was really only a "blind-tiger," and came upon a drinking

crowd, the ferment of his thoughts developed into action.

Sol Breck was sitting with his back turned as the boy strolled in and it chanced that he was talking about Alexander. The girl herself with her square sense of justice, would have recognized his comments as crude jesting and would have passed them by unresented.

But Joe had been bitterly accusing himself of timidity and he needed sustenance for his waning faith in his own temerity. It was characteristic of him that he should pick an easy beginning, as a timid swimmer seeks proficiency in shallow water. Sol Breck had the unenviable reputation of one who never declined battle—and never emerged from one crowned with victory. Joe hurled at him the challenge of the fighting epithet and after a brief but animated combat had him down and defeated. Then he returned home with a swelling breast, and just enough marks of conflict upon his own person to bear out his report of counsel heeded and resolution put to the touch.

Alexander listened without interruption to the end, for Joe had told her all but the name of his adversary and the exact words that had precipitated battle.

But when the narrative came to its conclusion she inquired quietly, "What did he say erbout me?"

"Oh, hit wasn't so much what he said es ther way he said hit," was Joe's somewhat shame-faced reply. "Ef hit hed been erbout any other gal, I reckon I mout of looked over it."

"What was it?" The demand was insistent.

"He jest 'lowed that if 'stid of warin' pants an' straddlin' hosses, ye'd pick ye out an upstandin' man an' wed him, thar mout come ter be some *real* men in ther fam'ly."

The girl's face crimsoned.

"I thought ye said hit war me ye fought erbout, Joe."

"I did say so, Alexander."

"An' ye didn't see no aspersion that called fer a fight—in ther way them words teched *you*?"

That phase of the matter had not occurred to Joe at all. He was used to being overlooked.

"He warn't thinkin' erbout me," he lamely exculpated. "I reckon he hed hit in head thet I hain't quite twenty-one yit."

For a while Alexander stood looking at him with a slowly gathering tempest of anger in her eyes, under which the boy fidgeted, and finally she spoke in that ominously still manner that marked moments of dang'er.

"What he said erbout me war true enough—an' ef ye admits what he all but said erbout you—thet ye hain't no man—then *thet's* true too."

The boy was crestfallen and a little impatient now. He had come to recount an achievement which had plumed and reappareled a limping self-respect and he had expected congratulation.

"What's ther use of faultin' me by mincin' words? I licked him, didn't I? Set hit down ter anything ye likes."

Her voice still held that cold note of inflexible but quiet anger. "Yes, ye licked him but hit looks like ter me ye picked yore man plum keerful an' got ye an easy one. Wait hyar, I'm goin' atter my hat."

"What fer?"

"Were a'goin' over thar tergether—an' ye're goin' ter crave his pardon."

"I wouldn't crave his pardon," burst out the boy violently, "ter save his soul from torment. I'd be a laughing stock ef I did."

"Ye're agoin' ter do one of two things, Joe," she announced with finality. "Ye're either agoin' ter ask his pardon, whilst I stands by an' hears ye do hit or else ye're a'goin' ter tell him thet ye licked him over ther wrong words—an' thet seein' ye blundered, ye're willin' ter lick him afresh over ther right ones—him or anybody he names ter fight in his place."

Joe hung his head for a moment, then the pricking of the old self-scorn came with a turning tide.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

It was an unmannerly, but a very astonished crew upon which they came but at the sight of Alexander herself they all became sheepish and discomfited of aspect.

"Sol," began the girl tersely, "Joe tells me thet him an' you hed a fight jest now over somethin' ye said erbout he. I kin do my own fightin', but Joe hes something ter tell ye on his own account."

So introduced, Joe spoke and this time it was the swimmer striking boldly into deep water.

"Alexander 'lows I didn't hev need ter fight over loose talk erbout her. But when airy feller says thar hain't no man in my household, so long's I'm thar, I hev got ample cause ter fight. Ye've got ter tek thet back right now. Ef so be ye hain't rested up yit, an' ye've got any friend hyar thet ye'd like ter hev take yore place, I'm ready fer him."

But Sol had had enough, for the present. Alexander's presence made him, somehow, feel foolish, as if his thrashing were less of an embarrassment than its cause.

"I war jest a-funnin,'" he protested. "I'm willin' ter take back anything thet's done give offense."

One day shortly after that, when Joe came unexpectedly into the house he surprised Alexander attired as he had never before seen her—in the skirts of her own sex.

"Fer ther Lord's sake," exclaimed the boy. "Thet's ther fust time I ever seed ye in petticoats. Looks like ye must hev on a half score of 'em."

"Like es not hit's ther last time ye'll ever see hit, too," retorted Alexander hotly while her cheeks flamed. "Some day I mout hev ter go down below ter some big town on business. A woman's got ter w'ar these fool things thar, an' I was practising so's I could larn ter walk with 'em flappin' round my legs."

Yet she walked, for all the alleged difficulty, with an untrameled and regal ease. With a sweep of hauteur she left the grinning boy and when she returned a few minutes later she was breeched and booted as usual.

Sometimes, in these days, she went to a crest from which the view reached off for leagues over the valley and beyond that over ridge upon ridge of hilltops. There she thought of many things and was very lonely. She could not have worded it but, deep in her heart, she felt the outcry of the Spring voice: "Make me anything but neuter when the sap begins to stir."

But how could this be any love-impulse in Alexander? Love, she had always heard, must fix itself upon some one endearing object and lay its glamor over definite features.

The most magnificent figure of a man she had ever seen often reared itself in her thought-pictures with its six feet six of straight limbed strength, its eagle-like keenness of eye, and its self-confident bearing.

"Ef I could really be a man," she told herself, "I'd love ter be a man like ther Halloway feller—ef only he wasn't so plum dirty and raggedy."

One day on her way back from the fields she saw a tall figure loafing near the front door of her house and, at that distance, she thought that it was Halloway. It stood so tall and straight that it must be, but that was because the setting sun was in her eyes and the man showed only in silhouette. So seen Jerry O'Keefe—for it proved to be Jerry—suffered little by comparison with any man she knew—except Halloway.

But Alexander did not greet him with any great warmth. She was angry with herself because her heart had started suddenly to pounding at the instant when she had imagined this man to be the other. She was angry, too, with Jerry for disappointing her.

So she nodded coolly and demanded, "What's yore business hyarabout?"

In Jerry the rising joyousness of rebirth was full confessed. He was here because since he had seen her last he had carried no other picture in his thoughts, and now that the world was in bloom he wanted to see her against a befitting background. To that end he had sold his small farm and rented a plot and cabin near-by and if there was to be no welcome for him here he had merely sold himself out of a home.

But the gray-blue eyes were whimsical, and the mobile lips smiling. He was unrebuffed as he made a counter-query.

"Kain't a feller kinderly come broguein' in hyar, without some special business brings him?"

Alexander felt that she had been unneighborly, but in her memory the things that Brent had said to her had become a sort of troublesome refrain. "Men will come and they won't be turned back." She remembered, too, her own hot retort, "Like hell they won't!" It was in the spirit of that retort that she answered.

"Ef ye hain't got no business hyar, ye hain't got no business hyar, an' thet's all thar air ter hit."

"Mebby ye're ther business yoreself, Alexander," he suggested and there was a persuasive

quality in his voice.

"I'm my own business, nobody else's."

In this mood that had troubled her of late, Alexander was very combative. She was not willing to surrender her code—not willing yet to be treated as a woman.

"I heers tell thet ye've moved over hyar, bag an' baggage—an' ef I kin help ye out any way, I'll seek ter convenience ye outen a sperit of neighborness." She spoke in that extra-deliberate fashion that went before a storm, and as she stood there with her head high, and her eyes undeviatingly meeting his, she had the beauty of a war-goddess. "But when ye hain't got no matter of need, don't come."

Jerry had no intention of being lightly repulsed. His purpose of courtship had become his governing law but he had learned much of this Amazonian woman and had set himself, not to an easy conquest, but to a hard campaign. The man who, merely to be near one woman, sells a river bottom farm that he had nursed into something like prosperity and who takes on rocky acres in its stead, has shown, by his works, the determination of his spirit.

Now, the humorous eyes riffled with a quiet amusement.

"I didn't say thet I come without business, Alexander. Mebby I hain't stated hit yit."

"Then ye'd better state hit. Ye don't seem ter be in no tormentin' haste."

O'Keefe thought that "tormentin' haste" in his position would be fatal and yet the streak of whimsey that ran through him brought a paradoxical answer.

"My hearth's cold over thar. I come ter borry fire."

He was watching her as he spoke, and now that he no longer stood under the disadvantage of comparison with Jack Halloway he was no mean figure of a man. One could not miss the fine, if slender, power of his long and shapely lines from broad shoulder to tapering waist. His hair curled crisply and incorrigibly and he bore himself with a lazy sort of grace, agile for all its indolence. Alexander could not be quite sure whether the eyes were insolent or humble. When he had stated his mission of "borrowing fire" he had used a quaint phrase, eloquent of a quainter custom. It had to do with that isolated life in a land where until recently matches were rare and when the hearth fire died one had to go to the neighbor's house and hasten back with a flaming fagot for its relighting.

"Ye don't seem ter hev ther drive of a man borryin' fire. Why didn't ye ask Joe. I heers him in thar."

"Hit's *goin' home* not *comin'* thet a man's got ter hasten with his fire," he reminded her. "I didn't ask Joe because—he hain't got ther kind of fire my heart needs, Alexander."

So her suspicion was true! He had been speaking, not literally, but in the allegory of a suitor and her gathering wrath burst.

"Then I hain't got hit fer ye nuther. Let yore h'arth stay cold, an' be damned ter ye—an' now begone right speedily!"

With pure effrontery the young man laughed. Into his voice he put a pretense of appeal, as he calmly stuffed his pipe with tobacco crumbs. "Alexander ye wouldn't deny a man such a plum needcessity es fire, would ye?" he questioned, though even as he said it he drew from his pocket a box of matches and struck one.

So he had made deliberate and calculated sport of her! Her anger saw in his presence itself only the insult of the first attack from those men who "would not be turned back," and once more the rage in her came to its boiling-point.

She wheeled and went into the house and when she came out her face was pale to the lips and her brows drawn in a resolute pucker, while in her hands she carried a cocked rifle.

"Down yonder lays my fence-line," she autocratically told the man who had continued standing where she had left him, and whose seeming was still unflurried. "I've got a license ter say who crosses hit. Ye've done sought ter make sport of me, an' now I commands ye ter cross ther fence an' begone from hyar." She paused a moment because her breath was coming fast with passion. "I warns ye nuver ter put foot on this farm ergin—I aims ter see thet ye don't—an' when ye starts away don't tarry ter look back, nuther."

Slowly Jerry O'Keefe nodded. One ordered from another's house must obey, but the twinkle had not altogether faded from his eyes and there was nothing precipitate in his movements, albeit the rifle was at ready and the girl's deep breast was heaving with unfeigned fury.

"All right," he acceded, "I'm goin' now but es fer not lookin' back, I wouldn't like ter mek no brash promises. You're hyar an' hit mout prove right hard ter keep my eyes turned t'other way. I'm an easy-goin' sort of feller anyhow, an' I likes ter let my glance kind of rove hyar an' thar."

Her hands trembled on the gun and her voice shook into huskiness. "Begone," she warned. "I kain't hold down my temper much longer."

"An' es fer comin' back," Jerry continued blandly, "some day you're ergoin' ter *invite* me back. Anyhow, I reckon I'd come, because thar's somethin' hyar thet'll kinderly pulls me hither stronger then guns kin skeer me off."

The girl sat there on her doorstep with her rifle across her knees and halfway to the fence-line Jerry paused and looked back. The rifle came up—and dropped back again as Alexander belatedly pretended that she had not seen him. At the stile O'Keefe paused to turn his head again. He even waved his hat, and this time she looked through him as through a pane of glass.

But when she had been sitting broodingly for a long while, the cloud slowly dissipated from her face. In her eyes a twinkle of merriment battled with the fire of righteous indignation, and at last she even laughed with a low pealing note like a silver bell.

"He's an impudent, no-count devil," she said, "but he's got right unfalterin' nerve, an' thar's a mighty pleasin' twinkle in his eyes."

Not long after that Alexander made a journey to a nearby town, but since it was one near the railroad she went in woman's attire, paying a new deference to public opinion which she had heretofore scorned. She was busily occupied there all day and her mission was one of mystery.

CHAPTER XV

The earliest manifestations of spring had ripened into a warmer fullness. Everywhere the rhododendron was bloom-loaded, and the large-petaled flower of the "cucumber tree" spread its waxen whiteness. Hill-sides were pink with the wild-rose and underfoot violets and the dandelions made a bright mosaic.

Again Alexander was approaching her door with her face set toward the sunset and again she saw before her own house the figure of a man who loomed tall, and who for a brief space remained a featureless silhouette against the colored sky.

She hastened her step a little, resolved that this time she would teach Jerry, in an unforgettable fashion, that her edicts of banishment were final and that they could not be lightly disobeyed—but this time it was not Jerry.

Indeed she had realized that almost immediately and her heart had missed its beat. The man was Holloway himself and he was looking in another direction just then, so he did not see the fleet, yet instantly repressed eagerness that flashed into and out of her eyes. It was a self-collected young woman, with a distinctly casual manner who crossed the stile and confronted her visitor.

As he turned and saw her, he started impulsively forward, but recovered himself and also adopted the matter-of-fact demeanor, which she had, herself, assumed.

"Howdy, Jack," said the girl carelessly. "I didn't know ye war hyarabouts. I'd jest erbout forgot ye altogether."

"I reckon thet would be a right easy thing ter do," he handsomely admitted, then each having indulged in the thrust and parry of an introductory lie, they stood there in the sunset, eying each other in silence.

But Alexander recognized a transformation in the man's appearance, and if she seemed tepid of interest, the semblance belied her throbbing pulses. Holloway was too accomplished an actor to have abandoned his pose or makeup. He must remain in character and dress the part, but he had used a consummate skill in doing so. In every detail of clothing he remained the mountaineer, yet there was no longer any trace of the slovenly or unclean.

He was close shaven and trim of hair. His flannel shirt, still open on his throat, was of good quality. The trousers that were thrust into high laced boots were not so new as to attract undue attention, but they fitted him. The note of carelessness was maintained—but with artistry to accentuate the extraordinary effect of physique and feature. He was eye-filling and rather splendid.

Alexander felt that some recognition of this metamorphosis was expected of her, but she had no intent of admitting the true force of its impression.

"Hit's a right smart wonder I knowed ye a-tall, ye've done spruced up so," was the dubious compliment with which she favored him after a deliberate scrutiny. "I hain't nuver seed ye with

yore face washed afore."

"I 'lowed I'd seek ter make a killin' with ye," he bantered easily, and she sniffed her simulated disdain. They had moved together up the steps of the porch, and he stood there looking at her, quelling the up-rush of admiration and avid hunger in his eyes. Then she said curtly, for in these days she was always on the defensive, and meant to be doubly so with him whom she secretly feared, "Ye're in ther house now. Ef ye wants ter mek a killin' with me, tek off yore hat. Don't folks hev no manners whar ye comes from?"

Halloway shook his head, not forgetful that one playing a part must remain in character.

"I don't tek off my hat ter no man," he replied, stressing the final word ever so lightly.

"I'm a man when I wants ter be, an' when I wants manners I aims ter hev 'em," she declared, but her visitor stood, still covered, in her presence, and after a moment she said curtly—yet rather breathlessly, "Wait hyar," and turning, disappeared into the house.

Floods begin slowly with trickles, but they break suddenly with torrents. A flood had seized Alexander at that moment. Perhaps she did not herself pause to recognize or analyze her motive. She merely acted on an impulse that had come with an on-sweep of conscious and subconscious tides. It was a motive that had to do with her activities that day when she had gone to the nearby town.

Halloway remained there, frankly puzzled. Unless she was like himself acting, her interest in his arrival was pallid and lukewarm. He had counted much on appearing suddenly before her at his best—and the impression seemed to have been negligible.

Where had she gone? He asked himself that question several times during the considerable interval of his waiting. The sunset was coming to its final splendor behind mountains that were ash of violet. Through the blossom-laden air stole a seductive intoxication that mounted to his head. The voices of the Red Gods had mastered him, and he had come.

Then he saw a vision in the doorway, and his senses reeled.

Alexander stood there as he had never seen her before. She was in a woman's dress, very simple of line and unadorned. But her beauty was such as could support and glorify simplicity. Indeed it required simplicity as a foil for its own delicate gorgeousness. The lithe slenderness of her figure was enhanced by the transformation. Her long hair hung in heavy braids that gave an almost childlike girlishness to her appearance. Alexander, he thought, was wholly delectable.

But as he stared at Alexander she flung him look for look and commanded:

"Now, tek off your hat."

He tossed the thing away from him, and hesitated for a moment gazing at her while his eyes kindled, then with an inarticulate sound in his throat and no other word, he sprang forward and caught her to him, in arms that would not be denied.

Alexander made no struggle. It would have been futile to match even her fine strength against the herculean power of those arms—and suddenly the girl felt faint.

For that unwarned and tumultuous conduct on the part of the man she had been totally unprepared and it was as though the wave of amazement which swept over her had left her gasping; bereft of both nerve-force and breath. But other waves were sweeping her too, so that she of the ready and invincible spirit for the moment rested inert in Halloway's arms as her brain reeled. In one way she was dazed into semiconsciousness. In another way, she was so staringly wide awake as she had never before been in life. She had thought of this man with feelings that she had neither named to herself nor analyzed, but the unadmitted sex call of the strong man to the strong woman had sounded like a bugle note through her nature. Now while the beginnings of an indescribable fury stirred within her, she none the less thrilled to his embrace with a flooding of her heart under which she almost swooned. While she felt his kisses on her temples, her cheeks and her lips, she had no power of speech or protest.

To Jack Halloway, it seemed that this non-resistance was unconditional surrender and through him in a current of fluid fire, ran the fierce ecstasy of victory.

But after a little Alexander straightened up and the pliant softness of her body stiffened in his arms. She pushed against his shoulders with steady hands. They were not struggling hands but firm and definite of meaning, and Halloway released her. He released her readily as a man may who can afford to be deferential in his moment of victory.

But when she was quite free, she stood unsteadily for a moment and then stepped back and leaned against the wall of the house. Her hands pressed against the weather-boarding with outspread fingers. Out of a white face she looked straight before her with eyes preternaturally wide and full of dazed wonderment.

At first there was no resentment, no denunciation. The girl only leaned there with parted lips

and heaving bosom and that fixed gaze which, for all its rigid tensility, seemed groping.

It was not as the individual that she now thought of Jack Halloway but of the terrifying and unexplained force that he had awakened in herself; the force of things that she never until now realized.

Halloway did not speak. He bent a little toward her, looking at her as his own breath came fast. At first he did not even marvel at the stunned, groping blankness of the unmoving features.

He had known that when she awoke it would be with the shock of latent fires set loose. Now it was a time to go very gently with her, until she found her footing in fuller comprehension again.

Then the girl said so faintly that he could hardly hear her:

"That's ther fust time thet...." She broke off there.

"I know it, Alexander. I couldn't stay away. I had to come!"

He took a step forward with outstretched arms but she lifted a pleading hand.

"Don't," she said. "I've got ter think ... go away now."

And triumphantly confident of what would come out of her meditation, he turned and picked up his hat and left her standing there. He might have talked to her of passionate love, he told himself, to the end of time and it would have meant nothing. Instead he had brought her face to face with it—and now there was no need of talk.

Jack Halloway had meant it when he admitted to Brent in New York that it would not do to give rein to his thoughts of Alexander. They were all lawless thoughts of a love not to be trammelled by the obligations of marriage.

If he hated the civilized world at times, there were other times when he could not live without it, and into its conventionalized pattern, Alexander could never fit. She was not civilized enough or educated enough to take her place there at his side, nor was she pagan enough to come to him without terms or conditions. So he had resolved to stay away, and put her out of his mind and in that determination he failed. Now he had flung away all heed. He had held her in his arms and consequences could care for themselves!

But when he had left the porch and Alexander had begun to grope her way out of the vortex of confusion, that small figment of wrath that she had known she should feel and yet had so far failed to feel, began to grow until it engulfed and merged into itself every other element of her reflections.

She had been scornful when Brent questioned her ability or her permanent wish to repulse suitors, and yet after only two had come, she no longer knew her own mind. But she told herself with a solemn indignation, she at least wanted to make her own terms. She had no intent of being swept off her feet by the masterful whim of a man who had never pleaded. Yet that was the thing that had just occurred.

Slowly the stunned eyes in the waxen white face became less wonder-wide and began to smoulder with outraged realization. She rose with the fixed determination that before the sun set, she would kill Halloway or compel him to kill her. One of them must die. But her own ideas of fairness challenged that edict. If she had the right to assume such a ground, she should have taken it without any instant of faltering. She should never have acknowledged an impulse of thrill while she was close-held in his arms. She had let him think that she had not resented it, and she was as much to blame as he.

So when Halloway came back the next morning with the glow of eagerness in his face, he found a very quiet girl waiting to receive him, and when he would have taken her in his arms she once more put out that warning hand, but this time with a different expression of lip and eye.

"Stop," she said. "Me an' you hev got ter talk together."

"Thet suits me," he assured her. "Thar hain't nothin' else I'd ruther do—save ter hold ye in my arms."

"I reckon ye knows I've done took oath thet no man could ever come on this place—sparkin'."

"I war right glad ter hev ye say that— Hit kept other fellers away, an' any man thet hit *could* skeer off wasn't hardly wuth hevin' round nohow. But thet war afore ye fell in love with me."

"Fell in love with ye?" She repeated the words after him still in that even somewhat puzzled quiet which was, for her, almost toneless. "Jack Halloway, when ye went away from hyar yestiddy evenin' an' I'd sat thar fer a full measured hour an' thought, I 'lowed thar warn't a soul on earth ner in hell thet I hated so much as you. I'd done med up my mind ter kill ye afore I laid down ter sleep."

There was an implacability about this new manner, that disquieted the man a little, but he said gravely:

"Them feelin's jest comes about because what ye felt yestiddy war all new ter ye. Hit's nat'ral enough, but hit won't endure."

She went on ignoring his protestations. "Ther only reason I *didn't* kill ye, war thet I'd done *let* ye ... an' I hated myself next es bad es you. Folks tells me thet I hain't always goin' ter want ter turn men back. Mebby thet's true."

"Ye knows full well a'ready, thet hit's true," he declared vehemently.

"Be thet es hit may, no man's ter wed me without he wooses me fust, an' no man hain't never goin' ter lay a hand on me without I consents. Now I aims ter try an' fergit erbout yestiddy—an' you'd better fergit hit too."

The man's eyes broke into vehement challenge. "So long es thar's life in me I won't fergit hit!"

"I reckon ye'd better heer me out," she reminded him with an ominous note and he nodded his head, waiting, while she continued.

"Yestiddy I seemed crazed—but terday I hain't. Ye 'pears ter be right sartain thet I loves ye. I don't know, but I either loves ye or I hates ye like all hell. Ef I loves ye I kain't kill ye—an' ef I hates ye thar's time enough."

"But Alexander, you do love me! I know——"

"Wa'al, I don't—an' thet's a right pithy point ter my manner of thinking! Ye're a right masterful sort of feller, an' ye likes ter plow yore way through life gloryin' in yore strength an' forcin' your will on weaker folks." She paused an instant then added significantly: "But I'm a right masterful sort of woman myself—an' I hain't ter be nowise driv. Ef you an' me kain't consort peaceable I reckon we'll jest erbout rake hell afore we finishes up our warfare."

As he looked at her his admiration was flaming. Possibly it was best, just now, to advance slowly.

"I'm willin' ter wait," he conceded slowly. "Ye're wuth hit."

"Ye says I loves ye. If I finds thet out fer myself, in due course I'll wed with ye. Ef I don't, I won't, but——" Her voice broke so suddenly out of the quiet plane in which it had been pitched, that her climax of words came like a sharp thunder clap on still air. "But ef ye seeks ter fo'ce me, or ef ever ergin ye lays a hand on me or teches me, 'twell I tells ye ye kin, afore God in Heaven, one of us has got ter die! An' I won't never be with ye unarmed, nuther."

Halloway did not judge it a good time to mention that her allusion to marriage left a rather wide territory of debate open. One thing at a time seemed enough and more than enough.

Alexander had not asked him in, and he inquired calmly: "Now thet ye've stated yore terms an' I've done agreed ter 'em, hain't ye goin' ter invite me in?"

"No," she said shortly. "I makes ther laws in my own household. Ye air goin' away an' ye hain't comin' back hyar fer one week. I aims ter be left alone fer a spell now. Ef them terms don't suit ye, ye needn't come back at all."

And in that week of reprieved decision Alexander took her life to pieces and searchingly examined it, item by item. Some strange reactions were taking place in the laboratory of her life. She was no more seen in breeches and boots. She had self-contemptuously decided that if she could not hold undeviatingly to her strongest tenet, but became a palpitant woman when a man seized her in his arms, she would throw overboard the whole sorry pretense.

She would henceforth be frankly and avowedly a woman, but a woman different from those about her, giving up none of the leadership that was in her blood or the self-pride that was her birthright.

One afternoon she met Jerry O'Keefe on the road, and with the old unabashed twinkle in his eye he accosted her.

"I heer tell ther big feller's back," he began and the girl flushed. "Hev ye done run him offen yore place, too?"

"Thet's my business."

"Yes *thet* is, but yore runnin' me off's right severely *mine*."

"Mebby I've got a rather who comes thar."

"So hev I." There was a lurking, somewhat engaging impertinence even in Jerry's quietest

rejoinders, a humorous boldness and self-confidence.

"Howsomever, I reckon ye're kinderly skeered that I'd mek ye think too towerin' much of me. I reckon ye dar'sn't trust yoreself."

Alexander looked at him, and for all her attempted severity she could not keep the twinkle out of her own pupils. If she had not succeeded in driving Halloway away, why should she stand out for the subterfuge of banishing Jerry? It reminded her of Joe's picking an easy man to whip. There was even a faint challenge of coquetry in her manner as she disdainfully announced: "Ef thet's ther way I'm feedin' yore vanity, come over whenever ye feels like hit. I'll strive ter endure ye, ef ye don't tarry too long."

"I kain't come afore ternight. Hit's sun-down now," was the instant response.

Things had not gone well with Jase Mallows. The wound that Bud had inflicted had healed slowly and he had lain long bedridden. He had been the last of the gang to hear the sorry story of how the robbery had failed and the sequel recording the deaths of Lute and his lieutenant. Now Jase heard that Alexander's door was no longer barred to men who came courting and he returned home. But he came nursing a grudge against Bud who had wounded him and who had set awry all his plans. For only one thing was he thankful. Alexander had no suspicion of his complicity in the effort to rob her.

But when Jase presented himself at Alexander's house, wearing a fancy waistcoat and a bright colored tie, he learned to his discomfiture that the bars which had been lowered to others were still up and fixed against himself.

Bud, too, was far from happy, as from a distance he watched Alexander's apotheosis. Bud knew that he was like a gray and inconspicuous moth enamored of a splendidly winged butterfly. She could never be thrilled by the colorless fidelity of a man who was simple almost to stupidity, even though he lived with no thought above his loyalty. One day almost unconquerable thirst came upon Bud. It attacked him suddenly as he passed the house and saw Halloway sitting on the porch talking with Alexander, and heard the peal of her responsive laughter.

That appetite rode him like a witch, making capital of his nervous dejection and he tramped the woods vainly struggling to submerge it in physical fatigue. Unfortunately it took a great deal of exertion to wear Bud down, and the mania of craving was as strong as his untiring muscles. By the purest of evil chance too, he stumbled upon an illicit still, where an acquaintance was brewing whiskey. He had not known that it was being operated there and had he sought to find it he could not have done so, for it was well hidden behind browse and thicket and a man watched furtively with a ready rifle. But the "blockader" recognized Bud and had no fears of his playing informer, so with an amused smile on his bearded face he stepped into sight with a tin cup invitingly out-held.

To Bud Sellers its sickening odor was the bouquet of ambrosia. It stole into his nostrils and set up in his brain insidious sensations of imagined delight. He pushed it back at first then seized it and gulped it greedily down.

Hurriedly he went away. He told himself that if he stopped there all would still be well, but it was as feasible to tell the tiger that has tasted blood to lie down and be good. He must have more. For a time Bud struggled, then he saddled a mule and went as fast as he could ride toward town. It was a race of endurance against a collapsing resolve. When he reached the village he sought out the town marshal and excitedly begged, "Fer God's sake lock me up in ther jail-house. Ther cravin's done come on me afresh. I'm goin' mad ergin."

The town marshal knew the history of Bud's alcoholic periodicity, yet he had no authority to jail a man on request in advance of any offense. "Ye don't look drunk yit, Bud, albeit I'm afear'd ye soon will be," he said. "I reckon I hain't hardly got ther power ter jail ye, without ye commits some misdeed."

But Bud was at the end of his struggle. In a minute more instead of pleading to be confined, he would be hunting for liquor. It was now or never. He seized up a brick that lay at his feet and hurled it through the glass window of a store, before which they stood talking.

"Kin ye do hit now?" he demanded hoarsely, and the town marshal said: "Yes, I reckon I kin—now."

Men have varied fashions for expressing their love of women. That night Jack Halloway sat on the moonlit porch of Alexander's house and Bud sat in the vermin-infested cell of the village lockup. But as the hours went on he found a certain recompense in the thought that he was keeping a pledge.

As for Jerry O'Keefe that night, he was doing nothing at all except thinking certain things about the great fellow who was with the girl, but those thoughts were putting out roots of future conflict.

CHAPTER XVI

Nothing had been heard of any Ku-Klux operations since Alexander's adventure, and even of that episode no unclean circulated story had gone abroad. Those who had worn the black masks were not apt to talk overmuch, and those who had made up Bud's force were for quite different reasons equally discreet. Since Alexander had won through safe and unrobbed, those who had been, in a fashion, her clansman, had few outstanding grudges to repay. Jack Halloway, for example, had come with a satisfied heart out of the baggage-room, by way of the wrecked telegraph office. For him the matter was concluded, save that he had made three enemies who would nurse a malignant grievance and seek, some day, to requite it with the ambushed rifle. The telegraph operator had altogether disappeared from the country, and his two immediate confederates, who were "branch-water men" dwelling in some remote pocket of the hills, had withdrawn to their thicketed abodes.

Bud Sellers had pieced two and two together, and though he kept a Masonic silence on the point, he had reached a conclusion. The house where Jase Mallows had been nursed back to health after his mysterious wounding, was not far from the place where he and Brent had been ambushed. The wound might have been the result of the volley he had himself fired at the rifle-flash, and if that were true the balance of that encounter lay in his favor. If it were not true, he had no means of knowing to whom he owed an unpaid score for his "lay-wayin'."

Only, he must keep an eye on Jase—because if his inference were correct, Jase would never forget.

Besides the telegraph man, the only other principal, actually or definitely known to any of Alexander's friends had been Lute Brown, and upon him they need spend no further thought. A long while after the tragedy had been played out there by yellow lantern-light, a woodsman passed the rotting cabin where Lute and his faithful partisan had died. It was indeed so long after, that there was some difficulty in identifying the bodies, and an inconclusive coroner's verdict left the matter stranded in mystery—and so it promised to remain. Privately, those conspirators, whose lips were sealed as to legal testimony, had hunted the assassin for several weeks, but without success. Occasionally, in widely separated places, a haggard and emaciated man was glimpsed who always escaped unidentified and with ghost-like speed. Children were frightened with tales of his burning eyes, and in neighborhood gossip he was spoken of as the "wild man of the woods."

For when Lute Brown's murderer, fleeing for his life, had opened his parcel and discovered the worthlessness of that for which he had turned Judas, something snapped in his befuddled brain. He became an Ishmael driven before the torture of a fixed idea—terror of capture, until one day his body was found, worn to a skeleton; matted of beard and hair, and lying with its head in a creek bed at the foot of a cliff over which the assassin had fallen.

So the Ku-Klux became again only a name.

If, however, the men who had followed Alexander were willing to let sleeping dogs lie, the other faction had not only the rancor of defeat remaining with them, but also the incurable itch of uneasy consciences.

At any time that drink loosened a careless tongue, dangerous hints might be dropped, and over at Coal City a newly elected Commonwealth's attorney was manifesting a zealous interest in the mystery of those two dead bodies and all the surrounding facts.

That Halloway knew at least two of their number by sight, if not by name, was a cloud of menace which hung over all. Since Jerry O'Keefe and Bud Sellers were in the big man's confidence they as well as Alexander herself fell into the gang's list of undesirable citizens.

But on the surface of life between Coal City and Shoulder-blade there was no outward ripple; no hint that fires still smouldered which might again leap to eruption. Men who had followed Lute and those who had been enlisted by Bud from time to time "met and made their manners" on the highway—without evidence of animosity.

Then one day when the early freshness of summer had been sunburned and freckled into a warmer fullness, a thing happened which stirred the sleeping dogs.

One of the three men of whom Halloway had disposed at the station and who bore ugly scars on his face where the cuffs had marked him, became involved in a boundary dispute with a neighbor, and a shooting affray followed—in which the neighbor fell wounded.

The assailant was arrested and brought to the Coal City Jail, and as he was being led hither, Halloway and Jerry O'Keefe, who chanced to be in town that day, came out of the court-house together.

That coincidence was observed by a loungeer in the public square who had, himself, been an alleged Ku-Klux man, on that memorable day and night. Out of his own anxieties he began weaving a pattern of fear.

He reasoned that if Halloway dropped a hint into the ear of the Commonwealth's Attorney that official might go lightly with the prosecution for shooting and wounding, provided, as an exchange of courtesies, this prisoner became fully and freely his tool in ferreting out the larger problem. He might be offered immunity on one indictment, if, as State's evidence, he made possible a number of true bills on graver charges.

The man kept Halloway and Jerry under observation until they left town and satisfied himself that so far they had not talked with the prosecutor—but that carried no assurance for the future, and several consultations ensued, in which certain measures were considered which did not enhance the safety of either Halloway or O'Keefe.

Halloway was less confident as the weeks passed. That first swift moment of apparent victory had not been followed by a satisfactory sequence of progressive steps.

He had sought to wake Alexander out of that sex-lethargy which lay like a moat between the citadel of her heart and the advantage of suitors. In that he had succeeded, too well for his liking. Always Alexander held surprises in store for him, which only maddened him the more, fanning his passion into a hotter blaze. Now when he sought to press his initial advantage to a greater conclusiveness, she only told him to wait and, like Portia judging her lovers, allowed others to come pay court as well, while over all she reigned with a regal sort of despotism, encouraging no one more than another.

But she was splendidly, vitally awake.

She still did with joy the things men did, and did them better than most men, but she was no longer blind to the stronger asset of her arresting beauty and the effect of its charm.

She realized these newly discovered attributes naively and without vanity, but now instead of insisting on the equality of a man, she demanded the homage of a queen.

And though she would have found her world desolate without that tallest and keenest of her cavaliers, she no longer thought of him as the only important figure in the world that he had opened to her.

In a somewhat formless and intuitive fashion she felt a slight undercurrent of distrust for Halloway, which she combated as ungenerous but could not wholly overcome.

But in constant conflict with these moments of misgiving there were other, rather wild moments, when the draw and pull of his fascination seemed invincible. At those times she realized that, should he open his arms and say, "Come," she would have to go as the iron filing goes to the magnet. To Alexander the whole world of love was in a nebulous and constructive state of flux and lava.

But she had by instinct a wary defensiveness, and she was on constant guard.

"Alexander," said Halloway one day when they were walking together along the creek-bed between the dark, waxy masses of the rhododendron, "Hit strikes me right forceable, thet fer a gal thet didn't hev no time of day fer any man, ye've done swung round mighty suddent. They hangs 'round ye now like bees 'round locust blooms."

"Did ye 'low thet ef I let any come, I'd refuse ter welcome ther balance?" she inquired and he retorted with more heat than he usually allowed himself. "Most women contrives ter satisfy themselves with one man, I reckon."

"Thet's atter they've done picked out ther one, fer dead shore," was her calm retort. "An' mebbly even then hit hain't frum choice."

A satirist might have derived pleasure from that situation of Alexander rejecting conventional pleas, urged by Jack Halloway.

The big man had halted and stood looking down at her. His hands gradually closed, then tautly clenched themselves. For a moment he contemplated throwing away caution and seeking once more to coerce her responsiveness in the imprisonment of his sudden embrace but he hesitated. Then while he still held his silence, Alexander spoke with that full and inelastic candor which was a cardinal of her nature.

"Ther gospel-truth is, Jack, I don't know yit whether I loves ye or hates ye, an' I kain't help mistrustin' ye somehow. I mout es well tell ye ther truth es ter lie ter ye."

"Mistrust me!" he echoed, incredulously. "Ye knows full well I loves ye. Ye kain't misdoubt thet!"

She shook her head. The sun was burnishing her hair into an aura, and the clear light shone searchingly on the fresh bloom of her cheek, the violet of her eyes and the crimson of her lips—revealing no flaw. She was all lovely and young, and yet Brent thought, she was alarmingly, almost paradoxically clever.

"Ye acts like ye loves me," was her seriously voiced response, "but somehow thar seems ter be a kind of greediness erbout hit. Take Bud Sellers fer instance—he's jest ther opposite. Thar hain't no greed in him."

Halloway might have retorted that also there was in Bud nothing to which her flaming personality could ever respond. His was the worship of a dumb and faithful beast. But he held his peace while the girl went steadily on.

"I oft-times takes myself ter task fer that suspicion, because hit don't seem far ter feel thet-away an' not know no reason."

She looked at him questioningly and very gravely, as one resolved upon a full but difficult confession.

"I hain't nuver seed ye foller no reg'lar work. Ye hain't doin' nothin' hyar now but jest hangin' around." She became halting there, for she had reached the point of greatest embarrassment, but she forced herself ahead.

"I hain't no millionaire myself, but we've got a good farm, and we don't owe no man nothin'." Once more she broke off before, with an inflexible frankness, she finished up. "Jack, thar's been times when I've wondered ef hit wasn't my bein' es well-fixed as I am thet made ye think so master much of me."

Then indeed the sprites and goblins of ironic mirth rioted in Halloway's brain. The surge of laughter that sought outlet from his lips came near to smothering him, but he succeeded in smothering it—though the effort almost clicked him. He, with a wealth which would have seemed to her as the treasure of the Incas, was falling under suspicion as a lazy fortune-hunter, seeking haven in the meager opulence of a mountain farm! Yet he dared not confess that wealth now because such admission would stamp him an impostor.

"I reckon," he said generously, though with just a touch of hurt pride. "I kin live down that distrust. Does ye suspicion Jerry O'Keefe too—or jest me?"

"Nobody couldn't suspicion Jerry," she said softly. "He's es straight es a poplar saplin' an' es plain ter see through es a clear spring-branch. He knows how ter gentle a woman, too."

"He don't understand ye an' ye'd mighty soon sicken of jest bein' gentled," argued Halloway. "He hain't got no idea of ther fires thet lays sleepin' in yore heart."

"He's got an idee of ther fire in his own, I reckon," replied Alexander.

It is the accepted rule of these mountains that when two men arrive to "set up" with a girl at the same time, she must choose between them and send the less favored away. Both Halloway and Jerry avoided the issue that might spring from such a situation. They met on the high-road with a full seeming of their old accord, but perhaps the semblance was an empty shell—or fast becoming one. There was a tacit understanding between them that certain evenings at Alexander's house belonged to each.

In Jerry's good-natured, whimsical eyes there had settled of late an unaccustomed gravity and since he was level-headed enough to recognize in Halloway a man who loomed brightly above others, his fear of him as a rival was genuine. It was O'Keefe's way to walk boldly and evenly through life, but a strong and tireless man will flinch in his gait from the hurt of a stone-bruised foot, and with Jerry the stone bruise was about the heart—which is worse. But it was more in the casual meeting than by the formal call, that O'Keefe conducted his courtship. He had a genius for materializing on the scene at the exact moment when he could perform some simple service, and of meeting Alexander by studious coincidence when she least expected him.

There was none-the-less the constant danger of a flareup because Halloway always bore himself with entire politeness yet with a courtesy which did not escape a sort of indulgent patronage; as though the serious thought of rivalry was absurd.

One day Bud Sellers came by the house. It was after he had been in jail and Alexander, who was standing on her porch, invited him in. Slowly and somewhat dubiously he accepted the invitation.

"I hain't seed ye fer quite a spell, Bud," began the girl smilingly, and with a brick red flush he answered. "Hit took holt on me ergin, Alexander. Hit war jest actually a-burnin' me up."

She did not ask what he meant by "it." She knew full well and she did not reproach him. She only inquired, "What happened, Bud?"

"I kep' my pledge ter yer, though." He spoke gruffly, because the sight of her was burning

him up too, with another kind of thirst. "I went an' hed myself jailed. I reckon hit won't hardly master me ergin fer a spell."

Alexander felt a lump rising in her throat. Since her awakening she had not missed the meaning of that look in his eyes. Slowly and candidly, she asked: "Bud, war hit on account of me? War ye frettin' over me—not a-keering?"

Sellers looked up in astonishment.

"How did ye know?" he demanded. "I hain't nuver breathed no word ter ye erbout keerin'. I knowed full well hit warn't no manner of use."

"I'm a woman, now, Bud," she reminded him. "A woman don't need ter be told some things."

"I knowed hit warn't no use." He only repeated the words, dully, and Alexander laid a hand on his trembling arm.

"Bud, Bud," she exclaimed self-accusingly. "I wisht I'd stayed a man. I don't seem ter do nothin' at this woman-game but jest stir up trouble. I loves ye right dearly, Bud, but hit's ther same fashion thet I loves my brother Joe—an' I reckon—that hain't what ye're a-seekin'."

But Bud drew back his shoulders and spoke with a brave assumption of restored cheerfulness.

"I'm a-seekin' whatever I kin hev," he staunchly declared. "More'n anything else, 'though, I'm seeking ter see ye happy." He paused then with a forced smile that, for all his effort, was stiff-lipped, and said slowly, "I reckon hit'll be either Halloway or Jerry ... they're both right upstanding men."

"Sometimes I thinks hit won't be nobody," she declared. "I'd done been raised up a boy so long thet since I turned back into a gal ergin, ther only thing I've been plum sartain of air thet I hain't been sartain of nuthin'. Sometimes I thinks a heap of Jerry, but more times Jack Halloway seems ter pintedly sot me on fire."

Jerry was tramping along the high-road, whistling an old ballad of lugubrious tune when a sharp turn brought him face to face with Jase Mallows. Jerry himself was for passing on with a brief salutation, but the other halted him and fell into voluble talk.

Jase complained that his wound had left certain after-effects which still gave him trouble.

"Hit's hell ter pay, when a law-abidin' man kain't travel ther highway withouten he's shot down like I was thet night," lamented Mallows virtuously. "I misdoubts ef I ever feels plum right inside me ergin. I wisht I knowed who thet feller war."

"Mebby he mistook ye fer somebody else," suggested Jerry. "Thet war ther same night them highwaymen sought ter lay-way Alexander—thar war right smart shootin' goin' on hyar an' thar."

"Did ye ever gain any knowledge of who them fellers war?" Mallows sought to couch his question in the manner of interest for the wrongs of another, but just a shade too much eagerness on his own part marred the effect.

Jerry smiled. He had caught that note and it piqued his curiosity, so with mountain secretiveness he became cryptic in his response. "Wa'al, mebbly we hain't tellin' all we knows—jest yit. Mebbly we're kinderly bidin' our time for a leetle spell."

It was not a comprehensive announcement. It was nine-tenths inspired by a spirit of teasing gossip-hunger into fuller revealment, but it happened to start a train of serious thought in the hearer.

Jase had recently returned from Coal City, and there he had talked with men who were watching with alarm the possibilities of an impending trial. The man who had shot his neighbor over a fence-line dispute was to face his prosecutors at the next term of court, and if he talked too much, large and portentous results might ensue.

The Commonwealth would know nothing of its potential leverage on the accused unless Halloway, O'Keefe or Alexander broke silence, and it followed that their silencing was highly important.

Through Jase's thoughts ran, in a threatening refrain, the words, "Mebby hit won't be long now."

So Jase saddled his mule that evening, despite the misery which was the relic of his wounding and started back to Coal City to convene a committee of ways and means.

CHAPTER XVII

The mail came irregularly to Shoulder-blade creek, but even irregular deliveries may bring bad news. Halloway received a letter, one day, containing a summons which he could not disregard. He had spoken contemptuously to Brent of money-grubbing, but his inflated wealth carried certain responsibilities which even he acknowledged.

He was perfectly willing that his world should see in him an incorrigible scoffer at moral conventions. He rather enjoyed being the object of maternal warnings to young daughters, but in financial affairs no stern moralist could have been more observant of rigid integrity, and in that, as in other things, he reversed the usual order. The business involved in the letter does not concern this narrative save in so far as it called him in peremptory terms away from Alexander and, at that, he fumed sulphurously.

He had, for the present, one more evening with her and he meant to make the most of it. If there was in him any power of hypnotism, and he still believed there was, he meant to exert it to the full.

Even in midsummer, there are chill nights in the mountains, and as he approached Alexander's house he thought gratefully of the fire that would be burning on her hearth.

She was sitting alone when he entered, by a small table, sewing, and she did not rise to welcome him. Lamp and firelight mingled in an orange and carmine glow that fell softly upon her. For a moment, as Halloway, pausing just inside the door, gazed at her, that adventurous hunger that fed upon her beauty became a positive avidity. Perhaps because he was leaving her, her beauty seemed what no earthly beauty is—absolute.

"Alexander," said Halloway slowly, "I've got ter go away fer a spell, an' I hates hit—I hates hit like all torment!"

She looked quickly up, and his narrow scrutiny told him that she had given ever so slight a start and that into her eyes had come a quickly repressed disappointment.

"I'll miss ye, Jack," she said simply. "What business calls ye away?"

That was an expected question and its answer was ready.

"I've done heired me a small piece of property from an uncle, way acrost ther Verginny line, an' I've got ter fare over thar an' sign some papers or do somethin' ter thet amount."

"How long does ye 'low ter be gone?"

He shook his head moodily. "Hit's a long journey through ther roughs an' I don't know how much time I'll hev ter spend over ther business, but I reckon ye knows that I won't tarry no longer then need be."

"Don't hasten unduly on my account," she coolly counseled him. "I'll strive ter mek shift somehow ter go on livin'."

The man had taken a chair near her and was bending forward, almost, but not quite, touching her. Now he rose and his voice trembled.

"Fer God's sake, Alexander, don't belittle me ner mek light of me ternight. I kain't endure hit. Heven't ye got no idee how master much I loves ye? Don't ye see thet ther two of us war made fer each other? I don't aim ter brag none—but ye knows I'm ther only man hyar-abouts thet understands ye—thet holds ye in full-high appreciation!"

He paused and she inquired calmly, "Air ye?"

"Ye knows hit!" He was talking tumultuously with the onrush of that dynamic spirit which drove him and gave him power. He stood there with his coat open over his magnificent chest, and his eyes alight with the forces that made him exceptional.

"Ye knows thet *you* hain't no every-day woman nuther. Ye knows thet ther like of yore beauty hain't been seed afore in these hills—not in mortal feature ner in ther blossomin' woods ner in ther blue skies over 'em all!"

Again he paused, and even while he adhered to a crude vernacular, there was, in the cadence of his voice, a forceful sort of eloquence. In the latent intensity of his personality dwelt a sheer wizardry which few women could have withstood.

"Hev ye ever seed a comet in ther heavens?" he abruptly demanded and without waiting for a reply swept rapidly on. "Well ye're like ter a comet, Alexander. Every star thet shines out thar ternight is hung high up in heaven an' every one is bright. But when a comet goes sweepin'

acrost ther skies, with a furrow of light trailin' along behind hit—we plum fergits them leetle stars—hit's like they'd all been snuffed. Hit's ther same way with you, Alexander. Deep down in yore heart thar's powerful fires a-burnin' thet no weak man kain't satisfy. When I looks at ye I clean fergits every other star that ever shone—because I've done seed *you*."

Once more Alexander began to feel that old uncertainty of reeling senses. His intonations were caresses. His eyes were beacons, and she took a tight hold on herself—for despite the hypnotic spell that he was weaving about her, a voice within her cautioned, "Be steady!" That indefinable ghost of suspicion stirred and troubled her.

"An' so sence I'm ther comet amongst them numerous small stars," she observed with an even voice, though her pulse beat was far from regular, "ye 'lows thet I'd ought ter belong ter *you*?"

He ignored the teasing brightness of her eyes; a light of defensive disguise.

"I 'lows thet hevin' oncet seed ye, an' loved ye, I hain't nuver goin' ter be satisfied with no lesser star."

The fire had leaped up and the room had grown warm. Halloway, in his impetuous fashion, ripped off his coat, flinging it to the floor, and stood with his great shoulders and chest bulking mightily beneath his flannel shirt.

Under the hurricane sweep of his love-making the girl from time to time closed her eyes in an effort to hold to her waning steadiness. This was one of those occasions when the fire in her responded to the fire in him; when she felt, with a sense of deep misgiving, that she could not resist him.

"Alexander," said the man, abruptly, dropping his voice from its impetuous pitch, to a more quiet and yet more ardent quality, "Ye 'lowed oncet thet I shouldn't never tech ye withouten ye said I mout. I've done obeyed ye—but now." He slowly extended both arms and stood upright in gladiatorial strength and compelling erectness. "But now ye're a-comin' inter my arms—of yore own accord—because we was made fer one another."

Again her lids came down over the girl's eyes and her fingers tightly gripped the chair-arms for support. Something in her heart was driving her irresistibly into those outstretched arms and something else—though that was growing weaker, she thought—kept whispering its warning, "Steady! Go steady! This is a spell but it isn't love."

She heard the hypnotic voice again. "Ye're a-comin' inter my arms, Alexander—ye're a-comin'—now!"

Her glance, ranging in desperation, fell on his coat at her feet, and with the instinct of grasping at any pretext, for a moment of thought and reprieve, she exclaimed:

"Give me thet coat, Jack!" Having breathlessly gone that far, she was able to finish with greater self-command. "Ther linin's in sheer rags. I kin be mendin' thet wust place by the sleeve thar—whilst ye talks."

"The coat kin wait," he declared. Her line of defense was bending now, under the weight of his onslaught, and it was no time for trivial interruption, but Alexander leaned forward and picked the thing up.

She had not yet begun to sew—her fingers lacked the needful steadiness—but she was making a pretense of studying the torn lining. She must avert her gaze from him for a moment or the tides that he was lashing about her would lift and carry her on their outswEEP.

Then suddenly she gave a violent start, and from her lips explosively broke the one word, "Jack!"

He knew that she was under a strained tension of emotion, and though the way she had flashed out that word was a marked contrast with her past attempts to seem controlled, he construed it as an evidence of final surrender to her feelings. She was already very pale and so she turned no paler, but in that moment something had happened to Alexander. Some thought or instinct or fact had brought her up short—transformed her out of weakness into strength, and when she spoke again it was with the self-containment of one who has been near the cliff's edge but who has definitely drawn back.

"I hed hit in head ter ask ye a question," she announced, slowly, "but I've done decided not ter do hit. This thread hain't suited ter ther job. I'll git me another spool."

She rose from her chair, and dismayed at the astonishing swiftness of her changed mood, Halloway took an impulsive step toward her. His arms were still receptively outstretched, but suddenly he felt that attitude to have become absurd. An altered light shone in her eyes now, and it was unpleasantly suggestive of contempt. She turned, absent-mindedly carrying the coat, and went into the other room.

What had happened, wondered the man. Something portentous had been born and matured in a breathing space—but what it was he could not guess. He knew only that victory had been between his open fingers and had slipped away. In this new and hardened mood of Alexander's, he might as well talk passionate love to the Sphinx.

But that was Alexander, he reflected. The tempestuous change from sun to storm was the capricious climate of her nature. She had been close to surrender and had wrested her independence out of his closing grasp by pure will-power. The reaction, he inferred, had been instantaneous—bringing the old resentment against being forced. Again he had lost—but also again he would win.

Alexander was not gone long and she returned with a restored calm. The fingers that stitched industriously at his torn coat, were as steady as before his coming.

"I don't aim ter be fo'ced, Jack," she quietly announced. "Ye boasts that ye kin mek me come into yore arms of my own free will. If ye kin—all right—but hit won't be afore ye fares back from yore journey. Hit won't be ternight."

Two weeks after Jack Halloway had started on his alleged trip across the Virginia boundary, Alexander also set out upon a journey.

She was going to Perry Center and meant to be there for some days, since matters concerning the farm were to be discussed with her uncle. This time the undertaking was less arduous than the trip from there back to Shoulder-blade had been.

Now it was midsummer and the railroad washouts had been repaired, so she had only to cross two mountain ridges and take the jerky little train from a point ten miles distant to her destination.

Perry Center was a hub about which swung a limited perimeter of rich farming lands. This fertile area was an oasis with steep desolation hedging it in on all sides, but within its narrow confines men could raise not only the corn which constituted the staple of their less fortunate neighbors, but the richer crop of wheat as well.

Therefore the men about Perry Center were as sheiks among goat-herds.

When Alexander set out on her ten-mile walk hefting the pack that held her necessaries for the trip, Jerry O'Keefe materialized grinning amiably from a clump of laurel. It was characteristic of Jerry to so appear from nowhere.

Now he nodded, and his eyes were brimming with that infectious smile of his.

"I jest kinderly happened ter hev a day off, Alexander," he assured her, "and I 'lowed hit wouldn't hurt none fer me ter come along es far es ther railroad train with ye an' tote thet bundle."

She gave it over to him, and since the trail there was narrow and thorn-hedged, she strode on ahead of him. Jerry was content, for through the midsummer woods, still dewy with morning freshness, he could follow no lovelier guide, and Jerry could be silent as well as loquacious.

They had put two-thirds of the journey behind them, when Alexander suggested, "Let's rest hyar a spell. Hit's a right good place ter pause an' eat a snack."

They stood on a pinnacle where time-corroded shoulders of sandstone broke eruptively through the soil. In a cluster of paw-paw trees there was a carpet of moss spread over ancient boulders, and off behind them stretched the nobility of forests unspoiled; of oak and ash and poplar and the mighty plumes of the pine. The crimson flower of the trumpet flower trailed everywhere, and a mighty vista was spread from foreground to horizon where the ashy purple of the last ridge merged with the sky.

But for Jerry the chief beauty was all close at hand.

"Alexander," he said, with his heart in his eyes, "ye're ther purtiest gal I ever seed—ther purtiest gal I reckon anybody ever seed."

The tease in her came to the surface. "Another feller likened me ter a comet amongst small stars, Jerry."

"I reckon I kin hazard a guess who thet feller war," he answered soberly. "There's only one man hyarabouts thet's got a gift of speech like thet. Myself, I don't like ter think of ye as a comet, Alexander, they're so plum outen reach."

She did not reply and Jerry went on. "An' yit mebbly he's right—I reckon thet's jest another reason for likenin' ye ter one—an' I reckon he knows, too, thet he flames right bright hisself."

The girl lifted her brows questioningly and Jerry went on.

"Hit's right hard fer me ter think erbout anything else. He stands betwixt me an' you an' he bulks so big thet he's kinderly hard ter git eround."

Alexander was sitting on the mossy rock, her eyes wandering off across the far-flung landscape. Now their gaze came back, recalled by something wistful in her companion's voice, and it occurred to her that this man himself would have towered above the generality.

"Ye're a right sizable sort of feller yore own self, Jerry," she reminded him and he laughed a shade bitterly. It was a very unusual thing for bitterness to tingle Jerry's voice, and it augured a bruised heart.

"I'm big amongst leetle fellers," he replied. "But along side him, I'm a runt."

"Ef he's got some thing ye hain't got, like es not, hit wucks t'other way round too. Ye're strong enough an' ye've got gentleness."

Jerry leaned forward to her. His voice trembled and his eyes broke into a sudden snap of flame.

"Alexander—ye knows ther way I loves ye. Ye kain't fathom ther full extent of hit all, but ye knows some small part of hit. Ye're good ter me—but when a man feels like I does towards you, thar hain't but one sort of goodness thet counts. I knows thet I cuts a sorry sort of figger alongside him, an' I hes ter fight myself day-long an' night-long ter keep from hatin' him fer hit. I hain't no Goliath outen ther Bible, but after all a right puny leetle feller took his measure."

He paused for an instant then swept feelingly on. "I wants ye ter answer me one question. Air hit jest because he's so monster big an' fine-looking thet ye thinks he's a piece of ther moon?"

"I hain't nuver said I thought he was," she interrupted, but Jerry stubbornly proceeded, and no one looking at his set face could doubt that he meant all he said.

"Because ef thet's hit, Alexander, afore God Almighty I'm plum willin' ter meet him an' fight him fer ye with my bare hands 'twell one of us dies. I hain't none afear'd of him, ef so be I'm fightin' fer you—an' ef he wins ther fight I'd rather be dead anyhow."

Alexander had never seen him so passion-ridden of manner before—and she thought that if such a combat took place, even with the odds uneven, the outcome would not be altogether certain.

Had Jerry known it, he was at that moment nearer to stirring the girl in the way that Halloway had stirred her, than he had ever been before, but her reply came in a grave and low-pitched voice.

"I hain't ter be won by no battle, Jerry."

"No, o'course not." He had brought himself back with an effort to a quieter mood and he even sought valiantly to muster the twinkle into his eyes and the whimsical note into his tone as he said:

"But atter all, I'm a right easy sort of feller ter git along with, an' I mout be kinderly handy eround ther house. These masterful husbands sometimes don't w'ar so well. Hit's like havin' ter live with a king, I reckon."

Now, it was the woman who insisted on gravity. "Look at me, Jerry," she commanded and their glances held level as she went on in deep earnestness.

"I'd hate fer ther two of ye ter think thet I'm playin' fast an' loose with ye. I'd hate ter think hit myself. Hit hain't thet—I was raised up a boy—I thought I'd always stay thet-a-way. Then I found I couldn't."

"Yes, I knows thet, Alexander. Thar hain't no censure fer ye es ter thet."

"Mebby thar ought ter be though. But ye sees hit's kinderly like I was livin' in a new world—an' I don't know hit well yit. I've got ter go slow. I hain't made up my mind an' then changed hit—I hain't blowed hot an' cold. Hit's jest thet I hain't been able ter come ter no conclusion one way ner t'other."

She had spoken with a defensive tone, one hardly certain, but as she finished a prideful note crept into her voice. "But when I does decide, I decides fer all time an' ther man I weds with kin trust me."

Jerry bade Alexander farewell after depositing her parcel by the threadbare seat of the battered day coach which was to carry her to Perry Center, but as he said good-by, he was, for once, acting without candor. He meant to go to Perry Center too, but being called by no business, except to follow her, he thought it wiser to make no announcement of his intention. When the engine wheezed and groaned to its start. Jerry swung himself into the baggage compartment, and after the elapse of a safe interval presented himself, grinning, in the day coach.

The girl pretended indignation, but her wrath was neither convincing nor terrifying. After a space she inquired, "Jerry, does ye know whar Jack Halloway come from afore he struck this section?"

O'Keefe shook his head. "I don't jedgmatically know what creek he was borned on, ef thet's what ye means, but I reckon hit warn't so fur away."

Her eyes narrowed a trifle. "Does ye even know—fer sure—thet he's a mountain man?"

Jerry laughed. "I hain't nuver heered tell of no man thet war raised up in the settlemints claimin' ter be a benighted boomer," he answered. "Hit's right apt ter be ther other way 'round." He paused, then judicially added: "When a man's co'tin a gal, he gin'rally seeks ter put hisself in ther best light he kin—not ther wust."

"Yes, thet sounds right reasonable," she admitted.

"What made ye ask, Alexander?"

After a dubious pause, she spoke hesitantly, "I jest fell ter studyin' erbout hit. Ef I tells ye, ye mustn't never name ther matter—ter nobody."

"I gives ye my hand on thet."

"Wa'al, Mr. Brent told me afore he left, thet ef I ever needed counsel I should write ter him. When Jack went away, I writ—an' yestiddy I got an answer back. My letter ter Mr. Brent asked ther same question thet I jest put up ter *you*."

"What did Brent say?"

She was looking out of the car window with eyes that were serious and preoccupied.

"He said he knowed all erbout him—but thet a question like thet ought rightfully ter be put ter a man fust-handed. He bade me ask Jack myself when he come back—but he pledged hisself ter answer all my questions ef Jack should happen ter refuse, atter he'd hed one chanst."

The gray-blue eyes narrowed for a moment, then O'Keefe inquired, "Does hit makes any great differ whar a man was borned at?"

"Mebby not. I just fell ter wonderin'."

"Does ye want my fam'ly Bible ter look me up in?" demanded Jerry and the girl laughed.

But she did not tell Jerry what lay back of this whole discussion. She did not confide to him the mystery of a coat with a patched lining.

It had been a very old coat, though at one time, long ago, a good one, and already it had been patched and repatched. When Alexander had picked it up that night before Halloway's departure, as she struggled to keep her feet against the elemental surge of his whirlpool passion, its inner breast pocket had spread a bit at the top, and her eyes had glimpsed a discolored tailor's label—bearing the words, "New York."

That had been the thing she needed: the floating spar to one who is drowning and it steadied her into instant resistance. She had gone to her own room and read there the full legend—almost obliterated by wear—almost, but not quite. Some letters and numbers were gone, but enough were left legible.

"Mr. J. C. Halloway," was written in ink with a number on Fifth Avenue, New York. Then there was the tailor's name and address—also on that main thoroughfare of Fashion.

Cumberland mountain loggers do not have their clothes hand tailored in Manhattan; and though the exact locality meant nothing to her, the town meant much.

The label was partly ripped away from the pocket, and the girl had snipped it loose altogether. Halloway had played a careful game. He had avoided carrying forwarded envelopes—he had held to the vernacular at times when sudden crisis threatened to drive him into forgetfulness. He had overlooked only one possible precaution—that of ripping out the tailor's trademark from his coat.

"Yes, we're right proud of thet thar wheat elevator. We all went partners ter raise ther money

fer rearin' hit," said Warwick McGivins, as he dismounted from his old pacing mare and pointed to a huge wooden building that stood at the edge of a bluff, from which one could drop a rock down a sheer hundred and fifty feet.

Alexander, his niece, and Jerry O'Keefe, following suit, slid from their saddles and the three walked through a wide gate, over a set of wagon scales and into the yard of the huge structure.

"Kinderly looks ter me like ye'd done deesigned hit fer a fort ter fight In'jins," suggested O'Keefe and the guide nodded his iron gray head. "Hit don't hurt none ter hev a house like thet solid-timbered," he asserted. "When ther crop's in, thet buildin' holds erbout all ther wheat thet ther passel of us fellers raises amongst us—an' we seeks ter hev hit held safe. Thar's some car-loads in thar right now, an' threshin' time hain't nigh over yit."

Drawing a key from his pocket he took them into the small office, and showed them the spaciouly dimensioned interior. There were no windows save high overhead, and only two doors. One of these was a great sliding affair where the wagons backed up, and the other was small but equally solid. It was a huge box of heavy timber, most of it constituting the bin itself, but the old fellow showed it proudly—nor was his pride misplaced, for with this great cube of massive timber, his neighbors had met and overcome a perplexing handicap of nature.

They climbed a ladder and looked down into the reservoir partly filled with golden grain, and Jerry, noticing a coil of rope hanging from an upright, inquired: "Did ye hev a lynchin' in hyar by way of house-warmin'?"

McGivins laughed, but his narrative had not yet come to uses of that rope, and he refused to be hurried.

"Ye sees," he zestfully enlightened, "we've got a sort of table land of wheat ground hyarabouts thet raises master crops—an' we've got a railroad runnin' right past our doors ter haul hit out ter ther world below."

"No wonder folks hyarabouts hes got prosperity," mused Alexander a little enviously, thinking of her rocky hillsides on Shoulder-blade.

"Yes, but ther road didn't do us no great lavish of good—'twell we deevised this hyar thing," her uncle reminded her. "Hit jest kinderly aggravated us. Ye see our fields lays on high ground an' ther railroad runs through a deep chasm. We kain't git down ter hit, nigh es hit be, withouten we teams over slavish ways fer siv'ral steep miles. Now I'll tek ye down ther clift an' show ye what's down thar—an' how we licked thet mountain."

He led them out and down a narrow path, where they had to hold to branch and root until they reached the bottom of a deep ravine—and there one hundred and fifty feet lower was another huge bin, open at its top, and connected with the upper structure by an almost vertical chute.

So after all it was a piece of highly creditable engineering. It enabled the grower to weigh and store his product above, and then by opening the runway to deposit it at the rails. In only one respect would an engineer have quarreled with the arrangement. The long lever that loosened and held the flowing tide of grain operated from outside the upper building instead of from within.

"What's ter hinder a thief from comin' in ther night-time," demanded Jerry practically, "an' runnin' hissself out a wagon-load of thet thar stuff an' haulin' hit off?"

The elder's face fell a little.

"Thet's a far question," he acknowledged, "but we couldn't skeercely tutor hit no otherwise—an' we keeps thet lever fastened with a chain an' padlock."

"But how erbout ther rope," persisted O'Keefe, and the older man explained. "Sometimes we has ter nail up loose planks inside thet runway, an' when we does a feller lets hissself down on thet rope."

In a week, the midsummer term of the High-court would convene and the case of the man who had wounded his neighbor would be called for trial.

The activities of possible informers became again a pregnant danger to the erstwhile Ku-Klux operators and again a squad of men with rifles set out to cope with the situation.

Halloway had slipped away for the time being, but the movements of Jerry and Alexander had been duly watched and reported. It did not altogether please the men charged with this new duty to operate about Perry Center. They would have preferred the wilder territory adjacent either to Shoulder-blade creek or to Coal City, but the thing must be accomplished and all matters are relative. If Perry Center lay in a smoother country it was still mountain country and wild enough if one were careful.

On an evening gorgeously alight with a full moon, Jerry came to the McGivins' house as was his custom. These were times when he did not have to consider sharing the right of way with a rival, and he was availing himself of his undisputed respite.

Shadows of deep purple-blue lay everywhere like velvet islands in the silver flood of the moon's radiance. Through the timbered slopes came the soft cadences of the night's minstrels—the voices of frogs and katydids and the plaintive call of the whippoorwills.

Alexander had been deeply reflective as she sat with her lovely chin resting on one hand, listening to the low-pitched voice in which her lover was pleading his cause.

"I kain't be sure—not yit," was her uncertain response to all his argument.

They saw a shadow fall across the lighted doorway at their backs, and heard the somewhat disturbed voice of Warwick McGivins.

"I've got ter go over thar ter ther wheat elevator, I reckon. I kain't find ther key nowhars an' I mistrusts I left hit in ther door when I war weighin' up wheat this evening; I'll jest leave ther two of ye hyar fer a spell."

Jerry rose obligingly to his feet. "I reckon my legs is a few y'ars younger than yourn," he announced cheerfully. "I'll jest teck my foot in my hand and light out fer over thar. Hit hain't but a whoop an' a holler distant nohow."

"Hit's a right purty night," volunteered Alexander, in a voice of vague restlessness. "I don't kindly feel like settin' still. I'll go along with ye, Jerry."

The young man's eyes brightened delightedly. It had been a strain on his innate courtesy to surrender so much of his moonlight evening with Alexander, and now he had his reward. There had been an unrest in her eyes to-night—yet somehow he had felt her nearer to him in thought, and his bruised feelings were stirring into fresh hope.

Together they started out, and under the spell of the night's graciousness one of those silences that seem a bond of sympathy fell between them.

The way led for a while along the high road, then turned off into the woods, where the rhododendron was massed thick. Here there was more of the velvet shadow and less of the direct moonlight, but through the open spaces that, too, fell in filtering patterns of platinum brightness.

Once Jerry halted abruptly and stood listening, then he went on again.

"I heered hit too," said Alexander understandingly, for in the hills one pauses to question unexplained sounds in the night time. "I reckon hit war some varmint stirring."

The route they had taken led along the margin of the bluff, and when they were close to the elevator, walking single file, with Alexander in the lead, the serenity broke with the malignant sharpness of a barking rifle.

Jerry heard the whining flight of the bullet that had missed his head by inches, and as though in obedience to a single nerve impulse, both the girl and the man fell flat to the better concealment of the ground, and edged back into the sootily shadowed laurel.

"We've got need ter separate," whispered Jerry, with his lips brushing her ear. "I aims ter git inside ther elevator—and hold 'em off. You hasten down over ther cliff an' work back ter ther house. I reckon hit's me they wants, but I'll endure 'twell ye brings help."

Without wasting a needless word or breath in argument, Alexander began noiselessly twisting her way towards the brow of the precipice. Jerry's heart was pounding with terror lest she be discovered—and to divert from her an attention that might prove fatal, he recklessly rose and leaped across a spot of moonlight, making a fleeting target, which brought from two separate sources responses of riflery.

The man knew now that whoever his assailants might be they were out in force and in earnest. Cautiously he worked his way along the shadows, his luck still holding until finally he had reached his point of vantage within a few yards of the open gate that led to the elevator itself. To gain that haven he must dash for it across a band of unmasked moonlight. Once inside, he had only to wait for the relief of reinforcements.

To the right and left of him, and from several spots at once, O'Keefe heard stirrings in the thicket. There must be a sizable pack out on the hunt and he surmised that they were making those unnecessary noises with the purpose of drawing his fire and bringing him into revealment by the spurt of his pistol.

The door of the elevator itself stood partly in the moonlight. Jerry O'Keefe could see the dull glitter that he knew to be the key—and could even make out—or so he thought—that the door stood an inch or two ajar.

Of that he was not quite certain—and it was a vitally important point.

If the lock was not caught, he might get in before he could be killed. If he had to fumble with a key, his end was certain.

Jerry drew himself together and made the dive. Four rifles spoke in unison and four bullets imbedded themselves in the heavy timbers of the great building as he hurled himself against the door, and felt it give laxly under his weight.

He had not fired a shot and between himself and his enemies stood the staunchness of walls against which their rifle bullets would pelt as harmlessly as hailstones. Except for his anxiety about Alexander he might have lighted his pipe and waited with a contented spirit.

Indeed, a slow smile did shape itself on his face, but a startled thought wiped it away as swiftly and completely as a wet sponge obliterates writing on a slate. That thought left his expression as black as a slate too.

Jerry drew his pistol, and for a moment it was in his mind to open the door and go out again.

When he had sent the girl away for reinforcements it had not occurred to him that this ambuscade might be intended to include her as well as himself. He had thought that, once apart from him, unless mistaken for him in the dark, she could walk safely. Indeed he had been at a total loss to explain, in any way, the motive of the attack.

Now it had flashed upon him that it was somehow an outgrowth of the old robbery attempt—and if that were true as high a price lay on the girl's head as upon his own. She was out there alone and in all likelihood unarmed.

Jerry O'Keefe broke into a cold sweat of panic—and he sat with his ears strained for a pistol shot—a shout—any indication that might call him across the moonlight zone beyond the door to her defense.

But the stillness of the midsummer night had settled again, except for the voices of the whippoorwill and the katydid.

By this time, he tried to reassure himself, Alexander had made her way down into the gorge and was beyond the touch of danger.

But that was not true. The girl had need to move with such silence as should break no twig and rustle no shrub. She must twist along a course that avoided the patches of moonlight, weaving her slow way in and out. Deliberation now was hard, but it would mean greater and more effective haste later on. She had even paused, crouching, with inheld breath, at a spot from which she could watch the door of the elevator, until Jerry had made his dash. With a heart swollen and strained by dread almost to bursting, she had seen him shoot across the exposed area and burst through the door—and she had heard the fusilade that resented his escape.

Or was it escape? He had plunged through the dark opening much as a falling man might go. But now safe, wounded or dead, he was inside and they could not reach him, so it behooved her to use wary care to the end that she might bring him help.

But as Alexander came to the two large boulders between which she meant to start down into the gorge she was arrested by a flicker of light there. The rock shielded from view the man who seemed to be kindling a pine torch, but the flare had warned her in time to make her crouch low and consider her course. That path which she had chosen was cut off.

Then, low and guarded voices stole across to her with the light.

"War's ther gal? She didn't git inside too, did she?"

"No, 'pears like she's done hid away—but I reckon they'll diskiver her afore she gits far."

"Don't let's waste no time, then. Ye've done splashed coal-oil on ther corner of ther warehouse, hain't ye?"

"Yes."

"Wa'al, come on. Ye've got yore torch ready. Let's tech her off. He thinks he's safe enough inside thar, but right shortly he'll sing another tune."

Alexander fell, for a moment, into a tremor and chill of wild panic. Suddenly as a revelation, yet beyond all shadow of doubt, she knew that the man who was doomed to a certain and most horrible death was, to her, the person of supreme consequence in all the world. The dynamic qualities of Holloway were nothing and less than nothing, now. She wanted for always that gentle strength and whimsical smile that were soon to be licked up in flame and torture. If this man were not saved she could, herself, no longer endure to live—and there was no way of saving him!

While Alexander crouched there with her blood congealed she saw the torch applied, saw its flame leap ravenously to the welcome of the kerosene and secure a hold upon the building itself as sure and tenacious as the grip of a bulldog's clamped jaws.

The plotters who fired the elevator showed her only their backs.

How long would it be before the man inside recognized the acrid odor and realized his fate? What would he do then? Presumably he would dash for the door, and there both flame and rifle fire would be awaiting him.

The incendiaries had now passed around the corner of the house and the moonlight fell upon the long chute which ran almost vertically down to the railway tracks below. Into Alexander's mind shot a desperate resolution. It offered a slender chance at best—yet the only one.

Still for a moment, she questioned it. There were so many ways that it might turn out—and of them all, one only could possibly end in success.

Then she slipped over to the great handle that controlled the flow of grain, locked into place with its chain and padlock. If she were seen she would, of course, be killed, but the murder crew seemed to have massed at the front of the place now, watching the door, until the fire should take that task off their hands. The flames were crackling loud enough now to cover the noise which must attend her next move—and to afford her a light for her work.

A heavy iron bar lay on the ground and with it the girl forced the chain and bent all her strength to the great lever that should launch the stored wheat into its quicksand flow. She flung her good muscles and her substantial weight so fiercely into that effort that the shaft snapped at its fulcrum—but not until it had done its work.

Alexander rushed for the brow of the cliff, and this time she was not obstructed. The relaxed vigilance of a job well done had stolen upon the watchers.

The journey down the precipice was one that had its difficulties, and Alexander's brain was reeling with a score of terrors—yet somehow she reached the tracks.

O'Keefe would not be in the wheat bin itself, she reflected. It would be dark in there too—until the light became a glare of death. Unless he chanced to hear, through other and fiercer sounds the soft flow of the myriad kernels, he would have no means of knowing that one desperate way was being opened to him. Even then his single hope would lie in quickness of perception and a sureness of judgment that acted flawlessly and smoothly under a supreme strain.

If he did see that the wheat was running out and did not wait for it all to spill itself, he would be sucked into its tide only to emerge dead. For it flowed slowly, pressing in every direction, and it would inevitably strangle the breath out of his lungs.

Even if he were judging all these odds with a meticulous nicety, Alexander questioned herself breathlessly, would there be time to wait for the full store to flow through that narrow channel? It was a race between a slow tide which could not be hurried and another which rushed on with the devouring fury of mania.

The girl threw herself down beside an empty freight car and dug her cold finger nails into her hot temples. She could hear the steady stream of wheat flowing into the bin there, and the deadly slowness of its progress through the hopper was driving her mad. The elevator she could not see, but by lifting her head, she could see out all too clearly the crimson sky overhead.

CHAPTER XIX

When the first acrid warning of scorched timbers came to his nostrils, Jerry O'Keefe had recognized the desperation of his plight and he laid out his simple plans in accordance. He meant to stay where he was till the last endurable moment, hoping against hope for the coming of the rescuers. When it was no longer possible to remain, he would go out of the door and sell his life at a price—but he knew he would have to sell it, and perhaps cheaply, for they would do their killing from cover.

He struck a match for a survey of the place where he must make his last stand and his eye fell on the coil of rope. Then, for the first time, he remembered its use, and vainly wished that the chute could be opened from within. By the light of other matches, he looked over into the great bin and what he saw astonished him. There was a moving suction at the center of the pile—a slow motion and declivity—though this afternoon the stuff had been heaped into a well-rounded mound. Further scrutiny verified the amazing results of his first impression. The hopper was open!

Jerry O'Keefe smiled grimly. His enemies had an ironic sense of humor, he thought. They meant to give him a choice of deaths, death at the door by flame and lead or death in the sluice by suffocation. Then an incredulous exclamation burst from his lips. Was there not a wild and

wholly improbable chance that this opening of an avenue might be Alexander's work? It seemed unlikely, almost inconceivable, but in resourcefulness and adroitness of thought nothing was quite inconceivable of Alexander.

She knew of the rope and its former use—and that meant that the flowing tide would not have to spell death for him if he waited long enough and acted wisely enough. Presumably these enemies were not neighbors, for if they had been they would not be burning their own grain. If that were granted it might follow that they would not know of the rope.

Jerry breathed deeply, and a desperate smile came for an instant to his tight lips.

He was watching the unhurried flow of out-running wheat and gauging, as was the girl below, the racing progress of the flames. Would there be time? The door was cut off now by sheets of fire and he had no longer any alternative. If the hot enemy reached him before the wheat was out, he must die by it or end matters with his own pistol.

He uncoiled the rope and threw its loose end into the bin, watching with a fascinated gaze the fashion in which it was dragged inward and downward.

In the increasing heat of the inferno he had thrown off his coat, and now his shirt went too. The sweat poured out of his naked chest and shoulders.

From rafters below him shot wicked tongues of widening flame— His breath was labored and his life seemed to wither. There was only a little grain left now at the bottom of the receptacle but there was also little strength or endurance left in him. His eyes burned horribly and he knew that he could no longer support his weight on a rope by the strength of his arms. He had climbed to the edge of the bin, and clung there. Then he fainted, and fell inward.

But the moment had arrived when at last the way was clear. The chute, polished smooth by the flowing kernels, did not even leave a splinter in his bare flesh, and when he shot down and out he fell on the soft mound of wheat that had gone before him.

Alexander's straining eyes saw his body flash into sight, and saw that it seemed lifeless. With a cry that she tried to stifle and could not, she called upon her last strength, and climbed into the great pen where he lay insensible.

The murderers had gone away. Their task seemed complete, and they had no wish to tarry too long after the countryside had been aroused by that beacon of fire.

But it was much later that neighborhood searchers found Alexander sitting on a mound of salvaged wheat with the head of an unconscious man in her lap. It was a man stripped to the waist, sweat-covered and smoke blackened. The girl was mumbling incoherent things into his unresponsive ear.

"Ye saved ther wheat fer us anyhow—an' ther doctor says he hain't none hurted beyond being scorched up some," declared Warwick McGivins that same night at his own house, and Alexander, limp to collapse with her long vigil of terror, but with eyes that glowed with triumph—and with something else—replied, "I've saved somethin' better then a mighty heap of wheat."

Jerry spoke from the bed, where he lay conscious now, but still very weak.

"Things looked mighty unsartain—fer a spell."

And the girl answered in a silvery voice that held the thrill of invincible courage. "Nothin' hain't never goin' ter be unsartain fer us from now on. Hit teks fire, I reckon, ter weld iron—but ___"

The enfeebled man tried to raise himself on his elbow, but she gently pressed him back.

"Does ye mean hit, Alexander?" he whispered tensely. "Hit hain't jest because I've been hurted a leetle—an' ye're compassionate fer me?"

"Jerry," she said and her voice became all at once softly tremulous, "jest es soon as ye're able I wants ye ter tek me in yore arms—an' I don't never want ye ter let me go ergin!"

"I'll git thet strong right soon," he declared with a fervor that brought the strength back to his voice—and the sparkle back into his blood-shot eyes.

Jack Halloway came into his rooms one day in early September and ran through some mail that lay piled on his table. He was not in a happy humor. The business here had dragged out to the annoying length of six weeks and his mind was busy with anxiety centering on the hills. But as his thoughts ran irritably along, the hand that had lifted an envelope out of the collection became rigid. It was a very plain envelope and quite unaccountably it was postmarked from the station near the mouth of Shoulder-blade creek.

Who, down there, could know his New York address? It could not be Brent, for this was not Brent's hand.

He ripped the thing open and from the unfolded sheet fell a tiny scrap of some sort. It seemed to be a small strip of soiled cloth and he let it lie on the table while he read the note itself.

The first paragraph brought from his lips an exclamation of dismay and alarm—and he paused a moment to collect himself before finishing.

"Dear Jack," said the letter. "You will wonder how I knew where to send this letter, but you see I did know.

"Jerry and I were married a week ago and all the neighbors came to our infare to wish us well. I saw to it that every man there took off his hat. I am sending you the tag that was on your coat pocket the day I mended it. It wasn't heedful for you to leave it there, and that's how I knew where you were apt to be now—instead of Virginia."

The man paused again and his great hand shook with disappointment and chagrin. Finally he turned the sheet and read the conclusion.

"Seeing that tag gave me warning just in time the night you bragged that you could make me come into your arms. Next time, Jack, I counsel you to be honest with the girls you make love to. They like it. Come and see us when you get back to the mountains. Alexander McGivins. P.S. I promised my paw to keep my own name when I was wed, and Jerry doesn't mind."

The letter escaped from nerveless fingers and floated down to the floor. At last Halloway picked up the small tailor's label and turned it in his fingers absentmindedly, as though he were not yet quite sure what he was doing.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A PAGAN OF THE HILLS ***

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