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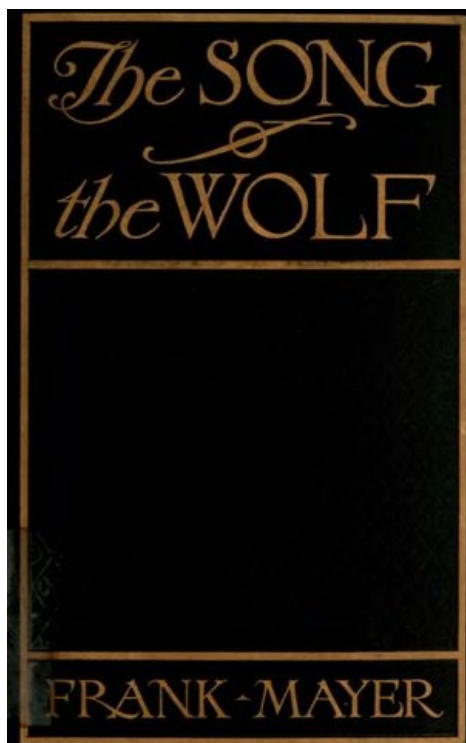
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THE SONG OF THE WOLF

BY FRANK MAYER

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"When a man gets through playin' thu goat he gin'rally feels some obligated to act the sheep foh a spell, so's to even up thu deal."

RED McVEY

THE SONG OF THE WOLF

CHAPTER I

A RIFT IN THE LUTE

Everything else was in harmony. If the sky turquoise was a shade or two paler than the prescribed robin's-egg, it blended perfectly with the unpronounced greens of the sprouting grass and the uncertain olive of the budding sagebrush. On the crest of the distant divide a silver-gray wreath of aspens lay against the tawny cheek of the mountain as daintily as an otter-fur collarette on the neck of a girl. Even the darker girdle of spruce and pine, lower down, lost its harsh individuality, merging insensibly into the faded umbers, sepias, lavenders and tans of the graduating background where the rocks and buckbrush fell away to the open slopes beneath.

On the vega below, the alkaline scars, as yet uncalcined by the sun's fires into glaring chalkiness, gave no offense in their moist neutrality, and the coyote slinking dejectedly among the deserted prairie-dog mounds was, in his ash-colored surtout, as inconspicuous as the long wan shadows cast by the weak spring sun. In the hollow of the foothill's arm lay a little lake, fed by a brook born in heights so remote that its purl was deduced rather than heard, and over all lay the soft glow of the fading twilight, accentuated by the subtle incense of the young year's breath.

It was a symphony of tender half-tone in minor key, one of these mystical, ethereal, God-painted Corots of the great West whose enchantment outlives life itself, calling with an insistence which will not be denied until the souls of its hearing yearn for its bondage again and return to the rack of the cow-range, the torments of the desert, the chain of the eternal hills.

The only discord was in the heart and speech of the man who swore savagely at his over-ridden horse stumbling among the loose bowlders of the half-effaced trail. The anathema and succeeding spur thrust were alike cruel and undeserved, for the faithful beast had borne his rider bravely throughout a long and weary day's work, and despite the favorable temperature of the mild spring day, his chest was foam-flecked and sweat-crusted and his gaunt flanks heaved pitifully. And yet there was nothing particularly vicious in the face of the cowpuncher glaring so disconsolately over the tender vista. It was a bit thin-lipped and there was more than a suggestion of merciless hardness in the deep lines about the mouth, but the blue-gray eyes were calm and steady and there was a sturdy independence in the out-thrust of his prominent chin and the bird-like poise of his head which, bespoke either a clear conscience or the lethal indifference of an indomitable will. Bull-throated, yet withal of a lean, rangy, muscular conformation, his every movement betokened virility and force; an experienced frontiersman would have glanced approvingly at his well-ordered equipment, the wicked blue Colts in its Mexican holster sagging at just the proper angle for quick work on a cartridge belt filled to the last becket, the pliable reata hanging in uninked coils with chafed honda evincing long usage. There was a significant absence of fringe and ornament about this man, yet the excellence of materials was noticeable, from the selected buckskin of his gauntlets to the tempered steel of his rowels and expensive Stetson hat; and women usually looked twice at the broad-chested, flat-thighed, bronze-faced fellow who returned their stares with disconcerting assurance. It was his habit to look all things squarely in the face, and before his level gaze women blushed unaccountably and men smiled, squirmed or turned quietly away as the circumstances warranted. Little children alone took liberties with him, and for these the bold eyes would soften wondrously and a rare gentleness creep into his usually crisp and terse speech.

The panorama stretched out before him as he topped the ridge, halting his horse instinctively to reconnoitre the ground, was one that would ordinarily have appealed to him, for despite his prosaic avocation, his was the true artistic temperament; but to-day he looked with weary unappreciation bordering upon disgust, and mumbled profanely under his heavy mustache.

The coyote sneaking stealthily among the short sagebrush caught his eye and he laughed mirthlessly. "Poor devil! Rustling like the rest of us to keep his miserable body and soul together—and making a damn poor job of it. It would be a mercy—" and he half drew the heavy revolver from its sheath. Just then the wolf sprang fiercely at a clump of grass and a plaintive squeal rose upon the air. Then the coyote trotted out into the open with a rabbit hanging limply from its jaws and made off across the vega in a swinging gallop instead of devouring its prey instantly, as one would have naturally anticipated, considering its gaunt and starved appearance.

Under the tan of the cowboy's face a darker flush spread redly.

"A bunch of starving pups in the arroyo yonder, and I would have wantonly killed her. God! what a brute I am."

For a space he sat in silent self-abasement; then as his horse champed impatiently on the bit, he tightened the rein and rode slowly down to the little lake.

At its edge he dismounted, and after removing the bridle so that his horse could drink and graze more comfortably, threw himself at full length upon the short grass. The well-trained broncho would not stray far, and both needed rest. The coyote was still in his thoughts, but his mood had changed. "After all," he meditated, "she got that rabbit unexpectedly when she sure needed it worst—and she won out by staying with the game. Maybe my turn will come, too, if I don't get buffaloed and stampede. Was it Seneca or Lucretius—no, Havard—who said that perseverance is a virtue

'that plucks success
Even from the spear-proof crest of rugged danger.'

Well, in this case I'll be virtuous from force of necessity. But how long, oh, Lord, how long?"

From which it might be inferred that this particular cowboy had some time or other drunk from springs Pierian as well as alkaline. Just now it was hard to say which was most bitter in his mouth.

He shifted restlessly to his elbow and built a cigarette; through its thin blue mist he waded retrospectively in the stream of memory. Rapidly in review passed his boyhood days in the far East, his college career with its vast ambitions and roseate dreams, his migration to the cloud-kissed Rockies where he had suffered the undoing of all his mawkish illusions. An idealist of the most refined type, he writhed even now at the merciless rape of all his virginal conceptions by that unsympathetic iconoclast Practicality, that ironical cynic who laughs our adolescent theories to scorn and desecrates the holiest of our dream-woven holies. All his finespun hopes had been ruthlessly rent by the hand of reality. Contact with humanity in its primeval phase had worn his unusually refined sensibilities to the quick and the reaction was as unhealthy as it was inevitable. From enthusiastic optimism to hopeless pessimism is only a short step for exaggerated natures like his, and there were few things that this man now held sacred—and none that he held holy.

Even life itself, and particularly that of other men, he held in contempt, and with the usual disastrous consequences. There were few, even in this land of reckless men, who cared to arouse the slumbering devil under the quiet demeanor of this gray-eyed range rider who killed first and argued afterward.

From the pinnacle of a great faith in his kind he had been hurled headlong to the depths of unbelief and suspicion. He had seen Loyalty mocked and betrayed; starving Intelligence bought with a price by crime-opulent Ignorance; naked Virtue crouched shivering in the shadow of exalted, ermined Vice; the sots and trulls of bestial Sensuality deified and worshiped in the public places. He had seen the harlotry of Society set above the sacrament of Maternity, the butchery of embryonic souls so that their lawful heritage might be squandered in the prostitution of Love to Vanity and Indolence. He had witnessed the sacrifice of every civic virtue to the Moloch of Greed and Graft, the abasement of all human motives to the idol of Self.

The fiercely-drawn cigarette burned his lips and he threw it away with a snarling curse, his whole sentience revolted with the odor of social corruption, his soul sickening in resentment of his own undeserved failure. He had been honest and industrious, energetic, leal and true, conscientious in all things—and to what end?

That he might look every man fearlessly in the face by day and go ahungry to a scant bed at night. He had labored servilely in the vineyard of the Lord and been paid by the contemptuously-thrown lees of the vintage. Thrice had he lost employment because he had indignantly refused to be a party to mendacity and rascality, the recollection of his rather strenuous resentment in the last instance wrinkling his face with a grim, unlovely smile; it had made an outlaw of him. But the other was an object of compassion ever since. Another Ishmael, he had turned naturally to the clean, free independence of the life outdoors, drifting ultimately to the cow range. His natural ability and adaptiveness soon brought him recognition in a sphere where men are weighed in the scale of their actual worth as men, not as puppets in the pantomime of conventionality. It paid him bread and he bedded where and how he chose. In the first flush of independence he felt a certain content, but his was too intense a nature—he was cursed with too much knowledge and ambition—and the encysted leaven began to work.

In one thing he was fortunate. The hard outdoor work had hammered the native iron of the man into finely-tempered steel and he was thewed and sinewed like a cougar. He had learned self-reliance, which is a good thing, and self-containment, which is a better. Best of all, he was beginning to place a value on himself; all he needed was incentive. And such men make their own opportunities.

The fast waning light warned him that it was time to take the trail again. It was quite dark when he swung himself into the saddle with ten miles of rough country to negotiate, and the trail's difficulties in nowise lessened his mental discontent. For the first time he was resenting morosely the necessity of preparing his own supper at the end of his journey, and he was nowise gentle in the roping of a fresh mount for the morrow's work on his arrival at the outlying camp, where he ate perfunctorily and without gust; despite his harsh fatigue a great restlessness sent him wide, with pipe in mouth, into the stellar splendor that beatifies every clear Colorado night.

The thin, pure air was surcharged with ozone and delicately perfumed with the aroma of the lemonia crushing beneath his feet. A big white moon topped the far-off crests of the Continental Divide, silvering the cottonwood fringe of the creek bank and transmuting the dull lead of the sagebrush waste into molten silver and liquid pearl. High up the aspens were a shimmering sea of aquamarine, and the snow fields at the foot of the moon were scintillating masses of opal; the cloudless sky above was a shield of steel-blue sapphire emblazoned with diamond stars. The sanctity of the profound solitude was as yet unbroken by the inevitable wolf wails; the tender benediction of a supernal beauty was over all; and everywhere, save in the hot heart of Ken Douglass, was a great Peace.

Unseeing the glory spread about him, he tramped far into the night, torn by conflicting emotions, none of which could he analyze. He was conscious only of a great Desire whose inchoateness maddened and bewildered him, and he stumbled blindly through the mazes of his uncertainty, falling over the truth at every turn but never once realizing it. Vainly he evoked all the logic and reason at his command, but the analogies of a by no means inconsiderable experience failed him utterly. It was ordinarily characteristic of him to arrive at conclusions with a bound where he himself was the object under consideration, but to-night his powers of concentration were strangely deficient and he chafed as much under the sense of indecision as he did over his inability to diagnose his ailment.

"What's the matter of me, anyhow?" he ruminated, lapsing whimsically into the range vernacular which he seldom affected. "Here I've been riding circle on myself all day and haven't rounded in even a sick maverick. I reckon I'm losing my grip on myself—and that's a bad sign. Guess I'm herding by my lonely too much and it's getting on my nerves. Might as well be a sheep-herd as hold down this job; then I'd have a dog to talk to at any rate. Well, wolfing it like this won't do my complexion any good; guess I'll go and get my beauty sleep!" But the gray eyes held an unusual languor when he rode out in the morning, and the look of worryment increased with every strenuous hour; all throughout the night had he lain wide-eyed, and the experience was a disturbing one. Never before had sleep been denied him; even on that memorable night when, in a difference of opinion as to whose horse was entitled to precedence at the public watering trough in Tin Cup, he had roped and dragged nigh to death the foreman of the C Bar outfit, he had audaciously crept into the bunkhouse of the outraged fellows who were vengefully seeking

him in every place but the right one, and after calmly appropriating the personal blankets of his victim, had slept the sleep of vindicated virtue. That this necessitated his shooting his way out, on his discovery by the astonished outfit the next morning, in nowise affected the soundness of his slumbers; sleep was imperative to this hard-working young man, and the incident had gone far towards the establishment of his standing on the range. He had watered his horses unchallenged and slept undisturbedly ever since.

Therefore his last night's experience was anomalous to a degree and one to be reckoned with seriously. In Douglass's perplexity he decided to extend the day's pascar to Tin Cup and get decently drunk; convinced that conviviality was the one essential lacking to his happiness. He dismounted at the ford of the creek on, the outskirts of the village and looked solicitously after the condition of his revolver. Not that he deliberately, contemplated "shooting up" the town; but there was always the possibility of the C Bar gang coming into town after their mail and it was only proper and wise to provide against contingencies. And Ken's favorite maxim was, "Never overlook no bets."

CHAPTER II

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

As he rode slowly up the little squalid street, seemingly lost in a brown study and gazing abstractedly straight between his horse's ears, he was in reality keenly alive to his surroundings. Not a face or movement escaped him, and his mouth hardened ever so slightly as he noted a couple of C Bar horses tied to the hitching rail before the door of the Alcazar saloon. Dismounting leisurely before the grimy little shack which did combined duty as stationery store and post office, he nodded casually to the crowd of loafers about the entrance; if he noticed significant glances toward the horses tied to the railing across the street, he made no sign. And when the old postmaster quietly volunteered the information, "Matlock is in town," he merely smiled his comprehension and rolled a fresh cigarette. Matlock was the man whom he had so ignominiously dragged at his rope's end a month ago. And Matlock had been indiscreet of speech since.

At the door he turned and came back with his hand extended to his friend, "I am sure grateful to you for your interest, Hank," he said gravely. "I noticed his horse as I came in. Well, so-long!" and thrusting into his pocket the bundle of mail at which he had scarcely glanced, went out, mounted his horse and rode unconcernedly toward the one hotel which the embryo metropolis boasted.

Hank Williams scratched his head thoughtfully as he turned again to the task of assorting the afternoon's mail. "Of course he must play his own hand," he ruminated, "an' he'll come mighty nigh to winnin' out. But all the same I'd like to set in the game a deal or two myself. Guess I'll look in at the Alcazar to-night."

"I ain't got no call to butt in," he continued as he puzzled over an unusually illegible address, "but that Matlock is a treacherous coyote an' there's no tellin' what lowdown play he'll make. I just nacherally have to keep cases to-night." His work finished, the old man proceeded to carefully fill the empty loops of his cartridge belt and there was a grim determination on his handsome hard old face as he spun the cylinder of his ".45" to test its perfect action.

Up at the hotel an ambushade was laid into which Douglass walked unwittingly. As his foot reached the first of the three low steps leading up to the rickety veranda, an arm shot around the corner of the house, there was a soft swis-h-h, a chuckle of tense triumph, and the folds of a lasso encircled his throat. Involuntarily his hand leaped to his holster on his hip and the ready gun came flashing half way up. But after a lightning glance at the chubby fist holding the other end of the reata, the twinkle in his eyes accorded but illy with his subsequent plunging and yelling as he sprawled on all fours and bawled like a choking calf.

Then from around the corner rushed a sturdy little boy of five, gathering up the slack of the rope as he came, followed by a red-cheeked, star-eyed girl of four, who brandished a huge branding iron. Upon the prostrate cowpuncher they precipitated themselves with a yell, the boy deftly throwing a bight of the rope about Ken's feet and drawing up the slack. Then placing one foot on Douglass's neck he laconically announced:

"Tied! Put the iron to 'im, Yule."

The little girl thrust the end of the brand against the brawny shoulder now quivering with the suppressed laughter of its owner and made a quaint sizzling noise with her puckered lips. The cowboy emitted an agonized bawl wonderfully like that of a calf in the throes of the red-hot iron's bite and the boy stooped to a critical examination. Bueno! he said approvingly, and then he untied the restraining coils, stepped back a pace and gave Ken the ethical kick in the ribs.

"Get up, you chump!" he ejaculated in comical imitation of Ken's accent and manner when at work in the branding corrals. Douglass was his model in everything, and only the week before he had the beatitude of seeing his hero actively engaged in a similar employment of the branding iron. But the little girl laid her soft cheek against the bronzed one of the cowboy and whispered sweetly, "Oh! Ten, youse is weally mine vewy own now, ain't youse? Buddy said youse would be if ve doed it."

The man made two attempts before he could answer. Then he laid his lips reverently on the rosebud mouth. "Yes, honey, I'm sure in your brand now," he said gently. And he quietly but firmly declined the glass of whiskey proffered him by her father as he sat her on the end of the dingy counter. The sweetness of those little lips was too fresh for that. Old Blount gave him a keen look of approval as he set the bottle back. "Your head's level," he said, misinterpreting Douglass's motive. "Matlock is a quick mover even if he is a cur. And he's ugly to-night."

"That so?" said Douglass indifferently, playing with the curls of the little child nestling against his breast. Mrs. Blount, coming to announce that supper was ready, shivered slightly and her kind brown eyes were filled with an unspoken entreaty. But he evaded their wistfulness and a certain doggedness gloomed in his own. All throughout the meal he held the child in his lap, and when he relinquished her to the troubled woman he said not unkindly: "I am not going to get drunk to-night and I shall do all I can to avoid trouble. Of course I am not going to let him kill me."

"Ask him to go back to the ranch, dearie, to go back at once for your sake," the woman said to the child, nervously. "Just this once, Ken," she pleaded. "You are so young—and life certainly holds so much for you!" But the child here interposed tearfully: "Ten shan't do home! Ten tate me widin' to-mov-ver."

"That's what, honey!" said Douglass, with quieting assurance. "Out of the mouth of babes—" he quoted whimsically and the woman turned away with a sigh. But all that night a light burned in her room and when little Eulalie said her prayers she knelt beside her with dumbly moving lips. She had known so much misery and heartache in this dreadful place—and this young man had once told her that his mother was dead. Strangely enough, she did not include Matlock in her appeal. Which was manifestly unfair and essentially feminine.

Hank Williams, dropping casually into the Alcazar that night, noted with no small satisfaction that Douglass occupied that seat at the poker table which commanded the whole room with the minimum of exposure in his own rear. "Trust him for that!" he chuckled, but his nod of greeting was anything but demonstrative. All the same he unobtrusively sat down at a point where he could see in profile every man in the room and likewise catch the first view of all who entered at either rear or front doors. Matlock was not in the room, but leaning against the counter of the bar were three of the C Bar outfit talking earnestly together. At the other end of the counter Blount was lighting an unusually refractory pipe which persisted in going out at every third puff. Williams, noting a sharp projection in the side pocket of Blount's coat, smiled quizzically.

"Derringer," he speculated. "Well, there ain't no accountin' for tastes. An' I've heard that Blount got two men in one scrap down in No Man's Land afore he come here. Guess Ken's good for a square deal all right. But I don't like Matlock's dodging the play in this way. Wonder what skunk trick he will try this time?"

Nearly every other man in the room was indulging in a like speculation. The only possible exceptions were the C Bar men at the counter and a slight, well-dressed young fellow who was watching the faro game at the other side of the room. The latter was evidently a stranger both to Tin Cup and to the game in which he was so thoroughly absorbed. Williams looked him over indifferently.

"Tenderfoot," he opined, "takin' in the sights. Maybe he'll see suthin' worth while if he hangs around a bit longer." And he smiled grimly and renewed his watch of the doors.

Less than a year before, Matlock had an altercation with a sheep herder over a game of cards in this very room and had been soundly thrashed by the unarmed man. The next night the shepherd's camp had been raided by a masked mob, his sheep ruthlessly slaughtered, despite the fact that he was on the right side of the "dead line," therefore entirely within his rights, and himself shot to death by the merciless marauders. Of course there was no positive proof of their identity, but the consensus of opinion pointed to the C Bar outfit, and the decent element among the range men had held significantly aloof from Matlock ever since. Douglass's escapade had in nowise affected his popularity among the resentful cattle owners who had been seriously involved by the outrage on the sheepman; the law of the range demands fair play and the feeling against Matlock was further intensified by a dastardly trick perpetrated by him a few days before Douglass's unceremonious man-handling of him.

Among the men working for the C Bar had been a quiet inoffensive German named Braun, whose ambition was to acquire a small ranch of his own. With this end in view he had allowed salary to accumulate in Matlock's hands until it had attained very respectable proportions. Upon this little hoard Matlock had long had designs, and one night he seduced Braun—who was a mere boy—into a game of cards where with the assistance of one of his confederate creatures he had deliberately robbed him of every cent. This in itself would have aroused but little comment; every man must protect himself in card play and any means that can be enforced to one's end in poker are admissible. But with the malicious brutality characteristic of all cowardly bullies, Matlock had subsequently taunted his victim with his lack of perspicuity, boasting openly of the means he had employed, until the boy, lashed into ungovernable fury, had fumblingly drawn his revolver, whereupon Matlock shot him through the head.

In the light of self-defense even this would have been condoned, but one of the dead man's friends, collecting his effects for transmission to his widowed mother, had discovered that Braun's revolver had been rendered absolutely useless by having its hammer point shortened in such a way that it could not reach the primers of the cartridges, the weapon being therefore

undischageable. It was evident that the point had been first broken off and the fracture cunningly ground smoothly round so as to avoid detection. And it was whispered significantly among the C Bar boys that Braun's gun had hung for the better-part of a day in the ranch blacksmith shop while he was employed on a distant irrigation ditch, and that Matlock had been refurbishing some branding Irons in the smithy during the interim. And one of the boys who had been friendly with the dead man found on the edge of the grindstone a deeply-cut indentation such as is made by the bite of casehardened steel.

It was now ten o'clock and Matlock had not put in his appearance; the smoke-dimmed atmosphere was heavy with expectancy but Douglass sat unconcernedly rolling cigarettes, occasionally making a bet and exchanging the rude badinage inseparable from the game. His face was sphinx-like in its immobility but the cold lethality of his eyes was apparent even to the inexperienced tenderfoot, who was growing strangely uncomfortable for some indefinable reason. The raucous clamor of the preceding hours had become unaccountably subdued and the soft flutter of the cards as they were dealt was distinctly heard. A sudden gust of wind slammed the insecurely fastened door with a sharp bang and a man sprang quickly behind the precarious shelter of the stove; even Williams stiffened perceptibly in his chair. The C Bar men had their hands on the butts of their revolvers. The gray-eyed man alone smiled contemptuously at the disconcerted fellow grinning behind the stove and said humorously:

"Better take a little bromide, Jim. This night air is hell on the nerves."

The tenderfoot was wavering between a conviction that it was time to go home and a morbid inclination to stay and see what all this portended. Impelled by an irresistible impulse, he went over and sat down beside Douglass, who courteously shoved back the chair for his better convenience. It was the one just vacated by the man behind the stove.

Then of a sudden it happened. In through the door walked Matlock, his bloated face working ominously and an evil glitter in his closely-set eyes. The player opposite Douglass, immediately between him and the newcomer, rose with exaggerated deliberation and strolled over to the counter, asking for a match. There was a perfect litter of matches on the table about the very respectable heap of chips and coin which he had accumulated but these were curiously overlooked, and what was even more remarkable, he displayed no unseemly celerity in returning to what was plainly a very profitable divertimento.

Then the tenderfoot, comprehending, was obsessed by a great desire to go somewhere and he moved nervously in his chair. The hand of the man beside him had dropped carelessly to his side and involuntarily he shifted his chair a little farther away. He wished now that he had gone home. But the pride inherent in every man worthy of the name chained him to his seat. He paled perceptibly, but Williams, watching him cynically out of the corner of his eye, gave a grin of appreciative surprise at the resolute squaring of his jaw and firm compression of lips.

"Blamed if the kid isn't game!" he ejaculated under his breath. "But all the same, if I was him I'd mosey off a leetle to one side—and that *my pronto*. The work's apt to be a bit wild in all this yere durned smoke."

Then Douglass did a generous thing.

"I think," said he quietly to the young stranger, "that Blount over there wants to speak to you."

The youngster looked him squarely in the eyes. "I don't know Blount—and if I did it can wait." He was going to see it out side by side with this man, come what might.

Matlock was no fool. As he halted with a swagger beside his men, one of them spoke quickly in an undertone and he looked calculatingly about the room. Something in the unfriendly silence warned him that this time his metal would be fairly put to the test and the sheer cowardice of the man shrank from the ordeal. He would wait for more propitious conditions and with a well-simulated nonchalance he ordered drinks for the house. The scant acceptance of his hospitality flooded his bloodshot eyes with impotent rage, but he made no comment thereon. He merely remarked that it was time to hit the trail, ignoring the titter of contemptuous surprise and disgust which greeted the announcement. Was this the thing he had foresworn so rabidly a scant four hours before! Someone laughed jeeringly and he whirled like a kicked cur, the fires of hell in his eyes.

"If anyone here's got any objections—!" he began furiously but he had been weighed and found wanting and the strain had been relaxed. The whole room was broadly smiling. Douglass's vis-à-vis had returned to his seat, and even the tenderfoot was laughing in pure relief.

Matlock's undoing was so complete that he did not even resent Blount's deep-toned "Buffaloed, by God!" He groped unseeingly for the door, followed by the scowling trio whose faces were flushed with the awful shame of his cowardice. At the threshold they stopped as one man, these three; they were brave men, if evil ones, and their sense of ethics had been outraged unpardonably.

"I'll take my time right now!" said one of them thickly. "I don't work for no d—d coward!" And the others acquiesced: "Same here!"

Matlock glared at them fiendishly for an eternal moment, one hand fumbling at his throat, the other fiercely gripping his gun; but they stared at him with somber contempt and deliberately turned their backs. It was the last straw, and mumbling insanely through frothed lips, the now

thoroughly discredited and wholly disgraced wretch stumbled pitifully out into the night of an ostracism more terrible than death.

Never again would man of these ranges take order from him. Never again would women—even the sordid trollops of the slums—give him aught but a pitying glance. And even the little children, awed by his shame, would shrink wide-eyed from his contamination. For the one sin unpardonable, the one foul specter against which range mothers invoke the intercession of their gods, is Cowardice.

CHAPTER III

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

Douglass, ambling around the hotel veranda with little Eulalie astride of his neck, the next morning, bumped into the tenderfoot who had sat beside him in the Alcazar. He grinned sheepishly, for his antics were anything but dignified and he and the child were both shouting at the top of their voices. But there was only appreciation in the younger man's eyes as he reflected "and this is the man who waited smilingly for possible death last night!" Aloud he said genially:

"Good morning, Mr. Douglass. They told me over at the ranch—the C Bar I mean—that I might find you here. At your convenience I would like to have a talk with you."

Douglass looked at him curiously. "The C Bar," he said wonderingly. The young man smiled. "Yes, I own it, as it happens. I am Robert Carter." The cowboy took his extended hand and the young fellow winced involuntarily. Eulalie, after grave deliberation, stuck out her chubby little fist.

"I likes you, I fink," she said with much conviction, and Carter bowed over it with a courtesy that placed him instantly in the good graces of both.

"I am honored!" he said with characteristic gentleness. "You are the first lady I have had the pleasure of meeting here, and your favor is an auspicious omen." He pressed his lips to the grimy fingers.

The child smiled softly. "Youse may tiss my face if you wants."

It is worthy of note that the cowboy watching him saw nothing incongruous in the flush of color that suffused this tenderfoot's face as he availed himself of the ingenuous permission. "Another critter in your brand, Yulie," he thought, "and this one's a thoroughbred!"

They adjourned to the shady side of the veranda and Carter, proffering his cigar case, said without preamble: "You are a college man, Mr. Douglass?" Ken, puffing at the excellent Havana, nodded affirmation.

"Yale '82."

"Princeton '86 myself," said Carter, and after the fashion of hereditary rivals the world over, they solemnly shook hands again. For awhile they smoked in silence, then Carter turned abruptly. "Will you manage the C Bar for me?"

Douglass puffed meditatively for a moment. A thunderbolt from the clear blue above would have surprised him less, but no stoic ever bore a face more immobile than that which he turned toward the owner of the biggest ranch on the Western Slope.

"How about Matlock?"

"He left this morning," said Carter grimly. "See here, Douglass, all I have in this world is invested in the ranch. My family—I have a mother and sister—has no other source of income. The outfit is badly run down and I find it to be in bad flavor with everybody in this section."

Douglass looked at him in surprise. "Why, I thought—"

"So did I," said Carter sententiously, "but I was wrong. I haven't had time to investigate the leak, but about half my fortune has seeped through it and it's got to be stopped. I want a capable man, whom I can trust, to take full charge and put it back on its feet. Will you take the job?"

Ken looked at him with a new understanding; this was a different man from the white-lipped one who had writhed so uncomfortably beside him the night before. There was no indecision in the tense, vibrant voice, and the almost effeminately delicate features were strong with a great determination. The cowboy was suddenly filled with a conviction that Tin Cup had underweighed this tenderfoot.

"Do I get a free hand?" he asked. "I can only work my own way."

Carter nodded shortly. "The actual work will be yours absolutely but I will take care of the outside business end. I have a knack that way—and I need something to keep me busy. So far I've had no time for investigation—came in on the stage yesterday afternoon and put up at Vaughan's, old friends of mine—but will get at the bottom of things to-day. You'll take hold on the first; that will give you a week to clear up your work. You'll start at three thousand a year. And now I'll go

back to the ranch and get busy."

They shook hands and Douglass said slowly: "I'll do what I can." And Carter was filled with great satisfaction, for he knew that was a pledge which would see fulfillment.

When he had gone, Ken sat for a long time in silent meditation. "I guess I've arrived!" he confided to the little girl who finally waked him out of this reverie. "Yulie dear, it pays to stay with the game!" And he went in to the congratulations of Blount and his wife, who were overjoyed at his good fortune.

Down at the Alcazar he found the three riders who had deserted Matlock overnight. "I'm taking charge of the C Bar on the first, boys," he said simply, "and I'd like you to stay on with me if you will. There's going to be a clean-up and a new deal. I'll play square, and you're all good hands. What d'ye say?"

The three looked interrogatively at each other and then Reddy McVey, the man who had taken the initiative the night before, said, "I reckon we'll stay."

"That's good! Your pay will go right along without any docking and I want you to go back to the ranch after we've had a drink, and finish up your corral building. And you might tell all the other boys that I won't make any changes—unless I have to. Sabe?"

They grinned their full understanding of the underlying significance of that qualifying clause, and Red assured him that the rest of the outfit would stay. "They're all good boys ef they are a leetle free on the bit," he confided. "An' they've only been obeying orders." Ken nodded his comprehension and the deal was properly ratified.

Over at the post office Williams was frankly exultant. "Best move ever made on the C Bar," he swore. "That tenderfoot has more savvy than I giv' him credit for. He's a sandy cuss, too. I was keepin' cases on him las' night and he shore panned out good. Looks a heap more like his mam than he does like th' ole man; reckon that's why I didn't get onto the brand quicker. There's good leather in your new boss, Ken."

"Kem in yere this mawnin'," continued the loquacious old fellow, "an' says—fust crack outer th' box—'What's th' name o' the feller who sits next to me las' night; the one who was waitin' fer Matlock to make a break?' er words to thet effect. 'How d'ye guess it?' I axes, bein' some took aback—fer I didn't think he was wise ter the play. 'Will ye tell me his name, man!' sez he, kinder impatient; 'I'm in a hurry.' Then I give him your handle an' bymeby he twisted your pedigree outer me, too. Not that he axes me any questions ter speak of, but somehow I slops over without thinkin' an' he listens sharp. 'You're a friend o' hisn?' he says, quiet like. 'Well, I don't wonder none. That's a man!' sez he. 'An' he's going to be my manager if I can fix it. I'm Carter, o' ther C Bar!'

"Say I, 'th' hell ye are! I knowed ole Bob Carter afore ye was earmarked. You don't look none like him.' But his jaws snaps amazin'. 'My father is daid,' he whips out, 'but I am Robert Carter all the same.' I axes his pardon an' he hikes out on your trail. An' I sez to myself, he's some man, too!"

Douglass going out encountered a lady just entering the store. As he stepped aside to allow her passage-way through the narrow door, their eyes met momentarily and she flushed slightly at the unconscious boldness of his look. Yet, curiously enough, she took no offense thereat, and turned around as old Williams bawled out, "Hey, there! Douglass. Come back yere; I've got a letter fer you I overlooked yisteday."

Out of the tail of his eye the man saw that the woman was young, dressed quietly yet in exquisite taste, and that she was extremely good to look at. She was evidently a stranger, yet there was something intangibly familiar about her features. It was not until that night that he traced the resemblance to Carter, when he knew immediately that this was the sister of whom his employer had spoken. And although none knew better than he the disparity of their social planes, he dropped off to sleep wishing that her stay on the ranch would be indefinitely prolonged, for, next to a horse he deemed a woman the most creditable and handsome of divine creations, and beauty he adored both in the concrete and abstract. It would be very pleasant and agreeable to come in contact occasionally with this extremely pretty girl; it would ameliorate the coarse, hard routine of his work just as the finding of a cluster of mountain heart's-ease had often before dispelled the gloom of a hard day's ride. His thought of her was purely impersonal as yet. He slept dreamlessly the sleep of healthy, heart-whole youth and when he waked with the dawn he had practically forgotten her existence.

And the woman? Well, after the fashion of woman, she thought more than once of the bronzed young fellow who had looked at her so audaciously. As she asked for her mail old Williams had volunteered some interesting information.

"So you are Bob Carter's leetle gal, the one he used to brag on so much to the boys, eh? Well, durn my pictur', if he didn't have good reason to! You look like your mammy, Miss, and she were the puttiest filly that ever run over this range! An' as good as she were purty! I mind oncet—" and there followed an interminable string of reminiscences very interesting to the girl but of no moment to this story.

"That feller thet jest went out is your brother's new foreman, Ken Douglass, the sandiest galoot an' best cowman on this range," he concluded. "Of course he didn't know who you was or he'd a spoke to you, 'deed he would! Ken's real polite." The girl smiled at his earnest assurance and said

gently: "I am quite sure of it."

"Betcher life!" affirmed the old man enthusiastically. "He's too da—er, hem! too much polite to some cattle as doesn't deserve it, accordin' to my way o' thinkin'. Why las' night he actoolly waited for a feller to begin killin' of him before drawin' his own gun! It waz plumb downright keerless o' him, an' some day he'll get it good an' plenty ef he don't watch out!"

Then, seeing the look of white consternation in the girl's face, he shut up like a clam, saying only that Ken could "take a plenty good keer o' hisself, when he wanted to." She went away, wondering what manner of man that could be who had not his own personal welfare constantly in mind, that being proverbially the first law of nature. Her wonder increased when, on casually mentioning her chance encounter with him, Mrs. Vaughan had acquainted her with as much of Douglass's record as was common property. It was so new to her, so abnormal in every particular when compared with her own code of ethics, that she was a little bewildered. She was shocked not a little at Mrs. Vaughan's frank enjoyment of the watering-trough episode and the ensuing bravado of the dare-devil fellow who had deliberately entered the lion's den to intensify the indignity put upon her brother's outfit. Yet somehow the indomitable courage of the man appealed to her strongly; all women love personal valor and this was the most exaggerated example of it that had ever come to her notice. She distinctly disapproved of the motive of it, but she blushed to think how glad she was that he had come safely out of the jaws of death with colors flying.

Strangely enough, she appreciated the Alcazar incident to the full, and at her brother's graphic relation evinced no surprise. She could readily understand this kind of courage and she only commended his tact. "He was master of the situation," she remarked, with an insight into the facts astonishing in one who had never in all her life heard a word spoken in anger; "and it is absurd to think that he was ignorantly exposing himself to inevitable death. He would have shot first in any event—and I think he would have hit." A conclusion so prescient that her brother gasped with astonishment.

"I guess your estimate of him tallies with mine, sis," he said teasingly. "I fell in love with him at first sight."

"How perfectly absurd!" she returned, with a rebuking hauteur, and deftly changing the subject proceeded to regale Mrs. Vaughan with the details of New York's latest operatic sensation. But she relented enough to clasp her soft white arm about her brother's neck just before retiring that night and whisper:

"It was very lovely and noble of him to try and send you out of danger. Oh! Bobbie, what would I have done if—"

Carter kissed her tenderly. "It was the whitest thing I ever saw, Gracie, and I want you to try and help me make it up to him. The man is a gentleman, too, no matter what his past has been. And with your aid we will keep him such. Besides, our fortune is in his hands to all intents and purposes and something tells me we are going to owe him much in the days to come."

It may have been telepathy, and then again it may have only been coincidence; but certain it is that at the very moment Grace Carter knelt beside her little white bed, Ken Douglass sitting on the edge of his bunk took from about his neck a slender gold chain to which was attached a locket, opened it with trembling hands and laid his lips with infinite tenderness and reverence on the mouth of the sweet-faced woman pictured therein.

"Oh! Mother," he prayed, "help me to make good!"

CHAPTER IV

IN THE MIDST OF ALARUMS

Luxuriously hammocked in the delightful cool of the broad veranda surrounding three sides of the C Bar ranch house, Grace Carter lay dreamily watching the shadow-dance on the slope of the fast purpling range. Outside, the sun devils were whirling maliciously, here and there kicking up a dust-spout in the wake of the sadly-tormented breezlets which foolishly ventured out in that July inferno. Overhead the sun was herding his cloud flocks to their fold in the brassy west, wearily dipping out of sight momentarily amidst their billowy fleeces. There was an intolerable shimmer on the low-lying adobe flats to the east, and the sea of alfalfa to the north drooped flaccidly in the furnace heat.

Her neglected novel lay limply on a bamboo tabour at her side and an open letter lay where it had fallen unrecked on the veranda floor. On the wide rail shelf blazed a glory of multi-colored cacti artistically potted in harmoniously contrasting cool-gray jars. A luxuriant wistaria at the porch angle behind her supplied the requisite foil for as perfect a picture as ever filled the eye of mortal man, and Douglass, coming noiselessly through the fetlock-deep dust of the driveway, reined up his tired horse in eager admiration.

The girl, lulled to sleep by the languor of the hour, was very good to look, upon and his eyes

drank in her beauty greedily. Her hands, locked together under the shapely head, were hidden in the wealth of golden brown hair that somehow had escaped its fastenings and lay in an aureole of glory about her delicately-chiseled face. The wide sleeves of the thin lavender-tinted silk kimono had fallen away from her arms, revealing their soft rounded contour and exquisite modeling. The clinging stuff of her filmy gown betrayed every perfection of outline, and peeping over one edge of the hammock was just a ravishing suspicion of silk-stockinged foot and ankle, dainty as a child's. Her skin, tanned golden tawny to the limit of the sun's daily caress, betrayed its true coloring in the creamy white hollow of her uncovered throat, where the treacherous fabric had failed in its trust. The lips, not too full but rather of a gentle firmness, were slightly parted, revealing well-shaped teeth, and the eyelashes and brows were long and beautifully arched.

As he sat unconsciously glowering at her, she moved slightly and the kimono slipped to one side, exposing the bodice of thin stuff beneath. Through its folds the rise and fall of her bosom were distinctly perceptible. He whirled his horse with a deep-chested oath and rode unseen to the stables. Taking something from his saddle-roll, he tiptoed back to the veranda and without once looking at the sleeping girl laid it on the open novel.

Waking an hour later, she chanced to look casually at the tabour. With a little cry of pleasure she picked up the heart-shaped bit of moist moss with its embedded cluster of mountain heart's-ease and her eyes were very soft as she laid it to her lips. There was no uncertainty as to their source; she knew that these were the first-offerings of the season, procurably only in the hardly penetrable cañons of the range, more than twenty dusty miles away, and she felt very grateful. She wore them on her corsage that night at dinner and later, coming on him smoking his post-prandial pipe under the stars, thanked him graciously.

As he muttered the conventional commonplaces of depreciation, his gleaming eyes were riveted for a moment on the flowers. Something in the intensity of his glance struck her like a blow; she paled and instinctively covered the blossoms with both hands. Instantly her mind reverted to her afternoon's siesta and her cheeks flamed with consciousness. She was far from unsophistication; she had seen men look so before but never with a similar acceleration of her heart-beats, never with this fierce resentment which now coursed through her whole being. She was quivering with a sense of vague outrage and her breath came fast and hard. Then with the unaccountability of the unfathomable feminine, she deliberately detached one of the dainty blooms and, standing with the filmy laces on her bosom brushing against his chest, deftly fastened it on the lapel of his coat. After all, the man had ridden far that day for her pleasure, and she smiled inscrutably as she recalled, on retiring that night, how his hands had clenched and his breast heaved when she had given him the flower. The rest of the violets were sadly wilted now and she threw them out of the window with a sudden impatient anger.

But an hour later a great horned owl, watching from a fence post the moonlit sward in front of the veranda in hopes of a possible mouse for his belated supper, hooted his contemptuous derision of another white-robed hunter groping in the shadows. And over at the bunkhouse a man with self-revilement was fumbling with a spray of heart's-ease and looking into vacancy.

When she came down to breakfast the next morning Douglass was already far out on the range. He had thrown his whole heart and soul into his work and the effect was already visible to the most casual observer. The ranch grounds had been thoroughly policed, all the halting projects of Matlock's régime had been spurred to finality, and cleanliness, method and order had replaced the previous chaos and squalor of the C Bar. Everything radiated the new manager's virility and energy. The renovated ditches were glistening bank full with their life-giving floods; the alfalfa and grain fields, now properly kept and irrigated, were billowy seas of emerald fore-promise; everything betokened activity and thrift. In three short months he had wrought wonders with the really excellent material at hand and the C Bar was fast regaining its old-time prestige as the best-ordered ranch west of the Divide.

Carter was openly enthusiastic over the wisdom of his choice of managers, a wisdom which he shrewdly supplemented by giving Douglass full sway in the conduct of affairs. At the latter's suggestion, he went East in June to secure certain necessary machinery, and the letter which had lain beneath her hammock the previous day was one written to Grace by her brother announcing his intention to have their mother accompany him on his return. The girl, interested by the novelty of her new environment, had elected to remain on the ranch, laughingly asserting that it was a precautionary measure in her brother's behalf, as she was sure Douglass had designs on the picturesque old ranch house and would tear down and rebuild it if not restrained by her presence. The real truth was that she knew in his loyal respect for her he would abstain from excesses in which he might be tempted to indulge in the absence of that restraint. She was not quite sure of the moral fortitude of this erratic young man, and even temporary interference with his work was a contingency calamitous to the C Bar interests. Up to last night she had felt only a great self-complacency over the result; but this morning, toying with her usually much-relished berries and cream, she was obsessed by the insistent thought that her self-congratulation was, after all, a trifle premature. The longer she reflected, the more she regretted that she had not gone back East with her brother. Not that she was in the slightest degree apprehensive of any untoward futurity; it was only that a new and unexpected factor had intruded itself into her already perfected scheme for the restoration of her brother's fortune—and the reclamation of Ken Douglass.

Women are usually creatures of one idea, and she was no exception to the general rule; her whole mentality had been concentrated on this one achievement, and here at the very outset the

fair fabric of her dreams was crumbling. She was oppressed with a sense of impending defeat that grew more and more disquieting as she recalled the stories she had heard of his indomitable will and pertinacity of purpose. She had been much impressed by a remark made by old Hank Williams on the morning of their first encounter, "Ken allus gits what he goes after!"

At the time she deemed it a very grand, almost heroic attribute, but just now it was fraught with a new significance. Something in her cogitations sent the blood to her face, then it receded, leaving her pale. She pushed the untasted food away impatiently and rose from the table. Going swiftly to her room, she took from between the leaves of her diary a cluster of withered flowers and stepped to the open window. In the very act of their contemptuous casting away she hesitated irresolutely, looked at them once more compassionately and replaced them in the morocco-bound booklet. Then with an air of renewed determination she returned to her breakfast and ate everything comestible in sight.

That night when Douglass returned, he bore in his arms a tiny antelope kid which he laughingly entrusted to her tender mercies. In his ride over the range he had come upon one of the pitiful little tragedies common to the great Outdoors with its unending struggle of the weak against the strong and merciless. In a little hollow of the foothills its mother, hamstrung by a pair of wolves and exhausted by her gallant fight against the inevitable, was making a last frantic effort to defend her offspring cowering between her feet. The revolver flashed twice vengefully and then a third time mercifully, for the poor doe's condition was hopeless. But of this third shot Douglass said nothing to Miss Carter, simply saying that the doe had succumbed to her injuries. Neither did he deem it advisable to tell her that with the economy and thrift inseparable from plainsmen, he had sent the carcass of the martyred mother to one of his outlying camps to eke out its larder, and so save the otherwise necessary sacrifice of a valuable yearling for camp meat. Nor did he mention the fact that this had occurred quite early in the afternoon, necessitating his "packing" the helpless kid about on his saddle for many weary miles.

The girl's eyes had filled at his simple recital and she cooed assuringly to the kid, which nestled contentedly in her arms. But something in her eyes and about her lips as he threw the wolf pelts at her feet caused the man to look at her curiously. He had seen that expression once before on the face of the wife of the dead sheepman when some one had told her of the finding of a C Bar rider with a load of buckshot through his heart some weeks after the assassination of her husband. There had been no over-officious zeal displayed by the authorities in their attempts to fix the responsibility of the man's death, despite the fact that the sheepman's son possessed one of the only three shotguns in the county, the deceased being reputedly a "bad man" and notoriously the creature of Matlock. He it was who had assisted in the fleecing of poor Braun, and the general consensus of opinion was that "he only got what was coming to him!" The code of the range is as drastic as it is simple.

"It's up to you now to mother this goat, Miss Grace," he said whimsically; "I'll send a man in to Tin Cup to-morrow for a gunnysackful of any pap-maker you nominate. We've got to assume the responsibility of him, his mother having come to grief on your demesne. When you are ready to christen him I'll get Red to stand godfather for him—that is, if you have no other preferred sponsor in mind."

The girl looked up quickly; his tone seemed a bit patronizing and to her mind altogether too familiar. It was an opportune time to inaugurate a new order of things which all day she had been formulating.

"I shall name him now," she said, icily. "He shall be known as Buffo and you are his sponsor."

"Buffo—a buffoon!" He laughed a little constrainedly. "Well, I think the name is appropriate. He is a fool and so was his mother before him. Otherwise they'd have never ventured in where naught but angels have any license to tread."

She bit her lip in chagrin as he lifted his sombrero and rode nonchalantly away. The intended rebuke had recoiled upon her and she was furious at her impotence. Retreating to the kitchen, she somewhat curtly ordered the cook—old Abigail Williams, sister to the postmaster, who in order to preserve the proprieties had been engaged in that capacity—to prepare some nourishment for her charge.

"We've got to feed the thing," she snapped in a tone strangely variant from her endearing coo of a few minutes before.

Abbie nodded briskly: "I'll fix up a rag on a bottle of new milk. I've raised 'em before. We bed two on em oncet—Hank ez thet foolish about sich critters."

"It'll make quite a peart pet," went on the garrulous old body. "An' I s'pose ye'll be fer givin' it sum name? Ourn was Belshazzar an' Sappho. Hank got the buck's name outen a book where it said in slick soundin' poetry as how Belshazzar was king an' Belshazzar waz lord. Thet buck were sure the mos' uppity critter! Nuthin' waz good enuf fer him to sociate with and he herded by hisself mos'ly. He waz allus on thu prod, stompin' aroun' darin' thu other critters to fite. He waz powerful or'nary, that Belshazzar, lordin' it over everybody an' allus huntin' trouble.

"He waz mean to thu she-goat an' treated her scan'lous! The more she tried to be sociable an' nice the more biggoty he got. She'd go up'n nuzzle 'im an' he'd back off an' look at her scornful and walk away high an' mighty-like on thu tips uv he's toes, jest like he's walkin' on aigs. He waz allus hurtin' uv her feelin's but he didn't seem to care none. An' thu poor critter would tag after

'im an' humor 'im ontill she made me sick! If he got outen her sight she'd blat an' take on suthin' drefful, an' one spring when he jumped thu fence an' went out gallivantin' with thu wild ones fer a spell, she went loco an' actooly cried tears! That's sure right. I seed 'em.

"That was the spring that Ken Douglass hit this range. One day when she is actin' more foolish than, most he pats her on thu back an' calls her 'Sappho' an' spouts a lot o' hifalutin dago talk an' wipes her eyes with his new silk han'kerchief—really! Tenderfeets air cu'r'ous critters an' Ken acts loco a leetle hissself sumtimes. He takes a heap o' int'rest in her after that, and fetches her apples n' things every time he goes to Tin Cup. An' one day I hears that durn fool say to Sappho as how he wishes he was a goat so that he could teach her to fergit her sorrer. Did ye ever hear anythin' so plumb ridic-lous! Then one day he rides up to thu gate an' says: 'Miss Abbie'—he kin be real polite when he wants—'there's rejoicin' in Lesbos to-day. Belshazzar has come back!' Then he rides off laffin, an' I gits my sunbonnit and hikes down to ther pastur'. Sure 'nough, thar's thet fool buck, an' for the fust time *he's* nuzzlin' her! An' thet Sappho she waz so foolish happy that I wanted to shake her."

Grace put the kid down very gently on the floor. "I had thought of a name for him but—"

A shadow darkened the door. "Hello, Buffo. You getting your first lesson, too?"

The girl stiffened instantly. "I shall call him that, after all. Thank you, Mr. Douglass, for strengthening my resolution."

"And as his godfather I, of course, must be Momus," said Ken, nothing abashed, though his eyes glittered. And in a not unpleasant if somewhat strident voice, he mischievously sang:

"Why gall and wormwood in a throat
Designed for hydromel!
Far better be a Buffo goat
And court the booze bot-tel."

Her lips curled at what she mistook for an implied threat. With all the hauteur she could summon to her aid, she swept him with her scorn. "Oh! If you feel a really irresistible desire to get drunk," she said, "that is a waste of talent far more appreciable by the critics of the Alcazar; my brother, being unfortunately absent, will be desolated at missing *this* performance."

She regretted her temerity even before she had finished. His face seemed to age as she looked. A man putting such indignity upon him, at first view of that face, would have hastily laid his hand on his pistol-butt; the girl placed hers tremblingly above her heart.

The man's self-restraint was wonderful. For an interminable moment which seemed an age to the frightened women—for even old Abbie was blanched with comprehension and stood with clasped hands and white lips—he was silent. Then in a voice whose calmness made the girl shiver with an undefinable fear, he said:

"That is twice to-day, Miss Carter, that you have been pleased to insult me. I am most unfortunate in having incurred your disfavor. My intrusion here was to acquaint you with the news that your brother, accompanied by your mother, will be here to-morrow night, a rider having just brought a telegram to that effect. It will take me but a few minutes to gather my effects. I will submit a full account of my stewardship to Mr. Carter to-morrow—from Tin Cup. It will be sufficiently full and comprehensive enough to obviate the necessity of any explanations on your part. Have I your permission to retire?"

Unable to think coherently she mutely nodded assent. Hat in hand, he turned on the threshold. "The performance will begin at ten, to-morrow night," he said. "Abbie, don't put any wormwood in Buffo's milk. It'll make him uppish."

But the gods who dispose of man's proposals ordained that Douglass was not to leave the C Bar that night. As he swung out into the moonlight his nostrils were assailed with the pungent fumes of burning hay and a man came running toward him.

"The stacks have been fired and the ditches cut! Red saw one of them and is on his trail!" Afar in the starlight a pistol snapped viciously; it was answered by a louder detonation, succeeded almost instantly by the fainter whip of the pistol. Then after a few seconds' interim came yet again the fainter report and all was silent.

"That's Red's .45," said the man with curt positiveness. "T'other must have had a Winchester, and he didn't fire but one shot. Red shot last." They were running full speed toward the burning stacks and Ken chose to waste no breath in speculative reply. But he was seeing a different red than that of the flaming hay as he recalled Williams's warning: "Look out fer Matlock. He's a pizen skunk and he'll stoop to anythin' ter play even." The fire being incendiary, admitted but one deduction, and he was praying his gods to give this man into his hands.

"'Twan't Matlock," said Red tersely, in answer to the interrogation in his comrade's eyes as he rode in to where they were standing helplessly watching the destruction of what was fortunately the smallest stack on the ranch, Ken's masterly directions executed by willing hands having extinguished the others. "'Twer that mizzuble Mexican side-kicker o' hisn, an' the damned varmint nearly got me. Shot his hoss an' he come back with his rifle. Got him second shot."

"Yeh fired three," said the man who had summoned Douglass, tentatively.

Red took a chew of tobacco. "Yep. Only winged him an' he possumed on me. Stuck his knife inter me but she glanced on a rib. He's daid now." His voice was unemotional but his face was white. Douglass, watching him sharply, laid his hand on the other's glove.

"Better get up to the shack, Red," he said quietly, "You've lost a lot of juice."

The man smiled wanly, reeled in his saddle, and clutching fruitlessly at the horn, slipped limply down into Douglass's supporting arms. Subsequent examination revealed that he had also been wounded by the Mexican's rifle shot. There was a ragged hole through the fleshy part of his thigh and hemorrhage had been profuse. Declining all offers of assistance, Douglass carried him to the bunkhouse and laid him on the rough bed. Looking at the white face of the fellow before him, his mouth resolved itself into a thin cruel line.

"By God, Matlock, you will pay in full for this!" He had unconsciously sworn it aloud and the men gathered around the bed of their stricken comrade knew that supreme sentence had been passed. They made no comment, but as Douglass, rolling up his sleeves, bent to the clumsy but efficient surgery that was to save Red's life, one of them nudged his neighbor and said inconsequentially, "Red weighs good two hunnerd!" And he looked admiringly at the ripples playing silkily under the bronze satin of his foreman's arms.

But far out on the prairie, riding in headlong guilty haste from the Nemesis that his craven heart dreaded as even his cowardice had never dreaded anything before, Matlock shivered telepathically and turned in his saddle. A startled night-fowl fluttered uncannily over his head and he crouched almost to his saddle-bow with terror. The flutter of Azrael's wings seemed very close!

An hour later, as Douglass emerged from the bunkhouse, old Abigail hesitatingly accosted him. "Yuah to come up to thu house, Ken, right way! Now don' yuh be foolish, boy; remember she's only a gel—an' young at that!"

He patted the wrinkled hand laid on his arm but shook his head in grim negation. "It isn't necessary, Abbie; you tell Miss Carter that it will all be in the report to-morrow!" And he gently but firmly put aside her restraining hand.

But the old woman was wise in her generation. "Look heah, Ken Douglass," she indignantly stormed; "don't yuh try no hifalutin with me. I ain't goin' to be stood off with no such a bluff ez that! Who nussed yuh when yuh got shot up by this yeah very mizzuble outfit las' summeh? Yuh come along o' me without no moah talk. An' when yuh git theah yuh go down on yuh stubboahn knees to that little angel an' promise thet yuh'll be good."

He laughed quizzically. "Is that one of the conditions she imposes—that getting down on my knees? I'm out of practice a little and my knees are all blacked up from that fire. I'm afraid I'd soil that immaculate carpet of hers."

"Yuh hev soiled a heap moah than her cyapet already," said the old woman significantly, "an' yuh mind's been blacker than yuh knees. Did yuh think she was one o' them dance-hall huzzies yuh've been herdin' with all yuh mean life? An' up tha' she sits cryin'—"

"Crying!" said the man sharply, and without another word he strode after the doddering old woman, who had knowingly turned even as she spoke.

As he entered the living-room the girl rose with an involuntary cry. His hair, eyebrows and mustache had been badly singed, his face was smoke-grimed and dirty, great holes had been burned in the thin shirt, the flesh showing angrily red through the rents. He was in sharp contrast with her own white daintiness as he stood there grim and forbidding, but she thought she had never looked upon a manlier man.

"I inferred from what Abbie said that you wished to see me?" The tone was cool and even but respectful.

"Yes—I wished—I thought—" she faltered incoherently, looking appealingly at him. But he only waited impassively, and the girl nervously clasped her hands.

"Tongue burned too?" snapped Abigail, with withering sarcasm, glowering wrathfully at him; the girl went up to him quickly, her eyes luminous with compassion.

"Oh! You are injured—you are suffering—I did not know—"

"It is nothing—merely a few slight scorches. Pray do not be concerned about it. And I am glad to assure you that McVey will recover. The bullet—" At the white terror which crept into the girl's face he stopped abruptly, clipping the words between his teeth and cursing his inadvertence.

"The bullet—McVey—I do not understand," she was wild-eyed now with fear and her voice was very faint. Old Abigail with an incredibly quick movement caught her around the waist.

"Sit down, honey, and we'll tell you about it. There! Thet's a dear. Matlock an' one uv his critters fired the haystacks an' cut the ditches so's Ken wouldn't hev no water to save 'em with. An' Red he see one uv 'em ridin' off an' runs him down an' shoots him up right! But the ornary cuss shoots back an' Red gets it in ther laig an' thet's all they is to it. Don't yuh worrit none; we only lost thu leetlest stack o' ther bunch."

"And the other—the one who ran away?" asked the girl with quick concern.

Abigail's lips curved in a grim smile. "Red shot three times. Once at the hoss."

CHAPTER V

"HER HEART WONT BE BROKE NONE"

True to her intuition, he came to her, lying in the hammock waiting his coming the next morning.

"I am afraid," he began apologetically, "that I will have to postpone my departure for some time, after all. It is imperative that the ditches be repaired, the crops needing immediate irrigation, and McVey's indisposition leaves us very short-handed. Besides, I am personally responsible for all these mishaps and must make them good."

His speech was almost contrite in its humility and his manner had lost much of its assurance. It was a moment fraught with possibilities and she was fully aware that the smallest concession on her part would pave the way to reconciliation. But she did not know of the bitter travail in which he had labored the livelong night, and the significance of his closing words evaded her understanding.

Attributing all the foregone evils to Matlock's personal hatred of him, and deeming himself therefore solely responsible for the damage inflicted by that worthy, he had quixotically resolved to remain in Carter's employ until his salary had accumulated to an amount sufficient to recoup the latter for all the loss sustained. That end attained, he would find Matlock—the rest was simple.

Nothing of this she knew, and yet she was conscious of a great impellment to be kind to this man. She had half arisen with a gracious word of thanks for his herculean labors in the behalf of her brother on her lips, when, by some fatality, the morning wrap she was wearing dropped from her shoulders. It was unfortunate that his eyes fell on the instant. When he again raised them she had caught up the garment and with a care so exaggerated that it sent the blood to his face, was haughtily fastening it about her throat. Her intent was unmistakable and he hardened like adamant. All too late she repented; that one second of perversity had undone a whole night's chastening and his voice was as cold as ice when he resumed:

"I will therefore be unable to meet your brother on his arrival. You can say to him that he will lose nothing by last night's work. I am going out to the ditch now and will not return until it has been fully restored." Then with an almost imperceptible inclination of his head, he left her without another look.

Turning uneasily in the hammock, she discovered for the first time that the entrance to the bunkhouse was visible through the interstices of the wistaria. The door was open to admit the solace of the balmy air to the wounded man, whose pale face with its closed eyes was plainly discernible in the semi-gloom of the darkened room. Shuddering slightly, she put her hands before her eyes, lowering them at the very moment that Douglass, belted and spurred, led his saddled horse up to the door.

She watched him enter, noting that he removed his sombrero on crossing the threshold. His every movement betokened care and caution, indicating his solicitude not to awaken the sleeper. Unconsciously she admired the sinuous, almost feline grace of the fellow who stood for quite a time looking down on his stricken comrade. Then she was startled to see him turn and raise his clenched fist in the air, his lips moving convulsively, and she shrank from what was written on his face when he again came softly out and mounted his horse. Ten minutes later she watched a cloud of dust blotting the horizon on the crest of the little rise to the north. When it had again settled, she went into her room and came out with a pair of shears in her hand.

McVey, jaded and wan from the manipulations of the surgeon who had come down overnight from Tin Cup, waked to find an exquisite bouquet of freshly cut flowers in a quaint Japanese vase on the little stand beside his bed. He had seen that vase before on the window-sill of Miss Carter's room and he blinked incredulously at it. His wonder was only exceeded by his embarrassment when, a few minutes later, that lady herself in person entered the room, followed by Abigail, who bore a platter of daintily prepared food.

"It's might good o' yuh, ma'am, too good!" he assured her in clumsy gratefulness, as she rearranged his pillows after the refectation. "But yuh shouldn't go to so much trouble; I'd rest a heap easier in my mind if I knowed you wasn't puttin' yuhself out none. But," reminiscently, "that chicken soup were shore fine!"

"You shall have some every day until you are well," she beamed on him from the doorway.

He thanked her with a gravity whose solemnity of effect was somewhat offset by his next utterance. "Say, Miss Williams," he said seriously in a stage aside, "when yuh cal'late I am well enough to stand it, yuh go out an' git some other Greaser to come up here and shoot me some more!"

"Yuh shet yuah trap, Red McVey," snapped the vestal addressed reprovingly, "an' rest yuah pore weak brain. Ain't yuh made trouble enough already, gettin' yuhself shot up right here in thu thick

o' thu hayin' an' Ken short-handed as it was? What onaccountable idjits men is anyway! Now yuh be good fer a spell!"

She flounced out with assumed asperity, halting at the threshold for a last admonishing look. The big fellow, his head hung in abashment, looked up pleadingly.

"Kiss me, mommer, an' I'll go to sleep!"

Routed horse, foot and dragoons, Abigail fled in confusion, and Red grinned in self-complacency as Miss Carter's silvery laugh tinkled in diminishing crescendo. Then he turned his face to the wall and really fell asleep.

"Beats all," confided Abigail that afternoon, to Grace, watching her deft manipulation of the dinner's pie crust, "what misonderstandable fools these men critters be. Thar's thet Ken Douglas o' yourn,"—watching slyly out of the corner of her eye the flushing face and compressing lips of her auditor—"now 'tain't sca'cely six months since he was sky-hootin' around yeah, wishful o' killin' every blessed cowpuncha in this outfit; an' now they ain't ary one o' the pin-headed dogies that ain't a beggin' to be allowed to do his killin' fer him! He had quite a time makin' 'em promise not ter cut in on Matlock, las' night. I hear 'm jawbonin' about it oveh to thu shack. But they finally allows he's Ken's meat an' 'grees ter keep han's off. I'd feel some sorry fer that Matlock ef he wa'nt sech a pizen skunk. I r'ally do wisht he was moah of a man! Ken's too clean a boy to hev ter stomp out sech a snake."

Miss Carter was not a woman of iron nerve and this dispassionate talk of killing affected her visibly. As the old woman proceeded with her disquieting recital, her face blanched, but with a great effort at self-control she held her peace; this was evidently the hour of revelations—and she had to know!

"But he has it ter do—he suah has! An' I wisht 'twas oveh. I doan reckon Matlock will ketch him nappin'—Ken's eye tooth is cut—but yuh nevah kin tell!" She sighed lugubriously and the girl's blood ran cold in her veins. "Thar's allus a chanct—an' Ken is a heap keerless at times. I hope he gits him soon!"

"But why?" said Grace unevenly, making a heroic struggle to retain the composure that was fast deserting her. "You talk as if he were compelled to kill this man."

"Well, hain't he?" replied Abbie, with naïve surprise in her voice, as she stopped pinching the edges of a pie and looked up in astonishment. "Hain't Matlock declar'd hisself? Hain't he bragged as how he'd cut thu heart out o' Ken an' show it ter him? Didn't he crawfish like a cowardly coyote when Ken called his bluff in thu Alcazar, an' then came sneakin' around yeah in thu night an' buhn yuh haystacks? Why, what moah d'yuh want him to do?" The indignation in her voice was genuine.

"But why—I cannot understand—" began the girl confusedly, "why is it necessary for Mr. Douglass to personally undertake the punishment of this wretch? Have you no laws that can be invoked to punish the one and protect the other?"

"Laws!" snorted the old woman contemptuously, "what good would all the laws be to Ken arter Matlock had him pumped full o' lead? Thar's only one law fer rattlesnakes on ther range, honey—kill 'em befoah they gits a chanct ter strike!" The leathery old face twitched venomously and she slashed the pie top with suggestive vigor.

"But that would be murder!" gasped the girl, her face gray with horror.

"Murder, huh! An' what would it be if Matlock has his way? Didn't he kill thet shepherd—who whopped him fair an' squar'—in cold blood? Didn't he jest nat'rally butcher thet pore Dutch boy arter fust crippin' o' his gun on ther sly, ther tre'cherous haound! Murder—!"

Her gray crest was erect and she was breathing audibly through passion-pinched nostrils. She put her hand kindly on the girl's shoulder. "Hit's got ter be one or t'other on 'em, honey. They hain't no other way. An' out yeah whar wimmin 'n children air left alone a heap at times hit's every good man's duty ter perfect his own. Did yuh heah what happened ter thet sheepman's wife thet night arter they killed her man?"

"Hit war one man done hit arter the rest was gone. He was masked, o' cose, but all thu rest o' yuh outfit was at thu Alcazar—Matlock with 'em—so's ter prove a alleyby. Thu one that were shy was thu feller they found on Hoss Creek a week later with nine buckshot in his rotten heart." And then she avoided the girl's eyes as she whispered something that brought Grace to her feet screaming with horror.

"Naow I ain't sayin'," she went on slowly, "thet Matlock is as low as thet. T'other was a half-breed 'n some say a convick. But thar's no room fer him on this range naow, an' he knows it. An' that kind o' man allus goes bad. He's got it in specul fer Ken, an' hit's suah one er t'other on 'em." And then she shot her last bolt mercilessly:

"Would yuh ruther he killed Ken?"

Outside somewhere a raven, scavenging indolently about the corrals, croaked gutturally; never again as long as she lived would Grace Carter hear without shuddering the uncanny dissonance of that foul bird. In the silence of that suddenly oppressive room the ticking of the little cheap alarm clock on the mantel beat upon her brain like the strokes of a drum, seeming to her

disordered mind to say "Kill-Ken!—Kill-Ken!"

She passed her hand numbly over her forehead, mechanically adjusting a stray wisp of hair. She was dimly conscious of an agony of compunction on the wrinkled face before her, but it excited in her only a dull wonder. Why was Abbie looking so strangely at her? If only that tiresome clock would cease its muttering! What was this strange thing now happening to her, this slipping away of a part of herself, this new and perturbing sense of sudden oldness and wisdom and—and heart-wrenching fear! For a moment she plucked petulantly at the velvet band about her throat; the room seemed reeling about her and she swayed unsteadily on her feet.

With a cry of keen self-reproach, Abigail threw her arm around the tottering girl and bore her into the darkened bedroom. When she emerged later it was with a sorely troubled mien.

"I'm not quite settled in my mind thet I've done ther right thing in tellin' her so suddenly. Still, since he's goin' ter do it she hed best be prepared. Pore lamb! Why didn't Ken finish ther job in thu fust place and be done with it! Now it'll come between 'em an' like as not she won't hav' him on account of it. Ther Lawd do move in myster'ous ways fer a fac'! An' they do say thet ther trail o' troo love is rough an' crooked. An' them sech a well-matched span, too!"

Abigail had evidently jumped to conclusions of her own, in her range-born simplicity overlooking the obvious disparity that a more captious conventionality would have interposed between the respective social planes of a society blossom and a "wild and woolly" cowpuncher. And if she had drawn any comparisons they would have been indubitably in favor of the latter. For in her environment she had acquired the faculty of properly estimating the worth of a real man. And then, again, Abigail was a woman, and there is a proverb about the contempt of familiarity.

"I reckon 'twer ther heat," she opined barefacedly when the young woman, a girl no longer since the ticking of that clock, expressed her inability to account for her sudden indisposition. "I heve nevah fainted mahself; reckon I wouldn't know how," with a grim attempt at jocularly. "Nevah had the time, anyhow. Yuh feelin' peart again, honey?"

Grace assented languidly. The antelope kid, fed to repletion, was blinking at her from his blanket nest in the corner. As she spoke he arose and wobbled over to her side, laying his cool, moist muzzle against her hand.

"Jest look at thet, now!" said Abbie delightedly. "Thu leetle cuss wants ter be petted an' coddled. Well, he's like all other he-critters, got ter be humored an' made much of, whether they deserve it or not. An' I guess," with shrewd philosophy and a certain deliberate emphasis, "thet's what we poor she-males was mos'ly created for. Take Hank, now. He's a reg'lar baby about sech things—an' whines like a sick pup ef he's overlooked in the slightest. Thar now, you Buffo!—lawks a mussy, dearie, he's got yuh hand all slobbered up—you hont yuah hole! It don't do to giv' 'em too much rope. Ef yuh do they's suah ter run on it an' thar's trouble all raound. Feed 'em well, speak 'em kind, an' give 'em theah haid on a hahd pull er in a tight place, an' they gentle quick, an' easy an' come up pullin' arter every fall. But doan yuh never go to crowdin' of 'em onreasonable at thu wrong time er they'll balk an' lay down, er kick over thu dash-boahd an' run away, accordin' to thu natuah o' thu brute. Yuh kin keep 'em up on thu bit when thu goin's good, but doan spur 'em when they's excited 'n feelin' they cawn!"

"Thu mos' on 'ems ondependable at times! some on 'ems loco all thu time—thet kind espeshully" pointing toward the bunkhouse from which was issuing the tinkle of a guitar to the accompaniment of a stentorian wail:

"Haow d-r-r-y I am! Haow d-r-r-y I am!
Gawd o-h-h-nly knows haow-w-w dry I am!"

"Yuah takin' thet tuh quite upsot me, and I done quite forgot thet no 'count Red. Heah him yowl! Long ways from daid yet, 'pears to me!"

Nevertheless, the cool hand laid on his hot brow was invested with a motherly tenderness, and the chiding voice was gentle and kind.

"Yuh better go and lay in yuah hammock, dearie," she suggested to Grace, "an' rest up a bit; I got a lot o' tidyin' up to do yeah." The room was already painfully clean and the man on the bed knit his brows quizzically.

"I do want my hair curled 'n' my mustache waxed 'n' some ody-kolone on my hank-chy," he murmured plaintively. "I shore do!"

Abigail glared at him, but Grace, with a final pat to the pillows, smiled indulgently. "Get well quickly; we need you too much; and it must be dreadful to have to stay indoors in this weather." Then she went out rather abstractedly, McVey's eyes following her with the wistfulness of a dog's. Abbie, watching him, smiled satirically.

"Red, too!" she ejaculated mentally; "well, why not? He's a whole lot of a man, hisself, an cats kin look at queens ef they likes. An' queens hev a lot o' things ter be done fer 'em thet only men kin do. I wonder now—!"

She looked at him speculatively, her lips tightening with a sudden determination. The cowboy grinned with quick prescience.

"Spit it out, Abbie. I caint help myself."

"Red," she said quietly without an attempt at preamble, "will yuh kill Matlock fer me?"

He stared his astonishment undisguisedly. There was absolutely no doubt as to the seriousness of her question; the grim set of her jaws, the anxiety in her eyes and general tenseness of muscle throughout the whole lean body betokened that.

In this man's life surprises were not infrequent and now as ever he displayed only the nonchalance characteristic of all typical frontiersmen in moments of crisis. Something in her manner and attitude repressed the almost irresistible desire to answer her humorously, and his reply was grave to solemnity.

"Yuh see, Miss Abbie, we-all promised Ken that we wouldn't cut in on thet deal. But I'd jest love to oblige yuh, an' if yuh can square me with the old man I'll take Matlock's trail soon as I can straddle m' hoss agin. Yuh see, Ken's kinder got hes heart sot on doin' thet leetle stunt hisself, an' he's apt to r'ar up an' sweat under thu collar when anybody musses with hes things. Yuh onderstand how 'tis—"

She withered him with a measureless scorn: "Yes, I onderstan'. Yuah afraid o' Matlock!" She turned to go. "An' I thought this was a man!"

"Stop a minnit, Miss Willi'ms!" The words were scarcely audible but she wheeled instanter. He had not moved a muscle so far as she could detect but she felt as though she had been clutched in a grasp of steel and whirled on a pivot. But the erstwhile pallid face was now justifying his nickname and his eyes were black with menace. "Thet's not eggsactly squar' now, is it?" His voice was almost pleading, the trembling hands alone betrayed the strain he was laboring under.

Mountain born and range bred, Abigail Williams was a woman of undaunted courage, but even her invincible spirit recoiled momentarily from the task she set herself. It was like plowing in a powder magazine with a red-hot share, but she was only concerned with the end in view and, deliberately considering the risk, employed the only means at hand.

"Squar' er raound," she said incisively, "It's thu mizzable truth. Ef it wa'nt, yuh would take thu job offen Ken's ban's an' keep my lamb's heart from breakin'!"

She could hear the beating of his heart in the absolute quiet that followed her audacious words. When she dared to raise her eyes he was very pale and wan but he met her pitying glance with a brave smile although his lips were twitching.

"I reckon that I've been a bit thick-haided," he said simply. "I ought have knowed thet you wa'nt the kind o' woman to take no sech mean advantage of a feller. Yuh'll excuse *me*, Miss Abbie! Yuh see, I didn't savvy the how o' things."

Abbie, torn with remorse and pity, was all woman again. In the reaction she wished she had left her words unsaid and impulsively went over and laid her hand on his. The cowboy covered it with his other bronzed paw and for a long time neither spoke. It was McVey who broke the silence.

"I'll kill him, o' cose. Reckon it'll cost me me' job—an' then some! It's goin' to be mahnst'ous hard to make Ken see it thu right way an' he'll be some rambunctuous about it. He's awful sot in hes ways an' it's goin' to be hard to explain. I'd shore hate to have some one play me thet trick, I suttinly would!"

The woman was crying now and as the weak drawl ended she grew hysterical. "Oh! Gawd, what hev I done?" she moaned under her breath; then she frantically implored him to forget what she had said, insisting that it was all a joke, that she was merely "tryin' to pay him back fer his impurence" the night before. But Red smiled his entire conviction.

"Miss Abbie, don't yuh do it no moah, don't yuh, now! It shore ain't yuah strong suit, yuh giv' yuah han' away. Lyin's man's work, an' a powerful bad business it is, too! Gawd nevah intended a woman's lips to be dirtied that away."

"An' besides, it's too late," he went on dispassionately. "Yuh've made many things plain to me that I was too locoed to see before. But tell me straight, is that true about her'n Ken?"

She nodded mutely, not daring to meet his eyes.

He looked long into the starlit sky, and Abbie, emboldened after a time by his seeming composure, rose and bade him good night. He reached out for the cigarette materials laid convenient to his hand.

"Guess I'll make a terbacco smoke." Abbie struck a match and he luxuriously filled his capacious lungs. Then slowly exhaling the pungent wreath he flicked the ash from the cigarette tip and tentatively extended his sinewy arm. It was as devoid of tremor as that of a bronze statue and he nodded his satisfaction.

"Her heart won't be broke none."

His voice was very calm and even.

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN AND THE WOMAN

At the junction of Horse and Squaw creeks, some seven miles from where Grace Carter was lying in her hammock awaiting the arrival of her brother and mother, Ken Douglass outspanned his weary scraper team and called his day's work done. The damage had been of even greater magnitude than he had feared and his most sanguine estimate placed the time required for complete repairs at three more days.

He had impressed every available man and team into the service, leaving only one young fellow at the ranch to do the choring inseparable to a holding like the C Bar. Having outlined his plans and assigned to each man his specific duty, he had personally plunged into the thick of the work, driving his men only a trifle less strenuously than he did himself. In consequence whereof it was a sore-musled crowd that ruefully rubbed their aching backs about the camp-fire that night, quaintly profane after the manner of their kind.

"Gawd! But you make a bum driver, Punk," said one of them dispassionately to a short, squat fellow who was anointing his blistered hands with bacon drippings. "Yuh pushed so hawd on thu lines that yuh raised cawns on that claybank's gooms. Was yuh thinkin' yuh was polin dogies oveh to Glenwood again?"

Now Punk Dixon was a bit sensitive on the dogie question; while employed in the engaging pursuit of prodding refractory yearlings up a loading chute that spring his flimsy footing had given way, precipitating him under the feet of two score frightened animals whose sharp hoofs had reduced his brand new "chaps" to rags and himself to a sadly dilapidated mass of incoherent blasphemy. But he grinned good-naturedly and wiped the surplus grease off his hands over the head of his tormenter.

"Thar! That's better'n that pink axle-grease yuh been lavigatin' yuh pore old coco with, Woolly," vigorously massaging the viscid fat into the bald pate with his thumbs, much to the hilarious enjoyment of the inconstant crowd who laughed even louder at the last victim's discomfiture. It was a tradition that "Woolly" Priest had been born with exceedingly long hair in plenteous supply, losing it in the stress of a hard winter succeeding "thet awful calamity to Grand County," as the narrator generously put it, by reason of a goat's having dined upon it, mistaking it for wire grass! According to the veracious relator his head had been so soft and mushy that the goat had "pulled the bristles out by the roots 'n they wa'nt annythin' left fer a starter." Certain it is that the shiny poll was entirely devoid of any hirsute covering at the present time, despite its owner's unremitting applications of all the patent nostrums he could get—the latest being an unguent built by Red McVey's suggestion out of rattlesnake oil and Tobasco sauce!

"Well," said one of the more optimistic among them as he kicked off his boots preparatory to turning in after supper, "this yeah life might be better, 'n it might be wuss. But I'm shore thankful fer this yeah leetle ole baid, an' thu knowin' that I'm goin' to roll out of it to-morrow mawnin' alive an' kickin'. They's a heap o' satisfaction in bein' able to ante when yuh are called to eat!"

"An' thu daid don't eat none. Say, Hungry, haow d' yuh like to be Braun?" The speaker was the friend of the dead man who had discovered the mutilation of the revolver. The badinage ceased instantly and an ominous silence fell upon the whole assemblage.

"Hungry" Thompson looked over to where Douglass was morosely glaring over the demolished ruins of his spring's labor. Even through the murk of the gathering night the clenched hands and swelling neck cords were visible to that sharp eye.

"Haow d'yuh like to be Matlock?"

A match snapped sharply as some inveterate smoker kindled his cigarette. A man sat bolt upright in his blankets and Hungry swore angrily. The camp sank to rest but not exactly to sleep, as the occasional clearing of a throat evinced. Eventually, when the fire had sunk to a heap of smouldering coals, tired nature asserted itself and the men slept.

To Douglass alone came neither sleep nor rest. His mind was in a turmoil of doubt and anger—doubt as to the nature of the strange obsession under which he travailed, and anger directed chiefly against himself. His hatred of Matlock was very bitter, but it was inconsequential in comparison with his savage self-objurgation. He did not go to bed, as common sense would have dictated and overwrought frame pleaded, but sat by the dead coals smoking himself black in the face.

"What an egregious ass I am!" he reflected, reviewing his senseless and stilted actions of the day before. "Here I am quarreling with the first bread and butter that ever came my way with jelly on it. After all, I am only a menial, Carter's hired man, and I presumed too far. What in the devil's name is the matter with me? My hide ought to be thick enough by this time, God knows! And yet that fool girl's little bodkin went through it like an electric spark and cut to the marrow! Well, she's taught me my place, all right, all right." He smiled his grim admiration of her cleverness. "But it's too late. It's a pity, too, for I think I could have made good."

It was characteristic of him that he never entertained even a momentary thought of a possibility of reconciliation. He had told her what he was going to do and that was settled business. It was

going to be a little rough on him to quit "broke"; it would take all his summer's wages to recoup Carter for that hay and the loss of the men's time incurred in the ditch mending. The fall round-up would be over by that time and work is scarce for unattached cowpunchers in the winter. It meant "choring for his board" until spring's activities widened the vista and the prospect was uninviting to one of energetic temperament.

Even more characteristic was his utter lack of resentment of the young lady's rebuke; he had "presumed too far" and got what was coming to him. He was conscious that he had deserved it, in more ways than one. But even as he admitted this to himself there crept again into his eyes a something not altogether wholesome and reassuring to any woman arousing it.

Of love so far he had known only two phases, the filial which is specifically restricted, and the universal which is diametrically diffused over so great an area that it is dubious whether it really merits that high classification. For his parents he had entertained an affection closely approximating idolatry, especially for his mother, whom he had known best, his father having died in his early childhood; he also had a certain affection for little children, for flowers, for the more frail and helpless things of creation in general, that might be dignified by the name of love but which more probably was merely the indulgent patronage of all strong natures for things weaker than themselves. At college he had made no special strong affiliations for the simple reason that few of his fellow-students were strong enough, physically, mentally, or morally, to greatly command his respect. And all unknowing to him he had come away from school with a hunger in his really affectionate heart that had not been appeased by precarious contact with the unsatisfying elements among which his lines had been cast. Not once in all his western career had he met with an affinitive soul on which he might have leaned and so gained that chastening sense of tender dependence without which no man ever yet attained happiness.

Women's beauty he admired, but their virtue he revered not at all; yet he had a paradoxical respect for that quality, whenever he encountered it, that first begat and ultimately conserved in him that anomalous chivalry of the frontier which impels a man to the espousal of the under dog's cause without hesitation. He would have fought instantly and to the death for a woman insulted; but he would just as readily have sprang to the aid of a man battling against unfair odds. Of conventionality he had only a contemptuous disregard, taking the goods the gods gave him—when altogether to his fastidious taste—when and where they offered. The very recklessness displayed, and its all too frequent indulgence and participation in by the objects of its incitation, had made him calloused, and cynical to a degree very disastrous to a man of his tender years. For at twenty-six it is befitting to take off one's hat to a petticoat hanging on a clothes line, after the traditional habit of Lord Chesterfield.

Let us not sit too hardly in judgment upon this red-corpuscled young savage. The fires of youth burn fiercely into the natural sequence of maturity's steady glow and senility's ashes. A boy's will is proverbially the wind's will, and youth must have its fling. In a land where every man is a law unto himself it is hard to fix limitations and the tide of license rolls high. There is no caste on the frontier, and the range of passion is as wide as the boundless horizon. He had been tenderly received in high places before, and so there was nothing incongruous in his quick desire for Grace Carter.

Something of this was passing through his mind now, but somehow it savored of sophistry and he knit his brows. He had said or done nothing to which the most hypercritical could logically take exceptions, yet her resentment had been spontaneous and unmistakable.

"*Honi soit qui mal y pense!*" he muttered, and again his eyes held that unlovely light. "One who divines, must feel—and she is only a woman after all." But the conclusion was not altogether satisfying and he shook his head. The cigarette was suddenly bitter in his mouth and he threw it away impatiently.

"No, damned if I believe that, either! I don't know what I believe. Guess I better hit the feathers." He rolled into bed, blinked sleepily at the stars for a few minutes, and with an indifferent "What the hell do I care, anyway!" fell asleep.

And in the hammock seven miles away she was making excuses for him. "He is very impatient of restraint," she was thinking, "and probably I misjudged him, he is so different from the others." Nevertheless a sudden flash of anger kindled in her eyes; then, strangely enough, she smiled softly into the starlight.

She had yet two hours to wait and the balmy stillness of the night was conducive to reflection. Her thoughts went back to the scenes of her former life and the people she had known in that vastly different environment. Men had been plentiful. In that effete land of worrying necessities the shrine of beauty, when allied with reputed wealth, has many devotees; the Carters were known to be "cattle kings." She was familiar with many types, and with the arrogance of all youthful women, deemed herself an infallible judge of men and their motives. There had been men of parts among her acquaintances: soldiers, merchants, clergymen, writers, financiers, and fops galore. Some she had respected, a few she had admired, many she had tolerated, but none she had loved. She was generous in her estimation of their worth and strove to enthuse over their many excellences, but to her irritation, suddenly realized that she was weighing them all against a gray-eyed man in a fire-rent shirt, with smoke-grimed face and singed hair.

She turned uneasily in her hammock, catching through the wistaria a glimpse of the open door of the dimly-lit bunkhouse. She could see the intermittent glow of Red's cigarette, and the glisten of

the polished steel in the holster, hung carelessly on his bed-post. Suddenly she was infected by the magnificent extravagance of this western life, this queer jumble of loyalty, pride, poverty, sacrifice, sin, strength, suffering, fortitude and malignity. She felt a fierce satisfaction in living where men begged for the privilege of killing the enemies of their friends, and she felt almost grateful to Red for his savage appreciation of the courage which had transformed Douglass from his dearest foe into his dearest friend. She had even a greater reason to be grateful to him, had she only known it.

"He must not leave," she said with a fine determination. "It will check his career—and we owe so much to him. I am a super-sensitive little fool and I will make amends. Bobbie said we must 'make it up to him' and I will. He is a gentleman, and he will not make it hard for me." Comforted by her intuitive assurance of that fact she laid her soft cheek on the pillow at precisely the moment of Douglass's line assumption of indifference, and fell asleep.

But out in the kitchen an old woman was awkwardly stroking the head of an antelope kid. "I wonder ef I done right?" she mumbled. "I wonder!"

CHAPTER VII

BELSHAZZAR

In October the Colorado mountain lands are very beautiful. They lack, it is true, the gorgeous coloring of the eastern Indian summer, with its beauty of scarlets, crimsons, ochres, maroons and mauves, the western color scheme being in half-tints of low tone. The barbaric splendor of the eastern autumn is here reflected only in the evening skies and in the glowing grays, blues, browns, blacks, bronzes and golds of the eyes, hair and faces of the hardy mountaineers.

Over the foothills and valleys are spread tenderly the more delicate tints of the Master's palette; the enveiling haze is golden instead of purple, the tints of verdure and earth are softly subdued and blend together with all the exquisite harmony of an old Bokhara rug. Even the once-disfiguring alkali barrens appeal to the eye now, their velvet cloaks of ash-of-roses contrasting most agreeably with the delicate olive-grays and heliotropes of the sage and rabbit brush. Here and there a belated Indian-shot flaunts its brilliant lance and over yonder a cactus masks its treachery with a blush; an occasional larkspur or gentian raises blue eyes from the gentle hill slopes, and down on the plains the martial Spanish-bayonet parades its oriflamme. The whole landscape has an underlying wash of burnt sienna, glowing warmly through the superimposed color.

The forests are mysterious with silent flitting mouse-blue and gray-tawny shadows, and the dim trails and passes are incised with the quaint hieroglyphics which tell the story of the migrant deer. The oily black-green splashes of spruce and fir, the silvery valance of the aspens, and the ermine of the snow coronal against the puce of protruding peaks in the higher ranges are the only decided colors in mass. Of early mornings the mountain bases in the distances are billows of smoked-pearl mist; as the light strengthens and the temperature rises, the mist rises with it, dissipating gradually into thin wreaths of dainty rose-pink, faint orange—and nothingness. In the as yet undisturbed shadows the bold cliffs suggest to the imaginative mind aggregations of uncut crystals; higher up, where they catch the downward reflected rays of the warming sun, they are amber and wine-colored topazes, and on the ice-capped summits they are scintillant as diamonds. At midday the pure rarified air is a marvel of transparent clarity and everything is as clear cut as a cameo.

It is not until late in the afternoon that the great mystery evolves. All of a sudden one is aware of a decided and yet intangible change. Imperceptibly but surely the temperature falls, the quality of light alters, the heat shimmer is no more and a golden radiance replaces the brazen glare of the sun; into the nostrils steals an indescribable perfume, elusive and infrangible, the brown scent of autumn wafted to the senses on the cool breath of the frozen heights above. Instinctively the perceptions sharpen; this is the hour when beast and bird bestir themselves and the vista is enlivened with a new animation. Out of nowhere, seemingly, struts a sage hen with her brood; another and yet another materializes under your feet until it seems as if the very soil was being transmuted into patches of gray-speckled life. In the apparent vacancy of that soft-swelling knoll to the west looms up the phantom bulk of an antelope, disproportionately large and deceptively black against the sun. A dun-colored heap of trash at the foot of a sagebrush in the bight of the dry creek-bed below resolves itself into a very live-looking coyote which blinks yearningly at the unattainable venison on the knoll above, wistfully licks his chops and slinks evilly in the wake of the grouse broods.

As the sun dips behind the detached mountain spurs in the west the shadows grow slightly blue and the high lights intensify. By some optical necromancy the clouds seem massed in the west, the whole eastern sweep of sky being an unbroken wash of salmon pink, relieved by tinges of apple-green at its nethermost edges. Against this tender background the minutest details of the majestic Rockies stand out with such vivid distinctness that one gasps with the wonder of it. Long after the low lands have gloomed these heights glow with a glory indescribable, and when it has finally passed one feels as though a glimpse of Heaven itself had been vouchsafed to the soul torn with Life's torturing skepticism.

But what words can describe, what brush portray the awful grandeur of the western sky! Before that riot of color the eye falls abashed as did those of Moses on the mount. The sublimity of it shrivels man's pitiful egoism until he grovels in humility and awe. When God lays His hand upon the sky the dimmest eye sees and the most skeptical heart believes!

She was saying as much in substance to him as they rode homeward in the soft afterglow, her face transfigured by the reverence in her heart. He assented gravely, his eyes dwelling admiringly upon her rare beauty. In the hallowing light of the hour she was invested with a new charm to this appreciative Pantheist and from some pigeon-hole of his well-stocked and retentive memory called the almost-inspired voice of old Ossian:

"Fair was Colna-Dona, the daughter of kings,
Her soul was a pure beam of light!"

Unconsciously he put his thought into words and the voice was very gentle. She looked at him dubiously, almost apprehensively; it was hard to differentiate between this man's cynicism and sincerity. Then she dropped her eyes in rosy confusion, her heart leaping unaccountably.

"That was a false note the Psalmist struck," he went on quietly, "when he sang of the wrath of his God. It were better he had dwelt only on the sweeter quantity of His love. I am sorry for that devotion inspired only by fear. *This* is the manifestation best calculated to insure one's keeping in the right trail." He swept his hand comprehensively toward the western glory. "Men do not love the thing they fear—nor women either." His tone was quizzical and challenging.

She looked up in sudden relief; this was more familiar ground and she laughed with sudden audacity.

"How do you know?"

"About women? Well, I'll admit that was a bluff; but I know all about men; I am one of them! The divinity that shapes our ends must kiss, not kick!"

At this unconscious confirmation of old Abigail's sage conclusions her laugh pealed out merrily. "Feed 'em well, speak 'em kind, an' give 'em theah haid on a hawd pull er in a tight place," she quoted with inimitable mimicry, and he grinned with quick understanding.

"Good old Abbie! I wonder who she loved enough to learn all that? And so you've been taking lessons, too!"

"I thought we had done with that," she said almost pleadingly. "You make it very hard for me!"

Instantly he was all contrition. "Forgive me! I shall not offend again." She took his extended hand frankly and for a time they rode in silence. The narrow cañon trail necessitated their riding very closely together and occasionally his leathern chaps brushed against her. Once, as they rounded an abrupt turn, the heavy revolver at his hip was jammed painfully against her gauntlet; she merely shut her teeth and smiled.

They were returning from Tin Cup, whither they had gone in the morning in company with Robert and his mother, who were leaving for the East. The morning after his arrival at the ranch she had bravely told her brother the whole circumstances of the preceding week, magnanimously taking upon herself all the blame—in which truth compels us to say her brother entirely agreed—and thereafter had ridden out to the camp of the ditch repairers and patched up a truce with Douglass.

"I am only a tenderfoot," she had wisely begun, "and always have had an unhappy faculty of doing the wrong thing unintentionally. You are a big, strong, generous man, and you will hold no malice against a foolish girl—!"

He capitulated instantly; but he was over-voluble in his reassurances and somehow she divined that her apology had missed fire so far as it affected his determination to leave when he had recouped her brother for the losses he had unwittingly brought about. She was not for a moment deceived by his studiously polite words but was too politic to betray it. He had affected not to see the hand she had timidly extended in amity and for that he would pay, later! There was much of old Bob Carter's inflexible determination in this frail-looking daughter of his.

To her mother she had, curiously enough, said nothing about it. She had even been unwise enough to impose secrecy upon her brother and Abigail as to the cause of the conflagration and Red's mishap, forgetting that Mrs. Carter was range bred and born, and that Nellie Vaughan was an incorrigible gossip! It would not have added to her equanimity to have known that inside of twenty-four hours her astute mother was in possession of all the facts and considerably perturbed thereover. She would, however, have appreciated the relief in her mother's eyes on her first encounter with Douglass.

"Clean, manly and good to look at," had been her shrewd verdict. "Thoroughbred stock, too. A good friend and a bad enemy! A good cowman and a valuable accession all around. I really must congratulate Robbie. But what is Grace's mysterious interest in him? She was very anxious not to have me find out the facts about this latest outrage, poor dear! Was it that she was afraid that I would be unduly exercised over a trifle like this?"

She smiled somewhat grimly as her mind went back to that day when, over her husband's

unconscious form thrown at her feet by the benumbing bullets of a gang of rustlers, she had emptied the magazine of his Winchester to such effect that border men rode far out of their way to take off their hats to "Bob Carter's pard." The recollection sent the blood into the fine old cheeks and her hands were again clenched retrospectively upon that shapely bit of walnut and steel which had served her so well that day. Then the lips softened wondrously and a great sweetness flooded her eyes. She was thinking how tenderly he had kissed her powder-blackened hands and bruised shoulder, his heart throbbing with love and wonder and pride of her.

She was very gracious to Douglass that night at dinner, leading him on with skill to talk of himself, and drawing him out to a degree that would have astonished him had he realized it. Under her charming personality, quick and sympathetic intelligence and clever induction, his reserve melted gradually and soon he was talking more freely than he had ever done to human being before. When he had finally made his exit she turned thoughtfully to her children.

"We want to be very judicious in our dealings with that young man. He is of sterling quality, but super-sensitive and impulsive, and requires handling with gloves of velvet. I think he is scrupulously honest, and I should imagine inordinately brave—and vain! Do you know anything of his antecedents?"

"Only that he is American born, of Scotch descent, mother," replied Robert, "and that he was educated at Yale. He is a civil engineer by profession, I believe, but he is hardly the kind of man from whom one would attempt to force confidences. All I know is that he is the pluckiest fellow in the world, and the most generous and considerate. Why, one night at the Alcazar—?" and he proceeded to the eager relation of his pet story.

She listened attentively, nodding her full comprehension. "That is what I would have expected of him; I am seldom mistaken in my judgment of the type. And I presume his services here are in every way satisfactory? Well, let us make every consistent effort to retain him; such men are scarce even in this land of good men. I suppose that the man Matlock has left the country?"

"He has not been seen since the night of which I spoke. Ken seems to have run him out for keeps!" His voice was distinctly boastful. "And if he knows what is good for him he'll stay out!"

If Mrs. Carter, glancing casually at her daughter, noted the sudden compression of Grace's lips, she made no comment thereon. She had craftily wormed out of one of the men, the youngster detailed for chore-work, the story of the men's agreement to leave Matlock's punishment to Douglass. She understood the situation thoroughly, and, as a typical range woman she approved of Douglass's determination. The quarrel was eminently his, and upon him in person devolved its settlement. What she could not understand was the distress in her daughter's face as she said earnestly:

"I am not so sure that you have seen the last of him. Such men as he are tenacious and revengeful; he fired our stacks, you remember! Don't look so surprised, Robbie. It was very nice and thoughtful of you and Grace to try to keep me from knowing, but your mother was born in this valley and is still in full possession of all her faculties. Besides, conversational topics are scarce, and your neighbors like to talk!" Then as an after-thought, "I think Mr. Douglass is fully able to cope with the situation!"

Later, as she stood by the window of her darkened room looking abstractedly out into the beautiful night, she saw him enter the room where Red lay strumming on his guitar. Approvingly she noted his quick, springy stride, his alert, upright carriage, the whole sinewy grace of him as he bent kindly over his comrade.

"What a splendid young animal it is," she mused smilingly, "one eminently calculated to fill the eye of a romantic young girl. After all, why should I interfere? As he said to-night, 'every one has to dree his own weird!' Then again, she has known all kinds of men, and this in all likelihood is merely a transient fancy bred of the novel environment and will doubtlessly pass in due course." Her face grew serious, however, as she recalled the concern in Grace's face at her reference to Matlock's revengefulness. "Propinquity—and youth—and passion! A precarious trio, indeed. Everything considered, I think I will take her back with me," concluded this astute woman of the world.

She was, nevertheless, not unduly surprised at Grace's negation of that proposal when it was broached the week before her mother's departure. The young woman urged her very evident physical betterment since coming to the ranch, and her great desire to witness that most spectacular of range functions, the fall round-up. With the imposed condition that her stay would not extend over the holiday season, her mother consented, hesitatingly. But she took occasion, that very evening, to casually bring Douglass under discussion, concluding a very generous estimation of him with the significant words: "One can trust to an appeal to his honor when every other means fail!" That she directed the remark particularly to Grace, was doubtless without premeditation, and assuredly called for no reply. Yet there was a certain resentment in the girl's rather constrained answer:

"Do you think it probable that such an exigency will ever arise?"

The world-wise old woman looked thoughtfully at the flushed face, thinking how singularly beautiful it was. Then she scanned the perfectly proportioned figure beneath, its exquisite modeling revealed and accentuated by the clinging silk fabric of the thin evening gown.

"Anything is probable to a man of his temperament," she said calmly. "Strong natures like his are contemptuous of limitations and laugh at ethical restrictions. That man, if I mistake not, will go straight to his desire as a bullet to the mark, regardless of what stands between."

Robert laughed fatuously, missing entirely the drift of the undercurrent. "You have certainly got him sized up right, Mater. Ken is 'sure chain lightin',' as Williams says."

"And if it be evil to stand in the path of a thunderbolt, how inconceivably foolish to invite its stroke!"

The young man stared dubiously at her; all this seemed inconsequential to him, this talk of thunderbolts and bullets. Did these foolish women think that Ken Douglass was ass enough to expose himself recklessly to either. In some respects the master of the C Bar was as unimaginative and simple-minded as a new-born baby.

"Don't yuh worrit none about thundeh-strikes," interjected Abbie with crisp assurance, entering the room in pursuit of the too-intrusive Buffo, who every evening persisted in joining the family circle. "They ain't goin' to be no thundeh-stawms so late in thu yeah; yuh suahly know thet, Mis' Cahtah, yuh was bawn heah!"

The lady addressed smiled indulgently at her old friend. "I am hoping that there will be no storms of any sort which will cause suffering and misery to anybody, Abbie. Life is too short to be spoiled with heartaches."

"Do you know whose property this is?" she asked Grace that night, coming into her bedroom as she was preparing to retire. "One of the men found it this morning just outside the main gate and brought it to me, thinking it belonged to Robert. But the handwriting is not his, I know, and I thought you might recognize it. There is no name on the fly-leaf." She handed her a thin, long, morocco-covered notebook, which opened of itself, as she laid it in the young lady's hand, at a place where the leaves were separated by a withered flower. It was a long-dried mountain heart's-ease, and, despite her efforts, her cheeks reddened consciously. The writing on the pages was in verse and she recognized the bold, free style at a glance. She had commented frequently on his firm, legible script when auditing his accounts in company with her brother. And once he had sent her a little formal note, asking if she had any commissions for him to execute in Denver, where he had gone on some private business shortly after her overtures at reconciliation. She had eagerly grasped the olive branch so chillingly extended, and his matching of the silk floss samples she sent him in reply was entirely to her satisfaction. It is a question if she would have appreciated the grim humor of her commission had she known his real mission to the capital city. He had been informed, on more or less reliable authority, that Matlock had been seen there a few days previously! The report proved to be false, and the note was now enveloping a cluster of withered heart's-ease in her sandalwood jewel case.

Without hesitation she identified the handwriting. "I think it must belong to Mr. Douglass;" she said frankly, meeting her mother's eyes without a particle of indecision. "I am quite familiar with his writing, having helped Bobbie in auditing his accounts. And this flower, I think, is one I gave him some months ago."

Mrs. Carter's eyes snapped with a fierce pride. She put her arm tenderly about the velvety neck.

"Kiss me, dearie! You are very like your father, and he was the bravest man God ever made!" At the threshold she turned; "I think it entirely permissible—indeed, I much desire that you read that verse."

For the first time since her coming to the ranch, Grace Carter turned the key in the door lock; then she laid the notebook on her dressing table and completed her preparations for rest. Finally, she sat down on the edge of the bed and opened the book. Carefully she removed the flower and laid it on a silk handkerchief, folded for its reception. For a time she sat looking at it reminiscently; then with a visible effort she turned to the clearly-written pages.

She read with great deliberation, a second and then a third time, a hymn to love, boyishly crude, but charged to the full with youth and longing; no better and no worse, perhaps, than the average effusion of twenty-six in love, not with woman but with love; authentic, and for that reason sacred; overwrought, as became the heedless passion which inspired it; self-revealing, but of sex and temper rather than of mind. A few years back it would have shocked her; now, it made her think.

She replaced the flower, closed the book and thrust it under her pillow. Far into the night she sat there, her arms clasped about her knees, her eyes luminous but unseeing. Finally the night chill aroused her and she slipped into bed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PASSING OF A CLOUD

But that was a week ago and now she was riding homeward with him in the moonlight. She had the notebook in the inside pocket of her riding jacket, having decided to return it to him in

person, and this had been her first opportunity, he having been away for the whole of the previous week on some range matter requiring his personal attention.

He had evidently dropped the book from his shirt pocket during his struggle with the refractory gate, and on his return had interrogated everyone on the ranch about it except the actual finder, that worthy being absent at the time of his return on some errand for Miss Carter. He was very anxious for its recovery for more reasons than one. It contained some valuable memoranda about his range work; and then, again, he had private reasons why none of the men should chance to fall afoul of his metrical effusion. He was familiar with the coarse badinage of the camp, a humor that respects no personage, however high his official position, and the possibilities worried him.

He felt a great chagrin that he had as yet not been able to locate Matlock. In his supersensitiveness he was obsessed with an entirely unfounded impression that he was losing prestige among his men because of the unavoidable delay. If they were to learn that he had been farther guilty of the inexcusable weakness of writing verse of that sentimental character, his cup of bitterness would be running over!

Imagine his unbounded relief when she handed it to him with the simple remark: "I have something here belonging to you, I think." But almost instantly he was filled with consternation. Had she by any miserable chance read that verse! Intuitively she felt what was passing in his mind and demurely fibbed for his reassurance: "Mamma recovered it—I think she said it was found at the gate—and brought it to me. I knew it was yours from the memoranda on the first page, but forgot to return it before. I sincerely hope I have not caused you any inconvenience?"

He was almost vehement in his eagerness to assure her that it was altogether a matter of no moment, but her eyes twinkled mischievously as she noted the care with which he bestowed it in a safe place. "After all, men are only boys grown up," she thought, and her regard for him was ludicrously maternal. She felt an almost irresistible desire to lecture him on the folly of his ways and the dangerous possibilities attendant on the writing of erotic verse; she actually began a homily on the uncertainty of life and one's logical duty of the enjoyment of things actually in possession rather than the pitiable craving for the unattainable. She had cleverly led up to it by enthusiastically admiring the beauty of the perfect night and the understandable attraction that these glorious surroundings had for everyone who came into intimate contact with them.

Once, in the emphasizing of some vital point in issue, she impulsively laid her gloved hand on his arm; the man started as if he had been stung and she recoiled from the hunger in his eyes. The mothering of a lion cub has its disadvantages, and thereafter her milk of human kindness overflowed no more.

There was an evident suspicion evinced in the keen attention he was paying to her words as she trenched on the delicate topic of logical content with one's militant blessings, and she ingeniously proceeded to disarm it.

"Why is it that among the thousands of susceptible and impressionable souls that have reveled in these delights, not one has had the moral courage to depict them in print? The labor would surely be one of love and the inspiration never lacks."

"Possibly," he suggested, "it is a matter of sheer mental and literary inability. But few have been endowed with the gift of Genius. And then, again, authorship is necessarily an affair of leisure, and life is apt to be strenuous in these hills." He turned in his saddle and laughingly asked her: "How much time could your cowpunchers afford to devote to the Muses, Miss Grace?"

"Genius knows no paltry restrictions of time and place," she said, with some acerbity, "and I know of at least one of the men you mention who has the ability if not the courage."

He winced a little at that and the cloud of suspicion grew denser. But it was partly dissipated at her earnest inquiry: "Why do not you, a man of keen discernment and liberal education, essay the task? I am certain that you would achieve a great success."

"I have other work to do," he said, gruffly. "And I am not sure that I find your suggestion at all complimentary. Am I to infer that in your estimation I am blessed with an inordinate amount of leisure time?"

She shrugged her shoulders with wrathful impatience; he was a bigger baby than she had thought. "That was gratuitous," she said, with a fine show of indignation; "and you are not at all nice when you are insolent." To her disgust he chuckled audibly, leaning over his pommel in simulated humility.

"Lesson number three. I'm getting that 'liberal education' fast," he murmured; "by and by I'll know enough to put into a book."

For the life of her she could not resist the temptation. "If you do, don't write it in verse."

Instantly she regretted her temerity. "There are so few people who write verse acceptably," she explained hurriedly, "and there are too many ambitious things that die 'abornin',' as Abbie would say, from that very reason. Prose has much more potentiality and is more acceptable to the masses. Of course"—the tone was that of innocence personified—"if you can do verse, that would be another matter. The essential thing is that you do write the book. Will you? Please."

The voice was almost tenderly imploring; his brow cleared. He was almost ashamed of his

momentary distrust of her. In polite society people do not read private documents; evidently this young woman had come dangerously close to his rash misjudgment and he was properly penitent.

Still he was tormented by an insistent doubt. Why had she particularized that first page of memoranda? With a fatuous attempt at diplomacy he put his foot into it.

"Why should you assume so flatteringly that I have any literary ability?" He thought the question almost Machiavelian in its adroitness.

She had her cue, now. "Well, your aptness at quotation from obscure sources presupposes a wide range of reading, a retentive memory, and a love for literature. Then, again, you have rare constructiveness and—and—" her simulation of modest distress would have deceived even a wiser man—"a horribly clever knack of impromptu rhyme, as I have regretful reasons for knowing."

Poor Machiavelli! He was at her feet figuratively in an instant. "That Buffo business! It was abominable of me! Don't judge me by a thing like that. I can do better things. Will you let bygones be bygones, if I plead guilty to the gentle impeachment and promise to let you criticise my future efforts?"

She took his extended hand frankly. "Everything begins right here." She gave thanks for a timely cloud's momentary obscuration of the moon as he laid his lips on the tiny gauntlet. Then she impulsively urged her horse into a gallop, and before the moon had emerged from behind the cloud, they had crossed the ridge and the ranch lights twinkled in view though still a good five miles away.

Up on the hillside above, behind a bowlder which commanded in easy range the point where their compact had been sealed, a man lay fumbling a rifle and fluently cursing the cloud which had so inopportunistically spoiled his aim. His vicious face was distorted with rage and fury, his mouth foaming with passion.

"Damn you," he raved, shaking his clenched fist at the offending white billow; "I'd got him if you had waited a second longer or crossed a second sooner. Everything goes against me, and he's got all the luck. I'll get him yet." And with hideous blasphemies trickling from his thick lips, he again shook his fist impotently at the derisively smiling face of the moon and slunk away to the horse tied in the shadows behind him.

In blissful ignorance of that narrowly averted calamity, the pair on the other side of the ridge rode silently along in the restored moonlight. The woman was very happy and loth to break the spell; the man whirling in the maelstrom of a jumbled introspection. The victim of strongly opposed currents, he drifted aimlessly in the sea of troubled thought, seeing no shore and seeking none. Content to leave much to Chance and more to Opportunity, he had hitherto let his destiny shape itself, satisfied with merely aiding fate to the best of his physical ability as the occasion offered; but now he was conscious of a growing incitement to dictate his own future. The temptation to try and dominate things was very strong. He had compelled the smaller ones to come his way when he had so chosen, why not the greater ones. He glanced covertly at the woman riding by his side; in the soft moonlight she was very fair.

It was she who first broke the silence, her words unconsciously pandering to his suddenly-formed resolution.

"How splendidly you ride, Mr. Douglass!" Her admiration was frank and sincere. "You have that horse under perfect control, and yet, if I am not mistaken, he is the worst of the three 'outlaws' which all the other boys have declared unridable. Abbie told me this morning that everybody is afraid of them."

"Abbie tells you a great many funny things, I reckon," he said, with an evasive grin, and she laughed reminiscently. "Well, old Highball here isn't just what you might call love-inspiring, and the boys have kind o' passed him up; they have too many other good gentle horses in their strings to justify my letting them take any chances. But as to their being 'afraid' of him, why that's all bosh. Cowpunchers who are afraid of any horse don't hold their jobs long, Miss Carter."

"Yet you, yourself, take the very chances that you shield your men from." The tone was severe and distinctly reproachful, albeit her heart beat with an understanding pride. He shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"Well, the brutes have got to earn their keep, and hay is high this year."

"Yes, about two inches, on that part of the public domain where this particular brute ranges," she said scornfully. "He has not been in the corrals for over two years, as I happen to know. I believe you overheard what Abbie said, and are riding him out of sheer perversity. You don't like to be thought afraid, do you?"

"No, ma'am," he said, so humbly that she laughed despite her resolve. Then, with a sudden burst of confidence, "You see, he threw me last week and kind o' upset my conceit, and it's been on my conscience ever since. We just had to come to some definite conclusion as to who is bossing this job. He's going to be a good horse now."

"Now, as to hating being thought afraid," he went on after a short silence, "I guess every man thinks that way. And yet there is something that every man fears, that he is more or less afraid of,

if he is only honest enough to admit it."

"And what are you afraid of?" There was much of incredulity and more of curiosity in her audacious question.

"Myself." He answered quietly; she was very sorry she had asked.

Just as they reached the main gate they were joined by Red McVey; who rode up from the opposite direction. He was riding another of the "outlaws" and Douglass noted that fact with a certain displeasure; his orders had been explicit about those horses. Red nonchalantly drawled an explanation:

"We didn't expect yuh back to-night; Miss Willi'ms said yuh would stay oveh in Tin Cup. Bud Vaughan was oveh to-day and said as how Miss Nellie was sick, so Miss Willi'ms allows she'd go oveh an' sit with her to-night. I'll tell yuh about the hoss lateh," he concluded in an undertone to Douglass, whose look of keen inquiry changed to one of concern at Grace's irrepressible exclamation.

"What is it?" His words were sharp and imperative. She was pale, but perfectly composed. Then, for the first time in her life she deliberately lied: "The horse crushed my hand against the gate; a mere trifle, but it startled me."

"What are we going to do for something to eat?" she said in pretended dismay. "I'm as hungry as a—a—"

"Tom-tit?" suggested Red drolly; she had, much to his abashment, once caught him feeding one with crumbs of cake, embellishing his service with profanely quaint ejaculations of delight.

"As a wolf," she averred decidedly, "and I haven't tried to cook since I was a little girl."

"Oh, that'll be all right," said Douglass cheerfully. "Red, here, is a wonder at making angel cake, and I can boil water without burning it, at a pinch. If you can stand camp chuck for once we'll make out to take the wire edge off your appetite, anyway."

"Oh, I've et," said Red hurriedly, the reference to that angel cake filling him with apprehension. "Had supper oveh to Vaughan's. You two go to wras'lin' yuh grub an' I'll take keer o' yuah hosses."

"Doan't yuh let him scoach thet wateh, Miss Cahteh," he volleyed as he retreated in good order, much relieved at his narrow escape. "He's a powahful wahm baby."

While she was changing her dress, Douglass got a fire going in the big Charter Oak stove and filled the kettle with fresh water from the spring. He brought over from the meat dive a generously big and tender steak and fossicked about in the pantry until he found the egg basket. There were a couple of tempting broilers lying on a platter, but he concluded that Abbie had prepared these with a view to Miss Carter's breakfast. He was grinding the coffee when she came in and she sniffed the grateful aroma rapturously.

She was very simply attired in a loose-fitting white dress with short sleeves, and about her slender waist was tied one of Abbie's huge gingham aprons. Her riding Hessians had been replaced with a pair of diminutive sandals which made a clicking little patter as she walked. He had unconsciously rolled up his sleeves, camp-cook fashion, the better to mix and mold the biscuit he contemplated making; the sight of her bare arms reminded him of his own and he hurriedly lowered the sleeves and began fumbling at the buttons. She came forward quickly and checked him with a pretty gesture.

"Put them up again! Men always work better with their sleeves rolled up, I have noticed, and all good cooks have them so. That's why I am wearing this waist; I am going to help." She looked complacently at her round, dimpled arms, then at the corded brawn of his. An irresistible impulse sent her close to his side. "Why," she said, with a fine assumption of wonder at the portentous discovery, "my arms are tanned as brown as yours." And she coquettishly held hers so close to his in comparison that they momentarily touched.

Through his veins there leaped a sudden fire as though his blood had turned to molten lava; he trembled. Stricken with a sudden terror she shrank away slightly, but her eyes never left his. The man was trying for self-control, and she wisely waited. The best time to play with fire is not when the coals are hottest.

"You, too, hate to be thought afraid." It was hardly more than a whisper. "And your arms are very beautiful." Holding her wrists very carefully, yet with a grip of steel, he bent forward and deliberately kissed each arm in the dimpling hollows. Then he gently released them, and turned once more to his coffee grinding.

So wise a man as Solomon declared, centuries ago, that the way of a man with a maid was beyond even his great understanding; but the composite intelligence of all the wise men that ever were or ever will be created cannot elucidate the greater mystery of the ways of a maid with a man. By all accepted rules and conventions, Miss Carter should have ostentatiously wiped her arms with a lace handkerchief, extravagantly casting it aside later with an air of loathing and disgust, and stalked out of the room with superior dignity without deigning him even a contemptuous glance. She did nothing of the kind. She merely laughed, a silvery, tinkling, infectious little ripple whose contagion was irresistible, and at his responsive grin the

atmosphere cleared instantly.

Her eyes fell upon the basket of eggs and she had a sudden inspiration: "I am going to make waffles. Now if we could only achieve the regulation fried chicken to go with it we should dine ideally."

"There are two in the pantry, ready to your hand," he replied eagerly. She ran out excitedly, as if to verify the good news; but once in the seclusion of the pantry her interest in the broilers moderated unaccountably. She seemed more concerned with the hollows of her arms and in her rapt inspection of them held them singularly close to her face. Her cheeks were engagingly flushed and her lips moist when she bore the fowls into the kitchen.

Douglass was inclined to be patronizing as she sat about her waffle-building; what could this pampered society pet possibly know about the plebeian craft of cookery? But his indulgence quickly changed to surprised admiration as he watched her deft manipulations.

"How long has it been since you were a little girl?" She smiled her quick delight at the implied compliment. "Oh, waffles are easy; Dad always insisted on my making them for him and I had considerable experience, and one does not exactly forget little things like that. How long has it been since you were a little boy?"

"I am one to-night," he averred, dextrously filching the first golden-brown disc as she laid it on the plate; as he danced about trying to bolt the hot dainty she rapped him on the head reprovingly with the huge spoon and they laughed with all the light-heartedness of the foolish children they really were.

It was a memorable meal that they finally sat down to, and neither of them ever forgot it. Sitting opposite to her in that comfortable old kitchen—he had begged the privilege of eating there instead of in the more formal dining-room—the man's heart was filling with a subtle consciousness that it would be very pleasant to have her sit so always throughout the days to come. It came to him with a certain shock, nevertheless; in all his former associations with women, his emotions had been of a distinctly different nature, and somehow the recollection of them was not pleasing. He even felt a certain angry resentment of the insidious charm of the comforting domesticity of his surroundings. What right had an indigent pauper of a cowpuncher to aspire to a heaven like this? It was only to her natural gentleness, her inherent graciousness, possibly only to a passing indulgent whim, that he was indebted for the favor she was showing. What had he, who would be penniless in another month—for he still stubbornly adhered to his determination to recoup his employer—to offer the mistress of the C Bar with its broad acres and "cattle on a thousand hills"? All incredible as it may seem he actually forgot for the moment that he had, unreprieved, kissed her arms a short half-hour before. It simply strengthened his resolution to get away from an environment provocative of such disturbing reflections.

The woman was thinking how big and brave and strong he was, and how integral a part of—how entirely he belonged in the plan of her cogitations. She could imagine him always sitting there, a bulwark between her and the evils of life, and she was very happy. She realized how it would take time and diplomacy to leash this untamed tiger, to bring into leading-strings this unbound Sampson who foolishly deemed that the sum of Life was Delilah; but she was the daughter of "the bravest man God ever made," and this was her Man. She knew it now beyond the peradventure of a doubt, and looking at him as he sat there in all his manly beauty, she thanked God for it.

His hand, outstretched toward the waffles, encountered hers, and he paled.

It was very still and quiet in the room; even the little alarm clock on the mantelpiece, unwound for once, lacking Abbie's careful hand, was silent. He arose with cruel deliberation and walked around the table toward her; she met him half way, all composure now, her hand extended. The antelope kid, with a comical yawn, came and stood between them.

"I am so grateful for your many kindnesses to me to-day," she said steadily, her eyes calm and unwavering. "I am more fatigued than I thought. Good night—and pleasant dreams."

The kid butted him playfully as though to recall him to earth again; he had stood such an unconscionable time holding her hand. The woman smiled on him kindly again, and instantly he relinquished it.

"Good night," he said dully, his face the color of copper. He went to the sofa where he had left his hat and holster and fumbled a while uncertainly. He took up the Stetson, leaving the weapon untouched. At the door he turned mechanically.

"Good night," he mumbled; "good night. And may you have no dreams at all."

The antelope butted him again, scornfully, as he passed out.

Grace Carter stood for a moment in silent meditation. Then she went to the sofa and drew the Colt from its sheath. With the weapon in her hand she extinguished the light and went into her bedroom, locking the door behind her.

When she had finished disrobing she laid the weapon on her reading stand within reach of her hand when abed. For a while she lay very quiet, open-eyed; then she arose, unlocked her door and replaced the revolver in its sheath, leaving both lying where he had tossed them.

Over at the bunkhouse Douglass stood glaring at the imperturbable Red. "I thought," said he

ominously, "that my orders were that nobody should ride those outlaws."

McVey, having finished the cigarette he was rolling, gave it a final lick with his tongue, twisted the ends adroitly, struck a match, and between tentative puffs, remarked:

"When they's nothing left in thu corral but one hoss I reckon it's ride thet er go afoot. When I got back from Vaughan's this evenin' I found thu pastur' bars down an' everything stompeded but thet buckskin outlaw. Reckon he were too or'nary to trail with thu bunch an' cut hisself out; ketched him in thu cow paddock."

Douglass carefully selected a cigarette paper and reached for the tobacco pouch. The hand that held the lighting match was very steady.

"How do you size it up, Red?"

"Matlock," said the other, tersely. "Thu bars were not only down, but dragged away more'n a rod. It were one man thet done it—his hoss shod all around 'ceptin' left hind foot. 'Twere too dark to track after I lost him in thu timber, but the whole cavvy is scattered to hell an' gone. Say, Ken, I'm goin' to rue back on that promise; an' I don't see as it's eggsactly fair on the other boys, either. S'posen sum of us was to meet up with that skunk accidental: are we to let him slip jest because yuh don't happen to be cavortin' around conteegious? I, fer one, *won't*, an' right here I gives yuh notice."

"Besides," he drawled softly, "I've got a privut grutch agin him of my own, an' I'm goin' to beat yuh to it if I kin."

The other shook his head deprecatingly. "Don't do anything rash, Red. I preëmpted that right first. And my claim's been bearing interest ever since."

CHAPTER IX

IN PART PAYMENT

The temporary loss of the horses was a twofold source of irritation to Douglass. They had been gathered with much labor for the forthcoming round-up and that work would all have to be done over again at quite an expenditure of time, patience and money; for this he deemed himself also responsible, and it added materially to the already large pecuniary obligation which he had assumed.

Then, he also regarded the malicious scattering of his horses as a stigma on his care and watchfulness of his employer's interests, as well as a personal affront and challenge to himself. It would be a sorry reflection on his professional ability, as well as on his courage, and he writhed in the shock to his really abnormal vanity. By established code he should have "got" Matlock long ago; and now he would have to defer the wiping out of that blot on his escutcheon until after the season's work was over. In the cold fury of his bitter self-revilement, he actually forgot the woman who had stirred his blood almost as strongly a short half-hour ago.

The mischief had been made possible only by the fact that the day after the horse round-up was ended he had indulgently granted a four days' leave of absence to his entire force, excepting only McVey, who had professed a lack of interest, to enable them to participate in a roping and riding tournament over in South Park. His own and Red's temporary absence to-day had given the perpetrator, of whose identity he had not even a momentary doubt, the chance to do the contemptible trick, the undoing of which would take a whole week's furious work with the entailed strain on both men and horses. His provocation was very great.

The next day, working over the ground, he found the freshly-cast shoe of the marauder's mount; it was a peculiarly constructed "blind-bar" affair, and Matlock's horse, his own private property, taken with him when he left the ranch, had a bad frog on his left hind hoof. His conviction was made a certainty later when the blacksmith at Gunnison identified the shoe as one that he had made for and attached to the left hind foot of the deposed foreman's horse. The chain of evidence was complete and conclusive.

By a rare bit of good fortune he discovered quite a large band of his best horses quietly feeding in a little valley some three miles from the house, and he quickly returned to the ranch, where he discussed with Red the likelihood of their being able to corral it; it was a big contract for two men, this particular band being a notoriously wild one and hard to handle, and now the animals would especially resent a return to durance vile after their previous week's confinement. But it meant an indispensable factor to the ultimate recovery of the other horses, without which, the outfit would be practically afoot. Red was logically pessimistic.

"Three might do it, but two ain't got any more chanct than a snowball in hell," was his opinion, and Douglass knew that he was right. It had taken four of his best riders to turn the trick a week before. But the other men were absolutely unavailable and long before their earliest possible return this band of horses would be off to their favorite range twenty miles or more away.

He determined to take a chance, saying hopefully, "Well, we might be able to corral a part of

them, anyway, and that would give us a few to work with."

Miss Carter, coming to summon them to breakfast, was made acquainted with the dilemma. "Can I be of any help?" she asked instantly. "I can ride fairly well, and under your instructions may really be of some assistance."

Douglass looked at Red doubtfully, but that worthy was for some inscrutable reason, enthusiastically sanguine. "Why, shore yuh kin! Yuah hosses wa'nt done up any to speak of by yuah pasear yiste'day, an' the buckskin is fresh. That bunch is ourn."

"Oh, I am so glad," she cried eagerly. "I'll be ready before you get saddled up."

She was flushed with excitement as they slowly cantered out, but paid careful attention to Douglass's minutely detailed instructions as he outlined his plan of campaign. Red looking admiringly at her skillful handling of the rangy roan gelding, the kindling eyes and firmly compressed lips, decided that she would "make good." He remarked as much to Douglass, who nodded his conviction and said a word or two of caution in an undertone:

"If they break back at the corral, see that she isn't in the way of the big blue; you know his trick. If there should be any danger, shoot quick and straight."

To Grace he said with frank admonition: "The leader of this bunch is a big blue stallion which has a nasty habit of whirling about just as he touches the corral gate; he will run over anything that opposes him when he breaks back, and if he tries it to-day, ride to one side as fast as you can. Don't try to stop him in any event. You understand?"

She merely nodded, her lips closing a bit more tightly. Then she smiled a protest: "Please don't try to 'buffalo' me—I think that is the proper word?—at the outset. This is my first round-up, you know. I'll 'make good,' as Mr. McVey said a while ago."

Both men laughed heartily. "Red's whisper is a little stertorous," admitted Douglass, "but you remember what I say: fight shy of the blue if he breaks." Down in his heart he knew that this woman would surely "make good" in anything she attempted, but nevertheless, he saw to it that the revolver slid easily and without a hitch in the holster, and loosened up a few cartridges in his belt. Red had already taken that precaution.

They circled the bunch without alarming it and with comparative ease started it corralwards, the leader proving unusually tractable for the nonce. Her roan was no novice at the business and covered his assigned arc as gracefully as a swallow, to the great delight of the young woman who was reveling in the pleasure of a new sensation. She wisely gave the horse his head, and the intelligent beast repaid her good judgment by cleverly heading off every straggler who essayed to dodge back to liberty. She was really proving of decided assistance and Red waved her a cordial encouragement from the left flank.

The horses were bunched closely together as they neared the corral gate, the leader trotting easily and with apparently no concern, directly towards the entrance. He was seemingly resigned to the inevitable and the riders closed in sharply to urge them through. Grace was much elated over her successful debut and gave a little exultant shout as the massive head and shoulders of the blue stallion were momentarily framed in the opening. She was inclined to be contemptuous of the ease with which it had been accomplished, and in the relief of the thought dropped her rein loosely on the roan's neck. At that exact moment the cunning beast in the gateway whirled like a flash, lowered his head like a snake, and darted back through the plunging throng which opened before him as a dry pine butt splits to a stoutly driven wedge.

Owing to the dense smother of dust about the gateway, and the further fact that the bunch, not missing their leader in its enveloping clouds, were crowding through the opening into the corral, neither of the men noted the maneuver of the stallion until he broke out of the press, heading obliquely to one side, between Douglass and Miss Carter.

Then was she conscious of a hoarse cry that rang like the roar of an anguished lion above the din of trampling feet:

"To the left! Get out of his way, for Christ's sake! To the left!"

Out of the dust blur, an animated lead-blue bullet, shot the great stallion, his head held low, his body extended until his stomach brushed the sagebrush beneath. The roan, taking the bit between his teeth, turned as on a pivot, almost unseating his rider, and raced undirected towards the exact point where the escaping animal could be best intercepted, intent only on the well-understood work which was logically his duty. It was his business to head off and turn back the fugitive, and, unchecked by his helpless rider, who clung fearfully to her saddle-horn in her extremity, he ran the race of his life, putting his whole heart into the work, her light weight hampering him almost negligibly.

The point of intersection was at least five hundred yards away, the horses racing along the converging sides of an obtuse angle, the roan some hundred yards in the lead; the point of convergence was just below the brow of a little hill, and the roan, running in open ground, had the advantage of the blue who was impeded by the thick sagebrush; he gained rapidly, changing the locus of intersection thereby, and finally swung at right angles across the stallion's course.

Grace had been vaguely conscious of a crackle of pistol shots and a confused roar of profanely

phrased implorations, but all her energies were concentrated to the end of keeping her seat on that plunging roan thunderbolt, whose speed was accelerated by the lashing reins which, dropping from her nerveless hand, were now flapping against his sides. Swinging in a beautiful arc of exactly the correct radius, the roan headed the blue in triumph, his legs stiffening as he crossed the latter's course, his hoofs tearing up the thin turf in a fifty-foot furrow as he essayed a turn in order to forestall any side divergence of the stallion. But the blue streak swerved not one iota.

With ears flattened against his head, eyes green with malignity and pain, lips curled back and teeth bared to the gums, he charged directly at the unbalanced roan, squealing fiendishly as he came. The gallant gelding floundered ineffectually for a footing, fell directly in the path of the infuriated beast, and threw his rider over his head.

Though dazed by her violent contact with the hard ground, Grace instinctively struggled to her knees, raising one hand as if to ward off that impending horror; twenty yards away the thudding hoofs beat on her ear drums like a funeral knell, her lips parted in a soundless gasp, then faintly as from a far distance she heard a dull concussion, felt a crashing blow, and lost consciousness.

When her eyes opened again they were in close juxtaposition to a rough tan-colored shirt whose coarse fiber rasped her cheek; the whole universe seemed rocking with a gentle up and down motion as soothing as the swing of her beloved hammock, but there was a curious numbness across her chest and lower limbs like that induced by the pressure of closely-encircling iron bands. Gradually it dawned upon her that she was in the arms of a man who, carrying her weight with perceptibly no effort, was running swiftly towards the house. One little shy upward glance completed her inventory; she deliberately closed her eyes and cuddled closer, so close that she could distinctly hear and count the strong heart-beats against her temple. Nor did she open them again until he had lain her on a sofa in the living room and bent solicitously over her.

"Thank God!" The relief in his voice was somehow very sweet to her. "I was afraid—tell me, are you hurt?"

"Only frightened, I think." The tone was effectively languid and hesitating; she was loth to dissipate the tender concern in his eyes. "But oh, the horror of it. I can scarcely realize that I am alive. Death seemed so close." She hid her face, shudderingly. "Was the horse killed?"

"The blue was," for some reason avoiding her glance, "but the roan is all right. You had a very close call. Why did you try to head him?"

"Don't scold me, please!" she pleaded. "I could not help it; he bolted when the other horse broke away and I lost my reins. I had no control over him, whatever. How did I get here?" The question was a marvel of innocent nescience. And how could he know that her heart was beating even more furiously than his as he had held her close for those five blissful minutes.

"I carried you," he said, simply. "There was no other way. Are you quite sure that you are not injured? That brute's head was lying on your shoulder when I picked you up. He must have struck you as he fell."

"I do feel sorely bruised," tentatively rubbing her side, "but I am certain that is all." She arose and walked lamely across the room in confirmation, then came back and sat down on the sofa. "How silly of me to faint! And how kind of you to take such care of me! Was I *very* heavy?"

"I've carried heavier women," he said, unthinkingly, and could have bitten his tongue off in instant chagrin at his unfortunate slip. "You see," he said with forced attempt at humor, "I make a business of rescuing young damsels in distress and carrying them off to places of safety."

"Really! How romantic!" hiding her sudden bitter anger under the mask of persiflage. "I assume they all came through their difficulties as happily as I?"

"I can't remember any of them dying," he said caustically; then with deliberate malice: "None of them even pretended to faint."

The evil bolt, although all unwittingly shot, came close home and she could have struck him in her shame and fury. How much did he know? And how dared he couple her with those nameless creatures! Taken at a disadvantage, the retort courteous failed her for once, and she was devoutly glad for the timely intervention of Red, who thrust his carrotty shock into the door at that moment.

"Miss Cahtah," he said with solemn gravity. "I'm almighty glad yuh ain't daid!" At her reassuring laugh of relief he added admiringly: "Yuh suttinly are quick on yuh feets, ma'am! Thet hoss was goin' some when yuh was standin' on yuah haid!" He had been quick to appreciate the strain she was laboring under and Red's panacea for any suffering was to make fun of it. She laughed again, a bit hysterically.

"Did I look particularly ridiculous?"

Red's protest was suspiciously grave: "Ridic'lous! suttinly not, ma'am. Yuh looked just like a angel, floppin hes wings—upside down."

They all shouted at that, their hilarity exciting the antelope kid into a rear charge upon Red, who used the incident to cover his retreat. He turned at the door to impart some good news.

"We've got the whole bunch corralled. Reckon thu shootin' an' yellin' you done, Ken, scared 'em in. I got thu bars up befoh I missed thu blue; fact is I didn't see him break, thu dust were so thick."

A minute later he returned with the additional good; tidings that Abbie was in sight; ten minutes more and he strode into the room, bearing in his arms a struggling, scratching, scolding burden which he deposited with much aplomb on the sofa besides Miss Carter.

"Reckon I'm some pumpkins on thu carry, mahself!" he said with much unction, grinning at the scandalized Abbie, who was quaintly anathematizing him. "No use yuh yowlin', Miss Abbie. The fashion's been sot an' yuh cloth is cut. But yuh shore got to gentle up a heap or Ken, yeah, will hev to do thu totin'."

Quick as a flash the old woman's arms went around Grace and the fair head was pillowed upon her bosom.

"What is it, honey?" she cooed, gently stroking the silken hair and entirely ignoring the men. The tensely strung nerves gave way and in the reaction the tears were softly welling. The two cowpunchers sneaked out sheepishly and once out of hearing, Red swore wonderingly.

"Well, I'm damned! Never peeped till it was all over with, and then clapped on the water-works. Wouldn't that bust yuah cinche!"

Douglass smiled but said nothing. Actuated by a common impulse, both men mounted their horses and rode over to where the blue stallion lay doubled up in a thickening pool of scarlet. Dismounting, they gave the dead beast a critical examination.

"Good shootin'!" said Red, touching approvingly six blue-black blots on the muscular hip that could be covered with the open palm; "but the range were too far—over two hundred, I reckon—and they had lost their force. Stern on all thu time, wa'nt he?"

Douglass nodded. "I tried to break his hip but the bullets were spent at that distance. This is what got him, Red." He touched an oozing puncture just forward of the shapely shoulder. "Looks like a small caliber high pressure to me; let's have it out."

Some minutes later both men were bending over a bit of metal lying in Red's palm. They were very thoughtful and a curious expression was playing over their faces. "It's a seven millimeter Mauser," said Douglass, quietly, "and there's only one such gun on this range. It's a pretty big payment on account, Red!"

McVey's lips hardened but he evaded the other's eye. "Let's get the direction," he said, "and maybe we can work it out."

In an incredibly short time these experienced frontiersmen had not only located the spot from which had been fired the shot that undoubtedly saved Miss Carter's life, but Douglass had as well found the discharged cartridge shell. It was a seven millimeter Mauser case, and Matlock was the possessor of the only weapon of the kind on this range! Furthermore, they found the depressions in the loose soil where he had knelt when firing the shot. It was a good three hundred yards from where the horse lay and Red once more said, "Damn good shoot in,' Ken! It's worth remembering when the time comes. A six-shooter ain't deuce high against that Dutch joker at long range."

Tracking the shooter's footprints back to the gully on the other slope of the hill, they were found to lead to where a horse had been tied. The horse tracks showed that the beast had cast his left hind shoe!

Back-tracking still farther, they ascertained that the tracks had proceeded to this spot from an eminence at the head of a wooded coulie which commanded the valley where the horses had been found. To these men it was as plain as a printed page that Matlock had followed their movements unseen, finally establishing his position on the crest of the little hill where the empty shell was found, a position that commanded the corral and all the country likely to be traversed by the blue in his attempt to escape!

"He figgered the blue would break back, and that you would try to turn him," said Red. "Yuh have had a close call, son!"

"Yet he saved her," said Douglass, steadily. "That's a big payment, Red, a big payment!"

"Yep!" answered McVey, noncommittally, "but only part payment."

CHAPTER X

THAT WHICH IS CÆSAR'S

The round-up was over, the marketable beef cut out and shipped, and life at the C Bar had resumed the normality of quiet routine. From now until spring the ranch labor would be nominal; a few weaklings to be fed and nurtured through the rigors of winter, a few likely colts to be broken and "gentled" against the next season's requirements, a few necessary repairs to

equipment and fences, much wood hauling for the long night's consumption, and an engaging season of rest and recuperation for man and beast.

All throughout the range there is a general reduction of working forces at this period, the superfluous men seeking the larger towns for the commendable purpose of putting into active circulation their season's hoardings; that they are almost always obsessed with a weird delusion that somewhere in the gilded halls of Chance the fickle dame Fortune awaits their coming with a whole cornucopia of royal favors, aces by preference, only insures the economy of time to that end. For whether she smile or not, there be always dimes and favors of price to reward the ambitious; and to be lucky in love is even more expensive than to be unlucky at cards. The process may be conditionally prolonged, but the final result is always the same. By the time the grass greens again they have been divested of everything, even of their cares, and are ready to take up the broken threads of the endless chain that links them indissolubly to the old traditions.

The C Bar outfit had narrowed down to four men besides Douglass. Red, Woolly, Punk and a saturnine-faced Texan whose addiction to unique expletives of an unconventional nature had secured for him the sobriquet of "Holy Joe." The two latter were detailed to "riding fences" while Red and Woolly did desultory choring and hauled wood.

Robert Carter had returned for the rodeo and he and Douglass had enjoyed several hunting trips in company afterward; that is to say, the former did, Douglass evincing a certain restlessness which he, however, successfully strove to conceal from the younger man. He was all impatience for the departure of Carter and his sister, for reasons that he did not care to share with either, and he felt a positive relief when the day of their leaving was definitely announced.

Carter had been vainly endeavoring to persuade him to accompany them, and one night enlisted his sister's influence to that end; her gentle insistence precipitated Douglass's proffer of repayment of the losses incurred through Matlock's emity.

"I haven't either the time or means at my disposal for such a junket," he said with decision. "I alone am responsible for all the losses occurring on this ranch of late, and there's just about enough due me on salary account to square it up. I've got it all figured out here," producing a memorandum sheet, "and I think my estimate of the damage is a fair one; I'd like your approval of it. It leaves a trifle over a hundred left coming to me and I've got other and more urgent uses for it. Besides, I've got work to do that can't be postponed."

Carter heard him in open-mouthed amazement, his astonishment changing first to amusement, then to indignation as he gathered the drift of Douglass's intent. Grace, suddenly comprehending many things previously only hinted at, looked genuinely distressed and tapped nervously on the carpet with her sandaled foot.

"Why, man, you're crazy!" shouted Carter. "Do you think for a moment that I will permit you to even contemplate such an absurdity?"

"Pardon me," said Douglass, suavely; "the question of your permit does not enter into the matter at all; and I've done all the thinking necessary. I have had it under contemplation for a long time. This business is going to be settled right here and now!" There was no mistaking his determination and Carter was dumb-founded.

"But—" he stammered, protestingly, "the thing is utterly inconceivable! I could not even momentarily entertain such a preposterous proposal. Why, supposing for argument's sake, that Matlock's private animosity to you in person had brought this about, how does that inculcate you? And if it did, do you think I would stand for your only taking a paltry hundred dollars for a whole season's hard work, the best work ever done on this range? Nonsense, old fellow; you've got another think coming!"

"Well, I'm thinking that a hundred odd is just what's coming to me, and just what I'm going to get!" said Douglass, obstinately. "It'll be plenty for what I am going to do with it."

Carter sprang up, stormily: "Don't be any more of an ass than God intended you to be. Quixotism went out centuries ago. You're going to get what's actually due you!"

"And that is a hundred odd, I believe you make it, Mr. Douglass?" interrupted Grace, evenly, with a look of imperious warning at her brother. "Can't you see, dear, that he is right! Now no more petty bickering between you two foolish boys. Don't look so desolated, Bobbie; Mr. Douglass does not intend this as a preamble to his resignation; he is not going to leave us. There are no quitters on the C Bar."

"Let me write the check," she continued, in hasty trepidation, not daring to look at the man she had so audaciously pre-empted to their service. "Not a word, leave it to me!" she whispered tensely to her brother, whose lips were again opening in protest. "For heaven's sake, don't spoil it all!"

As she dipped the pen in the ink she hesitated: "Your given name, Mr. Douglass? I have never learned it in full."

"Kenneth—Kenneth Malcolm," he said shortly. She bit her lip as she wrote hurriedly; he was so deliciously pompous!

"And the exact amount?" He handed her the memorandum. "One hundred and six dollars. Please

approve this, Bobbie." She extended the paper to her brother, pinching him viciously under the table as he hesitated. "Quick!" she breathed, almost hissing, and he scrawled the necessary endorsement. Then she wrote the amount in the body of the check. Carter signed it wrathfully, and she tendered it to Douglass with a smile.

"There! Now you are square with the world," she said, facetiously, but her lips were tremulous with anxiety; he had been so distressingly noncommittal as to that resignation!

"Not exactly with the whole world!" he said, grimly. "I've got a few other trifling obligations to discharge before I can subscribe to that flattering assumption."

"Don't think me ungrateful for your kindness," he continued, earnestly. "I appreciate your invitation more than you know; but you see, this would not go very far in luxurious old New York. It wouldn't more than hardly pay my fare there, and really my presence here is imperative for some indefinite time. I had no intention of resigning, but I am going to ask the favor of a month's leave of absence. McVey is perfectly competent to handle the outfit until my return."

"Take two months if you like," said Carter, cordially. "And while I am not at all easy in mind about that money business, I respect your wishes in the matter and we will consider that over and done with. But I insist on your being our guest at the old home next year. I have your promise?"

Douglass hesitated. "A great deal can happen in a year," he said, quietly; "but if I am alive and other conditions serve I shall be delighted."

Bobbie's manner was not quite so genial and complaisant to his sister when they were again alone: "See here, sis, what the devil—!"

"For shame, Bobbie!" she said, with laughing remonstrance, stopping further utterance with her soft palm. "Swearing isn't at all becoming to small boys. You are contracting very bad local habits." But she vouchsafed him no explanation whatever, merely rumpling his hair over his eyes and kissing him on the tip of his nose.

The day of their departure Douglass accompanied them as far as Tin Cup, where they would take the stage for Alpine. He was all cordiality to Carter and deference to Grace, showing at his best all throughout the pleasant ride. As she laid her hand in his at parting her eyes were full of wistful entreaty:

"Be good to Buffo and my roan, and very, very good to yourself! I am coming back in the spring and so will say *auf wiedersehen*, not good-by. You will write me occasionally? It will be manna to me until I can get back to 'God's country' again!"

His face brightened approvingly; "I like that! It is 'God's country,' surely, even though abandoned for a space by its brightest angel. Come back to us soon!"

"That was very sweet of you, and I am going to take it at full face value," she said, steadily. "That is the first compliment you have ever paid me and I am commensurably proud. But do you know"—her lips were very close to his ear—"it seems funny somehow! I had rather—oh, dear! I really can't help it!—but couldn't you manage to swear at me a little, Ken!" Her face was a vivid scarlet and she laughed a little hysterically. Before he had recovered from his astonishment she was in the arms of Abbie, who, attended by Red, had just driven up in the buckboard with the luggage.

She persistently avoided his eyes as she shook hands with Red. "Mr. McVey," she said, laughingly, "we have so over-burdened Mr. Douglass with responsibility for innumerable things that he won't have time to take care of himself; will you kindly look after him for us?"

Red's jaws closed spasmodically at the appeal underlying her forced levity; his grasp tightened ever so little but of other sign he was guiltless. Then he turned and looked at Douglass with preternatural gravity:

"I'm shore honahed, Miss Grace, with yuah commission! Yuh leave it to me! I'll see he gits he's milk regulah an' goes to hes leetle baid at seven every night. On yuah return I'll hand him oveh to you all wropped up in cotton bats, tied with pink ribbon like thet about yuah naick, thet is, purvidin' I kin rustle thu ribbon."

His meaning was unmistakable, and though blushing at his audacity, Grace took up the gage. Deliberately unclasping the tiny golden heart, which held the narrow band in place, she made a dainty little roll of the silk, fastened the end with the jewel and laid it in Red's bronze paw. Douglass, watching the little by-play with a curious interest, wondered at the quiver in that iron fist which could hold the weight of a heavy Colt's .45 with never a tremor.

Among the mail handed him later by old Hank was an official-looking document dated Denver. It was from the office of the State Registrar of brands and was almost laconic in its brevity:

"The brand O-O (left side); earmarks, square crop right, underbit left; is registered in the name of Bartholomew Coogan. He claims residence at Gunnison, and range in Gunnison County from Texas Creek to Quartz Creek. Date of record May 1st, 1898."

He reread the letter three times with exceeding care, his eyes narrowing to mere slits, then thrust it into an inner pocket. He was very thoughtful on the homeward ride, his preoccupied air at the supper table emboldening Punk to irreverent levity:

"These yeah partin's are shore deespiritin' things!" he observed, lugubriously, to nobody in particular. "I don't wonder none thet gloom has settled in one great gob oveh thu achin' souls of this yeah outfit. Why, I'm so sad, mahself, thet I kin hawdly eat pie!" Nevertheless he cast avaricious glances at Douglass's portion of that comestible and later took advantage of his abstraction to filch the savory morsel.

"Yuh'll be sum sadder if yuh don't keep yuah hooks on yuah side of the table!" warned Red, sinisterly, as he successfully repelled a similar assault on his own reserves. "Yuh moon-faced pie-eater, what yuh got to be sad about 'ceptin' thet yuh are alive?"

"Why," said Woolly, with well-feigned sympathy, "don't yuh know thet Punk's hed a great sorrer? He's been yirrigatin' the hull dum ranch with hes tears ontill yuh-ve gotter wear gum butes to git around in! Why, he's weeped so hawd thet hes years has got washed clean for oncet!"

Holy chortled in blasphemous delight as Woolly went on: "Punk's been lef stranded on thu shoals o' woe. He's stah o' happiness is sot 'an' thu mune o' he's desiah won't rise no moah! Thu light has gone outen he's young life an' he's token to writin' potery an' herdin' by hisself. He was token thet way early this mawnin' an' hes mizzery hes been suthin' scand'lous. He's made up a leetle pome all outen hes own haid thet would make a Ute cry. Speak it for us, Punk, won't yuh!"

Punk sighed dolorously and rested his head on his bowed arms. Then he raised it again and with a comical imitation of Douglass's abstraction looked into vacancy. Holy was gurgling ecstatically, his delight finding vent in a yell of irrepressible joy as Punk fumbled twistingly with his bare upper lip in emulation of Douglass's impatient twirls of his mustache.

His wandering thoughts recalled by that raucous guffaw, Douglass glared with cold disfavor at the twain, somehow realizing that he was more or less concerned in their horse-play. "What's the matter with you damn fools?" he asked, incautiously.

Punk looked at him in anguished protestation, shook his head in hopeless despondency and wailed:

"Oh! Gawd—haow *kin* I stand it? Haow kin I?"

Woolly looked at Douglass reproachfully. "To be sworn at in thet heartless way, an' him so young and gentle!" He put his arm sympathetically about Punk's shoulders; Red's eyes were twinkling in anticipation.

"Thar! thar! ole man! Don't yuh take it so hawd."

Punk laid his head wearily on Woolly's breast. Then as Holy and Red almost cried in their hilarity, he clasped his hands and crooned with heart-rending pathos:

"'Tis sweet tu love—
But oh! haow bitter
To hev yuh gyurl
Git up an' flit-ter!"

Douglass swore softly under his breath; then he looked meaningly at Red and touched his throat carelessly. Red sobered instantly and felt of something in the breast pocket of his shirt. His own fences were a trifle shaky and the temper of this particular colt was proverbially short and uncertain. He rose and went over to the water pail on the bench behind Woolly as if to get a drink, turning with a world of compassion in his eyes as Punk gasped faintly and sank back in Woolly's arms.

Instantly he was beside the twain, a huge dipper full of water in his hand. "Don't let him faint! don't yuh now, Woolly!" he yelled, in mock consternation. "Heah, put this on hes pore brow!" and he deliberately poured a quart of ice water down Punk's neck. The effect was as remarkable as it was instantaneous.

Punk's head flew up spasmodically, catching Woolly's nose with a force that tilted that worthy's chair backwards and sent them to the floor locked in each other's arms. Tangled up with their chairs, the impact was attended with such a series of excruciating bruises that both men lashed out retaliatingly and in a second they were fighting like wolves. Holy, leaning up against the wall for support, was convulsed with ecstasy: "Bite him in thu flank, Woolly! Pull hes ha'r out, Punk! Oh! Gawd! Let me die now!"

In the midst of the amenities entered Abbie with eyes aflame, a mopstick in her hand. Without hesitation, she impartially belabored both the combatants, calling frantically on Douglass and Red for aid. When their combined efforts had finally pried the two men apart she turned witheringly upon Douglass and lashed him with her scorn.

"A fine boss yuh be to let these coyotes tear each other to pieces! Ef yuh cain't manage men any bettah than thet yuh bettah take yuh leetle pen an' write potery fer a livin'. Maybe yuh'd git yuh name in thu papehs that way!" Then she stopped suddenly, the flood of invective dying on her tongue. The man's face was a livid gray, the teeth showing blue through the thin white lips. She quailed before the unlovable smile that distorted his mouth as he bowed ironically to her and went silently out.

"What hev I done wrong, now?" she muttered, speculatively. "He seemed touched on thu raw!"

Her thrust had been a random one and entirely without malice or specific reference; Abbie merely had a wholesome contempt for rhymes and rhymsters in general and had inadvertently exercised that contempt in lieu of other more opprobrious taunt. But this Douglass did not know; he leaped, instead, to a different and altogether unworthy conclusion, one that sickened him to the depths of his strong being and ultimately brought much unnecessary pain to another heart.

And yet, as he walked into the bunkhouse a few minutes later, no one looking at the outward impassiveness of that calm face would have even the remotest suspicion of the hell of resentful anger and outraged vanity burning in his heart. His lip even twitched with indulgent amusement as he watched Woolly and Punk solicitously binding up each other's wounds, each with a studiously exaggerated commiseration of the other's disfiguration.

"Gawd! Woolly, but yuh shore was playin' in luck when my haid hit yuh beak 'stead o' my fist!" Punk said, comfortingly, wiping that ensanguined member with a bit of wet burlap. Woolly grinned acquiescently:

"Thet's so, Punk, thet's so! It were shore consid'rit o' yuh to jab me with the softest thing yuh had. Ef yuh'll put a leetle skunk-oil on thet chawed year o' yourn I guess it'll grow out again', er I kin eat off thu otheh one to match it. Honest, son, I didn't aim to chaw off more'n a foot, but my jaw slipped."

"Thet must hev been when I swatted yuh against thu table laig," said Punk, regretfully. "Yuh know Ken has giv ordahs to kill everything with thu lumpy jaw, an' yuh mug is shore a heap outer place. Does yuh teeths track all right, old man?" The anxiety in his voice was very touching.

"They've kissed an' made up," explained Holy to Douglass, with blood-curdling expletiveness. "Ain't they jest thu two mos' lovin' waddies yuh eveh see?"

"When you two fellows get done monkeying with each other," said Douglass, impatiently, "I have something to tell you." Something in his tone enlisted their immediate attention. Red looked at him inquisitively.

"It was only a bit of harmless hoss-play," he mumbled, apologetically. "They didn't mean nuthin'." Douglass nodded indifferently. He had already forgotten the incident in the consideration of more serious things.

He took out of his pocket the letter he had that day received from Denver. "It's from the brand Registrar's office," he said, shortly. "I guess it clears up the mystery about that O Bar O brand." He read it with slow deliberation and at the mention of Coogan's name they exchanged meaning glances. Red whistled significantly. "Big Bart, eh!" The others said never a word.

Douglass meditatively took out of his vest pocket a broad-leaded indelible pencil with which he traced upon the margin of a newspaper the characters which composed the Carter brand: "C—." As the others watched him in silence he retraced them, closing up the ends of the first character and adding another after the second. As amended the brand was "O-O." There was no need of comment, for every man knew what his action implied.

In the midst of an impressive silence he rolled and lighted a cigarette; then he rose and strolled over to the fireplace, resting his arm on the mantel shelf. Red waited expectantly but there was visible discomfort in the uneasy demeanor of the other three men.

"Boys," said Douglass, slowly but with incisive distinctness. "When I took charge here I was under the impression that the O Bar O brand was owned by a man in Middle Park named Wistar, a friend of Mr. Carter's. I was even so assured by two of the men most trusted by Mr. Carter—I think you know to whom I refer—as well as by Mr. Carter himself, who was evidently misinformed. I have reason to believe that every man of this outfit, except McVey, knew differently, but I have no intention of asking any embarrassing questions. I want to say, however, that I am satisfied that since I came to the C Bar none of our old cattle have been absorbed by the O Bar O.

"But our tally sheets for the three previous years show a strange discrepancy with our present bunch; we are shy about five hundred head of cows, and our increase has fallen off unaccountably. And in this year's round-up I noticed a great many motherless calves and yearlings in the O Bar O brand. As a matter of curiosity I took a chance and killed a few of them, and here are the hides." He walked over to his bunk and took from underneath it three partly dried skins which he spread flesh side uppermost on the floor. To their experienced eyes it was plainly evident that the animals had been rebranded, the differently healed scars showing very plainly that the brands were originally C— afterwards altered to O-O.

"Every man in this room knows what this means; and every man also is aware that Mr. Matlock and Mr. Coogan always have been on terms of closest intimacy, it being the general impression that they are partners in several enterprises. Now, boys, I respect a man who keeps his own counsel at all times, and I am aware that when a fellow wants to know anything he is expected to find it out for himself. Well, I have been finding out enough to warrant my keeping you men on this job. I am sure that you are all right. But the fellows I let out this fall won't come back. I am going to see that there are a few more C Bar calves on the range this year, and a few less O Bar O's. If I had been reasonably sure of my premises before, the thing would have been straightened up long ago; but as I am going to acquire the O Bar O brand myself in a few days, it won't make any difference, as we will vent the brand and put the cattle under it back where they belong, in

the C Bar."

"One thing more," he continued dispassionately; "I expect every man who works for this outfit to play the limit in his employer's interest. I have set aside two thousand dollars out of our last sales to be used to defend any man who finds it necessary to shoot up a few of the skunks that are looting this range. I believe that you are all dependable men, and your wages will be raised twenty-five per cent, after the first of the month. McVey will act as assistant foreman, and you will take orders from him. I think that's all," he said with a yawn, "except that Red and I are going to Gunnison in the morning. You fellows keep tabs till we get back; we'll be gone about five or six days."

He filled his pipe, a sure indication that he contemplated an extended stroll, and scooped up a hot coal from the fireplace; at the door he turned for a final word: "We will take those hides with us."

After he had gone the men sat for a long time in silence. Then Holy swore enthusiastically: "By Gawd! fellers, that's a man!" Woolly felt of his swollen jaw tenderly and turned in pretended amazement: "Why, was yuh thinkin' he was a woman?"

Punk ceased operations on his cigarette and stared meditatively into the fire. "Wonder haow he's goin' to ack-kwire that brand? Trade those hides fer it, mebbe."

But Red McVey for once was silent. Going to his warbag he took therefrom his spare gun; it had a soft leather scabbard of the kind designed for wearing inside the coat under the left armpit. Very carefully he cleaned and recleaned the already speckless weapon and oiled it anew; he then bestowed a similar attention on the Colts in his belt, and filled both bandolier and belt with fresh cartridges from an unbroken box. Of the hides he made a neat package that would "ride" well on a pack-saddle. Then he took down his guitar and a moment later the night was vocal with the strains of "The Spanish Cavalier."

When his pipe was empty, Douglass went up to the office to write a letter. The rapidity with which he wrote showed that he had perfectly rehearsed its text. It was addressed to Robert Carter at his New York residence:

"DEAR MR. CARTER:—

"I have just proved to my entire satisfaction that you have been systematically robbed by Matlock and certain of his confederates in your employ, for the past three years. The proof is indisputable and I am going to secure restitution if I can. By the time you receive this the matter will be definitely settled one way or the other.

"The O-O brand is not owned, as you suppose, by Mr. Wistar, but by a side partner of Matlock's named Coogan, a saloon keeper and tin-horned gambler in Gunnison. Their game has been to not only alter your C— into O-O, but to have your own men, confederates of Matlock's and working under his directions, brand your calves in that brand, killing the mothers when necessary. I figure that your losses have been at least one thousand head. I have discharged every man implicated or under reasonable suspicion, retaining only four whom I deem dependable. I did not acquaint you of these facts before your departure for reasons that do not matter.

"Should I be fortunate in my endeavor I will report promptly. Should you not hear from me within the next two weeks you may assume that my attempt has been unsuccessful. In the latter event you had better place the matter in the hands of competent counsel; sufficient proofs can be easily supplied by the men now in your employ, and an examination of young cattle in the O-O brands will give you sufficient evidence for an action for damages."

On another sheet he wrote:

"In case of my death from any cause, I hereby direct that all my effects be given to Red McVey if he be alive; if he be not, then it is my wish that they be divided among the other three boys employed at the time of this writing on the C Bar ranch."

"BREWSTER."

He signed and sealed them in separate envelopes, directing both to Robert Carter. Then he entrusted them to Abbie with the request that she have the former mailed at once to New York, but to retain the latter for two weeks before mailing. He was very explicit in his instructions and enjoined her to carry them out in every particular. She was inclined to ask questions but he calmly ignored them and went off to bed, after informing her that he wanted breakfast at daybreak in the morning.

As he entered the bunkhouse the measured breaths from each bed were those of placidly sleeping men and he undressed in the dark so as not to disturb them. A single ray of moonlight lay across the room, hitting squarely the peg in the post above Red's bunk. It lit up the two revolvers hanging in their scabbards and Douglass smiled almost affectionately in the direction of their owner. When Red "packed" that extra gun he was enlisted for the whole war.

He went over and looked down kindly upon the stalwart sleeper. In the relaxation of sleep the stern face was gentle and almost handsome. Was he justified in taking this comely young fellow

into the grim uncertainty that lay ahead, into the jaws of the specter grinning waitingly behind the red lights of Bart Coogan's gambling hell at Gunnison? As he hesitatingly debated the question in his mind, Red turned slightly and mumbled in his sleep: "All right, honey—for yuah sake—"

Douglass, stepping back involuntarily, laid his hand upon the breast of the shirt hanging under the guns; it encountered something round in the flannel pocket, and instantly his face hardened. He went over to his own bunk and laid down.

"You've got to sit in the game, Red, for her sake. We are in the same boat and we've got to take our medicine. I wonder if she told old Abbie about that ribbon, too. Well, maybe we'll give her something more to laugh at before we are through." Then youth and healthful fatigue asserted itself and he rolled over and went to sleep.

CHAPTER XI

FRENZIED FINANCE

Outside of a fixed determination to compel the restoration of the stolen cattle, Douglass had no specific plans in mind as they rode away in the gray dawn. His actions would be determined by the conditions that would confront him at Gunnison, and he left much to what he deemed his luck, but which in reality was rather his great capability and aptitude in moments of crisis.

Of course, he would incidentally kill Matlock if justifying circumstances permitted, but he was not a killer in cold blood and the provocation would have to be amply sufficient. He resolved to let Matlock make the first hostile demonstration, after which matters were a thing of evolution purely; of the ultimate result he had not the slightest apprehension.

Every fiber of him was tingling with resentment of what he deemed Grace's duplicity; she had begged for his friendship and then had maliciously exposed him to ridicule by showing that foolish poem to Abbie, and the Lord only knew who else besides. She had made of him a laughing stock of the whole community, a butt for the coarse witticisms of his fellows, and the deeply-driven barb in his vanity rankled sore. Of course, he opined, she had only been making a fool of Red, too, but despite the old time-honored saw about misery loving company, he took small comfort in the thought, being rather disposed to harsher judgment of her for so unscrupulously playing upon that ignorant cowpuncher's fatuous credulity. Red knew nothing of fine ladies and their heartless machinations and it was a shame to encourage him in his hopeless folly. No lady would take such cruel advantage of puerile innocence! It is possibly apparent to the reader by this time that Mr. Douglass was somewhat of an egotist, whose personal estimation of himself bulked large in his stock in trade. If it be true that a man's vanity is the real unit of the measure of his possibilities, then Ken Douglass, scaled by the miles of his self-containment, might logically have aspired beyond the stars. Not that he underestimated other men in the slightest; he was quick to recognize and commend courage, fortitude, honesty and skill in his compeers; indeed, he heartily despised anyone in whom these primal qualities were not ingrained; but the ego was first in his cosmos and when a man humbly urges that he is the equal of all other men it may be set down as an axiom that he really thinks himself immeasurably their superior. Now the world always accepts a man at his own valuation in absence of evidence to the contrary, and he had vindicated his position so far as his range work went; he was concededly the best rider, roper, pistol shot and poker player in his circumscribed little world, and had, besides, the enviable reputation of never "falling down" in anything he essayed. In the flush of his present successes he entirely overlooked his previous grievous failures, as is man's wont the world over; the world was his own succulent oyster, and he, himself, the proper blade for its opening. Therefore he arrogantly pitied Red's unsophistication; at which the gods laughed.

As they rode along he made a clean breast of his dilemma. "It will have to be largely a case of bluff," he confided, "and we must make it stick. We have no time for lawing, and if we did, the shysters would get it all. Bart isn't easily buffaloed and will put up a stiff fight. Of course we've got the age on him—those hides are a strong card—but we're not going to have a walk-over. I can't see my way clear just yet, but it will work out as we go along. It sure won't be a picnic, but one thing is certain; we'll either get those cattle or Matlock will have to rustle a new partner."

Red shifted his cud and spat unerringly on the crest of a loco weed in the trail. "D'yuh 'spose we'll meet up with Matlock there? Reckon 'tain't likely though." Through the labored indifference of his speech, Douglass detected a certain restrained hopefulness and his face grew serious.

"I want to talk to you about that, Red. We've got nothing that we can fasten on him securely as yet, and we've got to go slow. Of course, if we get him to rights, or if he makes any bad breaks"—the pause was ominous. "But we don't want to raise any hell that we can't lay again. I'm going to give him all the rope that the game will stand; I think, however, that he has quit."

"Them kind nevah quits," said McVey sententiously, "an' yuh don't want to take any fool chances, Ken. I seen a feller oncet thet was monkeying with a rattler an' ketched 'im by thu tail. He got bit! Thu best way with a pizen reptyle is to blow his damn haid off, 'specially one thet yuh've pulled thu rattles offen."

They both grinned reminiscently at the reference to the Alcazar incident, but Douglass winced at the thought that although he had stopped Matlock's rattling for the time being, he had not neutralized the venom of his silent bite. And it is hard to side-step an unheralded stroke from behind.

"Well," he said unemotionally, "it's his first move."

"Hes last, yuh mean," muttered Red sotto voce, "fer I am to be first if he bats hes eye." But aloud he merely said, "That's what," and took a fresh chew of plug.

Douglass's perplexity as how his coup was to be executed increased with every passing hour. He carefully formulated and as regretfully discarded at least a hundred schemes, each of which appealed less and less to his practical judgment as he critically reviewed them. Never in his experience had he faced anything so intangible as the problem which now confronted him. He was at a loss for a precedent, and what was still worse, was in total ignorance of the laws governing the unique conditions. Not that he cared a rap for the laws so far as they might affect him personally, and he had an inborn contempt for conditions; but he wanted that transfer of the brand to be legally absolute and without recourse, and he did not want to involve Mr. Carter in the slightest degree.

When they eventually reached Gunnison he went straight to the office of the best lawyer in the town, a life-long friend of old Bob Carter, and succinctly and forcibly laid all the facts before him. After listening attentively to his explicit elucidation of the law in the case, and his logical course of procedure in the premises, Douglass shook his head.

"That will take months of lawing and jawing and I want those stolen cattle returned at once. It's got to be settled before I leave town, and I won't consent to involving Carter in any long-drawn-out, expensive litigation. There must be some way of settling it man to man. Will the law protect a bill of sale made out to me or Red, here, if I win it in a card game or force it out of him with a gun? That's what I want to know."

The old practitioner chuckled at this ingenuous imputation of the law's plasticity; his eyes twinkled in anticipation of the laugh he would raise in chambers when he got a chance to spring that joke on his dignified confreres. But his manner was gravity personified as he earnestly assured this exceedingly straightforward young fellow that much to his regret he would have to answer negatively.

"Even if you did get a sufficient and properly-drawn bill of sale out of Coogan by either of the means you suggest, he could come back at you with the 'baby act' and nullify the transfer by pleading no real consideration and invoking the statute which declares gambling debts noncollectible, in the first instance; and in the second, by setting up the plea of unlawful stress and intimidation. In either case you would lose out if he brought action."

"Supposin' he was daid an' couldn't get no action on hisself?" interjected Red, softly.

The old lawyer, frontier-hardened as he was, started nervously. "You surely don't contemplate any such—?"

"Any such what?" Red's face was a study in mild curiosity. "I was only asking yuh a question."

The lawyer moistened his lips tentatively before replying. "That would complicate matters very much—to all parties concerned. I hope, gentlemen—"

"An' if thu bill o' sale was made out to me, an' I was to trade it off to Ken, an' he was to tuhn it inter coin an' cache thu dough, what then?" The drawling voice was a sinister purr and somehow the half-shut eyes took on a feline expression. The lawyer suddenly achieved a new interest in this inquisitive young man; he looked at him from under his grizzled brows with professional appreciation.

"Why, you're a pretty fair shyster, yourself, Red," said Douglass humorously; "that idea didn't occur to me. That could not possibly involve Carter, could it?"

"No. But I trust—. " The old man's voice was hesitating and tremulous.

"O-h-h, put yuah trust in Jesus,
An' yuh shall see thu Throne!"

chanted Red, nasally; adding as an after-thought: "Thu C Bar pays cash."

"And it wants to retain you, Mr. Brewster, as counsel in event of my failure to accomplish the restitution of Mr. Carter's property," supplemented Douglass quickly. "You see, I've got to fight the devil with fire. If I lose out you have full authority to thrash it out in your own way. But I play my hand first."

"That's what," said Red laconically. "An' I'll keep cases on thu game."

At the request of Douglass the attorney drew up the correct form of a bill of sale with notorial attest; he refused the fee tendered him, saying: "I am glad to be of service to Bob Carter's boy. And if at any time you need my aid, professional or otherwise, command me without hesitation."

"Ken," said McVey oracularly, as they mounted their horses. "We're goin' to win out. We've seed a honest law-sharp an' our systems hev stood thu shock; an' we ain't been parted from our wealth

none. I think thu Lawd took thet way o' breakin' thu news to us, gentle like, thet Fawtune is goin' to smile on us. Betcha we have pie an' ice cream feh suppah."

He was still more optimistic when he came in, an hour or so after supper was over, to where Douglass sat thoughtfully smoking a cigar. His manner was even jubilant as he struck a match and sucked vivaciously at the proffered weed. "Matlock will be in town to-morrow; he was here yiste'day an' him an' Bart has gone out huntin'; so they say; like as not up ter sum lowdown meanness er 'tother; an' they're aixpected back to-morrer evenin'. Luck is suttinly comin' ouah way.

"I thought I'd go projeckin' around a leetle so as to kinda size up thu layout," he explained, "an' get a line on thu fo'thcomin' festivities. So I nacherally draps in to thu Palace an' thu barkeep gits loquacious. Was yuh thinkin' o' drinkin' a sarsaperiller with me?"

Time hanging heavy on their hands, the two cowpunchers strolled up the street in the search of diversion; at the Shoo Fly dance-hall the revelry seemed most promising and they went in to investigate. The usual quota of frowsy, bedraggled women were in evidence, wearily swinging in the eccentric mazes of a putative waltz or plying their blowsy victims with the stuff that had already stolen their souls and later would steal away what besotted senses they still held in precarious possession. It was an old experience to both of them and they looked listlessly about with the disinterestedness of bored familiarity.

Time was when these young men would have entered into the orgies with a certain reckless aplomb; there were a few girls among the throng who had not yet lost all their pristine comeliness, who still retained some few pitiful shreds of the femininity that should have made of them the loving wives and good mothers that Nature's God creatively intended; but to-night none of them looked good to these two not usually over-discriminative animals, intrepidly fresh as they were from pasture.

The whole thing jarred unaccountably upon both of them; Douglass looking disgustedly at the tawdry surroundings, at the flushed faces and professionally displayed charms, felt a great irritation at himself for coming here. Unconsciously he was comparing this sickening meretriciousness with the delightful reserve and dignity of another environment, and he felt the quick shame of a schoolboy detected in his first illicit adventure.

Red grunted telepathically: "Gawd, Ken, this yeah's a punk layout. Let's go out wheah it's clean." They settled their score and were in the act of rising when, McVey touched Douglass on the arm. A woman had just entered by a side door and was looking at them with a strange intentness.

"That's Coogan's woman," said Red, in a low voice; "Stunner, ain't she! Wonder he stands fer her comin' here."

The woman came forward with a curious snake-like quickness and seated herself at the adjoining table. She was a very striking creature, evidently one of the higher class Mexicans occasionally still to be met with on the Colorado frontier. She was not more than twenty-four or five years old, with all the color and voluptuousness of the younger women of her race. Her hair and eyes were of a peculiar blue-black color, her complexion ordinarily very light olive with carmine cheek tints but now exhibiting a pallor that only intensified the gleam in her big eyes. She was neither painted nor powdered, as both men noted approvingly, and was finely gowned in a modest, though expensive style. The only inharmonious thing in her entourage was the blaze of the diamonds with which she was lavishly bedecked.

She ordered brandy, and when it was brought drank it with reckless haste and called for more. Twice was her glass refilled, and the fiery stimulant flushed her face. At the third serving she paid the waiter and shudderingly pushed the glass away with every evidence of disgust.

To Douglass, watching her out of the corner of his eye, for somehow, her manner did not invite the leer customary on such occasions, she turned suddenly:

"You are the Señor Douglass of Rancho C Bar?"

Her voice, though very musical and low-pitched, was tensely strained. As it was apparent that her English, though correct, was labored, he answered, hat in hand, in her own tongue:

"*A las pies de usted, Señorita.*" (At your feet, Miss.)

She smiled gratefully, as much at his courteous consideration as in her relief at his knowledge of her tongue and its social ethics.

"*Bese usted las manos, Señor.*" (My hands for your kisses, Sir.)

Red looked his appreciation of her favor; they were very pretty hands, and while he was not "up" in the flowery etiquette of sunny Spain, he understood its language indifferently well. "Ken's shore thu luckiest devil on yearth!" he muttered under his breath, enviously. It soon developed, however, that his hastily-formed conclusions were at fault. As he in duty bound slowly rose to his feet with a studious, "Well, I must be goin'—see you lateh," she protestingly laid her hand on his arm.

"But no, Señor. It is that I wish to have the speech wis you bot'—but not here." She looked around in sudden alarm. "Can you to my room graciously come? I live in the ho-tel." Her manner was pleading and eager.

The eyes of the men met inquiringly. Red unostentatiously flecked a speck of dust from a slight bulge in his coat under the left armpit. Douglass tentatively placed his hand in the side pocket of his reefer. Then as one man they both answered. "Why, certainly, Señorita."

"In an hour, then. Come carefully. Numero 9, the one mos' far in the hall. I go first, now." And without further look at them she went out as unobtrusively as she had entered. Red calmly confiscated her rejected glass of brandy.

"Shame to waste good likker, 'specially when it's paid fer. What's yuh ijea, Ken, a plant?"

"Damfino! She's all worked up over something, that's sure. Well, it's all in the game." Then, with an inscrutable and not altogether pleasant flicker in his eyes, "Not a bad looker, eh, Red?"

McVey emptied the glass. "Brandy's hell foh a woman," was his enigmatical reply.

An hour later they gained her apartments unobserved, the hotel corridors being deserted at that hour. She had changed her gown and received them in a charming half-negligé of some filmy white stuff that set off her dark beauty ravishingly. Her eyes were out-gleaming her diamonds but her manner was quiet and composed.

They sat down and respectfully awaited her pleasure; but every article in that room could have been accurately catalogued by either man. There was only one door in the room besides the one through which they had entered and that stood partly ajar, revealing beyond a luxuriously furnished bedroom. A large double window gave down on the main street; one-half of it was closely curtained, but the hangings of the other was looped aside, and for a time she stood beside it looking down into the squalid street. Suddenly she drew the curtains close and with a strength hardly to be looked for in that slender wrist, whirled a heavy Morris chair directly before them and seated herself.

For a full minute she regarded them intently through half-closed eyes and then, addressing herself to Douglass, but keeping her eyes for the greater part of the time on McVey, she said slowly in her soft mother tongue:

"Your friend understands Spanish?"

"Sufficiently, Señorita," assured Red, "to follow your conversation."

"It is well," she said quietly, "but your address flatters me. I am Señora, not Señorita." She held out her left hand with a curiously proud gesture; on the third finger was a heavy plain band of dull gold.

"I am desolated—madame," said Red, instantly. Douglass bowed his polite acceptance of the correction.

"Yes," she went on wearily, "I am a married woman, no matter what the world, what *you* may think. The ceremony was performed by the Jefe Politico of Ameca, my natal town, though not solemnized by the church. There was a witness, but he is dead now. It was Pedro Rodriguez, the man you killed the night he and Señor Matlock burned the hay on your rancho."

In the tense silence which followed, the ticking of Douglass's watch was distinctly audible. Red's hand, fumbling with his watch chain, went up swiftly to his armpit; but Douglass, interpreting her even intonation more correctly, never moved a muscle. She smiled reassuringly at McVey:

"Nay, Señor. There is nothing to—to regret. He was a dog—and I love you for it." The hand sank to his knee and he flushed slightly.

"I was only a young girl," she went on rapidly, "and he was as big and as fair as his words. My mother was dead, my father engrossed with business cares: he was owner of the 'San Christobal' mine. I met him at night, for my father liked him not and forbade me. It was my first affair, and I thought I loved him." She laughed, a mirthless sibilance that was marvelously like a snake's hissing, her eyes hard and dry.

"I had a brother, an only one, Rafael. He was very dear to me and loved me greatly. He was, of the mine—what do you name it, the one who holds and pays the monies? Ah, mil gracias! the 'treasurer.' He was of the lively the liveliest and played much at the cards. And Don Bartholomew was of his friends the most esteemed. We knew not then that he made his living so: he had come to buy lands, he said, and he had letters, many from great men; they were not written by those whose names they bore as I know now, but we of Mejico know little of such things and trusted him fully.

"Then, one night, mi padre discovered me in his arms and there was much sorrow. I was to the casa confined and to him was said that we should see him no more. But you know our adage: '*No ay cerradura si es de oro la ganzua*' (there is no lock but that will open to a golden key), and Pedro Rodriguez, our servidor, was very poor. Like Eve, I listened to the serpent's voice; I was very young."

She covered her face with her hands and again the silence fell; Red licked his lips nervously: "The damned caterpillar!" he ejaculated. She roused at that and her manner changed. She seemed to speak mechanically and her words fell like drops of ice:

"One night he came in great haste and said that we must fly at once; a great trouble had come to him and his life was in peril. I had to marry him, you understand, and I had no other choice. We

went to the magistrate—he swore that we would be remarried by a priest of my faith when we reached his land, and so I consented. My father was absent and my brother—Oh! Rafael!" She broke down and sobbed bitterly. Red cursed aloud.

Of a sudden she calmed; her eyes were hot but her voice was cold and emotionless. "Not until yesterday did I know that on that very night he had robbed my brother at cards and treacherously shot him dead when his guilt was discovered. My father, thinking I knew all—God, give me vengeance on this man—died two weeks ago, cursing me with his last breath. I had it from an old acquaintance whom I met here all unexpectedly yesterday morn. They never answered my letters you know, and I dared not return. The child was dead born.

"The life with him has been hell. I had to live, and he was liberal in his brutal way. Long ago I learned from Pedro that he was robbing you, but for that I cared nothing. The men of your race have given me blood and gall to drink, and the thought of your wrongs was bitterly sweet to me; it would have been sweeter had your lives gone with it."

They looked at her entirely without resentment; this was something they could understand. Douglass felt a great sympathy for her, but Red was revolving something in his mind that made his eyes gleam evilly.

"Yesterday I upbraided him with the truth. God knows what I said, for my heart was hot and I think I was mad. He was devil enough to admit all, and taunt me with my helplessness. We are of a passionate blood, we people of the South, and I tried—. Enough! He beat me—me, Dolores Ysobel de Tejada! May his soul writhe in hell until I lave his accursed lips!" Her venomous fury was not shrill and vociferous; instead, it was cold and low-voiced, but Douglass breathed hard and Red clenched his lips, watching it. She sprang impulsively to her feet and tore violently at her bodice. As the thin silk ripped away they saw that arms, neck and breasts were purple.

She came closer, thrusting her shame into their very faces. "See!" she hissed, "the chivalry of the American gringo! Do you Yanquis treat all your women so tenderly, caballeros?"

Douglass's face hardened resentfully. "We are not all Coogans, Señora. Be seated, please, and for God's sake, cover up that horror! And now—why do you tell us this?"

"So that you will kill him—for a price."

Red laughed harshly. "By Gawd! Madame Dolores Ysobel de Tajeda—or Coogan, whatever yuah name is, I'd giv' a better price ef yuh was able to tuhn yuhself into a man fer a couple o' minnits. What d'yuh take us fer, greasers?" But Douglass, his own face very white and hard set, asked quietly, with an eager interest in his calm voice:

"And the price, Señora?"

"I will give him into your hands," she said coolly, "I have letters, some from Matlock, which he thought destroyed, and two from him to Matlock which were missent and returned here. In his absence, I received and kept them. I have also one from Rodriguez asking me for money and threatening me with exposure if I denied him. They are enough to prove your case and give you justification for killing him."

Douglass rose quietly. "You do me much honor, Señora. But I think your acquaintance with American men is, after all, very inconsiderable." And with a stiff inclination he left the room.

She ran after him impulsively but at the threshold of the door she paused. Then she swiftly returned and gently pushed Red down into the seat from which he had arisen. "Wait—a single little moment, Señor, I beg of you. I will return immediately." She ran into the bedroom and he heard a swift rustling. In ten minutes she returned, bearing in her hands a packet of letters. She had in some marvelous way succeeded in rerobering herself and was now arrayed in an exquisite tea gown which made Red's eyes light up with admiration. Inwardly exulting at the success of her experiment, she sat down close beside him on the divan and rapidly opened the letters.

At her insistence he took them, though very reluctantly, and perfunctorily scanned their contents. Then he reread them with deliberate care, hesitated for a moment and then thrust them in his breast pocket.

"I reckon I'll keep these for a few days at least; they may come in handy."

"It is your right, Señor McVey. And now there is more that you must know. They have sworn the death of yourself and friend: his because he stands between them and their thefts and has brought to black shame the man Matlock; yours because you did slay the jackal of my husband. Do you know that in the hands of the sheriff there is a warrant for the arrest of you both, sworn out by my husband, charging you with murder, and the Señor Douglass with being accessory thereto? It is the plan to have you in the weak jail confined—one single night will serve their purpose—and when your friends come the next morning it will be too late. The sheriff is a weakling, as you know—worse, he is as wax in the hands of Bartholomew, who did win from him at cards much treasure that is to the county belonging, though why that should be cause to make him lick my husband's hand I can not understand. Maybe you, a man, do know? And while two unarmed men are striving with those who will do my husband's bidding—even now has he gone to summons them, your coming being known to him through a spy who rode faster than you—yet others will be sent to your rancho to burn and destroy."

McVey stifled a great oath. "You are givin' me straight dope?" His strong hand was crushing her soft arm.

"As Heaven is my witness, Señor. I swear it by the memory of my dead!"

"Do you know when thu warrant is ter be served?" The question was curt and imperative.

"At nightfall, as soon as Bartholomew arrives with his fellows."

For a while he deliberated in silence, but into the woman's eyes crept triumph at sight of the grimly compressed lips and wrinkled brow. Then as she watched it was commingled with another expression that boded ill for the honor as well as the fortunes of Big Bart Coogan.

"I reckon I'll say adios, Señora," he said finally. "I have things to attend to. When can I see you again?"

Her raven locks brushed his as she bent forward to look at the tiny jeweled chatelaine watch on her bodice.

"It is yet scarcely ten of the clock," she murmured, coyly dropping her eyes. "The night is young."

His veins ran fire. The woman was very beautiful.

Douglass nodded confirmation as Red told him her story five minutes later. "Just got a tip myself from Barton," he observed calmly. Barton was the clerk of the court from which the warrant had issued, and as it happened, was an old college mate of Douglass and his personal friend. He was not in sympathy with the ring of grafters dominating the county offices, and had hastened to Douglass's enlightenment as soon as he learned of his arrival.

"They don't aim to give you a chance to secure bail for at least one night," he said significantly, "and while that may not mean anything in particular, I thought you had better be put 'wise.' And I've taken the liberty of asking Strang to send up three or four fellows from the Lazy K tomorrow. Hope you won't think me officious, old man; I thought it best to be on the safe side." Strang was a particular friend of both men.

Douglass smashed his fist in silent gratitude. "Guess we'll manage to give them a run for their money. Have a cigar?"

"I've got those letters, Ken," said Red casually. "Better read 'em oveh; they shore are interestin' lit'rachure. Thu gettin' of 'em ain't obleegated yuh none, an' mahself hawdly enough ter talk about. Naw, I didn't promise ter cook hes goose," meeting the other's eyes squarely; "I'm engagin' in anotheh kind o' frenzied fee-nawnce' altogetheh. Yuh hunt yuh leetle baid an' gatheh strength fer to-morrer's stren-u-hossity. I'm goin' on night-herd mahself."

Douglass wheeled sharply. "Yuh are not going to—?"

Red fumbled in the pocket of his shirt. "I'm agoin' ter ask yuh ter keep suthin' fer me to-night." Without raising his eyes he laid in Douglass's hand a small parcel wrapped in his best silk handkerchief. "I want ter keep it clean!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XII

NOT STRICTLY ACCORDING TO PROGRAM

As they emerged from the dining-room the next morning they were greeted by a short but sturdily built man whose deeply-set blue eyes lighted up as he slapped Douglass familiarly on the shoulder. It was Dave Strang, foreman of the Lazy K outfit on Cibolla Creek.

"Why, yuh old son of a gun, wheah d'yuah drap from?" asked Red, with a portentous wink. Douglass had just informed him of Barton's message and his remark was for the benefit of the loungers about the stove, among whom he had reason to believe were some of Coogan's familiars. He deemed it best to have them under the impression that the encounter was one of pure chance; being an enthusiastic devotee at the shrine of "stud poker," he believed in keeping inviolate the suit and value of his buried card.

"Oh, just been atrailing and got plumb wore out fer a look at suthin' besides sagebrush," answered Strang, easily; he had a few cards up his sleeve, himself. "What brings yuh fellows inter thu tem'tations of thu meetropoliss? Don't yuh know thet this is thu home of the devourin' lion an' thu laih o' thu feroshus tigehe? Come an' look at yeh innercent selfs in thu bottom of a glass!"

As they lined up at the bar Strang said quickly, in an undertone. "Six of us heah by dark. What's thu game?"

"Come up to my room in an hour or two and I'll put you next," said Douglass, cautiously; "some of this gang is keeping tab on us." Then he turned to the crowd politely: "Will you gentlemen join us? This is on me, Dave; no foolishness!"

After a few desultory commonplaces, during which Strang intimated that he would be in town

only a few hours, Douglass said, casually, "Drop in and see us before you go out, Dave. Been a long time since we had a talk." Strang looked doubtful.

"I only aim to stay till thu mail comes in an' I got a heap ter do. Mebby I kin spah a few minnits." Then he treated the crowd in turn with a nonchalant, "Well, so 'long!" hitched up his belt and strolled out.

Up at the post office he met them a few minutes later. "I'll be on deck in your room in an hour. I'll go there first, ahead of you."

They found him there at the appointed time and he was soon in possession of all the facts. Douglass's plan was quickly stated:

"We'll let them arrest us without any suspicious resistance. Of course they'll make us give up our guns, but they won't get these," tapping his pocket and belt; "we'll buy a pair of cheap guns for them to relieve us of—our own guns will be in Barton's hands at noon. He will make some excuse to come in and see us, bringing our guns with him. We have a hundred shells apiece. I think their scheme is to shoot us first so as to make sure, and hang us afterward so as to make it look like a lynching. I think they will mostly all be greasers, friends of Rodriguez, with a sprinkling of Coogan's curs to keep them to the work. We may not need you boys, but we are sure thankful for your good will! With eight of us it would be child's play."

"D'yuh reckon Matlock'll be among thu bunch?" asked Red, hopefully.

"Not he!" scornfully said Douglass. "He hasn't sand enough to face a full-grown man's gun. He'll be down at the Palace with Coogan when the fun starts, so as to establish an alibi. This is to be a Roman holiday, you understand, with the 'Roman' spelled g-r-e-a-s-e-r! Pity to spoil such a pretty scheme, eh?"

Just then there was a rap at the door. Red opened it and in entered one Lew Ballard, on whose neck they fell with much profane acclamation. He was United States Marshall for that district, an old cowpuncher and a warm friend of the trio. He grinned comprehensively at the three conspirators.

"What's this fairy story about a portending lynching that Barton's been stuffing me with?" he asked, pleasantly. When they had told him he slapped his thigh with enjoyment. "Say, it reads just like a book! Gawd! to think I can't take a hand in it!" Then a thought struck him and he roared. "Say, I've got a scheme that will put the cap-sheaf on the stack!"

"First of all, I'll swear the whole bunch of you in as deputy United States marshals. Then I'll arrest two of your boys, Strang, on some charge or another and get them in jail a few minutes before the mob comes. The other four you will hold in readiness outside. We'll switch cells and when the greasers get inside we'll lock them up in your places and you can go down and pass the time of day with your friend Coogan. Gawd! won't he be glad to see you! I forgot to say that Barton has already sent a rider over to the C Bar to put the boys wise to the gang that's going down there. Gee, but this will be a great night for Mexico!"

So it was arranged. The marshall went out and secured two extra revolvers and the C Bar arsenal was turned over to Barton. Strang went to instruct his men, and the two prospective victims pretended to get royally drunk so as to allay any suspicion. They played their parts so well that Coogan was completely taken in. With these two fools drunk it was a veritable cinch, he thought. Matlock, for some occult reason, was not so sanguine. He would be more at ease when it was all over and he shrewdly made arrangements for a hasty departure in case of mishap.

It was nearly ten o'clock before the chicken-hearted sheriff deemed the two cowpunchers sufficiently drunk enough to take chances with. At that hour he valiantly descended upon the Red Light saloon with a full posse and accomplished the arrest with scarcely any difficulty, the only casualty being to the sheriff's nose, which Red could not help flattening with the butt of his six-shooter.

Emerging from the jail after the incarceration of his prisoners, the sheriff encountered Marshall Ballard in charge of two heavily-ironed captives whom he was exultantly informed were two dangerous counterfeiters. He overheard the marshall request the turnkey to place them in the steel dungeon in the basement, as they were important prisoners and very dangerous characters. He waited until the marshall rejoined him and invited that official to have a night-cap, remarking that he was tired and would "hit the hay" without unseemly delay. Could he have known that at the moment of lifting his glass, Red McVey was sitting astride of the turnkey's neck, industriously engaged in stuffing his silk neckerchief into that worthy's capacious mouth, the Angostura in his cocktail would have turned to gall.

Down at the Palace with exaggerated ostentation Coogan and Matlock were seated in the main gambling room where their presence was very conspicuous; Matlock was nervous, but veiled his agitation under a stream of profanity that grew more and more vicious as the hours dragged along. His subterfuge did not deceive his more hardened accomplice, who looked at him with cynical contempt. Could Matlock have known the dark thoughts brooding in the evil mind of the big gambler, he would have sworn even more affrightedly.

"That cur is getting dangerous," Big Bart was thinking. "He'd squeal any time to save his own cursed neck, and he knows too much! I'll attend to his case when this affair blows over." From under his shaggy eyebrows he regarded his confederate evilly; of genuine courage he had no

dread, but of this man's moral as well as physical cowardice he was growing more and more afraid. The consummation of their present plot would only plunge him deeper into the toils of the law if Matlock should, in case of exposure, turn State's evidence. For another reason he was strangely perturbed; that afternoon he had seen a face which was irritatingly familiar but which he could not correctly place. In his avocation there are only two facial classifications: those of absolute strangers, which are to be studied with care, and those of people well known, which are to be watched jealously. A gambler dare risk no middle path in the physiognomy of his acquaintances; he must either know a face well or it must be that of a total stranger. And for the life of him he could not remember the time and place where he had formerly encountered it. Somehow he felt a presentiment of coming evil and he chafed under it. To-morrow he would make it his business to find out who and what that dignified old Mexican was!

As he registered this mental resolution, the door opened and in walked the object of his cogitations; he was accompanied by Lew Ballard and another Mexican at sight of whom Coogan paled perceptibly. He knew them both now! The elder man was Don Ramon Seguro, joint owner of the San Christobal mine; the other was Don Luis Garcia, sheriff of Jalisco.

Coogan was no coward; he had been in many a tight place before and escaped by reason of his brute courage and herculean strength. He furtively felt of his hip pocket, then quietly arose and went forward with extended hand. They had no proof of his killing Rafael de Tejada, he thought rapidly; the only eyewitness, Pedro Rodriguez, was dead; and he could fight extradition until such time as he could make his escape. He resolved to brazen it out.

Affecting not to know the Mexicans, he shook Ballard's hand cordially. "Ah, good evening, Mr. Ballard. I was just going to open a bottle in my private office. Will your friends join us?" The marshal and his friends would be delighted! Ballard nodded casually to Matlock as they passed him. For some reason Coogan did not include him in the invitation.

At the moment of opening the wine they heard in the distance the faint rattle of a fusillade of pistol shots. The Mexicans looked inquiringly at Ballard but he dismissed the matter with a careless, "Oh, just some drunken bunch of cowpunchers or railroad tarriers with more ammunition than sense; that kind of thing is getting altogether too prevalent; the authorities ought to put a stop to it! Say, that's a dandy bottle of fizz, Coogan! Do you drink of the wines of Champagne much in Arneca, Señores?" His Spanish was perfect, his voice and manner conventionally pleasant. On Coogan's brow was the glister of a dense perspiration; Ballard covered his mouth with his hand to hide a cynical smile.

Just as the glasses were filled there came from the rear of the saloon the rasping grate of a startled oath, succeeded by the hoof thuds of a rapidly-ridden horse. Coogan, involuntarily pushing aside the window blinds, cursed scornfully under his breath. "Got rattled and is hiking out for the timber, the cowardly dog! That settles his hash!" The rider was Matlock and he seemed to be in a hurry.

As Coogan turned his back the Mexican sheriff made a quick motion toward his hip but Ballard warningly caught his arm. "Wait!" he breathed, "there is much sport toward. There will be those here soon who will do amusing things." Coogan flashed around in quick suspicion, angered to think that for one moment he had foolishly relaxed his guard, but Ballard was serenely lighting his cigarette at that of Don Luis and the glass of Don Ramon was just descending from his lips.

When the wine was finished, Ballard insisted on ordering another bottle at his expense; this was followed by a third at the insistence of Don Luis. As the bubbles frothed over the crystal rims, Coogan, either from pure nerve or fearful bravado, raised his glass. "A toast, gentlemen:

"Here's to good health and untroubled mind;
Here's to good luck and fame;
Here's to the girl that is fair and kind;
And here's to the man who is game!"

"A toast worthy of another bottle, especially the last clause," said an approving voice in the doorway, and at sight of Ken Douglass standing there smiling, Coogan's glass crashed on the floor as his hand flew to his hip pocket.

"Easy, Bart!" There was no mirth in the eye gleaming menacingly behind the sights of the heavy .44 aligned so steadily upon the heart of the man into whose eyes had crept a superstitious terror at the sight of one risen from the dead. "Put both your hands on the table! Both, I said! There, that's more sensible! Mr. McVey, may I trouble you to remove that exceedingly uncomfortable thing from Mr. Coogan's pocket? It seems to be giving him a world of trouble and it will be in his way when he sits down to talk with me."

Coogan's face was ashen as Red lounged languidly into sight; the sweat poured down his cheeks in a stream and his lips opened and shut convulsively. He was trembling all over as Red unconcernedly walked behind him and relieved him of the weapon, which he put in his own pocket. On Don Luis's face was a great contempt and Ballard was grinning broadly.

"Now the derringers, Red, two of them, in his pants' pockets. You will excuse the liberty, Mr. Coogan, but accidents will happen occasionally and I wouldn't have you hurt yourself for the world! We are going to have a quiet little gentlemen's game of cards, you and I, and we don't want our foreign friends here to get a false impression about the ethics of our great national game. Sit down, please!" Coogan dropped nervelessly into his chair.

At a sign from Douglass, there entered into the room a cowboy bearing three beef-hides which he laid on the table. As Douglass spread them flesh side up the Mexicans looked significantly at each other; they were both experienced cowmen and the altered brands told their own tale.

Upon the skins Douglass laid successively a handful of gold coin and a packet of letters; opening the string which bound the latter he spread them out separately so that their signatures were easily read by the white-faced fellow sitting opposite to him. Then he turned to Strang, who was standing in the door behind him, watching his actions with deceptively mild interest.

"Dave, could you manage to get us a new deck of cards and something to smoke?"

Strang soon returned with a box of really excellent cigars and an unbroken package of cards. The former he had secured at the "Palace" bar, Coogan's weeds being the best in the city, a thing characteristic of all gambling hells whose whiskey and tobacco is always unexceptionable, but the cards he bought at the little drug store across the way. He had reason to be suspicious of the ornately-backed pasteboards affected by the Coogan establishment.

In the combined gambling hall and bar adjacent to the private room, four Lazy K cowpunchers were languidly lounging about with disconsolation written all over their faces; but Strang's orders had been imperative, so they had to content themselves with smoking innumerable cigarettes and hoping that something might occur to enliven the monotony of their vigil.

"It's up to yuh mugs to see that nobody gets offishus an' interrupts thu perceedin's!" had been his instructions; nevertheless they irresistibly gravitated toward the door of the private room, where they stood with thumbs hooked in their belts in suggestive proximity to the butts of their peacemakers.

Somehow the atmosphere was charged with expectancy and a strange constraint had fallen on the usually boisterous throng. Something unusual was taking place in that private room, but Big Bart's privacy was a thing not healthy to violate; and then again there was something peculiarly discouraging to idle curiosity in the grim faces of the bronzed quartet just outside the door. There was not a man in that assemblage who would not have given half of his hoard for one peep into that room, and similarly there was not a man of them who for thrice that consideration would have essayed such a breach of etiquette.

And up at the county jail another of the Lazy K outfit was cursing his luck and sarcastically requesting a horde of wretches in the basement dungeons to "holler a few, so's I kin use up a bunch o' these damn hulls. Holler just oncet!"

In an unlighted room on the second story of the little hotel four short blocks away, a woman sat crouched behind the curtains of a window which commanded fully the Palace saloon. She was still dressed in the inconspicuous dark robe in which she had watched the sadly aborted attempt at the jail a short half-hour before. Feverishly had she witnessed the stealthy approach of the scant dozen of slinking forms which had silently stolen into the frowning portals which had accommodately opened for their ingress; breathlessly had she waited until there came the sound of savage oaths, muffled thuds and the clamor of men in mortal combat. She had almost screamed in frantic apprehension as the invading force had been suddenly reinforced by four other figures with gleaming weapons in their hands. She would have called out warning of this new and terrible peril to the now certainly doomed prisoners, but her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth and she only sobbed and swayed in hysterical rage at the balking of her revenge. But suddenly to her amazement there came forth seven men clad in vaquero costume, who laughed boisterously and shot their revolvers aimlessly into the air. She gave a sharp gasp of relief as she heard a familiar voice say with unfeigned regret:

"Why, I've hed moah fun at a dawg fite! D'yuh reckon that theah was evah ary white man, ceptin' he were sick er asleep, that passed in his chips to sech a passd o' pulin' polecats like this yeah bunch we've jes' been bendin' ouah guns ovah? Gawd! Ken, I'll stink o' gawlic fer a week! Ef Coogan don't put up a betah scrap by hes lonesome than hes whole pack o' peccaries did, why, I'm goin' to swap my ole hawg laig fer a putty blowah an' hiah out on a sheep ranch whar they's suthin' doin'!"

And now she was waiting, waiting with a fierce impatience that bruised the soft taper fingers gripping the jeweled hilt of a slender *cuchilla* hidden in her bosom, waiting for the vicious crackle that would mercifully appease the maddening insistence of those two dead men calling from their graves in far-off Ameca.

For the greater part of an hour she shivered in an ecstasy of expectation and fear. "Mother of God! What if they should let him escape after all!" Clutching her stiletto, she ran vengefully out into the night.

CHAPTER XIII

A LAUGH IN THE NIGHT

Dave Ballard was the only man in the room who immediately lighted the cigar of Strang's

passing; the others seemed indifferent to the blandishments of the odorous goddess for the nonce. Big Bart, with the forced composure of a trapped wolf waiting the next move of his captor, nonchalantly chewed on his with affected indifference, but on his bull neck the sinews stood out like whipcords. The man was no coward but just now he was up against a game new to his great and diversified experience, another man's game, the futility of "bucking" which is proverbial even among layman. If it be true that the uncertainty of the future alone makes living endurable, then Bart Coogan was just now having the time of his life!

With his characteristic directness, Douglass came straight to the point without delay:

"Mr. Coogan, I have just ascertained that you are the putative owner of the O Bar O brand, the registry and record standing in your name. May I presume so far as to ask whether the title is solely in you or is it a partnership affair?" His tone was very respectful but business-like.

"While it's none of your damn business, I don't object to telling you that I am the whole firm," said Coogan, insolently. "And I'd like to know what in—!" He was beginning to get a grip on himself again and resorted to bluster.

"Thank you!" said Douglass, quietly, restraining a great desire to send his fist against that snarling mouth. "Now we'll get down to brass tacks in a jiffy. In the brand referred to there are presently six hundred head of cattle, six hundred and four, to be exact, including motherless calves. Of this number more than two-thirds bear altered brands similar to these." He pointed to the hides on the table: "May I ask how they came into your possession?"

"You can't prove nothing!" snarled the cornered wolf, viciously. The other smiled incredulously.

"No? Evidently you have not considered these," touching the letters, significantly. "Well, we won't argue that point. The upshot of the matter is that I have a proposal to make to you. I am anxious to acquire the ownership of the brand myself, and as I have not got enough ready money to buy it outright, what do you say to a little game of freeze-out, with these for my stakes as against your bill of sale?" He pointed to the heap on the table. "You'll be getting much the best of it!"

For a moment the gambler glared fiendishly at the imperturbable man facing him; his body was quivering all over with illy suppressed hate and fury. He crouched like a wild beast preparing to spring, his hands opening and closing nervously. Then out of the silence came the nasal humming of Red:

"Yeah's to thu gyurl thet is faih an' kind,
An' yeah's to thu man who is game!"

The taunt stung him back to composure again. Every gambler is a fatalist by nature; the chance was, after all, more than he had any logical right to expect under the circumstances. And Big Bart Coogan was game to the core of his calloused heart! With an admirable effort he recovered his self-control, and the hand that held the lighted match to the fresh cigar which Strang politely tendered him was as steady as a rock.

"Anything to oblige a fellow sport!" he said with a fine return to his professional deference. "Have you a blank form about you, Lew?"

Ballard produced one already filled out; the gambler glanced at him meaningly. "Got it all framed up, eh?"

"Framed up nothing!" said the marshal, indignantly. "If you win out this business will be dropped. I think, myself, that you are in big luck to get so favorable a deal! In his place I'd have settled it in another way."

"Well," said Coogan, affably, as he scrawled his name with a fountain pen at the bottom of the instrument, "after I've won out suppose you take his place." Ballard jerked his head in instantaneous acquiescence. "If you win out!" he assented, gravely. Then he summoned the bartender, who was a notary public, to take Coogan's acknowledgment of signature; the stakes were removed to a side table and the men cut for the deal, each man was given ten chips.

In poker everything goes that can be made go; Coogan knew perfectly well that there would be positively no interference on the part of the spectators, no matter how open and vile his attempts to cheat his antagonist. Douglass would be left severely alone in his self-defense, and he resolved to employ every means at his command to win, and that meant play of the foulest kind. Just so long as his opponent (for whom by the way he very foolishly felt the professional's contempt of amateurism) should not detect his crooked work, he would not be interfered with by his victim's friends. He had never watched Douglass's play before, but smiled confidently at what he mistook for awkwardness when Ken clumsily shuffled the cards, the deal having fallen to him.

It was dealer ante and Douglass stayed when Coogan came in. The gambler filled his hand, aces on sixes, on a three card draw. He passed the bet and Douglass bet one chip; Coogan raised it two and Douglass called. The latter had three queens and Coogan took the pot. He was quite certain of his man now; this cowpuncher was either rattled and had lost his nerve, or else he was an amateur of the rawest kind, it being evident from the fact of his drawing only two cards that he had the three queens before the draw, his other cards being a deuce and seven.

But his equanimity got a jar when Ken passed up the ante on his deal and subsequently regained all his lost chips on his own deal. The hands were astonishingly big for the stage of the game and

the gambler essayed a crooked play which apparently was not detected by Douglass. He was vastly encouraged thereby and tried it repeatedly, winning only a chip or two each time. Fortune seemed very capricious and at last both men were again on even footing, each having in possession his full quota of counters.

Emboldened by his previous successes in that line the gambler now went about systematically holding out cards; he finally secured the four aces, dealing Douglass a king full. When the latter called him all the chips of both men were in the pot.

"What have you got?" The cowboy's voice was peculiarly clear, his manner suave and courteous.

"What you got?" evasively retorted Coogan with a smirk.

"King full—and a .44 to your nothing! Your sleeve is too tight for this kind of work, Bart. I didn't think you'd dare try that on me; your work is very coarse!" He swept the heap of chips to his side of the table with the barrel of his revolver. "You'll find his real hand in his sleeve, Red. No, not that one—there's where he has the knife; the cards are in the left sleeve."

"Did you really think I was that easy?" he said reproachfully to the discomfited gambler, as McVey laid the bowie and secreted cards on the table. "Why, you've even misjudged your own hold-out—see!" He rapidly took up his opponent's hand and spread them face up before the astonished eyes of the gambler. There were only three, instead of four aces, with a jack and deuce. "I had you beat on the showdown, Bart. Really, I am surprised!" Then to the profane delight of Red, he carelessly opened his hand, exposing the missing ace which he had adroitly palmed. The spectators to a man laughed and after a moment Coogan joined in the hilarity. He was really a man of big caliber and he felt an unwilling admiration of this audacious youngster who had so cleverly hoisted him with his own petard. Besides, there is a certain wisdom of magnanimity in defeat.

"You've got me going and coming!" he admitted, laughingly; "I ain't got no kick coming." But his eyes wandered uneasily to the letters and hides on the floor and Douglass was generous.

He took the bowie knife and with three rapid circular slashes cut out those parts branded; upon these he laid the package of letters and held them out to the gambler together with his knife. He took them mechanically, staring incredulously at the cowpuncher, who said not unkindly:

"I reckon you've got more use for these than I have. But if I were you I'd keep out of the cattle business; the game isn't worth the candle!" Big Bart went over and tossed the bits of skin and the incriminating letters into the heart of the little coal fire blazing in the office stove. When they were finally consumed he turned to Red, who was nearest the door.

"Call in all your outfit and tell Billy to send in a basket of wine." With his own hand he filled the glasses and then turned to the waiting throng with uplifted beaker:

"To the new owner of the O Bar O!"

They drank it vociferously and when the bottles were finally empty Coogan passed around the cigars. Douglass, though fully aware of the man's uncanny past, felt for the now apparently despondent wretch the involuntary pity which the huntsman feels always for the dangerous tiger which he has laid low after a titanic struggle. He tried to think of some service that he could consistently render him; there was so much in this man of gigantic frame and undaunted courage! He had shown himself game to an incredible degree, and somehow the thought of that herculean throat purpling in the noose of a Mexican rope was violently distasteful to him. Impelled by a sudden impulse he went over to him and while ostensibly bidding him good-by, contrived to whisper unperceived:

"My horse, a roan, is tied just under this window. Nothing on this range can touch him! I'll hinder them all I can. Good luck to you!"

Over the man's face swept a great wonder. He tried to speak but the words stuck in his throat; he dropped his eyes and gripped Ken's hand hard.

"If I make it I'll live straight hereafter!" he mumbled, thankfully. There is no man so brave but what chills on the threshold of the Valley of the Shadow!

As Douglass turned laughingly to reply to some witticism of Ballard's concerning "bloated cattle kings" and their liquorous obligations to the common community, Coogan put his hands behind his back and with head bowed as in deep meditation paced slowly toward the window. The Mexican sheriff, resolutely interposed between him and the opening, drew his revolver and curtly said: "Pardon! Señor Coogan, I would have speech with you. I have here a warrant—"

He got no farther, having committed the fatal error of letting his man get too close. With a leap like that of a charging tiger, the gambler was upon him, one hand catching the wrist below the weapon, the other falling with frightful force upon the olive temple. Under the impact of their combined weight the flimsy window gave way like blotting paper and both men were precipitated on the ground outside. With a pretense of going to the sheriff's aid Douglass managed to trip up the marshall, whose quickly-drawn weapon was harmlessly discharged in the floor, and as the others stumbled and fell over his prostrate body Douglass managed to get himself somehow wedged in the window, thus effectually preventing any use of firearms.

As he struggled with exaggerated strenuousness to free himself from the entangled debris, he saw

Coogan gain his feet and run swiftly towards the tethered horse; he saw the halter rope severed with one deft slash of the bowie and the foot placed hastily in the stirrup. But the triumphant vault into the saddle was never made; the animal, alarmed at this summary and unusual method of release, was shying away from the man who was trying in his frenzied haste to mount on the wrong side. As Coogan hopped about with muttered oaths, trying to secure an effectual footing, a dark, slender figure seemed to rise out of the ground at his side. Douglass caught the blue gleam of polished steel in the moonlight just above Coogan's neck, heard the soft thud of a well-driven blow; he gave a great cry of warning but it fell upon unheeding ears. The man, releasing his hold upon the horse, staggered blindly about, thrusting savagely at random, a queer bubbling cry welling from his lips. Again and again as the stricken giant reeled tottering about, came that snake-like glide and merciless thrust until finally, his veins drained of their vital flood, Coogan fell on his face in the crimsoned snow.

And then above the rush of hurrying feet, above the cries of blasphemous wonder and alarm as the Palace vomited out its raucous filth, there arose a cackling horror that Douglass would never forget as long as he lived, the vacuous gibbering of Dolores Ysobel de Tejada, kissing her blood-stained *cuchilla* and screaming weird endearments to two dead men in Jalisco.

Don Luis Garcia, a little giddy and tremulous from the effects of that awful blow, wept remorsefully on the neck of McVey, who promptly suggested vinous consolation. "*Ay de mi!*" he wailed, "why deed I heem not keel so when that I the chance haddest! Now there will not the hangin' be, and Señorita de Tejada—Ah, *pobre nina!* She is what you call heem 'off-the-nut.' It is to weep—she of the ver' firs' familee was, and now—*Es muy lastima!* Eet iss too damn bad!"

Red assented dolorously. "An' Matlock got away, too! Señor, it are shore hell!" Then, remembering, he turned sharply aside so that the other could not see the dull flush on his cheek as Conscience slapped him in the face.

By the advice of Mr. Brewster, the lawyer, Douglass and McVey returned to the jail and reincarcerated themselves therein. The entrapped Mexicans were released with a series of warnings, so effectively phrased by the Lazy K cowpuncher in charge of them, coupled by a few emphasizing kicks impartially administered by him to each by way of self-consolation for his having missed all the fun, that they took their permanent departure for parts unknown without standing on the order of their going. The turnkey, for obvious reasons, was only too glad to keep his own counsel.

At the preliminary examination, which was held without delay, both men were fully exonerated on the grounds of self-defense and were as promptly discharged from custody. The bill of sale was duly recorded; another transfer of the brand and its contents from Douglass to Carter was executed and put on record, and relaxation was the logical order of the day.

Douglass, suddenly remembering his promise to report the result of his attempt, went up to the telegraph office and indited a brief message.

"Won out. O Bar O brand recorded in your name."

He did not know that it had been preceded by another message to the same address, sent by Warren Brewster in reply to one received from Carter, and ascribed the unconcealed admiration of the girl operator to an entirely different cause from that which actually inspired it. Evidently his vanity had suffered no discouragement over night. But he only smiled indulgently at her; she was a pale, anæmic, washed-out blonde and he had but small regard for the type.

Back in their palatial New York home Robert Carter and his sister were seated in the library, waiting with strained emotions for the ring of the messenger boy who would bring the answer to a message flashed an hour before to the far West. The man was visibly perturbed and ever and anon strode impatiently to the window, watch in hand, cursing the dilatoriness of telegraph companies in general and this one in particular. The woman sat very quiet and thoughtful in a big cozy chair before the open fire of sea coals, her head supported by one hand, the other lying clenched upon two open letters in her lap. Her face was very pale and there were lines of pain about the sensitive mouth. Her whole attitude betokened a great nervous tension and the eyes were luminous with dread. Mechanically she took up the letters and reread them for at least the hundredth time that morning. They were the two written by Douglass the night before his departure to Gunnison. It was evident that Abbie had either exceeded or misunderstood his instructions as to the posting of them, for they had arrived together in the same mail.

Once more she yielded to the fatal fascination of the shorter note: "In case of my death—" this time she got no farther for the letters swam in a blinding mist; her reserve broke down and she laid her head on the cushioned arm of the chair. Robert came quickly to her side.

"Don't! For God's sake, don't, Gracie! We will know in a minute." He put his arm tenderly around her. "There is absolutely nothing to apprehend; he is a man among a thousand and too wise to take any foolish risks. It is all right!" But his own agitation gave the lie to his brave assurance and he started nervously as the door-bell clanged harshly.

He took the ominous yellow envelope from the hand of the pompous lackey who presented it and almost tore the enclosure in twain as he wrenched it from its flimsy covering. One hasty glance and he gave a great shout of joy.

"Gracie—listen!"

"Douglass secured bill sale from Coogan without trouble. Is well and hearty. Congratulations on your manager! He is a wonder!"

"BREWSTER."

As she hastily confirmed his reading the bell clanged again and the obsequious waiter brought in Douglass's telegram. Quick as was the man, the girl reached the salver first. With a composure that strongly contrasted with her previous agitation, she handed it to her brother.

"It is from Mr. Douglass," she said calmly, "and confirms Mr. Brewster's wire. After all we were needlessly exercised about the whole matter. I had no idea that your friend had such a predilection for dramatic effects." And to his open-mouthed consternation she swept out of the room with a scornful smile on her face.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Mr. Robert Carter, blankly, to the dignified effigy in plush.

"Yessir," assented that functionary, gravely. "If you please, sir!"

CHAPTER XIV

A FAIR FIELD AND NO FAVORS!

It was very pleasant at the C Bar ranch when the bluebirds came again. Under the magical touch of the revivifying spring the buds were bursting with the sheer joy of living and the earth was soft with thankfulness. The cool, balmy air of the lower mesas was rich with the delicate fragrance of the greening things, and higher up the breath of the cañons was faintly redolent of the balsamic incense of pine and fir.

The meadows, lush with the largess of the melting snow fields above, resounded to the liquid gurgling of myriads of red and yellow-shouldered blackbirds wheeling and swinging over them in clouds of parti-colored animation; the streams, no longer mere empty stretches of thirsty sand and dry white boulders, were roaring the lusty pean of well-filled bellies and over-flushed veins. Far and near the land was dotted with slowly-moving cattle, nipping gratefully at the succulent grass tips, their formerly lank and rough-haired flanks distended with the young year's generous bounty. In the barnyards was a scurrying of yellow balls of down as the clucking hens told of some juicy tidbit wriggling for their delectation. Everywhere was new young life, and all things were fat with promise.

Scoured by the strenuous hand of winter, the ranch premises were delightfully clean and sweet; the fences and corrals, repaired and new-built, looked trim, strong and capable; the ditches were running bank-full in readiness for duty in the arid days to come. Everything betokened thrift and good management, and Douglass, looking at it with critical approvement, knew that so far he had made good.

"She nevah looked bettah," was McVey's satisfied comment as he sat on his horse on the crest of the little divide overlooking the ranch. "Yuh suah hev got thu layout well in hand. We'll hev hay to buhn this fall."

"There was too much burned last year," said Douglass grimly; "we'll try to put it to better use this time. I wonder what's become of him." It was the first reference he had made to Matlock for many weeks. Red spat indifferently.

"Pulled hes freight fer good, I reckon. Mont Butler told me he saw him in Laramie two weeks afteh yuh broke jail." Both men chuckled reminiscently. "He were full o' talk, as usual, but I reckon thet hes blowin' won't cause no cyclones in these yeah pahts. I feel real bad to think thet he didn't stop long enough to say goo'by to me thet night."

As they rode slowly in to lunch, warned by the blowing of a horn in the hands of the impatient Abbie, Douglass was unusually taciturn. As they unbridled their horses in the barn he said suddenly:

"Red, I'm going to take my vacation to-morrow; will be gone for a month. Day after to-morrow Mr. and Miss Carter will be at Tin Cup—got a letter from him last week. I want you to go and meet them. Better take the extra wagon for their luggage, as well as the buckboard and Miss Carter's roan; she wants to ride in. The buckboard is for Carter and a woman friend they are bringing with them. Of course you will be in charge while I'm gone. I'm going prospecting and I'll stake you in if I find a gold mine." He said it as a matter of course; these two had become inseparable in most things.

Red grunted suspiciously; he was evidently not so well pleased with prospective riches as he logically should have been.

"Yuh are shore yuh ain't goin' to try an' develop a lead mine in somebody's haid oveh to Laramie?" His tone was almost peevish.

Douglass gave him a reassuring thump amidships. "Not this trip, old man. I am going over to the head of the Roaring Fork to trace up some float I found there two years ago. I'd like mighty well

to have you come along, but we both can't leave at the same time, you know."

"It's very rich float," he said that night as they sat discussing final arrangements. "If I ever find that lead, Red, our working days are over. How'd you like to be a bloated bond-holder, eh, old-timer?"

Red grinned skeptically. "I'm from Texas. Yuh've got ter put it in mah hand."

"But in case we should strike it?" insisted the other with amused curiosity.

Red hung his belt and scabbard on the peg above his bunk; then he hung his sombrero over them, taking considerable time to their satisfactory disposal. But his head was thrown well back and his reply was almost a challenge in its curt incisiveness:

"Then I reckon I wouldn't have to baig what ribbons I took a fancy to."

Douglass's eyes narrowed to mere slits and he breathed very softly; then his brows unbent again, and he laughed cynically. "That isn't very complimentary to—to wearers of the ribbons, Red. Do you really think money can buy that kind of thing?"

"No, I reckon it wouldn't in her case," said McVey slowly, "but it would give a man thu right to sit in thu game." Then he raised his head proudly, sincerity, truth and resolution glowing in every lineament of his strong, bronzed face: "I love her," he said simply, "an' some day, when I've got thu right to, I'm goin' ter tell her so. An' now that I've been fool enough to let yuh fo'ce my hand, I wan't yuh to know that I only ask a faih field an' no favohs. To hell with yuh mine."

He flung angrily out of the house, his spurs clinking as he went. For quite a time Douglass sat in statuesque silence; then he, too, went out into the night, wending his way to the office, where he wrote far into the wee sma' hours. Finally he dismounted his fountain pen and reread carefully the longer of the four documents on which he had been engaged. They were respectively a complete report of the stewardship, a receipt for one thousand dollars covering his four months' salary (he took that sum in cash from the little safe), a short letter to Mr. Carter, and his resignation. He sealed them all in one envelope, which he addressed and confided to Abbie's care for prompt delivery to Carter on his arrival. Then he went back to the bunkhouse and in ten minutes was fast asleep.

As he pulled out in the morning Red noted that the horses which he rode and packed were Douglass's private property. Just before mounting he said, holding McVey's fist in a cordial grip, his other hand upon the brawny shoulder:

"Red, I have decided to make my vacation a permanent one. I am not coming back. You are in full charge now and naturally will be retained in that capacity. You are a square, straight, *white* man, and I am leaving you a free field. I wish you luck." He rode away, McVey watching him out of sight with wonder and consternation written all over his honest face.

Over at Tin Cup he tarried long enough to bait and rest his horses and bid his friends good-by, confiding to them the scant information that he was tired of ranch work and was going to try his luck at mining. He made all kinds of exaggerated promises to little Eulalie as she clung to him sobbingly, and solemnly pledged himself to kill a bear for Bud, who wanted the hide to make a pair of *chaparejos*.

He remained over night in town, leaving rather late the next day. The animals were fresh and the going good, nevertheless he did not get so far away but what the sweet face of Grace Carter glowed almost life-size in the field of his powerful prism binoculars as she sprang expectantly out of the stage and looked eagerly around with a keen disappointment growing in her eyes as McVey and Abbie alone appeared to welcome her. He saw her shake hands cordially with the former and a sneer disfigured his mouth; but it involuntarily dissipated as she was buried in the hug of the old woman who was patting her on the shoulder and crying for joy.

He suddenly changed the focus of the glass as another face came in view; Robert Carter was assisting a woman to alight and as she reached terra firma the declining sun rays irradiated her face sharply. The man licked his lips nastily: "Hell!" he muttered with a fierce regret, "why didn't I know that this was coming? Guess I've overlooked the best bet of my life." And that, with Ken Douglass, was a sin.

He watched them get under way for the ranch, and followed them with his glass until the distance swallowed them up. He had a broadside view for nearly the whole distance, as their course lay at nearly right angles to his line of vision. Occasionally he looked at the equestrienne on the prancing roan, but for the greater part of the time the lenses were centered on the face and form of the woman in the buckboard.

For the first time in his life Red McVey had dodged a direct issue when Carter had asked him why Douglass had not met them in person. In response to that question he had equivocally replied that Douglass had gone away on his vacation and had delegated the duty to him. He was devoutly glad that he was not forced into particulars and avoided any embarrassing questions by devoting himself assiduously to the baggage.

When he opened the envelope which Abbie handed to him after supper, Carter's irritation passed all bounds. With a forced politeness he excused himself to his guest and went into the office, where he was shortly joined by his sister, who intuitively surmised that something was wrong. He

almost thrust the letter into her hand, asking angrily:

"What the devil is the meaning of all this?"

She scanned the page hurriedly, her face paling as she read. It was very short, but concise:

"DEAR MR. CARTER:—

"In leaving your service I desire to thank you for the many courtesies enjoyed at your hands, and for the flattering confidence you have ever reposed in me. Enclosed please find a full statement of assets and liabilities which I ask you will confirm at your earliest convenience. I have done my best and I trust that my services have been satisfactory.

"Mr. McVey is perfectly competent to assume full management of the outfit and I sincerely hope that you will consider him favorably in that connection; he is absolutely honest and dependable, and is, besides, by far the best cowman of my acquaintance. I am recommending him without either his knowledge or consent.

"I have paid myself out of the funds in hand; please find voucher inclosed.

"Wishing the C— unbounded prosperity, and yourself the happiness and good fortune you deserve,

Yours very respectfully,

"KENNETH M. DOUGLASS."

Never a word as to his underlying reasons; not an intimation of his future plans and purposes, not even a conventional word of farewell to her. She laid the letter quietly on the table.

"Really, Robert, your question is astonishing," she said in cold asperity to his reiterated demand. "How could I possibly know of the reasons actuating Mr. Douglass? He has never taken me into his confidence and so I am more in the dark than you, his professed best friend, should logically be. Of course I share your regret at losing so valuable an employé; but assuredly I am not responsible for it in any way."

Then she swept out haughtily to the entertainment of her guest, leaving him standing there furious and altogether unconvinced. He went over to the bunkhouse to interrogate McVey, but could get no enlightenment from that taciturn individual, who really knew nothing of Douglass's motives. So the next morning he made a virtue of necessity and offered the position to Red, who accepted it without comment, merely observing: "I'll try to please yuh."

On leaving her brother, Grace went straight to Mrs. Brevoort with no little embarrassment in her manner. She realized now that both she and Robert had talked a great deal about their recalcitrant manager and she was at a loss how to explain the anomalous situation. But she went the best possible way about it, straight to the point.

"I am afraid that your proposed conquest of all the cowboys on the ranch will have to be deferred in at least one particular instance, Connie," she said with a fine attempt at humorous condolence; "the most eligible one, our manager, Mr. Douglass, having severed his connection with the C Bar, so Bobbie informs me. I am genuinely sorry, for he was 'the noblest Roman of them all!'"

It was cleverly done; so cleverly, in fact, that Constance Brevoort was completely nonplused, astute as she was. Long ago she had arrived at a conclusion not borne out by the seeming indifference of her hostess, who was placidly smiling at the regal beauty in the cozy armchair before the cheerful pinon fire. Under the cover of a pretended pout she watched Grace sharply.

"I have not learned the particulars yet," continued Grace airily, "but I rather suspect that he got forewarned somehow and has beaten a masterly retreat while yet in possession of all his faculties. Seriously, dear, I am sorry that you did not meet him; he is a very attractive man and a forceful one. I am dubious of the outcome of a passage between you and him, despite your proficiency in the gentle game of hearts." She was laughing quite naturally now, if a little bitterly; there is much said in jest that is meant in earnest.

Constance somehow detected the false note but gave no sign. She looked up languidly. "Really, I am getting interested. Maybe it is only a pleasure deferred. Is he handsome, this Sir Galahad of yours?" There was a covert malice in the question that failed of its intent, for Grace said steadily:

"Not handsome in the common acceptance of the term, perhaps, but the manliest man I have ever seen."

"And you have seen so many," murmured the other comprehensively. "He interests me more than ever. Is he irrevocably lost to me?"

"That," said Grace truthfully, "I cannot say. It's a small world, you know, and strange things come to pass." She gave a little retrospective pat to the head of Buffo, lying in her lap. "And some beautiful things pass for ever." The antelope licked her cheek sympathetically as the last sentence was breathed softly in his ear. Constance Brevoort, unhearing that last piteous cry, smiled confidently.

"It will come to pass, without question. And then—who knows."

Carter entering at this juncture, the conversation was diverted to other topics. Later that night as Mrs. Brevoort divested herself of the surface paraphernalia of the sex, she smiled approvingly at the revelations of the long cheval mirror in her dressing-room.

She was a handsome young matron of thirty, a perfect specimen of the southern type of brunette, with black eyes and hair, and creamy skin. Married at eighteen to Anselm Brevoort, a millionaire thirty years her senior, she had lived the life of luxury and dissipation inseparable from her social station, and was therefore naturally blasé and a bit enervated. Yet, as she stood there in the soft candle light, uncoiling her luxuriant masses of hair, it was evident that excesses had left no traces on her splendid physique.

Her marriage had been one of convenience purely; she had from the very beginning frankly disavowed any love for the man who made her the mistress of his establishment and the custodian of his honor, and the waning years had not brought any accession of the tender passion. Brevoort was a very unemotional man at the best and was wholly engrossed in his business affairs, living for the better part of his time at the clubs or abroad. She was therefore thrown a great deal on her own resources for amusement, and it must be admitted that she made the most of the many opportunities accorded to every beautiful woman in her sphere. Her natural pride and discriminativeness had served her among temptations that would have been disastrous to a weaker nature.

So it was that at the end of her "dolorous dozen" as she whimsically called her years of marital anomaly, she had run the gamut of every danger incident to such a career and had escaped without a scar. And her self-confidence was commensurably great. It was her laughing boast that no man had ever given her a sensation other than those of charity and weariness, and she was irritatingly frank in her expressions to that effect, even to her victims. Her visit to the Carter ranch was merely a caprice, occasioned by Grace's enthusiastic laudations of her pet western plainsmen and her mischievous intimation that beyond the Rockies was a world impregnable to even the prowess of this female Alexander. Grace was not a little alarmed at the prompt acceptance of her inadvertent challenge by the finished coquette, who really had no design whatever on her protégés but only utilized it as an excuse to get away for a time from an environment productive of ennui. She had heartily tired of the silly game and really welcomed the distraction of a new and unique experience.

Nevertheless, she had gaily laid a wager with Grace that she would, in less than the allotted two-months of her stay, bedeck her belt with the scalp of every cowpuncher within a radius of ten miles from the C Bar. And when, as the day of their departure for the West approached, Miss Carter realized that Mrs. Brevoort was in earnest, she wished that she had been less urgent in her conventional invitation: it is ever a dubious venture, this turning of one's pet preserve over to the questionable mercies of a skillful and calloused hunter.

Well, there was no danger now, she was thinking with a sad sinking of heart, as she looked wistfully at a cluster of long-dried heart's-ease in her escritoire. It was over and done with, and that chapter of her life was closed forever. For Abbie had, in a fit of self-reproach, told her of her taunt on that eventful night and she had instantly divined his thoughts and deductions. Her first impulse had been to write him and indignantly deny—what? He had not given voice to any such belief in her duplicity, and how was she to assume that he entertained such a thought without giving color and grounds for his suspicion? And then, again, he had not left any address and it would be impossible to reach him by mail. She knew him well enough to know that he would never again look upon her willingly in his foolish and unjustified resentment, and the probabilities of a consistent explanation were all against her. He had never written her one word during her eastern sojourn; his letters had been all of a purely business nature, curt and brief, always addressed to her brother and only containing the conventionally-required remembrances to herself. And now the over-wide gulf was forever unbridgable. In her desolation and heartache she cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XV

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Constance Brevoort's two months had lengthened into five and it was now October. Her experience had been unique and so diverting that the attractions of the eastern metropolis had paled before the more virile and exciting possibilities of this life primitive, and it had required but slight persuasion on the part of the Carters to induce her to prolong her stay until the time of their own return to New York.

The healthful outdoor life, to which she took with avidity, had worked wonders for her really splendid and responsive constitution, and her normal great beauty had been freshened and intensified to a degree that made her conquest of the unsophisticated cowpunchers a thing of almost unenjoyable ease. With the single exception of Red, who loyally worshiped at the shrine of his first-loved divinity, every man for miles around did open and unblushing homage to the bewitching goddess, who found in their frank adoration a charm and satisfaction unknown to her previous inane piracies on the placid shallows of the social millpond. Out here on the high seas of unshackled independence, where every man was a viking in his own right and cruised with

unbridled license through the deeps of his own will, each conquest was a victory to be written large on the tablet of her vanity. In her own land she had found many men who would languidly live for her favors; out here there was not one who would not eagerly die for the privilege of carrying out her most whimsical commands. And with womanly lack of philosophy she very much preferred those who would die to those who would live.

Under the jealous ministrations of her Centaur swains she had developed a great skill of horsemanship, and in their company she and Grace Carter had ridden the range thoroughly, leaving not one point thereof unexplored. Each man vied with the other in the breaking of a safe mount for her, and tradition has it that there were more gentle horses on the range that year than had ever been known before on the whole western slope. These extended rides were a Godsend for Grace, diverting her mind from its cankering memories and bringing a new beauty to both face and figure, until at last the amorous cowpunchers were frankly divided as to the supremacy of the two women's respective charms. Red, alone, had no indecision, either in thought or strenuous expression on that point.

"Thu black ain't in thu runnin' with thu bay; an' she ain't in her class, nuther," had been his unequivocal opinion when approached on that topic. "Thu one's good enough to put yuh wad on fer a quick spurt, but yuh kin trus' yuah life on thu otheh. Thu filly fer me, every time." But then Red was in love, and that always has a strongly modifying influence on one's convictions. That he was nearly alone in his judgment may be ascribed to the difference of tastes. And it may be stated as a curious coincidence that most of the cowpunchers were blondes.

Not a word had been heard from Douglass since his departure and he had actually passed out of the mind of Mrs. Brevoort altogether. When their paths did finally cross, however, it was under conditions that stamped him indelibly upon her mind and soul both.

She and Grace had ridden over to Tin Cup in the cool of the morning, spending the day with Mrs. Blount. They had, on their return, essayed a short cut through William's pasture field, with the intention of thereby shortening the distance and evading the dust which hung in big yellow clouds above a herd of cattle being driven up the county road.

In the field adjoining Grace saw, with an instantaneous recognition which sent the color from her cheeks, a rider engaged in corralling a pair of dusty pack-horses whose appearance betokened a long day's plodding. There could be no mistaking that erect, lithe figure, or the long, rangy "strawberry roan" he was so gracefully bestriding, and her heart leaped at sight of him. Constance, following the direction of her gaze, asked quickly:

"Who is that? What a superb seat he has!"

Even as her lips opened in reply, Grace saw Mrs. Brevoort's horse give a frantic kick at something entangling his legs, then leap affrightedly from side to side, while his rider screamed in terror. As he plunged again Grace screamed in unison as she realized her companion's peril; she never knew that at that moment of supreme dread she had instinctively cried out the name of the rider in the next field, conscious only of that terrible strand of barbed wire which was goading Constance's horse to frenzy. It was a thing of all too common occurrence in this land of wire fences; a loosely-coiled strand of the barbed steel had been left lying in the high grass where some careless repairsman had indolently flung it, and the horse had become hopelessly entangled in its trap. Scared and anguished by the ripping barbs, the horse was plunging madly about in his attempt to free himself from its cruel fetters, momentarily approaching a greater danger, as in his struggles he neared a high cut bank of the arroyo traversing the pasture.

At that shrill scream of "Ken! Ken!" the man whirled his horse about and looked inquiringly in their direction; one lightning-like glance and he sent the rowells home hard into the flank of the roan, which left the ground in one mighty leap. Over the intervening twenty rods he came like a thunderbolt, clearing the dividing fence by a good two feet as Douglass lifted him to the jump and gaining the side of the plunging horse just as the bank's edge crumbled under its feet.

He was not one moment too soon, for as his arm encircled Constance's waist, her horse went floundering down to a broken neck on the rocks thirty feet below. Even then for a few moments the issue was in doubt; Mrs. Brevoort was an exceedingly well-nurtured young woman, and one hundred and forty pounds of limp humanity is difficult to sustain with one arm while on the back of a horse struggling to retain his footing on the treacherous edge of a loose-earth precipice. But that arm had the strength of a steel bar, and its possessor was the best horseman in a land where all men rode for a living. Inside of ten seconds he was dismounting in safety, still holding the fainting woman with that one clasping arm.

As he touched the ground he placed the other arm around her supportingly, her weight for the first time telling on him. On his snatching her out of the saddle she had instinctively thrown her arms about his neck, and they were still there; her head lay drooped upon his shoulder and her loosened hair, whipping in the fresh breeze, was stinging his cheek and blinding his eyes as Grace rode up and flung herself from the saddle. There was a suggestiveness in the pose of the two that went to her heart with a pang: they looked so lover-like, this man with his arms about the clinging woman. For five long months she had been schooling her heart to resignation in the conviction that they would never meet in the flesh again, and here he had come back to her—with another woman in his arms. In that moment she hated Constance Brevoort with all the fervor of her strong young aching heart. For as she stood there, torn by passion and pulsating with joy at the sight of him whom she had deemed lost to her forever, she saw the black eyes cautiously

open and close again, the rose-red lips curve in a peculiar smile, and the white arms tighten about Douglass's neck.

In the first fury of her jealous rage she could have killed them both without compunction, but pride came to her rescue and as he gently laid his burden down in the deep grass, reason reasserted itself. Taking Constance's head in her lap, she said curtly:

"Get some water at once! There is plenty in the arroyo."

He was back in a half minute with his inverted sombrero full of the tepid fluid which Grace rather unceremoniously poured over Mrs. Brevoort's face and neck, sneering cynically at the well-simulated gasp of returning consciousness that rewarded her efforts. At the second douche Mrs. Brevoort's eyes opened a bit hastily; the water was a trifle turbid as well as tepid, and Constance doubted the benefits of that alkaline lotion on her zealously-preserved complexion. Grace smiled grimly and emptying the remainder of the water out of his sombrero handed it to him with exaggerated thankfulness.

He took it with a modest disclaimer and turned to the readjustment of his saddle which had been displaced during the rescue. Then he went to the recovery of the accoutrements of the dead horse in the arroyo and when he returned Mrs. Brevoort was in more appropriate condition to receive his formal introduction and convey her gratitude for the supreme service he had rendered. He evaded most of the latter by hastily riding back to town in the hopes of securing her another mount. He returned with the discomfiting report that there was not a single ridable animal available, and suggested that the ladies return to Tin Cup and stay over night, a rider being meanwhile sent to the C Bar ranch for a horse that she could handle with safety. As it was already well along in the heel of the day they were compelled to accept his advice and the return to the hotel was soon effected.

He was all deference to Miss Carter throughout the evening meal and the short succeeding hour of his company which he accorded them. He was frank in his confession of failure to find the mineral deposits of which he had been in search, although positive in his conviction that he would be ultimately successful. He was exceedingly affable in his manner and Grace was all sweetness in return. Constance Brevoort, watching the little by-play, was genuinely amused; with the wisdom of the old serpent she effaced herself as much as possible, and as soon as conventionality would permit, excused herself and retired to her room, leaving the leaven of her beauty to work in what she correctly judged to be warm and fertile soil. It was a clever bit of strategy that would in nine out of ten instances have been altogether successful and she smiled as she looked into the little mirror.

"This one will be worth while," she mused aloud, her mouth full of hair-pins. "But he will require different treatment from the others, and will have to be handled carefully. But why did she say he was not handsome? The man is as beautiful as a Greek god done in bronze. And he has the strength of ten. He caught me up like a feather." She looked with a strange admiration at the slight discoloration of the white flesh where his arm had gripped her waist. "Yes, he will be worth while."

But fate had capriciously designed this to be the tenth instance; after she had left the room an embarrassing silence had fallen upon the stuffy little parlor and after awhile, Douglass rose diffidently and stalked toward the door, mumbling some conventional excuse for his departure. His hand was already on the door knob when his name, softly spoken, caused him to turn instantly. Grace had also risen and was standing beside the table with one hand partly extended and something very like entreaty in her eyes.

"Tell me," she said without preamble, coming straight to the point, "why did you leave the C Bar? My brother says you gave no reason; and I think I have a right to know."

For the eternal half of a minute he regarded her with somber scorn. "I guess you've got another think coming," he said with slangy impoliteness. "When, and where, and how, and by whom was conferred upon you the right to demand of me an accounting of my private affairs?"

Her bosom was heaving in hot resentment of his studied incivility and her lips trembled with a fierce desire to give him scorn for scorn. But she had too much at stake and another opportunity might not offer if she let the present one escape her. So she wisely availed herself of woman's best weapon and a tear glistened in her eye as she said humbly: "I presumed too greatly; and I am fully rebuked. I have no right—not even the right to expect courtesy and justice at your hands. Yet you are a fair man, and some terrible mistake seems to have been made somehow. Tell me, please, why did you leave us as you did?"

He answered her, Yankee-wise, with a counter question: "Why did you show Abbie my poem?"

"Abbie—your poem—! I do not understand!" Her genuine wonder and surprise made him feel uneasy. 'Could it be possible, after all, that she was guiltless? If so—God! what a fool he had made of himself! He crossed the room impulsively, and laying his hand on her shoulder, looked squarely into her dewy eyes. She met his look bravely, then gently removing his hand, walked in her turn to the door. He intercepted her with a quick movement, his jaws squaring with determination.

"Let us have this thing out, here and now! Why did you deliberately make a laughing stock of me by exhibiting that foolish bit of verse and so expose me to the ridicule of the whole range? I want

the truth."

"And you could think me guilty of that!" There was more of sorrowful pity than indignation in the words and they cut him like a bullet. "Let me pass, please. I have no further curiosity to satisfy."

He barred the way obstinately, a shamed contrition struggling with sullen incredulity for the mastery. "Wait a minute," he said thickly. "If I am wrong in this I humbly beg your pardon, but I am going to be sure before I humiliate myself unnecessarily." Angry as she was, she had much difficulty to repress a smile at the arrogance of his vanity.

"Abbie taunted me with writing poetry and the men joined in her insinuations. Their only knowledge of my foolishness could have been derived from one source—the notebook which I lost and which you returned to me. There was no reference to it made before it came into your possession. What was I to infer?"

"That book was handed to me by my mother, who, as I understand, got it from one of the men who found it at the gate. He thought it belonged to my brother and so gave it to her. I beg to assure you that no one saw or handled it while in my possession but myself. And I certainly have not discussed its contents with any one." Reading full belief in his eyes, she recovered her composure instantly and thereafter had him on the defensive.

"Was the poetry really as bad as all that?" she asked with such apparent innocent naïveté that he was compelled against his will to smile somewhat sheepishly.

"It was arrant nonsense," he confessed. And then, somewhat bitterly. "Yet it was written in good faith, every word of it."

"Then I should like to read it," she said, with hypocritical interest. "I am curious to learn what could be the nature of the impressions that you could be impelled to perpetuate in verse."

"I thought you had no further curiosity to satisfy," he retorted evasively, his suspicions now entirely dissipated. "And I do not care to risk subjecting myself to any further indignities."

"That is very unkind of you." The reproof was gravely gentle. "My interest is not that of mere curiosity, believe me. I prophesied once that you could write poetry, remember. It would be a great pleasure to read the vindication of my intuition. *That* is woman's best trump card, you know. Please."

She laid her hand on his arm and he fumbled irresolutely with his hat; she smiled confidently, knowing well that he who hesitates with a woman is lost. Although greatly against his inclination he took the book from his inside pocket and put it in her hand, opened at the verse she was so familiar with.

With a great pretense at its more convenient reading, she went over to the lamp or the table; but it was really to hide a sudden trepidation she felt at her own audacity in thus forcing his hand. In order to gain time she reread it a second and then a third time. In the presence of the man standing there silently waiting her judgment, the lines took on a new and strange meaning, an intensity of pathetic appeal that filled her eyes with tears. She made no attempt to conceal them as she returned the booklet.

"I thank you," she said very gently. "It is my vindication—and my answer as well. 'A great Love's ecstasy!' May it be yours—and without the penalty."

Her face was drawn and wan, and the hand she extended to him as she bade him good night trembled visibly. He took it in both his and for an immortal second, happiness was very close to those two young people, had they only known. But Cupid was ever a mischievous imp and one of his arrows had only glanced; he laughed derisively and turned his back, resolving to drive the shaft home mercilessly when time and longing had worn to the quick this big simpleton's armor of obtuse vanity, as Douglass, restraining a sudden mad desire to take this woman in his arms and bruise her mouth with kisses, merely laid his lips respectfully on the little hand and deferentially held open the door.

At the entrance of the hotel he encountered Red McVey, coming to assure himself of the safety of the ladies. He had ridden out to meet them on their return journey, as was his wont, and, meeting the rider sent for a new mount for Mrs. Brevoort, had sent him on to the ranch with definite instructions, electing himself to ride through to town and as a matter of precaution, accompany them home the next day. The rider had not mentioned Douglass's participation in the mishap, and his presence was therefore a surprise to McVey, who was unaffectedly glad to see his best friend again.

At the Alcazar, a little later, Red had a sapient suggestion to make: "Befoh yuh squandah all thu gold yuh been diggin' outen yuh leetle ole mine, Ken, on this yeah mad-wateh outfit, yuh betteh lay yuh a leetle nest aig. Thu Vaughans want to sell theah ranch an' go east; reckon twenty thousand would buy it, cattle an' all. If yuh got that much denario in yuh jeans it's a mighty big bahgaln."

"Twenty thousand!" said Douglass derisively. "You haven't heard of a lone cowpuncher about my size that's been holding up any banks or treasure trains, have you? Twenty thousand! Why say, you old redheaded funny-bone, I'm ashamed to tell you what I'd do for one-half that much money, honest I am. I'm just seven bones to the good and I've come down here to make it a couple of

hundred, so's I can eat till the grass comes. It's next year I'll be buying twenty thousand-dollar bargains; the gold is there, all right, and I'm going to find it.

"I bought out a claim up there," he continued, "and who do you think owned it first?" He chuckled at thought of the surprise he was going to spring on Red. But his mirth got a sudden check as McVey nodded his head knowingly.

"Yes, I heered about it; 'twere Matlock, an' he's been talkin' a heap disrespect'ful about how he broke it off in yuh, oveh to Cheyenne. Says as how he is seven hundred dollars nearer even with yuh. I didn't think yuh'd let that coyote soak yuh thataway." His words were distinctly reproachful. Douglass smiled mysteriously.

"Don't you worry about my soaking, old-timer. He'll talk even more disrespectfully of himself about this time next year. That claim lies lengthwise along the top of the ridge, on both sides of it, and so constitutes the 'apex' of every vein below it throughout its full length. I am perfectly aware that he salted it for my benefit with ore taken from the Bonanza mine. I saw him doing it! But even if I hadn't known all about it I wouldn't have been fooled. The formation is entirely different from the Bonanza locality and any miner, let alone a professional mining engineer as I happen to be, would have tumbled to the salting at first sight of the stuff the fool scattered about the place. And that apex controls the vein that this came from!" He fished a bit of rock from his pocket and passed it to Red, whose eyes bulged out as he looked. Through its center, from side to side, ran a ribbon of dull yellow metal as wide as one's finger. Even to Red's unmetallurgical eyes its identity was plain.

"Gold! Pure gold!" he murmured with respectful awe. Then his big paw went out congratulatingly. "Shake! Gawd, ole man, but I'm shore glad!"

"What's a 'apex'?" he inquired of Douglass, some six hundred dollars winner for the night, as he left the faro table and walked arm in arm with him to the hotel. Douglass was very explicit in his explanation.

"Nearly all true fissure veins in these mountains are to all practical intents and purposes vertical; that is, they run straight up and down instead of lying horizontal. It naturally follows that, if they don't pinch out before they get there, they come to the surface at or near the top of the hill. The courts have decided that a claim located on the top or 'apex' of such veins controls them to whatever depth they may run; that is, an 'apex' claim holds all the veins under it clean down to China! So the fellow who owns the 'apex' practically owns the whole mountain for a space as long as the length of his claim. To make sure of catching the apex of any veins in the hill I took up two extensions—one on each side of the claim I bought from Matlock and his partner, so that my holdings are fifteen hundred feet long by nine hundred feet wide; as the hill crest is almost a knife-edge in sharpness I cover every vein in it. And somewhere under the loose slide-rock on that hill lies the lode from which this comes! Do you *sabe* now?"

Red gurgled his full comprehension. "Why yuh damned ole foxy gran'pa! I orter knowed thet yuh wouldn't let thet swab do yuh! But howd' yuh come to be dealin' with Matlock? I been a heap oneasy in my mind about that."

"Well, it was this way: Two years ago his partner, old Eric Olsen, the big Swede that Coogan bought the Palace from, you know, saw me prospecting on that mountain and naturally figured that I had found some good indications of mineral there or I would not be fooling around. So they plotted to salt a claim or two and swindle me a bit, their own prospecting of the ground revealing nothing at all. The whole mountain side is covered with slide-rock and there is no mineral in sight. So, calculating that a fool cowpuncher knew nothing about geology and so would bite at anything he could see with his own eyes, they stole a lot of rich ore from the Bonanza, over at Breckenridge, and salted her up good! As it happened, they chose the very claim I wanted to file on, the apex, and so I had to buy them out. I never came in contact with either of them at all; I bought it through a mining broker. But for a whole day I watched them through my field glasses salting the ground. The funny part of it is that by a very little work—Olsen is a good man with a drill and powder, you know—they did enough linear shafting to enable me to patent the ground. And in the five months that I have been at work on the extensions I have done enough work on each of them to patent them also. That's what I wanted this six hundred for. In ten days I'll have them patented, too, and then no one can jump them or cause me any trouble when I come to work the leads which I am sure lie under my apex claims."

On the first of the new year he received his patents from Washington; and in the interim he had secured work that promised to put him in sufficient funds to prosecute developments on his mining claims.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SONG OF THE WOLF

The next morning, yielding to McVey's urgencies, he consented to take part in the fall round-up just at hand, working in the interests of the C Bar outfit.

In the ensuing days of strenuous toil he worked harder than he had ever done before in all his range experience, spurred with the idea that he owed Carter some reparation for leaving his service so unceremoniously, and his staunch yeomanry appealed particularly to Anselm Brevoort, who had run out to see a rodeo and have a month's hunt with Carter. As the best hunter among the C Bar men it naturally devolved upon Douglass, after the range work was done, to act as guide to Brevoort and the ladies, who developed a great interest in the sport.

It was upon one of these trips that Brevoort casually mentioned his temptation to buy a ranch as an investment, asking Douglass's advice in the matter. The latter expressing some diffidence in the premises, Brevoort brought the point in issue to a definite focus by asking him if he thought the price asked for the Vaughan holdings, twenty thousand dollars, was excessive. Douglass thought it was excessively cheap, to the contrary, and said so emphatically.

"I would gladly give thirty for it if I had the money. There are more than twenty thousand dollars' worth of cattle in the VN brand without counting the ranch lands, which are worth nearly as much more. I think the Vaughans are loco to sell at the price!"

They had just finished luncheon and were lounging about a little spring enjoying their post-prandial pipes. Mrs. Brevoort was dallying with a dainty papelito and Grace was fussing with her pocket camera. Constance, gracefully exhaling a perfumed wraith, looked significantly to her husband, who gave an imperceptible nod and after a few thoughtful puffs came to the marrow of his subject.

"That's Carter's opinion, too, and McVey thinks it a great bargain, also. And as Mrs. Brevoort has taken a great fancy to the place for some reason, I think I will take it; that is, if I can secure some competent man to manage it for me. It would be a position of entire trust as I know nothing of the business and would necessarily be unable to give it scarcely any attention, my time being fully occupied otherwise. Are you open to such an engagement, Mr. Douglass?"

Grace Carter, her attention apparently riveted upon some intricate adjustment of her camera, scarcely breathed; Constance Brevoort, flicking the ash from her cigarette, never moved an eyelash. In the silence which followed the question, the champing of the horses on the grain in their nose-bags sounded to the women like a threshing machine.

"I am much flattered!" said Douglass, slowly. "But I am afraid that I will not be able to accept your offer. I have some mining interests to look after and—"

"But I understood you to say that you would gladly give thirty thousand dollars for it if you were in funds. That presupposes that you could find the time if necessary," said Brevoort, with humorous insistence. "Look here, Douglass, I am not in the habit of loading myself up with dubious investments, and I wouldn't give ten dollars for the whole layout unless I can secure you as manager. In your hands I feel as though I would get fair returns on my outlay. I am frank to say I have 'looked you up' as we say in town, and I want you to give it further consideration before turning my offer down. As to your mining interests, perhaps I could be of some assistance to you in that direction. Think it over; I won't take no for an answer right off the reel."

As he was unsaddling the horses on their return that night, Miss Carter, coming with some sugar lumps for her pet roan, stopped long enough to shyly venture the hope that he would be able to become one of the neighbors.

"The sale of their ranch will allow Nellie Vaughan to achieve the dream of her life, an extended trip abroad, and one realizes so few of one's dreams in this life, you know! Besides, you are part of the environment to me. You really 'belong'! I do hope you will accept Mr. Brevoort's proposal—for Nellie's sake!"

Very deliberately he hung the saddle on the rack. Then he came close to her, looking very masterful and Strong in the white moonlight.

"Nellie is to be congratulated on the thoughtfulness of her loving friends! But why should I, who am not one of them, take her into consideration at all? Promiscuous philanthropy is not my forte. The inducement is small. Have you nothing better to offer?"

"For our sakes, then;" she said ambiguously. "We will feel easier if you remain on this range, feel more secure in our lives and property." He flushed at the immensity of the compliment but ruthlessly forced her hand.

"That's rather high, but still not enough. Bid again!"

"For *my* sake!" It was nearly a whisper, but he heard. His eyes were triumphantly bright as, deftly eluding his curving arm, she sped swiftly away in the benign darkness. But it was a different glow from any which had ever irradiated them before: This was that of a soft, sweet tenderness that vaguely soothed even while strongly disconcerting him. He was very quiet under the spell of it as he went into supper, and noticeably distraught during the game of chess which he subsequently played with Mrs. Brevoort in the big living room later on.

Beating him with ridiculous ease she declined another game, saying, laughingly: "You are not in form to-night, Mr. Douglass, and I like victories more difficult of achievement. Time was when I was content with mere winning, no matter how easy the attainment of that end. But this life out here has spoiled me for inanities forever. I have still the insatiable desire for conquest, but now I want to go up against odds and win, to bring into camp only opponents worthy of my steel."

"But that," he said, with conventional politeness, "is unthinkable. There can be none entirely worthy of you!" She made a little *moué* at the wearisome compliment.

"Why do all men say the same things! I'm quite sure I've heard something like that a hundred times before. In fact, I've come three thousand miles to get away from it. Say something original, please, even if it be something wicked!"

He looked at her queerly but she met his gaze with eyes as audacious as her words. Over at the piano Grace was playing with much tender feeling one of Chopin's delicious nocturnes; before the open fireplace, Carter, Brevoort and McVey were discussing the possibilities of a well-managed ranch. The big room with its happy combination of modern and primitive amenities was the epitome of cheerfulness and comfort.

"Original? No man can say anything that is that. The possibilities were exhausted centuries ago. Even. Sin is stereotyped. There have always been women like you and men like me! What on earth could a man in my position say to a woman in yours that would be acceptably wicked?"

She smiled inscrutably; there was no abstraction in his manner now. "And yet you are so bold in other things!" she said, tauntingly. "To the brave all things are possible."

From far out in the darkness came the weird, long-drawn, mournful howl of some gaunt timber wolf foraging with his mate. It was very faint and the others, deeply engrossed in music and money matters, were unconscious of it. At its eerie repetition she laid her hand lightly on his arm.

"Listen! That is something new to me at all events. What can it be?"

"Only 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness,'" he whimsically quoted. "A gray wolf calling to his mate." He laid his hand restrainingly on hers and leaned so close that his hot breath swept her cheek.

"I wonder how brave, or wicked, you could really be, you wonderful creature!" he murmured, insidiously. Her color heightened but she made no reply. The pulse was very distinct in the veins of the soft little warm hand lying tremulously beneath his. "Listen! There it is again, the call of the Wild, the voice out of the Primitive inviting strong souls back into the boundless realm of the great First Cause. Are you brave enough to accept it, to go out and be the most gloriously fierce wolf of them all?"

"Why," she exclaimed, with a labored vivacity that deceived neither of them, "that is certainly original!"

"With—say with me for a running mate!" His voice was scarcely audible.

"And that is decidedly wicked!" She gently withdrew her hand. But there was small reproof in the seductive smile playing about her red lips. With the arrogance of the youthfully virile and strong he glanced contemptuously at the slight figure before the fireplace, old and worn and gray, debilitated with the fierce excesses of the chase after money; then he looked at the radiant beauty of the voluptuous young woman beside him and laughed grimly at the painful disparity between man and wife.

"And they say marriages are made in heaven!" To his credit be it said that he had intended the sneer to be mental only, but somehow or other, perhaps telepathically, the woman bent her head and a wave of crimson suffused her face.

"Wolves know no conventions," he went on with tense vehemence. "Out there in the wild soul calls to soul, body leaps to body in the fitness of true affinity. It is all Life, and therefore all Love; for Life is Love incarnated. The senile moralists of Humanity, that least fit race of all earthly animals, preach the equality of the sexes. As applied to human beings that is a lie. It is only out there among the wolves that She is the equal of He in all things, his mental, physical, psychical and sexual peer. That is why the type is kept pure and eternal. The wolf of twenty centuries hence will be fully the equal of the wolf of to-day. And why? Because of the virtue of perfect natural selection—the fittest to the fittest, without the let and hindrance of sickly sentimentality, the unnatural joining by Man-god made crimes of the unfit to the fit. Wolves breed wolves, with full powers of the highest enjoyment of Life and Love. Humanity begets weaklings, cowards, driveling idiots whose highest evolution is that shapeless thing called Hope, whose greatest virtue is submission to the anomalies of civilization. Even you, who could be the peer of any wolf that ever ran untrammled—"

He stopped abruptly, ashamed of his vehemence, and somewhat abashed by the indulgent if slightly satirical smile of his amused listener.

"Even if I could run, and howl, and go hungry; every man's hand, and what is infinitely worse, every woman's tongue against me! And what could the Wolf give me in exchange for this?" waving her hand around the room comprehensively and incidentally fondling her jewels.

"He could give you something in exchange for *that*," he said, with a sinister glance towards the fireplace and again she dropped her eyes.

He drew the chess board towards him and began mechanically arranging the pieces. Then he swept them impatiently into a heap and made as if to arise. She leaned forward suddenly and again laid her hand on his arm.

"The wolf subject is an interesting one to me. It is really a pity that I will not be accorded an opportunity of studying them in their native haunts. If it were not for your, to us, unfortunate obligations elsewhere, I should devote quite a portion of my time to the pursuit of more definite information about them."

His hot hand almost burned hers. "Why shouldn't you investigate the matter if you want to? Your husband is going to buy the VN ranch!" In silence more eloquent than words she gave him her hand.

After a few desultory minutes with the group about the fireplace, he strolled over to the piano. Grace welcomed him shyly, her touch on the keys a little uncertain as in compliance with her request he sang to her accompaniment the Toreador song from Carmen. The request was an inspiration on her part, she never having heard him sing before, and she had preferred it only to cover her soft confusion as she suddenly felt rather than saw his presence behind her. If his instant compliance had surprised her, his execution of it was a revelation to everyone in the room. He sang it easily and freely, a little raucously from lack of practice, it is true, but with the power and richness of voice that made even Constance Brevoort, hypercritical as she was in things musical, sit breathless to its conclusion.

The silence which followed was first broken by Red. "Gee, Ken," he said quaintly, "who'd ever thought yuh could beller so melojious as that! Why, yuh're a reg'lah preemoh-johnny!" In the hilarity which this evoked Grace said, reproachfully:

"And to think I never knew!"

He was almost boyishly elated at the implied compliment, and, at the insistence of his audience sang several other operatic selections very creditably. Then he turned in modest explanation to Carter's demand.

"We all sang a little at college, you know, and my mother was an accomplished musician. It is four years since I last sang. You are overkind to me."

"Do you not play as well?" impulsively asked Mrs. Brevoort. He shook his head negatively.

"Only a few accompaniment chords that I smash out indifferently! and I am dubious of my ability to do that after all these years of roping and ditch digging."

Anselm Brevoort, watching him speculatively through a fragrant cloud of cigar smoke, suddenly sprang a bomb. "Have you ever composed, Mr. Douglass, written any songs, for instance? I have heard that you range men have an aptitude in that direction."

Douglass surveyed him levelly for a moment, his face hardening with quick suspicion. "I have done most things foolish, after the manner of my kind, Mr. Brevoort," he said, curtly; "but I hardly think you would find even a passing interest in anything I have accomplished in that direction." Whereupon that astute financier subsided promptly, evincing no further curiosity as to the poetic attainments of this uncomfortably straight-speaking young personage. He was a very shrewd man and had long since learned to respect the moods and idiosyncrasies of others.

But Constance, his wife, detecting the sharp irritation in Douglass's voice, was seized with a malicious desire to know its cause; like her husband she was thinking: "That caught him on the raw, somehow. I wonder why?"

"You should allow your friends to be the judge of that, Mr. Douglass," she said, pleasantly. "I am quite certain myself that we should find much more than a passing interest if we could induce you to favor us. The songs inspired by this environment must naturally be full of color and strength. I should very much enjoy hearing one."

"Upon your heads be it, then!" He seated himself at the piano. "This," he said, turning to Mrs. Brevoort, meaningly, "I call 'The Song of the Wolf.'"

Through the silence of the room crept a queer, faint murmur like the breath of an æolian harp or the sighing of the wind through far-off pines. There was no attempt at harmonious arrangement and concordance; it was rather a vague, erratic and intangible dissonance, a weird jumble of soft discords that alternately pleased and pained. Gradually it increased in volume, as the wind rises to the approach of a storm, culminating finally in a thunderous crash of double bass. Then out of the contrastive silence of the succeeding lull came unmistakably the mournful howl of a wolf, wonderfully rendered by a few soft tremulous touches of those strong yet sensitive fingers.

Another rolling crash, a diminishing rumble, and then the rich, deep voice of the singer:

"Child of the Wind and Sun, I glide
Like a tongue of flame o'er the mountain's side.
Wherever falleth my blighting tread
Lie the whitening bones of the silent Dead.
For trail of wrath
Is my red-wet path
From the Sea's low rim to the glaciers high,
Ai y-u-u—yu—yu-u-u-u!
I live the better that others die.
Ai yu-u-u-u-u-u!

"Oh! sweet is the scent in the evening gale,
Of the dun deer wending adown the trail
Where I lie, grim ambushed, with bated breath,
A gray lance couched in the hand of Death!
At that maddening tang
White-bared each fang,
Dripping anon with ambrosia red;
Ai y-u-u—yu—yu-u-u-u!
Haste, sweetheart, to the feast outspread!
Ai yu-u-u-u-u-u!

"But sweeter even than Life's rich wine,
As, hot from the kill—ah-h! draught divine!—
It trickles adown my ravished throat,
Is my gaunt mate's deep-toned, chesty note.
As o'er hill and plain
She calls amain
Till the welkin quivers with ecstasy:
Ai y-u-u—yu—yu-u-u-u!
'Oh come, Beloved, to Love and me!'
Ai yu-u-u-u-u-u!

"Manlings spawned in the cities' slime.
Weaklings, withered before your prime.
What ken ye of the joys there be
Of Life and of Love and of Liberty!
Better hill and dell
As free Ishmael
Than the shackles of pomp and pageantry:
Ai yu-u-u—yu—yu-u-u-u!
Come out, oh! faint hearts, and howl with me!
Ai yu-u-u-u-u-u!"

In the storm of applause that rewarded his unique performance he rose and went over to the fireplace.

"If you are still disposed to the purchase of the Vaughan holdings I will accept your offer," he said to Brevoort. "But I must be free to come and go at will. I am one of the wolves, you know!"

Brevoort nodded a brisk acquiescence. "That is perfectly satisfactory to me. We will arrange the details."

McVey was genuinely pleased and said so; Carter rather grudgingly extended his congratulations; he would rather Douglass were the manager of his own estate. His grievance was still fresh and rankling.

Constance Brevoort, toying with the ivory chessmen, smiled commiseratingly at the soft irradiation of Grace's face.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FROWNING GODDESS SMILES

It was arranged that the transfer of the VN interests should be made at the last day of the year. The weather was still open and the days very delightful, and Brevoort evincing a lively interest in Douglass's mining venture, his wife proposed a junket over to the claims on the head of the Roaring Fork, something less than forty miles away as the crow flies. As the trip would have to be made over rather difficult trails it was decided to go on horseback, the camp paraphernalia being loaded on pack animals in charge of McVey, who somewhat eagerly volunteered his services.

The trail led through a very rugged country alive with big game and Brevoort was in the seventh heaven of a hunter's delight. For three days the cavalcade slowly wended its way through scenery unequalled anywhere on earth, and every minute was fraught with enjoyment. On the afternoon of the third day, when they finally reached the rough claim-cabin nestling in the giant spruces on the edge of a little sun-kissed park, their delight was unbounded.

Artistic in nature, Douglass had selected a most charming spot for his habitation. The little park, sloping to the westward, was knee-deep with grass, studded with the belated blooms of the high altitudes. Down one side purred a little brook, fed from a beautiful waterfall in easy view from the cabin door. To the south lay the snow-capped purple reaches of the Taylor Range over which they had just come, and to the east, behind the cabin, towered the majestic grandeur of the continent-dividing Rockies, the "Backbone of the World" in the poetical phraseology of the Ute Indians. From the cabin door one looked over an immense vista of mountain, plain, valley and river too exquisite for description by words.

Having come leisurely and comfortably, all were in the proper frame of mind and body for its enjoyment, and the scrupulously clean cabin came in for its share of deserved encomiums. It was immediately given over for the personal use of the ladies, who were delighted with the cozy bunks and foot-deep mattresses of aromatic spruce needles. The men, as much from preference as from necessity, spread their blankets under the open sky.

The sportsman's instinct was strong in Brevoort, so he and Douglass went out with their rifles, returning in less than an hour with a splendid buck deer and a dozen grouse. The little stream had also yielded up to Carter, who was an expert fly-fisherman, some two-score delicious trout, and the resulting meal was one fit for the gods. All cowboys are from necessity good cooks, and the fluffy, golden brown biscuits and fragrant coffee of Red's making were unexceptionable.

Despite the chill of the evening they sat around a roaring camp-fire until long after the moon rose, regaled by the quaint narratives of McVey, who was a born raconteur. What added to their subtle humor immensely was the fact that the embodied jokes were almost always turned at his own expense. But the last of his relations brought tears into the eyes of one woman at least, and made Douglass kick embarrassedly at the glowing log heap until the sparks arose in an inverted cascade of fire.

"Theah is some people in thu wohld that seem just bawn foh trubble! They are built a-puppas, like a woodpecker, an' mizzery nacherally poahs upon 'em when everybody else is so allfired happy that it hurts.

"I mind a fambly o' that kind which come oveh yeah from thu Picketwire (Purgatoire River) three yeah ago. They was foah on 'em, two ole ones an' a couple o' kids, boy 'n gyurl, 'bout sixteen yeahs ole, each."

"How old, each?" asked Douglass, artlessly.

"'Bout sixteen yeah ole, each, I said, an' I didn't stuttah, neither! They was twinned. Thu boy was tow-haided an' ornary; thu gyurl were a roan, even redder'n me! I think she were thu freckledst critter I eveh see, an' ugly! Say, honest, she was afeared to look inter a lookin' glass an' every time she see her face axcidental she hollered!

"Thet outfit were shore onlucky! Fust theah hosses got into a loco patch, an' one dawk night walked oveh a clift thinkin' it were thu aidge o' a sun crack. Then theah cow gits lumpy jaw an' haster be shot. Thu hekid tried to hold out kyards one night when Lem Bowers was feelin' mean, an' it took thu waggin an' hawness to pay fer sawin off hes laig. An' when he got so's he could mosey about agin, hes krutch got stuck in thu frawg o' the railroad crossin' in Gunnison an' a freight train mussed him up redic'lous!

"Naow yuh'd think thet thu two thousand plunks thu Company paid hes paw fer dammitches was a purty faih standoff fer past hawdships, but thet fambly's luck was suthin' scandalous! It were all in hunner dollah bills, an' thu ole woman cached 'em in thu matrass of her baid. Thu matrass were stuffed with wild hay, an' one day when thu ole woman were out pickin' Oregan grape an' osho-root fer thu ole man's rheumatiz, a burro loafered into camp an' et up thu hull shootin' match!

"The she-kid rustles a jawb as biscuit-shooter in a Swede beanery oveh to Crested Butte, but she was so plum ugly thet she scahed away all thu feeders an' thu boss sues her foh his come-back. Then she hikes out with a tinhawn Greaser an' ketches thu small-pawx down to Taos, an' passes out accordin'!

"One day thu ole man goes shy on meat and goes out huntin'. He don't see no deer but he finds a mine—just hes dum luck, ye see; he were lookin' fer chuck an' thu best he got was a stone! Well, he gits so axcited thet he tries to break a chunk offen thu laidge with his gun butt, an' thu blame ole shootin' iron jars loose an' blows hes fool wing off. Fawtuhn were a leetle severe on thu ole fellah, don't yuh think? But he manages ter git home with hes leetle ole hunk o' quawtz, tells thu ole woman wheah he found it, an' petehs out, hisself. They's so pooh thet she had ter go an' git hes gun so's ter be able ter sell it an' git enough mazuma ter plant him with thu 'propriate trimmin's. Them kind is allus great on perprieties!

"Well, she finds thu gun wheah he had drapped it on thu croppin's an' brings it an' a hull apern full o' thu rock home with her. Then she bawls it all out, foolish like, to ther neighbors; she hocks her weddin' dress fer enough ter pay a rock-sharp fer a assay on thu truck—an' o' cose thu durn skunk sneaks out an' jumps thu claim!"

He rolled a fresh cigarette and lit it with a red-hot coal juggled deftly between his palms. Douglass kicked the fire impatiently and yawned.

"Cut it short, Red! It's getting late. Of course she got so much gold out of her mine that she took the yellow fever and swallowed her false teeth, or was guilty of some other fantastic foolishness. You incorrigible old faker, you are making that up as you go!"

Red looked undecidedly after him as he strode away in the moonlight in the direction of the picketed horses. For a moment he hesitated, then he flung a fresh log on the fire and began to untie his blanket roll.

"It is gettin' along about beddin' down time, fer a fac'." But there was much of disconsolation in his voice. Red hated to spoil a good story.

"But the woman, the mine, finish your story!" came in rapid fire from his audience. He fumbled with his "soogans" a moment, then came over and looked thoughtfully into the fire.

"Thu fellah who jumped thu Las' Chance lode was a kind o' mine brokeh, one o' thu damn sharks as is allus raidy to take a low down advantage of thu mis-fort-unit an' helpless." Brevoort winced slightly and his wife smiled behind her hand. "He had anotheh felleh workin' fer him, a real white man! When this yeah las' felleh I'm tellin' yuh about finds out what the brokeh cuss's game is, he done raises—well, he nacherally buhns th' air! He acts real foolish about what he calls justice to the ignerent an' weak, an' when hes bawss perposes to let him shaih in thu profits an' help do thu ole woman outen her rights, he jes' up an' bends hes gun oveh thu dawg's haid—he's been on thu puny list eveh since! Then he, thu white felleh, goes out, pulls up thu jumpah's stakes an' re-locates thu mine in thu ole woman's name."

"That's a man after my own heart!" said Grace, enthusiastically. Red seemed a little put out over her assertion but he bravely swallowed his dose and continued.

"He's got a few hunnerd saved up and he makes it go far enough in development work to git her a patent on it. Bein' a United States Deputy he surveys thu claim hissself an' saves thet much. In sho't he makes her claim good so's no one kin steal it from her, an' thet ole woman owns a hat store, a ho-tel, a bank, an' foweh saloons in Gunnison now. She jes' wallers in wealth!"

Again he turned to his blankets. Out in the white moonlight Douglass stood looking over the silvered landscape, a retrospective bitterness curling his lip.

"And the surveyor, the man who saved her mine and in reality gave her this great wealth?" asked Grace, with a fierce wild pride burning in her heart.

"Well," said Red, gravely, "I told yuh she was a critter bawn to misfohtuhn. She went loco oveh thu thing, got in too much of a hurry, an' sold out the claim, unbeknownst ter him who were managin' it fer her, fer a measly hunnerd thousand, jes' two hours befoh he closed a deal with a big Denveh outfit foh a quateh million. An' she got so het up oveh her hawd luck thet she lost her memory an' couldn't remember thet she was owin' him anything when they come ter settle up. Thet were shore thu mos' unfawchinit thing 'at eveh happened to her. I reckon thet she'll go to hell on account of it!"

"But why did he not bring suit for a just and proper accounting?" asked Brevoort, impatiently. "He had a good case. The man must be a rank fool! What has become of him?"

Red spat speculatively into the fire. "I reckon he kinda hated ter fuss with a woman. He is a cow-punchaw now, an' all cowpunchaws is loco! Thu las' time I see him he were glommerin' all by hes lonesome in a moonlight jes' like this'n, an' I have an' ijea thet he were wishtful o' kickin' somebody's pants."

The moon was high in the heavens when Douglass came back to the fire. It had burned down to a heap of ruby coals and the others had long since entered the land of Nod. He lighted a last cigarette, crouching over the scant warmth as he smoked it.

Brevoort, not yet fully inured to the chill of these great heights, shivered in his sleep despite his generous covering. Douglass took a well-furred bearskin from his own bed and laid it gently over the thin-blooded sleeper. Then he pulled off his high-heeled boots and joined the silent majority. The gray mare was flicking her tail in the east when he opened his eyes again.

For five blissful days there was much of hunting, fishing and exploring of the charming neighborhood by the Carters and Brevoorts. Douglass and McVey expended their time and energies mostly on the development of the claims. But the covering of slide-rock was very thick and the vein persistently eluded them. Probe and strip where they would nothing but country-rock rewarded their efforts. Carter and Brevoort were inclined to a kindly expressed skepticism as to the existence of the lode, and even Red's optimistic faith in Douglass's good judgment was waning. The women alone, for some occult reason, gave him cheering encouragement, Grace in particular expressing her conviction of his ultimate success.

But up to the day preceding their intended departure nothing had materialized to vindicate his expenditure of time and money. On the morning of that day he had gone up alone to the shallow tunnel which he was driving into the hillside near the top of the ridge, intending to blast down a wide shelf of rock in the face of the adit in order to "square up" his work and leave everything in ship-shape for the next season's new operations.

He was using dynamite, the rock being very hard; and as this explosive exerts its force most powerfully against the object of most resistance, with an especial tendency to blow downward, he had merely placed a couple of the cartridge sticks with detonaters and fuses attached on the top of the shelf, covering them slightly with loose sand, depending on the well-defined cleavage of the rock to accomplish his purpose. As it happened to be the last of both powder and fuse supply on the claim, he did not trim off the fuse as short as usual; it was about four times the ordinary length, but as fuse is the least expensive item in such work he was unusually extravagant in this single instance.

It is singular upon what strange things the pivot of fate and fortune turns. Had he been ordinarily economical of that fuse these annals would end grewsomely with this chapter. For, as he lighted the fuse and walked leisurely out of the short tunnel, directing his steps toward a sheltering abutment of the ledge which assured protection from the flying fragments loosened by the

explosion of the heavy charge, Grace Carter slowly sauntered into view on the other side of the tunnel mouth, her hands full of some mountain blooms which she had gathered on the opposite slope of the ridge.

Neither saw the other until she stood directly in front of the excavation. He was lighting his pipe, his back towards her; she, thinking him to be about to leave the mine on his descent to the cabin, gayly called out:

"What's your hurry?"

Not dreaming of her dangerous proximity to the tunnel's mouth, he turned slowly, for the wind was fairly strong and he had not as yet secured a satisfactory light. He was about forty yards away. For one nerve-paralyzing second he was incapable of motion or speech. Then the pipe clattered on the slide-rocks and he was leaping like a cougar over the treacherous footing, a great cry bursting hoarsely from his white lips:

"Run! For God's sake, run! Away from the tunnel!"

Dazed by the awful fear in his voice, and misinterpreting the only two distinct words of his otherwise inarticulate command: "Run" and "Tunnel," she bolted obediently into the yawning mouth of the excavation. For a few seconds, with eyes blinded by the sudden transition from sun-glare to comparative darkness, she did not perceive the spluttering flare of the fuse. Then all at once came comprehension and in the shock of it she was as a marble statue. Paralyzed with horror at the awful death hissing there a scant five feet away, she seemed rooted to the ground; for the life of her she could not move hand or foot, standing numbly there waiting for the end. Each second seemed an eternity before his coming. His coming—to what? To share the horrible death that menaced her? She found her voice in one agonized scream of warning, but even as it left her lips he came dashing into the tunnel, shouting incoherent blasphemies and holding out both arms.

A pile of litter on the floor of the tunnel entrapped his foot. A treacherous stone turned beneath his flying tread, and wildly striving to regain his balance, he pitched forward to her feet, striking his head on the rocks. He lay very still, a thin stream of blood trickling down his forehead.

As a tigress protects her young, so did she cast her body between him and the fiery serpent hissing on the rock, her one thought being for his preservation. As she crouched above him there came vaguely into her mind the remembrance of a story told her in the long ago by her father, the story of a man who had saved his comrade by the plucking out of the burning fuse from a blast which was on the point of killing the man caught beneath some falling timbers. The details came painfully slow to her dazed mind and over there the fuse was hissing ominously.

Suddenly it was all clear to her and unhesitatingly she sprang to the shelf and clutched the smoking terror with both hands. One frantic tug and the deadly dynamite was dangling before her; with the swiftness of a swallow she reached the mouth of the tunnel and, summoning all her strength for one mighty effort, cast it far down the mountain side. Then she turned unsteadily and slowly groped her way, like one who is blind, to the silent figure on the tunnel floor.

Everything was swimming about her in a confused whirl; with a great effort she raised his head to her shoulder. A broad red stain spread over her white bodice but her eyes were unseeing, her lips passing searchingly over his face. As they found his mouth and rested there, a sharp explosion, followed by a tremendous rumble, jarred the air.

As though awakened from sleep by that detonation, Douglass opened his eyes. Her face was still upon his and he blinked uncomprehendingly. She was crying softly, helplessly, and his face was wet with her tears. Impulsively he put his arm around her and sat up erect.

With returning consciousness came remembrance and he cast his eyes fearfully towards the shelf, springing to his feet as he did so, with the girl firmly clasped in his arms. He took two steps towards the mouth of the tunnel and safety. Then he looked again at the little innocuous heap of sand; he passed his hand wonderingly over his eyes. There was a dull smear on the bronzed finger backs and he noticed the stain on her bodice.

"You are hurt!" His voice was husky with fear and sympathy. She shook her head negatively, not trusting herself to speak. "But the blast—the powder—where is it?"

"I threw it down the mountain side. You stumbled and fell. There was no other way."

He felt of his head tentatively; then he looked again at the stain on her bosom. He turned her face inquiringly to the light; upon lips and cheek lay a red like that on the back of his hand. In the semi-twilight his eyes grew luminous. Very tenderly he raised the tear-stained face and looked reverently into the dewy pools brimming over with that which made him close them with a kiss.

"Sweetheart!" he said softly. "Sweetheart!"

She put her white arms about his neck, and, clinging to him as though she would never let go, cried as if her heart would break.

From the head of the waterfall where she washed the jagged wound in his head, Douglass looking down to where she had thrown the dynamite, noted that the whole hillside was changed in appearance. Where once had been a shoulder-deep mass of loose slide-rock was now the bare face of the mountain, out of which cropped a ten-foot wide ledge of parti-colored rock which he

instantly, even at that considerable distance, classified as quartz. In that one comprehensive glance he divined the whole truth. As a result of the violent explosion, the mass of loose rock had been set in motion and an avalanche had ensued; the whole mountain side had been denuded of its covering of detritus which now lay heaped up at the base of the declivity.

In the clear light a sheen glittered over those portions of the ledge where its surface had been freshly abraded by the mass of rock grinding over it in the avalanche's descent; it was indubitably quartz, quartz in place, the only body of it found in situ so far on that mountain. His rich float had been of quartz gangue! Very quietly he turned and put his arms about the girl, conviction growing every minute.

"Dearie, I think you have killed two birds with one stone. Do you see that projecting ledge of rock yonder? I am certain it is the blind lode I have been looking for. If it is, we will be rich beyond the wildest dreams of avarice."

She laughed shyly and took his face between both pink palms.

"I am that already, Ken, dear." Very rich indeed was the treasure she laid on his lips. He caught her up to him fiercely, his face as white as the kerchief which she had bound about his brow. Unconsciously he was bruising her soft flesh, but she gloried in the pain of it.

Red McVey, coming over the crest of the ridge to investigate the explosion and the succeeding rumble of the avalanche which he had heard while hunting on the other slope, paused abruptly at sight of that tender tableau. Very cautiously, as one coming suddenly in the hunting trail upon a dangerous beast who is as yet unaware of the hunter's proximity, he took the rifle from his shoulder and cocked it, crouching as he did so to avoid detection and to insure a better aim. But even as his knee touched the ground a cold perspiration broke out all over his body; the red left his vision, something clicked in his throat, and licking his dry lips nervously, he lowered the hammer of his weapon and backed over the ridge out of sight.

Hand in hand the twain picked their way carefully down to the ledge. By a curious freak of chance the explosive had landed directly above the outcrop, and the ground about was strewn with fragments torn off by the concussion. One of the bits which Grace eagerly picked up was spangled with dull yellow points.

The man with his hand on the ledge looked out dreamily into the blue ether; the woman cuddled in the hollow of his arm looked only at him.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE HOUSE OF POTIPHAR

Mrs. Robert Carter was far too astute a politician to openly offer any opposition to her daughter's devotion for Douglass, though fully determined to unravel what she deemed a preposterous and altogether undesirable entanglement.

Having herself fought the hard fight against the ogres of Poverty and Adversity, she had no foolish illusions in the premises, and had long ago resolved that her daughter should be spared the grim heartaches that even love cannot wholly bar from the proverbial cottage. Her chief ambition was to see Grace established in a position commanding at the very outset all the amenities to which the girl had been accustomed from childhood, both of her children having come after Carter pere had achieved a substantial competence. There were many among the girl's suitors who offered this and more, and she felt a bitter impatience with the extravagance of youthful passion which now so perversely menaced all her plans.

While cordially conceding the beauty of love in the abstract, the concreteness of wealth and social position appealed far more potently to the world-worn old woman, who temporarily forgot her own girlish exaltations of days long gone in her apprehensions for her daughter's future.

Never was woman better qualified or disposed to appreciate youthful virility and sterling manliness; her personal esteem for Douglass was very high, and had it not been for the, to her, insuperable bar of his comparative poverty, she would have welcomed him with open arms. As it was, she was very indulgently disposed towards him. If his mines really developed into bonanza she would interpose no obstacle in his way. But in her wide experience she had known all too many just as promising prospects as his turn out miserable failures; when he had incontrovertibly established the value of his claims it would be time enough to consider his proposed alliance with her family.

All this she said to him with frank candor in a letter answering his request for her sanction to his engagement to Grace.

"I will give you two years," she concluded, "in which to demonstrate your ability to give her all the comforts to which she is accustomed. In the interim I shall take her abroad, and if at the expiration of that time you have 'made good,' and both of you are still of the same mind, I will give you my blessing with all my heart."

"But it must be distinctly understood that until then I recognize no manner of bond between you; she must be free to change her mind if she so chooses. I have no objection to a friendly exchange of correspondence between you during our absence, relying upon your honor to use no undue coercion. Please regard these stipulations as imperative and final."

He sent her a rather constrained acceptance and so it was arranged. Directly after the holidays Mrs. Carter and Grace sailed for Europe.

One balmy day in the following spring he was over at Tin Cup awaiting the coming of the stage. Two days before he had been advised by letter of the coming of the Brevoorts for a season's outing on their lately-acquired ranch. He had rather expected a letter from Grace by the same mail and was proportionately elated. Everything had gone well with him in the new year. He had secured the services of an experienced and altogether dependable miner, an old friend of his assaying days, to develop his mining claims, and the reports were eminently satisfying. With every foot of depth attained on the vein the ore grew better, and the property was yielding enough values to pay for its extensive exploitation. The ore chute, paying from grass roots down, was getting wider and richer; two promising "blind leads" had been struck in addition, and the opinion of all the visiting experts was that Douglass had struck it exceedingly rich. Should the improvement continue, his term of probation would be over before snow flew again. He did not need many more tons of that honeycombed quartz to satisfy Mrs. Carter's most stringent exactions.

He was therefore in a wonderfully complaisant frame of mind as old Timberline Tobe reined in his leaders with a flourish before Blount's hotel. Constance Brevoort, clad in an exceedingly well-fitting traveling costume of neutral gray, smiled her delight as he went forward with uplifted hands to assist her descent from the seat of honor on the box beside the driver. Of the two other passengers inside the stage he took small note; Brevoort could look after himself and be hand-shaken later. Just now the woman engrossed his whole attention.

Stiffened doubtlessly by her necessarily cramped position on the box throughout a half-day's jolting over rough mountain roads, she slipped awkwardly from the wheel and landed plump in his arms, her lips brushing his in her descent as he protectingly caught her close to save her from falling. His face was crimson, possibly from over-exertion, as he slowly released her. But even though the vice-like grip of his arms had been a moment or two overlong, Mrs. Brevoort made no protest; she only smiled at his discomposure and said somewhat ambiguously:

"Don't look so distressed, Mr. Douglass. I alone am to blame for that slip; and there have been no consequences."

He took her extended hand and shook it heartily. Into his eyes there crept a flicker of amusement tinged with audacity.

"I am not so sure of that," he said with pretended ruefulness, feeling in the breast pocket of his shirt. "My cigars are demolished. Were you really so glad to see me as all that?" She looked at him coquettishly through half-closed lids.

"Can you doubt, remembering how I threw myself into your arms in the recklessness of my transports?" She laughed unaffectedly, but underneath the dimples of her peachy cheeks spread the veriest wraith of a soft rose tint. For into his eyes had suddenly flamed something, a subtle spark that burned down through her body's jeweled sheath like a white-hot coal. A little frightened at the hot wave surging through her veins she was betrayed into another indiscretion.

"And you," she murmured seductively, "are you glad to see me?"

"I'll tell you later, when I am calm enough to phrase my joy in more conventional words than my present distraction permits." They both laughed a little constrainedly and he turned to greet the man who had just descended from the stage. Imagine his surprise to see, instead of the shriveled form of the financier, the portly bulk of a grinning white-headed old negro who was assisting an equally robust damsel of like ebon complexion, but considerably less years, to alight from the dusty vehicle.

Constance laughed at his frank bewilderment.

"Two family retainers from my girlhood's home, Uncle 'Rastus, my butler, and Lucindy, his daughter, my cook. At the last moment Mr. Brevoort was called away to Europe on business," she explained somewhat hurriedly. "He hopes to be able to join us in time for the fall hunting."

It was characteristic of the man that he did not mumble the conventional regrets over the defection of her husband; on the contrary, he did not hesitate to express his pleasure.

"That's nice!" was his rather startling comment to which, however, she took no exception, mischievously misinterpreting the reference of his words.

"Yes, I know you enjoy those hunting trips," she said demurely, "and Mr. Brevoort is even more enthusiastic. He says you are positively the most indefatigable man in the chase that he ever met. Have you chased much since we left?"

He glanced at her dubiously; she was the embodiment of naïve innocence as she stood there struggling with her pearl-colored suedes, the delicious color coming and going in her fresh, fair cheeks. He was not at all sure of her, and he hesitated a little as he caught up her valise and

relieved her of her discarded wraps.

"I wonder if there was any double meaning in that?" he thought, watching her out of the corner of his eye; but it was this man's creed, as has been previously noted, to overlook no bets. Aloud he said:

"The open season ended the day you left, and I haven't been to town since."

She bit her lip in discomfiture; there was a prematureness about this frontier lance that made him exceedingly difficult to parry, skilled as she was in the subtle art of fence. The insolent assurance of that thrust through her guard angered and alarmed her.

"You will pay for that," she resolved mentally, wrathful at his coarse arrogance. But her frown was only that of gentle wonderment as she turned inquiringly. "The town! I do not understand. Is there any game to be hunted there?"

"Only faro, and poker, and roulette, with other divertissements of divers kinds and sorts," he said humorously. "But one does not have to hunt much for any of them so far as my experience goes. Yet I've even left the seductive tiger unbuckled in his lair for over six long weary months. I've been so good that even the very thought of it hurts."

"You poor thing," she said with mock compassion; "how your talents have been wasted. What a pity that the virtue born of necessity is not entitled to commendation."

"Is there any virtue entitled to that?" he asked shamelessly. She drew a little apart from him, really shocked and not a little apprehensive.

"Certainly not that of Evolution," she said with some acerbity. "Against the stone ax and brutal strength of the Cave Man, woman's helpless trust, love and dependency are just as inadequate as it was in the beginning, æons ago. But even barbarians can, with profit, learn the lesson of decent forbearance."

"Stung!" His comical grimace and slangy confession of her sharper point completely disarmed her and she sheathed her rapier with a smile. But for the life of her she could not resist the temptation to bait this good-natured bear.

"After all, we are only a step removed from the Primitive," she said plaintively, "and in this wonderful environment of yours one comes actually within touch. Here we are at swords-points already, and only a few moments ago I was in your arms." Her heart was quaking at her great audacity as he made a sudden movement that brought him so near that his elbow grazed her shapely waist.

"Backward, oh! backward, turn, Time, in thy flight!" he hummed longingly. Unconsciously she swayed towards him for the fraction of an inch. She was even closer to the border-land than she had deemed.

Red McVey, coming for the mail, greeted them as they ascended the porch steps of the little hostelry. She very graciously laid her hand in his, and her face beamed with positive pleasure as he awkwardly congratulated her upon her splendid appearance.

"Well, little ole N'Yawk ain't done you no hurt as I kin see. Reckon I'll have to winter theah a spell mahself when mah caows come home," he said enthusiastically. "Yuah lookin' purtier 'n a red heifer."

Douglass grinned at her rosy confusion. "You've got a good eye for color, Red. But you ought to cultivate the virtue of forbearance, ought he not, Mrs. Brevoort?" But she scornfully ignored him and was rather profuse in her protestations to Red of her happiness at being back in "God's country" again.

At the dinner table that night Douglass maliciously reverted to the topic of forbearance. Turning to McVey he assumed a becoming gravity which the twinkle in his eyes belied.

"Say, old-timer, Mrs. Brevoort is skeptical of we poor cowpunchers' virtue; she thinks we have no power of forbearance. Can't you help me to convince her that we often keep from doing wicked things just for the pure love of being good."

Red, catching the mischievous note in his question, rose to the occasion manfully.

"Why, yuh ain't thinkin' that bad of us, are yuh?" he said with sorrowful reproach to Constance. "Indeed, ma'am, we are real gentle by spells. Why, I mind las' yeah when I was ridin' fences foh thu C Bar I got to thinkin' haow foolish it were o' me to keep hankerin' after thu delusions o' thu Alcazah, an' to keep wantin' to go oveh theah simultaneous an' waste my hawd eahned money on thu see-ductions o' thu flowin' bowl. So I braces up, an' says to thu devil o' temptation, kinda contemptuous-like, 'Hit thu back trail, Satan!'"

"Every time I feels thu iniquity o' thust comin' on me I jes' swaps the price o' a drink from my sack to a leetle ole terbacca bag I totes especial foh thet puppos, and goes an' dips my beak in healthy alkali wateh like a sensibul, fohbeahing Christian should. It were two bits every time an' by thu time Chris'mas comes raound thu smoke bag were plumb full. I suttinly fohboah a heap thet summah."

Genuinely interested at the simple relation, Constance asked sympathetically: "And what did you

do with the money so heroically saved, may I ask?"

"Well, I had thu price O' nine bottles o' booze in thu bag when I counted her oveh at Tin Cup on Chrismus eve. Theah's five bottles goes to a gallon, yuh know, so I rattles thu bones with thu perfessor an' o' cose I wins thu odd bottle. Then I blows six bits fer a two-gallon jug an'—"

Constance glared at him severely. Douglass laid his head on the table and cried.

The greater portion of the next day was spent by Constance in shopping and resting after her wearisome stage ride. Douglass had some saddlery matters to attend to and Grace's letter to answer. Red had volunteered to drive 'Rastus and Lucindy over to the VN ranch with the luggage and so it happened that Douglass and Mrs. Brevoort rode out together alone in the pleasant evening to her home-coming.

They jogged along very leisurely, talking only the veriest commonplaces after they had exhausted the more interesting topics of ranch and mine. Curiously enough, neither referred once to Grace Carter, her name not being mentioned throughout the whole journey. Toward the end of their ride both man and woman grew strangely silent. The white May moon was just peeping over the horizon as he dismounted before the door of the ranch house to assist her to alight.

As she released her foot from the stirrup and held out her hands, from somewhere far out on the prairie came the call of a wolf. Telepathically both turned toward the moonlit plain awaiting the answering cry; as it rang out in not unmusical cadence through the stilly night she shivered slightly and her hands trembled in his warm grasp. He leaned toward her, his eyes gleaming.

"Come," he said, masterfully. Shifting her left hand to his shoulder he threw his arm about her waist and lifted her from the saddle. But before her feet touched the ground he had gathered her up in his arms and was striding towards the house. Taken by surprise, she clung to him breathlessly, one arm still tightly clasped about his neck as he placed her feet upon the threshold. Very gently she disengaged herself from his embrace but made no effort to enter the house. He looked hungrily at her full red lips for a second, then stooped and laid his own upon the hand which he still retained.

"Welcome, oh, Queen, to your lair!" he said softly. "May you have good hunting."

Then, sombrero in hand, he bowed again and turning abruptly left her standing there silent in the white moonlight. Not until the shadows of the corral had swallowed him up did she so much as move a muscle.

Unto him a half hour later came old 'Rastus with her invitation to dine. When he finally joined her she was secretly relieved at the very presentable appearance he made in the modest suit of gray negligee which, he apologetically stated with engaging candor, was the nearest approximation he could make to full dress. All other cowboys of her acquaintance, while delightfully picturesque in their range costume, had looked disappointingly commonplace and uninteresting when clothed in civilized habiliments; but there was neither *gaucherie* nor self-consciousness about this exceedingly self-possessed young fellow, whose evident familiarity with the niceties of etiquette came as an agreeable surprise. Every slave to Convention is more or less a snob, and she had been under the yoke a whole lifetime. Her relief at his perfect deportment changed to an irritating sense of chagrin as she realized her own obtuseness in not recognizing from the first that this man had assuredly been bred, if not born, a gentleman. How was she to know if he were not even mentally amused at her inexcusable lack of perspicacity?

The truth of the matter was that Douglass thought nothing at all about it; he was thinking only of how attractive this woman was—in a different way from Grace Carter.

Old 'Rastus he had captivated instanter by his critical commendation of the really superb wine which she had, whimsically, it must be confessed, and to the secret indignation of the old darkey, ordered served. 'Rastus had mumbled something about the casting of pearls, but he melted instantly at Douglass's evident appreciation.

"Chateau Yquem, is it not, and of a vintage surely previous to '57!" he averred with the confidence of a connoisseur, lovingly rolling the delicious liquor under his tongue. "You are an exaggerated Lady Bountiful, my dear Mrs. Brevoort. This is ambrosia for the gods rather than a tippie for an obscure cowpuncher!"

"Yes, this Yquem has been in our cellars since '59; so Mr. Brevoort informs me. I am extremely fortunate in having selected it since it meets with your favor!" Her tone was sweetly sincere and he was inordinately flattered. She on her part was not a little amazed at the anomaly of a mere ranch hand's knowledge of rare old vintages and looked at him with a new interest. He was surely going to be worth exploitation!

When the cloth had been removed they adjourned to a little room which had been fitted up as a den by Brevoort. Here the coffee was served, and over her cigarette she watched him deftly preparing the cognac and kirschenwasser with all the assurance of an epicure, the caraffe having been set beside him by the old servitor as a matter of course; there was no doubt now in 'Rastus's mind about this "cow-gentleman" being to the manner born.

It being an unusually mild night, the windows, which faced on the open prairie land to the north, were partly open. The air was sweet with the fragrance of the purpling lucerne, punctuated by the aroma of her Turkish tobacco. In the mellow light of the rose-tinted acetylene globe

suspended overhead everything was invested with a deliciously soft warmth. Douglass, puffing luxuriously at his havana, was filled with a great conviction that he had not been so happy for years. This was what he would have when his mines were in bonanza and he had come to his own! But try as he would, he could not permanently establish Grace's presence on the divan over yonder; somehow the conditions did not lend themselves concordantly. The woman furtively watching him smiled intuitively; he was a very transparent young man, after all!

And yet how perfectly he fitted into the environment's scheme! In the soft rose light his clean-cut aquiline profile was as perfect as a well-chiseled cameo in red bronze. Vigor, strength and indomitable power breathed from every well-balanced line of his well-knit frame.

"Fit, and ready, to fight for his strong young life!" she was thinking admiringly, "a man among a thousand in these degenerate days. A 'running mate' who would go far with the wolf of his choosing. I wonder what he ever saw in that insipid goody-goody. She will tame him down to mediocrity, never realizing what she is desecrating, what she is robbing some other better-fitted woman of. She ought to have married Anselm!"

At the thought of her husband her face hardened. Very contemptuous did she wax in her merciless comparison of him with the stalwart young fellow sitting there so lordly in the arrogance of lusty manliness. Now that it was too late she realized that she had sold herself for a price! Of course Brevoort had paid, generously, magnificently, and without demur; but how had she benefited thereby? To the end only of being the leader of her social set, queen regnant of a symposium of sexless degenerates with whom she had not one mental or physical desire in common! The best proof of it was that she was here, far from their wearying inanities and hollow gilded gauds by deliberate choice. Her meditations terminated abruptly at this point; was that the real reason of her coming? She turned to him with a curious shyness, thankful for that rose-colored globe.

"You are fond of children, Mr. Douglass?" It was more an assertion than a question. His face lit up rarely.

"I love them!" he said, simply. "They are the sweetest flowers in God's garden!"

"Even as I do!" There was something strangely like a sob in her low voice, but she had not meant him to hear. "I congratulate you on your conquest of the little Blount girl; her adoration of you is actually idyllic!"

"Oh, Eulalie and I have been sweethearts for ages," he said, laughingly. "It was a case of love at first sight."

"Happy Eulalie!" she said, enviously. "She has been favored beyond the computation of the gods. That beatitude falls to the lot of but few of her sex."

"Are you voicing a personal grievance?" His eyes were full of amused incredulity. She smiled a little bitterly but evaded his question.

"What do you hear from Grace?" she asked, inconsequentially. He was sobered instantly.

"She is well; and enjoying herself, I gather from her last letter. They are on the wing constantly, you know, and it was unusually short. They are now headed for Venice, with a certain Lord Ellerslie in train. Do you happen to know him?" There was a mild anxiety in his tone.

"Yare Ellerslie? Yes, I know him very well. One of England's 'best' types; a fine gentleman of mildewed lineage. He is immensely wealthy!"

"Oh! I say, don't rub it into a fellow!" he protested, laughingly, but his eyes held a glitter that caught Constance's attention disagreeably. She rather pitied Lord Ellerslie at that moment.

"Oh! he is perfectly innocuous," she hastened to assure him; "nearly every designing mamma has given him up as impossible. His price is above the rubies of any woman's offering!" Her lip curled scornfully. "His *metier* is platonic."

"And you don't believe in their possibility," he concluded, dryly. She eyed him narrowly.

"Do you?"

"Not in their putative purity at any event. Of course, I am not a competent authority and my circle of acquaintances is limited to people of flesh and blood. Imagine such an absurdity as platonic between—"

"Between—?" she prompted audaciously, her seductive face close his.

"Between you and me, for instance!" he finished, calmly, his cool demeanor betraying nothing of the seething volcano beneath that unruffled surface. She rose somewhat precipitately and went over and stood by the window.

Faint and eerie from the muffling mazes of some far-off coulie came again the wolf cry. She turned shudderingly away.

"It sounds like the wail of a lost soul!"

"Calling to another affinitive soul, neither of them knowing or caring, in the all-compensative ecstasy of their own making, that they have lost anything at all! Do you imagine that fellow is

mouthed platonic out there?"

He had risen unconsciously and laid his hot hand on her bare arm; she shrank from it as though it burned her and deliberately placed the table between them. She rang the silver call bell.

"I can imagine nothing more to-night but that it is time to retire," she said, humorously. Before he could reply, Lucindy entered, bearing a salver on which was a glass of milk and a pitcher of water. Constance gave him her hand in gentle dismissal.

"Go to bed, Wolf," she said, mischievously, "and dream of—of platonic, as befits your rugged constitution. Personally, I am not equal to more than the inspirations of milk-and-water—as yet!"

As he opened the door the wolf howled in the distance. He turned with a smile of sinister significance as an answering call rang out in the night.

The fair hand holding the diluting pitcher wavered a trifle. A few drops of water failed of their destination and spattered on the table.

CHAPTER XIX

MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

It was three days before she saw him again, he having left at daybreak for a distant part of the range where he went to investigate a disturbing report of mysteriously disappearing cattle whose loss puzzled the most astute of his men. The news had come in over night, and reasoning that she would be a late riser after her fatiguing trip, he merely wrote her a short note saying that he was suddenly called away on urgent business and could not say just when he would return. He was, however, very explicit as to the horses that he deemed safe for her use, particularly recommending a bay filly which he had broken especially for her personal service. He did not deem it necessary to say that the filly was his own personal property, originally designed as a gift for Grace.

An inexplicable disappointment wrinkled her smooth brows as she read the carelessly polite words; this was such a note as her husband might have written and she tossed it aside impatiently. Somehow or other it seemed like a rebuff, this cold formality after their intimate conversation of the preceding night, and she resented it strongly. Had she, after all, made so little impression on this springald despite her tacit encouragement of him! Could it be possible that he was only maliciously amusing himself at her expense, playing even a more skillful game than she was capable of doing against such an unusual antagonist? This man was vastly different from those of her previous experience and she was far from her habitual calm as she musingly weighed the possibilities.

At her request the filly was saddled and she rode over the ranch, critically inspecting her new possessions. It was an unusually well-situated property, and under Douglass's strenuous management it had assumed an entirely new aspect. Everything was in perfect order and her eye dwelt in pleased approval on the countless evidences of his handiwork. With professional care and exactness he had reduced everything to a science, and although not as extensive as the C Bar holdings it was plain to the most casual observer that Constance Brevoort's ranch was a close second in pecuniary value and even excelled it in point of desirability as a place of habitation. Its income, in proportion to the respective investments, was at least twice as great as that of the Carter property, and promised to become even greater under a proposed change of policy now in Douglass's contemplation.

"It is a labor of love," she said appreciatively. "He could not have worked more faithfully or assiduously had the property been his own. What heights an ambitious soul could attain to if working in loving conjunction with so strong an executive nature as his." For a while she sat musing introspectively, a rapt smile on her beautiful face; then of a sudden she was filled with an unreasonable anger at Grace Carter. "To think of his being wasted upon a colorless entity like that chit!"

On her return to the house she sought the seclusion of the little den and wrathfully consumed a half dozen cigarettes. When dinner was announced she ate perfunctorily and at its conclusion sought the den again. It was far into the night when she finally arose and sought her bedchamber. As she turned down the silken coverlet her ear caught faintly that for which she had been waiting since the moon rose. She hesitated a moment and then went swiftly to the open window. The cry had come from the east, in the direction of the mountains where Douglass was at work. With a warm color rioting across her face she opened her mouth and made a queer little gurgling noise in her throat.

On the night of his return, tired, dusty and with a sullen anger burning in his heart, he somewhat curtly declined her invitation to dine, pleading fatigue and the necessity of a conference with his men. His tour of investigation had resulted in the discovery that very extensive depredations were being made upon the VN herds by what was evidently a well-organized and shrewdly commanded band of rustlers far more audaciously aggressive than any of his previous experience. At an audience which he requested the next morning, he urged the advantage of the

immediate adoption of the change in policy previously referred to.

This policy was to dispose of the rather mediocre lot of cattle at present in the VN brand for cash, and with the proceeds purchase a smaller bunch of high-grade stock, which could be close-herded and ranch-fed at a largely decreased expense and with an increased revenue, the VN conditions being peculiarly adapted to such a policy. She unhesitatingly authorized him to use his own discretion absolutely in anything connected with her interests and he immediately ordered a round-up with that end in view. He had already arranged for the sale of the cattle, he somewhat abashedly confessed to her secret amusement, and at a price rather above current quotations. The change could be made without either delay or loss and he was openly sanguine of the outcome of his new plans. During his absence he had partly succeeded in rounding up the cattle to be sold, and in ten days more he had delivered into her hand the buyer's check covering the transaction. To her great surprise it was for an amount some five thousand dollars in excess of the original purchase price of the whole ranch; evidently her manager had driven a very good bargain.

He did not think it necessary to tell her that he had caught the cowboys of a big syndicate in the act of running a bunch of VN steers out of the country under the pretense of a general round-up, or that he had gone directly to the headquarters of the outfit with a rather peremptory request that they buy the rest of the cattle together with the brand, a suggestion that the guilty parties found it advisable to accept in view of the direct evidence with which he confronted them of not only this, but several other shady transactions of a similar nature. Nor was she aware, until several days later, that in the course of a slight argument which he had indulged in with one of the syndicate's men, whom he had caught red-handed in the act of branding a VN calf whose mother lay in a nearby gully with a bullet hole in her head, he had resorted to a little "six-gun suasion" with the result that the other fellow was in the hospital at Leadville, while Douglass nursed an ugly flesh wound in his shoulder. The syndicate, composed largely of eastern men who for obvious reasons could not afford to have their acts unduly ventilated, were very glad to close with his rather excessive demands, backed as they were by the smoothest-working gun and handiest shot on the range.

She made the discovery in a rather unexpected way. They were out riding together one pleasant afternoon, and seduced by the magnificent going and delightful weather had prolonged their passee into the twilight hours. On the return canter, Douglass's horse, affrightened by a viciously whirring rattlesnake on which it narrowly escaped treading, began to "pitch" violently and for a few minutes Constance was treated to an exhibition of superb horsemanship which made her blood tingle. It was an unusually severe and long-sustained struggle between horse and rider, but the man conquered as a matter of course and the rest of the journey was without incident.

She had acquired the knack of dismounting by placing one hand on his left shoulder; in doing so, this evening, her bare hand encountered something wet and sticky. At that moment the door opened and a flood of light from the living-room illuminated them sharply. Looking curiously at her wet hand Constance caught her breath with a gasp.

"It is blood!" she cried in horror. "You are hurt!"

Despite his muttered assurance that it was nothing to be alarmed about she drew him into the living-room, where she became almost hysterical at the black-red blotch on his thin tan-colored silk shirt. Almost before he suspected what she was about she had unknotted the kerchief from around his throat and hastily bared his shoulder. In the violent plunging of the horse the clumsily-fixed bandage had become displaced, the wound had reopened and was bleeding freely.

Although entirely unaccustomed to the sight of any kind of wounds, she knew intuitively from the tiny blue-rimmed red puncture on the massive shoulder that this was a gun-shot injury. She ran over to her work basket and secured a pair of scissors with which she unhesitatingly cut away the shirt from the collar downwards, exposing the ragged gash of exit on the other side. To 'Rastus, watching her with open mouth and protruding eyes, she said sharply:

"Water, and some clean linen cloths, quick!"

She was a different woman now, and her subsequent ministrations were as deft and as effectual as those of a trained nurse. Very tenderly she bathed the shoulder, wondering all the while at its contrastive whiteness with the bronzed face and throat, marveling at the silky rippling of the muscles beneath as he obediently flexed his arm at her command. In less than ten minutes she had completed her surgery and in five more he was again rehabilitated in garments fetched by 'Rastus from his room in the bunkhouse. She would not hear of his attending to the horses, but had one of the men summoned, to whom their care was delegated. If she detected Douglass's dejected wink at the smiling young fellow, she made no sign, saying merely that she would be pleased to have him dine with her as she wished to discuss some business matters of importance with him.

Not until they had adjourned to the den did she evince the slightest curiosity as to the time and cause of his mishap. Then when he had his cigar nicely under way she demanded imperatively:

"And now be good enough to tell me, please, who shot you—why, where and when! I want the whole truth with no evasions."

Thus cornered, he told her the story in its most important details, ending with a regret that he had caused her so much apprehension and unnecessary trouble. Her eyes were bright with

wonder and admiration when he finished but she nodded approval.

"Served the wretch right!" she snapped. "I almost wished you had killed him."

"Well, ma'am," he said apologetically, "I tried all I knew how, but my horse bucked outrageously at his shot—he got his work in first, you know—and he seemed quiet enough when I shot. If you say so, I'll go and finish him." She smiled at the grim pleasantry, knowing it to be such.

"And in all probability get your other arm shot off! No, thanks, I prefer you as you are."

He brightened at this amazingly, but a mischievous twinkle stole into his eye. "I am glad to hear that. Now that I am acquainted with your preferences, I'll see that I keep in this winged condition. And yet, do you know that your predilection for one-armed men is a surprise to me." He looked quizzically at her sudden confusion. "Most ladies are partial to men with two good arms; but just so that you keep on preferring me I am content, no matter how anomalous the conditions."

She lit another papelito and smiled mockingly at him. "That was very clumsy. I must get you well as soon as possible, poor wolf. You run rather indifferently on one leg. What can such a benighted Ishmael as you possibly know of the partialities of ladies?"

"Not much," he confessed humbly, "and yet a few have been undeservedly generous to me. I am eager to learn, however, if the opportunity be graciously accorded me." She evaded his bold glance a little nervously. For a one-legged wolf he was coming disconcertingly fast. The water was getting rather deep for drifting, and in the face of this baffling head-wind she promptly tried another tack.

"Tell me," she asked curiously, "of the most wonderful thing in your certainly unique experience."

"You," he said promptly, and the crimson suffused her face. "I think you are the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to any man. There are times when I can hardly believe the evidence of my senses. Imagine me, a common menial, sitting here in the lap of luxury, holding familiar converse with a queen like you and not feeling in the least embarrassed, drinking in your ineffable loveliness unchecked, unrebuked, unafraid, as the desert sands thirstily absorb the heavenly ram, drunk with the rich wine of your sympathy and maddened with the subtle delirium of your personal charms."

His voice, low and tense in the beginning, was now vibrant; he had risen and was leaning across the low table, his muscles quivering, yet the woman felt not the slightest fear of him. On the contrary, she was thrilling to the core with a mad joy that she wanted to shout from the housetops. Her face was very pale, but her eyes were jet black and sparkling with a flame that burned down to the steel of the man, inciting him to recklessness, and he threw reason to the winds.

"Constance!" His whisper was hoarse with suppressed emotion. He walked swiftly to her side and held out his arms appealingly. She was quivering all over, her bosom heaving tumultuously. He bent over her slowly until his hot breath scorched her cheek. "Constance!"

Panting like a wounded animal she sprang to her feet; at the touch of his encircling arms she gave a tremulous little sigh and her head sank on his shoulder. Very tenderly, but firmly, he put one hand beneath her soft chin and forced her face upward toward his. Almost had his lips touched hers, when, with a gasping cry, she put both her hands against his chest and violently pushed him away.

"No! My God, no!" The words were a broken sob. "We are both mad! It cannot be! Think of my husband, of Grace!"

"It's a little late to think of them now. And what do they, or the rest of the whole world, signify to us?" Smiling confidently he again approached her with outstretched arms, but she swiftly evaded him, and snatched up a pearl-handled stiletto which she had been utilizing as a paper cutter. At his grim smile of contempt she flung it down on the table and laid her hand on the call bell. He gave a shrug and dropped his arms.

"That is unnecessary," he said quietly. "Your pitiful fear is an efficient safeguard against any further importunity. Courage is an indispensable quantity in the composition of a wolf. I have been ludicrously mistaken. May I hope that you will forgive and forget?"

"There is nothing to forgive, but neither of us must forget, again. Not ever again!" She was struggling for composure, her hard-clenched hand pressed against her heart. "I never dreamed _"

He laughed harshly. "You never dreamed that in the veins of men there could be red, as well as white corpuscles? Were there nothing but emasculates among your circle of acquaintance in the vaunted 'Four Hundred'?"

Wincing at his coarseness as though it had been a blow, she went over and leaned against the casement of the window, looking silently out at the stars. After a time he took up his sombrero and moved toward the door, pausing at the threshold to courteously bid her good night. At the sound of his voice she turned quickly.

"Wait!" She motioned to an easy chair. "Sit down, please. There is something which in justice to

us both, must be said before you go." He took the seat indicated and she turned again to the window. For quite a time she stared mutely into the night, the man waiting in patient silence. When she finally spoke it was in a tone so low that he had to bend forward to catch the words.

"You were right when you said that I was afraid; but it is not convention that has made me a coward. It is of myself that I am afraid, the new, strange self that has evolved since I came here, a year ago, filled with the pitiful conceit that I knew life—and men—thoroughly.

"Remember that I lived in a different world, in an artificial and enervating atmosphere where nothing is real but Rank, nothing sweet but Station, nothing precious but Money. As a girl I was sold to the highest bidder; he gave me all that wealth and genealogy could give, and up to six months ago I kept faith. Not one of the countless men with whom I amused myself ever aroused in me even one moment's serious thought; for twelve weary years I played at the inane game of platonic, with no further effect than to come finally to regard the vaunted 'love' of the poets as a libel on human intelligence. It had been proffered me in all tongues, in all climes, at all times, by all sorts and conditions of men; at first to my listless amusement and at last to my contemptuous disgust. It was part of my strained and unnatural environment; I wore these 'loves' on my sleeve as I wore hothouse orchids on my corsage, finding their emanations as nauseous and unwholesome.

"I was fed on sweets of flattery and wine of adulation, when all the time I was thirsting for pure affection, hungry for the strong meat of a real love. Yesterday I heard one of your men singing a plaintive ditty whose refrain absolutely portrays my miserable existence:

"'A bird in a gilded cage!'"

She threw out her hand passionately, her eyes filling with tears. It was with great effort that she recovered her self-control sufficiently to continue.

"I never realized what possibilities Life held until six months ago. Then for the first time I learned the difference in men—and the bitterness that comes with knowledge acquired too late. The confession may be unwomanly, but I glory in it. No, keep your seat." He had eagerly arisen and was holding out his arms. "I have been disloyal to my husband in the learning and this is part of my atonement."

She went over and stood beside him, breathing softly. In the subdued light her pallor only accentuated her ravishing beauty. Douglass thought he had never beheld so heavenly a thing. Very gently he leaned forward and touched her hand but she as gently shook her head in negation.

"I was foolishly, criminally weak to come back here. But I had to see you again. Oh! I am mad! mad! mad! I know only too well the nature of the passion I have inspired in you, and the humiliation of it is the bitterest part of my deserved punishment. Yet even your avid, brutal lust is a thousand times dearer to me than the refined insipidity of any other man's purest love. Stop! I say, or—!" She placed her hand resolutely on the bell, her determination indubitable.

"It is the hour of my shame and you must know all. I had rather be your running mate—Oh! you grand, lovable, vicious, merciless beast—than be queen regnant in heaven. But that can never be. I am the wife of Anselm Brevoort and you are the betrothed husband of another woman. But she will breed you no wolves, my lost Ishmael; your gettings will be bleating lambs. Ah, God! the shame of it!"

She struck the bell savagely as he sprang to his feet with a choking cry.

"And, now that you know, I confidently invoke your honor, your clean manliness, for my protection. You will help me against myself, will you not, dear?"

"And who will help me?" he muttered hoarsely. The perspiration was standing in white beads on his forehead. Swift as a flash she crossed over to him and laid her hand trustfully on his arm.

"We will help each other, beloved. Good night."

But hours after he had succumbed to the seductions of his coarse blankets she lay on her dainty bed with clenched hands and sleepless eyes, trying to pierce the gloomy veil of futurity and tearfully striving to reconcile a great misery with a greater joy.

"I love him! I love him!" she moaned passionately, "and if it were not for that milk-and-water baby he would love me with all the savage strength and intensity of his fierce nature. Oh! my Wolf, my strong, wild Wolf! What can that vapid ninny offer you in comparison to what I would give?"

She sat up erect, her eyes blazing in the darkness like those of a hunted wild beast.

"She shall not—I swear it! Home, station, wealth, honor, body and soul—I will sacrifice all! He is mine! mine! mine!" After awhile, in sheer exhaustion of passion, she fell into a troubled sleep.

The next day he obtained leave of absence for a fortnight's inspection of his mines. En route he mailed several letters entrusted by Mrs. Brevoort, one of which was addressed to a woman in New York. She was one of those inveterate gossips of high station who act as purveyors of "exclusive information" to the society editors of the great fashionable journals.

Some days later he stopped at Tin Cup for the ranch mail; it included a rather short and

unsatisfactory note from Grace, written hurriedly in transit, announcing her party's embarkation on Lord Ellerslie's yacht for a cruise on the Mediterranean. The girl was really homesick in truth, but relying too implicitly on Love's divination had omitted to make that fact clear, ending her missive with the ambiguous sentence: "I wish we had never left home. I am so unhappy." It was the first communication he had received from her for over six weeks. He did not know that her customary budget, a sort of daily diary mailed once a month, had gone down with the fated *Peruvia* in mid-ocean, and he was uneasy and resentful.

Mrs. Brevoort was out riding when he reached the ranch, so he merely instructed 'Rastus to inform her of his return, and dined at the common mess house. In the interim of waiting he glanced casually over the contents of the New York papers which he had received in the mail.

Unto Constance Brevoort, awaiting him with a great trepidation in the little den, came a white-lipped, stern-faced man with a paper crushed in his hand.

"Read that!" he said curtly, pointing to a paragraph at the head of the "Society Column." She caught her breath sharply but with no other visible evidence of emotion held the paper up to the light. He watched her grimly, a mirthless smile on his lips. With a well-simulated gasp of horror she let the sheet fall on the floor and turned to him breathlessly.

"It cannot be true! It is a lie! Oh! my poor friend!" Her voice was a curious commingling of fear and exultation. The gossip had done her work with artistic efficiency.

He picked up the paper and calmly read the paragraph aloud. It was short but succinct:

"We have it on indisputable authority that the engagement of one of Gotham's most lovely daughters, the beautiful Miss Grace Carter, to lord Yare Ellerslie, of ellesmere, Surrey, one of Britain's most eligible scions, will be formally announced on the return of his lordship's yacht from the Mediterranean, where he is at present cruising in company with his fiancée, her mother, and a party of mutual friends. It is said to be one of those delightful love-at-first-sight affairs, and society is all agog over the romantic outcome of what was merely intended to be a short pleasure trip. Lord Ellerslie is said to be immensely wealthy in his own right and will, besides, succeed to the title and vast estates of his father, the present earl. Miss Carter is a joint heiress of the millions of the famous 'cattle king,' Robert Carter. We understand that the honeymoon will include a cruise around the world in his lordship's magnificent yacht, which has been rechristened the 'Gracie' in honor of his prospective bride."

He laid the paper down on the table and stood looking silently at it. It seemed to the woman watching him nervously that he aged a dozen years since she last saw him. She almost relented at the sight of his fiercely-controlled misery, but she shut her teeth with determination. One cannot make an omelet without the breaking of eggs. The game was a desperate one, but she had everything at stake. She would play it out and win.

She was about to speak when he looked up with a harsh laugh.

"Your nobleman wasn't so very 'innocuous' after all, it seems. Her mother certainly lost no time. What is the accepted form of a letter of congratulation on such occasions?"

"Oh! it cannot be true!" she faltered, evading his eyes unaccountably. "There has been some terrible mistake!"

"And I have made it." He handed her Grace's little note. "This is the amount of her correspondence in the last two months. It seems to clinch the certainty of the glad tidings. And to think that I was fool enough to imagine that there was one pure, true heart among your fair, false sex." He turned upon her scornfully. "I wonder how much of what you said the other night was a lie. It is a rare accomplishment, this clever ability to turn an impending tragedy into a harmless comedy. Tell me, how long did you laugh after I had gone?"

She paled, for his mood was a dangerous one and a single false move might imperil everything. But she was a past-master of the gentle craft of love-making and all her finesse had been to this very end. She had calculated on the ease with which a heart may be caught in the rebound, and her opportunity was at hand. And she knew now, with a certainty that terrified and yet emboldened her, that she loved this man better than life and that existence without him would be one eternal curse. She was a brave woman and her hesitation was only momentary.

"Suffering has made you unjust, my friend," she said quietly. "I take bitter shame to myself for having bared my heart so nakedly to you that dreadful night, since it has been so pitiably unavailing. I did not laugh that night—I cried. I only wish I could lie to you, dear. It might be the means of conserving my honor and self-respect in those hours of danger—the every hour I spend in your company. Must I abase myself more? Must I tell you that I have prayed that this pain should come to you so that I might comfort you with a love so tender, so all-giving that you would blush in self-commiseration of your callow infatuation for that foolish fledgling who deserted the eyrie of an eagle for the flat commons of an English goose pasture? And now that the measure of my shame is complete, go—and leave me to the agony of it. Oh! my Wolf! my Wolf! I could have given so much, and so willingly! But now I hate you! I hate you! Go, I say! Go!" She pointed imperiously to the door with streaming eyes. "Will you go or must I summon the servants?"

But with eyes flaming and extended arms he advanced instead. With a little cry of alarm she

evaded him and took refuge on the divan, where she cowered with covered eyes. With a strange forced smile he sank on his knee beside her. Very gently he removed her hands from her face and compelled her to look at him. She was quivering all over and her eyes were gleaming like stars.

"What is the need of other servants when you have a loving slave here at your feet? Connie! Connie!"

Afar in the distance rang a familiar cry; at the eerie sound their pulses leaped in unison. The man put his whole soul into one fierce appeal:

"Connie! my Queen!"

From without stole the answering call of the she-wolf.

With a soft little cry that was half a laugh, half a sob, she drew his face down upon her bosom.

CHAPTER XX

A PASSAGE AT ARMS

At Brindisi, a month later, Grace found Douglass's letter awaiting her. She kissed it furtively and thrust it in her bosom, reserving its reading for the privacy of her room. Not until she had crept into bed did she open the prosaic government-stamped envelope which he methodically used. She always read his letters so, punctuating each tender sentence with a kiss and going to sleep with it tucked in her nightdress next her heart.

This was an unusually bulky enclosure and she hugged it in anticipation; how sweet it was of him to devote so much of his time to her in his busiest season. Passionately she pressed her lips to it again and with a sigh of delight drew out—a single sheet of note paper enclosing a closely-folded page of printed matter.

As though doubting her senses, she sat erect in bed and unfolded the newspaper; there was nothing enclosed therein and with perplexity writ large all over her face she turned curiously to the written sheet.

Slowly, as one in a daze, she read and reread it a dozen times; it was very short and in nowise ambiguously phrased, yet she did not seem able to grasp its meaning:

"My congratulations on the speed and facility with which your very astute and clever mother has extricated you from what must certainly have been a very embarrassing entanglement. May you be as happy in your new exalted station as you once made me imagine I was going to be!

"Owing you, as I do, not only my life but my fortune as well, for my mines are now in bonanza, I confess to even a greater indebtedness: you gave me a six-month of the only happiness I have ever known. But you would have rendered me an incalculably greater service had you left those dynamite cartridges undisturbed that day.

"If in the mutations of time and chance you should ever have need of me, the life and fortune which you gave are at your command. Good-by."

In an agony of bewilderment she took up the newspaper, intuitively seeking the Society Columns.

Mrs. Robert Carter, leisurely preparing for her night's rest in the adjoining apartment, looked up with a pleasant smile as the communicating door opened, a word of loving greeting on her lips. But there was little of answering affection in the glittering eyes and white face of the girl who, with clenched hands and dilating nostrils, advanced upon her. Something in the unnatural demeanor of Grace alarmed her and she nervously dropped her hair brush and rose to her feet.

"Gracie! What is It?"

Very deliberately the girl thrust the printed sheet into her mother's hand and in a calm voice demanded:

"Tell me, what part did you have in this?"

In astonishment the elder woman ran her eye hurriedly over the item the rigid finger was pointing out; her face hardened with anger and annoyance.

"None whatever, my child," she said with an evident truthfulness that carried with it instant conviction. "I am as much surprised and pained as you are. Instead of sanctioning such an alliance it would have received my firmest opposition. Lord Ellerslie scarcely approximates to my ideals of a son-in-law. This is the work of some contemptible penny-a-liner with a superfluity of space to fill; it is not worth refuting, dear; women of our station are always exposed to these petty annoyances and this may have been written with the very object of inciting our space-filling denial. Don't be unduly exercised over such a trifle." And then a bit reproachfully, "You really could not think me accessory to such a contemptible thing as that, daughtie?"

At the endearing diminutive the hardness left the girl's face and her lips trembled pitifully. Unable to speak she mutely held out Douglass's letter and the mother, comprehending, took her shelteringly to her bosom while she read it. At its conclusion she patted the silken hair caressingly.

"Don't worry, dearie," she said reassuringly. "A cablegram will set this matter right. It is unfortunate that he should have seen this particular paper." She paused abruptly, a sudden suspicion intruding itself. But she did not voice it, and bent to the consolation of the now weeping girl.

"Oh! Mummy," she sobbed, "I love him so! I love him so! Let us go home before my heart breaks!"

Mrs. Carter took up the letter again. "My mines are now in bonanza," she read.

"We will take the next steamer," she said quietly. "And upon second thought I think we had better not cable. Better make your denial in person; it will be more effective."

While Grace Carter was speeding homeward with a heavy heart, out at the VN ranch Constance Brevoort was in a delirium of feverish happiness, and Douglass, thrilled by her passionate abandon, had not yet tired. Upon him she showered all the affection so long repressed; and her fervor and intensity, which awed him not a little, was very flattering to his vanity. Too subtly wise to risk wearying him with too great exactions on his time, she was rather shy and disposed to hold him aloof, thus skillfully shifting the onus of importunity on to his shoulders and so keeping alive and burning the flame at which she had lighted all her hopes. But in the occasional moments of their intimate communion she flooded him with sweetness even as the "Serpent of the old Nile" washed reason from the mind of Antony and laved his soul with living fire. Of what the world might think or say, of her husband's fury and probable revenge, of her friends inevitable ostracism she thought with indifference if at all; in this new-found happiness everything else was lost. She lived entirely in the present, obstinately refusing to reckon with the future. Once, when he hesitatingly broached the subject of their future relations, she stopped his mouth with kisses and breathed into his ear the sophistry of the old Tent-maker of Naishapur:

"Ah, fill the Cup; what boots it
to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath
our Feet?
Unborn TO-MORROW and dead
YESTERDAY,
Why fret about them if TO-DAY
be sweet?"

She was very frankly in love with him, and he not at all with her. So far as she was concerned he was simply a wolf, with a wolf's wild desire. Of course, the situation had its attractions, and the risks incurred lent an added charm to this danger-loving young animal. He was infatuated with her physically, but that was all. Of this she was fully conscious, but with a hope born of desperation she determined to hold him while she could; who knows what a day may bring forth? Anselm Brevoort was getting old; she would be a very wealthy widow; and this man, despite his very humble station, had been reared in luxury and had a keen appreciation of the higher amenities. She was more than content to drift, leaving the ultimate harbor in the lap of the gods.

The story of a rich strike spreads very rapidly in a mining region; within three months after the explosion of that wild-flung dynamite all the Rocky Mountain country was agog with marvelous tales of Douglass's luck and a great rush of prospectors was made to the new Eldorado. At the time of the discovery of the quartz ledge, at Douglass's suggestion, Brevoort, Carter and McVey had conjointly located three extension claims on the vein, and the two women, Grace and Constance, had also located two claims in their joint names. The assessment work legally required to hold these claims had all been done and the necessary excavations had shown all the five extensions to contain values. The additional work required to make the holdings patentable was rushed to completion, and before the inrush of the prospective Midases had fairly begun, the titles had been made incontestably secure.

In the parlance of the camps Douglass's original discoveries "paid from grass-roots down" and his exploitation work was all in high grade ore. With the proceeds derived from its sale he installed a diamond drilling plant with which he thoroughly prospected the formation within his boundary lines with the result of indisputably establishing the continuity of the rich deposits. So extensive and valuable did these prove that he was fairly inundated with offers of purchase from the shrewd representatives of various syndicates, the figures rising with each successive bid as the vein was definitely proved. But the offers as yet were scarcely half the amount which Douglass had sturdily demanded for his holdings, although at his advice the two women and Red McVey sold out their interests to a syndicate headed and promoted by Anselm Brevoort. His good judgment was fully vindicated later, when, after extensive exploitation the consolidated five extension claims barely yielded ore enough to pay the purchase price, the real ore chimney being confined inside Douglass's property. And as the three lucky venders received in the neighborhood of one hundred thousand dollars each, with only a nominal outlay for assessment work and patenting, the transaction was very satisfactory to them.

Before sailing for Europe, Grace had at her brother's suggestion given Douglass power of attorney for the handling of her interests, and he had duly deposited her share of the proceeds to

her credit in Denver's best bank, notifying her brother of the disposition of the fund and suggesting that it be retained there until her return, when it could be presented as an agreeable surprise. Constance's share simply swelled an already very respectable private banking account, and Red McVey had very wisely taken Douglass's earnest advice and invested his entire fortune in Denver Tramway stock, eventually buying with the resultant dividends a splendid ranch. But that is another story.

Brevoort's syndicate was composed altogether of European investors, and that astute financier, fully aware of the great value of Douglass's holdings, was in conference with his colleagues in London, urging their acceptance of the cool million demanded by the hard-headed owner. The day Grace Carter and her mother landed in New York on their homeward passage he had finally achieved his point and immediately cabled Douglass and his Denver banking correspondent to that effect, authorizing the latter to make an initial payment of one-tenth of the required amount to bind the transaction pending his immediate return to complete the deal. At his earnest request Douglass left immediately on receipt of his advice for Denver.

Considering the unattractive conditions at the ranch in event of his absence for an indefinite time, it is scarcely to be wondered at that Constance Brevoort elected to accompany him.

Three days after their arrival at the metropolis, Grace Carter accompanied by her brother reached Denver on their way to the ranch, having no intimation of the others' presence in the city. In order to distract his sister's mind from her nervous brooding, Robert insisted upon her attendance at the opera, the night of their arrival, and at her listless acquiescence had procured box seats. It chanced to be *Carmen*, with Calve in the title role. The assemblage was a brilliant one and Calve was at her best. Always an emotional creature, Grace yielded to the fascination of the story and had temporarily forgotten her own troubles when she chanced to glance at the lower box immediately opposite, into which had just entered a man and woman. The woman was Constance Brevoort and her escort was Ken Douglass!

Even though clad in the conventional full dress in which she had never before beheld him, there was no mistaking that lean, muscular form and bronzed face. Eagerly she leaned forward, her lips parted and her face flushed with excitement. How wonderful to find him here so unexpectedly; it would shorten her agony at least five blessed days! But—but—why was Constance with him? Unconsciously a chilling wave swept over her and she drew back into the shelter of the box with a vague uneasiness tugging at her heart. Carter, frankly interested in the voluptuous *Carmen*, had no eyes except for the stage, and did not notice his sister's perturbation. It is worthy of note that she did not call his attention to the occupants of the other box.

For as she stealthily watched her betrothed husband's removal of Constance's cloak there was something in the manner of both that drove the color from her face. And when, in an intermission, as he leaned over her, she saw Constance Brevoort's lips laid surreptitiously on his throat, she gave a heart-broken gasp and nervously implored her brother to take her back to the hotel.

All unconscious of the cause, and with never a look at the opposite box, he instantly complied, reproaching himself with having subjected her to this unadvisable strain on her nerves. On their arrival at their hotel she pleaded a slight indisposition from weariness of travel and at once retired.

With clenched hands and white face she lay staring into the darkness. It was all plain to her now! For with an intuition that went straight to the mark, she knew who was the instigator of the report of her engagement to Lord Ellerslie; and she knew why! Curiously enough, she attached no blame to him, but she felt a deep and increasing hatred for the woman who had robbed her. There could be only one interpretation of their relations and her whole nature resented it passionately. But her love for him was very great and she was eager to give him the benefit of the doubt, even while her whole sentience shrieked his guilt.

The next morning she called a bellboy and handed him a bank note upon which lay a slip of paper.

"Find out for me, please," she said, with a forced smile, "the hotel where these two friends of mine are registered, without letting them know. I want to call upon them unexpectedly and surprise them." The lad bowed his appreciation of her generosity and in less than a half hour returned with the desired information. It was "dead easy to locate swells of that kind," as he shrewdly remarked to an envious colleague who had begrudged him that magnificent tip.

She was all honied complaisance when she called upon Constance that morning immediately after breakfast, much to that lady's consternation and surprise. For a moment Mrs. Brevoort was speechless and panic-stricken, but she was an old campaigner and soon recovered her composure. She professed her delight at the unexpected pleasure and then boldly played a false card.

"Your coming was so unexpected, dear, that it has deprived me of my good manners. I sincerely congratulate you on your engagement to Lord Ellerslie. It was a great surprise to me; I was, er—under the impression—"

Grace looked at her steadily, a cynical contempt faintly curling the red lips. "Really! How strange! I should have imagined that my own surprise would have been the greater, considering that, as you know, there was not a word of truth in that announcement so maliciously dictated by

some contemptible wretch to subserve her own vicious purpose. By this time our lawyers will have determined the responsibility for that pitiful lie, although I have already a full conviction as to its authorship! It's really dreadful, Connie! But, as mamma says, women of our station are proverbially exposed to such annoyances. And people have absolutely no regard for the probable consequences of their malicious gossip. Think of what it would mean to you, dear, for instance, if someone were to mercilessly convey to Mr. Brevoort an insinuation that you had been guilty of—a great indiscretion! Think of the publicity, the scandal, the shame of it; the loss of home, rank, station and friends."

Under the lash of the bitterly deliberate words Constance Brevoort winced and cringed. This thing of white flame and quiet fury was scarcely the "colorless entity" of her misplaced contempt. How much did she really know, anyway? The doubt was cutting her soul into ribbons.

Summoning all her really great courage to her aid, she affected to treat the matter humorously and gave an exaggerated little shiver of deprecation. But all the time her heart was quaking with a fear of the outraged girl before her. Yet she had all the proverbial courage—or is it the desperation—of the cornered wolf she knew herself to be, and metaphorically bared her teeth.

"How dramatically grewsome your suggestion, *cherie!* It really gives me the shivers! But supposing the absurdly impossible; what then? Don't you know that the world and all its hollow shams are well lost for a love like the one you are intimating?" It was a distinct challenge; one could read it diviningly in the set lips and flashing eyes as well. But love fights doggedly and unconquerably long after volatile and ephemeral passion has fled a stubborn field, and this was the love of the daughter of "the bravest man God ever made."

"You are jumping at conclusions, dear," she said, with a careless indulgence which made her hearer's jaws meet with a venomous click. "I have intimated nothing, not even the possibility of your ever being tempted by the arising of such a contingency. And yet, having had many lovers—if the tales be true—you should be able to speak authoritatively!"

If looks could have slain, the world would have been forever lost to Grace Carter at that moment. It took Constance quite a time to control herself sufficiently to avoid betraying her rage at this chit's insolent assurance. When she did speak her words were sweetly vitriolic:

"One can imagine the shock Ellerslie's vanity will encounter when he learns of that canard! Such things require so much explanation, too! I am really sorry, dear, at your humiliating predicament. And what in the name of Venus are you going to say in conciliation to Kenneth Douglass?"

Grace flinched pitifully at this double *touche* of her adversary's keen weapon, but her eyes glistened like burnished steel. The duel was to be a *l'outrance* now, and she put all her indignation and subtlety behind her blow. The older woman had noted with a malicious pleasure a dull flushing of the fair face and throat but had wrongly ascribed its cause. The battle ground was her bedchamber, and over on a chair, carelessly thrown, lay a man's light topcoat and a pair of gloves many sizes too large for Constance's dainty hands! With a world of scornful meaning the girl looked at the chair, and the eyes of the woman following the direction of that glance, grew black with confusion.

"I think he has been sufficiently appealed to in the name of your patron goddess," she said, icily, "and as for Lord Ellerslie, I rejected his proposal even before I had learned of his relations with the author of that despicable lie. As for Mr. Douglass—"

The words died on her tongue as the door, evidently communicating with another room adjoining, suddenly opened and a well-known voice said familiarly:

"Did I leave my coat and gloves in here last night, Connie? There would be the devil to pay if the chambermaid—!"

Standing there in his shirt sleeves, Ken Douglass was, for the first time in his reckless life, at a disadvantage too great for even his conceded adroitness to overcome. In a coma of stupefaction, with horror and shame written all over his gray-white face, he stood staring at the pale, haughty face so relentlessly directed toward him. For a full minute she held him on the rack of her scorn; then with a hard composure in her voice, which accorded but poorly with the unutterable loathing and aversion in her eyes, she said coldly:

"I am doubly fortunate in this rencounter. It saves much unnecessary waste of time, and fatigue, and verbiage to find you here! In justice to us both I have come all the way from Europe to tell you that my reported engagement to Lord Ellerslie was a cruel lie!"

And without another word she swept proudly out of the room without deigning one look at the woman cowering on the cushioned divan.

"Take me home, Bobbie!" she sobbed piteously to her brother, as she clung forsakenly to him in their sitting-room. And further explanation she would vouch him none, despite his bewildered implorations. "Take me home; I want Mummy!"

That night after she had retired he picked up from the floor, where it had fluttered unnoticed, a scrap of paper containing two names and a hotel address. He stared at it uncomprehendingly and then a cold sweat stood on his wrinkled brow. He went over to his dressing-case and took out a shining nickel-plated revolver. Tiptoeing cautiously into his sister's room he gently kissed the tear-stained face. Then he went out very softly and called for a cab.

In the ordinary of the vast hostelry he found Douglass sitting on an easy-chair, staring into vacancy. At his curt address the man looked up wearily and gravely motioned him toward the elevator. It was noticeable that neither offered to shake hands, despite the closeness of their relations and the further fact that they had not met in better than half a year.

In silence Carter strode after him until they reached Douglass's apartments; then turning to the silent man before him, he sternly asked:

"What have you done to my sister?"

Douglass, leaning against the window jamb, looking out into the soft summer night, made no reply. Carter crossed over fiercely and wrenched him around.

"Answer me! Or by God, I'll tear it out of you with my hands!"

His breath was coming thickly but there was no fear in the eyes of old Bob Carter's boy.

Douglass looked at him with apathetic wonder.

"I've lost her!" he answered dully. Carter looked at him with impatient amazement, mingled with suspicion. Was the man crazy, or was this only a weak attempt at evasion? He was going to know and that without any more foolishness. Savagely he caught hold of the other's coat lapel and shook him with an incredible strength.

"She came across an ocean and two continents to tell you that she was true to you, damn you! And she has just cried herself to sleep! I want the truth, do you hear!" His boyish face was convulsed with passion and his whole effeminate body was aquiver.

"I've lost her!" repeated Douglass, unemotionally, offering not the slightest resistance to the other's vehemence. "I've lost her!" as though that were the Alpha and Omega of all things. Then he turned fiercely to the younger man.

"What in hell do you want?"

The boy blazed back at him as fiercely, fumbling the weapon in his pocket.

"I want the whole truth of this miserable thing—the whole truth! And if you have made my sister suffer through anything unworthy, I want your heart's blood as well! Damn you, are you going to speak?" He clutched frantically at Douglass's throat. Very calmly the bronzed giant circled his wrists with a grip of steel and held him off at arms' length.

"Sit down, Carter," he said in a normal tone. "It is your right to know and you shall. I have wronged your sister! No, you fool, not in that way!" as the boy struggled furiously in his vice-like grip. "But I am deserving of any punishment you may choose to inflict." And without preamble he told Carter the whole story, only suppressing the name of the woman concerned.

At its conclusion the boy breathed easier and the truculence went out of him entirely as Douglass laid his head on his arms and muttered hoarsely:

"I love her! I love her! And now I've lost her!"

Bobbie Carter rose and put his hand on the brawny shoulder. His voice was harsh with sympathy, after the fashion of man.

"You've been all kinds of a senseless ass, Ken," he said, affectionately, his faith in his hero once more restored, "but it is not as bad as I thought. You want to break off with Mrs.—" he had almost betrayed his knowledge of that which Douglass had been chivalrously trying to conceal—"with that woman, whoever she is, and in course of time, after she has bawled her foolish little eyes out, Gracie will forgive you. I know her like a book. I'm her brother, you know! Buck up, old man! She'll make it hard for you, and you are going to get a bitter lesson. But it will come out all right in time—If you don't go loco again and spoil it all."

But all his pleading and remonstrances were unavailing with his sister when he sought to effect a reconciliation. She had been irremediably hurt, and, in her misery, actually hoped that she would never see him again. She insisted upon returning home; and then consented to go on to the ranch for a short, and, as she firmly resolved, a final visit!

Douglass, watching her as he thought unseen, the next morning at the Union Depot, as she entered the west-bound train, was filled with a great repentance and remorse. He did not know that she stood at the proper angle to see his disconsolate face until the train pulled out. It must be confessed, however, that it was a hard, unrelenting mouth that scornfully curved as he strode away with depressed head as the train glided out with accelerating speed.

"Like as not he will go straight back to that shameless creature as soon as we are safely out of sight!" she thought, with stiffly-erected head. And as a curious vindication of that strange quantity in women, which, for lack of some better name, we term "intuition," we are truthfully compelled to admit that is just exactly what he did!

A WIDENING CHASM

Ten days later Brevoort arrived in Denver and the deal was fully consummated. As the possessor of a million, cowpunching lost its charms for Douglass, who resigned his connection with the VN interests.

Brevoort, realizing his own inability to make a success of ranching without expert assistance, made Douglass a very favorable proposition to take over his ranch holdings, which was promptly accepted. Within thirty days he had purchased a fine "bunch" of high-grade cattle, placing the whole "outfit" under the efficient supervision of Punk Wilson, who, reinforced by a trio of Lazy K boys, who transformed their allegiance to Douglass, soon had matters running along swimmingly. The ranch was thereafter known as the Circle D, that being Douglass's private brand.

Immediately upon taking possession of his new property he had made an ineffectual overture towards Grace's conciliation; the girl, stung by jealousy and smarting under a sense of his disloyalty, had scornfully rejected his advances and the breach was wider than ever in consequence. Yet her visit was prolonged far into the autumn, possibly because she was determined not to give a clear field to Constance Brevoort, who had also apparently become a fixture. All relations between the two women had been severed irrevocably, each keeping to her own respective bailiwick. Constance had, with a reluctant regard for the proprieties, established herself at the Blounts, in Tin Cup, and after Grace's contemptuous treatment of Douglass, he spent the major portion of his time in the village. Brevoort, engrossed in his mining schemes, gravitated between Tin Cup and the Roaring Fork, unseeingly.

Over at the C Bar the situation was fast growing intolerable to Grace Carter. Although she would rather have died than admit it even to herself, her love for Douglass only increased with every heart-wrenching report of his recklessly open relations with the object of her deepest hatred, which were constantly sifting down to her through the neighbors' gossip. As their engagement had not been made public, she was spared the irritating commiseration which would otherwise have been her unenviable lot. All knowledge of it was fortunately restricted to Abbie, McVey, Brevoort and his wife; for obvious reasons it gained no further publicity. Therefore Douglass's affair was regarded enviously by the other range men, and it must be confessed, rather indulgently by the range women, who found not a great deal of fault with his conquest of this supercilious "big-bug" who had weaned the hearts of their men away from proper altars of devotion. Old Abbie, alone, was bitterly vituperative of both the man and his condoning admirers.

"Why is it," she indignantly snorted to Mrs. Blount, on the occasion of one of that lady's garrulous visits, "that all wimmen, even r'ally good ones, have a kinda sneakin' likin' foah a rake? Thu worse thu mizzable he-critters be, thu moah yuh giggle at theah nastiness! It's a wondeh to me thet men eveh get married at all any moah. I disremembeh eveh hearin' any she-male talkin' about thu goodness of any r'ally decent man, married er single; but jest let some tur'ble mean-minded cuss get to cuttin' capehs with some fool woman er tother, an' every ole brindle on thu range chaws on thu cud of it like a dogie on May blue-joint; an' as fer thu heifers, every blessed one on 'em purtends to be buffaloe if he crosses theah trail an' skitteh away, lookin' back disap'inted if he don't folleh an' try to raound 'em up. An' bimeby, when he gets good an' plenty tiahed o' hell-ahootin' araound, he jes' ups an' nach'rally takes hes pick o' thu cream o' thu bunch, leavin' thu skim milk fer better men whose shoes he ain't fitten to lick!

"I don't know why," she went on regretfully, calmly ignoring the indignant protest of her scandalized hearer, "an' I reckon Gawd, Hissself, don't know eitheh, but we locoed wimmen allus love bad men a heap better'n we do good ones. I've been seein' it all my life until I'm got plumb ashamed o' my sect."

But to Grace, that night, she said inconsistently, her gray crest bristling with impatience:

"Honey, anything in this wohld that's worth havin' is worth fightin' foh! Yuh are no Cahteh if yuh stand foh anybody's runnin' off yuah stock. Neveh yuh mind haow wild an' ornary he 'peahs to be just now, that fool boy is a thorrerbred at heart, and the best on 'em go loco by spells. Thu betteh the breed, thu worse they bolt when things go wrong, but they are mighty good critters to have in yuah brand! Thu trouble is that you been feedin' him on bran mash when he's system was ahollerin' foh star-shavin's! Ken Douglass ain't no yeahlin' no moah, honey; he ain't no child to be taken' an' raised like we did Buffo; he's a strong man an' wants strong meat with salt an' peppeh on it. An' long's he's not robbin' yuah lahdeh what yuh gotta kick about?"

But she turned her head away as the girl said bitterly:

"And you, too? It Is part of the Divine scheme, then, that only women should keep themselves pure and sweet and clean in order to merit the beatitudes of 'holy' matrimony! Delilah gets the kernel, and Ruth the husks! You shameless old woman! To think that *you* would dare preach such a wickedness with unblushing face!"

"Dearie," said the old woman slowly, "Theah's been Delilahs eveh since theah's been Samsons an' they allus will be. I reckon Gawd made 'em to kinda take thu aige offen men's sharp desiah so as to keep it from cuttin' puah hearts apaht. Yuh cain't change natuh, lammie; wild oats will be agrowin' long afteh thu second comin' o' Christ! But theah allus sown in wild an' waste places as is right an' fitten, an' thu seed runs out in time. Thu betteh growths need pureh soil, an' men wisely sow theah good seed in the clean gahdens that Gawd intended thu otheh kind o' wimmins' hearts to be. Yuh kin allus cook betteh, too, on thu steady heat of thu coals afteh the flame O'

fierce fiah has buhned itself out, an' thu brand that holds a man bites deepah if it's heated In the glowin' heart of Love afteh thu flame an' smoke of passion has drifted away.

"Theah's things In a man's natuh that's gotta be buhned out; yuh cain't prune 'em away. An' like measles, mumps an' small-pox, it's bettah to happen when he's young. When that Brevoort critter has trimmed Ken's lamps so's they'll burn steady without flickerin' he'll light up yuah life foh all time, honey. An' she's almost got thu jawb done, or I miss my guess! Yuh take my advice, an' when he comes cavortin' about yeah again within ropin' distance get yuah string on him and corral him foh keeps. He'll be good from now on if you give him thu chanct. An' if yuh don't, he'll run rampageous to the bad—an' yuh'll be to blame!"

And the wise old woman was even wiser than she knew. At that very moment, Douglass, looking at a picture that should have logically thrilled him to the core, was travailing in a morose discontent quite incompatible with his environment. The woman for whose sake he had imperiled all that a man holds dear, was sitting opposite him on the hotel veranda In the soft moonlight, with little Eulalie cuddled closely to her. Every full, round line of her betokened her perfect fitness for maternity and the motherhood implanted in every woman's heart was softly irradiating her face as she bent caressingly over the sleeping child. Intended by Nature as a mother of soldiers, here by the caprice of fate she was fostering the weak offspring of another less fit, denied woman's highest mission, debarred from Nature's most noble function. And he had but to say the word!

For that afternoon, in an agony of passion, she had whispered a temptation in his ear, clinging to him with all the seductiveness in her nature:

"Let us go away, dear, anywhere, anywhere, so that we are together! There will be a separation without any publicity, for he is very proud; and he really never cared! Make me the wife and mother that Nature intended me to be; give me the fulfillment that is every woman's due!"

It came to him with a shock, for he had been living only in the enjoyment of the present. Brought face to face with the eternal future, he realized a great unpreparedness, abnormal as it was disquieting. He had answered her evasively, with a politic tenderness that satisfied her temporarily; but he knew that her insistence was only deferred, and his answer was not ready. And to-night he was cursing the inevitable brutality that he knew he would ultimately be compelled to exercise.

For even as his soul yearned at the tender appeal of that picture most exquisite to man, the mothering of a child, the beauteous face before him was replaced by another, reproachful and haughty yet fair with a purity and beauty indescribable, the patrician mouth trembling and the sweet eyes brimming with appeal. Sharply he shut his teeth and sat erect.

Only one woman in the world should be mother to his children—and that woman was not the beauty crooning softly to that sleeping babe! He had lost her for a little while but he would find her, and the way back into her favor! And having found her, at whatever bitter cost, he would never let her go again! He resolved that on the morrow he would ride over to the C Bar and grovel in abasement at her feet if need be.

The woman sitting opposite him shivered telepathically and a tear fell on the face of the child.

"He is weighing me against her," she thought, fearfully, "and I am afraid—afraid! But I will not give him up! Oh, my God! I can not!"

And down at the C Bar Grace was crying to her heart:

"Will he come? Will he come?"

But it was Red McVey who came awooning in the soft dusk of the succeeding evening, his handsome face bright with a great love, his six feet of stalwart manliness begroomed with appropriate care. He was far from possessing his ordinary confidence, but he came bravely to the point and the girl's eyes held as much pride as they did sympathy for him.

"Your love is an honor to me," she said, gently. "I am proud to have inspired such a feeling in so grand a man, and I shall thank God on my knees for it to-night! But it is impossible, my dear friend; you will be generous and spare me explanations—"

"Don't cry!" he said, gently, but his face was very white and drawn. "I understand. Yuh are shore they ain't any hope. I'd wait foh yeahs?"

"No, dear friend, there is none. I do not think I shall ever marry. And I am going away to-morrow."

She held out her hand and he bent awkwardly over it. Very softly he pressed his lips upon the little pink palm. Then he stood erect, still holding the fluttering fingers in both his bronzed hands.

"Yuh will neveh know what yuh've been to me," he said, gravely, "and what yuh will always be to me still. It's goin' to hurt a little, of course; but I'll have my dreams, and that's something. And I'm shore yuah friend as you said. Gawd make yuh happy!"

Then he went quietly out, carefully closing the door behind him. The girl waited until the last echo of his firm steps had died away. Then she sat down beside the table, laid her face on her arms and cried bitterly.

It never occurred to either of them that he had made no reference to her engagement to Douglass, whose severance he could not possibly have known except by deduction.

The next afternoon he drove her over to a point where the stage could be intercepted without going to Tin Cup. She desired to avoid the possibility of a chance meeting with Constance Brevoort or Douglass, despite an almost irresistible temptation to see him for the last time. In ten days more she was aboard an ocean liner, her mother unquestioningly complying with her request for a continental tour, wisely leaving the girl to her own time in the matter of explanations. Besides, she had adroitly drawn out of Robert enough to confirm her suspicions, and she was unqualifiedly glad to encourage any distractions for the pale girl whose eyes were heavy with misery. As Grace expressed no preference she decided on Egypt, and the departure was made without unnecessary loss of time.

Had Grace gone direct to Tin Cup that day, instead of intercepting the stage some twenty miles out, or if the driver had been a more loquacious man than "Timberline," she would have been spared many heartaches at the price of a sickening terror. For the day before, the man that she loved, bleeding and senseless, had been carried into the hotel at Tin Cup, where a white-faced, wild-eyed woman sat by his bedside waiting the arrival of the doctor, stonily facing a despair too great for words.

With the firm intention of riding out to the C Bar that afternoon to make a last appeal to Grace for forgiveness and reconciliation, Douglass had rather reluctantly accompanied Constance for her morning's constitutional on horseback. Divining his intention in some mysterious manner known only to the loving jealous, she had determined to frustrate his purpose by making her ride unusually long, thus keeping him with her until too late to reach the C Bar that night. She was fighting for time, and every moment of delay was vital, she having been informed of the intended departure of Grace within the next few days. If she could manage to prevent their meeting before that time the chasm between the two would become permanently unbridgable.

Some ten miles out of town, in a magnificent cañon, reachable only by a somewhat difficult trail, was an exquisite little spot well known to both. It was one of their favorite rendezvous in the trout-fishing season, where they stopped to fry the delicious fish and boil the coffee indispensable to an *al fresco* luncheon. Hither, too, they had come on other innumerable occasions when absolute privacy was the desire of both, and it was to this place of tender associations and more or less compelling memories that she diplomatically led the way. Here, in the great outdoor temple of this pantheist's loving, with no other goddess to divert him from her own homage, was the place of all places to regain her fast waning influence over him. If she could only hold him for a little time longer success was assured.

Cleverly disregarding his taciturnity she kept up a merry chatter as they rode along, finally drawing him skillfully into a discussion of the geological features of the interesting region which they were slowly traversing; like every mining expert he was a bit professionally pedantic on this subject, and to this woman of abnormally clear perceptions it was a positive pleasure to him to impart the really great information with which his mind was stored. Once she got him warmed up to his subject he waxed enthusiastic in his dissertation on dykes, fissures, blanket veins and the like, even riding out of their course to point out confirming formations and collect specimens of their characteristic components. By the time they reached the embowered little glade in the cañon his sullenness was completely dissipated, and he kissed her very passionately as he lifted her from her horse. There was much of the old fire in him as she clung distractingly about his neck, and her eyes gleamed with triumph.

So absorbed had they become in each other that neither noticed the slinking figure which stole out of the glade at the sound of their approach, or the charcoal of a hastily-extinguished fire swirling in the eddies of the little pool. And mercifully they did not know, as they stood there in close-held rapture, drinking with clinging lips the Lethe of all things save love, that twenty feet away, from the vantage of a dense clematis tangle veiling a clump of dwarf box-elder, a pair of evil eyes burned above a snarling mouth, as a grimy hand drew cautiously back the firing bolt of a Mauser.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RENUNCIATION

Ballard, riding ahead of his posse, reined in his horse sharply at the head of the trail leading down to the stream as a shot crackled viciously in the depths of the cañon below. There was no mistaking that crisp, whip-like report of a small-calibered, high-pressure rifle cartridge, and he wondered much that it was not accompanied by the whine of the long metal-cased bullet about his ears. For the last twenty-four hours had he been in momentary expectation of that sinister song, of a possible succeeding agony of blindness, for he realized that he was now in the hands of the gods, and more or less at the mercy of the desperate man whom he had been relentlessly pursuing for the last three days, a man who would just as relentlessly kill him if the opportunity offered, a man who knew every inch of these mountain fastnesses in which he had taken refuge in his last extremity.

But despite all hazards of ambush he had kept doggedly on the trail, and now he was within reach of his quarry. Hurriedly directing two of his best mounted followers to cover the cañon's mouth below, and the remaining two to guard the only other possible exit above, he rode at breakneck speed down the precipitous trail, spurred to recklessness by a woman's wailing scream.

Four days before, the Gunnison Express had been boarded at a watering tank, some fifty miles out of the city, by a particularly villainous band of desperadoes who, not content with looting the passengers, mails and express matter, had maliciously aggravated their crime with murder, deliberately shooting down the conductor and express messenger after the robbery had been accomplished. It was an unheard-of brutality, the men being helpless, unarmed and unresisting, and pursuit of the wretches had been so prompt and successful that every member of the gang, save the one now in the cañon before him, was presently decorating a series of telegraph posts on the outskirts of the city, their captors having given them but exceedingly short shrift. And one of them, in an unavailing attempt to enlist the mercy of his grim executioners, had confessed that Matlock was the leader of the gang; but with characteristic cowardice had refrained from personal active participation in the robbery, merely directing their operations from a safe distance as arch plotter. His trail was soon found and had been skillfully followed so far by the expert marshal, whose long experience in trailing cattle on the cow range had made him one of the best trackers in the mountains.

Ballard was at a loss to account for the fatal recklessness of that shot. Matlock must certainly have known that it would betray his whereabouts and he was far too shrewd a villain to so unnecessarily expose himself to the risk of possible capture. There was but one explanation, and the marshal sent the spurs home with a great foreboding at heart.

"He *had* to fire that shot!" was the quick conjecture. "But why? He is either in a tight place or else is up to some fearful deviltry. That was certainly a woman's cry!" He was using both spur and cuerno now, and his gallant horse was responding grandly.

But before he reached the little glade, the echoes wakened to a rumbling roar at the duller concussion of a revolver shot. Then followed that most unnerving thing, the mourning of a woman for her dead. With a magnificent leap the horse cleared the brawling torrent and in the edge of the glade Ballard checked him with a savage oath. Flinging himself from the saddle, he ran eagerly forward, pulling his revolver as he went.

In the middle of the glade, beside a little spring which bubbled up amidst the grass, sat a stylishly-gowned woman holding to her bosom the head of his best friend. Across the white forehead trickled down a thin crimson stream which sadly stained and discolored the fawn-colored riding habit and left its grewsome horror on the lips passionately pressed to those of the man lying so still and quiet in her rocking arms.

And ten feet away, with his sightless eyes staring up at the blue sky, his shirt still smouldering from a powder burn above his heart, lay Matlock, still clutching the Mauser in his stiffening hand.

Douglass, on dismounting, had picketed the horses and thrown himself at full length on the grass with his head in Constance's lap. She had temporarily regained dominion over him and was deliriously happy in consequence, lavishing upon him all the tenderness of her really unselfish affection. With tact she induced him to talk of his earlier life and its vicissitudes, and in the relation he was so frank and confiding that he was invested with a new glory in her sight. Of his amours he was considerably reticent, his innate chivalry prompting him to repress anything which would give her pain, and she was wise enough to refrain from any embarrassing questions. Their communion was intimate, and she had not been so happy in many months.

Then by some unfortunate vagary she chanced to refer to his first difficulty with Matlock, asking him for the real facts in the case, and the man crouched in the clematis gnashed his teeth at Douglass's contemptuous reflections upon his cowardice.

"Oh, I took no particular risk," Douglass said carelessly; "the man was not only a cowardly cur, but a blundering fool as well, as was plainly shown in his foolish sale of that apex mine. Why, he might just as well have got the million out of it that I did, if he had been honest and only ordinarily intelligent. I knew the vein was there all the time, and I really think he had a suspicion of it. But his great mistake was his insane hatred of me, and he bungled his revenge badly. He really thought he was cleverly swindling me, when the fact was that he was playing directly into my hand."

He laughed scornfully and drew down the fair head to his.

"Let us forget about the fool. I had sworn to kill him once, but now that he was unconsciously the cause of all my good fortune I feel only pity for him."

Over in the clematis the sun was gleaming on a polished tube of steel that was leveled directly at his heart, the eyes aligned along its sights malignant with insane fury. But the finger crooked about the trigger was restrained by a fiendish thought and with a chuckle Matlock waited.

The distance was absurdly short and at that range he could clip the head of a match. Just two more inches of elevation of that hated head and he could send the jacketed bullet shearing just through the bridge of the aquiline nose, splitting both eyeballs and blinding his enemy for the

little space of life he would thereafter accord him. It would be passing sweet to have that helpless, sightless thing listen unseeingly to his maltreatment of the woman.

At that moment his horse, which had been picketed some distance away in the brush, discovered the presence of the two horses in the glade and gave a loud whinny of salutation. Douglass was on his feet in a second, his hand upon his revolver butt. The presence of another horse in that cañon was a suspicious thing and as he inclined his head toward the direction from which the whinny had come, his sharp eye discerned the gleam in the clematis.

Instantly the gun leaped from its scabbard, but in the moment of its release there came a faint haze from the leafy screen, a sharp report, and Douglass pitched forward, face down, beside the little spring, the revolver falling from his nerveless hand directly into the lap of the screaming woman.

Baffled of his proposed torture, and intent now only on making sure of the man he feared even in death, Matlock came running forward, working the bolt of his rifle as he ran. At the side of his victim he paused and thrust the muzzle of the weapon against the motionless head. He would not bungle this job, at any rate.

But even as his finger closed about the trigger, Constance Brevoort was upon him with a spring like that of a lioness fighting for her mate, her arms fully extended and both hands clutching the butt of the heavy .44 Colt. Instinctively he raised his weapon to fend off this new and unlooked-for antagonist; but he was a moment too late. As the flame leaped from the muzzle to his breast he numbly lowered the rifle, turned half around, and walking forward a few steps, clutched blindly at the air and sank limply to the ground. One spasmodic struggle in which he turned over on his back and then he lay very still, his mouth distorted by a ghastly grin.

At Ballard's signaling call, he was hastily rejoined by his posse and a hurried examination of Douglass's wound was made. The bullet had entered the skull just above the left temple, making its exit at the back of the head just where the parting of the hair ended. From all appearances it had passed directly through the upper portion of the brain, and Ballard shook his head hopelessly. But the heart was still beating vigorously and there was a very perceptible pulse.

A rider was dispatched instantly to the nearest ranch, some two miles away, for a conveyance, returning quickly with a buckboard. A rude stretcher was improvised, on which Douglass was tenderly carried to the head of the trail, and with his head in Constance's lap he was carefully but quickly driven to the hotel. A dozen riders were soon scouring the suburbs for the doctor, who was out making his round of daily calls, and just at noon he came riding post-haste. As it most fortunately happened, he was a practitioner of ability and experience, having filled for years the responsible position of operating surgeon in one of the East's most famous hospitals.

"It's an extra thousand on the side from me if you save him, Doc," said Ballard earnestly. "Don't you let my pard die!" The surgeon paused long enough from his examination to give him an assuring hand-grip.

"That was superfluous, Ballard," he said quietly. "He is my friend, too." And there was an appeal in the eyes of Constance Brevoort that outweighed all the treasures of Golconda.

Ballard, looking at her sympathetically, suddenly received an inspiration. Taking her quietly to one side he coughed apologetically and finally stammered out:

"I don't want to butt in, Mrs. Brevoort, but there will have to be a more or less rigid investigation of this affair by the coroner and—well, there is no use of your being put to any annoyance or embarrassment. And I reckon you really *don't* know what happened after Ken was shot. The coroner is a friend of ours and will not deem it necessary to question you at all; you will not have to appear at the inquest. It's a lucky thing I happened to get there in time to kill Matlock before he could do any further mischief."

He looked meaningly at her and she gasped with relief and wonder as the significance of his words dawned upon her.

"And you would do that for me, a stranger!" she said incredulously. "How noble you are!"

"Well," he said slowly, confused by the gratitude streaming from her eyes, "you are a friend of his, and I think he would prefer it so. So don't discuss the matter at all with anyone; just stand 'em all off somehow. Say you fainted when the first shot was fired. And let me do all the explaining. I was justified in doing it in my official capacity, you know, and my statement will end the matter."

And so the world was none the wiser. In the days to come two others were to learn the truth, and to these four alone was it restricted for all time. That night after the inquest the body of the dead desperado was taken to Gunnison, and Justice was satisfied.

To the woman waiting in the darkened room that afternoon it seemed an age before the surgeon returned with the implements necessary for the operation he had promptly determined on. Ever and anon she would look fearfully at her hands and shudder at what she thought she saw there. It would be easier to bear if she could only be assured that it had not all been in vain; the figure on the bed lay so alarmingly still. A dozen times she placed her ear to his heart to convince herself that it was still beating.

The door creaked shrilly on its rusty hinges and the doctor entered. After him followed Blount and Ballard, bearing between them a long deal table requisitioned from the dining-room. Raising the curtains, the room was flooded with a strong white light, in which the table was placed.

When the wounded man had been removed thereto, the surgeon turned to Constance.

"All operations are more or less attended with unpleasant features, Madam," he said kindly. "Had you not better retire?"

She begged piteously to be allowed to remain, even insisting upon her ability to render any necessary assistance. But he saw her shudder of apprehension as he opened the case of glittering instruments and he hesitated dubiously. She clasped her hands in prayerful entreaty and he turned to his work.

A few skillful strokes of the scalpel and he nodded his satisfaction.

"Merely a scalp wound with a slight depression of the parietal bone," he said reassuringly. "It will require trephining but that is at the worst only a minor operation. As soon as the pressure on the brain is relieved he will recover consciousness. The bullet did not penetrate the skull at all, being deflected by its acute angle of impact. It was an exceedingly close call, but in six weeks he will never know he was shot at all, provided no unforeseen complications arise."

A half hour later Douglass opened his eyes. His vision was still uncertain and he blinked uncomprehendingly at the white faces about him. Then he caught sight of the woman kneeling at the bedside in an agony of thanksgiving, her face hidden in her hands. He half rose from the table where he was lying and held out his arms pleadingly through the mists that clouded brain and eyes alike:

"Gracie, sweetheart, forgive—!"

As he fell back fainting in the arms of the irate doctor, who was taken unawares by his patient's unexpected action, and who was savagely cursing his own remissness in not having strapped him to the table, the woman rose from her knees and with one hand pressed to her heart, tottered unsteadily towards the door. Ballard, springing to her assistance, recoiled at the hopeless despair and misery written on that face. At the threshold she hesitated a moment, steadying herself with one hand braced against the casing. Then of a sudden she turned and walked firmly to the table; disregarding the surgeon's indignant remonstrance, she leaned over the unconscious man and laid her lips on his. For a full minute she held them there, her form as motionless as his, then with the slowness of one who is wearied unto death, she raised her head and stood with closed eyes beside him.

The men's faces were averted and their heads bowed as she went silently out. For not a one of them but was fully conversant with her relations to Douglass, and one of them at least knew of his engagement to Grace Carter.

But all of them were awed by the tragedy of this woman's misspent love, all reverently silenced by the atoning sacrifice offered up in that heart-breaking kiss of renunciation.

A week later when Douglass had regained full consciousness he was informed that Mr. and Mrs. Brevoort had returned to New York. He felt not a little hurt at her unceremonious departure without a word of farewell to him and was inclined to be morose and splenetic during the succeeding fortnight of convalescence. From Red McVey he had learned of Grace's departure on the day of his mishap, and was much relieved to know that she was probably unaware of his injury at the time of leaving, it being very doubtful if she had even heard of it up to the present time; her foreign address being unknown to any of her western friends, there had been no interchange of correspondence, and local happenings of this nature were not of sufficient interest to the eastern public to receive insertion in the New York papers. At least that is what he thought, forgetting that a robbery of the mails is an item of universal interest and also overlooking the fact that he was now a millionaire, whose attempted assassination by a ringleader of the desperadoes had been the welcome justification for glaring scare-heads in all the metropolitan dailies. It would have cut him to the quick had she been cognizant of his trouble and evinced no interest. He was also cynically resentful of Constance's apparent defection, ungenerously attributing it to her fear of being compromised.

Imagine his contrition when Ballard one day sought him out and delivered unto him an envelope addressed in Constance's familiar dainty chirography, admitting its detention for over three weeks by her express command.

"I was not to give it to you until you were fairly off the puny list," said the marshal gravely, "and there is something else that you should know before you read that letter."

And he proceeded to relate without any embellishment the facts in the matter of Matlock's taking off, supplementing them with other details of interest to the man who sat for hours after his friend had gone in bitter self-communion. It was quite dark when he went supperless to his room and opened the cream-tinted envelope.

The hours came and passed unrecked, and the gray dawn found him still sitting by the rickety little table, head in hands, poring dully over the lines that to his disordered fancy seemed written in her heart's blood.

"I am going away to-morrow, out into the pitiful Nothing in which all things end; and soon I will be even less than a memory to you. It is best so, for I would not have you hampered by a single regret in your enjoyment of the happiness that the future holds for you.

"You owe me nothing, although I have given you all—and gloried in the giving. For you at least vouchsafed me, through barred windows, a glimpse into the sanctuary where such as I may not enter. I realize now that it was impossible for me to have ever entered into the holy of holies; and yet, dear, can you blame me for hoping?

"I know now that I could never have entered fully into your life; the clay of my being leans too awry for that. But am I to blame for the shaking of the Potter's hand? I sought with all the assiduity of a weak woman's love, but there was a door to which I never found the key, a veil behind which I could not peer. Yet to me was given the rapture of the outer temple—and it was the bread of life.

"Be generous to me in this, the hour of my bitter atonement, and believe that my love was as pure and unselfish as it is possible for a woman to give. The proof of it is that I am giving you up now when I know that by a little finesse I could pull you down to hell with me. For I have spilled the Red Wine for you, my Wolf, and the reek of it would have been a bond and heel-rope between us.

"It is because of my love for you that I am giving you up, giving you into the hands of another woman. I have been but a flame to you, burning out the dross from your nature so that she might pour into her heart's crucible only the pure gold. God grant she mold the chalice aright.

"And now farewell while I have yet strength to say it. Forget me if you can. But if from the heights you ever look backward and downward, and in the sea of memory catch one faint reflection of me, let the thought be a kindly one.

"For oh, Man, who was more than God to me, I loved you too well!"

Very reverently he kissed the letter, then burned it in the flame of the smoky lamp. It was a long and weary ride to the nearest telegraph office at Gunnison, yet he never dismounted from his staggering horse until he heard the clicking of the sounders in the dingy little office.

"My life is yours alone," he wrote firmly; "let me make amends. Will you mold the chalice?"

Feverishly he strode up and down his apartment at the hotel until her answering wire was laid in his hand:

"You are even more noble than I thought, and shall have your reward. Grace waits you at Cairo. Have written her all that she must ever know. Go at once and God bless you both!"

He left that night for the East, and at the house of the Brevoorts learned that Mr. Brevoort and his wife had taken their departure two days before on an extended tour of the Orient. Yes, Mrs. Brevoort had left an enclosure for him.

It contained only a little note from Grace Carter to Constance and in his misery he could not understand why the latter had urged him to go to Cairo:

"I forgive you, even as I think God has forgiven you," Grace wrote, "for I, too, have been whirled in the maelstrom of his irresistible passion. I do not presume to sit in judgment of you, for you have given him his life—and at what an awful price! May God grant you forgetfulness, the boon that has been denied me."

Underneath this was written in Mrs. Carter's angular hand:

"I found this on my daughter's table the day after she was stricken down by brain fever, and an investigation of her correspondence shows it to have been intended for you. Now that the danger is passed and she is on the way to recovery, I send it to you with my contempt. Deem yourself fortunate that it is not my curse, instead."

On the forward deck of the great ocean grayhound that was cleaving the waters at record speed, a man stood that night with his face turned ever to the East. It would be ten days more before he could kiss the hem of her garment in supplication, ten days of hell in whose torturing fires his soul shriveled with a sickening fear.

If he had lost her, after all!

CHAPTER XXIII

BELSHAZZAR COMES BACK TO STAY

In her apartments at the Grand Hotel de Esbekie-yeh in Cairo, a wan-faced girl was looking wearily out over the splendid panorama spread before her. In the heel of the afternoon the level

rays of the sun were gilding parti-colored minarets of mosque and palaces with barbaric splendor. In the distance the Shoubrah palaces gleamed even more fairy-like than usual; the Abbasieyeh camps were astir with multi-hued life, and on its frowning rock the distant citadel was a gem in red bronze.

On the bosom of the world's most mysterious river, the brown sails were gleaming like the wings of great birds, and inshore the graceful lateens under the dipping shadoofs were closely folded as they lay at rest. Over beyond Ghizeh loomed the Pyramids which she was to visit on the morrow, the Sphinx in its majesty between. It was fairyland, in truth, the most gorgeous riot of color and mystery in the whole world, and yet she saw it not. The languorous air was heavy almost to oppression with the blended odor of jasmine, orange, citron, and the thousand and one flowers of the myriad gardens, mingled with the reek of the bazaars and the indescribable breath of the Nile. And yet she was all unconscious of it.

For in the nostrils of her introspection there was only the spicy tang of lemonias and sagebrush, and the eyes of her soul saw only a little glade embowered with artemesia and clematis, nestled deep in the forbidding cleft in the Rocky Mountains, many thousand miles away. A glade where lay a dead man with the snarl of baffled hatred petrified on his discolored lips, and another wounded almost to death, his head clasped close to the bosom of a woman whom she should be logically hating as woman was never hated before.

And yet in the heart of her there was only pity for the woman, whose letter lay in her lap. For the hundredth time she read the tear-stained words, feeling a new accession of tenderness at each transcribed sob:

"Yesterday, at the 'horse-shoe bend' in Lost Cañon, I killed the man called Jasper Matlock, after he had shot Kenneth Douglass from ambush. Mr. Douglass was not injured seriously, but at the time I thought him dead. Somehow I found his revolver in my hands and the man was making a second attempt.

"Mr. Ballard—ah, the great hearts of these westerners—magnanimously sought to shield me from the consequences and publicity. As though all the publicity in the world mattered now.

"I have wronged you, but in one thing only: the lie about your engagement to Ellerslie. That was my doing. In everything else I had the justification of every law of Nature; I loved him far better than you could ever do, and he was logically mine if I could but win him. I was ready and eager to sacrifice all, while you in your pitiful selfishness and egotism turned from the glory laid at your feet and yielded him nothing. Oh, you fool! You poor, weak fool! To deny him even the small assurance of your vain little body, when you should have found, as I did, ecstatic exaltation in letting him trample on my soul.

"Oh! child, in your wealth of possession be generous and give me a little of your kindness, a little of your forgiveness. I have so little, so little of him. I know now that I have never even had his respect, at times barely his tolerance. And, God help me, I loved him so. Can you understand when I say that I love him even the more that he was always greater than the manifold arts I exercised upon him? That all my sacrifices, my tenderness, my adoration gave him out apathetic amusement? I was ever but a toy to divert him from the agony your neglect caused him and any other woman as fair would have sufficed as well.

"To my shame be it said that I knew it all the time; but I was hoping against hope. To-day I go away from here, and from him, forever. He will come to you as certainly as the iron flies to the magnet, and he will be suffering, penitent and purified. My share of him has been the coarse dross of passion that must be skimmed from the crucible of every strong man's hot heart; yours will be the refined gold of his soul's first and last real love. For God's sake, child, play with happiness no more, lest you lose it as I have done.

"In the bitterness of the days to come it would lessen the pain if I thought you could ever come to forgive me. I can see to write no more. Mayhap these tears will in time wash out the stain on my soul. That on my hands I must see forever. It is the visible proof of my atonement, for by it I gave back his life to you."

The paper was wet with her tears as she thrust it into the bosom of her dress. Beside the open window she knelt and prayed for the peace of a troubled soul. But it could never be—this home-coming of her lost love. Her heart, too, was dead; the feet of her idol had crumbled and the glorious fabric of her dreams was dust. The yellow drifting sands of the Libyan desert shimmering before her aching eyes were no more dry and lifeless than the dead love moldering in her heart. Never again would her pulses leap at the sound of his voice or her senses reel at his touch. That was as much a thing of the past as Thebes, Luzor, Karnak and Athor out yonder, a dead thing buried in the ashes of a murdered hope.

Over in the aridity of the eternal desert, where for ages she had watched in contemptuous silence the petty tragedies enacted on the worn old stage of Life by the gibbering puppets who call themselves Man, the woman-breasted Sphinx, touched by the shadow of a passing cloud, smiled cynically into the vacancy of the everlasting East.

Two hours after her carriage had entered the airline avenue from Ghizeh to the Pyramids, the

incoming train from Alexandria bore into the composite Bedlam called "Masr el Kahira" a bronzed young American at sight of whom more than one *yashmak* fluttered eagerly as its dark-eyed owner beamed approval of this handsome *giaour*. Even the lounging pith-hatted Englishmen nodded their appreciation of this lithe Yankee who so hurriedly bounded up the steps of Shepheard's Hotel and spoke imperiously to the Maitre d' Hotel of that famous hostelry.

Money is everything in Cairo, and Lord Frederick Chillingham of H. R. M. Hussars was open in his admiration of the horsemanship of the newcomer as, a short half-hour afterward, Douglass, mounted on a superb barb, swept out into the square. How he obtained accouterments and that magnificent mount in so short a time is a mystery only known to the smiling factotums who bowed and scraped their enjoyment of one of the most princely *douceurs* that had ever been lavished upon them.

"Cowboy, b'gad!" drawled the honorable Freddie knowingly to a fair-faced young English girl who was watching the rider with a degree of interest rather distasteful to the stalwart guardsman. "I wonder now where the beggar got that horse. Best looker I've seen in Egypt."

"Best lookers, you mean, Freddie," corrected the girl mischievously; "but how do you know he is a cowboy?"

"By the seat of him," tersely explained the blond giant. "Rides straight up, grips with his thighs, don't know he's got stirrups; and don't need them, either. Those Yankees can ride no end!" he concluded grudgingly. "This one seems to be in a rush!"

But once out on the tawny stretch that lay between him and his heart's desire, Douglass checked the swallow-like flight of that wonderful blue-blood and paced more leisurely along in profound meditation. He was not at all sure of his reception. What was he going to say in pleading to his outraged queen? What God-given words would be vouchsafed him to offer in palliation? He groaned at thought of the hopelessness of it. What had he deserved but her contemptuous scorn!

He licked his lips nervously and a cold sweat broke on his brow despite the stifling heat that beat up in shimmering waves against his face. He fumbled a moment in the bosom of his shirt, and prayed for the second time in many years:

"Oh! Mother, help me!"

Suddenly, to the trained far-seeing eyes sweeping that cheerless waste hungrily, appeared a faint speck of color on one of the sand dunes at the base of the Sphinx. With eyes fixed unwaveringly upon it he put the barb at full speed. What he would do, what he would say—all hesitation dropped away in his fierce desire to look into her eyes once more, to hear that sweet voice again, though it were only to send him hurtling down into the hell of his deserts.

Grace Carter, sitting alone in the carriage, watched listlessly the rest of her party kodaking at a distance the immobile face of the Great Mystery. But she saw them as in a dream and ere long she was looking, with a heart as old and cold and dead as that of the grim Mistress of the Nile, as far and unseeing into the west as the Sphinx stared into the east.

Before her fast-misting eyes blazed one line in Constance's letter:

"For God's sake, play with happiness no more!"

It would be easy to obey that prayer, she thought bitterly, for never more would happiness come anigh her. Afar in the desert a sand spout flared up, whirled along feverishly for a few minutes, and was gone. She watched it with a strange fascination and muttered brokenly:

"Just like his love, fierce, threatening, grand and evanescent. And yet I was to blame! Oh, why did I ever let him go?"

The twanging of some stringed instrument in one of the Bedouin black tents clustered about the base of the Sphinx woke a long-forgotten chord and she mechanically crooned the words of a song that once wailed a heart misery as great as hers:

"Could you come back to me, Douglass, Douglass,
Back with the old-time smile that I knew?
I'd be so faithful and loving, Douglass!
Douglass, Douglass, tender and true!

"Could you come back with—"

Her voice broke and she buried her face in her hands, her form convulsed by a paroxysm of tears. Then to her numbed senses came vaguely another remembrance of the buried past, frantic hoof-beats. For a second she cowered as she had done on that awful day, then she turned with a sigh of relief to welcome, this time, the end of all things. Through her tear-blinded eyes she saw the blue stallion sweeping down upon her but she never flinched. God was going to be kind after all.

But even as the lean head ranged beside her, the foam splattering on her bosom as she involuntarily covered her eyes with her hands, from out of Chaos came a cry:

"Gracie, forgive—!"

Slowly she dropped her hands and stared incredulously. What was this wonder that had come to

her in the moment of death? She tottered unsteadily, swaying to and fro like a wind-tossed leaf. As in a fog she saw him there with arms extended, waiting to carry her across the dark ford.

Then, by God's mercy, her brain cleared and she knew.

At the Court of Europe's greatest prince men strive with each other doing honor to the beautiful wife of the new American Ambassador, Anselm Brevoort.

"As good as she is beautiful, God bless her!" was Frederick, Lord Chillingham's enthusiastic eulogy one night when her name was mentioned at the United, and his comrades silently drank her health standing.

"As pure and as cold as the stars above, God bless her!" sighs the silver-haired Ambassador, looking wistfully at her where she sits with her protégé, little Eulalie Blount, in her lap, patiently explaining that the tail makes all the difference between O and Q.

"I love oo, Tonnie!" lisps the little tot kneeling by her little white bed. And the woman, clasping in her bosom a tiny satin bag containing a common yellow telegraph blank on which are written a few now undecipherable words, looks dry-eyed into the night and wonders.

In the marshal's office at Gunnison, over their cigars and a big-bellied bottle, Red McVey and Ballard are looking reminiscently at a Mauser hanging on the wall.

"I reckon that were thu best jawb yuh evah done, Lew," says the cowboy with much conviction.

Ballard, dropping his eyes unaccountably, hesitates long over his selection of a fresh weed.

"What the hell else was there to do?" he says gruffly. But the recording angel, looking kindly and indulgently at the honest face, smiles softly and forgets the pen in his hand.

For a long time the men smoke in a silence more eloquent than words. Then Ballard shifts the threads in the loom.

"That's a great kid that Ken's got, I hear. Think I'll take a pasear over there with you when you go back and look at his points."

"That kid!" says Red enthusiastically. "Say, Lew, hush! He's thu biggest thing on thu range. Why, thu damn leetle cuss actooly kin make fists already, an' he jes' nacherally pre-empts my ole hawg laig every time I goes there. Thu han'le is good to cut his teeth on, Ken says, an' he kin eat it cleah off if he wants. I m thinkin' o leavin my spah gun foh him to nibble on at odd times."

"An' Ken?"

There is a certain diffidence in the sturdy fellow's voice. Red looking at him with a world of reassurance in his laughing blue eyes, grins broadly.

"Hell!" he says succinctly. "Yuh go oveh theah and watch hes eyes follerin' of her. When a man gits through playin' thu goat he gin'rally feels some obligated to act sheep foh a spell, so's to even up thu deal."

Over at the Circle D ranch a broad-shouldered man in flannel shirt and "fair leather" *chaparejos* lies sprawled on the veranda beside a low-hung hammock in which is lying a brown-haired woman. Pressed to her lips is a spray of mountain heart's-ease, and in her heart is the sweeter ease of mountains removed. The man is dusty and saddle-worn, but in his heart is a great Peace.

Tenderly he lays his lips on the hand shyly touching his bronzed cheek and the woman crimsons with pleasure. For a long time they lie in understanding silence, then the grave rich voice of the man says:

"Tell me, sweetheart, do you never long for the pleasant gayety, the diversions, the distractions of your old social world? Are you really happy and content here in this circumscribed little sphere?"

She slips quickly from the hammock to the floor beside him and draws his head up to her bosom.

"Do I ever long? Yes, sweetheart, I have wept with longing—for the hour of your daily return. I have sighed—for the coming of the dusk that would bring you home to baby and me! I have pined—for the music of the hoof-beats that would thrill me if they passed over my grave."

From the little nursery comes the lusty insistence of a child clamoring for his desires. Very gently she releases herself from his embrace. Then this Madonna of the Range goes proudly to the mothering of her first-born.

Old Abigail, hastening likewise to obey that imperious summons, smiles approvingly as the man,

catching at the garment trailing above his face, lays his lips to its hem.

"I kinda reckon," she says softly to herself, "that Belshazzar has come back to stay!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SONG OF THE WOLF ***

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