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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DESERT DUST ***



Like some land of Heart's Desire (*see page 22*).

DESERT DUST

By
EDWIN L. SABIN
Author of "How Are You Feeling Now?" etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
J. CLINTON SHEPHERD



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Desert Dust

CHAPTER I

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES

In the estimate of the affable brakeman (a gentleman wearing sky-blue army pantaloons tucked into cowhide boots, half-buttoned vest, flannel shirt open at the throat, and upon his red hair a flaring-brimmed black slouch hat) we were making a fair average of twenty miles an hour across the greatest country on earth. It was a flat country of far horizons, and for vast stretches peopled mainly, as one might judge from the car windows, by antelope and the equally curious rodents styled prairie dogs.

Yet despite the novelty of such a ride into that unknown new West now being spanned at giant's strides by the miraculous Pacific Railway, behold me, surfeited with already five days' steady travel, engrossed chiefly in observing a clear, dainty profile and waiting for the glimpses, time to time, of a pair of exquisite blue eyes.

Merely to indulge myself in feminine beauty, however, I need not have undertaken the expense and fatigue of journeying from Albany on the Hudson out to Omaha on the plains side of the Missouri River; thence by the Union Pacific Railroad of the new transcontinental line into the Indian country. There were handsome women a-plenty in the East; and of access, also, to a youth of family and parts. I had pictures of the same in my social register. A man does not attain to twenty-five years without having accomplished a few pages of the heart book. Nevertheless all such pages were—or had seemed to be—wholly retrospective now, for here I was, advised by the physicians to "go West," meaning by this not simply the one-time West of Ohio, or Illinois, or even Iowa, but the remote and genuine West lying beyond the Missouri.

Whereupon, out of desperation that flung the gauntlet down to hope I had taken the bull by the horns in earnest. West should be full dose, at the utmost procurable by modern conveyance.

The Union Pacific announcements acclaimed that this summer of 1868 the rails should cross the Black Hills Mountains of Wyoming to another range of the Rocky Mountains, in Utah; and that by the end of the year one might ride comfortably clear to Salt Lake City. Certainly this was "going West" with a vengeance; but as appeared to me—and to my father and mother and the physicians—somewhere in the expanse of brand new Western country, the plains and mountains, I would find at least the breath of life.

When I arrived in Omaha the ticket agent was enabled to sell me transportation away to the town of Benton, Wyoming Territory itself, six hundred and ninety miles (he said) west of the Missouri.

Of Benton I had never heard. It was upon no public maps, as yet. But in round figures, seven hundred miles! Practically the distance from Albany to Cincinnati, and itself distant from Albany over two thousand miles! All by rail.

Benton was, he explained, the present end of passenger service, this August. In another month—and he laughed.

"Fact is, while you're standing here," he alleged, "I may get orders any moment to sell a longer ticket. The Casements are laying two to three miles of track a day, seven days in the week, and stepping right on the heels of the graders. Last April we were selling only to Cheyenne, rising of five hundred miles. Then in May we began to sell to Laramie, five hundred and seventy-six miles. Last of July we began selling to Benton, a hundred and twenty miles farther. Track's now probably fifty or more miles west of Benton and there's liable to be another passenger terminus to-morrow. So it might pay you to wait."

"No," I said. "Thank you, but I'll try Benton. I can go on from there as I think best. Could you recommend local accommodations?"

He stared, through the bars of the little window behind which lay a six-chambered revolver.

"Could I do what, sir?"

"Recommend a hotel, at Benton where I'm going. There is a hotel, I suppose?"

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed testily. "In a city of three thousand people? A hotel? A dozen of 'em, but I don't know their names. What do you expect to find in Benton? You're from the East, I take it. Going out on spec', or pleasure, or health?"

"I have been advised to try Western air for a change," I answered. "I am looking for some place that is high, and dry."

"Consumption, eh?" he shrewdly remarked. "High and dry; that's it. Oh, yes; you'll find Benton high enough, and toler'bly dry. You bet! And nobody dies natural, at Benton, they say. Here's your ticket. Thank you. And the change. Next, please."

It did not take me long to gather the change remaining from seventy dollars greenbacks swapped for six hundred and ninety miles of travel at ten cents a mile. I hastily stepped aside. A subtle fragrance and a rustle warned me that I was obstructing a representative of the fair sex.

So did the smirk and smile of the ticket agent.

"Your pardon, madam," I proffered, lifting my hat—agreeably dazzled while thus performing.

She acknowledged the tribute with a faint blush. While pocketing my change and stowing away my ticket I had opportunity to survey her further.

"Benton," she said briefly, to the agent.

We were bound for the same point, then. Ye gods, but she was a little beauty: a perfect blonde, of the petite and fully formed type, with regular features inclined to the clean-cut Grecian, a piquant mouth deliciously bowed, two eyes of the deepest blue veiled by long lashes, and a mass of glinting golden hair upon which perched a ravishing little bonnet. The natural ensemble was enhanced by her costume, all of black, from the closely fitting bodice to the rustling crinoline beneath which there peeped out tiny shoes. I had opportunity also to note the jet pendant in the shelly ear toward me, and the flashing rings upon the fingers of her hands, ungloved in order to sort out the money from her reticule.

Sooth to say, I might not stand there gawking. Once, by a demure sideways glance, she betrayed knowledge of my presence. Her own transaction was all matter-of-fact, as if engaging passage to Benton of Wyoming Territory contained no novelty for her. Could she by any chance live there—a woman dressed like she was, as much à la mode as if she walked Broadway in New York? Omaha itself had astonished me with the display upon its streets; and now if Benton, far out in the wilderness, should prove another surprise—! Indeed, the Western world was not so raw, after all. Strange to say, as soon as one crossed the Missouri River one began to sense romance, and to discover it.

As seemed to me, the ticket agent would have detained her, in defiance of the waiting line; but she finished her business shortly, with shorter replies to his idle remarks; and I turned away under pretense of examining some placards upon the wall advertising "Platte Valley lands" for sale. I had curiosity to see which way she wended. Then as she tripped for the door, casting eyes never right nor left, and still fumbling at her reticule, a coin slipped from her fingers and rolled, by good fortune, across the floor.

I was after it instantly; caught it, and with best bow presented it.

"Permit me, madam."

She took it.

"Thank you, sir."

For a moment she paused to restore it to its company; and I grasped the occasion.

"I beg your pardon. You are going to Benton, of Wyoming Territory?"

Her eyes met mine so completely as well-nigh to daze me with their glory. There was a quizzical uplift in her frank, arch smile.

"I am, sir. To Benton City, of Wyoming Territory."

"You are acquainted there?" I ventured.

"Yes, sir. I am acquainted there. And you are from Benton?"

"Oh, no," I assured. "I am from New York State." As if anybody might not have known. "But I have just purchased my ticket to Benton, and—" I stammered, "I have made bold to wonder if you would not have the goodness to tell me something of the place—as to accommodations, and all that. You don't by any chance happen to live there, do you?"

"And why not, sir, may I ask?" she challenged.

I floundered before her query direct, and her bewildering eyes and lips—all tantalizing.

"I didn't know—I had no idea—Wyoming Territory has been mentioned in the newspapers as largely Indian country—"

"At Benton we are only six days behind New York fashions," she smiled. "You have not been out over the railroad, then, I suspect. Not to North Platte? Nor to Cheyenne?"

"I have never been west of Cincinnati before."

"You have surely been reading of the railroad? The Pacific Railway between the East and California?"

"Yes, indeed. In fact, a friend of mine, named Stephen Clark, nephew of the Honorable Thurlow Weed formerly of Albany, was killed a year ago by your Indians while surveying west of the Black Hills. And of course there have been accounts in the New York papers."

"You are not on survey service? Or possibly, yes?"

"No, madam."

"A pleasure trip to end of track?"

She evidently was curious, but I was getting accustomed to questions into private matters. That was the universal license, out here.

"The pleasure of finding health," I laughed. "I have been advised to seek a location high and dry."

"Oh!" She dimpled adorably. "I congratulate you on your choice. You will make no mistake,

then, in trying Benton. I can promise you that it is high and reasonably dry. And as for accommodations—so far as I have ever heard anybody is accommodated there with whatever he may wish." She darted a glance at me; stepped aside as if to leave.

"I am to understand that it is a city?" I pleaded.

"Benton? Why, certainly. All the world is flowing to Benton. We gained three thousand people in two weeks—much to the sorrow of poor old Cheyenne and Laramie. No doubt there are five thousand people there now, and all busy. Yes, a young man will find his opportunities in Benton. I think your choice will please you. Money is plentiful, and so are the chances to spend it." She bestowed upon me another sparkling glance. "And since we are both going to Benton I will say 'Au revoir,' sir." She left me quivering.

"You do live there?" I besought, after; and received a nod of the golden head as she entered the sacred Ladies' Waiting Room.

Until the train should be made up I might only stroll, restless and strangely buoyed, with that vision of an entrancing fellow traveler filling my eyes. Summoned in due time by the clamor "Passengers for the Pacific Railway! All aboard, going west on the Union Pacific!" here amidst the platform hurly-burly of men, women, children and bundles I had the satisfaction to sight the black-clad figure of My Lady of the Blue Eyes; hastening, like the rest, but not unattended—for a brakeman bore her valise and the conductor her parasol. The scurrying crowd gallantly parted before her. It as promptly closed upon her wake; try as I might I was utterly unable to keep in her course.

Obviously, the train was to be well occupied. Carried on willy-nilly I mounted the first steps at hand; elbowed on down the aisle until I managed to squirm aside into a vacant seat. The remaining half was at once effectually filled by a large, stout, red-faced woman who formed the base of a pyramid of boxes and parcels.

My neighbor, who blocked all egress, was going to North Platte, three hundred miles westward, I speedily found out. And she almost as speedily learned that I was going to Benton.

She stared, round-eyed.

"I reckon you're a gambler, young man," she accused.

"No, madam. Do I look like a gambler?"

"You can't tell by looks, young man," she asserted, still suspicious, "Maybe you're on spec', then, in some other way."

"I am seeking health in the West, is all, where the climate is high and dry."

"My Gawd!" she blurted. "High and dry! You're goin' to the right place. For all I hear tell, Benton is high enough and dry enough. Are your eye-teeth peeled, young man?"

"My eye-teeth?" I repeated. "I hope so, madam. Are eye-teeth necessary in Benton?"

"Peeled, and with hair on 'em, young man," she assured. "I guess you're a pilgrim, ain't you? I see a leetle green in your eye. No, you ain't a tin-horn. You're some mother's boy, jest gettin' away from the trough. My sakes! Sick, too, eh? Weak lungs, ain't it? Now you tell me: Why you goin' to Benton?"

There was an inviting kindness in her query. Plainly she had a good heart, large in proportion with her other bulk.

"It's the farthest point west that I can reach by railroad, and everybody I have talked with has recommended it as high and dry."

"So it is," she nodded; and chuckled fatly. "But laws sakes, you don't need to go that fur. You can as well stop off at North Platte, or Sidney or Cheyenne. They'll sculp you sure at Benton, unless you watch out mighty sharp."

"How so, may I ask?"

"You're certainly green," she apprised. "Benton's roarin'—and I know what that means. Didn't North Platte roar? I seen it at its beginnin's. My old man and me, we were there from the fust, when it started in as the railroad terminal. My sakes, but them were times! What with the gamblin' and the shootin' and the drinkin' and the high-cockalorums night and day, 'twasn't no place for innocence. Easy come, easy go, that was the word. I don't say but what times were good, though. My old man contracted government freight, and I run an eatin' house for the railroaders, so we made money. Then when the railroad moved terminus, the wust of the crowd moved, too, and us others who stayed turned North Platte into a strictly moral town. But land sakes! North Platte in its roarin' days wasn't no place for a young man like you. Neither was Julesburg, or Sidney, or Cheyenne, when they was terminuses. And I hear tell Benton is wuss'n all rolled into one. Young man, now listen: You stop off at North Platte, Nebraska. It's healthy and it's moral, and it's goin' to make Omyha look like a shinplaster. I'll watch after you. Maybe I can get you a job in my man's store. You've j'ined some church, I reckon? Now if you're a Baptist—?"

But since I had crossed the Missouri something had entered into my blood which rendered me obstinate against such allurements. For her North Platte, "strictly moral," and the guardianship of her broad motherly wing I had no ardent feeling. I was set upon Benton; foolishly, fatuously set. And in after days—soon to arrive—I bitterly regretted that I had not yielded to her wholesome, honest counsel.

Nevertheless this was true, at present:

"But I have already purchased my ticket to Benton," I objected. "I understand that I shall find the proper climate there, and suitable accommodations. And if I don't like it I can move elsewhere. Possibly to Salt Lake City, or Denver."

She snorted.

"In among them Mormons? My Gawd, young man! Where they live in conkibinage—several women to one man, like a buffler herd or other beasts of the field? I guess your mother never heard you talk like that. Denver—well, Denver mightn't be bad, though I do hear tell that folks nigh starve to death there, what with the Injuns and the snow. Denver ain't on no railroad, either. If you want health, and to grow up with a strictly moral community, you throw in with North Platte of Nebrasky, the great and growin' city of the Plains. I reckon you've heard of North Platte, even where you come from. You take my word for it, and exchange your ticket."

It struck me here that the good woman might not be unbiased in her fondness for North Platte. To extol the present and future of these Western towns seemed a fixed habit. During my brief stay in Omaha—yes, on the way across Illinois and Iowa from Chicago, I had encountered this peculiar trait. Iowa was rife with aspiring if embryonic metropolises. Now in Nebraska, Columbus was destined to be the new national capital and the center of population for the United States; Fremont was lauded as one of the great railroad junctions of the world; and North Platte, three hundred miles out into the plains, was proclaimed as the rival of Omaha, and "strictly moral."

"I thank you," I replied. "But since I've started for Benton I think I'll go on. And if I don't like it or it doesn't agree with me you may see me in North Platte after all."

She grunted.

"You can find me at the Bon Ton restaurant. If you get in broke, I'll take care of you."

With that she settled herself comfortably. In remarkably short order she was asleep and snoring.

CHAPTER II

TO BETTER ACQUAINTANCE

The train had started amidst clangor of bell and the shouts of good-bye and good-luck from the crowd upon the station platform. We had rolled out through train yards occupied to the fullest by car shops, round house, piled-up freight depot, stacks of ties and iron, and tracks covered with freight cars loaded high to rails, ties, baled hay, all manner and means of supplies designed, I imagined, for the building operations far in the West.

Soon we had left this busy Train Town behind, and were entering the open country. The landscape was pleasing, but the real sights probably lay ahead; so I turned from my window to examine my traveling quarters.

The coach—a new one, built in the company's shops and decidedly upon a par with the very best coaches of the Eastern roads—was jammed; every seat taken. I did not see My Lady of the Blue Eyes, nor her equal, but almost the whole gamut of society was represented: Farmers, merchants, a few soldiers, plainsmen in boots and flannel shirt-sleeves and long hair and large hats, with revolvers hanging from the racks above them or from the seat ends; one or two white-faced gentry in broadcloth and patent-leather shoes—who I fancied might be gamblers such as now and then plied their trade upon the Hudson River boats; two Indians in blankets; Eastern tourists, akin to myself; women and children of country type; and so forth. What chiefly caught my eye were the carbines racked against the ends of the coach, for protection in case of Indians or highwaymen, no doubt. I observed bottles being passed from hand to hand, and tilted en route. The amount and frequency of the whiskey for consumption in this country were astonishing.

My friend snored peacefully. Near noon we halted for dinner at the town of Fremont, some fifty miles out. She awakened at the general stir, and when I squeezed by her she immediately fished for a packet of lunch. We had thirty minutes at Fremont—ample time in which to discuss a very excellent meal of antelope steaks, prairie fowl, fried potatoes and hot biscuits. There was promise of buffalo meat farther on, possibly at the next meal station, Grand Island.

The time was sufficient, also, to give me another glimpse of My Lady of the Blue Eyes, who appeared to have been awarded the place of honor between the conductor and the brakeman, at table. She bestowed upon me a subtle glance of recognition—with a smile and a slight bow in one; but I failed to find her upon the station platform after the meal. That I should obtain other opportunities I did not doubt. Benton was yet thirty hours' travel.

All that afternoon we rocked along up the Platte Valley, with the Platte River—a broad but

shallow stream—constantly upon our left. My seat companion evidently had exhausted her repertoire, for she slumbered at ease, gradually sinking into a shapeless mass, her flowered bonnet askew. Several other passengers also were sleeping; due, in part, to the whiskey bottles. The car was thinning out, I noted, and I might bid in advance for the chance of obtaining a new location in a certain car ahead.

The scenery through the car window had merged into a monotony accentuated by great spaces. As far as Fremont the country along the railroad had been well settled with farms and unfenced cultivated fields. Now we had issued into the untrammelled prairies, here and there humanized by an isolated shack or a lonely traveler by horse or wagon, but in the main a vast sun-baked dead sea of gentle, silent undulations extending, brownish, clear to the horizons. The only refreshing sights were the Platte River, flowing blue and yellow among sand-bars and islands, and the side streams that we passed. Close at hand the principal tokens of life were the little flag stations, and the tremendous freight trains side-tracked to give us the right of way. The widely separated hamlets where we impatiently stopped were the oases in the desert.

In the sunset we halted at the supper station, named Grand Island. My seat neighbor finished her lunch box, and I returned well fortified by another excellent meal at the not exorbitant price, one dollar and a quarter. There had been buffalo meat—a poor apology, to my notion, for good beef. Antelope steak, on the contrary, was of far finer flavor than the best mutton.

At Grand Island a number of wretched native Indians drew my attention, for the time being, from quest of My Lady of the Blue Eyes. However, she was still escorted by the conductor, who in his brass buttons and officious air began to irritate me. Such a persistent squire of dames rather overstepped the duties of his position. Confound the fellow! He surely would come to the end of his run and his rope before we went much farther.

“Now, young man, if you get shet of your foolishness and decide to try North Platte instead of some fly-by-night town on west,” my seat companion addressed, “you jest follow me when I leave. We get to North Platte after plumb dark, and you hang onto my skirts right up town, till I land you in a good place. For if you don’t, you’re liable to be skinned alive.”

“If I decide upon North Platte I certainly will take advantage of your kindness,” I evaded. Forsooth, she had a mind to kidnap me!

“Now you’re talkin’ sensible,” she approved. “My sakes alive! Benton!” And she sniffed. “Why, in Benton they’ll snatch you bald-headed ’fore you’ve been there an hour.”

She composed herself for another nap.

“If that pesky brakeman don’t remember to wake me, you give me a poke with your elbow. I wouldn’t be carried beyond North Platte for love or money.”

She gurgled, she snored. The sunset was fading from pink to gold—a gold like somebody’s hair; and from gold to lemon which tinted all the prairie and made it beautiful. Pursuing the sunset we steadily rumbled westward through the immensity of unbroken space.

The brakeman came in, lighting the coal-oil lamps. Outside, the twilight had deepened into dusk. Numerous passengers were making ready for bed: the men by removing their boots and shoes and coats and galluses and stretching out; the women by loosening their stays, with significant clicks and sighs, and laying their heads upon adjacent shoulders or drooping against seat ends. Babies cried, and were hushed. Final night-caps were taken, from the prevalent bottles.

The brakeman, returning, paused and inquired right and left on his way through. He leaned to me.

“You for North Platte?”

“No, sir. Benton, Wyoming Territory.”

“Then you’d better move up to the car ahead. This car stops at North Platte.”

“What time do we reach North Platte?”

“Two-thirty in the morning. If you don’t want to be waked up, you’d better change now. You’ll find a seat.”

At that I gladly followed him out. He indicated a half-empty seat.

“This gentleman gets off a bit farther on; then you’ll have the seat to yourself.”

The arrangement was satisfactory, albeit the “gentleman” with whom I shared appeared, to nose and eyes, rather well soused, as they say; but fortune had favored me—across the aisle, only a couple of seats beyond, I glimpsed the top of a golden head, securely low and barricaded in by luggage.

Without regrets I abandoned my former seat-mate to her disappointment when she waked at North Platte. This car was the place for me, set apart by the salient presence of one person among all the others. That, however, is apt to differentiate city from city, and even land from land.

Eventually I, also, slept—at first by fits and starts concomitant with railway travel by night, then more soundly when the “gentleman,” my comrade in adventure, had been hauled out and deposited elsewhere. I fully awakened only at daylight.

The train was rumbling as before. The lamps had been extinguished—the coach atmosphere was

heavy with oil smell and the exhalations of human beings in all stages of deshabille. But the golden head was there, about as when last sighted.

Now it stirred, and erected a little. I felt the unseemliness of sitting and waiting for her to make her toilet, so I hastily staggered to achieve my own by aid of the water tank, tin basin, roller towel and small looking-glass at the rear—substituting my personal comb and brush for the pair hanging there by cords.

The coach was the last in the train. I stepped out upon the platform, for fresh air.

We were traversing the real plains of the Great American Desert, I judged. The prairie grasses had shortened to brown stubble interspersed with bare sandy soil rising here and there into low hills. It was a country without north, south, east, west, save as denoted by the sun, broadly launching his first beams of the day. Behind us the single track of double rails stretched straight away as if clear to the Missouri. The dull blare of the car wheels was the only token of life, excepting the long-eared rabbits scampering with erratic high jumps, and the prairie dogs sitting bolt upright in the sunshine among their hillocked burrows. Of any town there was no sign. We had cut loose from company.

Then we thundered by a freight train, loaded with still more ties and iron, standing upon a siding guarded by the idling trainmen and by an operator's shack. Smoke was welling from the chimney of the shack—and that domestic touch gave me a sense of homesickness. Yet I would not have been home, even for breakfast. This wide realm of nowhere fascinated with the unknown.

The train and shack flattened into the landscape. A bevy of antelope flashed white tails at us as they scudded away. Two motionless figures, horseback, whom I took to be wild Indians, surveyed us from a distant sand-hill. Across the river there appeared a fungus of low buildings, almost indistinguishable, with a glimmer of canvas-topped wagons fringing it. That was the old emigrant road.

While I was thus orienting myself in lonesome but not entirely hopeless fashion the car door opened and closed. I turned my head. The Lady of the Blue Eyes had joined me. As fresh as the morning she was.

"Oh! You? I beg your pardon, sir." She apologized, but I felt that the diffidence was more politic than sincere.

"You are heartily welcome, madam," I assured. "There is air enough for us both."

"The car is suffocating," she said. "However, the worst is over. We shall not have to spend another such a night. You are still for Benton?"

"By all means." And I bowed to her. "We are fellow-travelers to the end, I believe."

"Yes?" She scanned me. "But I do not like that word: the end. It is not a popular word, in the West. Certainly not at Benton. For instance—"

We tore by another freight waiting upon a siding located amidst a wide débris of tin cans, scattered sheet-iron, stark mud-and-stone chimneys, and barren spots, resembling the ruins from fire and quake.

"There is Julesburg."

"A town?" I gasped.

"The end." She smiled. "The only inhabitants now are in the station-house and the graveyard."

"And the others? Where are they?"

"Farther west. Many of them in Benton."

"Indeed? Or in North Platte!" I bantered.

"North Platte!" She laughed merrily. "Dear me, don't mention North Platte—not in the same breath with Benton, or even Cheyenne. A town of hayseeds and dollar-a-day clerks whose height of sport is to go fishing in the Platte! A young man like you would die of ennui in North Platte. Julesburg was a good town while it lasted. People *lived*, there; and moved on because they wished to keep alive. What is life, anyway, but a constant shuffle of the cards? Oh, I should have laughed to see you in North Platte." And laugh she did. "You might as well be dead underground as buried in one of those smug seven-Sabbaths-a-week places."

Her free speech accorded ill with what I had been accustomed to in womankind; and yet became her sparkling eyes and general dash.

"To be dead is past the joking, madam," I reminded.

"Certainly. To be dead is the end. In Benton we live while we live, and don't mention the end. So I took exception to your gallantry." She glanced behind her, through the door window into the car. "Will you," she asked hastily, "join me in a little appetizer, as they say? You will find it a superior cognac—and we breakfast shortly, at Sidney."

From a pocket of her skirt she had extracted a small silver flask, stoppered with a tiny screw cup. Her face swam before me, in my astonishment.

"I rarely drink liquor, madam," I stammered.

"Nor I. But when traveling—you know. And in high and—dry Benton liquor is quite a necessity. You will discover that, I am sure. You will not decline to taste with a lady? Let us drink to better

acquaintance, in Benton."

"With all my heart, madam," I blurted.

She poured, while swaying to the motion of the train; passed the cup to me with a brightly challenging smile.

"Ladies first. That is the custom, is it not?" I queried.

"But I am hostess, sir. I do the honors. Pray do you your duty."

"To our better acquaintance, then, madam," I accepted. "In Benton."

The cognac swept down my throat like a stab of hot oil. She poured for herself.

"A vôtre santé, monsieur—and continued beginnings, no ends." She daintily tossed it off.

We had consummated our pledges just in time. The brakeman issued, stumping noisily and bringing discord into my heaven of blue and gold and comfortable warmth.

"Howdy, lady and gent? Breakfast in twenty minutes." He grinned affably at her; yes, with a trace of familiarity. "Sleep well, madam?"

"Passably, thank you." Her voice held a certain element of calm interrogation as if to ask how far he intended to push acquaintance. "We're nearing Sidney, you say? Then I bid you gentlemen good-morning."

With a darting glance at him and a parting smile for me she passed inside. The brakeman leaned for an instant's look ahead, up the track, and lingered.

"Friend of yours, is she?"

"I met her at Omaha, is all," I stiffly informed.

"Considerable of a dame, eh?" He eyed me. "You're booked for Benton, too?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never been there, myself. She's another hell-roarer, they say."

"Sir!" I remonstrated.

"Oh, the town, the town," he enlightened. "I'm saying nothing against it, for that matter—nor against her, either. They're both O. K."

"You are acquainted with the lady, yourself?"

"Her? Sure. I know about everybody along the line between Platte and Cheyenne. Been running on this division ever since it opened."

"She lives in Benton, though, I understand," I proffered.

"Why, yes; sure she does. Moved there from Cheyenne." He looked at me queerly. "Naturally. Ain't that so?"

"Probably it is," I admitted. "I see no reason to doubt your word."

"Yep. Followed her man. A heap of people moved from Cheyenne to Benton, by way of Laramie."

"She is married, then?"

"Far as I know. Anyway, she's not single, by a long shot." And he laughed. "But, Lord, that cuts no great figger. People here don't stand on ceremony in those matters. Everything's aboveboard. Hands on the table until time to draw—then draw quick."

His language was a little too bluff for me.

"Her husband is in business, no doubt?"

"Business?" He stared unblinking. "I see." He laid a finger alongside his nose, and winked wisely. "You bet yuh! And good business. Yes, siree. Are you on?"

"Am I on?" I repeated. "On what? The train?"

"Oh, on your way."

"To Benton; certainly."

"Do you see any green in my eye, friend?" he demanded.

"I do not."

"Or in the moon, maybe?"

"No, nor in the moon," I retorted. "But what is all this about?"

"I'll be damned!" he roundly vouchsafed. And—"You've been having a quiet little smile with her, eh?" He sniffed suspiciously. "A few swigs of that'll make a pioneer of you quicker'n alkali. She's favoring you—eh? Now if she tells you of a system, take my advice and quit while your hair's long."

"My hair is my own fashion, sir," I rebuked. "And the lady is not for discussion between gentlemen, particularly as my acquaintance with her is only casual. I don't understand your remarks, but if they are insinuations I shall have to ask you to drop the subject."

"Tut, tut!" he grinned. "No offense intended, Mister Pilgrim. Well, you're all right. We can't be young more than once, and if the lady takes you in tow in Benton you'll have the world by the

tail as long as it holds. She moves with the top-notchers; she's a knowing little piece—no offense. Her and me are good enough friends. There's no brace game in that deal. I only aim to give you a steer. Savvy?" And he winked. "You're out to see the elephant, yourself."

"I am seeking health, is all," I explained. "My physician had advised a place in the Far West, high and dry; and Benton is recommended."

His response was identical with others preceding.

"High and dry? By golly, then Benton's the ticket. It's sure high, and sure dry. You bet yuh! High and dry and roaring."

"Why 'roaring'?" I demanded at last. The word had been puzzling me.

"Up and coming. Pop goes the weasel, at Benton. Benton? Lord love you! They say it's got Cheyenne and Laramie backed up a tree, the best days they ever seen. When you step off at Benton step lively and keep an eye in the back of your head. There's money to be made at Benton, by the wise ones. Watch out for ropers and if you get onto a system, play it. There ain't any limit to money or suckers."

"I may not qualify as to money," I informed. "But I trust that I am no sucker."

"No green in the eye, eh?" he approved. "Anyhow, you have a good lead if your friend in black cottons to you." Again he winked. "You're not a bad-looking young feller." He leaned over the side steps, and gazed ahead. "Sidney in sight. Be there directly. We're hitting twenty miles and better through the greatest country on earth. The engineer smells breakfast."

CHAPTER III

I RISE IN FAVOR

With that he went forward. So did I; but the barricade at the end of My Lady's seat was intact, and I sat down in my own seat, to keep expectant eye upon her profile—a decided relief amidst that crude *mélange* of people in various stages of hasty dressing after a night of cramped postures.

The brakeman's words, although mysterious in part, had concluded reassuringly. My Lady, he said, would prove a valuable friend in Benton. A friend at hand means a great deal to any young man, stranger in a strange land.

The conductor came back—a new conductor; stooped familiarly over the barricade and evidently exchanged pleasantries with her.

"Sidney! Sidney! Twenty minutes for breakfast!" the brakeman bawled, from the door.

There was the general stir. My Lady shot a glance at me, with inviting eyes, but arose in response to the proffered arm of the conductor, and I was late. The aisle filled between us as he ushered her on and the train slowed to grinding of brakes and the tremendous clanging of a gong.

Of Sidney there was little to see: merely a station-house and the small Railroad Hotel, with a handful of other buildings forming a single street—all squatting here near a rock quarry that broke the expanse of uninhabited brown plains. The air, however, was wonderfully invigorating; the meal excellent, as usual; and when I emerged from the dining-room, following closely a black figure crowned with gold, I found her strolling alone upon the platform.

Therefore I caught up with her. She faced me with ready smile.

"You are rather slow in action, sir," she lightly accused. "We might have breakfasted together; but it was the conductor again, after all."

"I plead guilty, madam," I admitted. "The trainmen have an advantage over me, in anticipating events. But the next meal shall be my privilege. We stop again before reaching Benton?"

"For dinner, yes; at Cheyenne."

"And after that you will be home."

"Home?" she queried, with a little pucker between her brows.

"Yes. At Benton."

"Of course." She laughed shortly. "Benton is now home. We have moved so frequently that I have grown to call almost no place home."

"I judge then that you are connected, as may happen, with a flexible business," I hazarded. "If you are in the army I can understand."

"No, I'm not an army woman; but there is money in following the railroad, and that is our present life," she said frankly. "A town springs up, you know, at each terminus, booms as long

as the freight and passengers pile up—and all of a sudden the go-ahead business and professional men pull stakes for the next terminus as soon as located. That has been the custom, all the way from North Platte to Benton.”

“Which accounts for your acquaintance along the line. The trainmen seem to know you.”

“Trainmen and others; oh, yes. It is to be expected. I have no objections to that. I am quite able to take care of myself, sir.”

We were interrupted. A near-drunken rowdy (upon whom I had kept an uneasy corner of an eye) had been careening over the platform, a whiskey bottle protruding from the hip pocket of his sagging jeans, a large revolver dangling at his thigh, his slouch hat cocked rakishly upon his tousled head. His language was extremely offensive—he had an ugly mood on, but nobody interfered. The crowd stood aside—the natives laughing, the tourists like myself viewing him askance, and several Indians watching only gravely.

He sighted us, and staggered in.

“Howdy?” he uttered, with an oath. “Shay—hello, stranger. Have a smile. Take two, one for lady. Hic!” And he thrust his bottle at me.

My Lady drew back. I civilly declined the “smile.”

“Thank you. I do not drink.”

“What?” He stared blearily. His tone stiffened. “The hell you say. Too tony, eh? Too—’ic! Have a smile, I ask you, one gent to ’nother. Have a smile, you (unmentionable) pilgrim; fer if you don’t ___”

“Train’s starting, Jim,” she interposed sharply. “If you want to get aboard you’d better hurry.”

The engine tooted, the bell was ringing, the passengers were hurrying, incited by the conductor’s shout: “All ‘board!”

Without another word she tripped for the car steps. I gave the fellow one firm look as he stood stupidly scratching his thatch as if to harrow his ideas; and perforce left him. By the cheers he undoubtedly made in the same direction. I was barely in time myself. The train moved as I planted foot upon the steps of the nearest car—the foremost of the two. The train continued; halted again abruptly, while cheers rang riotous; and when I crossed the passageway between this car and ours the conductor and brakeman were hauling the tipsy Jim into safety.

My Lady was ensconced.

“Did they get him?” she inquired, when I paused.

“By the scruff of the neck. The drunken fellow, you mean.”

“Yes; Jim.”

“You know him?”

“He’s from Benton. I suppose he’s been down here on a little pasear, as they say.”

“If you think he’ll annoy you—?” I made bold to suggest, for I greatly coveted the half of her seat.

“Oh, I’m not afraid of Jim. But yes, do sit down. You can put these things back in your seat. Then we can talk.”

I had no more than settled triumphantly, when the brakeman ambled through, his face in a broad grin. He also paused, to perch upon the seat end, his arm extended friendlily along the back.

“Well, we got him corralled,” he proclaimed needlessly. “That t’rantular juice nigh broke his neck for him.”

“Did you take his bottle away, Jerry?” she asked.

“Sure thing. He’ll be peaceable directly. Soused to the guards. Reckon he’s inclined to be a trifle ugly when he’s on a tear, ain’t he? They’d shipped him out of Benton on a down train. Now he’s going back up.”

“He’s safe, you think?”

“Sewed tight. He’ll sleep it off and be ready for night.” The brakeman winked at her. “You needn’t fear. He’ll be on deck, right side up with care.”

“I’ve told this gentleman that I’m not afraid,” she answered quickly.

“Of course. And he knows what’s best for him, himself.” The brakeman slapped me on the shoulder and good-naturedly straightened. “So does this young gentleman, I rather suspicion. I can see his fortune’s made. You bet, if he works it right. I told him if you cottoned to him—”

“Now you’re talking too much, Jerry,” she reproved. “The gentleman and I are only traveling acquaintances.”

“Yes, ma’am. To Benton. Let ’er roar. Cheyenne’s the closest I can get, myself, and Cheyenne’s a dead one—blowed up, busted worse’n a galvanized Yank with a pocket full o’ Confed wall-paper.” He yawned. “Guess I’ll take forty winks. Was up all night, and a man can stand jest so much, Injuns or no Injuns.”

“Did you expect to meet with Indians, sir, along the route?” I asked.

"Hell, yes. Always expect to meet 'em between Kearney and Julesburg. It's about time they were wrecking another train. Well, so long. Be good to each other." With this parting piece of impertinence he stumped out.

"A friendly individual, evidently," I hazarded, to tide her over her possible embarrassment.

Her laugh assured me that she was not embarrassed at all, which proved her good sense and elevated her even farther in my esteem.

"Oh, Jerry's all right. I don't mind Jerry, except that his tongue is hung in the middle. He probably has been telling you some tall yarns?"

"He? No, I don't think so. He may have tried it, but his Western expressions are beyond me as yet. In fact, what he was driving at on the rear platform I haven't the slightest idea."

"Driving at? In what way, sir?"

"He referred to the green in his eye and in the moon, as I recall; and to a mysterious 'system'; and gratuitously offered me a 'steer.'"

Her face hardened remarkably, so that her chin set as if tautened by iron bands. Those eyes glinted with real menace.

"He did, did he? Along that line of talk! The clapper-jaw! He's altogether too free." She surveyed me keenly. "And naturally you couldn't understand such lingo."

"I was not curious enough to try, my dear madam. He talked rather at random; likely enjoyed bantering me. But," I hastily placated in his behalf, "he recommended Benton as a lively place, and you as a friend of value in case that you honored me with your patronage."

"My patronage, for you?" she exclaimed. "Indeed? To what extent? Are you going into business, too? As one of—us?"

"If I should become a Bentonite, as I hope," I gallantly replied, "then of course I should look to permanent investment of some nature. And before my traveling funds run out I shall be glad of light employment. The brakeman gave me to understand merely that by your kindly interest you might be disposed to assist me."

"Oh!" Her face lightened. "I dare say Jerry means well. But when you spoke of 'patronage'—That is a current term of certain import along the railroad." She leaned to me; a glow emanated from her. "Tell me of yourself. You have red blood? Do you ever game? For if you are not afraid to test your luck and back it, there is money to be made very easily at Benton, and in a genteel way." She smiled bewitchingly. "Or are you a Quaker, to whom life is deadly serious?"

"No Quaker, madam." How could I respond otherwise to that pair of dancing blue eyes, to that pair of derisive lips? "As for gaming—if you mean cards, why, I have played at piquet and romp, in a social way, for small stakes; and my father brought Old Sledge back from the army, to the family table."

"You are lucky. I can see it," she alleged.

"I am, on this journey," I asserted.

She blushed.

"Well said, sir. And if you choose to make use of your luck, in Benton, by all means——"

Whether she would have shaped her import clearly I did not know. There was a commotion in the forward part of the car. That same drunken wretch Jim had appeared; his bottle (somehow restored to him) in hand, his hat pushed back from his flushed greasy forehead.

"Have a smile, ladies an' gents," he was bellowing thickly. "Hooray! Have a smile on me. Great an' gloryus 'casion—'ic! Ever'body smile. Drink to op'nin' gloryus Pac'fic—'ic—Railway. Thash it. Hooray!" Thus he came reeling down the aisle, thrusting his bottle right and left, to be denied with shrinkings or with bluff excuses.

It seemed inevitable that he should reach us. I heard My Lady utter a little gasp, as she sat more erect; and here he was, espying us readily enough with that uncanny precision of a drunken man, his bottle to the fore.

"Have a smile, you two. Wouldn't smile at station; gotto smile now. Yep. 'Ic! 'Ray for Benton! All goin' to Benton. Lesh be good fellers."

"You go back to your seat, Jim," she ordered tensely. "Go back, if you know what's good for you."

"Whash that? Who your dog last year? Shay! You can't come no highy-tighty over me. Who your new friend? Shay!" He reeled and gripped the seat, flooding me with his vile breath. "By Gawd, I got the dead-wood on you, you——!" and he had loosed such a torrent of low epithets that they are inconceivable.

"For that I'd kill you in any other place, Jim," she said. "You know I'm not afraid of you. Now get, you wolf!" Her voice snapped like a whip-lash at the close; she had made sudden movement of hand—it was extended and I saw almost under my nose the smallest pistol imaginable; nickeled, of two barrels, and not above three inches long; projecting from her palm, the twin hammers cocked; and it was as steady as a die.

Assuredly My Lady did know how to take care of herself. Still, that was not necessary now.

"No!" I warned. "No matter. I'll tend to him."

The fellow's face had convulsed with a snarl of redder rage, his mouth opened as if for fresh abuse—and half rising I landed upon it with my fist.

"Go where you belong, you drunken whelp!"

I had struck and spoken at the same time, with a rush of wrath that surprised me; and the result surprised me more, for while I was not conscious of having exerted much force he toppled backward clear across the aisle, crashed down in a heap under the opposite seat. His bottle shattered against the ceiling. The whiskey spattered in a sickening shower over the alarmed passengers.

"Look out! Look out!" she cried, starting quickly. Up he scrambled, cursing, and wrenching at his revolver. I sprang to smother him, but there was a flurry, a chorus of shouts, men leaped between us, the brakeman and conductor both had arrived, in a jiffy he was being hustled forward, swearing and blubbering. And I sank back, breathless, a degree ashamed, a degree rather satisfied with my action and my barked knuckles.

Congratulations echoed dully.

"The right spirit!"

"That'll l'arn him to insult a lady."

"You sartinly rattled him up, stranger. Squar' on the twitter!"

"Shake, Mister."

"For a pilgrim you're consider'ble of a hoss."

"If he'd drawn you'd have give him a pill, I reckon, lady. I know yore kind. But he won't bother you ag'in; not he."

"Oh, what a terrible scene!"

To all this I paid scant attention. I heard her, as she sat composedly, scarcely panting. The little pistol had disappeared.

"The play has been made, ladies and gentlemen," she said. And to me: "Thank you. Yes," she continued, with a flash of lucent eyes and a dimpling smile, "Jim has lost his whiskey and has a chance to sober up. He'll have forgotten all about this before we reach Benton. But I thank you for your promptness."

"I didn't want you to shoot him," I stammered. "I was quite able to tend to him myself. Your pistol is loaded?"

"To be sure it is." And she laughed gaily. Her lips tightened, her eyes darkened. "And I'd kill him like a dog if he presumed farther. In this country we women protect ourselves from insult. I always carry my derringer, sir."

The brakeman returned with a broom, to sweep up the chips of broken bottle. He grinned at us.

"There's no wind in him now," he communicated. "Peaceful as a baby. We took his gun off him. I'll pass the word ahead to keep him safe, on from Cheyenne."

"Please do, Jerry," she bade. "I'd prefer to have no more trouble with him, for he might not come out so easily next time. He knows that."

"Surely ought to, by golly," the brakeman agreed roundly. "And he ought to know you go heeled. But that there tanglefoot went to his head. Looks now as if he'd been kicked in the face by a mule. Haw haw! No offense, friend. You got me plumb buffaloed with that fivespot o' yourn." And finishing his job he retired with dust-pan and broom.

"You're going to do well in Benton," she said suddenly, to me, with a nod. "I regret this scene—I couldn't help it, though, of course. When Jim's sober he has sense, and never tries to be familiar."

She was amazingly cool under the epithets that he had applied. I admired her for that as she gazed at me pleadingly.

"A drunken man is not responsible for words or actions, although he should be made so," I consoled her. "Possibly I should not have struck him. In the Far West you may be more accustomed to these episodes than we are in the East."

"I don't know. There is a limit. You did right. I thank you heartily. Still"—and she mused—"you can't always depend on your fists alone. You carry no weapon, neither knife nor gun?"

"I never have needed either," said I. "My teaching has been that a man should be able to rely upon his fists."

"Then you'd better get 'heeled,' as we say, when you reach Benton. Fists are a short-range weapon. The men generally wear a gun somewhere. It is the custom."

"And the women, too, if I may judge," I smiled.

"Some of us. Yes," she repeated, "you're likely to do well, out here, if you'll permit me to advise you a little."

"Under your tutelage I am sure I shall do well," I accepted. "I may call upon you in Benton? If you will favor me with your address——?"

"My address?" She searched my face in manner startled. "You'll have no difficulty finding me;

not in Benton. But I'll make an appointment with you in event"—and she smiled archly—"you are not afraid of strange women."

"I have been taught to respect women, madam," said I. "And my respect is being strengthened."
"Oh!" I seemed to have pleased her. "You have been carefully brought up, sir."

"To fear God, respect woman, and act the man as long as I breathe," I asserted. "My mother is a saint, my father a nobleman, and what I may have learned from them is to their credit."

"That may go excellently in the East," she answered. "But we in the West favor the Persian maxim—to ride, to shoot, and to tell the truth. With those three qualities even a tenderfoot can establish himself."

"Whether I can ride and shoot sufficient for the purpose, time will show," I retorted. "At least," and I endeavored to speak with proper emphasis, "you hear the truth when I say that I anticipate much pleasure as well as renewed health, in Benton."

"Were we by ourselves we would seal the future in another 'smile' together," she slyly promised. "Unless that might shock you."

"I am ready to fall in with the customs of the country," I assured. "I certainly am not averse to smiles, when fittingly proffered."

So we exchanged fancies while the train rolled over a track remarkable for its smoothness and leading ever onward across the vast, empty plains bare save for the low shrubs called sagebrush, and rising here and there into long swells and abrupt sandstone pinnacles.

We stopped near noon at the town of Cheyenne, in Wyoming Territory. Cheyenne, once boasting the title (I was told) "The Magic City of the Plains," was located upon a dreary flatness, although from it one might see, far southwest, the actual Rocky Mountains in Colorado Territory, looking, at this distance of one hundred miles, like low dark clouds. The up grade in the west promised that we should soon cross over their northern flanks, of the Black Hills.

Last winter, Cheyenne, I was given to understand, had ten thousand inhabitants; but the majority had followed the railroad west, so that now there remained only some fifteen hundred. After dinner we, too, went west.

We overcame the Black Hills Mountains about two o'clock, having climbed to the top with considerable puffing of the engine but otherwise almost imperceptibly to the passengers. When we were halted, upon the crown, at Sherman Station, to permit us to alight and see for ourselves, I scarcely might believe that we were more than eight thousand feet in air. There was nothing to indicate, except some little difficulty of breath; not so much as I had feared when in Cheyenne, whose six thousand feet gave me a slightly giddy sensation.

My Lady moved freely, being accustomed to the rarity; and she assured me that although Benton was seven thousand feet I would soon grow wonted to the atmosphere. The habitués of this country made light of the spot; the strangers on tour picked flowers and gathered rocks as mementoes of the "Crest of the Continent"—which was not a crest but rather a level plateau, wind-swept and chilly while sunny. Then from this Sherman Summit of the Black Hills of Wyoming the train swept down by its own momentum from gravity, for the farther side.

The fellow Jim had not emerged, as yet, much to my relief. The scenery was increasing in grandeur and interest, and the play of my charming companion would have transformed the most prosaic of journeys into a trip through Paradise.

I hardly noted the town named Laramie City, at the western base of the Black Hills; and was indeed annoyed by the vendors hawking what they termed "mountain gems" through the train. Laramie, according to My Lady, also once had been, as she styled it, "a live town," but had deceased in favor of Benton. From Laramie we whirled northwest, through a broad valley enlivened by countless antelope scouring over the grasses; thence we issued into a wilder, rougher country, skirting more mountains very gloomy in aspect.

However, of the panorama outside I took but casual glances; the phenomenon of blue and gold so close at hand was all engrossing, and my heart beat high with youth and romance. Our passage was astonishingly short, but the sun was near to setting beyond distant peaks when by the landmarks that she knew we were approaching Benton at last.

We crossed a river—the Platte, again, even away in here; briefly paused at a military post, and entered upon a stretch of sun-baked, reddish-white, dusty desert utterly devoid of vegetation.

There was a significant bustle in the car, among the travel-worn occupants. The air was choking with the dust swirled through every crevice by the stir of the wheels—already mobile as it was from the efforts of the teams that we passed, of six and eight horses tugging heavy wagons. Plainly we were within striking distance of some focus of human energies.

"Benton! Benton in five minutes. End o' track," the brakeman shouted.

"My valise, please."

I brought it. The conductor, who like the other officials knew My Lady, pushed through to us and laid hand upon it.

"I'll see you out," he announced. "Come ahead."

"Pardon. That shall be my privilege," I interposed. But she quickly denied.

"No, please. The conductor is an old friend. I shall need no other help—I'm perfectly at home.

You can look out for yourself.”

“But I shall see you again—and where? I don’t know your address; fact is, I’m even ignorant of your name,” I pleaded desperately.

“How stupid of me.” And she spoke fast and low, over her shoulder. “To-night, then, at the Big Tent. Remember.”

I pressed after.

“The Big Tent! Shall I inquire there? And for whom?”

“You’ll not fail to see me. Everybody knows the Big Tent, everybody goes there. So au revoir.”

She was swallowed in the wake of the conductor, and I fain must gather my own belongings before following. The Big Tent, she said? I had not misunderstood; and I puzzled over the address, which impinged as rather bizarre, whether in West or East.

We stopped with a jerk, amidst a babel of cries.

“Benton! All out!” Out we stumbled. Here I was, at rainbow’s end.

CHAPTER IV

I MEET FRIENDS

What shall I say of a young man like myself, fresh from the green East of New York and the Hudson River, landed expectant as just aroused from a dream of rare beauty, at this Benton City, Wyoming Territory? The dust, as fine as powder and as white, but shot through with the crimson of sunset, hung like a fog, amidst which swelled a deafening clamor from figures rushing hither and thither about the platform like half-world shades. A score of voices dinned into my ears as two score hands grabbed at my valise and shoved me and dragged me.

“The Desert Hotel. Best in the West. This way, sir.”

“Buffalo Hump Corral! The Buffalo Hump! Free drinks at the Buffalo Hump.”

“Vamos, all o’ you. Leave the gent to me. I’ve had him before. Mike’s Place for you, eh? Come along.”

“The Widow’s Café! That’s yore grub pile, gent. All you can eat for two bits.”

A deep voice boomed, stunning me.

“The Queen, the Queen! Bath for every room. Individual towels. The Queen, the Queen, she’s clean, she’s clean.”

It was a magnificent bass, full toned as an organ, issuing, likewise as out of a reed, from a swart dwarf scarcely higher than my waist. The word “bath,” with the promise of “individual towels,” won me over. Something must be done, anyway, to get rid of these importunate runners. Thereupon I acquiesced, “All right, my man. The Queen,” and surrendering my bag to his hairy paw I trudged by his guidance. The solicitations instantly ceased as if in agreement with some code.

We left the station platform and went ploughing up a street over shoetops with the impalpable dust and denoted by tents and white-coated shacks sparsely bordering. The air was breezeless and suffocatingly loaded with that dust not yet deposited. The noises as from a great city swelled strident: shouts, hammerings, laughter, rumble of vehicles, cracking of lashes, barkings of dogs innumerable—betokening a thriving mart of industry. But although pedestrians streamed to and fro, the men in motley of complexions and costumes, the women, some of them fashionably dressed, with skirts eddying furiously; and wagons rolled, horses cantered, and from right and left merchants and hawksters seemed to be calling their wares, of city itself I could see only the veriest husk.

The majority of the buildings were mere canvas-faced up for a few feet, perhaps, with sheet iron or flimsy boards; interspersed there were a few wooden structures, rough and unpainted; and whereas several of the housings were large, none was more than two stories—and when now and again I thought that I had glimpsed a substantial stone front a closer inspection told me that the stones were imitation, forming a veneer of the sheet iron or of stenciled pine. Indeed, not a few of the upper stories, viewed from an unfavorable angle, proved to be only thin parapets upstanding for a pretense of well-being. Behind them, nothing at all!

In the confusion of that which I took to be the main street because of the stores and piles of goods and the medley of signs, what with the hubbub from the many barkers for saloons and gambling games, the constant dodging among the pedestrians, vehicles and horses and dogs, in a thoroughfare that was innocent of sidewalk, I really had scant opportunity to gaze; certainly no opportunity as yet to get my bearings. My squat guide shuttled aside; a group of loafers gave us passage, with sundry stares at me and quips for him; and I was ushered into a widely-open

tent-building whose canvas sign depending above a narrow veranda declared: "The Queen Hotel. Beds \$3. Meals \$1 each."

Now as whitely powdered as any of the natives I stumbled across a single large room bordered at one side by a bar and a number of small tables (all well patronized), and was brought up at the counter, under the alert eyes of a clerk coatless, silk-shirted, diamond-scarfed, pomaded and slick-haired, waiting with register turned and pen extended.

My gnome heavily dropped my bag.

"Gent for you," he presented.

"I wish a room and bath," I said, as I signed.

"Bath is occupied. I'll put you down, Mr.—" and he glanced at the signature. "Four dollars and four bits, please. Show the gentleman to Number Six, Shorty. That drummer's gone, isn't he?"

"You bet."

"The bath is occupied?" I expostulated. "How so? I wish a private bath."

"Private? Yes, sir. All you've got to do is to close the door while you're in. Nobody'll disturb you. But there are parties ahead of you. First come, first served."

I persisted.

"Your runner—this gentleman, if I am not mistaken (and I indicated the gnome, who grinned from dusty face), distinctly said 'A bath for every room.'"

Bystanders had pushed nearer, to examine the register and then me. They laughed—nudged one another. Evidently I had a trace of green in my eye.

"Quite right, sir," the clerk assented. "So there is. A bath for every room and the best bath in town. Entirely private; fresh towel supplied. Only one dollar and four bits. That, with lodging, makes four dollars and a half. If you please, sir."

"In advance?" I remonstrated—the bath charge alone being monstrous.

"I see you're from the East. Yes, sir; we have to charge transients in advance. That is the rule, sir. You stay in Benton City for some time?"

"I am undetermined."

"Of course, sir. Your own affair. Yes, sir. But we shall hope to make Benton pleasant for you. The greatest city in the West. Anything you want for pleasure or business you'll find right here."

"The greatest city in the West—pleasure or business!" A bitter wave of homesickness welled into my throat as, conscious of the enveloping dust, the utter shams, the tawdriness, the alien unsympathetic onlookers, the suave but incisive manner of the clerk, the sense of having been "done" and through my own fault, I peeled a greenback from the folded packet in my purse and handed it over. Rather foolishly I intended that this display of funds should rebuke the finicky clerk; but he accepted without comment and sought for the change from the twenty.

"And how is old New York, suh?"

A hearty, florid, heavy-faced man, with singularly protruding fishy eyes and a tobacco-stained yellowish goatee underneath a loosely dropping lower lip, had stepped forward, his pudgy hand hospitably outstretched to me: a man in wide-brimmed dusty black hat, frayed and dusty but, in spots, shiny, black broadcloth frock coat spattered down the lapels, exceedingly soiled collar and shirt front and greasy flowing tie, and trousers tucked into cowhide boots.

I grasped the hand wonderingly. It enclosed mine with a soft pulpy squeeze; and lingered.

"As usual, when I last saw it, sir," I responded. "But I am from Albany."

"Of course. Albany, the capital, a city to be proud of, suh. I welcome you, suh, to our new West, as a fellow-citizen."

"You are from Albany?" I exclaimed.

"Bohn and raised right near there; been there many a time. Yes, suh. From the grand old Empire State, like yourself, suh, and without apologies. Whenever I meet with a New York State man I cotton to him."

"Have I your name, sir?" I inquired. "You know of my family, perhaps."

"Colonel Jacob B. Sunderson, suh, at your service. Your family name is familiar to me, suh. I hark back to it and to the grand old State with pleasure. Doubtless I have seen you befoh, sur. Doubtless in the City—at Johnny Chamberlain's? Yes?" His fishy eyes beamed upon me, and his breath smelled strongly of liquor. "Or the Astor? I shall remember. Meanwhile, suh, permit me to do the honors. First, will you have a drink? This way, suh. I am partial to a brand particularly to be recommended for clearing this damnable dust from one's throat."

"Thank you, sir, but I prefer to tidy my person, first," I suggested.

"Number Six for the gentleman," announced the clerk, returning to me my change from the bill. I stuffed it into my pocket—the Colonel's singular eyes followed it with uncomfortable interest. The gnome picked up my bag, but was interrupted by my new friend.

"The privilege of showing the gentleman to his quarters and putting him at home shall be mine."

"All right, Colonel," the clerk carelessly consented. "Number Six."

"And my trunk. I have a trunk at the depot," I informed.

"The boy will tend to it."

I gave the gnome my check.

"And my bath?" I pursued.

"You will be notified, sir. There are only five ahead of you, and one gentleman now in. Your turn will come in about two hours."

"This way, suh. Kindly follow me," bade the Colonel. As he strode before, slightly listed by the weight of the bag in his left hand, I remarked a peculiar bulge elevating the portly contour of his right coat-skirt.

We ascended a flight of rude stairs which quivered to our tread, proceeded down a canvas-lined corridor set at regular intervals on either hand with numbered deal doors, some open to reveal disorderly interiors; and with "Here you are, suh," I was importantly bowed into Number Six.

We were not to be alone. There were three double beds: one well rumpled as if just vacated; one (the middle) tenanted by a frowsy headed, whiskered man asleep in shirt-sleeves and revolver and boots; the third, at the other end, recently made up by having its blanket covering hastily thrown against a distinctly dirty pillow.

"Your bed yonduh, suh, I reckon," prompted the Colonel (whose accents did not smack of New York at all), depositing my bag with a grunt of relief. "Now, suh, as you say, you desire to freshen the outer man after your journey. With your permission I will await your pleasure, suh; and your toilet being completed we will freshen the inner man also with a glass or two of rare good likker."

I gazed about, sickened. Item, three beds; item, one kitchen chair; item, one unpainted board washstand, supporting a tin basin, a cake of soap, a tin ewer, with a dingy towel hanging from a nail under a cracked mirror and over a tin slop-bucket; item, three spittoons, one beside each bed; item, a row of nails in a wooden strip, plainly for wardrobe purposes; item, one window, with broken pane.

The board floor was bare and creaky, the partition walls were of once-white, stained muslin through which sifted unrebuked a mixture of sounds not thoroughly agreeable.

The Colonel had seated himself upon a bed; the bulge underneath his skirts jutted more pronouncedly, and had the outlines of a revolver butt.

"But surely I can get a room to myself," I stammered. "The clerk mistakes me. This won't do at all."

"You are having the best in the house, suh," asserted the Colonel, with expansive wave of his thick hand. He spat accurately into the convenient spittoon. "It is a front room, suh. Number Six is known as very choice, and I congratulate you, suh. I myself will see to it that you shall have your bed to yourself, if you entertain objections to doubling up. We are, suh, a trifle crowded in Benton City, just at present, owing to the unprecedented influx of new citizens. You must remember, suh, that we are less than one month old, and we are accommodating from three to five thousand people."

"Is this the best hotel?" I demanded.

"It is so reckoned, suh. There are other hostelries, and I do not desire, suh, to draw invidious comparisons, their proprietors being friends of mine. But I will go so far as to say that the Queen caters only to the élite, suh, and its patronage is gilt edge."

I stepped to the window, the lower sash of which was up, and gazed out—down into that dust-fogged, noisy, turbulent main street, of floury human beings and grime-smear'd beasts almost within touch, boiling about through the narrow lane between the placarded makeshift structures. I lifted my smarting eyes, and across the hot sheet-iron roofs I saw the country south—a white-blotched reddish desert stretching on, desolate, lifeless under the sunset, to a range of stark hills black against the glow.

"There are no private rooms, then?" I asked, choking with a gulp of despair.

"You are perfectly private right here, suh," assured the Colonel. "You may strip to the hide or you may sleep with your boots on, and no questions asked. Gener'ly speaking, gentlemen prefer to retain a layer of artificial covering—but you ain't troubled much with the bugs, are you, Bill?"

He leveled this query at the frowsy, whiskered man, who had awakened and was blinking contentedly.

"I'm too alkalied, I reckon," Bill responded. "Varmints will leave me any time when there's fresh bait handy. That's why I likes to double up. That there Saint Louee drummer carried off most of 'em from this gent's bed, so he's safe."

"You are again to be congratulated, suh," addressed the Colonel, to me. "Allow me to interdeuce you. Shake hands with my friend Mr. Bill Brady. Bill, I present to you a fellow-citizen of mine from grand old New York State."

The frowsy man struggled up, shifted his revolver so as not to sit on it, and extended his hand.

"Proud to make yore acquaintance, sir. Any friend of the Colonel's is a friend o' mine."

"We will likker up directly," the Colonel informed. "But fust the gentleman desires to attend to

his person. Mr. Brady, suh," he continued, for my benefit, "is one of our leading citizens, being proprietor of—what is it now, Bill?"

"Wall," said Mr. Brady, "I've pulled out o' the Last Chance and I'm on spec'. The Last Chance got a leetle too much on the brace for healthy play; and when that son of a gun of a miner from South Pass City shot it up, I quit."

"Naturally," conceded the Colonel. "Mr. Brady," he explained, "has been one of our most distinguished bankers, but he has retired from that industry and is considering other investments."

"The bath-room? Where is it, gentlemen?" I ventured.

"If you will step outside the door, suh, you can hear the splashing down the hall. It is the custom, however, foh gentlemen at tub to keep the bath-room door closed, in case of ladies promenading. You will have time foh your preliminary toilet and foh a little refreshment and a pasear in town. I judge, with five ahead of you and one in, the clerk was mighty near right when he said about two hours. That allows twenty minutes to each gentleman, which is the limit. A gentleman who requires more than twenty minutes to insure his respectability, suh, is too dirty foh such accommodations. He should resort to the river. Ain't that so, Bill?"

"Perfectly correct, Colonel. I kin take an all-over, myself, in fifteen, whenever it's healthy."

"But a dollar and a half for a twenty minutes' bath in a public tub is rather steep, seems to me," said I, as I removed my coat and opened my bag.

"Not so, suh, if I may question your judgment," the Colonel reproved. "The tub, suh, is private to the person in it. He is never intruded upon unless he hawks his time or the water disagrees with him. The water, suh, is hauled from the river by a toilsome journey of three miles. You understand, suh, that this great and growing city is founded upon the sheer face of the Red Desert, where the railroad stopped—the river being occupied by a Government reservation named Fort Steele. The Government—the United States Government, suh—having corralled the river where the railroad crosses, until we procure a nearer supply by artesian wells or by laying a pipe line we are public spirited enough to haul our water bodily, for ablution purposes, at ten dollars the barrel, or ten cents, one dime, the bucket. A bath, suh, uses up consider'ble water, even if at a slight reduction you are privileged to double up with another gentleman."

I shuddered at the thought of thus "doubling up." God, how my stomach sank and my gorge rose as I rummaged through that bag, and with my toilet articles in hand faced the washstand!

They two intently watched my operations; the Colonel craned to peer into my valise—and presently I might interpret his curiosity.

"The prime old bourbon served at the fust-class New York bars still maintains its reputation, I dare hope, suh?" he interrogated.

"I cannot say, I'm sure," I replied.

"No, suh," he agreed. "Doubtless you are partial to your own stock. That bottle which I see doesn't happen to be a sample of your favorite preservative?"

"That?" I retorted. "It is toilet water. I am sorry to say I have no liquor with me."

"The deficiency will soon be forgotten, suh," the Colonel bravely consoled. "Bill, we shall have to personally conduct him and provide him with the proper entertainment."

"What is your special line o' business, if you don't mind my axin'?" Bill invited.

"I am out here for my health, at present," said I, vainly hunting a clean spot on the towel. "I have been advised by my physician to seek a place in the Far West that is high and dry. Benton"—and I laughed miserably, "certainly is dry." For now I began to appreciate the frankly affirmative responses to my previous confessions. "And high, judging by the rates."

"Healthily dry, suh, in the matter of water," the Colonel approved. "We are not cursed by the humidity of New York State, grand old State that she is. Foh those who require water, there is the Platte only three miles distant. The nearer proximity of water we consider a detriment to the robustness of a community. Our rainy weather is toler'bly infrequent. The last spell we had—lemme see. There was a brief shower, scurcely enough to sanction a parasol by a lady, last May, warn't it, Bill? When we was camped at Rawlins' Springs, shooting antelope."

"Some'ers about that time. But didn't last long—not more'n two minutes," Bill responded.

"As foh fluids demanded by the human system, we are abundantly blessed, suh. There is scurcely any popular brand that you can't get in Benton, and I hold that we have the most skillful mixtologists in history. There are some who are artists; artists, suh. But mainly we prefer our likker straight."

"We're high, too," Bill put in. "Well over seven thousand feet, 'cordin' to them railroad engineers."

"Yes, suh, you are a mile and more nearer Heaven here in Benton than you were when beside the noble Hudson," supplemented the Colonel. "And the prices of living are reasonable; foh money, suh, is cheap and ready to hand. No drink is less than two bits, and a man won't tote a match across a street foh less than a drink. Money grows, suh, foh the picking. Our merchants are clearing thirty thousand dollars a month, and the professional gentleman who tries to limit his game is considered a low-down tin-horn. Yes, suh. This is the greatest terminal of the greatest railroad in the known world. It has Omaha, No'th Platte, Cheyenne beat to a frazzle.

You cannot fail to prosper." They had been critically watching me wash and rearrange my clothing. "You are not heeled, suh, I see?"

"Heeled?" I repeated.

"Equipped with a shooting-iron, suh. Or do you intend to remedy that deficiency also?"

"I have not been in the habit of carrying arms."

"Most everybody packs a gun or a bowie," Bill remarked. "Gents and ladies both. But there's no law ag'in not."

I had finished my meager toilet, and was glad, for the espionage had been annoying.

"Now I am at your service during a short period, gentlemen," I announced. "Later I have an engagement, and shall ask to be excused."

The Colonel arose with alacrity. Bill stood, and seized his hat hanging at the head of the bed.

"A little liquid refreshment is in order fust, I reckon," quoth the Colonel. "I claim the privilege, of course. And after that—you have sporting blood, suh? You will desire to take a turn or two foh the honor of the Empire State?"

The inference was not quite clear. To develop it I replied guardedly, albeit unwilling to pose as a milksop.

"I assuredly am not averse to any legitimate amusement."

"That's it," Bill commended. "Nobody is, who has red in him; and a fellow kin see you've cut yore eye-teeth. What might you prefer, in line of a pass-the-time, on spec'?"

"What is there, if you please?" I encouraged.

He and the Colonel gravely contemplated each other. Bill scratched his head, and slowly closed one eye.

"There's a good open game of stud at the North Star," he proffered. "I kin get the gentleman a seat. No limit."

"Maybe our friend's luck don't run to stud," hazarded the Colonel. "Stud exacts the powers of concentration, like faro." And he also closed one eye. "It's rather early in the evening foh close quarters. Are you particularly partial to the tiger or the cases, suh?" he queried of me. "Or would you be able to secure transient happiness in short games, foh a starter, while we move along, like a bee from flower to flower, gathering his honey?"

"If you are referring to card gambling, sir," I answered, "you have chosen a poor companion. But I do not intend to be a spoil sport, and I shall be glad to have you show me whatever you think worth while in the city, so far as I have the leisure."

"That's it, that's it, suh." The Colonel appeared delighted. "Let us libate to the gods of chance, gentlemen; and then take a stroll."

"My bag will be safe here?" I prompted, as we were about to file out.

"Absolutely, suh. Personal property is respected in Benton. We'd hang the man who moved that bag of yours the fraction of one inch."

This at least was comforting. As much could not be said of New York City. The Colonel led down the echoing hall and the shaking stairs, into the lobby, peopled as before by men in all modes of attire and clustered mainly at the bar. He led directly to the bar itself.

"Three, Ed. Name your likker, gentlemen. A little Double X foh me, Ed."

"Old rye," Bill briefly ordered.

The bartender set out bottle and whiskey glasses, and looked upon me. I felt that the bystanders were waiting. My garb proclaimed the "pilgrim," but I was resolved to be my own master, and for liquor I had no taste.

"Lemonade, if you have it," I faltered.

"Yes, sir." The bartender cracked not a smile, but a universal sigh, broken by a few sniggers, voiced the appraisal of the audience. Some of the loafers eyed me amusedly, some turned away.

"Surely, suh, you will temper that with a dash of fortifiah," the Colonel protested. "A pony of brandy, Ed—or just a dash to cut the water in it. To me, suh, the water in this country is vile—inimical to the human stomick."

"Thank you," said I, "but I prefer plain lemonade."

"The gent wants his pizen straight, same as the rest of you," calmly remarked the bartender.

My lemonade being prepared, the Colonel and Bill tossed off full glasses of whiskey, acknowledged with throaty "A-ah!" and smack of lips; and I hastily quaffed my lemonade. From the dollar which the Colonel grandly flung upon the bar he received no change—by which I might figure that whereas whiskey was twenty-five cents the glass, lemonade was fifty cents.

We issued into the street and were at once engulfed by a ferment of sights and sounds extraordinary.

CHAPTER V

ON GRAND TOUR

The sun had set and all the golden twilight was hazy with the dust suspended in swirl and strata over the ugly roofs. In the canvas-faced main street the throng and noise had increased rather than diminished at the approach of dusk. Although clatter of dishes mingled with the cadence, the people acted as if they had no thought of eating; and while aware of certain pangs myself, I felt a diffidence in proposing supper as yet.

My two companions hesitated a moment, spying up and down, which gave me opportunity to view the scene anew. Surely such an hotch-potch never before populated an American town: Men flannel shirted, high booted, shaggy haired and bearded, stumping along weighted with excess of belts and formidable revolvers balanced, not infrequently, by sheathed butcher-knives—men whom I took to be teamsters, miners, railroad graders, and the like; other men white skinned, clean shaven except perhaps for moustaches and goatees, in white silk shirts or ruffled bosoms, broadcloth trousers and trim footgear, unarmed, to all appearance, but evidently respected; men of Eastern garb like myself—tourists, maybe, or merchants; a squad of surveyors in picturesque neckerchiefs, and revolver girted; trainmen, grimy engineers and firemen; clerks, as I opined, dapper and bustling, clad in the latest fashion, with diamonds in flashy ties and heavy gold watch chains across their fancy waistcoats; soldiers; men whom I took to be Mexicans, by their velvet jackets, slashed pantaloons and filagreed hats; darkly weathered, leathery faced, long-haired personages, no doubt scouts and trappers, in fringed buckskins and beaded moccasins; blanket wrapped Indians; and women.

Of the women a number were unmistakable as to vocation, being lavishly painted, strident, and bold, and significantly dressed. I saw several in amazing costumes of tightly fitting black like ballet girls, low necked, short skirted, around the smooth waists snake-skin belts supporting handsome little pistols and dainty poignards. Contrasted there were women of other class and, I did not doubt, of better repute; some in gowns and bonnets that would do them credit anywhere in New York, and some, of course, more commonly attired in calico and gingham as proper to the humbler station of laundresses, cooks, and so forth.

The uproar was a jargon of shouts, hails, music, hammering, barking, scuff of feet, trample of horses and oxen, rumble of creaking wagons and Concord stages.

"Well, suh," spoke the Colonel, pulling his hat over his eyes, "shall we stroll a piece?"

"Might better," assented Bill. "The gentleman may find something of interest right in the open. How are you on the goose, sir?" he demanded of me.

"The goose?" I uttered.

"Yes. Keno."

"I am a stranger to the goose," said I.

He grunted.

"It gives a quick turn for a small stake. So do the three-card and rondo."

Of passageway there was not much choice between the middle of the street and the borders. Seemed to me as we weaved along through groups of idlers and among busily stepping people that every other shop was a saloon, with door widely open and bar and gambling tables well attended. The odor of liquor saturated the acrid dust. Yet the genuine shops, even of the rudest construction, were piled from the front to the rear with commodities of all kinds, and goods were yet heaped upon the ground in front and behind as if the merchants had no time for unpacking. The incessant hammering, I ascertained, came from amateur carpenters, including mere boys, here and there engaged as if life depended upon their efforts, in erecting more buildings from knocked-down sections like cardboard puzzles and from lumber already cut and numbered.

My guides nodded right and left with "Hello, Frank," "How are you, Dan?" "Evening, Charley," and so on. Occasionally the Colonel swept off his hat, with elaborate deference, to a woman, but I looked in vain for My Lady in Black. I did not see her—nor did I see her peer, despite the fact that now and then I observed a face and figure of apparent attractiveness.

Above the staccato of conversation and exclamation there arose the appeals of the barkers for the gambling resorts.

"This way. Shall we see what he's got?" the Colonel invited. Forthwith veering aside he crossed the street in obedience to a summons of whoops and shouts that set the very dust to vibrating.

A crowd had gathered before a youth—a perspiring, red-faced youth with a billy-cock hat shoved back upon his bullet head—a youth in galluses and soiled shirt and belled pantaloons, who, standing upon a box for elevation, was exhorting at the top of his lungs.

"Whoo-oo! This way, this way! Everybody this way! Come on, you rondo-coolo sports! Give us a bet! A bet! Rondo coolo-oh! Rondo coolo-oh! Here's your easy money! Down with your soap! Let

her roll! Rondo coolo-oh!"

"It's a great game, suh," the Colonel flung back over his shoulder.

We pushed forward, to the front. The center for the crowd was a table not unlike a small billiard table or, saving the absence of pins, a tivoli table such as enjoyed by children. But across one end there were several holes, into which balls, ten or a dozen, resembling miniature billiard balls, might roll.

The balls had been banked, in customary pyramid shape for a break as in pool, at the opposite end; and just as we arrived they had been propelled all forward, scattering, by a short cue rapidly swept across their base.

"Rondo coolo, suh," the Colonel was explaining, "as you see, is an improvement on the old rondo, foh red-blooded people. You may place your bets in various ways, on the general run, or the odd or the even; and as the bank relies, suh, only on percentage, the popular game is strictly square. There is no chance foh a brace in rondo coolo. Shall we take a turn, foh luck?"

The crowd was craning and eyeing the gyrating balls expectantly. A part of the balls entered the pockets; the remainder came to rest.

"Rondo," announced the man with the short cue, amidst excited ejaculations from winners and losers. And according to a system which I failed to grasp, except that it comprised the number of balls pocketed, he deftly distributed from one collection of checks and coins to another, quickly absorbed by greedy hands.

"She rolls again. Make your bets, ladies and gents," he intoned. "It's rondo coolo—simple rondo coolo." And he reassembled the balls.

"I prefer not to play, sir," I responded to the heavily breathing Colonel. "I am new here and I cannot afford to lose until I am better established."

"Never yet seen a man who couldn't afford to win, though," Bill growled. "Easy pickin', too. But come on, then. We'll give you a straight steer some'rs else."

So we left the crowd—containing indeed women as well as men—to their insensate fervor over a childish game under the stimulation of the raucous, sweating barker. Of gambling devices, in the open of the street, there was no end. My conductors appeared to have the passion, for our course led from one method of hazard to another—roulette, chuck-a-luck where the patrons cast dice for prizes of money and valuables arrayed upon numbered squares of an oilcloth covered board, keno where numbered balls were decanted one at a time from a bottle-shaped leather receptacle called, I learned, the "goose," and the players kept tab by filling in little cards as in domestic lotto; and finally we stopped at the simplest apparatus of all.

"The spiel game for me, gentlemen," said the Colonel. "Here it is. Yes, suh, there's nothing like monte, where any man is privileged to match his eyes against fingers. Nobody but a blind man can lose at monte, by George!"

"And this spieler's on the level," Bill pronounced, sotto voce. "I vote we hook him for a gudgeon, and get the price of a meal. Our friend will join us in the turn. He can see for himself that he can't lose. He's got sharp eyes."

The bystanders here were stationed before a man sitting at a low tripod table; and all that he had was the small table—a plain cheap table with folding legs—and three playing cards. Business was a trifle slack. I thought that his voice crisped aggressively as we elbowed through, while he sat idly skimming the three cards over the table, with a flick of his hand.

"Two jacks, and the ace, gentlemen. There they are. I have faced them up. Now I gather them slowly—you can't miss them. Observe closely. The jack on top, between thumb and forefinger. The ace next—ace in the middle. The other jack bottommost." He turned his hand, with the three cards in a tier, so that all might see. "The ace is the winning card. You are to locate the ace. Observe closely again. It's my hand against your eyes. I am going to throw. Who will spot the ace? Watch, everybody. Ready! Go!" The backs of the cards were up. With a swift movement he released the three, spreading them in a neat row, face down, upon the table. He carelessly shifted them hither and thither—and his fingers were marvelously nimble, lightly touching. "Twenty dollars against your twenty that you can't pick out the ace, first try. I'll let the cards lie. I shan't disturb them. There they are. If you've watched the ace fall, you win. If you haven't, you lose unless you guess right."

"Just do that trick again, will you, for the benefit of my friend here?" bade the Colonel.

The "spieler"—a thin-lipped, cadaverous individual, his soft hat cavalierly aslant, his black hair combed flatly in a curve down upon his damp forehead, a pair of sloe eyes, and a flannel shirt open upon his bony chest—glanced alert. He smiled.

"Hello, sir. I'm agreeable. Yes, sir. But as they lie, will you make a guess? No? Or you, sir?" And he addressed Bill. "No? Then you, sir?" He appealed to me. "No? But I'm a mind-reader. I can tell by your eyes. They're upon the right-end card. Aha! Correct." He had turned up the card and shown the ace. "You should have bet. You would have beaten me, sir. You've got the eyes. I think you've seen this game before. No? Ah, but you have, or else you're born lucky. Now I'll try again. For the benefit of these three gentlemen I will try again. Kindly reserve your bets, friends all, and you shall have your chance. This game never stops. I am always after revenge. Watch the ace. I pick up the cards. Ace first—blessed ace; *and* the jacks. Watch close. There you are." He briefly exposed the faces of the cards. "Keep your eyes upon the ace. Ready—go!"

He spread the cards. As he had released he had tilted them slightly, and I clearly saw the ace land. The cards fell in the same order as arranged. To that I would have sworn.

"Five dollars now that any one card is not the ace," he challenged. "I shall not touch them. A small bet—just enough to make it interesting. Five dollars from you, sir?" He looked at me direct. I shook my head; I was sternly resolved not to be over tempted. "What? No? You will wait another turn? Very well. How about you, sir?" to the Colonel.

"I'll go halvers with you, Colonel," Bill proposed.

"I'm on," agreed the Colonel. "There's the soap. And foh the honor of the grand old Empire State we will let our friend pick the ace foh us. I have faith in those eyes of his, suhs."

"But that is scarcely fair, sir, when I am risking nothing," I protested.

"Go ahead, suh; go ahead," he urged. "It is just a sporting proposition foh general entertainment."

"And I'll bet you a dollar on the side that you don't spot the ace," the dealer baited. "Come now. Make it interesting for yourself."

"I'll not bet, but since you insist, there's the ace." And I turned up the right-end card.

"By the Eternal, he's done it! He has an eye like an eagle's," praised the dealer, with evident chagrin. "I lose. Once again, now. Everybody in, this time." He gathered the cards. "I'll play against you all, this gentleman included. And if I lose, why, that's life, gentleman. Some of us win, some of us lose. Watch the ace and have your money ready. You can follow this gentleman's tip. I'm afraid he's smarter than me, but I'm game."

He was too insistent. Somehow, I did not like him, anyway, and I was beginning to be suspicious of my company. Their minds trended entirely toward gambling; to remain with them meant nothing farther than the gaming tables, and I was hungry.

"You'll have to excuse me, gentleman," I pleaded. "Another time, but not now. I wish to eat and to bathe, and I have an engagement following."

"Gad, suh!" The Colonel fixed me with his fishy eyes. "Foh God's sake don't break your winning streak with eatin' and washin'. Fortune is a fickle jade, suh; she's hostile when slapped in the face."

Bill glowered at me, but I was firm.

"If you will give me the pleasure of taking supper with me at some good place——" I suggested, as they pursued me into the street.

"We can't talk this over while we're dry," the Colonel objected. "That is a human impossibility. Let us libate, suhs, in order to tackle our provender in proper spirit."

"And no lemonade goes this time, either," Bill declared. "That brand of a drink is insultin' to good victuals."

We were standing, for the moment, verging upon argument much to my distaste, when on a sudden who should come tripping along but My Lady of the Blue Eyes—yes, the very flesh and action of her, her face shielded from the dust by a little sunshade.

She saw me, recognized me in startled fashion, and with a swift glance at my two companions bowed. My hat was off in a twinkling, with my best manner; the Colonel barely had time to imitate ere, leaving me a quick smile, she was gone on.

He and Bill stared after; then at me.

"Gad, suh! You know the lady?" the Colonel ejaculated.

"I have the honor. We were passengers upon the same train."

"Clean through, you mean?" queried Bill.

"Yes. We happened to get on together, at Omaha."

"I congratulate you, suh," affirmed the Colonel. "We were not aware, suh, that you had an acquaintance of that nature in this city."

Again congratulation over my fortune! It mounted to my head, but I preserved decorum.

"A casual acquaintance. We were merely travelers by the same route at the same time. And now if you will recommend a good eating place, and be my guests at supper, after that, as I have said, I must be excused. By the way, while I think of it," I carelessly added, "can you direct me how to get to the Big Tent?"

"The Big Tent? If I am not intruding, suh, does your engagement comprise the Big Tent?"

"Yes. But I failed to get the address."

The Colonel swelled; his fishy eyes hardened upon me as with righteous indignation.

"Suh, you are too damned innocent. You come here, suh, imposing as a stranger, suh, and throwing yourself on our goodness, suh, to entertain you; and you conceal your irons in the fiah under your hat, suh. Do we look green, suh? What is your vocation, suh? I believe, by gad, suh, that you are a common capper foh some infernal skinning game, or that you are a professional. Suh, I call your hand."

I was about to retort hotly that I had not requested their chaperonage, and that my affair with

My Lady and the Big Tent, howsoever they might take it, was my own; when Mr. Brady, who likewise had been glaring at me, growled morosely.

"She's waitin' for you. You can square with us later, and if there's something doin' on the table we want a show."

The black-clad figure had lingered beyond; ostensibly gazing into a window but now and again darting a glance in our direction. I accepted the glances as a token of inclination on her part; without saying another word to my ruffled body-guards I approached her.

She received me with a quick turn of head as if not expecting, but with a ready smile.

"Well, sir?"

"Madam," I uttered foolishly, "good-evening."

"You have left your friends?"

"Very willingly. Whether they are really my friends I rather question. They have seen fit to escort me about, is all."

"And I have rescued you?" She smiled again. "Believe me, sir, you would be better off alone. I know the gentlemen. They have been paid for their trouble, have they not?"

"They have won a little at gambling, but in that I had no hand," I replied. "So far they have asked nothing more."

"Certainly not. And you put up no stakes?"

"Not a penny, madam. Why should I?"

"To make it interesting, as they doubtless said. The Colonel, as all the town knows, is a notorious capper and steerer, and the fellow Brady is no better, no worse. Had you stayed with them and suffered them to persuade you into betting, you would soon have been fleeced as clean as a shaved pig. The little gains they are permitted to make, to draw you on, is their pay. Their losses if any would have been restored to them, but not yours to you."

"Strange to say, they have just accused me of being a 'capper,'" I answered, nettled as I began to comprehend.

"From what cause, sir?"



"MADAM," I UTTERED FOOLISHLY, "GOOD EVENING."

"They seemed to think that I am smarter than to my actual credit, for one thing." I, of course, could not involve her in the subject, and indeed could not understand why she should have been held responsible, anyway. "And probably they were peeved because I insisted upon eating supper and then following my own bent."

"You were about to leave them?" Her face brightened. "That is good. They were disappointed in finding you no gudgeon to be hooked by such raw methods. And you've not had supper yet? Promise me that you will take up with no more strangers or, I assure you, you may wake in the morning with your pockets turned inside out and your memory at fault. This is Benton."

"Yes, this is Benton, is it?" I rejoined; and perhaps bitterly.

"Benton, Wyoming Territory; of three thousand people in two weeks; in another month, who

knows how many? And the majority of us live on one another. The country furnishes nothing else. Still, you will find it not much different from what I told you."

"I have found it high and dry, certainly," said I.

"Where are you stopping?"

"At the Queen—with a bath for every room. I am now awaiting the turn of my room, at the end of another hour."

"Oh!" She laughed heartily. "You are fortunate, sir. The Queen may not be considered the best in all ways, but they say the towels for the baths are more than napkin size. Meanwhile, let me advise you. Outfit while you wait, and become of the country. You look too much the pilgrim—there is Eastern dust showing through our Benton dust, and that spells of other 'dust' in your pockets. Get another hat, a flannel shirt, some coarser trousers, a pair of boots, don a gun and a swagger, say little, make few impromptu friends, win and lose without a smile or frown, if you play (but upon playing I will advise you later), pass as a surveyor, as a railroad clerk, as a Mormon—anything they choose to apply to you; and I shall hope to see you to-night."

"You shall," I assured, abashed by her raillery. "And if you will kindly tell me——"

"The meals at the Belle Marie Café are as good as any. You can see the sign from here. So adios, sir, and remember." With no mention of the Big Tent she flashed a smile at me and mingled with the other pedestrians crossing the street on diagonal course. As I had not been invited to accompany her I stood, gratefully digesting her remarks. When I turned for a final word with my two guides, they had vanished.

This I interpreted as a confession of jealous fear that I had been, in slang phrasing, "put wise." And sooth to say, I saw them again no more.

CHAPTER VI

"HIGH AND DRY"

The counsel to don a garb smacking less of the recent East struck me as sound; for although I was not the only person here in Eastern guise, nevertheless about the majority of the populace there was an easy aggressiveness that my appearance evidently lacked.

So I must hurry ere the shops closed.

"I beg your pardon. What time do the stores close, can you tell me?" I asked of the nearest bystander.

He surveyed me.

"Close? Hell!" he said. "They don't close for even a dog fight, pardner. Business runs twenty-five hours every day, seven days the week, in these diggin's."

"And where will I find a haberdashery?"

"A what? Talk English. What you want?"

"I want a—an outfit; a personal outfit."

"Blanket to moccasins? Levi's, stranger. Levi'll outfit you complete and throw in a yellow purp under the wagon."

"And where is Levi's?"

"There." And he jerked his head aside. "You could shut your eyes and spit in the doorway."

With that he rudely turned his back upon me. But sure enough, by token of the large sign "Levi's Mammoth Emporium: Liquors, Groceries and General Merchandise," I was standing almost in front of the store itself.

I entered, into the seething aisle flanked by heaped-up counters and stacked goods that bulged the partially boarded canvas walls. At last I gained position near one of the perspiring clerks and caught his eye.

"Yes, sir. You, sir? What can I do for you, sir?" He rubbed his hands alertly, on edge with a long day.

"I wish a hat, flannel shirt, a serviceable ready-made suit, boots, possibly other matters."

"We have exactly the things for you, sir. This way."

"Going out on the advance line, sir?" he asked, while I made selections.

"That is not unlikely."

"They're doing great work. Three miles of track laid yesterday; twelve so far this week. Averaging two and one-half miles a day and promising better."

"So I understand," I alleged.

"General Jack Casement is a world beater. If he could get the iron as fast as he could use it he'd build through to California without a halt. But looks now as if somewhere between would have to satisfy him. You are a surveyor, I take it?"

"Yes, I am surveying on the line along with the others," I answered. And surveying the country I was.

"You are the gentlemen who lay out the course," he complimented. "Now, is there something else, sir?"

"I need a good revolver, a belt and ammunition."

"We carry the reliable—the Colt's. That's the favorite holster gun in use out here. Please step across, sir."

He led.

"If you're not particular as to shine," he resumed, "we have a second-hand outfit that I can sell you cheap. Took it in as a deposit, and the gentleman never has called for it. Of course you're broken in to the country, but as you know a new belt and holster are apt to be viewed with suspicion and a gentleman sometimes has to draw when he'd rather not, to prove himself. This gun has been used just enough to take the roughness off the trigger pull, and it employs the metallic cartridges—very convenient. The furniture for it is O. K. And all at half price."

I was glad to find something cheap. The boots had been fifteen dollars, the hat eight, shirt and suit in proportion, and the red silk handkerchief two dollars and a half. Yes, Benton was "high."

With my bulky parcel I sought the Belle Marie Café, ate my supper, thence hastened through the gloaming to the hotel for bath and change of costume.

I had yet time to array myself, as an experiment and a lark; and that I sillily did, hurriedly tossing my old garments upon bed and floor, in order to invest with the new. The third bed was occupied when I came in; occupied on the outside by a plump, round-faced, dust-scalded man, with piggish features accentuated by his small bloodshot eyes; dressed in Eastern mode but stripped to the galluses, as was the custom. He lay upon his back, his puffy hands folded across his spherical abdomen where his pantaloons met a sweaty pink-striped shirt; and he panted wheezingly through his nose.

"Hell of a country, ain't it!" he observed in a moment. "You a stranger, too?"

"I have been here a short time, sir."

"Thought so. Jest beginnin' to peel, like me. I been here two days. What's your line?"

"I have a number of things in view," I evaded.

"Well, you don't have to tell 'em," he granted. "Thought you was a salesman. I'm from Saint Louie, myself. Sell groceries, and pasteboards on the side. Cards are the stuff. I got the best line of sure-thing stock—strippers, humps, rounds, squares, briefs and marked backs—that ever were dealt west of the Missouri. Judas Priest, but this is a roarer of a burg! What *it* ain't got I never seen—and I ain't no spring goslin', neither. I've plenty sand in my craw. You ain't been plucked yet?"

"No, sir. I never gamble."

"Wish I didn't, but my name's Jakey and I'm a good feller. Say, I'm supposed to be wise, too, but they trimmed me two hundred dollars. Now I'm gettin' out." He groaned. "Take the train in a few minutes. Dasn't risk myself on the street again. Sent my baggage down for fear I'd lose that. Say," he added, watching me, "looks like you was goin' out yourself. One of them surveyor fellers, workin' for the railroad?"

"It might be so, sir," I replied.

He half sat up.

"You'll want to throw a leg, I bet. Lemme tell you. It's a hell of a town but it's got some fine wimmen; yes, and a few straight banks, too. You're no crabber or piker; I can see that. You go to the North Star. Tell Frank that Jakey sent you. They'll treat you white. You be sure and say Jakey sent you. But for Gawd's sake keep out of the Big Tent."

"The Big Tent?" I uttered. "Why so?"

"They'll sweat you there," he groaned lugubriously. "Say, friend, could you lend me twenty dollars? You've still got your roll. I ain't a stivver. I'm busted flat."

"I'm sorry that I can't accommodate you, sir," said I. "I have no more money than will see me through—and according to your story perhaps not enough."

"I've told you of the North Star. You mention Jakey sent you. You'll make more than your twenty back, at the North Star," he urged inconsistent. "If it hadn't been for that damned Big Tent——" and he flopped with a dismal grunt.

By this time, all the while conscious of his devouring eyes, I had changed my clothing and now I stood equipped cap-a-pie, with my hat clapped at an angle, and my pantaloons in my boots, and my red silk handkerchief tastefully knotted at my throat, and my six-shooter slung; and I could scarcely deny that in my own eyes, and in his, I trusted, I was a pretty figure of a Westerner who would win the approval, as seemed to me, of My Lady in Black or of any other lady.

His reflection upon the Big Tent, however, was the fly in my ointment. Therefore, preening and adjusting with assumed carelessness I queried, in real concern:

"What about the Big Tent? Where is it? Isn't it respectable?"

"Respectable? Of course it's respectable. You don't ketch your Jakey in no place that ain't. I've a family to think of. You ain't been there? Say! There's where they all meet, in that Big Tent; all the best people, too, you bet you. But I tell you, friend——"

He did not finish. An uproar sounded above the other street clamor: a pistol shot, and another—a chorus of hoarse shouts and shrill frightened cries, the scurrying rush of feet, all in the street; and in the hall of the hotel, and the lobby below, the rush of still more feet, booted, and the din of excited voices.

My man on the bed popped with the agility of a jack-in-the-box for the window.

"A fight, a fight! Shootin' scrape!" In a single motion grabbing coat and hat he was out through the door and pelting down the hall. Overcome by the zest of the moment I pelted after, and with several others plunged as madly upon the porch. We had left the lobby deserted.

The shots had ceased. Now a baying mob ramped through the street, with jangle "Hang him! Hang him! String him up!" Borne on by a hysterical company I saw, first a figure bloody-chested and inert flat in the dust, with stooping figures trying to raise him; then, beyond, a man bareheaded, whiskered, but as white as death, hustled to and fro from clutching hands and suddenly forced in firm grips up the street, while the mob trailed after, whooping, cursing, shrieking, flourishing guns and knives and ropes. There were women as well as men in it.

All this turned me sick. From the outskirts of the throng I tramped back to my room and the bath. The hotel was quiet as if emptied; my room was vacant—and more than vacant, for of my clothing not a vestige remained! My bag also was gone. Worse yet, prompted by an inner voice that stabbed me like an icicle I was awakened to the knowledge that every cent I had possessed was in those vanished garments.

For an instant I stood paralyzed, fronting the calamity. I could not believe. It was as if the floor had swallowed my belongings. I had been absent not more than five minutes. Surely this was the room. Yes, Number Six; and the beds were familiar, their tumbled covers unaltered.

Now I held the bath-room responsible. The scoundrel in the bath had heard, had taken advantage, made a foray and hidden. Out I ran, exploring. Every room door was wide open, every apartment blank; but there was a splashing, from the bath—I listened at the threshold, gently tried the knob—and received such a cry of angry protest that it sent me to the right-about, on tiptoe. The thief was not in the bath.

My heart sank as I bolted down for the office. The clerk had reinstated himself behind the counter. He composedly greeted me, with calm voice and with eyes that noted my costume.

"You can have your bath as soon as the porter gets back from the hanging, sir," he said. "That is, unless you'd prefer to hurry up by toting your own water. The party now in will be out directly."

"Never mind the bath," I uttered, breathless, in a voice that I scarcely recognized, so piping and aghast it was. "I've been robbed—of money, clothes, baggage, everything!"

"Well, what at?" he queried, with a glimmer of a smile.

"What at? In my room, I tell you. I had just changed to try on these things; the street fight sounded; I was gone not five minutes and nevertheless the room was sacked. Absolutely sacked."

"That," he commented evenly, "is hard luck."

"Hard luck!" I hotly rejoined. "It's an outrage. But you seem remarkably cool about it, sir. What do you propose to do?"

"I?" He lifted his brows. "Nothing. They're not my valuables."

"But this is a respectable hotel, isn't it?"

"Perfectly; and no orphan asylum. We attend strictly to our business and expect our guests to attend to theirs."

"I was told that it was safe for me to leave my things in my room."

"Not by me, sir. Read that." And he called my attention to a placard that said, among other matters: "We are not responsible for property of any nature left by guests in their rooms."

"Where's the chief of police?" I demanded. "You have officers here, I hope."

"Yes, sir. The marshal is the chief of police, and he's the whole show. The provost guard from the post helps out when necessary. But you'll find the marshal at the mayor's office or else at the North Star gambling hall, three blocks up the street. I don't think he'll do you any good, though. He's not likely to bother with small matters, especially when he's dealing faro bank. He has an interest in the North Star. You'll never see your property again. Take my word for it."

"I won't? Why not?"

"You've played the gudgeon for somebody; that's all. Easiest thing in the world for a smart gentleman to slip into your room while you were absent, go through it, and make his getaway by the end of the hall, out over the kitchen roof. It's been done many a time."

"A traveling salesman saw me dressing. He went out before me but he might have doubled," I gasped. "He had one of the beds—who is he?"

"I don't know him, sir."

"A round-bellied, fat-faced man—sold groceries and playing cards."

"There is no such guest in your room, sir. You have bed Number One, bed Number Two is assigned to Mr. Bill Brady, who doubtless will be in soon. Number Three is temporarily vacant."

"The man said he was about to catch the train east," I pursued desperately. "A round-bellied, fat-faced man in pink striped shirt—"

"If he was to catch any train, that train has just pulled out."

"And who was in the bath, ten or fifteen minutes ago?"

"My wife, sir; and still there. She has to take her chances like everybody else. No, sir; you've been done. You may find your clothes, but I doubt it. You are next upon the bath list." And he became all business. "The porter will carry up the water and notify you. You are allowed twenty minutes. That is satisfactory?"

A bath, now!

"No, certainly not," I blurted. "I have no time nor inclination for a bath, at present. And," I faltered, ashamed, "I'll have to ask you to refund me the dollar and a half. I haven't a cent."

"Under the circumstances I can do that, although it is against our rules," he replied. "Here it is, sir. We wish to accommodate."

"And will you advance me twenty dollars, say, until I shall have procured funds from the East?" I ventured.

A mask fell over his face. He slightly smiled.

"No, sir; I cannot. We never advance money."

"But I've got to have money, to tide me over, man," I pleaded. "This dollar and a half will barely pay for a meal. I can give you references—"

"From Colonel Sunderson, may I ask?" His voice was poised tentatively.

"No. I never saw the Colonel before. My references are Eastern. My father—"

"As a gentleman the Colonel is O. K.," he smoothly interrupted. "I do not question his integrity, nor your father's. But we never advance money. It is against the policy of the house."

"Has my trunk come up yet?" I queried.

"Yes, sir. If you'd rather have it in your room—"

"In my room!" said I. "No! Else it might walk out the hall window, too. You have it safe?"

"Perfectly, except in case of burglary or fire. It is out of the weather. We're not responsible for theft or fire, you understand. Not in Benton."

"Good Lord!" I ejaculated, weak. "You have my trunk, you say? Very good. Will you advance me twenty dollars and keep the trunk as security? That, I think, is a sporting proposition."

He eyed me up and down.

"Are you a surveyor? Connected with the road?"

"No."

"What is your business, then?"

"I'm a damned fool," I confessed. "I'm a gudgeon—I'm a come-on. In fact, as I've said before, I'm out here looking for health, where it's high and dry." He smiled. "And high and dry I'm landed in short order. But the trunk's not empty. Will you keep it and lend me twenty dollars? I presume that trunk and contents are worth two hundred."

"I'll speak with the porter," he answered.

By the lapse of time between his departure and his return he and the gnome evidently had hefted the trunk and viewed it at all angles. Now he came back with quick step.

"Yes, sir; we'll advance you twenty dollars on your trunk. Here is the money, sir." He wrote, and passed me a slip of paper also. "And your receipt. When you pay the twenty dollars, if within thirty days, you can have your trunk."

"And if not?" I asked uncomfortably.

"We shall be privileged to dispose of it. We are not in the pawn business, but we have trunks piled to the ceiling in our storeroom, left by gentlemen in embarrassed circumstances like yours."

I never saw that trunk again, either. However, of this, more anon. At that juncture I was only too glad to get the twenty dollars, pending the time when I should be recouped from home; for I could see that to be stranded "high and dry" in Benton City of Wyoming Territory would be a dire situation. And I could not hope for much from home. It was a bitter dose to have to ask for further help. Three years returned from the war my father had scarcely yet been enabled to gather the loose ends of his former affairs.

"Now if you will direct me to the telegraph office——?" I suggested.

"The telegraph into Benton is the Union Pacific Railroad line," he informed; "and that is open to only Government and official business. If you wish to send a private dispatch you should forward it by post to Cheyenne, one hundred and seventy-five miles, where it will be put on the Overland branch line for the East by way of Denver. The rate to New York is eight dollars, prepaid."

I knew that my face fell. Eight dollars would make a large hole in my slender funds—I had been foolish not to have borrowed fifty dollars on the trunk. So I decided to write instead of telegraph; and with him watching me I endeavored to speak lightly.

"Thank you. Now where will I find the place known as the Big Tent?"

He laughed with peculiar emphasis.

"If you had mentioned the Big Tent sooner you'd have got no twenty dollars from me, sir. Not that I've anything against it, understand. It's all right, everybody goes there; perfectly legitimate. I go there myself. And you may redeem your trunk to-morrow and be buying champagne."

"I am to meet a friend at the Big Tent," I stiffly explained. "Further than that I have no business there. I know nothing whatever about it."

"I beg your pardon, sir. No offense intended. The Big Tent is highly regarded—a great place to spend a pleasant evening. All Benton indulges. I wish you the best of luck, sir. You are heeled, I see. No one will take you for a pilgrim." Despite the assertion there was a twinkle in his eye. "You will find the Big Tent one block and a half down this street. You cannot miss it."

CHAPTER VII

I GO TO RENDEZVOUS

The hotel lamps were being lighted by the gnome porter. When I stepped outside twilight had deepened into dusk, the air was almost frosty, and this main street had been made garish by its nightly illumination.

It was a strange sight, as I paused for a moment upon the plank veranda. The near vicinity resembled a fair. As if inspired by the freshness and coolness of the new air the people were trooping to and fro more restlessly than ever, and in greater numbers. All up and down the street coal-oil torches or flambeaus, ruddily embossing the heads of the players and onlookers, flared like votive braziers above the open-air gambling games; there were even smoked-chimney lamps, and candles, set on pedestals, signaling other centers. The walls of the tent store-buildings glowed spectral from the lights to be glimpsed through doorways and windows, and grotesque, gigantic figures flitted in silhouette. While through the interstices between the buildings I might see other structures, ranging from those of tolerable size to simple wall tents and makeshift shacks, eerily shadowed.

The noise had, if anything, redoubled. To the exclamations, the riotous shouts and whoops, the general gay vociferations and the footsteps of a busy people, the harangues of the barkers, the more distant puffing and shrieking of the locomotives at the railroad yards, the hammering where men and boys worked by torchlight, and now and then a revolver shot, there had been added the inciting music of stringed instruments, cymbals, and such—some in dance measures, some solo, while immediately at hand sounded the shuffling stamp of waltz, hoe-down and cotillion.

Night at Benton plainly had begun with a gusto. It stirred one's blood. It called—it summoned with such a promise of variety, of adventure, of flotsam and jetsam and shuttlecock of chances, that I, a youth with twenty-one dollars and a half at disposal, all his clothes on his back, a man's weapon at his belt, and an appointment with a lady as his future, forgetful of past and courageous in present, strode confidently, even recklessly down, as eager as one to the manners of the country born.

The mysterious allusions to the Big Tent now piqued me. It was a rendezvous, popular, I deemed, and respectable, as assured. An amusement place, judging by the talk; superior, undoubtedly, to other resorts that I may have noted. I was well equipped to test it out, for I had little to lose, even time was of no moment, and I possessed a friend at court, there, whom I had interested and who very agreeably interested me. This single factor would have glorified with a halo any tent, big or little, in Benton.

There was no need for me to inquire my way to the Big Tent. Upon pushing along down the street, beset upon my course by many sights and proffered allurements, and keenly alive to the romance of that hurly-burly of pleasure and business combined here two thousand miles west of New York, always expectant of my goal I was attracted by music again, just ahead, from an orchestra. I saw a large canvas sign—The Big Tent—suspended in the full shine of a locomotive reflector. Beneath it the people were streaming into the wide entrance to a great canvas hall.

Quickening my pace in accord with the increased pace of the throng, presently I likewise entered, unchallenged for any admission fee. Once across the threshold, I halted, taken all aback by the hubbub and the kaleidoscopic spectacle that beat upon my ears and eyes.

The interior, high ceilinged to the ridged roof, was unbroken by supports. It was lighted by two score of lamps and reflectors in brackets along the walls and hanging as chandeliers from the rafters. The floor, of planed boards, already teemed with men and women and children—along one side there was an ornate bar glittering with cut glass and silver and backed by a large plate mirror that repeated the lights, the people, the glasses, decanters and pitchers, and the figures of the white-coated, busy bartenders.

At the farther end of the room a stringed orchestra was stationed upon a platform, while to the bidding of the music women, and men with hats upon their heads and cigars in mouths, and men together, whirled in couples, so that the floor trembled to the boot heels. Scattered thickly over the intervening space there were games of chance, every description, surrounded by groups looking on or playing. Through the atmosphere blue with the smoke women, many of them lavishly costumed as if for a ball, strolled risking or responding to gallantries. The garb of the men themselves ran the scale: from the *comme il faut* of slender shoes, fashionably cut coats and pantaloons, and modish cravats, through the campaign uniforms of army officers and enlisted men, to the frontier corduroy and buckskin of surveyors and adventurers, the flannel shirts, red, blue and gray, the jeans and cowhide boots of trainmen, teamsters, graders, miners, and all.

From nearly every waist dangled a revolver. I remarked that not a few of the women displayed little weapons as in bravado.

What with the music, the stamp of the dancers, the clink of glasses and the ice in pitchers, the rattle of dice, the slap of cards and currency, the announcements of the dealers, the clap-trap of barkers and monte spielers, the general chatter of voices, one such as I, a newcomer, scarcely knew which way to turn.

Altogether this was an amusement palace which, though rough of exterior, eclipsed the best of the Bowery and might be found elsewhere, I imagined, not short of San Francisco.

From the jostle of the doorway to pick out upon the floor any single figure and follow it was well-nigh impossible. Not seeing my Lady in Black, at first sight—not being certain of her, that is, for there were a number of black dresses—I moved on in. It might be that she was among the dancers, where, as I could determine by the vista, beauty appeared to be whirling around in the embrace of the whiskered beast.

Then, as I advanced resolutely among the gaming tables, I felt a cuff upon the shoulder and heard a bluff voice in my ear.

“Hello, old hoss. How are tricks by this time?”

Facing about quickly with apprehension of having been spotted by another capper, if not Bill Brady himself (for the voice was not Colonel Sunderson’s unctuous tones) I saw Jim of the Sidney station platform and the railway coach fracas.

He was grinning affably, apparently none the worse for wear save a slightly swollen lower lip; he seemed in good humor.

“Shake,” he proffered, extending his hand. “No hard feelin’s here. I’m no Injun. You knocked the red-eye out o’ me.”

I shook hands with him, and again he slapped me upon the shoulder. “Hardly knowed you in that new rig. Now you’re talkin’. That’s sense. Well; how you comin’ on?”

“First rate,” I assured, not a little nonplussed by this greeting from a man whom I had knocked down, tipsy drunk, only a few hours before. But evidently he was a seasoned customer.

“Bucked the tiger a leetle, I reckon?” And he leered cunningly.

“No; I rarely gamble.”

“Aw, tell that to the marines.” Once more he jovially clapped me. “A young gent like you has to take a fling now and then. Hell, this is Benton, where everything goes and nobody the worse for it. You bet yuh! Trail along with me. Let’s likker. Then I’ll show you the ropes. I like your style. Yes, sir; I know a man when I see him.” And he swore freely.

“Another time, sir,” I begged off. “I have an engagement this evening—”

“O’ course you have. Don’t I know that, too, by Gawd? The when, where and who? Didn’t she tell me to keep my eyes skinned for you, and to cotton to you when you come in? We’ll find her, after we likker up.”

“She did?”

“Why not? Ain’t I a friend o’ hern? You bet! Finest little woman in Benton. Trail to the trough along with me, pardner, and name your favor-ite. I’ve got a thirst like a Sioux buck with a robe to trade.”

“I’d rather not drink, thank you,” I essayed; but he would have none of it. He seized me by the arm and hustled me on.

“O’ course you’ll drink. Any gent I ax to drink has gotto drink. Name your pizen—make it champagne, if that’s your brand. But the drinks are on me.”

So willy-nilly I was brought to the bar, where the line of men already loafing there made space.

"Straight goods and the best you've got," my self-appointed pilot blared. "None o' your agency whiskey, either. What's yours?" he asked of me.

"The same as yours, sir," I bravely replied.

With never a word the bartender shoved bottle and glasses to us. Jim rather unsteadily filled; I emulated, but to scantier measure.

"Here's how," he volunteered. "May you never see the back of your neck."

"Your health," I responded.

We drank. The stuff may have been pure; at least it was stout and cut fiery way down my unwonted throat; the one draught infused me with a swagger and a sudden rosy view of life through a temporary mist of watering eyes.

"A-ah! That puts guts into a man," quoth Jim. "Shall we have another? One more?"

"Not now. The next shall be on me. Let's look around," I gasped.

"We'll find her," he promised. "Take a stroll. I'll steer you right. Have a seegar, anyway."

As smoking vied with drinking, here in the Big Tent where even the dancers cavorted with lighted cigars in their mouths, I saw fit to humor him.

"Cigars it shall be, then. But I'll pay." And to my nod the bartender set out a box, from which we selected at twenty-five cents each. With my own "seegar" cocked up between my lips, and my revolver adequately heavy at my belt, I suffered the guidance of the importunate Jim.

We wended leisurely among games of infinite variety: keno, rondo coolo, poker, faro, roulette, monte, chuck-a-luck, wheels of fortune—advertised, some, by their barkers, but the better class (if there is such a distinction) presided over by remarkably quiet, white-faced, nimble-fingered, steady-eyed gentry in irreproachable garb running much to white shirts, black pantaloons, velvet waistcoats, and polished boots, and diamonds and gold chains worn unaffectedly; low-voiced gentry, these, protected, it would appear, mainly by their lookouts perched at their sides with eyes alert to read faces and to watch the play.

We had by no means completed the tour, interrupted by many jests and nods exchanged between Jim and sundry of the patrons, when we indeed met My Lady. She detached herself, as if cognizant of our approach, from a little group of four or five standing upon the floor; and turned for me with hand outstretched, a gratifying flush upon her spirited face.

"You are here, then?" she greeted.

I made a leg, with my best bow, not omitting to remove hat and cigar, while agreeably conscious of her approving gaze.

"I am here, madam, in the Big Tent."

Her small warm hand acted as if unreservedly mine, for the moment. About her there was a tingling element of the friendly, even of the intimate. She was a haven in a strange coast.

"Told you I'd find him, didn't I?" Jim asserted—the bystanders listening curiously. "There he was, lookin' as lonesome as a two-bit piece on a poker table in a sky-limit game. So we had a drink and a seegar, and been makin' the grand tower."

"You got your outfit, I see," she smiled.

"Yes. Am I correct?"

"You have saved yourself annoyance. You'll do," she nodded. "Have you played yet? Win, or lose?"

"I did not come to play, madam," said I. "Not at table, that is." Whereupon I must have returned her gaze so glowingly as to embarrass her. Yet she was not displeased; and in that costume and with that liquor still coursing through my veins I felt equal to any retort.

"But you should play. You are heeled?"

"The best I could procure." I let my hand rest casually upon my revolver butt.

She laughed merrily. There were smiles aside.

"Oh, no; I didn't mean that. You are heeled for all to see. I meant, you have funds? You didn't come here too light, did you?"

"I am prepared for all emergencies, madam, certainly," I averred with proper dignity. Not for the world would I have confessed otherwise. Sooth to say, I had the sensation of boundless wealth. The affair at the hotel did not bother me, now. Here in the Big Tent prosperity reigned. Money, money, money was passing back and forth, carelessly shoved out and carelessly pocketed or piled up, while the band played and the people laughed and drank and danced and bragged and staked, and laughed again.

"That is good. Shall we walk a little? And when you play—come here." We stepped apart from the listeners. "When you play, follow the lead of Jim. He'll not lose, and I intend that you shan't, either. But you must play, for the sport of it. Everybody games, in Benton."

"So I judge, madam," I assented. "Under your chaperonage I am ready to take any risks, the gaming table being among the least."

"Prettily said, sir," she complimented. "And you won't lose. No," she repeated suggestively, "you won't lose, with me looking out for you. Jim bears you no ill will. He recognizes a man when he meets him, even when the proof is uncomfortable."

"For that little episode on the train I ask no reward, madam," said I.

"Of course not." Her tone waxed impatient. "However, you're a stranger in Benton and strangers do not always fare well." In this she spoke the truth. "As a resident I claim the honors. Let us be old acquaintances. Shall we walk? Or would you rather dance?"

"I'd cut a sorry figure dancing in boots," said I. "Therefore I'd really prefer to walk, if all the same to you."

"Thank you for having mercy on my poor feet. Walk we will."

"May I get you some refreshment?" I hazarded. "A lemonade—or something stronger?"

"Not for you, sir; not again," she laughed. "You are, as Jim would say, 'fortified.' And I shall need all my wits to keep you from being tolled away by greater attractions."

With that, she accepted my arm. We promenaded, Jim sauntering near. And as she emphatically was the superior of all other women upon the floor I did not fail to dilate with the distinction accorded me: felt it in the glances, the deference and the ready make-way which attended upon our progress. Frankly to say, possibly I strutted—as a young man will when "fortified" within and without and elevated from the station of nondescript stranger to that of favored beau.

Whereas an hour before I had been crushed and beggarly, now I turned out my toes and stepped bravely—my twenty-one dollars in pocket, my six-shooter at belt, a red 'kerchief at throat, the queen of the hall on my arm, and my trunk all unnecessary to my well-being.

Thus in easy fashion we moved amidst eyes and salutations from the various degrees of the company. She made no mention of any husband, which might have been odd in the East but did not impress me as especially odd here in the democratic Far West. The women appeared to have an independence of action.

"Shall we risk a play or two?" she proposed. "Are you acquainted with three-card monte?"

"Indifferently, madam," said I. "But I am green at all gambling devices."

"You shall learn," she encouraged lightly. "In Benton as in Rome, you know. There is no disgrace attached to laying down a dollar here and there—we all do it. That is part of our amusement, in Benton." She halted. "You are game, sir? What is life but a series of chances? Are you disposed to win a little and flout the danger of losing?"

"I am in Benton to win," I valiantly asserted. "And if under your direction, so much the quicker. What first, then? The three-card monte?"

"It is the simplest. Faro would be beyond you yet. Rondo coolo is boisterous and confusing—and as for poker, that is a long session of nerves, while chuck-a-luck, though all in the open, is for children and fools. You might throw the dice a thousand times and never cast a lucky combination. Roulette is as bad. The percentage in favor of the bank in a square game is forty per cent. better than stealing. I'll initiate you on monte. Are your eyes quick?"

"For some things," I replied meaningly.

She conducted me to the nearest monte game, where the "spieler"—a smooth-faced lad of not more than nineteen—sat behind his three-legged little table, green covered, and idly shifting the cards about maintained a rather bored flow of conversational incitement to bets.

As happened, he was illy patronized at the moment. There were not more than three or four onlookers, none risking but all waiting apparently upon one another.

At our arrival the youth glanced up with the most innocent pair of long-lashed brown eyes that I ever had seen. A handsome boy he was.

"Hello, Bob."

He smiled, with white teeth.

"Hello yourself."

My Lady and he seemed to know each other.

"How goes it to-night, Bob?"

"Slow. There's no nerve or money in this camp any more. She's a dead one."

"I'll not have Benton slandered," My Lady gaily retorted. "We'll buck your game, Bob. But you must be easy on us. We're green yet."

Bob shot a quick glance at me—in one look had read me from hat to boots. He had shrewder eyes than their first languor intimated.

"Pleased to accommodate you, I'm sure," he answered. "The greenies stand as good a show at this board as the profesh."

"Will you play for a dollar?" she challenged.

"I'll play for two bits, to-night. Anything to start action." He twisted his mouth with ready chagrin. "I'm about ripe to bet against myself."

She fumbled at her reticule, but I was beforehand.

"No, no." And I fished into my pocket. "Allow me. I will furnish the funds if you will do the playing."

"I choose the card?" said she. "That is up to you, sir. You are to learn."

"By watching, at first," I protested. "We should be partners."

"Well," she consented, "if you say so. Partners it is. A lady brings luck, but I shall not always do your playing for you, sir. That kind of partnership comes to grief."

"I am hopeful of playing on my own score, in due time," I responded. "As you will see."

"What's the card, Bob? We've a dollar on it, as a starter."

He eyed her, while facing the cards up.

"The ace. You see it—the ace, backed by ten and deuce. Here it is. All ready?" He turned them down, in order; methodically, even listlessly moved them to and fro, yet with light, sure, well-nigh bewildering touch. Suddenly lifted his hands. "All set. A dollar you don't face up the ace at first try."

She laughed, bantering.

"Oh, Bob! You're too easy. I wonder you aren't broke. You're no monte spieler. Is this your best?"

And I believed that I myself knew which card was the ace.

"You hear me, and there's my dollar." He coolly waited.

"Not yours; ours. Will you make it five?"

"One is my limit on this throw. You named it."

"Oho!" With a dart of hand she had turned up the middle card, exposing the ace spot, as I had anticipated. She swept the two dollars to her.

"Adios," she bade.

He smiled, indulgent.

"So soon? Don't I get my revenge? You, sir." And he appealed to me. "You see how easy it is. I'll throw you a turn for a dollar, two dollars, five dollars—anything to combine business and pleasure. Whether I win or lose I don't care. You'll follow the lead of the lady? What?"

I was on fire to accept, but she stayed me.

"Not now. I'm showing him around, Bob. You'll get your revenge later. Good-bye. I've drummed up trade for you."

As if inspired by the winning several of the bystanders, some newly arrived, had money in their hands, to stake. So we strolled on; and I was conscious that the youth's brown eyes briefly flicked after us with a peculiar glint.

"Yours," she said, extending the coins to me.

I declined.

"No, indeed. It is part of my tuition. If you will play I will stake."

She also declined.

"I can't have that. You will at least take your own money back."

"Only for another try, madam," I assented.

"In that case we'll find a livelier game yonder," said she. "Bob's just a lazy boy. His game is a piker game. He's too slow to learn from. Let us watch a real game."

CHAPTER VIII

I STAKE ON THE QUEEN

Jim had disappeared; until when we had made way to another monte table there he was, his hands in his pockets, his cigar half smoked.

More of a crowd was here; the voice of the spieler more insistent, yet low-pitched and businesslike. He was a study—a square-shouldered, well set-up, wiry man of olive complexion, finely chiseled features save for nose somewhat cruelly beaked, of short black moustache, dead black long wavy hair, and, placed boldly wide, contrastive hard gray eyes that lent atmosphere of coldness to his face. His hat was pulled down over his forehead, he held an unlighted cigar between his teeth while he mechanically spoke and shifted the three cards (a diamond flashing from a finger) upon the baize-covered little table.

Money had been wagered. He had just raked in a few notes, adding them to his pile. His monotone droned on.

"Next, ladies and gentlemen. Sometimes I win, sometimes I lose. That is my business. The play is yours. You may think I have two chances to your one; that is not so. You make the choice. Always the queen, always the queen. You have only to watch the queen, one card. I have to watch three cards. You have your two eyes, I have my two hands. You spot the card only when you think you can. I meet all comers. It is an even gamble."

Jim remarked us as we joined.

"How you comin' now?" he greeted of me.

"We won a dollar," My Lady responded.

"Not I. She did the choosing," I corrected.

"But you would have chosen the same card, you said," she prompted. "You saw how easy it was."

"Easy if you know how," Jim asserted. "Think to stake a leetle here? I've been keepin' cases and luck's breaking ag'in the bank to-night, by gosh. Made several turns, myself, already."

"We'll wait a minute till we get his system," she answered.

"Are you watching, ladies and gentlemen?" bade the dealer, in that even tone. "You see the eight of clubs, the eight of spades, the queen of hearts. The queen is your card. My hand against your eyes, then. You are set? There you are. Pick the queen, some one of you. Put your money on the queen of hearts. You can turn the card yourself. What? Nobody? Don't be pikers. Let us have a little sport. Stake a dollar. Why, you'd toss a dollar down your throat—you'd lay a dollar on a cockroach race—you'd bet that much on a yellow dog if you owned him, just to show your spirit. And here I'm offering you a straight proposition."

With a muttered "I'll go you another turn, Mister," Jim stepped closer and planked down a dollar. The dealer cast a look up at him as with pleased surprise.

"You, sir? Very good. You have spirit. Money talks. Here is my dollar. Now, to prove to these other people what a good guesser you are, which is the queen?"

"Here," Jim said confidently; and sure enough he faced up the queen of hearts.

"The money's yours. You never earned a dollar quicker, I'll wager, friend," the dealer acknowledged, imperturbable—for he evidently was one who never evinced the least emotion, whether he won or lost. "Very good. Now——"

From behind him a man—a newcomer to the spot, who looked like any respectable Eastern merchant, being well dressed and grave of face—touched him upon the shoulder. He turned ear; while he inclined farther they whispered together, and I witnessed an arm steal swiftly forward at my side, and a thumb and finger slightly bend up the extreme corner of the queen. The hand and arm vanished; when the dealer fronted us again the queen was apparently just as before. Only we who had seen would have marked the bent corner.

The act had been so clever and so audacious that I fairly held my breath. But the gambler resumed his flow of talk, while he fingered the cards as if totally unaware that they had been tampered with.

"Now, again, ladies and gentlemen. You see how it is done. You back your eyes, and you win. I find that I shall have to close early to-night. Make your hay while the sun shines. Who'll be in on this turn? Watch the queen of hearts. I place her here. I coax the three cards a little——" he gave a swift flourish. "There they are."

His audience hesitated, as if fearful of a trick, for the bent corner of the queen, raising this end a little, was plain to us who knew. It was absurdly plain.

"I'll go you another, Mister," Jim responded. "I'll pick out the queen ag'in for a dollar."

The gambler smiled grimly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, pshaw, sir. These are small stakes. You'll never get rich at that rate and neither shall I."

"I reckon I can set my own limit," Jim grumbled.

"Yes, sir. But let's have action. Who'll join this gentleman in his guess? Who'll back his luck? He's a winner, I admit that."

The gray eyes dwelt upon face and face of our half circle; and still I, too, hesitated, although my dollar was burning a hole in my pocket.

My Lady whispered to me.

"All's fair in love and war. Here—put this on, with yours, for me." She slipped a dollar of her own into my hand.

Another man stepped forward. He was, I judged, a teamster. His clothes, of flannel shirt, belted trousers and six-shooter and dusty boots, so indicated. And his beard was shaggy and unkempt, almost covering his face underneath his drooping slouch hat.

"I'll stake you a dollar," he said.

"Two from me," I heard myself saying, and I saw my hand depositing them.

"You're all on this gentleman's card, remember?"

We nodded. The bearded man tipped me a wink.

"You, sir, then, turn the queen if you can," the gambler challenged of Jim.

With quick movement Jim flopped the bent-corner card, and the queen herself seemed to wink jovially at us.

The gambler exclaimed.

"By God, gentlemen, but you've skinned me again. I'm clumsy to-night. I'd better quit." And he scarcely varied his level tone despite the chuckles of the crowd. "You must let me try once more. But I warn you, I want action. I'm willing to meet any sum you stack up against me, if it's large enough to spell action. Shall we go another round or two before I close up?" He gathered the three cards. "You see the queen—my unlucky queen of hearts. Here she is." He stowed the card between thumb and finger. "Here are the other two." He held them up in his left hand—the eight of clubs, the eight of spades. He transferred them—with his rapid motion he strewed the three. "Choose the queen. I put the game to you fair and square. There are the cards. Maybe you can read their backs. That's your privilege." He fixed his eyes upon the teamster. "You, sir; where's your money, half of which was mine?" He glanced at Jim. "And you, sir? You'll follow your luck?" Lastly he surveyed me with a flash of steely bravado. "And you, young gentleman. You came in before. I dare you."

The bent corner was more pronounced than ever, as if aggravated by the manipulations. It could not possibly be mistaken by the knowing. And a sudden shame possessed me—a glut of this crafty advantage to which I was stooping; an advantage gained not through my own wit, either, but through the dishonorable trick of another.

"There's your half from me, if you want it," said Jim, slapping down two dollars. "This is my night to howl."

The teamster backed him.

"I'm on the same card," said he.

And not to be outdone—urged, I thought, by a pluck at my sleeve—I boldly followed with my own two dollars, reasoning that I was warranted in partially recouping, for Benton owed me much.

The gambler laughed shortly. His gaze, cool and impertinent, enveloped our front. He leaned back, defiant.

"Give me a chance, gentlemen. I shall not proceed with the play for that picayune sum before me. This is my last deal and I've been loser. It's make or break. Who else will back that gentleman's luck? I've placed the cards the best I know how. But six or eight dollars is no money to me. It doesn't pay for floor space. Is nobody else in? What? Come, come; let's have some sport. I dare you. This time is my revenge or your good fortune. Play up, gentlemen. Don't be crabbers." He smiled sarcastically; his words stung. "This isn't pussy-in-a-corner. It's a game of wits. You wouldn't bet unless you felt cock-sure of winning. I'll give you one minute, gentlemen, before calling all bets off unless you make the pot worth while."

The threat had effect. Nobody wished to let the marked card get away. That was not human nature. Bets rained in upon the table—bank notes, silver half dollars, the rarer dollar coins, and the common greenbacks. He met each wager, while he sat negligent and half smiled and chewed his unlighted cigar.

"This is the last round, gentlemen," he reminded. "Are you all in? Don't leave with regrets. You," he said, direct to me. "Are you in such short circumstances that you have no spunk? Why did you come here, sir, if not to win? Why, the stakes you play would not buy refreshment for the lady!"

That was too much. I threw scruples aside. He had badgered me—he was there to win if he could; I now was hot with the same design. I extracted my twenty-dollar note, and deaf to a quickly breathed "Wait the turn" from My Lady I planked it down before him. She should know me for a man of decision.

"There, sir," said I. "I am betting twenty-two dollars in all, which is my limit to-night, on the same right-end card as I stand."

I thought that I had him. Forthwith he straightened alertly, spoke tartly.

"The game is closed, gentlemen. Remember, you are wagering on the first turn. There are no splits in monte. Not at this table. Our friend says the right-end card. You, sir," and he addressed Jim. "They are backing you. Which do you say is the queen? Lay your finger on her."

Jim so did, with a finger stubby, and dirty under the nail.

"That is the card, is it? You are agreed?" he queried us, sweeping his cold gray eyes from face to face. "We'll have no crabbing."

We nodded, intently eying the card, fearful yet, some of us, that it might be denied us.

"You, sir, then." And he addressed me. "You are the heaviest better. Suppose you turn the card for yourself and those other gentlemen."

I obediently reached for it. My hand trembled. There were sixty or seventy dollars upon the table, and my own contribution was my last cent. As I fumbled I felt the strain of bodies pressing

against mine, and heard the hiss of feverish breaths, and a foolish laugh or two. Nevertheless the silence seemed overpowering.

I turned the card—the card with the bent corner, of which I was as certain as of my own name; I faced it up, confidently, my capital already doubled; and amidst a burst of astonished cries I stared dumbfounded.

It was the eight of clubs! My fingers left it as though it were a snake. It was the eight of clubs! Where I had seen, in fancy, the queen of hearts, there lay like a changeling the eight of clubs, with corner bent as only token of the transformation.

The crowd elbowed about me. With rapid movement the gambler raked in the bets—a slender hand flashed by me—turned the next card. The queen that was, after all.

The gambler darkened, gathering the pasteboards.

“We can’t both win, gentlemen,” he said, tone passionless. “But I am willing to give you one more chance, from a new deck.”

What the response was I did not know, nor care. My ears drummed confusedly, and seeing nothing I pushed through into the open, painfully conscious that I was flat penniless and that instead of having played the knave I had played the fool, for the queen of hearts.

The loss of some twenty dollars might have been a trivial matter to me once—I had at times cast that sum away as vainly as Washington had cast a dollar across the Potomac; but here I had lost my all, whether large or small; and not only had I been bilked out of it—I had bilked myself out of it by sinking, in pretended smartness, below the level of a more artful dodger.

I heard My Lady speaking beside me.

“I’m so sorry.” She laid hand upon my sleeve. “You should have been content with small sums, or followed my lead. Next time—”

“There’ll be no next time,” I blurted. “I am cleaned out.”

“You don’t mean—?”

“I was first robbed at the hotel. Now here.”

“No, no!” she opposed. Jim sidled to us. “That was a bungle, Jim.”

He ruefully scratched his head.

“A wrong steer for once, I reckon. I warn’t slick enough. Too much money on the table. But it looked like the card; I never took my eyes off’n it. We’ll try ag’in, and switch to another layout. By thunder, I want revenge on this joint and I mean to get it. So do you, don’t you, pardner?” he appealed to me.

As with mute, sickly denial I turned away it seemed to me that I sensed a shifting of forms at the monte table—caught the words “You watch here a moment”; and close following, a slim white hand fell heavily upon My Lady’s shoulder. It whirled her about, to face the gambler. His smooth olive countenance was dark with a venom of rage incarnate that poisoned the air; his syllables cracked.

“You devil! I heard you, at the table. You meddle with my come-ons, will you?” And he slapped her with open palm, so that the impact smacked. “Now get out o’ here or I’ll kill you.”

She flamed red, all in a single rush of blood.

“Oh!” she breathed. Her hand darted for the pocket in her skirt, but I sprang between the two. Forgetful of my revolver, remembering only what I had witnessed—a woman struck by a man—with a blow I sent him reeling backward.

He recovered; every vestige of color had left his face, except for the spot where I had landed; his hat had sprung aside from the shock—his gray eyes, contrasted with his black hair, fastened upon my eyes almost deliberately and his upper lip lifted over set white teeth. With lightning movement he thrust the fingers of his right hand into his waistcoat pocket.

I heard a rush of feet, a clamor of voices; and all the while, which seemed interminable, I was tugging, awkward with deadly peril, at my revolver. His fingers had whipped free of the pocket, I glimpsed as with second sight (for my eyes were held strongly by his) the twin little black muzzles of a derringer concealed in his palm; a spasm of fear pinched me; they spurted, with ringing report, but just at the instant a flanneled arm knocked his arm up, the ball had sped ceiling-ward and the teamster of the gaming table stood against him, revolver barrel boring into his very stomach.

“Stand pat, Mister. I call you.”

In a trice all entry of any unpleasant emotion vanished from my antagonist’s handsome face, leaving it olive tinted, cameo, inert. He steadied a little, and smiled, surveying the teamster’s visage, close to his.

“You have me covered, sir. My hand is in the discard.” He composedly tucked the derringer into his waistcoat pocket again. “That gentleman struck me; he was about to draw on me, and by rights I might have killed him. My apologies for this little disturbance.”

He bestowed a challenging look upon me, a hard unforgiving look upon the lady; with a bow he turned for his hat, and stepping swiftly went back to his table.

Now in the reaction I fought desperately against a trembling of the knees; there were

congratulations, a hubbub of voices assailing me—and the arm of the teamster through mine and his bluff invitation:

“Come and have a drink.”

“But you’ll return. You must. I want to speak with you.”

It was My Lady, pleading earnestly. I still could scarcely utter a word; my brain was in a smother. My new friend moved me away from her. He answered for me.

“Not until we’ve had a little confab, lady. We’ve got matters of importance jest at present.”

I saw her bite her lips, as she helplessly flushed; her blue eyes implored me, but I had no will of my own and I certainly owed a measure of courtesy to this man who had saved my life.

CHAPTER IX

I ACCEPT AN OFFER

We found a small table, one of the several devoted to refreshments for the dancers, in a corner and unoccupied. The affair upon the floor was apparently past history—if it merited even that distinction. The place had resumed its program of dancing, playing and drinking as though after all a pistol shot was of no great moment in the Big Tent.

“You had a narrow shave,” my friend remarked as we seated ourselves—I with a sigh of gratitude for the opportunity. “If you can’t draw quicker you’d better keep your hands in your pockets. Let’s have a dose of t’rant’lar juice to set you up.” Whereupon he ordered whiskey from a waiter.

“But I couldn’t stand by and see him strike a woman,” I defended.

“Wall, fists mean guns, in these diggin’s. Where you from?”

“Albany, New York State.”

“I sized you up as a pilgrim. You haven’t been long in camp, either, have you?”

“No. But plenty long enough,” I miserably replied.

“Long enough to be plucked, eh?”

We had drunk the whiskey. Under its warming influence my tongue loosened. Moreover there was something strong and kindly in the hearty voice and the rough face of this rudely clad plainsman, black bearded to the piercing black eyes.

“Yes; of my last cent.”

“All at gamblin’, mebbe?”

“No. Only a little, but that strapped me. The hotel had robbed me of practically everything else.”

“Had, had it? Wall, what’s the story?”

I told him of the hotel part; and he nodded.

“Shore. You can’t hold the hotel responsible. You can leave stuff loose in regular camp; nobody enters flaps without permission. But a room is a different proposition. I’d rather take chances among Injuns than among white men. Why, you could throw in with a Sioux village for a year and not be robbed permanent if the chief thought you straight; but in a white man’s town—hell! Now, how’d you get tangled up with this other outfit?”

“Which?” I queried.

“That brace outfit I found you with.”

“The fellow is a stranger to me, sir,” said I. “I simply was foolish enough to stake what little I had on a sure thing—I was bamboozled into following the lead of the rest of you,” I reminded. “Now I see that there was a trick, although I don’t yet understand. After that the fellow assaulted the lady, my companion, and you stepped in—for which, sir, I owe you more thanks than I can utter.”

“A trick, you think?” He opened his hairy mouth for a gust of short laughter. “My Gawd, boy! We were nicely took in, and we deserved it. When you buck the tiger, look out for his claws. But I reckoned he’d postpone the turn till next time. He would have, if you fellers hadn’t come down so handsome with the dust. I stood pat, at that. So, you notice, did the capper, your other friend.”

“The capper? Which was he, sir?”

“Why, Lord bless you, son. You’re the greenest thing this side of Omyha. A capper touched him on the shoulder, a capper bent that there card, a capper tolled you all on with a dollar or two, and another capper fed the come-ons to his table. Aye, she’s a purty piece. Where’d you meet up

with her?"

"With her?" I gasped.

"Yes, yes. The woman; the main steerer. That purty piece who damn nigh lost you your life as well as losin' you your money."

"You mean the lady with the blue eyes, in black?"

"Yes, the golden hair. Lady! Oh, pshaw! Where'd she hook you? At the door?"

"You shall not speak of her in that fashion, sir," I answered. "We were together on the train from Omaha. She has been kindness itself. The only part she has played to-night, as far as I can see, was to chaperon me here in the Big Tent; and whatever small winnings I had made, for amusement, was due to her and the skill of an acquaintance named Jim."

"Jim Daily, yep. O' course. And she befriended you. Why, d'you suppose?"

"Perhaps because I was of some assistance to her on the way out West. I had a little setto with Mr. Daily, when he annoyed her while he was drunk. But sobered up, he seemed to wish to make amends."

"Oh, Lord!" My friend's mouth gaped. "Amends? Yep. That's his nature. Might call it mendin' his pocket and his lip. And you don't yet savvy that your 'lady' 's Montoyo's wife—his woman, anyhow?"

"Montoyo? Who's Montoyo?"

"The monte thrower. That same spieler who trimmed us," he rapped impatiently.

The light that broke upon me dazed. My heart pounded. I must have looked what I felt: a fool.

"No," I stammered in my thin small voice of the hotel. "I imagined—I had reason to suspect that she might be married. But I didn't know to whom."

"Married? Wall, mebbe. Anyhow, she's bound to Montoyo. He's a breed, some Spanish, some white, like as not some Injun. A devil, and as slick as they make 'em. She's a power too white for him, herself, but he uses her and some day he'll kill her. You're not the fust gudgeon she's hooked, to feed to him. Why, she's known all back down the line. They two have been followin' end o' track from North Platte, along with Hell on Wheels. Had a layout in Omyha, and in Denver. They're not the only double-harness outfit hyar, either. You can meet a friendly woman any time, but this one got hold you fust."

I writhed to the words.

"And that fellow Jim?" I asked.

"He's jest a common roper. He alluz wins, to encourage suckers like you. 'Tisn't his money he plays with; he's on commish. Beginnin' to understand, ain't you?"

"But the bent card?" I insisted. "That is the mystery. It was the queen. What became of the queen?"

"Ho ho!" And again he laughed. "A cute trick, shore. That's what we got for bein' so plumb crooked ourselves. Why, o' course it was the queen, once. You see 'twas this way. That she-male and the capper in cahoots with her tolled you on straight for Montoyo's table; teased you a leetle along the trail, no doubt, to keep you interested." I nodded. "They promised you winnin's, easy winnin's. Then at Montoyo's table the game was a leetle slack; so one capper touched him on the shoulder and another marked the card. O' course a gambler like him wouldn't be up to readin' his own cards. Oh, no! You sports were the smart ones."

"How about yourself?" I retorted, nettled.

"Me? I know them tricks, but I reckoned I was smart, too. Then that capper Jim led out and we all made a small winnin', to prove the system. And Montoyo, he gets tired o' losin'—but still he's blind to a card that everybody else can see, and he calls for real play so he can go broke or even up. I didn't look for much of a deal on that throw myself. Usu'ly it comes less promisc'yus, with the gudgeon stakin' the big roll, and then I pull out. But you-all slapped down the stuff in a stampede, sartin you had him buffaloeed. On his last shuffle he'd straightened the queen and turned down the eight, usin' an extra finger or two. Them card sharps have six fingers on each hand and several in their sleeve, and he was slicker'n I thought. He might have refused all bets and got your mad up for the next pass; but you'd come down as handsome as you would, he figgered. So he let go. 'Twas fair and squar', robber eat robber, and we none of us have any call to howl. But you mind my word: Don't aim to put something over on a professional gamblin' sharp. It can't be done. As for me, I broke even and I alluz expect to lose. When I look to be skinned I leave most my dust behind me where I can't get at it."

Now I saw all, or enough. I had received no more than I deserved. Such a wave of nausea surged into my mouth—but he was continuing.

"Jest why he struck his woman I don't know. Do you?"

"Yes. She had cautioned me and he must have heard her. And she showed which was the right card. I don't understand that."

"To save her face, and egg you on. Shore! Your twenty dollars was nothin'. She didn't know you were busted. Next time she'd have steered you to the tune of a hundred or two and cleaned you proper. You hadn't been worked along, yet, to the right pitch o' smartness. Montoyo must ha'

mistook her. She encouraged you, didn't she?"

"Yes, she did." I arose unsteadily, clutching the table. "If you'll excuse me, sir, I think I'd better go. I—I—I thank you. I only wish I'd met you before. You are at liberty to regard me as a saphead. Good-night, sir."

"No! Hold on. Sit down, sit down, man. Have another drink."

"I have had enough. In fact, since arriving in Benton I've had more than enough of everything." But I sat down.

"Where were you goin'?"

"To the hotel. I am privileged to stay there until to-morrow. Thank Heaven I was obliged to pay in advance."

"Alluz safer," said he. "And then what?"

"To-morrow?"

"Yes. To-morrow."

"I don't know. I must find employment, and earn enough to get home with." To write for funds was now impossible through very shame. "Home's the only place for a person of my greenness."

"Why did you come out clear to end o' track?" he inquired.

"I was ordered by my physician to find a locality in the Far West, high and dry." I gulped at his smile. "I've found it and shall go home to report."

"With your tail between your legs?" He clapped me upon the shoulder. "Stiffen your back. We all have to pay for eddication. You're not wolf meat yet, by a long shot. You've still got your hair, and that's more than some men I know of. You look purty healthy, too. Don't turn for home; stick it out."

"I shall have to stick it out until I raise the transportation," I reminded. "My revolver should tide me over, for a beginning."

"Sell it?" said he. "Sell your breeches fust. Either way you'd be only half dressed. No!"

"It would take me a little way. I'll not stay in Benton—not to be pointed at as a dupe."

"Oh, pshaw!" he laughed. "Nobody'll remember you, specially if you're known to be broke. Busted, you're of no use to the camp. Let me make you a proposition. I believe you're straight goods. Can't believe anything else, after seein' your play and sizin' you up. Let me make you a proposition. I'm on my way to Salt Lake with a bull outfit and I'm in need of another man. I'll give you a dollar and a half a day and found, and it will be good honest work, too."

"You are teaming west, you mean?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Freightin' across. Mule-whackin'."

"But I never drove spans in my life; and I'm not in shape to stand hardships," I faltered. "I'm here for my health. I have——"

"Stow all that, son," he interrupted more tolerantly than was my due. "Forget your lungs, lights and liver and stand up a full-size man. In my opinion you've had too much doctorin'. A month with a bull train, and a diet of beans and sowbelly will put a linin' in your in'ards and a heart in your chest. When you've slept under a wagon to Salt Lake and l'arned to sling a bull whip and relish your beans burned, you can look anybody in the eye and tell him to go to hell, if you like. This roarin' town life—it's no life for you. It's a bobtail, wide open in the middle. I'll be only too glad to get away on the long trail myself. So you come with me," and he smiled winningly. "I hate to see you ruined by women and likker. Mule-skinmin' ain't all beer and skittles, as they say; but this job'll tide you over, anyhow, and you'll come out at the end with money in your pocket, if you choose, and no doctor's bill to pay."

"Sir," I said gratefully, "may I think it over to-night, and let you know in the morning? Where will I find you?"

"The train's camped near the wagon trail, back at the river. You can't miss it. It's mainly a Mormon train, that some of us Gentiles have thrown in with. Ask for Cap'n Hyrum Adams' train. My name's Jenks—George Jenks. You'll find me there. I'll hold open for you till ten o'clock—yes, till noon. I mean that you shall come. It'll be the makin' of you."

I arose and gave him my hand; shook with him.

"And I hope to come," I asserted with glow of energy. "You've set me upon my feet, Mr. Jenks, for I was desperate. You're the first honest man I've met in Benton."

"Tut, tut," he reproved. "There are others. Benton's not so bad as you think it. But you were dead ripe; the buzzards scented you. Now you go straight to your hotel, unless you'll spend the night with me. No? Then I'll see you in the mornin'. I'll risk your gettin' through the street alone."

"You may, sir," I affirmed. "At present I'm not worth further robbing."

"Except for your gun and clothes," he rejoined. "But if you'll use the one you'll keep the other."

Gazing neither right nor left I strode resolutely for the exit. Now I had an anchor to windward. Sometimes just one word will face a man about when for lack of that mere word he was drifting. Of the games and the people I wished only to be rid forever; but at the exit I was halted by a

hand laid upon my arm, and a quick utterance.

"Not going? You will at least say good-night."

I barely paused, replying to her.

"Good-night."

Still she would have detained me.

"Oh, no, no! Not this way. It was a mistake. I swear to you I am not to be blamed. Please let me help you. I don't know what you've heard—I don't know what has been said about me—you are angry——"

I twitched free, for she should not work upon me again. With such as she, a vampire and yet a woman, a man's safety lay not in words but in unequivocal action.

"Good-night," I bade thickly, half choked by that same nausea, now hot. Bearing with me a satisfying but somehow annoyingly persistent imprint of moist blue eyes under shimmering hair, and startled white face plashed on one cheek with vivid crimson, and small hand left extended empty, I roughly stalked on and out, free of her, free of the Big Tent, her lair.

All the way to the hotel, through the garish street, I nursed my wrath while it gnawed at me like the fox in the Spartan boy's bosom; and once in my room, which fortuitously had no other tenants at this hour, I had to lean out of the narrow window for sheer relief in the coolness. Surely pride had had a fall this night.

There "roared" Benton—the Benton to which, as to prosperity, I had hopefully purchased my ticket ages ago. And here cowered I, holed up—pillaged, dishonored, worthless in even this community: a young fellow in jaunty frontier costume, new and brave, but really reduced to sackcloth and ashes; a young fellow only a husk, as false in appearance as the Big Tent itself and many another of those canvas shells.

The street noises—shouts, shots, music, songs, laughter, rattle of dice, whirr of wheel and clink of glasses—assailed me discordant. The scores of tents and shacks stretching on irregularly had become pocked with dark spots, where lights had been extinguished, but the street remained ablaze and the desert without winked at the stars. There were moving gleams at the railroad yards where switch engines puffed back and forth; up the grade and the new track, pointing westward, there were sparks of camp-fires; and still in other directions beyond the town other tokens redly flickered, where overland freighters were biding till the morning.

Two or three miles in the east (Mr. Jenks had said) was his wagon train, camped at the North Platte River; and peering between the high canopy of stars and the low stratum of spectrally glowing, earthy—yes, very earthy—Benton, I tried to focus upon the haven, for comfort.

I had made up my mind to accept the berth. Anything to get away. Benton I certainly hated with the rage of the defeated. So in a fling I drew back, wrestled out of coat and boots and belt and pantaloons, tucked them in hiding against the wall at the head of my bed and my revolver underneath my stained pillow; and tried to forget Benton, all of it, with the blanket to my ears and my face to the wall, for sleep.

When once or twice I wakened from restless dreaming the glow and the noise of the street seemed scarcely abated, as if down there sleep was despised. But when I finally aroused, and turned, gathering wits again, full daylight had paled everything else.

Snores sounded from the other beds; I saw tumbled coverings, disheveled forms and shaggy heads. In my own corner nothing had been molested. The world outside was strangely quiet. The trail was open. So with no attention to my roommates I hastily washed and dressed, buckled on my armament, and stumped freely forth, down the somnolent hall, down the creaking stairs, and into the silent lobby.

Even the bar was vacant. Behind the office counter a clerk sat sunk into a doze. At my approach he unclosed blank, heavy eyes.

"I'm going out," I said shortly. "Number Three bed in Room Six."

"For long, sir?" he stammered. "You'll be back, or are you leaving?"

"I'm leaving. You'll find I'm paid up."

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir." He rallied to the problem. "Just a moment. Number Three, Room Six, you say. Pulling your freight, are you?" He scanned the register. "You're the gentleman from New York who came in yesterday and met with misfortune?"

"I am," said I.

"Well, better luck next time. We'll see you again?" He quickened. "Here! One moment. Think I have a message for you." And reaching behind him into a pigeonhole he extracted an envelope, which he passed to me. "Yours, sir?" I stared at the fine slanting script of the address:

*Please deliver to
Frank R. Beeson, Esqr.,
At the Queen Hotel.
Arrived from Albany, N. Y.*

CHAPTER X

I CUT LOOSE

I nodded; rebuffing his attentive eyes I stuffed the envelope into my pantaloons pocket.

"Good-bye, sir."

"Good luck. When you come back remember the Queen."

"I'll remember the Queen," said I; and with the envelope smirching my flesh I stepped out, holding my head as high as though my pockets contained something of more value.

The events of yesterday had hardened, thank Heaven; and so had I, into an obstinacy that defied this mocking Western country. I was down to the ground and was going to scratch. To make for home like a whipped dog, there to hang about, probably become an invalid and die resistless, was unthinkable. Already the Far West air and vigor had worked a change in me. In the fresh morning I felt like a fighting cock, or a runner recruited by a diet of unbolted flour and strong red meat.

The falsity of the life here I looked upon as only an incident. The gay tawdry had faded; I realized how much more enduring were the rough, uncouth but genuine products like my friend Mr. Jenks and those of that ilk, who spoke me well instead of merely fair. Health of mind and body should be for me. Hurrah!

But the note! It could have been sent by only one person—the superscription, dainty and feminine, betrayed it. That woman was still pursuing me. How she had found out my name I did not know; perhaps from the label on my bag, perhaps through the hotel register. I did not recall having exchanged names with her—she never had proffered her own name. At all events she appeared determined to keep a hold upon me, and that was disgusting.

Couldn't she understand that I was no longer a fool—that I had wrenched absolutely loose from her and that she could do nothing with me? So in wrath renewed by her poor estimate of my common sense I was minded to tear the note to fragments, unread, and contemptuously scatter them. Had she been present I should have done so, to show her.

Being denied the satisfaction I saw no profit in wasting that modicum of spleen, when I might double it by deliberately reading her effusion and knowingly casting it into the dust. One always can make excuses to oneself, for curiosity. Consequently I halted, around a corner in this exhausted Benton; tore the envelope open with gingerly touch. The folded paper within contained a five-dollar bank note.

That was enough to pump the blood to my face with a rush. It was an insult—a shame, first hand. A shoddy plaster, applied to me—to me, Frank Beeson, a gentleman, whether to be viewed as a plucked greenhorn or not. With cheeks twitching I managed to read the lines accompanying the dole:

SIR:

You would not permit me to explain to you to-night, therefore I must write. The recent affair was a mistake. I had no intention that you should lose, and I supposed you were in more funds. I insist upon speaking with you. You shall not go away in this fashion. You will find me at the Elite Café, at a table, at ten o'clock in the morning. And in case you are a little short I beg of you to make use of the enclosed, with my best wishes and apologies. You may take it as a loan; I do not care as to that. I am utterly miserable.

E.

To Frank Beeson, Esquire.

Faugh! Had there been a sewer near I believe that I should have thrown the whole enclosure in, and spat. But half unconsciously wadding both money and paper in my hand as if to squeeze the last drop of rancor from them I swung on, seeing blindly, ready to trample under foot any last obstacle to my passage out.

Then, in the deserted way, from a lane among the straggling shacks, a figure issued. I disregarded it, only to hear it pattering behind me and its voice:

"Mr. Beeson! Wait! Please wait."

I had to turn about to avoid the further degradation of acting the churl to her, an inferior. And as I had suspected, she it was, arriving breathless and cloak inwrapped, only her white face showing.

"You have my note?" she panted.

There were dark half circles under her eyes, pinch lines about her mouth, all her face was wildly strained. She simulated distress very well indeed.

"Here it is, and your money. Take them." And I thrust my unclosed fist at her.

"No! And you were going? You didn't intend to reply?"

"Certainly not. I am done with you, and with Benton, madam. Good-morning. I have business."

She caught at my sleeve.

"You are angry. I don't blame you, but you have time to talk with me and you shall talk." She spoke almost fiercely. "I demand it, sir. If not at the café, then here and now. Will you stand aside, please, where the whole town shan't see us; or do you wish me to follow you on? I'm risking already, but I'll risk more."

I sullenly stepped aside, around the corner of a sheet-iron groggery (plentifully punctured, I noted, with bullet holes) not yet open for business and faced by the blank wall of a warehouse.

"I've been waiting since daylight," she panted, "and watching the hotel. I knew you were still there; I found out. I was afraid you wouldn't answer my note, so I slipped around and cut in on you. Where are you going, sir?"

"That, madam, is my private affair," I replied. "And all your efforts to influence me in the slightest won't amount to a row of pins. And as I am in a hurry, I again bid you good-morning. I advise you to get back to your husband and your beauty sleep, in order to be fresh for your Big Tent to-night."

"My husband? You know? Oh, of course you know." She gazed affrightedly upon me. "To Montoyo, you say? Him? No, no! I can't! Oh, I can't, I can't." She wrung her hands, she held me fast. "And I know where you're going. To that wagon train. Mr. Jenks has engaged you. You will bull-whack to Salt Lake? You? Don't! Please don't. There's no need of it."

"I am done with Benton, and with Benton's society, madam," I insisted. "I have learned my lesson, believe me, and I'm no longer a 'gudgeon.'"

"You never were," said she. "Not that. And you don't have to turn bull-whacker or mule-skinner either. It's a hard life; you're not fitted for it—never, never. Leave Benton if you will. I hate it myself. And let us go together."

"Madam!" I rapped; and drew back, but she clung to me.

"Listen, listen! Don't mistake me again. Last night was enough. I want to go. I must go. We can travel separately, then; I will meet you anywhere—Denver, Omaha, Chicago, New York, anywhere you say—anywhere—"

"Your husband, madam," I prompted. "He might have objections to parting with you."

"Montoyo? That snake—you fear that snake? He is no husband to me. I could kill him—I will do it yet, to be free from him."

"My good name, then," I taunted. "I might fear for my good name more than I'd fear a man."

"I have a name of my own," she flashed, "although you may not know it."

"I have been made acquainted with it," I answered roundly.

"No, you haven't. Not the true. You know only another." Her tone became humbler. "But I'm not asking you to marry me," she said. "I'm not asking you to love me as a paramour, sir. Please understand. Treat me as you will; as a sister, a friend, but anything human. Only let me have your decent regard until I can get 'stablished in new quarters. I can help you," she pursued eagerly. "Indeed I can help you if you stay in the West. Yes, anywhere, for I know life. Oh, I'm so tired of myself; I can't run true, I'm under false colors. You saw how the trainmen carried favor all along the line, how familiar they were, how I submitted—I even dropped that coin a-purpose in the Omaha station, for *you*, just to test you. Those things are expected of me and I've felt obliged to play my part. Men look upon me as a tool to their hands, to make them or break them. All they want is my patronage and the secrets of the gaming table. And there is Montoyo—bullying me, cajoling me, watching me. But you were different, after I had met you. I foolishly wished to help you, and last night the play went wrong. Why did I take you to his table? Because I think myself entitled, sir," she said on, bridling a little, defiant of my gaze, "to promote my friends when I have any. I did not mean that you should wager heavily for you. Montoyo is out for large stakes. There is safety in small and I know his system. You remember I warned you? I did warn you. I saw too late. You shall have all your money back again. And Montoyo struck me—*me*, in public! That is the end. Oh, why couldn't I have killed him? But if you stayed here, so should I. Not with him, though. Never with him. Maybe I'm talking wildly. You'll say I'm in love with you. Perhaps I am—quién sabe? No matter as to that. I shall be no hanger-on, sir. I only ask a kind of partnership—the encouragement of some decent man near me. I have money; plenty, till we both get a footing. But you wouldn't live on me; no! I don't fancy that of you for a moment. I would be glad merely to tide you over, if you'd let me. And I—I'd be willing to wash floors in a restaurant if I might be free of insult. You, I'm sure, would at least protect me. Wouldn't you? You would, wouldn't you? Say something, sir." She paused, out of breath and aquiver. "Shall we go? Will you help me?"

For an instant her appeal, of swimming blue eyes, upturned face, tensed grasp, breaking voice, swayed me. But what if she were an actress, an adventuress? And then, my parents, my father's name! I had already been cozened once, I had resolved not to be snared again. The spell cleared and I drew exultant breath.

"Impossible, madam," I uttered. "This is final. Good-morning."

She staggered and with magnificent but futile last flourish clapped both hands to her face. Gazing back, as I hastened, I saw her still there, leaning against the sheet-iron of the groggery and ostensibly weeping.

Having shaken her off and resisted contrary temptation I looked not again but paced rapidly for the clean atmosphere of the rough-and-honest bull train. As a companion, better for me Mr. Jenks. When my wrath cooled I felt that I might have acted the cad but I had not acted the simpleton.

The advance of the day's life was stirring all along the road, where under clouds of dust the four and six horse-and-mule wagons hauled water for the town, pack outfits of donkeys and plodding miners wended one way or the other, soldiers trotted in from the military post, and Overlanders slowly toiled for the last supply depot before creaking onward into the desert.

Along the railway grade likewise there was activity, of construction trains laden high with rails, ties, boxes and bales, puffing out, their locomotives belching pitchy black smoke that extended clear to the ridiculous little cabooses; of wagon trains ploughing on, bearing supplies for the grading camps; and a great herd of loose animals, raising a prodigious spume as they were driven at a trot—they also heading westward, ever westward, under escort of a protecting detachment of cavalry, riding two by two, accoutrements flashing.

The sights were inspiring. Man's work at empire building beckoned me, for surely the wagoning of munitions to remote outposts of civilization was very necessary. Consequently I trudged best foot forward, although on empty stomach and with empty pockets; but glad to be at large, and exchanging good-natured greetings with the travelers encountered.

Nevertheless my new boots were burning, my thigh was chafed raw from the swaying Colt's, and my face and throat were parched with the dust, when in about an hour, the flag of the military post having been my landmark, I had arrived almost at the willow-bordered river and now scanned about for the encampment of my train.

Some dozen white-topped wagons were standing grouped in a circle upon the trampled dry sod to the south of the road. Figures were busily moving among them, and the thin blue smoke of their fires was a welcoming signal. I marked women, and children. The whole prospect—they, the breakfast smoke, the grazing animals, the stout vehicles, a line of washed clothing—was homy. So I veered aside and made for the spot, to inquire my way if nothing more.

First I addressed a little girl, tow-headed and barelegged, in a single cotton garment.

"I am looking for the Captain Adams wagon train. Do you know where it is?"

She only pointed, finger of other hand in her mouth; but as she indicated this same camp I pressed on. Mr. Jenks himself came out to meet me.

"Hooray! Here you are. I knew you'd do it. That's the ticket. Broke loose, have you?"

"Yes, sir. I accept your offer if it's still open," I said.

We shook hands.

"Wide open. Could have filled it a dozen times. Come in, come on in and sit. You fetched all your outfit?"

"What you see," I confessed. "I told you my condition. They stripped me clean."

He rubbed his beard.

"Wall, all you need is a blanket. Reckon I can rustle you that. You can pay for it out of your wages or turn it in at the end of the trip. Fust I'd better make you acquainted to the wagon boss. There he is, yonder."

He conducted me on, along the groups and fires and bedding outside the wagon circle, and halted where a heavy man, of face smooth-shaven except chin, sat upon a wagon-tongue whittling a stick.

"Mornin', Cap'n. Wall, I'm filled out. I've hired this lad and can move whenever you say the word. You—" he looked at me. "What's your name, you say?"

"Frank Beeson," I replied.

"Didn't ketch it last night," he apologized. "Shake hands with Cap'n Hyrum Adams, Frank. He's the boss of the train."

Captain Adams lazily arose—a large figure in his dusty boots, coarse trousers and flannel shirt, and weather-beaten black slouch hat. The inevitable revolver hung at his thigh. His pursed lips spurted a jet of tobacco juice as he keenly surveyed me with small, shrewd, china-blue eyes squinting from a broad flaccid countenance. But the countenance was unemotional while he offered a thick hand which proved singularly soft and flatulent under the callouses.

"Glad to meet you, stranger," he acknowledged in slow bass. "Set down, set down."

He waved me to the wagon-tongue, and I thankfully seated myself. All of a sudden I seemed utterly gone; possibly through lack of food. My sigh must have been remarked.

"Breakfasted, stranger?" he queried passively.

"Not yet, sir. I was anxious to reach the train."

"Pshaw! I was about to ask you that," Mr. Jenks put in. "Come along and I'll throw together a mess for you."

"Nobody goes hungry from the Adams wagon, stranger," Captain Adams observed. He slightly raised his voice, peremptory. "Rachael! Fetch our guest some breakfast."

"But as Mr. Jenks has invited me, Captain, and I am in his employ—" I protested. He cut me short.

"I have said that nobody, man, woman or child, or dog, goes hungry from the Adams wagon. The flesh must be fed as well as the soul."

There were two women in view, busied with domestic cares. I had sensed their eyes cast now and then in my direction. One was elderly, as far as might be judged by her somewhat slatternly figure draped in a draggled snuff-colored, straight-flowing gown, and by the merest glimpse of her features within her faded sunbonnet. The other promptly moved aside from where she was bending over a wash-board, ladled food from a kettle to a platter, poured a tin cupful of coffee from the pot simmering by the fire, and bore them to me; her eyes down, shyly handed them.

I thanked her but was not presented. To the Captain's "That will do, Rachael," she turned dutifully away; not so soon, however, but that I had seen a fresh young face within the bonnet confines—a round rosy face according well with the buxom curves of her as she again bent over her wash-board.

"Our fare is that of the tents of Abraham, stranger," spoke the Captain, who had resumed his whittling. "Such as it is, you are welcome to. We are a plain people who walk in the way of the Lord, for that is commanded."

His sonorous tones were delivered rather through the nose, but did not fail of hospitality.

"I ask nothing better, sir," I answered. "And if I did, my appetite would make up for all deficiencies."

"A healthy appetite is a good token," he affirmed. "Show me a well man who picks at his victuals and I will show you a candidate for the devil. His thoughts will like to be as idle as his knife."

The mess of pork and beans and the black unsweetened coffee evidently were what I needed, for I began to mend wonderfully ere I was half through the course. He had not invited me to further conversation—only, when I had drained the cup he called again: "Rachael! More coffee," whereupon the same young woman advanced, without glancing at me, received my cup, and returned it steaming.

"You are from the East, stranger?" he now inquired.

"Yes, sir. I arrived in Benton only yesterday."

"A Sodom," he growled harshly. "A tented sepulcher. And it will perish. I tell you, you do well to leave it, you do well to yoke yourself with the appointed of this earth, rather than stay in that sink-pit of the eternally damned."

"I agree with you, sir," said I. "I did not find Benton to be a pleasant place. But I had not known, when I started from Omaha."

"Possibly not," he moodily assented. "The devil is attentive; he is present in the stations, and on the trains; he will ride in those gilded palaces even to the Jordan, but he shall not cross. In the name of the Lord we shall face him. What good there shall come, shall abide; but the evil shall wither. Not," he added, "that we stand against the railroad. It is needed, and we have petitioned without being heard. We are strong but isolated, we have goods to sell, and the word of Brigham Young has gone forth that a railroad we must have. Against the harpies, the gamblers, the loose women and the lustful men and all the Gentile vanities we will stand upon our own feet by the help of Almighty God."

At this juncture, when I had finished my platter of pork and beans and my second cup of coffee, a tall, double-jointed youth of about my age, carrying an ox goad in his hand, strolled to us as if attracted by the harangue. He was clad in the prevalent cowhide boots, linsey-woolsey pantaloons tucked in, red flannel shirt, and battered hat from which untrimmed flaxen hair fell down unevenly to his shoulder line. He wore at his belt butcher-knife and gun.

By his hulk, his light blue eyes, albeit a trifle crossed, and the general lineaments of his stolid, square, high-cheeked countenance I conceived him to be a second but not improved edition of the Captain.

A true raw-bone he was; and to me, as I casually met his gaze, looked to be obstinate, secretive and small minded. But who can explain those sudden antagonisms that spring up on first sight?

"My son Daniel," the Captain introduced. "This stranger travels to Zion with us, Daniel, in the employ of Mr. Jenks."

The youth had the grip of a vise, and seemed to enjoy emphasizing it while cunningly watching my face.

"Haowdy?" he drawled. With that he twanged a sentence or two to his father. "I faound the caow, Dad. Do yu reckon to pull aout to-day?"

"I have not decided. Go tend to your duties, Daniel."

Daniel bestowed upon me a parting stare, and lurched away, snapping the lash of his goad.

"And with your permission I will tend to mine, sir," I said. "Mr. Jenks doubtless has work for me. I thank you for your hospitality."

"We are commanded by the prophet to feed the stranger, whether friend or enemy," he reproved. "We are also commanded by the Lord to earn our bread by the sweat of our brow. As long as you are no trifler you will be welcome at my wagon. Good-day to you."

As I passed, the young woman, Rachael—whom I judged to be his daughter, although she was evidently far removed from parent stock—glanced quickly up. I caught her gaze full, so that she lowered her eyes with a blush. She was indeed wholesome if not absolutely pretty. When later I saw her with her sunbonnet doffed and her brown hair smoothly brushed back I thought her more wholesome still.

Mr. Jenks received me jovially.

“Got your belly full, have you?”

“I’m a new man,” I assured.

“Wall, those Mormons are good providers. They’ll share with you whatever they have, for no pay, but if you rub ‘em the wrong way or go to dickerin’ with ‘em they’re closer’n the hide on a cold mule. You didn’t make sheep’s eyes at ary of the women?”

“No, sir. I am done with women.”

“And right you are.”

“However, I could not help but see that the Captain’s daughter is pleasing to look upon. I should be glad to know her, were there no objections.”

“How? His daughter?”

“Miss Rachael, I believe. That is the name he used.”

“The young one, you mean?”

“Yes, sir. The one who served me with breakfast. Rosy-cheeked and plump.”

“Whoa, man! She’s his wife, and not for Gentiles. They’re both his wives; whether he has more in Utah I don’t know. But you’d best let her alone. She’s been j’ined to him.”

This took me all aback, for I had no other idea than that she was his daughter, or niece—stood in that kind of relation to him. He was twice her age, apparently. Now I could only stammer:

“I’ve no wish to intrude, you may be sure. And Daniel, his son—is he married?”

“That whelp? Met him, did you? No, he ain’t married, yet. But he will be, soon as he takes his pick ‘cordin’ to law and gospel among them people. You bet you: he’ll be married plenty.”

CHAPTER XI

WE GET A “SUPER”

What with assorting and stowing the bales of cloth and the other goods in the Jenks two wagons, watering the animals and staking them out anew, tinkering with the equipment and making various essays with the bull whip, I found occupation enough; nevertheless there were moments of interim, or while passing to and fro, when I was vividly aware of the scenes and events transpiring in this Western world around about.

The bugles sounded calls for the routine at Fort Steele—a mere cantonment, yet, of tents and rough board buildings squatting upon the bare brown soil near the river bank, north of us, and less than a month old. The wagon road was a line of white dust from the river clear to Benton, and through the murk plodded the water haulers and emigrants and freighters, animals and men alike befloured and choked. The dust cloud rested over Benton. It fumed in another line westward, kept in suspense by on-traveling stage and wagon—by wheel, hoof and boot, bound for Utah and Idaho. From the town there extended northward a third dust line, marking the stage and freighting road through the Indian country to the mining settlements of the famous South Pass of the old Oregon Trail; yes, and with branches for the gold regions of Montana.

The railroad trains kept thundering by us—long freights, dusty and indomitable, bringing their loads from the Missouri River almost seven hundred miles in the east. And rolling out of Benton the never-ceasing construction trains sped into the desert as if upon urgent errands in response to some sudden demand of More, More, More.

Upon all sides beyond this business and energy the country stretched lone and uninhabited; a great waste of naked, hot, resplendent land blotched with white and red, showing not a green spot except the course of the Platte; with scorched, rusty hills rising above its fantastic surface, and, in the distance, bluish mountain ranges that appeared to float and waver in the sun-drenched air.

The sounds from Benton—the hammering, the shouting, the babbling, the puffing of the locomotives—drifted faintly to us, merged into the cracking of whips and the oaths and songs by the wagon drivers along the road. Of our own little camp I took gradual stock.

It, like the desert reaches, evinced little of feverishness, for while booted men busied themselves at tasks similar to mine, others lolled, spinning yarns and whittling; the several

women, at wash-boards and at pots and pans and needles, worked contentedly in sun and shade; children played at makeshift games, dogs drowsed underneath the wagons, and outside our circle the mules and oxen grazed as best they might, their only vexation the blood-sucking flies. The flies were kin of Benton.

Captain Adams loped away, as if to town. Others went in. While I was idle at last and rather enjoying the hot sun as I sat resting upon a convenient wagon-tongue Daniel hulked to me, still snapping his ox goad.

"Haowdy?" he addressed again; and surveyed, eying every detail of my clothing.

"Howdy?" said I.

"Yu know me?"

"Your name is Daniel, isn't it?"

"No, 'tain't. It's Bonnie Bravo on the trail."

"All right, sir," said I. "Whichever you prefer."

"I 'laow we pull out this arternoon," he volunteered farther.

"I'm agreeable," I responded. "The sooner the better, where I'm concerned."

"I 'laow yu (and he pronounced it, nasally, yee-ou) been seein' the elephant in Benton an' it skinned yu."

"I saw all of Benton I wish to see," I granted. "You've been there?"

"I won four bits, an' then yu bet I quit," he greedily proclaimed. "I was too smart for 'em. I 'laow yu're a greenie, ain't yu?"

"In some ways I am, in some ways I'm not."

"I 'laow yu aim to go through with this train to Salt Lake, do yu?"

"That's the engagement I've made with Mr. Jenks."

"Don't feel too smart, yoreself, in them new clothes?"

"No. They're all I have. They won't be new long."

"Yu bet they won't. Ain't afeared of peterin' aout on the way, be yu? I 'laow yu're sickly."

"I'll take my chances," I smiled, although he was irritating in the extreme.

"It's four hunderd mile, an' twenty mile at a stretch withaout water. Most the water's pizen, too, from hyar to the mountings."

"I'll have to drink what the rest drink, I suppose."

"I 'laow the Injuns are like to get us. They're powerful bad in that thar desert. Ain't afeared o' Injuns, be yu?"

"I'll have to take my chances on that, too, won't I?"

"They sculped a whole passel o' surveyors, month ago," he persisted. "Yu'll sing a different tyune arter yu've been corralled with nothin' to drink." He viciously snapped his whip, the while inspecting me as if seeking for other joints in my armor. "Yu aim to stay long in Zion?"

"I haven't planned anything about that."

"Reckon yu're wise, Mister. We don't think much o' Gentiles, yonder. We don't want 'em, nohaow. They'd all better git aout. The Saints settled that country an' it's ourn."

"If you're a sample, you're welcome to live there," I retorted. "I think I'd prefer some place else."

"Haow?" he bleated. "Thar ain't no place as good. All the rest the world has sold itself to the devil."

"How much of the world have you seen?" I asked.

"I've seen a heap. I've been as fur east as Cheyenne—I've teamed acrost twice, so I know. An' I know what the elders say; they come from the East an' some of 'em have been as fur as England. Yu can't fool me none with yore Gentile lies."

As I did not attempt, we remained in silence for a moment while he waited, provocative.

"Say, Mister," he blurted suddenly. "Kin yu shoot?"

"I presume I could if I had to. Why?"

"Becuz I'm the dangest best shot with a Colt's in this hyar train, an' I'll shoot ye for—I'll shoot ye for (he lowered his voice and glanced about furtively)—I'll shoot ye for two bits when my paw ain't 'raound."

"I've no cartridges to waste at present," I informed. "And I don't claim to be a crack shot."

"Damn ye, I bet yu think yu are," he accused. "Yu set thar like it. All right, Mister; any time yu want to try a little poppin' yu let me know." And with this, which struck me as a veiled threat, he lurched on, snapping that infernal whip.

He left me with the uneasy impression that he and I were due to measure strength in one way or another.

Wagon Boss Adams returned at noon. The word was given out that the train should start during the afternoon, for a short march in order to break in the new animals before tackling the real westward trail.

After a deal of bustle, of lashing loads and tautening covers and geeing, hawing and whoaing, about three o'clock we formed line in obedience to the commands "Stretch out, stretch out!"; and with every cask and barrel dripping, whips cracking, voices urging, children racing, the Captain Adams wagon in the lead (two pink sunbonnets upon the seat), the valorous Daniel's next, and Mormons and Gentiles ranging on down, we toiled creaking and swaying up the Benton road, amidst the eddies of hot, scalding dust.

It was a mixed train, of Gentile mules and the more numerous Mormon oxen; therefore not strictly a "bull" train, but by pace designated as such. And in the vernacular I was a "mule-whacker" or even "mule-skinner" rather than a "bull-whacker," if there is any appreciable difference in rôle. There is none, I think, to the animals.

Trudging manfully at the left fore wheel behind Mr. Jenks' four span of mules, trailing my eighteen-foot tapering lash and occasionally well-nigh cutting off my own ear when I tried to throw it, I played the teamster—although sooth to say there was little of play in the job, on that road, at that time of the day.

The sun was more vexatious, being an hour lower, when we bravely entered Benton's boiling main street. We made brief halt for the finishing up of business; and cleaving a lane through the pedestrians and vehicles and animals there congregated, the challenges of the street gamblers having assailed us in vain, we proceeded—our Mormons gazing straight ahead, scornful of the devil's enticements, our few Gentiles responding in kind to the quips and waves and salutations.

Thus we eventually left Benton; in about an hour's march or some three miles out we formed corral for camp on the farther side of the road from the railroad tracks which we had been skirting.

Travel, except upon the tracks (for they were rarely vacant) ceased at sundown; and we all, having eaten our suppers, were sitting by our fires, smoking and talking, with the sky crimson in the west and the desert getting mysterious with purple shadows, when as another construction train of box cars and platform cars clanked by I chanced to note a figure spring out asprawl, alight with a whiffle of sand, and staggering up hasten for us.

First it accosted the hulk Daniel, who was temporarily out on herd, keeping the animals from the tracks. I saw him lean from his saddle; then he rode spurring in, bawling like a calf:

"Paw! Paw! Hey, yu-all! Thar's a woman yonder in britches an' she 'laows to come on. She's lookin' for Mister Jenks."

Save for his excited stuttering silence reigned, a minute. Then in a storm of rude raillery—"That's a hoss on you, George!" "Didn't know you owned one o' them critters, George," "Does she wear the britches, George?" and so forth—my friend Jenks arose, peering, his whiskered mouth so agape that he almost dropped his pipe. And we all peered, with the women of the caravan smitten mute but intensely curious, while the solitary figure, braving our stares, came on to the fires.

"Gawd almighty!" Mr. Jenks delivered.

Likewise straightening I mentally repeated the ejaculation, for now I knew her as well as he. Yes, by the muttered babble others in our party knew her. It was My Lady—formerly My Lady—clad in embroidered short Spanish jacket, tightish velvet pantaloons, booted to the knees, pulled down upon her yellow hair a black soft hat, and hanging from the just-revealed belt around her slender waist, a revolver trifle.

She paused, small and alone, viewing us, her eyes very blue, her face very white.

"Is Mr. Jenks there?" she hailed clearly.

"Damn' if I ain't," he mumbled. He glowered at me. "Yes, ma'am, right hyar. You want to speak with me?"

"By gosh, it's Montoyo's woman, ain't it?" were the comments.

"I do, sir."

"You can come on closer then, ma'am," he growled. "There ain't no secrets between us."

Come on she did, with only an instant's hesitation and a little compression of the lips. She swept our group fearlessly—her gaze crossed mine, but she betrayed no sign.

"I wish to engage passage to Salt Lake."

"With this hyar train?" gasped Jenks.

"Yes. You are bound for Salt Lake, aren't you?"

"For your health, ma'am?" he stammered.

She faintly smiled, but her eyes were steady and wide.

"For my health. I'd like to throw in with your outfit. I will cook, keep camp, and pay you well besides."

"We haven't no place for a woman, ma'am. You'd best take the stage."

"No. There'll be no stage out till morning. I want to make arrangements at once—with you.

There are other women in this train." She flashed a glance around. "And I can take care of myself."

"If you aim to go to Salt Lake your main holt is Benton and the stage. The stage makes through in four days and we'll use thirty," somebody counseled.

"An' this bull train ain't no place for yore kind, anyhow," grumbled another. "We've quit roarin'—we've cut loose from that hell-hole yonder."

"So have I." But she did not turn on him. "I'm never going back. I—I can't, now; not even for the stage. Will you permit me to travel with you, sir?"

"No, ma'am, I won't," rasped Mr. Jenks. "I can't do it. It's not in my line, ma'am."

"I'll be no trouble. You have only Mr. Beeson. I don't ask to ride. I'll walk. I merely ask protection."

"So do we," somebody sniggered; and I hated him, for I saw her sway upon her feet as if the words had been a blow.

"No, ma'am, I'm full up. I wouldn't take on even a yaller dog, 'specially a she one," Jenks announced. "What your game is now I can't tell, and I don't propose to be eddicated to it. But you can't travel along with me, and that's straight talk. If you can put anything over on these other fellers, try your luck."

"Oh!" she cried, wincing. Her hands clenched nervously, a red spot dyed either cheek as she appealed to us all. "Gentlemen! Won't one of you help me? What are you afraid of? I can pay my way—I ask no favors—I swear to you that I'll give no trouble. I only wish protection across."

"Where's Pedro? Where's Montoyo?"

She turned quickly, facing the jeer; her two eyes blazed, the red spots deepened angrily.

"He? That snake? I shot him."

"What! You? Killed him?" Exclamations broke from all quarters.

She stamped her foot.

"No. I didn't have to. But when he tried to abuse me I defended myself. Wasn't that right, gentlemen?"

"Right or wrong, he'll be after you, won't he?"

The question held a note of alarm. Her lip curled.

"You needn't fear. I'll meet him, myself."

"By gosh, I don't mix up in no quarrel 'twixt a man and his woman." And—"Tain't our affair. When he comes he'll come a-poppin'." Such were the hasty comments. I felt a peculiar heat, a revulsion of shame and indignation, which made the present seem much more important than the past. And there was the recollection of her, crying, and still the accents of her last appeals in the early morning.

"I thought that I might find men among you," she disdainfully said—a break in her voice. "So I came. But you're afraid of *him*—of that breed, that vest-pocket killer. And you're afraid of me, a woman whose cards are all on the table. There isn't a one of you—even you, Mr. Beeson, sir, whom I tried to befriend although you may not know it." And she turned upon me. "You have not a word to say. I am never going back, I tell you all. You won't take me, any of you? Very well." She smiled wanly. "I'll drift along, gentlemen. I'll play the lone hand. Montoyo shall never seize me. I'd rather trust to the wolves and the Indians. There'll be another wagon train."

"I am only an employee, madam," I faltered. "If I had an outfit of my own I certainly would help you."

She flushed painfully; she did not glance at me direct again, but her unspoken thanks enfolded me.

"Here's the wagon boss," Jenks grunted, and spat. "Mebbe you can throw in with him. When it comes to supers, that's his say-so. I've all I can tend to, myself, and I don't look for trouble. I've got no love for Montoyo, neither," he added. "Damned if I ain't glad you give him a dose."

Murmurs of approval echoed him, as if the tide were turning a little. All this time—not long, however—Daniel had been sitting his mule, transfixed and gaping, his oddly wry eyes upon her. Now the large form of Captain Adams came striding in contentious, through the gathering dusk.

"What's this?" he demanded harshly. "An ungodly woman? I'll have no trafficking in my train. Get you gone, Delilah. Would you pursue us even here?"

"I am going, sir," she replied. "I ask nothing from you or these—gentlemen."

"Them's the two she's after, paw: Jenks an' that greenie," Daniel bawled. "They know her. She's follered 'em. She aims to travel with 'em. Oh, gosh! She's shot her man in Benton. Gosh!" His voice trailed off. "Ain't she purty, though! She's dressed in britches."

"Get you gone," Captain Adams thundered. "And these your paramours with you. For thus saith the Lord: There shall be no lusting of adultery among his chosen. And thus say I, that no brazen hussy in men's garments shall travel with this train to Zion—no, not a mile of the way."

Jenks stiffened, bristling.

"Mind your words, Adams. I'm under no Mormon thumb, and I'll thank you not to connect me and this—lady in any such fashion. As for your brat on horseback, he'd better hold his yawp. She came of her own hook, and damned if I ain't beginnin' to think—"

I sprang forward. Defend her I must. She should not stand there, slight, lovely, brave but drooping, aflame with the helplessness of a woman alone and insulted.

"Wait!" I implored. "Give her a chance. You haven't heard her story. All she wants is protection on the road. Yes, I know her, and I know the cur she's getting away from. I saw him strike her; so did Mr. Jenks. What were you intending to do? Turn her out into the night? Shame on you, sir. She says she can't go back to Benton, and if you'll be humane enough to understand why, you'll at least let her stay in your camp till morning. You've got women there who'll care for her, I hope."

I felt her instant look. She spoke palpitant.

"You have one man among you all. But I am going. Good-night, gentlemen."

"No! Wait!" I begged. "You shall not go by yourself. I'll see you into safety."

Daniel cackled.

"Haw haw! What'd I tell yu, paw? Hear him?"

"By gum, the boy's right," Jenks declared. "Will you go back to Benton if we take you?" he queried of her. "Are you 'feared of Montoyo? Can he shoot still, or is he laid out?"

"I'll not go back to Benton, and I'm not afraid of that bully," said she. "Yes, he can shoot, still; but next time I should kill him. I hope never to see him again, or Benton either."

The men murmured.

"You've got spunk, anyhow," said they. And by further impulse: "Let her stay the night, Cap'n. It'll be plumb dark soon. She won't harm ye. Some o' the woman folks can take care of her."

Captain Adams had been frowning sternly, his heavy face unsoftened.

"Who are you, woman?"

"I am the wife of a gambler named Montoyo."

"Why come you here, then?"

"He has been abusing me, and I shot him."

"There is blood on your hands? Are you a murderess as well as a harlot?"

"Shame!" cried voices, mine among them. "That's tall language."

Strangely, and yet not strangely, sentiment had veered. We were Americans—and had we been English that would have made no difference. It was the Anglo-Saxon which gave utterance.

She crimsoned, defiant; laughed scornfully.

"You would not dare bait a man that way, sir. Blood on my hands? Not blood; oh, no! He couldn't pan out blood."

"You killed him, woman?"

"Not yet. He's likely fleecing the public in the Big Tent at this very moment."

"And what did you expect here, in my train?"

"A little manhood and a little chivalry, sir. I am going to Salt Lake and I knew of no safer way."

"She jumped off a railway train, paw," bawled Daniel. "I seen her. An' she axed for Mister Jenks, fust thing."

"I'll give you something to stop that yawp. Come mornin', we'll settle, young feller," my friend Jenks growled.

"I did," she admitted. "I have seen Mr. Jenks; I have also seen Mr. Beeson; I have seen others of you in Benton. I was glad to know of somebody here. I rode on the construction train because it was the quickest and easiest way."

"And those garments!" Captain Adams accused. "You wish to show your shape, woman, to tempt men's eyes with the flesh?"

She smiled.

"Would you have me jump from a train in skirts, sir? Or travel far afoot in crinoline? But to soothe your mind I will say that I wore these clothes under my proper attire and cloak until the last moment. And if you turn me away I shall cut my hair and continue as a boy."

"If you are for Salt Lake—where we are of the Lord's choosing and wish none of you—there is the stage," he prompted shrewdly. "Go to the stage. You cannot make this wagon train your instrument."

"The stage?" She slowly shook her head. "Why, I am too well known, sir, take that as you will. And the stage does not leave until morning. Much might happen between now and morning. I have nobody in Benton that I can depend upon—nobody that I dare depend upon. And by railway, for the East? No. That is too open a trail. I am running free of Benton and Pedro Montoyo, and stage and train won't do the trick. I've thought that out." She tossed back her head, deliberately turned. "Good-night, ladies and gentlemen."

Involuntarily I started forward to intercept. The notion of her heading into the vastness and the gloom was appalling; the inertness of that increasing group, formed now of both men and women collected from all the camp, maddened. So I would have besought her, pleaded with her, faced Montoyo for her—but a new voice mediated.

“She shall stay, Hyrum? For the night, at least? I will look after her.”

The Captain’s younger wife, Rachael, had stepped to him; laid one hand upon his arm—her smooth hair touched ashine by the firelight as she gazed up into his face. Pending reply I hastened directly to My Lady herself and detained her by her jacket sleeve.

“Wait,” I bade.

Whereupon we both turned. Side by side we fronted the group as if we might have been partners—which, in a measure, we were, but not wholly according to the loud Daniel’s cackle and the suddenly interrogating countenances here and there.

“You would take her in, Rachael?” the Captain rumbled. “Have you not heard what I said?”

“We are commanded to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless, Hyrum.”

“Verily that is so. Take her. I trust you with her till the morning. The Lord will direct us further. But in God’s name clothe her for the daylight in decency. She shall not advertise her flesh to men’s eyes.”

“Quick!” I whispered, with a push. Rachael, however, had crossed for us, and with eyes brimming extended her hand.

“Will you come with me, please?” she invited.

“You are not afraid of me?”

“I? No. You are a woman, are you not?” The intonation was gentle, and sweet to hear—as sweet as her rosy face to see.

“Yes,” sighed My Lady, wearily. “Good-night, sir.” She fleetingly smiled upon me. “I thank you; and Mr. Jenks.”

They went, Rachael’s arm about her; other women closed in; we heard exclamations, and next they were supporting her in their midst, for she had crumpled in a faint.

Captain Adams walked out a piece as if musing. Daniel pressed beside him, talking eagerly. His voice reached me.

“She’s powerful purty, ain’t she, paw! Gosh, I never seen a woman in britches before. Did yu? Paw! She kin ride in my wagon, paw. Be yu goin’ to take her on, paw? If yu be, I got room.”

“Go. Tend to your stock and think of other things,” boomed his father. “Remember that the Scriptures say, beware of the scarlet woman.”

Daniel galloped away, whooping like an idiot.

“Wall, there she is,” my friend Jenks remarked non-committally. “What next’ll happen, we’ll see in the mornin’. Either she goes on or she goes back. I don’t claim to read Mormon sign, myself. But she had me jumpin’ sideways, for a spell. So did that young whelp.”

There was some talk, idle yet not offensive. The men appeared rather in a judicial frame of mind: laid a few bets upon whether her husband would turn up, in sober fashion nodded their heads over the hope that he had been “properly pinked,” all in all sided with her, while admiring her pluck roundly denied responsibility for women in general, and genially but cautiously twitted Mr. Jenks and me upon our alleged implication in the affair.

Darkness, still and chill, had settled over the desert—the only discernible horizon the glow of Benton, down the railroad track. The ashes of final pipes were rapped out upon our boot soles. Our group dispersed, each man to his blanket under the wagons or in the open.

“Wall,” friend Jenks again broadly uttered, in last words as he turned over with a grunt, for easier posture, near me, “hooray! If it simmers down to you and Dan’l, I’ll be there.”

With that enigmatical comment he was silent save for stertorous breathing. Vaguely cogitating over his promise I lay, toes and face up, staring at the bright stars; perplexed more and more over the immediate events of the future, warmly conscious of her astonishing proximity in this very train, prickled by the hope that she would continue with us, irritated by the various assumptions of Daniel, and somehow not at all adverse to the memory of her in “britches.”

That phase of the matter seemed to have affected Daniel and me similarly. Under his hide he was human.

CHAPTER XII

DANIEL TAKES POSSESSION

I was more than ever convinced of her wisdom in choice of garb when in early morning I glimpsed her with the two other women at the Adams fire; for, bright-haired and small, she had been sorrily dulled by the plain ill-fitting waist and long shapeless skirt in one garment, as adopted by the feminine contingent of the train. In her particular case these were worse fitting and longer than common—an artifice that certainly snuffed a portion of her charms for Gentile and Mormon eyes alike.

What further disposition of her was to be made we might not yet know. We all kept to our own tasks and our own fires, with the exception that Daniel gawked and strutted in the manner of a silly gander, and made frequent errands to his father's household.

It was after the red sun-up and the initial signaling by dust cloud to dust cloud announcing the commencement of another day's desert traffic, and in response to the orders "Ketch up!" we were putting animals to wagons (My Lady still in evidence forward), when a horseman bored in at a gallop, over the road from the east.

"Montoyo, by Gawd!" Jenks pronounced, in a grumble of disgust rather than with any note of alarm. "Look alive." And—"He don't hang up my pelt; no, nor yourn if I can help it."

I saw him give a twitch to his holster and slightly loosen the Colt's. But I was unburthened by guilt in past events, and I conceived no reason for fearing the future—other than that now I was likely to lose her. Heaven pity her! Probably she would have to go, even if she managed later to kill him. The delay in our start had been unfortunate.

It was dollars to doughnuts that every man in the company had had his eye out for Montoyo, since daylight; and the odds were that every man had sighted him as quickly as we. Notwithstanding, save by an occasional quick glance none appeared to pay attention to his rapid approach. We ourselves went right along hooking up, like the others.

As chanced, our outfit was the first upon his way in. I heard him rein sharply beside us and his horse fidget, panting. Not until he spoke did we lift eyes.

"Howdy, gentlemen?"

"Howdy yourself, sir," answered Mr. Jenks, straightening up and meeting his gaze. I paused, to gaze also. Montoyo was pale as death, his lips hard set, his peculiar gray eyes and his black moustache the only vivifying features in his coldly menacing countenance.

He was in white linen shirt, his left arm slung; fine riding boots encasing his legs above the knees and Spanish spurs at their heels—his horse's flanks reddened by their jabs. The pearl butt of a six-shooter jutted from his belt holster. He sat jaunty, excepting for his lips and eyes.

He looked upon me, with a trace of recognition less to be seen than felt. His glance leaped to the wagon—traveled swiftly and surely and returned to Mr. Jenks.

"You're pulling out, I believe."

"Yes, you bet yuh."

"This is the Adams train?"

"It is."

"I'm looking for my wife, gentlemen. May I ask whether you've seen her?"

"You can."

"You have seen her?"

"Yes, sir. We'll not beat around any bush over that."

He meditated, frowning a bit, eying us narrowly.

"I had the notion," he said. "If you have staked her to shelter I thank you; but now I aim to play the hand myself. This is a strictly private game. Where is she?"

"I call yuh, Pedro," my friend answered. "We ain't keepin' cases on her, or on you. You don't find her in my outfit, that's flat. She spent the night with the Adams women. You'll find her waitin' for you, on ahead." He grinned. "She'll be powerful glad to see you." He sobered. "And I'll say this: I'm kinder sorry I ain't got her, for she'd be interestin' company on the road."

"The road to hell, yes," Montoyo coolly remarked. "I'd guarantee you quick passage. Good-day."

With sudden steely glare that embraced us both he jumped his mount into a gallop and tore past the team, for the front. He must have inquired, once or twice, as to the whereabouts of the Captain's party; I saw fingers pointing.

"Here! You've swapped collars on your lead span, boy," Mr. Jenks reproved—but he likewise fumbling while he gazed.

I could hold back no longer.

"Just a minute, if you please," I pleaded; and hastened on up, half running in my anxiety to face the worst; to help, if I might, for the best.

A little knot of people had formed, constantly increasing by oncomers like myself and friend Jenks who had lumbered behind me. Montoyo's horse stood heaving, on the outskirts; and ruthlessly pushing through I found him inside, with My Lady at bay before him—her eyes brilliant, her cheeks hot, her two hands clenched tightly, her slim figure dangerously tense within her absurd garment, and the arm of the brightly flushed but calm Rachael resting

restraintfully around her. The circling faces peered.

Captain Adams, at one side apart, was replying to the gambler. His small china-blue eyes had begun to glint; otherwise he maintained an air of stolidity as if immune to the outcome.

"You see her," he said. "She has had the care of my own household, for I turn nobody away. She came against my will, and she shall go of her will. I am not her keeper."

"You Mormons have the advantage of us white men, sir," Montoyo sneered. "No one of the sex seems to be denied bed and board in your establishments."

"By the help of the Lord we of the elect can manage our establishments much better than you do yours," big Hyrum responded; and his face sombered. "Who are you? A panderer to the devil, a thief with painted card-boards, a despoiler of the ignorant, and a feeder to hell—yea, a striker of women and a trafficker in flesh! Who are you, to think the name of the Lord's anointed? There she is, your chattel. Take her, or leave her. This train starts on in ten minutes."

"I'll take her or kill her," Montoyo snarled. "You call me a feeder, but she shall not be fed to your mill, Adams. You'll get on that horse pronto, madam," he added, stepping forward (no one could question his nerve), "and we'll discuss our affairs in private."

She cast about with swift beseeching look, as if for a friendly face or sign of rescue. And that agonized quest was enough. Whether she saw me or not, here I was. With a spring I had burst in.

But somebody already had drawn fresh attention. Daniel Adams was standing between her and her husband.

"Say, Mister, will yu fight?" he drawled, breathing hard, his broad nostrils quivering.

A silence fell. Singularly, the circle parted right and left in a jostle and a scramble.

Montoyo surveyed him.

"Why?"

"For her, o' course."

The gambler smiled—a slow, contemptuous smile while his gray eyes focused watchfully.

"It's a case where I have nothing to gain," said he. "And you've nothing to lose. I never bet in the teeth of a pat hand. Sabe? Besides, my young Mormon cub, when did you enter this game? Where's your ante? For the sport of it, now, what do you think of putting up, to make it interesting? One of your mammies? Tut, tut!"

Daniel's freckled bovine face flushed muddy red; in the midst of it his faulty eyes were more pronounced than ever—beady, twinkling, and so at cross purposes that they apparently did not center upon the gambler at all. But his right hand had stiffened at his side—extended there flat and tremulous like the vibrant tail of a rattlesnake. He blurted harshly:

"I 'laow to kill yu for that. Draw, yu—!"

We caught breath. Montoyo's hand had darted down, and up, with motion too smooth and elusive for the eye, particularly when our eyes had to be upon both. His revolver poised half-way out of the scabbard, held there rigidly, frozen in mid course; for Daniel had laughed loudly over leveled barrel.

How he had achieved so quickly no man of us knew. Yet there it was—his Colt's, out, cocked, wicked and yearning and ready.

He whirled it with tempting carelessness, butt first, muzzle first, his discolored teeth set in a yellow grin. The breath of the spectators vented in a sigh.

"Haow'll yu take it, Mister?" he giped. "I could l'arn an old caow to beat yu on the draw. Aw, shucks! I 'laow yu'd better go back to yore pasteboards. Naow git!"

Montoyo, his eyes steady, scarcely changed expression. He let his revolver slip down into its scabbard. Then he smiled.

"You have a pretty trick," he commented, relaxing. "Some day I'd like to test it out again. Just now I pass. Madam, are you coming?"

"You know I'm not," she uttered clearly.

"Your choice of company is hardly to your credit," he sneered. "Or, I should say, to your education. Saintliness does not set well upon you, madam. Your clothes are ill-fitting already. Of your two champions—"

And here I realized that I was standing out, one foot advanced, my fists foolishly doubled, my presence a useless factor.

"—I recommend the gentleman from New York as more to your tastes. But you are going of your own free will. You will always be my wife. You can't get away from that, you devil. I shall expect you in Benton, for I have the hunch that your little flight will fetch you back pretty well tamed, to the place where damaged goods are not so heavily discounted." He ignored Daniel and turned upon me. "As for you," he said, "I warn you you are playing against a marked deck. You will find fists a poor hand. Ladies and gentlemen, good-morning." With that he strode straight for his horse, climbed aboard (a trifle awkwardly by reason of his one arm disabled) and galloped, granting us not another glance.

Card shark and desperado that he was, his consummate aplomb nobody could deny, except Daniel, now capering and swaggering and twirling his revolver.

"I showed him. I made him take water. I 'laow I'm 'bout the best man with a six-shooter in these hyar parts."

"Ketch up and stretch out," Captain Adams ordered, disregarding. "We've no more time for foolery."

My eyes met My Lady's. She smiled a little ruefully, and I responded, shamed by the poor rôle I had borne. With that still jubilating lout to the fore, certainly I cut small figure.

This night we made camp at Rawlins' Springs, some twelve miles on. The day's march had been, so to speak, rather pensive; for while there were the rough jokes and the talking back and forth, it seemed as though the scene of early morning lingered in our vista. The words of Montoyo had scored deeply, and the presence of our supernumerary laid a kind of incubus, like an omen of ill luck, upon us. Indeed the prophecies darkly uttered showed the current of thought.

"It's a she Jonah we got. Sure a woman the likes o' her hain't no place in a freightin' outfit. We're off on the wrong fut," an Irishman declared to wagging of heads. "Faith, she's enough to set the saints above an' the saints below both by the ears." He paused to light his dudeen. "There'll be a Donnybrook Fair in Utah, if belike we don't have it along the way."

"No Mormon'll need another wife if he takes her," laughed somebody else.

"She'll be promised to Dan'l 'fore ever we cross the Wasatch." And they all in the group looked slyly at me. "Acts as if she'd been sealed to him already, he does."

This had occurred at our nooning hour, amidst the dust and the heat, while the animals drooped and dozed and panted and in the scant shade of the hooded wagons we drank our coffee and crunched our hardtack. Throughout the morning My Lady had ridden upon the seat of Daniel's wagon, with him sometimes trudging beside, in pride of new ownership, cracking his whip, and again planted sidewise upon one of the wheel animals, facing backward to leer at her.

Why I should now have especially detested him I would not admit to myself. At any rate the dislike dated before her arrival. That was one sop to conscience when I remembered that she was a wife.

Friend Jenks must have read my thoughts, inasmuch as during the course of the afternoon he had uttered abruptly:

"These Mormons don't exactly recognize Gentile marriages. Did you know that?" He flung me a look from beneath shaggy brows.

"What?" I exclaimed. "How so?"

"Meanin' to say that layin' on of hands by the Lord's an'inted is necessary to reel j'inin' in marriage."

"But that's monstrous!" I stammered.

"Dare say," said he. "It's the way white gospelers look at Injuns, ain't it? Anyhow, to convert her out of sin, as they'd call it, and put her over into the company of the saints wouldn't be no bad deal, by their kind o' thinkin'. It's been done before, I reckon. Jest thought I'd warn you. She's made her own bed and if it's a Mormon bed she's well quit of Montoyo, that's sartin. Did you ever see the beat of that young feller on the draw?"

"No," I admitted. "I never did."

"And you never will."

"He says his name's Bonnie Bravo. Where did he find that?"

"Haw haw." Friend Jenks spat. "Must ha' heard it in a play-house or got it read to him out a book. Sounds to him like he was some punkins. Anyhow, if you've any feelin's in the matter keep 'em under your hat. I don't know what there's been between you and her, but the Mormon church is between you now and it's got the dead-wood on you. It's either that for her, or Montoyo. He knows; he's no fool and he'll take his time. So you'd better stick to mule-whacking and sowbelly."

Still it was only decent that I should inquire after her. No Daniel and no "Bonnie Bravo" was going to shut me from my duty. Therefore this evening after we had formed corral, watered our animals at the one good-water spring, staked them out in the bottoms of the ravine here, and eaten our supper, I went with clean hands and face and, I resolved, a clean heart, to pay my respects at the Hyrum Adams fire.

A cheery sight it was, too, for one bred as I had been to the company of women. Whereas during the day and somewhat in the evenings we Gentiles and the Mormon men fraternized without conflict of sect save by long-winded arguments, at nightfall the main Mormon gathering centered about the Adams quarters, where the men and women sang hymns in praise of their pretensions, and listened to homilies by Hyrum himself.

They were singing now, as I approached—every woman busy also with her hands. The words were destined to be familiar to me, being from their favorite lines:

Cheer, saints, cheer! We're bound for peaceful Zion!
Cheer, saints, cheer! For that free and happy land!
Cheer, saints, cheer! We'll Israel's God rely on;

We will be led by the power of His hand.

Away, far away to the everlasting mountains,
Away, far away to the valley in the West;
Away, far away to yonder gushing fountains,
Where all the faithful in the latter days are blest.

Into this domestic circle I civilly entered just as they had finished their hymn. She was seated beside the sleek-haired Rachael, with Daniel upon her other hand. I sensed her quickly ready smile; and with the same a surly stare from him, disclosing that by one person at least I was not welcomed.

"Anything special wanted, stranger?" Hyrum demanded.

"No, sir. I was attracted by your singing," I replied. "Do I intrude?"

"Not at all, not at all." He was more hospitable. "Set if you like, in the circle of the Saints. You'll get no harm by it, that's certain."

So I seated myself just behind Rachael. A moment of constraint seemed to fall upon the group. I broke it by my inquiry, addressed to a clean profile.

"I came also to inquire after Mrs. Montoyo," I carefully said. "You have stood the journey well, this far, madam?"

Daniel turned instantly.

"Thar's no 'Mrs. Montoyo' in this camp, Mister. And I'll thank yu it's a name yu'd best leave alone."

"How so, sir?"

"Cause that's the right of it. I 'laow I've told yu."

"I'm called Edna now, by my friends," she vouchsafed, coloring. "Yes, thank you, I've enjoyed the day."

Rachael spoke softly, in her gentle English accents. I learned later that she was an English girl, convert to Mormonism.

"We Latter Day Saints know that the marriage rites of Gentiles are not countenanced by the Lord. If you would see the light you would understand. Sister Edna is being well cared for. Whatever we have is hers."

"You will take her on with you to Salt Lake?"

"That is as Hyrum says. He has spoken of putting her on the stage at the next crossing. He will decide."

"I think I'd rather stay with the train," My Lady murmured.

"Yu will, too, by gum," Daniel pronounced. "I'll talk with paw. Yu're goin' to travel on to Zion 'long with me. I 'laow I'm man enough to look out for ye an' I got plenty room. The hull wagon's yourn. Guess thar won't nobody have anything to say ag'in that." His tone was pointed, unmistakable, and I sat fuming with it.

My Lady drily acknowledged.

"You are very kind, Daniel."

"Wall, yu see I'm the best man on the draw in this hyar train. I'm a bad one, I am. My name's Bonnie Bravo. That gambler—he 'laowed to pop me but I could ha' killed him 'fore his gun was loose. I kin ride, wrestle, drive a bull team ag'in ary man from the States, an' I got the gift o' tongues. Ain't afeared o' Injuns, neither. I'm elected. I foller the Lord an' some day I'll be a bishop. I hain't been more'n middlin' interested in wimmen, but I'm gittin' old enough, an' yu an' me'll be purty well acquainted by the time we reach Zion. Thar's a long spell ahead of us, but I aim to look out for yu, yu bet."

His blatancy was arrested by the intonation of another hymn. They all chimed in, except My Lady and me.

There is a people in the West, the world calls Mormonites
in jest,
The only people who can say, we have the truth, and
own its sway.
Away in Utah's valleys, away in Utah's valleys,
Away in Utah's valleys, the chambers of the Lord.

And all ye saints, where'er you be, from bondage try to
be set free,
Escape unto fair Zion's land, and thus fulfil the Lord's
command,
And help to build up Zion, and help to build up Zion,
And help to build up Zion, before the Lord appear.

They concluded; sat with heads bowed while Hyrum, standing, delivered himself of a long-winded blessing, through his nose. It was the signal for breaking up. They stood. My Lady arose

lithely; encumbered by her trailing skirt she pitched forward and I caught her. Daniel sprang in a moment, with a growl.

"None o' that, Mister. I'm takin' keer of her. Hands off."

"Don't bully me, sir," I retorted, furious. "I'm only acting the gentleman, and you're acting the boor."

I would willingly have fought him then and there, probably to my disaster, but Hyrum's heavy voice cut in.

"Who quarrels at my fire? Mark you, I'll have no more of it. Stranger, get you where you belong. Daniel, get you to bed. And you, woman, take yourself off properly and thank God that you are among his chosen and not adrift in sin."

"Good-night, sir," I answered. And I walked easily away, a triumphant warmth buoying me, for ere releasing her strong young body I had felt a note tucked into my hand.

CHAPTER XIII

SOMEONE FEARS

A note from a pretty woman always is a potential thing, no matter in what humor it may have been received. The mere possession titillates; and although the contents may be most exemplary to the eye, the mind is apt to go hay-making between the lines and no offense intended.

All the fatuousness that had led me astray to the lure of her blue eyes, upon the train and in hollow Benton, surged anew now—perhaps seasoned to present taste by my peppery defiance of Daniel. A man could do no less than bristle a little, under the circumstances; could do no less than challenge the torpedoes, like Farragut in Mobile Bay. Whether the game was worth the candle, I was not to be bullied out of my privileges by a clown swash-buckler who aped the characteristics of a pouter pigeon.

Mr. Jenks was just going to bed under the wagon. With pretext of warming up the coffee I kicked the fire together; while squatting and sipping I managed to unfold the note and read it by the flicker, my back to the camp.

All that it said, was:

If you are not disgusted with me I will walk a stretch with you on the trail, during the morning.

The engagement sent me to my blanket cogitating. When a woman proposes, one never knows precisely the reason. Anyway, I was young enough so to fancy. For a long time I lay outside the wagons, apart in the desert camp, gazing up at the twinkling stars, while the wolves whimpered around, and somewhere she slept beside the gentle Rachael, and somewhere Daniel snored, and here I conned her face and her words, elatedly finding them very pleasing.

Salt Lake was far, the Big Tent farther by perspective if not by miles. I recognized the legal rights of her husband, but no ruffling Daniel should quash the undeniable rights of Yours Truly. I indeed felt virtuous and passing valorous, with that commonplace note in my pocket.

We all broke camp at sunrise. She rode for a distance upon the seat of Daniel's wagon—he lustily trudging alongside. Then I marked her walking, herself; she had shortened her skirt; and presently lingering by the trail she dropped behind, leaving the wagon to lumber on, with Daniel helplessly turning head over shoulder, bereft.

"Bet you the lady up yonder is aimin' to pay you a visit," quoth friend Jenks the astute. "And Dan'l, he don't cotton to it. You ain't great shakes with a gun, I reckon?"

"I've never had use for one," said I. "But her whereabouts in the train is not a matter of shooting, is it?"

"A feller quick on the draw, like him, is alluz wantin' to practice, to keep his hand in. Anyhow I'd advise you to stay clear of her, else watch him mighty sharp. He's thinkin' of takin' a squaw."

We rolled on, in the dust, while the animals coughed and the teamsters chewed and swore. And next, here she was, idling until our outfit drew abreast.

"Mornin'," Jenks grunted, with a shortness that bespoke his disapproval; whereupon he fell back and left us.

She smiled at me.

"Will you offer me a ride, sir?"

My response was instant: a long "Whoa-oa!" in best mule-whacker. The eight-team hauled negligent, their mulish senses steeped in the drudgery of the trail; only the wheel pair flopped inquiring ears. When I hailed again, Jenks came puffing.

"What's the matter hyar?" He ran rapid eye over wagon and animals and saw nothing amiss.

"Mrs. Montoyo wishes to ride."

"The hell, man!" He snatched whip and launched it, up the faltering team. The cracker popped an inch above the off lead mule's cringing haunch twenty feet before. "You can't stop hyar! Can't hold the rest of the train. Joe! Baldy! Hep with you!" The team straightened out; he restored me the whip. His wrath subsided, for in less dudgeon he addressed her.

"Want to ride, do ye?"

"I did, sir."

"Wall, in Gawd's name ride, then. But we don't stop for passengers."

With that, in another white heat he had picked her up bodily, swung her upon the nearest mule; so that before she knew (she scarce had time to utter an astonished little ejaculation as she yielded to his arms) there she was, perched, breathless, upon the sweaty hide. I awaited results.

Jenks chuckled.

"What you need is an old feller, lady. These young bucks ain't broke to the feed canvas. Now when you want to get off you call me. You don't weigh more'n a peck of beans."

With a bantering wink at me he again fell back. Once more I had been forestalled. There should be no third time.

My Lady sat clinging, at first angry-eyed, but in a moment softened by my discomfiture.

"Your partner is rather sudden," she averred. "He asked permission of neither me nor the mule."

"He meant well. He isn't used to women," I apologized.

"More used to mules, I judge."

"Yes. If he had asked the mule it would have objected, whereas it's delighted."

"Perhaps he knows there's not much difference between a woman and a mule, in that respect," she proffered. "You need not apologize for him."

"I apologize for myself," I blurted. "I see I'm a little slow for this country."

"You?" She soberly surveyed me as I ploughed through the dust, at her knees. "I think you'll catch up. If you don't object to my company, yourself, occasionally, maybe I can help you."

"I certainly cannot object to your company whenever it is available, madam," I assured.

"You do not hold your experience in Benton against me?"

"I got no more than I deserved, in the Big Tent," said I. "I went in as a fool and I came out as a fool, but considerably wiser."

"You reproached me for it," she accused. "You hated me. Do you hate me still, I wonder? I tell you I was not to blame for the loss of your money."

"The money has mattered little, madam," I informed. "It was only a few dollars, and it turned me to a job more to my liking and good health than fiddling my time away, back there. I have you to thank for that."

"No, no! You are cruel, sir. You thank me for the good and you saddle me with the bad. I accept neither. Both, as happened, were misplays. You should not have lost money, you should not have changed vocation. You should have won a little money and you should have pursued health in Benton." She sighed. "And we all would have been reasonably content. Now here you and I are—and what are we going to do about it?"

"We?" I echoed, annoyingly haphazard. "Why so? You're being well cared for, I take it; and I'm under engagement for Salt Lake myself."

The answer did sound rude. I was still a cad. She eyed me, with a certain whiteness, a certain puzzled intentness, a certain fugitive wistfulness—a mute estimation that made me too conscious of her clear appraising gaze and rack my brain for some disarming remark.

"You're not responsible for me, you would say?"

"I'm at your service," I corrected. The platitude was the best that I could muster to my tongue.

"That is something," she mused. "Once you were not that—when I proposed a partnership. You are afraid of me?" she asked.

"Why should I be?" I parried. But I was beginning; or continuing. I had that curious inward quiver, not unpleasant, anticipatory of possible events.

"You are a cautious Yankee. You answer one question with another." She laughed lightly. "Yes, why should you be? I cannot run away with you; not when Daniel and your Mr. Jenks are watching us so closely. And you have no desire to be run away with. And Pedro must be considered. Altogether, you are well protected, even if your conscience slips. But tell me: Do you blame me for running away from Montoyo?"

"Not in the least," I heartily assured.

"You would have helped me, at the last?"

"I think I should have felt fully warranted." Again I floundered.

"Even to stowing me with a bull train?"

"Anywhere, madam, for your betterment, to free you from that brute."

"Oh!" She clapped her hands. "But you didn't have to. I only embarrassed you by appearing on my own account. You have some spirit, though. You came to the Adams circle, last night. You did your duty. I expected you. But you must not do it again."

"Why not?"

"There are objections, there."

"From you?"

"No."

"From Hyrum?"

"Not yet."

"From that Daniel, then. Well, I will come to Captain Adams' camp as often as I like, if with the Captain's permission. And I shall come to see you, whether with his permission or not."

"I don't know," she faltered. "I—you would have helped me once, you say? And once you refused me. Would you help me next time?"

"As far as I could," said I—another of those damned hedging responses that for the life of me I could not manipulate properly.

"Oh!" she cried. "Of course! The queen deceived you; now you are wise. You are afraid. But so am I. Horribly afraid. I have misplayed again." She laughed bitterly. "I am with Daniel—it is to be Daniel and I in the Lion's den. You know they call Brigham Young the Lion of the Lord. I doubt if even Rachael is angel enough." She paused. "They're going to make nooning, aren't they? I mustn't stay. Good-bye."

I sprang to lift her, but with gay shake of head she slipped off of herself and landed securely.

"I can stand alone. I have to. Men are always ready to do what I don't ask them to do, as long as I can serve as a tool or a toy. You will be very, very careful. Good-day, sir."

She flashed just the trace of a smile; gathering her skirt she ran on, undeterred by the teamsters applauding her spryness.

"Swing out!" shouted Jenks, from rear. "We're noonin'." The lead wagons had halted beside the trail and all the wagons following began to imitate.

CHAPTER XIV

I TAKE A LESSON

From this hour's brief camp, early made, we should have turned southward, to leave the railroad line and cross country for the Overland Stage trail that skirted the southern edge of the worse desert before us. But Captain Hyrum was of different mind. With faith in the Lord and bull confidence in himself he had resolved to keep straight on by the teamster road which through league after league ever extended fed supplies to the advance of the builders.

Under its adventitious guidance we should strike the stage road at Bitter Creek, eighty or one hundred miles; thence trundle, veering southwestward, for the famed City of the Saints, near two hundred miles farther.

Therefore after nooning at a pool of stagnant, scummy water we hooked up and plunged ahead, creaking and groaning and dust enveloped, constantly outstripped by the hurrying construction trains thundering over the newly laid rails, we ourselves the tortoise in the race.

My Lady did not join me again to-day, nor on the morrow. She abandoned me to a sense of dissatisfaction with myself, of foreboding, and of a void in the landscape.

Our sorely laden train went swaying and pitching across the gaunt face of a high, broad plateau, bleak, hot, and monotonous in contour; underfoot the reddish granite pulverized by grinding tire and hoof, over us the pale bluish fiery sky without a cloud, distant in the south the shining tips of a mountain range, and distant below in the west the slowly spreading vista of a great, bared ocean-bed, simmering bizarre with reds, yellows and deceptive whites, and ringed about by battlements jagged and rock hewn.

Into this enchanted realm we were bound; by token of the smoke blotches the railroad line led thither. The teamsters viewed the unfolding expanse phlegmatically. They called it the Red Basin. But to me, fresh for the sight, it beckoned with fantastic issues. Even the name breathed magic. Wizard spells hovered there; the railroad had not broken them—the cars and locomotives, entering, did not disturb the brooding vastness. A man might still ride errant into those slumberous spaces and discover for himself; might boldly awaken the realm and rule with

a princess by his side.

But romance seemed to have no other sponsor in this plodding, whip-cracking, complaining caravan. So I lacked, woefully lacked, kindred companionship.

Free to say, I did miss My Lady, perched upon the stoic mule while like an Arab chief I convoyed her. The steady miles, I admitted, were going to be as disappointing as tepid water, when not aerated by her counsel and piquant allusions, by her sprightly readiness and the essential elements of her blue eyes, her facile lips, and that bright hair which no dust could dim.

After all she was distinctly feminine—bravely feminine; and if she wished to flirt as a relief from the cock-sure Daniel and the calm methods of her Mormon guardians, why, let us beguile the way. I should second with eyes open. That was accepted.

Moreover, something about her weighed upon me. A consciousness of failing her, a woman, in emergency, stung my self-respect. She had twitted me with being “afraid”; afraid of her, she probably meant. That I could pass warily. But she had said that she, too, was afraid: “horribly afraid,” and an honest shudder had attended upon the words as if a real danger hedged. She had an intuition. The settled convictions of my Gentile friends coincided. “With Daniel in the Lion’s den”—that phrase repeated itself persistent. She had uttered it in a fear accentuated by a mirthless laugh. Could such a left-handed wooer prove too much for her? Well, if she was afraid of Daniel I was not and she should not think so.

I could see her now and then, on before. She rode upon the wagon seat of her self-appointed executor. And I might see him and his paraded impertinences.

Except for the blowing of the animals and the mechanical noises of the equipment the train subsided into a dogged patience, while parched by the dust and the thin dry air and mocked by the speeding construction crews upon the iron rails it lurched westward at two and a half miles an hour, for long hours outfaced by the blinding sun.

Near the western edge of the plateau we made an evening corral. After supper the sound of revolver shots burst flatly from a mess beyond us, and startled. Everything was possible, here in this lone horizon-land where rough men, chafed by a hard day, were gathered suddenly relaxed and idle. But the shots were accompanied by laughter.

“They’re only tryin’ to spile a can,” Jenks reassured. “By golly, we’ll go over and l’arn ‘em a lesson.” He glanced at me. “Time you loosened up that weepin’ o’ yourn, anyhow. Purty soon it’ll stick fast.”

I arose with him, glad of any diversion. The circle had not yet formed at Hyrum’s fire.

“It strikes me as a useless piece of baggage,” said I. “I bought it in Benton but I haven’t needed it. I can kill a rattlesnake easier with my whip.”

“Wall,” he drawled, “down in yonder you’re liable to meet up with a rattler too smart for your whip, account of his freckles. Twon’t do you no harm to spend a few ca’ttridges, so you’ll be ready for business.”

The men were banging, by turn, at a sardine can set up on the sand about twenty paces out. Their shadows stretched slantwise before them, grotesquely lengthened by the last efforts of the disappearing sun. Some aimed carefully from under pulled-down hat brims; others, their brims flared back, fired quickly, the instant the gun came to the level. The heavy balls sent the loose soil flying in thick jets made golden by the evening glow. But amidst the furrows the can sat untouched by the plunging missiles.

We were greeted with hearty banter.

“Hyar’s the champeens!”

“Now they’ll show us.”

“Ain’t never see that pilgrim unlimber his gun yit, but I reckon he’s a bad ‘un.”

“Jenks, old hoss, cain’t you l’an that durned can manners?”

“I’ll try to oblige you, boys,” friend Jenks smiled. “What you thinkin’ to do: hit that can or plant a lead mine?”

“Give him room. He’s made his brag,” they cried. “And if he don’t plug it that pilgrim sure will.”

Mr. Jenks drew and took his stand; banged with small preparation and missed by six inches—a fact that brought him up wide awake, so to speak, badgered by derision renewed. A person needs must have a bull hide, to travel with a bull train, I saw.

“Gimme another, boys, and I’ll hit it in the nose,” he growled sheepishly; but they shoved him aside.

“No, no. Pilgrim’s turn. Fetch on yore shootin’-iron, young feller. Thar’s yore turkey. Show us why you’re packin’ all that hardware.”

Willy-nilly I had to demonstrate my greenness; so in all good nature I drew, and stood, and cocked, and aimed. The Colt’s exploded with prodigious blast and wrench—jerking, in fact, almost above head; and where the bullet went I did not see, nor, I judged, did anybody else.

“He missed the ‘arth!” they clamored.

“No; I reckon he hit Montany ‘bout the middle. That’s whar he scored center!”

“Shoot! Shoot!” they begged. “Go ahead. Mebbe you’ll kill an Injun unbeknownst. They’s a pack

o' Sioux jest out o' sight behind them hills."

And I did shoot, vexed; and I struck the ground, this time, some fifty yards beyond the can. Jenks stepped from amidst the riotous laughter.

"Hold down on it, hold down, lad," he urged. "To hit him in the heart aim at his feet. Here! Like this——" and taking my revolver he threw it forward, fired, the can plinked and somersaulted, lashed into action too late.

"By Gawd," he proclaimed, "when I move like it had a gun in its fist I can snap it. But when I think on it as a can I lack guts."

The remark was pat. I had seen several of the men snip the head from a rattlesnake with a single offhand shot—yes, they all carried their weapons easily and wontedly. But the target of an immobile can lacked in stimulation to concord of nerve and eye.

Now I shot again, holding lower and more firmly, out of mere guesswork, and landed appreciably closer although still within the zone of ridicule. And somebody else shot, and somebody else, and another, until we all were whooping and laughing and jesting, and the jets flew as if from the balls of a mitrailleuse, and the can rocked and gyrated, spurring us to haste as it constantly changed the range. Presently it was merely a twist of ragged tin. Then in the little silence, as we paused, a voice spoke irritatingly.

"I 'laow yu fellers ain't no great shucks at throwin' lead."

Daniel stood by, with arms akimbo, his booted legs braggartly straddled and his freckled face primed with an intolerant grin at our recent efforts. My Lady had come over with him. Raw-boned, angular, cloddish but as strong as a mule, he towered over her in a maddening atmosphere of proprietorship.

She smiled at me—at all of us: at me, swiftly; at them, frankly. And I knew that she was still afraid.

"Reckon we don't ask no advice, friend," they answered. Again a constraint enfolded, fastened upon us by an unbidden guest. "Like as not you can do better."

Daniel laughed boisterously, his mouth widely open.

"I couldn't do wuss. I seen yu poppin' at that can. Hadn't but one hole in it till yu all turned loose an' didn't give it no chance. Haw haw! I 'laow for a short bit I'd stand out in front o' that greenie from the States an' let him empty two guns at me."

"S'pose you do it," friend Jenks promptly challenged. "By thunder, I'll hire ye with the ten cents, and give him four bits if he hits you."

"He wouldn't draw on me, nohaow," scoffed Daniel. "I daren't shoot for money, but I'll shoot for fun. Anybody want to shoot ag'in me?"

"Wasted powder enough," they grumbled.

"Ever see me shoot?" He was eager. "I'll show ye somethin'. I don't take back seat for ary man. Yu set me up a can. That thar one wouldn't jump to a bullet."

In sullen obedience a can was produced.

"How fur?"

"Fur as yu like."

It was tossed contemptuously out; and watching it, to catch its last roll, I heard Daniel gleefully yelp "Out o' my way, yu-all!"—half saw his hand dart down and up again, felt the jar of a shot, witnessed the can jump like a live thing; and away it went, with spasm after spasm, to explosion after explosion, tortured by him into fruitless capers until with the final ball peace came to it, and it lay dead, afar across the twilight sand.

Verily, by his cries and the utter savagery and malevolence of his bombardment, one would have thought that he took actual lust in fancied cruelty.

"I 'laow thar's not another man hyar kin do that," he vaunted.

There was not, judging by the silence again ensuing. Only—

"A can's a different proposition from a man, as I said afore," Jenks coolly remarked. "A can don't shoot back."

"I don't 'laow any man's goin' to, neither." Daniel reloaded his smoking revolver, bolstered it with a flip; faced me in turning away. "That's somethin' for yu to l'arn on, ag'in next time, young feller," he vouchsafed.

If he would have eyed me down he did not succeed. His gaze shifted and he passed on, swaggering.

"Come along, Edna," he bade. "We'll be goin' back."

A devil—or was it he himself?—twitted me, incited me, and in a moment, with a gush of assertion, there I was, saying to her, my hat doffed:

"I'll walk over with you."

"Do," she responded readily. "We're to have more singing."

The men stared, they nudged one another, grinned. Daniel whirled.

"I 'laow yu ain't been invited, Mister."

"If Mrs. Montoyo consents, that's enough," I informed, striving to keep steady. "I'm not walking with you, sir; I am walking with her. The only ground you control is just in front of your own wagon."

"Yu've been told once thar ain't no 'Mrs. Montoyo,'" he snarled. "And whilst yu're l'arnin' to shoot yu'd better be l'arnin' manners. Yu comin' with me, Edna?"

"As fast as I can, and with Mr. Beeson also, if he chooses," said she. "I have my manners in mind, too."

"By gosh, I don't walk with ye," he jawed. And in a huff, like the big boy that he was, he flounced about, vengefully striding on as though punishing her for a misdemeanor.

She dropped the grinning group a little curtsy. A demure sparkle was in her eyes.

"The entertainment is concluded, gentlemen. I wish you good-night."

Yet underneath her raillery and self-possession there lay an appeal, the stronger because subtle and unvoiced. It seemed to me every man must appreciate that as a woman she invoked protection by him against an impending something, of which she had given him a glimpse.

So we left them somewhat subdued, gazing after us, their rugged faces sobered reflectively.

"Shall we stroll?" she asked.

"With pleasure," I agreed.

Daniel was angrily shouldering for the Mormon wagons, his indignant figure black against the western glow. She laughed lightly.

"You're not afraid, after all, I see."

"Not of him, madam."

"And of me?"

"I think I'm more afraid for you," I confessed. "That clown is getting insufferable. He sets out to bully you. Damn him," I flashed, with pardonable flame, "and he ruffles at me on every occasion. In fact, he seems to seek occasion. Witness this evening."

"Witness this evening," she murmured. "I'm afraid, too. Yes," she breathed, confronted by a portent, "I'm afraid. I never have been afraid before. I didn't fear Montoyo. I've always been able to take care of myself. But now, here——"

"You have your revolver?" I suggested.

"No, I haven't. It's gone. Mormon women don't carry revolvers."

"They took it from you?"

"It's disappeared."

"But you're not a Mormon woman."

"Not yet." She caught quick breath. "God forbid. And sometimes I fear God willing. For I do fear. You can't understand. Those other men do, though, I think. Do you know," she queried, with sudden glance, "that Daniel means to marry me?"

"He?" I gasped. "How so? With your—consent, of course. But you're not free; you have a husband." My gorge rose, regardless of fact. "You scarcely expect me to congratulate you, madam. Still he may have points."

"Daniel?" She shrugged her shoulders. "I cannot say. Pedro did. Most men have. Oh!" she cried, impulsively stopping short. "Why don't you learn to shoot? Won't you?"

"I've about decided to," I admitted. "That appears to be the saving accomplishment of everybody out here."

"Of everybody who stays. You must learn to draw and to shoot, both. The drawing you will have to practice by yourself, but I can teach you to shoot. So can those men. Let me have your pistol, please."

I passed it to her. She was all in a flutter.

"You must grasp the handle firmly; cover it with your whole palm, but don't squeeze it to death; just grip it evenly—tuck it away. And keep your elbow down; and crook your wrist, in a drop, until your trigger knuckle is pointing very low—at a man's feet if you're aiming for his heart."

"At his feet, for his heart?" I stammered. The words had an ugly sound.

"Certainly. We are speaking of shooting now, and not at a tin can. You have to allow for the jump of the muzzle. Unless you hold it down with your wrist, you over shoot; and it's the first shot that counts. Of course, there's a feel, a knack. But don't aim with your eyes. You won't have time. Men file off the front sight—it sometimes catches, in the draw. And it's useless, anyway. They fire as they point with the finger, by the feel. You see, they *know*."

"Evidently you do, too, madam," I faltered, amazed.

"Not all," she panted. "But I've heard the talk; I've watched—I've seen many things, sir, from Omaha to Benton. Oh, I wish I could tell you more; I wish I could help you right away. I meant, a dead-shot with the revolver knows beforehand, in the draw, where his bullet shall go. Some men

are born to shoot straight; some have to practice a long, long while. I wonder which you are."

"If there is pressing need in my case," said I, "I shall have to rely upon my friends to keep me from being done for."

"You?" she uttered, with a touch of asperity. "Oh, yes. Pish, sir! Friends, I am learning, have their own hides to consider. And those gentlemen of yours are Gentiles with goods for Salt Lake Mormons. Are they going to throw all business to the winds?"

"You yourself may appeal to his father, and to the women, for protection if that lout annoys you," I ventured.

"To them?" she scoffed. "To Hyrum Adams' outfit? Why, they're Mormons and good Mormons, and why should I not be made over? I'm under their teachings; I am Edna, already; it's time Daniel had a wife—or two, for replenishing Utah. Rachael calls me 'sister,' and I can't resent it. Good at heart as she is, even she is convinced. Why," and she laughed mirthlessly, "I may be sealed to Hyrum himself, if nothing worse is in store. Then I'll be assured of a seat with the saints."

"You can depend upon me, then. I'll protect you, I'll fight for you, and I'll kill for you," I was on the point of roundly declaring; but didn't. Her kind, I remembered, had spelled ruin upon the pages of men more experienced than I. Therefore out of that super-caution born of Benton, I stupidly said nothing.

She had paused, expectant. She resumed.

"But no matter. Here I am, and here you are. We were speaking of shooting. This is a lesson in shooting, not in marrying, isn't it? As to the pressing need, you must decide. You've seen and heard enough for that. I like you, sir; I respect your spirit and I'm sorry I led you into misadventure. Now if I may lend you a little something to keep you from being shot like a dog, I'll feel as though I had wiped out your score against me. Take your gun." I took it, the butt warm from her clasp. "There he is. Cover him!"

"Where?" I asked. "Who?"

"There, before you. Oh, anybody! Think of his heart and cover him. I want to see you hold."

I aimed, squinting.

"No, no! You'll not have time to close an eye; both eyes are none too many. And you are awkward; you are stiff." She readjusted my arm and fingers. "That's better. You see that little rock? Hit it. Cock your weapon, first. Hold firmly, not too long. There; I think you're going to hit it, but hold low, low, with the wrist. Now!"

I fired. The sand obscured the rock. She clapped her hands, delighted.

"You would have killed him. No—he would have killed you. Quick! Give it to me!"

And snatching the revolver she cocked, leveled and fired instantly. The rock split into fragments.

"I would have killed him," she murmured, gazing tense, seeing I knew not what. Wrenching from the vision she handed back the revolver to me. "I think you're going to do, sir. Only, you must learn to draw. I can tell you but I can't show you. The men will. You must draw swiftly, decisively, without a halt, and finger on trigger and thumb on hammer and be ready to shoot when the muzzle clears the scabbard. It's a trick."

"Like this?" I queried, trying.

"Partly. But it's not a sword you're drawing; it's a gun. You may draw laughing, if you wish to dissemble for a sudden drop; they do, when they have iron in their heart and the bullet already on its way, in their mind. I mustn't stay longer. Shall we go to the fire now? I am cold." She shivered. "Daniel is waiting. And when you've delivered me safe you'd better leave me, please."

"Why so?"

She smiled, looking me straight in the eyes.

"Quién sabe? To avoid a scene, perhaps; perhaps, to postpone. I have an idea that it is better so. You've baited Daniel far enough for to-night."

We walked almost without speaking, to the Hyrum Adams fire. Daniel lifted upper lip at me as we entered; his eyes never wandered from my face. I marked his right hand quivering stiffly; and I disregarded him. For if I had challenged him by so much as an overt glance he would have burst bonds.

Rachael's eyes, the older woman's eyes, the eyes of all, men and women, curious, admonitory, hostile and apprehensive, hot and cold together—these I felt also amidst the dusk. I was distinctly unwelcome. Accordingly I said a civil "Good-evening" to Hyrum (whose response out of compressed lips was scarce more than a grunt) and raising my hat to My Lady turned my back upon them, for my own bailiwick.

The other men were waiting en route.

"Didn't kill ye, did he?"

"No."

"Wall," said one, "if you can swing a rattler by the tail, all right. But watch his haid."

Friend Jenks paced on with me to our fire.

"We were keepin' cases on you, and so was he. He saw that practice—damn, how he did crane! She was givin' you pointers, eh?"

"Yes; she wanted amusement."

"It'll set Bonnie Bravo to thinkin'—it'll shorely set him to thinkin'," Jenks chuckled, mouthing his pipe. "She's a smart one." He comfortably rocked to and fro as we sat by the fire. "Hell! Wall, if you got to kill him you got to kill him and do it proper. For if you don't kill him he'll kill you; snuff you out like a—wall, you saw that can travel."

"I don't want to kill him," I pleaded. "Why should I?"

Jenks sat silent; and sitting silent I foresaw that kill Daniel I must. I was being sucked into it, irrevocably willed by him, by her, by them all. If I did not kill him in defense of myself I should kill him in defense of her. Yet why I had to, I wondered; but when I had bought my ticket for Benton I had started the sequence, to this result. Here I was. As she had said, here I was, and here she was. I might not kill for love—no, not that; I was going to kill for hate. And while I never had killed a man, and in my heart of hearts did not wish to kill a man, since I had to kill one, named Daniel, even though he was a bully, a braggart and an infernal over-stepper it was pleasanter to think that I should kill him in hot blood rather than in cold.

Jenks spat, and yawned.

"I can l'arn you a few things; all the boys'll help you out," he proffered, "When you git him you'll have to git him quick; for if you don't—adios. But we'll groom ye."

Could this really be I? Frank Beeson, not a fortnight ago still living at jog-trot in dear Albany, New York State? It was puzzling how detached and how strong I felt.

CHAPTER XV

THE TRAIL NARROWS

Again we broke camp. We rolled down from the plateau into that wizard basin lying all beautiful and slumberous and spell-locked like some land of heart's desire. We replenished our water casks from the tank cars, we swapped for a little feed, we occasionally exchanged greetings with contractor outfits, and with grading crews. In due time we passed end o' track, where a bevy of sweated men were moiling like mad, clanging down the rails upon the hasty ties and ever calling for more, more. I witnessed little General "Jack" Casement of Ohio—a small man with full russet beard and imperative bold blue eyes—teetering and tugging at his whiskers and rampantly swearing while he drove the work forward. And we left end o' track, vainly reaching out after us, until the ring of the rails and the staccato of the rapid sledges faded upon our ears.

Now we were following the long line of bare grade, upturned reddish by the plows and scrapers and picks and shovels; sometimes elevated, for contour, sometimes merged with the desert itself. There the navvies digged and delved, scarcely taking time to glance at us. And day by day we plodded in the interminable clouds of desert dust raised by the supply wagons.

Captain Hyrum fought shy of their camps. The laborers were mainly Irish, trans-shipped from steerage, dock, and Bowery, and imported from Western mining centers; turbulent in their relaxations and plentifully supplied with whiskey: companies, they, not at all to the Mormon mind. Consequently we halted apart from them—and well so, for those were womanless camps and the daily stint bred strong appetites.

There were places where we made half circuit out from the grade and abandoned it entirely. In this way we escaped the dust, the rough talk, and the temptations; now and again obtained a modicum of forage in the shape of coarse weedy grasses at the borders of sinks.

But it was a cruel country on men and beasts. Our teamsters who had been through by the Overland Trail said that the Bitter Creek desert was yet worse: drier, barer, dustier and uglier. Nevertheless this was our daily program:

To rise after a shivery night, into the crisp dawn which once or twice glinted upon a film of ice formed in the water buckets; to herd the stiffened animals and place them convenient; to swallow our hot coffee and our pork and beans, and flapjacks when the cooks were in the humor; to hook the teams to the wagons and break corral, and amidst cracking of lashes stretch out into column, then to lurch and groan onward, at snail's pace, through the constantly increasing day until soon we also were wrung and parched by a relentless heat succeeding the frosty night.

The sleeping beauties of the realm were ever farther removed. In the distances they awaited, luring with promise of magic-invested azure battlements, languid reds and yellows like tapestry, and patches of liquid blue and dazzling snowy white, canopied by a soft, luxurious sky. But when we arrived, near spent, the battlements were only isolated sandstone outcrops inhabited by

rattlesnakes, the reds and yellows were sun-baked soil as hard, the liquid blue was poisonous, stagnant sinks, the snow patches were soda and bitter alkali, the luxurious sky was the same old white-hot dome, reflecting the blazing sun upon the fuming earth.

Then at sunset we made corral; against theft, when near the grade; against Indians and pillage when out from the grade, with the animals under herd guard. There were fires, there was singing at the Mormon camp, there was the heavy sleep beneath blanket and buffalo robe, through the biting chill of a breezeless night, the ground a welcomed bed, the stars vigilant from horizon to horizon, the wolves stalking and bickering like avid ghouls.

So we dulled to the falsity of the desert and the drudgery of the trail; and as the grading camps became less frequent the men grew riper for any diversion. That My Lady and Daniel and I were to furnish it seemed to be generally accepted. Here were the time-old elements: two men, one woman—elements so constituted that in other situation they might have brought comedy but upon such a trail must and should pronounce for tragedy, at least for true melodrama.

Besides, I was expected to uphold the honor of our Gentile mess along with my own honor. That was demanded; ever offered in cajolery to encourage my pistol practice. I was, in short, “elected,” by an obsession equal to a conviction; and what with her insistently obtruded as a bonus I never was permitted to lose sight of the ghastly prize of skill added to merit.

At first the matter had disturbed and horrified me mightily, to the extent that I anticipated evading the issue while preparing against it. Surely this was the current of a prankish dream. And dreams I had—frightfully tumultuous dreams, of red anger and redder blood, sometimes my own blood, sometimes another’s; dreams from which I awakened drenched in cold nightmare sweat.

To be infused, even by bunkum and banter, with the idea of killing, is a sad overthrow of sane balance. I would not have conceived the thing possible to me a month back. But the monotonous desert trail, the close companying with virile, open minds, and the strict insistence upon individual rights—yes, and the irritation of the same faces, the same figures, the same fare, the same labor, the same scant recreations, all worked as poison, to depress and fret and stimulate like alternant chills and fever.

Practice I did, if only in friendly emulation of the others, as a pass-the-time. I improved a little in drawing easily and firing snap-shot. The art was good to know, bad to depend upon. In the beginnings it worried me as a sleight-of-hand, until I saw that it was the established code and that Daniel himself looked to no other.

In fact, he pricked me on, not so much by word as by manner, which was worse. Since that evening when, in the approving parlance of my friends, I had “cut him out” by walking with her to the Adams fire, we had exchanged scarcely a word; he ruffled about at his end of the train and mainly in his own precincts, and I held myself in leash at mine, with self-consciousness most annoying to me.

But his manner, his manner—by swagger and covert sneer and ostentatious triumph of alleged possession emanating an unwearied challenge to my manhood. My revolver practice, I might mark, moved him to shrugs and flings; when he hulked by me he did so with a stare and a boastful grin, but without other response to my attempted “Howdy?”; now and again he assiduously cleaned his gun, sitting out where I should see even if I did not straightway look; in this he was most faithful, with sundry flourishes babying me by thinking to intimidate.

Withal he gave me never excuse of ending him or placating him, but shifted upon me the burden of choosing time and spot.

Once, indeed, we near had it. That was on an early morning. He was driving in a yoke of oxen that had strayed, and he stopped short in passing where I was busied with gathering our mules.

“Say, Mister, I want a word with yu,” he demanded.

“Well, out with it,” I bade; and my heart began to thump. Possibly I paled, I know that I blinked, the sun being in my eyes.

He laughed, and spat over his shoulder, from the saddle.

“Needn’t be skeered. I ain’t goin’ to hurt ye. I ’laow yu expected to make up to that woman, didn’t yu, ’fore this?”

“What woman?” I encouraged; but I was wondering if my revolver was loose.

“Edna. ’Cause if yu did, ’tain’t no use, Mister. Why,” indulgently, “yu couldn’t marry her—yu couldn’t marry her no more’n yu could kill me. Yu’re a Gentile, an’ yu’d be bustin’ yore own laws. But thar ain’t no Gentile laws for the Lord’s an’inted; so I thought I’d tell yu I’m liable to marry her myself. Yu’ve kep’ away from her consider’ble; this is to tell yu yu mought as well keep keepin’ away.”

“I sha’n’t discuss Mrs. Montoyo with you, sir,” I broke, cold, instead of hot, watching him very narrowly (as I had been taught to do), my hand nerved for the inevitable dart. “But I am her friend—her friend, mind you; and if she is in danger of being imposed upon by you, I stand ready to protect her. For I want you to know that I’m not afraid of you, day or night. Why, you low dog —!” and I choked, itching for the crisis.

He gawked, reddening; his right hand quivered; and to my chagrin he slowly laughed, scanning me.

“I seen yu practicin’. Go ahead. I wouldn’t kill yu *naow*. Or if yu want practice in ’arnest, start to

draw." He waited a moment, in easy insolence. I did not draw. "Let yore dander cool. Thar's no use yu tryin' to buck the Mormons. I've warned ye." And he passed on, cracking his lash.

Suddenly I was aware that, as seemed, every eye in the camp had been fastened upon us two. My fingers shook while with show of nonchalance I resumed adjusting the halters.

"Gosh! Looked for a minute like you and him was to have it out proper," Jenks commented, matter of fact, when I came in. "Hazin' you a bit, was he? What'd he say?"

"He warned me to keep away from Mrs. Montoyo. Went so far as to lay claim to her himself, the whelp. Boasted of it."

"Threwed it in your face, did he? Wall, you goin' to let him cache her away?"

"Look here," I said desperately, still a-tremble: "Why do you men put that up to me? Why do you egg me on to interfere? She's no more to me than she is to you. Damn it, I'll take care of myself but I don't see why I should shoulder her, except that she's a woman and I won't see any woman mistreated."

He pulled his whiskers, and grinned.

"Dunno jest how fur you're elected. Looks like there was something between you and her—though I don't say for shore. But she's your kind; she may be a leetle devil, but she's your kind—been eddicated and acts the lady. She ain't our kind. Thunderation! What'd we do with her? She'd be better off marryin' Dan'l. He'd give her a home. If you hadn't been with this train I don't believe she'd have follered in. That's the proposition. You got to fight him anyway; he's set out to back you down. It's your fracas, isn't it?"

"I know it," I admitted. "He's been ugly toward me from the first, without reason."

"Reckoned to amuse himself. He's one o' them fellers that think to show off by ridin' somebody they think they can ride. The boys hate to see you lay down to that; for you'd better call him and eat lead or else quit the country. So you might as well give him a full dose and take the pot."

"What pot?"

"The woman, o' course."

"I tell you, Mrs. Montoyo has nothing to do with it, any more than any woman. It's a matter between him and me—he began it by jeering at me before she appeared. I want her left out of it."

"Oh, pshaw!" Jenks scoffed. "That can't be did. He's fetched her into it. What do you aim to do, then? Dodge her? When you're dodgin' her you're dodgin' him, or so he'll take it."

"I'll not dodge him, you can bet on that," I vowed. "I don't seek her, nor him; but I shall not go out of my way to avoid either of them."

"And when you give him his dose, what'll you do?"

"If that is forced upon me, nothing. It will be in defense of my rights, won't it? But I don't want any further trouble with him. I hope to God I won't have."

"Shore," Jenks soothed. "You're not a killer. All the same, you're elected; he began it and you'll have to finish it. Then you'll needs look out for yourself and her too, for he's made her the stakes."

"Why will I?"

"Got to. The hull train thinks so, one way or t'other, and you're white."

"She can stay with the Mormons, if she wants to."

"Oh, yes; if she wants to. But do you reckon she does? Not much! She's lookin' to you—she's lookin' to you. She's a smart leetle piece—knows how to play her cards, and she's got you and Dan'l goin'."

"But she's married. You can't expect—"

"Oh, yes," he wagged again, interrupting. "Shore. There's Montoyo. I don't envy you your job, but damn' if you mightn't work harder and do wuss. She's a clipper, and I never did hear anything 'specially bad of her, beyond cappin'. Whoa, Jinny!"

I wrathfully cogitated. Now I began to hate her. I was a tool to her hand, once more, was I? And how had it come about? She had not directly besought me to it—not by word. Daniel had decreed, and already our antagonism had been on. And I had defied him—naturally. He should not bilk me of free movement. But the issue might, on the face of it, appear to be she. As I tugged at the harness, under breath I cursed the scurvy turn of events; and in seeking to place the blame found amazing cleverness in her. Just the same, I was not going to kill him for her account; never, never! And I wished to the deuce that she'd kept clear of me.

Jenks was speaking.

"So the fust chance you get you might as well walk straight into him, call him all the names you can lay tongue to, and when he makes a move for his gun beat him to the draw and come up shootin'. Then it'll be over with. The longer it hangs, the less peace you'll have; for you've got to do it sooner or later. It's you or him."

"Not necessarily," I faltered. "There may be another way."

"There ain't, if you're a he critter on two legs," snapped Jenks. "Not in this country or any other

white man's country; no, nor in red man's country neither. What you do back in the States, can't say. Trust in pray'r, mebbe."

Nevertheless I determined to make a last effort even at the risk of losing caste. In the reaction from the pressure of that recent encounter when I might have killed, but didn't, I again had a spell of fierce, sick protest against the rôle being foisted upon me—foisted, I could see, by her machinations as well as by his animosity. The position was too false to be borne. There was no joy in it, no zest, no adequate reward. Why, in God's name, should I be sentenced to have blood upon my hands and soul? Surely I might be permitted to stay clean.

Therefore this evening immediately after corral was formed I sought out Captain Adams, as master of the train; and disregarding the gazes that followed me and that received me I spoke frankly, here at his own wagon, without preliminary.

"Daniel and I appear to be at outs, sir," I said. "Why, I do not know, except that he seems to have had a dislike for me from the first day. If he'll let me alone I'll let him alone. I'm not one to look for trouble."

His heavy face, with those thick pursed lips and small china blue eyes, changed not a jot.

"Daniel will take care of himself."

"That is his privilege," I answered. "I am not here to question his rights, Captain, as long as he keeps within them; but I don't require of him to take care of me also. If he will hold to his own trail I'll hold to mine, and I assure you there'll be no trouble."

"Daniel will take care of himself, I say," he reiterated. "Yes, and look after all that belongs to him, stranger. There's no use threatening Daniel. What he does he does as servant of the Lord and he fears naught."

"Neither do I, sir," I retorted hotly. "One may wish to avoid trouble and still not fear it. I have not come to you with complaint. I merely wish to explain. You are captain of the train and responsible for its conduct. I give you notice that I shall defend myself against insult and annoyance."

I turned on my heel—sensed poised forms and inquiring faces; and his booming voice stayed me.

"A moment, stranger. Your talk is big. What have you to do with this woman Edna?"

"With Mrs. Montoyo? What I please, if it pleases her, sir. If she claims your protection, very good. Should she claim mine, she'll have it." And there, confound it, I had spoken. "But with this, Daniel has nothing to do. I believe that the lady you mention is simply your present guest and my former acquaintance."

"You err," he thundered, darkening. "You cannot be expected to see the light. But I say to you, keep away, keep away. I will have no gallivanting, no cozening and smiling and prating and distracting. She must be nothing to you. Never can be, never shall be. Her way is appointed, the instrument chosen, and as a sister in Zion she shall know you not. Now get you gone—" a favorite expression of his. "Get you gone, meddle not hereabouts, and I'll see to it that you are spared from harm."

Surprising myself, and perhaps him, I gazed full at him and laughed without reserve or irritation.

"Thank you, Captain," I heard myself saying. "I am perfectly capable of self-protection. And I expect to remain a friend of Mrs. Montoyo as long as she permits me. For your bluster and Daniel's I care not a sou. In fact, I consider you a pair of damned body-snatchers. Good-evening."

Then out I stormed, boiling within, reckless of opposition—even courting it; but met none, Daniel least of all (for he was elsewhere), until as I passed on along the lined-up wagons I heard my name uttered breathlessly.

"Mr. Beeson."

It was not My Lady; her I had not glimpsed. The gentle English girl Rachael had intercepted me. She stood between two wagons, whither she had hastened.

"You will be careful?"

"How far, madam?"

"Of yourself, and for her. Oh, be careful. You can gain nothing."

Her face and tone entreated me. She was much in earnest, the roses of her round cheeks paled, her hands clasped.

"I shall only look out for myself," said I. "That seems necessary."

"You should keep away from our camp, and from Daniel. There is nothing you can do. You—if you could only understand." Her hands tightened upon each other. "Won't you be careful? More careful? For I know. You cannot interfere; there is no way. You but run great risk. Sister Edna will be happy."

"Did she send you, madam?" I asked.

"N-no; yes. Yes, she wishes it. Her place has been found. The Lord so wills. We all are happy in Zion, under the Lord. Surely you would not try to interfere, sir?"

"I have no desire to interfere with the future happiness of Mrs. Montoyo," I stiffly answered.

"She is not the root of the business between Daniel and me, although he would have it appear so. And you yourself, a woman, are satisfied to have her forced into Mormonism?"

"She has been living in sin, sir. The truth is appointed only among the Latter Day Saints. We have the book and the word—the Gentile priests are not ordained of the Lord for laying on of hands. In Zion Edna shall be purged and set free; there she shall be brought to salvation. Our bishops, perhaps Brigham Young himself, will show her the way. But no woman in Zion is married without consent. The Lord directs through our prophets. Oh, sir, if you could only see!"

An angel could not have pleaded more sweetly. To have argued with her would have been sacrilege, for I verily believed that she was pure of heart.

"There is nothing for me to say, madam," I responded. "As far as I can do so with self-respect I will avoid Daniel. I certainly shall not intrude upon your party, or bother Mrs. Montoyo. But if Daniel brings trouble to me I will hand it back to him. That's flat. He shall not flout me out of face. It rests with him whether we travel on peacefully or not. And I thank you for your interest."

"I will pray for you," she said simply. "Good-bye, sir."

She withdrew, hastening again, sleek haired, round figured, modest in her shabby gown. I proceeded to the outfit with a new sense of disease. If she—if Mrs. Montoyo really had yielded, if she were out of the game—but she never had been in it; not to me. And still I conned the matter over and over, vainly convincing myself that the situation had cleared. Notwithstanding all my effort, I somehow felt that an incentive had vanished, leaving a gap. The affair now had simmered down to plain temper and tit for tat. I championed nothing, except myself.

Why, with her submissive, in a fracas I might be working hurt to her, beyond the harm to him. But she be hanged, as to that phase of it. I had been led on so far that there was no solution save as Daniel turned aside. Heaven knows that the matter would have been sordid enough had it focused upon a gambler's wife; and here it looked only prosaic. Thus viewing it I fought an odd disappointment in myself, coupled with a keener disappointment in her.

"You talked to Hyrum, I see," Jenks commented.

"I did."

"'Bout Dan'l, mebbe?"

"I wanted to make plain that the business is none of my seeking. Hyrum is wagon master."

"Didn't get any satisfaction, I'll bet."

"No. On the contrary."

"I could have told you you'd be wastin' powder."

"At any rate," I informed, "Mrs. Montoyo is entirely out of the matter. She never was in it except as she was entitled to protection, but now she requires no further notice."

"How so?"

"That is her wish. She sent me word by Rachael."

"She did? Wall?" He eyed me. "You swaller that?"

"Willingly." And I swallowed my bitterness also.

"Means to marry him, does she?"

"Rachael did not say as to that. Rather, she gave me to understand that a way would be found to release Mrs. Montoyo from Benton connections, but that no woman in Utah is obliged to marry. Is that true?"

"Um-m." Jenks rubbed his beard. "Wall, they do say Brigham Young is ag'in promisc'yus swappin', and things got to be done straight, 'cordin' to the faith. But an unjined female in the church is a powerful lonely critter. Sticks out like a sore thumb. They read the Bible at her plenty. Um-m," mused he. "I don't put much stock in that yarn you bring me. There's a nigger in the wood-pile, but he ain't black. What you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothing. It's not my concern. Now if Daniel will mind his affairs I'll continue to mind mine."

"Wall, Zion's a long way off yet," quoth friend Jenks. "I don't look to see you or she get there—nor Dan'l either."

He being stubborn, I let him have the last word; did not seek to develop his views. But his contentious harping shadowed like an omen.

CHAPTER XVI

I DO THE DEED

We had camped well beyond a last bunch of the red-shirted graders, so that the thread of a trail wended before, lonely, sand-obscured, leading apparently nowhere, through this desert devoid of human life. Line stakes of the surveyors denoted the grade; but the surveyors' work was done, here. Rush orders from headquarters had sent them all westward still, to set their final stakes across other deserts and across the mountains, clear to Ogden at the north end of the Salt Lake itself.

Seemingly we had cut loose and were more than ever a world to ourselves. The country had grown sterile beneath ordinary, if possible; and our thoughts and talk would have been sterile also were it not for that one recurrent topic which kept them quick. In these journeyings men seize upon little things and magnify them; discuss and rediscuss a phase until launched maybe as an empty joke it returns freighted with tragedy.

However, now that once My Lady had eliminated herself from my field I did not see but that Daniel and I might taper off into at least an armed neutrality. If he continued to nag me, it would be wholly of his own free will. He had no grievance.

Then in case that I did kill him—if kill him I must (and that eventuality hung over me like the sword of Damocles) I should be not ashamed to tell even my mother. In this I took what small comfort I might.

I had not spoken at length with Mrs. Montoyo for several days. We had exchanged merely civil greetings. To-day I did not see her during the march; did not attempt to see her—did not so much as curiously glance her way, being content to let well enough alone, although aware that my care might be misinterpreted as a token of fear. But as to proving the case against me, Daniel was at liberty to experiment with the status in quo.

Toward evening we climbed a second wide, flat divide. We were leaving the Red Basin, they said, and about to cross into the Bitter Creek Plains, which, according to the talk, were "a damned sight wuss!" Somewhere in the Bitter Creek Plains our course met the course of the Overland Stage road, trending up from the south for the passage of the Green River at the farther edge of the Plains.

I had only faint hope that Mrs. Montoyo would be delivered over to the stage there. It scarcely would be her wish. We were destined to travel on to Salt Lake City together—she, Daniel and I.

If the Red Basin had been bad and if the Bitter Creek Plains were to be worse, assuredly this plateau was limbo: a gray, bleak, wind-swept elevation fairly level and extending, in elevation perceptible mainly by the vista, as far as eye might see, northward and southward, separating basin from basin—one Hell, as Jenks declared, from the other.

Nevertheless there was a wild grandeur in the site, flooded all with crimson as the sun sank in the clear western sky beyond the Plains themselves, so that our plateau was still bathed in ruddy color when the Red Basin upon the one hand had deepened to purple and the white blotches of soda and alkali down in the Plains upon the other hand gleamed evilly in a tenuous gloaming.

We had corralled adjacent to another tainted pond, of which the animals refused to drink but which furnished a little rank forage for them and an oasis for a half dozen ducks. A pretty picture these made, too, as they lightly sat the open water, burnished to brass by the sunset so that the surface shimmered iridescent, its ripples from the floating bodies flowing molten in all directions.

After supper I took the notion to go over there, in the twilight, on idle exploration. Water of any kind had an appeal; a solitary pond always has; the ducks brought thoughts of home. Many a teal and widgeon and canvasback had fallen to my double-barreled Manton, back on the Atlantic coast—very long ago, before I had got entangled in this confounded web of misadventure and homicidal tendencies.

To the pond I went, mood subdued. It set slightly in a cup; and when I had emerged from a little swale or depression that I had followed, attracted by the laughter of children playing at the marge, whom should I see, approaching on line diagonal, but Mrs. Montoyo—her very hair and form—coming in likewise, perhaps with errand similar to mine: simple inclination.

And that (again perhaps) was a mutual surprise, indeed awkward to me, for we both were in plain sight from the camp. Certainly I could not turn off, nor turn back. Not now. It was make or break. Hesitate I did, with involuntary action of muscles; I thought that she momentarily hesitated; then I drove on, defiant, and so did she. The fates were resolved that there should be no dilly-dallying by the principals chosen for this drama that they had staged.

Our obstinate paths met at the base of a small point white with alkali, running shortly into the sedges. Had we timed by agreement beforehand we could not have acted with more precision. So here we halted, in narrow quarters, either willing but unable to yield to the other.

She smiled. I thought that she looked thinner.

"An unexpected pleasure, Mr. Beeson. At least, for me. It has been some days."

"I believe it has," I granted. "Shall I pass on?"

"You might have turned aside."

"And so," I reminded, "might you."

"But I didn't care to."

"Neither did I, madam. The pond is free to all."

I was conscious that a hush seemed to have gripped the whole camp, so that even the animals had ceased bawling. The children near us stared, eyes and mouths open.

"You have kept away from me purposely?" she asked. "I do not blame your discretion."

"I am not courting trouble. And as long as you are contented yonder——"

"I contented?" She drew up, paling. "Why do you say that, when you must know." She laughed weakly. "I am still for the Lion's den."

"You have become more reconciled—I've been requested not to interfere."

"You? Without doubt. By Daniel, by Captain Adams, likely by others. More than requested, I fancy. And you do perfectly right to avoid trouble if possible. In fact, you can leave me now and continue your walk, sir, with no reproaches. Believe me, I shall not drag you farther into my affairs."

"Daniel and Captain Adams have no weight with me, madam," I stammered. "But when you yourself requested——"

"That was merely for the time being. I asked you to leave me at the fire because I felt sure that Daniel would kill you."

"But yesterday evening—I refer to yesterday," I corrected. "You sent me word, following my talk with Hyrum."

"I did not."

"Not by Rachael?"

"No, sir."

"I so understood. I thought that she intimated as much. She said that you were to be happy; were already content. And that I would only be making you trouble if I continued our acquaintance."

"Oh! Rachael." She smiled with sudden softness. "Rachael cannot understand, either. I'm sure she intended well, poor soul. Were they all like Rachael—— But I had no knowledge of her talk with you. Anyway, please leave me if you feel disposed. Whether I marry Daniel or not should be no concern of yours. I shall have to find my own trail out. Look! There go the ducks. I came down to watch them. Now neither of us has any excuse for staying. Good——"

The hush had tightened into a strange pent stillness like the poise of earth and sky and beast and bird just before the breaking of a great and lowering storm. The quick clatter of the ducks' wings somehow alarmed me—the staring of the children, their eyes directed past us, sharpened my senses for a new focus. And glancing, I witnessed Daniel nearing—striding rapidly, straight for the point, a figure portentous in the fading glow, bringing the storm with him.

She saw, too. Her eyes widened, startled, surveying not him, but me.

"Please go. At once! I'll keep him."

"It is too late now," I asserted, in voice not mine. "I am here first and I'll go when I get ready."

"You mean to face him?"

"I mean to hear what he has to say, and learn what he intends to do. I don't see any other way—unless you really wish me to go?"

"No, no!" cried My Lady. "I don't want you to be harmed; but oh, how I have suffered." All her countenance was suffused—with anger, with shame, and even with hope. She trembled, gazing at me, and fluctuant.

"So have I, madam," said I, grimly.

"I think," she remarked in quiet tone, "that in a show-down you will best him. I'm sure of it; yes, I know it. You will play the man. You act cool. Good! Watch him very close. He'll give you little grace, this time. But remember this: I'll never, never, never marry him. Rather than be bound to him I'll deal with him myself."

"It won't be necessary, madam," said I—a catch in my throat; for while I was all iciness and clamminess, my hands cold and my tongue dry, I felt that I was going to kill him at last. Something told me; the sheer horror of it struck through; the inevitable loomed grisly and near indeed.

A panoramic lifetime crowds the brain of a drowning man; that same crowded my brain during the few moments which swung in to us Daniel, scowling, masterful, his raw bulk and his long shambling stride never before so insolent.

From New York and home and peace I traveled clear here to desert, outlawry and blood—and thence on through a second life as a marked man; but while I knew very well where I should shoot him (right through the heart), I turned over and over the one doubtful pass: where would he shoot me? Shoot me he would—chest, shoulder, arm, head; I could not escape, did not hope to escape. Yet no matter where his ball ploughed (and I poignantly felt it enter and sear me) my final bullet would end the match. Also, I argued my rights in the business; argued them before my father and mother, before the camp, before the world.

These thoughts which precede a certain duel to the death are not inspiring thoughts; since then

I have learned that other men, even practiced gun-men, have had the same trepidation to the instant of pulling weapon.

Daniel charged in for us. I did not touch revolver butt; he did not. My Lady lifted chin, to receive him. My eyes, fastened upon him, noted her, and noted, beyond us, the spying visages of the camp folk, all turned our way, transfixed and agog.

He barked first at her.

"Go whar yu belong, yu Jezebel! Then I'll tend to this——" The rabid epithet leveled at me I shall not repeat.

She straightened whitely.

"Be careful what you say, Daniel. No man on this earth can speak to me like that."

All his face flushed livid with a sneer, merging together yellow freckles and tanned skin.

"Can't, can't he? I kin an' I do. Why yu—yu—yu reckon yu kin shame me 'fore that hull train? Yu sneak out this-away, meetin' this spindle-shank, no-count States greenie who hain't sense enough to swing a bull whip an' ain't man enough to draw a gun? I've told yu an' I'm done tellin' yu. Now yu git. I've stood yore fast an' loose plenty. I mean business. Git! Whar yu'll be safe. I'll not hold off much longer."

"You threaten *me*?"

Her blue eyes were blazing above a spot of color in either cheek—with a growl he took a step, so that she shrank from his clutching hand, its scarred, burly fingers outcurved. And the time, perhaps the very moment had arrived. I must, I must.

"No more of that, you brute," I uttered, while my pounding heart flooded me with a cold, tingling stream. "If you have anything to say, say it to me."

He whirled.

"Yu! Why, yu leetle piece o' nothin'—yu shut up!" By sudden reach he gripped her arm; to her sharp, short scream he thrust her about.

"Git! I'm boss hyar." And at me: "What yu goin' to do? She's promised to me. I'm takin' keer of her; she's rode on my wagon; an' naow yu think to toll her off? Yu meet her ag'in right under my nose arter I've warned yu? Git, yoreself, or I'll stomp on yu like on a louse."

Absolutely, hot tears of mortification, of bitter injury, showed in his glaring eyes. He was but a big boy, after all.

"Our meeting here was entirely by accident," I answered. "Mrs. Montoyo had no expectation of seeing me, nor I of seeing her. You're making a fool of yourself."

He burst, red, quivering, insensate.

"Yu're a liar! Yu're a sneakin', thievin' liar, like all Gentiles. Yu're both o' yu liars. What's she?" And he spoke it, raving with insult. "But I'll tame her. She'll be snatched from yu an' yore kind. We'll settle naow. Yu're a liar, I say. Yu gonna draw on me? Draw, yu Gentile dog; for if I lay hands on yu once——"

"Look out!" she gasped tensely. But she had spoken late. That cold blood which had kept me in a tremor and a wonderment, awaiting his pistol muzzle, exploded into a seethe of heat almost blinding me. I forgot instructions, I disregarded every movement preliminary to the onset, I remembered only the criminations and recriminations culminating here at last. Bullets were too slow and easy. I did not see his revolver, I saw but the hulk of him and the intolerable sneer of him, and that his flesh was ready to my fingers. And quicker than his hand I was upon him, into him, climbing him, clinging to him, arms binding him, legs twining around his, each ounce of me greedy to crush him down and master him.

The shock drove him backward. Again My Lady screamed shortly; the children screamed. He proved very strong. Swelling and tugging and cursing he broke one grip, but I was fast to him, now with guard against his holstered gun. We swayed and staggered, grappling hither and thither. I had his arms pinioned once more, to bend him. He spat into my face; and shifting, set his teeth into my shoulder so that they champed like the teeth of a horse, through shirt and hide to the flesh. I raised him; his boots hammered at my shins, his knee struck me in the stomach and for an instant I sickened. Now I tripped him; we toppled together, came to the ground with a thump. Here he churned, while he flung me and still I stuck. The acrid dust of the alkali enveloped us. Again he spat, fetid—I sprawled upon him, smothering his flailing arms; gave him all my weight and strength; smelled the sweat of him, snarled into his snarling face, close beneath mine.

Once he partially freed himself and buffeted me in the mouth with his fist, but I caught him—while struggling, tossed and upheaved, dimly saw that as by a miracle we were surrounded by a ring of people, men and women, their countenances pale, alarmed, intent. Voices sounded in a dull roar.

Presently I had him crucified: his one outstretched arm under my knees, his other arm tethered by my two hands, my body across his chest, while his legs threshed vainly. I looked down into his bulging crooked eyes, glaring back presumably into my eyes, and might draw breath.

"Nuf? Cry 'Nuf,'" I bade.

"Nuf! Say 'Nuf,'" echoed the crowd.

He strained again, convulsive; and relaxed.

"'Nuf!" he panted through bared teeth. "Lemme up, Mister."

"This settles it?"

"I said "'Nuf,'" he growled.

With quick movement I sprang clear of him, to my feet. He lay for a moment, baleful, and slowly scrambled up. On a sudden, as he faced me, his hand shot downward—I heard the surge and shout of men and women, to the stunning report of his revolver ducked aside, felt my left arm jerk and sting—felt my own gun explode in my hand (and how it came there I did not know)—beheld him spin around and collapse; an astonishing sight.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRAIL FORKS

So there I stood, amidst silence, gaping foolishly, breathing hard, my revolver smoking in my fingers and my enemy in a shockingly prone posture at my feet, gradually reddening the white of the torn soil. He was upon his face, his revolver hand outflung. He was harmless. The moment had arrived and passed. I was standing here alive, I had killed him.

Then I heard myself babbling.

"Have I killed him? I didn't want to. I tell you, I didn't want to."

Figures rushed in between. Hands grasped me, impelled me away, through a haze; voices spoke in my ear while I feebly resisted, a warm salty taste in my throat.

"I killed him. I didn't want to kill him. He made me do it. He shot first."

"Yes, yes," they said, soothing gruffly. "Shore he did; shore you didn't. It's all right. Come along, come along."

Then—

"Pick him up. He's bad hurt, himself. See that blood? No, 'tain't his arm, is it? He's bleedin' internal. Whar's the hole? Wait! He's busted something."

They would have carried me.

"No," I cried, while their bearded faces swam. "He said "'Nuf'—he shot me afterward. Not bad, is it? I can walk."

"Not bad. Creased you in the arm, if that's all. What you spittin' blood for?"

As they hustled me onward I wiped my swollen lips; the back of my hand seemed to be covered with thin blood.

"Where he struck me, once," I wheezed.

"Yes, mebbe so. But come along, come along. We'll tend to you."

The world had grown curiously darkened, so that we moved as through an obscuring veil; and I dumbly wondered whether this was night (had it been morning or evening when I started for the pond?) or whether I was dying myself. I peered and again made out the sober, stern faces hedging me, but they gave me no answer to my mutely anxious query. Across a great distance we stumbled by the wagons (the same wagons of a time ago), and halted at a fire.

"Set down. Fetch a blanket, somebody. Whar's the water? Set down till we look you over."

I let them sit me down.

"Wash your mouth out."

That was done, pinkish; and a second time, clearer.

"You're all right." Jenks apparently was ministering to me. "Swaller this."

The odor of whiskey fumed into my nostrils. I obediently swallowed, and gasped and choked. Jenks wiped my face with a sopping cloth. Hands were rummaging at my left arm; a bandage being wound about.

"Nothin' much," was the report. "Creased him, is all. Lucky he dodged. It was comin' straight for his heart."

"He's all right," Jenks again asserted.

Under the bidding of the liquor the faintness from the exertion and reaction was leaving me. The slight hemorrhage from the strain to my weak lungs had ceased. I would live, I would live. But he—Daniel?

"Did I kill him?" I besought. "Not that! I didn't aim—I don't know how I shot—but I had to."

Didn't I?"

"You did. He'll not bother you ag'in. She's yourn."

That hurt.

"But it wasn't about her, it wasn't over Mrs. Montoyo. He bullied me—dared me. We were man to man, boys. He made me fight him."

"Yes, shore," they agreed—and they were not believing. They still linked me with a woman, whereas she had figured only as a transient occasion.

Then she herself, My Lady, appeared, running in breathless and appealing.

"Is Mr. Beeson hurt? Badly? Where is he? Let me help."

She knelt beside me, her hand grasped mine, she gazed wide-eyed and imploring.

"No, he's all right, ma'am."

"I'm all right, I assure you," I mumbled thickly, and helpless as a babe to the clinging of her cold fingers.

"How's the other man?" they abruptly asked.

"I don't know. He was carried away. But I think he's dead. I hope so—oh, I hope so. The coward, the beast!"

"There, there," they quieted. "That's all over with. What he got is his own business now. He hankered for it and was bound to have it. You'd best stay right hyar a spell. It's the place for you at present."

They grouped apart, on the edge of the flickering fire circle. The dusk had heightened apace (for nightfall this really was), the glow and flicker barely touched their blackly outlined forms, the murmur of their voices sounded ominous. In the circle we two sat, her hand upon mine, thrilling me comfortably yet abashing me. She surveyed me unwinkingly and grave—a triumph shining from her eyes albeit there were seamy shadows etched into her white face. It was as though she were welcoming me through the outposts of hell.

"You killed him. I knew you would—I knew you'd have to."

"I knew it, too," I miserably faltered. "But I didn't want to—I shot without thinking. I might have waited."

"Waited! How could you wait? 'Twas either you or he."

"Then I wish it had been I," I attempted.

"What nonsense," she flashed. "We all know you did your best to avoid it. But tell me: Do you think I dragged you into it? Do you hate me for it?"

"No. It happened when you were there. That's all. I'm sorry; only sorry. What's to be done next?"

"That will be decided, of course," she said. "You will be protected, if necessary. You acted in self-defense. They all will swear to that and back you up."

"But you?" I asked, arousing from this unmanly despair which played me for a weakling. "You must be protected also. You can't go to that other camp, can you?"

She laughed and withdrew her hand; laughed hardly, even scornfully.

"I? Above all things, don't concern yourself about me, please. I shall take care of myself. He is out of the way. You have freed me of that much, Mr. Beeson, whether intentionally or not. And you shall be free, yourself, to act as your friends advise. You must leave me out of your plans altogether. Yes, I know; you killed him. Why not? But he wasn't a man; he was a wild animal. And you'll find there are matters more serious than killing even a man, in this country."

"You! You!" I insisted. "You shall be looked out for. We are partners in this. He used your name; he made that an excuse. We shall have to make some new arrangements for you—put you on the stage as soon as we can. And meanwhile——"

"There is no partnership, and I shall require no looking after, sir," she interrupted. "If you are sorry that you killed him, I am not; but you are entirely free."

The group at the edge of the fire circle dissolved. Jenks came and seated himself upon his hams, beside us.

"Wall, how you feelin' now?" he questioned of me.

"I'm myself again," said I.

"Your arm won't trouble you. Jest a flesh wound. There's nothin' better than axle grease. And you, ma'am?"

"Perfectly well, thank you."

"You're the coolest of the lot, and no mistake," he praised admiringly. "Wall, there'll be no more fracas to-night. Anyhow, the boys'll be on guard ag'in it; they're out now. You two can eat and rest a bit, whilst gettin' good and ready; and if you set out 'fore moon-up you can easy get cl'ar, with what help we give you. We'll furnish mounts, grub, anything you need. I'll make shift without Frank."

"Mounts!" I blurted, with a start that waked my arm to throbbing. "'Set out,' you say? Why? And where?"

"Anywhar. The stage road south'ard is your best bet. You didn't think to stay, did you? Not after that—after you'd plugged a Mormon, the son of the old man, besides! We reckoned you two had it arranged, by this time."

"No! Never!" I protested. "You're crazy, man. I've never dreamed of any such thing; nor Mrs. Montoyo, either. You mean that I—we—should run away? I'll not leave the train and neither shall she, until the proper time. Or do I understand that you disown us; turn your backs upon us; deliver us over?"

"Hold on," Jenks bade. "You're barkin' up the wrong tree. 'Tain't a question of disownin' you. Hell, we'd fight for you and proud to do it, for you're white. But I tell you, you've killed one o' that party ahead, you've killed the wagon boss's son; and Hyrum, he's consider'ble of a man himself. He stands well up, in the church. But lettin' that alone, he's captain of this train, he's got a dozen and more men back of him; and when he comes in the mornin' demandin' of you for trial by his Mormons, what can we do? Might fight him off; yes. Not forever, though. He's nearest to the water, sech as it is, and our casks are half empty, critters dry. We sha'n't surrender you; if we break with him we break ourselves and likely lose our scalps into the bargain. Why, we hadn't any idee but that you and her were all primed to light out, with our help. For if you stay you won't be safe anywhere betwixt here and Salt Lake; and over in Utah they'll vigilant you, shore as kingdom. As for you, ma'am," he bluntly addressed, "we'd protect you to the best of ability, o' course; but you can see for yourself that Hyrum won't feel none too kindly toward you, and that if you'll pull out along with Beeson as soon as convenient you'll avoid a heap of unpleasantness. We'll take the chance on sneakin' you both away, and facin' the old man."

"Mr. Beeson should go," she said. "But I shall return to the Adams camp. I am not afraid, sir."

"Tut, tut!" he rapped. "I know you're not afraid; nevertheless we won't let you do it."

"They wouldn't lay hands on me."

"Um-m," he mused. "Mebbe not. No, reckon they wouldn't. I'll say that much. But by thunder they'd make you wish they did. They'd claim you trapped Dan'l. You'd suffer for that, and in place of this boy, and a-plenty. Better foller your new man, lady, and let him stow you in safety. Better go back to Benton."

"Never to Benton," she declared. "And he's not my 'new man.' I apologize to him for that, from you, sir."

"If you stay, I stay, then," said I. "But I think we'd best go. It's the only way." And it was. We were twain in menace to the outfit and to each other but inseparable. We were yoked. The fact appalled. It gripped me coldly. I seemed to have bargained for her with word and fist and bullet, and won her; now I should appear to carry her off as my booty: a wife and a gambler's wife. Yet such must be.

"You shall go without me."

"I shall not."

With a little sob she buried her face in her hands.

"If you don't hate me now you soon will," she uttered. "The cards don't fall right—they don't, they don't. They've been against me from the first. I'm always forcing the play."

Whereupon I knew that go together we should, or I was no man.

"Pshaw, pshaw," Jenks soothed. "Matters ain't so bad. We'll fix ye out and cover your trail. Moon'll be up in a couple o' hours. I'd advise you to take an hour's start of it, so as to get away easier. If you travel straight south'ard you'll strike the stage road sometime in the mornin'. When you reach a station you'll have ch'ice either way."

"I have money," she said; and sat erect.

CHAPTER XVIII

VOICES IN THE VOID

The directions had been plain. With the North Star and the moon as our guides we scarcely could fail to strike the stage road where it bore off from the mountains northward into the desert.

For the first half mile we rode without a word from either of us to violate the truce that swathed us like the night. What her thoughts were I might not know, but they sat heavy upon her, closing her throat with the torture of vain self-reproach. That much I sensed. But I could not reassure

her; could not volunteer to her that I welcomed her company, that she was blameless, that I had only defended my honor, that affairs would have reduced to pistol work without impulse from her—that, in short, the responsibility had been wholly Daniel's. My own thoughts were so grievous as to crush me with aching woe that forbade civil utterance.

This, then, was I: somebody who had just killed a man, had broken from the open trail and was riding, he knew not where, through darkness worse than night, himself an outlaw with an outlawed woman—at the best a chance woman, an adventuring woman, and as everybody could know, a claimed woman, product of dance hall and gaming resort, wife of a half-breed gambler, and now spoil of fist and revolver.

But that which burned me almost to madness, like hot lava underneath the deadening crust, was the thought that I had done a deed and a defensible deed, and was fleeing from it the same as a criminal. Such a contingency never had occurred to me or I might have taken a different course, still with decency; although what course I could not figure.

We rode, our mules picking their way, occasionally stumbling on rocks and shrubs. At last she spoke in low, even tones.

"What do you expect to do with me, please?"

"We shall have to do whatever is best for yourself," I managed to answer. "That will be determined when we reach the stage line, I suppose."

"Thank you. Once at the stage line and I shall contrive. You must have no thought of me. I understand very well that we should not travel far in company—and you may not wish to go in my direction. You have plans of your own?"

"None of any great moment. Everything has failed me, to date. There is only the one place left: New York State, where I came from. I probably can work my way back—at least, until I can recoup by telegraph message and the mails."

"You have one more place than I," she replied. She hesitated. "Will you let me lend you some money?"

"I've been paid my wages due," said I. "But," I added, "you have a place, you have a home: Benton."

"Oh, Benton!" She laughed under breath. "Never Benton. I shall make shift without Benton."

"You will tell me, though?" I urged. "I must have your address, to know that you reach safety."

"You are strictly business. I believe that I accused you before of being a Yankee." And I read sarcasm in her words.

Her voice had a quality of definite estimation which nettled, humbled, and isolated me, as if I lacked in some essential to a standard set.

"So you are going home, are you?" she resumed. "With the clothes on your back, or will you stop at Benton for your trunk?"

"With the clothes on my back," I asserted bitterly. "I've no desire to see Benton. The trunk can be shipped to me."

She said on, in her cool impersonal tone.

"That is the easiest way. You will live warm and comfortably. You will need to wear no belt weapon. The police will protect you. If a man injures you, you can summon him at law and wash your hands of him. Instead of staking on your luck among new people, you can enter into business among your friends and win from them. You can marry the girl next door—or even take the chance of the one across the street, her parentage being *comme il faut*. You can tell stories of your trip into the Far West; your children will love to hear of the rough mule-whacker trail—yes, you will have great tales but you will not mention that you killed a man who tried to kill you and then rode for a night with a strange woman alone at your stirrup. Perhaps you will venture to revisit these parts by steam train, and from the windows of your coach point out the places where you suffered those hardships and adventures from which you escaped by leaving them altogether. Your course is the safe course. By all means take it, Mr. Beeson, and have your trunk follow you."

"That I shall do, madam," I retorted. "The West and I have not agreed; and, I fear, never shall."

"By honest confession, it has bested you; and in short order."

"In short order, since you put it that way. Only a fool doesn't know when to quit."

"The greatest fool is the one who fools himself, in the quitting as in other matters. But you will have no regrets—except about Daniel, possibly."

"None whatever, save the regret that I ever tried this country. I wish to God I had never seen it—I did not conceive that I should have to take a human life—should be forced to that—become like an outlaw in the night, riding for refuge——" And I choked passionately.

"You deserve much sympathy," she remarked, in that even tone.

I lapsed into a turbulence of voiceless rage at myself, at her, at Daniel's treachery, at all the train, at Benton, and again at this damning predicament wherein I had landed. When I was bound to wrest free after having done my utmost, she appeared to be twitting me because I would not submit to farther use by her. I certainly had the right to extricate myself in the only

way left.

So I conned over and over, and my heart gnawed, and the acid of vexation boiled in my throat, and despite the axle grease my arm nagged; while we rode unspeaking, like some guilty pair through purgatory.

My lip had subsided; the pistol wound was superficial. Under different circumstances the way would have been full of beauty. The high desert stretched vastly, far, far, far before, behind, on either side, the parched gauntness of its daytime aspect assuaged and evanescent. For the moon, now risen, although on the wane, shed a light sufficient, whitening the rocks and the scattered low shrubs, painting the land with sharp black shadows, and enclosing us about with the mystery of great softly illumined spaces into which silent forms vanished as if tempting us aside. Of these—rabbits, wolves, animals only to be guessed—there were many, like potential phantoms quickened by the touch of the moonbeams. Mule-back, we twain towered, the sole intruders visible between the two elysians of glorified earth and beatific sky.

The course was southward. After a time it seemed to me that we were descending from the plateau; crouching gradually down a flank until, in a mile or so, we were again upon the level, cutting through another basin formed by the dried bed of an ancient lake whose waters had evaporated into deposits of salt and soda.

At first the mules had plodded with ears pricked forward, and with sundry snorts and stares as if they were seeing portents in the moonshine. Eventually their imaginings dulled, so that they now moved careless of where or why, their heads drooped, their minds devoted to achieving what rest they might in the merely mechanical setting of hoof before hoof.

I could not but be aware of my companion. Her hair glinted paly, for she rode bareheaded; her gown, tightened under her as she sat astride, revealed the lines of her boyish limbs. She was a woman, in any guise; and I being a man, protect her I should, as far as necessary. I found myself wishing that we could upturn something pleasant to talk about; it was ungracious, even wicked, to ride thus side by side through peace and beauty, with lips closed and war in the heart, and final parting as the main desire.

But her firm pose and face steadily to the fore invited with no sign; and after covertly stealing a glance or two at her clear unresponsive profile I still could manage no theme that would loosen my tongue. Thereby let her think me a dolt. Thank Heaven, after another twenty-four hours at most it might not matter what she thought.

The drooning round of my own thoughts revolved over and over, and the scuffing gait of the mules upon way interminable began to numb me. Lassitude seemed to be enfolding us both; I observed that she rode laxly, with hand upon the horn and a weary yielding to motion. Words might have stirred us, but no words came. Presently I caught myself dozing in the saddle, aroused only by the twitching of my wounded arm. Then again I dozed, and kept dozing, fairly dead for sleep, until speak she did, her voice drifting as from afar but fetching me awake and blinking.

"Hadn't we better stop?" she repeated.

That was a curious sensation. When I stared about, uncomprehending, my view was shut off by a whiteness veiling the moon above and the earth below except immediately underneath my mule's hoofs. She herself was a specter; the weeds that we brushed were spectral; every sound that we made was muffled, and in the intangible, opaquely lucent shroud which had enveloped us like the spirit of a sea there was no life nor movement.

"What's the matter?" I propounded.

"The fog. I don't know where we are."

"Oh! I hadn't noticed."

"No," she said calmly. "You've been asleep."

"Haven't you?"

"Not lately. But I don't think there's any use in riding on. We've lost our bearings."

She was ahead; evidently had taken the lead while I slept. That realization straightened me, shamed, in my saddle. The fog, fleecy, not so wet as impenetrable—when had it engulfed us?

"How long have we been in it?" I asked, thoroughly vexed.

"An hour, maybe. We rode right into it. I thought we might leave it, but we don't. It's as thick as ever. We ought to stop."

"I suppose we ought," said I.

And at the moment we entered into a sudden clearing amidst the fog enclosure: a tract of a quarter of an acre, like a hollow center, with the white walls held apart and the stars and moon faintly glimmering down through the mist roof overhead.

She drew rein and half turned in the saddle. I could see her face. It was dank and wan and heavy-eyed; her hair, somewhat robbed of its sheen, crowned with a pallid golden aureole.

"Will this do? If we go on we'll only be riding into the fog again."

I was conscious of the thin, apparently distant piping of frogs.

"There seems to be a marsh beyond," she uttered.

"Yes, we'd better stop where we are," I agreed. "Then in the morning we can take stock."

"In the morning, surely. We may not be far astray." She swung off before I had awkwardly dismounted to help her. Her limbs failed—my own were clamped by stiffness—and she staggered and collapsed with a little laugh.

"I'm tired," she confessed. "Wait just a moment."

"You stay where you are," I ordered, staggering also as I hastily landed. "I'll make camp."

But she would have none of that; pleaded my one-handedness and insisted upon cooperating at the mules. We seemed to be marooned upon a small rise of gravel and coarsely matted dried grasses. The animals were staked out, fell to nibbling. I sought a spot for our beds; laid down a buffalo robe for her and placed her saddle as her pillow. She sank with a sigh, tucking her skirt under her, and I folded the robe over.

Her face gazed up at me; she extended her hand.

"You are very kind, sir," she said, in a smile that pathetically curved her lips. There, at my knees, she looked so worn, so slight, so childish, so in need of encouragement that all was well and that she had a friend to serve her, that with a rush of sudden sympathy I would—indeed I could have kissed her, upon the forehead if not upon the lips themselves. It was an impulse well-nigh overmastering; an impulse that must have dazed me so that she saw or felt, for a tinge of pink swept into her skin; she withdrew her hand and settled composedly.

"Good-night. Please sleep. In the morning we'll reach the stage road and your troubles will be near the end."

Under my own robe I lay for a long time reviewing past and present and discussing with myself the future. Strangely enough the present occupied me the most; it incorporated with that future beyond the fog, and when I put her out back she came as if she were part and parcel of my life. There was a sense of balance; we had been associates, fellow tenants—in fact, she was entwined with the warp and woof of all my memories dating far back to my entrance, fresh and hopeful, into the new West. It rather flabbergasted me to find myself thinking that the future was going to be very tame; perhaps, as she had suggested, regretful. I had not apprehended that the end should be so drastic.

And whether the regrets would center upon my slinking home defeated, or in having definitely cast her away, puzzled me as sorely as it did to discover that I was well content to be here, with her, in our little clearing amidst the desert fog, listening to her soft breathing and debating over what she might have done had I actually kissed her to comfort her and assure her that I was not unmindful of her really brave spirit.

Daniel had been disposed of, Montoyo did not deserve her; I had won her, she could inspire and guide me if I stayed; and I saw myself staying, and I saw myself going home, and I already regretted a host of things, as a man will when at the forking of the trails.

The fog gently closed in during the night. When I awakened we were again enshrouded by the fleece of it, denser than when we had ridden through it, but now whiter with the dawn. As I gazed sleepily about I could just make out the forms of the two mules, standing motionless and huddled; I could see her more clearly, at shorter distance—her buffalo robe moist with the semblance of dew that had beaded also upon her massy hair.

Evidently she had not stirred all night; might be still asleep. No; her eyes were open, and when I stiffly shifted posture she looked across at me.

"Sh!" she warned, with quick shake of head. The same warning bade me listen. In a moment I heard voices.

CHAPTER XIX

I STAKE AGAIN

They were indistinguishable except as vocal sounds deadened by the impeding fog; but human voices they certainly were. Throwing off her robe she abruptly sat up, seeking, her features tensed with the strain. She beckoned to me. I scuttled over, as anxious as she. The voices might be far, they might be near; but it was an eerie situation, as if we were neighboring with warlocks.

"I've been hearing them some little while," she whispered.

"The Captain Adams men may be trailing us?"

"I hope not! Oh, I hope not," she gasped, in sheer agony. "If we might only know in time."

Suddenly the fog was shot with gold, as the sun flashed in. In obedience to the command a slow and stately movement began, by all the troops of mist. The myriad elements drifted in unison,

marching and countermarching and rearranging, until presently, while we crouched intent to fathom the secrets of their late camp, a wondrously beautiful phenomenon offered.

The great army rose for flight, lifting like a blanket. Gradually the earth appeared in glimpses beneath their floating array, so that whereas our plot of higher ground was still invested, stooping low and scanning we could see beyond us by the extent of a narrow thinning belt capped with the heavier white.

"There!" she whispered, pointing. "Look! There they are!"

Feet, legs, moving of themselves, cut off at the knees by the fog layer, distant not more than short rifle range: that was what had been revealed. A peculiar, absurd spectacle of a score or two of amputated limbs now resurrected and blindly in quest of bodies.

"The Mormons!" I faltered.

"No! Leggins! Moccasins! They are Indians. We must leave right away before they see us."

With our stuff she ran, I ran, for the mules. We worked rapidly, bridling and saddling while the fog rose with measured steadiness.

"Hurry!" she bade.

The whole desert was a golden haze when having packed we climbed aboard—she more spry than I, so that she led again.

As we urged outward the legs, behind, had taken to themselves thighs. But the mist briefly eddied down upon us; our mules' hoofs made no sound appreciable, on the scantily moistened soil; we lost the legs, and the voices, and pressing the pace I rode beside her.

"Where?" I inquired.

"As far as we can while the fog hangs. Then we must hide in the first good place. If they don't strike our trail we'll be all right."

The fog lingered in patches. From patch to patch we threaded, with many a glance over shoulder. But time was traveling faster. I marked her searching about nervously. Blue had already appeared above, the sun found us again and again, and the fog remnants went spinning and coiling, in last ghostly dance like that of frenzied wraiths.

Now we came to a rough outcrop of red sandstone, looming ruddily on our right. She quickly swerved for it.

"The best chance. I see nothing else," she muttered. "We can tie the mules under cover, and wait. We'll surely be spied if we keep on."

"Couldn't we risk it?"

"No. We've not start enough."

In a moment we had gained the refuge. The sculptured rock masses, detached one from another, several jutting ten feet up, received us. We tied the mules short, in a nook at the rear; and we ourselves crawled on, farther in, until we lay snug amidst the shadowing buttresses, with the desert vista opening before us.

The fog wraiths were very few; the sun blazed more vehemently and wiped them out, so that through the marvelously clear air the expanse of lone, weird country stood forth clean cut. No moving object could escape notice in this watchful void. And we had been just in time. The slight knoll had been left not a mile to the southwest. I heard My Lady catch breath, felt her hand find mine as we lay almost touching. Rounding the knoll there appeared a file of mounted figures; by their robes and blankets, their tufted lances and gaudy shields, yes, by the very way they sat their painted ponies, Indians unmistakably.

"They must have been camped near us all night." And she shuddered. "Now if they only don't cross our trail. We mustn't move."

They came on at a canter, riding bravely, glancing right and left—a score of them headed by a scarlet-blanketed man upon a spotted horse. So transparent was the air, washed by the fog and vivified by the sun, that I could decipher the color pattern of his shield emblazonry: a checkerboard of red and black.

"A war party. Sioux, I think," she said. "Don't they carry scalps on that first lance? They've been raiding the stage line. Do you see any squaws?"

"No," I hazarded, with beating heart. "All warriors, I should guess."

"All warriors. But squaws would be worse."

On they cantered, until their paint stripes and daubs were hideously plain; we might note every detail of their savage muster. They were paralleling our outward course; indeed, seemed to be diverging from our ambush and making more to the west. And I had hopes that, after all, we were safe. Then her hand clutched mine firmly. A wolf had leaped from covert in the path of the file; loped eastward across the desert, and instantly, with a whoop that echoed upon us like the crack of doom, a young fellow darted from the line in gay pursuit.

My Lady drew quick breath, with despairing exclamation.

"That is cruel, cruel! They might have ridden past; but now—look!"

The stripling warrior (he appeared to be scarcely more than a boy) hammered in chase,

stringing his bow and plucking arrow. The wolf cast eye over plunging shoulder, and lengthened. Away they tore, while the file slackened, to watch. Our trail of flight bore right athwart the wolf's projected route. There was just the remote chance that the lad would overrun it, in his eagerness; and for that intervening moment of grace we stared, fascinated, hand clasping hand.

"He's found it! He's found it!" she announced, in a little wail.

In mid-career the boy had checked his pony so shortly that the four hoofs ploughed the sand. He wheeled on a pivot and rode back for a few yards, scanning the ground, letting the wolf go. The stillness that had settled while we gazed and the file of warriors, reining, gazed, gripped and fairly hurt. I cursed the youth. Would to God he had stayed at home—God grant that mangy wolf died by trap or poison. Our one chance made the sport of an accidental view-halloo, when all the wide desert was open.

The youth had halted again, leaning from his saddle pad. He raised, he flung up glad hand and commenced to ride in circles, around and around and around. The band galloped to him.

"Yes, he has found it," she said. "Now they will come."

"What shall we do?" I asked her.

And she answered, releasing my hand.

"I don't know. But we must wait. We can stand them off for a while, I suppose——"

"I'll do my best, with the revolver," I promised.

"Yes," she murmured. "But after that——?"

I had no reply. This contingency—we two facing Indians—was outside my calculations.

The Indians had grouped; several had dismounted, peering closely at our trail, reading it, timing it, accurately estimating it. They had no difficulty, for the hoof prints were hardly dried of the fog moisture. The others sat idly, searching the horizons with their eyes, but at confident ease. In the wide expanse this rock fortress of ours seemed to me to summon imperatively, challenging them. They surely must know. Yet there they delayed, torturing us, playing blind, emulating cat and mouse; but of course they were reasoning and making certain.

Now the dismounted warriors vaulted ahorse; at a gesture from the chief two men rode aside, farther to the east, seeking other sign. They found none, and to his shrill hail they returned.

There was another command. The company had strung bows, stripped their rifles of the buckskin sheaths, had dropped robe and blanket about their loins; they spread out to right and left in close skirmish order; they advanced three scouts, one on the trail, one on either flank; and in a broadened front they followed with a discipline, an earnestness, a precision of purpose and a deadly anticipation that drowned every fleeting hope.

This was unbearable: to lie here awaiting an inevitable end.

"Shall we make a break for it?" I proposed. "Ride and fight? We might reach the train, or a stage station. Quick!"

In my wild desire for action I half arose. Her hand restrained me.

"It would be madness, Mr. Beeson. We'd stand no show at all in the open; not on these poor mules." She murmured to herself. "Yes, they're Sioux. That's not so bad. Were they Cheyennes—dog-soldiers— Let me think. I must talk with them."

"But they're coming," I rasped. "They're getting in range. We've the gun, and twenty cartridges. Maybe if I kill the chief——"

She spoke, positive, under breath.

"Don't shoot! Don't! They know we're here—know it perfectly well. I shall talk with them."

"You? How? Why? Can you persuade them? Would they let us go?"

"I'll do what I can. I have a few words of Sioux; and there's the sign language. See," she said. "They've discovered our mules. They know we're only two."

The scouts on either flanks had galloped outward and onward, in swift circle, peering at our defenses. Lying low they scoured at full speed; with mutual whoop they crisscrossed beyond and turned back for the main body halted two hundred yards out upon the flat plain.

There was a consultation; on a sudden a great chorus of exultant cries rang, the force scattered, shaking fists and weapons, preparing for a tentative charge; and ere I could stop her My Lady had sprung upright, to mount upon a rock and all in view to hold open hand above her head. The sunshine glinted upon her hair; a fugitive little breeze bound her shabby gown closer about her slim figure.

They had seen her instantly. Another chorus burst, this time in astonishment; a dozen guns were leveled, covering her and our nest while every visage stared. But no shot belched; thank God, no shot, with me powerless to prevent, just as I was powerless to intercept her. The chief rode forward, at a walk, his hand likewise lifted.



THE SCOUTS GALLOPED ONWARD

"Keep down! Keep down, please," she directed to me, while she stood motionless. "Let me try."

The chief neared until we might see his every lineament—every item of his trappings, even to the black-tipped eagle feather erect at the part in his braids. And he rode carelessly, fearlessly, to halt within easy speaking distance; sat a moment, rifle across his leggined thighs and the folds of his scarlet blanket—a splendid man, naked from the waist up, his coppery chest pigment-daubed, his slender arms braceleted with metal, his eyes devouring her so covetously that I felt the gloating thoughts behind them.

He called inquiringly: a greeting and a demand in one, it sounded. She replied. And what they two said, in word and sign, I could not know, but all the time I held my revolver upon him, until to my relief he abruptly wheeled his horse and cantered back to his men, leaving me with wrist aching and heart pounding madly.

She stepped lightly down; answered my querying look.

"It's all right. I'm going, and so are you," she said, with a faint smile, oddly subtle—a tremulous smile in a white face.

About her there was a mystery which alarmed me; made me sit up, chilled, to eye her and accuse.

"Where? We are free, you mean? What's the bargain?"

"I go to them. You go where you choose—to the stage road, of course. I have his promise."

This brought me to my feet, rigid; more than scandalized, for no word can express the shock.

"You go to them? And then where?"

She answered calmly, flushing a little, smiling a little, her eyes sincere.

"It's the best way and the only way. We shall neither of us be harmed, now. The chief will provide for me and you yourself are free. No, no," she said, checking my first indignant cry. "Really I don't mind. The Indians are about the only persons left to me. I'll be safe with them." She laughed rather sadly, but brightened. "I don't know but that I prefer them to the whites. I told you I had no place. And this saves you also, you see. I got you into it—I've felt that you blamed me, almost hated me. Things have been breaking badly for me ever since we met again in Benton. So it's up to me to make good. You can go home, and I shall not be unhappy, I think. Please believe that. The wife of a great chief is quite a personage—he won't inquire into my past. But if we try to stay here you will certainly be killed, and I shall suffer, and we shall gain nothing. You must take my money. Please do. Then good-bye. I told him I would come out, under his promise."

She and the rocks reeled together. That was my eyes, giddy with a rush of blood, surging and hot.

"Never, never, never!" I was shouting, ignoring her hand. How she had misjudged me! What a shame she had put upon me! I could not credit. "You shall not—I tell you, you sha'n't. I won't have it—it's monstrous, preposterous. You sha'n't go, I sha'n't go. But wherever we go we'll go together. We'll stand them off. Then if they can take us, let 'em. You make a coward of me—a dastard. You've no right to. I'd rather die."

"Listen," she chided, her hand grasping my sleeve. "They would take me anyway—don't you

see? After they had killed you. It would be the worse for both of us. What can you do, with one arm, and a revolver, and an unlucky woman? No, Mr. Beeson (she was firm and strangely formal); the cards are faced up. I have closed a good bargain for both of us. When you are out, you need say nothing. Perhaps some day I may be ransomed, should I wish to be. But we can talk no further now. He is impatient. The money—you will need the money, and I shall not. Please turn your back and I'll get at my belt. Why," she laughed, "how well everything is coming. You are disposed of, I am disposed of—"

"Money!" I roared. "God in Heaven! You disposed of? I disposed of? And my honor, madam! What of that?"

"And what of mine, Mr. Beeson?" She stamped her foot, coloring. "Will you turn your back, or —? Oh, we've talked too long. But the belt you shall have. Here—" She fumbled within her gown. "And now, adios and good luck. You shall not despise me."

The chief was advancing accompanied by a warrior. Behind him his men waited expectant, gathered as an ugly blotch upon the dun desert. Her honor? The word had double meaning. Should she sacrifice the one honor in this crude essay to maintain the other which she had not lost, to my now opened eyes? I could not deliver her tender body over to that painted swaggerer—any more than I could have delivered it over to Daniel himself. At last I knew, I knew. History had written me a fool, and a cad, but it should not write me a dastard. We were together, and together we should always be, come weal or woe, life or death.

The money belt had been dropped at my feet. She had turned—I leaped before her, thrust her to rear, answered the hail of the pausing chief.

"No!" I squalled. And I added for emphasis: "You go to hell."

He understood. The phrase might have been familiar English to him. I saw him stiffen in his saddle; he called loudly, and raised his rifle, threatening; with a gasp—a choked "Good-bye"—she darted by me, running on for the open and for him. She and he filled all my landscape. In a stark blinding rage of fear, chagrin, rancorous jealousy, I leveled revolver and pulled trigger, but not at her, though even that was not beyond me in the crisis.

The bullet thwacked smartly; the chief uttered a terrible cry, his rifle was tossed high, he bowed, swayed downward, his comrade grabbed him, and they were racing back closely side by side and she was running back to me and the warriors were shrieking and brandishing their weapons and bullets spatted the rocks—all this while yet my hand shook to the recoil of the revolver and the smoke was still wafting from the poised muzzle.

What had I done? But done it was.

CHAPTER XX

THE QUEEN WINS

She arrived breathless, distraught, instantly to drag me down beside her, from where I stood stupidly defiant.

"Keep out of sight," she panted. And—"Oh, why did you do it? Why did you? I think you killed him—they'll never forgive. They'll call it treachery. You're lost, lost."

"But he sha'n't have you," I gabbled. "Let them kill me if they can. Till then you're mine. Mine! Don't you understand? I want you."

"I don't understand," she faltered. She turned frightened face upon me. "You should have let me go. Nothing can save you now; not even I. You've ruined the one chance you had. I wonder why. It was my own choice—you had no hand in it, and it was my own chance, too." Her voice broke, her eyes welled piteously. "But you fired on him."

"That was the only answer left me," I entreated. "You misjudged me, you shamed me. I tell you —"

Her lips slightly curled.

"Misjudged you? Shamed you? Was that all? You've misjudged and shamed me for so long—" A burst of savage hoots renewed interrupted. "They're coming!" She knelt up, to peer; I peered. The Indians had deployed, leaving the chief lying upon the ground, their fierce countenances glaring at our asylum. How clear their figures were, in the sunshine, limned against the lazy yellowish sand, under the peaceful blue! "They'll surround us. I might parley for myself, but I can do nothing for you."

"Parley, then," I bade. "Save yourself, any way you can."

She drew in, whitening as if I had struck her.

"And you accuse me of having misjudged you! I save myself—merely myself? What do you intend

to do? Fight?"

"As long as you are with me; and after. They'll never take me alive; and take you they shall not if I can prevent it. Damn them, if they get you I mean to make them pay for you. You're all I have."

"You'd rather I'd stay? You need me? Could I help?"

"Need you!" I groaned. "I'm just finding out, too late."

"And help? How? Quick! Could I?"

"By staying; by not surrendering yourself—your honor, my honor. By saying that you'd rather stay with me, for life, for death, here, anywhere—after I've said that I'm not deaf, blind, dumb, ungrateful. I love you; I'd rather die for you than live without you."

Such a glory glowed in her haggard face and shone from her brimming eyes.

"We will fight, we will fight!" she chanted. "Now I shall not leave you. Oh, my man! Had you kissed me last night we would have known this longer. We have so little time." She turned from my lips. "Not now. They're coming. Fight first; and at the end, then kiss me, please, and we'll go together."

The furious yells from that world outside vibrated among our rocks. The Sioux all were in motion, except the prostrate figure of the chief. Straight onward they charged, at headlong gallop, to ride over us like a grotesquely tinted wave, and the dull drumming of their ponies' hoofs beat a diapason to the shrill clamor of their voices. It was enough to cow, but she spoke steadily.

"You must fire," she said. "Hurry! Fire once, maybe twice, to split them. I don't think they'll rush us, yet."

So I rose farther on my knees and fired once—and again, pointblank at them with the heavy Colt's. It worked a miracle. Every mother's son of them fell flat upon his pony; they all swooped to right and to left as if the bullets had cleaved them apart in the center; and while I gaped, wondering, they swept past at long range, half on either flank, pelting in bullet and near-spent arrow.

She forced me down.

"Low, low," she warned. "They'll circle. They hold their scalps dearly. We can only wait. That was three. You have fifteen shots left, for them; then, one for me, one for you. You understand?"

"I understand," I replied. "And if I'm disabled—?"

She answered quietly.

"It will be the same. One for you, one for me."

The circle had been formed: a double circle, to move in two directions, scudding ring reversed within scudding ring, the bowmen outermost. Around and 'round and 'round they galloped, yelling, gibing, taunting, shooting so malignantly that the air was in a constant hum and swish. The lead whined and smacked, the shafts streaked and clattered—

"Are you sorry I shot the chief?" I asked. Amid the confusion my blood was coursing evenly, and I was not afraid. Of what avail was fear?

"I'm glad, glad," she proclaimed. But with sudden movement she was gone, bending low, then crawling, then whisking from sight. Had she abandoned me, after all? Had she—no! God be thanked, here she came back, flushed and triumphant, a canteen in her hand.

"The mules might break," she explained, short of breath. "This canteen is full. We'll need it. The other mule is frantic. I couldn't touch her."

At the moment I thought how wise and brave and beautiful she was! Mine for the hour, here—and after? Montoyo should never have her; not in life nor in death.

"You must stop some of those fiends from sneaking closer," she counseled. "See? They're trying us out."

More and more frequently some one of the scurrying enemy veered sharply, tore in toward us, hanging upon the farther side of his horse; boldly jerked erect and shot, and with demi-volt of his mount was away, whooping.

I had been desperately saving the ammunition, to eke out this hour of mine with her. Every note from the revolver summoned the end a little nearer. But we had our game to play; and after all, the end was certain. So under her prompting (she being partner, commander, everything), when the next painted ruffian—a burly fellow in drapery of flannel-fringed cotton shirt, with flaunting crimson tassels on his pony's mane—bore down, I guessed shrewdly, arose and let him have it.

She cried out, clapping her hands.

"Good! Good!"

The pony was sprawling and kicking; the rider had hurtled free, and went jumping and dodging like a jack-rabbit.

"To the right! Watch!"

Again I needs must fire, driving the rascals aside with the report of the Colt's. That was five. Not sparing my wounded arm I hastily reloaded, for by custom of the country the hammer had rested over an empty chamber. I filled the cylinder.

"They're killing the mules," she said. "But we can't help it."

The two mules were snorting and plunging; their hoofs rang against the rocks. Sioux to rear had dismounted and were shooting carefully. There was exultant shout—one mule had broken loose. She galloped out, reddened, stirrups swinging, canteen bouncing, right into the waiting line; and down she lunged, abristle with feathered points launched into her by sheer spiteful joy.

The firing was resumed. We heard the other mule scream with note indescribable; we heard him flounder and kick; and again the savages yelled.

Now they all charged recklessly from the four sides; and I had to stand and fire, right, left, before, behind, emptying the gun once more ere they scattered and fled. I sensed her fingers twitching at my belt, extracting fresh cartridges. We sank, breathing hard. Her eyes were wide, and bluer than any deepest summer sea; her face aflame; her hair of purest gold—and upon her shoulder a challenging oriflamme of scarlet, staining a rent in the faded calico.

"You're hurt!" I blurted, aghast.

"Not much. A scratch. Don't mind it. And you?"

"I'm not touched."

"Load, sir. But I think we'll have a little space. How many left? Nine." She had been counting. "Seven for them."

"Seven for them," I acknowledged. I tucked home the loads; the six-shooter was ready.

"Now let them come," she murmured.

"Let them come," I echoed. We looked one upon the other, and we smiled. It was not so bad, this place, our minds having been made up to it. In fact, there was something sweet. Our present was assured; we faced a future together, at least; we were in accord.

The Sioux had retired, mainly to sit dismounted in close circle, for a confab. Occasionally a young brave, a vidette, exuberantly galloped for us, dared us, shook hand and weapon at us, no doubt spat at us, and gained nothing by his brag.

"What will they do next?" I asked.

"I don't know," said she. "We shall see, though."

So we lay, gazing, not speaking. The sun streamed down, flattening the desert with his fervent beams until the uplifts cringed low and in the horizons the mountain peaks floated languidly upon the waves of heat. And in all this dispassionate land, from horizon to horizon, there were only My Lady and I, and the beleaguering Sioux. It seemed unreal, a fantasy; but the rocks began to smell scorched, a sudden thirst nagged and my wounded arm pained with weariness as if to remind that I was here, in the body. Yes, and here she was, also, in the flesh, as much as I, for she stirred, glanced at me, and smiled. I heard her, saw her, felt her presence. I placed my hand over hers.

"What is it?" she queried.

"Nothing. I wanted to make sure."

"Of yourself?"

"Of you, me—of everything."

"There can be no doubt," she said. "I wish there might, for your sake."

"No," I thickly answered. "If you were only out of it—if we could find some way."

"I'd rather be in here, with you," said she.

"And I, with you, then," I replied honestly. The thought of water obsessed. She must have read, for she inquired:

"Aren't you thirsty?"

"Are you?"

"Yes. Why don't we drink?"

"Should we?"

"Why not? We might as well be as comfortable as we can." She reached for the canteen lying in a fast dwindling strip of rock shade. We drank sparingly. She let me dribble a few drops upon her shoulder. Thenceforth by silent agreement we moistened our tongues, scrupulously turn about, wringing the most from each brief sip as if testing the bouquet of exquisite wine. Came a time when we regretted this frugality; but just now there persisted within us, I suppose, that germ of hope which seems to be nourished by the soul.

The Sioux had counceled and decided. They faced us, in manner determined. We waited, tense and watchful. Without even a premonitory shout a pony bolted for us, from their huddle. He bore two riders, naked to the sun, save for breech clouts. They charged straight in, and at her mystified, alarmed murmur I was holding on them as best I could, finger crooked against trigger, coaxing it, praying for luck, when the rear rider dropped to the ground, bounded briefly and dived headlong, worming into a little hollow of the sand.

He lay half concealed; the pony had wheeled to a shrill, jubilant chorus; his remaining rider lashed him in retreat, leaving the first digging lustily with hand and knife.

That was the system, then: an approach by rushes.

"We mustn't permit it," she breathed. "We must rout him out—we must keep them all out or they'll get where they can pick you off. Can you reach him?"

"I'll try," said I.

The tawny figure, prone upon the tawny sand, was just visible, lean and snakish, slightly oscillating as it worked. And I took careful aim, and fired, and saw the spurt from the bullet.

"A little lower—oh, just a little lower," she pleaded.

The same courier was in leash, posted to bring another fellow; all the Sioux were gazing, statuesque, to analyze my marksmanship. And I fired again—"Too low," she muttered—and quickly, with a curse, again.

She cried out joyfully. The snake had flopped from its hollow, plunged at full length aside; had started to crawl, writhing, dragging its hinder parts. But with a swoop the pony arrived before we were noting; the recruit plumped into the hollow; and bending over in his swift circle the courier snatched the snake from the ground; sped back with him.

The Sioux seized upon the moment of stress. They cavorted, scouring hither and thither, yelling, shooting, and once more our battered haven seethed with the hum and hiss and rebound of lead and shaft. That, and my eagerness, told. The fellow in the foreground burrowed cleverly; he submerged farther and farther, by rapid inches. I fired twice—we could not see that I had even inconvenienced him. My Lady clutched my revolver arm.

"No! Wait!" The tone rang dismayed.

Trembling, blinded with heat and powder smoke, and heart sick, I paused, to fumble and to reload the almost emptied cylinder.

"I can't reach him," said I. "He's too far in."

Her voice answered gently.

"No matter, dear. You're firing too hastily. Don't forget. Please rest a minute, and drink. You can bathe your eyes. It's hard, shooting across the hot sand. They'll bring others. We've no need to save water, you know."

"I know," I admitted.

We niggardly drank. I dabbled my burning eyes, cleared my sight. Of the fellow in the rifle pit there was no living token. The Sioux had ceased their gambols. They sat steadfast, again anticipative. A stillness, menacing and brooding, weighted the landscape.

She sighed.

"Well?"

The pregnant truce oppressed. What was hatching out, now? I cautiously shifted posture, to stretch and scan; instinctively groped for the canteen, to wet my lips again; a puff of smoke burst from the hollow, the canteen clinked, flew from my hand and went clattering among the rocks.

"Oh!" she cried, aghast. "But you're not hurt?" Then—"I saw him. He'll come up again, in a moment. Be ready."

The Sioux in the background were shrieking. They had accounted for our mules; by chance shot they had nipped our water. Yet neither event affected us as they seemed to think it should. Mules, water—these were inconsequential in the long-run that was due to be short, at most. We husbanded other relief in our keeping.

Suddenly, as I craned, the fellow fired again; he was a good shot, had discovered a niche in our rampart, for the ball fanned my cheek with the wings of a vicious wasp. On the instant I replied, snapping quick answer.

"I don't think you hit him," she said. "Let me try. It may change the luck. You're tired. I'll hold on the spot—he'll come up in the same place, head and shoulders. You'll have to tempt him. Are you afraid, sir?" She smiled upon me as she took the revolver.

"But if he kills me—?" I faltered.

"What of that?"

"You."

"I?" Her face filled. "I should not be long."

She adjusted the revolver to a crevice a little removed from me—"They will be hunting you, not me," she said—and crouched behind it, peering earnestly out, intent upon the hollow. And I edged farther, and farther, as if seeking for a mark, but with all my flesh a-prickle and my breath fast, like any man, I assert, who forces himself to invite the striking capabilities of a rattlesnake.

Abruptly it came—the strike, so venomous that it stung my face and scalded my eyes with the spatter of sandstone and hot lead; at the moment her Colt's bellowed into my ears, thunderous because even unexpected. I could not see; I only heard an utterance that was cheer and sob in one.

"I got him! Are you hurt? Are you hurt?"

"No. Hurrah!"

"Hurrah, dear."

The air rocked with the shouts of the Sioux; shouts never before so welcome in their tidings, for they were shouts of rage and disappointment. They flooded my eyes with vigor, wiped away the daze of the bullet impact; the hollow leaped to the fore—upon its low parapet a dull shade where no shade should naturally be, and garnished with crimson.

He had doubled forward, reflexing to the blow. He was dead, stone dead; his crafty spirit issued upon the red trail of ball through his brain.

"Thank God," I rejoiced.

She had sunk back wearily.

"That is the last."

"Won't they try again, you think?"

"The last spare shot, I mean. We have only our two left. We must save those." She gravely surveyed me.

"Yes, we must save those," I assented. The realization broke unbelievable across a momentary hiatus; brought me down from the false heights, to face it with her.

A dizzy space had opened before me. I knew that she moved aside. She exclaimed.

"Look!"

It was the canteen, drained dry by a jagged gash from the sharpshooter's lead.

"No matter, dear," she said.

"No matter," said I.

The subject was not worth pursuing.

"We have discouraged their game, again. And in case they rush us——"

This from her.

"In case they rush us——" I repeated. "We can wait a little, and see."

CHAPTER XXI

WE WAIT THE SUMMONS

The Sioux had quieted. They let the hollow alone, tenanted as it was with death; there was for us a satisfaction in that tribute to our defense. Quite methodically, and with cruel show of leisure they distributed themselves by knots, in a half-encircling string around our asylum; they posted a sentry, ahorse, as a lookout; and lolling upon the bare ground in the sun glare they chatted, laughed, rested, but never for an instant were we dismissed from their eyes and thoughts.

"They will wait, too. They can afford it," she murmured. "It is cheaper for them than losing lives."

"If they knew we had only the two cartridges——?"

"They don't, yet."

"And they will find out too late," I hazarded.

"Yes, too late. We shall have time." Her voice did not waver; it heartened with its vengeful, determined mien.

Occasionally a warrior invoked us by brandishing arm or weapon in surety of hate and in promise of fancied reprisal. What fools they were! Now and again a warrior galloped upon the back trail; returned gleefully, perhaps to flourish an army canteen at us.

"There probably is water where we heard the frogs last night," she remarked.

"I'm glad we didn't try to reach it, for camp," said I.

"So am I," said she. "We might have run right into them. We are better here. At least, I am."

"And I," I confirmed.

Strangely enough we seemed to have little to say, now in this precious doldrums where we were becalmed, between the distant past and the unlogged future. We had not a particle of shade, not a trace of coolness: the sun was high, all our rocky recess was a furnace, fairly reverberant with the heat; the flies (and I vaguely pondered upon how they had existed, previously, and whence they had gathered) buzzed briskly, attracted by the dead mule, unseen, and captiously diverted

to us also. We lay tolerably bolstered, without much movement; and as the Sioux were not firing upon us, we might wax careless of their espionage.

Her eyes, untroubled, scarcely left my face; I feared to let mine leave hers. Of what she was thinking I might not know, and I did not seek to know—was oddly yielding and content, for our decisions had been made. And still it was unreal, impossible: we, in this guise; the Sioux, watching; the desert, waiting; death hovering—a sudden death, a violent death, the end of that which had barely begun; an end suspended in sight like the Dionysian sword, with the single hair already frayed by the greedy shears of the Fate. A snap, at our own signal; then presto, change!

It simply could not be true. Why, somewhere my father and mother busied, mindless; somewhere Benton roared, mindless; somewhere the wagon train toiled on, mindless; the stage road missed us not, nor wondered; the railroad graders shoveled and scraped and picked as blithely as if the same desert did not contain them, and us; cities throbbled, people worked and played, and we were of as little concern to them now as we would be a year hence.

Then it all pridefully resolved to this, like the warming tune of a fine battle chant: That I was here, with my woman, my partner woman, the much desirable woman whom I had won; which was more than Daniel, or Montoyo, or the Indian chief, or the wide world of other men could boast.

Soon she spoke, at times, musingly.

"I did make up to you, at first," she said. "In Omaha, and on the train."

"Did you?" I smiled. She was so childishly frank.

"But that was only passing. Then in Benton I knew you were different. I wondered what it was; but you were different from anybody that I had met before. There's always such a moment in a woman's life."

I soberly nodded. Nothing could be a platitude in such a place and such an hour.

"I wished to help you. Do you believe that now?"

"I believe you, dear heart," I assured.

"But it was partly because I thought you could help me," she said, like a confession. And she added: "I had nothing wrong in mind. You were to be a friend, not a lover. I had no need of lovers; no, no."

We were silent for an interval. Again she spoke.

"Do you care anything about my family? I suppose not. That doesn't matter, here. But you wouldn't be ashamed of them. I ran away with Montoyo. I thought he was something else. How could I go home after that? I tried to be true to him, we had plenty of money, he was kind to me at first, but he dragged me down and my father and mother don't know even yet. Yes, I tried to help him, too. I stayed. It's a life that gets into one's blood. I feared him terribly, in time. He was a breed, and a devil—a gentleman devil." She referred in the past tense, as to some fact definitely bygone. "I had to play fair with him, or— And when I had done that, hoping, why, what else could I do or where could I go? So many people knew me." She smiled. "Suddenly I tied to you, sir. I seemed to feel—I took the chance."

"Thank God you did," I encouraged.

"But I would not have wronged myself, or you, or him," she eagerly pursued. "I never did wrong him." She flushed. "No man can convict me. You hurt me when you refused me, dear; it told me that you didn't understand. Then I was desperate. I had been shamed before you, and by you. You were going, and not understanding, and I couldn't let you. So I did follow you to the wagon train. You were my star. I wonder why. I did feel that you'd get me out—you see, I was so madly selfish, like a drowning person. I clutched at you; might have put you under while climbing up, myself."

"We have climbed together," said I. "You have made me into a man."

"But I forced myself on you. I played you against Daniel. I foresaw that you might have to kill him, to rid me of him. You were my weapon. And I used you. Do you blame me that I used you?"

"Daniel and I were destined to meet, just as you and I were destined to meet," said I. "I had to prove myself on him. It would have happened anyway. Had I not stood up to him you would not have loved me."

"That was not the price," she sighed. "Maybe you don't understand yet. I'm so afraid you don't understand," she pleaded. "At the last I had resigned you, I would have left you free, I saw how you felt; but, oh, it happened just the same—we were fated, and you showed that you hated me."

"I never hated you. I was perplexed. That was a part of love," said I.

"You mean it? You are holding nothing back?" she asked, anxious.

"I am holding nothing back," I answered. "As you will know, I think, in time to come."

Again we reclined, silent, at peace: a strange peace of mind and body, to which the demonstrations by the waiting Sioux were alien things.

She spoke.

"Are we very guilty, do you think?"

"In what, dearest?"

"In this, here. I am already married, you know."

"That is another life," I reasoned. "It is long ago and under different law."

"But if we went back into it—if we escaped?"

"Then we should—but don't let's talk of that."

"Then you should forget and I should return to Benton," she said. "I have decided. I should return to Benton, where Montoyo is, and maybe find another way. But I should not live with him; never, never! I should ask him to release me."

"I, with you," I informed. "We should go together, and do what was best."

"You would? You wouldn't be ashamed, or afraid?"

"Ashamed or afraid of what?"

She cried out happily, and shivered.

"I hope we don't have to. He might kill you. Yes, I hope we don't have to. Do you mind?"

I shook my head, smiling my response. There were tears in her eyes, repaying me.

Our conversation became more fitful. Time sped, I don't know how, except that we were in a kind of lethargy, taking no note of time and hanging fast to this our respite from the tempestuous past.

Once she dreamily murmured, apropos of nothing, yet apropos of much:

"We must be about the same age. I am not old, not really very old."

"I am twenty-five," I answered.

"So I thought," she mused.

Then, later, in manner of having revolved this idea also, more distinctly apropos and voiced with a certain triumph:

"I'm glad we drank water when we might; aren't you?"

"You were so wise," I praised; and I felt sorry for her cracked lips. It is astonishing with what swiftness, even upon the dry desert, amid the dry air, under the dry burning sun, thirst quickens into a consuming fire scorching from within outward to the skin.

We lapsed into that remarkable patience, playing the game with the Sioux and steadily viewing each other; and she asked, casually:

"Where will you shoot me, Frank?"

This bared the secret heart of me.

"No! No!" I begged. "Don't speak of that. It will be bad enough at the best. How can I? I don't know how I can do it!"

"You will, though," she soothed. "I'd rather have it from you. You must be brave, for yourself and for me; and kind, and quick. I think it should be through the temple. That's sure. But you won't wait to look, will you? You'll spare yourself that?"

This made me groan, craven, and wipe my hand across my forehead to brush away the frenzy. The fingers came free, damp with cold sticky sweat—a prodigy of a parchment skin which puzzled me.

We had not exchanged a caress, save by voice; had not again touched each other. Sometimes I glanced at the Sioux, but not for long; I dreaded to lose sight of her by so much as a moment. The Sioux remained virtually as from the beginning of their vigil. They sat secure, drank, probably ate, with time their ally: sat judicial and persistent, as though depending upon the progress of a slow fuse, or upon the workings of poison, which indeed was the case.

Thirst and heat tortured unceasingly. The sun had passed the zenith—this sun of a culminating summer throughout which he had thrived regal and lustful. It seemed ignoble of him that he now should stoop to torment only us, and one of us a small woman. There was all his boundless domain for him.

But stoop he did, burning nearer and nearer. She broke with sudden passion of hoarse appeal.

"Why do we wait? Why not now?"

"We ought to wait," I stammered, miserable and pitying.

"Yes," she whispered, submissive, "I suppose we ought. One always does. But I am so tired. I think," she said, "that I will let my hair down. I shall go with my hair down. I have a right to, at the last."

Whereupon she fell to loosening her hair and braiding it with hurried fingers.

Then after a time I said:

"We'll not be much longer, dear."

"I hope not," said she, panting, her lips stiff, her eyes bright and feverish. "They'll rush us at sundown; maybe before."

"I believe," said I, blurring the words, for my tongue was getting unmanageable, "they're making ready now."

She exclaimed and struggled and sat up, and we both gazed. Out there the Sioux, in that world of their own, had aroused to energy. I fancied that they had palled of the inaction. At any rate they were upon their feet, several were upon their horses, others mounted hastily, squad joined squad as though by summons, and here came their outpost scout, galloping in, his blanket streaming from one hand like a banner of an Islam prophet.

They delayed an instant, gesticulating.

"It will be soon," she whispered, touching my arm. "When they are half-way, don't fail. I trust you. Will you kiss me? That is only the once."

I kissed her; dry cracked lips met dry cracked lips. She laid herself down and closed her eyes, and smiled.

"I'm all right," she said. "And tired. I've worked so hard, for only this. You mustn't look."

"And you must wait for me, somewhere," I entreated. "Just a moment."

"Of course," she sighed.

The Sioux charged, shrieking, hammering, lashing, all of one purpose: that, us; she, I; my life, her body; and quickly kneeling beside her (I was cool and firm and collected) I felt her hand guide the revolver barrel. But I did not look. She had forbidden, and I kept my eyes upon them, until they were half-way, and in exultation I pulled the trigger, my hand already tensed to snatch and cock and deliver myself under their very grasp. That was a sweetness.

The hammer clicked. There had been no jar, no report. The hammer had only clicked, I tell you, shocking me to the core. A missed cartridge? An empty chamber? Which? No matter. I should achieve for her, first; then, myself. I heard her gasp, they were very near, how they shouted, how the bullets and arrows spatted and hissed, and I had convulsively cocked the gun, she had clutched it—when looking through them, agonized and blinded as I was—looking through them as if they were phantasms I sensed another sound and with sight sharpened I saw.

Then I wrested the revolver from her. I fired pointblank, I fired again (the Colt's did not fail); they swept by, hooting, jostling; they thudded on; and rising I screeched and waved, as bizarre, no doubt, as any animated scarecrow.

It had been a trumpet note, and a cavalry guidon and a rank of bobbing figures had come galloping, galloping over an imperceptible swell.

She cried to me, from my feet.

"You didn't do it! You didn't do it!"

"We're saved," I blatted. "Hurrah! We're saved! The soldiers are here."

Again the trumpet pealed, lilting silvery. She tottered up, clinging to me. She stared. She released me, and to my gladly questing gaze her face was very white, her eyes struggling for comprehension, like those of one awakened from a dream.

"I must go back to Benton," she faltered. "I shall never get away from Benton."

We stood mute while the blue-coats raced on with hearty cheers and brave clank of saber and canteen. We were sitting composedly when the lieutenant scrambled to us, among our rocks; the troopers followed, curiously scanning.

His stubbled red face, dust-smearred, queried us keenly; so did his curt voice.

"Just in time?"

"In time," I croaked. "Water! For her—for me."

There was a canteen apiece. We sucked.

"You are the two from the Mormon wagon train?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. You know?" I uttered.

"We came on as fast as we could. The Sioux are raiding again. By God, you had a narrow squeak, sir," he reproved. "You were crazy to try it—you and a woman, alone. We'll take you along as soon as my Pawnees get in from chasing those beggars."

Distant whoops from a pursuit drifted in to us, out of the desert.

"Captain Adams sent you?" I inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"I will go back," I agreed. "I will go back, but there's no need of Mrs. Montoyo. If you could see her safely landed at a stage station, and for Benton—?"

"We'll land you both. I have to report at Bridger. The train is all right. It has an escort to Bitter Creek."

"I can overtake it, or join it," said I. "But the lady goes to Benton."

"Yes, yes," he snapped. "That's nothing to me, of course. But you'll do better to wait for the train at Bridger, Mr. —? I don't believe I have your name?"

"Beeson," I informed, astonished.

"And the lady's? Your sister? Wife?"

"Mrs. Montoyo," I informed. And I repeated, that there should be no misunderstanding. "Mrs. Montoyo, from Benton. No relative, sir."

He passed it over, as a gentleman should.

"Well, Mr. Beeson, you have business with the train?"

"I have business with Captain Adams, and he with me," I replied. "As probably you know. Since he sent you, I shall consider myself under arrest; but I will return of my own free will as soon as Mrs. Montoyo is safe."

"Under arrest? For what?" He blankly eyed me.

"For killing that man, sir. Captain Adams' son. But I was forced to it—I did it in self-defense. I should not have left, and I am ready to face the matter whenever possible."

"Oh!" said he, with a shrug, tossing the idea aside. "If that's all! I did hear something about that, from some of my men, but nothing from Adams. You didn't kill him, I understand; merely laid him out. I saw him, myself, but I didn't ask questions. So you can rest easy on that score. His old man seemed to have no grudge against you for it. Fact is, he scarcely allowed me time to warn him of the Sioux before he told me you and a woman were out and were liable to lose your scalps, if nothing worse. I think," the lieutenant added, narrowing upon me, "that you'll find those Mormons are as just as any other set, in a show down. The lad, I gathered from the talk, drew on you after he'd cried quits." He turned hastily. "You spoke, madam? Anything wanted?"

The trumpeter orderly plucked me by the sleeve. He was a squat, sun-scorched little man, and his red-rimmed blue eyes squinted at me with painful interest. He whispered harshly from covert of bronzed hand.

"Beg your pardon, sorr. Mrs. Montoyo, be it—that lady?"

"Yes."

"From Benton City, sorr, ye say?"

"From Benton City."

"Sure, I know the name. It's the same of a gambler the vigilantes strung up last week; for I was there to see."

I heard a gusty sigh, an exclamation from the lieutenant. My Lady had fainted again.

"The reaction, sir," I apologized, to the lieutenant, as we worked.

"Naturally," answered he. "You'll both go back to Benton?"

"Certainly," said I.

CHAPTER XXII

STAR SHINE

It was six weeks later, with My Lady all recovered and I long since healed, and Fort Bridger pleasant in our memories, when we two rode into Benton once more, by horse from the nearest stage point. And here we sat our saddles, silent, wondering; for of Benton there was little significant of the past, very little tangible of the present, naught promising of its future.

Roaring Benton City had vanished, you might say, utterly. The iron tendrils of the Pacific Railway glistened, stretching westward into the sunset, and Benton had followed the lure, to Rawlins (as had been told us), to Green River, to Bryan—likely now still onward, for the track was traveling fast, charging the mountain slopes of Utah. The restless dust had settled. The Queen Hotel, the Big Tent, the rows of canvas, plank, tin, sheet metal, what-not stores, saloons, gambling dens, dance halls, human habitations—the blatant street and the station itself had subsided into this: a skeleton company of hacked and weazened posts, a fantastic outcrop of coldly blackened clay chimneys, a sprinkling of battered cans. The fevered populace who had ridden high upon the tide of rapid life had remained only as ghosts haunting a potter's field, and the turmoil of frenzied pleasure had dwindled to a coyote's yelp mocking the twilight.

"It all, all is wiped out, like he is," she said. "But I wished to see."

"All, all is wiped out, dear heart," said I. "All of that. But here are you and I."

Through star shine we cantered side by side eastward down the old, empty freighting road, for the railway station at Fort Steele.

THE END

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