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Title: A Damaged Reputation

Author: Harold Bindloss

Release date: October 15, 2011 [EBook #37761]

Language: English

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DAMAGED REPUTATION ***

A DAMAGED REPUTATION

BY
HAROLD BINDLOSS

AUTHOR OF
*"ALTON OF SOMASCO" "MISTRESS OF BONAVENTURE" ETC.,
ETC.*



R. F. FENNO & COMPANY
18 EAST 17TH STREET, NEW YORK

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
Brooke Pauses to Reflect	9
CHAPTER II.	
Brooke Takes the Trail	25
CHAPTER III.	
The Narrow Way	37
CHAPTER IV.	
Saxton Makes an Offer	51
CHAPTER V.	
Barbara Renews an Acquaintance	64
CHAPTER VI.	
An Arduous Journey	79

CHAPTER VII.	
Allonby's Illusion	91
CHAPTER VIII.	
A Bold Venture	104
CHAPTER IX.	
Devine Makes a Suggestion	121
CHAPTER X.	
The Flume Builder	135
CHAPTER XI.	
An Embarrassing Position	151
CHAPTER XII.	
Brooke is Carried Away	166
CHAPTER XIII.	
The Old Love	179
CHAPTER XIV.	
Brooke Has Visitors	193
CHAPTER XV.	
Saxton Gains His Point	209
CHAPTER XVI.	
Barbara's Responsibility	222
CHAPTER XVII.	
Brooke Attempts Burglary	236
CHAPTER XVIII.	
Brooke Makes a Decision	249
CHAPTER XIX.	
Brooke's Bargain	264
CHAPTER XX.	
The Bridging of the Cañon	278
CHAPTER XXI.	
Devine's Offer	293
CHAPTER XXII.	
The Unexpected Happens	305
CHAPTER XXIII.	
Brooke's Confession	317
CHAPTER XXIV.	
Allonby Strikes Silver	334
CHAPTER XXV.	
Barbara is Merciless	350
CHAPTER XXVI.	
The Jumping of the Canopus	365
CHAPTER XXVII.	
The Last Round	381
CHAPTER XXVIII.	
Brooke Does Not Come Back	395
CHAPTER XXIX.	
A Final Effort	406
CHAPTER XXX.	
The Other Chance	419
CHAPTER XXXI.	
Brooke is Forgiven	431

I.

BROOKE PAUSES TO REFLECT.

It was a still, hot night, and the moon hung round and full above the cedars, when rancher Brooke sat in his comfortless shanty with a whisky bottle at his hand. The door stood open, and the drowsy fragrance of the coniferous forest stole into the room, while when he glanced in that direction he could see hemlock and cedar, redwood and balsam, tower, great black spires, against the luminous blueness of the night. Far above them gleamed the untrodden snow that clothed the great peaks with spotless purity; but this was melting fast under the autumn sun, and the river that swirled by the shanty sang noisily among the boulders.

There are few more beautiful valleys than that one among all the ranges of British Columbia, but its wild grandeur made little impression upon Brooke that night. He felt that a crisis in his affairs was at hand, and he must face it boldly or go under once for all, for it was borne in upon him that he had already drifted perilously far. His face, however, grew a trifle grim, and his fingers closed irresolutely on the neck of the bottle, for drifting was easy in that country, and pleasant, so long as one did not remember.

[Pg 10]

Even when the great peaks were rolled in tempest cloud, the snow fell but lightly among the Quatomac pines. Bright sunlight shone on them for weeks together, and it was but seldom a cold blast whipped the still, blue lake where the shadows of the cedars that distilled ambrosial essences lay asleep. There were deer and blue grouse in the woods, salmon in the river, and big trout in the lake; and the deleterious whisky purveyed at the nearest settlement was not inordinately dear. It had, however, dawned on Brooke by degrees that there were many things he could not find at Quatomac which men of his upbringing hold necessary.

In the meanwhile, his sole comrade, Jimmy, who assisted him to loaf the greater part of every day away, watched him with a curious little smile. Jimmy was big, loose-limbed, and slouching, but in his own way he was wise, and he had seen more than one young Englishman of Brooke's description take the down-grade in that colony.

"Feeling kind of low to-night?" he said, suggestively. "Now, I'd have been quite lively if Tom Gordon's Bella had made up to me. Bella's nice to look at, and 'most as smart with the axe as a good many men I know. I guess if you got her you wouldn't have anything to do."

[Pg 11]

Brooke's bronzed face flushed a trifle as he saw his comrade's grin, for it was what had passed between him and Tom Gordon's Bella at the settlement that afternoon which had thrust before him the question what his life was to be. He had also not surmised that Jimmy or anybody else beyond themselves had been present at that meeting among the pines. Bella was certainly pretty and wholly untaught, while, though he had made no attempts to gain her favor they had not been necessary, since the maid had with disconcerting frankness conferred it upon him. She had, in fact, made it evident that she considered him her property, and Brooke wondered uneasily how far he had tacitly accepted the position. His irresponsive coolness had proved no deterrent; he could neither be brutal, nor continually run away; and there were times when he had almost resigned himself to the prospect of spending the rest of his life with her, though he fancied he realized what the result of that would be. The woman had the waywardness and wildness of the creatures of the forest, and almost as little sensibility, while he was unpleasantly conscious that he was already sinking fast to her level. With a soulless mate, swayed by primitive instincts and passions, and a little further indulgence in bad whisky, it was evident that he might very well sink a good deal further, and Brooke had once had his ideals and aspirations.

[Pg 12]

"Jimmy," he said, slowly, "I'm thinking of going away."

Jimmy shook out his corn-cob pipe, and apparently ruminated. "Well, I'd 'most have expected it," he said. "The question is, where you're going to, and what you're going to do? You don't get your grub for nothing everywhere, and living's cheap here. It only costs the cartridges, and the deerhides pay the tea and flour. Besides, you put a pile of dollars into this place, didn't you?"

"Most of six thousand, and I've taken about two hundred out. Of course I was a fool."

Jimmy nodded with a tranquil concurrence which his comrade might not have been pleased with at another time.

"Bought it on survey, without looking at it?" he said. "Going to make your fortune growing fruit! It's kind of unfortunate that big peaches and California plums don't grow on rocks."

Brooke sat moodily silent awhile. He had, as his comrade had mentioned, bought the four hundred acres of virgin soil without examining it, which is not such an especially unusual proceeding on the part of newly-arrived young Englishmen, and partly explains why some land-agency companies pay big dividends. For twelve months he had toiled with hope, strenuously hewing down the great redwoods which cumbered his possessions; and expended the rest of his scanty capital in hiring assistance. It was only in the second year that the truth dawned on him, and he commenced to realize that treble the sum he could lay hands upon would not clear the land, and that in all probability it would grow nothing worth marketing then. In the meanwhile something had happened which made it easier for him to accept the inevitable, and losing hold of hope he had made the most of the present and ignored the future. It was sufficient that the forest and the river fed him during most of the year, and he could earn a few dollars hewing trails for the Government when they did not. His aspirations had vanished, and he dwelt, almost, if not quite, content in a state of apathetic resignation which is not wholesome for the educated Englishman.

[Pg 13]

It was Jimmy who broke the silence.

"What was it you done back there in England? I never asked you before," he said.

Brooke smiled somewhat drily, for it was not a very unusual question in that country. "Nothing the police could lay hands on me for. I only quarrelled with my bread and butter. I had plenty of it at one time, you see."

"That means the folks who gave it you?" said Jimmy.

"Exactly. It was the evident duty of one of them to leave me his property, and I think he would have done it, only he insisted on me taking a wife he had fixed upon as suitable along with it. There was, however, the difficulty that I had made my own choice in the meanwhile. I believe the old man was right now, though I did not think so then, and when we had words on the subject I came out to make a home for the other woman here."

[Pg 14]

"And you let up after two years of it?"

"I did," said Brooke, with a trace of bitterness. "The girl, however, did not wait so long. Before I'd been gone half the time she married a richer man."

Jimmy nodded. "There are women made that way," he said reflectively. "Still, you wouldn't have to worry 'bout Bella. Once you showed her who was to do the bossing—with a nice handy strap—she'd stick to you good and tight, and 'most scratch the eyes out of any one who said a word against her husband. Still, I figure she's not quite the kind of woman you would have married in the old country."

That was very evident, and Brooke sat silent while the memories of his life in the land he had left crowded upon him. He also recoiled from the brutality of the one his comrade had pictured him leading with the maid of the bush, though it had seemed less appalling when she stood before him, vigorous and comely, a few hours ago. He had, however, made no advances to her. On that point, at least, his mind was clear, and now he realized clearly what the result of such a match must be. Yet he knew his own loneliness and the maid's pertinacity, and once more it was borne in upon him that to stay where he was would mean disaster. Rising abruptly he flung the bottle out into the night, and then, while Jimmy stared at him with astonishment and indignation, laughed curiously as he heard it crash against a stone.

[Pg 15]

"That's the commencement of the change," he said. "After this I'll pitch every bottle you bring up from the settlement into the river."

"Well," said Jimmy, resignedly, "I guess I can bring the whisky up inside of me, and you'd get hurt considerable if you tried slinging me into the river. The trouble is, however, I'd be seeing panthers all the way up whenever I brought along a little extra, and I'm most scared of panthers when they aren't there."

Brooke laughed again, for, as he had discovered, men take life lightly in that country, but just then the soft beat of horse hoofs rose from across the river, and a cry came out of the darkness.

"Strangers!" said Jimmy. "Quite a crowd of them. With the river coming down as she's doing it's a risky ford. We'll have to go across."

They went, rather more than waist-deep in the snow-water which swirled frothing about them, for the ford was perilous, with a big black pool close below; and found a mounted party waiting them on the other side. There was an elderly man who sat very straight in his saddle with his hand on his hip, and Brooke, at least, recognized the bearing of one who had commanded cavalry in the Old Country. There was also a younger man, dismounted and smoking a cigarette, two girls on Cayuse ponies, and an Indian, whose appearance suggested inebriation, holding the bridles of the baggage mules. The men were certainly not ranchers or timber-right prospectors, but now and then of late a fishing party had passed that way into the wilderness.

[Pg 16]

"I understand the ford is not very safe, and the Indian has contrived to leave our tents behind," said the older man. "If you can take us across, and find the ladies, at least, shelter of any kind for the night, it would be a kindness for which I should be glad to make any suitable recompense."

Jimmy grinned, for it was evident that the speaker was an insular Englishman, and quite

unacquainted with the customs of that country, wherein no rancher accepts payment for a night's hospitality. Brooke had, however, a certain sense of humor, and touched his big shapeless hat, which is also never done in Western Canada.

"They can have it, sir," he said. "That is, if they're not very particular. Take the lady's bridle, Jimmy. Keep behind him, sir."

Jimmy did as he was bidden, and Brooke seized the bridle of the Cayuse the other girl rode. The half-tamed beast, however, objected to entering the water, and edged away from it, then rose with forehoofs in the air while Brooke smote it on the nostrils with his fist. The girl, he noticed, said nothing, and showed no sign of fear, though the rest were half-way across before he had an opportunity of doing more than cast a glance at her. Then, as he stood waist-deep in water patting the trembling beast, he looked up.

[Pg 17]

"I hope you're not afraid," he said. "It will be a trifle deeper presently."

He stopped with a curious abruptness as she turned her head, and stood still with his hand on the bridle a moment or two gazing at her. She sat, lithe and slim, but very shapely, with the skirt of the loose light habit she had gathered in one hand just clear of the sliding foam, and revealing the little foot in the stirrup. The moon, which hung round and full behind her shoulder, touched one side of the face beneath the big white hat with silvery light, that emphasized the ivory gleam of the firm white neck. He could also just catch the sparkle of her eyes in the shadow, and her freshness and daintiness came upon him as a revelation. It was so long since he had seen a girl of the station she evidently belonged to. Then she laughed, and it seemed to him that her voice was in keeping with her appearance, for it reached him through the clamor of the river, soft and musical.

"Oh, no," she said. "What are we stopping for?"

Brooke, who had seldom been at a loss for a neat rejoinder in England, felt his face grow hot as he smote the pony's neck.

[Pg 18]

"I really don't know. I think it was the Cayuse stopped," he said.

The girl smiled. "One would fancy that the water was a trifle too cold for even a pony of that kind to be anxious to stay in it."

They went on with a plunge and a flounder, and twice Brooke came near being swept off his feet, for the pony seemed bent on taking the shortest way to the other bank, which was, as it happened, not quite the safest one. Still, they came through the river, and Brooke dragged the Cayuse up the bank in time to see the rest disappear into the shanty. Then he boldly held up his hand, and felt a curious little thrill run through him as he swung his companion down.

"It was very good of you to come across for us, and I am afraid you must be very wet," she said. "This is really a quite inadequate recompense."

Then she turned and left him with the pony, staring vaguely after her, flushed in face, with a big piece of minted silver in his hand. It was at least a minute before he slipped it into his pocket with a curious little laugh.

"This is almost too much, and I don't know what has come over me. There was a time when I would have been quite equal to the occasion," he said.

Then he turned away to the stables, where Jimmy, who came in with an armful of clothing, found him rubbing down the Cayuse with unusual solicitude, in spite of its attempts to kick him.

[Pg 19]

"I guess you'll have to change," he said. "Those things aren't decent, and you can put the deerskin ones on. The old man's a high-toned Englishman going camping and fishing, and, by what she said, the younger girl's struck on frontiersmen. When you get into that jacket you'll look the real thing."

Brooke had no great desire to look like one of the picturesque desperadoes who are, somewhat erroneously, supposed, in England, to wander about the Pacific Slope, but as he mended his own clothes with any convenient piece of flour bag, he saw that his comrade's advice was good.

When he entered the shanty Jimmy had supper ready, but he realized, as he had never done since he raised its log walls, the comfortless squalor of the room. The red dust had blown into it, it was littered with discarded clothing, lines and traps, and broken boots, while two candles, which flickered in the draughts, stuck in whisky bottles, furnished uncertain illumination. He had made the unsteady table, and Jimmy had made the chairs, but the result was no great credit to either of them, while nobody who was not very hungry would have considered the meal his comrade laid out inviting. Still, his guests had evidently no fault to find with it, and during it the girl whose pony he had led once or twice glanced covertly at him.

[Pg 20]

She saw a tall man with a bronzed face of not unpleasant English type, attired picturesquely in fringed deerskin which had crossed the mountains from the prairie. He had grey eyes, and his hair was crisped by the sun; but while he was, she decided, distinctly, personable and still young, there was something in his expression which puzzled her. It was neither diffidence nor embarrassment, and yet there was a suggestion of constraint about him which his comrade was wholly free from. Brooke, on his part, saw a girl with brown eyes and hair who held herself well, and had a faint suggestion of imperiousness about her, and wondered with an uneasiness he was

by no means accustomed to what she thought of him, since he felt that the condition of his dwelling must show her the shiftless life he led. Still, he shook off that thought, and others that troubled him, and played his part as host, talking, with a purpose, only of the Canadian bush, until, when the meal was over, Jimmy, who felt himself being left out, turned to the guests.

"A little whisky would have come in to settle those fried potatoes down," he said. "I would have offered you some, but my partner here slung the bottle into the river just before you came."

There was a trace of a smile in the face of the grey-haired man, but the girl with the brown eyes looked up sharply, and once more Brooke felt his face grow a trifle hot. Men do not as a rule fling whisky bottles into rivers without a cogent reason, especially in Canada, where liquor is scarce. He was, however, both astonished and annoyed at himself that he should attach the slightest value to this stranger's good opinion. [Pg 21]

Then, when the others seconded Jimmy's suggestion, he took a dinky fiddle from its case, and, although there is little a rancher of that country will not do for the pleasure of a chance guest, wondered why he had complied so readily. He played French-Canadian dances, as the inhabitants play them, and though only some of them may be classed as music, became sensible that there was a curious silence of attention.

"That violin has a beautiful mellow tone," said the younger girl, whom he had scarcely noticed. "I am, however, quite aware that there is a good deal in the bowing."

"It might have!" said Jimmy, who disregarded his comrade's glance. "There was once a man came along here who said it would fetch the most of one thousand dollars. Still, every old Canadian lumberman can play those things, and you ought to hear him on the one he calls the Chopping. Play it for them, and I'll open the door so they can see the night and hear the river singing."

The military gentleman stared at him, and even the girl with the brown eyes, who was very reposeful, appeared surprised at this flight of fancy, which nobody would, from his appearance, have expected of Jimmy. [Pg 22]

"The Chopping? Oh, yes, of course I understand," she said. "This is the place of all places for it. We have never heard it in such surroundings."

Brooke smiled a little. "I'm afraid it is difficult to get moonlight and mystery out of an American steel first string," he said. "One can't keep it from screaming on the shifting."

He drew the bow across the strings, and save for the fret of the snow-fed river which rose and fell in deep undertone, there was a curious silence in the room. The younger girl watched the player with grave appreciation in her eyes, and a little flush crept into her companion's cheek. Perhaps she was thinking of the dollar she had given the man who could play the famous nocturne as she had rarely heard it played before, and owned what, though she could scarcely believe it to be a genuine Cremona, was evidently an old Italian fiddle of no mean value. There was also silence for at least a minute after he had laid down the bow, and then Brooke held out the violin to the girl who had praised its tone.

"Would you care to try the instrument?" he said.

"No," said the girl, with quiet decisiveness. "Not after that, though it is, I think, a better one than I have ever handled."

"And I fancy I should explain that she is studying under an eminent teacher, who professes himself perfectly satisfied with her progress," said the man with the grey hair. [Pg 23]

Brooke said nothing. He knew the compliment was sincere enough, but he had seen the appreciation in the other girl's eyes, and that pleased him most. Then, as he put away the fiddle the man turned to him again.

"I am far from satisfied with our Siwash guide," he said. "In fact, I am by no means sure that he knows the country, and as we propose making for the big lake and camping by it, I should prefer to send him back if you could recommend us anybody who would take us there."

Brooke felt a curious little thrill of anticipation, but it was the girl with the brown eyes he glanced at. She, of course, said nothing, but, though it seemed preposterous, Brooke fancied that she knew what he was thinking and was not displeased.

"With your approval I would come myself, sir," he said. "There is nothing just now to keep me at the ranch."

The other man professed himself pleased, and before Brooke retired to his couch in the stable the matter was arranged. He did not, however, fall asleep for several hours, which was a distinctly unusual thing with him, and then the face of the brown-eyed girl followed him into his dreams. Its reposefulness had impressed him the more because of the hint of strength and pride behind it, and again he saw her sitting fearlessly on the plunging horse in the midst of the river with the moon round and full behind her. [Pg 24]

II.

BROOKE TAKES THE TRAIL.

The sun had not cleared the dark firs upon the steep hillside, though the snow on the peaks across the valley glowed with saffron light, when Brooke came upon the girl with the brown eyes sitting on a cedar trunk beside the river, and she looked up with a smile when he stopped beside her. There was nobody else about, for the rest of the party had apparently not risen yet, and Jimmy had set out to catch a trout for breakfast. Save for the song of the river all the pine-shrouded hollow was very still.

"I was wondering if I might ask what you thought of this country?" said Brooke. "It is, of course, the usual question."

The girl laughed a little. "If you really wish to know, I think it is the grandest there is on this earth, as I believe it will be one of the greatest. Still, my liking for it isn't so astonishing, because, although I have lived in England, I am a Canadian."

Brooke made a little deprecatory gesture. "It's a mistake I've been led into before, and I'm not sure you would consider it a compliment if I told you that I scarcely supposed you belonged to Canada. It also reminds me of a friend of mine who had spent a few months in Spain, and took some pains to teach a man, who, though he was not aware of it, had lived fifteen years in Cuba, Castilian. Still, perhaps you will tell me what you thought of England."

[Pg 26]

The girl did not invite him, but she drew her skirt a trifle aside, and Brooke sat down upon the log beside her. She looked even daintier, and appealed to his fancy more, in the searching morning light than she had done when the moon shone down on her, which he was not altogether prepared for. Her eyes were clear and steady in spite of the faint smile in them, and there was no uncertainty of coloring on cheek or forehead, which had been tinted a delicate warm brown by wind and sun.

"When you came up I was just contrasting this valley with one I remember visiting in the Old Country," she said. "It was in the West. Major Hume, who is with us now, once took me there, and we spent an afternoon at a house which, I think, is older than any we have in Canada."

"In a river valley in the West Country?" said Brooke.

The girl nodded. "Yes," she said. "Ivy, with stems thicker than your wrist, climbs about the front of it, and a lawn mown until it looks like velvet slopes to the sliding water. A wall of clipped yews shuts it in, and the river slides past it silently without froth or haste, as though afraid that any sound it made would jar upon the drowsy quietness of the place. There is a big beech wood behind it, and one little meadow, green as an emerald, between that and the river—"

[Pg 27]

"Where the stepping-stones stretch across. A path comes twisting down through the dimness of the wood, and there are black firs upon the ridge above."

"Of course!" said the girl. "That is, beyond the ash poles—but how could you know?"

Brooke smiled curiously. "I was once there—ever so long ago."

His companion seemed a trifle astonished. "Then I wonder if you felt as I did, that those shadowy woods and dark yew hedges shut out all that is real and strenuous in life. One could fancy that nobody did anything but sit still and dream there."

Brooke smiled a little, though it had not escaped his attention that she seemed to take his comprehension for granted.

"Well," he said, reflectively, "there was very little else one could do. Anything that savored of strenuousness would have been considered distinctly bad form in that valley."

A little sardonic twinkle flickered in the girl's eyes. "Oh," she said, "I know. The distinction between those who work and those who idle is marked in your country. It even seems to be considered a desirable thing for a man to fritter his time away, so long as he does it gracefully. Still, there is room for all one's activities, and the big thoughts that lead to big schemes here. How far does your ranch go?"

[Pg 28]

"To the lake," said Brooke, who understood the purport of the question. "There are four hundred acres of it, and I have, I don't mind telling you, been here rather more than two years."

The girl glanced at the very small gap in the forest, and again the man guessed her thoughts.

"And that is all you have cleared?"

"Yes," said Brooke, with a little smile. "One can lounge very successfully here. Still, even if there was not a tree upon it the soil wouldn't be worth anything, and it's only in places one can find a foot or two of it. When I first came in, an enterprising gentleman in the land agency business sold me this wilderness of rock and gravel to feed cattle and grow fruit trees on, though I fancy I am not the only confiding stranger who has been treated in the same fashion in this country."

For a moment a curious expression, which Brooke could attach no meaning to, crept into his

companion's face, but though there was a faint flush in her cheeks it grew suddenly reposeful again.

"I gave you a dollar last night," she said, and stopped a moment. "I have, as I told you, lived in England, and I recognized by your voice that you came from there, but, of course, I hadn't—"

Brooke smiled at her. "If you look at it in one light, I scarcely think that explanation is gratifying to one's vanity. Still, you have also lived in Canada, and you ought to know that whoever parts with a dollar in this country, even under a misapprehension, very rarely gets it back."

[Pg 29]

The girl regarded him gravely a moment with the faint warmth still showing in her sun-tanned cheeks, and then looked away towards the sliding water. She said nothing whatever, although there was a good deal to be deduced from the man's speech. Then she rose as Major Hume came out of the house.

They left the ranch that day, and for a week Brooke led them through dark fir forests, and waited on them in their camps. He would also have stayed with them longer could he have found a reasonable excuse, but, as it happened, a most exemplary Siwash whom he knew appeared, and offered his services, when they reached the lonely mountain-girt lake. Then he said farewell to Major Hume, and was plodding down the homeward trail with his packs slung about him, when he met the girl coming up from the lake. She carried a cluster of the crimson wine-berries in her hand, and stopped abruptly when she saw him. She and her younger companions had been fishing that afternoon, and though Brooke could not see the latter amidst the serried trunks, their voices broke sharply through the stillness of the evening. It was significant that both he and the girl stood still without speaking until the voices grew less distinct.

[Pg 30]

Then she said, quietly, "So you are going away?"

"Yes," said Brooke, a trifle grimly. "An Indian I can recommend came in this afternoon. That made it unnecessary for me to stay."

"You seem in a hurry to go."

Brooke made a little gesture. "I fancy I have stayed with Major Hume quite as long as is good for me. The effort it cost me to go away was sufficiently unpleasant already. It is, you see, scarcely likely that I shall ever spend a week like the past one again."

There was sympathy in his companion's eyes, for she had seen his comfortless dwelling, and guessed tolerably correctly what manner of life he led. It would, she realized, have been easier for him had he been born a bushman, for there was no doubt in her mind that he was one who had been accustomed to luxury in England.

"You are going back to the ranch?" she said.

"For a little while, and then I shall take the trail. Where it will lead me is more than I know, but the ranch is as great a failure as its owner. And yet a month—or even a week—ago I was dangerously content to stay there."

The girl fancied she understood him, for she had seen broken men who had lost heart in the struggle sink to the Indian's level, and ask no more than the subsistence they could gain with rod and gun. That was, perhaps, enough for an Indian, but it seemed to her a flinging of his birthright away in the case of a white man. Her face was quietly grave, and Brooke felt a little thrill run through him as he looked at her.

[Pg 31]

She stood, slender and very shapely, with unconscious pride in her pose, in front of the great cylindrical trunk of a cedar whose grey bark forced up every line of her white-clad figure, and he realized, when he met the big grave eyes, that he had pulled himself upon the edge of a precipice a week ago. He had let himself drift recklessly during the last two years, but it was plain to him now that he would have gone down once for all had he mated with Bella.

"I think you are doing wisely," she said, quietly. "There is a chance for every man somewhere in this country."

Brooke smiled drily. "I am going to look for mine. Whether I shall find it I do not know, but I am, at least, glad I have seen you. Otherwise, I might have settled down at the ranch again."

"What have I to do with that decision?" and the girl regarded him steadily.

"It is a trifle difficult to explain. Still, you see, your gracious kindness reminded me of a good deal that once was mine, and after the past week I could never go back to the old life at the ranch. No doubt there comes to every one who attempts to console himself with them, a time when the husks and sty grow nauseating. I do not know why I should tell you this, and scarcely think I would have done so had there been any probability of our ever meeting again."

[Pg 32]

There was full comprehension in the girl's eyes, as well as a trace of compassion, and she held out a little hand.

"Good-bye!" she said, quietly. "If they are of any value, my good wishes go with you."

Brooke made her a little deferential inclination, as the dainty fingers rested a moment in his hard palm; then he swung off his big shapeless hat and turned away, but the girl stood still, looking after him, until the lonely, plodding figure faded into the shadows of the pines, while it was with a

little thrill of sympathy she went back to camp, for she realized it was a very great compliment the man had paid her. He was, it seemed, turning his back on his possessions, and going away, because she had awakened in him the latent sense of responsibility. She was, however, also a little afraid, for no one could foresee what the result of his decision would be, and she felt that to help in diverting the course of another's life was no light thing.

In the meanwhile, Brooke held on up the hillside with long, swinging strides, crashing through barberry thickets and trampling the breast-high fern, until he stopped and made his camp on the edge of the snow-scarped slopes when the soft darkness fell. His road was rough, and in places perilous, but there was a relief in vigorous action now the decision was made, and the old apathy fell from him as he climbed towards the peaks above. It was, however, several days later when he reached the ranch, and came upon Jimmy sprawling his ungainly length outside it, basking in the sun. Still, the latter took his corn-cob pipe from his lips, and became attentive when he saw his face. This, he realized, was not altogether the same man who had left him a little while ago.

[Pg 33]

"Get up!" said Brooke, almost sharply. "I want you to listen to me. If it suits you to stay here by yourself, you can; in the meanwhile, do what you like, which will, of course, be very little, with the ranch. In return, I'll only ask you to take care of the fiddle until I send for it. I'm going away."

Jimmy nodded, for he had expected this. "That's all right!" he said. "I guess I'll stay. I don't know any other place where one can grub out enough to eat quite so easily. Where're you going to?"

"I don't quite know," and Brooke smiled grimly. "Up and down the province—anywhere I can pick up a dollar or two daily by working for them."

"The trouble is that they're so blamed hard to stick to when you've got them," said Jimmy, reflectively. "Now, you don't want dollars here."

"If I had two thousand of them I'd stay, and make something of the ranch, rocky as it is."

"It couldn't be done with less, and I guess you're sensible. I'm quite happy slouching round here, but there's a kind of difference between you and me. That girl with the big eyes has been putting notions into you?"

[Pg 34]

Brooke made no disclaimer, and Jimmy laughed. "It's a little curious—you don't even know who she is?"

"Her name is Barbara. She is, she told me, a Canadian."

"Canada's quite a big country," said Jimmy, reflectively. "You could put England into its vest pocket without knowing it was there. I guess it will be a long while before you see her again, and if you meet her in the cities she's not going to remember you. You'd find her quite a different kind of young woman there. When are you going?"

"At sundown. I'd go now, but I want a few hours' rest and sleep."

Jimmy looked at him with sudden concern in his face. "Then I'll be good and lonely to-night," he said. "Say, do you think I could take out the fiddle now and then to keep me company? I guess I could play it, like a banjo, with my fingers."

"No," said Brooke, drily, "that's the one thing you can't do."

He flung himself down in his straw-filled bunk, dressed as he was, for he had floundered through tangled forest since the dawn crept into the sky; and the shadows of the cedars lay long and black upon the river when he opened his eyes again. Jimmy was busy at the little stove, and in another few minutes the simple meal, crudely served but barbaric in its profusion, was upon the table. Neither of the men said very much during it, and then Jimmy silently helped his comrade to gird his packs about him. The sun had gone, and the valley was dim and very still when they stood in the doorway.

[Pg 35]

"Good luck!" said Jimmy. "You'll come back by-and-by?"

Brooke smiled curiously as he shook hands with him. "If I'm ever a rich man, I may."

Then he went out into the deepening shadows, and floundering waist-deep through the ford, plodded up the climbing trail with his face towards the snow. It grew a trifle grim, however, when he looked back once from a bare hill shoulder, and saw a feeble light blink out far down in the hollow. Jimmy, he knew, was lying, pipe in hand, beside the stove, and, after all, the lonely ranch had been a home to him.

A man without ambition who could stifle memory might have found the life he led there a pleasant one. Bountiful Nature fed him, the hills that walled the valley in shut out strife and care, and now he was homeless altogether. He had also just six dollars in his pockets, and that sum, he knew, will not go a very long way in Western Canada.

As he gazed, the fleecy mist that rolled up from the river blotted out the light, and the man felt the deep stillness and loneliness as he had not done since he first came there. That sudden eclipse of Jimmy's light seemed very significant just then, for he knew it would never burn again as a beacon for him. The last red gleam had also faded off the snow, and, with a jerk at the pack straps that galled his shoulders, he set his lips, and swung away into the darkness of the coming night.

[Pg 36]

III.

THE NARROW WAY.

The big engine was running slowly, which did not happen often, and Brooke, who leaned on the planer table, was thankful for the respite. A belt slid round above him, and on either side were turning wheels, while he had in front of him a long vista of sliding logs, whirring saws, and toiling men. The air was heavy with gritty dust, and a sweet resinous smell, while here and there a blaze of sunshine streamed into the great open-sided building. Something had gone wrong with the big engine, and its sonorous panting, which reverberated across the still, blue inlet, had slackened a trifle. There was not, as a result of this, power enough to drive all the machines in the mill, and Brooke was waiting until the engineer should set matters right.

It was very hot in the big shed. In fact, the cedar shingles on the roof were crackling overhead; and Brooke's thin jean garments were soaked with perspiration. The dust the planer threw off had also worked its way through them, and adhered in smeary patches to his dripping face, while his hair and eyebrows might have been rubbed with flour. That fine powder was, however, not the worst, for he was also covered with prismatic grains of wood, whose sharp angles caused him an intolerable irritation when his garments rasped across his flesh. His hands were raw and bleeding, there was a cramp in one shoulder, and an ache, which now and then grew excruciating, down all the opposite side of him.

[Pg 38]

The toilers are, as a rule, at least, liberally paid in Western Canada, but a good deal is expected from them, and the manager of the mill had installed that planer because it could, the makers claimed, be run by one live man. The workmen, however, said that if he held to the contract he would very soon be dead, and Brooke was already worn out with the struggle to keep pace with steam. It was a long while since he had toiled much at the ranch, and in England he had not toiled at all, while, as he stood there, gasping, and hoping that the engineer would not get through his task too soon, he remembered that on the two eventful occasions in his life when he had made a commendable decision, it had brought him only trouble and strain. The way of the virtuous, it seemed, was hard.

He turned languidly when a man who carried an oil can came by and stopped a moment beside him.

"You're looking kind of played out," said the newcomer.

"It's not astonishing," said Brooke. "I feel quite that way."

"Then I guess that's a kind of pity. The boss will have the belt on the relief shaft in a minute now, and he allows he's going to cut every foot as much as usual by the supper hour. You'll have to shake yourself quite lively. How long've you been on to that planer?"

[Pg 39]

"A month."

"Well," said the engineer, "she broke the last man up in considerably less time than that. Weak in the chest he was, and when we were driving her lively he used to cough up blood. He had to let up sudden one day, and he's in the hospital now. Say, can't you strike somebody for a softer job?"

"I'm afraid I can't," said Brooke, drily. "I'll have to go on till I'm beaten."

The engineer made a little gesture of comprehension as he passed on, for the attitude the Englishman had adopted is not uncommon in the Dominion of Canada, or the country where toil is at least as arduous to the south of it. Men who demand, and not infrequently obtain, the full value of their labor, are proud of their manhood there, and there was an innate resoluteness in Brooke, which had never been wholly awakened in England.

Suddenly, however, the belt above him ran round; there was a clash as he slipped in the clutch, and a noisy whirring which sank to a deeper tone when he flung a rough redwood board upon the table. The whirring millers took hold of it, and its splintery edges galled his raw hands as he guided it, while thick dust and woody fragments torn off by the trenchant steel, whirled about him in a stream until his eyes were blinded and his nostrils filled. Then the board slid off the table smooth on one side, and he knew that he was lagging when the hum of the millers changed to a thin scream. They must not at any cost be kept waiting for their food, for by inexorable custom so many feet of dressed lumber every day was due from that machine.

[Pg 40]

He flung up another heavy piece, reckless of the splinters in his hand, made no pause to wipe the rust from his smarting eyes, and peering at the spinning cutters blindly thrust upon the end of the board, and wondered vaguely whether this was what man was made for, or how long flesh and blood could be expected to stand the strain. The board went off the table with a crash, and it was time for the next, while Brooke, who bent sideways with a distressful crick in his waist, once more faced the sawdust stream with lowered head. It ceased only for a second or two, while he stooped from the table to the lumber that slid by gravitation to his feet, and he knew that to let that stream overtake him and pile up would proclaim his incapacity and defeat. So long as he was there he must keep pace with it, whatever tax it laid upon his jaded body.

He did it for an hour, flagging all the while, for it was a task no man could have successfully undertaken unless he had done such work before, and Brooke's head was aching under a tension

[Pg 41]

which had grown unendurable that afternoon. Then the screaming millers closed upon a knot in the wood, and, half-dazed as he was, he thrust upon the board savagely, instead of easing it. There was a crash, a big piece of steel flew across the table, and the hum of the machine ceased suddenly. Brooke laughed grimly, and sat down gasping. He had done his best, and now he was not altogether sorry that he was beaten.

He was still sitting there when a dusty man in store clothes, with a lean, intent face, came along and glanced at the planer before he looked at him.

"You let her get ahead of you, and tried to make up time by feeding her too hard?" he said.

"No," said Brooke. "Not exactly! She got hold of a knot."

"Same thing!" said the other man. "You've smashed her, anyway, and it will cost the company most of three hundred dollars before we get her running again. You don't expect me to keep you after that?"

Brooke smiled drily. "I'm not quite sure that I'd like to stay."

"Then we'll fix it so it will suit everybody. I'll give you your pay order up to now, and you'll be glad I ran you out by-and-by. There are no chances saw-milling unless you're owner, and it's quite likely somebody's got a better use for you." [Pg 42]

Brooke understood this as a compliment, and took his order, after which he had a spirited altercation with the clerk, who desired him to wait for payment until it was six o'clock, which he would not do. Then he went back to his little cubicle, which, with its flimsy partitions one could hear his neighbor snoring through, resembled a cell in a hive of bees, in the big boarding-house, and slept heavily until he was awakened by the clangor of the half-past six supper bell. He descended, and, devouring his share of the meal in ten minutes, which is about the usual time in that country, strolled leisurely into the great general room, which had a big stove in the middle and a bar down one side of it. He already loathed the comfortless place, from the hideous oleographs on the bare wood walls down to the uncleanly sawdust on the floor.

He sat down, and two men, whose acquaintance he had made during his stay there, lounged across to him. Trade was slack in the province then, and both wore very threadbare jeans. There was also a significant moodiness in their gaunt faces which suggested that they had felt the pinch of adversity.

"You let up before supper-time?" said one.

"I did," said Brooke, a trifle grimly. "I broke up the Kenawa planer in the Tomlinson mill. That's why I came away. I'm not going back again."

One of the men laughed softly. "Then it was only the square thing. Since we've been here that planer has broke up two or three men. Held out a month, didn't you? What were you at before that?" [Pg 43]

"Road-making, firing at a cannery, surrey packing. I've a ranch that doesn't pay, you see?"

The other man smiled again. "So have we! Half the deadbeats in this country are landholders, too. Two men couldn't get away with many of the big trees on our lot in a lifetime, and one has to light out and earn something to put the winter through. This month Jake and I have made 'bout twenty dollars between us. I guess your trouble's want of capital—same as ours. One can't do a great deal with a hundred dollars. Still, you'd have had more than that when you came in?"

"I had," said Brooke, drily. "I put six thousand into the land, or rather the land-agent's bank, besides what I spent on clearing a little of it, and when I've paid my board and for the clothes I bought, I'll have about four dollars now."

"That's how those land-company folks get rich," said one of the men. "Was it a piece of snow mountain he sold you, or a bottomless swamp?"

"Rock. One might have drained a swamp."

The men smiled. "Well," said the first of them, "that's not always easy. A man's not a steam navvy—but the game's an old one. It was the Indian Spring folks played it off on you?"

"No. It was Devine."

[Pg 44]

There was a little silence, and then the men appeared reflective.

"Now, if any man in that business goes tolerably straight, it's Devine," said one of them. "Of course, if a green Britisher comes along bursting to hand over the bills for any kind of land, he'll oblige him, but I'd sit down and think a little before I called Devine a thief. Anyway, he's quite a big man in the province."

The bronze deepened a trifle in Brooke's face. "I can't see any particular difference between a swindler and a thief. In any case, the man robbed me, and if I live long enough I'll get even with him."

"That's going to be quite a big contract," said one of the men. "It's best to lie low and wait for another fool when you've been taken in. Besides, there's many a worse man in his own line than Devine. There was one fellow up at Jamieson's when the rush was on. He could talk the shoes off

a mule—and he was an Englishman. Whatever any man wanted, fruit-land, mineral-land, sawing lumber, and gold outcrop, he'd got. Picked it out on the survey map and sold it him. For 'most a month he rolled the dollars in, and then the circus began. The folks who'd made the deals went up to see their land, and most of them found it belonged to another man. You see, if three of them wanted maple bush, that's generally good soil and light to clear, and he'd only one piece of it, he sold the same lot to all of them. They went back with clubs, but that man knew when to light out, and he didn't wait for them."

[Pg 45]

Brooke sat silent awhile. He knew that the story was not a very unlikely one, for while, in view of the simplicity of the Canadian land tenure legislation, there is no reason why any man should be swindled, as a matter of fact, a good many are. He was also irritated that he had allowed himself to indulge in what he realized must have appeared a puerile threat. This was, of course, of no moment in itself, but he felt that it showed how he was losing hold of the nice discretion he had, at least, affected in England. Still, he meant exactly what he had said.

During the greater portion of two years he had attempted a hopeless task, and then, discovering his folly, resigned himself, and drifted idly, perilously near the brink of the long declivity which Englishmen of good upbringing not infrequently descend with astonishing swiftness in that country, and for that, rightly or wrongly, he blamed the man who had robbed him. Then the awakening had come, and he saw that while there were many careers open to a man with six thousand dollars, or even half of them, there was only strenuous physical toil for the man with none. He had attempted it, but proficiency in even the more brutal forms of labor cannot be attained in a day, and he now looked back on a year of hardship and effort which had left an indelible mark on him.

[Pg 46]

It had been a season when there was little industrial enterprise, and he had no friends, while the dollars he gained were earned for the most part by the strain of overtaxed muscles and bleeding hands. He had toiled up to his waist in snow-water at the mines, swung the shovel under the lashing deluge driving a Government road over a big divide, hung from dizzy railroad trestles holding with fingers bruised by the hammer the spikes the craftsmen drove, and been taught all there is to learn about exposure and fatigue. He had braced himself to bear it, though he had lived softly in England, but each time he crawled into draughty tent or reeking shanty, wet through, with aching limbs, at night, he remembered the man who had robbed him.

It was, perhaps, not altogether astonishing that under such conditions the wrong done him should assume undue proportions, and that when a slipping hammer laid his knuckles bare he should charge the smart to Devine, and long for the reckoning. The man who had condemned him to this life of toil had, he told himself, grown rich by theft, and he dwelt upon his injury until the memory of it possessed him. It was not, however, the physical hardship that troubled him most, but the thought of the opportunities he had lost, for since he had seen the girl with the brown eyes they had assumed their due value. Devine had not only taken his dollars, but had driven him out from the society of those who had been his equals, and made him one who could scarcely hope to meet a woman of refinement on friendly terms again. Coarse fare and a life of brutal toil were all that seemed left to him. There were, he knew, men in that country who had commenced with a very few dollars, and acquired a competence, but they were not young Englishmen brought up as he had been.

[Pg 47]

"You are the only man I've ever heard say anything good about any one in the land business, and it does not amount to much at that," he said. "Devine has been successful so far, but even gentlemen of his talents are liable to make a mistake occasionally, and if ever he makes a big one, it will probably go hardly with him. That, at least, is one consolation."

Another man who had been standing near the bar sauntered towards them, cigar in hand. He was dressed in store clothing, and his hands were, as Brooke noticed, not those of a workman, though they seemed wiry and capable. He had penetrating dark eyes, and the Western business man's lean, intent face, while Brooke would have guessed his age at a little over thirty.

"I don't mind admitting that I heard a little," he said. "Those land-agency fellows have a good deal to account for. You're not exactly struck on Devine?"

"No," said Brooke, drily. "I have no particular cause to be. Still, that really does not concern everybody."

[Pg 48]

"Beat him out of six thousand dollars!" said one of his companions.

The stranger laughed a little. "He has done me out of a good many more, but one has to take his chances in this country. You are working at the Tomlinson mill?"

"No," said Brooke. "I was turned out to-day."

"Got no notion where to strike next?"

"No."

The stranger, who did not seem at all repulsed by his abruptness, looked at him reflectively.

"I heard they were wanting survey packers up at the Johnston Lake in the bush," he said. "A Government man's starting to run the line through to the big range Thursday. If you took him this card up he might put you on."

Brooke took the card, and a little tinge of color crept into his face.

"I appreciate the kindness, but still, you see, you know nothing whatever about me," he said.

The stranger laughed. "I wouldn't worry. We're not particular in this country. Go up, and show him the card if you feel like it. I've been in a tight place myself once or twice, and we'll take it as an introduction. A good many people know me—you are Mr. Brooke?"

Brooke admitted it, and after a few minutes' conversation, the stranger, who informed him that he had come there in the hope of meeting a man who did not seem likely to put in an appearance now, moved away. [Pg 49]

"Thomas P. Saxton. What is he?" said Brooke to his companions, as he glanced at the card.

"Puts through mine and sawmill deals," said one of the men. "I'd light out for Johnston Lake right away, and if you have the dollars take the cars. Atlantic express is late to-night, waiting the Empress boat, and if you get off at Chumas, you'll only have 'bout twelve leagues to walk. I figure it will cost you four dollars."

Brooke decided that it would be advisable to take the risk, and when he had settled with his host and a storekeeper, found he had about six dollars left. When he went out, one of the ranchers looked at the other. He was the one who had spoken least, and a quiet, observant man, from Ontario.

"I'm not that sure it was good advice you gave him," he said.

"No," said his companion.

The other man appeared reflective. "I was watching Saxton, and he kind of woke up when Brooke let out about Devine. Now, it seems to me, it wasn't without a reason he put him on to that survey."

His companion laughed. "It doesn't count, anyway. The Government's dollars are certain."

"Well," said the Ontario man, drily, "if I had to give one of the pair any kind of a hold on me, I figure from what I've heard it would be Devine instead of Saxton." [Pg 50]

[Pg 51]

IV.

SAXTON MAKES AN OFFER.

It was raining as hard as it not infrequently does in the mountain province, and the deluge lashed the sombre pines that towered above the dripping camp, when Brooke stood in the entrance of the Surveyor's tent. He was wet to the skin, as well as weary, for he had walked most of thirty miles that day over a very bad trail, and was but indifferently successful in his attempts to hide his anxiety. The Surveyor also noticed the grimness of his wet face, and dallied a moment with the card he held, for he had known what fatigue and short commons were in his early days.

"I'm sorry I can't take you, but I've two more men than I've any particular use for already," he said at last. "I can't give you a place to spread your blankets in to-night either, because the freighter didn't bring up all our tents. Still, you might make Beasley's Hotel, and strike Saxton's prospectors, if you head back over the divide. He has a few men up there opening up a silver lead."

Brooke said nothing, and the Surveyor turned to his assistant as he moved away. "It's rough on that man, and he seems kind of played out," he said. "I can't quite figure, either, why Saxton sent him here, when he's putting men on at his mine. It seems to me I told him I was only going to take men who'd packed for me before." [Pg 52]

In the meanwhile, Brooke stood still a few moments in the rain. He was aching all over, and his wet boots galled him, while he was also very hungry, and uncertain what to do. There was nothing to be gained by pushing on four leagues to Beasley's Hotel, even if he had been capable of doing it, which was not the case, because he had just then only two or three copper coins worth ten cents in his pocket. It was, he knew, scarcely likely he would be turned out for that reason, but he had not yet come down to asking a stranger's charity. Supper, which he would have been offered a share of, was also over, and there was not a ranch about, only a dripping wilderness, for he had plodded on after the Surveyor from the lonely settlement at Johnston Lake.

It was very enviously he watched two men piling fresh branches on a crackling fire. Darkness was not far away, and already a light shone through the wet canvas of the Surveyor's tent. A cheerful hum of voices came out from the others, and a man was singing in one of them. The survey packers had, at least, a makeshift shelter for the night, food in sufficiency, and such warmth as the fires and their damp blankets might supply, while he had nowhere to lay his head. The smell of the stinging wood smoke was curiously alluring, and he felt as he glanced at the black wall of [Pg 53]

bush which closed in upon the little camp that his hardihood was deserting him, and in another minute he would go back and offer his services in return for food. Then his pride came to the rescue, and, turning away abruptly, he plodded back into the bush, where a bitter wind that came down from the snow blew the drips from the great branches into his face.

He kept to the trail instinctively, though he did not know where he was going, or why, when one place had as little to commend itself as another, he blundered on at all, except that he was getting cold, until the creeping dark surprised him at a forking of the way. He knew that the path he had come by led through a burnt forest and thin willow bush, while great cedars shrouded the other, which apparently wound up a valley towards the heights above. They promised, at least, a little more shelter than the willows, but that, he fancied, must be the trail that crossed the divide and it led into a desolation of rock and forest. He had very little hope of being offered employment at the mine the Surveyor had mentioned, and stood still for several minutes with the rain beating into his face, while, though he did not know it then, a good deal depended on his decision. A little mist rolled out of the valley, and it was growing very cold, while the dull roar of a snow-fed torrent made the silence more impressive.

[Pg 54]

Then, attracted solely by the sombre clustering of the cedars, which promised to keep off at least a little of the rain, he turned up the valley with a shiver, and finally unrolled his one wet blanket under a big tree. There was an angle among its roots, which ran along the ground, and, scooping a hollow in the withered sprays, he crawled into it, and lay down with his back to the trunk. The roar of the river seemed louder now, and he could hear a timber wolf howling far off on the hillside. He was very cold and hungry, but his weariness blunted the sense of physical discomfort, though as yet his activity of mind remained, and he asked himself what he had gained by leaving the ranch, and could find no answer.

Still, even then, he would not regret that he had broken away, for there was in him an inherent obstinacy, and he would have struggled on at the ranch had not the absence of funds precluded it, and consideration shown him that it would be merely throwing his toil away. Life, it seemed, had very little to offer him, but now he had made the decision he would adhere to it, though he had arrived at the resolution in cold blood, for it was his reason only which had responded to the girl's influence, and as yet what was spiritual in him remained untouched. He would not live as the Indians do, or sink into a sot. There were vague possibilities before him which, though this appeared most unlikely, might prove themselves facts, and the place he had been born to in England might yet be his. That was why he would not sell his birthright for a mess of stringy venison, and the deleterious whisky sold at the settlement, which seemed to him a most unfair price. Still, he went no further, even when he thought of the girl, which he did with dispassionate admiration.

[Pg 55]

Worn-out as he was, he slept, and awakened in the grey dawn almost unfit to rise. There was a distressful pain in his hip-joints, which those who sleep in the open are acquainted with, and at the first few steps he took his face went awry, but his physical nature demanded warmth and food, and there was only one way of obtaining it before the life went out of him. Whatever effort it cost him, he must reach the mine. He set out for it, limping, while the sharp gravel rolled under his bleeding feet as he floundered up the climbing trail. It seemed to lead upwards for ever between endless colonnades of towering trunks, and when at last pine and cedar had been left behind, there was slippery rock smoothed by sliding snow to be clambered over.

Still, reeling and gasping, he held on, and it was afternoon, and he had eaten nothing for close on thirty hours, when a filmy trail of smoke that drifted faintly blue athwart the climbing pines beneath him caught his eye. He braced himself for the effort to reach it, and went down with loose, uneven strides, smashing through sal-sal and barberry when he reached the bush again. The fern met above his head, there were mazes of fallen trunks to be scrambled through, and he tore the soaken jean that clung about him to rags in his haste. Still, he had learned to travel straight in the bush, and at last he staggered into sight of the mine.

[Pg 56]

There was a little scar on the hillside, an iron shanty, a few soaked tents and shelters of bark, but the ringing clink of the drills vibrated about them, and a most welcome smell of wood smoke came up to him with a murmur of voices. Brooke heard them faintly, and did not stop until a handful of men clustered about him, while, as he blinked at them, one, who appeared different from the others, pushed his way through the group.

"You seem considerably used up," he said.

"I am," said Brooke, hoarsely, "I'm almost starving."

It occurred to him that the man's voice ought to be familiar, but it was a few moments before he recognized him as the one who had sent him on the useless journey after the Surveyor.

"Then come right along. It's not quite supper-time, but there's food in the camp," he said.

Brooke went with him to the shanty, where he fell against a chair, and found it difficult to straighten himself when he picked it up. Saxton, so far as he could remember, asked no questions, but smiled at him reassuringly while he explained, somewhat incoherently, what had brought him there, until a man appeared with a big tray. Then Brooke ate strenuously.

[Pg 57]

"Some folks have a notion that one can kill himself by getting through too much at once when he's 'most starved," said Saxton. "I never found it work out that way in this country."

"Were you ever almost starved?" said Brooke, who felt the life coming back to him, with no great show of interest.

"Oh, yes," said Saxton, drily. "Twice, at least. I was three days without food the last time. One has to take his chances in the ranges, and you don't pick up dollars without trouble anywhere. Still, we'll talk of that afterwards. Had enough?"

Brooke said he fancied he had, and Saxton hammered upon the iron roof of the shanty until a man appeared.

"Give him a pair of blankets, Ike. He can sleep in the lean-to," he said.

Brooke went with the man, vacantly, and in another few minutes found himself lying in dry blankets on a couch of springy twigs. He was sensible that it was delightfully warm, but he could not remember how he got there, and was wondering why the rain no longer lashed his face, when sleep came to him.

It was next morning when he was awakened by the roar of a blasting charge, and lay still with an unusual sense of comfort until the silence that followed it was broken by the clinking of the drills. Then he rose stiffly, and put on his clothes, which he found had been dried, and was informed by a man who appeared while he was doing it that his breakfast was waiting. Brooke wondered a little at this, for he knew that it was past the usual hour, but he made an excellent meal, and then, being shown into a compartment of the little galvanized iron shanty, found Saxton sitting at a table. The latter now wore long boots and jeans, and there were pieces of discolored stone strewn about in front of him.

[Pg 58]

He looked up with a little nod as Brooke came in. "Feeling quite yourself again?" he said.

"Yes," said Brooke, "thanks to the way your men have treated me. This is, of course, a hospitable country, but I may admit that I could scarcely have expected to be so well looked after by one I hadn't the slightest claim upon."

"And you almost wondered what he did it for?"

Brooke was a trifle astonished, for this certainly expressed his thoughts, but he was in no way disconcerted, and he laughed.

"I should, at least, never have ventured to suggest that anything except good-nature influenced you," he said.

"Still, you felt it? Well, you were considerably used up when you came in, and, as I sent you to the Surveyor, who didn't seem to have any use for you, I felt myself responsible. That appears sufficient?"

[Pg 59]

Now, Brooke had mixed with men of a good many different stations, and he was observant, and, as might have been expected, by no means diffident.

"Since you ask, I scarcely think it does," he said.

Saxton laughed. "Take a cigar. That's the kind of talk I like. We'll come to the point right away."

Brooke lighted a cigar, and found it good. "Thanks. I'm willing to listen as long as appears necessary," he said.

"You have a kind of grievance against Devine?"

"I have. According to my notion of ethics, he owes me six thousand dollars, and I shall not be quite content until I get them out of him, although that may never happen. I feel just now that it would please me especially to make him smart as well, which I quite realize, is unnecessary folly."

The Canadian nodded, and shook the ash from his cigar. "Exactly," he said. "A man with sense keeps his eye on the dollars, and leaves out the sentiment. It's quite apt to get in his way and trip him up. Well, suppose I could give you a chance of getting those dollars back?"

"I should be very much inclined to take it. Still, presumably, you do not mean to do it out of pure good-nature?"

"No, sir," said Saxton, drily. "I'm here to make dollars. That has been my object since I struck out for myself at fourteen, and I've piled quite a few of them together. I'd have had more only that wherever I plan a nice little venture in mines or land up and down this province, I run up against Devine. That's quite straight, isn't it?"

[Pg 60]

"I fancy it is. You are suggesting community of interest? Still, I scarcely realize how a man with empty pockets could be of very much use to you."

"I have a kind of notion that you could be if it suited you. I want a man with grit in him, who has had a good education, and could, if it was necessary, mix on equal terms with the folks in the cities."

"One would fancy there were a good many men of that kind in Canada."

Saxton appeared reflective. "Oh, yes," he said, drily. "The trouble is that most of them have got

something better to do, and I can't think of one who has any special reason for wanting to get even with Devine."

"That means the work you have in view would scarcely suit a man who was prosperous, or likely to be fastidious?"

"No," said Saxton, simply. "I don't quite think it would. Still, I've seen enough to show me that you can take the sensible point of view. We both want dollars, and I can't afford to be particular. I'm not sure you can, either."

Brooke sat silent awhile. He could, at least, appreciate the Canadian's candor, while events had rubbed the sentiment he had once had plenty of out of him, and left him a somewhat hard and bitter man. The woman he believed in had used him very badly, and the first man he trusted in Canada had plundered him. Brooke was, unfortunately, young when he was called upon to face the double treachery, and had generalized too freely from too limited premises. He felt that in all society there must be a conflict between the men who had all to gain and those who had anything worth keeping, and sentiment, it seemed, was out of place in that struggle.

[Pg 61]

"As you observed, I can't afford to be too particular," he said. "Still, it is quite possible I might not be prepared to go quite so far as you would wish me."

The Canadian laughed. "I'll take my chances. Nobody can bring up any very low-down game against me. Well, are you open to consider my offer?"

"You haven't exactly made one yet."

"Then we'll fix the terms. Until one of us gives the other notice that he lets up on this agreement, you will do just what I tell you. Pay will be about the usual thing for whatever you're set to do. It would be reasonably high if I put you on to anything in the cities."

"Is that likely?"

"I've a notion that we might get you into a place where you could watch Devine's game for me. I want to feel quite sure of it before I take any chances with that kind of man. If I struck him for anything worth while, you would have a share."

[Pg 62]

Brooke's face flushed just a trifle, and again he sat silent a moment or two. Then he laughed somewhat curiously.

"Well," he said, "I suppose there are no other means, and the man robbed me."

Saxton smiled. "If we pull off the deal I'm figuring on, your share might 'most work up to those six thousand dollars. They're yours."

Brooke realized that it was a clever man he was dealing with, but in his present state of mind the somewhat vague arrangement commended itself to him. He was, he decided, warranted in getting his six thousand dollars back by any means that were open to him. More he did not want, for he still retained in a slight degree the notions instilled into him in England, which had, however, since he was seldom able to indulge in them, not tended to make him happier.

"There is a point you don't seem to have grasped," he said. "Since I am not to be particular, can't you conceive that it would not be pleasant for you if Devine went one better?"

Saxton laughed. "I've met quite a few Englishmen—of your kind—already," he said. "That's why I feel that when you've taken my dollars you're not going to go back on me without giving me warning. Besides, Devine would be considerably more likely to fix you up in quite another way. Now, I want an answer. Is it a deal?"

[Pg 63]

"It is," said Brooke, who, in spite of the fashion in which he had expressed himself during the last few minutes, felt a slight warmth in his face. Though he could not afford to be particular, there was one aspect of the arrangement which did not commend itself to him.

Saxton nodded. "Then, as you'll want to know a little about mining, we'll put you on now, helping the drillers, at \$2.50 a day. You'll get considerably more by-and-by. Take this little treatise on the minerals of the province, and keep it by you."

[Pg 64]

V.

BARBARA RENEWS AN ACQUAINTANCE.

There was an amateur concert for a commendable purpose in the Vancouver opera-house, which, since the inhabitants of the mountain province do not expect any organized body to take over their individual responsibilities, was a somewhat unusual event, and Miss Barbara Heathcote, who had not as yet found it particularly entertaining, was leaning back languidly in her chair.

"There are really one or two things they do a little better in the Old Country," she said.

The young man who sat beside her laughed. "There must be, or you never would have admitted it," he said. "Still, I'm not sure you would find many folks who would believe you here."

"One has to be candid occasionally," and Barbara made a little gesture of weariness. "There is still another hour of it, but, I sincerely hope, not another cornet solo. What comes next? We were a little late, and nobody provided me with a programme. They are inconsistent. Milly, I notice, has several."

The man opened the paper which a girl Barbara glanced at handed him.

[Pg 65]

"A violin solo," he said. "I think they mean Schumann, but it's not altogether astonishing that they've spelt it wrong. A man called Brooke is put down for it."

"Brooke!" said Barbara, a trifle sharply. "Where does he come from? Do you know him?"

"I can't say I do——" the man commenced reflectively, and stopped a moment when he saw the little smile in the girl's brown eyes. "What were you thinking?"

"I was wondering whether that means he can't be worth knowing."

"Well," said the man, good-humoredly, "there are, I believe, one or two decent folks in this city I haven't had the pleasure of meeting, but you were a trifle too previous. I don't know him, but if he's the man I think he is, I've heard about him. He came down from the bush lately, and somebody put him on to Naseby, the surveyor. Naseby's busy just now, doing a good deal for the Government—Crown mineral lands, I think, or something of that kind—and he took the man. I understand he's quite smart at the bush work, and Naseby's pleased with him. That's about all I can tell you. You're scarcely likely to know him."

Barbara sat silent a space, looking about her while the amateur orchestra chased one another through the treacherous mazes of an overture. The handsome building was well filled, but there were one or two empty places at hand, for the man who had sent her there had taken a row of them and sent tickets to his friends, as was expected from a citizen of his importance. It was, in the usual course, scarcely likely that she would know a man who had lately been installed in a subordinate place in a surveyor's service, for her acquaintances were people of position in that province, and yet she had a very clear recollection of a certain rancher Brooke who played the violin.

[Pg 66]

"I once met a man of that name in the bush," she said, with almost overdone indifference. "Still, he is scarcely likely to be the same one."

Her companion started another topic, and neither of them listened to the orchestra, though the girl was a trifle irritated at herself for wishing that the overture had been shorter. At last, when the second violins were not more than a note behind the rest, the music stopped, and Barbara sat very still with eyes fixed on the stage while the usual little stir and rustle of draperies ran round the building. Then there was silence for a moment, and she was sensible of a curious little thrill as a man who held a violin came forward into the blaze of light. He wore conventional evening-dress in place of the fringed deerskin she had last seen him in, and she decided that it became his somewhat spare, symmetrical figure almost as well. The years he had spent swinging axe and pounding drill had toughened and supplanted it, and yet left him free from the coarsening stamp of toil, which is, however, not as a rule a necessary accompaniment of strenuous labor in that country. Standing still a moment quietly at his ease, straight-limbed, sinewy, with a little smile in his frost-bronzed face, he was certainly a personable man, and for no very apparent reason she was pleased to notice that two of her companions were regarding him with evident approbation.

[Pg 67]

"I think one could call him quite good-looking," said the girl beside her. "He has been in this country a while, but I wouldn't call him a Canadian. Not from this side of the Rockies, anyway."

"Why?" asked Barbara, mainly to discover how far her companion's thoughts coincided with her own.

"Well," said the other girl, reflectively, "it seems to me he takes it too easily. If he had been one of us he'd have either been grim and serious or worrying with the strings. We're most desperately in earnest, but they do things as though they didn't count in the Old Country. Now he has got the A right off without the least fussing, as if he couldn't help doing it."

The explanation was rather suggestive than definite, but Barbara was satisfied with it. She was usually a reposeful young woman herself, and the man's graceful tranquillity, which was of a kind not to be met with every day in that country, appealed to her. Then he drew the bow across the strings, and she sat very still to listen. It was not music that a good many of his audience were accustomed to, but scarcely a dress rustled or a programme fluttered until he took the fiddle from his shoulder. Then, while the plaudits rang through the building, his eyes met Barbara's. Leaning forward a trifle in her chair, she saw the sudden intentness of his face, but he gazed at her steadily for a moment without sign of recognition. Then she smiled graciously, for that was what she had expected of him, and again felt a faint thrill of content, for his eyes were fixed on her when as the tumult of applause increased he made a little inclination.

[Pg 68]

He was not permitted to retire, and when he put the fiddle to his shoulder again she knew why he played the nocturne she had heard in the bush. It was also, she felt, in a fashion significant that it had now, in place of the roar of a snow-fed river, the chords of a grand piano for accompaniment, though the latter, it seemed to her, made an indifferent substitute. The bronze-faced man in

deerskin had fitted the surroundings in which she had seen him, and they had been close comrades in the wilderness for a week. It could, she knew, scarcely be the same in the city, but she saw that he was, at least, equally at home there. It was only their relative positions that had changed, for the guide was the person of importance in the primeval bush, and the fact that he had waited without a sign until she smiled showed that he had not failed to recognize it. When at last he moved away she turned to the man at her side.

[Pg 69]

"Will you go down and ask Mr. Brooke to come here?" she said. "You can tell him that I would like to speak to him."

The young man did not express any of the astonishment he certainly felt, but proceeded to do her bidding, though it afforded him no particular pleasure, for there was a certain imperiousness about Barbara Heathcote which was not without its effect. Brooke was putting away his fiddle when he came upon him.

"I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance, Mr. Brooke, but it seems you know a friend of mine," he said. "If you are at liberty, Miss Heathcote would like to see you."

"Miss Heathcote?" said Brooke, for it had happened, not unnaturally, that he had never heard the girl's full name. Her companions, of whom he had not felt warranted in inquiring it, had called her Barbara in the bush, and he had addressed her without prefix.

"Yes," said the other, who was once more a trifle astonished. "Miss Barbara Heathcote."

He glanced at Brooke sharply, or he would not have seen the swift content in his face, for the latter put a sudden restraint upon himself.

[Pg 70]

"Of course! I will come with you at once," he said, and a minute or two later took the vacant place at Barbara's side.

"You do not appear very much surprised, and yet it was a long way from here I saw you last," she said.

Brooke fancied she meant that it was under somewhat different circumstances, and sat looking at her with a little smile. She was also, he decided, even better worth inspection than she had been in the bush, for the rich attire became her, and the garish electric radiance emphasized the gleam of the white shoulder the dainty laces clung about and of the ivory neck the moonlight had shone upon when first they met.

"No," he said. "The fact is, I have seen you already on several occasions in this city."

Barbara glanced at him covertly. "Then why did you not claim recognition?"

"Isn't the reason obvious?"

"No," said Barbara, reflectively, "I scarcely think it is—unless, of course, you had no desire to renew the acquaintance."

"Does one usually renew a chance acquaintance made with a packer in the bush?"

"It would depend a good deal on the packer," said Barbara, quietly. "Now this country is——"

There was a trace of dryness in Brooke's smile. "You were going to say a democratic one. That, of course, might to some extent explain the anomaly."

[Pg 71]

"No," said Barbara, sharply, with a very faint flush of color in her face, "I was not. You ought to know that, too. Explanations are occasionally odious, and almost always difficult, but both Major Hume and his daughter invited you to their house if you were ever in England."

"The Major may have felt himself tolerably safe in making that offer," said Brooke, reflectively. "You see, I am naturally acquainted with my fellow Briton's idiosyncrasies."

The girl looked at him with a little sparkle in her eyes. "I do not know why you are adopting this attitude, or assigning one to me," she said. "Did we ever attempt to patronize you, and if we had done, is there any reason why you should take the trouble to resent it?"

Brooke laughed softly. "I scarcely think I could afford to resent a kindness, however it was offered; but there is a point you don't quite seem to have grasped. How could I be certain you had remembered me?"

The girl smiled a little. "Your own powers of recollection might have furnished a standard of comparison."

Brooke looked at her steadily. "The sharpness of the memory depends upon the effect the object one wishes to recollect produced upon one's mind," he said. "I should, of course, have known you at once had it been twenty years hence."

[Pg 72]

The girl turned to her programme, for now she had induced him to abandon his reticence his candor was almost disconcerting.

"Well," she said. "Tell me what you have been doing. You have left the ranch?"

Brooke nodded and glanced at the hand he laid on his knee, which, as the girl saw, was still ingrained and hard.

"Road-making for one thing," he said. "Chopping trees, quarrying rock, and following other useful occupations of the kind. They are, one presumes, healthy and necessary, but I did not find any of them especially remunerative."

"And now?"

Brooke's face, as she did not fail to notice, hardened suddenly, and he felt an unpleasant embarrassment as he met her eyes. He had decided that he was fully warranted in taking any steps likely to lead to the recovery of the dollars he had been robbed of, but he was sensible that the only ones he had found convenient would scarcely commend themselves to his companion. There was also no ignoring the fact that he would very much have preferred her approbation.

"At present I am surveying, though I cannot, of course, become a surveyor," he said. "The legislature of this country has placed that out of the question."

[Pg 73]

Barbara was aware that in Canada a man can no more set up as a surveyor without the specified training than he can as a solicitor, though she did not think that fact accounted for the constraint in the man's voice and attitude. He was not one who readily betrayed what he felt, but she was tolerably certain that something in connection with his occupation caused him considerable dissatisfaction.

"Still," she said, "you must have known a little about the profession?"

"Yes," said Brooke, a trifle unguardedly. "Of course, there is a difference, but I had once the management of an estate in England. What one might call the more useful branches of mathematics were also, a good while ago, a favorite study of mine. One could find a use for them even in measuring a tree."

The girl had a question on her lips, but she did not consider it advisable to ask it just then.

"You would find a knowledge of timber of service in Canada?" she said.

"Not very often. You see the only apparent use of the trees on my possessions was to keep me busy two years attempting to destroy them, and of late I have chiefly had to do with minerals."

"With minerals?" said the girl, quickly, and then, as he volunteered no answer, swiftly asked the question she had wished to put before. "Whose was the estate in England?"

[Pg 74]

Brooke did not look at her, and she fancied he was not sorry that the necessity of affecting a show of interest in the music meanwhile made continuous conversation difficult. His eyes were then turned upon a performer on the stage.

"The estate—it belonged to—a friend of mine," he said. "Of course, I had no regular training, but connection and influence count for everything in the Old Country."

Barbara watched him covertly, and once more noticed the slight hardening of his lips, and the very faint deepening of the bronze in his cheeks. It was only just perceptible, but though the sun and wind had darkened its tinting, Brooke had a clear English complexion, and the blood showed through his skin. His companion remembered the old house in the English valley, with its trim gardens and great sweep of velvet lawn, where he had admitted that he had once been long ago. The statement she had fancied at the time was purposely vague, and she wondered now if he had meant that he had lived there, for Barbara possessed the not unusual feminine capacity for putting two and two together. She, however, naturally showed nothing of this.

"I suppose it does," she said. "I wonder if you ever feel any faint longing for what you must have left behind you there. One learns to do without a good deal in Canada."

[Pg 75]

Brooke smiled curiously. "Of course! That is one reason why I am pleased you sent for me. This, you see, brings it back to me."

He glanced suggestively round the big, brilliantly-lighted building, across the rows of citizens in broadcloth, and daintily-dressed women, and then turned and fixed his eyes upon his companion's face almost too steadily. The girl understood him, but she would not admit it.

"You mean the music?" she said.

"No. The music, to tell the truth, is by no means very good. It is you who have taken me back to the Old Country. Imagination will do a great deal, but it needs a fillip, and something tangible to build upon."

Barbara laughed softly.

"I fancy the C. P. R. and an Allan liner would be a much more reliable means of transportation. You will presumably take that route some day?"

"I scarcely think it likely. They have, in the Western idiom, no use for poor men yonder."

"Still, men get rich now and then in this country."

The man's face grew momentarily a trifle grim. "It would apparently be difficult to accomplish it by serving as assistant survey, and the means employed by some of them might, if they went back to the old life, tend to prevent them feeling very comfortable. I"—and he paused for a second—"fancy that I shall stay in Canada."

[Pg 76]

Barbara was a trifle puzzled, and said nothing further for a space, until when the singer who occupied the stage just then was dismissed, the man turned to her.

"How long is a chance acquaintance warranted in presuming on a favor shown him in this country?"

Barbara smiled at him. "If I understand you correctly, until the other person allows him to perceive that his absence would be supportable. In this case, just as long as it pleases him. Now you can tell me about the road-making."

Brooke understood that she wished to hear, and when he could accomplish it without attracting too much attention, pictured for her benefit his life in the bush. He also did it humorously, but effectively, without any trace of the self-commiseration she watched for, and her fancy dwelt upon the hardships he lightly sketched. She knew how the toilers lived and worked in the bush, and had seen their reeking shanties and rain-swept camps. Labor is accounted honorable in that land, but it is none the less very frequently brutal as well as strenuous, and she could fancy how this man, who, she felt certain, had been accustomed to live softly in England, must have shrunk from some of his tasks, and picture to herself what he felt when he came back at night to herd close-packed with comrades whose thoughts and his must always be far apart. That many possibly better men had certainly borne with as hard a lot longer, after all, made no great difference to the facts. She also recognized that there was a vein of pathos in the story, as she remembered that he had told her it was scarcely likely he would ever go back to England again. That naturally suggested a good deal to her, for she held him blameless, though she knew it was not the regularity of their conduct at home which sent a good many of his countrymen out to Canada.

[Pg 77]

At last he rose between two songs, and stood still a moment looking down on her.

"I'm afraid I have trespassed on your kindness," he said. "I am going back to the bush with a survey expedition to-morrow, and I do not know when I shall be fortunate enough to see you again."

Barbara smiled a little. "That," she said, "is for you to decide. We are 'At home' every Thursday in the afternoon—and, in your case, in the evening."

He made her a little inclination, and turned away, while Barbara sat still, looking straight in front of her, but quite oblivious of the music, until she turned with a laugh, and the girl who sat next to her glanced round.

"Was the man very amusing?" she said.

"No," said Barbara, reflectively. "I scarcely think he was. I gave him permission to call upon us, and never told him where we lived."

"Still, he would, like everybody else in this city, know it already."

[Pg 78]

"He may," said Barbara. "That, I suppose, is what I felt at the time, but now I scarcely think he does."

"Then one would fancy that to meet a young man of his appearance who didn't know all about you would be something quite new," said her companion, drily.

Barbara flushed ever so slightly, but her companion noticed it. She was quite aware that if she was made much of in that city it was, in part, at least, due to the fact that she was the niece of a well-known man, and had considerable possessions.

[Pg 79]

VI. AN ARDUOUS JOURNEY.

It was late at night, and raining hard, when a line of dripping mules stood waiting beneath the pines that crowded in upon the workings of the Elktail mine. A few lights blinked among the log-sheds that clustered round the mouth of the rift in the steep hillside, and a warm wind that drove the deluge before it came wailing out of the blackness of the valley beneath them. The mine was not a big one, but it was believed that it paid Thomas P. Saxton and his friends tolerably well, in spite of the heavy cost of transport to the nearest smelter. A somewhat varying vein of galena, which is silver-lead, was worked there, and Saxton had, on several occasions, declined an offer to buy it, made on behalf of a company.

On the night in question he stood in the doorway of one of the sheds with Brooke, for whom the Surveyor had no more work just then, beside him. Brooke wore long boots and a big rubber coat, on whose dripping surface the light of the lantern Saxton held flickered. Here and there a man was dimly visible beside the mules, but beyond them impenetrable darkness closed in.

[Pg 80]

"It's a wicked kind of night," said Saxton, who, Brooke fancied, nevertheless, appeared quite content with it. "You know what you've got to do?"

"Yes," said Brooke, a trifle drily, "you have given me tolerably complete instructions once or twice already. The ore is to be delivered to Allonby at the Dayspring mine not later than to-morrow night, and I'm to be contented with his verbal acknowledgment. The getting it across the river will, I fancy, be the difficulty, especially as I'm to send half the teamsters back before we reach it."

"Still, you have got to send them back," said Saxton. "Jake and Tom will go on, and when you have crossed the ford that will be two mules for each of you. Not one of the other men must come within a mile of the trail forking. It's part of our bargain that you're to do just what I tell you."

Brooke laughed a little. "I'm not going to grumble very much at leading two mules. I have done a good deal harder work quite frequently."

"You'll find it tough enough by the time you're through. You must be in at the mine by daylight the day after to-morrow, anyway. Allonby will be sitting up waiting for you."

Brooke said nothing further, but went out into the rain, calling to one of the teamsters, and the mules were got under way. The trail that led to the Elktail mine sloped steep as a roof just there, and was slippery with rain and mire, but the mules went down it as no other loaded beasts could have done, feeling their way foot by foot, or glissading on all four hoofs for yards together. The men made little attempt to guide them, for a mule is opinionated by nature, and when it cannot find its own way up or down any ascent it is seldom worth while for its driver to endeavor to show it one. [Pg 81]

When they reached the level, or rather the depth of the hollow, for of level, in the usual sense of the word, there is none in that country, Brooke, who was then cumbered with no bridle, turned and looked round. The lights of the Elktail had faded among the pines, and there was only black darkness about him. Here and there he could discern the ghostly outline of a towering trunk a little more solid than the night it rose against, and he could hear the men and beasts floundering and splashing in front of him. A deep reverberating sound rose out of the obscurity beneath, and he knew it to be the roar of a torrent in a deep-sunk gully, while now and then a diminishing rattle suggested that a hundred-weight or so of water-loosened gravel had slipped down into the chasm from the perilous trail.

It was a difficult road to travel by daylight, and, naturally, considerably worse at night, while Brooke had already wondered why Saxton had not sent off the ore earlier. That, however, was not his business, and, shaking the rain from his dripping hat, he plodded on. It was still two or three hours before daylight when they reached a wider and smoother trail, and he sent away three of the men. [Pg 82]

"It's a tolerably good road now, and Saxton wants you at the mine," he said.

One of the teamsters who were remaining laughed ironically. "I'm blamed if I ever heard the dip down to the long ford called a good trail before!"

"Well," said one of the others, "what in the name of thunder are you going that way for?"

Brooke, who was standing close by, fancied that a man who had not spoken kicked his loquacious comrade viciously.

"Tom never does know where he's going. It's the mule that does the thinking for both of them," he said.

There was a little hoarse laughter, and those who were going back vanished into the deluge, while Brooke, who took a bridle now, went on with two men again. It was darker than ever, for great fir branches met overhead just there, but they at least kept off a little of the rain, and he groped onward, splashing in the mire, until the roar of a river throbbed across the forest as the night was wearing through. Then the leading teamster pulled up his mules.

"It's a nasty ford in daylight, and she'll be swirling over it waist-deep and more just now," he said. "Still, we've got to take our chances of getting through." [Pg 83]

"It will be light in two hours," said Brooke, suggestively. "Of course, you know better than I do whether we could make the wasted time up."

The man laughed curiously. "I guess we could, but there's two concerned bush ranchers just started their chopping over yonder. I had a kind of notion the boss would have told you that."

It commenced to dawn on Brooke that Saxton had a reason for not desiring that everybody should know he was sending ore away, but he was too wet to concern himself about the question then.

"I don't think he did," he said. "Anyway, if we have to go through in the dark there's nothing to be gained by waiting here."

They went on, down what appeared to be the side of a bottomless gully, with the stones and soil slipping away from under them, while half-seen trees flitted up out of the obscurity. Then they reached the bed of a stream, and proceeded along it, splashing and stumbling amidst the boulders. In the meanwhile the roar of the river was growing steadily louder, and when they

stopped again they could hear the clamor of the invisible flood close in front of them. It came out of the rain and darkness, hoarse and terrifying, but while the wind drove the deluge into his face Brooke could see nothing beyond dim, dripping trees.

"Well," said the leading teamster, "I have struck a nicer job than this one, but it has got to be done. Tether the spare mule, each of you, and then get in behind me."

[Pg 84]

Brooke had no diffidence about taking the last place in the line. Though he was in charge of the pack train, it was evident that the men knew a good deal more about that ford than he did, and he had no particular desire to make himself responsible for a disaster. Then there was a scrambling and splashing, and he found himself suddenly waist-deep in the river. He was, however, tolerably accustomed to a ford, and though the mule he led objected strenuously to entering the water, it proceeded with that beast's usual sagacity once it was in. He endeavored to keep its head a trifle up-stream, and as close behind his two companions as he could, but apart from that he left the beast to the guidance of its own acumen, for he knew that it is seldom the sagacious mule takes any risk that can be avoided.

Twice, at least, his feet were swept from under him, and once he lost his grip on the bridle, and simultaneously all sight of his companions and the beast he led. Then he felt unpleasantly lonely as he stood more than waist-deep in the noisy flood, but after a few yards floundering he found the mule again, and at last scrambled up, breathless and gasping, beneath the pines on the farther side.

"Hit it square that time!" said the teamster. "I'm not quite so sure as I'd like to be we can do it again."

[Pg 85]

They went back through the river for the rest of the mules, and were half-way across on the return journey when the leader shouted to them that they should stop. The water seemed deeper than it had been on the previous occasion, and Brooke found it difficult to keep his footing at all as he peered into the darkness. The rain had ceased, but there was little visible beyond the faint whiteness of sliding froth, and a shadowy blur of trees on either shore. He could see nothing that might serve any one as guide, and the leading teamster was standing still, apparently in a state of uncertainty, with dim streaks of froth streaming past him.

"I'm 'most afraid we're too far down-stream," he said. "Anyway, we can't stay here. Head the beasts up a little."

His voice reached the others brokenly through the roar of the torrent, and with a pull at the bridle Brooke turned his face up-stream. He could hear the rest splashing in front of him until his mule lost his footing, and he sank suddenly up to the breast. Then there was a shout, and a struggling beast swept down on him with the swing of an eddy. Brooke went down, head under, and one of the teamsters appeared to be shouting instructions to him when he came up again. He had not the faintest notion of what they were, and swung round with the eddy until he was driven violently against a boulder. There was a mule close beside him, and he contrived to grasp the bridle, and found to his astonishment that he could now stand upright without difficulty. Exactly where the others were, or where the opposite side of the river lay, he did not at the moment know; but the mule appeared to be floundering on with a definite purpose, and he went with it, until they scrambled up the bank, and he found two other men and one beast already there.

[Pg 86]

"One of them's gone," said the teamster. "There'll be trouble when we go back, but I guess it can't be helped. Anyway, there's 'most a fathom in the deep below the ford, and no mule would do much swimming with that load."

"A fathom's quite enough to cover the bags up so nobody's going to find them," said the other man.

Brooke did not quite understand why, since the ore was valuable, this fact should afford the teamster the consolation it apparently did, but he was not in a mood to consider that point just then, and all his attention was occupied when they proceeded again. The trail that climbed the rise was wet and steep, and seemed to consist largely of boulders, into which he blundered with unpleasant frequency. It was but little better when they once more plunged into the forest, for the way was scarcely two feet wide, and wound round and through thickets of thorn and fern which, when he brushed against it, further saturated him. He was wet enough already, but the water which remained any time in his clothing got slowly warm. It also dipped into splashy hollows and climbed loose gravel banks, while once a hoarse shout from the leader, which changed to a howl of pain, was followed by a stoppage. The man had stumbled into a clump of the horrible Devil's club thorn, than which nothing that grows anywhere is more unpleasant when it gets a good hold on human flesh.

[Pg 87]

He was cut loose, and his objurgations mingled with the soft splashing from the branches as they blundered on until a faint grey light filtered down, and the firs they passed beneath grew into definite form. It had also become unpleasantly chilly, and a thin, clammy mist rose like steam from every hollow. Then the trees grew thinner as they climbed steadily, until at last Brooke could see the black hill shoulders rise out of the trails of mist, and the leader pulled up his mules.

"We've done 'bout enough for one spell, and nobody's going to see us here," he said. "Get a fire started. I'm emptier'n a drum."

Brooke, who knew where to find the resinous knots, was glad to help, and soon a great fire

blazed upon a shelf of rock. The mules were tethered and forage given them, and the men lay steaming about the blaze until the breakfast of flapjacks, canned stuff, and green tea was ready. It was despatched in ten minutes, and rolling his half-dried blanket about him, Brooke lay down to sleep. He had a strip of very damp rock for mattress, and a bag of ore for pillow, but he had grown accustomed to a hard bed in the bush, and had scarcely laid his head down when slumber came to him. Food and sleep, he had discovered, were things to be appreciated, for it was not always that he was able to obtain very much of either. His stay in the Canadian cities had been brief, and the night he had spent with the brown-eyed girl at the opera-house had already drifted back into the past.

[Pg 88]

It was raining when he awakened, and they once more took the trail, while during what was left of the day they plodded among the boulders beside frothing streams, crept through shadowy forests, and climbed over treacherous slopes of gravel and slippery rock outcrop round the great hill shoulders above. Everywhere the cold gleam of snow met the eye, save when the mists that clung in ragged wisps about the climbing pines rolled together and blotted all the vista out. The smell of fir and balsam filled every hollow, and the song of the rivers rang through a dead stillness that even to Brooke, who was accustomed to it, was curiously impressive.

There was no sign of man anywhere, save for the smear of trampled mire or hoof-scattered gravel, and no sound that was made by any creature of the forest in all the primeval solitude. For no very evident reason, tracts of that wild country remain a desolation of grand and almost overwhelming beauty, and in such places even the bushman speaks softly, or plods on faster, as though anxious to escape from them, in wondering silence. The teamsters, however, appeared by no means displeased at the solitude, and Brooke was not in a condition to be receptive of more than physical impressions. His long boots were full of water, his clothes were soaked, the sliding gravel had galled his feet, and his limbs ached. The beasts were also flagging, for their loads were heavy, and the patter of their hoofs rose with a slower beat through the rain, while the teamsters said nothing save when they urged them on.

[Pg 89]

They rested again for an hour and lighted another fire, and afterwards found the trail smoother, but evening was closing in when, scrambling down from a hill shoulder, they came upon a winding valley. It was filled with dusky cedars, and the mist rolled out of it, but the teamsters quickened their pace a trifle, and smote the lagging beasts. Then, where the trees were thinner, Brooke saw a faint smear of vapor a little bluer than the mist drawn out across the ragged pines above him, and one of his companions laughed.

"Well," he said, "I guess we're there at last, and if Boss Allonby isn't on the jump you'll be putting away your supper, and as much whisky as you've any use for inside an hour."

"Is it a complaint he's often troubled with?" said Brooke.

[Pg 90]

The teamster grinned. "He has it 'bout once a fortnight—when the pack beasts from the settlement come in. It lasts two days, in the usual way, and on the third one every boy about the mine looks out for him."

Brooke asked no more questions, though he hoped that several days had elapsed since the supplies from the settlement had come up, and in another few minutes they plodded into sight of the mine. The workings appeared to consist of a heap of débris and a big windlass, but here and there a crazy log hut stood amidst the pines which crowded in serried ranks upon the narrow strip of clearing. The door of the largest shanty stood open, and the shadowy figure of a man appeared in it.

"Good-evening, boys," he said. "You have brought the ore and Saxton's man along?"

One of the teamsters said they had, and turned to Brooke with a laugh.

"You're not going to have any trouble to-night," he said. "He's coming round again, and when he feels like it, there's nobody can be more high-toned polite!"

[Pg 91]

VII.

ALLONBY'S ILLUSION.

The shanty was draughty as well as very damp, and the glass of the flickering lamp blackened so that the light was dim. It, however, served to show one-half of Allonby's face in silhouette against the shadow, as he sat leaning one elbow on the table, with a steaming glass in front of him. Brooke, who was stiff and weary, lay in a dilapidated canvas chair beside the crackling fire, which filled the very untidy room with aromatic odors. It was still apparently raining outside, for there was a heavy splashing on the shingled roof above, and darkness had closed down on the lonely valley several hours ago, but while Brooke's eyes were heavy, Allonby showed no sign of drowsiness. He sat looking straight in front of him vacantly.

"You will pass your glass across when you are ready, Mr. Brooke," he said, and the latter noticed

his clean English intonation. "The night is young yet, that bottle is by no means the last in the shanty, and it is, I think, six months since I have been favored with any intelligent company. I have, of course, the boys, but with due respect to the democratic sentiments of this colony they are—the boys, and the fact that they are a good deal more use to the country than I am does not affect the question."

[Pg 92]

Brooke smiled a little. His host was attired somewhat curiously in a frayed white shirt and black store jacket, which was flecked with cigar ash, and had evidently seen better days, though his other garments were of the prevalent jean, and a portion of his foot protruded through one of his deerhide slippers. His face was gaunt and haggard, but it was just then a trifle flushed, and though his voice was still clear and nicely modulated, there was a suggestive unsteadiness in his gaze. The man was evidently a victim of indulgence, but there was a trace of refinement about him, and Brooke had realized already that he had reached the somewhat pathetic stage when pride sinks to the vanity which prompts its possessor to find a curious solace in the recollection of what he has thrown away.

"No more!" he said. "I have lived long enough in the bush to find out that is the way disaster lies."

Allonby nodded. "You are no doubt perfectly right," he said. "I had, however, gone a little too far when I made the discovery, and by that time the result of any further progress had become a matter of indifference to me. In any case, a man who has played his part with credit among his equals where life has a good deal to offer one and intellect is appreciated, must drown recollection now and then when he drags out his days in a lonely exile that can have only one end. I am quite aware that it is not particularly good form for me to commiserate myself, but it should be evident that there is nobody else here to do it for me."

[Pg 93]

Brooke had already found his host's maudlin moralizings becoming monotonous, but he also felt in a half-contemptuous fashion sorry for the man. He was, it seemed to him, in spite of his proclivities, in the restricted sense of the word, almost a gentleman.

"If one may make the inquiry, you came from England?" he said.

Allonby laughed. "Most men put that question differently in this country. They talk straight, as they term it, and apparently consider brutality to be the soul of candor. Yes, I came from England, because something happened which prevented me feeling any great desire to spend any further time there. What it was does not, of course, matter. I came out with a sheaf of certificates and several medals to exploit the mineral riches of Western Canada, and found that mineralogical science is not greatly appreciated here."

He rose, and taking down a battered walnut case, shook out a little bundle of greasy papers with a trembling hand. Then a faint gleam crept into his eyes as he opened a little box in which Brooke saw several big round pieces of gold. The dulness of the unpolished metal made the inscriptions on them more legible, and he knew enough about such matters to realize that no man of mean talent could have won those trophies.

[Pg 94]

"They would, I fancy, have got you a good appointment anywhere," he said.

"As a matter of fact, they got me one or two. It is, however, occasionally a little difficult to keep an appointment when obtained."

Brooke could understand that there were reasons which made that likely in his host's case, but he had by this time had enough of the subject.

"What are you going to do with the ore I brought you?" he said.

Allonby's eyes twinkled. "Enrich what we raise here with it."

"It is a little difficult to understand what you would gain by that."

Allonby smiled suggestively. "I would certainly gain nothing, but Thomas P. Saxton seems to fancy the result would be profitable to him."

"But does the Dayspring belong to Saxton?"

Allonby emptied his glass at a gulp. "As much as I do, and he believes he has bought me soul and body. The price was not a big one—a very few dollars every month, and enough whisky to keep me here. If that failed me, I should go away, though I do not know where to, for I cannot use the axe. He is, however, now quite willing to part with the Dayspring, which has done little more than pay expenses."

[Pg 95]

A light commenced to dawn on Brooke, and his face grew a trifle hot. "That is presumably why he arranged that I should bring the ore down past the few ranches near the trail at night?"

"Precisely!" said Allonby. "You see, Saxton wants to sell the mine to another man—because he is a fool. Now the chief recommendation a mine has to a prospective purchaser is naturally the quality of the ore to be got out of it."

"But the man who proposed buying it would send an expert to collect samples for assaying."

Allonby's voice was not quite so clear as it had been, but he smiled again. "It is not quite so difficult for a mine captain who knows his business to contrive that an expert sees no more than is advisable. A good deal of discretion is, however, necessary when you salt a poor mine with

high-grade ore. It has to be done with knowledge, artistically. You don't seem quite pleased at being mixed up in such a deal."

Brooke was a trifle grim in face, but he laughed. "I have no doubt that, considering everything, it is a trifle absurd of me, but I'm not," he said. "One has to get accustomed to the notion that he is being made use of in connection with an ingenious swindle. That, however, is a matter which rests between Saxton and me, and we may talk over it when I go back again. Why did you call him a fool?"

[Pg 96]

Allonby leaned forward in his chair, and his face grew suddenly eager. "I suppose you couldn't raise eight thousand dollars to buy the mine with?"

Brooke laughed outright. "I should have some difficulty in raising twenty until the month is up."

"Then you are losing a chance you'll never get again in a lifetime," and Allonby made a little gesture of resignation. "I would have liked you to have taken it, because I think I could make you believe in me. That is why I showed you the medals."

Brooke looked at him curiously for a moment or two. It was evident that the man was in earnest, for his gaunt face was wholly intent, and his fingers were trembling.

"It is a very long time since I had the expectation of ever calling eight thousand dollars my own, and if I had them I should feel very dubious about putting them into any mine, and especially this one."

Allonby leaned forward further, and clutched his arm. "If you have any friends in the Old Country, beg or borrow from them. Offer them twenty per cent.—anything they ask. There is a fortune under your feet. Of course, you do not believe it. Nobody I ever told it to would even listen seriously."

"I believe you feel sure of it, but that is quite another thing," and Brooke smiled.

Allonby rose shakily, and leaned upon the table with his fingers trembling.

[Pg 97]

"Listen a few minutes—I was sure of attention without asking for it once," he said. "It was I who found the Dayspring, not by chance prospecting, but by calculations that very few men in the province could make. I know what that must appear—but you have seen the medals. Tracing the dip and curvature of the stratification from the Elktail and two prospectors' shafts, I knew the vein would approach the level here, and I put five thousand dollars—every cent I could scrape together—into proving it. We struck the vein, but while it should have been rich, we found it broken, displaced, and poor. There had, you see, been a disturbance of the strata. I borrowed money, worked night and day, and starved myself—did everything that would save a dollar from the rapidly-melting pile—and at last we struck the vein again, and struck it rich."

He stopped abruptly and stood staring vacantly in front of him, while Brooke heard him noisily draw in his breath.

"You can imagine what that meant!" he continued. "After what had happened in England I could never go back a poor man, but a good deal is forgiven the one who comes home rich. Then, while I tried to keep my head, we came to the fault where the ore vein suddenly ran out. It broke off as though cut through with a knife, and went down, as the men who knew no better said, to the centre of the earth. Now a fault is a very curious thing, but one can deduce a good deal when he has studied them, and a big snow-slide had laid bare an interesting slice of the foundations of this country in the valley opposite. It took me a month to construct my theory, and that was little when you consider the factors I had to reckon with—ages of crushing pressure, denudation by grinding ice and sliding snow, and Titanic upheavals thousands of years ago. The result was from one point of view contemptible. With about four thousand dollars I could strike the vein again."

[Pg 98]

"Of course you tried to raise them?"

Allonby made a grimace. "For six long years. The men who had lent me money laughed at me, and worked the poor ore back along the incline instead of boring. Somebody has been working it—for about five cents on the dollar—ever since, and when I told them what they were letting slip all of them smiled compassionately. I am of course—though once it was different—a broken man, with a brain clouded by whisky, only fit to run a played-out mine. How could I be expected to find any man a fortune?"

His brain, it was evident, was slightly affected by alcohol then, but there was no mistaking the genuineness of his bitterness. It was too deep to be maudlin or tinged with self-commiseration now. The little hopeless gesture of resignation he made was also very eloquent, and while the rain splashed upon the roof Brooke sat silent regarding him curiously. The dim light and the flickering radiance from the fire were still on one side of his face, forcing it up with all its gauntness of outline, but the weakness had gone out of it, and for once it was strong and almost stern. Then a little sardonic smile crept into it.

[Pg 99]

"A fortune under our feet—and nobody will have it! It is one of Fate's grim jests," he said. "I spent a month making a theory, and every day of six years—that is when I was capable of thinking—has shown me something to prove that theory right. Now Saxton wants to swindle another man into buying the mine for—you can call it a song."

He poured out another glass with a shaking hand, and then turned abruptly to his companion.

"Put on your rubber coat and come with me," he said.

Brooke would much rather have retired to sleep, but the man's earnestness had its effect on him, and he rose and went out into the rain with him. Allonby came near falling down the shaft when they stood at its head, but Brooke got him into the ore hoist and sent him down, after which he descended the running chain he had locked fast hand over hand. The level, as he had been told, was close to the surface, and while Allonby walked unsteadily in front of him with a blinking candle in his hat, they followed it into the face of the hill. Twice his companion stumbled over a piece of the timbering, and the light went out, while Brooke wondered uneasily if there was another sinking anywhere ahead as he lighted it again. He knew a little about mining, since he had on one or two occasions earned a few dollars assisting in the driving of an adit.

[Pg 100]

Finally, Allonby stopped and leaned against the dripping rock, as he took off his hat and held the candle high above his head. Then he turned and pointed down the gallery the way they had come.

"Look at it!" he said, thickly. "Until we struck the ore where you see the extra timbering, I counted the dollars every yard of it cost me as I would drops of my life's blood. I worked while the men slept, and lived like a Chinaman. There was a fortune within my grasp if those dollars would hold out until I reached it—and fortune meant England, and I once more the man I had been. Then—we came to that."

He swung round and pointed with a wide, dramatic gesture which Brooke fancied he would not have used in his prosperous days, to a bare face of rock. It was of different nature to the sides of the tunnel, and had evidently come down from above. Brooke understood. The strata his companion had been working in had suddenly broken off and gone down, only he knew where. He sat down on a big fallen fragment, and there was silence for a space, emphasized by the drip of water in the blackness of the mine. Brooke was very drowsy, but the scene, with its loneliness and the haggard face of his companion showing pale and drawn in the candle-light, had a curious effect on him, and in the meanwhile compelled him to wakefulness.

[Pg 101]

"You know where that broken strata has dipped to?" he said, at last.

Allonby, who laughed in a strained fashion, sat down abruptly, and thrust a bundle of papers upon his companion. "Almost to a fathom. If you know anything of geology, look at these."

Brooke, who unrolled the papers, knew enough to recognize that, even if his companion had illusions, they were the work of a clever man. There was skill and what appeared to be a high regard for minute accuracy in every line of the plans, while he fancied the attached calculations would have aroused a mathematician's appreciation. He spent several minutes poring over them with growing wonder, while Allonby held the candle, and then looked up at him.

"They would, I think, almost satisfy any man, but there is a weak point," he said.

Allonby smiled in a curious fashion. "The one the rest split on? I see you understand."

"You deduce where the ore ought to be—by analogy. That kind of reasoning is, I fancy, not greatly favored in this country by practical men. They prefer the fact that it is there established by the drill."

Allonby made a little gesture of impatience. "They have driven shaft and adit for half a lifetime, most of them, and they do not know yet that one law of Nature—the sequence of cause and effect—is immutable. I have shown them the causes—but it would cost five thousand dollars to demonstrate the effect. Well, as no one will ever spend them, we will go back."

[Pg 102]

He had come out unsteadily, but he went back more so still, as though a sustaining purpose had been taken from him, and, as he fell down now and then, Brooke had some difficulty in conveying him to the foot of the shaft. When he had bestowed him in the ore hoist, and was about to ascend by the chain, Allonby laughed.

"You needn't be particularly careful. I shall come down here head-foremost one of these nights, and nobody will be any the worse off," he said. "I lost my last chance when that vein worked out."

Then Brooke went up into the darkness, and with some difficulty hove his companion to the surface. They went back to the shanty together, and as Allonby incontinently fell asleep in his chair, Brooke retired to the bunk set apart for him. Still, tired as he was, it was some little time before he slept, for what he had seen had made its impression. The shanty was very still, save for the snapping of the fire, and the broken-down outcast, who held the key of a fortune the men of that province were too shrewd to believe in, slept uneasily, with head hung forward, in his chair. Brooke could see him dimly by the dying light of the fire, and felt very far from sure that it was a delusion he labored under.

[Pg 103]

When he awakened next morning Allonby was already about, and looked at him curiously when he endeavored to reopen the subject.

"It is not considerate to refer next morning to anything a man with my shortcomings may have said the night before," he said. "I think you should recognize that fact."

"I'm sorry," said Brooke. "Still, it occurred to me that you believed very firmly in the truth of it."

Allonby smiled drily. "Well," he said, "I do. What is that to you?"

"Nothing," said Brooke. "I shall, as I think I told you, be worth about thirty dollars when the

month is out. What is the name of the man Saxton wishes to sell the mine to?"

"Devine," said Allonby, and went out to fling a vitriolic reproof at a miner who was doing something he did not approve of about the windlass, while Brooke, who saw no more of him, departed when he had made his breakfast.

[Pg 104]

VIII. A BOLD VENTURE.

It was a hot morning shortly after Brooke's return to the Elktail mine, and Saxton sat in his galvanized shanty with his feet on a chair and a cigar in his hand. The door stood open and let a stream of sunlight and balsamic odors of the forest in. He wore soil-stained jeans, and seemed very damp, for he had just come out of the mine. Thomas P. Saxton was what is termed a rustler in that country, a man of unlimited assurance and activity, troubled by no particular scruples and keen to seize on any chances that might result in the acquisition of even a very few dollars. He was also, like most of his countrymen, eminently adaptable, and the fact that he occasionally knew very little about the task he took in hand seldom acted as a deterrent. It was characteristic that during the past hour he had been endeavoring to show his foreman how to run a new rock-drilling machine which he had never seen in operation until that time.

Brooke, who had been speaking, sat watching him with a faint ironical appreciation. The man was delightfully candid, at least with him, and though he was evidently not averse from sailing perilously near the wind it was done with boldness and ingenuity. There was a little twinkle in his keen eyes as he glanced at his companion. [Pg 105]

"Well," he said, "one has to take his chances when he has all to gain and very little to let up upon. That's the kind of man I am."

"I believe you told me you had got quite a few dollars together not very long ago," said Brooke, reflectively.

The smile became a trifle plainer in Saxton's eyes. "I did, but very few of them are mine. Somehow I get to know everybody worth knowing in the province, and now and then folks with dollars to spare for a venture hand them me to put into a deal."

"On the principle that one has to take his chances in this country?"

Saxton laughed good-humoredly. "Well," he said, "I never go back upon a partner, anyway, and when we make a deal the other folks are quite at liberty to keep their eyes on me. They know the rules of the game, and if they don't always get the value they expected they most usually lie low and sell out to another man instead of blaming me. It pays their way better than crying down their bargain. Still, I have started off mills and wild-cat mines that turned out well, and went on coining dollars for everybody."

"Which was no doubt a cause of satisfaction to you!"

[Pg 106]

Saxton shook his head. "No, sir," he said. "I felt sorry ever after I hadn't kept them."

Brooke straightened himself a trifle in his chair, for he felt that they were straying from the point.

"Industrial speculations in this province remind me of a game we have in England. Perhaps you have seen it," he said, reflectively. "You bet a shilling or half-a-crown that when you lift up a thimble you will find a pea you have seen a man place under it. It is not very often that you accomplish it. Still, in that case—there is—a pea."

"And there's nothing but low-grade ore in the Dayspring? Now, nobody ever quite knows what he will find in a mine if he lays out enough dollars looking for it."

"That," said Brooke, drily, "is probably correct enough, especially if he is ignorant of geology. What I take exception to is the sprinkling of the mine with richer ore to induce him to buy it. Such a proceeding would be called by very unpleasant names in England, and I'm not quite sure it mightn't bring you within the reach of the law here. Mind, what you may think fit to do is, naturally, no concern of mine, but I have tolerably strong objections to taking any further personal part in the scheme."

"The point is that we're playing it off on Devine, the man who robbed you, and has once or twice put his foot on me. I was considerably flattened when I crawled from under. He's a big man and he puts it down heavy." [Pg 107]

"Still, I feel it's necessary to draw the line at a swindle."

Saxton made a little whimsical gesture. "Call it the game with the pea and thimble. Devine has got a notion there's something in the mine, and I don't know any reason why I shouldn't humor him. He's quite often right, you see."

"It does not affect the point, but are you quite sure he isn't right now?"

"You mean that Allonby may be?"

"I shouldn't consider it quite out of the question."

Saxton laughed softly. "Allonby's a whisky-skin, and I keep him because he's cheap and it's a charity. Everybody knows that story of his, and he only trots it out when he has got a good bottle of old rye into him. At most other times he's quite sensible. Anyway, Devine doesn't want the mine to keep. He has to get a working group with a certain output and assays that look well all round before he floats it off on the English market. If he knew I was quietly dumping that ore in I'm not quite sure it would rile him."

Brooke sat silent a space. He had discovered by this time that it is not advisable to expect any excess of probity in a mining deal, and that it is the speculator, and not the men who face the perils of the wilderness (which are many, prospecting), who usually takes the profit. A handful or two of dollars for them, and a big bank balance for the trickster stock manipulator appeared to be the rules of the game. Still, nobody can expect to acquire riches without risk or labor, and it seemed no great wrong to him that the men with the dollars should lose a few of them occasionally. Granting that, he did not, however, feel it warranted him in taking any active part in fleecing them.

[Pg 108]

"Still, if another bag of ore goes into the Dayspring you can count me out," he said. "No doubt, it's a trifle inconsistent, but you will understand plainly that I take no further share in selling the mine."

Saxton shook his head reproachfully. "Those notions of yours are going to get in your way, and it's unfortunate, because we have taken hold of a big thing," he said. "I'm an irresponsible planter of wild-cat mining schemes, you're nobody, and between us we're going to best Devine, the biggest man in his line in the province, and a clever one. Still, that's one reason why the notion gets hold of me. When you come in ahead of the little man there's nothing to be got out of him, and Devine's good for quite a pile when we can put the screw on."

Again Brooke was sensible of a certain tempered admiration for his comrade's hardihood, for it seemed to him that the project he had mooted might very well involve them both in disaster.

[Pg 109]

"You expect to accomplish it?" he said.

"Well," said Saxton, drily, "I mean to try. We can't squeeze him much on the Dayspring, but we want dollars to fight him with, and that's how we're going to get a few of them. It's on the Canopus I mean to strike him."

"The Canopus!" said Brooke, who knew the mine in question was considered a rich one. "How could you gain any hold on him over that?"

"On the title. By jumping it. Devine takes too many chances now and then, and if one could put his fingers on a little information I have a notion the Canopus wouldn't be his. I guess you know that unless you do this, that, and the other, after recording your correct frontage on the lead or vein, you can't hold a mine on a patent from the Crown. Suppose you have got possession, and it's found that there was anything wrong with the papers you or your prospectors filed, the minerals go back to the Crown again, and the man who's first to drive his stakes in can re-locate them. It's done now and then."

Brooke sat silent a space. A jumper—as the man who re-locates the minerals somebody else has found, on the ground of incorrect record or non-compliance with the mining enactments, is called—is not regarded with any particular favor in that province, or, indeed, elsewhere, but his proceedings may be, at least, perfectly legitimate, and there was a certain simplicity and daring of conception in the new scheme that had its effect on Brooke.

[Pg 110]

"I will do what I can within limits," he said.

Saxton nodded. "Then you will have to get into the mine, though I don't quite know how we are going to fix it yet," he said. "Anyway, we've talked enough for one day already, and you have to go down to the settlement to see about getting those new drills up."

Brooke set out for the settlement, and slept at a ranch on the way, where he left his horse which had fallen lame, for it was a two days' journey, while it was late in the afternoon when he sat down to rest where the trail crossed a bridge. The latter was a somewhat rudimentary log structure put together with the axe and saw alone, of a width that would just allow one of the light wagons in use in that country to cross over it, and, as the bottom of the hollow the river swirled through was level there, an ungainly piece of trestle work carried the road up to it. There was a long, white rapid not far away, and the roar of it rang in deep vibrations among the rocks above. Brooke, who had walked a long way, found the pulsating sound soothing, while the fragrance the dusky cedars distilled had its usual drowsy effect on him, and as he watched the glancing water slide by his eyes grew heavy.

He did not remember falling asleep, but by and by the sombre wall of coniferous forest that shut the hollow in seemed to dwindle to the likeness of a trim yew hedge, and the river now slid by smooth and placidly. There was also velvet grass beneath his feet in place of wheel-rutted gravel and brown fir needles. Still, the scene he gazed upon was known to him, though it seemed

[Pg 111]

incomplete until a girl with brown eyes in a long white dress and big white hat appeared at his side. She fitted the surroundings wonderfully, for her almost stately serenity harmonized with the quietness and order of the still English valley, but yet he was puzzled, for there was sunlight on the water, and he felt that the moon should be shining round and full above her shoulder. Then when he would have spoken the picture faded, and he became suddenly conscious that his pipe had fallen from his hand, and that he was dressed in soil-stained jeans which seemed quite out of keeping with the English lawn. That was his first impression, but while he wondered vaguely how he came to have a pipe made out of a corn-cob, which cost him about thirty cents, at all, a rattle of displaced gravel and pounding of hoofs became audible, and he recognized that something unusual was going on.

He shook himself to attention, and looking about him saw a man sitting stiffly erect on the driving seat of a light wagon and endeavoring to urge a pair of unwilling horses up the sloping trestle. They were Cayuses, beasts of native blood and very uncertain temper, bred by Indians, and as usual, about half-broken to the rein. They also appeared to have decided objections to crossing the bridge, for which any one new to the province would scarcely have felt inclined to blame them. The river frothed beneath it, the ascent was steep with a twist in it, and a small log, perhaps a foot through, spiked down to the timbers, served as sole protection. It would evidently not be difficult for a pair of frightened horses to tilt a wheel of the very light vehicle over it.

[Pg 112]

Still, the structure compared favorably with most of those in the mountains, and Brooke, who knew that it is not always advisable to interfere in a dispute between a bush rancher and his horses, sat still, until it became evident to him that the man did not belong to that community. He was elderly, for there was grey in the hair beneath the wide hat, while something in the way he held himself and the fit of his clothes, which appeared unusually good, suggested a connection with the cities. It was, however, evident that he was a determined man, for he showed no intention of dismounting, and responded to the off horse's vicious kicking with a stinging cut of the whip. The result of this was a plunge, and one wheel struck the foot-high guard with a crash. The man plied the whip again, and with another plunge and scramble the beasts gained the level of the bridge. Here they stopped altogether, and one attempted to stand upright while Brooke sprang to his feet.

[Pg 113]

"Hadn't you better get down, sir, or let me lead them across?" he said.

The man, tightening both hands upon the reins, cast a momentary glance at him, and his little grim smile and the firm grip of his long, lean fingers supplied a hint of his character.

"Not until I have to," he said. "They're going to cross this bridge."

Brooke moved a few paces nearer. It was one thing for a rancher accustomed to horses and bridges of that description to take pleasure in such a struggle, but quite another in the case of a man from the cities, and he had misgivings as to the result of it. The latter, however, showed very little concern, though the near horse was now apparently endeavoring to kick the front of the wagon in. Then Brooke sprang suddenly towards them as both backed the wagon against the log. He fancied that one wheel was mounting it when he seized the near horse's head, but after that he had very little opportunity of noticing anything.

The beast plunged, and came near swinging him off his feet, the wagon pole creaked portentously, and the whip fell swishing across the other horse's back again. Then there was a hammering of hoofs, and a rattle; the team bolted incontinently, and because the bridge was narrow, Brooke, who lost his hold, sprang upon the log that very indifferently guarded it. It was, however, rounded on the top, and next moment he found himself standing knee-deep in the river, shaken, and considerably astonished, but by no means hurt. A drop of ten feet or so is not very apt to hurt an agile man who alights upon his feet. He saw the wagon bounce upon the half-round logs, as with the team stretching out in a furious gallop in front of it, it crossed the trestle on the opposite side, and vanish into the forest; and then finding himself very little the worse, proceeded to wade back to the bridge. He was plodding up the climbing trail beneath the firs when a shout came down and he saw the man had pulled the wagon up. When Brooke drew level he looked at him with a little dry smile.

[Pg 114]

"I guess you and the Cayuses came off the worst," he said.

Brooke glanced at the horses. They were flecked with lather but quiet enough now, and it was evident that the driver had beaten the spirit out of them on the ascent.

"I fancied the result would have been different a little while ago," he said.

The stranger laughed. "I 'most always get my way," he said. "Still, I didn't pull the team up to tell you that. You're going in to the settlement?"

Brooke said he was, and the stranger bade him get up, which he did, and seized the first opportunity of glancing at his companion. There is, it had already appeared to him, a greater typical likeness between the business men of the Pacific slope, in which category he placed his companion, than is usual in the case of Englishmen. Even when large of frame they seldom put on flesh, and the characteristic lean face and spare figure alone supply a hint of restlessness and activity, which is emphasized by mobility of features and quick nervous gesture. The man who drove the wagon was almost unusually gaunt, and while his eyes, which were brown, and reminded Brooke curiously of somebody else's, seemed to scintillate with a faint sardonic twinkle, there was a suggestion of reticence in his firm thin lips, and an unmistakable stamp of command

[Pg 115]

upon him. He also held himself well, and Brooke fancied that he was in his own sphere a man of some importance. His first observation was, however, not exactly what Brooke would have expected from an Englishman of his apparent station.

"I'm much obliged to you," he said. "I don't like to be beaten, and it's a thing that doesn't happen very often. Besides, when a horse is too much for a man it's kind of humiliating. There's something that doesn't strike one as quite fitting in the principle of the thing."

Brooke laughed. "I'm not sure it's worth while to worry very much over a point of that kind, especially when it seems likely to lead to nothing beyond the probability of being pitched into a river."

"Still," said the stranger, with the little twinkle showing plainer in his eyes, "in this case it was the other man who fell in." [Pg 116]

"I fancy it quite frequently is," said Brooke, reflectively. "That is usually the result of meddling."

The stranger nodded, and quietly inspected him. "You have been here some time, but you are an Englishman," he said.

"I am," said Brooke. "Is there any reason why I should hide the fact?"

"You couldn't do it. How long have you been here?"

"Four years in all, I think."

"What did you come out for?"

Brooke was accustomed to Western brusquerie, and there was nothing in his companion's manner which made the question offensive.

"I fancy my motive was not an unusual one. To pick up a few dollars."

"Got them yet?"

"I can't say I have."

The stranger appeared reflective. "There are not many folks who would have admitted that," he said. "When a man has been four years in this country he ought to have put a few dollars together. What have you been at?"

"Ranching most of the time. Road-making, saw-milling, and a few other occupations of the same kind afterwards."

"What was wrong with the ranch?"

Persistent questioning is not unusual in that country, for what is considered delicacy depends largely upon locality, and Brooke laughed. [Pg 117]

"Almost everything," he said. "It had a good many disadvantages besides its rockiness, sterility, and an unusually abundant growth of two-hundred-foot trees. Still, it was the man who sold it me I found most fault with. He was a land agent."

"One of the little men?"

"No. I believe he is considered rather a big one—in fact about the biggest in that particular line."

The little sardonic gleam showed a trifle more plainly in the stranger's eyes. "He told you the land was nicely cleared ready, and would grow anything?"

"No," said Brooke. "He, however, led me to believe that it could be cleared with very little difficulty, and that the lumber was worth a good deal. I daresay it is, if there was any means whatever of getting it to a mill, which there isn't. He certainly told me there was no reason it shouldn't grow as good fruit as any that comes from Oregon, while I found the greatest difficulty in getting a little green oat fodder out of it."

"You went back, and tried to cry off your bargain?"

Brooke glanced at his companion, and fancied that he was watching him closely. "I really don't know any reason why I should worry you with my affairs. My case isn't at all an unusual one."

"I don't know of any why you shouldn't. Go right on." [Pg 118]

"Then I never got hold of the man himself. It was one of his agents I made the deal with, and there was nothing to be obtained from him. In fact, I could see no probability of getting any redress at all. It appears to be considered commendable to take the newly-arrived Britisher in."

The other man smiled drily. "Well," he said, "some of them 'most seem to expect it. Ever think of trying the law against the principal?"

"The law," said Brooke, "is apt to prove a very uncertain remedy, and I spent my last few dollars convincing myself that the ranch was worthless. Now, one confidence ought to warrant another. What has brought you into the bush? You do not belong to it."

The stranger laughed. "There's not much bush in this country, from Kootenay to Caribou, I

haven't wandered through. I used to live in it—quite a long while ago. I came up to look at a mine. I buy one up occasionally."

"Isn't that a little risky?"

"Well," said the other, with a little smile, "it depends. There are goods, like eggs and oranges, you don't want to keep."

"And a good market in England for whatever the Colonials have no particular use for?"

The stranger laughed good-humoredly. "Did you ever strike any real good salt pork in Canada?"

[Pg 119]

"No," said Brooke, decisively, "I certainly never did."

"Then where does the best bacon you get in England come from? Same with cheese—and other things."

"Including mines?"

"Well, when any of them look like paying it's generally your folk who get them. Know anything about the Dayspring?"

"Not a great deal," Brooke said, guardedly. "I have been in the workings, and it is for sale."

"Ore worth anything at the smelter?"

Now Brooke was perfectly certain that such a man as his companion appeared to be would attach no great importance to any information obtained by chance from a stranger.

"There is certainly a little good ore in it," he said, drily.

"That is about all you mean to tell me?"

"It is about all I know definitely."

The stranger smiled curiously. "Well," he said, "I'm not going to worry you, and I guess I know a little more."

Brooke changed the topic, and listened with growing interest, and a little astonishment, to his companion as they drove on. The man seemed acquainted with everything he could mention, including the sentiments of the insular English and the economics as well as the history of their country. He was even more astonished when, as they alighted before the little log hotel at the pine-shrouded settlement, the host greeted the stranger.

[Pg 120]

"You'll be Mr. Devine who wrote me about the room and a saddle horse?" he said.

"Yes," said the other man, who glanced at Brooke with a little whimsical smile, "you have addressed me quite correctly."

Brooke said nothing, for he realized then something of the nature of the task he and Saxton had undertaken, while it was painfully evident that he had done very little to further his cause at the first encounter. He also found the little gleam in Devine's eyes almost exasperating, and turned to the hotel-keeper to conceal the fact.

"Has the freighter come through?" he said.

"No," said the man. "Bob, who has just come in, said he'd a big load and we needn't expect him until to-morrow."

Devine had turned away now, and Brooke touched the hotel-keeper's arm. "I don't wish that man to know I'm from the Elktail," he said.

"Well," said the hotel-keeper, "you know Saxton's business best, but if I had any share in it and struck a man of that kind looking round for mines I'd do what was in me to shove the Dayspring off on to him."

[Pg 121]

IX.

DEVINE MAKES A SUGGESTION.

There was only one hotel, which scarcely deserved the title, in the settlement, and when Brooke returned to it an hour after the six o'clock supper, he found Devine sitting on the verandah. He had never met the man until that afternoon, and had only received one very terse response to the somewhat acrimonious correspondence he had insisted on his agent forwarding him respecting the ranch. He had no doubt that the affair had long ago passed out of Devine's memory, though he was still, on his part, as determined as ever on obtaining restitution. He had, however, no expectation of doing it by persuasion, though the man was evidently a very different individual

from the one his fancy had depicted, and, that being so, recrimination appeared useless, as well as undignified. He was, therefore, while he would have done nothing to avoid him, by no means anxious to spend the remainder of the evening in Devine's company. The latter was, however, already on the verandah, and looked up when he entered it.

"I had almost a fancy you meant to keep out of my way," he said.

[Pg 122]

Brooke sat down, and there was a trace of dryness in his smile.

"If I had felt inclined to do so, you would scarcely expect me to admit it? I don't mean because that would not have been complimentary to you," he said.

Devine laughed, and handed his cigar-case across. "Take one if you feel like it. I quite see your point," he said. "Some of you folks from the old country are a trifle tender in the hide, but I don't mind telling you that there was a time when I spent an hour or two every day keeping out of other men's way. They wanted dollars I couldn't raise, you see, and now and then I had to spend mornings in the city because I couldn't get into my office on account of them. I meant to pay them, and I did, but there was no way of doing it just then."

Brooke's smile was a trifle curious, and might have been construed into implying a doubt of his companion's commendable intentions, but the latter did not appear to notice it, and he took one of the cigars offered him, and found it excellent. Though they were to be adversaries, there was nothing to be gained by betraying a puerile bitterness against the man, and now he had met him, Brooke was not quite so sure as he could have wished that he disliked him personally. He meant to secure his six thousand dollars if it could be done, which appeared distinctly doubtful, and sentiment of any kind was, he assured himself, out of place. Still, he did not altogether relish Devine's cigar.

[Pg 123]

"They were probably persistent men," he said.

Devine glanced at him sharply, but Brooke's face was, or at least he hoped so, expressionless.

"Well," he said, tranquilly, "I contrive to pay my debts as the usual thing, but we'll let that slide. What are you at up here in the bush?"

"Mining, just now," said Brooke. "To be more definite, acting as handy man about a mine."

"You'd make more rock-drilling. Feel fond of it?"

"I can't say I do. Still, I have a notion that it is going to lead to the acquisition of a few dollars presently."

Devine sat silent at a space, apparently reflecting, and then looked up again.

"Now," he said, "suppose I was to make you an offer, would you feel inclined to listen to me?"

Brooke had acquired in England a composure which was frequently useful to him, but he was young, and started a trifle, while once more the blood showed through his unfortunately clear skin.

"I think I could promise that much, at least," he said.

"Well," said Devine, "I have some use for a man who knows a little about bush ranches and mines, and understands the English folks who now and then buy them from me. I could afford to pay him a moderate salary."

[Pg 124]

Brooke closed one hand a trifle, and the bronze deepened in his face. The opportunity Saxton had been waiting for was now, it seemed, being thrust upon him, and yet he felt that he could not avail himself of it. It was clear that he had everything to gain by doing so, but there was, he realized now, a treachery he could not descend to. He strove to persuade himself that this was a sentimental weakness, for it had become even more apparent of late that with the knowledge he had gained of that country there would be no great difficulty in making his way once he had the dollars he had been robbed of again in his hands, and he had had a bitter taste of the life that must be dragged through by the man with none. Still, the fact that his instincts, which, as occasionally happens to other men, would not be controlled by his reason, revolted from the part he must play if he made terms with Devine, remained, and he sat very still, with forehead wrinkled and one hand clenched, until his companion, who had never taken his eyes off him, spoke again.

"It doesn't sound good enough?" he said.

Brooke shook himself together. "As a matter of fact, I am very doubtful if I shall get quite as good an offer again. Still, I am afraid I can't quite see my way to entertaining it."

"No?" said Devine. "I guess you have your reasons?"

[Pg 125]

Brooke felt that he could scarcely consider the motive which had induced him to answer as he did a reason. It was rather an impulse he could not hold in check, or the result of a prejudice, but he could not explain this, and what was under the circumstances a somewhat illogical bitterness against Devine took possession of him.

"When I first came into this province my confiding simplicity cost me a good deal, and I almost think I should rather feel myself impelled to warn any of my countrymen I came into contact with

against making rash ventures in land and mines than induce them to do so," he said.

Devine smiled drily. "That is tolerably plain talk, anyway. Still, it ought to be clear that a man can't keep on taking folks' dollars without giving them reasonable value anywhere. No, sir. As soon as they find out he has only worthless goods to sell, they stop dealing with him right away. There's another point. Are they all fools who come out from England to buy mines and ranching land?"

"I have certainly met a few who seemed to be. Of course, I include myself," said Brooke, grimly.

"Well, you can take it from me, and I ought to know, that there are folks back yonder quite as smart at getting one hundred and fifty cents for the dollar's worth as any man in Canada. We needn't, however, worry about that. I made you an offer, and you have quite decided that it wouldn't suit you?"

[Pg 126]

Again Brooke sat silent a space. He felt in some degree bound to Saxton, though he had certainly earned every dollar the latter had handed him, and it had been agreed that a verbal intimation from either would suffice to terminate the compact between them. There was also no reason why he should do anything that would prejudice him if he entered Devine's service, and a very faint hope commenced to dawn on him that there might be a way out of the difficulty. Devine appeared to be a reasonable man, and he determined to at least give him an opportunity.

"It is probably an unusual course under the circumstances, but before I decide I would like to ask a question," he said. "We will suppose that you or one of your agents had sold a man who did not know what he was buying a tract of worthless land, and he demanded compensation. What would you do?"

"The man would naturally look at the land and use his discretion."

"We'll assume that he didn't. Men who come into this country at a time when everybody is eager to buy now and then most unwisely take a land-agent's statements for granted. Even if they surveyed the property offered them they would not very often be able to form any opinion of its value."

"Then," said Devine, drily, "they take their chances, and can't blame the other man."

[Pg 127]

"Still, if the buyer convinced you that your agent knew the land was worth nothing when he sold it him?"

Devine glanced at him sharply. "That would be a little difficult, but I'll answer you. I've been stuck with a good many bad bargains in my time, and I never went back and tried to cry off one of them. No, sir. I took hold and worried the most I could out of them. Nobody quite knows what a piece of land in this country is or will be worth, except that it's quite certain every rod of it is going to be some use for something, and bring in dollars to the man who holds on to it, presently."

"Then you would not make the victim any compensation?"

"No, sir. Not a cent. I shouldn't consider him a victim. That's quite straight?"

"I scarcely think anybody would consider it ambiguous," Brooke said, drily, for he felt his face grow warm, and realized that it was not advisable to give the anger that was gaining on him the rein. "It demands an equal candor, and I have given you one of my reasons for deciding that it would not suit me to enter your service. I can't help wondering what induced you to make me the offer."

Devine laughed. "Well," he said, reflectively, "so am I. I had, as I told you, a notion that I might have a use for a man of the kind you seem to be, but I'm not quite so sure of it now. Though I don't know that I'm especially thin in the skin, some of the questions you seem fond of asking might make trouble between you and me. For another thing, on thinking it over afterwards, it struck me that the team might have tilted that wagon off the bridge this afternoon. I'm not sure that they would have done, but you came along handy."

[Pg 128]

He rose with a little sardonic smile and went into the hotel, leaving Brooke sitting on the verandah and staring at the dusky forest vacantly, for his thoughts were not exactly pleasant just then. He had been offered a chance Saxton, at least, would have eagerly seized upon, and it was becoming evident that there was little of the stuff successful conspirators are made of in him. He could not ignore the fact that it was a conspiracy they were engaged in, for he meant to get his six thousand dollars back, and found it especially galling to remember that it was a kindness Devine had purposed doing him.

He had also misgivings as to what his confederate—for that was, he recognized, the most fitting term he could apply to Saxton—would have to say about his decision, and after all it was evident that he owed him a little. Once more he fumed at his folly in ever buying the ranch, for all his difficulties sprang from that mistake, and he felt he could not face the result of it and drag out his days cut off from all that made life bearable, a mere wielder of axe and shovel, without a struggle, even though it left a mark on him which could never be quite effaced.

[Pg 129]

The freighter came in early next morning with the drills, and Brooke, who hired pack-horses, set off with them, but as he drove the loaded beasts out of the clearing he saw Devine watching him from the verandah, with a little smile. He made a salutation, and Brooke, for no apparent reason,

jerked the leading pack-horse's bridle somewhat viciously. It was a long journey to the mine, and there were several difficult ascents upon the way, but he reached it safely, and found Saxton expecting him impatiently. They spent an hour or two getting the drills to work, and then sat down to a meal in the galvanized shanty.

Saxton was damp and stained with soil, his long boots were miry, and one of his hands was bleeding, but he laughed a little as he glanced at the heavy, doughy bread and untempting canned stuff on the table and round the comfortless room.

"I guess I don't get my dollars easily," he said. "There are quite a few ways of making them, but the one the sensible man has the least use for is with the hammer and drill. Still, I'm going back to the city, and we'll try another one presently. You'll stay here about a week, and then there'll be work for you. I've heard of something while you were away."

"So have I!" said Brooke. "I met Devine, and he gave me an opportunity of entering his service." [Pg 130]

Saxton became suddenly eager. "You took it?"

"No," said Brooke, drily, "I did not. I had one or two reasons for not doing so, though I feel it is very probable that you would not appreciate them."

Saxton stared at him in astonishment, and then made a little gesture of resignation. "Well," he said, "I guess I wouldn't—after what I've seen of you. Still, can't you understand what kind of chance you've thrown away? I might have made 'most anything out of the pointers you could have picked up and given me."

Brooke smiled drily. "I don't think you could," he said. "As a matter of fact, I wouldn't have given you any."

Saxton turned towards him resolutely, with his elbows planted on the table and his black eyes intent. "Now," he said, "I want a straight answer. Are you going back on your bargain?"

"No. If I had meant to do that, I should naturally have taken Devine's offer. As I have told you a good many times already, I am going to get my six thousand dollars out of him. That is, of course, if we can manage it, about which I am more than a little doubtful."

Saxton laughed contemptuously. "You would never get six dollars out of anybody who wasn't quite willing to let you have them," he said. "A struggling man has no use for the notions you seem proud of." [Pg 131]

"I really can't help having them," said Brooke, with a little smile.

Saxton shook his head. "Well," he said, "it's fortunate you're not going to be left to yourself, or somebody would take the clothes off you. Now, I've heard from a friend of mine, who has a contract to build the Canopus folks a flume. It seems they want more water, and it's Devine's mine."

"How is that going to help us?"

"Since Leeson made that contract, he got the offer of another that would pay him better, and he's willing to pass it on at Devine's figure to any one who will take it off his hands. Now, I'll find you a man or two and tools, and when they're ready, you'll start right away for the Canopus and build that flume."

"The difficulty is that I haven't the least notion how to build a flume."

Saxton made a little impatient gesture. "Then I guess you have got to learn, and there are plenty of men to be hired in the bush who do. You know how to rough down redwood logs and blow out rocks?"

Brooke admitted that he did, and Saxton nodded.

"Then the thing's quite easy," he said. "You look at the one they've got already, and make another like it. Haven't you found out yet that a man can do 'most anything that another one can?"

"Well," said Brooke, "I'll try it, but that brings us to the question, what else do you expect from me? It is very probable that I shall make an unfortunate mistake for both of us, if you leave me in the dark. I want to understand the position." [Pg 132]

Saxton explained it at length, and Brooke leaned back in his chair, glancing abstractedly through the open door as he listened, for his mind took in the details mechanically, while his thoughts were otherwise busy. He saw the dusky forest he had toiled and lost hope in, and then, turning his head a trifle, the comfortless dingy room and Saxton's intent face and eager eyes. He was speaking with little nervous gestures, vehemently, and all the sensibility that the struggle had left in Brooke shrank from the sordidness of the compact he had made with him. The fact that his confederate apparently considered their purpose perfectly legitimate and even commendable, intensified the disgust he felt, but once more he told himself that he could not afford to be particular. There was, it seemed, a price to everything, and if he was ever to regain his status he must let no more opportunities slip past him.

Still the memory of the old house in the English valley, and a certain silver-haired lady who had long ago paced the velvet lawns that swept about it with her white hand upon his shoulder,

returned to trouble him. She had endeavored to instil the fine sense of honor that guided her own life into him, and he remembered her wholesome pride and the stories she had told him of the men who had gone forth from that quiet home before him. Most of them had served their nation well, even those who had hewn down the ancient oaks and mortgaged the wheat-land in the reckless Georgian days, and now, when the white-haired lady slept in the still valley, he was about to sell the honor she had held priceless for six thousand dollars in Western Canada. Nevertheless, he strove to persuade himself that the times had changed and the old codes vanished, and sat still listening while Saxton, stained with soil and water from the mine, talked on, and gesticulated with a bleeding hand. He touched upon frontages, ore-leads, record and patents from the Crown, and then stopped abruptly, and looked hard at Brooke.

[Pg 133]

"Now I think you've got it all," he said.

"Yes," said Brooke, whose face had grown a trifle grim, "I fancy I have. I am to find out, if I can, how far the third drift runs west, and when the driving of it began. Then one of us will stake off a claim on Devine's holding and endeavor, with the support of the other, to hold his own in as tough a struggle as was probably ever undertaken by two men in our position. You see I have met Devine."

Saxton laughed. "I guess he's not going to give us very much trouble. He'll buy us off instead, once we make it plain that we have got the whip hand of him. Your share's six thousand dollars, and if you lay them out as I tell you, you'll go back to England a prosperous man."

[Pg 134]

Brooke smiled a trifle drily. "I hope so," he said. "Still, I shall have left more than I could buy with a great many dollars behind me in Canada."

"Dollars will buy you anything," said Saxton. "That is, when you have enough of them. They're going to buy me a seat in the Provincial Legislature by and by. Then I'll let the business slide, and start in doing something for the other folks. We've got 'most everything but men here, and I'll bring out your starving deadbeats from England and make them happy—like Strathcona."

Brooke looked hard at him, and then leaned back in his chair, and laughed when he saw that he was perfectly serious.

[Pg 135]

X. THE FLUME BUILDER.

It was a hot afternoon, and a long trail of ethereal mist lay motionless athwart the gleaming snow above, when Brooke stood dripping with perspiration in the shadow of a towering pine. The red dust was thick upon him, and his coarse blue shirt, which was badly torn, fell open at the neck as he turned his head and looked down fixedly into the winding valley. A lake flashed like a mirror among the trees below, save where the slumbering shadows pointed downwards into its crystal depths, but the strip of hillside the forest had been hewn back from was scarred and torn with raw gashes, and the dull thumping of the stamp-heads that crushed the gold-bearing quartz jarred discordantly through the song of the river. Mounds of débris, fire-blackened fir stumps, and piles of half-burnt branches cumbered the little clearing, round which the towering redwoods uplifted their stately spires, and the acrid fumes of smoke and giant powder drifted through their drowsy fragrance.

The blotch of man's crude handiwork marred the pristine beauty of the wilderness; but it had its significance, and pointed to what was to come when the plough had followed the axe and drill, and cornfields and orchards should creep up the hillsides where now the solemn pines looked down upon the desecrated valley. Brooke, however, was very naturally not concerned with this just then. He was engaged in building a flume, or wooden conduit to bring down water to the mine, and was intently watching two little trails of faint blue smoke with a thin red sparkle in the midst of them which crept up a dark rock's side.

[Pg 136]

He had no interest whatever in the task when he undertook it, but a somewhat astonishing and unexpected thing had happened, for by degrees the work took hold of him. He was not by nature a loungeur, and was endued with a certain pertinacity, which had, however, only led him into difficulties hitherto, or he would probably never have come out to Canada. Thus it came about that when he found the building of the flume taxed all his ingenuity, as well as his physical strength, he became sensible of a wholly unanticipated pleasure in the necessary effort, and had almost forgotten the purpose which brought him there.

"How long did you cut those fuses to burn?" he said to Jimmy, who, though by no means fond of physical exertion, had come up to assist him from the ranch.

The latter glanced at the two trails of smoke, which a handful of men, snugly ensconced behind convenient trees, were also watching.

[Pg 137]

"I guessed it at four minutes," he said. "They're 'bout half-way through now. Still, I can't see

nothing of the third one."

"No," said Brooke. "Nor can I. That loosely-spun kind snuffs out occasionally. Quite sure they're not more than half-way through?"

"No," said Jimmy, reflectively. "I'd give them 'most two minutes yet. Hallo! What in the name of thunder are you going to do?"

It was not an unnatural question, because when those creeping trains of sparks reached the detonators the rock would be reft asunder by giant powder and a shower of ponderous fragments and flying débris hurled across the valley, while Brooke, who swung round abruptly, bounded down the slope.

Jimmy stared at him in wonder, and then set off without reflection in chase of him. He was not addicted to hurrying himself when it was not necessary, but he ran well that day, with the vague intention of dragging back his comrade, whose senses, he fancied, had suddenly deserted him. The men behind the trees were evidently under the same impression, for confused cries went up.

"Go back! Stop right there! Catch him, Jimmy; trip him up!"

Jimmy did his best, but he was slouching and loose of limb, while Brooke was light of foot and young. He was also running his hardest, with grim face and set lips, straight for the rock, and was scrambling across the débris beneath it, which rolled down at every step, when Jimmy reached up and caught his leg. He said nothing, but when Brooke slid backwards, grabbed his jacket, which tore up the back; and there was a shout from the men behind the trees, two of whom came running towards the pair.

[Pg 138]

"Pull him down! No, let go of him, and tear the fuses out!"

Nobody saw exactly what took place next, and neither Brooke nor Jimmy afterwards remembered; but in another moment the latter sat gasping among the débris, while his comrade clambered up the slope alone. It also happened, though everybody was too intent to notice this, that a girl, with brown eyes and a big white hat, who had been strolling through the shadow of the pines on the ridge above, stopped abruptly just then. She could see the trail of sparks creep across the stone, and understood the position, which the shouts of the miners would have made plain to her if she had not. She could not see the man's face, though she realized that he was in imminent peril, and felt her heart throb painfully. Then, in common with the rest of those who watched him, she had a second astonishment, for he did not pull out the burning fuses, but crawled past them, and bent over something with a lighted match in his hand.

[Pg 139]

Brooke in the meanwhile set his lips as the match went out, and struck another, while a heavy silence followed the shouts. The men, who grasped his purpose, now realized that interference would come too late, and those who had started from them went back to the trees. There only remained Brooke, clinging with one hand to a cranny of the rock while he held the match, whose diminutive flame showed pale in the blaze of sunlight, and Jimmy, rising apparently half-dazed from among the débris. The girl in the white hat afterwards recalled that picture, and could see the two lonely men, blurred figures in the shadows, and clustering pines. When that happened, she also felt a curious little thrill which was half-horror and half-appreciation.

Then the third fuse sparkled, and Brooke sprang down, grasped Jimmy's shoulder, and drove him before him. There was a fresh shouting, and now every one could see two men running for their lives for the shelter of the pines. It seemed a very long while before they reached them, and all the time three blue trails of smoke and sparkling lines of fire were creeping with remorseless certainty up the slope of stone. The girl upon the ridge above closed her hands tightly to check a scream, and bronzed men, who had braved a good many perils in their time, set their lips or murmured incoherently.

In the meanwhile the two men were running well, with drawn faces, staring eyes, and the perspiration dripping from them, and there was a hoarse murmur of relief when at last they flung themselves into the shadow of the pines. It was followed by a stunning detonation, and a blaze of yellow flame, while the hillside trembled when the smoke rolled down. Flying fragments of rock came out of it, there was a roar of falling stones, a crashing in the forest where great boughs snapped, and the lake boiled as though torn up by cannon shot. Then a curious silence followed, intensified by an occasional splash and rattle as a stone which had travelled farther than the rest came down, and the girl in the white hat retired hastily as the fumes of giant powder, which produce dizziness and nausea, drifted up the hillside.

[Pg 140]

Brooke sat down on a felled log, Jimmy leaned against a tree, and while the men clustered round them they looked at one another, and gasped heavily.

"I figured you'd be blown into very little pieces less than a minute ago," said one of those who stood by. "What did you do it for, anyway?"

Brooke blinked at the questioner. "Third fuse snuffed out," he said. "It would have spoiled the shot. I cut it to match the others, and lighted it."

This was comprehensible, for to rend a piece of rock effectively, it is occasionally necessary to apply the riving force at several places at the same time.

"Still, you could have pulled the other fuses out and put new ones back. It would have been

[Pg 141]

considerably less risky," said another man.

Brooke laughed breathlessly. "It certainly would, but I never thought of that," he said.

Then Jimmy broke in. "What made me sit down like I did?" he said.

"It was probably the same thing that tore my jacket half-way up the back."

"Well," said Jimmy, "there's a big lump there didn't use to be on the side of my head, too, and it was the concernedest hardest kind of rock I sat down upon. Next time you try to blow yourself up, I'm not going after you."

Brooke glanced at him quietly, with a curious look in his eyes.

"What made you come at all?" he said.

Jim appeared to reflect. "I've done quite a lot of foolish things before—and I don't quite know."

Brooke only smiled, but a little flush crept into Jimmy's face, for men do not express their sentiments dramatically in that country, that is, unless they are connected with mineral speculations or the selling of land.

"Of course!" he said. "I fancy I shall remember it."

They turned away together to inspect the result of the shot, and one of the miners who looked after them nodded approval. "When that man takes hold of anything he puts it through 'most every time," he said. "There's good hard sand in him."

[Pg 142]

In the meanwhile Jimmy glanced at his comrade, apparently with an entire absence of interest, out of half-closed eyes.

"I guess you were too busy to see a friend of yours a little while ago?" he said.

"I expect I was," said Brooke. "Anyway, nobody I'm acquainted with is likely to be met with in this part of the province, unless it was Saxton."

"No," said Jimmy, "it wasn't him. Saxton doesn't go trailing round in a big white hat and a four-decker skirt with a long tail to it."

Brooke turned a trifle sharply, and glanced at him. "You mean Miss Heathcote?"

"Yes," said Jimmy, reflectively, "if it's the one that was Barbara last time, I guess I do. You have been finding out the rest of it since you met her at the ranch? She was up yonder ten minutes ago."

He pointed to a forest-covered ridge above the mine, but Brooke, looking up with all his eyes, saw nothing but the serried ranks of climbing pines. As it happened, however, the girl, who stood amidst their shadows, saw him, and smiled. She had noticed Jimmy's pointing hand, and fancied she knew what his companion was looking for.

"Then you are certainly mistaken," he said. "There is nowhere she could be staying at within several leagues of the Canopus."

"There's the Englishman's old ranch house Devine bought. It's quite a good one."

[Pg 143]

Brooke started a little, and Jimmy, who was much quicker of wit than some folks believed, noticed it.

"She certainly couldn't be staying there. It's quite out of the question," he said, with an assurance that was chiefly intended to convince himself.

"Well," said Jimmy, who appeared to ruminate, "I guess you know best. Still, I can't think of any other place, unless she's living in a cave."

Brooke said nothing further, but signed to the men who were waiting, and proceeded to roll the shattered rock out of the course of his flume. He felt it was certain that Jimmy was mistaken, for the only other conclusion appeared preposterous, and he could not persuade himself to consider it. Still, he thought of the girl with the brown eyes often while he swung axe and hammer during the rest of the afternoon, and when he strolled up the hillside after the six o'clock supper he was thinking of her still. He climbed until the raw gap of the workings was lost among the pines, and then lay down.

The evening was still and cool, for the chill of the snow made itself felt once the sunlight faded from the valley. Now and then a sound came up faintly from the mine, but that was not often, and a great quietness reigned among the pines, which towered above him, two hundred feet to their topmost sprays, in serried ranks. They were old long before the white man first entered that wild mountain land, while, as he lay there in the scented dimness among their wide-girthed trunks, all that concerned the Canopus and its pounding stamp-heads slipped away from him. He was worn out in body, but his mind was clear and free, and, lying still, unlighted pipe in hand, he gave his fancy the rein, and, forgetting Devine and the flume, dreamed of what had once been his, and might, if he could make his purpose good, be his again.

[Pg 144]

The sordid details of the struggle he had embarked upon faded from his memory, for the cold silence of the mountains seemed to banish them. It gave him courage and tranquillity, and, for

the time at least, nothing seemed unattainable, while through all his wandering fancies moved a vision of a girl in a long white dress, who looked down upon him fearlessly from a plunging pony's back. That was the recollection he cherished most, though he had also seen her with diamonds gleaming in her dusky hair in the Vancouver opera-house.

Then he started, and a little thrill ran through him as he wondered whether it was a trick his eyes had played him or he saw her in the flesh. She stood close beside him, with a grey cedar trunk behind her, in a long trailing dress, but the white hat was in her hand now, and the little shapely head bared to the cooling touch of the dew. Still, she had materialized so silently out of the shadows that he almost felt afraid to move lest she should melt into them again, and he lay very still, watching her until she glanced at him. Then he sprang, awkwardly, to his feet, with a little smile.

[Pg 145]

"I would scarcely venture to tell you what I thought you were, but it is in one respect consoling to find you real," he said.

"Why?" said the girl.

"Because you are not likely to vanish again. You must remember that I first saw you clothed in white samite, with the moon behind your shoulder, in the river."

The girl laughed. "I wonder if you know what white samite is?"

"I don't," said Brooke, reflectively. "I never did, but it seems to go with water lapping on the rocks and mystery. Still, you—are—material, fortunately."

"Very," said Barbara. "Besides, I certainly did not bring you a sword."

Brooke appeared to consider. "One can never be quite certain of anything—especially in British Columbia. But how did you come here?"

The girl favored him with a comprehensive glance, which Brooke felt took in his well-worn jean, coarse blue shirt, badly-rent jacket, and shapeless hat.

"I was about to ask you the same thing. It was in Vancouver I saw you last," she said.

"I came here on a very wicked pack-horse—one that kicked, and on two occasions came very near falling down a gorge with me. I am now building a flume for the Canopus mine—if you know what that is."

[Pg 146]

Barbara laughed. "I fancy I know rather more about flumes than you did a little while ago. At least, I have reason to believe so, from what a mining foreman told me this afternoon. He, however, expressed unqualified approval, as well as a little astonishment, at the progress you had made. You see, I happened to observe what took place before the shot was fired a few hours ago."

"Then you witnessed an entirely unwarranted piece of folly."

A curious little gleam crept into Barbara's eyes, but she smiled. "You could have cut those fuses, and relighted them afterwards, but, since you did not remember it, I don't think that counts. What made you take the risk?"

"Well," said Brooke, reflectively, "after worrying over the probable line of cleavage of that troublesome rock, it seemed to me that if I wished to split it, I must explode three charges of giant powder in certain places simultaneously. Now, if you examine what you might call the texture of a rock, though, of course, a really crystalline body—"

Barbara made a little gesture of impatience. "That is not in the least what I mean—as I fancy you are quite aware."

"Then," said Brooke, with a faint twinkle in his eyes, "I'm afraid I don't quite understand the moral causes of the proceeding myself, though I have heard my comrade describe one quality which may have had something to do with it as mulishness. It was, of course, reprehensible of me to be led away by it, especially as when I took the contract I really didn't care if the flume was never built."

[Pg 147]

"And now you mean to finish it if it ruins you?"

"No," said Brooke, "I really don't think I do. In fact, I hope to make a good many dollars out of it, directly or indirectly."

He had spoken without reflection, and was sensible of a most unpleasant embarrassment when the girl glanced at him sharply, which she did not fail to notice.

"Building flumes is evidently more profitable than I thought it was," she said. "Still, you will no doubt make most of those dollars—indirectly?"

Brooke decided that it was advisable to change the subject. "I have," he said, "answered—your—question."

"Then I will do the same. I came here, because one can see the sunset on the snow from this ridge, most prosaically on my feet."

"But from where?" and Brooke's voice was almost sharp.

"From the old ranch house in the valley, of course!"

Brooke made an effort to retain his serenity, but his face grew a trifle grim, and he looked at the girl curiously, with his lips tight set. Then he made a little gesture. [Pg 148]

"But that is where Devine lives when he comes here. It's preposterous!" he said.

Barbara felt astonished, though she was very reposed. "I really don't see why it should be. Mrs. Devine is there. We have to entertain a good deal in the city, and are glad to get away to the mountains for quietness occasionally."

"But what connection can you possibly have with Mrs. Devine?"

"I am," said Barbara, quietly, "merely her sister. I have always lived with her."

Brooke positively gasped. "And you never told me!"

"Why should I? You never asked me, and I fancied everybody knew."

Brooke stood silent a moment, with the fingers of one hand closed, and the blood in his face, then he turned, as the girl moved, and they went back along the little rough rail together.

"Of course, I can think of no reason," he said, quietly. "Still, the news astonished me."

Barbara glanced away from him. There was only one way in which she could account for his evident concern at what she had told him, and the deduction she made was not altogether unpleasant to her, though, as it happened, it was not the correct one. The man was, as he had told her, without friends or dollars, but she knew that men with his capacities do not always remain poor in that country, and there were qualities which had gained her appreciation in him, while it had not dawned on her that there might also be others which could only meet with her disapprobation. [Pg 149]

"If you had called at the address I gave you in Vancouver, you would have known exactly who I was, but there is now nothing to prevent you coming to the ranch," she said.

Brooke glanced down somewhat grimly at his hard, scarred hands and his clothes, and a faint flush crept into the girl's face.

"Have I to remind you again that you are not in the English valley?" she said. "Mr. Devine, at least, is rather proud of the fact that he once earned his living with the shovel and the drill."

"I am not sure that the one you imagine is my only reason for feeling a trifle diffident about presenting myself at Mr. Devine's house," said Brooke, very slowly.

Barbara looked at him with a little imperious smile. "I did not ask you for any at all. I merely suggested that if you wished to come we should be pleased to see you at the ranch."

Brooke made her a little inclination, and said nothing, until, when another white-clad figure appeared among the pines, the girl turned to him. [Pg 150]

"That is Mrs. Devine," she said. "Shall I present you?"

Brooke stopped abruptly, with, as the girl noticed once more, a very curious expression in his face. He meant to use whatever means were available against Devine, but he could not profit by a woman's kindness to creep into his adversary's house.

"No," he said, almost harshly. "Not to-night. It would be a pleasure—another time."

Barbara looked at him with big, grave eyes, and the faintest suggestion of color in her cheek. "Very well," she said. "I need not detain you."

Brooke swung round, and as Mrs. Devine strolled towards them, retired almost precipitately into the shadow of the pines, while, when he stopped again, with a curious little laugh, he was distinctly flushed in face.

[Pg 151]

XI.

AN EMBARRASSING POSITION.

The wooden conduit which sprang across a gorge just there on a slender trestle was full to the brim, and Brooke, who leaned on his long hammer shaft, watched the crystal water swirl by with a satisfaction which was distinctly new to him, while the roar it made as it plunged down into the valley from the end of the uncompleted flume came throbbing across the pines. Though it was a very crude piece of engineering, that trestle had cost him hours of anxious thought and days of strenuous labor, and now, standing above it, very wet and somewhat ragged, with hands as hard as a navvy's, he surveyed it with a pride which was scarcely warranted by its appearance. It was, however, the creation of his hands and brain, and evidently capable of doing its work effectively.

Then he smiled somewhat curiously as he remembered with what purpose he had taken over the contract to build the flume from its original holder, and, turning abruptly away, walked along it until he stopped where the torrent that fed it swirled round a pool. The latter had rapidly lowered its level since the big sluice was opened, and he stood looking at it intently while a project, which involved a fresh struggle with hard rock and forest, dawned upon him. He had gained his first practically useful triumph over savage Nature, and it had filled him with a desire he had never supposed himself capable of for a renewal of the conflict. A little sparkle came into his eyes, and he stood with head flung back a trifle and his corded arms uncovered to the elbow, busy with rough calculations, and once more oblivious of the fact that he was only there to play his part in a conspiracy, until a man with grey in his hair came out of the shadow of the pines.

[Pg 152]

"I came up along the flume and she's wasting very little water," he said. "Not a trickle from the trestle! It would 'most carry a wagon. You must have spent quite a pile of dollars over it."

Brooke smiled a trifle drily, for that was a point he had overlooked until the cost had been sharply impressed upon him.

"I'm afraid I did, Mr. Devine," he said. "Still, I couldn't see how to get the work done more cheaply without taking the risk of the flume settling a little by and by. That would, of course, have started it leaking. What do you think of it?"

Devine smiled as he noticed his eagerness. "It seems to me that risk would have been mine," he said. "I've seen neater work, but not very much that looked like lasting longer. Who gave you the plan of it?"

[Pg 153]

"Nobody," said Brooke, with a trace of the pride he could not quite repress. "I worried it out myself. You see, I once or twice gave the carpenters a hand at stiffening the railroad trestles."

Devine nodded, and flashed a keen glance at him as he said, "What are you looking at that pool for?"

Brooke stood silent a moment or two. "Well," he said, diffidently, "it occurred to me that when there was frost on the high peaks you might have some difficulty in getting enough water to feed the flume. You can see how the pool has run down already. Now, with a hundred tons or so of rock and débris and a log framing, one could contrive a very workable dam. It would ensure you a full supply and equalize the pressure."

"You feel equal to putting the thing through?"

"I would at least very much like to try."

Devine regarded him thoughtfully. "Then you can let me have your notions."

Brooke unfolded his crude scheme, and the other man watched him keenly until he said, "If that meets with your approbation I could start two of my men getting out the logs almost immediately."

Devine smiled. "Has it struck you that there is a point you have forgotten?"

"It is quite possible there are a good many."

[Pg 154]

"You can't think of one that's important in particular?"

"No," said Brooke, reflectively, "not just now."

A little sardonic twinkle crept into Devine's eyes. "Well," he said, "before I took hold of any contract of that kind I would like to know just how much I was going to make on it, and what it would cost me."

Brooke looked at him and laughed. "Of course!" he said. "Still, I never thought of it until this moment."

"It's quite clear you weren't raised in Canada," said Devine. "You can worry out the thing during the afternoon and bring along any rough plan you'd like to show me to the ranch this evening. That's fixed? Then there's another thing. Has anybody tried to stop you getting out lumber?"

"No," said Brooke. "I met two men who appeared to be timber-right prospectors more than once, but they made no difficulty."

Devine, who seemed a trifle astonished, looked at him curiously before he turned away. "Then," he said drily, "you are more fortunate than I am."

Brooke went back to his work, and supper had been cleared away in his double tent when he completed his simple toilet, which had commenced with a plunge into a whirling pool of the snow-fed river, preparatory to his visit to the ranch. Jimmy, who had assisted in it, stood surveying him complacently.

"Now," he said, with a nod of approbation, "I guess you'll do when I've run a few stitches up the back of you. Stand quite still while I get the tent needle."

[Pg 155]

Brooke glanced at the implement he produced somewhat dubiously, for it was of considerable thickness and several inches long.

"I suppose," he said, resignedly, "you haven't got a smaller one?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I guess I wouldn't trust it if I had," he said. "I want to fix that darn up good and strong so it will do you credit. There are two women at the ranch, and it's quite likely they'll come in and talk to you."

Brooke made no further protest, but he smiled somewhat curiously as Jimmy stitched away. His work was not remarkable for neatness, and Brooke remembered that the two women at the ranch were fresh from the cities, where men do not mend their clothes with pieces of tents or cotton flour bags. Then he decided that, after all, it did not matter what they thought of him. One would probably set him down as a rude bush chopper, and the other, whose good opinion he would have valued under different circumstances, was a kinswoman of his adversary. Sooner or later she would know him for what he was, and then it was clear she would only have contempt for him. That she of all women should be Mrs. Devine's sister was, he reflected with a sense of impotent anger, one of the grim jests that Fate seemed to delight in playing. [Pg 156]

"Now," said Jimmy, breaking off his thread at last, "I guess you might go 'most anywhere if you stand with your face to the folks who talk to you, and don't sit down too suddenly. Be cautious how you get up again if you hear those stitches tearing through."

Brooke went out, and discovered that Jimmy had, no doubt as a precautionary measure, sewn several of his garments together as he walked through the shadowy bush towards the ranch. Devine, to whom the scheme suggested had commended itself, was, as it happened, already waiting him in a big log walled room. He sat by the open window, which looked across blue lake and climbing pines towards the great white ramparts of unmelting snow that shut the valley in. The rest of the room was dim, and now the sun had gone, sweet resinous odors and an exhilarating coolness that stirred the blood like wine came in. Two women sat back in the shadow, and Devine moved a little in his chair as he answered one of them.

"I know very little about the man, but I never saw more thorough work than he has put in on the flume," he said. "That's 'most enough guarantee for him, but there are one or two points about him I can't quite worry out the meaning of. For one thing, the timber-righters haven't stopped him chopping." [Pg 157]

Mrs. Devine looked thoughtful, for she was acquainted with the less pleasant aspect of mine-owning, but Barbara broke in.

"It is a little difficult to understand what use timber-rights would be to anybody here," she said. "They could hardly get their lumber out, and there are very few people to sell it to if they put up a mill."

"I expect they mean to sell it me," said Devine, a trifle grimly.

"But you always cut what you wanted without asking anybody."

"I did. Still, it seems scarcely likely that I'm going to do it again. If anyone has located timber-rights—which he'd get for 'most nothing on a patent from the Crown—he has never worried about them until the Canopus began to pay. Of course, one has to put in timber as he takes out the ore, and it seems to have struck somebody that the men who started it on the Canopus had burnt off all the young firs they ought to have kept. That's why he bought those timber-rights up."

"Still there are thousands of them nobody can ever use, and you must have timber," said Barbara.

"Precisely!" said Devine. "That man figures that when I get it he's going to screw a big share of the profits in this mine out of me."

A portentous sparkle crept into Barbara's eyes, while Mrs. Devine, who knew her husband best, watched him with a little smile. [Pg 158]

"But that is infamous extortion!" said the girl.

Devine laughed. "Well," he said, "it's not going to be good business for the man who puts up the game, but I don't quite see why he didn't strike Brooke for a few dollars as well. Men of his kind are like ostriches. They take in 'most anything."

He might have said more, but Brooke appeared in the doorway just then and stood still with, so Barbara fancied, a faint trace of disconcertion when he saw the women, until Devine turned to him.

"Come right in," he said. "Barbara tells me she has met you, but you haven't seen Mrs. Devine. Mr. Brooke, who is building the new flume for me, Katty."

There was no avoiding the introduction, nor could Brooke escape with an inclination as he wished to do, for the lady held out her hand to him. She was older and more matronly than Barbara, but otherwise very like her, and she had the same gracious serenity. Still, Brooke felt his cheeks burn beneath the bronze on them as he shook hands with her. It was one thing to wrest his dollars back from Devine, but, while he cherished that purpose, quite another to be graciously welcomed to his house.

"We are very pleased to see any of Barbara's friends," she said. "You apparently hadn't an opportunity of calling upon us in Vancouver?" [Pg 159]

Brooke glanced at Barbara, who was not exactly pleased with her sister just then, and met his gaze a trifle coldly. Still, he was sensible of a curious satisfaction, for it was evident that the girl who had been his comrade in the bush had not altogether forgotten him in the city.

"I left the day after Miss Heathcote was kind enough to give me permission," he said.

He felt that his response might have been amplified, but he was chiefly conscious of a desire to avoid any further civilities then, and because he was quite aware that Barbara was watching him quietly, it was a relief when Devine turned to him.

"We'll get down to business," he said. "You brought a plan of the dam along?"

He led the way to the little table at the window, and while Mrs. Devine went on with her sewing and Barbara took up a book again, Brooke unrolled the plan he had made with some difficulty. Then the men discussed it until Devine said, "You can start in when it pleases you, and my clerk will hand you the dollars as soon as you are through. How long do you figure it will take you?"

"Three or four months," said Brooke, and looking up saw that the girl's eyes were fixed on him. She turned them away next moment, but he felt that she had heard him and they would be companions that long.

[Pg 160]

"Well," said Devine, "it's quite likely we will be up here part, at least, of the time. Now you'll have to put on more men, and I haven't forgotten what you admitted the day I drove you in to the settlement. You'll want a good many dollars to pay them."

"If you will give me a written contract, I dare say I can borrow them from a bank agent or mortgage broker on the strength of it."

"Oh, yes," said Devine, drily. "It's quite likely you can, but he would charge you a percentage that's going to make a big hole in the profit."

"I'm afraid I haven't any other means of getting the money."

"Well," said Devine, "I rather think you have. In fact, I'll lend it you as the work goes on."

Brooke felt distinctly uncomfortable and sat silent a moment, for this was the last thing he had desired or expected.

"I have really no claim on you, sir," he said at length. "In this province payment is very seldom made until the work is done, and quite often not until a long while afterwards."

Devine smiled drily. "I guess that is my business. Now is there any special reason you shouldn't borrow those dollars from me?"

Brooke felt that there was a very good one, but it was one he could not well make plain to Devine. He was troubled by an unpleasant sense of meanness already, and felt that it would be almost insufferable to have a kindness thrust upon him by his companion. He was, though he would not look at her, also sensible that Barbara Heathcote was watching him covertly, and decided that what he and Devine had said had been perfectly audible in the silent room.

[Pg 161]

"I would, at least, prefer to grapple with the financial difficulty in my own way, sir," he said.

Devine made a little gesture of indifference. "Then, if you should want a few dollars at any time you know where to come for them. Now, I guess we're through with the business and you can talk to Mrs. Devine—who has been there—about the Old Country."

Brooke did so, and after the first few minutes, which were distinctly unpleasant to him, managed to forget the purpose which had brought him to the ranch. His hostess was quietly kind, and evidently a lady who had appreciated and was pleased to talk about what she had seen in England, which was, as it happened, a good deal. Brooke also knew how to listen, and now and then a curious little smile crept into his eyes as she dilated on scenes and functions which were very familiar to him. It was evident that she never for a moment supposed that the man who sat listening to her somewhat stiffly, from reasons connected with Jimmy's repairs to his clothes, could have taken a part in them, but he was once or twice almost embarrassed when Barbara, who seemed to take his comprehension for granted, broke in.

[Pg 162]

In the meanwhile a miner came for Devine, who went out with him, and by and by Mrs. Devine, making her household duties an excuse, also left the room. Then Barbara smiled a little as she turned to Brooke.

"I wonder," she said, quietly, "why you were so unwilling to meet my sister? There is really no reason why anybody should be afraid of her."

Brooke was glad that the dimness which was creeping across the valley had deepened the shadow in the room, for he was not anxious that the girl should see his face just then.

"You assume that I was unwilling?" he said.

"It was evident, though I am not quite sure that Mrs. Devine noticed it."

Brooke saw that an answer was expected from him. "Well," he said, "Mrs. Devine is a lady of station, and I am, you see, merely the builder of one of her husband's flumes. One naturally does not care to presume, and it takes some little time to get accustomed to the fact that these little

distinctions are not remembered in this country."

Barbara laughed. "One could get accustomed to a good deal in three or four years. I scarcely think that was your reason."

"Why?" said Brooke.

"Well," said the girl, reflectively, "the fact is that we do recognize the distinctions you allude to, though not to the same extent that you do; but it takes rather longer to acquire certain mannerisms and modes of expressing oneself than it does to learn the use of the axe and drill. To be more candid, any one can put on a flume-builder's clothes."

[Pg 163]

"I fancy you are jumping at conclusions. There are hotel waiters in the Old Country who speak much better English than I do."

"It is possible. I am, however, not quite sure that they would make good flume-builders. Still, we will let that pass, as well as one or two vague admissions you have previously made me. Why wouldn't you take the dollars you needed when Mr. Devine was perfectly willing to lend them to you?"

"It really isn't usual to make a stranger an advance of that kind," said Brooke, reflectively. "Besides, I might spend the dollars recklessly, and then break away and leave the work unfinished some day. Everybody is subject to occasional fits of restlessness here."

Barbara laughed. "Pshaw!" she said. "You had a much better reason than that. Now I think we were what might be called good comrades in the bush?"

Again Brooke felt a little thrill of pleasure. The girl sat where the dim light that still came in through the open window fell upon her, and she was very alluring with the faint smile, which was, nevertheless, curiously expressive, in her eyes.

[Pg 164]

"Yes," he said, almost grimly, "I had a better reason. I cannot tell you what it was, but it may become apparent presently."

Barbara asked no more questions, and while she sat silent, Mrs. Devine came in with a little dainty silver set on a tray. Maids of any kind, and even Chinese house-boys, are scarce in that country, especially in the bush, and Brooke realized that it must have been with her own hands she had prepared the quite unusual meal. Supper is served at six or seven o'clock through most of Canada. Probably the stove was burning, and her task was but a light one, but once more Brooke was sensible of a most unpleasant embarrassment when she smiled at him.

"Barbara and I got used to taking a cup of coffee in the evening when we were in England," she said. "Talking of the Old Country reminded me of it. Will you pour it out, Barbara?"

Barbara did so, and Brooke's fingers closed more tightly than was necessary on the cup she handed to him, while the cracker he forced himself to eat came near choking him. This was absurd sentimentality, he told himself, but, for all that, he dared scarcely meet the eyes of the lady who had, he realized, prepared that meal out of compliment to him. It was a relief when it was over and he was able to take his leave, but, as it happened, he forgot the plan he had laid down, and Barbara, who noticed it, overtook him in the log-hall. Devine had not come back yet.

[Pg 165]

"We shall be here for some little time—in fact, until Mr. Devine has seen the new adit driven," she said.

Brooke understood that this was tantamount to a general invitation, and smiled, as she noticed, somewhat wryly.

"I am afraid I shall scarcely venture to come back again," he said. "Mrs. Devine is very kind, but still, you see—it really wouldn't be fitting."

Then he turned and vanished into the darkness outside, and Barbara went back to the lighted room with a curious look in her eyes.

[Pg 166]

XII.

BROOKE IS CARRIED AWAY.

The flume was finished, and the dam already progressing well, when one morning Devine came out, somewhat grim in face, from the new adit he was driving at the Canopus. The captain of the mine also came with him, and stood still, evidently in a state of perplexity, when Devine looked at him.

"Well," said the latter, brusquely, "what are we going to do, Wilkins?"

The captain blinked at the forest with eyes not yet accustomed to the change of light, as though in search of inspiration, which apparently did not come.

"There's plenty timber yonder," he said.

"There is," said Devine, drily. "Still, as we can't touch a log of it, it isn't much use to us. There is no doubt about the validity of the patent that fellow holds it under either, and it covers everything right back to the cañon. He doesn't seem disposed to make any terms with me."

Wilkins appeared to reflect. "Hanging off for a bigger figure, but there are points I'm not quite clear about. Mackinder's not quite the man to play that game—I guess I know him well, and if it had been left to him, once he saw there were dollars in the thing, he'd have jumped right on to them and lit out for the cities to raise Cain with them. Now, I kind of wonder if there's a bigger man behind him."

[Pg 167]

"That's my end of the business," said Devine, with a little grim smile. "I'll take care of it. There are men in the cities who would find any dead-beat dollars if he wanted them for a fling at me. The question is—What about the mine? You feel reasonably sure we're going to strike ore that will pay for the crushing at the end of that adit?"

Wilkins glanced round at the forest, and then lowered his voice a trifle, though it was some distance off and there was nobody else about.

"We have got to, sir—and it's there if it's anywhere," he said. "You have seen the yield on the lower workings going down until it's just about worth while to keep the stamps going, and though none of the boys seem to notice anything, there are signs that are tolerably clear to me that the pay dirt's running right out. Still, I guess the chances of striking it again rich on the different level are good enough for me to put 'most every dollar I have by me in on a share of the crushings. I can't say any more than that."

"No," said Devine, drily. "Anyway, I'm going on with the adit. But about the timber?"

"Well, we will want no end of props, and that's a fact. It's quite a big contract to hold up the side of a mountain when you're working through soft stuff and crumbly rock, and the split-logs we've been worrying along with aren't going to be much use to us. We want round props, grown the size we're going to use, with the strength the tree was meant to have in them."

[Pg 168]

Devine looked thoughtful. "Then I'll have to get you them. Say nothing to the boys, and see nobody who doesn't belong to the gang you have sent there puts his foot in any part of the mine. It is, of course, specially necessary to keep the result of the crushings quiet. I'm not telling you this without a reason."

Wilkins went back into the adit, and Devine proceeded to flounder round the boundaries of the Englishman's abandoned ranch, which he had bought up for a few hundred dollars, chiefly because of the house on it. It consisted, for the most part, of a miry swamp, which the few prospectors who had once or twice spent the night with him said had broken the heart of the Englishman after a strenuous attempt to drain it, while the rest was rock outcrop, on which even the hardy conifers would not grow. Devine, who wet himself to the knees during his peregrination, had a survey plan with him, but he could see no means of extending his rights beyond the crumbling split-rail fence, and inside the latter there were no trees that appeared adapted for mining purposes. Willows straggled over the wetter places, and little, half-rotten pines stood tottering here and there in a tangled chaos a man could scarcely force his way through, but when he had wasted an hour or two, and was muddy all over, it became evident that he was scarcely likely to come upon a foot of timber that would be of any use to him. He had, of course, been told this, but he had on other occasions showed the men who pointed out insuperable difficulties to him that they were mistaken.

[Pg 169]

Devine, however, was, as that fact would indicate, not the man to be readily turned aside. He wanted mine props, and meant to obtain them, and, though his face grew a trifle grimmer, he climbed the hillside to where Brooke was busy knee-deep in water at the dam. He signed to him, and then, taking out his cigar-case, sat down on a log and looked at the younger man.

"Take one!" he said.

Brooke lighted a cigar, and sat down, with the water draining from him. "We'll have another tier of logs bolted on to the framing by to-morrow night," he said.

Devine glanced at the dam indifferently. "You take kindly to this kind of thing?" he said.

Brooke smiled a little, for he had of late been almost astonished at his growing interest in his work. Of scientific engineering he knew nothing, though he remembered that several relatives of his had made their mark at it, but every man who lives any time in the bush of the Pacific slope of necessity acquires some skill with axe and cross-cut saw, besides a working acquaintance with the principles of construction. Wooden houses, bridges, dams, must be built, and now and then a wagon road underpinned with redwood logs along the side of a precipice. He had done his share of such work, but he had, it seemed, of late become endued with a boldness of conception and clearness of insight into the best means of overcoming the difficulties to be faced, which had now and then astonished those who assisted him.

[Pg 170]

"I really think I do, though I don't know why I should," he said. "I never undertook anything of the description in England."

"Then I guess it must be in the family. Any of your folks doing well back there as mechanics?"

Brooke smiled somewhat drily. As a matter of fact, a near kinsman of his had gained distinction in the Royal Engineers, and another's name was famous in connection with irrigation works in Egypt. He did not, however, feel it in any way incumbent on him to explain this to Devine.

"I could not exactly say they are," he said. "Anyway, isn't it a little outside the question?"

"Well," said Devine, drily, "I don't quite know. What's born in a man will come out somehow, whether it's good for him or not. Now, I was thinking over another piece of work you might feel inclined to put through for me."

[Pg 171]

Brooke became suddenly intent, and Devine noticed the little gleam in his eyes as he said, "If you can give me any particulars——"

"Come along," said Devine, a trifle grimly, "and I'll show you them. Then if you still feel willing to go into the thing we can worry out my notion."

Brooke rose and followed him along the hillside, which was seamed with rock outcrop and thinly covered with brushwood, while the roar of water grew louder in his ears. When they had made a mile or so Devine stopped and looked about him.

"It wouldn't cost too much to clear a ground-sled trail from here to the mine," he said. "A team of mules could haul a good many props in over it in a day."

"But where are you going to get them from?" said Brooke.

Devine smiled curiously. "Come along a little further, and I'll show you."

Again Brooke went with him, wondering a little, for he knew that a cañon would cut off all further progress presently, until Devine stopped once more where the hillside fell sheer away beneath them.

"Now," he said, quietly, "I guess we're there. You can see plenty young firs that would make mining props yonder."

Brooke certainly could. The hillside in front of him rose, steep as a roof, to the ridge where the tufts of ragged pines were silhouetted in sombre outline against the gleaming snow behind. Streaked with drifting mist, they rolled upwards in serried ranks, and there was apparently timber enough for half the mines in the province. The difficulty, however, was the reaching it, for, between him and it, a green-stained torrent thundered through a tremendous gap, whose walls were worn smooth and polished for four hundred feet or so. Above that awful chasm rose bare and slippery slopes of rock, on which there was foothold for neither man nor beast, and only a stunted pine clung here and there in the crannies. What the total depth was he did not know, but he recoiled instinctively from the contemplation of it, and would have drawn back a yard or two only that Devine stood still, looking down into the gap with his usual grim smile.

[Pg 172]

Still, it was a minute or two before he was sensible of more than a vague awe and a physical shrinking from that tremendous display of Nature's forces, and then, by degrees, his brain commenced to record the details of the scene. He saw the snow-fed river diminished by distance to a narrow green riband swirling round the pools, and frothing with a curious livid whiteness over reef and boulder far down in the dimness. The roar it made came up in long pulsations of sound, which were flung back by the climbing pines that seemed to tremble in unison with it. The rocks were hollowed a trifle at their bases, and arched above the river. It was, as a picture, awe-inspiring and sublime, but from a practical point of view an apparently insurmountable barrier between the owner of the Canopus mine and the timber he desired. Devine, however, knew better, for he was a man who had grappled with a good many apparently insuperable difficulties, and Brooke became sensible that he expected an expression of opinion from him.

[Pg 173]

"The timber is certainly there, but I quite fail to see how it could be of the least use to anybody situated where we are," he said. "That cañon is, I should fancy, one of the deepest in the province."

Devine nodded, but the little smile was still in his eyes, and he pointed to the one where, by crawling down the gully a torrent had fretted out, an agile man might reach a jutting crag a couple of hundred feet below.

"The point is that it isn't very wide," he said. "It wouldn't take a great many fathoms of steel rope to reach across it."

Brooke realized that, because the crag projected a little, this was correct; but as yet the suggestion conveyed no particular meaning to him.

"No," he said. "Still, it isn't very evident what use that would be."

Devine laughed. "Now, if you had told me you knew anything about engineering, you would have given yourself away. Have you never heard of an aerial tramway? It's quite simple—a steel rope set up tight, a winch for hauling, and a trolley. With that working, and a skid-slide up the gully, one could send over the props we want without much difficulty. It would be cheaper than buying off the timber-righters."

[Pg 174]

Brooke gasped as the daring simplicity of the scheme dawned on him. If one had nerve enough to undertake it the thing was perfectly feasible, and he turned to Devine with a glow in his eyes.

"It could be done," he said. "Still, do you know anybody who would be willing to stretch that rope across?"

Devine looked at him steadily, noticing the slight dilation of his nostrils and the intentness of his face.

"Well," he said, drily, "I was going to ask you."

The blood surged into Brooke's forehead, and for the time he forgot his six thousand dollars and that the man who made the suggestion had plundered him of them. He had, during the course of his English education, shown signs of a certain originality and daring of thought which had slightly astonished those who taught him, and then had lounged three or four years away in the quiet valley, where originality of any kind was not looked upon with favor. The men and women he had been brought into contact with in London were also, for the most part, those who regarded everything from the accepted point of view, and his engagement to the girl his friends regarded with disapproval had, though he did not suspect this at the time, been in part, at least, a protest against the doctrine that no man of his station must do anything that was not outwardly befitting and convenient to it.

[Pg 175]

The revolt had brought him disaster, as it usually does, but it had also thrust upon him the necessity of thinking for himself, though even during his two years' struggle on the worthless ranch he had not realized what qualities he was endued with, for it was not until he met Barbara Heathcote by the river that they were wholly stirred into activity. Then ambition, self-confidence, and lust of conflict with men and Nature asserted themselves, for it was, in point of fact, a sword she had brought him. Still, he was as yet a trifle inconsequent and precipitate in his activities, for at times the purpose which had sent him to the Canopus mine faded into insignificance, and he became oblivious to everything beyond the pleasure he found in the grapple with natural difficulties he was engaged in. Those who had known Brooke in England would have had little difficulty in recognizing him morally or physically as he stood, brawny and sinewy, in ragged jeans, high above the thundering river.

"Then I'll undertake it," he said, with a little vibration in his voice.

Devine looked hard at him again. "Feel sure you can do it? You'll want good nerves."

[Pg 176]

"I think I can," said Brooke, with a quietness the other man appreciated.

"Then you can go down to the Mineral Development's new shaft, where they have one of those tramways working, and see how they swing their ore across the valley. I'll give you a line to the manager. Start when you're ready."

Devine said nothing further as they turned back towards the mine, but Brooke felt that the bargain was already made. His companion was not the man to haggle over non-essentials, but one who knew what he wanted and usually went straight to the point. Brooke left him presently, and, turning off where the flume climbed to the dam, came upon Jimmy, tranquilly leaning upon his shovel while he watched the two or three men who toiled waist-deep in water.

"I was kind of wondering whether she wouldn't be stiffer with another log or two in that framing?" he said, in explanation.

"Of course!" said Brooke, drily. "It's more restful than shovelling. Still, that's my affair, and you'll have to rustle more and wonder less. I'm going to leave you in charge here."

Jimmy grinned. "Then I guess the way that dam will grow will astonish you when you come back again. Where're you going to?"

Brooke told him, and Jimmy contemplated the forest reflectively.

[Pg 177]

"Well," he said, "nobody who saw you at the ranch would ever have figured you had snap enough to put a contract of that kind through. Still, you have me behind you."

"A good way, as a rule," said Brooke, drily. "Especially when there is anything one can get very wet at to be done. Still, I shouldn't wonder if you were quite correct. I scarcely think I ever suspected I had it in myself."

Jimmy still ruminated. "A man is like a mine. You see the indications on the top, but you can't be sure whether there's gold at the bottom or dirt that won't pay for washing, until you set the drills going or put in the giant powder and shake everything up. Still, I can't quite figure how anything of that kind could have happened to you."

Brooke flashed a quick glance at him, but Jimmy's eyes were vacant, and he was apparently watching a mink slip in and out among the roots of a cedar.

"There is a good deal of gravel waiting down there, and only two men to heave it out," he said.

"Oh, yes," said Jimmy, tranquilly. "Still, it's a good while until it's dark, and I was thinking. Now, if you had the dollars you threw away over that ranch, and me for a partner, you'd make quite a smart contractor. While they're wanting flumes and bridges everywhere, it's a game one can pile up dollars at."

[Pg 178]

Brooke's face flushed a trifle, and he slowly closed one hand.

"Confound the six thousand dollars, and you for reminding me of them!" he said. "Get on with your shovelling."

[Pg 179]

XIII. THE OLD LOVE.

Next morning Brooke set out for the Mineral Development Syndicate's new shaft, which lay a long day's ride nearer the railroad through the bush, and was well received by the manager.

"Stay just as long as it pleases you, and look at everything you want, though you'll have to excuse me going round with you to-day," he said. "There's a party of the Directors' city friends coming up, and it's quite likely they'll keep me busy."

Brooke was perfectly content to go round himself, and he had acquired a good deal of information about the working of aerial tramways when he sat on the hillside watching a rattling trolley swing across the tree tops beneath him on a curving rope of steel. A foreman leaned on a sawn-off cedar close by, and glanced at Brooke with a little ironical grin when a hum of voices broke out behind them.

"You hear them? I guess the boss is enjoying himself," he said.

Brooke turned his head and listened, and a woman said, "But how do those little specks of gold get into the rock? It really looks so solid."

[Pg 180]

"That's nothing," said the foreman. "She quite expects him to know how the earth was made. Still, the other one's the worst. You'll hear her starting in again once she gets her breath. It's not information she's wanting, but to hear herself talk."

The prediction was evidently warranted, for another voice broke in, "What makes those little trucks run down the rope? Gravity! Of course, I might have known that. How clever of you to think of it. You haven't anything like that at those works you're a director of, Shafton?"

Brooke started a little, for though the speaker was invisible her voice was curiously familiar. It was also evidently an Englishman who answered the last remark, and Brooke, who decided that his ears must have deceived him, nevertheless became intent. He felt that the mere fancy should have awakened a host of memories, but he was only sensible of a wholly dispassionate curiosity when the voice was raised again, though it was, at least, very like one to which he had frequently listened in times past. Then there was a patter of approaching steps, and he rose to his feet as the strangers and the mine manager came down the slope. There were several men, one of whom was palpably an Englishman, and two women. One of the latter stopped abruptly, with a little exclamation.

"Harford—is it really you?" she said.

[Pg 181]

Brooke quietly swung off his wide hat, which he remembered, without embarrassment, was considerably battered, and while most of the others turned and gazed at him, stood still a moment looking at her. He did not appreciate being made the central figure in a dramatic incident, but it was evident that the woman rather relished the situation. Several years had certainly elapsed since she had tearfully bidden him farewell with protestations of unwavering constancy, but he realized with faint astonishment that he felt no emotion whatever, not even a trace of anger.

"Yes," he said. "I really think it is."

The woman made a little theatrical gesture, which might have meant anything, and in that moment the few illusions Brooke still retained concerning her vanished. She seemed very little older than when he parted from her, and at least as comely, but her shallow artificiality was very evident to him now. Her astonishment had, he felt, been exaggerated with a view to making the most of the situation, and even the little tremble in her voice appeared no more than an artistic affectation. The same impression was conveyed by her dress, which struck him as too ornate and in no way adapted to the country.

Then she turned swiftly to the man who stood beside her, looking on with a little faintly ironical smile. He was a personable man, but his lips were thin, and there was a suggestion of half-contemptuous weariness in his face.

[Pg 182]

"This is Harford Brooke, Shafton. Of course, you have heard of him!" she said with a coquettish smile, which it occurred to Brooke was not, under the circumstances, especially appropriate. "Harford, I don't think you ever met my husband."

Brooke stood still and the other man nodded with an air of languid indifference. "Glad to see you, I'm sure," he said. "Met quite a number of Englishmen in this country."

Then he turned towards the other woman as though he had done all that could be reasonably expected of him, and when the manager of the mine led the way down into the valley Brooke found himself walking with the woman who had flung him over a few paces behind the rest of the party. He did not know exactly how this came about, but he was certain that he, at least, had neither desired nor in any way contrived it.

They went down into the hollow between colonnades of towering trunks, crossed a crystal stream and climbed a steep ascent towards the clashing stamp-heads, but the woman appeared in difficulties and gasped a little until Brooke held out his arm. He had already decided that her little high-heeled shoes were distinctly out of place in that country, and wondered at the same time what kind Barbara Heathcote wore, for she, at least, moved with lithe gracefulness through the bush. He was, however, sensible of nothing in particular when his companion looked up at him as she leaned upon his arm. [Pg 183]

"I was wondering how long it would be before you offered to help me. You used to be anxious to do it once," she said.

Brooke smiled a little. "That was quite a long time ago. I scarcely supposed you needed help, and one does not care to risk a repulse."

"Could you have expected one from me?"

There was an archness in the glance she cast him which Brooke was not especially gratified to see, and it struck him that the eyes which he had once considered softest blue were in reality tinged with a hazy grey, but he smiled again as he parried the question. "One," he said, "never quite knows what to expect from a lady."

His companion made no immediate answer, but by and by she once more glanced up at him.

"I am really not used to climbing if Shafton is, and I am not going any further just now," she said.

A newly-felled cedar lay conveniently near the trail, but its wide-girthed trunk stood high above the underbrush, and Brooke dragged up a big hewn-off branch to make a footstool before his companion sat down on it. The branch was heavy, and she watched his efforts approvingly.

"Canada has made you another man. Now, I do not think Shafton could have done that in a day," she said. "Of course, he would never have tried, even to please me." [Pg 184]

Brooke, who was by no means certain what she wished him to understand from this, leaned against a cedar looking down at her gravely. This was the woman who had embittered several years of his life, and for whom he had flung a good deal away, and now he was most clearly sensible of his folly. Had he met her in a drawing-room or even the Vancouver opera-house, it might not have been quite so apparent to him, but she seemed an anachronism in that strip of primeval wilderness. Nature was dominant there, and the dull pounding of the stamp-heads, which came faintly through the silence among the great trunks that had grown slowly during centuries, suggested man's recognition of the curse and privilege that was laid upon him in Eden. Graceful idleness was not esteemed in that country, where bread was won by strenuous toil, and the stillness and dimness of those great forest aisles emphasized the woman's artificial superficiality. Voice and gesture, befrizzled, straw-colored hair which he had once called golden, constricted waist, and figure which was suggestively wooden in its curves, enforced the same impression, until the man, who realized that she had after all probably made at least as good a use of life as he had, turned his eyes away.

"You really couldn't expect him to," he said, with a little laugh. "He has never had to do anything of that kind for a living as I have." [Pg 185]

He held up his hands and noticed her little shiver as she saw the scarred knuckles, hard, ingrained flesh, and broken nails.

"Oh," she said, "how cruel! Whatever have you been doing?"

Brooke glanced at his fingers reflectively. "On the contrary, I suppose I ought to feel proud of them, though I scarcely think I am. Building flumes and dams, though that will hardly convey any very clear impression to you. It implies swinging the axe and shovel most of every day, and working up to the waist in water occasionally."

"But you were always so particular in England."

"I could naturally afford to be. It cost me nothing when I was living on another man's bounty."

The woman made a little gesture. "And you gave up everything for me!"

Brooke laughed softly, for it seemed to him that a little candor was advisable. "As a matter of fact, I am not quite sure that I did. My native wrong-headedness may have had its share in influencing me. Anyway, that was all done with—several years ago."

"You will not be bitter, Harford," and she cast him a glance of appeal which might have awakened a trace of tenderness in the man had it sprung from any depth of feeling. "Can anything of that kind ever be quite done with?"

Brooke commenced to feel a trifle uneasy. "Well," he said, reflectively, "I certainly think it ought to be." [Pg 186]

To his relief his companion smiled and apparently decided to change the subject. "You never even sent me a message. It really wasn't kind."

"It appeared considerably more becoming to let myself sink into oblivion. Besides, I could scarcely be expected to feel certain that you would care to hear from me."

The woman glanced at him reflectively. "I have often thought about you. Of course, I was dreadfully sorry when I had to give you up, but I really couldn't do anything else, and it was all for the best."

"Of course!" said Brooke, with a trace of dryness, and smiled when she glanced at him sharply. "I naturally mean in your case."

"You are only involving yourself, Harford. You never used to be so unfeeling."

"I was endorsing your own statement, and it is, at least, considerably easier to believe that all is for the best when one is prosperous. You have a wealthy husband, and Helen, who wrote me once, testified that he indulged you in—she said every caprice."

"Yes," said his companion, thoughtfully, "Shafton is certainly not poor, and he is almost everything any one could expect him to be. As husbands go, I think he is eminently satisfactory."

"One would fancy that an indulgent and wealthy husband of distinguished appearance would go a tolerably long way." [Pg 187]

Again the woman appeared to reflect "Prosperity is apt to kill romance," she said. "One is never quite content, you know, and I feel now and then that Shafton scarcely understands me. That is a complaint people appear to find ludicrous, of course, though I really don't see why they should do so. Shafton is conventional and precise. You know exactly what he is going to do, and that it will be right, but one has longings now and then for something original and intense."

Brooke regarded her with a little dry smile. One, as he had discovered, cannot have everything, and as she had sold herself for wealth and station it appeared a trifle unreasonable to repine because she could not enjoy a romantic passion at the same time. It was, in fact, very likely that had anything of the kind been thrust upon her she would not have known what to do with it. It also occurred to him that there were depths in her husband's nature which she had never sounded, and he remembered the look of cynical weariness in the man's face. Lucy Coulson was one who trifled with emotions as a pastime, but Brooke had no wish to be made the subject of another experiment in simulated tenderness, even if that was meant, which, under the circumstances, scarcely seemed likely.

"Well," he said, "no doubt most people long for a good deal more than they ever get; but your friends must have reached the stamps by now, and they will be wondering what has become of you." [Pg 188]

"I scarcely think they will. The men seem to consider it a waste of time to talk to anybody who doesn't know all about ranches and mines, and Shafton has Miss Goldie to attend to. She has attached herself to him like a limpet, but she is, of course, a Canadian, and I really don't mind."

Almost involuntarily Brooke contrasted her with a Canadian who had spent a week in the woods with him. Barbara Heathcote had never appeared out of place in the wilderness, for she was wholly natural and had moved amidst those scenes of wild grandeur as though in harmony with them, with the stillness of that lonely land in her steady eyes. There was no superficial sentimentality in her, for her thoughts and emotions were deep as the still blue lakes, and he could not fancy her disturbing their serenity for the purpose of whiling an idle day away. Then his face hardened, for it was becoming unpleasantly evident that she could not much longer even regard him with friendliness and there was nothing to be gained by letting his fancy run away with him.

"You are not the man I used to talk nonsense with, Harford," said his companion, who had in the meanwhile been watching him. "This country has made you quiet and a little grim. Why don't you go back again?" [Pg 189]

"I am afraid they have too many men with no ostensible income in England."

"Still you could make it up with the old man."

Brooke's face was decidedly grim. "I scarcely think I could. Rather more was said by both of us than could be very well rubbed off one's memory. Besides, I think you know what kind of man he is?"

Lucy Coulson leaned forward a trifle and there was a trace of genuine feeling in her voice. "Harford," she said, "he frets about you—and he is getting very old. Of course, he would never show anybody what he felt, but I could guess, because he was once not long ago almost rude to me. That could only have been on your account, you know. It hurts me a little, though one could scarcely take exception to anything he said—but you know the quiet precision of his manner. If it wasn't quite so perfect it would be pedantic now. One feels it's a relic of the days of the hoops and patches ever so long ago."

"What did he say?" asked Brooke, a trifle impatiently.

"Nothing that had any particular meaning by itself, but for all that he conveyed an impression,

and I think if you were to go back——"

"Empty-handed!" said Brooke. "There are circumstances under which the desire for reconciliation with a wealthy relative is liable to misconception. If I had prospered it would have been easier." [Pg 190]

Lucy Coulson looked at him thoughtfully. "Perhaps I did use you rather badly, and it might be possible for me to do you a trifling kindness now. Shall I talk to the old man when I go home again? I see him often."

Brooke shook his head. "I shall never go back a poor man," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Everybody travels nowadays, and Shafton is never happy unless he is going somewhere. We started for Japan, and decided to see the Rockies and look at the British Columbian mines. That is, of course, Shafton did. He has money in some of them, and is interested in the colonies. I have to sit on platforms and listen while he abuses the Government for neglecting them. In fact, I don't know when I shall be able to get him out of the country now. Of course, I never expected to meet you here—and almost wonder if there is any reason beyond the one you mentioned that has kept you here so long."

She glanced at him in a curious fashion and made the most of her eyes, which he had once considered remarkably expressive ones.

"I can't quite think of any other, beyond the fact that I have a few dollars at stake," he said.

"There is nothing else?"

"No," said Brooke, a trifle too decisively. "What could there be?" [Pg 191]

His companion smiled. "Well," she said, "I fancied there might have been a Canadian. They are not all very good style, but some of them are almost pretty, and—when one has been a good while away——"

The man flushed a trifle at the faint contempt in her tone. "I scarcely think there is one of them who would spare a thought for me. I should not be considered especially eligible even in this country."

"And you have a good memory!"

Brooke felt slightly disconcerted, for it was not the first delicate suggestion she had made. "I don't know that it is of any benefit to me. You see, I really haven't anything very pleasant to remember."

Lucy Coulson sighed. "Harford," she said, dropping her voice a trifle, "you must try not to blame me. If one of us had been richer—I, at least, can't help remembering."

Brooke looked at her steadily. Exactly where she wished to lead him he did not know, but she had flung away her power to lead him anywhere long ago. Perhaps she was influenced by vanity, for there was no genuine passion or tenderness in her, but Brooke was a well-favored man, and she had her caprices and drifted easily.

"I really don't think you should," he said. "Your husband mightn't like it, and it is quite a long while ago, you know." [Pg 192]

A little pink flush crept into the woman's cheek and she rose leisurely. "Perhaps he will be wondering where I am, after all," she said. "You must come and make friends with him. We may be staying for some time yet at the C. P. R. Hotel, Vancouver."

Brooke went with her and spent some little time talking to her husband, who made a favorable impression upon him, while when he took his leave of them the woman let her hand remain in his a moment longer than there was any apparent necessity for.

"You must come down and see us—it really isn't very far, and we have so much to talk about," she said.

Brooke said nothing, but he felt that he had had a warning as he swung off his big shapeless hat and turned away.

[Pg 193]

XIV. BROOKE HAS VISITORS.

The afternoon was hot, and the roar of the river in the depths below emphasized the drowsy stillness of the hillside and climbing bush, when Brooke stood on the little jutting crag above the cañon. Two hundred feet above him rose a wall of fissured rock, but a gully, down which the white thread of a torrent frothed, split through that grim battlement, and already a winding strip of somewhat perilous pathway had been cut out of and pinned against the side of the chasm. Men

with hammers and shovels were busy upon it, and the ringing of the drills broke sharply through the deep pulsations of the flood, while several more were clustered round the foot of an iron column, which rose from the verge of the crag, where the rock fell in one tremendous sweep to the dim green river.

Close beside it, and overhung by the rock wall, stood Brooke's double tent, for, absorbed as he had become in the struggle with the natural difficulties that must be faced and surmounted at every step, he lived by his work, and when he had risen that morning the sun had not touched the dim white ramparts beyond the climbing pines. He was just then, however, not watching his workmen, but looking up the gorge, and a little thrill of pleasure ran through him when two figures in light draperies appeared at the head of it. Then he went up at a pace which Jimmy, who grinned as he watched him, wondered at, and stopped a trifle breathless beside the two women who awaited him above. [Pg 194]

"I was almost afraid you would not come," he said. "You are sure you would care to go down now you have done so?"

Mrs. Devine gazed down into the tremendous depths with something that suggested a shiver, but Barbara laughed. "Of course," she said. "Those men go up and down with big loads every day, don't they?"

"They have to, and that naturally makes a difference," said Brooke, with a little smile.

"Then we can go down because we wish to, which is, in the case of most people, even a better reason."

Mrs. Devine appeared a trifle uncertain, and her face expressed rather resignation than any special desire to make the descent, but she permitted Brooke to assist her down the zig-zag trail, while Barbara followed with light, fearless tread. Once they entered the gully, they could not, however, see the cañon, which, in the elder lady's case, at least, made the climb considerably easier, and they reached the tent without misadventure. The door was triced up to form an outer shelter, and Barbara was a trifle astonished when Brooke signed them to enter. [Pg 195]

She had seen how he lived at the ranch, and the squalid discomfort of the log room had not been without its significance to her, but there was a difference now. Nothing stood out of place in that partition of the big double tent, and from the spruce twigs which lay a soft, springy carpet, on the floor, to the little nickelled clock above her head, all she saw betokened taste and order. Even the neat folding chairs and table shone spotlessly, and there was no chip or flaw upon the crockery laid out upon the latter. There had, it seemed, been a change, of which all this was but the outward sign, in the man who stood smiling beside her.

"Tea at four o'clock is another English custom you may have become addicted to, and you have had a climb," he said. "Still, I'm afraid I can't guarantee it. Jimmy does the cooking."

Jimmy, as it happened, came in with a teapot in his hand just then. "Well," he said, "I guess I'm considerably smarter at it than my boss. You needn't be bashful, either. I've a kettle that holds most of a gallon outside there on the fire, and here's two big tins of fixings we sent for to Vancouver."

Mrs. Devine smiled, but Brooke's face was a trifle grim, as he glanced at his retainer, and Barbara did not look at either of them just then. It was, of course, after all, only a little thing, but she was, nevertheless, gratified that he could think of these trifles in the midst of his activities. She, however, took the white metal teapot, which was burnished brilliantly, from Jimmy, who, in spite of Brooke's warning glances, still hung about the tent, contemplating her with evident approbation as she passed the cups. [Pg 196]

"I guess she does it considerably smarter than Tom Gordon's Bella would have done," he said, with a wicked grin. "Bella had no use for teapots either. She'd have given it you out of the kettle."

The glance Brooke rewarded him with was almost venomous, for he had seen the swift inquiry which had flashed into them fade as suddenly out of Barbara's eyes. She could not well admit the least desire to know who Tom Gordon's Bella was, though she would not have been unwilling to be enlightened. Jimmy, however, beamed upon Mrs. Devine, who had taken up her cup.

"I hope you like it. No smoke on that," he said. "When you use the green tea a smack of the resin goes well as flavoring, especially if it's brewed in a coal-oil tin. Now, there's tea they make right where they sell it in Vancouver, but what you've got is different I guess it's grown in China, or it ought to be, for the boss he sent me down, and says he——"

"Isn't it about time you made a start at getting that boulder out?" said Brooke, drily. [Pg 197]

Jimmy retired unwillingly, and Brooke glanced deprecatingly at his guests. "We have been comrades for several years," he said.

"Of course!" said Mrs. Devine, with a little smile. "Still, I really don't think you need be so anxious to hide the fact that you have taken some pains to provide these little dainties for us. It would have been apparent in any case. We know how men live in the bush."

Brooke made no disclaimer, though a faint trace of color deepened the bronze in his face, for he remembered the six thousand dollars, and winced under her graciousness. Then they discussed other matters, until at last Barbara laid aside her cup.

"We came to see the cañon, and how you mean to put the rope across," she said.

She glanced at her sister, but Mrs. Devine resolutely shook her head. "I have seen quite as much of the cañon as I have any wish to do," she said. "Besides, it was not exactly an easy matter getting down here, and I expect it will be considerably worse getting up. You can go with Mr. Brooke, my dear."

They left her in the tent, and five minutes later Brooke led the girl to a seat on a dizzy ledge, from which the rock fell away in one awful smooth wall.

"Now," he said quietly, "you can look about you."

Barbara, who had been too occupied in picking her way to notice very much as yet, drew in her breath as she gazed down into the tremendous chasm. The sunshine lay warm upon the pine-clad slopes above, but no ray of brightness streamed down into that depth of shadow, and its eerie dimness was thickened by the mist which drifted filmily above the river's turmoil. Out of it a deep vibratory roar came up, diminished by the distance, in long pulsations that died far up among the pines in sinking waves of sound.

[Pg 198]

"Oh," she said, with a little gasp, "it's tremendous!"

"A trifle overwhelming!" said Brooke, reflectively, "and yet it gets hold of one. There is a difference between it and the English valley you once mentioned."

Barbara turned to him, with a little gleam in her eyes.

"Of course!" she said. "One is glad there is, since it is typical of both countries. You couldn't tame this river and set it gliding smoothly between mossy stepping-stones."

"No," said Brooke, "I scarcely think one would wish to if he could. One feels it wouldn't be fitting."

"And yet we shall put the power that's in it into harness by and by."

"Without taming it?"

Barbara nodded. "Yes," she said. "If you had ever stood in a Canadian power house, as I have done once or twice, you would understand. You can hear the big dynamos humming in one low, deep note while the little blue sparks flicker about the shafts. They stand for controlled energy; but the whole place rocks with the whirring of the turbines and the thunder of the water plunging down the shoots. The river that drives them does it exulting in its strength. You couldn't fancy it lapping among the lily leaves in sunlit pools. It hasn't time."

[Pg 199]

"To have no time for artistic effect is typical of this country, then?" said Brooke.

Barbara smiled. "Yes," she said, "I really think it is. We shall come to that later, but this, you see, isn't art, but something greater. It's nature untrammelled, and primeval force."

"Then you, who personify reposefulness, admire force?"

Barbara held her hand up. "When it accomplishes anything I do; but listen," she said. "That sound isn't the discord of purposeless haste. There's a rhythm in it. It's ordered and stately harmony."

Brooke sat still, watching the little gleam in her brown eyes, until she turned again to him.

"You are going to put that rope across?" she said.

"I am, at least, going to try. There will, however, be difficulties."

Barbara smiled a little. "There generally are. Still, I think you will get over them." She looked down again at the tremendous gap, and then met his eyes in a fashion that sent a thrill through him. "It would be worth while."

[Pg 200]

"I almost think it would. Still, it is largely a question of dollars, and I have spent a good many with no great result already."

"My brother-in-law will not see you beaten. He would throw in as much as the mine was worth before he yielded a point to the timber-righters."

Brooke noticed the little hardness in her voice, and the sparkle in her eyes. "If he did, you would evidently sympathize with him?"

"Of course, though it wasn't exactly in that sense I meant it would be worth while. One would naturally sympathize with anybody who was made the subject of that kind of extortion. If there is anything detestable, it is a conspiracy."

"Still," said Brooke, reflectively, "it is in one sense a perfectly legitimate transaction."

"Would you consider yourself warranted in scheming to extort money from any one?"

Brooke did not look at her. "It would, of course, depend—upon, for example, any right I might consider I had to the money. We will suppose that somebody had robbed me——"

"Then one who has been robbed may steal?"

Brooke made a little deprecatory gesture while the blood crept to his face. "I'm afraid I have never given any questions of this kind much consideration. We were discussing the country."

Barbara laughed. "Of course. I ought to have remembered. You are so horribly afraid of betraying your sentiments in England that you would almost prefer folks to believe you hadn't any. I am, however, going to venture on dangerous ground again. I think the country is having an effect on you. You have changed considerably since I met you at the ranch." [Pg 201]

"It is possible," and Brooke met her gaze with a little smile in his eyes. "Still, I am not quite sure it was altogether the fault of the country."

Barbara looked down at the cañon. "Isn't that a little ambiguous?"

"Well," said Brooke, reflectively, "it is, at least, rather a stretching of the simile, but I saw you first clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, in the midst of a frothing river—and I am not quite sure that you were right when you said it was not a sword you brought me."

Barbara flashed a swift, keen glance at him, though she smiled. "Then beware in what quarrel you draw it—if I did. One would expect such a gift to be used with honor. It could, however, be legitimately employed against timber-righters, claim-jumpers, and all schemers and extortioners of that kind."

She stopped a moment, and looked at him, steadily now. "Do you know that I am glad you left the ranch?"

"Why?" [Pg 202]

"What you are doing now is worth while. You would consider that priggishness in England, but it's the truth."

"You mean helping your brother-in-law to get ahead of the timber-righters?"

"No," said Barbara. "That is not what I mean, though if it is any consolation to you, it meets with my approbation, too."

"Then what I was doing before was not worth while?"

"That," said Barbara, with a trace of dryness, "is a question you can answer best, though I saw no especial evidence of activity of any kind. The question is—Can you do nothing better still? This province needs big bridges and daringly-built roads."

"I'm afraid not," and Brooke smiled a trifle wryly. "It costs a good many dollars to build a big bridge, and it is apparently very difficult for any man to acquire them so long as he works with his own hands."

"Still, isn't it worth the effort—not exactly for the dollars?"

Brooke looked at her gravely, with a slight hardening of his lips.

"I think it would be in my case," he said. "The difficulty is that I should run a heavy risk if the effort was ever made. Now, however, I had, perhaps, better show you how far we have got with the tramway." [Pg 203]

There was, as it happened, not very much to show, and before half an hour had passed Barbara and Mrs. Devine climbed the steep ascent, while Brooke returned to redeem the hour spent with them by strenuous toil. It was also late that night before he flung aside the sheet of crude drawings and calculations he was making, and leaned back wearily in his chair. His limbs were aching, and so were his eyes, and he sat still awhile with them half-closed in a state of dreamy languor. He had dropped a tin shade over the lamp, and the tent was shadowy outside the narrow strip of radiance. There was no sound from the workmen's bark and canvas shanty, and the pulsating roar of the cañon broke sharply through an impressive stillness, until at last there was a faint rattle of gravel outside that suggested the approach of a cautious foot, and Brooke straightened himself suddenly as a man came into the tent. His face was invisible until he sat down within the range of light, and then Brooke started a little.

"Saxton!" he said.

Saxton laughed, and flung down his big hat. "Precisely!" he said. "There are camps in the province I wouldn't have cared to come into like this. It wouldn't be healthy for me, but in this case it seemed advisable to get here without anybody seeing me. Left my horse two hours ago at Tomlinson's ranch."

"It was something special brought you so far on foot?" [Pg 204]

"Yes," said Saxton, "I guess it was. I came along to see what in the name of thunder you were doing here so long."

"I was building Devine a dam, and I am now stretching a rope across the cañon to bring his mine props over."

Saxton straightened himself, and stared at him, with blank astonishment in his face.

"I want to understand," he said. "You are putting him a rope across to bring props over with?"

"Yes," said Brooke. "Is there anything very extraordinary in that?"

Saxton laughed harshly. "Under the circumstances, I guess there is. Do you know who's stopping him cutting all the props he wants right behind the mine?"

"No," said Brooke, drily. "Devine doesn't either, which I fancy is probably as well for the man. The one who holds the rights is, I understand, only the dummy."

"Then I'll tell you right now. It's me."

Brooke started visibly, and then laid a firm restraint upon himself. "I warned you against leaving me in the dark."

Saxton slammed his hand down on the table. "Well," he said, "who would have figured on your taking up that contract? What in the name of thunder do you want to build his slingway for?" [Pg 205]

Brooke sat thoughtfully silent for a moment or two. "To tell the truth, I'm not quite sure I know. The thing, you see, got hold of me."

"You don't know!" and Saxton laughed again, unpleasantly. "It's no great wonder they were glad to send you out here from the Old Country. The last thing I counted on was that my partner would spoil my game. You'll have to stop it right away."

Brooke closed his eyes a trifle, and looked at him. "No," he said. "That is precisely what can't be done."

There was no anger in his voice, and he made no particular display of resolution, but Saxton seemed to realize that this decision was definite. He sat fuming for a space, and then made a little emphatic gesture, which expressed complete bewilderment as well as desperation. Still, even then, he was quick enough of wit to make no futile protest, for there are occasions when the quiet inertia of the insular Englishman, who has made up his mind, is more than a match for the nervous impatience of the Westerner.

"Well," he said again, as though it was the only thing that occurred to him, "what did you do it for?"

Brooke smiled quietly. "As I told you not long ago, I really don't know."

"Then I guess there's nobody could size you up, and put you in the grade you belong to. You wouldn't take Devine's dollars when he wanted to hire you, and now you're building flumes and dams for him. I can't see any difference. There's no sense in it." [Pg 206]

"I'm afraid there is really very little myself. It's rather like splitting hairs, isn't it? Still, there is, at least, what one might call a distinction. You see, I took over another man's contract, and what I'm doing now doesn't make it necessary for Devine to favor me with his confidence."

Saxton shook his head in a fashion that suggested he considered his comrade's case hopeless. "And it's just his confidence we want!" he said. "You don't seem able to get hold of the fact that you can't make very many dollars and keep your high-toned notions at the same time. The thing's out of the question. Now, I once heard a lecture on the New England States long ago, and pieces of it stuck to me. There were two or three of the hard old Puritans made their little pile cutting Frenchmen's and Spaniards' throats in the Gulf of Mexico, and built meeting-houses when they came home and settled down. Still, they had sense enough to see that what was the correct thing among the Quakers and Baptists of New England was quite out of place on the Caribbean Sea."

Brooke felt that there was truth in this, but he meant, at least, to cling to the distinction, even though he disregarded the difference, and Saxton seemed to realize it. [Pg 207]

"Well," he said resignedly, "we may do something with that prop sling when we jump the claim. How are you getting on about the mine?"

"In point of fact, I'm not getting on at all. Each time I try to saunter into the workings, I am civilly turned out again. Devine, it seems, will not even let the few men who work on top in."

Saxton appeared to reflect. "Now, I wonder why," he said. "He's too smart to do anything without a reason, and he's not afraid of you, or he'd never have had you round the place. Still, you'll have to get hold of the facts we want before we can do anything, and I'm not quite sure what use I'll make of those timber-rights in the meanwhile. They cost me quite a few dollars, and it may be a while yet before anybody takes them from me. Building that slingway isn't quite what I expected from Devine after buying up forests to oblige him."

"Well, I will do what I can, but I wish Devine would give me those dollars back of his own accord. I'm almost commencing to like the man."

Saxton shook his head. "You can't afford to consider a point of that kind when it's against your business," he said. "Anyway, if you can give me a blanket or two, I'll get some sleep now. I have to be on the trail again by sun-up."

Brooke gave him his own spruce-twig couch, and made him breakfast in the chilly dawn on a kerosene stove, and then was sensible of a curious relief as his confederate vanished into the filmy mists which drifted down the gorge. [Pg 208]

XV.

SAXTON GAINS HIS POINT.

Brooke was very wet and physically weary, which in part accounted for his dejected state of mind, when he led his jaded horse up the last few rods of climbing trail that crossed the big divide. It had just ceased raining, and the slippery rock ran water, while a cold wind, which set him shivering, shook a doleful wailing out of the scattered pines. One of them had fallen, and, stopping beside it, he looped the bridle round a broken branch, and sat down to rest and think, for the difficulties of the way had occupied his attention during a long day's journey, and, since he expected to meet Saxton in another hour, he had food for reflection.

It was not a cheerful prospect he looked down upon, and that evening the desolation of the surroundings reacted upon him. The gleaming snow was smothered now in banks of dingy mist, and below him there rolled away a dreary waste of pines, whose ragged spires rose out of the drifting vapors rent and twisted by the ceaseless winds. It was, in words he had not infrequently heard applied to it, a hard country he must spend his years of exile in, and of late nothing had gone well with him.

[Pg 210]

Since he had last seen Saxton, he had lived in a state of tension, waiting for the time when circumstances should render the carrying out of their purpose feasible, and yet clinging to a faint hope that he might, by some unknown means, still be relieved of the necessity of persisting in a course that was becoming more odious every day. The dam was almost completed, but it was with dismay he had counted the cost of it, and twice the steel rope had torn up stays and columns, and hurled them into the cañon, while he would, he knew, be fortunate if he secured a profit of a couple of hundred dollars as the result of several months of perilous labor. Prosperity, it was very evident, was not to be achieved in that fashion. He had also seen very little of Barbara Heathcote for some time, and she had been to him as a mental stimulant, of which he felt the loss, while now his prospects seemed as dreary as the dripping waste he stared across with heavy eyes. All this, as it happened, bore directly upon his errand, for it once more brought home the fact that a man without dollars could expect very little in that country, while there was, it seemed, only one way of obtaining them open to him. It was true that he shrank from availing himself of it, but that did not, after all, greatly affect the case, and he endeavored to review the situation dispassionately.

He had decided that he was warranted in recovering the six thousand dollars by any means available, and it was evidently folly to take into account the anger and contempt of a girl who could, of course, be nothing to him. Her station placed that out of the question, since it would, so far as he could see, be a very long time indeed before he could secure even the most modest competence, and he felt that there was a still greater distinction between them morally; but, in spite of this, he realized that the girl's approbation was the one thing he clung to. He could scarcely nerve himself to fling it away, and yet it seemed, in the light of reason, a very indifferent requital for a life of struggle and poverty. She had, he told himself, merely taken a passing interest in him, and once she met a man of her own station fortunate enough to gain her regard, was scarcely likely even to remember him.

[Pg 211]

Then he rose with a little hardening of his lips, and, flinging himself wearily into the saddle, strove to shake off his thoughts as the jaded horse floundered down into the valley. They were both too weary to attempt to pick their way, and went down, sliding and slipping, with the gravel rattling away from under them, until they reached the thicker timber, and smashed recklessly through thickets of giant fern and salmon berry. Now and then a drooping branch struck Brooke as he passed, but he scarcely noticed it, and rode on, swaying in his saddle, while great drops of moisture splashed upon his grim, wet face. It was sunrise when he had ridden out from the Canopus mine, with his horse's head turned towards the settlement, and dark was closing down when at last he dropped, aching all over, from the saddle at the door of Saxton's shanty at the Elktaill mine. The latter, who opened it, smiled at him somewhat drily, and was by no means effusive in his greeting.

[Pg 212]

"I wasn't quite sure the message I sent you from Vancouver would fetch you, though I made it tolerably straight," he said.

"You certainly did," said Brooke. "In fact, I don't know that you could have made it more unlikely to bring me here. Still, what put the fancy that I might disregard it into your head?"

Saxton looked at him curiously. "Well," he said, with an air of reflection, "you seemed to be quite at home in several senses, and making the most of it there. There are folks who would consider that girl with the big eyes pretty."

Brooke, who was entering the shanty, swung round sharply. "I think we can leave Miss Heathcote out. It's a little difficult to understand how you came to know what I was doing at the Canopus? You were in Vancouver."

Saxton appeared almost disconcerted for a moment, but he laughed. "Well," he said, "I figured on what was most likely when I heard Miss Heathcote was still there."

He saw that he had made another mistake, and wondered whether Brooke, who had, as it happened, done so, had noticed it, while the fact that the latter's face was now expressionless

[Pg 213]

roused him to a little display of vindictiveness.

"I heard something about her in Vancouver, anyway, which it's quite likely she didn't mention to you. It was that she's mighty good friends with one of the Pacific Squadron officers. She has a good many dollars of her own, and they're mostly folks who make a splash in their own country."

Brooke afterwards decided that this must have been an inspiration, but just then he felt that Saxton was watching him, and showed no sign of interest.

"If she did, I don't remember it, though I should consider the thing quite probable," he said. "Still, as Miss Heathcote's fancies don't concern us, wouldn't it be more to the purpose if you got me a little to eat?"

Saxton summoned his cook, and nothing more was said until Brooke had finished his meal. Then his host looked at him as they sat beside the crackling stove.

"Isn't it 'bout time you made a move at the Canopus?" he said. "So far as you have gone, you have only spoiled my hand. You didn't go there to build Devine flumes and dams."

"In point of fact, I rather think I did. The difficulty, however, is that I am still unable to get into the mine. I have invented several excuses, which did not work, already. Nobody except the men who get the ore is even allowed to look at the workings."

[Pg 214]

A little gleam crept into Saxton's eyes. "Now, it seems to me that Devine has struck it rich, or he wouldn't be so concerned particular. It's quite plain that he doesn't want everybody to know what he's getting out of the Canopus. It's only a mine that's paying folks think of jumping."

"Has it struck you that he might wish to sell it, and be taking precautions for exactly the opposite reason?"

Saxton made a little gesture of approval, though he shook his head. "You show you have a little sense now and then, but there's nothing in that view," he said. "Is a man going to lay out dollars on dams and wire-rope slings when he knows that none of them will be any use to him?"

"I think he might. That is, if he wanted investors, who could be induced to take it off his hands, to hear of it."

"The point is that he has only to put the Canopus into the market, and they'd pile down the dollars now."

"Still, it is presumably our business, and not Devine's, you purposed to talk about."

Saxton nodded. "Then we'll start in," he said. "You can't get into the mine, and it has struck me that if you could your eyes wouldn't be as good as a compass and a measuring-chain. Well, that brings us to the next move. When Devine left Vancouver a week ago, he took up a tin case he keeps the plans and patents of the Canopus in with him. You needn't worry about how I'm sure of this, but I am. Those papers will tell us all we want to know."

[Pg 215]

"I have no doubt they would. Still, I don't see that we are any nearer getting over the difficulty. Devine is scarcely likely to show them me."

"You'll have to lay your hands upon the case. It's in the ranch."

Brooke's face flushed, and for a moment his lips set tight, while he closed one hand as he looked at his confederate. Then he spoke on impulse, "I'll be hanged if I do!"

Saxton, who had, perhaps, expected the outbreak, regarded him with a little sardonic smile.

"Now," he said, quietly, "you'll listen to me, and put aside those notions of yours for a while. I've had about enough of them already. Devine robbed you—once—and he has taken dollars out of my pocket a good many times, while I can't see any great difference between glancing at another man's papers and crawling into his mine. We're not going to take the Canopus from him anyway—it would be too big a deal—but we have got to find out enough to put the screw on him. You don't owe him anything, for you're building those flumes and dams cheaper than he would get it done by anybody else."

[Pg 216]

Brooke sat silent a space, with the blood still in his cheeks and one hand closed. He was sensible of a curious disgust, and yet it was evident that his confederate was right. There was, after all, no great difference between the scheme suggested and what he had already been willing to do, and yet he was sensible that it was not that fact which chiefly influenced him, for Saxton had done wisely when he hinted at Barbara Heathcote's supposititious fondness for the naval officer. Brooke had already endeavored to contemplate the likelihood of something of this kind happening, with equanimity, and there was nothing incredible about the story. The men of the Pacific Squadron were frequently in Victoria, and steamers crossed to Vancouver every day; but now probability had changed to what appeared to be certainty, he was sensible almost of dismay. At the same time, the restraint which had counted most with him was suddenly removed, and he turned to Saxton with a little decisive gesture. He certainly owed Devine nothing, and his confederate had, when he needed it badly, shown him what he fancied was, in part, at least, genuine kindness.

"Well," he said, "I will do what I can."

"Then," said Saxton, drily, "you had better do it soon. Devine goes across to the Sumas valley, where he's selling land, every now and then, and I have reason for believing he's expected there not later than next week. I guess he's not likely to take that case with him. It's quite a big one. You'll get hold of it, and find out what we want to know, as soon as he's gone."

[Pg 217]

"The question is—How am I to manage it? You wouldn't expect me to pick the lock of his safe, presumably?"

Saxton, who appeared reflective, quite failed to notice the irony of the inquiry. "Well," he said, "if I figured I could do it, I guess I wouldn't let that stand in my way. Still, I'm not sure that he has any, and it's even chances he keeps the case under some books or truck of that kind in the room he has fixed up as office at the ranch. You see, the dollars for the men come straight up from Vancouver every pay-day."

Brooke straightened himself in his chair, with a little shake of his shoulders. "Now," he said, "we'll talk of something else. This isn't particularly pleasant. I had, of course, realized before I came out that one might find it necessary to follow an occupation he had no particular taste for in the Dominion of Canada, which is, it seems, the home of the adaptable man who can accustom himself to anything, but I really never expected that I should consider it an admissible thing to steal my employer's papers. That, however, is not the question. Give me a cigar, and tell me how you purpose stimulating the progress of this great province when you get into the Legislature."

[Pg 218]

Saxton did so at length, and it was perfectly evident that he saw no incongruity between what he purposed to do when in the Legislature and the means he adopted of getting there, for he sketched out reforms and improvements with optimistic ability. Once or twice a sardonic smile crept into Brooke's eyes, for there was no mistaking the fact that the man was serious, and then his attention wandered, and he ruminated on the position. Saxton appeared curiously well informed as to Devine's movements, but though Brooke could find no answer to the question how he had obtained the information, it did not, after all, seem to be of any great importance, and he once more found himself listening to his comrade languidly. Saxton was then declaiming against official corruption and incapacity.

"We want to make a clean sweep, and put the best and squarest men into office. This country has no use for any other kind," he said.

"That," said Brooke, drily, "is no doubt why you are going in. Anyway, I fancy it is getting late, and I have a long ride before me to-morrow."

Saxton smiled good-humoredly. "Well," he said, "I can go just as straight as any man when I've made my little pile. Most folks find it a good deal easier then."

It seemed to Brooke, who had not found adversity especially conducive to uprightness, that there was, perhaps, a certain truth in his comrade's notion, but he felt no great inclination to consider the question, and in another ten minutes was sinking into sleep. He also started before sunrise next morning, and was walking stiffly up the climbing trail to the Canopus mine, with the bridle of the jaded horse in his hand, when he came upon Barbara Heathcote amidst the pines. She apparently noticed his weariness and the mire upon the horse.

[Pg 219]

"The trail must have been very bad," she said.

"It certainly was," said Brooke, who, because it did not appear advisable that any one should suspect he was riding to the Elktail mine, had taken the trail to the settlement when he set out. "When there has been heavy rain, it usually is. The trail-choppers should have laid down logs in the Saverne swamp."

"But what took you that way?" said the girl. "It must have been a tremendous round."

Brooke realized that he had been indiscreet, for nobody who wished to reach the settlement was likely to cross that swamp.

"As a matter of fact, it is," he said. "As you see, the horse is almost played out."

Barbara glanced at him, as he fancied, rather curiously, but she changed the subject. "I have a friend from Vancouver, who heard you play at the concert, here, and we had hoped you might be persuaded to bring your violin across to the ranch to-night. Katty asked Jimmy to tell you that we expected you. That is, if you were not too tired."

[Pg 220]

Brooke felt the blood creep into his face. He longed to go, but he had a sense of fitness, and he felt that, although such scruples were a trifle out of place in his case, he could not, after the arrangement he had made with Saxton, betray the girl's confidence by visiting the ranch again as a respected guest. No excuse but the one she had suggested, however, presented itself, and it seemed to him advisable to make use of it with uncompromising candidness. Her friendliness hurt him, and, since it presumably sprang from a mistaken good opinion, it would be a slight relief to show her that he was deficient even in courtesy.

"I'm almost afraid I am," he said.

Barbara Heathcote had a good deal of self-restraint, but there was a trace of astonishment in her face, and, for a moment, a suspicious sparkle in her eyes.

"Then we will, of course, excuse you," she said. "You will, I hope, not think it very inconsiderate

of me to stop you now."

Brooke said nothing, but tugged at the bridle viciously, and trudged forward into the gloom of the pines, while Barbara, who would not admit that she had come there in the hope of meeting him, turned homewards thoughtfully. As it happened, she also met the freight-packer, who brought their supplies up on the way.

[Pg 221]

"Where is Saverne swamp? Behind the range, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes, miss," said the freighter, pointing across the pines. "Back yonder."

"Then if I wished to ride into the settlement I could scarcely go round that way?"

The man laughed. "No," he said. "I guess you couldn't. Not unless you started the night before, and then you'd have to climb right across the big divide. Nobody heading for the settlement would take that trail."

He went on with his loaded beasts, and Barbara stood still, looking down upon the forest with a little pink tinge in her cheeks and a curious expression in her eyes. Remembering the trace of disconcertion he had shown, she very much wished to know where Brooke had really been.

[Pg 222]

XVI.

BARBARA'S RESPONSIBILITY.

Darkness had closed down outside, and the lamp was lighted in Devine's office, which occupied a projection of the wooden ranch. Behind it stood the kitchen, and a short corridor, which gave access to both, led back from its inner door to the main building. Another door opened directly on to the clearing, and a grove of willows, past which the trail led, crept close up to it, so that any one standing among them could see into the room. There was, however, little probability of that happening, for nobody lived in that stretch of forest, except the miners, whose shanty stood almost a mile away. Devine sat opposite the captain of the mine across the little table, and he had let his cigar go out, while his face was a trifle grim.

"The last clean-up was not particularly encouraging, Tom," he said.

Wilkins nodded, and there was a trace of concern in his face, which was seamed and rugged, for he was one of the old-time prospectors, who, trusting solely to their practical acquaintance with the rocks, had played a leading part in the development of the mineral resources of that province.

[Pg 223]

"The trouble is that the next one's going to be worse," he said. "The pay-dirt's getting scarcer as we cut further in, and I have a notion that the boys are beginning to notice it now and then, though there's not a man in the crowd who would make his grub prospecting. They're road-makers, most of them."

Devine glanced at the little leather-bound book he held, in which was entered the net yield of gold from the ore the stamps crushed down, and noted the steady decrease.

"It's quite plain to me that the vein is working out," he said. "It remains to be seen whether we'll strike better rock with the adit on the different level. I don't notice very many signs of that yet."

Wilkins shook his head. "I guess I haven't seen any for a week, and we're spending quite a pile of dollars trying to hold the hillside up. The signs were all on top," he said. "There are ranges where you can strike it just as sure and easy as falling off a log, but I guess something long ago shook these mountains up, and mixed up all the rock. There's only one man figures he knows how it was done, and he won't talk about it when he's sensible."

"Allonby, of the Dayspring!" said Devine. "Now, the last time we worried about the thing you told me you considered our chances good enough to put your savings in. Would you feel like doing it to-day? I want the information, not the dollars. You know it's generally wisest to be straight with me."

[Pg 224]

"No, sir," said Wilkins, drily, "I wouldn't."

Devine sat thoughtfully silent for a minute or two, and the captain, who lighted his cigar again, wondered what was in his mind. He felt tolerably certain there was, as usual, a good deal, and that something would result from it presently.

"You went through the Dayspring?" Devine said, at length.

"I did. So far as I can figure, it's a mine that will make its living, and nothing worth while more. 'Bout two or three cents on the dollar."

"Allonby thinks more of it."

A little incredulous smile crept into the captain's eyes. "When he has got most of a bottle of rye

whisky into him! Allonby's a skin."

"Well," said Devine, "I'm going over to talk to him, and I needn't keep you any longer in the meanwhile. You will remember that only you and I have got to know what the Canopus is really doing."

The captain's smile was very expressive as he went out, but when the door closed behind him Devine sat still with wrinkled forehead and thoughtful eyes while half an hour slipped by. He was, however, not addicted to purposeless reflections, and the results of his cogitations as a rule became apparent in due time. He cheerfully took risks, or chances, as he called them, which the average English business man would have shrunk from, for the leaders of the Pacific Slope's activities have no time for caution. Life is too short, they tell one, to make sure of everything, and it is, in point of fact, not particularly long in case of most of them, for there is a significant scarcity of old men. Like the rest, he staked his dollars boldly, and when he lost them, which happened now and then, accepted it as what was to be expected, and usually recouped himself on another deal. [Pg 225]

That was why he had bought the Canopus under somewhat peculiar circumstances, and extended the workings without concerning himself greatly as to whether every stipulation of the Crown mining regulations had been complied with, until the mine proved profitable, when it had appeared advisable not to court inquiry, which might result in the claim being jumped by applying for corrected records. It also explained the fact that although he had no safe at the ranch, he had brought up all the plans and papers relating to it from his Vancouver office, and kept them merely covered by certain dusty books. Nobody who might feel an illegitimate interest in them would, he argued, expect to find them there.

While he sat there the inner door opened softly, and Barbara, who came in noiselessly, laid a hand upon his shoulder. Devine had not, as it happened, heard her, but it was significant that he did not start at all, and only turned his head a trifle more quickly than usual. Then he looked up at her quietly. [Pg 226]

"Are you never astonished or put out?" she said. "You didn't expect me?"

Devine smiled a little. "Well," he said, "I don't think I often am. The last time I remember, a cinnamon bear ran me up a tree. What brought you, anyway?"

"It's getting late," and Barbara sat down. "You have been here two hours already. Now, of course, you show very little sign of it, but I can't help a fancy that you have been worrying over something the last day or two. I suppose one could scarcely expect you to take me into your confidence."

"The thing's not big enough to worry over, but I have been thinking some. We have struck no gold in the adit, and now when we're waiting for the props the Englishman has dropped the rope into the cañon. That little contract is going to cost him considerable."

Barbara wondered whether he had any particular reason for watching her, or if she only fancied that his gaze was a trifle more observant than usual.

"Still, I think he will get a rope across," she said.

"Oh, yes," said Devine, indifferently. "There's grit in him. A curious kind of man. Wouldn't take a good offer to work for me, and yet he jumped right at those contracts. He's going to find it hard to make them pay his grocery bill. I guess he hasn't told you anything?" [Pg 227]

"No," said Barbara, a trifle hastily, for once more she felt the keen eyes scan her face. "Of course not. Why should he?"

Devine smiled. "If you don't know any reason you needn't ask me. You can't make a Britisher talk, anyway, unless he wants to."

He made a little gesture as though to indicate that the subject was not worth discussing, and then, taking up a bundle of documents, turned to her again.

"You see those papers, Bab? They're plans and Crown patents for the mine. I'm going away tomorrow, and can't take them along, so I'll put them under that pile of old books yonder. Now, if I was to tell Katty to make sure the doors were fast she'd get worrying, but you have better nerves, and I'll ask you to see that nobody gets in here until I come back again. Nobody's likely to want to, but I'll put a screw in the window, and give you the key."

Barbara laughed. "I shall not be afraid. Are the papers valuable?"

"No," said Devine, with a trace of dryness. "Not exactly! In fact, I'm not quite sure they would be worth anything to anybody in a month or two. Still, the man who got hold of them in the meanwhile might fancy he could make trouble for me."

"How?" said Barbara. "You said they mightn't be much use to anybody." [Pg 228]

Devine smiled a little, but it was evident that he had considerable confidence in the discretion of his wife's sister.

"I can't explain part of it," he said. "When I took hold of the Canopus, it didn't seem likely to pay me for my trouble, and I didn't worry about the patents or how far they covered what I was

doing. Now, if you drive beyond the frontage you've made your claim on, it constitutes another mine, which isn't covered by your record and belongs to the Crown. It's open to any jumper who comes along. Besides, unless you do a good many things exactly as the law lays down, your patent mayn't hold good, and any one who knows the regulations can re-record the claim."

"That means you or the previous owner neglected one or two formalities, and an unscrupulous person who found it out from those papers could take the Canopus, or part of it, away from you?"

Devine smiled grimly. "Yes," he said. "That is, he might try."

"I understand," said Barbara. "Still, there are no strangers here, and I don't think you have a man who would attempt anything of that kind about the mine."

"Or at the cañon?"

Barbara was sensible of a curious little thrill of anger, for Brooke was at the cañon, but she looked at him steadily.

[Pg 229]

"No," she said. "I am quite sure that is the last thing one would expect from anybody at the cañon, but if we stay here Katty will be wondering what has become of me."

Devine rose and followed her out of the room, and in another half-hour the ranch was in darkness. He rode away early next morning, and the big, empty living-room seemed lonely to the two women who sat by the window when night drew in again. The evening was very still and clear, and the chill of the snow was in the motionless air. No sound but the distant roar of the river broke the silence, and when the white line of snow grew dimmer high up in the dusky blue, and the pines across the clearing faded to a blur of shadow, Mrs. Devine shivered a little.

"I suppose quietness is good for one, if only because it isn't very nice, but it gets a trifle depressing now and then," she said. "Why didn't you ask Mr. Brooke to come across?"

"You may have noticed that he never comes when my brother-in-law is not here, and then he brings drawings or estimates of some kind with him."

Mrs. Devine appeared reflective. "Grant has not been away for almost two weeks now, and it is quite that time since we have seen Mr. Brooke," she said. "Didn't we ask him to come when you had Minnie here?"

"You did," said Barbara, with a faint flush, which the shadows hid. "He asked me to excuse him."

[Pg 230]

"Because Grant was away?"

"No," said Barbara, drily. "That, at least, was not the reason he gave me. He said he was—too tired."

Mrs. Devine laughed, for she had noticed the hardness in her sister's voice.

"It really must have been exasperating. He should have thought of a better excuse," she said.

"You have only to hold up a finger at Vancouver, and they all flock round, eager to do a good deal more than you wish them to, while this flume-builder doesn't seem to understand what is implied by a royal invitation. No doubt you will find a way of making him realize his contumacy."

"I am almost afraid I shall not have the opportunity."

"And you can't very well attempt to make one, especially as I remember now that Grant told me he was very hard at work at the cañon. It would be even worse to be told he was too busy, since that implies that one has something better to do."

Barbara had a spice of temper, as her sister naturally knew, but she smiled at this, for she was unwilling to admit, even to herself, and much less to anybody else, that she felt the slightest irritation at the fact that Brooke had shown no eagerness to avail himself of the invitation she had given him. Still, she was, on this score, very far from feeling pleased with him.

[Pg 231]

"I dare say he has," she said.

"Then he is, at least, not doing it very successfully. The rope—I forgot how much Grant said it cost—fell into the cañon."

"I am not very sure there are many men who would have attempted to put a rope across at all," said Barbara, and did not realize for a moment that she had, to some extent, betrayed herself. She might, though she did not admit it, feel displeased with the flume-builder herself, but that was no reason why she should permit another person to disparage his capabilities, all of which her sister was probably acquainted with.

"Well," she said, indifferently, "we hope he will be successful. The man pleases me, but I would very much like to know what Grant thinks about him."

"Then why don't you ask him?"

Mrs. Devine shook her head. "Grant never tells anybody his opinions until he's tolerably sure he's right, and I fancy he is a little undecided about Mr. Brooke as yet," she said. "Still, it's getting shivery, and this silence is a trifle eerie. I'm going to bed."

She lighted a lamp, but when she went out Barbara made her way to her room without one.

There was nobody else beyond Wilkins' wife in the ranch, and she had retired some time ago. The rambling wooden building was not dark, but dusky, with black depths of shadow in the corners of the rooms, for the dim crepuscular light would, at that season, linger almost until the dawn. To some natures it would also have been more suggestive of hidden dangers than impenetrable obscurity, but Barbara passed up the rickety stairway and down an echoing passage fearlessly, and then sat down by the open window of her room, looking out into the night. A half-moon was now slowly lifting itself above the faintly-gleaming snow, and she could see the pines roll away in sombre battalions into the drifting mists below. Their sleep-giving fragrance reached her through the dew-cooled air, but she scarcely noticed it as she lay with her low basket-chair drawn close up to the window-sill.

[Pg 232]

It was the flume-builder her thoughts hovered round, and she endeavored fruitlessly to define the attraction he had for her, or, as she preferred to consider it, the reason for the interest she felt in him. She admitted that this existed, and wondered vaguely how much of it was due to vanity resulting from a recognition of the fact that it was she who had roused him from a state of too acquiescent lethargy. What she had seen at the Quatomac ranch had had its significance for her, and she had realized the hopelessness of the life he was leading there. Even if she had not done so, he had told her, more or less plainly, that it was she who had given him new aspirations, and re-awakened his sense of responsibility. That, perhaps, accounted for a good deal, since she was endued with the compassionate maternal instinct which, when it finds no natural outlet, prompts many women to encourage, and on opportunity, shelter the beaten down and fallen.

[Pg 233]

It was, however, evident that the flume-builder did not exactly come under that category. Indeed, of late, his daring and pertinacity had won her admiration as well as sympathy, and that led her to the question what his aspirations pointed to. She would not consider it, for the fashion in which she had once or twice felt his eyes dwell upon her face was, in that connection, almost unpleasantly suggestive. Then she wondered why the fact that he had not long ago excused himself from spending an evening in her company at the ranch should have hurt her, as she now almost admitted that it did. It was, she decided, not exactly due to pique or wounded vanity, for, though very human in many respects, she, at least, considered herself too strong for either. That, however, brought her no nearer any answer which commended itself to her.

The man was less brilliant than several she had met. She could not even be sure that there were not grave defects in his character, and he was, in the meanwhile, a mere flume-builder. Yet he was different from those other men, though, since the difference was by no means altogether in his favor, it was almost irritating that her thoughts should dwell upon him, to the exclusion of the rest. There was presumably a reason for this, but she made a little impatient movement, and resolutely put aside the subject as one suggested itself. It was, she decided, altogether untenable, and, in fact, preposterous.

[Pg 234]

Still, she felt far from sleepy, and sat still, shivering a little now and then, while the moon rose higher above the snow, until its faint light drove back the shadows from the swamp. The clustering pines shook off their duskiness, and grew into definite tracery; an owl that hooted eerily flitted by on soundless wing, and she felt the silence become suddenly almost overwhelming. There was no wind that she could feel, but she could hear the little willow leaves stirring, it seemed, beneath the cooling dew, for the sound had scarcely strength enough to make a tangible impression upon her senses. It, however, appeared to grow a trifle louder, and she found herself listening with strained attention when it ceased awhile, until it rose again, a trifle more clearly. She glanced at the cedars above the clearing, but they stood sombre and motionless in silent ranks, and she leaned forward in her chair with heart beating more rapidly than usual as she wondered what made those leaves move. They were certainly rustling now, while the ranch was very silent, and the rest of the clearing altogether still.

Then a shadow detached itself from the rest, and its contour did not suggest that of a slender tree. It increased in length, and, remembering Devine's papers, she rose with a little gasp. Her sister, as he had pointed out, had delicate nerves, Mrs. Wilkins was dull of hearing, and, as the men's shanty stood almost a mile away, it was evident that she must depend upon her own resources. She stood still, quivering a little, for almost a minute, and then with difficulty repressed a cry when the dim figure of a man appeared in the clearing. Two minutes later she slipped softly into the room where Katty Devine lay asleep, and opened a cupboard set apart for her husband's use, while, when she flitted across the stream of radiance that shone in through the window, she held an object, that gleamed with a metallic lustre, clenched in one hand.

[Pg 235]

[Pg 236]

XVII.

BROOKE ATTEMPTS BURGLARY.

The half-moon Barbara watched from her window floated slowly above the serrated tops of the dusky pines when Brooke groped his way through their shadow across a strip of the Englishman's swamp. The ranch which he was making for rose darkly before him with the willows clustering close up to that side of it, and he stopped and stood listening when he reached them. The night

was very still, so still, indeed, that the deep silence vaguely troubled him. High above the climbing forests great ramparts of never-melting snow gleamed against the blue, and standing there, hot, breathless, and a trifle muddy, he felt their impressive white serenity, until he started at a faint rattle in the house. It ceased suddenly, but it had set his heart throbbing unpleasantly fast, though he was sensible of a little annoyance with himself because this was the case.

There was nothing he need fear, and he was, indeed, not quite sure that the prospect of facing a physical peril would have been altogether unpleasant then. Devine was away, the women were doubtless asleep, and it was the fact that he was about to creep like a thief into a house where he had been hospitably welcomed which occasioned his uneasiness. It was true that he only meant to acquire information which would enable him to recover the dollars he had been defrauded of, but the reflection brought him no more consolation than it had done on other occasions when he had been sensible of the same disgust and humiliation.

[Pg 237]

He was, however, at the same time sensible of a faint relief, for the position had been growing almost intolerable of late, and, though he shrank from the revelation, it seemed preferable that Barbara Heathcote should see him in the true light at last. This, it was evident, must happen ultimately, and now it would, at least, dispense with the hateful necessity of continuing the deception. He had also, though that appeared of much less importance then, met with further difficulties at the cañon, and he realized almost with content that Devine would in all probability pay him nothing for the uncompleted work. He did not wish to feel that he owed Devine anything.

In the meanwhile a little bent branch from which the bruised leaves drooped limply caught his eye, for he had trained his powers of observation following the deer at the ranch, and moving a trifle he noticed one that was broken. It was evident that somebody had recently forced his way through the thicket towards the house, and he wondered vacantly why anyone should have done so when a good trail led round the copse. The question would probably not have occupied his attention at any other time, but just then he was glad to seize upon anything that might serve to distract his thoughts from the purpose he had on hand.

[Pg 238]

He could not, however, stay there considering it, and following the bend of the willows he came to the door of the ranch kitchen, behind which the office stood, and once more he stopped to listen. There was nothing audible but the distant roar of the cañon, and, though nobody could see him, he felt his face grow hot as he laid one hand upon the door and inserted the point of a little steel bar in the crevice. Devine's office was isolated from the rest of the ranch, but Brooke felt that if anybody heard the sound he expected to make he would not be especially sorry. He would not abandon his project, but he could have borne anything that made it impracticable with equanimity.

The door, however, somewhat to his astonishment, swung open at a touch, and he crept in noiselessly with an even greater sense of degradation. The inmates of the ranch were, it seemed, wholly unsuspecting, and he whom they had treated with gracious kindness was about to take a shameful advantage of their confidence. Still, he crossed the kitchen carrying the little bar and did not stop until he reached the office door. This stood ajar, but he stood still a moment in place of going in, longing, most illogically, for any interruption. The ranch seemed horribly and unnaturally still, for he could not hear the sound of the river now, until there was a low rustle that set him quivering. Somebody, it appeared, was moving about the room in front of him. Then a board creaked sharply, and with every nerve strung up he drew the door a trifle open.

[Pg 239]

A faint stream of radiance shone in through the window, but it fell upon the wall opposite, and the rest of the room was wrapped in shadow, in which he could just discern a dim figure that moved stealthily. It was evidently a man who could have come there with no commendable purpose, and as he recognized this a somewhat curious thing happened, for Brooke's lips set tight, and he clenched the steel bar in a fit of venomous anger. It did not occur to him that his own object was, after all, very much the same as the stranger's, and creeping forward noiselessly with eyes fixed on the dusky figure he saw it stoop and apparently move a book that stood on what seemed to be a box. That movement enabled him to gain another yard, and then he stopped again, bracing himself for the grapple, while the dim object straightened itself and turned towards the light.

Brooke could hear nothing but the throbbing of his heart, and for a moment his eyes grew hazy; but that passed, and he saw the man hold up an object that was very like a tin case. He moved again nearer the light, and Brooke sprang forward with the bar swung aloft. Quick as he was, the stranger was equally alert, and stepped forward instead of back, while next moment Brooke looked into the dully glinting muzzle of a pistol.

[Pg 240]

"Stop right where you are!" a voice said.

Brooke did as he was bidden, instinctively. Had there been any unevenness in the voice he might have risked a rush, but the grim quietness of the order was curiously impressive, and for a second or two the men stood tense and motionless, looking at one another with hands clenched and lips hard set Brooke recognized the intruder as a man who wheeled the ore between the mine and stamps, and remembered that he had not been there very long.

"What do you want here?" he said, for the silence was getting intolerable.

The man smiled grimly, though he did not move the pistol, and his eyes were unpleasantly steady.

"I was going to ask you the same thing, but it don't count," he said. "There's a door yonder, and

you have 'bout ten seconds to get out of it. If you're here any longer you're going to take tolerably steep chances of getting hurt."

Brooke realized that the warning was probably warranted, but he stood still, stiffening his grasp on the bar, for to vacate the position was the last thing he contemplated. Barbara Heathcote was in the ranch, and he did not remember that she had also two companions then. Nor did he know exactly what he meant to do, that is, while the stranger eyed him with the same unpleasant steadiness, for it was evident that a very slight contraction of his forefinger would effectually prevent him doing anything. Then while they stood watching each other breathlessly for a second or two a door handle rattled and Brooke heard a rustle of draperies.

[Pg 241]

"Look behind you!" said the stranger, sharply.

Brooke, too strung up to recognize the risk of the proceeding, swung round almost before he heard him, and then gasped with consternation, for Barbara stood in the entrance holding up a light. She was, however, not quite defenseless, as Brooke realized when he saw the gleaming pistol in her hand. Next moment his folly, and the fact that the stranger had also seen it, became evident, for there was a hasty patter of feet, and when Brooke turned again he had almost gained the other door of the room. Barbara, who had moved forward in the meanwhile, however, now stood between him and it, and turning half round he raised the pistol menacingly. Then with hand clenched hard upon the bar Brooke sprang.

There was a flash and a detonation, the acrid smoke drove into his eyes, and he fell with a crash against the door, which was flung to in front of him. He had, as he afterwards discovered, struck it with his head and shoulder, but just then he was only sensible of an unpleasant dizziness and a stinging pain in his left arm. Then he leaned somewhat heavily against the door, and he and the girl looked at each other through the filmy wisps of smoke that drifted athwart the light, while a rapid patter of footsteps grew less distinct. Barbara was somewhat white in face, and her lips were quivering.

[Pg 242]

"Are you hurt?" she said, and her voice sounded curiously strained.

"No," said Brooke, with a little hollow laugh. "Not seriously, anyway. The fellow flung the door to in my face, and the blow must have partly dazed me. That reminds me that I'm wasting time. Where is he now?"

Barbara made a little forceful gesture. "Halfway across the clearing, I expect. You cannot go after him. Look at your arm."

Brooke turned his head slowly, for the dizziness he was sensible of did not seem to be abating, and saw a thin, red trickle drip from the sleeve of his jean jacket, which the moonlight fell upon.

"I scarcely think it's worth troubling about. The arm will bend all right," he said. "Still, perhaps, you wouldn't mind very much if I took this thing off."

He seized the edge of the jacket, and then while his face went awry let his hand drop again.

"It might, perhaps, be better to cut the sleeve," he said. "Could you run this knife down the seam? The jean is very thin."

[Pg 243]

The girl's hand shook a little as she opened the knife he passed her, and just then a cry came down faintly from one of the rooms above. Barbara swung round swiftly, and moved into the corridor.

"Nothing very dreadful has happened, and I am coming back in a minute or two, but whatever you do don't come down," she said authoritatively, and Brooke heard a door swing to above.

Then she came towards him quietly, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Keep still, and I will not be long. Katty is apt to lose her head," she said.

Her fingers still quivered a little, but she was deft in spite of it, and when the slit sleeve fell away Brooke sat down on the table with a little smile.

"Very sorry to trouble you," he said. "I don't know much about these things, but the artery evidently isn't cut, and I don't think the bone is touched. That means there can't be very much harm done. Would you mind tying my handkerchief tightly round it where I've laid my finger?"

Barbara, who did so, afterwards sat down in the nearest chair, for she felt a trifle breathless as well as somewhat limp, and there was an embarrassing silence, while for no very apparent reason they now avoided looking at one another. A little filmy smoke still drifted about the room, and a short steel bar, a tin case, and a litter of papers lay between them on the floor. There were red splashes on one or two of the latter.

[Pg 244]

"The man must have dropped them," said Barbara, quietly, though her voice was still not quite her usual one. "He, of course, brought the bar to open the door with."

Brooke did not answer the last remark.

"I fancy he dropped them when he flung the door in my face," he said.

"Of course!" said Barbara. "He had his hands full."

The point did not seem of the least importance to her, but she was shaken, and felt that the silence which was growing significant would be insupportable. Then a thought struck her, and she looked up suddenly at the man.

"But, now, I remember, you had the bar," she said.

"Yes," said Brooke, very simply, though his face was grim. "I certainly had."

The girl had turned a little so that the light shone upon her, and he saw the faint bewilderment in her eyes. It, however, vanished in a moment or two, but Brooke decided that if he guessed her thoughts correctly he had done wisely in admitting the possession of the bar.

"Of course! You hadn't a pistol, and it was, no doubt, the only thing you could find," she said. "I'm afraid I did not even remember to thank you, but to tell the truth I was too badly frightened to think of anything." [Pg 245]

Brooke nodded comprehendingly, but Barbara noticed that the blood was in his cheeks and he smiled in a very curious fashion.

"I scarcely think I deserve any thanks," he said.

Barbara made a little gesture. "Pshaw!" she said. "You are not always so conventional, and both I and Grant Devine owe you a great deal. The man must have been a claim-jumper, and meant to steal those papers. They are—the plans and patents of the Canopus."

She stopped a moment, and then, seeing Brooke had noticed the momentary pause, continued, with a little forced laugh and a flush in her cheeks, "That was native Canadian caution asserting itself. I am ashamed of it, but you must remember I was rather badly startled a little while ago. There is no reason why I should not tell—you—this, or show you the documents."

Brooke made a little grimace as though she had hurt him physically.

"I think there is," he said.

The girl stared at him a moment, and then he saw only sympathy in her eyes.

"I'm afraid my wits have left me, or I would not have kept you talking while you are in pain. Your arm hurts?" she said.

"No," said Brooke, drily. "The arm is, I feel almost sure, very little the worse. Hadn't you better pick the papers up? You will excuse me stooping to help you. I scarcely think it would be advisable just now." [Pg 246]

Barbara knelt down and gathered the scattered documents up, while the man noticed the curious flush in her face when one of them left a red smear on her little white fingers. Rising, she held them up to him half open as they had fallen, and looked at him steadily.

"Will you put them straight while I find the band they were slipped through?" she said.

Brooke fancied he understood her. She had a generous spirit, and having in a moment of confusion, when she was scarcely capable of thinking concisely, suggested a doubt of him, was making amends in the one fashion that suggested itself. Then she turned away, and her back was towards him as she moved slowly towards the door, when a plan of the Canopus mine fell open in his hand. The light was close beside him, but he closed his eyes for a moment and there was a rustle as the papers slipped from his fingers, while when the girl turned towards him his face was awry, and he looked at her with a little grim smile.

"I am afraid they are scattered again," he said. "It was very clumsy of me, but I find it hurts me to use my left hand."

Barbara thrust the papers into the case. "I am sorry I didn't think of that," she said. "Even if you don't appreciate my thanks you will have to put up with my brother-in-law's, and he is a man who remembers. It might have cost him a good deal if anybody who could not be trusted had seen those papers—and now no more of them. Take that canvas chair, and don't move again until I tell you." [Pg 247]

Brooke made no answer, and Barbara went out into the corridor.

"Will you dress as quickly as you can, Katty, and come down," she said. "I don't know where you keep the decanters, and I want to give Mr. Brooke, who is hurt a little, a glass of wine."

Brooke protested, but Barbara laughed as she said, "It will really be a kindness to Katty, who is now, I feel quite sure, lying in a state of terror, with everything she dare reach out to get hold of rolled about her head."

It was three or four minutes later when Mrs. Devine appeared, and Barbara turned towards her, speaking very quietly.

"There is nothing to be gained by getting nervous now," she said. "A man came in to steal Grant's papers about the mine, and Mr. Brooke, who saw him, crept in after him, though he had only a little bar, and the man had a pistol. I fancy Grant is considerably indebted to him, and we must, at least, keep him here until one of the boys brings up the settlement doctor." [Pg 248]

Brooke rose to his feet, but Barbara moved swiftly to the door and turned the key in it.

"No," she said, decisively. "You are not going away when you are scarcely fit to walk. Katty, you haven't brought the wine yet."

Brooke sat down again, and making no answer, looked away from her, for though he would greatly have preferred it he scarcely felt capable of reaching his tent. Then there was silence for several minutes until Mrs. Devine came back with the wine.

"You are going to stay here until your arm is seen to. My husband would not be pleased if we did not do everything we could for you," she said.

[Pg 249]

XVIII.

BROOKE MAKES A DECISION.

It was the second morning after the attempt upon the papers, and Brooke lay in a basket chair on the little verandah at the ranch. In spite of the settlement doctor's ministrations his arm was a good deal more painful than he had expected it to be, his head ached; and he felt unpleasantly lethargic and limp. It, however, seemed to him that this wound was not sufficiently serious to account for this, and he wondered vaguely whether it resulted from too strenuous physical exertion coupled with the increasing mental strain he had borne of late. That question was, however, of no great importance, for he had a more urgent one to grapple with, and in the meanwhile it was pleasant to lie there and listen languidly while Barbara talked to him.

The sunshine lay bright upon the climbing pines which filled the listless air with resinous odors, but there was restful shadow on the verandah, and wherever the eye wandered an entrancing vista of gleaming snow. Brooke had, however, seen a good deal of snow, and floundered through it waist-deep, already, and it was the girl who sat close at hand, looking, it seemed to him, refreshingly cool and dainty in her loose white dress, his gaze most often rested on. Her quiet graciousness had also a soothing effect upon the man who had risen unrefreshed after a night of mental conflict which had continued through the few brief snatches of fevered sleep. Brooke felt the need of moral stimulant as well as physical rest, for the struggle he had desisted from for the time was not over yet.

[Pg 250]

He was tenacious of purpose, but it had cost him an effort to adhere to the terms of his compact with Saxton, and it was with a thrill of intense disgust he realized how far it had led him when he came upon the thief, for there was no ignoring the fact that it would be very difficult to make any great distinction between them. It had also become evident that he could not continue to play the part Saxton had allotted him, and yet if he threw it over he stood to lose everything his companion, who was at once a reproach to him and an incentive to a continuance in the career of deception, impersonated. Her society and his few visits to the ranch had shown him the due value of the refinement and congenial environment which no man without dollars could hope to enjoy, and re-awakened an appreciation of the little amenities and decencies of life which had become scarcely more than a memory to him. With the six thousand dollars in his hands he might once more attain them, but it was now evident that the memory of how he had accomplished it would tend to mar any satisfaction he could expect to derive from this. He could, in the meanwhile, neither nerve himself to bear the thought of the girl's scorn when she realized what his purpose had been, nor bid her farewell and go back to the aimless life of poverty. One thing alone was certain. Devine's papers were safe from him.

[Pg 251]

He lay silent almost too long, watching her with a vague longing in his gaze, for her head was partly turned from him. He could see her face in profile, which accentuated its clean chiselling, while her pose displayed the firm white neck and fine lines of the figure the thin white dress flowed away from. He had also guessed enough of her character to realize that it was not to any approach to physical perfection she owed most of her attractiveness, for it seemed to him that she brought with her an atmosphere of refinement and tranquillity which nothing that was sordid or ignoble could breathe in. Perhaps she felt his eyes upon her, for she turned at last and glanced at him.

"I have been thinking—about that night," she said.

"You really shouldn't," said Brooke, who felt suddenly uneasy. "It isn't worth while."

Barbara smiled. "That is a point upon which opinions may differ, but I understand your attitude. You see, I have been in England, and you apparently believe it the correct thing to hide your light under a bushel there."

[Pg 252]

"No," said Brooke, drily, "at least, not all of us. In fact, we are not averse from graciously permitting other folks, and now and then the Press, to proclaim our good deeds for us. I don't know that the more primitive fashion of doing it one's self isn't quite as tasteful."

Barbara shook her head. "There are," she said, "several kinds of affectation, and I am not to be

put off. Now, you are quite aware that you did my brother-in-law a signal service, and contrived to get me out of a very unpleasant, and, I fancy, a slightly perilous situation."

The color deepened a little in Brooke's face, and once more he was sensible of the humiliation that had troubled him on previous occasions, as he remembered that it was by no means to do Devine a service he had crept into the ranch. It was a most unpleasant feeling, and he had signally failed to accustom himself to it.

"I really don't think there was very much risk," he said. "Besides, you had a pistol."

Barbara laughed softly. "I never fired off a pistol in my life, and I almost fancy there was nothing in the one in question."

"Didn't you notice whether there were any cartridges in the chamber?"

"No," said Barbara. "I'm not sure I know which the chamber is, but I pressed something I supposed to be the trigger, and it only made a click."

[Pg 253]

Brooke glanced at her a trifle sharply. "You meant to fire at the man?"

"I'm afraid I did. Was it very dreadful? He was there with an unlawful purpose, and I saw his eyes grow wicked and his hand tighten just as you sprang at him. Still, I was almost glad when the pistol did not go off."

She seemed to have some difficulty in repressing a shiver at the recollection, and Brooke sat silent for a moment or two with his heart throbbing a good deal faster than usual. He could guess what that effort had cost his companion, and that it was his peril which had nerved her to overcome her natural shrinking from taking life. Perhaps Barbara noticed the effect her explanation had on him, and desired to lessen it, for she said, "It really was unpleasant, but I remembered that you had come there to ensure the safety of my brother-in-law's property, and one is permitted to shoot at a thief in this country."

Brooke, who could not help it, made a little abrupt movement, and felt his face grow hot as he wondered what she would think of him if she knew the purpose that had brought him there. The fact that she seemed quite willing to believe that one was warranted in firing at a thief had also its sting.

"Of course!" he said. "I am, however, inclined to think you saved my life. The man probably saw your hand go up and that made him a trifle too precipitate. Still, perhaps, he only wanted to look at your brother-in-law's papers and had no intention of stealing anything."

[Pg 254]

Barbara, who appeared glad to change the subject, smiled.

"Admitting that, I can't see any great difference," she said. "The man who runs a personal risk to secure a wallet with dollar bills in it that belongs to somebody else naturally does not expect commendation, or usually get it, but it seems to me a good deal meaner thing to steal a claim by cunning trickery. For instance, one has a certain admiration for the train robbers across the frontier. For two or three road-agents—and there are not often more—to hold up and rob a train demands, at least, a good deal of courage, but to plunder a man by prying into his secrets is only contemptible. Don't you think so?"

Brooke winced beneath her gaze.

"Well," he said slowly, "I suppose it is. Still, you see there may be excuses even for such a person."

"Excuses! Surely—you—do not feel capable of inventing any for a claim-jumper?"

Brooke felt that in his case there were, at least, one or two, but he had sufficient reasons for not making them clear to the girl.

"Well," he said, "I wonder if you could make any for a train-robber?"

Barbara appeared reflective. "We will admit that the dishonesty is the same in both cases, though that is not quite the point. The men who hold a train up, however, take a serious personal risk, and stake their lives upon their quickness and nerve. They have nobody to fall back upon, and must face the results if the courage of any of the passengers is equal to theirs. Daring of that kind commands a certain respect. The claim-jumper, on the contrary, must necessarily proceed by stealth, and, of course, rarely ventures on an attempt until he makes sure that the law will support him, because the man he means to rob has neglected some trivial requirement."

[Pg 255]

"Then it is admissible to steal, so long as you do it openly and take a personal risk? Still, I believe I have heard of claim-jumpers being shot, though I am not quite sure that it happened in Canada."

Barbara laughed. "They probably deserved it. It is not admissible to steal under any circumstances, but the safer and more subtle forms of theft are especially repellent. Now, I think I have made out my case for the train-robber, but I cannot see why you should constitute yourself an advocate for the claim-jumper."

Brooke contrived to force a smile. "It is," he said, "often a little difficult to make sure of one's motives, but we can, at least, take it for granted that the man who robs a train is the nobler

rascal."

Barbara, who appeared thoughtful, sat silent awhile. "It was fortunate you arrived when you did that night," she said, meditatively. "Still, as you could not well have known the man meant to make the attempt, or have expected to find anybody still awake at the ranch, it seems an almost astonishing coincidence."

[Pg 256]

Though he surmised that no notion of what had brought him there had entered his companion's mind, Brooke felt hot to the forehead now, for he was unpleasantly sensible that the girl was watching him. An explanation that might have served also suggested itself to him, but he felt that he could not add to his offences.

"It certainly was," he said, languidly. "I have, however, heard of coincidences that were more astonishing still."

Barbara nodded. "No doubt," she said. "We will let it go at that. As you may have noticed, we are now and then almost indecently candid in this country, but I agree with my brother-in-law who says that nobody could make an Englishman talk unless he wanted to."

"Silence is reputed to be golden," said Brooke, reflectively, "and I really think there are cases when it is. At least, there was one I figured in when some two or three minutes' unchecked speech cost me more dollars than I have made ever since. It happened in England, and I merely favored another man with my frank opinion of him. After a thing of that kind one is apt to be guarded."

[Pg 257]

"I think you should cultivate a sense of proportion. Can one make up for a single mistake in one direction by erring continually in the opposite one? Still, that is not a question we need go into now. You expect to get the rope across the cañon very shortly?"

"Yes," said Brooke, whose expression changed suddenly, "I do."

"And then?"

Brooke, who felt the girl's eyes upon him, and understood what she meant, made a little gesture. "I don't know. I shall probably take the trail again. It does not matter greatly where it may lead me."

There was a curious little vibration he could not quite repress in his voice, and both he and his companion were, under the circumstances, silent a trifle too long, for there are times when silence is very expressive. Then it was Barbara who spoke, though she felt that what she said was not especially appropriate.

"You will be sorry to go?"

Brooke looked at her steadily, with his lips set, and, though she did not see this, his fingers quivering a little, for he realized at last what it would cost him to leave her. For a moment a hot flood of passion and longing threatened to sweep him away, but he held it in check, and Barbara only noticed the grimness of his face.

[Pg 258]

"What answer could I make? The conventional one demanded scarcely fits the case," he said, and his laugh rang hollow.

"But the dam will not be finished," said Barbara, who realized that she had made an unfortunate start.

Again Brooke sat silent. It seemed folly to abandon his purpose, and he wondered whether he would have sufficient strength of will to go away. It was also folly to stay and sink further under the girl's influence, when the revelation he shrank from would, if he persisted in his attempt to recover his dollars, become inevitable. Still, once he left the Canopus he must go back to a life of hardship and labor, and, in spite of the humiliation and fear of the future he often felt, the present was very pleasant. On the other hand there was only scarcity, exposure to rain and frost, and bitter, hopeless toil. He sat very still with one hand closed, not daring to look at his companion until she spoke again.

"You say you do not know where the trail may lead you, and you do not seem to care. One would fancy that was wrong," she said.

"Why?"

Barbara turned a little, and looked at him with a faint sparkle in her eyes. "In this province the trail the resolute man takes usually leads to success. We want bridges and railroad trestles, forests cleared, and the valleys lined with roads. You can build them."

[Pg 259]

Brooke shook his head, though her confidence in him, as well as her optimism, had its due effect.

"I wish I was a little more sure," he said. "The difficulty, as I think I once pointed out, is that one needs dollars to make a fair start with."

"They are, at least, not indispensable, as the history of most of the men who have done anything worth while in the province shows. Isn't there a certain satisfaction in starting with everything against one?"

"Afterwards, perhaps. That is, if one struggles through. There is, however, one learns by

experience, really very little satisfaction at the time, especially if one scarcely gets beyond the start at all."

Barbara smiled a little, though she looked at him steadily. "You," she said, "will, I think, go a long way. In fact, if it was a sword I gave you, I should expect it of you."

Brooke came very near losing his head just then, though he realized that, after all, the words implied little more than a belief in his capabilities, and for a few insensate moments he almost decided to stay at the Canopus and make the most of his opportunities. Saxton, he reflected, might put sufficient pressure upon Devine to extort the six thousand dollars from him without the necessity for his part becoming apparent at all. With that sum in his hands there was, he felt, very little he could not attain, and then he shook off the deluding fancy, for it once more became apparent that the deed, which gave Saxton the hold he wished for upon Devine would, even if she never heard of it, stand as barrier between Barbara Heathcote and him. [Pg 260]

"One feels inclined to wonder now and then whether success does not occasionally, at least, cost the man who achieves it more than it is worth," he said. "The actual record of the leaders one is expected to look up to might, in that connection, provide one with a fund of somewhat astonishing information."

Barbara made a little gesture of impatience. "Is the poor man the only one who can be honest?"

"One would, at least, feel inclined to fancy that the man who is unduly honest runs a serious risk of remaining poor."

"I think that is an argument I have very little sympathy with," said Barbara. "It is, you see, so easy for the incapable to impeach the successful man's honesty. I might even go a little further and admit that it is an attitude I scarcely expected from you."

Brooke smiled somewhat bitterly. "You will, however, remember that I have made no attempt to persuade you of my own integrity."

Just then, as it happened, Mrs. Devine came into the verandah with a packet in her hand.

"These are the papers the man tried to steal," she said. "Since you insist upon going back to the cañon to-day I wonder if you would take care of them?" [Pg 261]

Brooke gasped, and felt the veins swell on his forehead as he looked at her. "You wish me to take them away?"

"Of course! My nerves are really horribly unsettled, and I was sent to the mountains for quietness. How could any one expect me to get it when I couldn't even sleep for fear of that man or some one else coming back for these documents?"

"They are, I think, of considerable importance to your husband," said Brooke.

"That is precisely why I would like to feel that they were safe in your tent. Nobody would expect you to have them there."

Brooke turned his head a little so that he could see Barbara's face.

"I appreciate your confidence," he said, and the girl noticed that his voice was a trifle hoarse. "Still, I must point out that I am almost a stranger to Mr. Devine and you."

Barbara smiled a little, but there was something that set the man's heart beating in her eyes.

"I am not sure that everybody would be so willing to make the most of the fact, but I feel quite sure my sister's confidence is warranted," she said. "That, of course, does not sound very nice, but you have made it necessary." [Pg 262]

Brooke, who glanced curiously at the single seal, laid down the packet, and Mrs. Devine smiled. "I feel ever so much easier now that is off my mind," she said. "Still, I shall expect you to sleep with the papers under your pillow."

She went out, and left him and Barbara alone again, but Brooke knew that the struggle was over and the question decided once for all. The girl's trust in him had not only made those papers inviolable so far as he was concerned, but had rendered a breach with Saxton unavoidable. He knew now that he could never do what the latter had expected from him.

"You appeared almost unwilling to take the responsibility," said the girl.

Brooke smiled curiously. "I really think that was the case," he said. "In fact, your confidence almost hurt me. One feels the obligation of proving it warranted—in every respect—you see. That is partly why I shall go away the day we swing the first load of props across the cañon."

Barbara felt a trace of disconcertion. "But my brother-in-law may ask you to do something else for him."

"I scarcely think that is likely," said Brooke, with a little dry smile.

Barbara said nothing further, and when she left him Brooke was once more sensible of a curious relief. It would, he knew, cost him a strenuous effort to go away, but he would, at least, be freed from the horrible necessity of duping the girl, who, it seemed, believed in him. When Jimmy [Pg 263]

arrived that evening to accompany him back to his tent at the cañon, and expressed his satisfaction at the fact that he did not appear very much the worse, he smiled a trifle drily.

"That," he said, "is a little astonishing. I am, I think, warranted in believing myself six thousand dollars worse off than when I went away."

Jimmy stared at him incredulously.

"Well," he said, "I never figured you had that many, and I don't quite see how you could have let them get away from you here. Something you didn't expect has happened?"

Brooke appeared reflective. "I'm not quite sure whether I expected it or not, but I almost hope I did," he said.

[Pg 264]

XIX.

BROOKE'S BARGAIN.

There was a portentous quietness in the little wooden town which did not exactly please Mr. Faraday Slocum, the somewhat discredited local agent of Grant Devine, as he ascended the steep street from the grocery store. The pines closed in upon it, but their sombre spires were growing dim, and the white mists clung about them, for dusk was creeping up the valley. The latter fact brought Slocum a sense of satisfaction, and at the same time a growing uneasiness. He had, as it happened, signally failed to collect a certain sum from the store-keeper, who had expressed his opinion of him and his doings with vitriolic candor, and it was partly as the result of this that very little escaped his notice as he proceeded with an ostentatious leisureliness towards his dwelling.

A straggling row of stores and houses, log and frame and galvanized iron, jumbled all together in unsightly confusion, stretched away before him towards the gap in the forest where the railroad track came in, but it was the little groups of men who hung about them which occupied his quiet attention. He saluted them with somewhat forced good-humor as he went by, but there was no great cordiality in their responses, and some of them stared at him in uncompromising silence. There was, he felt, a certain tension in the atmosphere, and it was not without a purpose he stopped in front of the wooden hotel, where a little crowd had collected upon the verandah.

[Pg 265]

"It's kind of sultry to-night, boys," he said.

Nobody responded for a moment or two, and then there was an unpleasant laugh as somebody said, "You've hit it; I guess it is."

Slocum remembered that most of those loungers had been glad to greet him, and even hand him their spare dollars, not long ago; but there was a decided difference now. He was a capable business man, who could make the most of an opportunity, and the inhabitants of the little wooden town had shown themselves disposed to regard certain trifling obliquities leniently, while they or their friends made satisfactory profits on the deals in ranching land and building lots he recommended. That, however, was while the boom lasted, but when the bottom had, as they expressed it, dropped out, and a good many of them found themselves saddled with unmarketable possessions, they commenced to be troubled with grave doubts concerning the rectitude of his conduct. Slocum was naturally quite aware of this, but he was a man of nerve, and quietly walked up the verandah steps.

[Pg 266]

"It's that hot I must have a drink, boys. Who's coming in with me?" he said, genially.

A few months ago a good many of them would have been willing to profit by the invitation, but that night nobody moved, and Slocum laughed softly.

"Well," he said, "I'm not going to worry you. This is evidently a temperance meeting."

He passed into the empty bar alone, and a man who leaned upon the counter in his shirt sleeves shook his head as he glanced towards the verandah.

"They're not in a good humor to-night. It looks very much as if someone has been talking to them?" he said.

Slocum smiled a little, though he had already noticed this, and taken precautions the bar-keeper never suspected.

"I guess they'll simmer down. Who has been talking to them?" he said.

"The two ranchers you sold the Hemlock Range to. There was another man who'd bought a piece of natural prairie, and it cost him most of five dollars before he got through telling them what he thought of you. Now, I don't know what their notion is, but I'd light out for a little if I was you."

Slocum appeared to reflect. "Well," he said, "I may go to-morrow."

"I'd go to-night," said the bar-keeper, significantly. "I guess it would be wiser."

[Pg 267]

Slocum, who did not consider it necessary to tell him that he quite agreed with this, went out, and a few minutes later stopped outside his house, which was the last one in the town. A big, rudely-painted sign, nailed across the front of it, recommended any one who desired to buy or sell land and mineral properties or had mortgages to arrange, to come in and confer with the agent of Grant Devine. He glanced back up the street, and was relieved to notice that there was nobody loitering about that part of it. Then he looked at the forest the trail led into, which was shadowy and still, and, slipping round the building, went in through the back of it. A woman stood waiting him in a dimly-lighted room, which was littered with feminine clothing besides two big valises and an array of bulky packages. She was expensively dressed, but her face was anxious, and he noticed that her fingers were quivering.

"You're quite ready, Sue?" he said.

The woman pointed to the packages with a little dramatic gesture. "Oh, yes," she said. "I'm ready, though I'll have to leave most two hundred dollars' worth of clothes behind me. I've no use for taking in plain sewing while you think over what you've brought me to in the penitentiary."

Slocum smiled drily. "If you hadn't wanted quite so many dry goods, I'm not sure it would have come to this, but we needn't worry about that just now. Tom will have the horses round in 'bout five minutes. You don't figure on taking all that truck along with you?"

[Pg 268]

"I do," said the woman. "I've got to have something to put on when we get to Oregon!"

"Well," said Slocum, grimly, "I'll be quite glad to get out with a whole hide, and I guess it couldn't be done if we started with a packhorse train or a wagon. I hadn't quite fixed to light out until I got the message that Devine, who didn't seem quite pleased with the last accounts, was coming in."

"Could you have stood the boys off?"

"I might have done," said Slocum, reflectively. "Still, I couldn't stand off Devine. It's dollars he's coming for, and I've got 'bout half the accounts call for here."

"You're going to leave him them?"

Slocum laughed. "No," he said. "I guess they'll come in handy in Oregon. I'm going to leave him the boys to reckon with. They'll be here with clubs soon after the cars come in, and we'll be a league away down the trail by then."

A patter of horse hoofs outside cut short the colloquy, though there was a brief altercation when the woman once more insisted on taking all the packages with her. Slocum terminated it by bundling her out of the door, and, when she tearfully consented to mount a kicking pony, swung himself to the saddle. Still, for several minutes his heart was in his mouth, as he picked his way through the blacker shadows on the skirt of the beaten trail, until a man rose suddenly out of them.

[Pg 269]

"Hallo!" he said. "Where're you going?"

Slocum, leaning sideways, gave his wife's pony a cut with the switch he held, and then laughed as he turned to the man.

"I guess that's my business, but I'm going out of town."

"Quite sure?" said the other, who made a sudden clutch at his bridle.

He did not reach it, for Slocum was ready with hand and heel, and the switch came down upon the outstretched arm. Then there was a plunge and a rapid beat of hoofs, and Slocum, swinging half round in his saddle, swept off his hat to the gasping man.

"I guess I am," he said. "You'll tell the boys I'm sorry I couldn't wait for them."

Then he struck his wife's horse again. "Let him go," he said. "We'll have three or four of them after us in about ten minutes."

The woman said nothing, but braced herself to ride, and, while the beat of hoofs grew fainter among the silent pines, the man on foot ran gasping up the climbing trail. There was bustle and consternation when he reached the wooden town, and, while two or three men who had good horses hastily saddled them, the rest collected in clusters which coalesced, and presently a body of silent men proceeded towards the Slocum dwelling. As they stopped in front of it, the hoot of a whistle came ringing across the pines, and there was an increasing roar as a train came up the valley. That, however, did not, so they fancied, concern them, and they commenced a parley with the local constable, who came hurrying after them. His duties consisted chiefly in the raising and peddling of fruit, and he had been recommended for the post by popular acclaim as the most tolerant man in the settlement, but he was, it seemed, not without a certain sense of responsibility.

[Pg 270]

"What d'you figure on doing with those clubs, boys?" he said.

"Seasoning them," said somebody. "Mine's quite soft and green. Now, why're you not taking the trail after Slocum? The province allows you for a horse, and Hake Guffy's has three good legs on him, anyway."

The constable waved his hand, deprecatingly. "He fell down and hurt one of them hauling green stuff to the depôt. I guess I'd have to shove him most of the way."

There was a little laughter, which had, however, a trace of grimness in it, and one of the men grasped the constable's shoulder.

"Hadn't you better go round and run Jean Frenchy's hogs out of your citron patch?" he said.

For a moment the constable appeared about to go, and then his face expanded into a genial grin. [Pg 271]

"That's not good enough, boys," he said. "I'm not quite so fresh that the cows would eat me. What've you come round here for, anyway?"

The man who had spoken made a little gesture of resignation. "Well," he said, "if you have got to know, we are going in to see if Slocum has left any of the dollars he beat us out of behind him."

"No," said the constable, stoutly. "Nobody's going in there without a warrant, unless it's me."

There was a little murmur. The man was elderly, and a trifle infirm, which was partly why it had been decided that he was most likely to find a use for the provincial pay, but he turned upon the threshold and faced the crowd resolutely. Had he been younger, it is very probable that he would have been hustled away, but a Western mob is usually, to some extent, at least, chivalrous, and there was another murmur of protest.

"Go home!" said one man. "They're not your dollars, anyway."

"Boys," and the old man swung an arm aloft, "I'm here, and I'm going to make considerable trouble for the man who lays a hand on me. This is a law-abiding country, and Slocum wasn't fool enough to leave anything he could carry off."

"We don't want to hurt you," said one of the assembly, "but we're going in."

There was a growl of approbation, and the men were closing in upon the door when a stranger pushed his way through the midst of them, and then swung round and stood facing them beside the constable. He held himself commandingly, and, though nobody appeared to recognize him, for darkness was closing down, the meaning of his attitude was plain, and the crowd gave back a little. [Pg 272]

"Go home, boys!" he said. "I'll most certainly have the law of any man who puts his foot inside this door."

There was a little ironical laughter, and the crowd once more closed in. Half the men of the settlement were present there, and a good many of them had bought land from, or trusted their spare dollars to, Slocum.

"Who are you, anyway?" said one.

The stranger laughed. "The man who owns the building. My name's Devine."

It was a bold announcement, for those who heard him were not in the best of humors then, or disposed to concern themselves with the question how far the principal was acquainted with or responsible for the doings of his agent.

"The boss thief!" said somebody. "Get hold of him, and bring him along to the hotel. Then, if Thorkell can't lock him up, we'll consider what we'll do with him."

"No," said another man. "He'll keep for a little without going bad, and we're here to see if Slocum left anything behind him. Break that door in!" [Pg 273]

It was a critical moment, for there was a hoarse murmur of approbation, and the crowd surged closer about the pair. At any sign of weakness it would, perhaps, have gone hardly with them, but the elderly constable stood very still and quiet, with empty hands, while Devine fumbled inside his jacket. Then he swung one foot forward, and his right arm rose, until his hand, which was clenched on a dusky object, was level with his shoulder.

"Boys," he said, drily, "somebody's going to get hurt in another minute. This is my office, and I can't do with any of you inside it to-night."

"Then, if you hand our dollars out, it would suit us most as well," said the spokesman.

Devine appeared to laugh softly. "I guess there are very few of them there. Anybody who can prove a claim on me will get satisfaction, but he'll have to wait. Neither the place nor I will run away, and you'll find me right here when you come along to-morrow."

"Are you going to give every man back the dollars Slocum got from him?"

It was evident that the question met with the approbation of the crowd, and a less resolute man might have temporized, but Devine laughed openly now.

"No," he said, drily. "That's just what I'm not going to do. A man takes his chances when he makes a deal in land, and can't expect to cry off his bargain when they go against him. Still, if any one will bring me proof that Slocum swindled him, I'll see what I can do, but I guess it will be very little if some of you destroy the books and papers he recorded the deals in. You'll have to wait until to-morrow, while I worry through them." [Pg 274]

His resolution had its due effect, and the fact that no man could reach the threshold until he and the constable had been pulled down counted for a good deal, too. The men also wanted no more than they considered themselves entitled to, and shrank from what, if it was to prove successful, must evidently be a murderous assault upon two elderly men.

"I guess there's sense in that," said one of them. "It's going to be quite easy to make sure he don't get out of the settlement."

"I'm for letting him have until to-morrow, anyway," said another. "Still, the papers aren't there. Where's John Collier? He picked up some books and truck Slocum slung away when he met him on the trail."

"I've got them right here," and another man stepped forward. "I was coming in from the ranch when I heard two horses pounding down the trail, and jumped clear into the fern. The man who went past me tried to sling a package into the gully, but I guess he got kind of rattled when I shouted, and dropped the thing. He didn't seem to want to stop, and, when he went on at a gallop, I galloped round and picked the package up."

[Pg 275]

Devine lowered the pistol, and turned quietly to the crowd. "There are just two courses open to you, boys, and you're going to make mighty little but trouble for yourselves by taking one of them. This is my office, and so long as I can hold you off nobody's coming in until he's asked. I feel quite equal to stopping two or three. Now, if you'll let me have those books and go home quietly, I'll have straightened Slocum's affairs out by to-morrow, and be ready to see what can be done for you."

The men were evidently wavering, and there was a brief consultation, after which the leader turned to Devine.

"We've no use for making any trouble that can be helped, and we'll go home," he said. "You can have those books, and a committee will come round to see what you've fixed up after breakfast to-morrow."

Devine nodded tranquilly. "I guess you're wise," he said. "Good night, boys!"

They went away, and left him to go in with the constable, who came out in a few minutes with a contented grin, which suggested that Devine had signified his appreciation of his efforts liberally. The latter, however, sat down, dusty and worn with an arduous journey, to undertake a night's hard work. He had left the Canopus before sunrise, and spent most of the day in the saddle, but nobody would have suspected him of weariness as he sat, grim and intent of face, before a table littered with papers. He had just imposed his will upon an angry crowd, and the tension of the past few minutes would have shaken many a younger man, but he showed no sign of feeling it, and, as the hours slipped by, only rose at intervals to stretch his aching limbs and brush the cigar ash from his dust-smear'd clothes. This was one of the hard men who, in building up their own fortunes, had also laid the foundations of the future prosperity of a great province, and a little fatigue did not count with him.

[Pg 276]

The settlement was very still, and the lamp-light paling as the chilly dawn crept in, when at last he opened a book that recorded Slocum's dealings several years back. There were several folded slips on which he had jotted down certain data inside it, and Devine smiled somewhat drily as he came upon one entry:—

"24th. 6,000 dollars from Harford Brooke, in purchase of 400 acres bush land, Quatomac Valley. Ref. 22, slip B."

Devine turned up 22 B, and read: "Mem. About 150 acres 200-foot pines, with gravel sub-soil, and very little mould on top of it. Rest of it rock. Oregon man bid 1,000 dollars on the 2nd, but asked for re-survey and cried off. 12th. Gave Custer four days' option at 950. 20th. Asked the British sucker 6,500, and clinched the deal at 6,000."

[Pg 277]

Devine closed the book, and sat thoughtfully still for a minute or two. The epithet his agent had applied to Brooke carried with it the stigma of puerile folly in that country, and Devine had usually very little sympathy with the men it could be fittingly attached to. Still, he felt that nobody could very appropriately term his contractor a sucker now, and he had just discovered that he had been systematically plundered himself. Several points which had given him food for reflection also became suddenly plain, and he lighted another cigar before he fell to work again. He had, however, in the meanwhile decided what course to adopt with Brooke when he went back to the Canopus mine.

[Pg 278]

XX.

THE BRIDGING OF THE CAÑON.

It was a week or two after he undertook the investigation of Slocum's affairs, and once more the

light was failing, when Devine stood at the head of the gully above the cañon. His wife and Barbara were with him, and they were about to descend, when a cluster of moving figures appeared among the pines on the opposite hillside. So far as Devine could make out, they were rolling down two or three small trunks of firs.

The river was veiled in white mist now, but the sound of its turmoil came up hoarsely out of the growing obscurity, and there was sufficient light above to show the rope which spanned the awful chasm. It swept downwards in a flattened curve, slender and ethereal, at that distance, as a film of gossamer, and lost itself in the gloom of the rocks, across the cañon. Barbara, however, fancied she realized what it had cost the flume-builder to place it there, and, as he glanced at it, a somewhat curious look crept into Devine's eyes. He knew that slender thread of steel had only been flung across the hollow at the risk of life and limb, and under a heavy nervous strain.

[Pg 279]

"If we are going down, hadn't we better start?" said Mrs. Devine. "If it gets quite dark before we come up, I shall certainly have to stay there until to-morrow. In fact, I'm quite willing to let you and Barbara go without me now."

Devine smiled. "I'm not sure we'll go at all. It seems to me Brooke means to give the thing a private trial before he asks me to come over and see it work, and that's why he waited until it was almost dark. Can you make him out, Barbara?"

Barbara had, as a matter of fact, already done so, but she realized that her sister's eyes were upon her, and for no very apparent reason preferred not to admit it.

"It is getting a little shadowy among the pines, and Katty used to tell me she had sharper eyes than mine," she said.

Mrs. Devine laughed. "Still," she said, reflectively, "I scarcely think I have seen Mr. Brooke quite so often as you have."

Devine glanced at them both a trifle sharply, but there was nothing in their faces that gave him a clue to their thoughts. "Well," he said, "I'm a good deal older than either of you, but I can make him out myself now. As usual, he seems to be doing most of the work."

Nobody said anything further, and the moving figures stopped where the rope ran into the shadows of the rocks, while it was a few minutes later when a long, dusky object swung out on it. It slid somewhat slowly down the incline, and then stopped where the slight curve led upward, and remained dangling high above the hidden river. A shout came faintly through the roar of water in the gulf below, and the dark mass oscillated violently, but otherwise remained immovable.

[Pg 280]

"What are they doing? Shouldn't it have run all the way across?" asked Mrs. Devine.

Devine nodded. "I guess they're 'most pulling their arms off trying to haul the thing across," he said. "It should have come itself, but the sheave the trolley runs on must have jammed, or they haven't pulled all the kinks and snarls out of the rope. It's quite a big log they've loaded her with."

The suspended trunk still oscillated, and a faint clinking came up with a hoarse murmur of voices from the hollow. Then there was silence, and Devine, who pointed to a fallen cedar, took out his cigar-case.

"We'll stay right here, and see the thing out," he said. "I guess the boys have quite enough to worry them just now."

Barbara surmised that most of the anxiety would fall on Brooke, and wondered why she should feel as eager as she did to see the fir trunk safely swung across. The economical handling of mining props was naturally not a subject she had any particular interest in, though she realized that the success of his venture was of some importance to the man who had stretched the rope across the cañon. There was no ostensible reason why it should affect her, and yet she was sensible of a curious nervous impatience.

[Pg 281]

In the meanwhile, it was growing darker, and she could not quite see what the dim figures across the river were doing. They did not, in fact, appear to be doing anything in particular, beyond standing in a group, while the rope no longer oscillated. A thin, white mist commenced to drift out of the hollow in filmy wisps, and, in a curious fashion, suggested the vast depth of it. The silence the roar of the river broke through grew more intense as the chill of the distant snow descended, and the stately pines seemed to grow older and greater of girth. They dwarfed the tiny clustering figures into insignificance, and as iron columns and the raw gashes in the side of the gully faded into the gathering night, it seemed to Barbara that here in her primeval fastnesses Nature ignored man's puny handiwork.

Then it was with a little thrill of anticipation she saw there was a movement among the dusky figures at last, but it cost her an effort to sit still when one of them appeared to move out on the rope, for she felt she knew who it must be. Devine rose sharply, and flung his cigar away, while his wife seemed to shiver apprehensively.

"One of them is coming across. Isn't it horribly dangerous?" she said.

[Pg 282]

Devine nodded. "It depends a good deal on what he means to do, but if he figures on clearing the jammed trolley there is a risk, especially to a man who has only one sound hand," he said.

"They've slung him under the spare one. It's most probably Brooke."

Mrs. Devine glanced at Barbara, and fancied that the rigidity of her attitude was a trifle significant. The girl, however, said nothing, for her lips were pressed together, and she felt a shiver run through her as she watched the dusky figure sliding down the curving rope. The rope itself was no longer visible, but the dangling shape that moved across the horrible gulf was forced up by the whiteness of the drifting mists below. She held her breath when it stopped, and swung perilously beside the pine trunk which oscillated too, and then clenched her fingers viciously as it rose and apparently clutched at something overhead. Then she became sensible of the distressful beating of her heart, and that the tension was growing unendurable. Dark pines and hillside seemed to have faded now, and the dim objects outlined against the sliding mists dominated her attention. Still, though they were invisible to her, the space between the hoary pines, tremendous rock wall, and never-melting snow, formed a fitting arena for that conflict between daring humanity and unsubdued Nature.

[Pg 283]

Barbara never knew how long she sat there with set lips and straining eyes, but the time seemed interminable, until at last she gasped when Devine, who had been standing as motionless as the pines behind him, moved abruptly.

"I guess he has done it," he said. "That man has hard sand in him."

The dusky trunk slid onward; the dangling figure followed it; and a hoarse cry, that had a note of exultation in it as well as relief, came up when they vanished into the gloom beneath the dark rock's side.

"They've got him, but I guess that's not all they mean," said Devine. "Whatever was wrong with it, he has fixed the thing. They've beaten the cañon. The sling's working."

Then Barbara, rising, stood very straight, with a curious feeling that she had a personal part in those men's triumph. It did not even seem to matter when she felt that Mrs. Devine was looking at her.

"Why don't you shout?" said the latter, significantly.

Barbara laughed, but there was a little vibration in her voice her sister had not often noticed there.

"If I thought any one could hear me, I certainly would," she said.

They stayed where they were a few minutes, until once more a faint creaking and rattling came out of the mist, and an object, that was scarcely distinguishable, swung across the chasm. Another followed, until Barbara had counted three of them, and Devine laughed drily as they turned away.

[Pg 284]

"It's most of eight miles round by the cañon foot, where one can get across by the big redwood log, but I guess they'd have taken the trail if Brooke hadn't given them a lead," he said. "It's not easy to understand any one, but that's a curious kind of man."

"Is Mr. Brooke more peculiar than the rest of you?" asked Barbara.

Devine seemed to smile, though she could not see him very well.

"Well," he said, drily, "that's rather more than I know, but I have a notion that his difficulty is he isn't quite sure what he would be at. Now, the man who does one thing at one time, and all with the same purpose, is the one who generally gets there first."

"And Brooke does not do that?"

"It kind of seems to me he is being pulled hard two ways at once just now," said Devine, with a curious little laugh.

Barbara asked no more questions, and said very little to her sister as they walked home through the pines. She could not blot out the picture which, for a few intense minutes, she had gazed upon, though it had been exasperatingly blurred, and, she felt, considering what it stood for, ineffective in itself—a dim, half-seen figure, dwarfed to insignificance, swinging across a background of filmy mist. There had been nothing at that distance to suggest the intensity of the effort which was the expression of an unyielding will, but she had, by some subtle sympathy, grasped it all—the daring that recognized the peril and disregarded it, and the thrill of the triumph, the wholesome satisfaction born of the struggle with the primitive forces of the universe which man was meant to wage. This, it seemed to her, was a nobler one than the strife of the cities, where wealth was less often created than torn or fleeced from one's fellows; for needy humanity flowed in to build her homes and prosper by sturdy toil at every fresh rolling back of the gates of the wilderness. The miner and the axeman led the way; but the big plough oxen and plodding packhorse train followed hard along the trails they made. Behind, in long procession, jaded with many sorrows, came the outcasts from crowded Eastern lands, but there was room, and to spare, for all of them in the new Canaan.

[Pg 285]

That the man who had bridged the cañon would admit any feelings of the kind was, she knew, not to be expected. Men of his description, she had discovered, very seldom do, and she could rather fancy him coming fresh from such a struggle to discuss the climate or the flavor of a cigar. Yet he had once told her that she had brought him a sword, and, as she had certainly shivered at his

[Pg 286]

peril, she could, without asking herself troublesome questions, now participate in the victory he had won. Still, she seemed to feel that one could not draw any very apt comparison between him and the stainless hero of the Arthurian legend belted with Excalibur, for Brooke was, she fancied, in the phraseology of the country, not that kind of man. That, however, appeared of less importance, since she had discovered that perfection is apt to pall on one.

She had, she decided, permitted this train of thought to carry her sufficiently far, when a man appeared suddenly in the shadowy trail. It was evident that he did not see them at first, and Barbara fancied he was a trifle disconcerted and half-disposed to slip back into the undergrowth when he did. He, however, passed them hastily, and Devine swung round and looked after him.

"That wasn't one of Brooke's men?" he said.

"No," said Barbara. "I don't think it was. You didn't recognize him, Katty?"

Mrs. Devine laughed. "If you didn't, I scarcely fancy there was anything to be gained by asking me."

Barbara was not quite pleased with her sister, but she noticed that Devine was standing still.

"Was there anything remarkable about the man?" she said.

Devine laughed. "I didn't see his face; but if he's the man I took him for, nobody would have expected to meet him here."

[Pg 287]

Then he turned, and they proceeded towards the ranch, while Barbara, who recollected Devine's speech at the cañon, also remembered her sister had said she would like to know what her husband really thought of Brooke. This had not been very comprehensible to Barbara, who had experienced no great trouble in forming what she believed to be an accurate opinion concerning the flume-builder. It was her feelings towards him that presented the difficulty.

In the meanwhile, Brooke had flung himself down in a folding-chair in his tent. He was soaked with perspiration, his hard hands still quivered a little from the nervous strain, and his bronzed face was a trifle more colorless than usual, but he was, for the time being, sensible of a quiet exultation. He had done a difficult and dangerous thing, and the flush of success had swept away all his anxieties. He, however, found it a trifle difficult to sit still, and was carefully selecting a cigar in an attempt to compose himself, when a man came in, and took the chair opposite him. Then his face grew a trifle hard, and all sense of satisfaction was suddenly reft away from him.

"I scarcely expected you quite so soon, Saxton," he said. "Here are cigars; you'll find some drinkables in the box yonder."

Saxton opened the box he pointed to, and then looked at him with a grin as he took out a bottle.

[Pg 288]

"I've no great use for California wine. Bourbon whisky's good enough for me," he said. "Who've you been entertaining? Not Devine, anyway."

"Isn't the question a little outside the mark? If you want it, there's water with ice in it here. It's from the tail of the glacier."

Saxton laughed. "Then it would take a man 'most an hour and a half to bring a pail of it. It's quite easy to tell where you came from. Well, I'm here; but on the other occasions it was I who sent for you."

"There is, however, a difference on this one, though I wouldn't like you to think that was the reason. The fact is, I've been busy."

"Well," said Saxton, "we'll get down to the business one. Still, how'd you get your arm in a sling?"

"Are you sure you don't know?"

"Quite!" and Saxton's sincerity was evident. "How should I?"

"I had fancied you knew all about it by this time, and felt a little astonished that you didn't come over, but I see I was mistaken. I tried to get hold of Devine's papers, as I promised you, and came upon another man attempting the same thing. During the difference of opinion that followed he shot me."

Saxton rose, and, kicking his chair aside, condemned himself several times as he moved up and down the tent.

"To be quite straight, I put another man on to it, as you didn't seem to be making much of a show," he said. "Still, what in the name of thunder did he want to shoot you for, when he knew you were standing in with me?"

[Pg 289]

"I can't say. The difficulty was that I was not as well informed as he seems to have been. It would have paid you better to be frank with me. Hasn't the man come back to you?"

"No," and Saxton's face grew a trifle vicious, "he hasn't—concern him! You see what that brings us to? I felt sure of that man; but it's plain he meant to find out what I wanted, and then, if he couldn't make use of it himself, sell it me. There are three of us after the same thing now."

Brooke shook his head. "No," he said, drily, "I don't think there are. You and the other man make

two, while I scarcely fancy either of you will get hold of the papers, because I gave them back to Devine, and he has sent them to Vancouver."

"You had them?" and Saxton gasped.

"I certainly had," said Brooke. "They were put up in a very flimsy packet, which Mrs. Devine handed me. I did not, however, look at one of them."

Saxton, who seemed about to sit down, crossed the tent and stared at him.

"Well," he said, "may I be shot if I ever struck another man quite like you! What in the name of thunder made you let Devine have them back for?"

"I really don't think you would appreciate my motives, especially as I'm not quite sure I understand them myself. Anyway, I did it, and that, of course, implies that there can be no further understanding between you and me. I don't mean to question the morality of what we purposed doing, but, to be quite frank, I've had enough of it."

[Pg 290]

Saxton, who appeared to restrain himself with an effort, sat down and lighted a cigar.

"No doubt I could worry along 'most as well without you, but there's a question to be answered," he said, drily. "Do you mean to give me away?"

"It's not one I appreciate, and it seems to me a trifle unnecessary. You can reassure yourself on that point."

Saxton took a drink of whisky. "Well," he said, meditatively, "I guess I can trust you, and I'm not going to worry about letting you off the deal. You have too many fancies to be of much use to anybody. There's just another thing, and it has to be said. It's business I have on hand, and life's too short for any man to waste time he could pile up dollars in, trying to get even with a partner who has gone back on him. In fact, I've a kind of liking for you—but you'll most certainly get hurt if you put yourself in my way. It's a friendly warning."

Brooke laughed. "I will endeavor to keep out of it, so far as I can."

Saxton nodded, and then looked at him reflectively.

"Miss Heathcote's kind of pretty," he said.

[Pg 291]

"I suggested once already that we should get on better if you left Miss Heathcote out."

"You did. Still, when I've anything to say, it is scarcely a hint of that kind that's going to stop me. I guess you know she has quite a pile of dollars?"

Brooke's face flushed. "I don't, and it does not concern me in the least."

"She has, anyway. Devine's wife brought him a pile, and I heard one sister had the same as the other. Now, you ought to feel obliged to me."

Brooke straightened himself a trifle in his chair. "I don't wish to be unpleasant, but you have gone quite as far as is advisable. Can't you see the thing you are suggesting is quite out of the question?"

Saxton surveyed him critically. "Well," he said, reflectively, "I have seen better-looking men—quite a few of them, and you're blame hard to get on with, but there are women who don't expect too much."

Brooke's face was growing flushed, but he realized that nothing short of physical violence was likely to restrain his visitor, and he laughed.

"You will, of course, believe what pleases you," he said. "Are you going to stay here to-night?"

"No," said Saxton. "When I'm through with this whisky, I'm going right back to Tomlinson's ranch. I wouldn't like Devine to run up against me, and he nearly did it on the trail a little while ago."

Brooke looked up sharply. "He recognized you?"

"No," said Saxton, drily. "He didn't. It wouldn't have suited me. When I come to clinch with Devine, I want to be sure I have the whip-hand of him. Still, it wouldn't have been a case of pistols out and getting behind a tree. It's quite a long while since I had any, and, though you don't seem to think so in England, nobody has any use for a circus of that kind now. I don't know that the way they had in '49 wasn't better than trying to get ahead of the other man quietly."

[Pg 292]

Brooke made a little gesture of resignation. Saxton, he realized, had sufficient discretion not to persist in a useless attempt to hold him to his compact, but he was addicted to moralizing, and Brooke, who lighted another cigar, listened, as patiently as he could, while he discoursed upon the anxieties of the enterprising business man.

[Pg 293]

XXI.

DEVINE'S OFFER.

Evening had come round again when Brooke called at the ranch, in response to a brief note from Devine, and found the latter sitting, cigar in hand, at his office table.

"Take a cigar, if you feel like it, Mr. Brooke. We have got to have a talk," he said.

Brooke did as he suggested, and when he sat down, Devine passed a strip of paper across to him.

"There's your cheque for the tramway. I'll ask you for a receipt," he said. "Make up an account of what the dam has cost you to-morrow, and we'll try to arrange the thing so's to suit both of us."

Brooke appeared a trifle astonished. "It is by no means finished, sir."

"Well," said Devine, drily, "I'm not quite sure it ever will be. The mine no longer belongs to me. It's part of the Dayspring Consolidated Mineral Properties. I've been working the thing up quietly for quite a while now, and I've a cable from London that the deal's put through."

Brooke, remembering what he had heard from Saxton, looked hard at him. "You have sold it out to English company promoters?" [Pg 294]

"Not exactly! I'm taking so many thousand dollars down, and a controlling share of the stock. I'm also the boss director, with full power to run operations as appears advisable at the mines. How does the deal strike you?"

"Since you ask for my opinion, I fancy I should have preferred a good many dollars, and very little stock."

Devine glanced at him with a curious smile.

"You believe Allonby's a crank?"

"Other people do. On my part, I'm not quite sure of it. Still, it seems to me that the men who spend their money to prove him right will run a tolerably heavy risk, especially as, so far, at least, there appears to be no ore that's worth reduction in the mine, so far as it has been opened up."

"How do you know what is in the Dayspring?" and Devine looked at him steadily.

Brooke made a little gesture. "I don't think that point's important," he said. "You, no doubt, had a purpose in telling me as much as you have done?"

Devine did not answer for a moment or two, and Brooke was sensible of a slight bewilderment as he watched him. This was, he knew, a hard, shrewd man, and yet he had apparently permitted Saxton to beguile him into buying a mine in which nobody but a man whose faculties had been destroyed by alcohol believed. He was also, it seemed, willing to risk a moderate competence in another one which was liable to be jumped at any moment. The thing was almost incomprehensible. [Pg 295]

Then Devine made a sign that he desired attention. "When I told you this, I had a purpose," he said. "We are going to spend a pile of dollars on the Dayspring, and my part of the business lies in the city. Wilkins stays right at the Canopus, and while Allonby goes along with the mine it's too big a contract to reform him. That brings me to the point. I want a man to take charge at the Dayspring under him, and though you were not exactly civil when I made you an offer once before, we might make it worth your while."

Brooke gasped, and felt his face becoming warm.

"I have very little practical experience of mining, sir," he said.

Devine nodded tranquilly. "Allonby has enough for two, but he lets up and loses his grip when the whisky comes along," he said. "Still, I guess you have got something that's worth rather more to me. You couldn't help having it. It was born in you."

Brooke sat silent for a space, with an unpleasant realization of the fact that Devine's keen eyes were watching him. He had come there with the intention of severing his connection with the man, and now that astonishing offer had been made him in the very room he had not long ago crept into with the purpose of plundering him. Every detail of what had happened on that eventful night came back to him, and he remembered, with a sickening sense of degradation, how he had leaned upon the table where Devine was sitting then and permitted the startled girl to force her thanks on him. Then he raised his head, as Devine, turning a little, looked at him with disconcerting steadiness. [Pg 296]

"You have more reasons than the one you gave me for not taking hold?" he said.

Suddenly, Brooke made up his mind. He was sick of the career of deception, and had already meant to put an end to it, while he now seized upon the opportunity of placing a continuance in it out of the question.

"I have, and can't help fancying that one of them is a tolerably good one," he said. "You see, you

really know very little about me."

"Go on," said Devine, drily. "I'm generally quite willing to back my opinion of a mine or man. Besides, I have picked up one or two pointers about you."

"Still," said Brooke, very slowly, while his face grew set, "you don't know why I came here to build that flume for you."

Then he gasped with astonishment, for Devine laughed.

"Well," he said, drily, "I guess I do."

Brooke, who lost command of himself, rose abruptly, and stood looking down on him, with one quivering hand clenched on the edge of the table. [Pg 297]

"You know I meant to jump the claim?" he said.

"I had a notion that you meant to try."

Then there was a curious silence, and the two men remained motionless, looking at one another for a space, the younger one leaning somewhat heavily upon the table, with the crimson showing through the bronze in his face, the elder one watching him with a little grim smile. There was also a suggestion of sardonic amusement in it at which the other winced, as he would scarcely have done had Devine struck him.

"And you let me stay on?" he said at length.

"I did. It was plain you couldn't hurt me, and there was a kind of humor in the thing. I had just to put my hand down and squelch you when I felt like it."

Brooke recognized that he had deserved this, but he had never felt the same utter sense of insignificance that he did just then. His companion evidently did not even consider it worth while to be angry with him, and he wondered vacantly at his folly in even fancying that he or Saxton could prove a match for such a man.

Then Devine made a little gesture. "Hadn't you better sit down? We're not quite through yet."

Brooke did as he suggested.

"Still——" he said.

Devine smiled again. "You don't quite understand? Well, I'll try to make it plain. You make about the poorest kind of claim-jumper I ever ran up against, and I've handled quite a few in my time. It's not your fault. You haven't it in you. If you had, you'd have stayed right with it, and not let the dam-building get hold of you so that you scarcely remembered what you came here for. You couldn't help that either." [Pg 298]

To be turned inside out in this fashion was almost too disconcerting to be exasperating, and Brooke sat stupidly silent for a moment or two.

"After all, we need not go into that," he said. "I suppose what I meant to do requires no defence in this country, but while I am by no means proud of it, I should never have undertaken it had you not sold me a worthless ranch. I purposed doing nothing more than getting my six thousand dollars back."

"You figure that would have contented the man behind you?"

Brooke was once more startled, for Devine's penetration appeared almost uncanny, but he remembered that he, at least, owed a little to his confederate.

"You think there was another man?" he said.

Devine laughed. "I guess I'm sure. You don't know enough to fix up a thing of this kind. Who is he?"

"That," said Brooke, drily, "is rather more than I feel at liberty to tell you. I have, however, broken with him once for all." [Pg 299]

Devine made a little gesture which implied that the point was of no great importance. "Well," he said, "I guess I've no great cause to be afraid of him, if he was content to have you for a partner. The question is—Are you going to take my offer?"

"You are asking me seriously?"

"I am. It seems to me I sized you up correctly quite a while ago, and you have had about enough claim-jumping. Now, I don't know that I blame you, and, anyway, if you had very little sense, it showed you had some grit. As the mining laws stand, it's a legitimate occupation, and you tell me you only figured on getting your dollars back. Well, if you want them, you can work for them at a reasonable salary."

Brooke was once more astonished. Sentiment, it appeared, counted for as little with Devine as it had done with Saxton, and with both of them business was simply and solely a question of dollars.

"Then you disclaim all responsibility for your agent's doings?" he said.

"No," said Devine, drily. "If Slocum had swindled you, it would have been different, but you made a foolish deal, and you have got to stand up to it. Nobody was going to stop you surveying that land before you bought it, or getting a man who knew its value to do it for you. I'm offering you the option of working for those six thousand dollars. Do you take it?"

[Pg 300]

Brooke scarcely considered. The money was no longer the chief inducement, for, as Devine had expressed it, the work had got hold of him, and he was sensible of a growing belief in his capabilities, while he now fancied he saw his opportunity.

"Yes," he said, simply.

Devine nodded. "Then we'll go into the thing right now," he said. "You'll start for the Dayspring soon as you can to-morrow."

An hour had passed before they had arranged everything, and it seemed to one of them that it was, under the circumstances, a somewhat astonishing compact they made. What the other thought about it did not appear, but he was one who was seldom very much mistaken in his estimate of the character of his fellow-men. Then, as it happened, Brooke came upon Barbara in the log-walled hall as he was leaving the ranch, and stood still a moment irresolute. Whether Devine would tell her or his wife what had passed between them he did not know, but it appeared very probable, and just then he almost shrank from meeting her. It did not, however, occur to him to ask himself how she happened to be there.

"So you are not going out on the trail that leads to nowhere in particular, after all?" she said.

Brooke showed his astonishment. "You knew what Devine meant to offer me?"

"Of course!" and Barbara smiled. "I don't even mind admitting that I think he did wisely."

[Pg 301]

"Now, I wonder why?"

Barbara laughed softly. "Don't you think the question is a little difficult, or do you expect me to present you with a catalogue of your virtues?"

"I'm afraid the latter is out of the question. You would want, at least, several items."

"And you imply that I should have a difficulty in finding them?"

Brooke had spoken lightly, partly because the interview with Devine had put a strain on him, and he dare scarcely trust himself just then, but a tide of feeling swept him away, and his face grew suddenly grim. The girl was very alluring, and her little smile showed plainly that she had reposed her confidence in him.

"Yes," he said, a trifle hoarsely, "you would have the greatest difficulty in finding one, and I am almost glad that I am going away to-morrow. Such a man as I am is scarcely fit to speak to you."

Barbara was, though she did not show it, distinctly startled. She had never heard the man speak in that fashion, and his set face and vibrant voice were new to her. Indeed, she had now and then wondered whether he ever really let himself go. Still, she looked at him quietly, and, noticing the swollen veins on his forehead, and the glow in his eyes, decided it would not be advisable to admit that she attached much importance to what he had said. He was, she fancied, fit for any rashness just then.

[Pg 302]

"I suppose we, all of us, have moods of self-depreciation occasionally," she said. "Still, one would not have fancied that you were unduly morbid, and one part of that little speech was a trifle inexplicable."

Brooke laughed curiously, but the girl noticed that one of his lean, hard hands was closed as he looked down on her.

"There are times when one has to be one's self, and civilities don't seem to count," he said. "I am glad that I am going away, because if I stayed here I should lose the last shred of my self-respect. As a matter of fact, I have very little left, but that little is valuable, if only because it was you who gave it me."

"Still, one would signally fail to see how you could lose it here."

Brooke stood still, looking at her with signs of struggle, and, she could almost fancy, passion, in his set face; and then made a little gesture, which seemed to imply that he had borne enough.

"You will probably understand it all by and by," he said. "I can only ask you not to think too hardly of me when that happens."

Then, as one making a strenuous effort, he turned abruptly away, and Barbara, who let him go, went back to the room where her sister sat, very thoughtfully.

Brooke in the meanwhile swung savagely along the trail, beneath the shadowy pines, for he recognized, with a painful distinctness, that Barbara Heathcote's view of his conduct was by no means likely to coincide with Devine's, and he could picture her disgust and anger when the revelation came, while it was only now, when he would in all probability never meet her on the same terms again, he realized the intensity of his longing for the girl. He had also, he felt, succeeded in making himself ridiculous by a display of sentimentality that must have been

[Pg 303]

incomprehensible to her, and though that appeared of no great importance relatively, it naturally did not tend to console him. When he reached his tent Jimmy stared at him.

"I guess you look kind of raised," he said. "Where's your hat?"

Brooke laughed hoarsely. "I believe I must have left it at the ranch. Still, that's not so very astonishing, because, even if I didn't do it altogether, I came very near losing my head."

Jimmy again surveyed him, with a grin. "Devine," he said, suggestively, "has been giving you whisky, and it mixed you up a little? That's what comes of drinking tea."

Brooke made no answer, though a swift flush rose to his face, as he remembered his half-coherent speeches at the ranch, and the astonishment in the girl's eyes, for it seemed probable that the explanation that had occurred to Jimmy had also suggested itself to her. Then he smiled grimly, as he decided that it did not greatly matter, after all, since she could not think more hardly of him than she would do when the truth came out presently.

[Pg 304]

[Pg 305]

XXII.

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

It was already late at night, but the mounted mail carrier had not reached the Dayspring mine, and Allonby, who was impatiently waiting news of certain supplies and plant, had insisted on Brooke sitting up with him. It was also raining hard, and, in spite of the glowing stove, the shanty reeked with damp, while there was a steady splashing upon the iron roof above. Now and then a trickle descended from a defective joint in it, and formed a rivulet upon the earthen floor, or fizzled into a puff of steam upon the corroded iron pipe which stretched across the room. The latter was strewn with soil-stained clothing, and wet knee-boots with the red mire of the mine still clinging about them.

Brooke lay drowsily in a canvas chair, while Allonby sat at the uncleanly table, with a litter of burnt matches and tobacco ash as well as a steaming glass in front of him. His eyes were bleared and watery, and there were curious little patches of color in his haggard face, while the gorged, blue veins showed upon his forehead. He had been discoursing in a maudlin fashion which Brooke, who had endeavored to make the best of his company during the last three months, found singularly exasperating, but he moved abruptly when a stream from the roof suddenly descended upon his grizzled head.

[Pg 306]

"That," he said, "is one of the trifles a man with a sense of proportion and a contemplative temperament makes light of. The curse of this effete age is its ceaseless striving after luxury."

Brooke laughed softly, as he watched the water run down the moralizer's nose. "It is," he said, "at least, not often attainable in this country."

"Which is precisely why men grow rich in the Colonies. Now, here are you and I, who at one time in our lives required four or five courses for dinner, not only subsisting, but thriving upon grindstone bread, flapjacks, molasses, and the contents of certain cans from Chicago, which one cannot even be certain are what they are averred to be, though the Colonist consumes them with the faith that asks no questions."

"I fancy you are, in one respect, taking a good deal for granted," Brooke said, drily.

Allonby made a deprecatory gesture. "Being, although you might occasionally find a difficulty in crediting it, one myself, I am seldom mistaken about the points of a man who has moved in good society, though I may admit that it was the ruin of me. Had I been brought up in this country, one-third of my income would have sufficed me, and I should have made provision for my grey hairs with the rest, while I fed, like a Canadian, out of vessels of enamel and the useful wood pulp. As it was, I wasted my substance, and, unfortunately, that of other men who had undue confidence in me, in London clubs, with the result that I am now what is sometimes termed a waster in the land of promise."

[Pg 307]

"It is not very difficult to get through a good deal of one's substance in a certain fashion, even in Canada," and Brooke glanced reflectively at the array of empty bottles.

"That point of view, although a popular one, is illusory, which can be demonstrated by mathematics. A man, it is evident, cannot drink more than a certain quantity of whisky. His physical capacity precludes it, while even in my bad weeks the cost of it could not well exceed some eight dollars. Excluding that item, one could live contentedly here at an outlay of one dollar daily, if he did not, unfortunately, possess a memory."

It seemed to Brooke that this latter observation might be true, if one had, at least, any hope for the future. Allonby's day was nearly done, and he had only the past to return and trouble him, but Brooke felt just then that, in spite of his pride in the profession which had been rather forced upon him than adopted, he had very little to look forward to, since he had, by his own folly, made

the one thing he longed for above all others unattainable. He had been three months at the Dayspring, and had heard nothing from Barbara. She must, he fancied, have discovered the part he had played by this time, and would blot him out of her memory, while now, when it seemed conceivable that he might make his mark in Canada, all that this implied had become valueless to him. Wealth and celebrity might perhaps be attainable, but there would be nobody to share them with, for he realized that Barbara Heathcote did not possess the easy toleration on certain points which appeared to characterize Saxton and Devine. In the meanwhile, Allonby did not seem pleased with his silence.

[Pg 308]

"You are," he said, a trifle quickly, "by no means an entertaining companion for a man who is at times too sensible of the irony of his position, and appear to be without either comprehension or sympathy. Here am I, who was accustomed to fare sumptuously in London clubs, living on the husks and other metaphorical et ceteras, and endeavoring—for that is all it amounts to—to console myself with profitless reflections. I am, of course, in the elegant simile of the country, a tank, or whisky-skin, but I am still a man who found a fortune and stripped himself of everything but whisky to develop it."

Brooke laughed to conceal his impatience. "Then you are as sure as ever about the silver? We have got a good way down without finding very much sign of it."

Allonby rose, with a little flush in his watery eyes, and leaned, somewhat unsteadily, upon the table.

[Pg 309]

"It is the one thing I believe in. The rest, and I once had my fancies and theories like other men, are shadows and chimeras now. Only the silver is real—and there. All I made in Canada is sunk in this mine, which no longer belongs to me, and when I make the great discovery not a dollar will fall to my share."

"Then it is a little difficult to understand what you are so anxious to find the silver for."

Allonby swayed a trifle on his feet, but the gleam in his eyes grew brighter. "You," he said, "are, as I pointed out, curiously deficient in comprehension, but you never won a case of medals that were coveted by the keenest brains among all those who hoped to enter your profession. Of what use are dollars to a whisky-tank who will, in all probability, be found mangled at the bottom of the shaft one day? Still, when I made the calculations we are now working on, there was no man in the province with a knowledge equal to mine, and I ask no more than to prove them right."

Brooke sat silent, because he could think of nothing appropriate to say. He had asked the question lightly, and had got his answer. It made the attitude of this broken-down wreck of humanity plain to him, and he vaguely realized the pathos underlying it. Possessed by the one fancy, the man had lost or flung away all that life might have offered him, while he clung to the apparently worthless mine, not, it seemed, for the dollars that success might bring him, but from pride in his professional skill and the faculties which had long deserted him. That, as he said, was his one point of faith, and he lived only to vindicate it.

[Pg 310]

Then Allonby lurched unsteadily to the door, and held his hand up as he opened it.

"Listen!" he said. "Is that the mail carrier? I must know when we'll get those drills and the giant powder before I sleep. The sinking goes on slowly, and life is very uncertain when one drinks whisky as I do."

Brooke listened, and, for a time, heard only the splash from the pine boughs and the patter of the rain, while Allonby's frail figure cut against the white mists that slid past the doorway. Then a faint, measured thudding came up the valley, and he remembered afterwards that he felt a curious sense of anticipation. The sound swelled into the beat of horse hoofs floundering and slipping on the wet gravel, and Brooke smiled at his eagerness, for though he had, he fancied, cut himself off from all that concerned his past in England, he had never been quite able to await the approach of a mail carrier with complete indifference, and he felt the suggestiveness of the drumming of the weary horse's feet. There had been a time when he had listened with beating heart while it drew nearer down the shadowy trail, and once more a little thrill ran through him.

[Pg 311]

Then there was a clatter of hoofs on wet rock, and a shout, as a man pulled his jaded beast up in the darkness outside, while a dripping packet was flung into the room. Brooke could see nobody, but a voice said, "That's your lot; I guess I can't stop. Got to make Truscott's before I sleep, and the beast's gone lame."

The rattle of hoofs commenced again, and Brooke sat idly watching Allonby, who was tearing open the packet with shaky fingers.

"The tools and powder are coming up," he said. "Hallo! Excuse my inadvertence, Brooke. This one's apparently for you."

Brooke caught the big blue envelope tossed across to him, and when he had taken out several precisely folded papers and glanced at the sheet of stiff legal writing, sat still, staring vacantly straight in front of him. The uncleanly shanty faded from before his eyes, and he was not even conscious that Allonby, who had laid down his own correspondence, was watching him until the latter broke the silence.

"I know that style of envelope, but it is, presumably, too long since you left England for it to contain any unpleasant reference to a debt," he said. "Has somebody been leaving you a

fortune?"

Brooke smiled in a curious, listless fashion. "No," he said, "not a fortune. Still, I suppose one could almost consider it a competence."

[Pg 312]

"Then you appear singularly free from the satisfaction one would naturally expect from a man who had just received any news of that description," said Allonby, drily.

Brooke's face grew suddenly grim. "If it had come a little earlier, it might have been of much more use to me."

Allonby had, apparently, sufficient sense left in him to recognize that any further observations he might feel inclined to make were scarcely likely to be appreciated just then, and once more Brooke sat motionless, with the letter in his hand, and the inclosures that had slipped from his fingers strewn about the floor. He had been left with what any one with simple tastes would have considered a moderate competence, at least, in Canada, by the man he had quarrelled with, and he gathered from the lawyer's letter that, if he wished it, there would be no difficulty in at once realizing the property. It naturally amounted to considerably more than the six thousand dollars he had sold his self-respect for, and at the moment he was only sensible of a bitter regret that the news had not come to hand a little earlier.

If that had happened, he would never have made the attempt upon the papers, and might have broken with Saxton without the necessity for any explanation with Devine. He had no doubt that the latter had acquainted his wife and Barbara, which meant that he would be branded for ever as rather worse than a thief in her eyes. The money which would have saved him, and might have bought him happiness, was he felt, almost useless to him now.

[Pg 313]

In the meanwhile, Allonby had turned to his own correspondence, and the shanty was very still, save for the patter of the rain outside and the doleful wailing of the pines. Brooke gazed at the letter he held with vacant eyes, but though he scarcely seemed to notice his surroundings, he could long afterwards recall them clearly—the litter of soil-stained garments and mining boots, the crackling stove, the rain that flashed through the stream of light outside the open door, and Allonby's haggard face and wasted figure.

Then it occurred to him that there was a discrepancy between the time when the will was made and that on which the news of it had been sent to him, and as he stooped to pick up the papers from the floor, he came upon a black-edged envelope. He recognized the writing, and, hastily opening it, found it was from an English kinsman.

"You will be sorry to hear that Austin Dangerfield has succumbed at last," he read. "He was, perhaps, a little hard upon you at one time, but Clara and I felt that he was right in his objections to Lucy all along, and no doubt you realized it when she married Shafton Coulson. However that may be, the old man mentioned you frequently a little before the end, and seemed to feel the fact that he had driven you away, which was, no doubt, what induced him to leave you most of his personal property. Baron and Rodway will have sent you a schedule, and, as one of the executors, I would say that we had some difficulty in finding where to address you until we heard from Coulson that Lucy had met you. There is one point I feel I should refer to. As you will notice, part of the estate is represented by stock in a Canadian mine. Austin, whose mental grip was getting a trifle slack latterly, appears to have been led rather too much by Shafton Coulson in the stock operations he was fond of dabbling in, and I fancy it was by the latter's advice he made the purchase. There is very little demand for the shares on the market here, but you will perhaps be able to form an accurate opinion concerning their value."

[Pg 314]

Brooke laid down the letter, and took up the lawyers' schedule. Then he laughed curiously as he realized that a considerable proportion of his legacy was represented by shares in the Dayspring Consols. One of the mines, he knew, was liable to be jumped at any moment, and the other was worthless, unless the opinion of his half-crazy companion could be taken seriously. There were one or two more small gashes in the hillside, concerning which the miners he had questioned appeared distinctly dubious.

Allonby turned at the sound. "One would scarcely have fancied from that laugh that you were feeling very much more pleased than you were when you hadn't gone into the affair," he said.

[Pg 315]

"Then it was a tolerably accurate reflection of my state of mind," said Brooke. "This legacy, which came along two or three months after the time when it would have been of vital importance to me, consists in part of shares in this very mine. That is naturally about the last thing I would have desired or expected, and results from one of the curious conjunctions of circumstances which, I suppose, come about now and then. When the thing one has longed for does come along, it is generally at a time when the wish for it has gone."

"Commiseration would be a little unnecessary," said Allonby, with unusual quietness. "The competence you mention will certainly prove a fortune before you are very much older."

"I don't feel by any means as sure of it as you seem to be. Still, under the circumstances, it doesn't greatly matter."

Allonby, with some difficulty, straightened himself. "I am," he said, not without a certain dignity which almost astonished Brooke, "a worn-out wastrel and a whisky-tank, but I'll live to show the men who look down on me with contemptuous pity what I was once capable of. That is all I am holding on to life for. It is naturally not a very pleasant one to a man with a memory."

For a moment he stood almost erect, and then collapsed suddenly into his chair. "Devine has a brain of another and very much lower order, though it is of a kind that is apt to prove more useful to its possessor, and in his own sphere there are very few men to equal him. If I do not fall down the shaft in the meanwhile, we will certainly show this province what we can do together. And now I believe it is advisable for me to go to bed, while I feel to some extent capable of reaching it. My head is at least as clear as usual, but my legs are unruly."

[Pg 316]

[Pg 317]

XXIII. BROOKE'S CONFESSION.

The Pacific express had just come in, and the C. P. R. wharf at Vancouver was thronged with a hurrying crowd when Barbara Heathcote and her sister stood leaning upon the rails of the *s. s. Islander*. Beneath them the big locomotive which had hauled the dusty cars over the wild Selkirk passes was crawling slowly down the wharf with bell tolling dolefully, and while a feathery steam roared aloft above the tiers of white deckhouses a stream of passengers flowed up the gangway. Barbara, who was crossing to Victoria, watched them languidly until an elaborately-dressed woman ascended, leaning upon the arm of a man whose fastidious neatness of attire and air of indifference to the confusion about him proclaimed him an Englishman. She made a very slight inclination when the woman smiled at her.

"It is fortunate she can't very well get at us here," she said, glancing at the pile of baggage which cut them off from the rest of the deck. "Three or four hours of Mrs. Coulson's conversation would be a good deal more than I could appreciate."

"You need scarcely be afraid of it in the meanwhile," said Mrs. Devine. "It is a trifle difficult to hear one's self speak."

[Pg 318]

"For which her husband is no doubt thankful. Until I met them once or twice I wondered why that man wore an habitually tired expression. Of course there are Englishmen who consider it becoming, but one feels that in his case his looks are quite in keeping with his sensations."

Mrs. Devine laughed. "You don't like the woman?"

"No," said Barbara, reflectively. "I really don't know why I shouldn't, but I don't. She certainly poses too much, and the last time I had the pleasure of listening to her at the Wheelers' house she patronized me and the country too graciously. The country can get along without her commendation."

"I wonder if she asked you anything about Brooke?"

"No," said Barbara, a trifle sharply. "Where could she have met him?"

"In England. She seemed to know he was at the Dayspring, and managed, I fancy, intentionally, to leave me with the impression that they were especial friends in the Old Country. I wonder if she knows he will be on board to-day?"

"Mr. Brooke is crossing with us?" said Barbara, with an indifference her sister had some doubts about.

"Grant seemed to expect him. He is going to buy American mining machinery or something of the kind in Victoria. I believe it was he Grant left us to meet."

[Pg 319]

Barbara said nothing, though she was sensible of a curious little thrill. She had not seen Brooke since the evening he had behaved in what was an apparently inexplicable fashion at the ranch, and had heard very little about him. She, however, watched the wharf intently, until she saw Devine accost a man with a bronzed face who was quietly threading his way through the hurrying groups, and her heart beat a trifle faster than usual as they moved together towards the steamer. Then almost unconsciously she turned to see if the woman they had been discussing was also watching for him, but she had by this time disappeared. Barbara, for no very apparent reason, felt a trifle pleased at this.

In the meanwhile Devine was talking rapidly to Brooke.

"Here is a letter for you that came in with yesterday's mail," he said. "Struck anything more encouraging at the mine since you wrote me?"

"No," said Brooke. "I'm afraid we haven't. Still, Allonby seems as sure as ever and is most anxious to get the new plant in."

Devine appeared thoughtful. "You'll have to knock off the big boring machine anyway. The mine's just swallowing dollars, and we'll have to go a trifle slower until some more come in. English directors didn't seem quite pleased last mail. Somebody in their papers has been slating the Dayspring properties, and there's a good deal of stock they couldn't work off. In fact, they

[Pg 320]

seemed inclined to kick at my last draft, and we'll want two or three more thousand dollars before the month is up."

Brooke would have liked to ask several questions, but between the clanging of the locomotive bell and the roar of steam conversation was difficult, and when they stopped a moment at the foot of the gangway Devine's voice only reached him in broken snatches.

"Got to keep your hand down—spin every dollar out. I'm writing straight about another draft. Use the wires the moment you strike anything that would give the stock a lift."

"If you're going I guess it's 'bout time you got aboard," said a seaman, who stood ready to launch the gangway in; and Brooke, making a sign of comprehension to Devine, went up with a run.

Then the ropes were cast off, and he sat down to open his letter under the deckhouse, as with a sonorous blast of her whistle the big white steamer swung out from the wharf. It was from the English kinsman who had previously written him, and confirmed what Devine had said.

"I'm sorry you are holding so much of the Canadian mining stock," he read. "You are, perhaps, better posted about the mine than I am, but though the shares were largely underwritten, I understand the promoters found it difficult to place a proportion of the rest, and my broker told me that several holders would be quite willing to get out at well under par already."

[Pg 321]

It was not exactly good news from any point of view, and Brooke was pondering over it somewhat moodily when he heard a voice he recognized, and looking up saw a woman with pale blue eyes smiling at him.

"Lucy!" he said, with evident astonishment, but no great show of pleasure.

"You looked so occupied that I was really afraid to disturb you," said the woman. "Shafton is talking Canadian politics with somebody, and I wonder if you are too busy to find a chair for me."

Brooke got one, and his companion, who was the woman Barbara had alluded to as Mrs. Coulson, sat down, and said nothing for a while as she gazed back across the blue inlet with evident appreciation. This was, in one respect, not astonishing, though so far as Brooke could remember she had never been remarkably fond of scenery, for the new stone city that rose with its towering telegraph poles roof beyond roof up the hillside, gleaming land-locked waterway, and engirdling pines with the white blink of ethereal snow high above them all, made a very fair picture that afternoon.

"This," she said at last, "would really be a beautiful country if everything wasn't quite so crude."

[Pg 322]

"It is certainly not exactly adapted to landscape-gardening," said Brooke. "A two-thousand foot precipice and a hundred-league forest is a trifle big. Still, I'm not sure its inhabitants would appreciate such praise."

Lucy Coulson laughed. "They are like it in one respect—I don't mean in size—and delightfully touchy on the subject. Now, there was a girl I met not long ago who appeared quite displeased with me when I said that with a little improving one might compare it to Switzerland. I told her I scarcely felt warranted in dragging paradise in, if only because of some of its characteristic customs. I think her name was Devane, or something equally unusual, though it might have been her married sister's. Perhaps it's Canadian."

She fancied a trace of indignation crept into the man's bronzed face, but it vanished swiftly.

"One could scarcely call Miss Heathcote crude," he said.

Lucy Coulson did not inquire whether he was acquainted with the lady in question, but made a mental note of the fact.

"It, of course, depends upon one's standard of comparison," she said. "No doubt she comes up to the one adopted in this country. Still, though the latter is certainly pretty, what is keeping—you—in it now?"

[Pg 323]

"Then you have heard of my good fortune?"

"Of course! Shafton and I were delighted. Your executors wrote for your address to me."

Brooke started visibly as he recognized that she must in that case have learned the news a month before he did, for a good deal had happened in the meanwhile.

"Then it is a little curious that you did not mention it in the note you sent inviting me to meet you at the Glacier Lake," he said.

Lucy Coulson lifted her eyes to his a moment, and then glanced aside, while there was a significant softness in her voice as she said, "The news seemed so good that I wanted to be the one who told it you."

Again Brooke felt a disconcerting sense of embarrassment, and because he had no wish that she should recognize this looked at her steadily.

"It apparently became of less importance when I did not come," he said with a trace of dryness. "There is a reliable postal service in this country. Do you remember exactly what day you went to the Lake on?"

Mrs. Coulson laughed, and made a little half-petulant gesture. "I fancied you did not deserve to hear it when you could not contrive to come forty miles to see me. Still, I think I can remember the day. Shafton had to be in Vancouver on the Wednesday——"

[Pg 324]

She told him in another moment, and Brooke was sensible of a sudden thrill of anger that was for the most part a futile protest against the fact that his destiny should lie at the mercy of a vain woman's idle fancy, for had he known on the day she mentioned he would never have made the attempt upon Devine's papers. Barbara Heathcote, he decided, doubtless knew by this time what had brought him to the ranch on the eventful night, and even if she did not the imposition he had been guilty of then remained as a barrier between him and her. After permitting her to give him credit for courage and a desire to watch over her safety he dare not tell her he had come as a thief. Still, he recognized that it was, after all, illogical to blame his companion for his own folly.

"Harford," she said, gently, "are you very vexed with me?"

Brooke smiled in a somewhat strained fashion. "No," he said, "I scarcely think I am, and I have, at least, no right to be. I don't know whether you will consider it a sufficient excuse, but I was very busy on the day in question. I was, you see, under the unfortunate necessity of earning my living."

"I think there was a time when you would not have let that stand in the way, but men are seldom very constant, are they?"

Brooke made no attempt to controvert the assertion. It seemed distinctly wiser to ignore it, since his companion apparently did not remember that she had now a husband who could hardly be expected to appreciate any unwavering devotion offered her, which was a fact that had its importance in Brooke's eyes, at least. Then she turned towards him with disconcerting suddenness.

[Pg 325]

"Why don't you go home now you have enough to live, with a little economy, as you were meant to do?" she said. "This country is no place for you."

Brooke, who did not remember that she previously endeavored to lead up to the question, started, for it was one which he had not infrequently asked himself of late, and the answer that the opportunity of proving his capabilities as a dam-builder and mining engineer had its attractions was, he knew, not quite sufficient in itself. Then, as it happened, Barbara Heathcote and Mrs. Devine, who appeared in the companion, came towards them along the deck, and Lucy Coulson noticed the glow in his eyes that was followed by a sudden hardening of his face. Perhaps she guessed a little, or it was done out of wantonness, for she laid her white-gloved hand upon his arm and leaned forward a trifle.

"Harford," she said, looking up at him, "once upon a time you gave me your whole confidence."

Brooke hoped his face was expressionless, for he was most unpleasantly sensible of that almost caressing touch upon his arm, as well as of the fact that his attitude, or, at least, that of his companion, was distinctly liable to misconception by any one aware that she was another man's wife. He had no longer any tenderness for her, and she had in any case married Shafton Coulson, who, so far as he had heard, made her a very patient as well as considerate husband.

[Pg 326]

"That was several years ago," he said.

Lucy Coulson laughed, and, though it is probable that she had seen them approach, turned with a little start that seemed unnecessarily apparent as Barbara and Mrs. Devine came up, while Brooke hoped his face did not suggest what he was thinking. As a matter of fact, it was distinctly flushed, which Barbara naturally noticed. She would have passed, but that Mrs. Coulson stopped her with a gesture.

"So glad to see you!" she said. "Can't you stay a little and talk to us? One is out of the breeze under the deck-house here. Harford, there are two unoccupied chairs yonder."

Brooke wished she would not persist in addressing him as Harford, but he brought the chairs, and Mrs. Devine, who had her own reasons for falling in with the suggestion, sat down. Barbara had no resource but to take the place beside her, and Lucy Coulson smiled at both of them.

"I believe Mrs. Devine mentioned that you had met Mr. Brooke," she said to the girl. "He is, of course, a very old friend of mine."

[Pg 327]

She contrived to give the words a significance which Brooke winced at, but he sat watching Barbara covertly while the others talked, or rather listened while Lucy Coulson did. Barbara scarcely glanced at him, but he fancied that Devine had not told her yet, or she would not have joined a group which included him at all. The position was not exactly a pleasant one, but he could think of no excuse for going away, and listened vacantly. Lucy Coulson, as it happened, was discoursing upon Canada, which when she did not desire to please a Canadian was a favorite topic of hers. Barbara, however, on this occasion only watched her with a little reposeful smile, and so half an hour slipped by while, with masts swinging lazily athwart the blue, the white-painted steamer rolled along, past rocky islets shrouded in dusky pines, across a shining sea above which white lines of snow gleamed ethereally.

Mrs. Coulson, however, had no eyes to spare for any of it, for when they were not fixed upon the girl she was watching Brooke.

"Some of the men we met in the mountains were delightfully inconsequent," she said at length. "There was one called Saxton at a mine, who spent a good deal of one afternoon telling us about the reforms that ought to be made in the administration of this province, and which I fancy he intended to effect. It was, of course, not a subject I was greatly interested in, but the man was so much in earnest that one had to listen to him, and Shafton told me afterwards that he was, where business was concerned, evidently a great rascal. Shafton, you know, enjoys listening quietly and afterwards turning people inside out for inspection. Still, perhaps, it was a little unwise to single the man out individually. There is always a risk of somebody who hears you being a friend of the person when you do that kind of thing—and now I remember he mentioned Mr. Brooke."

[Pg 328]

Brooke noticed that Barbara cast a swift glance at him, and wondered with sudden anger if Lucy Coulson had not already done him harm enough. Then Barbara turned towards the latter.

"Saxton," she said quietly, "is an utterly unprincipled man. I really do not think we have many like him in this country. You probably mistook his reference to Mr. Brooke."

Mrs. Coulson laughed. "Of course, I may have done, though I almost think he said Harford was a partner of his. Perhaps, however, he had a purpose in telling us that, for he had been trying to sell Shafton some land company's shares, though if it hadn't been true he would scarcely have ventured to mention it."

There was a sudden silence, and Brooke, who felt Barbara's eyes upon him, heard the splash of water along the steamer's plates and the throbbing of the screw. He also saw that Mrs. Devine was rather more intent than usual, and that Lucy Coulson was wondering at the effect of what she had said. He could, he fancied, acquit her of any ill intent, but that was no great consolation, for he could not controvert her assertion, and he felt that now she had mentioned the condemning fact his one faint chance was to let Barbara have the explanation from his own lips instead of asking it from Devine. Still, he could scarcely do so when the rest were there, and Lucy Coulson, at least, showed no intention of leaving him and the girl alone. It was, in fact, almost an hour later when her husband crossed the deck and she rose.

[Pg 329]

"Shafton has nobody to talk to, and one has to remember their duty now and then," she said.

Then as the steamer swung round a nest of reefs that rose out of a white swirl of tide the sea breeze swept that side of the deckhouse and Mrs. Devine departed for another wrap or shawl. Lifting her head Barbara looked at the man steadily.

"Was that woman's story true?" she said.

Brooke made a little gesture which implied that he attempted no defence.

"It was," he said.

A faint spark crept into Barbara's eyes, and a tinge of color into her cheek. "You know what you are admitting?"

"I am afraid I do."

Barbara Heathcote had a temper, and though she usually held it in check it swept her away just then.

[Pg 330]

"Then, though we only discovered it afterwards, you knew that Saxton was scheming against my brother-in-law, and bought up the timber-rights to extort money from him?"

Again Brooke made a little gesture, and the girl, who seemed stirred as he had scarcely believed her capable of being, straightened herself rigidly.

"And yet you crept into his house, and permitted us—it is very hard to say it—to make friends with you! Had you no sense of fitness? Can't you even speak?"

Brooke was too confused, and the girl too furious, for either of them to realize the significance of her anger, since the fact that she had merely permitted him to meet her as an acquaintance at the ranch scarcely seemed to warrant that almost passionate outbreak.

"I'm afraid there is nothing I can plead in extenuation except that Grant Devine's agent swindled me," he said.

Barbara laughed scornfully. "And you felt that would warrant you playing the part you did. Was it a spy's part only, or were you to be a traitor, too?"

Then Brooke, who lost his head, did what was at the moment, at least, a most unwise thing.

"I expect I deserve all you can say or think of me," he said. "Still, I can't help a fancy that you are not quite free from responsibility."

[Pg 331]

"I?" said Barbara, incredulously.

Brooke nodded. "Yes," he said, desperately, "you heard me correctly. Under the circumstances it isn't exactly complimentary or particularly easy to explain. Still, you see, you showed me that the content with my surroundings I was sinking into was dangerous when you came to the Quatomac ranch; and afterwards the more I saw of you the more I realized what the six thousand dollars I hoped to secure from Devine would give me a chance of attaining."

He broke off abruptly, as though afraid to venture further, and Barbara watched him a moment, breathless with anger, with lips set. There was nobody on that part of the deck just then, and the steady pounding of the engines broke through what the man felt to be an especially disconcerting silence. Then she laughed in a fashion that stung him like a whip.

"And you fancied there were girls in this country with anything worth offering who would be content with such a man as you are?" she said. "One has, however, to bear with a good deal that is said about Canada, and perhaps you would have been able to keep the deception that gained the appreciation of one of them up. You are proficient at that kind of thing."

"I am quite aware that the excuse is a very poor one."

[Pg 332]

The girl felt that whether it was dignified or not the relief speech afforded was imperative.

"Haven't you even the wit to urge the one creditable thing you did?"

Brooke contrived to meet her eyes. "You mean when I came into the ranch one night. You don't know that was merely a part of the rest?"

The blood rushed to Barbara's face. "The man was your confederate, and you fell out over the booty—or perhaps you heard me coming and arranged the little scene for my benefit?"

"No," said Brooke, with a harsh laugh. "In that case the climax of it would have been unnecessarily realistic. You may remember that he shot me. Still, since you may as well know the worst of me, it happened that we both came there with the same purpose, which is somewhat naturally accounted for by the fact that your brother-in-law was away that night."

"And you allowed me to sympathize with you for your injury and to fancy——"

Barbara broke off abruptly, for it appeared inadvisable under the circumstances to let him know what motive she had accredited him with.

"My brother-in-law is naturally not aware of this?" she said.

"I, at least, considered it necessary to acquaint him with most of it before I went to the Dayspring. No doubt you will find it difficult to credit that, but if it appears worth while you can of course confirm it. You would evidently have been less tolerant than he has shown himself!"

[Pg 333]

Barbara stood up, and Brooke became sensible of intense relief as he saw Mrs. Devine was approaching with a bundle of wraps.

"I would sooner have sacrificed the mine than continue to have any dealings with you," she said.

Then she turned away, and left him sitting somewhat limply in his chair and staring vacantly at the sea. He saw no more of her during the rest of the voyage, but when two hours later the steamer reached Victoria he went straight to the cable company's office and sent his kinsman in England a message which somewhat astonished him.

"Buy Dayspring on my account as far as funds will go," it read.

[Pg 334]

XXIV.

ALLONBY STRIKES SILVER.

Winter had closed in early, with Arctic severity, and the pines were swathed in white and gleaming with the frost when Brooke stood one morning beside the crackling stove in the shanty he and Allonby occupied at the Dayspring mine. A very small piece of rancid pork was frizzling in the frying-pan, and he was busy whipping up two handfuls of flour with water, to make flapjacks of. He could readily have consumed twice as much alone, for it was twelve hours since his insufficient six o'clock supper, but he realized that it was advisable to curb his appetite. Supplies had run very low, and the lonely passes over which the trail to civilization led were blocked with snow, while it was a matter of uncertainty when the freighter and his packhorse train could force his way in.

When the flour was ready he stirred the stove to a brisker glow, and, crossing the room, flung open the outer door. It was still an hour or two before sunrise, and the big stars scintillated with an intensity of frosty radiance, though the deep indigo of the cloudless vault was paling in color, and the pines were growing into definite form. Here and there a sombre spire or ragged branch rose harshly from the rest, but, for the most part, they were smeared with white, and his eyes were dazzled by the endless vista of dimly-gleaming snow. Towering peak and serrated rampart rose hard and sharp against a background of coldest blue. There was no sound, for the glaciers' slushy feet that fed the streams had hardened into adamant, and a deathlike silence pervaded the frozen wilderness.

[Pg 335]

Brooke felt the cold strike through him with the keenness of steel, and was about to cross the

space between the shanty and the men's log shelter, when a dusky figure, beating its arms across its chest, came out of the latter.

"Are the rest of the boys stirring yet?" he said.

The man laughed, and his voice rang with a curious distinctness through the nipping air.

"I guess we've had the stove lit 'most an hour ago," he said. "They've no use for being frozen, and that's what's going to happen to some of us unless we can make Truscott's before it's dark. Say, hadn't you better change your mind, and come along with us?"

Brooke made a little sign of negation, though it would have pleased him to fall in with the suggestion. Work is seldom continued through the winter at the remoter mines, and he had most unwillingly decided to pay off the men, owing to the difficulty of transporting provisions and supplies. There was, however, a faint probability of somebody attempting to jump the unoccupied claim, and he had of late become infected by Allonby's impatience, while he felt that he could not sit idle in the cities until the thaw came round again. Still, he was quite aware that he ran no slight risk by remaining.

[Pg 336]

"I'm not sure that it wouldn't be wiser, but I've got to stay," he said. "Anyway, Allonby wouldn't come."

The other man dropped his voice a little. "That don't count. If you'll stand in, we'll take him along on the jumper sled. The old tank's 'most played out, and it's only the whisky that's keeping the life in him. He'll go out on the long trail sudden when there's no more of it, and it's going to be quite a long while before the freighter gets a load over the big divide."

Brooke knew that this was very likely, but he shook his head. "I'm half afraid it would kill him to leave the mine," he said. "It's the hope of striking silver that's holding him together as much as the whisky."

"Well," said the man, who laughed softly, "I've been mining and prospecting most of twenty years, and it's my opinion that, except the little you're getting on the upper level, there's not a dollar's worth of silver here. Now I guess Harry will have breakfast ready."

He moved away, and when Brooke went back into the shanty, Allonby came out of an inner room shivering. His face showed grey in the lamplight, and he looked unusually haggard and frail.

[Pg 337]

"It's bitter cold, and I seem to feel it more than I did last year," he said. "We will, however, be beyond the necessity of putting up with any more unpleasantness of the kind long before another one is over. I shall probably feel adrift then—it will be difficult, in my case, to pick up the thread of the old life again."

"If you stay here, I'm not sure you'll have an opportunity of doing it at all," said Brooke. "It's a risk a stronger man than you are might shrink from."

"Still, I intend to take it. We have gone into this before. If I leave Dayspring before I find the silver, I leave it dead."

Brooke made a little gesture of resignation. "Well," he said, "I have done all I could, and now, if you will pour that flour into the pan, we'll have breakfast."

Both men were silent during the frugal meal, for they knew what they had to look forward to, and the cold silence of the lonely land already weighed upon their spirits. Long weeks of solitude must be dragged through before the men who were going south that morning came back again, while there might very well be interludes of scarcity, and hunger is singularly hard to bear with the temperature at forty degrees below. Allonby only trifled with his food, and smiled drily when at last he thrust his plate aside.

[Pg 338]

"Dollars are not to be picked up easily anywhere, and you and I are going to find out the full value of them before the thaw begins again," he said. "We shall, no doubt, also discover how thoroughly nauseated one can become with his companion's company. I have heard of men wintering in the mountains who tried to kill one another."

Brooke laughed. "It's scarcely likely we will go quite as far as that, though I certainly remember two men in the Quatomac Valley who flung everything in the range at each other periodically. One was inordinately fond of green stuff, and his partner usually started the circus by telling him to take his clothes off, and go out like Nebuchadnezzar. They refitted with wood-pulp ware when the proceedings became expensive."

Just then there was a knock upon the door, which swung open, and a cluster of shadowy figures, with their breath floating like steam about them, appeared outside it. One of them flung a deerhide bag into the room.

"We figured we needn't trail quite so much grub along, and I guess you'll want it," a voice said. "Neither of you changed your minds 'bout lighting out of this?"

"I don't like to take it from you, boys," said Brooke, who recognized the rough kindness which had prompted the men to strip themselves of the greater portion of their provisions. "You can't have more than enough for one day's march left."

[Pg 339]

"I guess a man never hits the trail so hard as when he knows he has to," somebody said. "It will

keep us on the rustle till we fetch Truscott's. Well, you're not coming?"

For just a moment Brooke felt his resolution wavering, and, under different circumstances, he might have taken Allonby by force, and gone with them, but by a somewhat involved train of reasoning he felt that it was incumbent upon him to stay on at the mine because Barbara Heathcote had once trusted him. It had been tolerably evident from her attitude when he had last seen her, that she had very little confidence in him now, but that did not seem to affect the question, and most men are a trifle illogical at times.

"No," he said, with somewhat forced indifference. "Still, I don't mind admitting that I wish we were."

The man laughed. "Then I guess we'll pull out. We'll think of you two now and then when we're lying round beside the stove in Vancouver."

Brooke said nothing further. There was a tramp of feet, and the shadowy figures melted into the dimness beneath the pines. Then the last footfall died away, and the silence of the mountains suddenly seemed to grow overwhelming. Brooke turned to Allonby, who smiled.

[Pg 340]

"You will," he said, "feel it considerably worse before the next three months are over, and probably be willing to admit that there is some excuse for my shortcomings in one direction. I have, I may mention, put in a good many winters here."

Brooke swung round abruptly. "I'm going to work in the mine. It's fortunate that one man can just manage that new boring machine."

He left Allonby in the shanty, and toiled throughout that day, and several dreary weeks, during most of which the pines roared beneath the icy gales and blinding snow swirled down the valley. What he did was of very slight effect, but it kept him from thinking, which, he felt, was a necessity, and he only desisted at length from physical incapacity for further labor. The snow, it was evident, had choked the passes, so that no laden beast could make the hazardous journey over them, for the anxiously-expected freighter did not arrive, and there was an increasing scarcity of provisions as the days dragged by; while Brooke discovered that a handful of mouldy flour and a few inches of rancid pork daily is not sufficient to keep a man's full strength in him. Then, when an Arctic frost followed the snow, Allonby fell sick, and one bitter evening, when an icy wind came wailing down the valley, it dawned upon his comrade that his condition was becoming precarious. Saying nothing, he busied himself about the stove, and smiled reassuringly when Allonby turned to him.

[Pg 341]

"Are we to hold a festival to-night, since you seem to be cooking what should keep us for a week?" said the latter.

"I almost fancy it would keep one of us for several days, which, since you do not seem especially capable of getting anything ready for yourself, is what it is intended to do," said Brooke. "I shall probably be that time in making the settlement and getting back again."

"What are you going there for?"

"To bring out the doctor."

Allonby raised his head and looked at him curiously. "Are you sure that, with six or eight feet of snow on the divide, you could ever get there?"

"Well," said Brooke, cheerfully, "I believe I could, and, if I don't, you will be very little worse off than you were before. You see, the provisions will not last two of us more than a few days longer, and you can take it that I will do all I can to get through the snow. Since you are not the only man who is anxious to find the silver, your health is a matter of importance to everybody just now."

Allonby smiled curiously. "We will consider that the reason, and it is a tolerably good one, or I would not let you go. Still, I fancy you have another, and it is appreciated. There is, however, something more to be said. You will find my working plans in the case yonder should anything unexpected happen before you come back. Life, you know, is always a trifle uncertain."

[Pg 342]

"That," said Brooke, decisively, "is morbid nonsense. You will be down the mine again in a week after the doctor comes."

"Well," said Allonby, with a curious quietness, "I should, at least, very much like to find the silver."

Brooke changed the subject somewhat abruptly, and it was an hour later when he shook hands with his comrade and went out into the bitter night with two blankets strapped upon his shoulders. Their parting was not demonstrative, though they realized that the grim spectre with the scythe would stalk close behind each of them until they met again, and Brooke, turning on the threshold, saw Allonby following him with comprehending eyes. Then he suddenly pulled the door to, shutting out the lamplight and the alluring red glow of the stove, and swung forward, knee-deep in dusty snow, into the gloom of the pines. The silence of the great white land was overwhelming, and the frost struck through him.

It was late on the third night when he floundered into a little sleeping settlement, and leaned gasping against the door of the doctor's house before he endeavored to rouse its occupant. The latter stared at him almost aghast when he opened it, lamp in hand, and Brooke reeled, grey in

the face with weariness and sheeted white with frozen snow, into the light.

[Pg 343]

"Steady!" he said, slipping his arm through Brooke's. "Come in here. Now, keep back from the stove. I'll get you something that will fix you up in a minute. You came in from the Dayspring—over the divide? I heard the freighter telling the boys it couldn't be done."

Brooke laughed harshly. "Well," he said, "you see me here, and, if that's not sufficient, you're going to prove the range can be crossed yourself to-morrow."

The doctor was new to that country, and he was very young, or he would, in all probability, not been there at all, but when he heard Brooke's story he nodded tranquilly. "I'm afraid I haven't done any mountaineering, but I had the long-distance snowshoe craze rather bad back in Montreal," he said. "You're not going to give me very much of a lead over the passes, anyway, unless you sleep the next twelve hours."

Brooke, as it happened, slept for six and then set out with the young doctor in blinding snow. He had forty to fifty pounds upon his back now, and once they left the sheltering timber it cost them four strenuous hours to make a thousand feet. Part of that night they lay awake, shivering in the pungent fir smoke in a hollow of the rocks, and started again, aching in every limb, long before the lingering dawn, while the next day passed like a very unpleasant dream with the young doctor. The snow had ceased, and lay without cohesion, dusty and dry as flour, waist-deep where the bitter winds had whirled it in wreaths, while the glare of the white peaks became intolerable under the cloudless sun.

[Pg 344]

For hours they crawled through juniper scrub or stunted wisps of pines, where the trunks the winds had reaped lay piled upon each other in tangled confusion, with the sifting snow blown in to conceal the pitfalls between. By afternoon the doctor was flagging visibly, and white peaks and climbing timber reeled formlessly before his dazzled eyes as he struggled onward the rest of that day. Then, when the pitiless blue above them grew deeper in tint until the stars shone in depths of indigo, and the ranges fading from silver put on dim shades of blueness that enhanced their spotless purity, they stopped again, and made shift to boil the battered kettle in a gully, down which there moaned a little breeze that seared every patch of unprotected skin. The doctor collapsed behind a boulder, and lay there limply while Brooke fed the fire.

"I'm 'most afraid you'll have to fix supper yourself to-night," he said. "Just now I don't quite know how I'm going to start to-morrow, though it will naturally have to be done."

Brooke glanced round at the grim ramparts of ice and snow that cut sharp against the indigo. Night as it was, there was no softness in that scheme of color lighted by the frosty scintillations of the stars, and a shiver ran through his stiffened limbs.

[Pg 345]

"Yes," he said. "Nobody not hardened to it could expect to stand more than another day in the open up here."

He got the meal ready, but very little was said during it, and for a few hours afterwards the doctor lay coughing in the smoke of the fire, while his gum-boots softened and grew hard again as he drew his feet, which pained him intolerably between whiles, a trifle further from the crackling brands. He staggered when at last Brooke, finding that shaking was unavailing, dragged him upright.

"Breakfast's almost ready, and we have got to make the mine by to-night," he said.

The doctor could never remember how they accomplished it, but his lips were split and crusted with coagulated blood, while there seemed to be no heat left in him, when Brooke stopped on a ridge of the hillside as dusk was closing in.

"The mine is close below us. In fact, we should have seen it from where we are," he said.

Worn out as he was, the doctor noticed the grimness of his tone. "The nearer the better," he said. "I don't quite know how I got here, but you scarcely seem at ease."

"I was wondering why Allonby, who does not like the dark, has not lighted up yet," Brooke said, drily. "We will probably find out in a few more minutes."

[Pg 346]

Then he went reeling down the descending trail, and did not stop again until he stood amidst the piles of débris and pine stumps, with the shanty looming dimly in front of him across the little clearing. It seemed very dark and still, and the doctor, who came up gasping, stopped abruptly when his comrade's shout died away. The silence that closed in again seemed curiously eerie.

"He must have heard you at that distance," he said.

"Yes," said Brooke, a trifle hoarsely. "If he didn't, there's only one thing that could have accounted for it."

Then they went on again slowly, until Brooke flung the door of the shanty open. There was no fire in the stove, and the place was very cold, while the darkness seemed oppressive.

"Strike a match—as soon as you can get it done," said the doctor.

Brooke broke several as he tore them off the block with half-frozen fingers, for the Canadian sulphur matches are not usually put up in boxes, and then a pale blue luminescence crept across the room when he held one aloft. It sputtered out, leaving a pungent odor, and thick darkness

closed in again; but for a moment Brooke felt a curious relief.

"He's not here," he said.

The doctor understood the satisfaction in his voice, for his eyes had also turned straight towards the rough wooden bunk, and he had not expected to find it empty. [Pg 347]

"The man must have been fit to walk. Where has he gone?" he said.

Brooke fancied he knew, and, groping round the room, found and lighted a lantern. Its radiance showed that his face was grim again.

"If you can manage to drag yourself as far as the mine, I think it would be advisable," he said. "It seems to me significant that the stove is quite cold. One would fancy there had been no fire in it for several hours now."

The doctor went with him, and somehow contrived to descend the shaft. Brooke leaned out from the ladder, swinging his lantern when they neared the bottom, and his shout rang hollowly among the rocks. There was no answer, and even the doctor, who had never seen Allonby, felt the silence that followed it.

"If the man was as ill as you fancied how could he have got down?" he said.

"I don't know," said Brooke. "Still, I think we shall come upon him not very far away."

They went down a little further into the darkness, and then the prediction was warranted, for Brooke swung off his hat, and the doctor dropped on one knee when Allonby's white face appeared in the moving light. He lay very still, with one arm under him, and, when a few seconds had slipped by, the doctor looked up and, meeting Brooke's eyes, nodded. [Pg 348]

"Yes," he said. "It must have happened at least twelve hours ago. How, I can't tell exactly. Cardiac affection, I fancy. Anyway, not a fall. There is something in his hand, and a bundle of papers beside him."

Brooke glanced away from the dead man, and noticed the stain of giant powder on the rock, and shattered fragments that had not been where they lay when he had last descended. Then he turned again, and took the piece of stone the doctor had, with some difficulty, dislodged from the cold fingers.

"It's heavy," said the latter.

"Yes," said Brooke, quietly. "A considerable percentage of it is either lead or silver. You are no doubt right in your diagnosis; so far as it goes, I'm inclined to fancy I know what brought on the cardiac affection."

The doctor, who said nothing, handed him the papers, and Brooke, who opened them vacantly, started a little when he saw the jagged line, which, in drawings of the kind, usually indicates a break, was now traced across the ore vein in the plan. There was also a scrap of paper, with his name scrawled across it, and he read, "When you have got your dollars back four or five times over, sell out your stock."

He scarcely realized its significance just then, and, moving the lantern a little, looked down on Allonby's face again. It was very white and quiet, and the signs of indulgence had faded from it, while Brooke was sensible of a curious thrill of compassion. [Pg 349]

"I wonder if the thing we long for most invariably comes when it is no use to us?" he said. "Well, we will go back to the shanty."

There was nothing more that any man could do for Allonby until the morrow, and the darkness once more closed in on him, while the flickering light grew fainter up the shaft.

[Pg 350]

XXV.

BARBARA IS MERCILESS.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening when Brooke stopped a moment as he entered the verandah of Devine's house, which stood girt about by sombre pines on a low rise divided by a waste of blackened stumps and branches from the outskirts of Vancouver city. Beneath him rose the clustering roofs and big electric lights, and a little lower still a broad track of silver radiance, athwart which a great ship rode with every spar silhouetted black as ebony, streaked the inlet. Though the frost was arctic in the ranges he had left a few days ago, it was almost warm down there, and he felt that he would have preferred to linger on the verandah, or even go back to his hotel, for the front of the wooden house was brilliantly lighted, and he could hear the chords of a piano.

It was evident that Mrs. Devine was entertaining, and standing there, draped from neck to ankles

in an old fur coat, he felt that he with his frost-nipped face and hard, scarred hands would be distinctly out of place amidst an assembly of prosperous citizens, while he was by no means certain how Mrs. Devine or Barbara would receive him. Often as he had thought of the latter, since he made his confession, he felt scarcely equal to meeting her just then. Still, it was necessary that he should see Devine, who was away at the neighboring city of New Westminster, when Brooke called at his office soon after the Pacific express arrived that afternoon, but had left word that he would be at home in the evening and would expect him; and flinging his cigar away he moved towards the door.

[Pg 351]

A Chinese house boy took his coat from him in the hall, and as he stood under the big lamp it happened that Barbara came out of an adjacent door with two companions. Brooke felt his heart throb, though he did not move, and the girl, who turned her head a moment in his direction, crossed the hall, and vanished through another door. Then he smiled very grimly, for, though she made no sign of being aware of his presence, he felt that she had seen him. This was no more than he had expected, but it hurt nevertheless. In the meanwhile the house boy had also vanished, and it was a minute or two later when Mrs. Devine appeared, but Brooke could not then or afterwards decide whether she had heard the truth concerning him, for, though this seemed very probable, he knew that Barbara could be reticent, and surmised that Devine did not tell his wife everything. In any case, she did not shake hands with him.

"My husband, who has just come home, is waiting for you in his smoking-room," she said. "It is the second door down the corridor."

[Pg 352]

Brooke fancied that she could have been a trifle more cordial, but the fact that she sent nobody to show him the way, at least, was readily accounted for in a country where servants of any kind are remarkably scarce. It also happened that while he proceeded along the corridor one of Barbara's companions turned to her.

"Did you see the man in the hall as we passed through?" she said. "I didn't seem to recognize him."

Barbara was not aware that her face hardened a trifle, but her companion noticed that it did. She had certainly seen the man, and had felt his eyes upon her, while it also occurred to her that he looked worn and haggard, and she had almost been stirred to compassion. He had made no claim to recognition, but his face had not been quite expressionless, and she had seen the wistfulness in it. There was, in fact, a certain forlornness about his attitude which had its effect on her, and it was, perhaps, because of this she had suddenly hardened herself against him.

"He is a Mr. Brooke—from the mine," she said.

"Brooke!" said her companion. "The man from the Dayspring? I should like to talk to him."

Barbara made a little gesture, the meaning of which was not especially plain. She had read the sensational account of the journey Brooke and the doctor had made through the ranges, which had by some means been supplied the press. It made it plain to her that the man was doing and enduring a good deal, and she was not disposed to be unduly severe upon a repentant offender, even though she fancied that nothing he could do would ever reinstate him in the place he once held in her estimation. The difficulty, however, was that she could not be sure he was contrite at all, or had not sent that story to the press himself with a purpose, though she realized that the last course was a trifle unlikely in his case.

[Pg 353]

"Since Grant Devine will probably bring him in you may get your wish," she said, indifferently.

Devine in the meanwhile was gravely turning over several pieces of broken rock which Brooke had handed him.

"Yes," he said, "that's most certainly galena, and carrying good metal by the weight of it. How much of it's lead and how much silver I naturally don't know yet, but, anyway, it ought to leave a good margin on the smelting. You haven't proved the vein?"

"No," said Brooke, "I fancy we are only on the edge of it, but it would have cost me two or three weeks' work to break out enough of rock to form any very clear opinion alone, and I was scarcely up to it. It occurred to me that I had better come down and get the necessary men, though I'm not sure we can contrive to feed them or induce them to come."

[Pg 354]

Devine nodded. "You must have had the toughest kind of time!" he said. "Well, we'll bid double wages, and you can offer that freight contractor his own figure to bring provisions in."

He stopped abruptly with a glance at Brooke's haggard face. "I guess you can hold out another month or two."

"Of course," said Brooke, quietly.

"It's worth while. Allonby was quite dead when you got back to him?"

"Yes, I and the doctor buried him. We used giant powder."

Devine laid down his cigar. "It was a little rough on Allonby, for it was his notion that the ore was there, and now, when it seems we've struck it, it's not going to be any use to him. I guess that man put a good deal more than dollars into the mine."

Brooke, who had lived with Allonby, knew that this was true, but Devine made a little abrupt

gesture which seemed to imply that after all that aspect of the question did not greatly concern them.

"I'll send you every man we can raise," he said. "I've got quite a big credit through from London, and we can cut expenses by letting up a little on the Canopus."

"But you expected a good deal from that mine."

"No," said Devine, drily, "I can't say I did. It's quite a while since we got a good clean up out of it." [Pg 355]

Brooke sat silent, apparently regarding his cigar, for a moment or two. "Are you sure it's wise to tell me so much?" he said. "There are men in this city who would make good use of any information I might furnish them with."

Devine smiled in a curious fashion. "Well," he said, reflectively, "I guess it is. You've had about enough of playing Saxton's game, and, though I don't know that everybody would do it, I'm going to trust you."

"Thank you," said Brooke, quietly.

Devine, who took up his cigar again, made a little movement with his hand. "We'll let that slide. Now when I got the specimen and your note which the doctor sent on I figured I'd increase my holding, and cabled a buying order to London, but I had to pay more for the stock than I expected. It appears that a man, called Cruttenden, had been quietly taking any that was put on the market up."

Brooke knew that his trustee had, as directed, been buying the Dayspring shares, but he desired to ascertain how far Devine's confidence in him went.

"That didn't suggest anything to you?" he said.

"No," said Devine, drily, "it didn't—and I've answered your question once. Besides, the man who snapped up every thing that was offered hadn't waited until you struck the ore. Still, I'd very much like to know what he was buying that stock for." [Pg 356]

Brooke did not tell him. Indeed, he was not exactly sure what had induced him to cable Cruttenden to buy. He had acted on impulse with Barbara's scornful words ringing in his ears, and a vague feeling that to share the risks of the man he had plotted against would be some small solace to him, for he had not at the time the slightest notion that the hasty act of self-imposed penance was to prove remarkably profitable.

"I scarcely think it is worth while worrying over that point," he said. "There are folks in our country with more money than sense, or a good many foreign mines would never be floated, and it is just as likely that the man did not exactly know why he was doing it himself."

Devine laughed. "Well," he said, "we'll go along now and see what the rest are doing."

Brooke would considerably sooner have gone back to his hotel, but Devine persisted, and he was one who usually carried out his purpose. Brooke was accordingly presented to a good many people whom he had never seen before, and did not find remarkably entertaining, though he fancied that most of them appeared a trifle interested when they heard his name. The reason for this did not, however, become apparent until he stopped close by a girl who looked up at him. She was young, but evidently by no means diffident. [Pg 357]

"You are Brooke of the Dayspring, are you not?" she said, making room for him beside her.

"I certainly come from that mine," said Brooke, and the girl turned to one of her companions.

"You wouldn't believe he was the man," she said.

Brooke was not altogether unaccustomed to the directness of the West, but he felt a trifle embarrassed when two pairs of eyes were fixed upon him in what seemed to be an appreciative scrutiny.

"One would almost fancy that you had heard of me," he said.

The girl laughed. "Well," she said, "most of the folks in this province who read newspapers have. There was a column about you and your sick partner and the doctor. You carried him across the range when he was too played out to walk, didn't you?"

"No," said Brooke, a trifle astonished. "I certainly did not. He was a good deal too heavy, as a matter of fact, and I was not very fit to drag myself. But when did this quite unwarranted narrative come out, and what shape did it take?"

They told him as nearly as they could remember, and added running comments and questions both at once.

"You had almost nothing to eat for a week when you started across the range to bring the doctor out. That must have been horrid—and what did it feel like?" said one. [Pg 358]

Brooke shook his head. "I really don't know," he said. "I should recommend you to try it."

"And then the poor man was dead when you got there—I 'most cried over him. There was a good

deal about it. It must have been creepy coming upon him lying in the dark."

Brooke, who understood a little about Western journalism, waited until they stopped, for the thing was becoming comprehensible to him.

"Now," he said, "I know how the story got out. I didn't think the doctor would be guilty of anything of that kind, but no doubt he told the little schoolmaster at the settlement, who is a friend of his, and, I believe, addicted to misusing ink. Still, you see, the thing is evidently inaccurate. Do I look as if I could do without anything to eat for a week?"

One of the girls again favored him with a scrutinizing glance. "Well," she said, with a little twinkle in her eyes, "you certainly look as though square meals were scarce at the Dayspring."

Brooke laughed, and then glancing round saw Barbara approaching. He fancied that she could not well have avoided seeing him unless she wished to, but she passed so close that her skirt almost touched him, and then stopped, apparently smiling down on a matronly lady a few yards away. Brooke felt his face grow warm, and was glad that his companions' questions covered his confusion. [Pg 359]

"Who'd you get to do the funeral? There wouldn't be any kind of clergyman up there."

"No," said Brooke, grimly. "We had to manage it ourselves—that is, the doctor did. I'm afraid it wasn't very ceremonious—and it was snowing hard at the time."

He sat silent a moment while a little shiver ran through him as he remembered the bitter blast that had whirled the white flakes about the two lonely men, and shaken a mournful wailing from the thrashing pines.

"How dreadful!" said one of his companions. "The story only mentioned the big glacier, and the forest lying black all round."

Brooke fancied he understood the narrator's reticence, for there were details the doctor was not likely to be communicative about.

"The big glacier was, at least, three miles away, and nobody could have seen it from where we stood," he said, evasively.

Just then, and somewhat to his relief, Mrs. Devine came up to him. "There are two or three people here who heard you play at the concert, and I have been asked to try to persuade you to do so again," she said. "Clarice Marvin would be delighted to lend you her violin."

Seeing that it was expected of him, Brooke agreed, and there was a brief discussion during the choosing of the music, in which two or three young women took part. Then it was discovered that the piano part of the piece fixed upon was unusually difficult, and the girl who had offered Brooke the violin said, "You must ask Barbara, Mrs. Devine." [Pg 360]

Barbara, being summoned, made excuses when she heard what was required of her, until the lady violinist looked at her in wonder.

"Now," she said, "you know you can play it if you want to. You went right through it with me only a week ago."

A faint tinge of color crept into Barbara's cheek, but saying nothing further, she took her place at the piano, and Brooke bent down towards her when he asked for the note.

"It really doesn't commit you to anything," he said. "Still, I can obviate the difficulty by breaking a string."

Barbara met his questioning gaze with a little cold smile.

"It is scarcely worth while," she said.

Then she commenced the prelude, and there was silence in the big room when the violin joined in. Nor were those who listened satisfied with one sonata, and Barbara had finished the second before she once more remembered whom she was playing for. Then there was a faint sparkle in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"It is unfortunate that you did not choose music as a career," she said. [Pg 361]

Brooke laughed, though his face was a trifle grim.

"The inference is tolerably plain," he said. "I really think I should have been more successful than I was at claim-jumping."

Barbara turned away from the piano, and Brooke, who laid down the violin, took the vacant place beside her.

"Still, I'm almost afraid it's out of the question now," he said, looking down at his scarred hands. "The kind of thing I have been doing the past few years spoils one's wrist. You no doubt noticed how slow I was in part of the shifting."

The girl noticed the leanness of his hands and the broken nails, and then glanced covertly at his face. It was gaunt and hollow, and she was sensible that there was a suggestion of weariness in his pose, which had, so far as she could remember, not been there before. Again a little thrill of

compassion ran through her, and she felt, perhaps illogically, as she had done during the sonata, that no man could be wholly bad who played the violin as he did. Still, the last thing she intended doing was admitting it.

"Why did you stay at the Dayspring through the winter?" she asked, abruptly.

"Well," said Brooke, reflectively, "I really don't know. No doubt it was an unwarranted fancy, but I think I felt that after what I had purposed at the Canopus I was doing a little *per contra*, that is, something that might count in balancing the score against me, though, of course, I'm far from certain that it could be balanced at all. You see, it was a little lonely up there, especially after Allonby died, as well as a trifle cold."

[Pg 362]

Barbara would have smiled at any other time, for she knew what the ranges were in winter, but, as it was, her face was expressionless and her voice unusually even.

"I think I understand," she said. "It was probably the same idea that once led your knights and barons to set out on pilgrimages with peas in their shoes, though it is not recorded that they did the more sensible thing by restoring their plundered neighbors' possessions."

Brooke laughed. "Still, my stay at the Dayspring served a purpose, for, although somebody else would no doubt have done so eventually, I found the galena, and I didn't go quite so far as the gentlemen you mention after all. No doubt it is very reprehensible to steal a mine, or, in fact, anything, but I don't know that charitable people would consider that feeling tempted to do so was quite the same thing."

Barbara started a little, and there was a distinct trace of color in her face.

"I never quite grasped that point before," she said. "You certainly stopped short of—?"

"The actual theft," said Brooke. "I don't, however, mind admitting that the thing never occurred to me until this moment, but I can give you my word, whatever it may be worth, that I never glanced at the papers after you handed them to me."

[Pg 363]

There was a trace of wonder in Barbara's face, though she was quite aware that it could not be flattering to any man to show unnecessary astonishment when informed that he had, after all, some slight sense of honor.

"Then I really think I did you a wrong, but we are, I fancy, neither of us very good at ethics," she said, languidly, though she was now sensible of a curious relief. The man had, it seemed, at least, not abused her confidence altogether, for, while there was no evident reason why she should do so, she believed his assertion that he had not glanced at the papers.

"Hair-splitting," said Brooke, reflectively, "is an art very few people really excel in, and I find the splitting of rocks and pines a good deal easier and more profitable. You were, of course, in spite of your last admission, quite warranted in not seeing me twice to-night."

"I think I was," and Barbara looked at him steadily. "You see, I believed in you. In fact, you made me, and it was that I found so difficult to forgive you."

It was a very comprehensive admission, and Brooke, whose heart throbbed as he heard it, sat silent awhile.

"Then," he said, very slowly, "it would be useless to expect that anything I could do would ever induce you to once more have any confidence in me?"

[Pg 364]

Barbara's eyes were still upon him, though they were not quite so steady as usual.

"Yes," she said, quietly, "I am afraid it is."

Brooke made her a little inclination. "Well," he said, "I scarcely think anybody acquainted with the circumstances would blame you for that decision. And now I fancy Mrs. Devine is waiting for you."

[Pg 365]

XXVI.

THE JUMPING OF THE CANOPUS.

The snow was soft at last, and honeycombed by the splashes from the pines, which once more scattered their resinous odors on a little warm breeze, when Shyanne Tom came plodding down the trail to the Canopus. He was a rock-driller of no great proficiency, which was why Captain Wilkins had sent him on an errand to a ranch; and was then retracing his steps leisurely. It was still a long way to the mine, but he was in no great haste to reach it, because he found it pleasanter to slouch through the bush than swing the hammer, and the time he spent on the journey would be credited to him. He had turned out of the trail to relight his pipe in the shelter of a big cedar, which kept off the wind, when he became sensible of a beat of horse hoofs close

behind him. He would have heard it earlier, but that the roar of a river, which had lately burst its icy chains, came throbbing across the trees.

Shyanne was shredding his tobacco plug with a great knife, but he turned sharply round because he could not think of any one likely to be riding down that trail, which only led to the Canopus, just then. As it happened, he stood in the shadow, and it is difficult to make out a man who does not move amidst the great grey-tinted trunks, especially if he is dressed in stained and faded jean; but the sunlight was on the trail, and Shyanne was struck by the attitude of one of the horsemen who appeared among the trees. There were five or six of them, and the beasts were heavily loaded with provisions and blankets, as well as axes and mining tools. The last man, however, led a horse, which carried nothing at all, and the leader, who had just pulled his beast up, was holding up his hand. It was evident to Shyanne that they had seen his tracks in the snow, but, as that was a peaceful country, he failed to understand why it should have brought the party to a standstill. He, however, stayed where he was, watching the leader, who stooped in his saddle.

[Pg 366]

"It can't be more than a few minutes since that fellow went along, and his tracks break off right here," he said. "I guess there's a side trail somewhere, though the bush seems kind of thick."

"A blame rancher looking for a deer," said another man. "Anyway, if he'd heard us, he'd have stopped to talk."

The leader, Shyanne fancied, appeared reflective. "Well," he said, "I can't quite figure where he could have come from. Tomlinson's ranch is quite a way back, and there's not another house of any kind until you strike the mine. Still, I guess we needn't worry, so long as he hasn't seen us."

[Pg 367]

He shook his bridle, and while one or two of the men turning in their saddles looked about them the horses plodded on, but Shyanne stood still for at least five minutes. He was not especially remarkable for intelligence, but it was evident to him that the men had a sufficient reason for desiring that nobody should see them. Then he put his pipe away, and proceeded circumspectly up the trail, with the print of the horse hoofs leading on before him, until they turned off abruptly into the bush. The meaning of this was incomprehensible, since it was not the season when timber-right or mineral prospectors started on their journeys, and Shyanne decided that it might be advisable to go on and inform Wilkins of what he had seen. Still, he made no great progress, for the snow was soft, and, after all, the Canopus did not belong to him.

About the time he reached it, Brooke, who had come up there on some business with Wilkins, was lounging, cigar in hand, on the verandah at the ranch. The night was, for the season, still and almost warm, and a half-moon hung low above the dripping pines, while he found the silence and the sweet resinous odors soothing, for he had been toiling feverishly at the Dayspring of late. Why he stayed there when there was no longer any reason he should not go back to England, and Barbara had told him that his offences were too grievous to be forgiven, he did not exactly know. Still, the work had taken hold of him, and he felt that while she was in the country he could not go away. He was wondering, disconsolately, whether time would soften her indignation, or if she would always be merciless, when Wilkins came into the verandah. He was an elderly and somewhat deliberate man, but Brooke fancied he was anxious just then.

[Pg 368]

"It's kind of fortunate you're here to-night. We've got to have a talk," he said.

Brooke gave him a cigar, and leaned against the balustrade, when he slowly lighted it.

"You can't let me have the men I asked for?" he said.

Wilkins made a little gesture. "All you want. That's not the point. Now, you just let me have a minute or two."

Ten had passed before he had related what Shyanne had told him, and then Brooke, who saw the hand of Saxton in this, quietly lighted another cigar.

"Well," he said, "what do you make of it? They're scarcely likely to be timber-righters?"

"They might be claim-jumpers."

"Still, nobody could jump a claim whose title was good."

Wilkins appeared a trifle uneasy, though it was too dark for Brooke to see him well, but he apparently made up his mind to speak.

"The fact is, our title isn't quite as good as it might be. That is, there's a point or two anybody who knew all about it could make trouble on," he said, and then turned, a trifle impatiently, to Brooke. "You take it blame quietly. I had kind of figured that would astonish you."

[Pg 369]

Brooke laughed. "I had surmised as much already. We'll suppose the men Shyanne saw intend to jump the claim. How will they set about it?"

"They'll wait until they figure every one's asleep—twelve o'clock, most likely, since that would make it easy to get their record in the same day, though it's most of an eight hours' ride to the office of the Crown recorder. Then they'll drive their stakes in quietly, and while the rest sit down tight on the pegged-off claim, one of them will ride out all he's worth to get the record made. After that, they'll start in to bluff the dollars out of Devine."

He stopped somewhat abruptly, and Brooke fancied that he had something still upon his mind,

but he had discovered already that it was generally useless to attempt the extraction of any information Wilkins had not quite decided to impart.

"Then what are we going to do?" he said.

"Turn out the boys, and hold the jumpers off as long as we can, while somebody from our crowd rides out to put a new record in. When a claim's bad in law anybody can stake it, and the Crown will register him as owner until they can straighten out the thing."

[Pg 370]

"Then what do you expect from me?"

Wilkins' answer was prompt and decisive. "We'll have a horse ready. You'll ride for the Company."

Brooke turned from him abruptly, and looked down the valley. He would have preferred to avoid an actual conflict with Saxton for several reasons, but he could not remain neutral, and must choose between Devine and him. He had also broken off his compact, and while he wished the jumpers had been acting for another man, there was apparently only the one course open to him. It was also conceivable that if he could make a valid new record it would count for a little in his favor with Barbara.

"I certainly seem the most suitable person, and you can get the horse ready," he said. "Still, is there any reason I shouldn't make sure of the thing by starting right away?"

Wilkins thought there was. "Well," he said, "I've only Shyanne's tale to go upon, and supposing those men aren't claim-jumpers after all, what do we gain by sending you to make a new record on the claim?"

"Nothing beyond letting everybody know that your patent's bad, and raising trouble with the Crown people over it, while I scarcely fancy Devine would thank me for doing that unnecessarily. It would be wiser to wait and make certain of what they mean to do."

"You've hit it," said Wilkins. "I'll go along and talk to the boys."

[Pg 371]

He disappeared into the darkness, and Brooke, who was feeling chilly now, went back to the stove, while it was two hours later when he took his place behind one of the sawn-off firs which dotted the hillside above what had been one of the most profitable headings of the mine. The half-moon was higher now, and the pale radiance showed the six-foot stumps that straggled up the steep slope in rows until the bush closed in on them again. There was no longer any snow upon the firs, and they towered against the blueness of the night in black and solemn spires. The bush was also very quiet, as was the strip of clearing, and there was nothing to show that a handful of men were waiting there with a sense of grim anticipation.

Half an hour slipped by, and there was no sound from the forest but the soft rustling of the fir twigs under a little breeze, while Brooke, who found the waiting particularly unpleasant, and was annoyed to feel his fingers were quivering a little with the tension, grew chilly. It would, he felt, be a relief when the jumpers came, but another ten minutes dragged by and there was still no sign of them. The breeze had grown a trifle colder, and the firs were whispering eerily, while he could now hear the men moving uneasily. Then he started when the howl of a wolf came out of the bush, and, leaning forward, grasped Wilkins' arm.

[Pg 372]

"I suppose they will come?" he said.

The mine captain made a sign to a man who crouched behind a neighboring tree.

"Quite sure you were awake when you saw those men, Shyanne?" he said. "Harrup hadn't been giving you any of the hard cider?"

Shyanne chuckled audibly. "Not more'n a jugful, anyway, and I don't see things on the hardest cider they make in Ontario. No, sir, those men were there, and I've a notion there's one of them yonder now."

The shadows of the firs were black upon the clearing, but a dark patch was projected suddenly beyond the rest, and a voice came faintly through the whispering of the trees.

"Stand by," it said. "They're coming along."

Then Brooke set his lips as a human figure, carrying what seemed to be an axe, materialized out of the gloom. Another appeared behind it, and then a third, while, when a fourth became visible, Wilkins rose suddenly.

"Now, what in the name of thunder are you wanting here?" he said.

The foremost man jumped, as Shyanne asserted afterwards, like a shot deer, but the rest, who had apparently steadier nerves, came on at a run, and a man behind them shouted, "Don't worry 'bout anything, but get your stakes in. I'll do the talking."

[Pg 373]

Then, while Brooke slipped away, Wilkins stepped out into the moonlight with a Marlin rifle gleaming dully in his hand. "Stop right where you are," he said. "Where's the man who wants to talk?"

The men stopped, and stood glancing about them, irresolutely. There were six in all, but rather more than that number of shadowy objects had appeared unexpectedly among the sawn-off

stumps. While they waited Saxton stepped forward.

"Well," he said, "you see me."

"Oh, yes," said Wilkins, drily, "and I guess I've seen many a squarer man. What do you want crawling round our claim, anyway?"

"It's not yours. Your patent's bad, and we're going to re-locate it for you. Haven't you got those stakes ready, boys?"

"Bring them along," said Wilkins. "I'm waiting."

He stood stiff and resolute, with the rifle at his hip, and the moonlight on his face, which was very grim, and once more the claim-jumpers glanced at their leader, dubiously. They were aware that although the regulations respecting mineral claims might not have been complied with, there are conditions under which a man is warranted in holding on to his property. Wilkins also appeared quite decided on doing it.

Then Saxton's voice rose sharply. "Hallo!" he said. "What the——"

[Pg 374]

Wilkins swung round, and saw three or four more shadowy figures enter the clearing from the opposite side, and they also apparently carried stakes and axes.

"Figured you'd get in ahead of us, Saxton," said one of them.

Saxton evidently lost his temper. "Well," he said, "I guess I'm going to do it, you slinking skunk. If it can't be fixed any other way, I'll strike you for shooting Brooke."

Wilkins laughed. "Any more of you coming along? It's a kind of pity you didn't get here a little earlier."

They knew what he meant in another moment, when the sound of a horse ridden hard through slushy snow rose from the shadows of the pines. Wilkins made a little ironical gesture.

"I guess you'll never get rich claim-jumping, boys," he said.

Then Saxton's voice rose again. "The game's not finished. We'll play you for it yet," he said. "Where's that horse? Get your stakes in."

He vanished in another minute, but his followers remained, and there was for a time a very lively scuffle about the stakes Brooke had already hammered in. They were torn up, and replaced several times before the affray was over, and then two men, who furnished a very vague account of the fashion in which they had received their injuries, were with difficulty conveyed to the Vancouver hospital. In spite of a popular illusion, pistols are not in general use in that country, but it is not insuperably difficult to disable an opponent effectively with an axe or shovel.

[Pg 375]

In the meanwhile, three men, who realized that, under the circumstances, a good deal would depend upon who was first to reach it, were riding hard by different ways towards the recorder's office, and Brooke, having no great confidence in the horse Wilkins had supplied him with, had taken what was at once the worst and shortest route. That is not a nice country to ride through in daylight, even when there is no snow upon the ground, and there were times when he held his breath as the horse plunged down the side of a gulley with the half-melted snow and gravel sliding away beneath its hoofs. They also smashed and floundered through withered fern and crackling thickets of sal-sal and salmon berry, and during one perilous hour Brooke dragged the beast by the bridle up slopes of wet and slippery rock, from which the winds had swept the snow away.

Still, it was long since he had felt in the same high spirits, and when they reached more even ground the rush through the cold night air brought him a curious elation. He felt he was, at least doing what might count in his favor against the past, and, apart from that, there was satisfaction to be derived from the reckless ride itself. He had, however, only a blurred recollection of most of it, flitting forest, peaks that glittered coldly, the glint of moonlight on still frozen lakes, and the frequent splashings through icy fords, until, when the stars had faded, and the firs rose black and hard against the dawn, they reeled down to the bank of a larger river, from which the white mists were streaming. It swirled by thick with floating ice, and the horse strenuously objected to enter the water at all. Twice it reared at the stabbing of the spurs, and then bounded with arching back, but Brooke was used to that trick, and contrived to keep his saddle until he and the beast slid down the bank together, and there was a splash and flounder as they reached the water.

[Pg 376]

It was most of it freshly-melted ice, and when he slipped from the saddle, which he promptly found it necessary to do, the cold took his breath away, and he clung by the stirrup leather, gasping and half-dazed, while the beast proceeded unguided for a minute or two. Then, as they swung round in a white eddy, his perceptions came back to him, and he realized that there was no longer any need for swimming, when he drove against a boulder, whose head just showed above the swirling foam. He got on his feet somehow, and was never quite sure whether he led the beast through the rest of the passage or held on by the bridle, but at last they staggered up the opposite bank, where a man he could not see very well in the dim light sat looking down on him from the saddle. Brooke moved a pace nearer, and then recognized him as the one who had shot him at Devine's ranch.

[Pg 377]

"Saxton has taken the high trail and he'll cross by the bridge, but I guess we're quite a while

ahead of him," he said. "Now, do you know any reason why we shouldn't pool the thing?"

Brooke stared at him, divided between indignation and appreciation of his assurance.

"Yes," he said, drily, "several, and one of them is quite sufficient by itself."

"Figure it out," said the other. "I tell you Saxton can't make our time over the high trail, though it's a better road. Now that one of us will get there first is a sure thing, but it's quite as certain it can't be both, and I'd be content with half of what you bluff out of Devine. That's reasonable."

Brooke felt his face grow a trifle hot, though he recognized that it was not astonishing the man should credit him with the purpose he had certainly been impelled by at their last meeting.

"I can't make a deal with you on any terms," he said. "Ride on, or pull your horse out of the trail."

"I guess that wouldn't suit me," said the other man, and when Brooke had his foot in the stirrup, suddenly swung up his hand.

Then there was a flash and a detonation, and the horse plunged. The flash was repeated, and while Brooke strove to clear his foot of the stirrup, the beast staggered and fell back on him. It, however, rolled and struggled, and, for his foot was free now, he contrived to drag himself away. [Pg 378]

When he was next sensible of anything, he could hear a very faint thud of hoofs far up the climbing trail, and, after lying still for several minutes, ventured to move circumspectly. He felt very sore, but all his limbs appeared to be in their usual places, and, rising shakily, he found, somewhat to his astonishment, that he could walk. The horse was evidently dead, but there was, he remembered, a ranch not very far away, and a certain probability of the other man still breaking one of his own limbs or his horse's legs, for the trail was rather worse than trails usually are in that country. Brooke accordingly decided to hobble on to the ranch, and somehow accomplished it, though the man who opened the door to him looked very dubious when he asked him for a horse.

"The only beast I've got isn't worth much, but you don't look up to taking him in over the lake trail," he said.

He, however, parted with the horse, and hove Brooke into the saddle, while the latter groaned as he rode away. One arm and one leg were stiff and aching, and at every jolt his back hurt him excruciatingly, but a few hours later he rode, spattered with mire and slushy snow, into a little wooden town, and had afterwards a fancy that somebody offered to lift him down. He was not sure how he got out of the saddle, but a man he recognized took the horse, and he proceeded, limping stiffly, with his wet clothes sticking to his skin, to the Crown mining office. The recorder, who appeared to be a young Englishman, looked hard at him when he came in, and then pointed to a chair. [Pg 379]

"You may as well sit down. If my surmises are correct, there is no great need for haste," he said.

Brooke's face, which was a trifle grey, grew suddenly set.

"Some one else has already recorded a new claim on the Canopus?" he said.

"Yes," said the recorder. "In fact, two of them, and the last man was good enough to inform me that there was another of you coming along."

"Then you can't give a record?"

"No," said the other man, with a little smile. "I'm not sure that any of you will get one in the meanwhile; that is, not until we have obtained a few particulars from Mr. Devine."

"I have come on behalf of him."

"That," said the recorder, "is, under the circumstances, no great recommendation. In fact, there are several points your employer will be asked to clear up before we go any further with the matter."

Brooke, who asked no more questions, contrived to make his way to the hotel, and flung himself down to rest, when he had ascertained when the Pacific express came in. Important as it was that he should see Devine, he was, however, very uncertain whether he would be able to get up again. [Pg 380]

[Pg 381]

XXVII. THE LAST ROUND.

The whistle screamed hoarsely as the long train swung out from the shadow of the pines, and Brooke raised himself stiffly in his seat in a big, dusty car. A sawmill veiled in smoke and steam swept by, and, while the roar of wheels sank to a lower pitch, he caught the gleam of the blue inlet Vancouver City is built above ahead. Then, as the clustering roofs, which seamed the hillside

ridge on ridge with a maze of poles and wires cutting against the background of stately pines grew plainer, he straightened his back with an effort. It was aching distressfully, and he felt dizzy as well as stiff, while he commenced to wonder whether his strength would hold out until he had seen Devine and finished his business in the city.

Then the cars lurched a little, there was a doleful tolling of a bell, and when the long, dusty train rolled slowly into the depôt he dropped shakily from a vestibule platform. The rough planking did not seem quite steady, and he struck his feet against the metals when he crossed the track, but he managed to reach Devine's office, and found that he was out. He would, however, be back in another hour, his clerk said, and it occurred to Brooke that he could, in the meanwhile, consult a doctor. The latter asked him a few questions, and then sat looking at him thoughtfully for a moment or two.

[Pg 382]

"It's not quite clear to me how the horse came to fall on you. You were dismounted at the time?" he said. "Still, after all, that's not quite the question."

Brooke smiled a little. "No," he said. "I scarcely think it is."

"Well," said the doctor, drily, "whichever way you managed it, the snow was either very soft or something else took the weight of the beast off you, but I don't think you need worry greatly about that fall. Lie down for a day or two, and rub some of the stuff I give you on the bruises. Now, suppose you tell me what you've been doing for the last few months."

Brooke did so concisely, and the doctor nodded. "Pretty much as I figured," he said. "You want to stop it right away. Go down the Sound on a steamboat, or across to Victoria for two or three weeks, and do nothing."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question."

The doctor made a little gesture. "Then, if you go on taking it out of yourself, there'll be trouble, especially if you worry. Go slow, and eat and sleep all you can for a month, anyway."

Brooke thanked him, and went back to Devine's office thoughtfully. He felt that the advice was good, though there were difficulties in the way of his acting upon it. He had already realized that the strain of the last few months, the insufficient food, and feverish work, were telling upon him, but he had made up his mind to hold out until the work at the Dayspring was in full swing and the value of the ore lead had been made clear beyond all doubt. Then there would be time to rest and consider the position.

[Pg 383]

Devine was in when he reached the office, and looked hard at him, but he said very little while Brooke told his story. Nor did he appear by any means astonished or concerned.

"Well," he said, reflectively, "it's quite likely that we'll have the pleasure of seeing Mr. Saxton to-morrow. He'll hang off until then, and when he comes I'll be ready to talk to him. In the meanwhile, you're coming home with me."

Brooke hoped that he did not show the embarrassment he certainly felt, for, much as he longed to see her, it was, after their last meeting, difficult to believe that Barbara would appreciate his company, and he scarcely felt in a mood for another taste of her displeasure.

"I had decided on going out on the Atlantic express this evening," he said. "There is a good deal to do at the Dayspring, and I could scarcely expect Mrs. Devine to be troubled with me. Besides, you see, I came right away——"

He glanced significantly at his clothes, but Devine, who rose, laid a hand on his shoulder.

[Pg 384]

"You're coming along," he said. "I may want you to-morrow."

Brooke, who felt too languid to make another protest, went with him, and when they reached the house on the hillside, Devine led him into a room which looked down on the inlet.

"Sit down," he said, pointing to a big lounge chair. "I'll send somebody to look after you, and, unless you look a good deal better than you do now, you'll stay right here to-morrow. In the meanwhile, you'll excuse me. There are one or two folks I have to see in the city."

He went out, and Brooke, who let his head, which ached a good deal, sink back upon the soft upholstery, wondered vacantly what Mrs. Devine would think when she saw him there. He still wore the garments he was accustomed to at the mine, and, though they were dry now, and, at least, comparatively clean, he felt that long boots and soil-stained jeans were a trifle out of place in that dainty room. That, however, did not seem to matter. He was drowsy and a trifle dizzy, while the room was warm, and it was with a little start he heard the door-handle rattle a few minutes later. Then, while he endeavored to straighten himself, Barbara came in.

"I feel that I ought to offer you my excuses for being here, though I am not sure that I could help it," he said. "Grant Devine is of a somewhat determined disposition, and he insisted on bringing me."

[Pg 385]

Barbara did not notice him wince as with pain when he turned to her, for she was not at that moment looking at him.

"Then why should you make any? It is his house," she said.

This was not very promising, for Brooke felt it suggested that, although the girl was willing to defer to Devine's wishes, they did not necessarily coincide with hers.

"It is!" he said. "Still, I seem to have acquired the sense of fitness you once mentioned, and I feel I should not have come. One is, however, not always quite so wise as he ought to be, and I was feeling a trifle worn out when your brother-in-law invited me. That probably accounted for my want of firmness."

Barbara glanced at him sharply, and noticed the gauntness of his face and the spareness of his frame, which had become accentuated since she had last seen him. It also stirred her to compassion, which was probably why she endeavored, as she had done before, to harden her heart against him.

"No doubt you spent last night in the saddle, and the trails would be bad," she said. "I believe they are getting some tea ready, and, in the meanwhile, how are you progressing at the mine?"

Brooke realized that she had heard nothing about his ride or the jumping of the Canopus, and determined that she should receive no enlightenment from him. This may have been due to wounded pride, but it afterwards stood him in good stead. Nor would he show that her chilly graciousness, which went just as far as the occasion demanded and no further, hurt him, and he accordingly roused himself, with an effort, to talk about the mine. The girl had usually appeared interested in the subject, and it was, at least, a comparatively safe one.

[Pg 386]

She, on her part, noticed the weariness in his eyes, and found it necessary to remind herself of his offences, for the story he told was not without its effect on her. It was, though he omitted most of his own doings, a somewhat graphic one, and she realized a little of the struggle he and the handful of men Devine had been able to send him had made, half-fed, amidst the snow. Still, for no very apparent reason, his composure and the way he kept himself in the background irritated her.

"One would wonder why you put up with so much hardship. Wasn't it a little inconsequent?" she said.

Brooke's gaunt face flushed. "Well," he said, "one is under the painful necessity of earning a living."

"Still, could it not be done a little more easily?"

"I don't know that it is, under any circumstances, a remarkably simple thing, but that is not quite the question, and, since you seem to insist, I'll answer you candidly. In my case, it was almost astonishingly inconsequent—that is, as I expect you mean, about the last thing any one would naturally have expected from me. Still, I felt that, after what I had done, I had a good deal to pull up, you see; though that is a motive with which, as I noticed when I mentioned it once before, you apparently can scarcely credit me."

[Pg 387]

Barbara smiled. "It was your own actions that made it difficult."

"I admitted on another occasion that I am not exactly proud of them, but there was some slight excuse. There usually is, you see."

"Of course!" said Barbara. "You need not be diffident. In your case there were the dollars of which my brother-in-law plundered you."

Brooke looked at her with a little glint in his eyes. "You," he said, slowly, "can be very merciless."

"Well," said Barbara, who met his gaze with quiet composure, "I might have been less so had I not expected quite so much from you. After all, it does not greatly matter—and here is the tea."

"I think it matters a good deal, but perhaps we needn't go into that," said Brooke, who took the cup she handed him. "You have poured out tea for me on several occasions now, but still, each one recalls the first time you did it at the Quatomac ranch."

The same thing had happened to Barbara, but she laughed. "It, presumably, made no difference to the tea, and yours runs some risk of getting cold."

Brooke appeared to be holding his cup with quite unnecessary firmness, and she fancied his color was a trifle paler than it had been, but he smiled.

[Pg 388]

"I really do not remember that it tasted any the worse," he said. "Perhaps you can remember how the sound of the river came in through the open door that night, and the light flickered in the draughts. It showed up your face in profile, and I can still picture Jimmy sitting by the stove, with his mouth wide open, watching you. He had evidently never seen anything of the kind before."

Barbara noticed the manner in which he pulled himself up, and realized that the sentence had deviated from its natural conclusion. It was, though he had certainly been guilty of obtaining what she was pleased to consider her esteem by a course of disgraceful imposition, gratifying that he should be able to recall that evening. That, however, was not to be admitted.

"I remember that the two candles were stuck in whisky bottles," she said. "You removed them somewhat suddenly when you came in."

Brooke smiled, but his face was a trifle grey in patches now, and the cup was shaking visibly. "I

really shouldn't have done," he said. "Still, you see, I was a trifle flurried that night, and like Jimmy in one respect, in that I had never—"

"You, at least, had been handed tea by a lady before," said Barbara, severely.

"I had, but the incomplete explanation still holds good. Well, it was, no doubt, unwise of me to take those candlesticks away, since to disguise one's habits for a stranger's benefit naturally implies a deficiency of becoming pride, and it could, in any case, only have made the thing more palpable to you."

[Pg 389]

"One's habits?" said Barbara, who would not admit comprehension.

Brooke nodded. "Men," he said, "do not, as a rule, buy whisky bottles to make candlesticks of, and there were, as I believe you noticed, a good many more of them already on the floor. Still, you see, your good opinion—was—important to me, and I was willing to cheat you into bestowing it on me even then. It matters—it really does matter—a good deal."

Then there was a crash, and Brooke's cup struck the leg of the chair, while his plate rolled across the floor, and Barbara's dress was splashed with tea. The man sat gripping the chair arm hard, and blinking at her, while his face grew grey; but when she rose he apparently recovered himself with an effort.

"Very sorry!" he said, slowly. "Quite absurd of me! Still, I have had a good deal to do—and very little sleep—lately."

Barbara was wholly compassionate now. "Sit still," she said, quietly. "I will bring you a glass of wine."

"No," said Brooke, a trifle unevenly. "I must have kept you here half an hour already, and I am afraid I have spoiled your dress into the bargain. That ought to be enough. If you don't mind, I think I will go and lie down."

[Pg 390]

He straightened himself resolutely, and Barbara, who called the house-boy, stood still, with a warm tinge in her face, when he went out of the room. The man was evidently worn out and ill, and yet he had endeavored to hide the fact to save her concern, while she had found a most unbecoming pleasure in flagellating him. He had met her very slightly-veiled reproaches with a composure which, she surmised, had not cost him a little, even when his strength was melting away from him. Then she flushed a still ruddier color as she remembered that, in any case, dissimulation was a strong point of his, for she felt distinctly angry with herself for recollecting it.

She had engagements that evening, and did not see him, while he had apparently recovered during the night, for, when she came down to breakfast, Mrs. Devine told her that he had already gone out with her husband. In point of fact, an eight-hours' sleep had done a good deal for Brooke, who lunched, or rather dined, with Devine in the city, and then went with him to his office to wait until the Pacific express came in.

"The train's up to schedule time. I sent to ask them at the dépôt," said Devine. "I guess we'll have Mr. Saxton here in another ten minutes."

[Pg 391]

The prediction was warranted, for he had about half smoked the cigar he lighted when Saxton was shown in. The latter was dressed tastefully in city clothes, and wore a flower in his buttonhole. He also smiled as he glanced at Brooke.

"It was quite a good game you put up, and you got away five minutes before I did," he said. "Still, three men are a little too many to jump a claim when I'm one of them."

Brooke's face grew a trifle grim, for he saw Saxton's meaning, but Devine regarded the latter with a faint, sardonic smile.

"Sit down and take a cigar," he said. "I guess you came here to talk to me, and Mr. Brooke never meant to jump the claim."

"No?" and Saxton assumed an appearance of incredulity very well. "Now I quite figured that he did."

"You can fix it with him afterwards," said Devine. "It seems to me that we're both here on business."

"Then we'll get down to it. I have put in a record on the Canopus mine. I guess you know your patent's not quite straight on a point or two."

"You're quite sure of that?"

"The Crown people seem to be. Now, I can't draw back my claim without throwing the mine open to anybody, but I'm willing to hold on and trade my rights to you when I've got my improvements in. Of course, you'd have to make it worth while, but I'm not going to be unreasonable."

[Pg 392]

Devine laughed a little. "There was once a jumper who figured he'd found the points you mentioned out. He wanted eight thousand dollars. Would you be content with that?"

"No," said Saxton, drily. "I'm going to strike you for more."

There was silence for a moment or two, and Brooke leaned forward a little as he watched his

companions. Saxton was a trifle flushed in face, and his dark eyes had an exultant gleam in them, while the thin, nervous fingers of one hand were closed upon the edge of the table. His expression suggested that he was completely satisfied with himself and the strength of his position, for it apparently only remained for him to exact whatever terms he pleased. Devine's attitude was, however, not quite what one would have expected, for he did not look in the least like a man who felt himself at his adversary's mercy. He sat smiling a little, and trifling with his cigar.

"Well," he said, reflectively, "I guess the man I mentioned was sorry he asked quite as much as he did. What is your figure?"

"I'll wait your bid."

Devine sat still for several moments, with the little sardonic smile growing plainer in his eyes, and Brooke, who felt the tension, fancied that Saxton was becoming uneasy. There was a curious silence in the room, through which the whirr of an elevator jarred harshly. [Pg 393]

"One dollar," he said.

Saxton gasped. "Bluff!" he said. "That's not going to count with me. You want a full hand to carry it through, and the one you're holding isn't strong enough. Now, I'll put down my cards."

"One dollar," said Devine, drily.

Saxton stood up abruptly, and gazed at him in astonishment, with quivering fingers and tightening lips. "I tell you your patent's no good."

"I know it is."

Again there was silence, and Brooke saw that Saxton was holding himself in with difficulty.

"Still, you want to keep your mine," he said.

"You can have it for what I asked you, and if you can clear the cost of working, it's more than I can do. The Canopus was played out quite a while ago."

Even Brooke was startled, and Saxton sat down with all his customary assurance gone out of him. His mouth opened loosely, he seemed to grow suddenly limp, and his cigar shook visibly in his nerveless fingers.

"Now," he said, and stopped while a quiver of futile anger seemed to run through him, "that's the last thing I expected. What'd you put up that wire sling for? I can't figure out your game."

Devine laughed. "It's quite easy. You have just about sense enough to worry anybody, or you wouldn't have dumped that ore into the Dayspring, and worked off one of the richest mines in the province on to me. Well, when I saw you meant to strike me on the Canopus, I just let you get to work because it suited me. I figured it would keep you busy while I took out timber-rights and bought up land round the Dayspring. Nobody believed in Allonby, and I got what I wanted at quite a reasonable figure. I'm holding the mine and everything worth while now. There's nothing left for you, and I guess it would be wiser to get hold of a man of your own weight next time." [Pg 394]

Saxton's face was colorless, but he put a restraint upon himself as he turned to Brooke.

"You knew just what this man meant to do?"

"Oh, yes," said Devine, drily. "He told me quite a while ago. You're going? Haven't you any use for that dollar?"

Saxton said nothing whatever, but the door slammed behind him, and Brooke, who, in spite of Devine's protests, went back to the Dayspring that evening, never saw him again.

[Pg 395]

XXVIII.

BROOKE DOES NOT COME BACK.

Devine went home a little earlier than usual after Saxton left him, and dusk was not far away when he sat recounting the affair in his wife's drawing-room. She listened with keen appreciation, and then looked up at him.

"But where is Brooke?" she said.

Devine smiled. "I guess he's buying mining tools. You can't keep that man out of a hardware store," he said. "I wanted to bring him back, but he was feeling better, and made up his mind to go out on the Atlantic express. He asked me to make his excuses, as he had fixed to meet an American machinery agent, and wasn't quite sure he could get round."

"Perhaps it is just as well," said Mrs. Devine, who appeared reflective. "Do you think you are wise

in encouraging that man to come here, Grant?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it that. I brought him. He didn't want to come."

"You are, of course, quite sure?" and Mrs. Devine's smile implied that she, at least, was a trifle incredulous. "Hasn't it struck you that Barbara——"

[Pg 396]

"So far as I've noticed lately, Barbara didn't seem in any way pleased with him."

Mrs. Devine made a little impatient gesture. "That," she said, "is exactly what I don't like. It's a significant sign. Barbara wouldn't have been angry with him—if it was not worth while."

"You said nothing when he came to the ranch, while we were at the mine."

"The man was pleasant company, and there was, it seemed to me, very little risk of a superior workman attracting Barbara's fancy."

Devine laughed. "I guess I was of no great account when you married me."

"Pshaw!" said Mrs. Devine. "Anyway, you hadn't plotted to steal a mine from the people I belonged to."

Devine's eyes twinkled. "It showed his grit, and 'most anything is considered square in a mining deal. Besides, there were the six thousand dollars Slocum took out of him."

"I am quite aware that such transactions are evidently not subject to the ordinary code, but, seriously, if you would be content with Harford Brooke as my brother-in-law, it is considerably more than I would be. We don't even know why he left the Old Country."

"Well," said Devine, drily, "I guess I have a notion. I've been finding out a good deal about him. But get on with your objections."

[Pg 397]

"Barbara has a good many dollars."

"So has Brooke. You needn't worry about that point."

Mrs. Devine's astonishment was very apparent. "Then whatever is he working at the mine for—and why didn't you tell me before?"

"I guess it's because that kind of thing pleases him, and, anyway, it's only since last mail came in I knew."

"You're quite sure, now?"

"I'll tell you what I heard. There was a man who bought up our stock in England when nobody else seemed to have any use for it. The directors wanted to know a little about him, and they found it was a trust account. He was taking up the stock for another man, who had been left quite a few dollars, and that man was called Harford Brooke. The executor, it seems, told somebody that the man he was buying for was here. Now, it's not likely there are two of them in this part of Canada."

The door, as it happened, was not closed, and Mrs. Devine was too intent to hear it swing open a little further. "The dollars," she said, "are by no means the most important consideration, but still ——"

She stopped abruptly at a sound, and then turned round with a little gasp, for Barbara stood just inside the room. Then there was a disconcerting silence for a moment or two, until the girl glanced at Devine.

[Pg 398]

"Yes," she said, quietly. "I heard. When did Mr. Brooke buy that stock?"

Devine understood the question, and once more the twinkle crept into his eyes.

"Well," he said, "it was quite a while before they found the silver. I don't know what he did it for. Now, I guess I've been here longer than I meant to stay. You'll excuse me, Katty."

He seemed in haste to get away, and when the door closed behind him the two who were left looked at one another curiously. Mrs. Devine was evidently embarrassed.

"I suppose," she said, drily, "you don't know why Brooke bought those shares, either?"

"I think I do," said Barbara, with unusual quietness, though the color was very visible in her cheeks. "He had a reason——"

She stopped abruptly, and there was once more an awkward silence, until she made a little impulsive gesture.

"Oh!" she said, sharply now, "I feel horribly mean. He stayed there through the winter when they had scarcely anything to eat, and bought that stock when nobody else would have it or believed in the Dayspring. Then he risked his life to save the Canopus, and when he came down, worn out and ill, I had only hard words for him."

"Well," said Mrs. Devine, drily, "the sensation is probably good for you. You don't seem to remember that he also tried to jump the mine."

[Pg 399]

Barbara turned towards her with a little sparkle in her eyes. "Have you—never—done anything that was wrong?"

Mrs. Devine naturally saw the point of this, but while she considered her answer, Barbara, who had a good deal to think of, and scarcely felt equal to any further conversation just then, abruptly turned away. Glancing at her watch, she went straight to a room, from the window of which she could see the road to the depôt, for she knew the Atlantic express would shortly start, and she had not been told that Brooke was not coming back. Exactly what she meant to say to him she did not know, but she felt she could not let him go without, at least, a slight expression of her appreciation of what he had done. She knew that he would value it, and that it would go far to blot out the memory of past unkindness. He had certainly meant to jump the Canopus, and deceived her shamefully, which was far harder to forgive, for the realization of the fact that she had bestowed rather more than friendliness upon a man who was unworthy of it had its sting, but she scarcely remembered that now. He had, it appeared, since then, sacrificed his fortune and broken down his strength, and that, considering the purpose which she fancied had impelled him, went a long way to condone his offences. [Pg 400]

He, however, did not appear on the road, as she had expected; and she grew a trifle anxious when the tolling of a bell came up from the depôt by the wharf as the big locomotive backed the long cars in. It was also significant that she did not notice that the room, which had no stove in it, was very cold. Then looking down she saw men with valises pass across an opening between the roofs and express wagons lurching along the uneven road. The train would start very soon, and there was at least one admission she must make, but the minutes were slipping by and still Brooke did not come. The man, it almost appeared, was content to go away without seeing her, though she felt compelled to admit that in view of what had passed at their last meeting this was not altogether astonishing. Still, the fact that he could do so hurt her, and she waited in a state of painful tension. A very few minutes would suffice for him to climb the hill, and even if there was no opportunity for an explanation, which now appeared very probable, a smile or even a glance might go a long way to set matters right.

The few minutes, however, slipped by as the rest had done, until at last the locomotive bell slowly clanged again, and the hoot of a whistle came up the hillside and was flung back by the pines. Then a puff of white smoke rolled up from the wharf, and Barbara turned away from the window with the crimson in her face as the cars swept through an opening between the clustering roofs. The train had gone, and the man would not know how far she had relented towards him. She could settle to nothing during the rest of the evening, and scarcely slept that night, though she naturally did not mention the fact when she and Mrs. Devine met at breakfast next morning. Instead, she took out a letter she had received a week earlier. [Pg 401]

"It's from Hetty Hume, and the English mail goes out to-day," she said. "She suggests that I should come over and spend a few months with her. I really think we did what we could for her when she was here with the Major."

Mrs. Devine took the letter. "I fancy she wants you to go," she said. "She mentions that she has asked you several times already."

Barbara appeared reflective. "So she has," she said. "In fact, I think I'll go. The change will do me good."

"Well," said Mrs. Devine, "I suppose you can afford it, but if you indulge in many changes of that kind you're not going to have very much of a dowry."

"Do you think I need one?"

Mrs. Devine laughed as she glanced at her, but her face grew thoughtful again. "Perhaps in your case it wouldn't be necessary, and though it is a very long way, I fancy that you might do worse than go to England and stay there while Hetty is willing to keep you." [Pg 402]

A little flush crept into Barbara's cheek, but she said quietly, "I think I'll start on Saturday."

She did so, and it came about one night while the big train she travelled by swept across the rolling levels of the Assiniboian prairie that Brooke sat in his shanty at the Dayspring with Jimmy, who had just come down from the range, standing in front of him. The freighter had still now and then a difficulty in bringing them provisions in, and whenever Jimmy found the persistent plying of drill and hammer pall upon him he would go out and look out for a deer, though it was not always that he came back with one. On this occasion he brought a somewhat alarming tale instead.

"A big snow-slide must have come along since I was up on that slope before, and gouged out quite a cañon for itself," he said. "Anyway, if it wasn't a snow-slide it was a cloudburst or a waterspout. They happen around when folks don't want them now and then."

"Come to the point," said Brooke. "I'm sufficiently acquainted with the meteorological perversities of the country."

"Slinging names at them isn't much use. I've tried it, and any one raised here could give you points at the thing. Now before I came to Quatomac I was staying up at the Tillicum ranch, and I'd just taken a new twelve-dollar pair of gum-boots off one night when there was a waterspout up the valley that washed me and Jardine out of the house. We sailed along until we struck a convenient pine, and sat in it most of the night while the flood went down. Then I hadn't any [Pg 403]

gum-boots, and Jardine couldn't find his house."

"I believe you told me you went down the river on a door on the last occasion," Brooke said, wearily. "Still, it doesn't greatly matter. What has all this to do with the hollow the snow-slide made in the range?"

"Well," said Jimmy, "I guess you know the way the big rock outcrop runs across the foot of the valley. Now, before the snow-slide or the waterspout came along the melting snow went down into the next hollow, and the one where the outcrop is got just enough to keep the outlet of the creek that comes through it open."

"I do. Will it be an hour or more before you make it clear how that concerns anybody?"

"No, sir. I'm getting right there. The snow's melting tolerably fast, and the drainage from the big peak isn't going the way it used to now. The foot of the valley's quite a nice-sized lake, and the stream has washed most of the broke-up pines the snow brought down into the outlet gully. I guess you have seen a bad lumber jam?"

Brooke had, and he started as he recognized the significance of what was happening, for once a drifting log strikes fast in a narrow passage the stream is very apt to pile up and wedge fast those that come behind into a tolerably efficient substitute for a dam, while when log still follows log the result is usually an inextricable confusion of interlocked timber. [Pg 404]

"When the jam up broke we'd have the water and the wreckage down on the mine," he said.

"All there is of it," said Jimmy. "It would cost quite a pile of dollars to dry the workings out."

Brooke strode to the door and flung it open, but there was black darkness outside and a persistent patter of thick warm rain. Then he swung round with an objurgation and Jimmy grinned.

"I guess it's no use. You couldn't see a pine ten foot off, and there isn't a man in the country who would go down that gully with a lantern in his hand," he said. "Go off to sleep. You'll see quite as much as you want to, anyway, to-morrow."

Brooke stood still and listened a moment or two while the hoarse roar of a river which he knew was swirling in fierce flood among the boulders far down in the hollow came up in deep reverberations across the pines. It was a significant hint of what was likely to happen when the pent-up water poured down upon the mine. Still, there was nothing he could do in that thick darkness.

"Sleep!" he said. "When almost every dollar I have—and a good deal more than that—is sunk in the mine." [Pg 405]

"Well," said Jimmy, reflectively, "in your place, if I could make sure of the dollars, I'd take my chances on the rest. Now and then I'm quite thankful I haven't any. It saves a mighty lot of worry."

He swung out of the shanty, and Brooke, who flung himself down on his couch of spruce twigs, endeavored to sleep, though he had no great expectation of succeeding. As it happened, he lay tossing or holding himself still by an effort the long night through, for he had set his whole mind on the prosperity of the Dayspring. A good deal of his small fortune was also sunk in it, though that was not of the greatest moment to him. He had a vague hope that when the mine was, through his efforts, pouring out high-grade ore, he might reinstate himself in Barbara's estimation. In that case, at least, she might believe in his contrition, for he felt that where protests were evidently useless deeds might avail. Then the dollars in question would be valuable to him.

It was two hours before the dawn, and still apparently raining hard, when he rose and lighted the stove. He felt a trifle dizzy and very shivery as he did it, but the frugal breakfast put a little warmth into him, and he went out into the thick haze of falling water and up the hillside, walking somewhat wearily and with considerably more effort than he had found it necessary to make a few months ago.

[Pg 406]

XXIX.

A FINAL EFFORT.

A dim, grey light was creeping through the rain when Brooke stopped on a ridge of hillside that broke off from the parent range above the mine. The pines were slowly growing into shape, though as yet they showed as mere spires of blackness in the sliding haze, and there was a faint glimmer in the hollow beneath him, while the sound of running water drowned the splashing of the rain. The snow upon the lower slopes had mostly melted now, though that on the great hill shoulders would swell the frothing rivers for months to come, and, sinking ankle-deep in quaggy

mould, he went down through the dripping undergrowth until he stopped again on the verge of what had become in the last few days a muddy lake.

The wreckage of the higher forests was strewn upon it, but Brooke noticed that it drifted steadily in one direction, and floundering along the water's edge, he reached a narrow gully, which had served as outlet for the stream through the ridge that hemmed in the valley. The passage was, however, now choked by a mass of groaning timber, which was apparently growing every hour, and it already seemed scarcely possible to cut through that pile of wreckage by any means at his command. Once the pent-up water, which seemed rising rapidly, burst the jam, it would come down in an overwhelming torrent upon the mine, and he sat down on a fallen redwood to consider how the difficulty could be grappled with.

[Pg 407]

He, however, found it no easy matter to keep his mind upon the question at all. His head was aching, he felt unpleasantly limp, as well as wet and cold, and the distressful stiffness of his back suggested that he had by no means recovered from the effects of his fall. The long months of strenuous physical toil, the scanty, and, when the freighter could not get in, often wholly insufficient food, and exposure to bitter frost and snow, had left their mark on him, while now, worn out in mind and body as he was, he realized that a last grim effort was demanded from him. How it was to be made he did not know, and he was sitting still, shivering, with the rain running from him, when Jimmy and another man from the mine appeared. It was almost light now, and the miner glanced at the gathering water with evident concern.

"I guess something has got to be done," he said.

Brooke lifted himself shakily to his feet, and blinked in a curious, heavy fashion at the man.

"It has, and if you'll bring the boys up we'll make a start," he said. "Now I don't know that we could cut that jam, and if we did it would only turn the lake loose on the mine. What I purpose is to break a new cut through the rise where it's thinnest, and run enough water off to ease the pressure. Then we might, if it appeared advisable, get at the jam. In the meanwhile every man I can spare from here will start in cutting out a ten-foot trench at the mine. That would take away a good deal of any water that did come down."

[Pg 408]

"I've been at this kind of work 'most all my life, and that's 'bout how I would fix it," said the other man.

"Well," said Brooke, "there's just another point. Once you get started, you'll go right on, and there'll be very little sleep for any one until it's done, but we'll credit you with half extra on every hour's time in the pay-bill."

The man laughed and waved his hand. "You needn't worry 'bout that. I guess the boys will see you through," he said.

He disappeared into the rain, and the struggle commenced when he came back with the men. There were but a handful of them in all, and their task appeared almost beyond accomplishment, even to those born in a country where man and Nature unsubdued come to the closest grapple, and human daring and endurance must make head against the tremendous forces that unloose the rivers and slowly grind the ranges down. It is a continuous struggle, primitive and elemental, in which brute strength and the animal courage that plies axe and drill with worn-out muscle and bleeding hands plays at least an equal part with ingenuity, for man has arrayed against him sun and frost, roaring water, crushing ice, and sliding snow; and those who fall in it lie thick by towering trestle bridge and along each railroad track. Worn out, aching in every limb, and with heavy eyes, Brooke braced himself to bear his part in it.

[Pg 409]

For three days they toiled with pick and shovel and clinking drill, and the roar of the blasting charges shook the wet hillside, but while the trenches deepened slowly the water rose. By night the big fires snapped and sputtered, and the feeble lanterns blinked through the rain, while wild figures, stained with mire and dripping water, moved amidst the smoke, and those who dragged themselves out of the workings lay down on the wet ground for a brief hour's sleep. Brooke, however, so far as he could afterwards remember, did not close his eyes at all, and where his dripping figure appeared the shovels swung more rapidly, and the ringing of the drills grew a trifle louder. The pace was, however, too fierce to last, and, though even the men who work for another toil strenuously in that land, it was evident to him that while their task was less than half-done, they could not sustain it long.

Baffled in one direction, he had also changed his plans, for the ridge was singularly hard to cut through, even with giant powder, and he had withdrawn most of the men from it and sent them to the trench, which would, he hoped, afford a passage to, at least, part of the water that must eventually come down upon the mine. It was late on the third night when it became evident that this would very shortly happen, and he sat, wet through and very weary, in his tent on the hillside, when Jimmy and another man came in.

[Pg 410]

"Water's riz another foot since sundown, and I guess there's lakes of it ready to come down yonder," said the miner, who stretched out a wet hand, and pointed towards the dripping canvas above him, though Brooke surmised that he intended to indicate the range. "So far as I could make out, there's quite a forest of smashed-up logs sailing along to pile up in the jam."

Brooke lifted a wet, grey face, and blinked at him with half-closed eyes.

"Then I'm afraid there are only two courses open to us," he said. "We can wait until the jam

breaks up, when there'll be water enough to fill the Dayspring up and wash the plant above ground right down into the cañon, or we must try to cut it now."

"And turn the lake loose on us with the trench 'bout half big enough to take it away?" said Jimmy.

"Yes," said Brooke, grimly. "You have a six-foot dam thrown up. I'm not sure it will stand, but it's a good deal less likely to do it when the lake is twice as big." [Pg 411]

Jimmy looked at the other man, who nodded. "The boss is right," he said. "You can't stop to look for the nicest way out when you're in a blame tight place. No, sir, you've got to take the quickest one. When do you figure on starting on the jam, Mr. Brooke?"

"Now."

The man appeared astonished, and shook his head. "It can't be done in the dark," he said. "I guess nobody could find the king log that's keying up the jam, and though the boys aren't nervous, I'm not sure you'd get one of them to crawl down that gulley and over the live logs until it's light. They couldn't see to do anything with the axe anyway."

Brooke smiled drily. "Since they will not be asked to do it, that does not count. I purposed trying giant-powder, and going myself; that is, unless Jimmy feels anxious to come along with me."

"I don't," said Jimmy, with decision in his tone. "If it was anybody else, watching him would be quite good enough for me. Still, as it isn't, I guess I'll have to see you through."

"Thanks!" said Brooke. "You can let them know what to expect at the mine, Cropper. I'll want you to put the detonators on the fuses with me, Jimmy."

The other man went out, and the two who were left proceeded to nip down the fulminating caps on the strips of snaky fuse, after which they carefully embedded them in sundry plastic rolls, which looked very like big candles made of yellow wax. These they packed in an iron case, and then, carrying an axe and a big auger, went out of the tent. The rest of the men left at the ridge were waiting them, for every one understood the perilous nature of the attempt, though, as two men were sufficient for the work, there was nothing that they could do, and they proceeded in a body through the dripping undergrowth towards the gully. Here a big fire of resinous wood was lighted, and when at last the smoky glare flickered upon the wet rocks in the hollow, Brooke, who stripped to shirt and trousers, flung himself over the edge. [Pg 412]

He dropped upon a little ledge, and made another yard or two down a cranny, then a bold leap landed him on a second ledge, and the groaning trunks were close beneath him when he dropped again. The glare of the fire scarcely reached him now, and Jimmy, who alighted close by him, looked up longingly at the flickering light above.

"It wasn't easy getting down, and I'd feel better if I knew just how we were going back," he said. "I guess it's not quite wise either to bang that can about on the rocks."

This was incontrovertible, for while giant powder, which is dynamite, is, with due precaution, comparatively safe to handle, and cannot be exploded without a detonator, so those who make it claim, it is still addicted to going off with disastrous results on very small provocation. Brooke, who had the case containing it slung round his back, was, however, looking down on the logs that stirred and heaved beneath him with the water spouting up through the interstices between. He could see them when the fire grew brighter. [Pg 413]

"The king should not be far away, from the look of the jam," he said. "If we can't cut it, we may jar it loose. Giant powder strikes down. Let me have the axe."

Jimmy glanced at him, and shook his head, for Brooke's face showed drawn and grey in the flickering light.

"I'll do any chopping that's wanted, and be glad when I get you out of this," he said.

He dropped upon the timber, and the gap he splashed into closed up suddenly as he whipped out his leg. Then, with Brooke behind him, he crawled over the grinding logs, and by and by drove the point of the auger into one that seemed to run downwards through the midst of them. It was a good many feet in girth, and Brooke gasped heavily when he also laid hold of the auger crutch. The hole they made was charged with one of the yellow rolls, and, moving to a second log, they bored another, while the mass shook and trembled under them, and twice a great spout of water fell splashing upon them. The logs were apparently endued with vitality, for they moved under and over their fellows, and ground upon them with the pulsations of the stream that brought down fresh accessions and found a fresh channel that promptly closed again. The jam might resist the pressure for another week, or break up at any moment, and whirl down the gully in chaotic ruin. Still, with the rain beating down upon them, the pair toiled on until several sticks of explosive had been embedded, when Brooke rose very stiffly and straightened himself as he took a little case out of his pocket. [Pg 414]

"I don't know that we've got the king, but the general shake-up ought to loosen it," he said. "Light your fuse, Jimmy, and then get up. I'll come in a moment or two, when I'm ready."

Jimmy looked up, and saw a cluster of dark figures outlined against the glow of the fire, for the men had crowded to the edge of the gully.

"Stand by to give us a lift up, boys," he said.

Then he turned away, and was rather longer than he liked persuading a damp match to ignite. The fuse, however, sparkled readily, and, groping his way across the logs, he clutched a ledge of rock. It was wet and slippery, and he slid back from it, hurting one arm, while, when he regained the narrow shelf, a voice was raised warningly above.

"Let her go," it said. "Jimmy's fuse will be on to the powder before you're through."

Jimmy turned, and dimly saw his comrade still apparently stooping over one of the logs.

[Pg 415]

"Have I got to come back and bring you?" he shouted.

Brooke stood up, and a faint sparkling broke out at his feet. "Go on," he said. "It's burning now."

Jimmy said nothing further. Those fuses were short, and he was anxious to be clear of the gully. Still, even though he decided to sacrifice the axe, it was not an easy matter to ascend the almost precipitous slope of slippery rock, and as he climbed higher the glare of the fire in his eyes confused him. He had, however, almost reached the top when there was a crash and a rattle of stones below him, and he twisted himself partly round, while a hoarse shout rang out.

"Get hold of him!" cried one of the men. "Oh, jump for it. He'll be over the ledge!"

For a moment Jimmy had a glimpse of a wet, white face, and a hand, apparently clinging to a cranny, and then the flicker of firelight sank and left him in black darkness. He did not understand exactly what had taken place, but it was unpleasantly evident that the fuses would soon reach the powder, while his comrade, whom he could no longer see, was apparently unable to ascend the gully.

"Can't you get him?" shouted somebody.

"Jump down. Put the fuses out!" said another man.

Jimmy was, fortunately, one of the slow men who usually keep their heads, and while he glanced down at the twinkling fuses in the dark pit beneath him, he swung up a warning hand.

[Pg 416]

"Light right out of that, boys. It can't be done," he said. "Hold on, partner. Let me know where you are—I'm coming along."

A faint shout answered him, and Jimmy made his way downwards until he could discern a dusky blur, which he surmised was Brooke, close beneath him. Taking a firm hold with one hand, he leaned down and clutched at it, and then, with every muscle strained, strove to drag his comrade up. Jimmy was a strong man, but Brooke, it seemed, was able to do very little to help him, and Jimmy's fingers commenced to slacken under the tension. Then Brooke, who made a convulsive flounder, lost the grip he had, and the arm Jimmy clung to was torn away from him. A dull sound that was unpleasantly suggestive rose from a ledge below, and there was silence that was more so after it.

Then while Jimmy leaned down, blinking into the darkness and ignoring the risk he ran, a yellow flash leapt out below, and there was a stunning detonation. It was followed almost in the same moment by another, and the solid rock seemed to heave a shiver, while the hollow was filled with overwhelming sound and a nauseating vapor. Giant-powder strikes chiefly downwards, which was especially fortunate for two men just then, but the rock was swept by flying fragments of shattered trunks, and Jimmy cowered against it half-dazed. Then another sound rose out of the acrid haze as the rent trunks crushed beneath the pressure, and there was an appalling grinding and smashing of timber. It was succeeded by a furious roar of water.

[Pg 417]

A minute had probably slipped by when once more a man who showed faintly black against the firelight leaned over the edge of the gully, and his voice reached Jimmy brokenly.

"Hallo! Are either of you alive?" he cried.

Jimmy roused himself with an effort. "Well," he said, hoarsely, "I guess I am. I don't quite know whether Brooke is."

"Then I'm coming down," said the other man. "We have got to get him out of the stink if there's anything left of him."

Jimmy grasped the necessity for this, since the fumes of giant-powder are in confined spaces usually sufficient to prostrate a strong man, and several of his comrades apparently came down instead of one, bringing lanterns and blazing brands with them. There was a slippery ledge a little lower down the gully, and while the nauseating vapor eddied about them and the shattered wreckage went thundering past below, they made their way along it until they came on Brooke.

He was lying partly up on the ledge with his feet in the swirling torrent and his shirt rent open. There was a big red smear on it, his lips were bloodless, and one arm was doubled limply under him. Jimmy stooped and shook him gently, but Brooke made no sign, and his head sank forward until his face was hidden. Then Jimmy, who slipped his hand inside the torn shirt, withdrew it, smeared and warm, with a little shiver.

[Pg 418]

"He's bleeding quite hard, and that shows there's life in him. We have got to get him out of this right now," he said.

None of them quite remembered how they did it, for few men unaccustomed to the ranges would

have cared to ascend that gully unencumbered by daylight, but it was accomplished, and when a litter of fir branches had been hastily lashed together they plodded behind it in silence down the hillside. If anything could be done, and they were very uncertain on that point, it could only be done in the shanty.

As they floundered down the trail a man met them with the news that very little of the water had got into the mine, but that did not appear of much importance to any one just then. After all, the Dayspring belonged to an English company, and it was Brooke, who lay in the litter oblivious of everything, they had worked for.

[Pg 419]

XXX.

THE OTHER CHANCE.

The blink of sunlight was pleasantly warm where Barbara sat with Hetty Hume on a seat set back among the laurels which just there cut off the shrewd wind from the English lawn. A black cloud sailed slowly over the green hilltop behind the old grey house, and the close-cropped grass was sparkling still with the sprinkle of bitter rain, but the scent of the pale narcissus drifted up from the borders and the sticky buds of a big chestnut were opening overhead. Barbara glanced across the sweep of lawn towards the line of willows that swung their tasseled boughs above the palely flashing river. They were apparently dusted with silver and ochre, and here and there a flush of green chequered the ridge of thorn along the winding road that led the eye upwards to the clean-cut edge of the moor. It was, however, a regular, even line, cropped to one unvarying level save for the breaks where the neat gates were hung; the road was smooth and wide, with a red board beside the wisp of firs above to warn all it might concern of the gradient; while the square fields with the polled trees in the trim hedgerows all conveyed the same impression. This was decorous, well-ordered England, where Nature was broken to man's dominion centuries ago. As she glanced at it her companion laughed.

[Pg 420]

"The prospect from here is, I believe, generally admitted to be attractive, though I have not noticed any of my other friends spend much time in admiring it," she said. "Still, perhaps it is different in your case. You haven't anything quite like it in Canada."

"No," said Barbara. "Anyway, not between Quatomac and the big glacier. You remember that ride?"

"Of course!" said Hetty Hume. "I found it a little overwhelming. That is, the peaks and glaciers. I also remember the rancher. The one who played the violin. I suppose you never came across him again?"

"I met him once or twice. At a big concert—and on other occasions."

Barbara's smile was indifferent, but she was silent for the next minute or two. She had now spent several weeks in England, and had found the smooth, well-regulated life there pleasant after the restless activity of the one she had led in Western Canada, where everybody toiled feverishly. She felt the contrast every day, and now the sight of that softly-sliding river, whose low murmur came up soothingly across the lawn, recalled the one that frothed and foamed amidst the Quatomac pines, and the roar that rose from the misty cañon. That, very naturally, also brought back the face of the flume-builder, and she wondered vaguely whether he was still at the Dayspring, and what he was doing then, until her companion turned to her again.

[Pg 421]

"We will really have to decide about the Cruttendens' dance to-night," she said. "It will be the last frivolity of the season in this vicinity."

"I haven't met Mrs. Cruttenden, have I?" said Barbara, indifferently.

"You did, when you were here before. Don't you remember the old house you were so pleased with lower down the valley? In any case, she remembers you, and made a point of my bringing you. Cruttenden has a relative in your country, though I never heard much about the man."

Barbara remembered the old building very well, and it suddenly flashed upon her that Brooke had on one occasion displayed a curious acquaintance with it. Everything that afternoon seemed to force him upon her recollection.

"You would like to go?" she said.

"I, at least, feel I ought to. We are, of course, quite newcomers here. In fact, we had only bought Larchwood just before you last came over, and it was Mrs. Cruttenden who first took us up. One may live a very long while in places of this kind without being admitted within the pale, you see, and even the rank of Major isn't a very great warranty, especially if it has been gained in foreign service instead of Aldershot."

[Pg 422]

Miss Hume stopped as her father came slowly down the pathway with a grey-haired lady, whose dress proclaimed her a widow, and the latter's voice reached the girl's clearly. Her face was, so

Barbara noticed, very expressive as she turned to her companion.

"I think you know what I really came for," she said. "I feel I owe you a very great deal."

Major Hume made a little deprecatory gesture. "I have," he said, "at least, seen the papers, and was very glad to notice that Reggie has got his step. He certainly deserved it. Very plucky thing, especially with only a handful of a raw native levy to back him. Frontal attack in daylight—and the niggers behind the stockade seem to have served their old guns astonishingly well!"

"Still, if it had not been for your forbearance he would never have had the opportunity of doing it," said the lady. "I shall always remember that. You were the only one who made any excuse for him, and he told me his colonel was very bitter against him."

The pair passed the girls, apparently without noticing them, and Barbara did not hear Major Hume's answer, but when he came back alone a few minutes later he stopped in front of them.

"You were here when we went by?" he said.

[Pg 423]

"Yes," said Hetty. "We heard you quite distinctly, too, and that suggests a question. What was it Reggie Ferris did?"

Major Hume smiled drily. "Stormed a big rebel stockade with only a few half-drilled natives to help him. If you haven't read it already I can give you a paper with an account of the affair."

"That," said Hetty, "is, as you are aware, not what I wished to ask. What was it he did before he left the line regiment? It was, presumably, something not especially creditable—and I always had an idea that he owed it to you that the result was not a good deal more unpleasant."

The Major appeared a trifle embarrassed. "I scarcely think it would do you very much good to know," he said. "The thing wasn't a nice one, but there was good stuff in the lad, who, it was evident to me, at least, had been considerably more of a fool than a rogue, and all I did was to persuade the Colonel, who meant to break him, to give him another chance. It seems I was wise. Reggie Ferris has had his lesson, and has from all accounts retrieved his credit in the Colonial service."

"If I remember correctly you once made a bad mistake in being equally considerate to another man," said Hetty, reflectively.

"I certainly did, but you will find by the time you are as old as I am that taking it all round it is better to be merciful."

[Pg 424]

"The Major," said Hetty, with a glance at Barbara, "is a confirmed optimist—and he has been in India."

Major Hume smiled. "Well," he said, "the mistakes one makes from that cause hurt one less afterwards than the ones that result from believing in nobody. Now, there was that young woman who was engaged to Reggie—"

"He has applied the suggestive epithet to her ever since she gave him up," said Hetty. "Still, I really don't think anybody could have expected very much more from her."

"No," said the Major, grimly. "In my opinion she went further than there was any particular necessity for her to do. She knew the man's shortcomings when she was engaged to him—and she should have stuck to him. You don't condemn any one for a single slip in your country, Miss Heathcote?"

Barbara made no answer, for this, it seemed, was just what she had done, but Hetty, who had been watching her, laughed.

"You couldn't expect her to admit that their standard in Canada is lower than ours," she said.

The Major appeared disconcerted. "That is not exactly what I mean. They have a little more charity yonder, and, in some respects, a good deal more sense. From one or two cases I am acquainted with they are, in fact, usually willing to give the man who trips another chance instead of falling upon him mercilessly before he can get up."

[Pg 425]

"Still you haven't told us yet what Reggie Ferris did."

Major Hume laughed as he turned away. "I am," he said, "quite aware of it."

He left them, and Hetty smiled as she said, "The Major has not infrequently been imposed upon, but nothing will disabuse him of his cheerful belief in human nature, and I must admit that he is quite as often right as more censorious people. There was Lily Harland who gave Reggie Ferris up, which, of course, was probably only what he could have expected under the circumstances, but Reggie, it appears, is wiping out the past, and I have reasons for surmising that she has been sorry ever since. Nobody but my father and his mother ever hear from him now, and if that hurts Lily she has only herself to blame. She had her opportunity of showing what faith she had in the man, and can't expect to get another just because she would like it."

She wondered why the warm color had crept into her companion's face, but Barbara said nothing, and vacantly watched the road that wound up through the meadows out of the valley, until a moving object appeared where it crossed the crest of the hill. In the meanwhile her thoughts were busy, for the Major's suggestive little story had not been without its effect on her,

[Pg 426]

and the case of Reggie Ferris was, it seemed, remarkably similar to that of a certain Canadian flume-builder. The English soldier and Grant Devine had both been charitable, but she and the girl who was sorry ever since had shown themselves merciless, and there was in that connection a curious significance in the fact that Reggie Ferris, who was now brilliantly blotting out the past, wrote nobody but his mother and the man who had given him what the latter termed another chance. Barbara remembered the afternoon when she waited at the window and Brooke, who, she fancied, could have done so had he wished, had not come up from the depôt. She could not ignore the fact that this had since occasioned her a vague uneasiness.

In the meanwhile the moving object had been growing larger, and when it reappeared lower down the road resolved itself into a gardener who had been despatched to the nearest village on a bicycle.

"We will wait until Tom brings in the letters," said Hetty.

It was a few minutes later when the man came up the path and handed her a packet. Among the letters she spread out there was one for Barbara, whose face grew suddenly intent as she opened it. It was from Mrs. Devine, and the thin paper crackled under her tightening fingers as she read:

"I have been alone since I last wrote you, as Grant had to go up to the Dayspring suddenly and has not come back. There was, I understand, a big flood in the valley above the mine, and Brooke, it seems, was very seriously hurt when endeavoring to protect the workings. I don't understand exactly how it happened, though I surmise from Grant's letters that he did a very daring thing. He is now in the Vancouver hospital, for although Grant wished him brought here, the surgeon considered him far too ill to move. His injuries, I understand, are not very serious in themselves, but it appears that the man was badly worn out and run down when he sustained them, and his condition, I am sorry to say, is just now very precarious."

[Pg 427]

The rest of the letter concerned the doings of Barbara's friends in Vancouver, but the girl read no more of it, and sat still, a trifle white in the face, with her hands trembling, until Hetty turned to her.

"You don't look well," she said. "I hope nothing has happened to your sister or Mr. Devine?"

"No," said Barbara, quietly, though there was a faint tremor in her voice. "They are apparently in as good health as usual."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Hetty, with an air of relief. "There is, of course, nobody else, or I should have known it, though you really seem a trifle paler than you generally do. Shall we go in and look through these patterns? I have been writing up about some dress material, and they've sent cuttings. Still, I don't suppose you will want anything new for Mrs. Cruttenden's?"

[Pg 428]

"No," said Barbara, in a voice that was almost too even now, and not in keeping with the tension in her face. "In fact, I'm not going at all."

Hetty glanced at her sharply, and then made a little gesture of comprehension.

"Very well!" she said. "Whenever you feel it would be any consolation you can tell me, but in the meanwhile I have no doubt that you can get on without my company."

She moved away, and Barbara, who was glad to be alone, sat still, for she wished to set her thoughts in order. This was apparently the climax all that had passed that afternoon had led up to, but she was just then chiefly conscious of an overwhelming distress that precluded any systematic consideration of its causes. The man whom she had roused from his lethargy at the Quatomac ranch was now, she gathered, dying in the Vancouver hospital, but not before he had blotted out his offences by slow endurance and unwearying effort in the face of flood and frost. She would have admitted this to him willingly now, but the opportunity was, it seemed, not to be afforded her, and the bitter words with which she had lashed him could never be withdrawn. She who had shown no mercy, and would not afford him what Major Hume had termed another chance, must, it seemed, long for it in vain herself.

By degrees, however, her innate resolution rose against that decision, and she remembered that it was not, in point of time, at least a very long journey to British Columbia. There was nothing to prevent her setting out when it pleased her; and then it occurred to her that the difficulties would be plentiful at the other end. What explanation would she make to her sister, or the man, if—and the doubt was horrible—he was, indeed, still capable of receiving it? He had never in direct speech offered her his love, and she had not even the excuse of the girl who had given Reggie Ferris up for throwing herself at his feet. She was not even sure that she could have done it in that case, for her pride was strong, and once more she felt the hopelessness of the irrevocable. She had shown herself hard and unforgiving, and now she realized that the man she loved—and it was borne in upon her, that in spite of his offences she loved him well—was as far beyond her reach as though he had already slipped away from her into the other world at whose shadowy portals he lay in the Vancouver hospital.

[Pg 429]

There had been a time, indeed the occasion had twice presented itself, when she could have relented gracefully, but she could no longer hope that it would ever happen again, and it only remained for her to face the result of her folly, and bear herself befittingly. It would, she realized, cost her a bitter effort, but the effort must be made, and she rose with a tense white face and turned towards the house. Hetty, as it happened, met her in the hall, and looked at her curiously.

[Pg 430]

"There are, as you may remember, two or three people coming in to dinner," she said. "I have no doubt I could think out some excuse if you would sooner not come down."

"Why do you think that would please me?" said Barbara, quietly.

"Well," said Hetty, a trifle drily, "I fancied you would sooner have stayed away. Your appearance rather suggested it."

Barbara smiled in a listless fashion. "I'm afraid I can't help that," she said. "Your friends, however, will presumably not be here for an hour or two yet."

Hetty made no further suggestions, and Barbara moved on slowly towards the stairway. She came of a stock that had grappled with frost and flood in the wild ranges of the mountain province, and courage and steadfastness were born in her, but she knew there was peril in the slightest concession to her gentler nature she might make just then. What she bore in the meanwhile she told nobody, but when the sonorous notes of a gong rolled through the building she came down the great stairway only a trifle colder in face than usual, and immaculately dressed.

[Pg 431]

XXXI. BROOKE IS FORGIVEN.

It was a pleasant morning, and Brooke lay luxuriating in the sunlight by an open window of the Vancouver hospital. His face was blanched and haggard, and his clothes hung loosely about his limbs, but there was a brightness in his eyes, and he was sensible that at last his strength was coming back to him. Opposite him sat Devine, who had just come in, and was watching him with evident approbation.

"You will be fit to be moved out in a day or two, and I want to see you in Mrs. Devine's hands," he said. "We have a room fixed ready, and I came round to ask when the doctor would let you go."

Brooke slowly shook his head. "You are both very kind, but I'm going back to the Old Country," he said. "Still, I don't know whether I shall stay there yet."

Devine appeared a trifle disconcerted. "We had counted on you taking hold again at the Dayspring," he said. "Wilkins is getting an old man, and I don't know of any one who could handle that mine as you have done. Quite sure there's nothing I could do that would keep you?"

[Pg 432]

Brooke lay silent a moment or two. He was loth to leave the mine, but during his slow recovery at the hospital a curious longing to see the Old Country once more had come upon him. He could go back now, and, if it pleased him, pick up the threads of the old life he had left behind, though he was by no means sure this would afford him the satisfaction he had once anticipated. The ambition to prove his capabilities in Canada had, in the meanwhile, at least, deserted him since his last meeting with Barbara, and he had heard from Mrs. Devine that it would probably be several months before she returned to Vancouver. He realized that it was she who had kept him there, and now she had gone, and the mine was, as Devine had informed him, exceeding all expectations, there was no longer any great inducement to stay in Canada. He had seen enough of the country, and, of late, a restless desire to get away from it had been growing stronger with every day of his recovery. It might, he felt, be easier to shake off the memory of his folly in another land.

"No," he said, slowly, "I don't think there is. I feel I must go back, for a while, at least."

"Well," said Devine, who seemed to recognize that protests would be useless, "it's quite a long journey. I guess you can afford it?"

Brooke felt the keen eyes fixed on him with an almost disconcerting steadiness, but he contrived to smile.

[Pg 433]

"Yes," he said, "if I don't do it too extravagantly, I fancy I can."

"Then there's another point," said Devine, with a faint twinkle in his eyes. "You might want to do something yonder that would bring the dollars in. Now, I could give you a few lines that would be useful in case you wanted an engagement with one of your waterworks contractors or any one of that kind."

"I scarcely think it will be necessary," said Brooke, with a little smile.

"Well," said Devine, "I have a notion that it's not going to be very long before we see you back again. You have got used to us, and you're going to find the folks yonder slow. I can think of quite a few men who saved up, one or two of them for a very long while, to go home to the Old Country, and in about a month they'd had enough of it. The country was very much as they left it—but they had altered."

He stopped a moment, with a little chuckle, before he continued. "Now, there was Sandy Campbell, who ran the stamps at the Canopus for me. He never spent a dollar when he could help it, and, when he'd quite a pile of them, he told me he was just sickening for a sight of Glasgow. Well, I let him go, and that day six weeks Sandy came round to the mine again. The Old Country was badly played out, he said, but, for another month, that was all he would tell me, and then the facts came out. Sandy's friends had met him at the Donaldson wharf, and started a circus over the whisky. Somebody broke the furniture, and Sandy doubled up a policeman who, he figured, had insulted him, so they had him up for doing it before whatever they call a magistrate in that country. Sandy's remarks were printed in a Glasgow paper, and he showed it me.

[Pg 434]

"'Forty shillings. It's an iniquity,' he said. 'Is this how ye treat a man who has come six thousand miles to see his native land? I will not find ye a surety. I'm away back by the first Allan boat to a country where they appreciate me.'"

Brooke laughed. "Still, I don't quite see how Sandy's case applies to me."

"I guess it does. One piece of it, anyway. Sandy knew where he was appreciated, and we have room for a good many men of your kind in this country. That's about all I need say. When you feel like it, come right back to me."

He went out a few minutes later, and Brooke lay still thoughtfully, with his old ambitions re-awakening. There was, he surmised, a good deal of truth in Devine's observations, and work in the mountain province that he could do. Still, he felt that even to make his mark there would be no great gain to him now. Barbara could not forgive him, but she was in England, and he might, at least, see her. Whether that would be wise he did not know, and scarcely fancied so, but the faint probability had its attractions, and he would go and stay there—until he had recovered his usual vigor, at least.

[Pg 435]

It was, however, a little while before the doctors would permit him to risk the journey, and several months had passed when he stood with a kinsman and his wife on the lawn outside an old house in an English valley. The air was still and warm, and a full moon was rising above the beeches on the hillside. Its pale light touched the river, that slid smoothly between the mossy stepping-stones, and the shadows of clipped yew and drooping willow lay black upon the grass. There was a faint smell of flowers that linger in the fall, and here and there a withered leaf was softly sailing down, but that night it reminded Brooke of the resinous odors of the Western pines, and the drowsy song of the river, of the thunder of the torrent that swirled by Quatomac. His heart was also beating a trifle more rapidly than usual, and for that reason he was more than usually quiet.

"I suppose your friends will come?" he said, indifferently.

Mrs. Cruttenden, who stood close by him, laughed. "To the minute! Major Hume is punctuality itself. I fancy he will be a little astonished to-night."

"I shall be pleased to meet him again. He was to bring Miss Hume?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Cruttenden, with a keen glance at him. "And Miss Heathcote, whom you asked about. No doubt she will be a trifle astonished, too. You do not seem quite so sure that the meeting with her will afford you any pleasure?"

[Pg 436]

Brooke smiled a trifle grimly. "The most important question is whether she will be pleased to see me. I don't mind admitting it is one that is causing me considerable anxiety."

"Wouldn't her attitude on the last occasion serve as guide?"

Brooke felt his face grow warm under her watchful eyes, but he laughed.

"I would like to believe that it did not," he said. "Miss Heathcote did not appear by any means pleased with me. Still, you see, you sometimes change your minds."

"Yes," said Mrs. Cruttenden, reflectively. "Especially when the person who has offended us has been very ill. It is, in fact, the people one likes the most one is most inclined to feel angry with now and then, but there are circumstances under which one feels sorry for past severities."

Brooke started, for this appeared astonishingly apposite in view of the fact that he had, as she had once or twice reminded him, told her unnecessarily little about his Canadian affairs. The difficulty, however, was that he could not be sure she was correct.

"You naturally know what you would do, but, after all, that scarcely goes quite as far as one would like," he said.

[Pg 437]

Mrs. Cruttenden laughed softly. "Still, I fancy the rest are very like me in one respect. In fact, it might be wise of you to take that for granted."

Just then three figures appeared upon the path that came down to the stepping-stones across the river, and Brooke's eyes were eager as he watched them. They were as yet in the shadow, but he felt that he would have recognized one of them anywhere and under any circumstances. Then he strode forward precipitately, and a minute later sprang aside on to an outlying stone as a grey-haired man, who glanced at him sharply, turned, with hand held out, to one of his companions. Brooke moved a little nearer the one who came last, and then stood bareheaded, while the girl

stopped suddenly and looked at him. He could catch the gleam of the brown eyes under the big hat, and, for the moon was above the beeches now, part of her face and neck gleamed like ivory in the silvery light. She stood quite still, with the flashing water sliding past her feet, etherealized, it seemed to him, by her surroundings and a complement of the harmonies of the night.

"You?" she said.

Brooke laughed softly, and swept his hand vaguely round, as though to indicate the shining river and dusky trees.

"Yes," he said. "You remember how I met you at Quatomac. Who else could it be?"

[Pg 438]

"Nobody," said Barbara, with a tinge of color in her face. "At least, any one else would have been distinctly out of place."

Brooke tightened his grasp on the hand she had laid in his, for which there was some excuse, since the stone she stood upon was round and smooth, and it was a long step to the next one.

"You knew I was here?" he said.

"Yes," said Barbara, quietly.

Brooke felt his heart throbbing painfully. "And you could have framed an excuse for staying away?"

The girl glanced at him covertly as he stood very straight looking down on her, with lips that had set suddenly, and tension in his face. The moonlight shone into it, and it was, she noticed, quieter and a little grimmer than it had been, while his sinewy frame still showed spare to gauntness in the thin conventional dress. This had its significance to her.

"Of course!" she said. "Still, it did not seem necessary. I had no reason for wishing to stay away."

Brooke fancied that there was a good deal in this admission, and his voice had a little exultant thrill in it.

"That implies—ever so much," he said. "Hold fast. That stone is treacherous, and one can get wet in this river, though it is not the Quatomac. Absurd to suggest that, isn't it? Are not Abana and Pharpar better than all the waters of Israel?"

[Pg 439]

Barbara also laughed. "Do you wish the Major to come back for me?" she said. "It is really a little difficult to stand still upon a narrow piece of mossy stone."

They went across, and Major Hume stared at Brooke in astonishment when Cruttenden presented him.

"By all that's wonderful! Our Canadian guide!" he said.

"Presumably so!" said Cruttenden. "Still, though, my wife appears to understand the allusion, it's more than I do. Anyway, he is my kinsman, Harford Brooke, and the owner of High Wycombe."

Brooke smiled as he shook hands with the Major, but he was sensible that Barbara flashed a swift glance at him, and, as they moved towards the house, Hetty broke in.

"You must know, Mr. Cruttenden, that your kinsman met Barbara beside a river once before, and on that occasion, too, they did not come out of it until some little time after we did," she said.

"That," said Cruttenden, "appears to imply that they were—in—the water."

"I really think that one of them was," said Hetty. "Barbara had a pony, but Mr. Brooke had not, and his appearance certainly suggested that he had been bathing. In fact, he was so bedraggled that Barbara gave him a dollar. She had, I must explain, already spent a few months in this country."

[Pg 440]

Brooke was a trifle astonished, and noticed a sudden warmth in Barbara's face.

"If I remember correctly, you had gone into the ranch, Miss Hume," he said, severely.

"No," said Hetty. "You may have fancied so, but I hadn't. I was the only chaperon Barbara had, you see. I hope she didn't tell you not to lavish the dollar on whisky. No doubt you spent it wisely on tobacco."

Brooke made no answer, and his smile was somewhat forced; but he went with the others into the house, and it was an hour or two later when he and Barbara again stood by the riverside alone. Neither of them quite knew how it came about, but they were there with the black shadows of the beeches behind them and the flashing water at their feet. Brooke glanced slowly round him, and then turned to the girl.

"It reminds one of that other river—but there is a difference," he said. "The beeches make poor substitutes for your towering pines, and you no longer wear the white samite."

"And," said Barbara, "where is the sword?"

Brooke looked down on her gravely, and shook his head. "I am not fit to wear it, and yet I dare not give it back to you, stained as it is," he said. "What am I to do?"

"Keep it," said Barbara, softly. "You have wiped the stain out, and it is bright again."

[Pg 441]

Brooke laid a hand that quivered a little on her shoulder. "Barbara," he said, "I am not vainer than most men, and I know what I have done, but unless what once seemed beyond all hoping for was about to come to me, you and I would not have met again beside the river. It simply couldn't happen. You can forget all that has gone before, and once more try to believe in me?"

"I think," said Barbara, quietly, "there is a good deal that you must never remember, too. I realized that"—and she stopped with a little shiver—"when you were lying in the Vancouver hospital."

"And you knew I loved you, though in those days I dare not tell you so? I have done so, I think, from the night I first saw you, and yet there is so much to make you shrink from me."

"No," said Barbara, very softly, "there is nothing whatever now—and if perfection had been indispensable you would never have thought of me."

Brooke laid his other hand on her shoulder, and, standing so, while every nerve in him thrilled, still held her a little apart, so that the silvery light shone into her flushed face. For a moment she met his gaze, and her eyes were shining.

"Do you know that, absurd as it may sound, I seemed to know that night at Quatomac that I should hold you in my arms again one day?" he said. "Of course, the thing seemed out of the question, an insensate dream, and still I could never quite let go my hold of the alluring fancy."

[Pg 442]

"And if the dream had never been fulfilled?"

Brooke laughed curiously. "You would still have ridden beside me through many a long night march, with the moon shining round and full behind your shoulder, and I should have felt the white dress brush me softly where the trail was dark."

"Then I should have been always young to you. You would never have seen me grow faded and the grey creep into my hair."

Brooke drew her towards him, and held her close. "My dear, you will be always beautiful to me. We will grow old together, and the one who must cross the last dark river first will, at least, start out on the shadowy trail holding the other's hand."

It was an hour later when Barbara, with the man's arm still about her, glanced across the velvet lawn to the old grey house beneath the dusky slope of wooded hill. The moonlight silvered its weathered front, and the deep tranquillity of the sheltered valley made itself felt.

"Yes," said Brooke, "it is yours and mine."

Barbara made a little gesture that was eloquent of appreciation. "It is very beautiful. A place one could dream one's life away in. We have nothing like it in Canada. You would care to stay here always?"

"Any place would be delightful with you."

[Pg 443]

The girl laughed softly, but her voice had a tender thrill in it, and then she turned towards the west.

"It is very beautiful—and full of rest," she said. "Still, I scarcely think it would suit you to sit down in idleness, and all that can be done for this rich country has been done years ago."

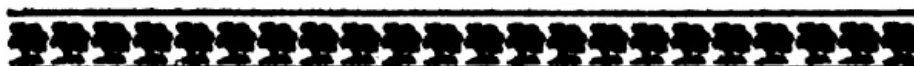
"I wonder," said Brooke, who guessed her thoughts, "if you would be quite so sure when you had seen our towns."

"Still, one would need to be very wise to take hold there—and I do not think you care for politics."

"No," said Brooke, with a faint, dry smile. "Besides, remembering Saxton, I should feel a becoming diffidence about wishing to serve my nation in that fashion. There are men enough who are anxious to do it already, and I would be happier grappling with the rocks and pines in Western Canada."

"Then," said Barbara, "if it pleases you, we will go back to the great unfinished land where the dreams of such men as you are come true."

THE END.





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Transcriber's Note: The following typographical errors present in the original edition have been corrected.

In the table of contents, **The Jumping of the Caonpus** was changed to **The Jumping of the Canopus**.

In Chapter VII, **The result was from one point of view comtemptible** was changed to **The result was from one point of view contemptible**.

In Chapter VIII, an extra quotation mark was deleted after **it was the other man who fell in**.

In Chapter XI, a comma was changed to a period after **a kindness thrust upon him by his companion, "Of course!" be said**, was changed to **"Of course!" be said.**, and **the distinctions you allude too** was changed to **the distinctions you allude to**.

In Chapter XIII, a missing quotation mark was added after **We may be staying for some time yet at the C. P. R. Hotel, Vancouver**.

In Chapter XIV, a question mark was changed to a period after **nature untrammelled, and primeval force**.

In Chapter XVIII, a missing period was added after **"I'm not quite sure whether I expected it or not, but I almost hope I did," he said**.

In Chapter XX, **What, in the name of thunder** was changed to **What in the name of thunder**.

In Chapter XXI, **Lou, no doubt, had a purpose** was changed to **You, no doubt, had a purpose**.

In Chapter XXII, **much more pleased that you were** was changed to **much more pleased than you were**.

In Chapter XXV, **They told me as nearly as they could remember** was changed to **They told him as nearly as they could remember**.

In Chapter XXVI, a quotation mark was removed after **he had certainly been impelled by at their last meeting**.

In Chapter XXIX, **B ooke braced himself to bear his part in it** was changed to **Brooke braced himself to bear his part in it**.

In Chapter XXXI, an extra quotation mark was removed before **I guess you can afford it?**

In the advertisement for *The Spotter*, an extra period was deleted after "A Story of the Early Days in the Pennsylvania Oil Fields.", and a period was changed to a comma after **Duncan Cameron is a Pennsylvania farmer**.

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