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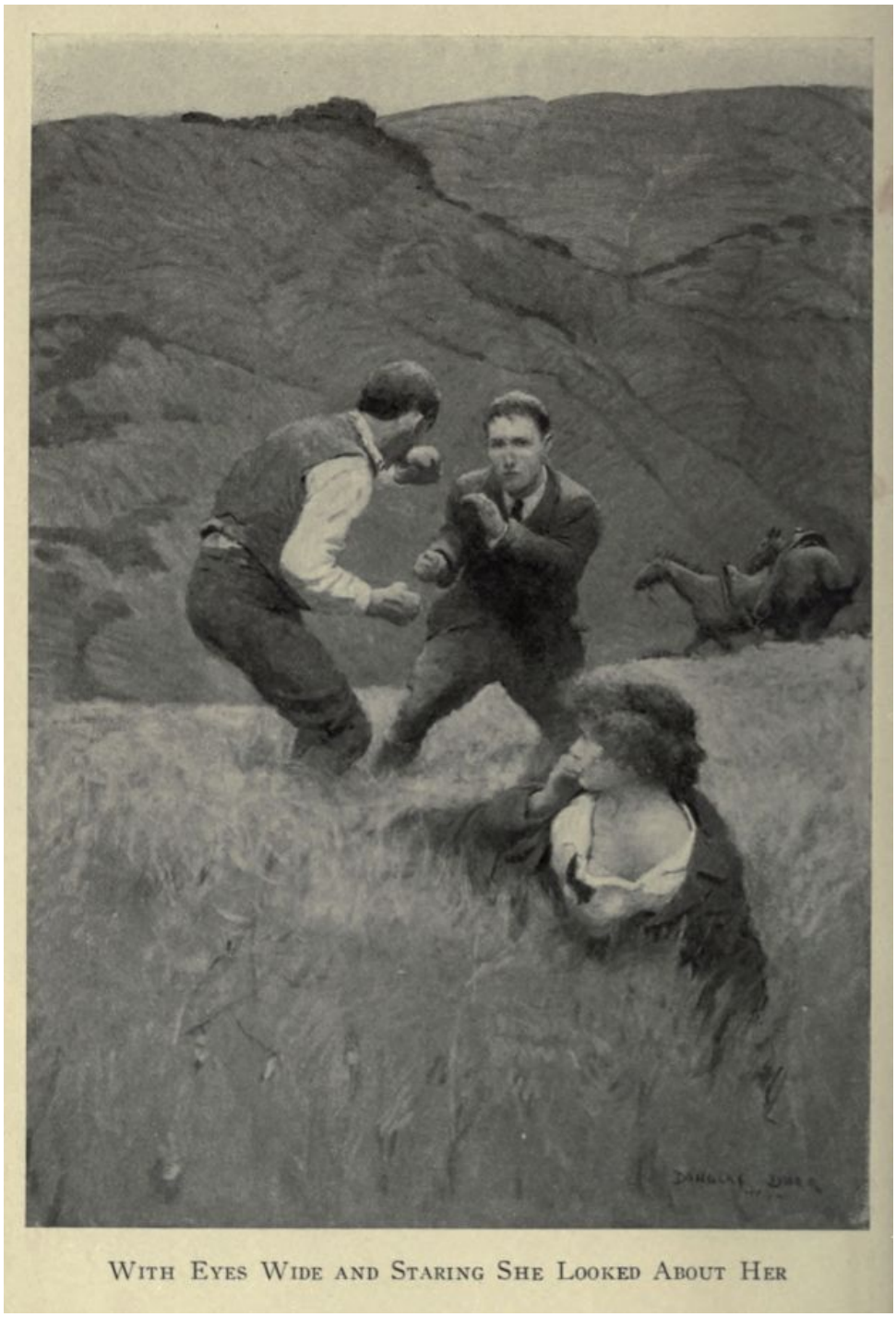

With Eyes Wide and Staring She Looked About Her

THE SON OF HIS FATHER

BY

RIDGWELL CULLUM

AUTHOR OF
"THE MEN WHO WROUGHT,"
"THE WAY OF THE STRONG," "THE NIGHT-RIDERS,"

Illustrations by
DOUGLAS DUER

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TO
G. RALPH HALL-CAINE
WHOSE SYMPATHY WITH MY WORK HAS NEVER
FAILED TO CHEER ME THROUGHOUT
OUR LONG AND VALUED
FRIENDSHIP

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CHAPTER I

UNREPENTANT

"To wine, women and gambling, at the age of twenty-four—one hundred thousand dollars. That's your bill, my boy, and—I've got to pay it."

James Carbhoy leaned back smiling, his half-humorous eyes squarely challenging his son, who was lounging in a luxurious morocco chair at the other side of the desk.

As the moments passed without producing any reply, he reached towards the cabinet at his elbow and helped himself to a large cigar. Without any scruple he tore the end off it with his strong teeth and struck a match.

"Well?"

Gordon Carbhoy cleared his throat and looked serious. In spite of his father's easy, smiling manner he knew that a crisis in his affairs had been reached. He understood the iron will lying behind the pleasant steel-gray eyes of his parent. It was a will that flinched at nothing, a will that had carved for its owner a great fortune in America's most strenuous financial arena, the railroad world. He also knew the only way in which to meet his father's challenge with any hope of success. Above everything else the millionaire demanded courage and manhood—manhood as he understood it—from those whom he regarded well.

"I'm waiting."

Gordon stirred. The millionaire carefully lit his cigar.

"Put that way it—sounds rotten, Dad, doesn't it?" Gordon's mobile lips twisted humorously, and he also reached towards the cigar cabinet.

But the older man intercepted him. He held out a box of lesser cigars.

"Try one of these, Gordon. One of the others would add two dollars to your bill. These are half the price."

The two men smiled into each other's eyes. A great devotion lay between them. But their regard was not likely to interfere with the business in hand.

Gordon helped himself. Then he rose from his chair. He moved across the handsome room, towering enormously. His six feet three inches were well matched by a great pair of athletic shoulders. His handsome face bore no traces of the fast living implied by the enormous total of his debts. The wholesome tan of outdoor sports left him a fine specimen of the more brilliant

youth of America. Then, too, in his humorous blue eyes lay an extra dash of recklessness, which was probably due to his superlative physical advantages. He came back to his chair and propped his vast body on the back of it. His father was watching him affectionately.

"Dad," he exclaimed, "I'm—sorry."

The other shook his head.

"Don't say that. It's not true. I'd hate it to be true—anyway."

Gordon's face lit.

"You're—going to pay it?"

"Sure. I'm not going to have our name stink in our home city. Sure I'm going to pay it. But ——"

"But—what?"

"So are you."

The faint ticking of the bracket clock on the wall suddenly became like the blows of a hammer.

"I—I don't think I——"

Young Gordon broke off. His merry eyes had suddenly become troubled. The crisis was becoming acute.

For some moments the millionaire smoked on luxuriously. Then he removed his cigar and cleared his throat.

"I'm not going to shout. That's not my way," he said in his easy, deliberate fashion. "Guess folks have got to be young, and the younger they're young—why, the better. I was young, and—got over it. You're going to get over it. I figure to help you that way. This is not the first bill you've handed me, but—but it's going to be the last. Guess your baby clothes can be packed right up. Maybe they'll be all the better for it when you hand 'em on to—your kiddie."

The trouble had passed out of the younger man's eyes. They were filled with the humor inspired by his father's manner of dealing with the affair in hand.

"That's all right," he said. "I seem to get that clear enough."

"I'm glad." The millionaire twisted the cigar into the corner of his mouth. "We can pass right on to—other things. You've been one of my secretaries for three years, and it don't seem to me the work's worried you a lot. Still, I put you in early thinking you'd get interested in the source of the dollars you were handing out in bunches. Maybe it wasn't the best way of doing it. Still, I had to try it. You see, it's a great organization I control—though you may not know it. I control more millions than you could count on your fingers and toes, and they've cost me some mental sweat gathering 'em together. Some day you've got to sit in this chair and talk over this 'phone, and when you do you'll be—a man. You see, I don't fancy my pile being invested in cut flowers and automobiles for lady friends. I don't seem to have heard that thousand-dollar parties to boys who can't smoke a five-cent cigar right, and girls who're just out for a good time anyway, are liable to bring you interest on the capital invested, except in the way of contempt. And five-thousand dollar apartments are calculated to rival the luxury of Rome before its fall. Big play at 'draw' and 'auction' are two diseases not provided for amongst the cures in patent med'cine advertisements, and as for the older vintages in wines, they're only permissible in folks who've quit worrying to scratch dollars together. None of these things seem to me good business, and in a man at the outset of his career some of 'em are—immoral. You've had your preliminary run, and I'll admit you've shown a fine turn of speed. But it smacks too much of the race-track, and seems to me quite unsuited to the hard highroad of big finance you're destined to travel.

"Just one moment," he went on, as, with flushing cheeks and half-angry eyes, his son was about to break in. "You haven't got the point of this talk yet. This bill you've handed me don't figure as largely in it as you might guess. I've thought about things these months. I don't blame you a thing. I'm not kicking. The fact you've got to grab and get your hind teeth into is that there comes a time when two can't spend one fortune with any degree of amicability. It's a sort of proposition like two dogs and a bone. Now from a canine point of view that bone certainly belongs to one of those dogs. No two dogs ever stole a bone together. Consequently, the situation ends in a scrap, and it isn't always a cert. that the right thief gets the bone. How it would work out between us I'm not prepared to guess, but, as 'scrap' don't belong to the vocabulary between us, we'll handle the matter in another way. Seeing the fortune—at present—belongs to me, I'll do the spending in—my own way. My way is mighty simple, too, as far as you're concerned. I'm going to stake you all you need, so you can get out and find a bone you can worry on *your own*. That's how you're going to pay this bill. You're going to get busy quitting play. We are, and always have been, and always will be, just two great big friends, and I'd like you to remember that when I say that the life you're living is all right for a boy, but in a man it leads to dirty

ditches that aren't easy climbing out of, and—you can't do clean work with dirty hands. When you've shown me you're capable of collecting a bone for your own worrying—why, you can come right back here, and I'll be pleased and proud to hand over the reins of this organization, and I'll be mighty content to sit around in one of the back seats and get busy with the applause. Now you talk."

Gordon began without a moment's hesitation. Something of his heat had passed, but it still remained near the surface.

"Quite time I did," he cried almost sharply. "Look here, father, I don't think you meant all you said the way your talk conveyed it. To me the most important of your talk is the implied immorality of my mode of life. Then the inconsistent fashion in which you point my way towards—big finance."

His eyes lit again. They had suddenly become dangerously bright.

"Here, we're not going to quarrel, nor get angry," he went on, gathering heat of manner even in his denial. "We're too great friends for that, and you've always been too good a sportsman to me, but—but I'm not going to sit and listen to you or anybody else accusing me of immorality without kicking with all my strength!"

He brought one great fist down on the desk with a bang that set the ink-wells and other objects dancing perilously.

"I'm not angry with you. I couldn't get angry with you," he proceeded, with a suppressed excitement that added to his father's smile; "but I tell you right here I'll not stand for it from you or anybody. My only crime is spending your money, which you have always encouraged me to do. From my university days to now my whole leisure has been given up to athletics. A man can't live immorally and win the contests I have won. I don't need to name them. Boxing, sculling, running, baseball, swimming. You know that. Any sane man knows that. The money I've spent has been spent in the ordinary course of the life to which you have brought me up. You have always impressed on me the great position you occupy and the necessity for keeping my end up. That's all I have to say about my debts, but I have something to say on the subject of the inconsistency with which you censure immorality in the same breath as you demand my immediate plunge into the mire of big finance."

He paused for a moment. Then, as abruptly as it had arisen, his heat died down, and gave place to the ready humor of his real nature.

"Gee, I want to laugh!" He sprang from his seat and began to pace the floor, talking as he moved. His father watched him with twinkling, affectionate eyes. "Immorality? Psha! Was there ever anything more immoral than modern finance? You imply I have learned nothing of your organization in the three years I've been one of your secretaries. Dad," he warned, "I've learned enough to have a profound contempt for the methods of big corporations in this country, or anywhere else. It's all graft—graft of one sort or another. Do you need me to tell *you* of it? No, I don't think so. Twenty-five millions wouldn't cover the fortune you've made. I know that well enough. How has it been made? Here, I'll just give you one instance of the machinations of a big corporation. How did you gain control of the Union Grayling and Ukataw Railroad? Psha! What's the use? You know. You hammered it, hammered it to nothing. You got your own people into it, and sat back while they ran it nearly into bankruptcy under your orders. Then you bought. Bought it right up, and—sent it ahead. Immoral? It makes me sweat to think of the people who must have lost fortunes in that scoop. Immoral? Why, I tell you, Dad, any man can make a pile if he sticks to the old saw: 'Don't butt up against the law—just dodge it.' It's only difficult for the fellow who remembers his Sunday-school days. So far, Dad, I've avoided immorality. I'm waiting till I start on big finance to become its victim. That's my talk. Now you do some."

His father nodded. Then he said dryly, "This carpet cost me five hundred dollars, that chair fifty. Try the chair."

Gordon laughed at the imperturbable smile on his father's face, but he flung his great body into the chair.

James Carbhoy deliberately knocked the ash from his cigar. It was many years since he had received such a straight talk from any man. Some of it had stung—stung sharply, but the justice or injustice of it he set aside. His whole mind and heart were upon other matters. He took no umbrage. He swept all personal feeling aside and regarded the boy whom he idolized.

"We've both made some talk," he observed, "but I think the last word's with me. I don't seem to be sure which of us has put up the bluff. Maybe we both have. Anyway, right here and now I'm going to call your hand. I offered you a stake. You say it's easy to make a pile. Can you make a pile?"

Gordon shrugged.

"Why, yes. If I follow your wish and embark on—big finance. And—forget my Sunday school."

The millionaire gathered up the sheaf of loose accounts on the desk and held them up. His

smile was grim and challenging.

"One hundred thousand dollars these bills represent. The cashier will hand you a check for that amount. Say, you've shown your ability to spend that amount; can you show your ability to make it?"

For a moment the boy's blue eyes avoided the half-ironical smile of his father's. Then suddenly they returned the steady gaze, and a flush spread swiftly over his handsome face. Something of his father's purpose was dawning upon him. He began to realize that the man who had made those many millions was far too clever for him when it came to debate. He squared his shoulders obstinately and took up the challenge. There was no other course for him. But even as he accepted it his heart sank at the prospect.

"Certainly," he cried. "Certainly—with a stake to start me."

His father nodded.

"Sure. That goes," he said.

Then he laid the papers on the desk, and his whole manner underwent a further change. His eyes seemed to harden with the light of battle. There was an ironical skepticism in them. Even there was a shadow of contempt. For the moment it seemed as if he had forgotten that the man before him was his son, and regarded him merely as some rival financier seeking to beat him in a deal.

"I'll hand you one hundred thousand dollars. That's your stake. This is the way you'll pay those bills. You'll leave this city in twenty-four hours. You can go where you choose, do what you choose. But you must return here in twelve months' time with exactly double that sum. I make no conditions as to how you make the money. That's right up to you. I shall ask no questions, and blame you for no process you adopt, however much I disapprove. Then, to show you how certain I am you can't do it—why, if you make good, there's a half-share partnership in my organization waiting right here for you."

"A half-share partnership?" Gordon repeated incredulously. "You said—a half-share?"

"That's precisely what I said."

All of a sudden the younger man flung back his head and laughed aloud.

"Why, Dad, I stand to win right along the line—anyway," he exclaimed.

The older man's eyes softened.

"Maybe it's just how you look at it."

The change in his father's manner was quite lost upon Gordon. He only saw his enormous advantage in this one-sided bargain.

"Say, Dad, was there ever such a father as I've got?" he cried exuberantly. "Never, never! But you're not going to monopolize all the sportsmanship. I can play the game, too. I don't need one hundred thousand dollars on this game. I don't need twelve months to do it in. I'm not going to cut twelve months out of our lives together. Six is all I need. Six months, and five thousand dollars' stake. That's what I need. Give me that, and I'll be back with one hundred and five thousand dollars in six months' time. I haven't a notion where I'm going or what I'm going to do. All I know is you've put it up to me to make good, and I'm going to. I'll get that money if—if I have to rob a bank."

The boy's recklessness was too much for the gravity of the financier. He sat back and laughed. He flung his half-smoked cigar away, and in a moment father and son had joined in a duel of loud-voiced mirth.

Presently, however, their laughter died out. The millionaire sprang to his feet. His eyes were shining with delight.

"I don't care a darn how you do it, boy," he cried. "As you say, it's up to you. You see, I've got over my Sunday-school days, as you so delicately reminded me. That's by the way. But there's more in this than maybe you get right. You're going to learn that no graft can turn five thousand dollars into one hundred thousand in six months without a mighty fine commercial brain behind it. It's that brain I'm looking for in my son. Now get along and see your mother and sister. You've only got twenty-four hours' grace. Leave these bills to me. You're making a bid for the greatest fortune ever staked in a wager, and things like that don't stand for any delay. Get out, Gordon, boy; get out and—make good."

He held one powerful hand out across the desk, and Gordon promptly seized and wrung it.

"Good-by, Dad, and—God bless you."

CHAPTER II

IN CHASTENED MOOD

Of course, the whole thing was ridiculous. Gordon knew that. No one could know it better. The more he thought about it the more surely he was certain of it. He told himself that he, personally, had behaved like a first-class madman over the whole affair. How on earth was he to make one hundred thousand dollars in six months? It couldn't be done. That was all. It simply couldn't be done. What power of mischief had driven him to charge his highly respectable father with graft? It was a rotten thing to do anyway. And it served him right that it had come back on him by pointing the way to the present impossible situation.

He was perfectly disgusted with himself.

But after a while he began to chuckle. The thing was not without an atmosphere of humor—of a sort. No doubt his friends would have seen a tremendous humor in the idea of his making one hundred thousand dollars under any conditions.

One hundred thousand dollars! What a tremendous sum it sounded viewed from the standpoint of his having to make it. He had never considered it a vast sum before. But now it seemed to grow and grow every time he thought of it. Then he laughed. What stupid things "noughts" were. They meant so much just now, and, in reality, they mean nothing at all.

Oh, dear. The whole thing was a terrible trouble. It was worse. It was a tragedy. But—he mustn't give his friends the laugh on him. That would be the last straw. No. The whole thing should remain a secret between his father and himself. He almost broke into a sweat as he suddenly remembered the Press. What wouldn't the Press do with the story. The son and heir of James Carbhoy, the well-known multi-millionaire, leaving home to show the world how to make one hundred thousand dollars in record time! A stupendous farce. Then the swarm of reporters buzzing about him like a cloud of flies in summer time. The prospect was too depressing. Think of the columns in the Press, especially the cheaper Press. They would haunt him from New York to —Timbuctoo!

It couldn't be done. He felt certain that in such circumstances suicide would be justifiable. Thoughts such as these swept on through his disturbed brain as he sped up Broadway on his way to say good-by to his mother and sister. He had been lucky in finding his father's high-powered automobile standing outside the palatial entrance of the towering Carbhoy Building. Nor had he the least scruple in commandeering it.

His visit to the east side of Central Park was in the nature of a whirlwind. He had no desire to be questioned, and he knew his young sister, Gracie, too well to give her a chance in that direction. Their friends were wont to say that, for one so young—she was only thirteen—she was all wit and intellect. He felt that that was because she was his father's daughter. For himself he was positive she was all precocity and impertinence. And he told himself he was quite unprejudiced.

As for his mother, she was one of those gentle Southern women who declare that no woman has the right to question the doings of the male members of her household, and, in spite of the luxury with which she was surrounded, and which she never failed to feel the burden of—she was originally a small farmer's daughter—still yearned for that homely meal of her youth, "supper"—a collation of coffee, cakes, preserves and cold meats.

Experience warned him that he must give her no inkling of the real facts. She would be too terribly shocked at the revelation.

So, for an hour or more, in the little family circle, in his mother's splendid boudoir, he talked of everything but his own affairs. Nor was it until he was in the act of taking his leave that he warned them both that he was leaving the city for six months. He felt it was a cowardly thing to do, but, having fired his bombshell in their midst, he fled precipitately before its stunning effect had time to pass away.

Off he sped, the automobile urged to a dangerous speed, and it was with a great sense of relief that he finally reached his own apartment on Riverside Drive.

Letting himself in, he found his man, Harding, waiting for him.

"Mrs. Carbhoy has been ringing you up, sir," he said in the level tones of a well-trained servant. "She wants to speak to you, sir—most important."

Gordon hardened his heart.

"Disconnect the 'phone then," he said sharply, and flung himself into a great settle which

stood in the domed hall.

"Very good, sir."

The man was moving away.

"If my mother or sister should come here, I'm out. Send word down to the office that there's no one in."

The valet's face was quite expressionless. Gordon Carbhoy had his own way of dealing with his affairs. Harding understood this. He was also devoted to his master.

"Yes, sir."

He vanished out of the hall.

Left alone a great change came over Gordon. The old buoyancy and humor seemed suddenly to fall from him. For once his eyes were perfectly, almost painfully serious. He stared about him, searching the remoteness of his surroundings, his eyes and thoughts dwelling on the luxury of the apartment he had occupied for the last three years. It was a two-floored masterpiece of builder's ingenuity. It was to be his home no longer.

That splendid domed hall had been the scene of many innocent revels. Yes, in spite of the accusation of immorality, his parties had been innocent enough. He had entertained the boys and girls of his acquaintance royally, but—innocently. Well, that was all done with. It was just a memory. The future was his concern.

The future. And that depended on his own exertions. For a moment the seriousness of his mood lifted. Surely his own exertions as a business man was a broken reed to—— What about failure? What was to follow—failure? He hadn't thought of it, and his father hadn't spoken of it.

Suddenly the cloud settled again, and a sort of panic swept over him. Did his father intend to —kick him out? It almost looked like it. And yet—— Had he intended this stake as his last? What a perfect fool he had been to refuse the hundred thousand dollars. Then, in a moment, his panic passed. He was glad he had done so—anyway.

He selected a cigar from his case and sniffed at it. He remembered his father's. His handsome blue eyes were twinkling. His own cigars cost half a dollar more than his father's, and the fact amused him. He cut the end carefully and lit it. Then he leaned back on the cushions and resigned himself to the reflection that these things, too, must go with the rest. They, too, must become a mere memory.

"Harding!" he called.

The man appeared almost magically.

"Harding, have you ever smoked a—five-cent cigar?" he inquired thoughtfully.

The valet cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to say, sir, I haven't."

"Sorry?" Gordon's eyes were smiling.

"A mere figure of speech, sir."

"Ah—I see. They must be—painful."

"Very, I should think, sir. But, beg pardon, sir, I believe in some—ahem—low places, they sell two for five cents!"

"Two? I—I wonder if the sanitary authorities know about it."

Gordon smiled into the serious face of his devoted henchman. Then he went on rapidly—

"What baggage do you suggest for a six months' trip?"

"Europe, sir?"

"No."

"South, sir?"

"I—haven't made up my mind."

"General then, sir. That'll need more. There's the three large trunks. The steamer trunk. Four suit cases. Will you need your polo kit, sir, and your——?"

Gordon shook his head.

"Guess your focus needs adjusting. Now, suppose you were getting a man ready for a six months' trip—a man who smoked those two-for-five cigars. What would you give him?"

Harding's eyelids flickered. He sighed.

"It would be difficult, sir. I shouldn't give him clean under-garments, sir. I should suggest the oldest suit I could find. You see, sir, it would be waste to give him a good suit. The axles of those box cars are so greasy. I'm not sure about a toothbrush."

"Your focus is adjusting itself."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

"And the five-cent-cigar man?"

Harding's verdict came promptly.

"A hand bag with one good suit and ablutionary utensils, sir. Also strong, warm under-garments, and a thick overcoat. One spare pair of boots. You see, sir, he could carry that himself."

"Good," cried Gordon delightedly. "You prepare for that five-cent-cigar man. Now I want some food. Better ring down to the restaurant."

"Yes, sir. An oyster cocktail? Squab on toast, or a little pheasant? What about sweets, sir, and what wine will you take?"

"Great gods no, man! Nothing like that. Think of your five-cent-cigar man. What would he have? Why, sandwiches. You know, nice thick ones, mostly bread. No. Wait a bit. I know. A club sandwich. Two club sandwiches, and a bottle of domestic lager. Two things I hate—eternally. We must equip ourselves, Harding. We must mortify the flesh. We must readjust our focus, and outrage all our more delicate susceptibilities. We must reduce ourselves to the requirements of the five-cent-cigar man, and turn a happy, smiling world into a dark and drear struggle for existence. See to it, good Harding, see to it."

The man withdrew, puzzled. Used as he was to Gordon's vagaries, the thought of his master dining off two hideous club sandwiches and a bottle of *domestic* lager made his staunch stomach positively turn.

His perfect training, however, permitted of no verbal protest. And he waited on the diner with as much care for punctilio as though a formal banquet were in progress. Then came another violent shock to his feelings. Gordon leaned back in his chair with a sigh of amused contentment.

"Do you think you could get me a—five-cent cigar, Harding?" he demanded. "Say, I enjoyed that food. That unique combination of chicken, hot bacon and—and something pickly—why, it's great. And as for *domestic* lager—it's got wine beaten a mile. Guess I'm mighty anxious to explore a—five-cent cigar."

Harding cleared his throat.

"I'll do my best, sir. It may be difficult, but I'll do my best. I'll consult the clerk downstairs. He smokes very bad cigars, sir."

"Good. You get busy. I'll be around in my den."

"Yes, sir," Harding hesitated. Then with an unusual diffidence, "Coffee, sir? A little of the '48 brandy, sir?"

Gordon stared.

"Can I believe my ears? Spoil a dinner like that with—'48 brandy? I'm astonished, Harding. That focus, man; that five-cent-cigar focus!"

Gordon hurried off into his den with a laugh. Harding gazed after him with puzzled, respectful eyes.

Once in the privacy of his den, half office, half library, and wholly a room of comfort, Gordon forgot his laugh. His mind was quite made up, and he knew that a long evening's work lay before him.

He picked up the receiver of his private 'phone to his father's office and sat down at the desk.

"Hello! Hello! Ah! That you, Harker? Splendid. Guess I'm glad I caught you. Working late, eh? Sure. It's the way in er—big finance. Yes. Got to lie awake at nights to do the other feller. Say. No. Oh, no, that's not what I rang you up for. It's about—finance. Ha, ha! It's a check for me. Did the governor leave me one? Good. Five thousand dollars, isn't it? Well, say, don't place it to my credit. Get cash for it to-morrow, and send it along to—— Let me see. Yes, I know. You send along a bright clerk with it. He can meet me at the Pennsylvania Depot to-morrow, at noon—sharp. Yes.

In the waiting-room. Get that? Good. So long."

"That's that," he muttered, as he replaced the receiver. "Now for Charlie Spiers."

He turned to the ordinary 'phone, picked up the receiver, gave the operator the number, and waited.

"Hello! Hello, hello, hello! That you, Charlie? Bully. I wasn't sure getting you. Guess my luck's right in. How are you? Goo—— No, better not come around to-night. Fact is, I'm up to my back teeth packing and things. I've got to be away awhile. Business—important." He laughed. "Don't get funny. It's not play. No. Eh? What's that? A lady? Quit it. If there's a thing I can't stand just about now it's a suggestion of immorality. I mean that. The word 'immoral' 's about enough to set me chasing Broadway barking and foaming at the mouth. I said I'm going away on business, and it's so important that not even my mother knows where I'm going. Yes. Ah, I'm glad you feel that way. It's serious. Now, listen to me; it's up to you to do me a kindness. I'm going to write the mater now and again. But I can't mail direct, or she'll know where I am, see? Well, I can send her mail under cover to you, and you can mail it on to her. Get me? Now, that way, you'll know just where I am. That's so. Well, you've got to swear right along over the wire you won't tell a soul. Not the governor, or the mater, or Gracie, or—or anybody. No, I don't need you to cuss like a railroader about it. Just swear properly. That's it. That's fine. On your soul and honor. Fine. I'm glad you added the 'honor' racket, it makes things plumb sure. Oh, yes, your soul's all right in its way. But—— Good-by, boy. I'll see you six months from to-day. No. Too busy. So long."

Gordon hung up the receiver and turned back to his desk with a sigh. He opened a drawer and took out his check-book, and gave himself up to a few minutes of figures. There was not a great deal of money to his credit at the bank, but it was sufficient for his purposes. He wrote and signed three checks. Then he tore the remaining blanks up and flung them into the waste-basket.

After that he turned his attention to a systematic examination of his papers. It was a long, and not uninteresting process, but one that took a vast amount of patience. He tore up letter after letter, photographs, bills, every sort of document which a bachelor seems always to accumulate when troubled by the disease of youth.

In the midst of his labors he came across his father's private code for cable and telegraph. It brought back to him the memory of his position as one of his father's secretaries. He smiled as he glanced through it. It must be sent back to the office. He would hand it to the clerk who brought him his money in the morning. So he placed it carefully in the inside pocket of his coat and continued his labors.

Half an hour later Harding appeared.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "I had some difficulty, but"—he held up an oily-looking cigar with a flaming label about its middle, between his finger and thumb—"I succeeded in obtaining one. I had to take three surface cars, and finally had to go to Fourth Avenue. It was a lower place than I expected, sir, seeing that it was a five-cent cigar."

"That means it cost me twenty cents, Harding—unless you were able to transfer."

Gordon eyed the man's expressionless face quizzically.

"I'm sorry, sir. But I forgot about the transfer tickets."

Gordon sighed with pretended regret.

"I'm sure guessing it's—bad finance. We ought to do better."

"I could have saved the fares if I'd taken your car, sir," said Harding, with a flicker of the eyelids.

"Splendid, gasoline at thirteen cents, and the price of tires going up."

Gordon drummed on the desk with his fingers and became thoughtful. He had a painful duty yet to perform.

"Harding," he said at last, with a genuine sigh, his eyes painfully serious. "We've got to go different ways. You've—got to quit."

The valet's face never moved a muscle.

"Yes, sir."

"Right away."

"Yes, sir."

Then the man cleared his throat, and laid the oily-looking cigar on the desk.

"I trust, sir, I've given satisfaction?"

"Satisfaction?" Gordon's tone expressed the most cordial appreciation. "Satisfaction don't express it. I couldn't have kept up the farce of existence without you. You are the best fellow in the world. Guess it's I who haven't given satisfaction."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh—you agree?"

"Yes, sir. That is, no, sir."

Harding passed one thin hand across his forehead, and the movement was one of perplexity. It was the only gesture he permitted himself as any expression of feeling.

"I'm going away for six months—as a five-cent-cigar man," Gordon went on, disguising his regret under a smile of humor. "I'm going away on—business."

"Yes, sir." The respectful agreement came in a monotonous tone.

"So you'll—just have to quit. That's all."

"Yes, sir."

"Ye-es."

"You will—need a man when you come back, sir?" The eagerness was unmistakable to Gordon.

"I—hope so."

Harding's face brightened.

"I will accept temporary employment then, sir. Thank you, sir."

Gordon wondered. Then he cleared his throat, and held out two of the checks he had written.

"Here's two months' wages," he said. "One is your due. Guess the other's the same, only—it's a present. Now, get this. You'll need to see everything cleared right out of this shanty, and stored at the Manhattan deposit. When that's done, get right along and report things to my father, and hand him your accounts for settlement. All my cigars and cigarettes and wine and things, why, I guess you can have for a present. It don't seem reasonable to me condemning you to five-cent cigars and domestic lager. Now pack me one grip, as you said. I'll wear the suit I've got on. Mind, I need a grip I can tote myself—full."

"Very good, sir. Thank you, sir. Anything else, sir?"

"Why, yes." Gordon was smiling again. "Hand this check in at the bank when it opens to-morrow, and get me cash for it, and bring it right along. That's all, except you'd better get me another disgusting sandwich, and another bottle of tragedy beer for my supper. There's nothing else."

With a resolute air Gordon turned back to his work, as, with an obvious sigh of regret, Harding silently withdrew.

CHAPTER III

GORDON ARRIVES

Gordon Carbhoy sat hunched up in his seat. His great shoulders, so square and broad, seemed to fill up far more space than he was entitled to. His cheerful face showed no signs of the impatience and irritability he was really enduring. A seraphic contentment alone shone in his clear blue eyes. He was a picture of the youthful conviction that life was in reality a very pleasant thing, and that there did not exist a single cloud upon the delicately tinted horizon of his own particular portion of it.

In spite of this outward seeming, however, he was by no means easy. Every now and again he would stand up and ease the tightness of his trousers about his knees. He felt dirty, too, dirty and untidy, notwithstanding the fact that he had washed himself, and brushed his hair, many times in the cramped compartment of the train devoted to that purpose. Then he would fling himself into his corner again and give his attention to the monotonously level landscape beyond the window and strive to forget the stale odor so peculiar to all railroad cars, especially in summer time.

These were movements and efforts he had made a hundred times since leaving the great

terminal in New York. He had slept in his corner. He had eaten cheaply in the dining-car. He had smoked one of the delicious cigars, from the box which the faithful Harding had secreted in his grip, in the smoker ahead. He had read every line in the magazines he had provided himself with, even to the advertisements.

The time hung heavily, drearily. The train grumbled, and shook, and jolted its ponderous way on across the vast American continent. It was all very tedious.

Then the endless stream of thought, often fantastic, always unconvincing, always leading up to those ridiculous cyphers representing one hundred thousand dollars. If only they were numerals. Nice, odd numerals. He was a firm believer in the luck of odd numbers. But no. It was always "noughts." Most disgusting "noughts."

He yawned for about the thousandth time on his two days' journey, and wondered hopelessly how many more times he would yawn before he reached the Pacific.

Hello! The conductor was coming through again. Going to tear off more ticket, Gordon supposed. That tearing off was most interesting. He wondered if the ticket would last out till he reached Seattle. He supposed so.

Seattle! The Yukon! The Yukon certainly suggested fortune, the making of a rapid fortune. But how? One hundred thousand dollars! There it was again.

His eyes were following the movements of the rubicund conductor. The man looked enormously self-satisfied, and was certainly bursting with authority and adipose tissue. He wondered if he couldn't annoy him some way. It would be good to annoy some one. He closed his smiling eyes and feigned sleep.

The vast bulk of blue uniform and brass buttons bore down upon him. It reached his "pew," dropped into the seat opposite, and tweaked him by the coat sleeve.

Gordon opened his eyes with a pretended start.

"Where are we?" he demanded irritably.

"Som'eres between the devil an' the deep sea, I guess," grinned the man. "Your—ticket."

Gordon began to fumble slowly through his pockets. He knew precisely where his ticket was, but he searched carefully and deliberately in every other possible place. The man waited, breathing heavily. He displayed not the slightest sign of the annoyance desired. At last Gordon turned out the inside pocket of his coat. The first thing he discovered amongst its contents was his father's private code book, and the annoyance was in his eyes rather than in those of the conductor. His resolve to return it had been entirely forgotten.

He forthwith produced his ticket.

"The devil's behind us, I s'pose," said Gordon. "Anyway, we're told it's the right place for him. I'll be glad when we reach the sea."

The conductor examined the ticket, while Gordon returned the code book to his pocket.

"Ah, Seattle," the brassbound official murmured. Then he looked into the now smiling face before him. "You ain't for Snake's Fall?"

"Guess I shouldn't have paid for a ticket to Seattle if I were," Gordon retorted with some sarcasm.

"That's so," observed the official, quite undisturbed. "I knew one guy was for Seattle. I was kind o' wondering 'bout him. Se-attle," he murmured reflectively.

"On the coast. A seaport. Puget Sound," said Gordon objectionably.

"A low down sailor town on the side of a hill, wher' if you ain't climbin' up you're mostly fallin' down. Wher' it rains nigh six months o' the year, an' parboils you the rest. Wher' every bum going to or coming from the Yukon gets thoroughly soused and plays the fool gener'ly."

The man's retort was as pointedly objectionable as Gordon's had been, and the challenge of it stirred the latter's sense of humor.

"Guess I'm one of the bums 'going to,'" he said cheerfully. The man's fat-surrounded eyes ceased to grin.

"Startin' fer the Yukon in—July? Never heard of it," he said, with a shake of the head. "It's as ridiculous as startin' fer hell in summer time. You'll make Alaska when she freezes up, and sit around till she opens next spring. Say——"

"You mean I'll get hung up for—ten months?" cried Gordon aghast.

"Jest depends on your business."

"Yes, of course."

Gordon's heart sank as the man grunted up from his seat, and handed him back his mutilated ticket. He watched him pass on down the car and finally vanish through the doorway of the parlor-car beyond. Then his eyes came back to his surroundings. He stared at the heads of his fellow travelers dotting the tops of the seats about him. Then his eyes dropped to his grip on the opposite seat lying under his overcoat, and again, later, they turned reflectively towards the window. Ten months. Ten months, and he only had six before him in which to accomplish his purpose. Was there ever a more perfect imbecile? Was there ever such a fool trick?

A smile of chagrin grew in his eyes as he remembered how he had arrived at the Pennsylvania Depot, and had studied the list of places to which he could go, seeking to find in the names an inspiration for the accomplishment of his purpose. There had been so many that his amazed head had been set whirling. There he had stood, wondering and gawking like some foolish country "Rube," without one single idea beyond the fact that he must go somewhere and make one hundred thousand dollars in six months' time.

Then had come that one illuminating flash. He saw the name in great capital letters in an advertisement. "The Yukon." Of course. It was the one and only place in the world for quick fortunes, and forthwith he had booked his passage to Seattle.

Nor was he likely to forget his immense satisfaction when he heard Harding's respectful "Yes, sir," in response to his information. Now he certainly was convinced that he was own brother to the finest bred jackass in the whole wide world. However, there was nothing to be done but go on to Seattle. He had paid for his ticket, and, Providence willing, to Seattle he would go.

But Providence had its own ideas upon the matter. Furthermore, Providence began at once to set its own machinery working in his behalf. It was the same Providence that looks after drunken men and imbeciles. Half an hour later it impelled him to gather up his traps and pass forward into the smoker, accompanied by one of his own big, expensive cigars.

He pushed his way into the car through the narrow door of communication. A haze of tobacco smoke blurred his view, but at once he became aware of a single, melancholy, benevolent eye gazing steadily at him.

It was an amiable eye and withal shrewd. Also it was surrounded by a shaggy dark brow. This had a fellow, too, but the eye belonging to the fellow was concealed beneath what was intended to be a flesh-tinted cover, secured in place by elastic round its owner's head.

The surrounding face was rugged and weather tanned. And it finished with a mop of iron-gray hair at one end, and an aggressively tufted chin beard at the other. But the thrusting whisker could not disguise the general strength of the face.

Below this was a spread of large body clad in a store suit of some pretensions, but of ill fit, and a heavy gold watchchain and a large diamond pin in the neckwear suggested opulence. Furthermore, One Eye suggested the prime of middle life, and robust health and satisfaction.

There was only one other occupant of the car. He was two or three seats away, across the aisle. He promptly claimed Gordon's attention. He was amusing himself by shooting "crap" on a baize-covered traveling-table. Both men were smoking hard, and, by the density of the atmosphere, and the aroma, the newcomer estimated that they, unlike himself, were not five-cent-cigar men.

He paused at the dice thrower's seat and watched the proceedings. The man appeared not to notice his approach at all, and continued to labor on with his pastime, carrying on a muttered address to the obdurate "bones."

"Come 'sev,'" he muttered again and again, as he flung the dice on the table with a flick of the fingers.

But the "seven" would not come up, and at last he raised a pair of keen black eyes to Gordon's face.

"Cussed things, them durned bones," he said briefly, and went on with his play.

Gordon smiled.

"It's like most things. It's luck that tells."

The player grinned down at the dice and nodded agreement, while he continued his muttered demands. Gordon flung his traps into another seat, and sat himself down opposite the man. Crap dice never failed to fascinate him.

The melancholy benevolence of One Eye remained fixed upon the pair.

The seven refused to come up, and finally the player desisted.

"Sort of workin' calculations," he explained, with an amiable grin. "An' they don't calc worth a cent. As you say, the hull blamed thing is chance. Sevens, or any other old things 'll just come up when they darned please, and neither me nor any other feller can make 'em come—playin' straight."

The man bared his gold-filled teeth in another amiable grin. And Gordon fell.

His unsuspicious mind was quite unable to appreciate the obvious cut of the man. The rather flashy style of his clothes. The keen, quick, black eyes. The disarming ingenuousness of his manner and speech. These things meant nothing to him. The men he knew were as ready to win or lose a few hundred dollars on the turn of a card as they were to drink a cocktail. The thought of sharp practice in gambling was something which never entered their heads.

He drew out a dollar bill and laid it on the table. The sight of it across the aisle made One Eye blink. But the black-eyed stranger promptly covered it, and picked up the dice. He shook them in the palm of his hand and spun them on the baize, clipping his fingers sharply.

"Come 'sev,'" he muttered.

The miracle of it. The seven came up and he swept in the two dollars. In a moment he had replaced them with a five-dollar bill. Gordon responded.

"I'll take two dollars of that," he said, and staked his money.

The man spun the dice, and a five came up. Then it was Gordon's turn to talk to the dice, calling on them for a seven each time the man threw. The play became absorbing, and One Eye, from across the aisle, craned forward. The seven came up before the five, and Gordon won, and the dice passed.

The game proceeded, and the luck alternated. Then Gordon began to win. He won consistently for awhile, and nearly twenty dollars had passed from the stranger's pocket to his.

It was an interesting study in psychology. Gordon was utterly without suspicion, and full of boyish enthusiasm. His blue eyes were full of excited interest. He followed each throw, and talked the jargon of the game like any gambler. All his boredom with the journey was gone. His quest was thrust into the background. Nothing troubled him in the least. The joy of the rolling dice was on him, and he laughed and jested as the wayward "bones" defied or acquiesced to his requirements.

The stranger was far more subtle. For a big powerful man he possessed absurdly delicate hands. He handled the dice with an expert touch, which Gordon utterly lacked. He talked to the dice as they fell in a manner quite devoid of enthusiasm, and as though muttering a formula from mere habit. He grumbled at his losses, and remained silent in victory, and all the while he smoked, and smoked, and watched his opponent with furtive eyes.

One Eye watched the game from the corner without a sign.

A stranger, on his way through the car, paused to watch the game. Presently he passed on, and then returned with another man.

After awhile Gordon's luck began to wane. His twenty dollars dropped to fifteen. Then to ten. Then to five. The stranger threw a run of "sevens." Then the dice passed. But Gordon lost them again, and presently the five dollars he was still winning passed out of his hands.

From that moment luck deserted him entirely. The stranger threw a succession of wins. Gordon increased his stakes to five-dollar bills. Now and again he pulled in a win, but always, it seemed, to lose two successive throws immediately afterwards. There were times when it seemed impossible to wrest the dice from his opponent. Whenever he held them himself he lost them almost immediately.

"Seventy-five dollars, that makes," he said, after one such loss. "They're going your way, sure."

"It's the luck of things," replied the stranger laconically.

One Eye across the aisle smiled to himself, and abandoned his craning.

Gordon plunged. He doubled his bets with the abandon of youth and inexperience. And the stranger never failed to tempt him that way when they were his dice. He always laid more stake than he believed his opponent would accept.

The hundred dollars was reached and passed in Gordon's losses. Still the game went on. He passed the hundred and fifty—and then Providence stepped in.

By this time a number of onlookers had gathered in the car. The place was full of smoke. They were standing in the aisle. They were sitting on the arms of the seats of the two players. One or two were leaning over the backs of the seats.

Suddenly the speeding train jolted heavily over some rough points. It swayed for a moment with a sort of deep-sea roll. The onlooker seated on the arm of the stranger's seat was jerked from his balance and sprawled on the player. In his efforts to save himself he grabbed at the table, which promptly toppled. The gambler made a lunge to save it, and, in the confusion of the moment, a second pair of crap dice, identical with the pair Gordon was about to shoot, rolled out of his hand.

Just for an instant there was a breathless pause as Gordon pounced on them. Then one word escaped him, and his face went deathly white as he glared furiously at the man across the table.

"Loaded!"

One Eye again craned forward. But now the patch was entirely removed from his second eye.

The next part of Providence's little game was played without a single word. One great fist shot out from Gordon's direction, and its impact with its object sounded dull and sodden. The gambler's head jolted backwards, and he felt as though his neck had been broken. Then the baize-covered table was projected across the car by Gordon's other great hand, while the spectators fled in the direction of the doorways, and pushed and scrambled their ways through.

Then ensued a wild scene. The animal was stirred to offense with a sublime abandon.

One Eye remained in his corner, his eyes alight with an appreciation hardly to have been expected, contemplating humorously the tangle of humanity as it moved, with lightning rapidity, all over the car. Once, as the battle swayed in his direction, he even moved his traps under the seat, lest their bulk should incommode the combatants.

For a moment, at the outset, the two men appeared to be a fair match. But the impression swiftly passed. The youth, the superb training, the skill of Gordon became like the sledge-hammer pounding of superior gunnery in warfare. He hit when and where he pleased, and warded the wilder blows of his opponent with almost unconcern. But the narrowness of the aisle and the presence of the seats saved the gambler, and both men staggered and bumped about in a way that deprived Gordon of much of the result of his advantage.

The train began to slow up. One Eye glanced apprehensively out of the window. He gathered up his belongings, and picked up the litter of money scattered on the floor.

Then he sat watching the fight—and his opportunity.

The men had closed. Regardless of all, they fought with a fury and abandon as cordial as it now became unscientific. The gambler, clinging to his opponent, strove to ward off the blows which fell upon his features like a hailstorm. Gordon, with superlative ferocity, was bent on leaving them unrecognizable. It was a bloody onslaught, but no more bloody than Gordon intended it to be. He was stirred now, a young lion, fighting for the only finish that would satisfy him.

One Eye's opportunity came. He made a run for the door as the train pulled up with a jolt.

But the fight went on. The stopping of the train conveyed nothing to the fighting men. Neither saw nor cared that one of the doors was suddenly flung open. Neither saw the rush of men in uniform. The invasion of their ring by the train crew meant nothing to them.

Then something happened.

CHAPTER IV

GORDON LANDS AT SNAKE'S FALL

Gordon sat up and rubbed his eyes. Then one blood-stained hand went up to his head, and its fingers passed through his ruffled hair. It smoothed its way down one cheek, and finally dropped to the ground on which he was sitting.

Where was he?

Suddenly he became aware of the metal track in front of him, and—remembered. He glanced down the track. Far in the distance he could see the speeding train. Then his eyes came back to his immediate surroundings, and discovered that he was sitting on the boarded footway of a small country railroad depot.

How did he get there? How on earth did he get there?

As no answer to his mute inquiry was forthcoming he explored further. He discovered that his grip and overcoat were beside him, also his hat. And some distance away a number of loungers were idly watching him, with a smile of profound amusement on every face.

The latter discovery filled him with a swiftly rising resentment, and, grabbing his hat and thrusting it on his head, he leaped to his feet. He had no intention of permitting amusement at his expense.

"I guess you sure had some good time," said a deep, musical voice at his elbow.

Gordon swung about and stood confronting the man, One Eye, whom he had seen in the train. For a moment he had it in mind to make some furiously resentful retort. But the man's appearance held his curiosity and diverted his purpose. The patch had been removed from his second eye, which now beamed upon him in company with its fellow.

"Guess these are yours," the man went on, thrusting a roll of bills out towards him. "That 'sharp' dropped his wad during the scrap. I hated to think a grafting train boss was goin' to collect it. You see, I guessed how that scrap would end."

"Are they mine?" Gordon was not quite sure he wasn't dreaming.

"Mostly."

The stranger's reply was full of dry humor. Suddenly Gordon's eyes lit.

"Where is that 'sharp'? I haven't done with——"

The stranger pointed after the train.

"You'll need to hustle some."

The anger died out of Gordon's eyes and he began to laugh. With some diffidence he accepted the money.

"Say, it's—mighty decent of you," he cried cordially. Then, for want of better means of expression, "Mighty decent."

The two men stood steadily regarding each other. Tall and broad as Gordon was, the stranger was no less. But he added to his stature the massiveness of additional years.

Gordon's feelings were under perfect control now. His eyes began to brighten with their native humor. He was longing to solve the mystery of that eye-shade which had disappeared from his companion's face, but was constrained to check his curiosity.

"You said you guessed how the scrap would end?" he said. "There's a sort of blank in my—memory. I mean about the finish."

The big stranger began to rumble in his throat. To Gordon the sound was comforting in its wholesome enjoyment.

"It don't need a heap of guessing when a train 'sharp,' who's got the conductor grafted from his brassbound cap to the soles of his rotten feet, gets into a scrap how things are going to end. I'd sort of hoped you'd 'out' him before the crew come along. Guess you'd have done it if there'd been more room. That's the worst of scrappin' in a railroad car," he added regretfully. "That train boss got along with his crew and threw you out—on your head. They kept the 'sharp' aboard, being well grafted, and figgered to hold up your baggage. I guessed diff'rently. That all your baggage?" he inquired anxiously.

Gordon gazed down at the grip and coat.

"That's all," he said. Then he impulsively threw out a hand, and the stranger took it. "It's decent—mighty decent of you." Again his buoyant laugh rang out. "Say, I surely do seem to have had some good time."

The twinkling eyes of the stranger nearly closed up in a cordial grin.

"Seems to me you're fixed here till to-morrow, anyway. There ain't any sort of train west till then. You best come along over to the hotel. They call it 'hotel' hereabouts. I'm goin' that way."

Gordon agreed, gathered up his property, and fell in beside his companion.

They moved across the track, and as they went he caught some impression of the ragged little prairie town at which he had so inadvertently arrived. There seemed to him to be but a single, unpaved street, consisting of virgin prairie beaten bare and hard by local traffic. This was lined on one side by a fringe of wooden houses of every size and condition, with gaps here and there for roads, yet to be made, turning out of it. These houses were mostly of a commercial nature. Back of this he vaguely understood there to be a sparse dotting of other houses, but their purpose and arrangement remained a mystery to him. Still farther afield he beheld the green

eminence of foothills, and still farther on, away in the distance, the snowy ramparts of the Rocky Mountains. The town seemed to occupy only one side of the track—the south side. The depot was beyond it, on the other.

They picked their way across the track and debouched upon the Main Street, the name of which Gordon discovered painted in indifferent characters upon a disreputable signboard. Then they turned westwards in the direction of an isolated building rather larger than anything else in the village.

After awhile, as his companion made no further effort at conversation, Gordon's interest and curiosity refused to permit the continued silence.

"What State are we in?" he inquired.

"Montana."

Gordon glanced quickly at his companion.

"What place is this?"

"Snake's Fall."

The announcement set Gordon laughing.

"What's amiss with Snake's Fall?" inquired the other sharply.

"Why, nothing. I was just thinking. You see, the conductor told me 'most everybody was making for Snake's Fall on the train. I'm sorry that 'sharp' wasn't. Say——"

"What?"

Gordon laughed again.

"I remember you in the smoker, only—you seemed to have a—a patch over your left eye."

"Sure."

"Now you haven't got it?"

"No."

"I'm not curious, only——"

The stranger's eyes lit ironically.

"Sure you ain't. That's the hotel. Peter McSwain's. He's the boss. He's a friend of mine, an' I guess he'll fix you right for the night."

The snub was decided but gentle. The man's deep, musical voice contained no suggestion of displeasure. However, he had made the other feel that he had been guilty of unpardonable rudeness.

He was reduced to silence for the rest of the journey to the hotel, and gave himself up to consideration of this new position in which he now found himself. The one great fact that stood out in his mind was that he had gained another day on the wrong side of his ledger, and, however wrong he had been in his first attempt at fortune, his course had been hopelessly diverted into a still more impossible channel. The absurdity of the situation inclined him to amusement, but the knowledge of the real seriousness of it held him troubled.

As they neared the hotel his curiosity further made itself felt. The place was an ordinary frame building with a veranda. It was square and squat, like a box. It was two-storied, with windows, five in all, and a center doorway. These were dotted on the face of it like raisins in a pudding. Its original paint was undoubtedly white, but that seemed to have long since succumbed to the influence of the weather, and now suggested a hopeless hue which was anything but inspiriting.

Leaning against the door-casing, in his shirt-sleeves, was a smallish, florid man with ruddy hair. His waistcoat was almost as cheerful as his face, and, judging by the sound of his voice as he talked to a number of men lounging on the veranda, the latter quite matched the pattern of his violently checked trousers.

"That's Peter," remarked One Eye, the name, failing a better, Gordon still thought of his companion by. "He's a bright boy, is Peter," he added, chuckling.

"The proprietor of the—hotel?" said Gordon, interested.

"Sure."

Then a hail reached them from the veranda.

"Got back, Silas?" cried the loud-voiced hotel-keeper.

"Just what you say yourself," retorted Silas amiably. "Seems to me I bought a ticket and just got off the train. Still, ther' ain't nothing certain in this world except—graft."

"That's so," laughed the other. "Still, ther' ain't much of a shadow 'bout you, so we'll take it as real. Who's your friend?"

The hotel-keeper eyed Gordon with a view to trade. The man called Silas laughed and turned to Gordon.

"Guess I didn't get your name. Mine's Mallinsbee—Silas Mallinsbee. I'm a rancher, way out ther' in the foothills."

Gordon thought for a moment. Then he decided to use two of his given names in preference to his father's.

"Mine's Gordon Van Henslaer. Glad to meet you."

"Van Henslaer?" Mallinsbee's eyes twinkled. "Guess the first and last letters on your grip are spare. Kind of belong back east. How-do?" Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned to McSwain and the men on the veranda who were interestedly surveying Gordon. "This is Mister Gordon Van Henslaer from New York. Thought he'd like to break his journey west and get a look around Snake's Fall."

Gordon laughed.

"I was persuaded at the last minute," he added. "Can you let me have a room?"

McSwain became active.

"Sure. Guess we're pretty busy these times, with the town gettin' ready to boom. But I guess I ken fix any friend of Silas Mallinsbee. Ther's a room they calculated makin' into a bathroom back of the house, but some slick Alec figured the boys of Snake's Fall were prejudiced, so cut it out. It's small, but we got a bed fixed ther', an' you ken clean yourself at the trough out back. Come right along in."

Gordon was half inclined to protest, but Mallinsbee's voice came opportunely—

"I told you Peter 'ud fix you right. I've slept in that room myself, and you'll find it elegant sleepin', if you don't get a nightmare and get jumping around. We'll go right in."

Gordon's protest died on his lips. Mr. Mallinsbee had a persuasion all his own. There was a humorous geniality about him that was quite irresistible to the younger man, nor could he forget the manner in which he had helped him after the debacle on the train. He felt that it would have been churlish to refuse his good offices.

They passed into the building. The office was plainly furnished. A few Windsor chairs, a table, an empty stove, a few nigger pictures on the walls, and a large register for guests' names. This was the whole scheme.

Gordon flung down his grip.

"Well, I'm thankful to be off that train, anyway," he said. "Sign here, eh?" as Peter threw the book towards him. "Say," he added, glancing at the list of names above his, "you sure are busy."

Peter grinned complacently, while Mallinsbee looked on.

"You've hit this city at the psychological moment in its history, sir," he declared expansively. "You've hit it, sir, when, if I ken be allowed to use the expression, the snow's gone an' all the earth's jest bustin' with new life. You've hit it, sir, when fortunes are just going to start right into full growth with all the impetus of virgin soil. Snake's Fall, sir, is about to become the greatest proposition in the Western States, as a sure thing for soaking dollars into it. And here, sir, standing right at your elbow, is the courage, enterprise and intellect that's made it that way. Mr. Silas Mallinsbee is the father of this city, sir; he's more—he's the creator of it. And, sir, I congratulate you on the friendship of such a man, a friendship, sir, in which I have the honor to share."

He grabbed a filthy piece of blotting-paper and dabbed it cheerfully over Gordon's name in the book, while the latter smiled at the monument of enterprise himself.

"I was quite unaware——" he began. But Mallinsbee cut him short.

"Peter's a good feller," he declared, "but some seven sorts of a galoot once told him he ought to go into Congress, and he's been talking ever since. Ther's jest one thing 'll stop Peter talking, and that's orderin' a drink. Which I'm doin' right now. Peter, you'll jest hand us two cocktails. Your specials. And take what you like yourself."

Peter accepted the order with alacrity. His admiration of and friendship for Mallinsbee could not be doubted for a moment. And somehow Gordon felt it was a good sign. He returned in a few moments with the cocktails, and a glass of rye whiskey for himself.

"I know a better play than my special cocktails," he said, a huge wink distorting most of his ginger-hued features. "They're all right for customers, but I ain't no use fer picklin' my liver. How?"

"Here's to the extermination of all 'sharps,'" said Mallinsbee in his deep, rolling voice, and with a meaning glance in Gordon's direction.

Gordon nodded.

"And here's to the confusion of graft and grafters."

All three drank and set their glasses down.

"Graft?" said Mallinsbee thoughtfully. Then he shrugged his massive shoulders and laughed. "It's not a heap of use blaming grafters for their graft. They can't help it, any more than you can help scrappin' when a feller hits your wad on the crook. Graft—why, I just hate to think of the ways of graft. But you can't get through life without it; anyway, not life on this earth. I used to think graft a specialty of this country, but guess I was wrong. I'd localized. It don't belong to any one country more than another. It belongs to life; to our human civilization. It's the time limit of life causes the trouble. Nature makes it a cinch we've all got to be rounded up in the get-rich-quick corral. We start life foolish. Then for a while we get a sight more foolish. Then for a few mousy years we take on quite a nice bunch of sense. After that we start getting foolish again, and then the time limit comes right down on the backs of our necks like an ax. Well, I guess those years of sense are so mighty few we've got to get rich quick against the time we start on the foolish racket again, and graft, of one sort or another, is the short cut necessary.

"You see, there's every sort of graft. All through life we're looking around for something we ain't got. Did you ever see a kid around his parents? Graft; it's all graft. No kiddy ever acted right because he fancied that way. He's lookin' ahead fer something he's needing, and his pop or his momma are the folks to pass it along to him. Did you ever know a kid take his physic without the promise of candy, or the certainty it would come his way? That's graft. Say, ain't the gal you fancy the biggest graft of all? You don't get nowhere with her without graft. She'll eat up everything you can hand her, from automobiles and jewels down to five-cent candy. Then when you've started getting old and sick and foolish again, having grafted a pile out of life yourself, don't every grafter you ever knew come around an' hand you cures and listen to your senile wisdom just as though they thought you the greatest proposition ever and hated to see you sick? That's graft. You've got a pile and they're needin' it."

The twinkle in the big man's eyes while he was talking found a joyous response in Gordon's. The tongue in the cheek of this native of Snake's Fall pleased him mightily. But the wide-eyed sunset of Peter McSwain's features was one of sober earnestness and admiration.

"Gee!" he cried, with prodigious appreciation. "He orter write a book!"

CHAPTER V

A LETTER HOME

The bathroom proved to be a veritable rabbit hutch, though clean. But Gordon was astonished to find how far the old life had fallen away behind him. The bareness of the room did not disturb him in the least, and, after a wash in the trough at the back of the hotel, and having dried himself on a towel that may have seen cleaner days, and refused to be inveigled by the attraction of an unclean comb, securely tied to a defective mirror in the passage to the back door, he came back to his bedroom with an added appreciation for its questionable luxury.

Mallinsbee had ridden off on a great chestnut horse, nor, until Gordon saw him in the saddle, was he definitely able to classify him in his mind. Big as the amiable stranger was, he sat in the saddle as though he had been born in it, and he handled his horse as only a cattle man can.

At supper-time he had an opportunity of studying something of his fellow guests in the house. They were a mixed gathering, but every table in the dining-room was full to overflowing. Certainly McSwain was justified in his claim to a rush of business.

It was quickly obvious to Gordon that these people were by no means natives of the place. The majority were undoubtedly business men. Shrewd, keen men of the speculative type, judging from the babel of talk going on about him. As far as he could make out the whole interest of the

place was land. Land—always land—and again land.

In view of Mallinsbee's friendship Peter McSwain had requested him to sit beside him at his especial table. And he forthwith began to question his host.

"Seems to be a big talk of land going on," he said, as he ate his macaroni soup.

Peter gulped violently at a long tube of macaroni and nearly choked.

"Sure," he said, his eyes wide with an expression the meaning of which Gordon was never quite certain about. It might have meant mere astonishment, but it also suggested resentment. "Sure it's land. What else, unless it's coal, would they talk in Snake's Fall? Every blamed feller you see settin' around in this room is what Silas Mallinsbee calls a ground shark. Which means," he added, with a grin, "they're out to buy or steal land around Snake's Fall. We guess they prefer stealing. The place is bung full with 'em."

Gordon's interest deepened.

"But why, if you'll forgive me, around—Snake's Fall?"

"Young man," said Peter severely, "you're new to the place, and that's your excuse for such ignorance." He pushed his half-finished soup aside and adopted an impressive pose with both elbows on the table, his hands together, and one finger describing acrobatic gyrations to point his words. The manner of it fascinated his hearer. "Let me tell you, sir, that Snake's Fall is the new coalfield of this great country. Sir," he added, with great dramatic effect, "Snake's Fall is capable of supplying the coal of the *world*! There's hundreds of billions of tons of high-grade coal underlying these silly-lookin' hummocks they call the foothills. All this land around Snake's Fall was Silas Mallinsbee's ranch, and he found the coal. That's why I said Silas Mallinsbee was the father of Snake's Fall. He sold this land to a great coal corporation, and bought land away further up in the hills, where he still runs his ranch. He's a great man with a pile of dollars. And he's clever, too. He's kep' for himself all the land either side of the railroad, except this town. And that's why all these land pirates, or ground sharks, are around. The railroad ain't declared their land yet, and everybody's waiting to jump in. The coal's five miles west of here, and the railroad has got to say if they'll keep the depot where it is, or build a new one further along, right on the coal seams. That's the play we're all watching. We want to buy right. We want to buy for the boom. These guys here are out to get in on the ground floor, and see prices go sky high—when they've bought. There'll be some dandy piles made in this play—and lost."

By the time he had finished Gordon was agog with excitement. It had stirred as the man began to talk, without his fully understanding the meaning of it. Then, as he proceeded, it grew, and with its growth came enlightenment. Vaguely he saw the hand of Providence in the affairs of the last few days.

He had planned his own little matters, or rather he had drifted into them, and then the gods of fortune had taken a hand. And the way of it. He began to smile. A strangely impish mood must have stirred them. His journey. His discovery of the absurdity of his own plans in the nick of time. His visit to the smoker. His play with a "sharp." His fight, and his sudden and uncalculated arrival at Snake's Fall. Here he was, quite without the least intention of his own, landed into the only sort of place in which it could be reasonably hoped he might pick up a fortune quickly. He wondered how he was likely to fare in competition with these ground sharks about him. And the thought made him begin to laugh.

McSwain eyed him doubtfully.

"Amusin', ain't it?" he said, without appreciation.

Gordon shook his head.

"If you only knew—it is."

Peter went on with his food for a few moments in silence.

"I s'pose the boom will come big when it does start?" hazarded Gordon presently.

"Big? Say, you ain't got a grip on things yet. Snake's Fall could supply the whole—not half—world with high-grade stove coal. Does that tell you anything? No? Wal, it jest means that when the railroad says the word, hundred-dollar plots 'll fetch a thousand dollars in a week, and maybe ten thousand in a month or less. I tell you right here that in six months from the time the railroad talks there'll be fifty thousand speculators right here, and we'll most of us rake in our piles. We only got to jump in at the start, maybe a bit before, and the game's right in our hands. Get me? I tell you, sir, this is bigger than the first Kootenay rush and nigh as big as the Cobalt boom in Canada."

Gordon was impressed.

"And to think I came here by accident."

"Accident?"

"You see, I was persuaded—against my will."

His eyes were twinkling.

"Ah, Mallinsbee persuaded you—being a friend of his."

"No. As a matter of fact I think it was the train conductor who persuaded me."

"He's a wise guy, then."

"Ye-es. I don't guess I'll see him again. I surely owe him something for what he did."

Peter nodded seriously as he gazed at the humorous eyes of his companion.

"He's given you the chance of—a lifetime, sir. And that's a thing ther' ain't many in this country yearning to do."

After that the meal progressed in silence until the pie was handed round.

Gordon was thinking hard. He was wondering, in view of what he had heard, what he ought to do. Land. What did he know about land? How could he measure his wits against the wits of such land speculators as he saw about him? He studied the faces of some of the clamorous crowd in the dining-room. They were a strangely mixed lot. There were undoubtedly men of substance among them, but equally surely the majority were adventurers looking to step into the arena of the coming boom and wrest a slice of fortune by hook, or, more probably, by crook. What did he know? What could he do? And his mind went back to the sharp on the train, and the way he had fallen to the man's snare. Again he wanted to laugh. He had counted the bills which Mallinsbee had handed him, in the privacy of his bathroom. He only remembered to have lost about two hundred dollars to the gambler. The dollars handed to him amounted to well over three hundred. The miracle of it all. He had nearly killed the gambler, and, instead of losing, he had made over a hundred dollars on the deal. The miracle of it!

"Do you believe in miracles?" he laughed abruptly.

Peter glanced up from his plate suspiciously. Then he promptly joined in the other's amusement. He always remembered that this newcomer was a friend of Silas Mallinsbee.

"Meracles?" he said reflectively. "I can't say I always did. But one or two things have made some difference that way. Takin' one extra drink saved my life once. The takin' of that drink wasn't jest a meracle," he added dryly. "It was more of a habit them days. Still, it was a meracle in a way. Me an' my brother wer' on a bust. We were feeling that good we was handin' out our pasts in lumps to each other, same as if we was strangers, and wasn't raised around the same cabbige patch. Wal, he'd borrowed an automobile and left the saloon to wind it up, and get things fixed. While he was gone the boys handed me another cocktail. Then the bartender slung one at me, an' I hadn't no more sense than to buy another one myself. Then some damn fool thought rye was the best mix for drinkin' on top o' cocktails, an' so they put me to bed. Guess I never see my brother get back from that joy ride." He sighed. "I allow they had to bury a lot of that automobile with him, he was so mussed up. Sort o' meracle, you'd say? Then there was another time. Guess it was my wife. She was one o' them females who make you feel you want to associate with tame earthworms. Sort o' female who never knew what a sick headache was, an' sang hymns of a Sunday evening, and played a harmonium when she was feelin' in sperits. Sort o' female who couldn't help smellin' out when you was lyin' to her, an' gener'ly told you of it. A good woman though, an' don't yer fergit it. Wal, I got sick once an' when I got right again she guessed it was up to 'em to insure myself in her favor. Guess I'd just paid my first premium when she goes an' takes colic an' dies. I did all I knew. I give her ginger, an' hot-water bags, an' poultices. It didn't make no sort o' difference. She died. I ain't paid no premiums since. Sort o' meracle that," he added, with a satisfied smile. "Then there's this coal. I hadn't started this hotel six months when Mallinsbee gets busy an' makes his deal with the corporation. You ain't goin' to make a pile out of a bum country hotel without a—meracle."

The man's gravity was impressive, and Gordon strove for sympathy.

"Yes," he declared, with smiling emphasis. "There are such things as miracles. One has happened this day—and here. My arrival here was certainly a miracle. A peculiarly earthy miracle, but, nevertheless, a—miracle. Say, I'll have to write some in the office. See you again."

Gordon pushed back his chair and hurried away through the crowded room towards the office. But here again was a crowd. Here again was "land"—always "land." And in desperation he betook himself to his bathroom. He felt he must write to his mother. He felt that on this his arrival in Snake's Fall he could do no less than reassure her of his well-being.

Mrs. James Carbhoy sighed contentedly as she raised her eyes from the last of a number of sheets of paper in her lap. Her husband turned from his contemplation of the scorching streets, and the parched foliage of the wide expanse of trees beyond the window.

"Well?" he inquired. "Where is the boy?"

There was the faintest touch of anxiety in his inquiry, but his face was perfectly controlled, and the humor in his eyes was quite unchanged.

Mrs. Carbhoy sighed again.

"I don't know. He doesn't say. Nor does he give the slightest clew." She examined the envelope of the letter. "It was mailed here in New York. It's a rambling sort of letter. I hope he is all right. This hot weather is—— Do you think he——"

Her husband laughed.

"I guess he's all right. You see I don't fancy he wants us to know where he is. That's come through some friend, I'd say. Just read it out."

Gordon's mother leaned back in her chair again. She was more than ready to read her beloved boy's letter again, in spite of her misgivings. Besides, there was a hope in her thoughts that she had missed some clew as to his whereabouts which her clear-sighted husband might detect.

"DEAREST MUM:

"Destinations are mighty curious things which have a way of making up their minds as to whom they are terminals for, regardless of the individual. Most of us think the matter of destination is in our own hands. We make up our minds to go to the North Pole; well, if we get there it's because no other terminal on the way has made up its mind to claim us. I've surely arrived at my destination, a place I wasn't going to, nor had heard of, nor dreamed of—even when I had nightmare. I guess this place must have said to itself, 'Hello, here's Gordon Carbhoy on the train; he's every sort of fool, he don't know if it's Palm Sunday or Candlemas, he hasn't got more sense than an old hen with kittens, let's divert him where we think he ought to go.' So I arrived here quite suddenly this afternoon and, in consequence, have wasted some fifty odd dollars of passage money. It's a good beginning, and one the old Dad 'll surely appreciate.

"Talking of the old Dad, I'd like you to tell him from me that I don't think graft is confined to—big finance. This is a discovery he's likely to be interested in. Also, since he's largely interested in railroads, though not from a traveling point of view, I would point out that much might be done to improve accommodation. The aisles are too narrow and the corners of the seats are too sharp. Furthermore, the best money-making scheme I can think of at the moment is a billet as a conductor of a transcontinental express.

"However, these things are just first impressions.

"There are other impressions I won't discuss here. They relate to arrival platforms of depots. When a fellow gets out on his own in the world, there are many things with which he comes into contact liable to strike him forcibly. Those are the things in life calculated to teach him much that may be useful to him afterwards. I have already come into contact with such things, and though they are liable to leave an impression of soreness generally, their lessons are quite sound.

"On the whole, in spite of having lost fifty odd dollars on my railroad ticket, my first two or three days' adventures have left me with a margin of profit such as I could not reasonably have expected. I mention this to show you, presuming that the Dad has told you the object of my going, that my eye is definitely focused on the primary purpose of my ramblings.

"I am keeping my eyes well open and one or two of my observations might be of interest to you.

"I have discovered that the luxurious bath is not actually necessary to life, and, from a hygienic point of view, there's no real drawback to the kind of soap vulgarly known as 'hoss.' Furthermore, the filtration of water for ablutionary purposes is quite unnecessary. All it needs is to be of a consistency that'll percolate through a fish net. Moreover, judging from observations only, I have discovered that a comb and brush, if securely chained up, can be used on any number of heads without damaging results.

"Observation cannot be considered complete without its being turned upon one's fellow-creatures. I have already come into contact with some very interesting specimens of my kind. Without worrying you with details I have found some of them really worth while. Generalizing, I'd like to say right here that man seems to be a creature of curious habits—many of which are bad. I don't say this with malice. On the contrary, I say it with appreciation. And, too, I never realized what a general hobby amongst men the collecting of dollars was. It must be all the more interesting that, as a collection, it never seems completed. I'd like to remark that view points change quickly under given circumstances, and I am now bitten with the desire to become a collector.

"Furthermore, my focus had readjusted itself already. For instance, I feel no repulsion at the

manners displayed in the dining-room of a small country 'hotel.' I feel sure that the man who eats with his mouth open and snores at the same time is quite justified, if he happens to be bigger and stronger than the man who hears and sees him. I also feel that a man is only within his rights in having two or even three helpings of every dish in a hotel run on the American plan, unless the limit to a man's capacity is definitely estimated on the printed tariff. Another observation came my way. Honesty seems to be a matter of variable quality. A nice ethical problem is suggested by the following incident. A man robs his victim; a righteously indignant onlooker sees the transaction, and his honesty-loving nature rebels. He forthwith robs the robber and hands the proceeds of his robbery to the original victim. This seems to me to open up a road to discussion which I'm sure the Dad and I would enjoy—though not at this distance.

"I have already learned that there are plenty of great men in the world whose existence I had never suspected. I have a feeling that local celebrities have a greater glory than national heroes. George Washington never told a lie, it is true, and his birthday forms an adequate excuse for a certain stimulation in the enjoyments of a people. But he never discovered a paying field for speculation by the dollar chasers. Until a man does that he can have no understanding of real glory.

"I hope you and Gracie are well. I think it would be advisable to check Gracie's appetite for candy. I am already realizing that luxury can be overdone. She might turn her attention to peanuts, which I observe is a popular pastime amongst the people with whom I have come into contact. I would suggest to the old Dad that five-cent cigars have merits in spite of rumor to the contrary. I feel, too, that the dollar ninety-five he would thus save on his smoke might, in time, become a valuable asset.

"Your loving son,
"GORDON."

CHAPTER VI

GORDON PROSPECTS SNAKE'S FALL

It was a blazing day. The dust of the prairie street smothered boots and trouser-legs with a fine gray powder which even rose high enough to get into the throats of pedestrians, and drive them headlong to the nearest place where they could hope to quench a raging thirst.

There was no shelter from the sun, unless it were to be found upon the verandas with which many of the Snake's Fall houses were fronted. Gordon's face was rapidly blistering as he idly wandered through the town. Great streams of perspiration coursed from beneath his soft felt hat. His double collar felt sticky, and suggested imminent collapse. To all of which discomforts were now added a swarm of flies buzzing about his moist face with a distracting persistence which tried even his patience.

Gordon was abroad fairly early. He was abroad for several reasons. He possessed a haunting dread of the rapid passing of time. He had slept healthily, if not altogether comfortably. Nor had he yet made up his mind whether the floor of his room would not be preferable to his bed for the passing of future nights. The floor was smooth, there were no hummocks on it. Then, too, the sorely tried and thoroughly slack bed-springs would be avoided, and the horrible groans of a protesting frame would remain silent. It was a matter to be given consideration before the day ended, and, being really of a very thorough nature, he decided to consider it after supper.

He had lain awake for a long time that first night under the shelter of Peter McSwain's hospitable roof, and in the interim of dodging the flock hummocks he had closely considered his future movements.

He argued, if things were as he had been told they were in Snake's Fall, he did not see how he could do better than throw his lot in with the crowd of "ground sharks" awaiting the boom. Having convinced himself in this direction, he felt that at the very earliest opportunity he must reassure himself of Peter McSwain's veracity. He felt that no member of the get-rich-quick brigade could dare to ignore the claims of a great coal discovery about to boom. Besides, the whole thing had been pitched into his lap; or rather it was he who had been pitched. Nor did the roughness of the method of his arrival detract from the chances spreading out before his astonished eyes.

Now he was searching the place for those signs which were to tell him of the accuracy of his information. Nor was it long before he realized that such a search on his part was scarcely likely to prove productive. His knowledge of coal had never been more intimate than the payment of certain fuel bills presented to him at intervals in the past by the faithful Harding. While as for indications of a boom—well, he had heard that a boom came along, everybody robbed everybody else, and in the end a number of widows and orphans found themselves deprived of their savings,

and a considerable body of attorneys had increased their year's income out of all proportion to their just deserts. He felt his weakness keenly. However, he persisted. He felt the only thing was to attack the problem with an open mind. He did so, and it quickly became filled with a humorous interest that had nothing to do with his purpose.

Surveying his surroundings, he thought that never in his life had he even imagined such a quaint collection of habitations. The long, straight street, running parallel to the railroad track suggested a row of jagged, giant teeth. Each building was set in its own section of jawbone, distinct from its nearest neighbor. Then they reared their heads and terminated in a pointed fang or a flat, clean-cut edge of high boarding. Sometimes they possessed a mere sloping roof, like a well-worn tooth, and, here and there, a half-wrecked building, with its roof fallen in, stood out like a severely decayed molar.

Most of the stores—and he counted a dozen or more—suggested a considerable trade. In this direction he noted a hardware store particularly. A drug store, too, with an ice-cream soda fountain, seemed to be in high favor, as also did several dry-goods stores, judging by the number of females in attendance. But the small candy stores were abandoned to the swarming flies.

The people were interesting. There certainly was a considerable number about, in spite of the heat. They, anyway the men, all looked hot like himself, but seemed to be surcharged with an energy that appeared to him somewhat artificial. They hurried unnecessarily. They paused and spoke quickly, and passed on. Here and there they fell into groups, and their boisterous laughter suggested the inevitable funny story or risque tale. There were a great number of vehicles rattling about—buggies, buckboards, democrat wagons—while several times he was passed by speeding saddle-horses which smothered him in the dust raised by their unshod hoofs.

At last he came to the end of the street, and turned to retrace his steps. It was all too interesting to be readily abandoned on this his first day beyond the conventions of life as his father's son.

Just outside a large livery barn he came to an abrupt halt, and stood stupidly staring at the entrance of the largest dry-goods store in the street. The whole thing had caught and held him in a moment. He seemed to remember having seen something of the sort in a moving picture once; perhaps it was years ago. But in real life—never.

A great chestnut saddle-horse had dashed up to the tying-post outside the store. It had reined up with a jerk, and its rider had flung out of the saddle with the careless abandon he had read about or seen in the pictures. Hooking the reins over a peg, the rider hurried towards the store. It was then Gordon obtained a full view.

In a moment the flies were forgotten and the heat of the day meant nothing to him. What a vision was revealed! The coiled masses of auburn hair, the magnificent hazel eyes and the delightful sun-tanned oval of the face, the trim figure and perfect carriage, the costume! The long habit coat and loose riding-breeches terminated in the daintiest of tan riding-boots and silver spurs. Splendid! What a picture for his admiring eyes! A picture of grace, and health, and beauty.

But the vision was gone in a moment. The girl had passed into the store, and it was only left to the enthusiastic spectator to turn to the magnificent chestnut horse she had so unconcernedly left waiting for her.

Almost immediately, however, his attention was diverted into another direction. A dark, sallow-faced man had promptly taken up his position at the entrance of the store, and stood gazing in after the vanished figure of the girl.

For some absurd reason Gordon took an intense dislike to the man. He looked unhealthy, and he hated that look in a man. Besides, the impertinence of standing there spying upon a lady who was doubtless simply bent on an ordinary shopping expedition. It was most exasperating. All unconsciously he straightened his great figure and squared his shoulders. It would not have required much to have made him go and ask the man what he meant by it.

He was rapidly working himself up into a superlative rage, when the girl in the fawn riding-costume reappeared. A delightful smile broke over his good-looking face, but only to be promptly swallowed up in a scowl. The girl had paused, and was speaking to the anæmic creature whose presence he felt to be an outrage.

He noted her smile. What a delightful smile! Yes, he could distinctly make out two dimples beyond the corners of her pretty mouth. His dislike of the favored man merged into a regret for himself.

Hello! The smile had gone from the girl's face. Her beautiful hazel eyes were sparkling with resentment. The man was looking angry, too. Gordon rubbed his hands. Then he began to grin like a revengeful and malicious schoolboy. The girl had moved on to her horse, and in doing so it almost looked as if she had deliberately pushed past the white-livered creature attempting to detain her.

She leaped into the saddle and swung the horse about almost on its haunches. The next moment she was lost in a cloud of dust as she raced down the street.

"Mighty fine horsemanship that," said a voice, as Gordon gazed open-mouthed after the girlish vision. "A smart gal, too, eh?"

Gordon turned. A small man was sitting at the open doors of the livery barn upon an upturned box. He was leaning forward lazily, with his elbows on his knees and his hands clutching his forearms. His towzled, straw-colored hair stuck out under the brim of his prairie hat, and a chew of tobacco bulged one thin, leathery cheek. His trousers were fastened about his waist with a strap, and his only upper garment was a dirty cotton shirt which disclosed an expanse of mahogany-colored chest below the neck.

"Smart gal?" retorted Gordon enthusiastically. "That don't say a thing. She might have stepped right out of the pages of a book." Then he added, as an afterthought, "And it would have to be a mighty good book, too."

"Sure," nodded the other in agreement.

"Who is she?"

The man grinned and spat.

"Why, that's Miss Hazel. Every feller in this city knows Miss Hazel. If you need eddication you want to see her astride of an unbroken colt. Ther' never was a cowpuncher a circumstance aside o' her. She's the dandiest horseman out."

"I'd say you're right, all right."

"Right? Guess ther' ain't no argument. Hosses is my trade. I was born an' raised with 'em. It don't take me guessin' twice 'bout a horseman. I got forty first-class hosses right here in this barn, an' I got a bunch runnin' on old Mallinsbee's grazin'. Y'see, a livery barn is a mighty busy place when a city starts to think o' booming. All them rigs an' buggies you see chasin' around are hired right here," he finished up proudly.

Gordon became interested. He felt the man was talking because he wanted to talk. He was talking out of the prevailing excitement which seemed to actuate everybody on the subject of the coming boom. He encouraged him.

"I'd say a livery barn should be a mighty fine speculation under these conditions," he said, while the keen gray eyes of the barn proprietor quietly sized him up. "There ought to be a pile hanging to it."

"Ye-es."

The man's demur roused the other's curiosity.

"Not?" he inquired.

"'Tain't that. Ther's dollars to it, but—they don't come in bunches. Y'see, I'm out after a wad—quick. We all are. When the railroad talks we'll know where we are. But it's best to be in before. See? Oh, I guess the barn's all right. 'Tain't that. Say, I'd hand you this barn right here, every plug an' every rig I got, if you could jest answer me one question—right."

"And the question?" Gordon smiled.

"Wher' is the bloomin' depot to be? Here, or yonder to the west at Buffalo Point? Answer that right, an' you can have this caboose a present."

The little man sighed, and Gordon began to understand the strain of waiting for these people looking for a big pile quick. He shook his head.

"I'm beginning to think I'd like to know myself. Say, I s'pose you figure this is a great place to make money? I s'pose you fancy it's a sure thing?"

The man unfolded his arms and waved one hand in a comprehensive gesture.

"Do you need to ask me that?" he inquired, almost scornfully. "What does them big coal seams tell you? Can you doubt? Hev' you got two eyes to your head which don't convey no meaning to your brain? Them coal seams could stoke hell till kingdom come, an' shares 'ud still be at a premium. That's the backbone. Wal, we ain't got shares in that corporation, but the quickest road to the pile o' dollars we're yearning for is in town plots. An'," he added regretfully, "every day brings in more sharps, an' every new sharp makes it harder. It's that blamed railroad we're waiting for, an' that railroad needs to graft its way in before it'll talk."

"Graft? Graft again," laughed Gordon.

"Why, cert'nly." The livery man opened his eyes in astonishment. "Folks don't do nothin' for nix that I ever heard. Specially railroads. That depot 'll be built where their interests lie, an' we'll have to go on guessin' till they get things fixed."

"I see."

"Which says you ain't blind."

"No, I don't think I'm blind exactly. It's just—lack of experience. I must get a peek at those seams. Mallinsbee's the man who'll know about things as soon as anybody, I s'pose. He owns all the land along the railroad, doesn't he?"

The man rubbed his hands and grinned.

"Sure. He'll know, an' through him us as he's let in on the ground floor. Say, he's a heap of a good feller—an' bright. Y'see, him an' us, some of us fellers who been here right along before the coal was found, are good friends. There's some of us got stakes down Buffalo Point way as well as up here. See? O' course, our pile lies Buffalo Point way, an' we're hopin' he'll fix the railroad corporation that way. If he does, gee! he's the feller we're gamblin' on."

Gordon's interest had become almost feverish as he listened. He was gathering the corroboration he needed with an ease he had never anticipated.

"I suppose one hundred thousand dollars would be nothing to make if—things go right?"

"If things go our way, I'd say a hundred thousand wouldn't be a circumstance," cried the man enthusiastically. "I'd make that out of a few hundred dollars without a worry—if things went right. But it ain't the way of things to go right when you figger up."

"No, I s'pose it's a matter of chance. The chance comes, and you've just got to grab it right and hold it."

"Sure. Chance! If chance hits you, why, don't go to hit back. Jest hug it—same as you would your best gal."

Gordon laughed and peered into the shadowy interior of the barn.

"Guess that's good talk," he said, "and I'm going to listen. I've got right hold of that chance, and I'm hugging it. Seems to me I'll need to get out and get a peek at Silas Mallinsbee's coal. Can you hire me a rig?"

"I got a dandy top buggy an' team," cried the man, now alert and ready for business. "Ten dollars to supper-time. How?"

Gordon nodded, and the man vanished within the barn.

Left alone, he reflected on the rapidity of the movement of events. He had had a luck that he surely could not have anticipated. Why, under the influence of the prevailing enthusiasm of the place, he seemed to feel that the whole thing was too utterly simple. He wondered what his father would have said had he been there. It would be a glorious coup to return home with that one hundred thousand dollars well before the expiry of his time limit.

From the dark interior of the barn came the sounds of horses' hoofs clattering on the boarded floor.

Presently his thoughts drifted from the important matters in hand to a far less consequent matter. It was not in his nature to be long enamored of the hunt for fortune, no matter what the consequences attached to it.

He began to think of the vision in fawn-colored riding-costume. So her name was Hazel. Hazel—what? he wondered. A pretty name, and well suited to her. Hazel. Those eyes, and the gorgeous masses of her hair! He sighed. For a moment he thought of inquiring of the livery man her other name. Then he smilingly shook his head and decided to let that remain a secret for the present. It added to the romance of the thing. Of one thing he was certain: he must contrive to see her again, and get to know her. Fortune or no fortune, if his father were to cut him off with the proverbial shilling as a spendthrift and waster, if he never saw a partnership in the greatest financial corporation in the United States, that girl could not be allowed to flash into his life like a ray of spring sunshine, and pass out of it again because he hadn't the snap to get to know her.

He had known so many women in his own set at home. He had admired, he had flirted harmlessly enough, he had shed presents and given parties, but somehow he felt that amongst all those society beauties there had not been one comparable to this wild rose of the foothills.

"Say, it's a bright team an' 'll need handlin'," said the doubtful voice of the livery man.

"Don't worry," returned Gordon, shocked into the affairs of the moment by the anxious voice.

"Good." The man sounded relieved.

"Which is the best way?"

"Why, chase the trail straight away west. You can't miss it. I'll take that ten dollars."

Gordon paid and climbed into the buggy. The next moment the vehicle rolled out of the barn.

CHAPTER VII

"MISS HAZEL"

Gordon was in no mood to take things easily. Something of the atmosphere of the place had already got into his blood. His was similar to the mood of those whom he had seen hurrying unnecessarily in the town. Those whom he had seen exchanging hurried words and passing on.

Although he lived in the age of automobiles and aeroplanes, nothing of his education had been forgotten by his father. He was a perfect whip with a four-in-hand, and now, as he handled a "bright" team of livery horses, it was child's play to him. He bustled his horses until he had left the ragamuffin town behind him, then he settled down to a steady, round gait, and gave himself up to the prospect of the contemplation of those scenes of industry which he shortly hoped to discover.

Within ten minutes of leaving the town he discovered the first signs. Men and horses appeared in the distance upon the hills. At one point he discerned a traction engine hauling a string of laden wagons. It was the first breaking up of the monotonous green of the low hills. And it promptly suggested that, in the hidden hollows, he would probably discover far more energetic signs of the work of the coal corporation, which doubtless must have already begun in real earnest.

Things were becoming interesting. He wondered how much work had been done. There was no sign of the coal itself yet. He remembered to have visited coal mines once, and then everything had been black and gloomy. Vast heaps of slack had been piled everywhere, and the pit heads had been surmounted by hauling machinery. There had been great black wastes dotted by houses and streets, which seemed to have taken to themselves something of the hue of the deposits which had brought them into existence. Even the men and women, and particularly the children, had been living advertisements for the great industry which supported them. Here, as yet, there were no such signs. However, doubtless further on there would——

All in a moment his thoughts of coal were broken off, and all his interest vanished like a puff of that coal's smoke in a gale. Coal no longer meant anything to him. He didn't care if the whole wide world starved for coal for all eternity. A chestnut horse was on the trail ahead, and a figure was stooping beside it examining its nearside forefoot. The figure was clad in a *fawn-colored riding-costume*.

The electric current of his feelings communicated itself to his team through the whip as its conductor. The team reared and plunged, then, under his strong hands, they bowled merrily along the dusty trail at a great though well-controlled speed towards the distant figures.

The girl dropped the horse's hoof and straightened herself abruptly. She turned with a quick movement, and gazed back over the trail, her eyes alert and questioning. Her wide prairie hat was thrust slightly from her forehead, and a coil of abundant auburn hair was displayed beneath its brim. Her finely penciled eyebrows were drawn together in an unmistakable question, and her pretty eyes were obviously speculative.

She waited while the buggy drew nearer. She recognized the team as from Mike Callahan's barn, but the occupant of the vehicle was a stranger to her.

The latter fact drew her attention more closely. For a moment she had hoped that it was someone she knew. She needed someone she knew just now. Anyway, a stranger was always interesting, even though he could not afford her the assistance she just now happened to need.

She descried a boyish, eager face on the top of a pair of wonderful shoulders. But that which made a strong appeal to her was the manner in which he was handling his horses. There was nothing here of the slovenly prairie teamster. The stranger, whoever he was, was a master behind a good team of horses. She delighted in a horseman, whether he were in the driving-seat or the saddle.

But all of a sudden she became aware that her regard had been observed, and, with a little smile twinkling in the depths of her hazel eyes, she picked up her horse's forefoot again, and once more probed with her gauntleted finger for the cause of the desperate lameness with which he had been suddenly attacked.

She heard the buggy come up. She was aware that the team had swung out to avoid collision.

Then a cheery voice greeted her ears with its pleasant and welcome inquiry—

"You seem to be in a fix. Can I help any?"

Before the girl looked round she was aware that the teamster had alighted. Then when she finally released her hold of the injured hoof, and stood up, she found herself confronted by Gordon's smiling blue eyes, as he stood bare-headed before her.

Somehow or other a smiling response was unavoidable.

"That's real kind of you," she said, "but I don't guess you can. You see, poor Sunset's dead lame with a flint in his frog, and—and I just can't get the fool thing out."

Gordon endeavored to look serious. But the trouble was incomparable in his mind with the delightful charm of this girl, in her divided riding-suit. However, his effort to conceal his admiration was not without some success.

"I don't guess we can stand for any old thing like an impertinent flint," he said impulsively. "Sunset must be relieved. Sunset must be put out of pain. I'm not just a veterinary surgeon, but I'm a specialist on the particular flint which happens to annoy you. Just grab these lines while I have a look."

The frank unconventionality of the man was wholly pleasing, and the girl found herself obeying him without question.

"It's the nearside," she explained.

Then she remained silent, watching the assured manner in which the stranger set about his work. He picked up the hoof and examined it closely. Then he drew out a folding button-hook from a trouser pocket. Then, for a few moments, she watched his deft manipulation of it.

Presently he stood up holding a long, thin, sharp splinter of flint between finger and thumb.

"Say," he remarked, as he returned the buttonhook to his pocket, while his eyes shone merrily, "I believe if some bright geologist were to set out chasing these flints to their lair, I've a notion he'd pull up in—in—well, aspirate a certain measure in cloth and I'd guess you get the answer right away. It's paved with 'em. That's my secret belief. I could write a treatise on 'em. I've discovered every breed and every species. I tell you if you want to study these rocks right, you need to run an automobile, and find yourself in a hurry, having forgotten to carry spare tires. Ugh!" He flung the stone away from him and turned again to the horse.

Still watching him, the girl saw him deliberately tear off a piece of his handkerchief, and, with the point of his pocket-knife, stuff it into the jagged gash in poor Sunset's frog.

"That'll keep out some of Snake's Fall," he observed, returning the rest of his handkerchief to his pocket. "We'll take it out when we get him home." Then he deliberately turned to his team and tied Sunset alongside. After that, in the most practical manner, he moved the wheels of the buggy apart. "Jump right in. Guess you know the way, so you can show it me. You see, I'm a stranger. Say, it's an awful thing to be a stranger. Life's rotten being a stranger."

The girl was gazing at him with wide, wondering eyes that were half inclined to resentment. She was not accustomed to being ordered about in this cavalier fashion. She had no intention of being incontinently swept off her feet.

"Thanks," she said, with an assumption of hauteur. "If you'll untie Sunset I'll ride home."

"Ride home? Say, you're joking. Why, you can't ride Sunset with that gash in his frog. Say, you couldn't be so cruel. Think of the poor fellow silently suffering. Think of the mute anguish he would endure at each step. It—it would be a crime, an outrage, a—a——" He broke off, his eyes twinkling merrily.

The girl wanted to be annoyed. She told herself she was annoyed, but she nevertheless began to laugh, and Gordon knew he was to have his way.

"I really couldn't think of accepting your—— Besides, you weren't going to Buffalo Point. You know you weren't."

"Do I?" Gordon's eyes were blankly inquiring. "Now how on earth do I know where I was going? Say, I guess it's true I had in my mind a vision of the glinting summer sun, tinting the coal heaps with its wonderful, golden, ripening rays—though I guess it would be some work ripening stove coal—but as to my ever getting there—well, that just depended on the trail I happened to take. As I said, I'm a stranger. And I may as well admit right here that I've a hobby getting mussed up with wrong trails."

The girl's laughter dispelled her last effort at dignity.

"I knew you were a stranger. You see, I get to know everybody here—by sight."

Gordon made a gesture of annoyance.

"There," he exclaimed in self-disgust, "I ought to have thought of that before. How on earth could I expect you to ride in a stranger's buggy, with said stranger on the business end of the lines? Then the hills are so near. Why, you might be spirited off goodness knows where, and your loving relatives never, never hear of you no more, and—— Say, we can easily fix that though. My name's—Van Henslaer. Gordon Van Henslaer from New York. Now if you tell me—what's the matter?"

A merry peal of laughter had greeted his announcement, and Gordon looked on in pretended amazement, waiting for her mirth to subside.

"Oh dear, oh dear," the girl cried at last. "I might have known. Say, of course I ought to have known. You came here yesterday on the train—by mistake. You——"

"That's so. I'd booked through to Seattle, but—some interfering pack of fools guessed I'd made a—mistake,"

The girl nodded. Her pretty eyes were still dancing with merriment.

"Father came by the same train, and told me of someone who got mixed up in—in a fight, and they threw——"

"Don't say another word," Gordon cried hurriedly. "I'm—I'm the man. And your father is——?"

"Mallinsbee—Silas Mallinsbee!"

"Then you are Hazel Mallinsbee."

"How do you know my first name?"

"Why, I saw you in town, and the livery man told me you were 'Miss Hazel.' Say, this is bully. Now we aren't strangers, and you can ride in my buggy without any question. Jump right in, and I'll drive you—where is it?"

Hazel Mallinsbee obeyed without further demur. She sprang into the vehicle, and Gordon promptly followed. The next moment they were moving on at a steady, sober pace.

"It's Buffalo Point," the girl directed. "It's only four miles. Then you can go on and enjoy your beautiful pathetic picture of the coal workings. But you won't have much time if we travel at this gait," she added slyly.

Gordon shook his head.

"It's Sunset," he said. "We must consider his poor foot."

There was laughter in Hazel's eyes as she sighed.

"Poor Sunset. Perhaps—you're right."

"Without a doubt," Gordon laughed. "He might get blood poisoning, or cancer, or dyspepsia, or something if we bustled him."

Hazel pointed a branching trail to the north.

"That's the trail," she said. "Father's at home. He'll be real glad to see you. Say, you know father ought to know better—at his age. He—he just loves a scrap. He was telling me about you, and saying how you 'hammered'—that's the word he used—the 'sharp.' He was most upset that the train crew spoiled the finish. You know father's a great scallywag. I don't believe he thinks he's a day over twenty. It's—it's dreadful—with a grown-up daughter. He's—just a great big boy for all his gray hair. You should just see him out on the range. He's got all the youngsters left standing. It must be grand to grow old like he does."

Gordon listened to the girl's rich tones, and the enthusiasm lying behind her words, and somehow the whole situation seemed unreal. Here he was driving one of the most perfectly delightful girls he had ever met to her home, within twenty-four hours of his absurd arrival in a still more absurd town. Nor was she any mere country girl. Her whole style spoke of an education obtained at one of the great schools in the East. Her costume might have been tailored on Fifth Avenue, New York. Yet here she was living the life of the wonderful sunlit prairie, the daughter of an obscure rancher in the foothills of the Rockies.

"Say, your father is just a bully feller," he agreed quickly. "He didn't know me from—a grasshopper, but he did me all sorts of a good service. It don't matter what it was. But it was one of those things which between men count a whole heap."

The girl's enthusiasm waxed.

"Father's just as good as—as he's clever. But," she added tenderly, "he's a great scallywag.

Oh dear, he'll never grow up." A few minutes later she pointed quickly ahead with one gauntleted hand.

"That's Buffalo Point," she said. "There where that house is. That's our house, and beyond it, half a mile, you can see the telegraph poles of the railroad track."

Gordon gazed ahead. They still had a good mile to go. The lonely house fixed his attention.

"Say, isn't there a village?" he inquired. "Buffalo Point?"

The girl shook her head.

"No. Just that little frame house of ours. Father had it built as—a sort of office. You see, we're both working hard on his land scheme. You see, it's—it's our hobby, the same as losing trails is yours."

Gordon laughed.

"That's plumb spoiled my day. I'd forgotten the land business. Now it's all come over me like a chill, like the drip of an ice wagon down the back of my neck. I s'pose there'll always be land around, and we've always got to have coal. It seems a pity, doesn't it. Say, there hasn't been a soul I've met in twenty-four hours, but they've been crazy on—on town sites. They're most ridiculous things, town sites. Four pegs and four imaginary lines, a deal of grass with a substrata of crawly things. And for that men would scrap, and cheat, and rob, and—and graft. It's—a wonder."

Hazel Mallinsbee checked her inclination to laugh again. Her eyes were gazing ahead at the little frame house, and they grew wistfully serious.

"It isn't the land," she said simply. "The scrap, and cheat, and rob, and graft, are right. But it's the fight for fortune. Fortune?" she smiled. "Fortune means everything to a modern man. To some women, too, but not quite in the way it does to a man. You see, in olden days competition took a different form. I don't know if, in spite of what folks say about the savagery of old times, they weren't more honest and wholesome than they are now. However, nature's got to compete for something. Human nature's got to beat someone. Life is just one incessant rivalry. Well, in old times it took the form of bloodshed and war, when men counted with pride the tally of their victories. Now we point with pride to our civilization, and gaze back in pity upon our benighted forefathers. Instead of bloodshed, killing, fighting, massacring and all the old bad habits of those who came before us, we point our civilization by lying, cheating, robbing and grafting."

Gordon smiled.

"Put that way it sounds as though the old folks were first-class saints compared with us. There's a deal of honesty when two fellers get right up on their hind legs and start in to mush each other's faces to a pulp. But it isn't just the same when you creep up while the other feller isn't wise and push the muzzle of a gun into his middle and riddle his stomach till it's like a piece of gruyère cheese."

Hazel shook her head. Her eyes were still smiling, but Gordon detected something of the serious thought behind them. He vainly endeavored to sober his mood in sympathy.

"Guess it's the refinement of competition due to the claims of our much proclaimed culture and civilization. I think civilization is a—a dreadful mockery. To call it a whitewash would be a libel on a perfectly innocent, wholesome, sanitary process. That's how I always feel when I stop to think. But—but," her eyes began to dance with a joyous enthusiasm, "I don't often think—not that way. Say, I just love the battle, I mean the modern battle for fortune. It's—it's almost the champagne of life. I know only one thing to beat it."

Gordon had forgotten the team he was driving, and let them amble leisurely on towards the house, now so rapidly approaching.

"What's—the real champagne?" he inquired.

The girl turned and gazed at him with wide eyes.

"Why," she cried. "Life—just life itself. What else? Say, think of the moment your eyes open to the splendid sunlight of day. Think of the moment you realize you are living—living—living, after a long, delicious night's sleep. Think of all the perfect moments awaiting you before night falls, and you seek your bed again. It is just the very essence of perfect joy."

"It's better after breakfast, and you've had time to get around some."

The ardor of the girl's mood received a sudden douche. Just for a moment a gleam of displeasure shadowed her eyes. Then a twinkling smile grew, and the clouds dispersed.

"Isn't that just a man? Where's your enthusiasm? Where's your joy of life? Where's your romance, and—and spirit of hope?"

A great pretense of reproach lay in her rapid questions.

"Oh, they're all somewhere lying around, I guess," returned Gordon simply. "Those things are all right, sure. But—but it's a mighty tough proposition worrying that way on—on an empty stomach. It seems to me that's just one of life's mistakes. There ought to be a law in Congress that a feller isn't allowed to—to think till he's had his morning coffee. The same law might provide for the fellow who fancies himself a sort of canary and starts right in to sing before he's had his bath. I'd have him sent to the electric chair. That sort of fellow never has a voice worth two cents, and he most generally has a repertoire of songs about as bright as Solomon's, and a mighty deal older. Sure, Miss Mallinsbee, I haven't a word to say against life in a general way, but it's about as wayward as a spoilt kid, and needs as much coaxing."

Hazel Mallinsbee watched the play of the man's features while he talked. She knew he meant little or nothing of what he said. The fine, clear eyes, the smiling simplicity and atmosphere of virile youth about him, all denied the sentiments he was giving vent to. She nodded as he finished.

"At first I thought you meant all—that," she said lightly. "But now I know you're just talking for talking's sake." Then, before he could reply, she pointed excitedly at the house, now less than a hundred yards away. "Why, there's father, standing right there on the veranda!" she exclaimed.

Gordon looked ahead. The old man was waving one great hand to his daughter.

CHAPTER VIII

AT BUFFALO POINT

To Gordon's mind Hazel Mallinsbee attached far greater importance to her father's presence on the veranda than the incident warranted. It did not seem to him that there was the least necessity for his being there at all. Truth to tell, the matter appeared to him to be a perfect nuisance. He had rather liked Silas Mallinsbee when he had met him under somewhat distressing circumstances in the town. Now he felt a positive dislike for him. His strong, keen, benevolent face made no appeal to his sympathies now whatsoever.

Besides, it did not seem right that any man who claimed parentage of such a delightful daughter as the girl at his side should slouch about in a pair of old trousers tucked into top-boots and secured about his waist by a narrow strap. And it seemed positively indecent that he should display no other upper garment than a cotton shirt of such a doubtful hue that it was impossible to be sure of its sanitary condition.

However, he allowed none of these feelings betrayal, and replied appropriately to Hazel's excited announcement. He was glad, later, he had exercised such control, for their arrival at the house was the immediate precursor of an invitation to share their midday meal, which had already been placed on the table by the silent, inscrutable Hip-Lee, the Chinese cook and general servitor in this temporary abode.

The horses had been housed and fed in the temporary stable at the back of the house, and a committee of three had sat upon Sunset's injury and prescribed for and treated it. Now they were indoors, ready for the homely meal set out for them.

Hip-Lee moved softly about setting an additional place at the table for the visitor. Silas Mallinsbee was lounging in the doorway, looking out across the veranda. Hazel was superintending Hip-Lee's efforts. Gordon was endeavoring to solve the problem of the rapid and unexpected happenings which had befallen him since his arrival, and at the same time carry on a conversation with the rumbling-voiced originator of Snake's Fall boom.

"At one time I guessed I'd bumped right into the hands of the Philistines," he said. "That's when I was—er arriving. Since then a Samaritan got busy my way and dumps me right down in the heart of the Promised Land, which just now seems to be flowing with milk and honey. I set out to view the dull black mountains of industry, and instead I arrive at the sparkling plains of delightful ease. Mr. Mallinsbee, you certainly have contrived to put me under enormous obligation."

Gordon's eyes were pleasantly following the movements of the girl's graceful figure about the plain but neat parlor. "I suppose all offices in the West are not like this, because——"

Mallinsbee rumbled a pleasant laugh.

"Office?" he said, without turning. "That's jest how Hazel calls it. Guess she's got notions since she finished off her education at Boston. She's got around with a heap of 'em, includin' that

suit she's wearin'. Y'see, she's my foreman hoss-breaker, and reckons skirts and things are—played out. Office? Why, it's just a shack. Some time you must get around out an' see the ranch house. It's some place," he added with simple pride.

Hazel went up to her father and pretended to threaten him by the neck.

"See, Daddy, you can just quit telling about my notions to—folks. Anyway"—she turned her back to Gordon—"I appeal to you, Mr. Van Henslaer, isn't an office a place where folks transact big deals and make fortunes?"

"That's how folks reckon when they rent them," said Gordon. "Of course, I've known folks to sleep in 'em. Others use 'em as a sort of club smoking lounge. Then they've been known to serve some men as a shelter from—home. I used to have an office."

Silas Mallinsbee turned from his contemplation of the horizon. He was interested, and his shrewd eyes displayed the fact.

Hazel clapped her hands.

"And what did you use it for?" she demanded quizzically.

"I—oh, I—let's see. Well, mostly an address from which to have word sent to folks I didn't want to see that—I was out. I used to find it useful that way."

Mallinsbee's chuckle amused Gordon, but Hazel assumed an air of judicial severity.

"A spirit not to be encouraged." Then, at the sound of her father's chuckle, "My daddy, you are as bad as he. Now food's ready, so please sit in. We can talk easier around a table than when people are dreaming somewhere in the distance on the horizon, or walking about a room that isn't bigger than the bare size to sit in. Anyway, Mr. Van Henslaer, this office is for business. I won't have it disparaged by my daddy, or—or anyone else. It serves a great purpose so far as we're concerned." Then she added slyly, "You see, we're in the throes of the great excitement of making a huge pile, for the sheer love of making it. Aren't we, Daddy, dear?"

Silas Mallinsbee looked up from the food he was eating with the air of a man who only eats as a matter of sheer necessity.

"Say, Mr. Van Henslaer," he said in his deep tones, "I've been a rancher all my life. Cattle, to me, are just about the only things in the world worth while, 'cept horses. I've never had a care or thought outside 'em, till one day I got busy worrying what was under the ground instead of keeping to the things I understood above the ground. Y'see, the trouble was two things," he went on, smiling tenderly in his daughter's direction. "One was I'd fed the ranch stoves with surface coal that you could find almost anywheres on my land, and the other was the fates just handed me the picture of a daughter who caught the dangerous disease of 'notions' way down east at school in Boston. Since she's come along back to us I've had coal, coal, coal all chasin' through my head, an' playing baseball with every blamed common-sense idea that ever was there before. Wal, to tell things quick, I made a mighty big pile out of that coal just to please her. We didn't need it, but she guessed it was up to me to do this. But that didn't finish it. This gal here couldn't rest at that. She guessed that pile was made and done with. She needs to get busy in another direction. Well, she gets to work, and has all my land on the railroads staked out into a township, and reckons it's a game worth playing. The other was too dead easy. This time she reckons to measure her brains and energy against a railroad! She reckons to show that we can match, and beat, any card they can play. That's the reason of this office."

Hazel laughed and raised an admonishing finger at the smiling face and twinkling eyes of her father.

"What did I tell you, Mr. Van Henslaer?" she cried. "Didn't I say he was just a scallywag? Oh, my great, big daddy, I'm dreadfully, dreadfully ashamed and disappointed in you. I'm going to give you away. I am, surely. There, there, Mr. Van Henslaer, sits the wicked plotter and schemer. Look at him. A big, burly ruffian that ought to know better. Look at him," she went on, pointing a dramatic finger at him. "And he isn't even ashamed. He's laughing. Now listen to me. I'm going to tell you my version. He's a rancher all right, all right. He's been satisfied with that all his life, and prosperity's never turned him down. Then one day he found coal, and did nothing. We just used to talk of it, that was all. Then another day along comes a friend, a very, very old friend and neighbor, whom he's often helped. He came along and got my daddy to sell him a certain patch of grazing—just to help him out, he said. He was a poor man, and my big-hearted daddy sold it him at a rock-bottom price to make it easy for him. Three months later they were mining coal on it—anthracite coal. That fellow made a nice pile out of it. He'd bluffed my daddy, and my daddy takes a bluff from no man. Well, say, he just nearly went crazy being bested that way, and he said to me—these were his words: 'Come on, my gal, you and me are just goin' to show folks what we're made of. If there's money in my land we're going to make all we need before anyone gets home on us. I'm goin' to show 'em I'm a match for the best sharks our country can produce—and that's some goin'.' There sits the money-spinner. There! Look at him; he's self-confessed. I'm just his clerk, or decoy, or—or any old thing he needs to help him in his wicked, wicked schemes!"

Mallinsbee sat chuckling at his daughter's charge, and Gordon, watching him, laughed in

chorus.

"I'm kind of sorry, Mr. Mallinsbee, to have had to listen to such a tale," he said at last, with pretended seriousness, "but I guess you're charged, tried, convicted and sentenced. Seeing there's just two of you, it's up to me to give the verdict Guilty!" he declared. "Have you any reason to show why sentence should not be passed upon you? No? Very well, then. I sentence you to make that pile, without fail, in a given time. Say six months. Failing which you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you have assisted in the ruin of an innocent life."

In the midst of the lightness of the moment Gordon had suddenly taken a resolve. It was one of those quick, impulsive resolves which were entirely characteristic of him. There was nothing quite clear in his mind as to any reason in his decision. He was caught in the enthusiasm of his admiration of the fair oval face of his hostess, whose unconventional camaraderie so appealed to his wholesome nature; he was caught by the radiance of her sunny smile, by the laughing depths of her perfect hazel eyes. Nor was the manner of the man, her father, without effect upon his responsive, simple nature.

But his sentence on Silas Mallinsbee had caught and held both father's and daughter's attention, and excited their curiosity.

"Why six months?" smiled Hazel.

"Say, it's sure some time limit," growled Mallinsbee.

Gordon assumed an air of judicial severity.

"Is the court to be questioned upon its powers?" he demanded. "There is a law of 'contempt,'" he added warningly.

But his warning was without effect.

"And the innocent's ruin?" demanded Hazel.

The answer came without a moment's hesitation.

"Mine," said Gordon. And his audience, now with serious eyes, waited for him to go on.

Hip-Lee had brought in the sweet, and vanished again in his silent fashion. Then Gordon raised his eyes from his plate and glanced at his host. They wandered across to and lingered for a moment on the strong young face of the girl. Then they came back to his plate, and he sighed.

"Say, if there's one thing hurts me it's to hear everybody telling a yarn, and my not having one to throw back at 'em," he said, smiling down at the simple baked custard and fruit he was devouring. "Just now I'm not hurt a thing, however, so that remark don't apply. You see, my yarn's just as simple and easy as both of yours, and I can tell it in a sentence. My father's sent me out in the world with a stake of my own naming to make one hundred thousand dollars in six months!"

He was surprised to witness, the dramatic effect of his announcement. Hazel's astonishment was serious and frankly without disguise. But her father's was less marked by outward expression. It was only obvious from the complete lack of the smile which had been in his shrewd eyes a moment before.

"One hundred thousand dollars in six months!" Hazel exclaimed. She had narrowly escaped scalding herself with the coffee Hip-Lee had just served. She set her cup down hastily.

"Guess your father's takin' a big chance," said Mallinsbee thoughtfully.

But their serious astonishment was too great a strain for Gordon. He began to laugh.

"It's my belief life's too serious to be taken seriously, so the chance he's taken don't worry me as, maybe, it ought," he said. "You see, my father's a good sportsman, and he sees most things the way every real sportsman sees 'em—where his son's concerned. Morally I owe him one hundred thousand dollars. I say morally. Well, I guess we talked together some. I—well, maybe I made a big talk, like fellows of my age and experience are liable to make to a fellow of my father's age and experience. Then I sort of got a shock, as sometimes fellows of my age making a big talk do. In about half a minute I found a new meaning for the word 'bluff.' I thought I'd got its meaning right before that. I thought I could teach my father all there was to know about bluff. You see, I'd forgotten he'd lived thirty-three more years than I had. Bluff? Why, I'd never heard of it as he knew it. The result is I've got to make one hundred thousand dollars in six months or forfeit my legitimate future." Then he added with the gayest, most buoyant laugh, "Say, it's a terrible thing to think of. It's dead serious. It's as serious as an inter-university ball game."

The lurking smile had returned to Mallinsbee's eyes, and Hazel frankly joined in Gordon's laugh.

"And you've come to Snake's Fall to—to make it?" she cried.

"I can't just say that," returned Gordon.

"No." Mallinsbee shook his head, and the two men exchanged meaning glances. Then the old man went on with his food and spoke between the mouthfuls. "You had an office?"

"Sure. You see, I was my father's secretary."

"Secretary?" Mallinsbee looked up quickly.

Gordon nodded.

"That's what he called me. I drew the salary—and my allowance. It was an elegant office—what little I remember of it."

The old man's regard was very nearly a broad laugh.

"Say, you made a talk about an 'innocent's' life gettin' all mussed up?"

Gordon nodded with profound seriousness.

"Sure," he replied. "Mine. I don't guess you'll deny my innocence." Mallinsbee shook his head. "Good," Gordon went on; "that makes it easy. If you don't make good I lose my chance. I'm going to put my stake in your town plots."

The rancher regarded him steadily for some moments. Then—

"Say, what's your stake?" he inquired abruptly.

Gordon had nothing to hide. There was, it seemed to him, a fatal magnetism about these people. The girl's eyes were upon him, full of amused delight at the story he had told; while her father seemed to be driving towards some definite goal.

"Five thousand dollars. That and a few hundred dollars I had to my credit at the bank. It don't sound much," he added apologetically, "but perhaps it isn't quite impossible."

"I don't guess there's a thing impossible in this world for the feller who's got to make good," said Mallinsbee. "You see, you've got to make good, and it don't matter a heap if your stake's five hundred or five thousand. Say, talk's just about the biggest thing in life, but it's made up of hot air, an' too much hot air's mighty oppressive. So I'll just get to the end of what I've to say as sudden as I can. I guess my gal's right, I'm just crazy to beat the 'sharps' on this land scoop, and I'm going to do it if I get brain fever. Now it's quite a proposition. I've got to play the railroad and all these ground sharks, and see I get the juice while they only get the pie-crust. I'm needing a—we'll call him a secretary. Hazel is all sorts of a bright help, but she ain't a man. I need a feller who can swear and scrap if need be, and one who can scratch around with a pen in odd moments. This thing is a big fight, and the man who's got the biggest heart and best wind's going to win through. My wind's sound, and I ain't heard of any heart trouble in my family. Now you ken come in in town plots so that when the boom comes they'll net you that one hundred thousand dollars. You don't need to part with that stake—yet. The deal shall be on paper, and the cash settlement shall come at the finish. Meanwhile, if need be, for six months you'll put in every moment you've got on the work of organizing this boom. Maybe we'll need to scrap plenty. But I don't guess that'll come amiss your way. We'll hand this shanty over for quarters for you, and we'll share it as an office. This ain't philanthropy; it's business. The man who's got no more sense than to call a bluff to make one hundred thousand dollars in six months is the man for me. He'll make it or he won't. And, anyway, he's going to make things busy for six months. You ain't a 'sharp' now—or I wouldn't hand you this talk. But I'm guessin' you'll be mighty near one before we're through. We've got to graft, and graft plenty, which is a play that ain't without attractions to a real bright feller. You see, money's got a heap of evil lyin' around its root—well, the root of things is gener'ly the most attractive. Guess I've used a deal of hot air in makin' this proposition, but you won't need to use as much in your answer—when you've slept over it. Say, if food's through we'll get busy, Hazel."

Mrs. James Carbhoy was in bed when she received her morning's mail. Perhaps she and her millionaire husband were unusually old-fashioned in their domestic life. Anyway, James Carbhoy's presence in the great bedstead beside her was made obvious by the heavy breathing which, in a less wealthy man, might have been called snoring, and the mountainous ridge of bedclothes which covered his monumental bulk.

A querulous voice disturbed his dreams. He heard it from afar off, and it merged with the scenes he was dwelling upon. A panic followed. He had made a terrible discovery. It was his wife, and not the president of a rival railroad, who was stealing the metals of a new track he was constructing as fast as he could lay them.

He awoke in a cold sweat. He thought he was lying in the cutting beside the track. His wife had vanished. He rubbed his eyes. No, she hadn't. There she was, sitting up in bed with a sheaf of papers in her hand. He felt relieved.

Now her plaint penetrated to his waking consciousness.

"For goodness' sake, James," she cried, "quit snoring and wake up. I wish you'd pay attention when I'm speaking. I'm all worried to death."

The multi-millionaire yawned distressingly.

"Most folks are worried in the morning. I'm worried, too. Go to sleep. You'll feel better after a while."

"It's nothing to do with the morning," complained his wife. "It's—it's a letter from Gordon. The poor boy writes such queer letters. It's all through you being so hard on him. You never did have any feeling for—for anybody. I'm sure he's suffering. He never talked this way before. Maybe he don't get enough to eat; he don't say where he is either. Perhaps he's just nowhere in particular. You'd better ring up an inquiry bureau——"

"For goodness' sake read the letter," growled the drowsy man. "You're making as much fuss as a hen with bald chicks."

Mrs. Carbhoy withered her husband with a glance that fell only upon the back of his great head. But she had her way. She meant him to share in her anxiety through the text of the, to her, incomprehensible letter. She read slowly and deliberately, and in a voice calculated to rivet any wandering attention.

"DEAREST MUM:

"There's folks who say that no man knows the real meaning of luck, good or bad, till he takes to himself a wife. This may be right. My argument is, it's only partially so. There may be considerable luck about matrimony. For instance, if any fool man came along and married our Gracie he'd be taking quite a chance. Her native indolence and peevishness suggest possibilities. Her tongue is vitriolic in one so young, as I have frequently had reason to observe. This would certainly be a case where the man would learn the real meaning of luck. But there wouldn't be a question. His luck would be out—plumb out. Jonah would have been a mascot beside him.

"This is by the way.

"I argue luck can be appreciated fully through channels less worrying. When luck gets busy around its coming is kind of subtle. It's sudden, too; kind of butts in unnoticed, sometimes painfully, and generally without shouting. Maybe it happens with a bump or a jar. Personally I'm betting on the 'bump' play. A bump of that nature got busy my way when I arrived here. I now have a full appreciation of luck. Quite as full an appreciation as the man would who married our Gracie. But in my case I guess it's good luck. This isn't going to tell you all that's in my mind, but, seeing I haven't fallen for fiction yet, I guess I won't try to be more explicit. Luck, in my present position, means the coming responsibility of success. You might hand this on to the old Dad.

"Talking of the old Dad, it seems to me that, for a delicate digestion, baked custard and fruit have advantages over ice-cream as a sweet. This again is by the way.

"In my last letter I gave you a few first impressions on arrival at my destination. Now, if you'll permit, I'll add what I might call the maturer reflections of a mind wide awake to life as it really is, and to the inner meaning of those things which are so carefully hidden from one brought up in luxury, as I have been. One of the 'dead snips' this way is that cleverness and wisdom are often confused by the ignorant. Cleverness don't mean wisdom, and—vice versa. For instance, loafing idly down a main street six inches deep in a dust that would shame a blizzard when the wind blows, with a blazing sun scorching the marrow of the spine till it's ready to be spread out on toast, escorted by an army of disgusting flies moving in massed formation, and not knowing better than to drive your soul to perdition through the channel of extreme bad language, don't suggest cleverness. Yet there may surely be a deal of wisdom in it if it only keeps you from doing something a heap more foolish. Maybe this don't sound altogether bright, but there's quite a deal in it. Think it out. Another thought is that learning's quite a sound proposition. For instance, a superficial knowledge of geology may come mighty handy at unexpected moments. A knowledge of this served me at a critical moment only to-day. So you see an intimate acquaintance with sharp flints, collected—the acquaintance, not the flints—during my time as the possessor of an automobile, which the Dad provided me with and for the upkeep of which he so kindly paid, has likely had more influence upon my future life than the best talk ever handed out by a Fifth Avenue preacher ever would have done. I have no thought of being irreverent. I am merely handing you a fact. People say that missed opportunities always make you hate to think of them in after life. For my part, I've generally figured this to be the philosophic hot air of a man who's getting old and hates to see youth around him, or else the chin mush of some fool man who's never had any opportunities, talking through the roof of his head. I kind of see it different now. You gave me the opportunity of studying all the beauties of the world seen through an artist's life. I guessed at the time that would be waste of precious moments that might be spent chasing athletics. It's only to-day I've got wise to what a heap I've lost in twenty-four years. Colors just seemed to me messy mixtures only fit to spoil paper and canvas with. Well, to-day I've hit on something in the way of color that's just about set me crazy to see it all the time. It's a sort of

yellowy, greeny brown. That don't sound as merry as it might, but to me it talks plenty. It's just the dandiest color ever. I discovered it out on a 'long, lone trail'—that's how folks talk in books—where the surroundings weren't any improvement on just plain grass. Say, Mum, I guess that color is great. It gets a grip on you so you don't seem to care if a local freight train comes along and dissects your vitals, and chews them up ready for making a delicatessen sausage. When I die I'll just have to have my shroud dyed that color, and my coffin fixed that way, too.

"This isn't so much of a passing thought as the others. Guess some folks might figure it to be a disease. Maybe the old Dad would. Well, I shan't kick any if I die of it.

"Talking of Art, I'm just beginning to get a notion that curves are wonderful, wonderful things. These days of mechanical appliances I've always regarded drawing such things by hand as positively ridiculous. I don't think that way now. If I could only draw the wonderful curves I have in mind now, why, I guess I'd go right on drawing them till the birds roosted in my beard and my bones were right for a tame ancestral skeleton.

"The daylight of knowledge is sort of creeping in.

"I've learned that frame houses have got Fifth Avenue mansions beat a mile, and the smell of a Chinee can become a dollar-and-a-half scent sachet in given circumstances. I've learned that real sportsmanship isn't confined to athletics by any means, and a lame chestnut horse can be a most friendly creature. I've discovered that one man of purpose isn't more than fifty per cent. of two, when both are yearning one way. I'm learning that life's a mighty pleasant journey if you let it alone and don't worry things. It's no use kicking to put the world to rights. It's going to give you a whole heap of worry, and, anyway, the world's liable to retaliate. Also I'd like to add that, though I guess I'm gathering wisdom, I don't reckon I've got it all by quite a piece.

"Having given you all the news I can think of I guess I'll close.

"Your affectionate son,
"GORDON.

"P.S.—My remarks about Gracie are merely the privileged reflections of a brother. When she grows up I dare say she'll be quite a bully girl. It takes time to get sense.

"G."

"I don't understand it, anyway," sighed Gordon's mother, as she laid the letter aside. "You'll have to get him back to home, James. He's suffering. We'll send out an inquiry——"

She broke off, glancing across at the mass of humanity so peacefully snoring at the far side of the bed, and, after a brief angry moment, resigned herself to the reflection that men, even millionaires, were perfectly ridiculous and selfish creatures who had no right whatever to burden a poor woman's life with the responsibility of children.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRST CHECK

It was characteristic of Gordon to act unhesitatingly once a decision was arrived at. The consideration of Silas Mallinsbee's generous offer was the work of just as many seconds as it took the rancher to make it in. Though, verbally, it was left for a decision the next day, Gordon had no doubts in his mind whatever as to the nature of that decision.

When he returned to McSwain's sheltering roof, when another meal had been devoured in the evening, when the soup-like contents of the wash-trough had been stirred in the doubtful effort of cleansing himself, when the busy flies had gone to join the birds in their evening roost, he betook himself to his private bathroom, and sat himself upon his questionable bed and gave himself up to reflection, endeavoring to apply some of the wisdom he believed himself to have already acquired.

But the application was without useful effect.

He began by an attempt to review the situation from a purely financial standpoint, and in this endeavor he stretched out his great muscular limbs along his bed, and propped his broad back against the wall with a dogged do-or-die look upon his honest face.

At once a mental picture of Hazel Mallinsbee obscured the problem. He dwelt on it for some profoundly pleasant moments, and then resolutely thrust it aside.

Next he started by frankly admitting that Mallinsbee's offer left him a certain winner all along the line—if things went right. Good. If things went wrong—but they couldn't go wrong with those wonderful yellowy brown eyes of Hazel's smiling encouragement upon him. The thought was absurd.

Again for some time his problem was obscured. But after a few minutes he set his teeth and attacked it afresh.

Of course, if things did go wrong he was done—absolutely finished. His six months would have expired, his stake would have melted into thin air. His whole future—— But he would have spent six months at Hazel's side, working upon something that was obviously very dear to her brave and loyal heart. What more could a man desire?

He felt his great muscles thrill with a mighty sense of restrained effort. Was there any thought in the world so inspiring as that which had the support of the most wonderful creature he had ever met for its inspiration? He thought not. His pulses stirred at the bare idea of being Hazel Mallinsbee's companion all those weeks and months. Of course it would mean nothing to her. She was far too clever, and—and altogether brainy to give him a second thought. But he felt he could help her. He felt that to go back home with the knowledge that he—he had been one of the prime factors in her achieving the hope of her life would not be without compensations. Compensations? He wondered what form such compensations took. They certainly would need to be considerable for the loss of such a companionship.

He thought of the vision he had seen upon the trail. The beautifully rounded figure. The graceful movements, so obviously natural. Then those eyes, and——

He smiled and abandoned all further attempt to consider seriously the offer he had received. What was the use? His good fortune was certainly running in a strong tide. To attempt to steer a course was to fly in the face of his own luck. No, he would swim with it, let it take him whither it might. Meanwhile, Hazel had promised to meet him on the morrow, and show him the great coal seam, after which he was to interview her father, and have supper at the—office. Forthwith he hastily retired to his nightly game of hide-and-seek amongst the hummocks of flock in his disreputable bed, that the long hours of night might the more speedily merge into a golden to-morrow.

The next day Gordon, at an early hour, spent something over fifty dollars on a pair of ready-made riding-breeches and boots. For once in his life he felt that the faithful Harding had been found wanting. Somehow, in arriving at this conclusion, he had forgotten the episode of the five-cent-cigar man. Anyhow, the purchase had to be made, since it was necessary to ride out to the coal seams.

It was during the time spent on these matters an incident occurred which caused him some irritation. He saw in the distance, as he was making his way to the principal store, the pale-faced, sickly-looking creature who had accosted Hazel the day before. The sight of the man put him into a bad temper at once, and he forthwith gave the storekeeper all the unnecessary trouble he could put him to.

Then, on returning to his hotel, he discovered the man in the office talking to Peter McSwain. His swift temper left him utterly without shame, and he stood and stared at the object of his dislike, taking him in from head to foot with profoundly contemptuous eyes.

Somehow his inspection made him feel glad he disliked the man. He was a broad-chested person with aggressively cut clothes. His black hair was obviously greased, and his general cast of features suggested his Hebrew origin. Gordon had no grudge against him on this latter score. It was not that. It was the narrow, shifty eyes, the hateful way in which he smoked his cigar, with its flaming band about its middle. It was the loud coarse laugh and general air of impertinent arrogance that set his back bristling. And this—this had spoken to Hazel Mallinsbee only the day before.

He deposited his parcels in his bathroom, and returned to the office to find McSwain by himself. He had no hesitation in satisfying his curiosity.

"Say," he demanded, in a crisp tone. "Who was that rotten-looking 'sharp' you were yarning to when I came in?"

Peter's amiable expression underwent the most trifling change.

"Guess I lost ten thousand dollars talkin' that way once," he said, smelling cautiously at one of his own cigars.

Gordon promptly snapped back.

"Maybe I've lost more than that. But it don't cut any ice. Who was he?"

Peter smiled as he lit his cigar.

"David Slosson. Guess he's chief robber for the railroad company. You've seen him. Are you scared any? Say, we've been waitin' to hear him talk two days now. I guess you could hand us a bunch of emperors, an' kings, an' princes, an' dust over 'em a sprinkling of presidents, but I don't reckon you'd stir a pulse among us like the coming of that man did to this city. That feller's right here to put the railroad in on this land scoop. When he's fixed 'em the way he wants we'll hear from the railroad."

Gordon's eyes were thoughtful.

"Chief grafter, eh? He surely looks it."

"Some of 'em do," agreed Peter. "It's my belief the best of 'em don't, though," he added reflectively. "Yet he surely ought to be right. Railroads don't usual graft with anything but the best. He was talkin' pretty, too."

"Pretty? More than he looked," snorted Gordon. Then he began to laugh. "Say, you and I are pretty well agreed about miracles. I sort of feel it'll have to be one of them miracles if the time don't come when I knock seventeen sorts of stuffing out of that man. I feel it coming on like a disease. You know, creeping through my bones, and getting to the tips of my fingers. I'd like to spoil his store suit in the mud, and beautify his features with your 'hoss' soap, and drown 'em in—well, what's in your washing-trough."

Peter's smile was cordial enough at the forcefulness of his young guest. He had not forgotten that Gordon was a friend of Mallinsbee.

"I wouldn't play that way till we see how he's buying," he said cautiously.

"Play?" Gordon laughed and shook his head. "Well, perhaps you're right. It certainly will be some play."

After midday dinner Gordon set out on one of Mike Callahan's horses to keep his appointment with Hazel Mallinsbee. All his ill-humor of the morning was forgotten, and he looked forward with unalloyed pleasure to his afternoon, which was to culminate in his entering into his agreement with her father.

Hazel was waiting for him on the veranda of the office. Her horse, a fine brown mare, was standing ready saddled. Gordon noted the absence of Sunset, and understood, but he noted also that her smile of welcome was lacking something of the joyous spirit she had displayed the night before.

"Sunset off duty?" he inquired, as he came up and leaped out of the saddle to assist her.

Hazel scorned his assistance. She was in the saddle almost before he was aware of her intention.

"Sunset's father's," she said. "The Lady Jane is my saddle horse. She's the most outrageous jade on the ranch. That's why I like her. Every moment I'm in the saddle she's trying to get the bit between her teeth. If she succeeded she'd run till she dropped." Then, with a deliberate effort, she seemed to thrust some shadow from her mind as they set off at a brisk canter. "You know, father's just dying to show you the ranch. He's quite quaint and boyish. He takes likes and dislikes in the twinkle of an eye, and before all things in his life comes his wonderful ranch. I'll tell you a secret, Mr. Van Henslaer. The day you—arrived, after he'd told me just how you had arrived, he said, 'I'd like to get that boy working around this lay out. I like the look of him. He don't know a lot, but he can do things.' He's certainly taken one of his wonderful, impulsive fancies to you. He's very shrewd, too."

Gordon laughed.

"Now I wonder how I ought to take that. I'm all sorts of a fool, but I can hit hard. That's about his opinion of me, eh?"

Hazel's eyes were slyly watching him. She shook her head.

"That's not it," she smiled back. "You don't know my daddy. He might say that, but there's a whole lot of other thoughts stumbling around in his funny old head. If he wants you he thinks you can do more than hit hard."

The humor of it all got hold of Gordon.

"Good," he cried, with one of his whole-hearted laughs. "Now I'll let you into a secret. This is a great secret. One of those secrets a feller generally hangs on tight to because he's half ashamed of it. I can do more than hit hard!"

Then he became serious, and it was the girl's turn to find amusement.

"You see, I've been raised in a bit of a hothouse. Maybe it's more of a wind shelter, though. You know, where the rough winds of modern life can't get through the crevices and buffet you. That's why I fell for that sharp on the train. That's why I bumped head first into Snake's Fall.

That's why your daddy thinks I don't know a lot. But I tell you right here I've got to make that hundred thousand dollars in six months, and I'm going to do it by hook or crook, if there's half a smell of a chance. I've no scruples whatsoever. I just *must* make it, or—or I'll never face my father ever again. Do you get me? Whatever you have at stake in this land proposition, it's just nothing to what I have. And you'll know what I mean when I say it's just the youthful pride and foolish egoism of twenty-four years. Say, do you know what it means to a kid when he's dared to do some fool trick that may cost his life? Well, that's my position, but I've done the daring for myself. My mood about this thing is the sort of mood in which, if I couldn't get that money any other way, I'd willingly hold up a bullion train."

The girl nodded. For a moment she made no attempt to answer him. She was gazing out ahead at a point where signs of busy life had made themselves apparent. Something of the shadow that had been in her eyes at their meeting had returned. Gordon was watching them, and a quick concern troubled him.

"Say," he observed anxiously. "You're—worried. I saw it when I came up."

The girl endeavored to pass his inquiry off lightly.

"Worried?" she shook her head. "The anxieties of the business are on my poor daddy's shoulders, and will soon be on yours. They're not on mine."

But Gordon was not easily put off. He edged his horse closer to her side.

"But you *are* worried," he declared doggedly. Then he added more lightly, "I'll take a chance on it. It's—a man. And he's got a sort of whitewash face, and black, shoe-shined hair. He's got a nose you'd hate to run up against with any vital part. As for his clothes, well—a blind man would hate to see 'em."

The girl turned sharply.

"What makes you think that way?"

Gordon smiled triumphantly.

"Guess I've been trying to impress you with the fact that foolishness—like beauty—is only skin deep. The former applies to me. The latter—well, I guess I must have just read about—that."

"If you're not careful you'll convince me," Hazel laughed.

"That's one of the things I'm yearning to do."

"You're talking of David Slosson," she challenged him.

Gordon nodded.

"The railroad's—chief grafter."

"And a hateful creature."

"Who's started right away to—annoy you—from the time he got around Snake's Fall."

A great surprise was looking back into Gordon's eyes.

"You're guessing. You can't know that," Hazel said, with decision.

"Maybe. Say,"—Gordon's eyes were half serious, half smiling—"a girl don't push her way past a man when he's talking to her if—he isn't annoying her."

"Then you saw him stop me on Main Street yesterday?"

"Sure." Then, after a pause, Gordon went on, "Say, tell me. We're to be fellow conspirators."

Just for one moment Hazel Mallinsbee looked him straight in the eyes. She was thinking, thinking swiftly. Nor were her thoughts unpleasant. For one thing she had realized that which Gordon had wished her to realize—that he was no fool. She was seeing that something in him which doubtless her father had been quick to discover. She was thinking, too, of his direct, almost dogged manner of driving home to the purpose he had in view, and she told herself she liked it. Then, too, all unconsciously, she was thinking of the open, ingenuous, smiling face of his. The handsome blue eyes which were certainly his chief attraction in looks, although his other features were sound enough. She decided at once that for all these things she liked him and trusted him. Therefore she admitted her worries.

"Yes," she said, "it's David Slosson—and your description of him is too good. He's been here two days. He came here the day before you. He came out to see father directly he arrived, but, as you know, father was away. I had to see him. And it wasn't pleasant. Maybe you can guess his attitude. I don't like to talk of it. He took me for some silly country girl, I s'pose. Anyway I got rid of him. Then he saw me yesterday." Suddenly her face flushed, and an angry sparkle shone in her

eyes. "His sort ought to be raw-hided," she declared vehemently. Then, after a pause, in which she choked her anger back, "We got a note from him this morning to say he'd be along this afternoon. Father's going to see him. And I was scared to death you wouldn't get along in time. That's why I was waiting ready for you, and hustled you off without seeing father. I was scared the man would get around before we were away. I haven't said a word to my daddy. You see he'd kill him," she finished up, with a whimsical little smile.

Gordon was gazing out ahead at the great coal workings they were now approaching. But though he beheld a small village of buildings, and an astonishing activity of human beings and machinery, for the time, at least, they had no interest for him.

"I knew I was up against that man directly I saw him peeking into that store after you," he said deliberately. "Miss Mallinsbee, I'm going to ask you all sorts of a big favor. We three are going to work together for six months. Well, any time you feel worried any by that feller, don't go to your daddy, just come right along to me. I guess it would puzzle more than your daddy to kill him after I've done with him. I don't guess it's the time to talk a lot about this thing now. I don't sort of fancy big talk that way, anyhow. All I ask you is to let me know, and to be allowed to keep my own eyes on him."

Hazel shook her head.

"I don't think I can promise you anything like that," she said seriously. "But I—thank you all the same. You see, out here a girl's got to take her own chances, and I'm not altogether helpless that way." Then she definitely changed the subject and pointed ahead. "There, what do you think of it?"

"Think of it? Why, he's a low down skunk!" cried Gordon fiercely, unable any longer to restrain his feelings.

"I wasn't speaking of him. It!" the girl laughed. "The coalpits."

"Oh!" There was no responsive laugh from Gordon. Then he added with angry pretense of enjoyment, "Fine!"

For nearly two hours they wandered round the embryonic coal village, examining everything in detail, and not without a keen interest. The place, hidden away amongst the higher foothills, was a perfect hive of industry. Great masses of machinery were lying about everywhere, waiting their turn for the attention of the engineers. Wooden buildings were in the course of construction everywhere. A small army of miners and their wives and children had already taken up their abode, and the men were at work with the engineers in the preparatory borings already in full operation.

Even to Gordon's unpracticed eye there was little doubt of the accuracy of the information he had received relating to Snake's Fall. Here there was everything required to provoke the boom he had been warned of. Here was an evidence that the boom would be a genuine one built on the solid basis of great and lasting commercial interest. Long before they started on their return journey he congratulated himself heartily upon the accident which had brought him into the midst of such an enterprise, and thanked his stars for the further chance which had brought him into contact with the train "sharp," and so with Silas Mallinsbee.

It was getting on towards the time for the Mallinsbees' evening meal when the little frame house once more came within view. There was a decided charm in its isolation. On all sides were the undulations of grass which denoted the first steps towards the foothills. There was a wonderful radiance of summer sheen upon the green world about them, and the brightness of it all, and the pleasantness, set Gordon thinking of the pity that all too soon it would be broken up almost entirely by those black and gloomy signs of man's industry when the resources of the old world have to be tapped.

However, he was content enough with the moment. The sky was blue and radiant, the earth was all so green, and the wide, wide world opened out before him in whatever direction he chose to gaze. While beside him, sitting her mare with that confident seat of a perfect horsewoman, was the most beautiful girl in all the world, a girl in whose companionship he was to spend the next six months. The gods of Fortune were very, very good to him, and he smiled as the vision of his sportsman father flashed through his mind.

But his moments of pleasant reflection were abruptly cut short.

Hazel had suddenly raised one pointing arm, and a note of concern was in her voice.

"Look," she cried. "Something's—upset my daddy."

Gordon looked in the direction of the house.

Silas Mallinsbee was pacing the veranda at a gait that left no doubt in his mind. It was the agitated walk of a man disturbed.

"What's the matter?" demanded Gordon, with some concern.

"It looks like—David Slosson," said Hazel, in a hard voice.

They rode up in silence, and the girl was the first to reach the ground.

"Daddy——" she began eagerly.

But her father cut her short. The flesh-tinted patch, which Gordon had almost forgotten, which he used to cover his left eye with, was thrust up absurdly upon his forehead. His heavy brows were drawn together in an angry frown. His tufty chin beard was aggressively thrust, his two great hands were stuck in the waist of his trousers, which gave him further an air of truculence.

"Say," he cried, his deep, rolling voice now raised to a pitch of thunder, "it's taken me fifty-six years to come up with what I've been chasing all my life. Say, I've spent years an' years huntin' around to find something meaner than a rattlesnake. Guess I come up with him to-day."

"David Slosson," cried Hazel, her eyes wide with her anger.

Her father waved her aside as she came towards him.

"No, don't you butt in. I've got to let off hot air, or—or—I'll bust."

He paced off down the little veranda, and came back again. Then he stood still, and suddenly brought one great fist down with terrific force into his other palm.

"Gee, but it's tough. Say, you ever tried to hold a slimy eel?" he cried, glaring fiercely into Gordon's questioning eyes. "No? It's a heap of a dirty and unsatisfact'ry job, but it ain't as dirty as dealing with Mr. David Slosson, nor half as unsatisfact'ry. You can stamp your heel on it, and crush it into the ground. With David Slosson you just got to talk pretty and fence while you know he's got you beat all along the line, an' all the time you're just needin' to kill him all to death. Of all the white-livered bums. Say, if only the good God would push him right into these two hands an' say squeeze him. Say——" He held out his two clenched fists as though he were wringing out a sponge.

Gordon raked his hair with one hand.

"Do you need to worry that way, Mr. Mallinsbee? I owe him some myself."

The old man glared for some moments. Then a subtle smile crept into his eyes. Hazel saw it, and seized the opportunity.

"Let's get right inside and have food. You can tell us then, Daddy. You see, Mr. Van Henslaer's one of our confederates now. He's come along to tell you so."

It was with some difficulty that Hazel contrived to pacify her father, but at last she succeeded in persuading him to partake of the pleasant meal provided by Hip-Lee.

Gordon was glad when at last they all sat down. The appetizing smell of coffee, the delicious plates of cold meats, the glass dishes of preserves, and steaming hot scones, all these things appealed to the accumulated appetite consequent upon his ride.

"Now tell us all about it," Hazel demanded, when the meal was well under way.

Old Mallinsbee, still with the absurd eye-shade upon his forehead, had recovered his humor, and he poured out his story in characteristic fashion.

"Wall," he said, "maybe I was hot when you come up. He'd been gone best part of an hour. During that time I'd been sort of bankin' the furnaces. Gordon Van Henslaer, my boy, I hate meanness worse 'n any devil hated holy water. Ther's all sorts of meanness in this world, and ther' ain't no other word to describe it. Killing can be just every sort of thing from justifiable homicide down to stringin' up some black scallywag by the neck for doin' the same things white folks do an' get off with a caution. The feller that steals ain't always to blame. As often as not we need to blame the general community. Lyin's mostly a disease, an' when it ain't I guess it's a sort of aggravated form of commercial enterprise, or the budding of a great newspaper faculty. You can find excuse, or other name, fer most every crime of human nature—'cept meanness. David Slosson is just the chief ancestor of all meanness, an' when I say that, why—it's some talk. He's here to put the railroad in on the land scoop, and, in that respect, I guess he's all I could have expected. We were making elegant talk. Or, I guess, he was mostly. He said his chiefs had sent him up to see how the general public could best be served by his road with regard to this coal boom, and I told him I was dead sure that railroads never failed in their service of the public. I pointed out I had always observed it.

"That talk of mine seemed to open up the road for things, and I handed him a good cigar and pushed a highball his way. Then he made a big music of railroads in general, and talked so pious that it set me yearnin' for my bed. Then I got wide awake. Say, I ain't done a heap in chapel goin' recently, but I've sort of got hazy recollections of sitting around dozing, while the preacher doped

a lot of elegant hot air about things which kind of upset your notions of life generally. Then I seem to recollect getting a sack pushed into my face, and I got visions of the terrible scare of its coming, and the kind of nervous chase for that quarter that I could have sworn I'd set ready in my pocket for such an emergency. That's how I felt—nervous. He was talkin' prices of plots.

"Wal, I got easy after awhile, and we fixed things elegant. The railroad was to get a dandy bunch of plots at bedrock prices, if they built the depot right here at Buffalo Point. And that feller was quick to see that I was out for the interests of the public, and to make things easy for the railroad. So he talked pretty. Then—then he hooked me a 'right.' He asked me plumb out how he stood. I was ready for him. I said that nothing would suit me better than he should come in the same way with the railroad." He shook his head regretfully. "That man hadn't the conscience of a louse. He was yearning for twenty town plots, in best positions, five of 'em being corner plots, in the commercial area for—nix! I was feeling as amiable as a she wild-cat, and I told him there was nothing doing that way. He said he'd hoped better from my public-spirited remarks. I assured him my public spirit hadn't changed a cent. He said he was sure it hadn't, and was astonished what a strong public spirit was shown around the whole of Snake's Fall. He said that the old town was just the same as Buffalo Point. They were most anxious to help the railroad out, too. Which, seeing the depot—the old depot—was already standing there, made it a cinch for the railroad. They were dead anxious to save the railroad trouble and expense. I pushed another highball at him, but he guessed he hadn't a thirst any more, and one cigar was all he ever smoked in an afternoon. Then he oozed off, and I was glad. I guess homicide has its drawbacks."

"High 'graft,'" said Gordon.

"Maybe it's 'high,'" said Mallinsbee, with a smile in which there was no mirth. "Guess I wouldn't spell it that way myself. There's just one thing certain: if my side of the game has to go plumb to hell David Slosson don't get his graft the way *he* wants it. And that's what you and me are up against."

"And we'll beat him."

"We got to."

"You and——"

"You," cried Mallinsbee, thrusting out a hand towards him across the table.

The two men gripped. Gordon had joined the conspirators.

CHAPTER X

GORDON MAKES HIS BID FOR FORTUNE

Gordon's new address was Buffalo Point, and, entering upon his duties, he felt like some Napoleon of finance about to embark upon a market-breaking scheme in which the brilliancy of his manipulations were to shine forth for the illumination of the pages of history, yet to be written.

That was how he felt. Those were the feelings of the moment. Later the burden of his responsibilities obscured the Napoleonic image, and raised up in his mind a thought as to the wisdom of butting one's head against a brick wall.

However, for the time at least the joy of responsibility was considerable, and the greater joy of the companionship and trust of his new friends was something which inspired him to great efforts.

He studied the affairs of Buffalo Point with a care for detail and an assiduity which quickly became the surprise and delight of Silas Mallinsbee. He went over every foot of the new township as laid out by a well-known firm of town planners from New York under Mallinsbee's orders and under State supervision. He spent one entire day in studying the drawn plans, and, finally, having committed all the details to memory, he felt himself equipped to devote his whole attention to the cajoling of the railroad which was the sum and substance of their combined efforts.

In the first week of his occupation he learned many things which had been obscure. He took the story of Mallinsbee's operations and examined it closely, discovering in the process that he possessed a faculty for clear reasoning altogether surprising. Furthermore, he discovered that Mallinsbee, though possibly unpracticed in the work of a big financial undertaking, yet possessed all, and more, of the shrewdness he had vaguely suspected.

One of the first efforts of the old man had been to secure the interest of many of the chief traders in the old township of Snake's Fall. Also that of the Bude and Sideley Coal Company. This

had been done very simply but effectively. After having marked off the town sites he required for himself he had then offered, and sold, to pretty well every landowner in Snake's Fall a certain allotment of sites at a merely nominal fee. This, as the man himself declared in the course of his story, left Snake's Fall pretty well "not carin' a whoop which way the old cat jumped." The "cat" in this instance being the railroad.

In this way direct and active opposition from the landholders of Snake's Fall was minimized. As he explained, it was "graft," but he felt that it was justifiable. This left him with the good will of the citizens and free to act on broader lines. Then he began to pull all the wires he could command with the coal people, who regarded him in the friendliest spirit. However, there was difficulty here, though the difficulty was not insurmountable. Their engineers were at work already on the plans to be put into almost immediate operation for the construction of a private track to link up the coalfields with Snake's Fall. With them it was a question of time. They could not afford delay, and the exploitation of the new township would mean delay for them, although they admitted they would be relieved of a great expense from its proximity to their workings.

Mallinsbee, after stupendous efforts, and careful negotiations of the right kind, finally effected a compromise. He was given three months, of which already one week had elapsed, in which to obtain the definite assurance that the railroad would accept Buffalo Point as the new city. In the meantime the coal people's construction would be held up, and they would assist him with all the influence they could command in persuading the railroad. This concession was not unaided by considerable graft, and the graft took the form of an agreement that Mallinsbee, out of his own pocket, would construct them a coal depot and yards in conjunction with the railroad, and hand them the titles of the land necessary for it.

He had just returned from the east, where he had been in consultation with the Bude and Sideley people, and with whom he had ratified this agreement, and, at the same time, the railroad had been induced to move in the matter. All along he had triumphed through the agency of graft, and the crowning point of his triumph had been demonstrated in the arrival at Snake's Fall of Mr. David Slosson.

Gordon's first impressions of all these things was that Silas Mallinsbee had contrived with considerable skill, and that all was more or less plain sailing. All that remained was to go on, with the grafting hand thrust ready into the pocket for all eventualities, and he found himself smiling at the thought of his father, and how surely his own theories of financial undertakings were working out.

That was his first impression. But it only lasted until he became aware of those subtleties of human nature lying behind human effort and intention. He had reckoned without David Slosson, and, more than all, he had reckoned without Silas Mallinsbee himself.

During that first week of his new work David Slosson had called at the office twice. Once he had encountered only Gordon, and Hazel had arrived during the visit. The second time he had had another interview with Silas Mallinsbee. It was immediately after that interview that Gordon gained some appreciation of the point where human psychology stepped into the arena of commercial competition.

The revelation came in Silas Mallinsbee's own statement of the result of that interview.

"Gordon, my boy," he said. He had quickly abandoned the use of Gordon's formal address. "If that feller gets around here too frequent with his blackmail, I'm going to kill him."

Then he thrust the patch over his left eye high up on to his forehead, and Gordon realized the angry light shining in the man's eyes. With one eye covered his face had almost been expressionless. His evident surprise at this realization did not fail to attract the rancher's attention.

His angry eyes softened to a smile of amusement.

"You're wonderin' 'bout that patch?" he went on. "Wal, when I get up against a feller who's brighter than I am in a deal, I don't figure to take chances. Ever played 'draw' with a one-eyed man? No? Wal, I did—once. An' I ain't recovered from all he taught me yet. He taught me that two eyes can just about give away double as much as one. Which, in financial dealings, is quite a piece. I guess that patch has saved me quite a few dollars in its time. An' it makes me kind of sore to think I didn't meet that one-eyed 'sharp' earlier in life."

Gordon nodded as he folded up the plan of the town lying on his desk.

"You were using it on—Mr. David Slosson. Say, is he smart, or is he just a—crook?"

Mallinsbee rose from his chair and moved cumbersomely over to the doorway, and stood with his back turned, gazing out.

"I ain't fixed him that way—yet. He's sure a crook, anyway. That's a cinch. 'Bout the other we'll know later. Say, I'm open to graft anybody on this thing—reasonably. It's part of the game. It's more. It's the game itself. But I don't submit to blackmail."

"There doesn't seem much difference," said Gordon, drawing some letter-paper towards him, and preparing to write.

The other remained where he was, moodily gazing out at the hills where his beloved ranch lay.

"You'd think not—but there is," Mallinsbee went on. "You graft an organization when you're needin' something from them which they ain't under obligation to themselves to do. That's buying and selling, and, as things go, there ain't much kick coming. But when you've done that, and their favor's fixed right, it's blackmail if their servants come along and refuse to carry out their work if you don't pay *their* price. This feller Slosson is a servant of the railroad. I'm ready to graft all they need. He's out for blackmail. That feller wants to be paid something for nothing. He don't do a thing for us. He's got to do the work I'm paying the railroad for. See? Say, Gordon, boy, happen what likes I won't do it. That feller don't make one cent out of me. I'm on the buck, an' I don't care a curse."

Mallinsbee had turned about to deliver his irrevocable decision, and, as Gordon met the man's serious, obstinate expression, he realized something of the psychology lying behind a big financial transaction.

If Slosson had been a man of reasonable grafting disposition, if he had been a pleasant, amiable personality, if he had been a—man, if Silas Mallinsbee had been used to affairs such as his father dealt in—well—. But it was useless to speculate further. He only saw a troublous situation growing up for him to contend with.

"We've got to get him playing our game," he hazarded.

"That we'll never do. We're playing a straight bid for a win. He couldn't play a straight bid for anything."

"No." There was a great cordiality in Gordon's negative.

"It's us who've got to play him—someways."

"It's some proposition," mused Gordon.

"It surely is. There's ways." Mallinsbee laughed shortly. "Maybe I'll hand him over to Hazel." Then he gave another short laugh. "Guess the ranch 'll interest him some—too."

Gordon's eyes lit apprehensively.

"I wouldn't do that," he said almost sharply.

Mallinsbee faced about.

"Why not? Hazel's a bright girl. She's as wise as any two men. A crook don't worry her a thing."

"I guess all that's right enough. But—she's a girl, and—I don't seem to feel it's fair to her."

Mallinsbee remained silent for some moments. Gordon watched the broad back of the great, lolling figure in the doorway with an alarm he would not have displayed had he been facing him. Then the sound of clattering hoofs outside broke up the silence and the old man turned.

"Here she is," he cried, with a shadowy smile. "Guess she can speak for herself."

Gordon could have cursed the luck that had brought the girl there at that moment. He understood the depth of her devotion to her father and his enterprise. Nothing could have been less opportune.

But, in a moment, his annoyance became lost in his delight at the sound of her cheery greeting.

"Hello, Daddy," he heard her call out.

Gordon remained where he was, waiting to feast his eyes upon the fresh beauty of this girl, who occupied so large a portion of his thoughts.

Her father stood aside to allow her to pass in, and Gordon had his reward in her radiant smile.

"How's our junior partner?" she cried gayly.

"Feeling just about ready to turn the office into a twelve-foot ring and—hurt somebody," the junior partner retorted quickly.

Hazel pulled a long face.

"Is it that way?" she demanded, and turned back to her father. Then she added playfully:

"What's ruffled the atmosphere of our—dovecote?"

The old man began to chuckle.

"Dovecote?" he said. "Guess armed fortress comes nearer describing this lay out. Anyway the temper of its occupants," he added, his twinkling eyes on the determined features of his protégé. "Guess I'll get goin' out to the ranch while you two scrap things out. Seems to me I need to get the cobwebs of David Slosson out of my head."

He took his departure without haste, but with the obvious intention of avoiding any further discussion of David Slosson for the present. And Gordon was not sorry for his going. He felt that at all costs his suggestion that Hazel should take her place in the ring with this man Slosson was not to be thought of.

But he was reckoning without Hazel herself. He was calculating with all a man's—a young man's—assurance that this girl would regard his opinions in the light he regarded them himself.

Hazel sat herself upon the edge of his desk, and flicked the rawhide quirt against the leg of her top boot. Her prairie hat was thrust back from her forehead, and her pretty tanned face was turned in a smiling inquiry upon Gordon.

"What is it?" she asked, with that new alertness the man had come to regard as a part of her nature, second only to her delightful camaraderie.

He smiled back into her merry eyes.

"I'm wondering why two men bent on a joint purpose can't see the same thing in the same light."

"Which means you and my daddy have already started an argument which I'll have to settle."

Gordon laughed.

"Guess you'll settle it, though—there's no need."

"Why not? If you can't agree?"

"We do agree."

"Then where's the argument?"

"There isn't one."

Hazel began to laugh.

"Why did you say there was?"

"I didn't. It was you who said that."

Hazel's smile had died away.

"It's Slosson, of course," she said decidedly. And Gordon began to wish she were not so clearsighted, nor so direct in her challenges.

"Oh, he's a constant thorn," he said evasively.

"Has he been here to-day?"

Gordon nodded.

"And the result?"

"Your father is—obdurate. Says he won't submit to blackmail."

"Has Slosson abated his terms?"

"I don't think so."

Hazel rose quickly from her seat on the desk. She walked slowly across the room and propped herself in the doorway, in precisely the same position as her father had occupied. Gordon's eyes watched her every movement. He knew she was considering deeply, and intuition warned him that the result of her consideration might easily conflict with that which he had in his mind. But he was not prepared for the announcement which came a moment later.

She came back to the desk quickly, and took up her old place on it. Her pretty lips were firmly set, and she gazed soberly and unflinchingly down into Gordon's apprehensive blue eyes.

"I shall have to deal with David Slosson," she said quietly. Then, with a light, expressive shrug: "It won't be pleasant—not by quite a lot. But—it's got to be done, and done quickly. Father

won't give way, so—he must."

But, in a moment, Gordon's protest came with all the enthusiasm of his impulsive nature. To think of this beautiful child having to defile herself by cajoling a creature like this Slosson moved him to a pitch of distraction. Whatever else he did not know, he knew the meaning of expression when men gaze at women. And he had not forgotten his first morning in Snake's Fall.

"Miss Mallinsbee," he cried, his big body leaning forward in his earnestness, and all his feelings displayed in his ingenuous face, "I'd rather let this thing go plumb smash than that you should be brought into contact with that filthy scum again. Say, you're too young, and good, to understand such creatures. I know——"

Hazel was smiling whimsically down into his anxious eyes.

"And you're so old and wise you can see plumb through him," she cried. Then with an exact reproduction of his manner, she leaned forward so that their faces were within a foot of each other. "You two Solomons can't deal with him worth two cents. My daddy's too obstinate, and you —are too prejudiced. He's got to be dealt with, and I'm going to do it. In a case like this a girl's wiser than any two men."

"That's—just how your father argued," cried Gordon, in exasperation. And the next moment he could have bitten off his tongue.

Hazel clapped her hands.

"So that was the argument," she cried delightedly. "My daddy in his wisdom thought of me, and you—you being just a big, big chivalrous boy with notions, couldn't see the same way."

Then she sat up, and her eyes grew very serious. That which lay behind them was completely hidden from her companion, as she intended it to be.

Had it been possible for him to have read her approval of himself in her attitude, he now made it beyond question by the sudden wave of heat which swept through his heart.

"I tell you, you've no right to sacrifice yourself," he cried hotly. "Nor has your father——"

"No right? Sacrifice?" Hazel's eyes opened wide, and in their beautiful depths a sparkle of resentment shone. "Who says that?" she demanded. Then in a moment her merry thought banished the clouds of her displeasure. She began to tease. "Why shouldn't I do this? Say, you've roused my curiosity. What's the danger? I—I just love danger. What is the danger I'm running?"

But Gordon's sense of humor was unequal to her teasing on such a subject. He remained sulkily silent.

"I'm waiting," Hazel urged slyly.

Gordon cleared his throat. He glanced up at her a little helplessly. Their eyes met, and somehow he caught the infection of her lurking smile.

He was forced to laugh in spite of himself.

"If—if you don't know, it's not for me to say," he cried at last, with a shrug. "But I tell you, right here, if you were my sister you wouldn't go near Slosson, if I had to—to chain you up."

"But I'm not your sister," retorted Hazel, with her dazzling smile. "And, if I were, I shouldn't be a sister of yours if I didn't." Then she laughed at herself. "Say, isn't that real bright?" Then with a great pretense at severity she flourished an admonitory finger at him. "Gordon Van Henslaer," she said solemnly, "you're just as obstinate as my daddy, but you haven't got his wisdom." Her pretense passed and she became suddenly very earnest. "This thing is just all the world to my daddy," she said, "and I can help him. Wouldn't you help him if you had such a dear, quaint old daddy as I have? I'm sure you would. What does it matter to me what I may have to put up with if I can help him out? True, it doesn't matter a thing. Insults? Why, I'll just deal with them as they come along." Then her mood lightened. "Say, we're just two real good friends, Mr. Van Henslaer, aren't we? Friends. It's got a bully sound. That's just how my daddy and I've been ever since my poor momma died years and years ago. Heigho!" she sighed. "And now I've got another friend, and that's you. Say, we're always going to be friends, too, because you're going to understand that this—this thing is business, and business isn't play. My daddy wants to make good, and I'm going to do all I know. And," she added slyly, "that's quite a lot. Do you know, in this thing I'm dead honest when I'm dealing with honest folk, and I'm a 'sharp' when I'm dealing with 'sharps'? By that I just mean I'm not scared of a thing. Certainly of nothing Mr. David Slosson can do. My daddy can trust me, and he's known me all my life. You've only known me a week, but you can trust me too. I'm out to help things along, so just let's forget this—this talk."

Gordon's admiration for the girl was so obvious that no words of his were necessary to illuminate it, but he shook his head seriously as she finished speaking.

"I just can't help it, Miss Mallinsbee," he said, a little desperately. "If anything happened to you I'd never forgive myself. What do you mean to do?"

Hazel smiled at his manner. Her smile was confident, but it was also an expression of her regard for him. She had no intention of modifying her decision, but she liked him for his dogged protest.

"You just leave that to me," she cried buoyantly. "I haven't an idea in my silly head—yet. All I can say is, David Slosson is to be encouraged. He's to be flattered. I'm going to make him smile real prettily with that mealy face of his. Guess I'll have to take him out rides—but I'll promise you it won't be my fault if he don't break his wicked neck."

Gordon was forced to join in the girl's infectious laugh, but it was without enjoyment. To think of this man riding at Hazel's side, basking in her smiles, enjoying her company just when and where he pleased. The thought was maddening. And it set his fingers tingling and itching to possess themselves of his throat and squeeze the life out of him.

"And how long's this to go on for?" he asked sulkily, in spite of his laugh.

Hazel's eyes opened wide.

"Why—until he weakens, and we get things fixed."

"And if he beats your game?"

"He'll hate himself first, and then we'll have to reorganize our plans."

"Then I guess I'll get busy on the other plans."

"I shall be beaten?"

Gordon glanced away towards the window. His eyes had become reflective.

"It's the only thing I can see," he said slowly. "He'll finish by insulting you. I know his kind. He'll insult you, sure. And I—well, I shall just as surely pretty near kill him. And then we'll need other—plans."

CHAPTER XI

HAZEL MALLINSBEE'S CAMPAIGN

The seductive mystery of the hills was beyond all words. A wonderful outlook of wide valleys, bounded in almost every direction by the vast incline of wood-clad hills, opened out a world that seemed to terminate abruptly everywhere, yet to go on and on in an endless series of great green valleys and mountain streams. Darkling wood-belts crept up the great hillsides, deep in mysterious shadows, stirring imagination, and carrying it back to all those haunting dreams of early childhood. For the most part these were all untrodden by human foot, and so their mystery deepened. Then above, often penetrating into the low-lying clouds, the crowning glory of alabaster peaks whose snowy sheen dazed the wondering eyes raised towards them.

In the valleys below, the green, the wonderful green, bright and delicate, and quite unfaded by the scorching sun of the prairie away beyond. Pastures beyond the dreams of all animal imagination in their humid richness. Water, too, and low, broken scrubs and woodland bluffs—one vast panorama of verdant beauty, such as only the eye of an artist or the heart of a ranchman could appreciate.

It was the setting of Silas Mallinsbee's ranch, that ranch which was more to him than all the world, except his motherless daughter. Gordon had seen it all as he rode out to spend the week-end on a ranch horse, placed by Mallinsbee at his disposal. He had marveled then at the delights spread out before his eyes. Now, on the Sunday morning, while he awaited breakfast, he wondered still more as he examined, even more closely, that wealth of natural splendor spread out for his delight.

He was lounging on the deep sun-sheltered veranda which faced the south. The ranch house was perched high up on the southern slope of one of the lesser hills. Above him the gentle morning breeze sighed in the rustling tree-tops of a great crowning woodland. Below him, and all around him, were the widespreading buildings and corrals of a great ranching enterprise. It seemed incredible to him that within twenty miles of him, away to the east, there could exist so mundane and sordid an undertaking as the Bude and Sideley Coal Company, and the vicious chorus of ground sharks which haunted Snake's Fall. He felt as though he were gazing out upon some enchanted valley of dreamland, where the soft breezes and glinting sunlight possessed a magic to rest the teeming energy of modern highly tuned brain and nerves.

Its seductiveness lulled him to a profound meditation, and into his dreaming stole the figure

of the mistress of these miles of perfect beauty. Now he had some understanding of that fascinating buoyancy of spirit, the simple devotion with which she contemplated the life that claimed her. How could it be otherwise? Here was nature in all its wonders of simplicity, shedding upon the life sheltering at its bosom an equal simplicity, an equal strength, an equal singleness of mind with which it was itself endowed. He felt that if he, too, had been brought up in such surroundings no city flesh-pots could ever have offered him any fascination. He, too, must have felt that this—this alone was the real life of man.

The play of the dancing sunlight through the distant trees held his gaze. He forgot to smoke, he forgot everything except the beauty about him, the stirring ranch life below him, and the girl whose fascination was daily possessing a greater and greater hold upon him.

Then, quite gently, something else subtly merged itself with the pleasant tide of his meditations. It was the deep note of a voice which came from close beside him in a rolling bass that afforded no jar.

"A picture that's mighty hard to beat," it said.

Gordon nodded without turning.

"Sure."

"Kind of holds you till you wonder why folks ever build cities and things."

"Sure."

"There ain't a muck hole in miles and miles around that you could fall into, and not come out of with a clean conscience an' a wholesome mind. Kind of different to a city."

Gordon stirred. He turned and looked into Silas Mallinsbee's smiling eyes.

"It's—all yours?" he inquired.

"For miles an' miles around. I got nigh a hundred miles of grazing in these hills—and nobody else don't seem to want it. Makes you wonder."

Gordon laughed.

"Say, set a spade into the ground and find a marketable mineral and tell somebody. Then see."

Mallinsbee chewed an unlit cigar, and his chin beard twisted absurdly.

"That's it," he said slowly. "There's nothing to these hills as they are, except to a cattleman, I guess. Cattle don't suit the modern man. Your profitable crop's a three years' waiting, and that don't mean a thing to folk nowadays, except a dead loss of time on the round-up of dollars. They don't figure that once you're good and going that three years' crop comes around once every year. So they miss a deal."

"Yes, they'd reckon it slow, I guess," Gordon agreed. "But," he went on with enthusiasm, "the life of it. The air." He took a deep breath of the sparkling mountain atmosphere. "It's champagne. The champagne of life. Say, it's good to be alive in such a place. And you," he gazed inquiringly into the man's strong face, "you began it from—the beginning?"

"I built the first ranch house with my own hands. My old wife an' I built up this ranch and ran it. And now it's rich and big—she's gone. She never saw it win out. Hazel's took her place, and it's been for her to see it grow to what it is. She helped me ship my first single year's crop of twenty thousand beeves to the market ten years ago. She was a small kiddie then, and she cried her pretty eyes out when I told her they were going to the slaughter yards of Chicago. You see, she'd known most of 'em as calves."

"The work of it must be enormous," meditated Gordon, after a pause in which he had pictured that small child weeping over her lost calves.

"So," rumbled Mallinsbee. "We're used to it. I run thirty boys all the year round, and more at round-up. Guess if I was missing Hazel wouldn't be at a loss to carry on. She's a great ranchman. She knows it all."

"Wonderful," Gordon cried in admiration. "It's staggering to think of a girl like that handling this great concern."

"There's two foremen, though. They've been with us years," said the other simply.

But Gordon's wonder remained no less, and Mallinsbee went on—

"After breakfast we'll take a gun and get up into those woods yonder. Maybe we'll put up a jack rabbit, or a blacktail deer. Anyway, I guess there's always a bunch of prairie chicken around."

"Fine," cried Gordon, all his sporting instincts banishing every other thought. "Which——"

But Hazel's voice interrupted him, summoning them both to breakfast.

"Come along, folks," she cried, "or the coffee 'll be cold."

The men hurried into the house. Gordon felt that there was nothing and no power on earth that could keep him from his breakfast in that delicious mountain air, with Hazel for his hostess.

The meal was all he anticipated. Simple, ample, wholesome country fare, with the accompaniment of perfect cooking. He ate with an appetite that set Hazel's merry eyes dancing, and her tongue accompanying them with an equally merry banter. And all the time Silas Mallinsbee looked on, and smiled, and rumbled an occasional remark.

After breakfast the two men set out with their guns.

"We're sure making Sunday service," said Hazel's father, glancing into the breech of his favorite gun.

Gordon concurred.

"Up in the woods there," he laughed.

"With a congregation of fur and feather," laughed Hazel.

"Which is as wholesome as petticoats an' swallowtails," said her father, "an' a good deal more healthy fer our bodies."

"But what about your souls?" inquired Hazel slyly.

"Souls?" Her father snapped the breech closed. "A soul's like a good sailin' ship. If she's driving on a lee shore it's through bad seamanship and the winds of heaven, and you can't save it anyway. If she ain't driving on a lee shore—well, I don't guess she needs saving."

"It's a great big scallywag," came through the open doorway after them, as they departed. The tenderness and affection in the manner of the girl's parting words made Gordon feel that his great host had some compensation for the absence of that mother who had blessed him with such a pledge of their love.

The two men were returning with their bag. It was not extensive, but it was select. A small blacktail was lying across Mallinsbee's broad shoulders. Gordon was carrying a large jack-rabbit, and several brace of prairie chicken. The younger man was enthusiastic over their sport.

"Talk to me of a city! Why, I could do this twice a day and every day, till I was blind and silly, and deaf and dumb. I sort of feel life don't begin to tell you things till you get out in the open, at the right end of a gun. Makes you feel sorry for the fellows chasing dollars in a city."

They were approaching the limits of a woodland bluff, from the edge of which the ranch would be in view.

"Guess that's how I've always felt—till little Hazel got without a mother," replied Mallinsbee. "After that—well, I just guess I needed other things to fill up spare thoughts."

Gordon's enthusiasm promptly lessened out of sympathy. Something of the loneliness of the ranch life—when one of the partners was taken—now occurred to him.

"Yes," he said earnestly, "the right woman's just the whole of a man's world. I guess there are circumstances when—this sun don't shine so bright. When a man feels something of the vastness and solitude of these hills, when their mystery sort of gets hold of him. I can get that—sure."

"Yep. It's just about then when a bit of coal makes all the difference," Mallinsbee smiled. "I wouldn't just call coal the gayest thing in life. But it's got its uses. When the summer's past, why, I guess the stoves of winter need banking."

Gordon nodded his understanding.

"But your daughter is just crazy on this life," he suggested.

The old man's smile had passed.

"Sure." Then he sighed. "She's been my partner ever since, sort of junior partner. But sometime she 'll be—going." Then his slow smile crept back into his eyes. "Then it'll be winter all the time. Then it'll have to be coal, an' again coal—right along."

They emerged from the woods, and instinctively Gordon gazed across at the distant ranch. In a moment he was standing stock still staring across the valley. And swiftly there leaped into his eyes a dangerous light. Mallinsbee halted, too. He shaded his eyes, and an ominous cloud settled

upon his heavy brows.

"Some one driven out," he muttered, examining narrowly a team and buggy standing at the veranda.

Gordon emitted a sound that was like a laugh, but had no mirth in it.

"It's a man, and he's talking to Miss Mallinsbee on the veranda. It don't take me guessing his identity. That suit's fixed right on my mind."

"David Slosson," muttered Mallinsbee, and he hurried on at an increased pace.

It was after the midday dinner which David Slosson had shared with them.

When her father and Gordon arrived, and before objection could be offered by anybody, Hazel asked her uninvited guest to stay to dinner. David Slosson, without the least hesitation, accepted the invitation. In this manner all opposition from her father was discounted, all display of either man's displeasure avoided. She contrived, with subtle feminine wit, to twist the situation to the ends she had in view. She disliked the visitor intensely. The part she had decided to play troubled her, but she meant to carry it through whatever it cost her, and she felt that an opportunity like the present was not to be missed.

Her father accepted the cue he was offered, but Gordon was obsessed with murderous thoughts which certainly Hazel read, even in the smile with which he greeted the man he had decided was to be his enemy.

To Gordon, David Slosson was even more detestable socially than in business. Here his obvious vulgarity and commonness had no opportunity of disguise. He displayed it in the very explanation of his visit.

"Say," he cried, "Snake's Fall is just the bummest location this side of the Sahara on a Sunday. I was lyin' around the hotel with a grouch on I couldn't have scotched with a dozen highballs. I was hatin' myself that bad I got right up an' hired a team and drove along out here on the off-chance of hitting up against some one interestin'." Then he added, with a glance at Hazel, which Gordon would willingly have slain him for: "Guess I hit."

This was on the veranda. But later, throughout the meal, his offenses, in Gordon's eyes, mounted up and up, till the tally nearly reached the breaking strain.

The man put himself at his ease to his own satisfaction from the start. He addressed all his talk either to Hazel or to her father, and, by ignoring Gordon almost entirely, displayed the fact that antagonism was mutual.

He criticised everything he saw about him, from the simple furnishing of the room in which they were dining, and the food they were partaking of, and its cooking, even to the riding-costume Hazel was wearing. He lost no opportunity of comparing unfavorably the life on the ranch, the life, as he put it, to which her father condemned Hazel, with the life of the cities he knew and had lived in. He passed from one rudeness to another under the firm conviction that he was making an impression upon this flower of the plains. The men mattered nothing to him. As far as Mallinsbee was concerned, he felt he held him in the palm of his hand.

Never in his life had Gordon undergone such an ordeal as that meal, which he had so looked forward to, in the pleasant company of father and daughter. Never had he known before the real meaning of self-restraint. More than all it was made harder by the fact that he felt Hazel was aware of something of his feelings. And the certainty that her father understood was made plain by the amused twinkle of his eyes when they were turned in his direction.

Then came the *dénouement*. It was at the finish of the meal that Hazel launched her bombshell. Slosson, in a long, coarse disquisition upon ranching, had been displaying his most perfect ignorance and conceit. He finished up with the definite statement that ranching was done, "busted." He knew. He had seen. There was nothing in it. Only in grain or mixed farming. He had had wide experience on the prairie, and you couldn't teach him a thing.

"You must let me show you how fallible is your opinion," said Hazel, with more politeness of language than intent. There was a subtle sparkle in her eyes which Gordon was rejoiced to detect. "Let me see," she went on, "it's light till nearly nine o'clock. You see, I mustn't keep you driving on the prairie after dark for fear of losing yourself." She laughed. "Now, I'll lend you a saddle horse—if you can ride," she went on demurely, "and we'll ride round the range till supper. That'll leave you ample time to get back to Snake's Fall without losing yourself in the dark."

Gordon wanted to laugh, but forced himself to refrain. Mallinsbee audibly chuckled. David Slosson looked sharply at Hazel with his narrow black eyes, and his face went scarlet. Then he forced a boisterous laugh.

"Say, that's a bet, Miss Hazel," he cried familiarly. "If you can lose me out on the prairie

you're welcome, and when it comes to the saddle, why, I guess I can ride anything with hair on."

"Better let him have my plug, Sunset," suggested Mallinsbee gutturally.

But Hazel's eyes opened wide. She shook her head.

"I wouldn't insult a man of Mr. Slosson's experience by offering him a cushy old thing like Sunset," she expostulated. Then she turned to Slosson. "Sunset's a rocking-horse," she explained. "Now, there's a dandy three-year-old I've just finished breaking in the barn. He's a lifey boy. Wouldn't you rather have him?" she inquired wickedly.

Slosson's inclination was obvious. He would have preferred Sunset. But he couldn't take a bluff from a prairie girl, he told himself. Forthwith he promptly demanded the three-year-old, and his demand elicited the first genuine smile Gordon had been able to muster since he had become aware of Slosson's presence on the ranch.

Within half an hour one of the ranch hands brought the two horses to the veranda. Hazel's mare, keen-eyed, alert and full of life, was a picture for the eye of a horseman. The other horse, shy and wild-eyed, was a picture also, but a picture of quite a different type.

Hazel glanced keenly round the saddle of the youngster. Then she approached Slosson, who was stroking his black mustache pensively on the veranda, and looked up at him with her sweetest smile.

"Shall I get on him first?" she inquired. "Maybe he'll cat jump some. He's pretty lifey. I'd hate him to pitch you."

But to his credit it must be said that Slosson possessed the courage of his bluff. With a half-angry gesture he left the veranda and took the horse from the grinning, bechapped ranchman. He knew now that he was being "jollied."

"Guess you can't scare me that way, Miss Hazel," he cried, but there was no mirth in the harsh laugh that accompanied his words.

He was in the saddle in a trice, and, almost as quickly, he was very nearly out of it. That cat jump had come on the instant.

"Stick to him," Hazel cried.

And David Slosson did his best. He caught hold of the horn of the saddle, his heels went into the horse's sides, and, in two seconds, his attitude was much that of a shipwrecked mariner trying to balance on a barrel in a stormy sea. But he stuck to the saddle, although so nearly wrecked, and though the terrified horse gave a pretty display of bucking, it could not shed its unwelcome burden. So, in a few moments, it abandoned its attempt.

Then David Slosson sat up in triumph, and his vanity shone forth upon his pale face in a beaming smile.

"He's some horseman," rumbled Mallinsbee, loud enough for Slosson to hear as the horses went off.

"Quite," returned Gordon, in a still louder voice. "If there's one thing I like to see it's a fine exhibition of horsemanship."

Then as the horses started at a headlong gallop down towards the valley, the two men left behind turned to each other with a laugh.

"He called Hazel's bluff," said the girl's father, with a wry thrust of his chin beard.

"Which makes it all the more pleasant to think of the time when my turn comes," said Gordon sharply.

David Slosson was more than pleased with himself. He was so delighted that, by a miraculous effort, he had stuck to his horse, that his vanity completely ran away with him. He would show this girl and her mossback father. They wanted to "jolly" him. Well, let them keep trying.

Once the horses had started he gave his its head, and set it at a hard gallop. He turned in the saddle with a challenge to his companion.

"Let's have a run for it," he cried.

The girl laughed back at him.

"Where you go I'll follow," she cried.

Her words were well calculated. The light of vainglory was in the man's eyes, and he hammered his heels into his horse's flanks till it was racing headlong. But Hazel's mare was at

his shoulder, striding along with perfect confidence and controlled under hands equally perfect.

"We'll go along this valley and I'll show you our next year's crop of beeves," cried Hazel, later. "They're away yonder, beyond that southern hill, guess we'll find half of them around there. You said ranching was played out, I think."

"Right ho," cried the man, with a sneering laugh. "Guess you'll need to convince me. Say, this is some hoss."

"Useful," admitted Hazel, watching with distressed eyes the man's lumbering seat in the saddle.

They rode on for some moments in silence. Then Hazel eased her hand upon the Lady Jane, and drew up on the youngster like a shot from a gun.

"We'll have to get across this stream," she declared, indicating the six-foot stream along which they were riding. "There's a cattle bridge lower down which you'd better take. There it is, away on. Guess you can see it from here."

"What are you goin' to do?" asked the man sharply. He was expecting another bluff, and was in the right mood to call it, since his success with the first.

But Hazel had calculated things to a nicety. She owed this man a good deal already for herself. She owed him more for his impertinent ignoring of Gordon, and also for his disparagement of the ranch life she loved.

Without a word she swung her mare sharply to the left. A dozen strides, a gazelle-like lifting of the round, brown body, and the Lady Jane was on the opposite bank of the stream.

Before David Slosson was aware of her purpose, and its accomplishment, his racing horse, still uneducated of mouth, had carried him thirty or forty yards beyond the spot where Hazel had jumped the stream. At length, however, he contrived to pull the youngster up.

He smiled as he saw the girl on the other side of the stream. He remembered her suggestion of the bridge, and he shut his teeth with a snap. The stream was narrower here, so he had an advantage which, he believed, she had miscalculated. He took his horse back some distance and galloped at the stream. Hazel sat watching him with a smile, just beyond where he should land. His horse shuffled its feet as it came up to the bank. Then it lifted. Slosson clung to the horn of the saddle. Then the horse landed, stumbled, fell, hurling its rider headlong in a perfect quagmire of swamp.

Slosson gathered himself up, a mass of mud and pretty well wet through. Hazel was out of the saddle in a moment and offering him assistance with every expression of concern. She came to the edge of the swamp and reached out her quirt. The man ignored it. He ignored her, and scrambled to dry ground without assistance.

"I told you to take the bridge," Hazel cried shamelessly. "You knew you were on a young horse. Oh dear, dear! What a terrible muss you're in. My, but my daddy will be angry with me for —for letting this happen."

Her apparently genuine concern slightly mollified the man.

"I thought you were putting up another bluff at me, Miss Hazel," he said, still angrily. "Say, you best quit bluffing me. I don't take 'em from anybody."

"Bluff? Why, Mr. Slosson, I couldn't bluff you. I—I warned you. Same as I did about the cat-jumping your horse put up. Say, this is just dreadful. We'll have to get right back, and get you dried out and cleaned. I guess that horse is too young for a—city man. I ought to have given you Sunset. He'd have jumped that stream a mile—if you wanted him to. Say—there, I'll have to round up your horse, he's making for home."

In a moment Hazel was in the saddle again, and the man alternately watched her and scraped the thick mud off his clothes.

He was decidedly angry. His pride was outraged. But even these things began to pass as he noted the ease and skill with which she rounded up the runaway horse. She was doing all she could to help him out, and the fact helped to further mollify him. After all, she *had* warned him to take the bridge. Perhaps he had been too ready to see a bluff in what she had suggested. After all, why should she attempt to bluff him? He remembered how powerful he was to affect her father's interests, and took comfort from it.

She came back with the horse and dismounted.

"Say," she cried, in dismay, "that dandy suit of yours. It's all mussed to death. I'm real sorry, Mr. Slosson. My word, won't my daddy be angry."

The man began to smile under the girl's evident distress, and, his temper recovered, his peculiar nature promptly reasserted itself.

"Say, Miss Hazel—oh, hang the 'miss.' You owe me something for this, you do, an' I don't let folks owe me things long."

"Owe?" Hazel's face was blankly astonished.

"Sure." The man eyed her in an unmistakable fashion.

Suddenly the girl began to laugh. She pointed at him.

"Guess we'll need to get you home and cleaned down some before we talk of anything else I owe. That surely is something I owe you. Here, you get up into the saddle. I'll hold your horse, he's a bit scared. We'll talk of debts as we ride back."

But Slosson was in no mood to be denied just now. Although his anger had abated, he felt that Hazel was not to go free of penalty. He came to her as though about to take the reins from her hand, but, instead, he thrust out an arm to seize her by the waist.

Then it was that a curious thing happened. The young horse suddenly jumped backwards, dragging the girl with it out of the man's reach. It had responded to the swift flick of Hazel's quirt, and left the man without understanding, and his amorous intentions quite unsatisfied. The next moment the girl was in her own saddle and laughing down at him.

"I forgot," she cried, "you'd just hate to have your horse held by a—girl. You best hurry into the saddle, or you'll contract lung trouble in all that wet."

Slosson cursed softly. But he knew that she was beyond his reach in the saddle. A tacit admission that, at least here, on the ranch, she dominated the situation.

"And I've never been able to show you those beeves, and convince you about ranching," Hazel sighed regretfully later on, as they rode back towards the ranch. But her sigh was sham and her heart was full of laughter.

She was thinking of the delight she would witness in Gordon's eyes, when he beheld the much besmirched suit of this man, to whom he had taken such a dislike.

CHAPTER XII

THINKING HARD

The days slipped by with great rapidity. They passed far too rapidly for Gordon. The expectation of Silas Mallinsbee that David Slosson would eventually listen to reason, and accept terms for himself similar to those agreeable to him on behalf of the railroad, showed no sign of maturing. The firmness of his front in no way seemed to affect the grafting agent, and from day to day, although the rancher and his assistant waited patiently for a definite *dénouement*, nothing occurred to hold out promise one way or another. Mallinsbee said very little, but he watched events with wide-open eyes, and not altogether without hope that the man would be brought to reason. His eyes were on Hazel, smiling appreciation, for Hazel was at work using every art of which she was capable to frustrate any opposition to her father's plans, and to help on, as she described it, the "good work."

"I'm a 'sharper' in this, Mr. Van Henslaer," she declared, in face of one of Gordon's frequent protests. "I'm no better than David Slosson. And I—I want you to understand that. I think your ideas of chivalry are just too sweet, but I want you to look with my eyes. We're a bunch of most ordinary folk who want to win out. If you and my daddy thought by burying him, dead or alive, you could beat his hand, why, I guess it would take an express locomotive to stop you. Well, I'm out to try and put him out of harm's way in my own fashion. If I can't do it, why, he'll find I'm not the dandy prairie flower he's figuring I am just now. That's all. So meanwhile get on with any old plans you can find up your sleeve. By hook or *crook* we've *got* to make good."

By this expression of the girl's extraordinary determination doubtless Gordon should have been silenced. But he was not silenced, nor anything like it. The truth was he was in love—wildly, passionately, jealously in love. It nearly drove him to distraction to watch the way in which, almost daily, this man Slosson drove out to see Hazel and take her out for buggy rides or horse riding. Not only that, he and her father were practically ignored by the man. They were just so much furniture in the office, and when by any chance the agent did deign to notice them there was generally something offensive in his manner of address.

Worst of all, as the outcome of Hazel's campaign there were no signs that matters were one whit advanced towards the successful completion of their project, and the days had already grown into weeks. All Gordon could do was to busy himself with formulating wild and impossible schemes for beating this creature. And a hundred and one strenuous possibilities occurred to

him, all of which, however, offered no suggestion of bending the man, only of breaking him. The sum and substance of all his efforts was a deadly yearning to kill David Slosson, kill him so dead as to spoil forever his chances of resurrection.

This was much the position when, nearly three weeks later, in response to a peremptory note from Slosson in the morning, Silas Mallinsbee decided that Gordon should deal with him on a business visit in the afternoon.

Oh yes, Gordon would interview him. Gordon would deal with him. Gordon would love it above all things. Was he given a free hand?

But Mallinsbee smiled into the fiery eyes of the young giant and shook his head, while Hazel looked on at the brewing storm with inscrutable eyes of amusement.

"There's no free hand for anybody in this thing, Gordon, boy," said Mallinsbee slowly. "And I don't guess there's any crematoriums or undertakers' corporation around Snake's Fall. Anyway, Hip-Lee wouldn't do a thing if you asked him to bury a white man."

"White man?" snorted Gordon furiously.

"Remember you're—fighting for my daddy as well as yourself, Mr. Van Henslaer," said Hazel earnestly.

Gordon sighed.

"I'll remember," he said. And his two friends knew that the matter was safe in his hands.

Left alone in his office, Gordon endured an unpleasant hour after his dinner. It was not the thoughts of his coming interview that disturbed him. It was Hazel. It was of her he was always thinking, when not actually engaged upon any duty. Every day made his thoughts harder to bear.

For awhile he sat before his desk, leaning back in his chair, gazing blankly at the wooden wall opposite him. She was always the same to him; his worst fits of temper seemed to make no difference. She only smiled and humored or chided him as though he were some big, wayward child. Then the next moment she would ride off with this vermin Slosson, full of merry sallies and smiling graciousness, whom, he knew, if she had any right feeling at all, she must loathe and despise. Well, if she did loathe him, she had a curious way of showing it.

He thrust his chair back with an angry movement, and walked off into the bedroom opening out of the office. He looked in. The neatness of it, the scent of fresh air pouring in through its open window, meant nothing to him. He saw none of the work of the guiding hand which, in preparing it, had provided for his comfort. Hip-Lee kept it clean and made his bed, the same as he cooked his food. It did not occur to Gordon to whom Hip-Lee was responsible.

There were pictures on the walls, and it never occurred to Gordon that these had been taken from Hazel's own bedroom at the ranch—for his enjoyment. Nor was he aware that the shaving-glass and table had been specially purchased by Hazel for his comfort. There were a dozen and one little comforts, none of which he realized had been added to the room since it had been set aside for his use.

He flung himself upon the bed, all regardless of the lace pillow-sham which had once had a place on Hazel's own bed. He was in that frame of mind when he only wanted to get through the hours before Hazel's sunny presence again returned to the office. He was angry with her. He was ready to think, did think, the hardest thoughts of her; but he longed, stupidly, foolishly longed for her return, although he knew that, with her return, fresh evidence of Slosson's attentions to her and of her acceptance of them would be forthcoming.

He was only allowed another ten minutes in which to enjoy his moody misery. At the end of that time he heard the rattle of wheels beyond the veranda, and sprang from his couch with the battle light shining in his eyes.

But disappointment awaited him. It was not Slosson who presented himself. It was the altogether cheerful face of Peter McSwain which appeared at the doorway.

"Say," he cried. Then he paused and glanced rapidly round the room. "Ain't Mallinsbee around?" he demanded eagerly.

Gordon shook his head.

"Business?" he inquired. "If it's business I'm right here to attend to it."

Peter hesitated.

"I s'pose you'd call it business," he said, after a considering pause, during which he took careful stock of Mallinsbee's representative. Then he went on, with a suggestion of doubt in his tone, "You deal with his business—confidential?"

Gordon smiled in spite of his recent bitterness. He moved over to his desk and sat down, at

the same time indicating the chair opposite him. As soon as McSwain had taken his seat Gordon leaned forward, gazing straight into the man's always hot-looking face.

"See here, Mr. McSwain, we're at a deadlock for the moment, as maybe you know. Later it'll straighten itself out. I can speak plainly to you, because you're a friend of Mr. Mallinsbee, and you're interested with us in this deal. I'm here to represent Mr. Mallinsbee in everything, even to dealing with the railroad people, so anything you've got to say, why, just go ahead. For practical purposes you are talking to Mr. Mallinsbee."

The disturbed Peter sighed his relief.

"I'm glad, because what I've got to say won't keep. If you folks don't get a cinch on that dago-lookin' Slosson feller the game's up. He's askin' options up at Snake's. He's not buyin' the land yet, just lookin' for options. Maybe you know I got two plots on Main Street, besides my hotel. Well, he's made a bid for options on 'em for two months. He says other folks are goin' to accept his offer. There's Mike Callahan, the livery man. Slosson's been gettin' at him, too. Mike come along and told me, and asked what he should do. I guessed I'd run out and see Mallinsbee. If ther' ain't anything doin' here at Buffalo, why, it's up to us to accept."

The man mopped his forehead with a gorgeous handkerchief. His eyes were troubled and anxious. He felt he would rather have dealt with Mallinsbee. This youngster didn't look smart enough to deal with the situation.

Gordon was tapping the desk with a penholder. He was thinking very hard. He knew that the definite movement had come at last, and that it was adverse to their interests. This was the reply to Mallinsbee's resolve. For the moment the matter seemed overwhelming. There seemed to be no counter-move for them to make. Then quite suddenly he detected a sign of weakness in it.

"Say," he demanded at last, "why does the man want options? I take it options are to safeguard him *in case* he wants to buy. This thing looks better than I thought. He's guessing he may quarrel with us. He's thinking maybe we won't come to terms. He's worrying that the news of that will get around, and that, in consequence, up will go prices in Snake's. That'll mean the railroad 'll have to pay through the nose, and he'll get into trouble if they have to buy up there. You see, the bedrock of this layout is—this place has to boom anyway, and they've got to get in either here or at Snake's."

Peter rubbed his hands. His opinion of Gordon began to undergo revision.

"Then what are we to do?" The anxiety in his eyes was lessening.

Gordon sprang from his seat, and brought one hand down on his desk with a slam.

"Do? Why, let him go to hell. Refuse him any option," he cried fiercely. "Here, I'll tell you what you do. And do it right away. How do you stand with the folks up there?"

"Good. They mostly listen when I talk," said Peter, with some pride.

"Fine!" cried Gordon. "We'll roast him some. See here, I know you're holding with us. I know Mike is, and several others. Your interests are far and away bigger here than in Snake's. So you'll get busy right away. You'll get all the boys together who've got interests here. Tell 'em we've fallen out over the railroad deal with Slosson. Tell 'em to get the town together, and then let 'em explain about this rupture. I'll guarantee the rupture's complete. Make 'em refuse all options and boost their prices for definite sale, and threaten to raise 'em sky-high unless the railroad make a quick deal. Put a fancy figure on your land at which he *daren't* buy. You get that? Now I'll show you how we'll stand. He's *got to come in on this place then*. He'll have to buy at our price, because—*the railroad must get in*. You must play the town folks who've got land there, but none here, to force the prices up on the strength of our quarrel with the railroad, and I'll guarantee that quarrel's complete this afternoon. Well?"

The last vestige of Peter's worry had disappeared. His eyes shone admiringly as he gazed at the smiling face of the man who had conceived so unscrupulous a scheme. He nodded.

"The railroad's got to get in," he agreed. "If they can't get in here they've got to there. Offer him boom prices there, and if he closes—which he *daren't*—we make our bits, anyway. If he don't, then he's got to buy here *on your terms*, and—the depot comes here, and the boom with it. Say, it's bright. An' you'll guarantee that scrap up?"

"Sure."

Peter sprang to his feet.

"That's Mallinsbee's—word?"

"Absolutely."

The man's hot face became suddenly hotter, and his eyes shone.

"I'll get right back and we'll hold a meetin' to-night. Say, we've got to fool those who ain't got

interests here—they ain't more than fifty per cent.—and then we'll send prices sky-high. You can bet on it, Mr. Van Henslaer, sir. All it's up to you to do is to turn him down and drive him our way. We'll drive him back to you. It's elegant."

Gordon gave a final promise as they shook hands when Peter had mounted his buggy. Then the hotel proprietor drove off in high glee.

Gordon went back to his office without any sensation of satisfaction. He had committed Mallinsbee to a definite policy that might easily fall foul of that individual's ideas. But he had committed him, and meant to carry the thing through against all opposition.

The cue had been too obvious for him to neglect. It was Slosson who had made a false move. He was temporizing, instead of acting on a fighting policy, and it was pretty obvious to him that his temporizing was due to his growing regard for Hazel. The man was mad to ask for options. He was a fool—a perfect idiot. No, the opportunity had been too good to miss. If Slosson had shown weakness, he did not intend to do so. Then, as he sat down and further probed the situation, a real genuine sensation of satisfaction did occur. There would no longer be any necessity for Hazel to attempt to play the man.

All in a moment he saw the whole thing, and a wild delight and excitement surged through him. He was in the heart of a youngster's paradise once more. The sun streaming in through the window was one great blaze of heavenly light. The world was fair and joyous, and, for himself, he was living in a palace of delight.

It was in such mood that he heard the approach of David Slosson.

The agent entered the office with all the arrogance of a detestable victor. His first words set Gordon's spine bristling, although his welcoming smile was amiability itself.

Slosson glanced round the room, and, discovering only Gordon, flung himself into Mallinsbee's chair and delivered himself of his orders.

"Say, you best have your darned Chinaman take my horse around back an' feed him hay. Where's Mallinsbee?"

Gordon assumed an almost deferential air, but ignored the order for the horse's care.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Mallinsbee won't be around this afternoon. He's going up in the hills on a shoot," he lied shamelessly. "Maybe for a week or two. Maybe only days."

"What in thunder? Say, was he here this morning? I sent word I was coming along."

Slosson's black eyes had narrowed angrily, and his pasty features were shaded with the pink of rising temper.

Gordon's eyes expressed simple surprise.

"Sure, he was here. Your note got along 'bout eleven. He guessed he couldn't stop around for you. You see, a few caribou have been seen within twenty miles of the ranch. They don't wait around for business appointments."

Slosson brought one fist down on the arm of his chair, and in a burst of anger almost shouted at the deferential Gordon.

"Caribou?" he exploded. "What in thunder is he chasin' caribou for when there's things to be settled once and for all that won't keep? Caribou? The man's crazy. Does he think I'm going to wait around while he gets chasin'—caribou?"

Gordon maintained a perfect equanimity, but he wanted to laugh badly. He felt he could afford to laugh.

"There's no need to 'wait around,'" he deferred blandly. "I am here to act for Mr. Mallinsbee—absolutely. The entire affairs of the township are in my hands, and I have his definite instructions how to proceed. If you have any proposition to make I am prepared to deal with it."

For all his apparent deference a note had crept into Gordon's tone which caught the suspicious ears of the railroad agent. He peered sharply into the blue eyes of the man across the desk.

"You have absolute power to deal in Mallinsbee's interest?" he questioned harshly.

"In *Mr.* Mallinsbee's interests," assented Gordon.

"Wal, what's his proposition?" The man's mustached upper lip was slightly lifted and he showed his teeth.

"Precisely what it was when he first explained it to you."

The deference had gone out of Gordon's voice. Then, after the briefest of smiling pauses, he added—

"That is in so far as the railroad is concerned. For your own personal consideration his offer of sites to you remains the same as regards price, but the selection of position will be made by—us."

Gordon was enjoying himself enormously. He had taken the law into his own hands, and intended to put things through in his own way. He expected an outburst, but none was forthcoming. David Slosson was beginning to understand. He was taking the measure of this man. He was taking other measures—the measure of the whole situation. Of a sudden he realized that he was being told, in his own pet phraseology, to—go to hell. He had consigned many people in that direction during his life, but somehow his own consignment was quite a different matter, especially through the present channel.

He pulled himself up in his chair and squared his shoulders truculently.

"I guess Mallinsbee knows what this means—for him?" he inquired sharply, but coldly.

"I fancy *Mr.* Mallinsbee does."

"Now, see here, Mister—I ferget your name," Slosson cried, with sudden heat. "I'm not the man to be played around with. If this is your *Mister* Mallinsbee's final offer, it just means that the railroad can't do business with him. Which means also that his whole wild-cat land scheme falls flat, and is so much waste ground, only fit for grazing his rotten cattle on. I'm not here to mince words——"

"No," concurred Gordon in a steady, cold tone.

"I said I'm not here to mince words. If I can't get my original terms there's nothing doing, and I'll even promise, seeing we're alone, to get right out of my way to sew up this concern, lock, stock and barrel."

"That seems to be the obvious thing to do from your point of view—if you can," said Gordon calmly. "Seeing that *Mr.* Mallinsbee is nearly as rich as a railroad corporation, there may be difficulties. Anyway, threats aren't business talk, and generally display weakness. So, if you've no business to talk, if you don't feel like coming in on our terms—why, that's the door, and I guess your horse is still waiting for that hay you seemed to think just now he needed."

Gordon picked up a pen and proceeded deliberately to start writing a letter. He felt that David Slosson had something to digest, and needed time. All he feared now was that Mallinsbee or Hazel might come in before he rid the place of this precious representative of the railroad.

After a few moments he glanced up from his letter.

"Still here?" he remarked, with upraised brows.

In a moment Slosson started from the brown study into which he had fallen and leaped to his feet. His narrow black eyes were blazing. His pasty features were ghastly with fury, and Gordon, gazing up at him, found himself wondering how it came that the hot summer sun of the prairie was powerless to change its hue.

The agent thrust out one clenched fist threateningly, and fairly shouted at the man behind the desk—

"I'll make you all pay for this—Mallinsbee as well as you. You think you can play me—me! You think you can play the railroad I represent! I'll show you just what your bluff is worth. You, a miserable crowd of land pirates! I tell you your land isn't worth grazing price without our depot. And I promise you I'll break the whole concern——"

"Meanwhile," said Gordon, deliberately rising from his seat and moving round his desk, "try that doorway, before I—break you. There it is." He pointed. "Hustle!"

There comes a moment when the wildest temper reaches its limits. And even the most furious will pause at the brick wall of possible physical violence. David Slosson had spat out all his venom, or as much of it as seemed politic. The threatening attitude of Gordon, his monumental size and obvious strength, his cold determination, all convinced him that further debate was useless. So he drew back at the "brick wall" and negotiated the doorway as quickly as possible.

Two minutes later Gordon sighed in a great relief, and passed a hand across his perspiring forehead. Slosson had passed out of view as Mallinsbee, on the back of the great Sunset, appeared on the horizon.

"That was a close call," he muttered. "Two minutes more and the old man might have spoiled the whole scheme."

Silas Mallinsbee's personality seemed to crowd the little office when, five minutes later, he entered to find Gordon busy at his desk writing a letter home to his mother.

Gordon displayed no sign of his recent encounter when he looked up. His ingenuous face was smiling, and his blue eyes were full of an obvious satisfaction. Mallinsbee read the signs and rumbled out an inquiry.

"Slosson been around?"

Gordon nodded.

"Sure."

"Fixed anything?"

"Quite a—lot."

"You're lookin' kind of—happy?"

"Guess that's more than—Slosson was."

Mallinsbee's eyes became quite serious.

"I told Hazel just now I'd get along back. You see, I kind of remembered you just weren't sweet on Slosson, and guessed after all I'd best be around when he came. Hazel thought it might be as well, too. Specially as she didn't want to sit around and find no Slosson turn up. So——"

Gordon was on his feet in an instant. All his smile had vanished. A look of real alarm had taken its place.

"She was waiting for that skunk? Where?" he demanded in a tone that suddenly filled the father with genuine alarm.

"He was to go on to the coalpits after he was through here, and she was to meet him there an' ride over to the young horse corrals where they been breaking. She was to let him see the boys doin' a bit o' broncho bustin'. What's——"

"The coalpits? That's the way he took. Say, for God's sake stay right here—and let me use Sunset. I——"

But Gordon did not wait to finish what he had to say. He was out of the house and had leaped into the saddle before Mallinsbee could attempt to protest. The next moment he was galloping straight across country in the direction of the Bude and Sideley's Coal Company's workings.

CHAPTER XIII

SLOSSON SNATCHES AT OPPORTUNITY

Gordon had taken David Slosson's measure perfectly, notwithstanding his own comparative inexperience of the world. Apart from the agent's business methods, he had seen through the man himself with regard to Hazel. Hence, now his most serious alarm. The memory of those lascivious eyes gazing after Hazel in the Main Street of Snake's Fall, on his first day in the town, had never left him, and though he had listened to Hazel's positive assurance of her own safety in dealing with the man a subtle fear had continually haunted him. This was quite apart from his own jealous feelings. It was utterly unprejudiced by them. He knew that sooner or later, unless a miracle happened, Hazel would become the victim of insult. Deep down in his heart, somewhere, far underneath his passionate jealousy, he knew that Hazel was only encouraging Slosson that she might help on their common ends, but he had always doubted her cleverness to carry such a matter through successfully. To his mind there could only be one end to it all, and that end—insult.

Now the thing was almost a certainty. With Slosson in his present mood anything might happen. So he pressed Sunset to a rattling gallop. If Slosson insulted her——? But he was not in the mood to think—only to act.

That his fears were well enough founded was pretty obvious. David Slosson, as he hurried away from Mallinsbee's office, knew that he had played the game of his own advantage and—lost. This sort of thing had not often happened, and on those rare occasions on which it had happened he had so contrived that those who had caused him a reverse paid fairly dearly in the end. He was one of those men who believed that if a man only squeezed hard enough blood could be contrived from a stone. Against every successful offensive of the enemy there was nearly always a way of "getting back."

That he could "get back" on the commercial side of the present affair he possessed not the

smallest doubt. He would "recommend" to his company that the present depot at Snake's Fall, with certain enlargements, and the private line to be built by the Bude and Sideley Coal people, were all that was sufficient to serve the public, and, through his judicious purchase of sites in the old township, a far more profitable enterprise for them than the new township could offer. Personally, he would have to sacrifice his own interests. But since Mallinsbee and his cub of an office boy would be badly "stung," the matter would not be without satisfaction to his revengeful nature. Then there was that other matter—and he moistened his thin lips as he contemplated it.

In spite of all Gordon's lack of faith in Hazel's efforts, they had not been without effect. Slosson had been flattered. His vanity had seen conquest in Hazel's readiness to accept his company. It had been obvious to him from the first that the manner in which he had displayed his "nerve" before her at the ranch pleased her more than a little. After all, she was a mere country girl—a "rube" girl.

Nor was it likely that she would be difficult now. She was pretty, pretty as a picture. Her figure appealed to his sensual nature. She didn't know a thing—outside her ranch. Well, he could teach her. Especially now. Oh, yes, it was all very opportune. He would teach her all he knew. He laughed. He would teach her for—her father's sake. And—yes, for the sake of that young cub of a man that had ordered him out of the office.

What was his name—"Van Henslaer"? Yes, that was it. A "square-head," he supposed. The country was full of these American-speaking German "square-heads." Then quite suddenly he began to laugh. For the first time since he came to Snake's Fall the thought occurred to him that possibly this fellow was in love with Hazel himself. He had been so busy prosecuting his own attentions to her himself that he had never considered the possibility of another man being in the running. The thought inspired an even more pleasant sensation. It threw a new light upon Van Henslaer's attitude. Well, there was not much doubt as to who was the favored man. The fellow's very attitude suggested his failure.

Slosson felt he was going to reap better than had seemed at first. He would ruin Mallinsbee's schemes and satisfy his company at a slight personal loss to himself. He would complete his triumph over the individual in Mallinsbee's office. First of all, through Mallinsbee's failure in the land scheme, by robbing him of a position, and secondly, through robbing him of all chance of success with the girl. It was not too bad a retort. He would have made it harsher if he could, but, for a start, it would have to do. Later, of course, since he would see a great deal of Snake's Fall and his power in the place would increase, he would extend operations against his enemies.

Hazel must be his—his entirely. To that he had made up his mind. She was much too desirable to be "running loose," he told himself. Marriage was out of the question, unless he wished to commit bigamy; a pleasantry at which he laughed silently. Anyway, if it were possible, it would not have suited him. Marriage would have robbed him of the right to break up her father's land scheme. No, marriage was—— Well, he was married—to his lasting regret.

Hazel was very attractive; very. He could quite understand a man making a fool of himself over her. He had once made a fool of himself, and in consequence marriage was very cheap from his point of view. He regarded women now as lawful prey. And apart from Hazel's attractiveness, which was very, very seductive, it would be a pretty piece of getting back on her father and that other. He laughed again. It was quaint. The prettier a woman the greater the fool she was.

So he rode on towards the coalpits.

His narrow eyes were alert, watching the horizon on every side. He was looking for that fawn-colored figure on its brown mare. His thoughts were full of it now. The rest was all thrust into the background, leaving full play to his desires, which were fast overwhelming all caution. It would have been impossible to overwhelm his sense of decency.

Suddenly it occurred to him that it was ridiculous that he should go on to the coalpits. His eagerness was swaying him. His mad longing for the girl swept everything before it. Why should he not cut across to the westward and intercept her on the way from the ranch? She must come that way, and—he could not possibly miss her.

He looked at his watch. It wanted half an hour to their appointment. Why, he would be at the pits in ten minutes, which would leave him a full twenty minutes of waiting.

In his mood of the moment it was a thought quite impossible. So he swung his horse westwards, with his eyes even more watchful for the approach of the figure he was seeking.

Perhaps Hazel was late. Perhaps Slosson was traveling faster than he knew. Anyway, he was already in the shadow of the bigger hills when he discovered the speeding brown mare with its dainty burden. Hazel discovered him almost at the same instant, and reined in her horse to let him come up. In a moment or two his roughly familiar greeting jarred her ears.

"Hello!" he cried. "There never was a woman who could keep time worth a cent. I guessed you'd strayed some, so I got along quick."

He had reined up facing her on the cattle track, and his sensual eyes covertly surveyed her from head to foot.

"Why, you haven't been near the pits," protested Hazel, avoiding his gaze. "You've come across country. Anyway, it's not time yet." She pulled off a gauntlet and held up her wrist for him to look at the watch upon it.

He reached out, caught her hand, and drew it towards him on the pretense of looking at the watch. His eyes were shining dangerously as he did so. Just for an instant Hazel was taken unawares. Then her pretty eyes suddenly lost their smile, and she drew her hand sharply away.

Slosson looked up.

"Your watch is wrong," he declared, with a grin intended to be facetious, but which scarcely disguised the feelings lying behind it.

Hazel was smiling again. She shook her head.

"It isn't," she denied. "But come on, or we'll miss the fun. I've got a youngster there in the corrals, never been saddled or man-handled. I'm going to ride him for your edification when the boys are through with the others. It's a mark of my favor which you must duly appreciate."

She led the way back towards the hills at a steady canter.

"Say, you've got nerve," cried Slosson, in genuine admiration. "Never been saddled?"

"Or man-handled," returned Hazel, determined he should lose nothing of her contemplated adventure. "He was rounded up this morning at my orders out of a bunch of three-year-old prairie-bred colts. You'll surely see some real bucking—not cat-jumping," she added mischievously.

"Say, you can't forget that play," cried the man, with some pride. "I'd have got on that hoss if he'd bucked to kingdom-come. I don't take any bluff from a girl."

"I s'pose girls aren't of much account with you? They're just silly things with no sense or—or anything. Some men are like that."

A warm glow swept through the man's veins.

"I allow it just depends on the girl."

"Maybe you don't reckon I've got sense?"

Slosson gazed at her with a meaning smile.

"I've seen signs," he observed playfully.

"Thanks. You've surely got keen eyes. Black eyes are mostly keen. Say, I wonder how much sense they reckon they've seen in me?"

"Well, I should say they've seen that you reckon David Slosson makes a tolerable companion to ride around with. Which is some sense."

Hazel turned, and her pretty eyes looked straight into his. A man of less vanity might have questioned the first glance of them. But Slosson only saw the following smile.

"Just tolerable," she cried, in a fashion which could not give offense. Then she abruptly changed the subject. "Get through your business at—the office?" she inquired casually.

Slosson's eyes hardened. In a moment the memory of Gordon swept through his brain in a tide of swift, hot anger.

"There's nothing doing," he said harshly.

Hazel turned. A quick alarm was shining in her eyes, and the man interpreted it exactly. Caution was abruptly cast to the winds.

"Say, Hazel," he cried hotly, "I'm going to tell you something. Your father's a—a fool. Oh, I don't mean it just that way. I mean he's a fool to set that boy running things for him. He's plumb killed your golden goose. We've broken off negotiations. That's all. The railroad don't need Buffalo Point."

"But what's Gordon done?" the girl cried, for the moment off her guard. "Father gave him instructions. You had an offer to make, and it was to be considered—duly."

"What's Gordon done?" The man's eyes were hot with fury. "So that's it—'Gordon.' He's 'Gordon,' eh?" All in a moment venom surged to the surface. The man's unwholesome features went ghastly in his rage. "He turned me—me out of the office. He told me to go to hell. Say, that pup has flung your father's whole darned concern right on to the rocks. So it's 'Gordon,' eh? To everybody else he's 'Van Henslaer,' but to you he's 'Gordon.' That's why he's on to me, I guessed as much. Well, say, you've about mussed up things between you. My back's right up, and I'm cursed if the railroad 'll move for the benefit of those interested in Buffalo Point."

Hazel had heard enough. More than enough. Her temper had risen too.

"Look here, Mr. Slosson. I don't pretend to mistake your inference. Gordon is just a good friend of mine," she declared hotly. "But I've no doubt that whatever he did was justified. If we're going on any farther together you're going to apologize right here and now for what you've said about Gordon."

She reined up her mare so sharply that the startled creature was flung upon her haunches, and the man's livery horse went on some yards farther before it was pulled up. But Slosson came back at once and ranged alongside. They were already in the bigger hills, and one shaggy crag, overshadowing them, shut out the dazzling gleam of the westering sun.

"There's going to be the need of a heap of apology around," cried Slosson, but something of his anger was melting before the girl's flashing eyes. Then, too, the moment was the opportunity he had been seeking. "See here, Hazel——"

"Don't you dare to call me 'Hazel,'" the girl flung out at him hotly. "You will apologize here and now."

There was no mistaking her determination, and the man watched her with furtive eyes. He pretended to consider deeply before he replied. At a gesture of impatience from the girl he finally flung out one arm.

"See here," he cried, "maybe I oughtn't to have said that, and I guess I apologize. But—you see, I was sort of mad when you talked that way about this—'Gordon.'" His teeth clipped over the word. "You see, Hazel," he insinuated again, "we've had a real good time together, and you made it so plain I'm not—indifferent to you that it just stung me bad to hear you speak of—'Gordon.' I'm crazy about you, I am sure. I'm so crazy I can't sleep at nights. I'm so crazy that I'd let the railroad folk go hang just for you—if you just asked me. I'd even forget all that feller said, and would pool in on Buffalo Point the way your father needs—if you asked me."

He waited. He had thrown every effort of persuasion he was capable of into his words and manner, and Hazel was deceived. She did not observe the furtive eyes watching her. She was only aware of the almost genuine manner of his pleading.

"If I asked you?" she said thoughtfully. Then she looked up quickly, her eyes half smiling. "Of course I ask you."

In a moment the man pressed nearer.

"And you'll play the game?" he asked almost breathlessly.

All in a moment a subtle fear of him swept through the girl. Instinctively her hand tightened its grip on the heavy quirt swinging from her wrist.

"What do you mean?" she demanded in a low tone.

The man's eyes were shining with the meaning lying behind his words. There should have been no necessity to ask that question.

Quite suddenly he reached farther out and seized her about the waist with one hand, while with the other he caught her reins to check her mare. The next moment he had crushed her to him and his flushed face was close to hers.

"There's only one game," he cried hoarsely. "And——"

But he got no further. Like a flash of lightning Hazel's quirt slashed furiously at him. The blow was wild and missed its object. It fell on his horse's head and neck. Again it was raised, and again it fell on the horse and on her mare. The horse plunged aside and her own mare started forward. The next moment both riders were on the ground, struggling violently.

Sunset plowed along over the prairie. True enough, he was the rocking-horse Hazel had declared him to be. But she might have added that he was the speediest horse ever foaled on her father's range.

Gordon was in no mood to spare him. But, press him as he might, he seemed incapable of sounding the full depths of his resources.

Had Gordon only taken the course of the impatient Slosson he would have arrived in time to have prevented the catastrophe. But as it was he made the coalpits, and, finding no trace of either Hazel or the agent, with prompt decision he headed at once for the southern corrals. It was some time before he discovered the tracks he sought, and was beginning to think that in some extraordinary fashion he had missed them altogether. The thought stirred his jealousy, and —but he put all doubt from his mind, and further bustled the long-suffering Sunset. Then came the moment when he first saw the hoof-prints in the sand of the cattle track. In a moment his

thoughts cleared and his old fears urged him on.

He was right now, he knew. The hills about him were growing in height and ruggedness. The corrals were only a few miles on, and Sunset was racing down the track as if he were aware of the threatening danger to the girl whom he had so often carried on his back. But even if he were he was utterly unprepared for the furious thrashing of his present rider's heels which came as they were approaching one great shaggy hill to the south of them, in answer to a thin, high-pitched shrill for "Help!"

Gordon heard and understood. He had been right, after all, and a terrible panic and fury assailed him. Sunset was racing now, with his barrel low to the ground. Then as they came into the shadow of the hill the faithful creature felt the bit in his mouth jar suddenly and painfully, and he nearly sank on to his haunches.

Gordon was out of the saddle and rushing headlong like some rage-maddened bull.

Something had happened, and Hazel, in a partial daze, scarcely understood quite what it was. All she knew was that she was no longer struggling desperately in the arms of a man, with his hideous face thrust towards hers with obvious intention. She had fought as she had never dreamed of having to fight in all her life, and in her extremity she had shrilled again and again for "Help!" which, had she thought, she would have known was miles from the lonely spot where she was struggling. Then had happened that something she could not understand. She only knew that she was no longer struggling, and that hideous, coarse, passion-lit face had vanished from before her terrified eyes.

She had heard a voice, a familiar voice, hoarse with passion. The words it had uttered were the foulest blasphemy, such words as only a man uses when in the heat of battle and his desire is to kill. Then had passed that nightmare face from before her eyes.

After some moments her mental faculties became less uncertain, and with their clearing she became aware of a confusion of sounds. She heard the sound of blows and the incessant shuffling of feet through the tall prairie grass. She looked about her.

All in a minute she was on her feet, her eyes wide and staring with an expression half of terror, half of the wildest excitement. A fight was going on—a fight in which six feet three of science was arrayed against lesser stature but equal strength and a blend of animal fury which yearned to kill.

David Slosson came at his hated adversary in lunging rushes and with all his weight and muscle, hoping to clinch and reduce the battle to the less scientific condition of a "rough-and-tumble" as it is known only in America. Once he could achieve a definite clinch he knew that the advantage would lie with him. He knew the game of "chew and gouge" as few men knew it. He had learned it in his earlier days of lumber camps.

But Gordon had steadied himself from his first mad rush. It was the sight of Hazel in this man's clutches that had roused the desire for murder in his hot blood. Now it was different. Now it was a fight, a fight such as he could enjoy; and such were his feelings that he was determined it should be a fight to a finish, even if that finish should mean a killing.

He had no difficulty in punishing. His opponent's arms came at him wildly, while his own leads and counters struck home with smashes of a staggering nature. Twice he got in an uppercut which set his man reeling, and in each case he smashed home his left immediately with all the force of his great shoulders. But David Slosson was tough. He seemed to thrive on punishment, and he came again and again.

Gordon was in his element. His physical condition had never been more perfect, and, provided that clinch was prevented, nothing on earth could save his man. The blood was already streaming from Slosson's cheek, and an ugly split disfigured his lower lip.

Now he came in with his head down—a favorite bull rush of the "rough-and-tumble." Gordon saw it coming and waited. He side-stepped, and smashed a terrific blow behind the left ear. The man stumbled, but saved himself. With an inarticulate attempt at an oath he was at the boxer again. Another rush, but it checked half-way, and a violent kick was aimed at Gordon's middle. It missed its mark, but caught him on the side of the knee. The pain of the blow for a moment robbed the younger man of his caution. He responded with a smashing left and right. They both landed, but in the rush his loose coat was caught and held as the agent fell.

Slosson clung to the coat as a terrier will cling to a stick. In spite of the rain of blows battering his head he held on. It was the first hold he needed. The second came a moment later. His other arm crooked about Gordon's right knee. The next moment they were on the ground in the throes of a wild, demoniacal "rough-and-tumble."

The science of the boxer could serve Gordon no longer. He knew it. He knew also that the fight was more than leveled up. The struggle had degenerated into an inhuman aim for those vital parts which would leave the victim blind or maimed for life.

By the luck of Providence he fell uppermost. His hands being free and his strength at its greatest, also possessing nothing of the degraded mind of the rough-and-tumble fighter, he went for his opponent's throat, and got his grip just as he felt the other's teeth clip, in a savage snap, at his right ear. It was a happy miss, or he knew he would have spent the rest of his life with only one ear, and possibly part of the other.

But there were other things to avoid. He crushed the man's head upon the ground, while his great hands tightened their grip upon his throat. But Slosson's hands were not idle. They struggled up, and Gordon felt that they were groping for his throat. His own pressure increased.

"Squeal, you swine!" he roared. "Squeal, or I'll choke the life out of you!"

The man was unable to squeal under the terrible throat-hold. His breath was coming in gasps. All of a sudden those groping hands made a lunge at Gordon's eyes. One finger even struck his left eye with intent to gouge it out. Gordon threw back his head, but dared not release his hold. His only other defense was an instinctive one. He opened his mouth and made a wolfish snap at the hand that had sought to blind him. He bit three of its fingers to the bone. There was a cry from the man under his hands, and the straining body beneath him ceased to struggle.

Gordon released his hold and stood up. He aimed one violent kick of disgust at the man's ribs and turned away.

CHAPTER XIV

THE REWARD OF VICTORY

Gordon breathed hard. He wiped the dust from his perspiring face, as a man almost unconsciously will do after a great exertion. His eyes, however, remained on his defeated adversary. Presently he moved away a little uncertainly. A moment later, equally uncertainly, he picked up his soft felt hat. Then, his gaze still steadily fixed on the object of his concern, he all unconsciously smoothed his ruffled hair and replaced his hat upon his head.

Hazel, too, was tensely regarding the deathly silent figure of David Slosson. A subtle fear was clutching at her heart. So still. He was so very still.

Gordon's breathing became normal, but his eyes remained absurdly grave. He approached the prostrate man. But before he reached his side he paused abruptly and breathed a deep sigh of relief—and began to laugh.

"Right!" he cried. Nor was he addressing any one in particular.

Hazel heard his exclamation, and the clutching fear at her heart relaxed its grip. She understood that Gordon, too, had shared her dread.

Now she shifted her regard to the victor. Her eyes were full of a deep, unspeakable feeling. Gordon was looking in another direction, so, for the moment, she had nothing to conceal.

The man's attention was upon the horses. A strange diffidence made him reluctant to follow his impulse and approach Hazel. He had no pride in his victory. Only regret for the exhibition he had made before her. Sunset and Slosson's horse were grazing amicably together within twenty yards of the trail. The fight had disturbed them not one whit. The Lady Jane had moved off farther, and, in proud isolation, ignored everybody and everything concerned with the indecent exhibition.

Gordon secured the livery horse to a bush, and rode off on Sunset to collect the Lady Jane. When he returned the defeated man was stirring.

One glance told Gordon all he cared to know, and he passed over to where Hazel was still standing, and in silence and quite unsmilingly he held the Lady Jane for her to mount.

Hazel avoided his eyes, but not from any coldness. She feared lest he should witness that which now, with all her might, she desired to conceal. Her feelings were stirred almost beyond her control. This man had come to her rescue—he had rescued her—by that great chivalrous manhood that was his. And somehow she felt that she might have known that he would do so.

Gordon was looking at David Slosson, who was already sitting up. Once Hazel was in the saddle he moved nearer to the disfigured agent.

"If you're looking for any more," he said coldly, "you can find it. But don't you ever come near Buffalo Point again or Mallinsbee's ranch. If you do—I'll kill you!"

David Slosson made no reply. But his eyes followed the two figures as they rode off, full of a bitter hatred that boded ill for their futures should chance come his way.

For some time the speeding horses galloped on, their riders remaining silent. A strange awkwardness had arisen between them. There was so much to say, so much to explain. Neither of them knew how to begin, or where. So they were nearing home when finally it was Gordon whose sense of humor first came to the rescue. They had drawn their horses down to a walk to give them a breath.

Gordon turned in his saddle. His blue eyes were absurdly smiling.

"Well?" he observed interrogatively.

The childlike blandness of his expression was all Hazel needed to help her throw off the painful restraint that was fast overwhelming her. Again he had saved her, but this time it was from tears.

"Well?" she smiled back at him through the watery signs of unshed tears.

"I guess Sunset 'll hate this trail worse than anything around Buffalo Point," Gordon said, with a great effort at ease. "He got a flogging I'll swear he never merited."

"Dear old Sunset," said the girl softly. "And—and he can go."

"Go? Why, he's an express train. Say, the Twentieth Century, Limited, isn't a circumstance to him."

Gordon's laugh sounded good in Hazel's ears, and the last sign of tears was banished. It had been touch and go. She had wanted to laugh and to scream during the fight. Afterwards she had wanted only to weep. Now she just felt glad she was riding beside a man whom she regarded as something in the nature of a hero.

"I sort of feel I owe him an apology," Gordon went on doubtfully. "Same as I owe you one. I—I'm afraid I made a—a disgusting exhibition of myself. I—I wish I hadn't nearly bitten off that cur's fingers. It's—awful. It—was that or lose my eyesight."

Hazel had nothing to say. A shiver passed over her, but it was caused by the thought that the man beside her might have been left blinded.

"You see, that was 'rough and tough,'" Gordon went on, feeling that he must explain. "It's not human. It's worse than the beasts of the fields. I—I'm ashamed. But I had to save my eyes. I thought I'd killed him."

"I'm glad you didn't," Hazel said in a low voice. Then she added quickly, "But not for his sake."

Gordon nodded.

"He deserved anything."

Suddenly Hazel turned a pair of shining eyes upon him.

"Oh, I wish I were a man!" she cried. "Deserved? Oh, he deserved everything; but so did I. I'll never do it again. Never, never, never! You warned me. You knew. And it was only you who saved me from the result of my folly. I—I thought I was smart enough to deal with him. I—I thought I was clever." She laughed bitterly. "I thought, because I run our ranch and can do things that few girls can that way, I could beat a man like that. Say, Mr. Van Henslaer, I'm—just what he took me for—a silly country girl. Oh, I feel so mad with myself, and if it hadn't been for you I don't know what would have happened. Oh, if I could only have fought like you. It—it was wonderful. And—I brought it all on you by my folly."

There was a strange mixture of emotion in the girl's swift flow of words. There was a bitter feeling of self-contempt, a vain and helpless regret; but in all she said, in her shining eyes and warmth of manner, there was a scarcely concealed delight in her rescuer's great manhood, courage and devotion. If Gordon beheld it, it is doubtful if he read it aright. For himself, a great joy that he had been of service in her protection pervaded him. Just now, for him, all life centered round Hazel Mallinsbee and her well-being.

"You brought nothing on," he said, his eyes smiling tenderly round at her. "He's a disease that would overtake any girl." Then he began to laugh, with the intention of dispelling all her regrets. "Say, he's just one of life's experiences, and experience is generally unpleasant. See how much he's taught us both. You've learned that a feller who can wear a suit that sets all sense of good taste squirming most generally has a mind to match it. I've learned that no honesty of methods, whether in scrapping or anything else, is a match for the unscrupulous methods of a low-down mind. Guess we'll both pigeon-hole those facts and try not to forget 'em. But say—there's worse worrying," he added, with an absurdly happy laugh.

"Worse?"

"Only worse because it hasn't happened yet—like the other things have. You see, the worst always lies in those things we don't know."

"You're thinking of the Buffalo Point scheme?"

"Partly."

"Partly?"

"Did he tell you anything?"

Hazel nodded.

"He said you'd—turned him out of the office."

"That all?" Gordon was chuckling.

"He said you'd told him to go to——" Hazel's eyes were smiling.

"Just so. I did," returned Gordon. "That's the trouble now. I've got to face your father. I've hit on a plan to beat this feller. I've got the help of Peter McSwain and some of the boys at Snake's. I'd a notion we'd pull the thing off, so I just took it into my own hands—and your father don't know of it. I'm worrying how he'll feel. You see, if I fail, why, I've busted the whole contract. And now this thing. Say, what's going to happen next?" As he put his final question his smiling face looked ludicrously serene.

Hazel had entirely recovered from her recent experiences. She laughed outright. More and more this man appealed to her. His calm, reckless courage was a wonderful thing in her eyes. Their whole schemes might be jeopardized by that afternoon's work, but he had acted without thought of consequence, without thought of anybody or anything beyond the fact that he yearned to beat this man Slosson, and would spare nothing to do so. What was this wild scheme he had suddenly conceived, almost the first moment he was left in sole control?

She tried to look serious.

"Can you tell it me now?" she asked.

"I could, of course, but——"

"You'd rather wait to see father about it."

"I don't know," said Gordon, with a wry twist of the lips and a shrug. "Say, did you ever feel a perfect, idiotic fool? No, of course you never have, because you couldn't be one. I feel that way. Guess it's a sort of reaction. I just know I've busted everything. The whole of our scheme is on the rocks, through me, and, for the life of me, somehow I—I don't care. I've hit up that cur so he won't want his med'cine again for years, and it was good, because it was for you. So I don't just care two cents about anything. Say, I'm learning I'm alive, same as you talked about the first day I met you, and it's you are teaching me. But the champagne of life isn't just Life. Guess Life is just a cheap claret. You're the champagne of my life. That being so, I guess I'm a drunkard for champagne."

Hazel was held serious by some feeling that also kept her silent. Somehow she could no longer face those shining, smiling, ingenuous blue eyes. She wanted to, because she felt they were the most beautiful in the whole world, and she longed to go on gazing into them forever and ever. But something forced her to deny herself, and she kept hers straight ahead.

Gordon went on.

"Say, I haven't said anything wrong, have I?" he cried, fearful of her displeasure. "You see, I can't put things as they run through my head. That's one of the queer things about a feller. You know, I've got a whole heap of beautiful language running around in my head, and when I try to turn it loose it comes out all mussed up and wrong. Guess you've never been like that. That's where girls are so clever. D'you know, if you were to ask me just to pass the salt at supper it would sound to me like the taste of ice-cream?"

Hazel looked round at the earnest face with a swift sidelong glance. Then her laughter would no longer be denied.

"Would it?" she cried.

"Say, don't laugh at a feller. I'm in great trouble," Gordon went on quickly.

"Trouble?"

"Sure. Wouldn't you be if you'd bust up a man's scheme the same as I have, and if the only person in the world whose opinion you cared for can't help but think you all sorts of a fool?"

Hazel's smile had become very, very tender.

"Who thinks you a—fool?"

"Anybody with sense."

"Then I'm afraid I've got no sense."

Gordon found himself looking into the girl's serious eyes.

"You—don't think me—a—fool?" he cried incredulously.

Hazel had no longer any inclination to laugh. A great emotion suddenly surged through her heart, and her pretty oval face was set flushing.

"When a woman owes a man what I owe you, if he were the greatest fool in the world to others, to that woman he becomes all that is great and fine, and—and—oh, just everything she can think good of him. But you—you are not a fool, or anything approaching it. I don't care what you have done in our affairs—for me, whatever it is, it is right. I'll tell you something more. I am certain that if my daddy wins through it will be your doing."

Gordon had nothing to say. He was dumbfounded. Hazel, in her generosity, was the woman he had always dreamed of since that first day he had seen her, which seemed so far back and long ago. He had nothing to say, because there was just one thought in his mind, and that thought was, then and there to take her in his arms and release her for no man, not even her——

Hazel was pointing along the trail.

"Why, there is my daddy coming along—on foot. I've never—known him to walk a prairie trail ever before, I wonder what's ailing him."

And then Gordon had to laugh.

They were back in the office. By every conceivable process Silas Mallinsbee had sought to discover what had happened. But Hazel would tell him nothing, and Gordon followed her lead.

The old man was disturbed. He was on the verge of anger with both of them. Then Hazel lifted the safety valve as she remounted her mare, preparatory to a hasty retreat homewards.

"I'll get back to home, Daddy," she said, in a tone lacking all her usual enthusiasm. "Mr. Van Henslaer has a lot to tell you about things, and when I am not here he'll be able to tell you all that happened—out there."

Gordon again took his cue.

"Yes, I've a heap to tell you," he said, without any display of enjoyment.

The men passed into the office as Hazel took her departure. Her farewell wave of the hand and its accompanying smile for once were not for her father. Even in the midst of his mixed feelings that obvious farewell to Gordon made the old rancher feel a breath of the winter he had once spoken of, nipping the rims of his ears.

And his mind settled upon the thought of banking the furnaces with—coal.

He took his seat in the big chair he always used and lit a cigar. Gordon went at once to his desk and sat down. He leaned forward with hands clasped, and looked squarely into the strong face before him.

"It's bad talk," he said briefly.

"So I guessed."

Then, after a few moments of silence, Gordon recounted the story of the events of the afternoon right up to Mallinsbee's arrival at the office.

The rancher listened without comment, but with obvious impatience. This was not what he wanted to hear first. But Gordon had his own way of doing things.

"You see, I took a big chance on the spur of the moment," he finished up. "I just didn't dare to think. The idea took right hold of me. And even now, when I tell it you in cold blood, I seem to feel it was one of those inspirations that don't need to be passed by. In the ordinary way I believe it would succeed. Slosson would have been driven into our plans. But—but now there's worse to come."

"So I guessed."

Mallinsbee's answer was sharp and dry.

"And it's the most important of your talk," he added a moment later. "What happened—out there?"

Gordon's eyes took on a far-away expression as he gazed out of the window.

"I nearly killed David Slosson," he said simply. Then he added, "I knew I'd have to do it before I'd finished."

His gaze came back to Mallinsbee's face. A fierce anger had made his blue eyes stern and cold. Then he told the rancher of his finding Hazel struggling furiously in the man's arms, and of her piteous cry for help, and all that followed.

While he was still talking the girl's father had leaped from his seat and began pacing the little room like a caged wild beast. His cigar was forgotten, and every now and then he paused abruptly as Gordon made some definite point. His eyes were darkly furious, his nostrils quivered, his great hands clenched at his sides, and in the end, when the story was told, he stood towering before the desk with a pair of murderous eyes shining down upon the younger man.

"God in heaven!" he cried furiously; "and he's still alive?"

Then he turned away abruptly. A revolver-belt was hanging on the wall, and he moved towards it. But Gordon was on his feet in a moment.

"That gun's mine, and—you can't have it!"

Gordon was standing in front of the weapon, facing the furious eyes of the father.

"Stand aside! I'm—going to kill him—now."

But Gordon made no movement.

"No," he said, with a stony calmness.

It was a painful moment. It was a moment full of threat and intense crisis. One false move on Gordon's part, and the maddened father's fury would be turned on him.

The younger man forced a smile to his eyes.

"You once said I could scrap, Mr. Mallinsbee. I promise you I scrapped as I never did before. That man hasn't one whole feature in his face, and if the hangman's rope had been drawn tight around his neck it couldn't have done very much more damage than my fingers did. I tell you he's has his med'cine good and plenty. There's no need for more—that way. But we're going to hurt him. We're going to hurt him more by outing him from this deal of ours than ever by killing him. We're going to stand at nothing now to—'out' him. Let's get our minds fixed that way. If one plan don't succeed—another must."

Standing there eye to eye Gordon won his way. He saw with satisfaction the fire in the old man's eyes slowly die down. Then he watched him reluctantly return to his chair.

It was not until the rancher had struck a match and relit his cigar that Gordon ventured to return to his desk.

"You're right, boy," Mallinsbee said at last. "You're right—and you've done right. If the whole scheme busts we—can't help it. But—but we'll out that—cur."

The hall porter at the Carbhoy Building was perturbed. He was more than perturbed. He was ruffled out of his blatant superiority and dignity, and reduced to a condition when he could not state, with any degree of accuracy, whether the Statue of Liberty was a symbol of Freedom or a mere piece of cheap decoration for New York Harbor.

The precincts of the beautiful colored marble entrance hall over which he presided had been invaded, against all rules, by a woman who obviously had no business there. Moreover, he had been powerless to stay the invasion. Also he had been forced to submit out of a sheer sense of politeness to the sex, a politeness it was not his habit to display even towards his wife. Furthermore, like the veriest underling, instead of the autocrat he really was, he had been ordered—*ordered*—to announce the lady's arrival to Mr. James Carbhoy, and forthwith conduct her to that holy of holies, which no other female, except the cleaner, had ever been permitted to enter. It was Mrs. James Carbhoy who had caused the deplorable upheaval.

But Mrs. James Carbhoy was in no mood to parley with any hall porter, however gorgeous his livery. She was in no mood to parley even with her husband. She was disturbed out of her customary condition of passive acquiescence. She was heartbroken, too, and ready to weep against any manly chest with which her head came into contact. It is doubtful, even, if a Fifth Avenue policeman's chest would have been safe from her attentions in that direction. And surely distress must certainly be overwhelming that would not shrink from such support.

James Carbhoy detected the signs the moment his door was opened, and his wife tripped over the fringe of the splendid Turkey carpet and precipitated herself into the great morocco arm-chair nearest to her, waving a bunch of letter-paper violently in his direction.

"I've been to the Inquiry Bureau, and had a man detailed right away to go and find the boy," she burst out at once. Then all her mother's anxiety merged into an attack upon the man who silently rose from his desk and closed the door she had left open. "I don't know what to say to you, James," she went on. "I can't just think why I'm sitting right here in the presence of such a monster. Here you've driven our boy from the house. Maybe you've driven him to his death, or even worse, and I can't even get you to make an attempt to discover if he's alive or—or dead. This letter came this morning," she went on, holding the pages aloft, lest he should escape their reproach. "And if he hasn't gone and married some hussy there, out in some uncivilized region, I don't know a thing. S'pose he's married a half-breed or—or a squaw," she cried, her eyes rolling in horror at the bare idea. "It—it'll be your fault—your doing. You're just a cruel monster, and if it wasn't for our Gracie's sake I'd—I'd get a divorce. You—you ought to be ashamed, James Carbhoy. You ought—ought to be in—in prison, instead of sitting there grinning like some fool image."

The millionaire leaned back in his chair wearily.

"Oh, read the letter, Mary. You make me tired."

"Tired? Letter, you call it," cried the excited woman. "I tell you it's—it's a lot of gibberish that no sane son of ours ever wrote. Oh! you're as bad as those men at the bureau. I made them read it, and—and they said he was a—bright boy. Bright, indeed! You listen to this and you can judge for yourself—if you've any sense at all."

"DEAREST MUM:

"I haven't written you in weeks, which should tell you that I am quite up to the average in my sense of filial duty. It should also tell you that I *hope* I am prospering both in health and in worldly matters. I say 'hope' because nothing much seems certain in this world except the perfidy of human nature. It has been said that disappointment is responsible for all the hope in the world, but I'd like to say right here that that's just a sort of weak play on words which don't do justice to the meanest intelligence. I am full of hope and haven't yet been disappointed. Not even in my conviction that human nature has some good points, but bad points predominate, which makes you feel you'd, generally speaking, like to kick it plenty.

"While I'm on the subject of human nature it would be wrong not to discriminate between male and female human nature. Male can be dismissed under one plain heading: 'Self'—a heading which embraces every unpleasant feature in life, from extreme moral rectitude, with its various branches of self-complacency, down to chewing tobacco, to me a symbol of all that is criminally filthy in life. Female human nature comes under a similar heading, only, in a woman's case, 'Self' is a combination of the two personalities, male and female. You see, 'Self,' in female human nature, is not a complete proposition in itself. Before it becomes complete there must be a man in the case, even if he be a disgrace to his sex. I will explain. You couldn't entertain any feeling or purpose without the old Dad coming into your focus. But with man it's different. The only reason a woman comes into his life at all is so that he can kick her out of it if she don't do just as he says and wants. I guess this sounds better to me writing from here than maybe it will to you in your parlor in New York. But it's easier to say things when you feel yourself shorn of the artificialities of life.

"This is merely preliminary, leading up to two pieces of news I have to hand to you. The first is, I have discovered that woman is the greatest proposition inspired by a creative Providence for the delight of man, but in business, unless specially trained, she's liable to fall even below the surface scum which includes the lesser grade of biped called 'man.' The second is that man, generally, is a pretty disgusting brute, and I allow he deserves all he gets in life, even to lynching. Understand I am speaking generally, as a looker-on, whose eyes are no longer blinded by the glamour of wealth in a big city and the comforts of a luxurious home.

"I feel I've got to say right here that to me, apart from the foregoing observations, woman is just the most wonderful thing in all this wonderful world. Her perfections and graces are just sublime; her understanding of man is so sympathetic that it don't seem to me she'd need more than two guesses to locate how many dollars he'd got in his pocket or the quality of the brain oozing out under his hat.

"I guess her eyes are just the dandiest things ever. Furthermore, when they happen to be hazel, they got a knack of boring holes right through you, and chasing around and finding the smallest spark of decency that may happen to be lying hidden in the general muck of a man's moral makeup. They do more than that. I'd say there never was a man in this world who, under such circumstances, happens to become aware of some such spark, but wants to start right in and fan it into a big bonfire to burn up the refuse under which it's been so long secreted. That's how he's bound to feel—anyway, at first.

"A woman's just every sort of thing a man needs around him. It don't seem a matter for worry if the sun-spots became a complete rash and its old light went out altogether. That feller would still see those wonderful eyes shining out of the darkness, giving him all the light he needed in which to play foolish and think himself all sorts of a man.

"Guess when he'd worked overtime that way and sleep set him dreaming he'd make pictures he couldn't paint in a year. There'd be every sort of peaceful delight in 'em. There'd be lambs, and children without clothes, and birds and flowers. And the lambs would bleat, and the children sing, and the birds flutter, and the flowers smell, and all the world would be full of joy. Then he'd wake up. Maybe it would be different then. You see, a man awake figures his woman needs to look like the statue of Venus, be bursting with the virtues of a first-class saint, and possess the economical inspiration of a Chinee cook.

"In pursuance of these discoveries of mine I feel that maybe I've got a wrong focus of our Gracie. Maybe when she gets sense, and sort of finds herself floating around in the divine beauties of womanhood, some escaped crank may chase along and figure she possesses some of the wonderful charms I've been talking about. Personally I wish our Gracie well, and am hoping for the best. Still, I feel whatever trouble she has getting a husband I don't guess it'll end there—the trouble, I mean.

"To come to my second discovery, it has afforded me some pleasant moments, as well as considerable disgust and anger. It may seem difficult to associate these emotions without confusion. But were you to fully understand the situation you would realize that they could be associated in one harmonious whole. With anger coming first, you find yourself in a frenzied state of elation, capable of achieving anything, from murder down to robbing the dead. It is a splendid feeling, and saves one from the rust of good-natured ineptitude. Then come the pleasant moments, which may find themselves in extreme exertion and the general exercise of muscles, and even, in some cases—brains. Disgust is the necessary mental attitude under reaction. This is how my discovery affected me. But I fancy the object through which I made my second discovery was probably affected otherwise. I can't just say offhand. Maybe I'll learn later, and be able to tell you.

"There is not a day passes but what I make discoveries of a more or less interesting nature. For instance, I've learned that there's nothing like three people hating one person to make for a bond of friendship between them. I'd say it's far more binding than marriage vows at the altar. This comes under the heading of 'more' interesting. Under the 'less' comes such things as—the only time that impulsive action justifies itself is when you're sure of winning out. I have given myself two examples of impulsive action only to-day. The one in which I have won out seems to have ruined the chances of the other. This is a confusion that doesn't seem to justify anything. Still, a philosopher might be able to disentangle it.

"I should be glad if you would give the old Dad my best love, and tell him that the figures representing one hundred thousand dollars grow in size with the advancing weeks. Nor can I tell how big they will appear by the end of six months. If they grow in my view at the present rate, by the end of six months it seems to me I'll need to walk around looking through the wrong end of a telescope so as to get a place for my feet anywhere on this continent. However, as 'disappointment' has not yet appeared to create 'hope,' it is obvious that 'conviction' remains.

"I regret that time does not permit me to write more, so I will close. Any further news I have to give you I will embody in another letter.

"Your loving son,
"GORDON.

"P.S.—I have been thinking a great deal about Gracie lately, she being of the female sex. Of course, I could not compare her with a real woman, but I feel, with a little judicious broadening of her mind, say by travel or setting her out to earn her living, she might develop in the right direction. It is a thought worth pondering. Such a process might even have good results.

"G."

Mrs. James Carbhoy's angry and disgusted eyes were raised from her reading to confront her husband's amused smile.

"Well?" she demanded. "Is it sunstroke, or—or——?"

"That inquiry agent was a smart feller," the millionaire interrupted. "Gordon surely is a—bright boy."

Mrs. Carbhoy's indignation leaped. And with its leap came another. She fairly bounced out of the chair she had occupied and hurled herself at the mahogany door of the office.

"James Carbhoy, I shall see to this matter myself. I always knew you were merely a money machine. Now I know you have neither heart nor sense."

She flung open the door. Again she tripped over the fringe of the carpet, and, with a smothered ejaculation, flew headlong in the direction of the hall porter's stately presence.

CHAPTER XV

IN COUNCIL

There come days in a man's life which are not easily forgotten. Some poignant incident indelibly fixes them upon memory, and they become landmarks in his career. The next day became one of such in Gordon's life.

It was just a little extraordinary, too, that memory should have selected this particular day in preference to the preceding one. The first of the two should undoubtedly have been the more significant, for it partook of a nature which appealed directly to those innermost hopes and yearnings of a youthful heart. Surely, before all things in life, Nature claims to itself the passionate yearning of the sexes as paramount. Gordon had fought for the woman he loved, and basked in her smiles of approval at his victory. Was not this sufficient to make it a day of days? The psychological fact remained, the indelible memory of the next day was planted on the mysterious photographic plates of his mental camera in preference.

It was a day of wild excitement. It was a day of hopes raised to a fevered pitch, and then hurled headlong to a bottomless abyss of despair. It was a day of passionate feeling and bitter memories. A day of hopeless looking forward and of depression. Then, as a last and final twist of the whirligig of emotion, it resolved itself into one great burst of enthusiasm and hope.

It started in at the earliest hour. Hip-Lee was preparing breakfast, and Gordon was still dressing. A note was brought from Peter McSwain. Gordon opened it, and the first emotions of an eventful day began to take definite shape.

The note informed him that McSwain had been faithful to his promise. He, assisted by Mike Callahan of the livery barn, had worked strenuously. The results had been splendid amongst all the principal landholders in Snake's Fall and Buffalo Point. Prices this morning were "skied" prohibitively.

The holders saw their advantage. Even if the railroad bought in Snake's Fall they would be "on velvet." They agreed that it was the first sound move made. They agreed that it was good to "jolly" a railroad. The men who did not hold in Buffalo only held insignificant property in Snake's Fall, which would be useless to the railroad. But should the railroad buy there, even these would be benefited.

Gordon began to feel that palpitating excitement in the stomach indicative of a disturbed nervous system. Things were stirring. He examined the situation from the view point of yesterday's encounter. With these people working in with him, the future certainty began to look brighter than when he had retired to bed over-night.

Mallinsbee came along after breakfast, and Gordon showed him McSwain's message.

The rancher read it over twice. Then his opinion came in deep, rumbling notes.

"That's sure what you needed," he said, with a shrewd, twinkling smile. "But I don't guess the shoutin's begun."

"No?"

Gordon eyed him uneasily. He had felt rather pleased.

"We can't shout till Slosson talks," the rancher went on. "That talk of Peter's is still only our side of the play."

"Yes."

Gordon was at his desk.

Then a diversion was created by the advent of a fat stranger with a large expanse of highly colored waistcoat, and a watchguard to match.

He wanted to talk "sites," and spent half an hour doing so. When he had gone Mallinsbee offered an explanation which had passed Gordon's inexperience by.

"That feller's worried," he observed. "He's got wind there's something doing, and is scared to death the speculators are to be shut out. He's going back to report to the boys. Maybe we'll hear from Peter again—later. I wonder what Slosson's thinking?"

Gordon smiled.

"I doubt if he can think yet," he said. "I allow he was upset yesterday. I'd give a dollar to see

him when he starts to try and buy."

"You're feeling sure."

Mallinsbee's doubt was pretty evident.

"Sure? I'm sure of nothing about Slosson except his particular dislike of me, and, through me, of you."

"Just so. And when a man hates the way he hates you, if he's bright he'll try to make things hum."

"He's bright all right," allowed Gordon.

A further diversion was created. Two men arrived in a buckboard, and Mallinsbee's explanation was verified. They were looking for information. It was said the railroad was to boycott Buffalo Point. It was said, even, that they had bought in Snake's Fall. Was this so? And, anyway, what was the meaning of the rise in prices at that end?

"Why, say," finished up one of the men, "when I was talking to Mason, the dry goods man, this morning, he told me there wasn't a speculator around who'd money enough to buy his spare holdings in Snake's. And when I asked him the figger he said he needed ten thousand dollars for two side street plots and twenty thousand for two avenue fronts. He's crazy, sure."

Mallinsbee shook his head.

"Not crazy. Just bright."

When the man had departed, and Mallinsbee had removed the patch from his eye, he smiled over at Gordon.

"Peter's surely done his work," he said.

Gordon warmed with enthusiasm. If those were the prices ruling Mr. Slosson would have no option but to be squeezed between the two interests. Whatever his personal feelings, he must make good with his company. No agent, unless he were quite crazy, would dare face such prices for his principals.

"I don't see that Slosson's a leg to stand on," he cried, his enthusiasm bubbling. "We've just got to sit around and wait."

Mallinsbee agreed.

"Sure. Sit around and wait," he said, with that baffling smile of his.

Gordon shrugged, and bent over some figures he had been working on. Presently he looked up.

"How's Miss Hazel this morning?" he inquired casually. He had wanted to speak of her before, but the memory of her father's anger yesterday had restrained him. Now he felt he was safe.

"Just sore over things," said the old man, with a sobering of the eyes. "I talked to her some last night. She guesses she owes you a heap, but it ain't nothing to what I owe you."

Gordon flushed. Then he laughed and shook his head.

"No man or woman owes me a thing who gives me the chance of a scrap," he said.

The old man smiled.

"No," he agreed. "With a name like 'Van Henslaer'—you ain't Irish?"

"Descendant of the old early Dutch."

"Ah. They were scrappers, too."

Gordon nodded and went on with his figures. So the morning passed. It was a waiting for developments which both men knew would not long be delayed. Mallinsbee was unemotional, but Gordon was all on wires drawn to great tension. The subtle warnings from Mallinsbee not to be too optimistic had left him in a state of doubt. And an impatience took hold of him which he found hard to restrain.

The two men shared their midday meal. Mallinsbee wanted to get back to the ranch, but neither felt such a course to be policy yet. Besides, now that the crisis had arrived, Gordon was anxious to have his superior's approval for his next move. He had taken a chance yesterday. Now he wanted to make no mistake.

The *dénouement* came within half an hour of Hip-Lee's clearing of the table. It came with the

sound of galloping hoofs, with the rush of a horseman up to the veranda.

The two men inside the office looked at each other, and Gordon rose and dashed at the window.

"It's McSwain," he said, and returned to the haven of his seat behind his desk. His announcement had been cool enough, but his heart was hammering against his ribs.

"Then I guess things are going queer," said the rancher pessimistically.

Gordon was about to reply when the door was abruptly thrust open, and the hot face and hotter eyes of Peter appeared in the doorway.

"Well?"

For the life of him Gordon could not have withheld that sharp, nervous inquiry.

McSwain came right into the room and drew the door closed after him. Quite suddenly his eyes began to smile in that fashion which so expresses chagrin. He flung his hat on Gordon's desk and sat himself on the corner of it. Then he deliberately drew a long breath.

"I'm as worried as a cat goin' to have kittens," he said. "That feller Slosson's beat us. Maybe he's stark, starin' crazy, maybe he ain't. Anyways he came right along to me this morning with a face like chewed up dogs' meat, with a limp on him that 'ud ha' made the fortune of a tramp, and a mitt all doped up with a dry goods store o' cotton-batten, and asked me the price of my holdings in Snake's. I guessed I wasn't selling my hotel lot, but I'd two Main Street frontages that were worth ten thousand dollars each, and a few other bits going at the waste ground price of five thousand each."

"Well?"

This time it was Mallinsbee's inquiry.

"He closed the deal for his company, and planted the deposit."

"He closed the deal?" cried Gordon thickly, all his dreams of the future tumbling about his ears.

"Why, yes." McSwain regarded the younger man's hopelessly staring eyes for one brief moment. Then he went on: "I was only the first. This was after dinner. Say, in half an hour he's put his company in at Snake's to the tune of nearly a quarter million dollars. He's mad. They'll fire him. They'll repudiate the whole outfit. I tell you he never squealed at any old price. He's beat our play here. But how do we stand up there? A crazy man comes along and makes deals which no corporation in the world would stand for. There ain't a site in Snake's worth more'n a hundred dollars to a railroad who's got to boom a place. Well, if his corporation turns him down, how do we stand? Are they goin' to pay? No, sir; not on your life."

"They'll have to stand it," said Mallinsbee.

"They'll try and fight it," retorted Peter hotly.

"And you can't graft the courts like a railroad can," put in Gordon quickly.

"They'll have to stand it," repeated Mallinsbee doggedly. "An' I'll tell you how. Maybe Slosson's crazy. Maybe he's crazy to beat us, an' I allow he's not without reason for doin' it—now. But it would cost the railroad a big pile to shift that depot here. It would have been better for them in the end. You see, they'd have got their holdings in the township here for pretty well nix, and so they wouldn't have felt the cost of the depot. The city would have paid that, as well as other old profits. Anyway, the capital would have had to be laid out. In Snake's they are laying out capital in their holdings only. They'll get it back all right, all right—and profits. Slosson's relying on making up their leeway for them in the boom. He's takin' that chance, because he's crazy to beat—us."

"And he's done it," said Gordon sharply.

"Yep. He's done it," muttered McSwain regretfully.

"He surely has," agreed Mallinsbee, without emotion.

Gordon was the only one of the trio who appeared to be depressed. McSwain had the consolation of getting his profit in Snake's Fall. The only sense in which he was a loser was that his holdings in Buffalo Point were larger than in the other place. Therefore he was able to regard the matter more calmly, in the light of the fortunes of war. Mallinsbee, who had staked all his hopes on Buffalo Point, seemed utterly unaffected.

A few minutes later McSwain hurried away for the purpose of watching further developments, promising to return in the evening and report. Neither he nor Gordon felt that there was the least hope whatever. Mallinsbee offered no opinion.

When Peter had ridden off, and the two men were left alone, Gordon, weighed down with his failure, began to give expression to his feelings.

He looked over at the strong face of his benefactor, and took his courage in both hands.

"Mr. Mallinsbee," he said diffidently, "I want to tell you something of what I feel at the way things have gone through—my failure. I——"

Mallinsbee had thrust his fingers into his waistcoat pocket, and now drew forth a cigar.

"Say, have a smoke, boy," he said, in his blunt, kindly fashion. "That's a dollar an' a half smoke," he went on, "an' I brought two of 'em over from the ranch to celebrate on. Guess we best celebrate right now."

It was a doleful smile which looked back at the rancher as Gordon accepted the proffered cigar.

"But I——"

"Say, don't bite the end off," interrupted Mallinsbee. "Here's a piercer."

"Thanks. But you must let——"

"I'll be mighty glad to have a light," the other went on hastily.

Gordon was thus forced to silence, and Mallinsbee continued.

"Say, boy," he said, as he settled himself comfortably to enjoy his expensive cigar, "a business life is just the only thing better than ranching, I'm beginning to guess. You got to figure on things this way: ranching you got so many hands around, so much grazin', so many cattle. Your only enemy is disease. So many head of cows will produce so many calves, and Nature does the rest. That's ranching in a kind of outline which sort of reduces it to a question of figures which it wouldn't need a trick reckoner to work out. Now business is diff'rent. Ther's always the other feller, and you 'most always feel he's brighter than you. But he ain't. He's just figurin' the same way at his end of the deal. So, you see, the real principles of commerce aren't dependent on the things you got and Nature, same as ranching. Your assets ain't worth the paper they're written on—till you've got your man where you want him. Now, to do that you got to ferget you ever were born honest. You've just got one object in life, and that is to get the other feller where you want him. It don't matter how you do it, short of murder. If you succeed, folks'll shout an' say what a bright boy you are. If you fail they'll say you're a mutt. The whole thing's a play there ain't no rules to except those the p'lice handle, and even they don't count when your assets are plenty. You'll hear folks shouting at revival meetings, an' psalm-smitin' around their city churches. You'll hear them brag honesty an' righteousness till you feel you're a worse sinner than ever was found in the Bible. You'll have 'em come an' look you in the eye and swear to truth, and every other old play invented to allay suspicions. And all the time it's a great big bluff for them to get you where *they* want you. An' that's why the game's worth playing—even when you're beat. If business was dead straight; if you could stake your all on a man's word; if ther' weren't a man who would take graft; if you didn't know the other feller was yearning to handle your wad—why, the game wouldn't be a circumstance to ranching."

"That sounds pretty cynical," protested Gordon. He, too, was smoking, but the failure of his scheme left him unsmiling.

"It's the truth. We were trying to get Slosson where we wanted him. He's doing the same by us. So far he seems to monopolize most of the advantage. The question remaining to us now—and it's the only one of interest from our end of the line—is: Will the President of the Union Grayling and Ukataw Railroad do as I think he will—back his agent's play? Will he stand for his crazy buying? Will he fall for Slosson's game to get us where he wants us? I believe he will, but we can't be dead certain. Our only chance is to try and make it so he won't—even if the Snake's boys lose their stuff up there."

Gordon was sitting up. His cigar was removed from the corner of his mouth and held poised over an ash-tray. There was a sharp look of inquiry in his eyes.

"What's the President of the Union Grayling and Ukataw Railroad got to do with it?" he demanded quickly.

The rancher raised his heavy brows.

"This is a branch of his road, I guess."

"A—a branch?" Gordon's breath was coming rapidly.

"Sure. You see, it's a branch linking up with the Southern Trunk route. It runs into the Grayling line where it enters the Rockies. That's how you make the coast this way."

"And this—is part of the Union Grayling system?" Gordon persisted, his blue eyes getting bigger and bigger with excitement.

"Sure," nodded Mallinsbee, watching him closely.

Then the explosion came. Gordon could contain himself no longer. He flung his newly lit dollar-and-a-half cigar on the floor with all the force of pent feelings and leaped to his feet.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "The President of that road is my father!"

"Eh?" Then, without another sign, Mallinsbee pointed reproachfully at the fallen cigar. "It cost a dollar an' a ha'f, boy."

But Gordon was beside himself with excitement. A great flash of light and hope was shining through his recent mental darkness. It didn't matter to him at that moment if the cigar had cost a thousand dollars.

"But—but don't you understand?" he almost yelled. "The President of the Union Grayling and Ukataw is my—father."

"James Carbhoy."

"Yes, yes. My name's Gordon Van Henslaer Carbhoy."

Then quite suddenly Gordon sat down and began to laugh. Then he stooped and picked up his cigar. He was still laughing, while he carefully wiped the dust from the cigar's moistened end.

"James Carbhoy's your—father?"

Mallinsbee was no longer disturbed at the waste of the cigar. All his attention was fixed on that laughing face in front of him.

Gordon nodded delightedly, while he once more thrust his cigar into the corner of his mouth.

"You're thinkin' something?"

Mallinsbee was becoming infected by the other's manner.

"Sure I am." Gordon nodded. "I'm thinking a heap. Say, the fight has shifted its battle-ground. It's only just going to begin. Gee, if I'd only thought of it before! The Union Grayling and Ukataw! It's fate. Say, it isn't Slosson any longer. It's son and father. I've got to scrap the old dad. Gee! It's colossal. Say, can you beat it? I've got to make my little pile out of my old dad. And—he sent me out to make it and show him what I could do."

"But how? I don't just see——"

"How? How?"

Gordon's laughing eyes sobered. He suddenly realized that he had only considered the humorous side of the position. His brain began to work at express speed. How was he to turn this thing to account? How? Yes—how?

Mallinsbee watched him for many silent minutes. And during those minutes scheme after scheme, each one more wild than its predecessor, flashed through Gordon's brain. None of them suggested any sane possibility. He knew he was up against one of the most brilliant financiers of the country, who, in a matter like this, would regard his own son simply as "the other feller." He must trick him. But how? How?

For a long time, in spite of his excited delight, Gordon saw no glamour of a hope of dealing successfully with his father. Then all in a flash he remembered something. He remembered he still had his father's private code book with him. He remembered Slosson. If Slosson could only be—silenced.

In a moment he was on his feet again.

"I've got it!" he cried exultantly. "I've got it, Mr. Mallinsbee! You said that it didn't matter, short of murder, how we got the other feller where we needed him. Will you come in on the wildest, most crazy scheme you ever heard of? We can beat the game, and we'll take money for nothing. We can make my dad build the depot right here and scrap Snake's Fall. We can make him—and without any murder. Will you come in?"

"In what?" demanded a girlish voice from the veranda doorway.

Gordon swung round, and Mallinsbee turned his smiling, twinkling eyes upon his daughter, who had arrived all unnoticed.

"It's a scheme he's got to beat his father, gal," laughed Mallinsbee in a deep-throated chuckle.

"His father?" Hazel turned her smiling, inquiring eyes upon the man who had rescued her yesterday.

"Yes, James Carbhoy," said her father, "the President of this railroad."

Hazel's eyes widened, and their smile died out.

"Your father—the—millionaire—James Carbhoy?" she said. And her note of regret must have been plain to anybody less excited than Gordon.

But Gordon was beyond all observation of such subtle inflections. He was obsessed with his wild scheme. He started forward. Walking past Hazel, he closed and locked the door. Then with alert eyes he glanced at the window. It was open. He shut it and secured it. Then he set a chair for Hazel close beside her father, and finally brought his own chair round and sat himself down facing them.

"Listen to me, and I'll tell you," he grinned, his whole body throbbing with a joyous humor. "We're going to get the other feller where we need him, and that other feller is my—dear—old—Dad!"

CHAPTER XVI

SOMETHING DOING

During the next two or three days the entire atmosphere of Snake's Fall underwent a significant change. All doubt had been set at rest. The whole problem of the future boom was solved, and David Slosson received as much homage in the conversation of the general run of the citizens as though he were the victorious general in a military campaign. The lesser people, who would receive the most benefit from the coming boom, regarded him with wide-eyed wonder at the stupendous nature of the wildly exaggerated reports of his dealings in land. They saw in him a Napoleon of finance, and remembered that their concerns were vastly more valuable through his operations.

Men of maturer business instincts withheld their judgment and contented themselves with a rather dazed wonder. Others, those who had actually and already profited by his preliminary deals, chuckled softly to themselves, rubbed their hands gently, pocketed his paper and deposit money, and wrote him down "plumb crazy." But even so, there was a sober watchfulness as to the next movements in the approaching boom. Those who were the farthest seeing kept an eye wide open on Buffalo Point. So far as they could see it was not possible for the Buffalo Point interests to go under without a "kick." When would that "kick" come, and where would it be delivered?

As for David Slosson, after his first effort, which had been the deciding factor in the future of Snake's Fall, he remained unapproachable. He was living at Peter McSwain's hotel, and occupied a bedroom and parlor, which latter served him as an office. Here he remained more or less invisible, possibly while his disfigured features underwent the process of mending, possibly nursing his wrath and plotting developments against the object of it. There was even another possible explanation. Maybe the plunge into the land market he had taken needed a great concentration of effort to completely manipulate it. Whatever it was, very little of the railroad company's agent was seen after his first setting defiant foot into the arena of affairs.

McSwain was more than interested. The hotel-keeper seemed to have become obsessed with the idea that David Slosson was the only creature worth regarding on the face of the earth. This was after he, Peter, had spent the evening of that memorable first day of real movement, in the company of Silas Mallinsbee and Gordon, out at the office at Buffalo Point.

Peter McSwain had always been an attentive landlord in his business, now he had suddenly become even more so, especially to David Slosson. There was not a single requirement that the agent could conceive, but Peter was on hand to supply it. He was more or less at his elbow the whole time.

Then, too, Mike Callahan became a frequenter of the hotel, and even boarded there. Furthermore, a wonderful friendliness between him and Peter sprang up, which was so marked that the townspeople saw in it a combination of forces possibly foreshadowing the inauguration of a great hotel enterprise under their joint control. This also was after that first evening, when Mike Callahan had also formed one of the party at the office at Buffalo Point.

Another point of interest, had it been noticeable by the more curious and interested of the frequenters of the hotel, was, that at any time that Peter McSwain found it necessary to absent himself from the hotel, Mike was always found in his place superintending the running of the establishment.

However, these small details were merely an added puff of wind to the breath of general excitement prevailing. The one thought in the place seemed to be of those preparations

necessary for the boom. Already certain contracts, long since prepared for such a happening, were put into operation. A number of buildings were started, or prepared to start. The news had been sent broadcast by interested citizens, and a fresh influx of people began and heavy orders from the various traders were placed with the wholesalers in the East.

David Slosson in his quarters was made aware of these things, but somehow they raised small enough enthusiasm in him. Truth to tell, he was far too deeply concerned with the subtleties of his own affairs. His course of action had not been the wild plunge which Peter McSwain had suggested. On the contrary, such was his venomous nature that he had pitted his own abilities and fortune against the Buffalo Point interests in a carefully calculated scheme.

For years he had been engaged in every corner of the United States and Canada in such work as he was now doing. In the process of such work, by methods of unscrupulous grafting and blackmail he had contrived a fortune of no inconsiderable amount. So that now he was no ordinary agent. He was a "representative" of the interests he worked for. In his case the distinction was a nice one.

As the result of his encounter with Gordon he had resolved upon the crushing defeat of his adversaries by hurling the entire weight of his personal fortune into the scale. True enough he had bought without regard to price. He bought all he could in the best positions, and even in the quarters which would not meet with the railroad's approval. So his purchases had to be far greater, both in extent and price, than in the ordinary way he would have made at Buffalo Point.

Having thus bought, and thrown his own money into the affair, this was his plan of dealing with the matter. First, he knew this boom was based on sound foundations. The future was assured by the vast coal-fields just opening up. The Bude and Sideley Coal Company was only the first. There would be others, many of them. With the railroad depot at Snake's Fall, the whole of the outlying positions of the city would boom with the rest. *Any land round it would be of enormous value*. So he purchased in every direction. He bought at "skied" prices from the big holders, so that the railroad should be satisfied as to positions, and he bought largely in the outlying parts of the city where no "skied" prices could rule. Then he pooled the price which he knew the railroad would pay, with his own fortune to pay the whole bill, put the railroad in *on the best sites at their own price*, and held the balance of his purchases for himself.

It was his only means of justifying to his principals his declining to accept Buffalo Point's terms, and though it meant locking up his available capital in Snake's Fall, he knew, in the end, he would recoup himself with added fortune, and have wrecked those who had rejected his blackmail, and added to their audacity by personal assault. It pleased him to think that Hazel Mallinsbee would also be made to suffer for what he considered her outrageous treatment of himself.

His method was certainly Napoleonic, and for its very audacity it should succeed. As he reviewed his position he could find no appreciable flaws. If the coal were there the place must boom, and—*he knew the coal was there*.

So he was satisfied.

Five days after making his first deal, those deals which had inspired so much derision, his whole operations were completed. He was feeling contented. It had been a strenuous time, and had demanded every ounce of energy and commercial acumen he possessed to complete the work. He knew that his whole future was at stake, but he also knew that he held the four aces which would be the finally deciding factors in the game. He felt free at last to notify the President of the Union Grayling and Ukataw Railroad of his transactions, and was confident of that shrewd financier's approval and felicitations. Nor were the latter the least desirable in his estimation.

He had already dined in his parlor, as had been his custom since his encounter with Gordon. But now he intended to move abroad. He felt himself to be the arbiter of the fate of these "rubes," as he characterized the citizens of Snake's Fall, and he did not see the necessity for denying himself the adulation such a position entitled him to.

With a self-satisfied feeling he picked up a long code message he had written out and thrust it in his pocket. Then, carefully putting away all other private papers into his dressing-case, and locking it, he sauntered leisurely out of his room.

He intended to give himself his first breathing space for five days, and he lounged downstairs to the hotel office.

Sure enough, the first person he encountered was Peter McSwain. The man looked hot, but then he always looked hot. His smile of welcome was almost servile, and David Slosson felt pleased at the sign.

The consequence was, his manner promptly became something more than autocratic. There was a domineering note in his voice, and a cool insolence in his regard of his host. Peter remained quite undisturbed. His mind went back to the scene in the office at Buffalo Point on the eventful first evening, and an even greater servility beamed out of his hot eyes.

"Yes, sir," he cried, in answer to Slosson's inquiry as to the movements in the town.

"Movements? Why, I'd sure say you've set this place jumping as though you'd opened up an earthquake under it. I tell you frankly, Mr. Slosson, sir, we been waitin' days and days with our eyes on you for a lead. I don't guess it means a thing to a gentleman like you, but if you'd been a sort o' cock angel right down from the clouds on an aeroplane you couldn't ha' been blessed more'n the folks right here have been blessin' your name these last days, since you outed that bum outfit down at Buffalo Point."

"They're a pretty rotten crowd," agreed Slosson, well enough pleased. "Though I say it, it takes a man of experience to handle a crowd like that. They're sheer blackmailers, but I don't stand for a thing like that. You see, our play is to serve the public right. Well, seeing Snake's Fall is a straight proposition I guess I had to treat 'em right. I figure I put a heap of dollars in the way of Snake's Fall. You won't do so bad yourself?"

Peter smiled amiably.

"I can't kick."

"Kick?" Slosson's eyes widened. "Guess you ought to get right on your knees, and thank—me." Then he laughed. "Say, maybe you'll start putting up a—real hotel."

His contempt was marked as he let his glance wander over his simple and primitive surroundings. Peter took no sort of umbrage.

"Well, that was how I was figurin'. Y'see I got to be first in that line. Since you downed Mallinsbee's crowd of crooks, why, it's going to make things easy. Say, you don't figure to sink dollars that way yourself? Maybe you could get right in on the ground floor."

His cordial tone pleased the agent, but he pretended to consider the matter too small for his participation.

"I'd need a big holding," he laughed. "I ain't time for one-hossed shows. Still, I thank you for the offer. Guess the Mallinsbee crowd are kicking 'emselves to death. What?"

Peter nodded impressively, and drew closer in his confidence.

"Kickin'? That don't describe it. They deserve it, too. They kep' us dancing around guessin' with their patch of grazin'. Say, this town owes you a big heap, an' I'm glad. There's one thing owin' a real smart gent like you, Mr. Slosson, sir, an' quite another owin' a crowd of crooks like Mallinsbee's. This town ain't likely to forget. There's things like testimonials around, sir," he added, winking significantly, "and when a city's making a big pile through a man, testimonials are like to take on a mighty handsome shape."

Slosson grinned.

"I shouldn't discourage 'em," he said pleasantly. "The folks 'll see where they are in a few days. Here." He pulled out his long cypher message from his pocket, and held it out towards Peter triumphantly. "You can read it if you like. You won't be able to get its meaning, but I'll tell you what it is. It's to tell my company to go right ahead. They're in. That means that Snake's Fall is made, sir, completely and finally made, and the Mallinsbee ground sharks are plumb down and out. And I'm glad to say I've been the means of fixing things that way for you."

Peter took the message. He took it rather quickly—almost too quickly. He read it. The words were so much gibberish to him, and it was far too long to remember. But with a quick effort he took in the one word of address, and the first six words of the message.

Then he handed it back.

"Do you need that sent off, sir?" he inquired easily, but his heart was beating quickly.

Slosson shook his head.

"Guess I'll send it myself. I'm going across to the depot right now." He folded up the paper. "That's the sentence on the Buffalo Point crooks, and its execution will follow—quick."

"An' serve 'em darned right," cried Peter sharply. "I ain't time for crooks like them. You're right, sir. Don't take chances. See that sent off yourself, sir. I'm real glad you come along here. There'll be fortunes lying around in your track, an' then there's always them—testimonials. Say, you'll just excuse me, sir, but there's some all-fired 'rubes' shoutin' for drinks in the bar. I——"

Slosson laughed.

"Yes, you get right on. The boys have money to burn in this city now. They'll have more later. I'll get going."

He moved off and passed through the crowded office, and out of the hotel, while Peter dashed swiftly into his private office. He went straight to his desk and wrote on paper all he could remember of the code message. Then he stood up and swore softly to himself.

For some moments he let himself go at the expense of the man he had just been talking to. Then he became calmer, and his face grew thoughtful. Then, after awhile, a smile grew in his hot eyes, and he murmured audibly—

"I wonder. Steve Mason's a good boy, an' he don't draw a big pile slamming the keys of his instruments over there. I wonder."

After that he left the office and hurried out to the veranda, and stood watching, in the evening light, for the figure of David Slosson leaving the telegraph operator's office.

Gordon and Hazel Mallinsbee were riding amongst the hills. Gordon was on Sunset, and Hazel's brown mare was reveling in the joy of a fresh morning gallop through her native valleys and woodlands.

Ever since the memorable day when he discovered that Slosson was his father's agent, Gordon had lived in a state of almost feverish delight. At his instigation they had closed up the office at Buffalo Point, to give color to their defeat by the agent. At his instigation they had arranged many other more or less significant matters. But it had been Mallinsbee's own suggestion that Gordon should take up his abode at the ranch instead of sharing the hospitality of Mike Callahan's livery barn in Snake's Fall.

It was a glorious summer day and the mountain breezes came down the hillsides with that refreshing cool belonging to the heights above. The joy of living was thrilling both of them as they rode, and their horses, too, seemed to have caught the infection. But there was something more than the mere joy of life and health actuating them now. There was an excitement such as neither could have experienced during those long, dull hours which, during the past weeks, had been spent in the now closed office at Buffalo Point.

They raced along down a wide green valley lined upon either side by wood-clad slopes of hills, which mounted up towards the blue for several hundreds of feet. Ahead of them shone the white ramparts of the mountain range. They scintillated in the sunlight, a shimmering wall of snow and ice many thousands of feet high. Before them lay miles and miles of broken hills, rising higher and higher as they approached the ultimate barrier of the Rockies themselves.

The riders were in a perfect maze of valleys, and woods, and mountain streams, and hills; a maze from which it seemed well-nigh impossible to disentangle themselves. Yet, with her trained eyes, and wonderful inborn knowledge of hill-craft, Hazel piloted their course without hesitation, without question. The whole region was an open book to her in the summer time. For miles and miles through that broken land she knew every headland, every shadowy wood, every green valley and gurgling stream. As she often told Gordon, it was her world—her home and her world, it belonged to her.

"But I should lose myself in five minutes," Gordon protested, as they swung out of the valley and into a narrow cutting between two sheer-faced cliffs, overgrown with scrub and small bush, which left hardly any room for their horses along the banks of a trickling brook which divided them.

"Surely you would," Hazel, who was now in the lead, called back over her shoulder. "And I guess I should just as soon lose my way in your wonderful New York. You follow right along, and I'll promise to bring you home by supper." Then, with laughing anxiety, "But for goodness' sake don't lose our lunch out of your saddle bags. We'll be starving after another hour of this."

The warning startled Gordon into an apprehensive survey of his saddle bags. They were quite secure, however, and he followed closely on the mare's heels.

Quickly it became apparent that they were traveling a well-worn cattle path overgrown by the low scrub. It was difficult, but Hazel followed it unfalteringly. Half a mile up this narrow, the great facets of the hills on either side began to close in on them, and still further ahead Gordon discovered that they almost met overhead, the narrowest possible crack alone dividing them.

He was wondering in which direction lay their way out of such a hopeless cul-de-sac when he saw Hazel suddenly bend her body low over her mare's neck, and, at the same moment, she called back a warning to him.

"'Ware overhead rocks!" she cried.

Gordon instantly followed her example, and kept close behind her as she entered a passage which was practically a tunnel. Now their difficulties were increased tenfold. The tunnel, in spite of the narrow split in its roof, was almost dark. The low bush completely hid the track and the little tumbling creek beside the path had deepened to a six-foot cut bank.

Gordon became troubled. But it was not for himself so much as for Hazel. His horse, Sunset, was steady as a rock, but the brown mare ahead was as timid as a kitten. He glanced anxiously at the figure of the girl. The journey seemed not to trouble her one bit. Her mare, too, considering her timidity, was wonderfully steady. No doubt it was the result of perfect confidence in the

clever little creature on her back, he thought. His gaze passed still further ahead. He was looking for the termination of this mysterious winding tunnel. But twenty yards was the limit of his vision and, so far, no end was in sight.

Suddenly Hazel's merry laugh came echoing back to him.

"Say, isn't this a great place?" she cried. "It's like one of those enchanted lands you read of in fairy books." Then she added a further warning. "Keep low. We're nearly through."

The horses scrambled on in the semi-darkness. But for Gordon the enchantment of the place was passing, and he was glad to know they were nearly through.

A few minutes later he saw Hazel begin to straighten herself up in the saddle. He followed her example with some caution and considerable relief. The roof was becoming higher, so, too, was the light increasing. Gordon breathed a sigh.

"I don't know about the lunch," he said. "I've bumped the walls for some considerable time. Is there much more of it?"

But before Hazel's reply could reach him his inquiry was answered by the cavern itself. All in an instant they rounded a bend and a dazzling beam of sunlight banished the darkness and nearly blinded him. Two minutes later he pushed his way through a dense screen of willows, and emerged upon the bank of a beautiful, serene lake of absolutely transparent, sunlit water.

"Behold the spring which is the source of that little stream," cried Hazel, indicating the lake spread out before them. "Isn't it a fairy-book picture? Look round you. Oh, say, I just love it to death."

Gordon gazed about him in wonder. The lake was quite small, but its setting was as beautiful as any artist could have painted it. All around it, on two-thirds of its circumference, a hundred different shades of green illumined the wonderful tangled vegetation. He looked for the place from which they had emerged. It was completely hidden. Gone, vanished as if by magic. All that remained were the great hills at the back and the wooded banks of the lake at their feet.

He looked down at the water. Clear, clear; it was clear as crystal. Then he turned towards the sun, and something of the wonder of it all thrilled him. A sea, a calm, unruffled sea of the greenest grass he had ever beheld stretched out before him. Or was it a broad river of grass? Yes, it was a wide river, perhaps two miles wide, with great mountainous banks on either side. To him they seemed to be standing at its source, and its flow carried his gaze away on towards the west, where, above all, miles and miles away, shone the white peaks of the mountains.

The banks of this superb valley were deeply wooded from the base to the soaring summits. Only were the hues of the foliage varied. Right at the foot the green was bright, but less bright than the tall sweet grass. While higher, the dark foliage of pine woods rose somberly on stately towering blackened trunks.

At last Gordon turned back to the girl, who had sat watching the intent expression of his face.

"Tell me," he said, and he made a comprehensive gesture with one hand.

Hazel was waiting only for that sign.

HAZEL WAS WAITING FOR THAT SIGN

Hazel Was Waiting for That Sign

"Where we stand now we are twenty miles from the ranch," she said. "The only other outlet to this valley is twenty miles further on to the west. If you could not find our secret passage again, you would have to travel sixty miles through the most amazing country to get back home."

"Sixty miles back?" Gordon muttered.

"Sure," returned Hazel. Then she laughed. "Even then, unless you'd been pretty well born in these hills you'd never find the way."

Gordon nodded, and glanced in the direction whence they had come. There was not a sign of the tunnel to be seen. The foliage screen looked impenetrable. He began to smile.

"And your cattle station?" he questioned.

"Come on."

Hazel turned her mare away, and set off at a brisk canter. She followed the line of the hills at the edge of the wide plain of sweet grass.

Gordon followed her, marveling at the place, but more still at his guide. A quarter of an hour's gallop under the shade of the most amazingly beautiful woods he ever remembered to have seen, brought them to a clearing, in the midst of which stood a smallish frame house. It was more or less surrounded by a number of large, heavy-timbered corrals. The whole place was perfectly hidden by the screen of woods from view of the valley beyond.

Hazel leaped out of the saddle and passed hurriedly into the house. Next minute she returned with two picket ropes.

"We'll picket them both while we eat and get a peek around the place. We aren't yearning for a twenty-mile tramp back."

Gordon agreed. He remained silent while they off-saddled and secured their horses beyond the woods on the open grass. He was thinking hard. He was reviewing the purpose which had brought them to this wonderful outworld hiding-place. Nor were his thoughts wholly free from doubts and qualms.

At length the work was done. Their saddle blankets were laid out to dry in the sun, and the saddle bags were emptied of the ample lunch Hazel had carefully provided.

The girl was entirely mistress of the situation. Gordon felt his helplessness out here in the secret heart of nature.

"Shall we eat first or——?" Hazel broke off questioningly.

"Can't we look around the house while the kettle boils?" inquired Gordon, looking up from the fire he had kindled after some difficulty. He was kneeling on the bare, dusty ground which had been trodden by the hoofs of thousands of cattle in the past.

The girl nodded. Her delight in being this man's cicerone was superlative. This was different from the days she had spent with David Slosson.

"Sure. Come on," she cried. "And there's a well out back where we can fill the kettle."

They hurried off to the well, and, between them, rather like two children, they filled the kettle. Then they returned and placed it on the fire, and again approached the house.

It was a squat, roomy structure of the ordinary frame type, but it was in perfect preservation even to its paint, and Hazel pointed this out as they approached.

"You see this was my daddy's first home," she said. "It's where I was born." She drew a deep, happy sigh. "I seem to remember every stick of it. And my daddy, why, he just loves it, too. That's why, though we don't use it now, he has it painted every year, and kept clean. You see, when my daddy built this for my momma he hadn't a pile of dollars. It was just all he could afford, and he didn't ever guess he'd have a great deal to spend on a home. We lived here years, and our cattle grazed out in the valley beyond. I used to spend my whole time on the back of a small broncho mare, chasing up and down the hills and woods. And that's how I found that tunnel we came through. My, but I do love this little place!"

"It's great," agreed Gordon warmly. "I'd call it a—a poet's home."

The girl flung open the front door and led the way in. Instantly Gordon had the surprise of his life. It was furnished. Completely and comfortably furnished. What was more, the furniture, though old, was in perfect repair, and the room looked as though it had been recently occupied.

"When you said 'disused,'" Gordon exclaimed, "I—I—thought it would be empty."

The girl smiled a little sadly.

"No," she said. "We couldn't forsake it. It would be like forgetting my poor momma. No. The furniture and things are just as we used them when she was with us."

She passed from the parlor to the bedrooms, and the lean-to kitchen and washhouse. Everything was in perfect order, except for a slight dust which had gathered.

"You see, Hip-Lee and one of the choremen and I can fix it up in a day ready for occupation. That's how my daddy likes to have it. My daddy loved our lovely momma. I don't guess he'll ever get over losing her." Then she looked up, and her shadow of sadness had gone. "Come along," she cried. "You've seen it all. So we'll just shut it up again, and get back to our camp. I'm guessing that kettle'll be boiled dry."

But the kettle was only just on the boil, and the girl made the tea while Gordon set out the food and plates. Then, when all was ready, they sat down to their *tête-à-tête* picnic with all the enjoyment of two children, but with that between them which seemed to fill the whole air of the valley with an intoxicating sense of happiness and delight.

"And what about that other place—that log and adobe shack you told me of?" demanded Gordon, taking his tea-cup from the girl's hand.

Hazel laughed.

"That's a dandy shack, full of ants and crawly things, and its roof leaks water. It's up on a hill where the wind just blows pneumonia through it. If I showed it you I sort of reckon you'd be scared to use it for—for anything."

Gordon joined in her laugh.

"I guess it'll be the real thing for my job. Say, don't you sort of feel like a criminal? I do." He laughed again as he passed the plate of cut meats to his companion.

"Criminals?" laughed Hazel buoyantly. "Why, I just feel as if you and my daddy and I were all hanging by the neck on the highest peak of the Rockies. Say, you're sure—sure of things?"

"I guess there's nothing sure in this world, except that no saint was ever a financial genius. Sure? Say, how can we be sure till we've fixed things the way we want 'em? But I tell you we've got to make good. I won't believe we can fail. We mustn't fail. If only Peter can get hold of Slosson's messages. Only one will do. If he can do that, and it's what I expect, why—the whole thing becomes just a practical joke, only not so harmful."

Gordon attacked his food with a healthy appetite, and the girl watched him happily.

"It's the cleverest thing ever," she cried, "and—and I can't think how you thought of it, and, having thought of it—dared to attempt to carry it out."

Gordon smiled.

"I'm not clever, but—I did think of it, didn't I? And as to carrying it out, why, I guess we're the same as the others. We're 'sharps.' We're land pirates. We're ground sharks."

Hazel set her cup down.

"But you are clever. I didn't mean it that way."

"You're the first person ever told me."

"Am I?" Hazel blushed. Nor did she know why. Gordon, watching her, sat entranced.

"Sure. Most everybody reckons I'm just a—a bit of an athlete—that's all. My sister Gracie never gets tired of telling me what an all-sorts-of-fool I am."

"How old is your—Gracie?"

"Thirteen."

"That makes a diff'rence."

"Oh, she doesn't get it all her own way," laughed Gordon. "I hide her chocolates. That makes her mad. She's a passion for candy. But the old dad is a bully feller. He's all sorts of a sportsman, and he guesses that the best day in his life will be the one in which he finds I'm not a fool."

Hazel gurgled merrily.

"That'll come along soon."

Gordon nodded.

"Gee! It makes me laugh to think of it. But say," he went on, a moment later, "I'm glad you don't think me a fool. I'm just longing for——" But he broke off and abruptly rose from the ground. Their meal was finished. "Do we wash things or do we just pack 'em up?"

"Oh, we'll pack 'em," said Hazel, rising hastily. A sort of nervous hurry was in her movement. "We won't rob the choreman and Hip-Lee of their rights. Say, you bring up the horses, and I'll pack. We can water them at the lake as we pass out—the horses, I mean."

A few minutes later Gordon returned with the horses.

As he rounded the bend in the now overgrown track, which had once formed the main approach to the little ranch, and caught sight of the graceful fawn-clad figure moving about, he stood for a moment to feast his eyes upon the picture the girl made. She was all he had ever dreamed of in life. There was nothing of the delicate exotic here, none of the graceful gowning of a city, concealing an unhealthy body reduced almost to infirmity by the unwholesome night life of modern social demands. She was just a living example of the grace with which Nature so readily endows those who obey her wonderful, helpful laws. The perfect contours, the elasticity of gait, the clear, keen, beautiful eyes, and the pretty tanning under the shade of her wide-brimmed hat.

The beating of the man's heart quickened. All his feelings rose, and set him longing to tell her all that was in his heart. He wanted then and there to become her champion for all time. A great passionate wave set the warm blood of youth surging to his head. He felt that she belonged to him, and him alone. Had he not fought for her as those warriors of old would have done? Yes, somehow he felt that she was his, but, with a strange cowardice, he feared to put his fate to the test through words which could never express half of all he felt. He longed and feared, and he told himself——

But Hazel was looking in his direction. She saw him standing there, and peremptorily

summoned him to her presence.

"For goodness' sake," she cried. "Dreaming when there's work to be done. Bring them right along, or we'll never get started. There's all twenty miles before supper."

Gordon hurried forward, and as he came up he made his excuses.

"I had to look," he said apologetically. "You see it isn't every day a feller gets a chance to see a real picture—like I've seen. Say, these hills, I guess, can hand all that Nature can paint that way, but you need a human life in it to make a picture real to just an ordinary man's eyes. I—had to look."

But Hazel seemed to have become suddenly aware of something of that which lay behind his words, and she hastily, and with flushed cheeks, turned to the work of saddling her horse. Gordon attempted to help, but she laughingly declined any aid. She pointed at the saddle bags on his saddle.

"They're packed," she said. "Say, I'll show you how to refold your blanket. This way."

Gordon spent some delicious moments struggling with his blanket under the girl's superintendence, and his regret was all too genuine when, at last, it was placed on Sunset's back with the saddle on the top of it. As for the mare, she was saddled and bitted in the time it took him to cinch Sunset up. By the time he had adjusted the bit Hazel was in the saddle, gazing down at his efforts with merry, laughing eyes.

"It does seem queer," she said. "Here are you, big and strong, and capable of most anything. Yet it puzzles you around a saddle—which is so simple."

Gordon climbed into his saddle at last, and smiled round at her.

"I'm learning more than I ever guessed I'd learn when I left New York. I've learned a heap of things, and you've taught me most of them. Sometime I'll have to tell you all you've taught me, and then—and then, why, I guess maybe you'll wonder." He laughed as they moved off. But somehow Hazel kept her eyes averted.

"Now for the enchanted tunnel again," he cried, in a less serious mood. "More enchantment, more delight! And then—then to the serious criminal work we have on hand. Criminal. It sounds splendid. It sounds exciting. We're conspirators of the deepest dye."

CHAPTER XVII

THE CODE BOOK

It seemed as though Peter McSwain never did anything without perspiring. He perspired now with the simple effort of thought. But it was a considerable effort and a considerable thought. He crowded more of the latter into five minutes, he assured himself, than a bankrupt Wall Street man could have done on the eve of settling day. The object of his thought was the telegraph operator and the subject of it the interesting thesis of bribery. Then, too, there were the side issues, which included David Slosson, a telegraph message, and two men waiting at the other end of things for the result of his share in the proceedings.

He made no attempt at pleasant conversation with the row of guests lounging with feet skywards on the shady veranda. For the time at least the affairs of his hotel were quite secondary. It seemed to him just now that these men were the misfortunes of a commercial interest. They were the things that kept him living concealed beneath an exterior of polite attention which he detested. He had never had a chance of being his real self until this moment. There was work of a delicate nature to be performed, work which was to prove his ability in those finer channels where individuality would count and genuine cleverness must be displayed. A lot was depending upon his capacity.

This feeling inspired him, and the dew on his forehead became a moist and shallow lake that was already overflowing its banks. At the end of five minutes, after having seen David Slosson leave the telegraph office and move off down the Main Street, this lake became a streaming torrent as he left the veranda and passed round to the back of the hotel.

This retrograde movement was a part of his deeply laid plans. He had no object in visiting either his barn or his kitchens. The Chinese cook possessed no interest for him at the moment, and as for the hens and the team of horses, and his lame choreman who tended them, they had never been farther from his thoughts.

He appeared interested, however, and mopped his forehead several times as he surveyed the

scene with attentive eye. Then he passed on without a word. Now his route became circuitous. He walked a hundred yards away from the town, and appeared to be contemplating the open country with weighty thoughts in his mind. Then he turned away and moved in another direction, towards the railroad track. Again he paused with measuring eye. Then he crossed the track and strode off in a fresh direction. This time he was moving northwards away from the depot and telegraph office. Those who now chanced to observe him lost all interest in his movements, and for the time his perspiring face was forgotten. By the time he came within view of the hotel veranda again his very existence had been forgotten in the midst of the busy talk of his guests. And so he was enabled to reach the telegraph office from the farther side without arousing comment.

He casually opened the door and found himself standing before the barrier of the paper-littered office. The operator was at his instrument table ticking out a message in that alert, concentrated manner peculiar to all telegraphists. The man glanced round at his visitor and continued his work without a sign of recognition, and the hotel-keeper propped himself on the counter and drew a cigar from his vest pocket.

By the time he had lit it satisfactorily the ticking of the instrument ceased, and a sigh of relief warned him that Steve Mason was free. He glanced across at the table with his hot eyes and a shadowy smile.

"Busy these times, Steve," he said genially. "The old days when we had time to sit around in this office and yarn are as far back as the flood. Say, you ain't got paralysis of the arm yet? Maybe you work 'em both. Hev a smoke?"

Steve smiled wearily.

"Don't you never take on operatin', Peter," he said, accepting the proffered smoke. "Thanks. What's this? One of those 'multiflavums' of yours you keep for drummers?"

Peter shook his head.

"My own smokes. They match the times. We're all making fortunes."

"Are we?"

"Well—ain't we?"

"None of it's come my way," said Steve, lighting his cigar. "But that's always the way. We get shunted to a bum town like this on a branch, and they pay us salary according. If the city makes a break and gets busy and we're nearly crazy with overwork they don't boost us up. Overwork don't mean overpay, nor overtime. They ain't raised me a dollar. I'm going to get right on the buck if things keep up. I tell you I've eaten three meals in this office to-day, with my hand on the key, and I—I'm just sick to death. I don't take or send again this night."

"Guess you'll be able to make a break when you sell your holdings," McSwain went on sympathetically. He raised the barrier and stepped into the office, and sat himself in a chair he had often occupied in the unruffled days before the coal.

Steve laughed and sat himself on the corner of his instrument table.

"I ain't got no holding. You can't buy land on a hundred dollars a month. No, sir. What with the Chinee laundry and my boarding-house, I guess I need to smoke your 'multiflavums' and drink your worst rye. Why, I ain't got a balance over to buy an ice-cream-soda in winter."

"You sure are badly staked," murmured Peter.

They smoked in silence for some moments. The atmosphere of the little office was opening the pores of Peter's skin again.

"Say," he went on presently, mopping his brow carefully, "I made quite a stake out of that agent feller, Slosson. Somewheres around ten thousand dollars. Quite a piece of money, eh? I ain't sure he's a fool or a pretty wise guy."

"He's the railroad man," said Steve significantly.

"Yes. That don't make him out a fool, does it?"

"I'd smile."

"So'd I—if I knew more. I'd give a hundred dollars to see what's to happen in the next week or so. I've got a big stake here, if the railroad don't shift the depot. Slosson says they won't. Says he's bought all he needs right here for his company. I take it he's helped himself, too. Still, I'd like to know. The boys back at the hotel are fallin' right over 'emselves to get in. They reckon this place is a cinch—since Slosson's bought. I'd like to be sure."

Steve laughed. He read through his friend's purpose now. The visit was not, as he told himself, for nothing. Peter was looking for information which it would be a serious offense for

him to give—if he possessed any, which he didn't.

"Guess there's nothing doing, Peter," he said slyly.

"What d'you mean?" The hotel-keeper's eyes were hotter than ever. But there was no resentment in them.

"Why, I just don't know a thing what Slosson's doing. And if I did I couldn't tell you. It would be a criminal offense. Slosson ain't sent a word over the line since he started to buy metal until to-night, and the message I've just sent for him is in code, so, as far as I'm concerned, it's so much Greek. I don't know who it's to, even. That's why I guess there's nothing doing."

"No—I s'pose not. I s'pose codes can be read, though? There's experts who worry out any old code. Guess it's mighty interestin'. If Slosson's sendin' in code I guess he's got something in it he don't need folks to know. That makes it more worrying."

Peter heaved a great sigh of longing. The other shook his head.

"You've got to find the key to 'em," he said.

"Yep—a Bible, or some queer old book. Maybe the 'History of the United States.' Say, I'd hate to chase up the 'History of the United States' looking for a key. Maybe it would be interestin', though. Say——"

"You couldn't do it in a month of years," laughed Steve, humoring his friend. "What would it be worth to you to be able to read his code?"

"Oh, maybe I'd make fifty thousand dollars."

"Whew! That's some money."

"Sure. I'd like to try. Say, boy, I'll hand you five hundred dollars to let me take a copy of that message. All you need do is just leave it on your table there for five minutes and lock the outer door. Then just pass right into the other room till the five minutes is up. I'll hand you the bills right here an' now. I'd like to figure on that message. Is it a bet?"

Steve shook his head. He was scared. He knew the consequences of discovery to himself too well. It was penitentiary. It was the equivalent of tapping wires. But Peter was unfolding a big roll of bills, and the temptation of handling that money was very great.

"You just need to copy the message out? That all?"

"Just that. No more."

"You won't need to disfigure my record?"

"Sure not." Peter grinned. He was sweating, profusely. He felt he was on a hot scent and likely to make a kill.

"Only to make a *copy*. It's a big bunch of money for just a copy," Steve demurred suspiciously.

Peter laughed.

"Say, boy, we're old friends. I ain't out to do you a hurt. All I need is to try and worry out that code and know things. If I was sure of being able to read it, why, this five hundred would be five thousand, and worth it all to me, every cent of it. If I can't read that code, then I'll just hand you back my copy, and no harm's done. See? I tell you I wouldn't hurt you for more than the money I hope to make. Is it a bet?"

Steve passed out through the barrier and turned the key in the door. Then he came back.

"I'll take that money."

"Good."

Peter paid it over, and then watched the other as he took the original message which Slosson had written off a file and laid it on the table beside a blank form.

"Say, be as sharp as you can over it," Steve said urgently. Then he passed into the inner room and closed the door.

The interior of Mike Callahan's livery barn was typical of a small prairie town. Rows of horse-stalls ran down either side of it, from one end to the other. At the far end sliding doors opened out upon an enclosure, round which were the sheds sheltering a widely varied collection of rigs and buggies. Also here there was further accommodation for horses. Just inside the main barn, to the left, the American Irishman had two small rooms. The one at the front, with its window on Main Street, was his office. Behind this, dependent for light upon a window at the side of the

building, was a harness-room crowded with saddles and harness of every description, also a bunk on which Mike usually slept when he kept the barn open at night.

It was late at night now, about midnight on the day following Peter McSwain's momentous effort with Steve Mason. Four men were gathered together in profound council in Mike's harness-room. The atmosphere of the place was poisonous. A horse blanket obscured the window, and the door was shut and locked, although the barn itself was closed for the night, and there was small enough chance of intrusion. Still, every precaution had been taken to avoid any such contingency.

A single guttering candle stuck in the neck of a black bottle illumined the intent faces of the men. Gordon was sitting at a small table with a sheet of paper in front of him and a small morocco-bound book beside it. Silas Mallinsbee and Peter McSwain were sitting upon Mike Callahan's emergency bunk, while the owner of it contented himself with an upturned bucket near the door. Cigar-smoke clouded the room and left the atmosphere choking, but all of them seemed quite impervious to its inconvenience.

For awhile there was no other sound than the rustle of the leaves of Gordon's book and the scratching of the indifferent pen he had borrowed from Mike. Then, after what seemed interminable minutes, he looked up from his task with a transparent smile.

"It's all right," he said in a low, thrilling tone. "I guess we've got the game in our hands. He's used the governor's code."

"You can read it?" demanded Peter quickly, leaning forward with a stiff, tense motion.

"Is it what we guessed?" inquired Mike, with a sigh of relief.

Mallinsbee alone offered no comment.

Gordon nodded in answer to each inquiry. He was reading what he had written over to himself.

Then he turned sharply to Peter.

"For goodness' sake give me a cigar. I need something to keep me from shouting."

His tone, and the expression of his eyes were full of excitement.

"It's the greatest luck ever," he went on, while Peter produced a cigar and passed it across to him. "This feller's in direct communication with the governor. You see, this code is the private one. I had it as the dad's secretary. The manager had it, and, of course, my father. No one else. So it's just about certain this thing was an important matter for Slosson to be allowed to use it. Now I'd never heard of this Slosson before, so that it's also evident he's one of my father's secret agents. A matter which further proves the affair's importance."

He lit his cigar and puffed at it leisurely as he contemplated his paper with even greater satisfaction.

"This is addressed direct to the old man, which—makes our work doubly easy," he went on. "Also the nature of the message helps us. If it had been to our manager it would have been more difficult to work out my plans."

He raised the paper so that the candlelight fell full upon it.

"This is the transcript. 'Occipud, New York'—that's my father," he added in parenthesis.

"'Have bought in Snake's Fall, working on instructions. Buffalo Point crowd out for a heavy graft. Utterly unscrupulous lot, offering impossible deal. Have turned them down on grounds provided for in your instructions. Snake's Fall everything you require. Would suggest you come up here incognito, if possibly convenient. There are other propositions in coal worth a deep consideration. Coal deposits here the greatest in the country. Must come an enormous boom. Will send word later on this matter. Am sending letter covering operations. I think it will be urgent that you visit this place shortly in interests of boom as well as the coal.—SLOSSON.'"

Gordon looked round at the faces of his companions in silent triumph. And in each case he encountered a keen expectancy. As yet his fellow conspirators were rather in the dark. The significance of that transcript was not yet sufficiently clear.

"What comes next?" inquired Mallinsbee in his calm, direct fashion.

The others simply waited for enlightenment.

Gordon chuckled softly.

"Now we know we can get at Slosson's messages and my father's messages to him, and, having the code book, by a miracle of good luck, in my possession, the rest is easy. First, Peter must get a copy of my father's reply to this. Meanwhile I shall send an urgent message to my

father in Slosson's name to *come up here at once*. The answer to that must never reach Slosson. Get me, Peter? You've got that boy Steve where you need him. You must hold him there and pay his price. I'll promise him he'll come to no harm. When my father finds out things I'll guarantee to pacify him. This way we'll get my father here, I'll promise you. And when he does get here the fun 'll begin—as we have arranged. That clear? Mike's got his work marked out. You yours, Peter. Mr. Mallinsbee and I will do the rest. Peter, you did a great act laying hands on this message. It was worth double the price. The whole game is now in our hands."

Gordon folded up the paper and placed it inside the code book, which he carefully returned to his pocket.

Mike rubbed his hands.

"Say, it's sure a great play," he said gleefully.

"And seein' you're his son the risk don't amount to pea-shucks," nodded the perspiring hotel proprietor.

"You can be quite easy on that score," laughed Gordon. "I can promise you this: it won't be the old dad's fault, when this is over, if you don't find yourselves gathered around a mighty convivial board somewhere in New York—at his expense. You know my father as a pretty bright financier. I don't guess you know him as the sportsman I do."

Mallinsbee suddenly bestirred himself and removed his cigar.

"I kind o' wish he weren't your father, Gordon, boy," he said bluntly. "It sort of seems tough to me."

Gordon's eyes shot a whimsical smile across at Hazel's father.

"I'd hate to have any other, Mr. Mallinsbee," he said. "Maybe I know how you're feeling about it. But I tell you right here, if my father knew I had this opportunity and didn't take it, he'd turn his face to the wall and never own me as his son again. You're reckoning that for a son to do his father down sort of puts that son on a level with David Slosson or any other low down tough. Maybe it does. But I just think my father the bulliest feller on earth, and I love him mighty hard. I love him so well that I'd hate to give him a moment's pain. I tell you frankly that it would pain him if I didn't take this opportunity. It would pain him far more than anything we intend to do to him —when we get him here."

He rose from his seat and his good-natured smile swept over the faces of his companions.

"How do you say, gentlemen? Our work's done for to-night. Are we for bed?"

CHAPTER XVIII

WAYS THAT ARE DARK

The people of Snake's Fall were in the throes of that artificial excitement which ever accompanies the prospect of immediate and flowing wealth in a community which has been feverishly striving with a negative result.

Nor was this excitement a healthy or agreeable wave of emotion. It was aggressive and vulgar. It was hectoring and full of a blatant self-advertisement. Men who had never done better for themselves than a third-rate hotel, or who had never used anything more luxurious than a street car for locomotion in their ordinary daily life, now talked largely of Plaza hotels and automobiles, of real estate corners and bank balances. They sought by every subterfuge to exercise the dominance of their own personalities in the affairs of the place, only that they might the further enhance their individual advantage. Schemes for building and trading were in everybody's minds, and money, so long held tight under the pressure of doubt, now began to flow in one incessant stream towards the coffers of the already established traders.

Every boom city is more or less alike, and Snake's Fall was no variation to the rule. Gambling commenced in deadly earnest, and the sharpers, with the eye of the vulture for carrion, descended upon the place. How word had reached them would have been impossible to tell. Then came the accompaniment of loose houses, and every other evil which seems to settle upon such places like a pestilential cloud.

To Gordon, looking on and waiting, it was all a matter of the keenest interest, not untinged with a certain wholesome-minded disgust, and when he sometimes spoke of it in the little family circle at the ranch, or to the worldly-wise Mike Callahan in his barn, his talk was never without a hint of real regret.

"It makes a feller feel kind of squeamish watching these folks," he observed to Mike, as they sat smoking in the latter's harness-room one afternoon. "You see, if I didn't know the whole game was lying in the palm of my hand I'd just simply sicken at the sordidness of it. We can't feel that way, though. We're worse than them. They're just dead in earnest to beat the game by the accepted rules of it, which don't debar general crookedness. We're out to win by sheer piracy. Makes you laugh, doesn't it? Makes it a good play."

Mike was older, and had been brought up in a hard school.

"Feelin's don't count one way or the other, I guess," he replied contemptuously. "When it comes to takin' the dollars out of the other feller's pocket I'm allus ready and willin'. You can allus help him out after you beat him. Private charity after the deal is a sort of liqueur after a good dinner."

"Charity?" Gordon laughed.

"Well, maybe you got another name for it," retorted Mike indifferently.

"Several," laughed Gordon. "Rob a man and give him something back needs another name."

"They call it 'charity' in the newspapers when them philanthropists hand back part of the wad they've collected from a deluded public—anyway. It don't seem different to me." Mike's tone was sharply argumentative.

"It isn't different," agreed Gordon. "They're both a salve to conscience. The only thing is that public charity of the latter nature has the advantage of personal advertisement. I'm learning things, Mike. I'm learning that the moment you get groping for dollars, you've just tied up into a sack all the goodness and virtue handed out to you by the Creator and—drowned it."

Though Gordon was never able to carry any sort of conviction on these matters with Mike, his occasional regrets found a cordial sympathy in Hazel Mallinsbee. She watched him very closely during the days of waiting for the maturity of his schemes. She knew the impulse which had inspired him. She understood it thoroughly. It was humor, and she liked him all the better for it. She realized to the full all the depth of love Gordon possessed for his father, an affection which was not one whit the less for the fact that to all intents and purposes his object was the highway robbery of that parent.

It was something of a paradox, but one which she perfectly understood. She felt that it was a case of two strong personalities opposed to each other in friendly rivalry. Gordon had propounded his beliefs to a man of great capacity whose convictions were opposed. Opportunity had served the younger man, who now intended to drive his point home ruthlessly, with a deep, kindly humor lying behind his every act. She could imagine, though she had never seen James Carbhoy, these two men, big and strong and kindly, sitting opposite each other, smoking luxuriously when it was all over, discussing the whole situation in the friendliest possible spirit.

Her father offered little comment. Curiously enough, this man, who had so much at stake, deep in his heart did not approve of the whole thing. It was not that he possessed ordinary scruples. Had the conspiracy been opposed to anybody but Gordon's father he would have been heart and soul in the affair. He would have reveled in the daring of the trick which Gordon intended to carry out. As it was, he was old-fashioned enough to see some sort of heinous ingratitude and offense in the fact of a son pitted piratically against his father.

However, he, like his daughter, watched closely for every sign this son of his father gave. But while Hazel watched with sympathy and real understanding, he saw only with the searching eyes of the observer who is seeking the manner of man with whom he is dealing.

Once only, during the days of waiting and comparative inaction, he gave vent to his disapproval, and even then his manner was purely that of regret.

They were sitting together in the evening sunlight on the veranda of the ranch.

"Gordon, boy," he said in his deep, rumbling voice, after a long, thoughtful pause; "if I had a son, which I guess I haven't, it would hurt like sin to think he'd act towards me same as you're doing to your father."

His remark did not bring forth an immediate reply. When, however, it finally came, accompanied as it was by twinkling, mischievous blue eyes, and a smile of infinite amusement, Hazel, who was standing in the doorway of the house, fully understood, although it left her father unconvinced.

"If you were my father, I guess you wouldn't hate it a—little bit," Gordon said cheerfully. Then his eyes wandered in Hazel's direction, and presently came back again to her father's face. "Maybe I'll live many a long year yet, and if I do I can tell you right here that perhaps there'll only be one greater moment in my life, than the moment in which we win out on this scheme. I just want you to remember, all through, that I love my old dad with all that's in me. Same as Hazel loves you."

From that moment Gordon heard no further protest throughout all the preparations that had to be made. Silas Mallinsbee cheerfully acquiesced in all that was demanded of him. Furthermore, he tacitly acknowledged Gordon's absolute leadership.

Under that leadership much had to be done of a subtle, secret nature. The impression had to be created that the Buffalo Point interests had completely abandoned the game. It was an anxious time—anxious and watchful. David Slosson was kept under close surveillance by the four conspirators, and, to this end, Gordon and Silas Mallinsbee spent most of their time in Snake's Fall, which further added to the impression that their interests had been abandoned.

Having succeeded in bribing Steve Mason, the telegraph operator, in the first place, Peter McSwain further bought him body and soul over to their interests. Mallinsbee's purse was wide open for all such contingencies, and Steve was left with the comfortable feeling that, whatever happened, he had made sufficient money to throw up his job before any crash came, and clear out to safety with a capital he could never have honestly made out of his work.

Thus Gordon had been enabled at last to dispatch his urgent code message to his father, purporting as it did to come from David Slosson. It was an irresistible demand for the Union Grayling and Ukataw Railroad President's immediate presence in Snake's Fall. It had been made as strong as David Slosson would have dared to make it. Nor, when the answer to it arrived, would it ever reach the agent. Nothing was forgotten. Every detail had been prepared for with a forethought almost incredible in a man of Gordon's temperament and experience.

It was late evening the second day after the dispatching of Gordon's urgent message. He had not long returned home to the ranch with Hazel's father from a day amidst the excitement reigning in Snake's Fall. Hazel was in the house clearing away supper and generally superintending her domestic affairs. Silas Mallinsbee was round at the corrals in consultation with his ranch foreman. Gordon was alone on the veranda smoking and gazing thoughtfully out at the wonderful ruddy sunset.

For him there was none of the peace which prevailed over the scene that spread out before him. How could there be? Every moment of the two days which had intervened since the dispatching of his message had been fraught with tense, nervous doubt. Every plan he had made depended on the answer to that message, and he felt that the time-limit for the answer's arrival had been reached. It must come now within a few hours. He felt that he must get it to-morrow morning or never. And when it came what—what then? Would it be the reply he desired, or an uncompromising negative? He felt that the whole thing depended upon the relations between his father and his agent. He was inclined to think, from the very nature of the work his father had intrusted to Slosson, that those relations were of the greatest confidence. He hoped it was so, but he could not be absolutely sure. Therefore the strain of waiting was hard to bear.

While his busy thoughts teemed through his brain, and his unappreciative gaze roamed over the purpling of the distant hills, his ears, rendered unusually acute in the deep evening calm, suddenly caught the faint, distant rumble of a vehicle moving over the trail.

His quick eyes turned alertly. There was only one trail, and that was the road to Snake's Fall. The alertness of his eyes communicated itself to his body. He moved off the veranda and gazed down the trail, of which he now obtained a clear view. A team and buggy were approaching at a rapid rate, and, even at that distance, he fancied he recognized it as the one of Mike Callahan's which he had himself driven.

A wave of excitement swept over him. Could it be that——?

He went back to the veranda. The impulse to summon Mallinsbee was hard to resist. But he forced himself to calmness.

Five minutes later Mike Callahan drove up, and his team stood drooping and sweating.

"Say," he cried, in aggrieved fashion, "it jest set me whoopin' mad when that wire-tappin' operator fell into my barn with his blamed message, twenty minutes after you an' Mallinsbee had left. Look at the time of it. It had buzzed over the wire ha'f an hour before you went." Then he began to grin, and a keen light shone in his Irish eyes. "But when I see who it was from I guessed I'd need to get busy. 'Tain't in your fancy code. It's jest as plain as my face. Read it. The game's up to us. Guess it's our move next."

But Gordon was paying no attention to the Irishman. He was reading the brief message which at last set all his doubts at rest.

"Arrive Snake's Fall noon seventeenth."

It was addressed to Slosson, but there was no signature.

"That's to-morrow." Gordon's eyes lit. Then a shadow of doubt crossed his smiling face. "It's dead safe Steve hasn't sent a copy to Slosson?"

Mike grinned.

"Steve don't draw his wad till—we're sure."

"No."

At that moment Mallinsbee appeared round the angle of the building. Gordon's face was wreathed in smiles as he turned to him.

"We get to work—to-night," he said.

Mallinsbee nodded, without a sign of the other's excitement.

"So I guessed when I see Mike's team. Peter wise?"

"Yep." The Irishman's spirits had risen to a great pitch. "I put him wise."

"Splendid. He's got everything ready?"

Gordon was thinking rapidly.

"Better send your team round to the barn," said Mallinsbee, with that thoughtful care he had for all animals. "Then come inside and get some supper."

Mike prepared to drive round to the barn.

"I see the rack in his yard," he grinned.

"Good."

Then Gordon laughed. The last care had been banished. Now it was action. Now? Ah, now he was perfectly happy.

The night was intensely still. The last revelers in Snake's Fall had betaken themselves to their drunken slumbers. The only lights remaining were the glow of a small cluster of red lamps just outside the town at the eastern end of it, and the peeping lights behind the curtained windows of the houses to which these belonged. There was no need to question the nature of these houses. In the West they are to be found on the fringe of every young town that offers the prospect of prosperity.

There was a single light burning in the hall of McSwain's hotel. This was as usual, and would burn all night. For the rest, the house was in darkness. The last guest had retired to rest a full hour or more.

The stillness was profound. The very profundity of it was only increased by the occasional long-drawn dole of the prairie coyote, foraging somewhere out in the distance for its benighted prey.

The shadowed outbuildings behind the hotel remained for a long time as quiet as the rest of the world. The horses in the barn were sleeping peacefully. The fowls and turkeys and geese which populated the yard in daylight were as profoundly steeped with sleep as the rest of the feathered world. Even the two aged husky dogs, set there on the presumption of keeping guard, were composed for the night.

But after awhile sounds began to emanate from the dark barn. With the first sound a dog-chain rattled, and immediately a low voice spoke. After that the dog-chain remained still. Next came the sound of hoofs on the hard sand floor of the barn. They were hasty, but swiftly passing. The last sound was heard as two horses emerged upon the open, each led by a shadowy figure quite unrecognizable in the velvety darkness of the starlit night.

The horses moved across towards the vague outline of a large hayrack which stood mounted in the running gear of a dismantled wagon, and the figures leading them began at once to hook them up in place. While this was happening two other figures were loading the rack with hay from the corral near by, in which stood a half-cut haystack. Their work seemed to be more intricate than the usual process of loading a hayrack. There seemed to be a sort of wide and long cage in the bottom of the rack, and the hay needed careful placing to leave the interior of this free, while yet surrounding it completely and rendering it absolutely obscured.

In less than half an hour the work was completed, and the four men gathered together and conversed in low voices.

After this a fresh movement took place. The group broke up, and each moved off as though to carry out affairs already agreed upon. One man mounted the rack and took up his position for

driving the team. Another stood near the rear of the wagon and remained waiting, whilst the other two moved towards the hotel.

These latter parted as they neared the building. One of them entered it through the back door, and as he came within the radiance of the solitary oil-lamp it became apparent that his face was completely masked. He moved stealthily forward, listening for any unwelcome sound, mounted the staircase, and was immediately swallowed up by the darkness of the corridor above.

Meanwhile his companion had taken another route. He had moved along the building to the left of the back door. His objective was the iron fire-escape which went up to the gallery outside the upper windows.

He found it almost at the end of the building, and began the ascent. In a few moments he was at the top, and, moving along the narrow iron gallery, he counted the windows as he passed them. At the fifth window he paused and examined it. The blind inside was withdrawn, and he ran over in his mind the various details which had been given him. He knew that the latch inside had been carefully removed.

He tried the window cautiously. It moved easily to his pressure, and a smile stole over his masked features when he remembered that ample grease had been placed in its slipway. It was good to think that these contingencies had been so carefully provided for.

The window was sufficiently open. The process had been entirely soundless, but he bent down and listened intently. Far away, somewhere inside, he could hear the sound of deep breathing. He made his next move quickly and stealthily. One leg was raised and thrust through the opening, and, bending his great body nearly double, he made his way into the room beyond.

Pausing for a few moments to assure himself that the sleeper in the adjoining room had not been disturbed, he next made his way towards the door, aided by the light of a silent sulphur match. He quickly withdrew the bolt, and was immediately joined by the man who had entered the hotel through the back door.

Now he turned his attention to the room itself. Yes, everything was as he had been told. It was a largish room, and a small archway, hung with heavy curtains, divided it from another. The portion he had entered was furnished as a parlor, and beyond the curtains was the bedroom. Signing to his companion to remain where he was, he moved swiftly and silently to the heavy drawn curtains. For a second he listened to the breathing beyond; then he parted them and vanished within.

David Slosson awoke out of a heavy sleep with a sudden nightmarish start. He thought some one was calling him, shouting his name aloud in a terrified voice.

But now he was wide awake in the pitch-dark room: no sound broke the silence. He was on his back, and he made to turn over on to his side. Instantly something cold and hard encountered his cheek and a whispering voice broke the silence.

"One word and you're a dead man!" said the voice. "Just keep quite still and don't speak, and you won't come to any harm."

David Slosson was no fool, nor was he a coward, but, amongst his other many experiences on the fringe of civilization, he had learned the power of a gun held right. He knew that his cheek had encountered the cold muzzle of a gun. Shocked and startled and helpless as he was, he remained perfectly still and silent, awaiting developments.

They came swiftly. The curtains parted and a man, completely masked and clad in the ordinary prairie kit of the West, and bearing a lighted lamp in his hand, entered the room. His first assailant, holding the gun only inches from his head, Slosson could not properly discern. Out of the corners of his eyes he was aware that his face was masked like that of the other, but that was all.

The newcomer set the lamp down on a table and advanced to the other side of the bed. Instantly he produced a strap, enwrapped in the folds of a thick towel.

Slosson realized what was about to happen, and contemplated resistance.

As though his thoughts had been read the man with the gun spoke again—

"Only one sound an' I'll blow your brains to glory. Ther' ain't no help around that you ken get in time. So don't worry any."

The threat of the gun was irresistible, and Slosson yielded.

The second man forced the strap gag into his mouth and buckled it tightly behind his victim's head. This done, the agent's hands were lashed fast with a rope. Then the gun was withdrawn and the wretched agent was assisted into his clothes, after the pockets had been searched for weapons.

In a quarter of an hour the whole transaction was completed, and, with hands securely fastened behind his back and the gag in his mouth fixed cruelly firmly, David Slosson stood ready to follow his captors.

During all that time he had used his eyes and all his intelligence to discover the identity of his assailants, but without avail. Even their great size afforded him no enlightenment, with their entire faces hidden under the enveloping masks.

In silence the light was extinguished. In silence they left the room and proceeded down the stairs. In silence they came to the waiting hayrack outside. Here Slosson beheld the other two masked figures, one on the wagon, and the other waiting at the rear of it. But he was given no further chance of observation. His captors seized him bodily and lifted him into the cage beneath the hay, while one of the men got in with him and now secured his feet.

After that more hay was thrown into the vehicle, till it looked like an ordinary farmer's rack, and then the horses started off, and the prisoner knew that, for some inexplicable reason, he had been kidnaped.

Mrs. Carbhoy had been concerned all day. When she was concerned about anything her temper generally gave way to a condition which her youthful daughter was pleased to describe as "gritty." Whether it really described her mother's mood or not mattered little. It certainly expressed Gracie's understanding of it.

To-day nothing the child did was right. She had called her physical culture instructress a "cat" that morning, only because she had been afraid to enter into a more drastic physical argument with her. For that her "gritty" mother had deprived her of candy for the day. She had refused to do anything right at her subsequent dancing lesson, in consequence, and for that she had had her week's pocket-money stopped. Then at lunch she had willfully broken the peace by upsetting a glass of ice-water upon the glass-covered table, and incidentally had broken the glass. For this she was confined to her school-room for the rest of the day, and was only allowed to appear before her disturbed mother at her nine-o'clock bed hour.

When a very indignant Gracie appeared before her mother to fulfill her final duty of kissing her "good-night," that individual was more "gritty" than ever. She was in the act of opening a bulky letter addressed to her in a familiar handwriting. Gracie knew at once from whom it came. Instantly the imp of mischief stirred in her bosom.

"What nursing home will you send Gordon to when he gets back?" she inquired blandly.

Her mother eyed her coldly while she drew out the sheets of letter-paper. She pointed to a wall bell.

"Ring that bell," she ordered sharply.

Gracie obeyed, wondering what was to be the consequence of her fresh effort. She had not long to wait. Her mother's maid entered.

"Tell Huxton to pack Miss Gracie's trunks ready for Tuxedo. She will leave for Vernor Court by the midday express. Her governesses will accompany her."

The maid retired. In an instant all hope had fled, and Gracie was reduced to hasty penitence.

"Please, momma, don't send me out to the country. I'm sorry for what I've done to-day, real sorry—but I've just had the fidgets all day, what with pop going away and—and that silly Gordon never coming near us, or—or anything. True, momma, I won't be naughty ever again. 'Deed I won't. Oh, say you won't send me off by myself," she urged, coming coaxingly to her mother's side. "There's Jacky Molyneux going to take me a run in his automobile to-morrow afternoon, and we're going to Garden City, and he always gives me heaps of ice-cream. Oh, momma, don't send me off to that dreadful Tuxedo."

At all times Mrs. Carbhoy was easily cajoled, and just now she was feeling so miserable and lonely since her husband had been called away on urgent business, she knew not where. Then here was another of Gordon's troublesome letters in her lap. So in her trouble she yielded to her only remaining belonging. But she forthwith sat her long-legged daughter on a footstool at her feet, and as penance made her listen to the reading of the letter which had just arrived. Somehow, in view of the previous letters from her son, Mrs. Carbhoy felt it to be impossible to face this new one without support, even if that support were only that of her wholly inadequate thirteen-year-old daughter.

"DEAREST MUM:

"Since Cain got busy shooting up his brother Abel, since Delilah became a slave to the tonsorial art and practiced on Samson, since Jael turned her carpentering stunts to considerable

account by hammering tacks into poor Sisera's head, right through the long ages down to the record-breaking achievements of the champion prevaricator Ananias, I guess the crookedness of human nature has progressed until it has reached the pitch of a fine art, such as is practiced by legislators, diplomats and New York police officers.

"This is a sweeping statement, but I contend it is none the less true.

"I'd say that in examining the facts we need to study the real meaning of 'crookedness.' We must locate its cause as well as effect. Now 'crookedness' is the divergence from a straight line, which some fool man spent a lifetime in discovering was the shortest route from one given point to another. No doubt that fellow thought he was making some discovery, but it kind of seems to me any chump outside the bug-house and not under the influence of drink would know it without having to spend even a summer vacation finding it out, and, anyway, I don't guess it's worth shouting about.

"I guess it's up to us to track this straight line down in its application to ethics. That buzzy-headed discoverer also says a line is length without breadth. Consequently, I argue that a straight line is just 'nothing,' anyway. Then when a mush-headed dreamer starts right out to walk the straight line of life it's a million to one chance he'll break his fool neck, or do some other positively ridiculous stunt that's liable to terminate what ought to have been a promising career. I submit, from the foregoing arguments, the straight line of ethical virtue is just a vision, a dream, an hallucination, a nightmare. It's one of those things the whole world loves to sit around on Sundays and yarn about, and just as many folks would hate to practice, anyway. And this is as sure as you'll find the only bit of glass on the road when you're automobiling if you don't just happen to be toting a spare tyre.

"Seeing that you can't everlastingly keep trying to walk on 'nothing' without disastrous consequences, and, further, seeing the days of miracles have died with many other privileges which our ancestors enjoyed, such as being burned at the stake and painting up our bodies in fancy colors, it is natural, even a necessity, that 'crookedness' should have come into its own.

"Let's start right in at the first chapter of a man's life. It'll point the whole argument without anything else. It's ingrained even in the youngest kid to resort to subterfuge. Subterfuge is merely the most innocent form in a crook's thesis. Maybe a kid, lying in its cradle, with only a few days of knowledge to work on, don't know the finer points he'll learn later. But he knows what he wants, and is going to get it. He's going to get the other feller where he wants him, and then force him to do his bidding. It's his first effort in 'crookedness' when he finds the straight line of virtue is just a most uncomfortable nightmare. How does he do it?

"I guess it's this way. He needs his food. He guesses his gasoline tank needs filling. He don't guess he's going to lie around with a sort of mean draught blowing pneumonia through his vitals. He just waits around awhile to see if any one's yearning to pump up his infantile tyre, and when he finds there's nothing doing, why, he starts right in to make his first fall off the straight line of virtue. You see, the straight line says that kid's tank needs filling only at stated intervals. The said kid don't see it that way, so he turns himself into a human megaphone, scares the household cat into a dozen fits, starts up a canine chorus in the neighboring backyards, makes his father yearn to shoot up the feller that wrote the marriage service, sets the local police officer tracking down a murder that was never committed, and maybe, if he only keeps things humming long enough, sets all the State legal machinery working overtime to have his parents incarcerated for keeping an insanitary nuisance on the premises.

"See the crookedness of that kid? The moment he finds himself duly inflated with milk he lies low. Do you get the lesson of it? It's plumb simple. That kid wanted something. He didn't care a cuss for regulations. He just laid right there and said, 'Away with 'em!' He was thirsty, or hungry, or greedy. Maybe he was all three. Anyway, he wanted, and set about getting what he wanted the only way he knew. All of which illustrates the fact that when human nature demands satisfaction no laws or regulations are going to stand in the way. And that's just life from the day we're born.

"From the foregoing remarks you may incline to the belief that I have set out willfully to outrage every moral and human law. This is not quite the case. I am merely giving you the benefit of my observations, and also, since I am merely another human unit in the perfectly ridiculous collection of bipeds which go to make up the alleged superior races of this world, I must fall into line with the rest.

"If Abel gets in my way I must 'out' him. If I can manufacture a down cushion out of old Samson's hair to make my lot more comfortable, I'm just going to get the best pair of shears and get busy. If I'm going to collect amusement from studding that chump Sisera's head with tacks, why, it's up to me to avoid delay that way. And as for Ananias, he seems to me to have been a long way ahead of his time. They'd have had his monument set up in every public office in the country to-day. He'd have been the emblem of every trading corporation I know, and his effigy would have served as the coat-of-arms for the whole of the present-day creation.

"I trust you are keeping well, and the responsibility of guiding the development of our Gracie is showing no sign of undermining your constitution. Gracie is really a good girl, if a little impetuous. I notice, however, that impetuosity gives way before the responsibilities of life. So far she is quite young. I'm hoping good results when she gets responsibility.

"Give my best love to the old Dad, and tell him that he must be careful of his health in such a desperate heat as New York provides in summer time. I think a month's vacation in the hills would be excellent for him at this time of year. I am looking forward to the time when I shall see him again.

"You might tell him I hope to fulfill my mission under schedule time. If you do not hear from me again you will know I am working overtime on the interests in which I left New York.

"Your loving son,
"GORDON.

"P.S.—It occurs to me I have not told you all the news I would have liked to tell you. But two pieces occur to me at the moment. First, that achievement in life demands not the fostering of the gentler human emotions, but their outraging. Also, no man has the right to abandon honesty until dishonesty pays him better.

"G."

The mother's sigh was a deep expression of her hopeless feelings as she finished the last word of her son's postscript.

Gracie watched her out of the corners of her eyes.

"What's the matter, momma?" she inquired.

Her mother broke down weakly.

"They haven't found a trace of him yet. They can't locate how these letters are mailed. They can't just find a thing. And all the time these letters come along, and—and they get worse and worse. It's no good, Gracie; the poor boy's just crazy. Sure as sure. It's the heat, or—or drink, or strain, or—maybe he's starving. Anyway, he's gone, and we'll never see our Gordon again—not in his right mind. And now your poor father's gone, too. Goodness knows where. I'll—yes, I'll have to set the inquiry people to find him, too, if—if I don't hear from him soon. To—to think I'd have lived to see the day when——"

"I don't guess Gordon's in any sort of trouble, momma," cried Gracie, displaying an unexpected sympathy for her distracted parent. Then she smiled that wise little superior smile of youth which made her strong features almost pretty. "And I'm sure he's not—crazy. Say, mom, just don't think anything more about it. And I'd sort of keep all those letters—if they're like that. You never told me the others. May I read them? I never would have believed Gordon could have written like that—never. You see, Gordon's not very bright—is he?"

CHAPTER XIX

JAMES CARBHOY ARRIVES

Snake's Fall was in that sensitive state when the least jar or news of a startling nature was calculated to upset it, and start its tide of human emotions bubbling and surging like a shallow stream whose course has been obstructed by the sudden fall of a bowlder into its bed.

Early the following morning just such a metaphorical bowlder fell right into the middle of the Snake's Fall stream. The news flew through the little town, now so crowded with its overflowing population of speculators, with that celerity which vital news ever attains in small, and even large places. It was on everybody's lips before the breakfast tables were cleared. And, in a matter of seconds, from the moment of its penetration to the individual, minds were searching not only the meaning, but the effect it would have upon the general situation, and their own personal affairs in particular.

David Slosson, the agent of the Union Grayling and Ukataw Railroad, had defected in the night! He had gone—bolted—leaving his bill unpaid at McSwain's hotel!

For a while a sort of paralysis seized upon the population. It was staggered. No trains had passed through in the night. Not even a local freight train. How had he gone? But most of all—why?

The next bit of news that came through was that Peter's best team had been stolen from the barn, also an empty hay-rack. This was mystifying, until it became known that Peter's buggy was laid up at Mike Callahan's barn, undergoing repairs. The hayrack was the only vehicle available. But what about saddle horses for a rapid bolt? Curiously enough it was discovered that Peter's

saddle horses were out grazing. Besides, the story added that the man had taken his baggage with him. Not a thing had been left behind, and baggage like his could not have been carried on a saddle horse.

The story grew as it traveled. It was the snowball over again. It was said that Peter had been robbed of a large amount of money which he kept in his safe. Also his cash register had been emptied. An added item was that Peter himself had been knifed, and had been found in a dying condition. In fact every conceivable variation of the facts were flung abroad for the benefit of credulous ears. Consequently the tide of curious, and startled, and interested news-seekers set in the direction of Peter's hotel at an early hour.

Then it was that something of the real facts were discovered. And, in consequence, those who had participated in Slosson's land deals, and had received deposit money, congratulated themselves. While those who had not so profited felt like "kicking" themselves for their want of enterprise.

Peter stormed through his house the whole morning. He was like a very hot and angry lion in a cage far too small for it. His story, as he told it in the office, was superlative in furious adjectives.

"I tell you fellows," he cried, at a group of wondering-eyed boarders in his establishment, "I ha'f suspected he was a blamed crook from the first moment I got my eyeballs onto him. The feller that 'll bilk his board bill is come mighty low, sirs. So mighty low you wouldn't find a well deep enough for him. He had the best rooms in the house at four an' a ha'f dollars a day all in, an' I ain't see a fi' cent piece of his money, cep' you ken count the land deposit he paid me. I just been right through his rooms, an' he ain't left a thing, not a valise, nor a grip. Not even a soot of pyjamas, or a soap tablet. He's sure cleared right out fer good, and we ain't goin' to see him round again," he finished up gloomily.

Then his fire broke out again.

"But that ain't what I'm grievin' most, I guess. Ther's allus skunks around till a place gets civilized up, an' their bokay ain't pleasant. But he's a hoss thief, too. There's my team. You know that team of mine, Mr. Davison," he went on, turning to the drug storekeeper who had dropped in to hear his friend's news. "You've drove behind 'em many a time. They got a three-minute gait between 'em which 'ud show dust to any team around these parts. That team was worth two thousand dollars, sirs, and was matched to an inch, and a shade of color. Say, if I get across his tracks, an' Sheriff Richardson is out after him with a posse, I'm goin' to get a shot in before the United States Authorities waste public money feeding him in penitentiary. I'm feelin' that mad I can't eat, an' I don't guess I'd know how to hand a decent answer to a Methodist minister if he came along. If I don't get news of that team I'm just going to start and break something. I don't figure if he'd burned this shack right over my head I'd have felt as mad as I do losin' that dandy team."

When questioned as to how the man had got away his answer came sharply.

"How? Why, what was there to stop him, sir? I tell you right here we ain't been accustomed to deal with his kind in Snake's. The folk around this layout, till this coal boom started, has all been decent citizens." He glared with hot eyes upon the men about him, who were nearly all speculators attracted by that very coal boom. "There's that darned fire-escape out back, right down from his room, an' what man has ever locked his barn in these parts? Psha!" he cried, in violent disgust. "I've had that team three years, and I've never so much as had a lock put to the barn."

So it went on all the morning. Peter's fury was one of the sights of the township for that day. He was never without an audience which flowed and ebbed like a tide, stimulated by curiosity, self-interest, and the natural satisfaction of witnessing another's troubles which is so much an instinct of human nature.

And beneath every other emotion which the agent's sudden defection aroused was a wave of almost pitiful meanness. The dreams of the last week and more had received a set back. In many minds the boom city was tottering. The crowding hopes of avarice and self-interest had suddenly received a douche of cold water. What, these speculators asked themselves, and each other, did the incident portend, what had the future in store?

So keen was the interest worked up about Peter McSwain's house that every other consideration for the time being was forgotten. Party after party visited Slosson's late quarters with a feeling of conviction that some trifling clew had been overlooked, and, by some happy chance, the luck and glory of having discovered it might fall to their lot. But it was all of no avail. The room was absolutely empty of all trace of its recent occupant, as only an hotel room can become.

With the excitement the daily west-bound passenger train was forgotten, and by the time it was signaled in, the little depot was almost deserted. There were one or two rigs backed up to it on the town side, and perhaps a dozen townspeople were present. But the usual gathering was nowhere about.

Amongst the few present were Hazel Mallinsbee and Gordon. They had driven up in a democrat wagon with a particularly fine team, and having backed the vehicle up to the boarded platform, they stood talking earnestly and quite unnoticed. Hazel was dressed in an ordinary suit that possessed nothing startling in its atmosphere of smartness. Her skirt was of some rather hard material, evidently for hard wear, and the upper part of her costume was a white lawn shirtwaist under a short jacket which matched her skirt. Her head was adorned by her customary prairie hat, which, in Gordon's eyes, became her so admirably.

Gordon was holding up a picture for the girl's closest inspection.

"Say, it's sheer bull-headed luck I got this with me," he was saying. "I found it amongst my old papers and things when I left New York, and I sort of brought it along as a 'mascot.' The old dad's older than that now, but you can't mistake him. It's a bully likeness. Get it into your mind anyway, and then keep it with you."

Hazel gazed admiringly at the portrait of the man who claimed Gordon as his son. For the moment she forgot the purpose in hand.

"Isn't he just splendid?" she exclaimed. "You're—you're the image of him. Why, say, it seems the unkindest thing ever to—to play him up."

Gordon laughed.

"Don't worry that way. We're going to give him the time of his life." Then he glanced swiftly about him, and noted the emptiness of the depot. "I guess Peter's keeping the folks busy. He's a bright feller. I surely guess he's working overtime. Now you get things fixed right, Hazel. The train's coming along."

The girl nodded.

"You can trust me."

"Right." Gordon sighed. "I'll make tracks then. But I'll be around handy to see you don't make a mistake."

He left the depot and disappeared. Hazel stood studying the picture in her hand, and alternating her attention with the incoming train. She was in a happy mood. The excitement of her share in Gordon's plot was thrilling through her veins, and the thought that she was going to meet his father, the great multi-millionaire, left her almost beside herself with delighted interest.

She wondered how much she would find him like Gordon. No, she thought softly, he could never be really like Gordon. That was impossible. A multi-millionaire could never have his son's frank enthusiasm for life in all its turns and twistings of moral impulse. Gordon faced life with a defiant "don't care." That glorious spirit of youth and moral health. His father, for all his physical resemblance, would be a hard, stern, keen-eyed man, with all experience behind him. Then she remembered Gordon's injunctions.

"Be just yourself," he had said. Then he had added, with a laugh, "If you do that you'll have the dear old boy at your feet long before the day's had time to get cool."

It was rather nice Gordon talking that way, and the smile which accompanied her recollection was frankly delighted. Anyway she would soon know all about it, for the train was already rumbling its way in.

James Carbhoy had done all that had been required of him by his agent's message. He had not welcomed the abandonment of his private car in favor of the ordinary parlor car and sleeper. Then, too, the purchase of a ticket for his journey had seemed strange. But somehow, after the first break from his usual method of travel, he had found enjoyment in the situation. His fellow passengers, with whom he had got into conversation on the journey, had passed many pleasant hours, and it became quite absorbing to look on at the affairs of the world through eyes that, for the time being, were no longer those of one of the country's multi-millionaires.

However, the journey was a long one, and he was pleased enough when he reached his destination all unheralded and unrecognized. It amused him to find how many travelers in the country knew nothing about James Carbhoy and his vast financial exploits.

As the train slowed down he gathered up his simple belongings, which consisted of a crocodile leather suitcase, a stout valise of the same material; and a light dust coat, which he slung over his arm. Armed with these, he fell in with the queue making its way towards the exit of the car. He frankly and simply enjoyed the situation. He told himself he was merely one of the rest of the get-rich-quick brigade who were flocking to the Eldorado at Snake's Fall.

He was the last to alight, and he scanned the depot platform for the familiar figure of his confidential agent. As he did so the locomotive bell began to toll out its announcement of progress. The train slowly slid out of the station behind him.

David Slosson was nowhere to be seen, and he had just made up his mind to search out a hotel for himself when he became aware of the tailored figure of a young girl standing before him, and of the pleasant tones of her voice addressing him.

"Your agent, David Slosson, Mr. Carbhoy, has been detained out beyond the coalfields on your most urgent business," she said. "So I was sent in with the rig to drive you out to your quarters."

The millionaire was startled. Then, as his steady eyes searched the delightful face smiling up at him, his start proved a pleasant one. There was something so very charming in the girl's tone and manner. Then her extremely pretty eyes, and—Gordon's father mechanically bared his head, and Hazel could have laughed with joy as she beheld this strong, handsome edition of the Gordon she knew.

"Well, come, that was thoughtful of Slosson," he said kindly. "He certainly has shown remarkable judgment in substituting your company for his own. My dear young lady, Slosson as a man of affairs is possible, but as a companion on a journey, however short—well, I—— And you are really going to drive me to my hotel. That's surely kind of you."

Hazel flushed. She felt the meanest thing in the world under the great man's kindly regard. However, she reminded herself of the great and ultimate object of the part she was playing and steeled her heart.

"The team's right here, sir." She felt justified in adding the "sir." She felt that she must risk nothing in her manner. "I'll just take your baggage along."

She was about to relieve the millionaire of his grips, but he drew back.

"Say, I just couldn't dream of it. You carry my grips? No, no, go right ahead, and I'll bring them along."

In a perfect maze of excitement and confusion the girl hastily crossed over to her team. Somehow she could no longer face the man's steady eyes without betraying herself like some weak, silly schoolgirl. This was Gordon's father, she kept telling herself, and—and she was there to cheat him. It—it just seemed dreadful.

However, no time was wasted. She sprang into the driving-seat of the democrat spring rig, and took up the reins. The millionaire deposited his grips in the body of the vehicle, and himself mounted to the seat beside her. In a moment the wagon was on the move.

As they moved away, out of the corners of her eyes Hazel saw the grinning face of Gordon peering out at them from the window of Steve Mason's telegraph office, smiling approval and encouragement. Curiously enough, the sight made her feel almost angry.

They moved down Main Street at a rattling pace, and, in a few moments, turned off it into one of those streets which only the erection of dwelling-houses marked. There were no made roads of any sort. Just beaten, heavy, sandy tracks on the virgin ground.

Hazel remained silent for some time. She was almost afraid to speak. Yet she wanted to. She wanted to talk to Gordon's father. She wanted to tell him of the mean trick she was playing upon him, for, under the influence of his steady eyes and the knowledge that he was Gordon's father, a great surge of shame was stirring in her heart which made her hate herself.

For some time the man gazed about him interestedly. Then, as they lost themselves among the wooden frame dwelling-houses, he breathed a deep sigh of content and drew out one of those extravagant cigars which Gordon had not tasted for so many weeks.

"Say, will smoke worry you any, young lady?" he inquired kindly.

Hazel was thankful for the opportunity of a cordial reply.

"Why, no," she cried. Then on the impulse she went on, "I just love the smell of smoke where men are." She laughed merrily. "I guess men without smoke makes you feel they're sick in body or conscience."

Gordon's father laughed in his quiet fashion as he lit his cigar.

"That way I guess folks of the Anti-Tobacco League need to start right in and build hospitals for themselves."

The girl nodded.

"Anti-Tobacco?" she said. "Why, 'anti' anything wholesomely human must be a terrible sick crowd. I'd hate to trust them with my pocket-book, and, goodness knows, there's only about ten cents in it. Even that would be a temptation to such folks."

Again came the millionaire's quiet laugh.

"That's the result of the healthy life you folks live right out here in the open sunshine," he said, noting the pretty tanning of the girl's face. "I don't guess it's any real sign of health, mentally or physically, when folks have to start 'anti' societies, eh?"

"No, sir," replied the girl. "Did you ever know anybody that was really healthy who started in to worry how they were living? It's just what I used to notice way back at college in Boston. The girls that came from cities were just full of cranks and notions. This wasn't right for them to eat, that wasn't right for them to do. And it seemed to me all their folks belonged to some 'anti' society of some sort. If the 'anti' wasn't for themselves it was for some other folks who weren't worried with the things they did or the way they lived. It just seems to me cities are full of cranks who can run everything for other folks and need other folks to run everything for them. It's just a sort of human drug store in which every med'cine has to be able to cure the effects of some other. Out here it's different. We got green grass and sunshine, the same as God started us with, and so we haven't got any use for the 'anti' folks."

"No." James Carbhoy had forgotten the journey and its object. He was only aware of this fresh, bright young creature beside him. He stirred in his seat and glanced about him from a sheer sense of a new interest, and in looking about he became aware of a horseman riding on the same trail some distance behind them.

"You said Boston just now," he said curiously. "You were educated in Boston?"

Hazel nodded.

"Yes, my poppa sent me to Boston. He just didn't reckon anything but Boston was good enough. But I was glad to be back here again."

The millionaire would have liked to question her more closely as to how she came to be driving a team at Slosson's command. He had no great regard for his agent outside of business, But somehow he felt it would be an impertinence, and so refrained. Instead, he changed the subject.

"How far out are the coalfields?" he inquired.

"About five miles." The memory of her purpose swept over the girl again, and her reply came shortly, and she glanced back quickly over her shoulder.

As she did so she became sickeningly aware that two horsemen were on the trail some distance behind them. How she wished she had never undertaken this work!

"I suppose there's quite a town there now?" was the millionaire's next inquiry.

"Not a great deal, but there's comfortable quarters the other side of it. It's going to be a wonderful, wonderful place, sir, when the railroad starts booming it."

Hazel felt she must get away from anything approaching a cross-examination.

"I don't just get that," said Carbhoy evasively.

"Well, it's just a question of depot. You see, there's coal right here enough to heat the whole world. That's what folks say. And when the railroad fixes things so transport's right, why, everybody 'll just jump around and build up big commercial corporations, and—there'll be dollars for everybody."

"I see—yes."

"Mr. Slosson is working that way now," the girl went on. Then she added, with a shadowy smile, "That's why he couldn't get in to meet you, I guess."

"He must be very busy," said the millionaire dryly. "However, I'm glad." And Hazel turned in time to discover his kindly smile.

Carbhoy gazed about him at the open plains with which they were surrounded. The air, though hot, was fresh, and the sunlight, though brilliant, seemed to lack something of that intensity to be found in the enclosed streets of a city. He threw away his cigar stump, and in doing so he glanced back over the trail again. He remained gazing intently in that direction for some moments. Then he turned back.

"I guess those fellers riding along behind are just prairie men," he said.

Hazel started and looked over her shoulder. There were four men now riding together on the trail. They were steadily keeping pace with her team some two hundred yards behind.

It was some moments before the man received his answer. Hazel was troubled. She was almost horrified.

"Yes," she said at last, with an effort. "They're just prairie men." Then she smiled, but her smile was a further effort. "They're pretty tough boys to look at, but I'd say they're all right.

Maybe you're not used to the prairie?"

The millionaire smiled.

"I've seen it out of a train window," he said.

"Through glass," said Hazel. "It makes a difference, doesn't it? It's the same with everything. You've got to get into contact to—to understand."

"But there hasn't always been glass between me and—things."

Hazel's smile was spontaneous now as she nodded her appreciation.

"I'm sure," she said. "You see, you're a millionaire."

Carbhoy smiled back at her.

"Just so." This girl was slowly filling him with amazement.

"It's real plate-glass now," Hazel went on.

"And plate-glass sometimes gets broken."

"Yes, I s'pose it does. But you can fix it again—being a millionaire."

"Yes——"

The millionaire broke off. There was a rush of hoofs from behind. The horsemen were close up to them, coming at a hard gallop. Carbhoy turned quickly. So did Hazel. The millionaire's eyes were calmly curious. He imagined the men were just going to pass on. Hazel's eyes were full of a genuine alarm. She had known what to expect. But now that the moment had come she was really terrified. What would Gordon's father do? Had he a revolver? And would he use it? This was the source of her fear.

It was a breathless moment for the girl. It was the crux of all Gordon's plans. She was the center of it. She, and these men who were to execute the lawless work.

She was given no time to speculate. She was given no time but for that dreadful wave of fear which swept over her, and left her pretty face ghastly beneath its tanning. A voice, harsh, commanding, bade her pull up her team, and the order was accompanied by a string of blasphemy and the swift play of the man's gun.

"Hold 'em up, blast you! Hold 'em, or I'll blow the life right out o' you!" came the ruthless order.

At the same time James Carbhoy was confronted with a gun from another direction, and a sharp voice invited him to "push his hands right up to the sky."

Both orders were obeyed instantly, and as Hazel saw her companion's hands thrown up over his head a great reaction of relief set in. She sat quite still and silent. Her reins rested loosely in her lap. She no longer dared to look at her companion. Now that all danger of his resistance was past she feared lest an almost uncontrollable inclination to laugh should betray her.

She kept her eyes steadily fixed upon these men, every one of whom she had known since her childhood, and to whom she fully made up her mind she intended to read a lecture on the subject of the use of oaths to a woman, sometime in the future. As she watched them her inclination to laugh grew stronger and stronger. They had carried out their part with a nicety for detail that was quite laudable. Each man was armed to the teeth, and was as grotesque a specimen of prairie ruffianism as clothes could make him—the leader particularly. And he, in everyday life, she knew to be the mildest and most quaintly humorous of men.

But his work was carried out now without a shadow of humor. He looked murder, or robbery, or any other crime, as he ordered her out of the driving seat, and waited while she scrambled over the back of the seat to one of those behind with a movement well-nigh precipitate. Then, at a sign, one of the other men took her place, and, at another short command to "look over" the millionaire, the same man proceeded to search Gordon's father for weapons. The production of an automatic pistol from one of his coat pockets filled Hazel with consternation at the thought of the possibilities of disaster which had lain therein.

But the four assailants gave no sign. Their work proceeded swiftly and silently. The millionaire's feet were secured, and he was left in his seat. Then, under the hands of the man who had replaced Hazel, the journey was continued with the escort beside and behind the vehicle.

As they drove on Hazel wondered. Her eyes, very soft, very regretful, were fixed on the iron-gray head of the man in the front seat. She registered a vow that if he were hurt by the bonds that held his ankles fast some one was going to hear about it. Now that the whole thing was over and done with she felt resentful and angry with anybody and everybody—except the victim of the outrage. She was even mad with herself that she had lent assistance to such a cruel trick.

But the millionaire gave no sign. Hazel longed to know something of his feelings, but he gave neither her nor his assailants the least inkling of them for a long time. At last, however, a great relief to the girl's feelings came at the sound of his voice, which had lost none of its even, kindly note.

"Say," he observed, addressing the ruffian beside him, who was busily chewing and spitting, "you don't mind if I smoke, do you?"

Then Hazel made a fresh vow of retribution for some one as the answer came.

"You can smoke all the weed you need," the man said, with a fierce oath, "only don't try no monkey tricks. You're right fer awhile, anyways, if you sit tight, I guess, but if you so much as wink an eye by way of kickin', why, I'll blow a whole hurricane o' lead into your rotten carcase."

It was a long and weary journey that ended somewhere about midnight. Nor was it until the teamster drew up at the door of a small, squat frame house that James Carbhoy's bonds were finally released. He was thankful enough, in spite of his outward display of philosophic indifference. He knew that he was the victim of a simple "hold-up," and had little enough fear for his life. The matter was a question of ransom, he guessed. It was one of those things he had often enough heard of, but which, up to now, he had been lucky enough to escape. He only wondered how it came about that these "toughs" had learned of his coming. He felt that it must have been Slosson's fault. He must have opened his mouth. Well, for the time, at least, there was little to do but hope for the best and make the best of things generally.

He was given no option now but to obey. His captors ordered him out of the wagon in the same rough manner in which they ordered Hazel. And the leader conducted them both into the house.

There was a light burning in the parlor, and the millionaire looked about him in surprise at the simple comfort and cleanliness of the place. He had expected a mere hovel, such as he had read about. He had expected filth and discomfort of every sort. But here—here was a parlor, neatly furnished and with a wonderful suggestion of homeness about it. He was pleasantly astonished. But the leader of the gang was intent upon the business in hand.

He turned to Hazel first and pointed at the door which led into the kitchen.

"Say, you!" he cried roughly. "You best get right out wher' you'll belong fer awhiles. We ain't used to female sassiety around this layout, an' I don't guess we need any settin' around now. Say, you'll jest see to the vittles fer this gent an' us. Ther's a Chink out back ther' what ain't a circumstance when it comes to cookin' vittles. You'll see he fixes things right—seein' we've a millionaire fer company. Get busy."

Hazel departed, but a wild longing to box the fellow's ears nearly ruined everything. There certainly was a reckoning mounting up for some one.

The moment she had departed the man turned his scowling, repellent eyes upon his male prisoner.

"Now, see here, Mister James Carbhoy. I guess you're yearning for a few words from me. Wal, I allow they're goin' to be mighty few. See?" he added brutally. "I ain't given to a heap of talk. There's jest three things you need to hear right here an' now. The first is, it's goin' to cost you jest a hundred thousand dollars 'fore you get into the bosom o' your family again. The second is, even if you got the notion to try and dodge us boys, you couldn't get out o' these mountains without starvin' to death or breakin' your rotten neck. You're jest a hundred miles from Snake's Fall, and ninety o' that is Rocky Mountains an' foothills. You ain't goin' to be locked in a prisoner here. There ain't no need. You can jest get around as you please—in daylight—and one of the boys 'll always be on your track. At night you're just goin' to stop right home—in case you lose yourself. The third is, if you kick any or try to get away—well, I don't guess you'll try much else on this earth. The room over this is your sleep-room, an' I guess you can tote your baggage right there now. So long."

Without waiting for a reply the man beat a retreat out through the front door, which he locked behind him with considerable display.

Once outside, the man hurried away round to the back of the house, where, to his surprise, he found Hazel waiting for him.

She addressed him by name in a sharp whisper.

"Bud!" she commanded. "Come right here!"

Then, as the man obeyed her, she led him silently away from the house in the direction of the corrals. Once well out of earshot of the house she turned on him.

"Now see here, Bud," she cried. "I've had all I'm yearning for of you for the next twenty-four

years. Now you're going to light right out back to the ranch right away, and don't you ever dare to come near here again—ever. My! but your language has been a disgrace to any New York tough. I've never, never heard such a variety of curse words ever. If I'd thought you could have talked that way I'd have had you go to Sunday school every Sunday since you've been one of our foremen."

"'Tain't just nothin', Miss Hazel," the man deprecated. "I ken do better than that on a round-up when the boys get gay. Say, it just did me good talkin' to a multi-millionaire that way. I don't guess I'll ever get such a chance again."

"That you won't," cried Hazel, smiling in the darkness, in spite of her outraged feelings.

"But I acted right, Miss," protested the man. "I don't guess he'd have located me fer anything but a 'hold-up.' Say, we'd got it all fixed. We just acted it over. I was plumb scared he'd shoot, though. You never can tell with these millionaires. I was scared he wouldn't know enough to push his hands up. Say, we'd have had to rush him if he hadn't, an' maybe there'd have been damage done."

Hazel sighed.

"There's enough of that done already. Say, you're sure you didn't hurt his poor ankles. You see," she explained, "he's Mr. Gordon's father."

The man began to laugh.

"Say, don't it beat all, Miss Hazel, stealin' your own father? How 'ud you fancy stealin' Mr. Mallinsbee? Gee! Mr. Gordon's a dandy. He sure is. He's a real bright feller, and I like him. What's the next play, Miss?"

"Goodness only knows," cried Hazel. Then she began to laugh. "Some harebrained, mad scheme, or it wouldn't be Gordon's. Anyway, you made it plain I'm to look after the—prisoner?"

"Sure. I also told him it would cost him a hundred thousand dollars before he gets out of here."

Hazel nodded and laughed.

"It'll do that." Then she sighed. "It'll take me all my wits keeping him from guessing I'm concerned in it. I don't know. Well, good-night, Bud. You're going back to the ranch now. You've only one of the boys here? That's right. Which is it? Sid Blake?"

"Yes, Miss. I left Sid. You see, he's bright, and up to any play you need. I'll get around once each day. Good-night, Miss."

CHAPTER XX

THE BOOM IN EARNEST

It was late in the evening. The lonely house at Buffalo Point stood out in dim relief against the purpling shades of dusk. At that hour of the evening the distant outline of Snake's Fall was lost in the gray to the eastwards. South, there were only the low grass hillocks, now blended into one definite skyline. To the westward, the sharp outline of the mountains was still silhouetted against the momentarily dulling afterglow of sunset. The evening was still, with that wonderful silence which ever prevails at such an hour upon the open prairie.

A light shone in the window of the hitherto closed office at Buffalo Point, and, furthermore, a rig stood at the door with a team of horses attached thereto, which latter did not belong to Mike Callahan.

An atmosphere not, perhaps, so much of secrecy as of portent seemed to hang about the place. The solitary light in the surroundings of gathering night seemed significant. Then the team, too, waiting ready to depart at a moment's notice. But above all, perhaps, this was the first time a sign of life had been visible in the house since the closing down at the moment when Slosson's sudden plunge into the real estate world of Snake's Fall had apparently swept all rivalry from his triumphant path.

Of a truth, a portentous moment had arrived in the affairs of those interested in Buffalo Point. And the significance of it was displayed in the earnest faces of the four men gathered together in the office. Silas Mallinsbee sat smoking in his own armchair, and with a profound furrow of concentration upon his broad forehead. His usually thrusting chin-beard rested upon the front of his shirt by reason of the intent inclination of his great head. Mike Callahan was seated on a

small chair his elbows resting upon his parted knees, and his chin supported upon the knuckles of his locked fingers. His eyes were intently fixed upon the desk, behind which Gordon was frowning over a sheet of paper, upon which the scratching of his pen made itself distinctly audible in the silence. Peter McSwain, the fourth conspirator, was still suffering from a fictitious heat, and was comfortably, but wakefully, snoring under its influence, with a sort of nasal ticking noise which harmoniously blended with the scratching of Gordon's pen.

It was fairly obvious that the work Gordon was engaged upon was the central interest of all present, for every eye was steadily, almost anxiously, riveted upon the movement of his pen.

After a long time Gordon looked up, and a half smile shone in his blue eyes.

"Give us a light, some one," he demanded, as he turned his sheet of paper over on the blotting-pad, and drew his code book from an inner pocket and laid it beside it.

Mike Callahan produced and struck the required match. He held it while Gordon re-lit his half-burned cigar, which had gone out under the pressure of thought its owner had been putting forth.

"Good," the latter exclaimed, as the tobacco glowed under the draught of his powerful lungs. Then he turned the paper over again. "Guess I got it fixed. I haven't coded it yet, but I'll read it out. It's to Spenser Harker, my father's chief man."

"Cancel all previous arrangements made through Slosson for Snake's Fall. Take following instructions. Have bought heavily at Buffalo Point, which is right on the coal-fields. Depot to be built at once at Buffalo Point. Make all arrangements for dispatch of engineers and surveyors at once. There must be no delay in starting a boom. My son, Gordon, is here to represent our interests. Put this to the general manager of the Union Grayling and Ukataw, and yourself see no delay. Am going on to coast on urgent affairs. Gordon has the matter well in hand and will control at this end. This should be a big coup for us.

"JAMES CARBHOY."

As Gordon finished reading he glanced round at his companions' faces through the smoke of his cigar. Mike was audibly sniggering. Mallinsbee's eyes were smiling in that twinkling fashion which deep-set eyes seem so capable of. As for Peter McSwain, from sheer force of habit he drew forth a colored handkerchief and mopped his grinning eyes.

"You ain't going to send that?" he said incredulously.

"Why not?"

"But—that piece about yourself?" grinned Mike. "You darsen't to do it."

"I think I get his point," nodded Mallinsbee, his broad face beaming admiration. "Sort of local color, I guess."

Gordon twisted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. His blue eyes were shining with a sort of earnest amusement. His sharp white teeth were gripping the mangled end of his cigar firmly.

"Say, fellows," he said, after a moment's thought, "I'm kind of wondering if you get just what this thing means to me. It just needs a sum in dollars to get its meaning to you. But for me it's different. I need to make dollars, too. But still it's different. You see, some day I've got to sit right in my father's chair, and run things with a capital of millions of dollars. But before I do that I've got to get right up and convince my father I can handle the work right. He doesn't figure I can act that way—yet. So it's up to me to show him I can. Well, I've started in, and I'm going to see the game through to the end. I've backed my wits to push this boat right into harbor safe. And in doin' that I've got to squeeze the biggest financier in the country. When I've done it right, that financier will know he can hand over his particular craft to my steering without fear of my running it on the rocks. The dollars I need to make out of this are just a circumstance. They are the outward sign of my fitness for my father's edification. That piece about my representing my father isn't just local color either. I actually intend to assume that character, and, from now on, I intend to work direct with headquarters, ordering the whole transaction for the railroad myself in *my own name*. Do you get me? From now on I *am* my father's representative. If Spenser Harker chooses to come right along here, if the general manager of the Union Grayling chooses to come along, I shall meet them, and insist that the work goes through. You see, I am my father's son, I am still his secretary, and they have word in private code *from my father* that I represent him. There can be no debate. All they know of me is that I left New York on confidential work for my father. Well, this, I guess, is the confidential work. Gentlemen, we've simply got to sit right back and help ourselves to our profits. And while we're doing that, why, I guess the dear old dad is taking his well-earned vacation in the hills, while David Slosson is feeling a nasty draught through the chinks in an old adobe and log shack which I hope will blow the foul odors out of his

fouler mind. You can leave the after part of this play safely in my hands. Meanwhile, if you'll just give me five minutes I'll code this message. Then we'll drive right into town and send it over the wire."

Sunday in an obscure country hotel on the western plains is usually the dullest thing on earth. The habit of years is a whitewash of respectability and a moderation of tone, both assumed through the medium of a complete change of attire from that worn during the week. There is nothing on earth but the loss by fire, or the definite destruction of them, which will stop the citizen, who possesses such things, from arraying himself in a "best suit." It is the outward sign of an attempted cleansing of the soul. There can be no doubt of it. That suit is not adjusted for the purpose of holiday enjoyment. That is quite plain. For each man is as careful not to do anything that can destroy the crease down his trousers, as he is not to sit on the tails of his well-brushed Prince Albert coat.

The day is spent in just "sitting around." The citizen will talk. That is not calculated to spoil his suit. He will even write his mail after a careful adjustment of the knees of his trousers. He will sneak into the bar by a back door to obtain an "eye-opener." This, again, will involve no great risk to his suit. Then he will dine liberally off roast turkey and pie of some sort. If the hotel is fairly well priced he will even get an ice-cream with his midday dinner. In the afternoon he will again sit around and talk. He may even venture a walk. Then comes the evening supper. It is the worst function of a dreary day—a meal made up of cakes, preserves, tea or coffee, and any cold meats left over during the week.

After that the "best suits" somehow seem to fade out of sight, and a generally looser tone prevails.

Such had been the Sundays in Snake's Fall since ever the town had boasted an hotel with boarding accommodation. No guest had ever dared to break through the tradition. It would have required heroic courage to have done so. But now changes in the town were rapidly taking place. So rapidly, indeed, that the times might well have been characterized as "breathless."

On this particular Sunday a perfect revolution was in progress. Amongst the older inhabitants who managed to drift to the vicinity of the hotel a feeling of unreality took possession of them, and they wondered if it were not some curious and not altogether pleasant dream. The hotel was thronged with a blending of strangers and townspeople, clad, regardless of the day, in a state of excitement such as might only have been expected at the declaration of a world war, or a presidential election.

It was the culmination of the excitement inspired originally by the news of Slosson's defection, and which, in the course of less than a week, had been augmented by happenings in swift and rapid succession, such as set sober business men wondering if they were living on a volcano instead of a coalmine, or if the days of miracles had indeed returned upon the world.

Well before the excitement over Slosson had died down it became known that the Buffalo Point interests were at work again. Mallinsbee's office was opened once more. Furthermore, he had acquired two clerks, and was securing others from down east. This was more than significant. It attracted every eye in the new direction. Men strove to solve the question with regard to its relationship to Slosson's going. The thought which promptly came to each mind was that Slosson's going was less a miracle than a natural disappearance. His wild buying had inspired doubt from the first. The man had gone crazy, and his employers had turned him down. So he had bolted. The opening of Buffalo Point warned them that the railroad had in consequence come to terms with Mallinsbee. So there had been a fresh rush for information in that direction.

But this rush received no encouragement and less information, and the sorely tried speculators were once more flung back into their own outer darkness.

Then came the next, the culminating excitement. The news drifted into the place from outside sources. It came from agents and friends in the east. Surveyors and engineers and construction gangs were about to be sent to *Buffalo Point*! The news was quite definite, quite decided. It was more. It was accompanied by peremptory orders and urgent requests that those who were on the spot should get in on the Buffalo Point township without a moment's delay, and price was not to hinder them.

Had it been needed, there were no two people in the whole of Snake's Fall better placed for the dissemination and exaggeration of the news than Peter McSwain at the hotel and Mike Callahan at the livery barn. Nor were they idle. Nor did they miss a single opportunity.

In the office of the hotel, while service was on at the little church, and all the womenfolk and children were singing their tender hearts out in an effort to get an appetite for Sunday's dinner, Peter was the center of observation amidst a crowd of bitterly complaining commercial sinners, each with his own particular ax to grind and a desperate grievance against the crooks who were rigging the land markets in the neighborhood for their own sordid profit. He was holding forth, debating point for point, and, as he would have described it himself, "boosting the old boat over a heavy sea."

Some one had suggested that Buffalo Point had been in league with Slosson to hold up the situation, while the former completed their own arrangements to the detriment of the community. Peter promptly jumped in.

"Say, youse fellers are all sorts of 'smarts,' anyway," he said, with a pitying sort of contempt. "What you need is gilt-edged finance. You're scared to death pulling the chestnuts out o' the fire. You're mostly looking for a thousand per cent. result, with only a five per cent. courage. That's just about your play. What's the use in settin' around here talking murder when the plums are lyin' around? Pick 'em up, I says. Pick 'em right up an' get your back teeth into 'em so the juice jest trickles right over your Sunday suits. They're there for you. Just grab. I'm tired of talk. The truth is, some o' youse feelin' you've burnt your fingers over Slosson. Slosson was the railroad's agent. Your five per cent. minds saw the gilding in following Slosson. When he skipped out with my team you were stung bad. You've got stakes in Snake's, while you're finding out now the railroad ain't moved that way. An' so you're just scared to death to show the color of your paper till you see the depot built and the locomotives passing this place ringing a chorus of welcome for Buffalo. Then where are you? You're going to pay sucker prices then, or get right back east with a big debit for wasted board and time. I'm takin' a chance myself, and it ain't with any five per cent. courage. I got a big stake in both places, and I don't care a continental where they build the depot."

Mike Callahan was talking in much the same strain in the neighborhood of his barn, which somehow always became a sort of Sunday meeting-place for loungers seeking information. But Mike, acting on instructions, went much further. He spoke of the reports of the movements of the railroad's engineers and surveyors. He assured his hearers he had had definite word of it himself, and then added a hint that started something in the nature of a panic amongst his audience.

"It ain't no use in guessing," he said from his seat on an upturned bucket at the open door of his barn. "I ain't got loose cash to fling around. Mine is just locked right up in hossflesh and rigs, so I ain't got no ax needs sharpening. But I drive folks around and I hear them yarning. I drove a crowd out to Mallinsbee's place—the office at Buffalo Point yesterday. They were guests of his. They were talkin' depots and things the whole way. Say, ever heard the name of Carbhoy? Any of youse?"

Some one assured him that Carbhoy was President of the Union road, and Mike winked.

"Jest so," he observed. "As sure as St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland, one of that gang was called 'Carbhoy.' I heard one of 'em use the name. And I heard the feller called 'Carbhoy' tell him to close his map. Not just in them words, but the sort of words a millionaire might use. That gang are guests of Mallinsbee. Wher' they are now I can't say. I didn't drive 'em back."

It was small enough wonder that the conflagration of excitement fairly swallowed up the town of vultures. The Buffalo Point interests intended it to do so. Nor could their agents have been better selected. They were established citizens who came into contact with the whole floating population of the place. They were above suspicion, and they just simply laughed and talked and pushed their pinpricks home, preparing the way for the *dénouement*.

On the Monday following, the effect of their work began to show itself. Amongst other visitations Mallinsbee was invaded by a deputation representing large real-estate interests.

Under Gordon's management the office had been entirely converted. Now the original parlor office had been turned over to the use of the clerical staff. The bedroom Gordon had occupied had become Mallinsbee's private office, and the other bedroom had been made into an office for Gordon himself. There was no longer any appearance of a makeshift about the place. It was an organized commercial establishment ready for the transaction of any business, from battling with a royal eagle of commerce down to the plucking of the half-fledged pigeon.

The deputation arrived in the morning, and consisted of Mr. Cyrus P. Laker and Mr. Abe Chester. These two men represented two Chicago real-estate corporations who were prepared to shed dollars that ran into six figures in a "right" enterprise.

The rancher had been notified of their coming, and had sat in consultation with Gordon for half an hour before their arrival. When the clerk showed them into Mallinsbee's private office they found him fully equipped, with his hideous patch over one eye, and Gordon sitting near by at a small table under the window.

Abe Chester overflowed the chair the clerk set for him, and Laker possessed himself of another. They were in sharp contrast, these two. One was lean and tall, the other was squat and breathed asthmatically. But both were men of affairs, and equal to every move in a deal.

The tall man opened the case, with his keen eyes searching the baffling face of the rancher. Just for one moment he had doubtfully eyed Gordon's figure, so intently bent over his work, but Mallinsbee had reassured him with the words, "My confidential secretary."

Mr. Laker assumed an air of simple frankness.

"Our errand is a simple one, Mr. Mallinsbee," he began in hollow tones which seemed to

emanate from somewhere in the region of his highly shined shoes. Then he smiled vaguely, a smile which Gordon mentally registered as being "childlike," as he observed it out of the corners of his eyes. "We are looking for two little pieces of information which you, as a business man, will appreciate as being a justifiable search on our part. You see, we are open to negotiating a deal of several hundred thousand dollars, of course depending on the information being satisfactory."

"There's several rumors afloat that maybe you can confirm or deny," broke in Abe Chester shortly. His *confrère's* "high-brow" methods, as he termed them, irritated him.

"Just so," agreed Laker suavely. "Two rumors which affect the situation very nearly. The first is, is it a fact that the President of the Union Grayling and Ukataw Railroad is your guest at the present moment? The second is, there is a rumor afloat that the railroad company are actually preparing to build their depot here. Is this so?"

Mallinsbee's expression was annoyingly obscure. Mr. Laker felt that he was smiling, but Abe Chester was convinced that a smile was not within a mile of his large features. Both men were agreed, however, that they distrusted that eye-patch.

Gordon awaited the rancher's reply with amused patience. It came in the rumbling, heavy voice so like an organ note, after a duly thoughtful pause.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, with the air of a man who has bestowed a weight of consideration upon his answer, "you have put what a legal mind maybe 'ud consider 'leading' questions. Not having a legal mind, but just the mind of an *honest* trader, I'll say they certainly are *some* questions. However, it don't seem to me they'll prejudice a thing answering 'em straight. You are yearning to deal—well, so am I; an' if my answer's going to help things that way, why, I thank you for asking. Mr. Carbhoy is my guest at this moment. How long he'll remain my guest I can't just say. You see, he's going along to the coast when we're through fixing things right for Buffalo Point. That answers your first question, I guess. The second's even easier. The railroad's engineers will be right here with plans and specifications and materials and workers for building the depot at Buffalo Point on *Wednesday noon*."

Abe Chester drew a short asthmatical breath. His leaner companion smiled cadaverously.

"Then it will give us both much pleasure to talk business," said the latter.

"Sure," agreed Chester, sparing words which cost him so much breath, of which he possessed such a small supply.

Mallinsbee pushed cigars towards them. He felt the occasion needed their moral support.

"Help yourselves, gentlemen," he said. "Guess it'll make us talk better. There's a whole heap of talk coming."

The two men helped themselves, tenderly pressing the cigars and smelling them. The rancher took one himself, with the certainty of its quality, and lit it.

"A lot to talk about?" inquired Mr. Laker, not without misgivings.

"Why, yes." The rancher pulled deeply at his cigar and examined the ash thoughtfully. "Yes," he went on after a moment, "I guess I'll have to say quite a piece before you talk money. You see, I'd just like you to understand the position. It's perhaps a bit difficult. This scheme has been lying around quite a time, inviting folks to put money into it at a profitable price to themselves. A number of wise friends of mine have taken the opportunity and are in, good and snug. There's a number of others hadn't the grit. Maybe I don't just blame them. You see, it was some gamble, and needed folks who could take a chance. Wall, those days are past. There's no gamble now. It's as good as American double eagles. You see, Snake's will just become a sort of flag station, while Buffalo Point will sit around in a halo of glory with a brand-new swell depot. It's been some work handling this proposition, and the folks interested, including the Bude and Sideley Coal Company, need a deal of compensation for their work. Personally, I am not selling a single frontage now until the depot is well on the way. In short, I need a fancy price. In conclusion, gentlemen, let me say quite plainly that what I would have sold originally for three figures will now, or rather when the time comes, cost four—and maybe even five."

"You mean to shut us out," snapped Abe Chester.

"Is it graft?" inquired Laker, with something between a sneer and anger.

"Call it what you like," said Mallinsbee coldly. "I've told you the plain facts, as I shall tell everybody else. Those who want to get in on the Buffalo Point boom will have to pay money for it —good money. I think that is all I have to say, gentlemen."

CHAPTER XXI

A TRIFLE

Few men were less given to dreaming than James Carbhoy. Usually he had no spare time on his hands for such a pastime. Dreams? Well, perhaps he occasionally let imagination run riot amidst seas of amazing figures, but that was all. All other dreams left him cold. Now it was different.

He was reclining in an old-fashioned rocker chair outside the front door of his prison. The air of the valley was soft and balmy, the sun was setting, and a wealth of ever-changing colors tinted the distant mountain-tops; a wonderful sense of peace and security reigned everywhere. So, somehow, he found himself dreaming.

He filled the chair almost to overflowing and reveled in its comfort, just as he reveled in the comfort even of his prison. His hands were clasped behind his iron-gray head, and he drank deeply of the pleasant, perfumed air. His captivity had already exceeded three weeks, and the first irritation of it had long since passed, leaving in its place a philosophic resignation characteristic of the man. He no longer strove seriously to solve the problem of his detention. During the first days of his captivity he had thought hard, and the contemplation of possible disaster to many enterprises resulting from this enforced absence had troubled him seriously, but as the days wore on and no word came from his captors his resignation quietly set in, and gradually a pleasant peace reigned in place of stormy feelings.

James Carbhoy possessed a considerable humor for a man who spent his life in multiplying, subtracting and adding numerals which represented the sum of his gains and losses in currency, and perhaps it was this which so largely helped him. His temperament should undoubtedly have been at once harsh, sternly unyielding and bitterly avaricious. In reality it was none of these things. It was his lot to cause money to make money, and the work of it was something in the nature of an amusement. He was warm-hearted and human; he loved battle and the spirit of competition. Then, too, he possessed a deplorable love for the knavery of modern financial methods. This was the underlying temperament which governed all his actions, and a warm, human kindliness saved him from many of the pitfalls into which such a temperament might well have trapped him.

As he sat there basking in the evening sunlight he felt that on the whole he rather owed his captors a debt of gratitude for introducing him to a side of life which otherwise he might never have come into contact with. He knew at the same time that such a feeling was just as absurd as that the spirit of fierce resentment had so easily died down within him. All his interests were dependent upon his own efforts for success, and here he was shut up, a prisoner, with these very affairs, for all he knew, going completely to the dogs.

His conflicting feelings made him smile, and here it was that his humor served him. After all, what did it matter? He knew that some one had bested him. It was not the first time in his life that he had been bested. Not by any means. But always in such cases he had ultimately made up the leeway and gained on the reach. Well, he supposed he would do so again. So he rested content and submitted to the pleasant surroundings of his captivity.

There was one feature of his position, however, which he seriously did resent. It was a feature which even his humor could not help him to endure with complacency. It was the simple presence of a Chinaman near him. He cordially detested Chinamen—so much so that, in all his great financial undertakings, he did not possess one cent of interest in any Chinese enterprise.

Hip-Lee was maddeningly ubiquitous. There was no escape from him. If the millionaire's fellow prisoner, the pretty teamstress, entered his room to wait on him—and their captors seemed to have forced such service upon her—Hip-Lee was her shadow. If he himself elected to go for a walk through the valley—a freedom accorded him from the first—there was not a moment but what a glance over his shoulder would have revealed the lurking, silent, furtive figure in its blue smock, watchful of his every movement, while apparently occupied in anything but that peculiar form of pastime. James Carbhoy resented this surveillance bitterly. Nor did he doubt that beneath that simple blue smock a long knife was concealed, and, probably, a desire for murder.

However, nothing of this was concerning him now. The hour was the hour of peace. The perfection of the scene he was gazing upon had cast its spell about him, and he was dreaming—really dreaming of nothing. The joy of living was upon him, and, for the time being, nothing else mattered.

In the midst of his dreaming the sound of a footstep coming round the angle of the building to his right roused him to full alertness. He glanced round quickly and withdrew his hands from behind his head. Mechanically he drew his cigar-case from an inner pocket and selected a cigar. But he was expectant and curious, his feelings inspired by his knowledge that Hip-Lee always moved soundlessly.

His eyes were upon the limits of the house when the intruder materialized. Promptly a wave of pleasurable relief swept over him as he beheld the pretty figure of his fellow captive. But he

gave no sign, for the reason that the girl was obviously unaware of his presence, and it yet remained to be seen if the yellow-faced reptile, Hip-Lee, was at hand as usual.

He watched her silently. He was struck, too, by her expression of rapt appreciation of the scene before her, which added further to his reluctance to break the spell of her enjoyment. But as the hated blue smock did not make its appearance, the man could no longer resist temptation. The opportunity was too good to miss.

"It's some scene," he said in a tone calculated not to startle her, his gray eyes twinkling genially.

But Hazel was startled. She was startled more than she cared about. Her one object was always to avoid contact with Gordon's father, except under the watchful eyes, of Hip-Lee. She feared that keen, incisive brain she knew to lie behind his steady gray eyes. She feared questions her wit was not ready enough to answer without disaster to the plans of her fellow conspirators.

She hated the part she was forced to play, but she was also determined to play it with all her might. She must act now, and act well. So, with a resolute effort, she faced her victim.

"I—I just didn't know you were here, sir," she said truthfully, while her eyes lied an added alarm. "But—but talk low, or the——"

"You're worrying over that mongrel Chink," said Carbhoy quickly. "I expected to see his leather features following you around. I guess he's got ears as long as an ass, and just about twice as sharp. Say, I'm going to kill that mouse-colored serpent one of these times if he don't quit his games. Say——"

He broke off, studying the girl's pretty face speculatively. There was no doubt her eyes wore a hunted expression—she intended them to.

"They treating you—right?" he demanded.

Hazel's effort was better than she knew as she strove for pathos.

"Oh, yes, I s'pose so," she said hopelessly. "I'm let alone, and—I get good food. It—it isn't that."

"What is it?"

The man's question came sharply.

Hazel turned her face to the hills and sighed. The movement was well calculated.

"It's my folks." Then, with a dramatic touch, "Say, Mr. Carbhoy, do you guess we'll ever—get out of this? Do you think we'll get back to our folks? Sometimes I—oh, it's awful!"

Her words carried conviction, and the man was taken in.

"Say," he said quickly, "I'm making a big guess we'll get out later—when things are fixed. This is not a ransom. But it means—dollars."

He lit his cigar, and its aroma pleasantly scented the air.

Hazel sighed with intense feeling—to disguise her inclination to laugh.

"Yes, sir," she said hopelessly. "One hundred thousand dollars."

Gordon's father smiled back at her.

"I'd hate to think I was held up for less," he said. "It would sort of wound my vanity."

The girl could have hugged him for the serenity of his attitude. Nothing seemed to disturb him. She felt that Gordon had every reason for his devotion to his father, and ought to be well ashamed of himself for submitting him to the outrage which had been perpetrated.

"Who—who do you think has done this?" she hazarded hesitatingly. "Slosson?"

"Maybe. Though——"

"Slosson should have met you himself," the girl declared emphatically.

"He certainly should," replied Carbhoy, with cold emphasis. "He'll need to explain that—later. Say, how did you come to be driving me?"

Hazel suddenly felt cold in the warm air.

"I was just engaged to, because Mr. Slosson couldn't go himself. You see, father has a spare team, and I do a goodish bit of driving. You see, we need to do 'most anything to get money here."

"Yes, that's the way of things." The man's eyes were twinkling again, and Hazel began to hope that she was once more on firm ground.

Nor was she disappointed when the man went on.

"I guess we're all out after—dollars," he said reflectively. Then he removed his cigar and luxuriously emitted a thin spiral smoke from between his pursed lips. "It don't seem the sort of work a girl like you should be at, though. Still, why not? It's a great play—chasing dollars. It's the best thing in life—wholesome and human. I've always felt that way about it, and as I've piled up the years and got a peek into motives and things I've felt more sure that competition—that's fixing things right for ourselves out of the general scrum of life—is the life intended for us by the Creator."

Hazel nodded.

"Life is competition," she observed, with a wise little smile.

"Sure. That's why human nature is dishonest—has to be."

There was a question in the girl's eyes which the millionaire was prompt to detect.

"Sure it's dishonest. Can you show me a detail of human nature which is truly honest? Say, I've watched it all my life, I've built every sort of construction on it. Wherever I have built in the belief that honesty is the foundation of human nature things have dropped with a smash. Now I know, and my faith is none the less. Human nature is dishonest. It's only a question of degree. I'm dishonest. You're dishonest. But in your case it's only in the higher ethical sense. You wouldn't steal a pocket-book. You wouldn't commit murder. But put yourself into competition with a girl friend baking a swell layer cake, calculated to disturb the digestion of an ostrich. Say, you'd resort to any old trick you could think of to fix her where you wanted her."

Hazel laughed.

"I wouldn't shoot her up, but—I'd do all I knew to beat her."

"Just so."

"After what's happened to us here I guess human nature isn't going to find a champion in me," Hazel went on. "Still, it's pretty hard to lose your faith in human nature that way."

"Lose? Who said 'lose'?" cried the man, with a cordial laugh. "Not I. If I suddenly found it 'honest,' why, I'd hate to go on living. Human nature's got to be just as it is. Honesty lies in Nature. That's the honesty that folks talk about and dream about. It isn't practicable in human life. Dishonesty is the leavening that makes honesty, in the abstract, palatable. Say, think of it—if we were all honest like idealists talk of. What would we have worth living for? Do you know what would happen? Why, we'd all be sitting around making hymns for everybody else to sing, till there was such an almighty hullabaloo we'd all get crazy and have to sign a petition to get it stopped. We'd all be fixed up in a sort of white suit that wouldn't ever need a laundry, and every blamed citizen would start right in to turn the world into a sort of hell by always telling the truth. Just think what it would mean if you had to tell some friend of yours what you thought of her for sneaking your latest beau."

"It certainly would be liable to cause a deal of trouble," laughed Hazel.

"Trouble? I should say." The millionaire chuckled softly as he returned his cigar to his mouth. "Say, I was reading the obituary of a preacher—my wife's favorite—the other day. He lost his grip on life and fell through. That reporter boy was bright, and I wondered when I was reading what he'd have said if he'd spoke the truth as he saw it. To read that obituary you'd think that preacher feller was the greatest saint ever lived. I felt I could have wept over that poor feller, the talk was so elegant and poetic. I just felt the worst worm ever lived beside that preacher. I felt I ought to spend the last five dollars I had to fix his grave up with pure white lilies, if I had to go without food to do it. It was fine. But the writer never said a word about that preacher living in a swell house in Fifth Avenue, and the $20,000 he took every year for his job, and the elegant automobile he chased around to the houses of his rich congregation in. If he'd died in the slums on the east side I guess that newspaper wouldn't ever have heard of him, and that writer wouldn't have got dollars for the pretty language it was his job to scratch together for such an occasion."

"It doesn't sound nice put that way," sighed Hazel. "I suppose it's all competition even trying to make folks live right. I suppose that preacher was successful in his calling—the same as you are in yours. I suppose his human nature was no different to other folks'."

"That's it. Life's splendidly dishonest and a perfect sham. Come to think of it, Ananias must have been all sorts of a great man to be singled out of a world of liars. On the other hand, he'd have had some rival in the feller who first accused George Washington of never lying. Psha! life's a great play, and I'd hate it to be different from what it is. We're all just as dishonest as we can be and still keep out of penitentiary: which makes me feel mighty sorry for them that don't. From the fisherman to the Sunday-school teacher we're all liars, and if you charged us with it we'd deny it, or worse, and thereby add further proof to the charge. I've thought a deal over this hold-

up, and it seems to me those guys bluffed us some."

"You mean about the—ransom," said Hazel, the last sign of amusement dying swiftly out of her eyes.

"Why, yes." The millionaire smoked in silence for some moments. Then quite suddenly he removed the cigar from between his lips. "Maybe you don't know I'm working on a big land scheme in these parts. It seems to me some bright gang intend to roll me for my wad. I don't guess Slosson's in it."

"Then who is it, sir?" demanded the girl, with unconscious sharpness.

The man's steady eyes surveyed her through their half-closed lids. He shook his head.

"I can't just say—yet. We'll find out in good time." His smile was quietly confident. "Anyway, for the moment some one's got the drop on me, and I'll just have to sit around. But—it's pretty tough on you, Miss—Miss——"

"Mallinsbee," said Hazel, without thinking.

"Mallinsbee?"

The man's gray eyes became suddenly alert, and Hazel felt like killing herself. She believed, in that one unguarded moment, she had ruined everything. She held her breath and turned quickly towards the setting sun, lest her face should betray her.

Then her terror passed as she heard the quiet, kindly laugh of the man as he began speaking again.

"Well, Miss Mallinsbee, here we are, and here we've just got to stay. I came here to get the best of a deal. We're all out to do some one or something, somehow or somewhere. It don't much matter who. And when a man acts right he don't squeal when the other feller's on top. He just sits around till it's his move, and then he'll try and get things back. I'm not squealing. It's my turn to sit around—that's all. Meanwhile, with the comforts at my disposal—good wines, good cigars and mountain air—I'm having some vacation. If it weren't for that darned Chink with his detestable blue suit I'd——"

"Hush!" Hazel had turned and held up a warning finger.

In response the man glanced sharply about him. There, sure enough, standing silent and immovable at the corner of the building, was the hated vision of blue with its crowning features of dull yellow.

James Carbhoy flung himself back in his rocker. All the humor and pleasure had been banished from his strong face, and only disgust remained.

"Oh, hell!" he exclaimed, and flung his cigar with all his force in the direction of the intruder.

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE TRAIL

It was a night to remember, if for nothing else for the exquisite atmospheric conditions prevailing. The moon was at its full, like some splendid jewel radiating a silvery peace upon a slumbering world. The jeweled sky suggested the untold wealth of an infinite universe. The perfumed air filled lungs and nostrils with a beatific joy in living, and the darkened splendor of the crowding hills inspired a reverence in the human heart so profound, that it left scarce a place for the smallness of mundane hopes and yearnings. The splendor, the breadth of beauty sank into the human soul and left the spirit straining at its earthly bonds, and gazing with longing towards the infinite power which ordered its existence.

For ten miles of the journey from the old ranch-house Hazel rode under the sublime influence of feelings so inspired. Nothing of the conditions were new to her. The mountain nights in summer were as much a part of her existence as was the ranching life of her home. She knew them as she knew the work that filled her daylight hours. But their effect upon her never varied—never weakened. No familiarity with them could change that feeling of the infinite sublimity somewhere beyond the narrow confines of human life. She drank in the deep draughts of perfect life, she gazed abroad with shining eyes of simple happiness on the splendid world, and a superlative thankfulness to the Creator of all things that life had been thus vouchsafed her uplifted her heart and all that was spiritual within her.

The journey to her home was twenty miles, but her favorite mare possessed wings so far as its mistress was concerned. The distance was all too short for the splendid young body, and that youthful mood of delight. Hazel reveled in the expenditure of the energy required, as the mare, beneath her, seemed to revel in the physical effort of the journey.

For the greater part of the road the cobwebs of affairs she was engaged upon left Hazel indifferent. The delight of life left no room for them. But after the half way had been passed there came to her flashes of thought which reduced her feelings to a more human mood.

Nor was that mood of the easiest. She experienced feelings of disquiet, even alarm. She felt vexed, and a great resentment, and even genuine anger, began to take possession of her. But these were interspersed with moments when a certain irresponsibility and humor would not be denied, and underlying all and every other emotion was a great passionate longing, which she scarcely admitted even to herself.

Her mind was fixed upon two men: father and son. For the time at least, they were the pivot of all things worldly for her. In her thoughts the son possessed attributes little short of a demi-god, while the father had become a being endowed with a deep, reflected regard. There was room in her woman's heart for both in their respective places. She knew she loved them, and her variations of mood were inspired by the cruelly farcical atmosphere of the position surrounding them both. She was angry with Gordon, bitterly angry at one moment, at the next she reveled in the exquisite impudence of his daring. At one moment her woman's tender pity went out to the big-hearted man who had been submitted to such indignities by his own son and herself, and all those concerned in the conspiracy, and, at the next, she found herself smiling at the humor of his attitude towards his persecutors. Then, too, over all these complications of feeling she was stirred with alarm at that painful memory of the unguarded moment, when, lulled by her interest in the millionaire's talk, she had admitted her name to him. Visions of hideous possibilities rose before her eyes. If he should chance to know her father's name. Why not? Surely he knew. But after that one sharp interrogation he had given no sign.

She sighed a sort of half-hearted relief, but remained unconvinced. It was this last contingency which had inspired her night journey home. She had ridden out the moment she had been certain that their captive had retired for the night.

There were still some eight miles to go before the ranch would be reached when Hazel experienced a fright, which left her ready to turn and flee back over the way she had come as swiftly as the legs of her mare could carry her.

On clearing a bluff of spruce, around which her course lay, in the full radiance of the moon's high noon, she suddenly beheld a horseman riding towards her, a ghostly figure moving soundlessly over the high grass.

Such was the effect of this vision upon her, that, beyond being able to bring her mare to an abrupt halt, panic left her paralysed. In all her years she had never encountered a horseman riding late at night in the mountains. Who was he? Who could he be? And an eerie feeling set her flesh creeping at the ghostliness and noiselessness of his coming.

She sat there stupidly, her pretty cheeks ashen in the moonlight. And all the time the man was coming nearer and nearer, traveling the same trail she would have done had she pursued her course. Then an abject terror surged upon her. He must meet her!

In an instant her paralysis left her, and she gathered her reins to turn her mare about. But the maneuver was never effected. She had suddenly recognized the horse the man was riding. It was Sunset. The next moment she further recognized the broad shoulders of the man in the saddle, and a glad cry broke from her, and she urged her mare on to meet him.

"Gordon!" she cried, in a world of delight and relief as she came up with him.

"You, Hazel?" came the joyous response of her ghostly visitor.

"You just scared me all to death," protested the girl, as the big chestnut ranged up beside her.

"I did?" Gordon was smiling tenderly down at the pretty figure, so fascinating in the moonlight as it sat astride the brown mare.

"My, but I thought—I—oh, I don't know what I thought. But what are you doing around—now?"

The girl was smiling happily enough. Even in the silver of the moonlight it was obvious that the color had returned to her cheeks.

"I was going to ask you that," returned Gordon. "But I guess I best tell you things first." Then he began to laugh. "I was coming out to see you, but—not you only. Say, I'm just the weakest conspirator ever started out to trap a mouse. Look at me. Say, get a good look. It isn't the sort of thing you'll see every time you open your eyes. I was sick to death feeling the old dad was shut up a prisoner, and I felt I must get along, even if it was only just to get a peek, and be sure he wasn't

suffering."

Hazel's eyes were tenderly regarding the great creature in the bright moonlight. She had been so recently angry at this son's heartless action, that his expression of contrition made her feel all the more tender towards him.

"He's in bed, and—I'd guess he's snoring elegantly by now," she said, with a smile. "I—I waited to start out till he was in bed." Then her eyes met his. "What were you coming to—see me for?"

The direct challenge very nearly precipitated matters. Gordon had excuses enough for seeing her, but only one real purpose. He hesitated before replying.

"We've made good," he said at last, by way of subterfuge, and the girl drew a deep breath of joyous content.

"You've—made—good?" she questioned, more in the way of reassuring herself than desiring a reply.

Gordon moved his horse so that she could turn about.

"Let's go back to the—prison," he said, his words charged with the excited delight stirring within him.

"Yes, we've made good." The girl turned her mare about and the two moved on the way she had already come, side by side. "Listen, while I tell you. Say, I could sort of shout it around the hill-tops—if they weren't so snowy and cold. Snake's Fall is just a surging land market for us at Buffalo. There are real estate offices opening everywhere, and everybody you meet on the sidewalk is a broker of some sort. The Bude and Sideley folk turned their holdings loose directly we got the surveyors and engineers of the railroad up, and the folks all jumped. Then the men at Snake's, who held in ours, followed suit. But your father, bless him, held tight. The boom fairly rose to a shriek, and we've been fighting to sit tight, and let the prices go up skywards. Then we had a meeting, and your father loosened up a bit. Just to keep the spurt on. Meanwhile I've handled things down east, and kept the wires singing. The railroad have started a great advertising campaign at my orders. The coal company, too, are talking Snake's Fall, and Buffalo Point. In a month there'll be such a rush as only America, and this continent generally knows how to make. Even now sites are changing hands at ridiculous prices. Meanwhile I've got the railroad busy. Already ten construction trains have come through, and they've started on the new depot." He drew a deep sigh of satisfaction. Then in a sort of shamefaced manner he went on. "But I've had to weaken in the old dad's direction. I can't make good and leave him out all together. You see, that play of Slosson's in Snake's will have to be made good, and my father will have to make it that way. So I've got your father to give me a six months' option on a stretch of land adjoining the coalpits which he hadn't ceded to the Bude people. You see, if there's coal there it'll put my father right with the game, and we shan't have hurt him any. Meanwhile things will go on, and we'll have to keep the old dad for another month. Then I sell, and——"

"You'll have won out," broke in Hazel, her eyes shining in the moonlight. Then a shadow crossed her face. "But when your father knows what you've done? What then?"

Gordon seemed to consider his reply carefully.

"You can leave that to me, Hazel," he said at last, with a whimsical smile. "There's surely got to be a grand finale to this, and when it comes I'll still need your help. Say, why were you riding in to the ranch—at dead of night?"

The abrupt question shocked the girl out of her delighted content. The memory of her trouble came overwhelmingly upon her. But Gordon was waiting.

"You're making good, but I've made pretty bad," she said, thrusting a desire to burst into tears resolutely from her. "I'm just every sort of fool and I—don't know how much damage I haven't done. Everything's gone right until this evening. Hip-Lee has just been as near perfect as a Chinaman can be. We've carried out all our plans right through, and I've never been near your father without Hip-Lee looking on. That is—until this evening." The girl sighed. The confession of her blundering was hard to make. "It was this way," she went on presently. "Your father was out walking. I hadn't seen him return. I was in the kitchen fixing his supper, and it was sticky hot, and I just hated the flies, so I went out for a breath of air. Hip-Lee had been playing his spy game on your father. Well, I just stood out front of the house taking a look at the hills, and wishing I was amongst their snows, when your father spoke. He had got back, and was sitting outside the house, and, maybe, like me he was yearning for that snow. Well, I just couldn't run away—so we talked. I guess we'd talked quite awhile, and I'd kind of forgotten things, and in the middle of his talk he started to address me by my name, and got as far as 'Miss.' Then, without a thought, I spoke my name. He just seemed startled, but never said a word about it, and now I'm worried to death. Was there ever such——"

The girl broke off, and it seemed to Gordon, in spite of her attempted smile, she was very near tears. Instantly he smothered his own feelings of alarm at her story and endeavored to console her. He laughed, but in Hazel's hyper-sensitive condition of anxiety, his laugh lacked its

usual buoyancy.

"That's nothing to worry over," he said. "I'd say if your name had meant anything to him he wouldn't have given you breathing time before you'd learned a heap of things that wouldn't have sounded pretty. Dad's no end of a sport, but when he gets a punch, and the fellow who gives it him don't vanish quick, he's got a way of hitting back mighty hard. I don't guess that break's going to figure any in our play. He never said a word?"

"Not a word." Hazel tried to take comfort, but still remained unconvinced. "Anyway what could he do?"

Gordon remained serious for some moments. Then his eyes lit again.

"Not a thing," he said emphatically, and Hazel knew he meant it.

For some time they rode on in silence, and thought was busy with them both. Hazel was thinking of so many things, all of which somehow focussed round the man at her side, and her ardent desire to obey his lightest commands in the schemes of his fertile brain. Gordon had dismissed every other thought from his mind but the delightful companionship of this ride, which had come all unexpectedly. The girl's mare led slightly, and the sober chestnut kept his nose on a level with her shoulder, and thus Gordon was left free to regard the girl he loved without fear of embarrassment to her. But somehow Hazel was not unaware of his regard. A curious subconsciousness left her with the feeling that her every movement was observed, and a pleasant, excited nervousness began to stir her. She hastily broke the silence.

"You said you'd still need my help when—the grand finale came," she demanded.

"Sure," came the prompt reply. Then very slowly the man added; "I can't do anything without your help—now."

The girl glanced round quickly.

"You mean—with your father a prisoner?"

The man's smile deepened, and his blue eyes gazed thoughtfully, ardently, into the hazel eyes, which, in a moment, became hidden from him.

"I don't think I meant—quite that," he said.

The girl offered no reply, and the man went on.

"You see, we have become sort of partners in most everything, haven't we? I don't seem to think of anything without you being in it." Then he laughed, a little nervous laugh. "I don't try to either. Say, I went out to the cattle station, and had a look at Slosson the other day. The boys have got him pretty right, and—I felt sorry for him."

"Why?" Hazel asked her question without thinking. She somehow felt incapable of thought just now. She felt like one drifting upon some tide which was beyond her control, and the only guiding hand that mattered was this man's.

Gordon gave one of his curious short laughs, which might have meant anything.

"I don't know," he said. Then: "Yes, I do though. Think of a fellow who's had his business queered, who's staked a big gamble and lost, not only that, but the girl he's crazy about, and meanwhile is rounded up in a shack that wouldn't keep a summer shower out, and seems as though it was set up on purpose by some crazy genius as a sort of playground for every sort of wind ever blew. Say, if I lost my partner now, I'd—— Guess our partnership ought to expire in a month. This play will be through then."

"Yes."

With all her desire to talk on indifferently, Hazel could find no word to add to the monosyllable. She was trembling with a delightful apprehension she could not check. And somehow she had no desire to check it. This man was all powerful to sway her emotions, and she knew it. The moments were growing almost painful in the tenseness of her emotions.

"Another month. It's—awful for me to think of."

"Is it?"

The inanity of her remark would have made Hazel laugh at any other time. Now, it passed her by, its meaninglessness conveying nothing with the submerging of her humor in the sea of stronger emotions.

Gordon urged his horse to draw level with the mare. Then he deliberately drew it down to a walk on the rustling grass, and Hazel followed his example without protest. All about them was the delicate silver tracery of the moonlight through the trees. The warmth of the perfumed night air possessed a seductiveness only equaled by the night beauties of the scene about them. It was

such a moment when the most timorous lover must become emboldened, and emulate the bravest. But Gordon knew no timidity. His only fear was for failure. Had he realized the tumult which his words had stirred within this girl's bosom he might well have flung all hesitation to the winds. As it was he threw the final cast with all the strength of his virile, impetuous nature.

"Another month. Must it end then, Hazel?" He reached out and seized, with gentle firmness, the girl's bridle hand. "Must it? Say, can't it be partners—for life?" His eyes were very tender, but their humor was still lurking in their depths. He leaned towards her and the girl's hand remained unresistingly in his. "D'you know, dear, I sort of feel to-night I'd like to have a dozen Slossons standing around waiting, while I scrapped 'em all in turn for you. Maybe that don't tell you much. It can't mean anything to you. It means this to me. It means I just want to be the fellow who's got to see to it that life runs as smooth as the wheels of a Pullman for you. It means I don't care a thing for anything else in the world but you, not even this play we're at now. I guess I just loved you the day I first saw you, and have gone on loving you worse and worse ever since, till I don't guess there's any doctor, but having you always with me, can save me from an early grave." Somehow the two horses had come to a standstill. Nor were they urged on. "I just want you, Hazel, all the time," Gordon went on, more and more tenderly. "You'll never get to know how badly I want you. Will you—shall it be—partners—always?"

The girl was gazing out over the moonlight scene so that Gordon could see nothing of the light of happiness shining in her pretty eyes. All he knew was the trembling of the hand he still held in his. Then, suddenly, while he waited, he felt the girl's other hand, soft, warm, full of that quiet strength which he knew to be hers, close over his, and a wild thrill swept through his whole body.

"Is it 'yes'?" he demanded, with a passionate pressure of his hand, and a great light burning in his eyes. "Mine! Mine! For—as long as we live?"

The girl still made no verbal reply, but she bowed her head and gently raised his hand, and tenderly pressed it to her soft bosom. In an instant she lay crushed in his arms while the two horses, with heads together, seemed lost in a friendly discussion of the extraordinary proceedings going on between their riders.

What they thought about them was apparently on the whole favorable, for presently, with mute expressions of good will, their handsome heads drew apart and lowered significantly. The next moment they were enjoying a pleasant siesta, such as only a four-footed creature can accomplish standing without risk to life and limb.

Half an hour later they were wide awake and full of bustling activity. The closed heels on their saddle cinchas warned them that even lovers' madness has its limits of duration, and that the practical affairs of life must inevitably become paramount in the end.

So they answered the call, and raced down the trail in the cool of the night.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN NEW YORK

Mrs. James Carbhoy had endured anything but a happy time for several weeks. She had received no news from her beloved son; her husband had spirited himself away on business and left her without a word of definite information as to his whereabouts; while even the trying presence of her young daughter was denied her, since she had been forced to dispatch that personification of childish willfulness to their estate at Tuxedo, that she might be put through a course of disciplining by her various governesses.

She was alone, she reminded herself not less than three times a day, and to be alone in her great mansion at Central Park was the limit of earthly punishment as she understood it. She detested it. She hated the hot summer landscape of the park; she was worried to death by the chorus of automobile hooters as the cars sped up and down the great asphalt way; she felt that the red-and-white stone palaces with which she was surrounded were the ugliest things ever hidden from blind eyes, and an army of servants could be, and was, the most nerve-racking thing she had ever been called upon to endure. For two peas she would pack a bag—no, her maid would have to pack it; she was denied even that pleasure—and hie herself to Europe.

This was something of the condition of mind to which she was reduced, when one morning two events happened almost simultaneously which changed the whole aspect of things, and created in her something approaching a desire to continue the dreary monotony of life.

The first was the advent of her mail, with a long letter from her son *dated at Buffalo Point*, and the second was an urgent request from her husband's manager, Mr. Harker, desiring

permission to wait upon her, as he had the most encouraging news from the long-lost Gordon and her husband's affairs generally.

Gordon's mother did not read her son's letter at once. She saw the heading and glanced at the opening paragraph. The satisfaction so inspired caused her to set it aside for careful perusal after her breakfast. Mr. Harker would be up to see her at about eleven o'clock. That would give her ample time to have digested its contents before he arrived.

For the first time in weeks she ate an ample breakfast at her customary early hour. She further forgot to make her maid's life a burden during the process of dressing, and she even enjoyed glancing over the advertisements of the daily newspapers. Then came the hour of seclusion in her boudoir when she yielded herself to the perusal of her boy's letter.

"BUFFALO POINT,
Near Snake's Fall.

"DEAREST MUM:

"It seems so long since I sent you any mail, and I seem to have so much news to tell you, and I've so completely forgotten what I have already told you, that I hardly know where to begin. However, you'll see by the heading of this letter I am at Buffalo Point, and am glad to say I have received a visit from the dear old Dad, who is just as happy as any man of his devotion to work can be—on vacation. His visit to me here has placed me in a position of great trust in his affairs in the neighborhood, and I am very proud that, through my own efforts, I have been so placed. After this I feel that the dear old Dad will never have cause to question my ability in dealing with big affairs. I feel he will acknowledge that the seed of his example has really fallen on fruitful soil, and that, after all, perhaps I shall yet prove a worthy son of a great father.

"This, I guess, brings me to the discussion of a subject which has kind of interested me some these last days. It is the modern understanding of filial duty. I s'pose even such a duty changes in its aspect, as everything else seems to change, with the passage of time. Chasing around in the dark days of pre-civilized times filial duty seemed pretty clearly marked. One of the first duties of a son was, when his mother wasn't around to claim the privilege, to get in the way when his father wanted to hit something with his club. He was also kind of handy as a sacrifice, either well broiled or minced into fancy chunks, to make his father's Gods feel good and get benevolent. Then he was mighty useful doing chores around the home, so his father didn't have to do more work than it took him filling his stomach with Saurian steaks and Pterodactyl cutlets, and getting drunk on a sort of beer, which his wife had contracted the habit of making for him in the intervals between being laid out cold with a stone club.

"There don't seem to be much doubt about those days. A son's filial duty lasted just as long as his father could enforce it with physical discipline. When he couldn't do it that way any longer, then the son and father generally made a big talk together, and whatever odds and ends of the father could be collected at the finish of the pow-wow were handed over to some local soup kitchen to make stock.

"Then the son usually took a wife, and so the same old play went on.

"With variations and moderations these things seem to have gone on, on some such general lines, right down to our present day. In some grades of present-day life I don't think there's such a heap of change as you'd guess. The conditions prevail, only the weapons and things are different. However, that's by the way. The thing that requires careful study is how far filial duty is justified.

"Filial duty is a pretty arbitrary thing when a man who can really think looks into it. I maintain that obligation is too much imposed upon offspring. I contend they don't owe a thing to their parents. It's the parents who owe to the offspring. This may shock you, but I hope you will put all personal feeling aside and regard it in the nature of an academic discussion. First of all, the fact of life is dependent upon the whim of parents to impose it. It is not a thing which a child owes gratitude for. Say, take a feller who can't swim, tie half a ton of lead around his neck and boost him into a whirlpool full of rocks and things, and ask him for gratitude. I'm open to gamble when he gets his breath he won't say a thing—not a thing—about gratitude. Maybe he'll remember every other emotion ever given to erring humanity, but I don't guess he'd be able to spell the word gratitude, let alone talk it.

"We'll pass the subject of life for the moment. We've got it. We didn't want, but we got. And all the kicking won't alter it. Now filial duty demands obedience, and parents start right in from the first to make a kid's life a burden that way. Say, we'll take that whirlpool racket again. It's like two folks standing high and dry on a rock above it, and firing stones all around the poor darned fool struggling to win out. It don't matter which way he turns he's headed off with a rock dropped plumb ahead of him. Those rocks are labeled 'obey.' Say, after about twenty years of dodging those rocks parents 'll tell that feller of all they did for him in his youth, and say he's ungrateful just because he's learned enough sense to realize his parents are fools, anyway, and ought to be petrified mummies in a public museum.

"One of the worst sins of parents toward children is the fact that as soon as they take to sitting around in rockers, and their hinges start to creak when they get up, they don't ever seem to remember the time when their joints didn't have to make queer noises. When folks get that way they reckon it's the duty of all offspring just to sit around and gape in fool credulity, while they tell 'em what wonderful folk their parents—used to be, and how they—the children—if they lived a century, could never hope to be half as wonderful. A really bright kid generally hopes that for once his parent is talking truth. I say it with all respect that the gentlest, most harmless, most inoffensive father would resort to any subterfuge to have his son think he could lick creation if he fancied that way; and there isn't a woman so almighty plain but what she'll contrive to get her daughters—while they're still children—crazy enough to believe she was the beauty of her family, and that all their good looks are due to her side of the matrimonial contract.

"Of course, it isn't a desirable thought to picture your mother playing at holding hands in dark corners with fellers who never had a hundred-to-one chance of being your father; also it isn't just pleasant to speculate on the tricks she had to play to get your father to the jumping-off mark; neither do you care to dwell on what she thought of the chorus girls your father was in the habit of buying wine for, and decorating up with fancy clothes and jewels in his spare moments. You don't feel it's a nice thing to think of the numbers of times some one else has had to take off your father's boots for him overnight, and bathe his aching head with ice-water to get him down town in the morning to his office. But it wouldn't hurt you a thing if parents made a point of remembering all these things for themselves, and would give up making you quit playing parlor games during sermon in church on Sundays and inventing your own words to the hymn tunes.

"Now let's jump to what I call the breaking-point of filial duty. It's the point when a kid gets old enough to master the inner meaning of the expression 'damn fool,' which has probably been liberally applied to him for years. It's the moment when physical discipline can no longer obtain for—physical reasons. It's the point when two real live men, or two real live women, face each other with a contentious situation lying between them. Where does obligation lie? Does it remain —anyway?

"In Nature it does not. In human nature it remains—chiefly because of undue sentimentalism. Now sentimentalism should be a luxury, and not a law. This is obvious to any mind not suffocated by the gases of decadence. I'd like to say Nature's laws are sane and just, and, since they are inspired by a great and wise Providence, it's not reasonable to guess they can be improved upon by a psalm-smiting set of folks, who spend their whole lives in wrapping 'emselves around with cotton batten to keep out the wholesome draughts of Nature's lungs.

"So I feel that when the breaking-point of filial duty is reached it is no longer mother and daughter, father and son, in the practicalities of life. Take commerce. Father and son are in competition. Each is fighting for his own. How far is a son justified in emptying an automatic pistol into his father's food depot, when that mistaken parent guesses he's yearning to storm his son's stronghold of commercial enterprise? How far is that father justified in doping his son's liquor, so he won't lie awake at nights planning to roll him for his wad next morning? Take a daughter and her momma. Most mothers act as though they had to live all their lives with their daughters' husbands. And most daughters act as though they preferred their mommas should. I ask: how far has a mother right to butt in to run her daughter's home doings, and so muss up for some one else what she was never able to do right for herself? Why shouldn't a daughter be allowed to make her own mess of things, and later on, when she collects sense, clean it up again the best she knows?

"These are questions in my mind. These are questions I don't just seem able to answer right myself, and sort of feel they'd have given old Sol some insomnia, in spite of all his glory over the baby episode he made such a song about. Well, I put 'em down here, and maybe you can tell me about 'em, and, anyway, they make some problem.

"Maybe I haven't set out my news to the best advantage, but my mind is very busy with fixing things as they should go. You see, I'm working hard in the old Dad's interest, and am hoping soon to get that little word of approval from him which means so much, coming from so great a man. I am looking forward to seeing you again soon, and hope to see your dear, smiling face and pretty eyes just as bright and happy as I always remember them. Give my love to our Gracie, and tell her that the only way to get rid of those peculiarly spindle lower legs, which have always been one of her worst physical defects, is to adopt ankle exercises. It's a defect, like many others in her character, which can be improved with conscientious effort and patience.

"Your loving son,
"GORDON.

"P.S.—Your future daughter-in-law is just crazy to be taken into your motherly fold.

"G."

Mr. Harker's face was wreathed in smiles at the thought of the pleasant news it was his good fortune to be conveying to the wife of his chief. His smile remained until he heard the trim maid's announcement at the door of Mrs. Carbhoy's boudoir. Then the smile vanished, as though it had

never been, and his well-nourished features became an assortment of troubled bewilderment. Furthermore, within five minutes of his ushering into the lady's presence he had registered a solemn vow that celibacy should remain his lot, until the day that saw his ample remains become a subject for cooking operations by the crematorium experts.

Mr. Harker was certainly unfortunate in his selection of the moment at which to pay his call. Mrs. James Carbhoy had had half an hour since reading her son's letter, in which to pursue that hateful hyphenated word "daughter-in-law" through every darkened channel of her somewhat limited mental machinery.

Daughter-in-law! It was everywhere. She could not lose sight of it. She could not escape its haunting meaning. It pursued her wherever she went. It was there, lurking amidst the folds of her gowns if she peered inside the great hanging wardrobes. It danced like a will-o'-the-wisp in every mirror which her troubled eyes chanced to encounter. It was interwoven with the patterns of the carpets; and the wall-paperings found a lurking-place for it amidst the unreal foliage which adorned them. It laughed at her when she angrily turned away to avoid it, and when she endeavored to defy it its mocking only increased. So it was that the unoffending Harker encountered the full tide of her angry alarm and maternal despair.

Mr. Harker had prepared a well-turned opening for his excellent news. But it was never used. Even as his lips moved to speak they remained sealed, held silent by the bitter cry of outraged maternal pride.

"He's married!" she cried. "Married—and I—I have never been consulted!"

Mr. Harker felt as though he had been caught up in the whirl of a physical encounter in which his opponent held all the advantage.

Mrs. Carbhoy waited for no comment. She rushed headlong, following up her advantage, smashing in "lefts" and "rights" indiscriminately.

"It's disgraceful—terrible! The ingratitude of it! After all his father and I have done for him! To think how we've always guided and taught him! The callous selfishness! The moment he's out of our sight—this—this is what happens. He's picked up with some wicked, designing female, whose father's certain to be a—a—gaolbird—or, anyway, ought to be. Not a word to a soul. We—we don't know who she is—or—or what. He don't even say her name. Daughter-in-law! It's—it's —— Mr. Harker, I'm just wondering when I'll come over all crazy."

Mr. Harker welcomed the pause.

"You say Mr. Gordon's married?" he demanded incredulously.

"Yes—no. That is, he—he says 'your future daughter-in-law'!"

Mr. Harker breathed a deep relief and strove to smile confidence upon his chief's wife.

"Ah, yes. Mr. Gordon was always one for the girls. But he wouldn't make a fool of himself that way——"

In a moment the second round of the battle was raging.

"Fool? Fool? Every man's a fool, if some woman chooses!" cried Mrs. Carbhoy, and promptly hurled herself into a bitter tirade against her sex, sparing no race of monsters from likeness to it.

Mr. Harker was forced to submit from sheer inability to compete with the rapid flow of expression. But later on he had his opportunity at what he considered to be the termination of the "second round," while his opponent retired to her corner to be fanned by her seconds.

"Anyway, ma'am, if he's not yet married there's still hope. I guess Mr. Carbhoy's wise to what's doing with him. You see, he's been there with him."

"James Carbhoy!" The contemptuous emphasis on her husband's name opened the "third round," and Mr. Harker felt that the timekeeper had called "time" before he was ready.

For three full minutes the scornful wife of the millionaire recited an amplified denunciation upon husbands in general and millionaires in particular. But even so the round had to come to its natural conclusion, and when they were both resting once more in their "corners," Mr. Harker achieved something almost approaching success.

"You know, Mrs. Carbhoy, I was feeling pretty good coming along here in my automobile. Mr. Gordon's something more to me than just your son. We're real good friends, and I was feeling as anxious for his future as maybe you were. Well, when I got word from your husband at Snake's saying that he'd turned our affairs over to Mr. Gordon I was real glad, and I felt now here was the boy's chance. Then, day after day, along come his instructions, and I saw by the grip he'd got on things he'd taken his chance, and was pushing it through with as much smartness as Mr. Carbhoy himself might have shown. I was more than gratified, ma'am. Why, only to-day I've received word of a big coal option he's taken for us. As he's got it it's something for nothing. Nobody could have done better, not even your husband, ma'am. I really can't think there's going to be any mistakes

about—strange females."

The man's tribute had a mollifying effect upon the mother. But she was still the "mother" rather than a creature of logic. She saw her boy being led to his undoing by some designing creature of her own sex, and her instinct warned her of the hideous dangers to millionaires' sons inherent in so guileful a race.

"If I could only feel that he was experienced in the world," she said helplessly. "But what does our poor Gordon know of women?"

Mr. Harker smiled. He was thinking with the intimacy of one man who knows another. He knew, too, something of the way in which Gordon's money had generally been spent.

"We must hope the best, ma'am," he said, with a hypocritical sigh. "He's evidently not married, so—what do you intend to do about it while Mr. Carbhoy is on the coast?"

"Do? Do? Why, I shall just go up to Snake's whatever-it-is, or Buffalo what's-its-name, and—and——"

"I should wait awhile, ma'am, if I were you," Mr. Harker interrupted her, fearing another outburst. "I'm expecting David Slosson in the city soon. He's one of our confidential men who's been working up at Snake's for us. I haven't heard from him for quite a while. He's sure to be along down soon, because he's got to make a report. Maybe he can tell us just how things are. Anyway, I wouldn't go up there. It's a queer, wild sort of place, and in no way fit for you."

"Will Slosson be around soon?"

"Sure, ma'am."

"Then I'll wait," cried the troubled mother, without cordiality. Then she appealed to the man who had always been something more than a mere commercial figure in her husband's life. "You know, if anything went wrong with my boy, Mr. Harker, it would just break my heart. I—I couldn't bear it. But I tell you right here there's no wretched female going to play her tricks on our Gordon with me around, and while I've got James Carbhoy's millions to my hand. And if your man Slosson don't give us satisfactory news of the boy, then, if Snake's what's-its-name were the worst place on earth—I should make it."

"If it comes to that, ma'am, there are other folks feel that way, too," said the manager earnestly. "But meanwhile I'd say don't worry a thing."

"I don't!" snapped the mother sharply. "The person who'll need to do all the worrying is that—female."

CHAPTER XXIV

PREPARING FOR THE FINALE

"I'm getting scared, Gordon. Real truth, I am."

Hazel was in the saddle. Gordon had just mounted Sunset. It was the close of a long, arduous, triumphant day for Gordon, and he was feeling very happy, though mentally weary. The horses moved off before he made any reply. He had just dismissed Peter McSwain and Mike Callahan, with whom he had been in close consultation, and Hazel's father was still within the office to see to its closing for the night and the departure of the clerical staff.

The way lay towards the ranch, and the trail the horses were taking skirted the new township, now no longer a waste of untrodden grass, but a busy camp with a strongly flowing human tide.

Hazel had come to meet him at her lover's urgent request, and she was glad enough to get away from the old ranch house, where the charge of her captive there was seriously beginning to trouble her. Now she had at last voiced something of those feelings which the rapid passing of the weeks had steadily inspired. She knew that her peace of mind demanded some change from this worrying situation. In her loyalty she had struggled to perform her share in the conspiracy. She knew, too, that she had succeeded fairly well, and that her efforts were all appreciated to their full. She had contrived that her lover's father should never know a moment's discomfort. That his life in captivity should be made as easy and pleasant as possible. There were no signs that it had been otherwise, but now, seven weeks had elapsed since his arrival, and what had just seemed a scandalous joke to her originally, had become a sort of painful nightmare which she was longing to throw off. The moment she and Gordon were actually alone, she had been impelled to break the silence which was steadily undermining her nerve.

Gordon's horse was close abreast of the brown mare, and its rider smiled down from his great height upon the pretty tailored figure of the girl who had become all the world to him.

"I know," he said sympathetically. "It's sort of that way with me, too. I don't just mean I'm scared. There's nothing for me to be scared about. It's—sort of conscience with me. As for your father—say"—his smile broadened—"he's taken to his eye-patch with everybody—me, too. I guess that means he's worried no end."

"What—what are you going to do—then?"

Hazel eagerly watched that big, open, ingenuous face with its widely smiling blue eyes. And, watching it, she discerned added signs of a growing humor. Finally he laughed outright.

"Say, we're just the limit for a bunch of conspirators. Yes—the limit. You're the only one of us who's had the moral courage to put your feelings into words. We're all scared. We've all been scared these weeks. Your father's scared, so he can't look at any man with two eyes. Peter's all of a shiver every time he comes within hailing distance of the sheriff. As for Mike—well, Mike's sold all his holdings, and is bursting to sell his livery business, all but one team, so he'll have the means of skipping the border at a minute's notice. Say, have you figured out how we stand? How I stand? Well, from a point of law I guess I'm a good candidate for ten years' penitentiary. I've kidnapped two men; one's a dirty dog, anyway, and the other's one of the biggest millionaires in the country. I've fraudulently played up a railroad. I've started this boom on the biggest fraud ever practiced. I've—say, ten years! Why, I guess the tally of this adventure looks to me like twenty in the worst penitentiary to be found in the country. It—makes me perspire to think of it."

He was laughing in a perfectly reckless fashion, and, in spite of her very real fears, Hazel perforce found herself joining in.

"It's desperate, Gordon," she cried. "And as for you, who worked it all out, and led it, you—you are the dearest blackguard ever breathed." Then quite suddenly her eyes sobered, and her apprehension returned with a rush. "But how long is—it to last? I—I can't go on much longer, and your father's getting restive and suspicious."

Gordon reached down and patted Sunset's crested neck.

"It's finished now. That's why I asked you to come and meet me. I've sold."

"You've sold?"

In a moment the last shadow of fear had passed out of the girl's pretty eyes. Now she was agog with excited admiration.

"Yes." The man nodded. "It had to be done carefully. I've been selling quietly for days and now it's finished. I didn't get the prices I hoped quite, but that was because I felt I dared not wait longer to clear up the general mess I'd made. Your father helped me, and I now sit here with a roll of precisely one hundred and five thousand dollars, and a definite promise to your father to fix things with the great James Carbhoy so no trouble is coming to any one—not even Slosson. I don't know. Now it's all over I'm sort of sorry. You know this sort of thing—the excitement of beating folks—is a great play. I want to be at it all the time."

"You've got to meet your father yet," said the girl warningly.

"The old dad? Why, yes, I s'pose I have." Gordon chuckled. "Say, I don't wonder folks taking to crooked ways. They just set your blood tingling like—like a glass of champagne on an empty stomach. Just look out there." He pointed at the new township. "Say, isn't it wonderful? All in a few weeks. And all the result of one man's crookedness."

"And your father has been a—prisoner—the whole time. Over seven weeks," rebuked the girl.

"But it's only three weeks since I met you that night on the trail, Hazel. No other time concerns me. Not even the dear old dad's captivity. That was the beginning of all things that matter for me."

"You seem to date everything around that—ridiculous episode," said Hazel slyly. "I——"

"I do."

"Don't interrupt me, sir. I was going to assure you that your proper spirit should be one of contrition for what you have made your father endure."

"It is."

"You said you didn't care."

"I don't."

"Then——"

Gordon burst out into a happy laugh.

"Don't you see, dear? I just don't care for, or think about anything else in the world. You—you—you are just mine, so what's the use of talking of the old dad."

"Really? True? True?" The girl's tender eyes were melting as they gazed up into her lover's. "More to you than all—this?" She indicated the busy life on the new township. The miracle, as she regarded it, which he had worked. The man smiled, his eyes full of a great, tender love. "I'm glad," the girl sighed. "It isn't always so with men—where the making of money is concerned, is it?" She breathed a great contentment and happiness. "Yes, I'm—so glad. It's the same with me, but—I want all this to go on right—because of you. I want your success. I want your success as a man, and—with your father. I'm very jealous for those things now. You see, you belong to me, don't you?" She turned and gazed away across the plain. "Oh, it's good to see it all—to see all the busy work going on. Look there—and there," she pointed quickly in many directions. "Buildings going up. Temporary buildings. The substantial structures to come later. Then the road gangs at work. The carpenters at the sidewalks. The surveyors. The teams and wagons. Above all, that depot being built with all expedition by—your father." She laughed happily and clapped her hands. "It's all growing every day. A mushroom town. And you—you have made that money your great father dared you to make. Dared you—you, and you have made it out of him! Oh, dear! the humor of it is enough to make a cat laugh. Here you, by sheer audacity and roguery, have held up a railroad and coolly played the highwayman on your own father!"

Gordon shook his head.

"Call it grabbing opportunity. It was an opportunity which came my way through the trifling oversight of forgetting to return the private code book which the old dad had entrusted to my care. Say, I can never thank the dad enough for that half-hour talk in his office which sent me out into the wilderness. If he hadn't handed it to me, I should never have blundered into Snake's; and if I hadn't blundered into Snake's I shouldn't have found you. I guess my parent's just one of the few to whom a son owes anything. He gave me life, but didn't stop at that. He gave me you."

Hazel's eyes were smiling happily.

"And in return you lay violent hands on him, and incarcerate him while you do your best to rob him."

"It sounds pretty bad."

"If I didn't know you I'd say that gratitude fell out of your cradle and killed herself when the fairies got around at your birth. But you didn't ask me to ride all these miles in to—to say just all these nice things to me, Gordon? Besides, now you've completed your—graft, what about your poor long-suffering prisoners? How are you going to save us all from the consequences of your evil ways? Your father will hate me." The girl sighed in pretended despair. "He'll never consent to—to——"

"Our marriage? Say, if I'm a judge of things I'll have to stand by so he don't embrace you too often, himself."

They both laughed like the two happy children they were. There was no cloud that could mar the sun of their delight now. Hazel, for all her fears, had perfect faith in this great reckless creature. She had never been able to obscure the memory of his battle with Slosson on her behalf. Her faith was unbounded.

So they rode on, leaving the busy new world the man had created behind them, as they made their way on towards the ranch. They were leaving everything behind them, the shadows and sunlight of past strenuous days, which is the way of youth. They gazed ahead towards the future with every confidence, and lived in a perfect present which contained only their two selves.

It was not until they had nearly reached the ranch, and the wide pasture stocked with grazing cattle came into view, that the girl was able to pin her lover down to the urgent matters which lay ahead of him. Then she received from that simple creature the brief account of his intentions. For a moment she was staggered. Then, after a brief digestion of the details, she began to laugh. The rank absurdity and impudence of them took her fancy, and she found herself caught in the humor of it all, and ready again to carry out his lightest wish.

"It's still the same, you see," Gordon finished up. "I still want you, and your precious help, the same as I always shall. I just can't do a thing without you, and as long as you are with me, why, I don't guess failure's got a chance of getting its nose in front. I've got it all fixed, if you'll play your part. All I ask is, for the Lord's sake don't start in to laugh at the critical time. I want you scared to death till I appear, and then you'll just need to chase up an attack of hysterics or something, throw your heels around and yell blue murder, and finish up by grabbing me around the neck, and fainting dead away with happiness. The rest I'll see to. It's some situation for you, but don't worry when the limelight leaves you in the dark and finds its way to me. It's just the sort of thing you can find in any old dime novel. The heroines always act that way, and the hero, too. When you get back, start right in to think about every dime story you've ever read. Remember all the things the heroines ever did, and then do 'em all yourself. See? Guess that isn't as clear as it might be, but when you've filtered it through that bright little head of yours it'll be like spring

water in a moss-grown mountain creek."

"Whatever will he say when he knows?" laughed the girl.

"Say? well, that's not an easy guess," retorted Gordon, with a responsive laugh. "But, anyway, it's dead sure he'll think a heap more. Say, there's just one thing more. When you come-to out of that joyous faint, you got to leave us together for half an hour. Maybe you'll have some sort of preparation to make, or something. Sort of stagger out of the room supported by me, and if Hip-Lee attempts to butt in during that half hour—kill him."

"You really want me to do—all this?" Hazel's laughing eyes were raised questioningly.

"Everything, but—the killing."

"The fainting—really?"

"Sure." The man's eyes opened wide. "It's the picture. It's the reality. It's the local color."

"Oh, dear!" laughed Hazel, as they rode up to the ranch house. "I suppose I've got to do it."

"You will?"

Gordon flung himself out of the saddle. Hazel laughingly held out her hand in assurance.

"My hand on it, Gordon, dear," she cried.

The man seized it in both of his. Then, regardless of what sharp eyes might be peeping in their direction, he reached up, and, catching her about the waist, drew her down towards him till her head was level with his, and kissed her rapturously.

"Say, you're the greatest little woman on earth, and—I love you to death."

Hazel hastily drew herself out of his strong arms, and, with flushed face, straightened herself up in the saddle.

"And you are the greatest and most ridiculous creature ever let loose to roam this world—and I—love you for it."

The man laughed. Hazel's laugh joined in.

"Then—to-night?"

Hazel nodded.

"Good-by, dear—till to-night."

CHAPTER XXV

THE RESCUE

It was nearly midnight. The house was quiet. It was so still as to suggest no life at all within its simple, hospitable walls. It was in darkness, too, at least from the outside, for all curtains had been drawn for the night, with as much care as though it were a dwelling facing upon some busy thoroughfare in a city.

But, late as the hour was, the occupants of the old ranch house were not in bed. Hazel was awake, and sitting expectantly waiting in her bedroom, while somewhere within the purlieus of the kitchen Hip-Lee sat before an open window in the darkness, doubtless dreaming wakefully of some flea-ridden village up country in his homeland.

Upstairs, too, there were no signs of those slumbers which were so long overdue. Mr. James Carbhoy was seated in a comfortable rocker-chair adjacent to his dressing bureau, making an effort to become interested in the "History of the Conquest of Mexico" by the light of a well-trimmed oil lamp.

Not one word, however, of the pages he had read had conveyed interest to his preoccupied mind. It is doubtful if their meaning had been conveyed with any degree of continuity. He was irritable—irritable and a shade despondent.

He had been a captive in that valley for over seven weeks, and the imprisonment had begun to tell upon his stalwart hardihood. Seven long weeks of his own company, under easy and even pleasant circumstances. Even Hazel's company, shadowed as she was by the hated Hip-Lee, had

been denied him. Had it been otherwise he might have felt less dispirited, for he liked and admired her; and, in spite of the fact that on that one memorable occasion when he had talked to her alone she had betrayed, what he now was firmly convinced was her own perfidious share in his kidnapping, he was human enough to disregard it, and only remember that she was an extremely pretty and wholly charming creature.

Yes, he knew now that he had been duped by this daughter of Mallinsbee, whom he knew owned Buffalo Point, and the whole thing had been a financial coup engineered by the "smarts" who belonged to his faction. He had solved the whole problem of his captivity in one revealing flash, the moment he had learned that this girl was the daughter of Mallinsbee. He had needed no other information. His keenly trained mind, with its wide understanding of the methods of financial interests, had driven straight to the heart of the matter. It was only the details which had been lacking. But even these had, in a measure, been filled in during his long hours of solitude and concentrated thought.

It was some of the obscured riddles which beset him now, as they had beset him for days. He could not account for his own confidential agent Slosson in the matter. Had he been bought over? It seemed impossible, since Slosson had advised the depot remaining at Snake's Fall, which was against Mallinsbee's interests. Had he been dealt with, too? It seemed more likely. But if this were so it made the daring or desperation of the whole coup suggest to his mind that he was dealing with men of unusual caliber, and consequently the situation possessed for him possibilities of a most unpleasant character.

Then, again, the fact that they were content to leave him unapproached in his captivity puzzled and disquieted him even more. What could they achieve with regard to the railroad without his authority? Nothing, positively nothing, he assured himself. Then what was the purpose to be served? He could not even guess, and the uncertainty of it all annoyed, irritated, worried him as the time went on.

His mind was full of all these concerns as he sat reading the romantic story of a people with impossible names, and so he lost all the beauties of one of the most perfect romances in the world. Finally, he set the book aside and prepared for bed and more hours of worried sleeplessness.

James Carbhoy was a typical New Yorker of the best type. In an unexaggerated way he was fastidious of his appearance and gave a careful regard to his bodily welfare. He was a man who luxuriated in cleanly habits of living, and his linen was a sort of passion with him. In his captivity he had been well cared for in this respect, and the only cause he had for complaint was the absence of his daily bath, which he seriously deplored.

Now he went to the old-fashioned washstand, prepared for his nightly ablutions, and laid himself out a clean suit of pyjamas. Then he divested himself of some of his upper garments. He had just started to remove his shirt, and one arm still remained in its sleeve as he proceeded to remove it coatwise, when all further action was quite suddenly suspended and he stood listening.

A sound had reached his quick ears, a curious sound which, at that hour of the night, was quite incomprehensible to him. After some breathless moments he abandoned the divestment of his clothing and swiftly restored his coat and vest. Then he extinguished his light and drew the curtains from before the window and opened it further. He sat down on his bedstead and, resting an elbow on the window-ledge, gazed out into the starlit, moonless night.

The sound which had held his attention was still evident. It was the sound of galloping horses in the distance, the soft plod of many hoofs over the rich grass of the valley. It was faint but distinct, and, to this man's inexperienced ears, suggested a large party of horses, probably horsemen, approaching his prison. With what object? he wondered, and, wondering, a feeling of excitement took possession of him.

Five minutes later his attention was distracted to another direction. Other sounds reached him, sounds which emanated from close about his prison itself. There was a movement going on just below him, and horses were moving about, apparently somewhere in front, where he knew the corrals to be. His excitement increased. In all his long weeks of imprisonment he had seen nothing of his captors and no signs of them. Now, apparently, they were below him, possibly keeping guard, and he wondered if they had been there every night, silent warders, whose presence had been all undiscovered by himself.

It was difficult, difficult to understand or to believe. Yet there was no doubt that men were gathered below; he could faintly hear their voices talking in hushed tones, and, equally, he could plainly hear the sound of their horses. He wished there was a moon to give him light enough to see what was going on.

But now the more distant sounds had grown louder, and as they grew the voices below spoke in less guarded tones. And from the manner of their speech the listening man knew that something serious was afoot.

A sudden resolve now formulated in his mind, and he left his place at the window and stood up. Then he moved swiftly to his door and opened it. The house seemed wrapped in silence, and

he moved out to the head of the small flight of stairs leading to the floor below. He passed down and reached the door of the parlor.

Here he paused for a moment listening. All was still within, and he cautiously opened the door. The lamp was lit, and, standing beside the table, upon which the breakfast things were already set, he discovered the figure of the daughter of Mallinsbee with her back turned towards him. There was another figure present, too, and, to his intense chagrin, the millionaire beheld the yellow features of Hip-Lee near the curtained window.

However, he passed into the room, and Hazel turned confronting him. He gazed intently into her face, so serious and apparently troubled. The yellow lamplight imparted a curious hue, and the man fancied she looked seriously frightened.

"What's happening?" he demanded, and an unusual brusqueness was in his tone.

The girl's eyes surveyed his expression swiftly. She looked for something she feared to discover there, and the faintest sigh of relief escaped her as she realized that her fears were unfounded.

"That's what we—are trying to find out," she replied, her words accompanied by a glance of simple, half-fearful helplessness.

The man checked the reply which promptly rose to his lips. He remembered in time that this girl was the daughter of Mallinsbee and that she was exceedingly pretty. To the former he had no desire to give anything away, while to the latter he desired to display every courtesy.

"Our guards seem to be on the alert, and—somebody is approaching," said the millionaire, with a baffling smile. "If it weren't such a peaceful spot I'd say there was an atmosphere of—trouble."

"I—I sort of feel that way, too," said Hazel in a scared manner. She had gathered all her histrionic abilities together, and intended to use them. "I wonder what trouble it is?"

"Seems as if it was for the men who—took us," observed Carbhoy, with a dryness he could not quite disguise.

"You—mean our folks have located our whereabouts and—are going to rescue us?"

The millionaire smiled into the innocent, questioning eyes, which, he knew, concealed a humorous guile.

"I didn't just mean that," he said. "Maybe the trouble won't come yet." He glanced at the Chinaman standing sphinx-like at the curtains. "Must he remain?" he said, appealing directly to the girl.

Hazel felt the necessity for a bold move.

"Don't let him worry you. We can't help ourselves. I dare not risk offending him." She conjured a well-feigned shudder.

The millionaire laughed, and his laugh left the girl troubled and disconcerted. She would have liked to know what lay behind it. However, she kept to her attitude of fear. She must play her part to the end.

"Hark!" Carbhoy turned his head, listening intently. The girl followed his example. "Say——" The millionaire broke off, and his smile was replaced by a look of puzzled incredulity.

A shot had been fired. It was answered by a shot from somewhere close to the house. A look of doubt sprang into his gray eyes, and he darted to the window and unceremoniously brushed the hated Chinaman aside. He drew the curtain cautiously aside and peered out into the bight. Hazel beheld the change of expression and his quick, alert movements with satisfaction. She knew that the sounds of the shots had disconcerted him. He was more than impressed. He was convinced.

Then followed a portentous few moments. The two single shots were converted into something like a rattle of musketry. And intermingled with it came the hoarse, blasphemous cries of men, and the pounding of horses' hoofs racing hither and thither. The man at the window remained silent, his eyes glued to the crack of the divided curtains. He saw flashes of gunfire and the dim outline of moving figures. But the details of the scene were hidden from him by the darkness. Hazel, standing close behind him, rose to a great effort. One hand was laid abruptly upon his arm, and her nervous fingers clutched at his coat-sleeve as though she were seeking support. She caught a sharp breath.

"My God!" she cried in a tense whisper, while somehow her whole body shook.

Carbhoy gave one glance in her direction. His eyes and features had become tense with excitement. With his disengaged hand he patted the girl's with a reassuring gentleness, and finally it remained resting upon her clutching fingers.

"It's a scrap up all right," he said, with conviction that had no fear in it. "But it's their game, not——"

But his words were cut short by the great shouting that went up outside the house. Then came more firing, and the sharp plonk of bullets as they struck the building were plainly heard by the watchers. Hazel urged the man at the curtains—

"Come away. For goodness' sake come away. A stray shot! That window! You——"

She strove to drag the man away in a wild assumption of panic. But the millionaire intended to miss nothing of what was going on. The danger of his position did not occur to him. He firmly released himself from her clutch.

"You sit right down, my dear," he said kindly. "Just get right out of line with this window. I want to see this out. Say, hark! They're hitting it up good, eh?"

His eyes were alight with the excitement of battle, and Hazel, watching him, with fear carefully expressed in her eyes, could not help but admire the spirit of her lover's father, and more than ever regret the part she was forced to play.

She withdrew obediently as the sounds of battle waxed and the cries of the combatants made the still night hideous. The firing had become almost incessant, and the bullets seemed to hail upon the building from every direction. Then, too, the galloping horses added to the tumult, and it was pretty obvious the defenders were charging their opponents.

"There seems to be about two to one attacking," said the millionaire over his shoulder presently.

As he turned he surveyed with pity the strong look of terror the girl had contrived. He never once looked in the detested Chinaman's direction. In his heart he would not have regretted a chance shot disturbing those yellow, immobile features.

Then, turning back again quickly—

"I wonder!"

Now that the battle seemed to be at its height, and whilst awaiting its issue, he had time for conjecture. What was the meaning of it? And who were the attacking party? Was Slosson at its head? Had Harker sent up and was this a sheriff's posse? Both seemed possible. Yet neither, somehow, convinced him. Whoever were attacking, it was pretty certain in his mind that his release was the object.

But the moment passed, and he became absorbed once more in the battle itself. It seemed miraculous to his twentieth-century ideas that such a condition of things could prevail. Why, it was like the old romantic days of the hard drinking, hard swearing "bad men," and a sort of boyish delight in the excitement of it all swept through his veins. He had no time or thought for the part the now terror-stricken girl had played in his captivity. All he felt was a large-hearted, chivalrous regret for her present condition, of which no doubt remained in his mind.

A rush of horsemen charged up to the building. The watching man saw their outline distinctly. There seemed to him at least eight or ten. He saw another crowd, smaller numerically, charge at them, and then the revolvers spat out their vicious flashes of ruddy fire. The crowd dispersed and gathered again. Another fusillade. Then something seemed to happen. The whole crowd swept away in the darkness, and the sounds of shooting and the cries of men died away into the distance.

He waited awhile to assure himself that, so far as their position was concerned, the battle was at an end. Then he turned away from the window.

"They've cleaned 'em out," he said sharply. "I can't tell whose outed. They've ridden off at the gallop, firing and cursing as they went. Maybe our captors have driven the others off. Maybe it's the other way. We'll—hark!"

He was back at the window again in a second.

"They're coming back," he cried. "Say——"

Hazel was at his side in a moment.

"Are they the——?"

"Can't say who," cried Carbhoy, peering intently. "A big bunch of 'em."

"Our men were only four," said Hazel quickly.

The millionaire was too intent to look round, and so he missed the girl's smile over at Hip-Lee. But the tone of her voice was unmistakable in its anxiety.

"There's eight or more here," he cried. "Say, they're dismounting! They're——"

"They're coming into the house!" cried Hazel in an extravagant panic. "They——"

At that instant a loud voice beyond the door of the room was heard shouting to the men outside—

"Keep a keen eye while I go through the house! Don't let a soul escape. If they've hurt one hair of her head somebody's going to pay, and pay dear."

The millionaire was standing stock still in the middle of the room. A curious look was gleaming in his steady eyes. Hazel, in the midst of her pretended panic, beheld it and interpreted it. She read in it a recognition of the speaker's voice, but she also read incredulity and amazement.

But at that instant the door burst open and a great figure rushed headlong into the room. As the girl beheld it she flung wide her arms and, with a cry, ran towards the intruder.

"Gordon! Gordon! At last, at last!" she cried. "Oh, I thought you would never find me! Never, never!"

Her final exclamations were lost in the bosom of his tweed coat, as she flung herself into his arms and burst into a flood of hysterical weeping and laughter.

"Hazel! My poor little Hazel! Say, I've been nearly crazy. I——"

Gordon broke off, the girl still lying in his arms. His eyes had lifted to the face of his father, and their keen, steady glance became instantly absorbed by the gray speculation behind the other's.

"Dad! You?"

The astonishment, the incredulity were perfect. They might well have deceived anybody.

"Sure," said the millionaire dryly. Then, "I don't guess they've hurt her any, though. Maybe you best hand her over to her father," he went on, pointing at the burly figure of Silas Mallinsbee, who, with his patch well down over his eye, had appeared at that moment in the doorway. "Guess he'll know how to soothe her some. Meanwhile you'll maybe tell me how you lit on our trail."

The man's smile was disarming, yet Gordon fancied he detected a shadow of that lurking irony which he knew so well in his father.

He turned about, however, and passed Hazel over to the rancher, while he added tender injunctions—

"Say, Mr. Mallinsbee, she's scared all to death. You best get her to bed. Poor little girl! Say, I'd like——"

But he did not complete his sentence. Instead he turned to his father, as Hazel, with difficulty restraining her laughter, was led from the room by her solemn-faced, fierce-eyed parent.

"Say, Dad, what in the name of all creation has brought you here?"

The millionaire turned, and a cold eye of hatred settled upon the background which Hip-Lee formed to the picture.

"Do we need that yellow reptile present?" he said unemotionally.

"I guess not," said Gordon readily. Then he pointed the door to the Mongolian. "Get!" he ejaculated. And the injunction was acted upon with silent alacrity.

Then the two men faced each other.

"Well?" demanded the father.

The son smiled amiably.

"Well?" he retorted. And both men sat down.

CHAPTER XXVI

CASHING IN

Gordon's eyes were alight with a wonder that somehow lacked reality as he dropped into the chair beside the table.

"You? You?" he murmured. Then aloud: "It—it's incredible!" Then, with an impulsive gesture. "In the name of all that's crazy what's—what's the meaning of it? How in the world have you got into the hands of these ruffians?"

His father selected one of the two remaining cigars in his case, and passed the other across.

"Try again," he said quietly, as he bit the end off his.

But Gordon did not "try again." He took the proffered cigar, and sat devouring the silent figure and sphinx-like face of the other, while he felt like one who had received a douche of ice-cold water from a pail. His acting had missed fire, and he knew it. He wondered how much else of his efforts had missed fire with this abnormally acute man. He had intended this to be the moment of his triumph. He had intended to lay before his father his talent of silver, doubled and redoubled an hundredfold. He had intended, with all the enthusiasm of youthful vanity, to display the triumph of his understanding of the modern methods of dealing with the affairs of finance. He was going to prove his theories up to the hilt.

Now, somehow, he felt that whatever victory he had achieved the clear, keen brain behind his father's steady gray eyes saw through him completely, right down into the deepest secrets which he had believed to be securely hidden. Face to face with this man, who had spent all the long years of his life studying how best to beat his fellow man, his acting became but a paltry mask which obscured nothing. "Try again." Such simple words, but so significant. No, it was useless to "try again" with this dear, shrewd creature he was so futilely endeavoring to deceive.

The cold of the gray eyes had changed. It was only a slight change, but to Gordon, who understood his father so well, it was clearly perceptible and indicative of the mood behind. There was a suggestion of a smile in them, an ironical, half-humorous smile that scattered all his carefully made plans.

The millionaire struck a match and held it out to light his son's cigar, and, as Gordon leaned forward, their eyes met in a steady regard.

"Nothing doing?" inquired the father, as he carefully lit his own cigar from the same match.

Gordon shook his head, and his eyes smiled whimsically.

"Then I best do first talk." The millionaire leaned back in his chair and breathed out a thin spiral of smoke. Then he sighed. "Good smokes these. Mallinsbee's a man of taste."

"Mallinsbee?"

"Sure."

"Go on."

"He's kept me well supplied. Also with good wine. I owe him quite a debt—that way. Say——" The millionaire paused reflectively. Then he went on in the manner of a man who has arrived at a complete and definite decision: "Guess it would take hours asking questions and getting answers. It's not my way, and I don't guess I'm a lawyer anyway, and you aren't a shady witness. We know just how to talk out straight. I've had over seven weeks to think in—and thinking with me is—a disease. Let's go back. I had a neat land scoop working up here. Slosson was working it. He's been a secret agent of mine for years. I've no reason to distrust him. He fixes things right for us and sends word for me to come along. That's happened many times before. It's not new, or—unusual. When I get here I'm met by a very charming young girl with a rig and team. Her excuse for meeting me is reasonable. The rest is easy. We are both held up, and brought here—captives. Then I start in to think a lot. Argument don't carry me more than a mile till that same charming girl, who's just done all she knew to make things right for me, makes her first break. When I found out she was the daughter of Mallinsbee I did all the thinking needed in half an hour. I knew I was to be rolled on this land deal by Mallinsbee's crowd, and, judging by the methods adopted, to be rolled good. You see we'd had negotiations with Mallinsbee about his land at Buffalo Point before. See?"

Gordon silently nodded.

His father breathed heavily, and, with a wry twist of his lips, rolled his cigar firmly into the corner of his mouth.

"Now, when I'd done thinking it just left me guessing in two directions. One of 'em I answered more or less satisfactorily. This was the one I answered. What had become of Slosson? Had he been handled by these folk, or had he doubled? The latter I counted out. I've always had him where I wanted him. He wouldn't dare. So I said he'd been 'handled.' The other was how could they hope to deal with the Union Grayling without my authority? That's still unanswered, though I see a gleam of daylight—since meeting you here. However, Gordon boy, you've certainly given me the surprise of my life—finding you associated with Mallinsbee—and taken to play-

acting. That was a pretty piece outside with guns. I allow it got me fine. But you overdid it showing in here. That also told me another thing. It told me that a feller can spend a lifetime making a bright man of himself, while it only takes a pretty gal five seconds yanking out one of the key-stones to the edifice he's built. I guess I've been mighty sorry for your lady friend. I guessed she was pining to death for her folks, and was scared to death of that darnation Chink. However, I'm relieved to find she's just a bunch of bright wits, and don't lack in natural female ability for play-acting. Maybe you can hand me some about those directions I'm still guessing in. I'll smoke while you say some."

Father and son smiled into each other's faces as the elder finished speaking. But while Gordon's smile was one of genuine admiration, his father's still savored of that irony which warned the younger that all was by no means plain sailing yet.

"I'm glad you feel that way about Hazel, Dad," cried Gordon, his face flushing with genuine pleasure. "She's some girl. I guess I'm the luckiest feller alive winning her for a wife, eh?"

"You're going to—marry her?"

"Why, yes. She's the greatest, the best, the——"

"Just so. But we're not both going to marry her."

Gordon flung back in his chair with a great laugh. But his father's eyes still maintained their irony.

"Say, I'm sort of sorry talking that way now. There's other things." Gordon fumbled in his pocket while he went on. "Slosson? Why Slosson's trying to stave off pneumonia in a disused, perforated shack way up on Mallinsbee's ranch. He's a skunk of a man anyway, and I had to let him know I thought that way. I haven't heard about the pneumonia yet, but if he got it I don't guess it would give me nightmare." Then he handed across a small volume in morocco binding which he had taken from his pocket. "I don't seem to think you'll need much explanation about the other. That's your code book, which I forgot to return in the hurry of quitting New York."

The millionaire turned the cover, closed it again, and quietly bestowed it in his pocket.

"Guess I'll keep this," he said without emotion. "Yes, it tells me a lot. It tells me I've credited Mallinsbee and his crowd with the work of my son. It tells me that my own son is solely responsible for the idea, and execution, of rolling his father on this land deal. It tells me that the principles of big finance must have a fertile resting place somewhere in my son. Well, there's quite a lot of time before daylight."

It had been an anxious moment for Gordon when he handed back the private code book, and he had watched his father closely. He was seeking any sign of anger, or regret, or even pain, as his own actions became apparent to the other. There were no such signs. There was only that non-committal half smile, and it left him still uncertain.

His father's patience seemed inexhaustible. Had Gordon only realized it this was the very sign he should have looked for in such a man. James Carbhoy loved his son as few men regard their offspring, but he wanted his son to be something more than a mere object of his affection. He wanted him to be an object upon which he could bestow all the enormous pride of a self-made man. He wanted to feel that exquisite thrill of triumph resulting to his vanity, that Gordon was his son—the son of his father.

"Yes, there's quite a while before daylight, Dad, and I'm glad." Gordon ran his fingers through his hair. "So I'd better hand it you from the beginning. I want you to get a right understanding of my motives. It was opportunity. That thing you've always taught me fools most always try to dodge, and most good men generally miss."

His father nodded and Gordon settled himself afresh in his chair.

"Yes, I'm in this thing, Dad," he went on, after the briefest of pauses. "In it right up to my neck," he added, with a whimsical smile. "It was the opportunity I needed to make good. Being neither a fool nor a good man I took it, and now I sit with a wad of one hundred and five thousand dollars in good United States currency. It's here in my pocket, and I'm ready to hand it over to you in payment for those old debts. You will observe I have still eight weeks of my six months to run. I want to say, as you'll no doubt agree when you've heard my story, that I've made, or acquired it, through graft and piracy, such as I talked about to you awhile back, and, as far as I can see, my method has been as completely dishonest as an honest man could adopt. Dad, I've always regarded your sense of humor as one of your greatest attributes, but whether it'll stand for the way I've treated you, even with my intimate knowledge of you, I'm not prepared to guess. This is the yarn."

Gordon plunged into the story without further preamble while his father sat and smoked on with that half smile still fixed in his gray eyes. The younger man watched the still, inscrutable, sphinx-like figure with eyes of grave speculation. He missed no detail in the story of his irresponsibility and haphazard adventure. He started at the moment when he booked his passage for Seattle, and carried it on right down to the melodramatic moment when he burst into that

parlor to rescue the girl he loved from a peril which he knew had never threatened her. He told it all with a detail that spared neither himself, nor the confidential agent Slosson, nor any one else concerned. He showed up the spirit of graft which actuated every step of his progress, and did not hesitate to apply the lash with merciless force upon the railroad organization his father controlled.

And right through, from beginning to end, the millionaire listened without sign or comment. He wanted to hear all this boy—his boy—had to say. And as he went on that pride, parental pride, in him grew and grew.

At the end of the story Gordon added a final comment—

"I want to say, Dad, I haven't done this all myself. I've had the help of two of the most cheerful, lovable rascals I've ever met. Also the help of one honest man. But above all, through the whole thing, I've been supported by the smile of the sweetest and best woman in the world, the girl who's done her best to care for your comfort here. She's sacrificed all scruples to help me out, while her father, bless him, has never approved any of my dirty schemes. There you are, Dad, that's the yarn. I don't guess it'll make you shout for joy, but, anyway, you started me out to make good—anyway I chose—and I've made good. Furthermore, I've made good within the time limit, and, in making good, I'm bringing back a wife to our home city. I'm standing on my own legs now, as you always guessed you wanted me to, and if you don't just fancy the gait I travel—why, it's up to you. That's mine—now you say."

The fixity of his father's attitude had driven Gordon to say more than he had intended, but he meant it, every word, nor did he regard his parent with any less affection for it. But now, as he awaited a response, a certain unease was tugging at his heartstrings.

At last the millionaire rose from his seat and crossed to the curtained window. He drew the curtains aside, and, raising the sash, flung out his cigar stump. Then for a moment he gazed out at the moonless night. While he stood thus the smile in his thoughtful eyes deepened.

At last, however, he turned back, and the face that confronted the son he loved wore the sharp, hawk-like look which his opponents in the business world of New York were so familiar with.

"That's all right," he said sharply. "But—you've forgotten something."

Gordon became extremely alert.

"Have I?" Then he laughed. "It 'ud be a miracle if I hadn't."

"Sure. Most folks forget something. I forgot that code book."

"Yes."

Their eyes met.

"You've forgotten that I can stop the work at Buffalo Point. You've forgotten that you've passed out of the realms of simple graft and plunged into criminal proceedings, which brings you within the shadow of the law. You've forgotten that I can smash your schemes, break you, and send you to penitentiary—you and your entire gang."

The steady eyes were deadly as they coldly backed the sharp pronouncement of the words. Gordon was caught by the painful emotion which the harshness of them inspired. He knew that his father had spoken the simple truth. He knew that in the eyes of the world he was a plain criminal. The unpleasant feeling was instantly thrust aside, however. He had not embarked upon this affair without intending to carry it through to the end he desired.

"I haven't forgotten those things, Dad," he said, with a sharpness equal to the other's. "I thought of 'em all—and prepared for 'em. I'm not playing. You put this thing up to me. I'm here to see it through."

"And then?" There was a shade of sarcasm in the millionaire's tone.

"Then? Why, I could tell you lots of reasons why you can't do any of these things. There's arguments that I don't guess you've missed already. But, anyway, just one little fact 'll be sufficient to go on with. You're here a captive, and you can't get away till I give the word."

For one of the very few times in his life James Carbhoy was seriously disconcerted. Choler began to rise, and a hot flush tinged his cheeks and his eyes sparkled.

"You—would keep me here a prisoner—indefinitely?" he exploded.

"I'm not playing, Dad," Gordon warned.

Gordon had risen from his chair, and the two stood eye to eye. It was a tense moment, full of potent possibilities. One of them must give way, or a clash would inevitably follow, a clash which would probably destroy forever that perfect devotion which had always existed between them.

For Gordon it was a moment of extreme pain. But in him was no thought of yielding. From his father it was his invincible determination to force an acknowledgment of fitness in human affairs as he understood them.

At that moment there was no humor in the situation for him.

In the older man, however, humor was perhaps more matured. Parental affection, too, is perhaps a bigger, wider, deeper thing than the filial emotions of youth. He had only intended to test this son of his. His challenge had been intended to try him, to confound. But the confounding had been with him in the shock of his son's irrevocable determination.

That moment of natural resentment passed as swiftly as it had arisen. Gordon was all, and even more, he told himself dryly, than he had hoped. And so the moment passed, and the hard, gray eyes melted to a kindly, whimsical smile which had not one vestige of irony in it.

"You're a blamed young scamp," he said cordially; "but—I'm afraid I like you all the better for it. Say, do you think that little girl of yours and her father have gone to bed yet?"

Gordon reached across, holding out his hand.

"Dear old Dad," he cried, "I'm dead sure we'll find 'em both not a mile the other side of that door. The game's played out, and—we quit?"

The father caught his son's hand and wrung it.

"It's played out, boy; and God bless you!" They stood for a moment hand gripped in hand. Then the millionaire pointed at the door.

"I'd like to see 'em before—daylight."

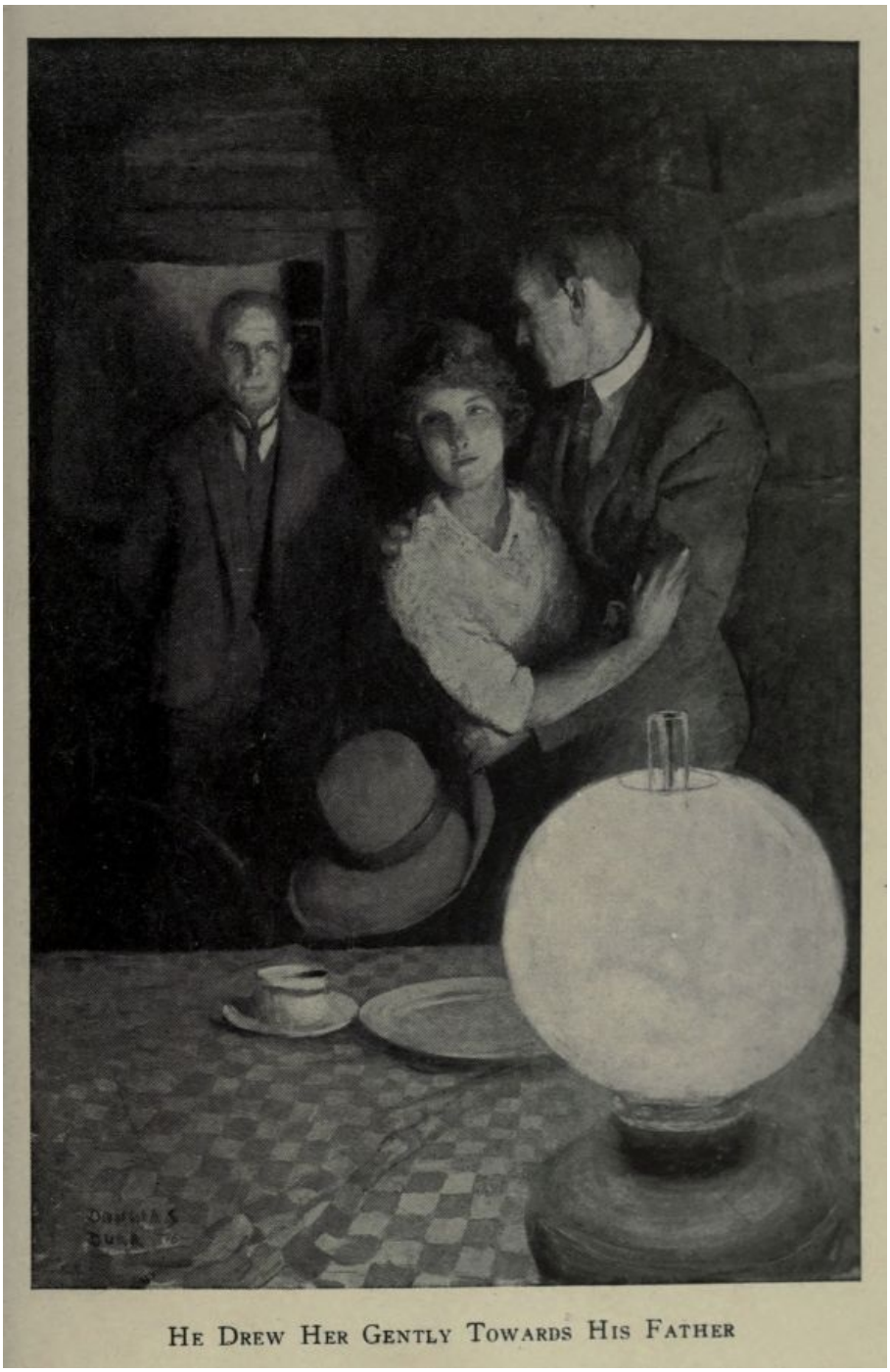
With a delighted laugh Gordon turned away to the door and flung it open.

"Say," he called, "Hazel! Ho! Mr. Mallinsbee!"

In a moment Hazel had darted to her lover's side, and was followed more decorously by the burly rancher, with his patch well down over one eye. Gordon pointed at it.

"Guess you can do without that, Mr. Mallinsbee. You're not going to face an opponent; you're going to meet a—friend."

He slid his arm about the girl's waist and drew her gently forward towards his father standing waiting to receive her with humorously twinkling eyes.



He Drew Her Gently Towards His Father

He Drew Her Gently Towards His Father

"So you're to be my little daughter," cried the millionaire kindly. "Well, my dear, I'm glad. I like grit, and you've got it plenty. I like a pretty face, and—but I guess Gordon's told you all about that. Seeing you're to be my daughter—and Gordon's left me no choice in the matter, the same as he left me no choice in other things—I feel I've the right to tell you you're a pair of—as impertinent young rascals as I've ever had the happiness to claim relationship with. Let me see, just come here, and—Gordon owes me for many nights of anxiety, and I guess I've a right to make him pay. I'll be satisfied with the payment of a kiss from you."

He held out his arms, and Hazel, with a joyous laugh and blushing cheeks, ran to them.

"Thank you, my dear," laughed the millionaire, as the girl frankly kissed him. "And that's the change." He closed his arms about her and returned her kiss.

Then, when he had released her, he turned to Mallinsbee and held out his hand.

"I can always make friends with the fellow who licks me, Mr. Mallinsbee. I'm glad to meet you —with that patch removed from your eye. The game's played and you've won, and I promise you all that's been done in my name by my son goes. You see, henceforth he's my partner now, so he's the right to act in my name. I'm trusting him with my dollars, but you are trusting him with something far more precious. I hope he'll prove as good a son to you as, I'm glad to say, I consider he's been to me."

Mallinsbee smiled a little sadly, and his eyes gazed tenderly in Hazel's direction.

"Directly that boy of yours come around, Mr. Carbhoy, I felt the chill of winter beating up. I'm

glad he come, though—I like him. But," he added, with a sigh, "I'll sure need to bank those furnaces some."

Hazel left the millionaire's side and crossed to her father, and passed her arm about his vast waist.

"Don't start yet, Daddy," she said, smiling up at the rugged face. "I haven't left you yet, and when I do it's only going to be for a small piece at a time."

Silas Mallinsbee shook his head.

"Don't you worry, little gal," he said gently. "I guess this winter's goin' to be a mild one. You see, I'm goin' to have a son as well as a daughter, and—who knows?—maybe grandsons——"

But Hazel had quickly pressed one hand over his lips and stifled the possibilities he was about to enumerate.

Gordon laughed, and his father smiled over at the other father.

"See, Mr. Mallinsbee, we don't need to worry with the summer," Gordon cried. "Summer generally fixes things right for itself. Meanwhile we'll just make the winter as easy as we can. You've given your little girl to me, and she's all you care for in the world. Well, that's a trust that demands all the best I can give. I won't fail you. I won't fail her. And you, Dad, I won't fail you."

"Good boy," said the millionaire, with a glow of pride. "I just know it, and—I know it for Mr. Mallinsbee and Hazel, too, if they don't know it for themselves. Say——"

For a moment his eyes grew serious. Then into them crept a gleam of twinkling humor which found reflection on the faces of both Gordon and Hazel, who waited for him to complete what he had to say.

"You've told your mother, Gordon?" he inquired. "Seems to me you've told her 'most everything in those—chatty—letters of yours."

Gordon grinned and shook his head, while Hazel waited—not without some apprehension. His father's smile gave way to a quaint expression of awe at such negligence.

"I'd say she'd be pleased, of course," the millionaire said, without conviction. "It's a mercy not always bestowed on a boy to get a wife like—Hazel. Your mother's a mighty good woman, Gordon, and I'll allow she's got her ways about things. But she's good, and I guess she'll just take to Hazel right away."

There was no confidence in his manner, in spite of the bravery of his words. But Gordon quickly cleared the atmosphere with his cheery confidence.

"You leave the dear old mater to me, Dad," he cried. "You see, you only married her—she raised me. I'll write her to-night, and—say, that reminds me," he added, glancing at his watch. "Daylight'll be around directly. Hazel needs her rest. Hadn't we——"

Hazel laughed. She had no real desire for bed, but she was tired, weary with the strain of all the swiftly moving events. She caught at his suggestion and demanded compliance.

"Yes," she cried. "There's another day to-morrow. Oh, that wonderful to-morrow! A long, bright, happy day in which we have nothing to conceal, no wicked schemes to be worked out. A day of real happiness, when we can just be our real selves. Let's all go to bed and dream our dreams with the full certainty that, however happy our to-day is, to-morrow has always the possibility of being happier."

But Gordon did not write the promised letter that night. He held long communion with himself, and decided to send a telegram. He realized that diplomacy must be brought to bear, for his mother, with all her exquisite qualities, possessed a slightly arbitrary side to her character where her home and belongings were concerned. Therefore he decided on a bold stroke.

He sacrificed his own rest that night, and in doing so sacrificed that of certain others. Sunset was roused from his equine slumbers, as also was Steve Mason disturbed out of a portion of his night's rest.

Gordon rode hard into Snake's Fall. He wished to make the return journey before breakfast. On arrival at the township he ignored every protest from the operator. He overruled him on every point, and was prepared to back his overruling with physical force.

Steve Mason was literally scrambled into his clothes and set to work at those hated keys, and the New York call was sent singing over the wires.

Meanwhile Gordon was left at work upon a sheet of paper upon which, after considerable thought, his diplomatic effort resolved itself into a piece of superlative effrontery.

And this was the message which startled his mother over her morning coffee and rolls, and incidentally sent a current of furious feminine excitement through the entire Carbhoy establishment at Central Park, like a sharp electric storm.

"*Mrs. James Carbhoy,*
"*New York.*

"Gordon's work here beyond praise. Boy has done wonders. When you hear all you will be proud of him. I am with him here now. Great events developing. Am most anxious to form alliance with certain people for financial reasons. Your influence required on social side. You will understand when I say rich, desirable heiress. Gordon needs persuasion. Come at once. Special to Snake's Fall. Will meet you at latter depot.

"JAMES CARBHOY."

When this message was handed to the impatient operator and he had carefully read it over, the man looked up with what Gordon regarded as an impertinent grin.

His resentment promptly leaped.

"Say," he cried in a threatening tone, "there's some faces made for grinning, and others that couldn't win prizes that way amongst a crowd of fool-faced mules. Guess yours was spoiled for any sort of chance whatever, so cut out trying to make it worse than your parents made it for you. Get me? Just play about on those fool keys and set the tune of that message right, or Mr. James Carbhoy's going to hear things quick."

The threat of the President of the railroad was sufficient to enforce compliance, but Steve Mason was no respector of persons outside that authority, and his retort came glibly.

"You wrote this, Mister, and—you ain't Mr. James Carbhoy," he said, with a sneer and a half-threat.

But Gordon was in no mood for trifling about anything. He was anxious to be off back to the ranch.

"Mr. James Carbhoy is my father," he cried sharply, "and if that don't penetrate your perfectly ridiculous brain-box I'll add that I'm the son of my father—Mr. James Carbhoy. Are you needing anything, or—will you get busy?"

Steve Mason decided to "get busy," and so the message winged its way over the wires.

THE END

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Son of His Father
The Men Who Wrought
The Golden Woman
The Law-Breakers
The Way of the Strong
The Twins of Suffering Creek
The Night-Riders
The One-Way Trail
The Trail of the Axe

The Sheriff of Dyke Hole
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