The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Fortune of the Landrays, by Vaughan Kester

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: The Fortune of the Landrays

Author: Vaughan Kester
Illustrator: Margaret West Kinney
Illustrator: Troy Kinney

Release date: July 11, 2016 [EBook #52560]
Most recently updated: January 26, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Widger from page images generously
provided by the Internet Archive

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FORTUNE OF THE LANDRAYS ***

THE FORTUNE OF THE LANDRAYS

By Vaughn Kester

Illustrated by The Kinneys

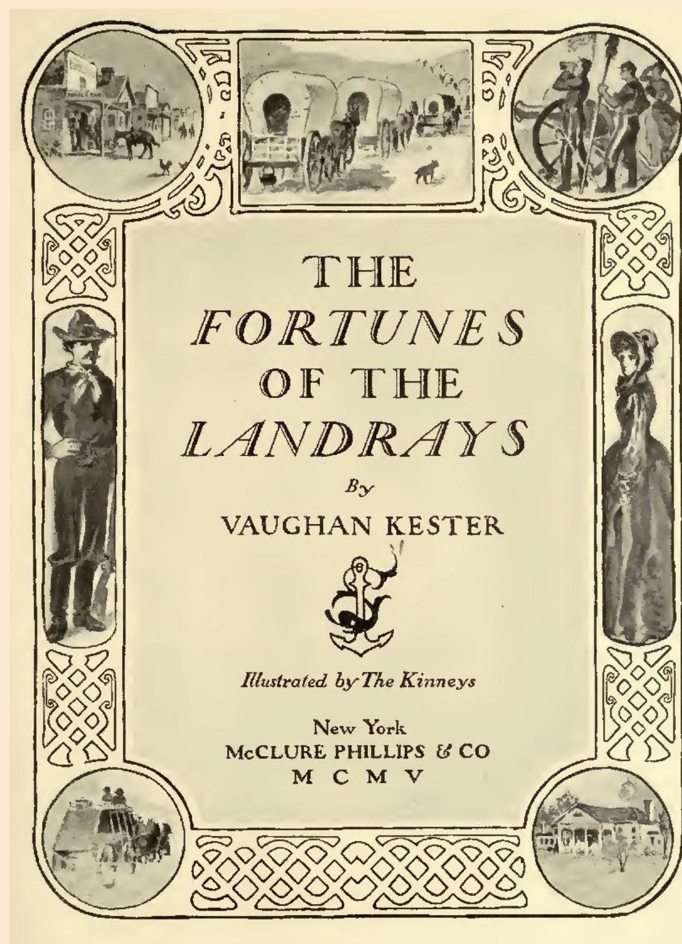
New York: McClure Phillips and Company

1905

THE FORTUNES OF THE LANDRAYS

VAUGHAN KESTER

VIRGINIA LANDRAY


THE
FORTUNES
OF THE
LANDRAYS
By
VAUGHAN KESTER
Illustrated by The Kinneys
New York
McCLURE PHILLIPS & CO
M C M V

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHAPTER THIRTY

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

CHAPTER FORTY

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

CHAPTER FIFTY

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

|CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

CHAPTER ONE

THE boy on the box was surfeited with travel. Glancing back over the swaying top of the coach, he had seen miles upon miles of hot dusty road, between banked-up masses of forests or cultivated fields, dwindle to a narrow thread of yellow. Day after day there had been the same tiresome repetition of noisy towns and sleepy cross-road villages, each one very like the other and all having a widely different appearance from that which he conceived Benson would present.

The wonderful life of the road, varied and picturesque, no longer claimed his attention. The black dot a mile distant was unnoticed. It was a long line of freight wagons north-bound to some lake port, laden with pork, flour and hides. Presently, these wagons would be passed by a party of mounted traders, travelling south to Baltimore for supplies, with their sacks of Spanish dollars loaded upon pack horses. Next they would journey for a little space with a cattle dealer and his men, who were taking a drove of Marino sheep across the state to Indiana. But the boy's curiosity had been more than satisfied; he had only to close his eyes to see again the vivid panorama of the road in the blaze of that hot June sun.

They had changed drivers so many times he had lost all count of them; and with the changing drivers a wearisome succession of passengers had come and gone; but to-day he and his father rode alone upon the box. That morning, the latter had told him they would reach Benson by noon, yet strangely enough his interest flagged; the miles seemed endless—interminable. He was sore and stiff; his little legs ached from their cramped position, and at last utterly weary he fell into a troubled sleep, his head resting on his father's arm, and his small hands, moist and warm, clasped idly in his lap.

His father, grim, motionless, and predisposed to silence, gave brief replies to such questions as Mr. Bartlett, the driver, saw fit to ask;—for Mr. Bartlett was frankly curious. As he said himself, he always liked to know who his passengers were, where they came from, where they were going, and if possible their business.

Now as they began the long descent of Landray's Hill, south of Benson, Mr. Bartlett pushed forward his brake handle and said, “That's Benson ahead of us, off yonder where you see the church spires; would you 'a knowed it, do you think?”

Instantly the man at his side who had been sitting low in his seat, took a more erect position, while a sudden light kindled in his dull eyes.

“Known it?” after a moment's survey of the scene before him. “Well, I guess not.” There was palpable regret in his tone, just touched by some hidden emotion; a passing shade of feeling not anticipated, that moved him.

“I allowed you wouldn't. Twenty years makes a heap of difference, don't it? Gives you a turn?” interestedly.

“Well, sort of,” with gentle sadness.

“I know how you feel. I been that way myself,” said the driver. Mr. Bartlett was short and stocky, with ruddy cheeks and great red hands. As one who mingled muck with the world, he prided himself on his social adaptability.

The stranger bestowed upon him a glance of frank displeasure. He felt vaguely that the other's sentiment was distasteful to him. It smacked of such fat complacency. At last he said, “I'd about made up my mind that I wa'n'. to see it again.” here a violent fit of coughing interrupted him. When it subsided, Mr. Bartlett remarked sympathetically:

“You ought to take something for that cough of your's. I would if it was mine.”

The stranger, still choking, shook his head.

“Where does it take you?”

“Here,” resting a bony hand on his sunken chest.

“Lungs?”

The stranger's jaws grew rigid. He favoured the driver with a sinister frown.

There was silence between them for a little space, which Mr. Bartlett devoted to a thoughtful study of his

companion. Under this close scrutiny the stranger moved restlessly. A sense of the other's physical health oppressed him; it seemed to take from his own slender stock of vitality.

“Hope I ain't crowding you,” said Mr. Bartlett. “Here, I'll make more room for you. Well sir, Benson's about the healthiest place I know of. When a man gets ready to die there, he has to move away to do it.”

“Who the hell's talking about dying?” demanded the stranger savagely. “There are plenty of graveyards where I came from.”

“There are plenty of graveyards everywhere; yes sir, you'd have to do a heap of travelling to get shut of them.” admitted Mr. Bartlett impartially.

“And all the thundering fools ain't buried yet,” said the stranger shortly.

Mr. Bartlett meditated on this apparently irrelevant remark in silence. He had found the stranger taciturn and sullen, or given to flashes of grim humour.

“Where's Landray's mill?” the latter now demanded, the glint of anger slowly fading from his eyes.

“See that clump of willows down yonder, to the right of the road? It's just back of them.”

“Who's running it?”

“Old General Landray's sons, Bush and Steve,” he spoke of them with easy familiarity.

“I see you know them,” said the stranger.

“It'd be funny if I didn't,—everybody knows 'em.”

“I reckon so,” said the stranger briefly.

“I allow you knowed the general?” remarked Mr. Bartlett.

“I recollect him well enough.”

“He was right smart of a man in his day, and one of the old original first settlers. I knowed him well myself,” observed Mr. Bartlett.

“Powerful easy man to get acquainted with; awful familiar, wa'n'. he?” and the stranger grinned evilly.

“Well, I knowed him when I seen him,” said Mr. Bartlett, with some reserve; and he seemed willing to abandon the subject. “What you laughing at?” he added quickly, for the stranger was chuckling softly to himself.

“Oh, nothing much. Did you know him after he was took with the gout? You're sort of fat; say now, did he ever cuss you for getting in his way? It's likely that's what brought you to his notice,” and he exploded in a burst of harsh laughter. “Oh, yes, I reckon you knowed him well—when you seen him.”

This singular assault on his innocent pretensions had a marked and chilling effect on the driver. He edged away from the stranger, and there was a long pause; but silence was not to be where Mr. Bartlett was concerned. He now asked, pointing to the sleeping child, “Ain't you going to wake him up? He'll feel as if he'd missed something.”

“I guess he'll have a chance to see all there is to see when we get there. He's clean tired out. You say the Landray boys have the mill? The old general used to own a distillery across the race from it; what became of that?”

“It's there yet; Levi Tucker has it now. He's got the tavern, too, and I don't suppose he'd care to part with either. He's his own best customer; Colonel Sharp says he's producer and consumer both; I allow you didn't know the colonel?”

Again the stranger shook his head, and the driver's placid voice just pitched to carry above the rattle of wheels and the beat of hoofs, droned on, a colourless monotone of sound.

“I didn't suppose you did, he's since your time, I guess; he's editor of the *Pioneer* at Benson, and a powerful public speaker; I reckon near about as good as old Webster himself, only he ain't got the name. I don't remember ever seeing him but what he had his left hand tucked in at the top of his wes'-coat; yes, I reckon you might say he was a natural born speaker; when he gets stumped for a word he just digs it up from one of them dead languages, and everything he says is as full of meat as an egg; it makes you puzzle and study, and think, and even then you don't really get what he's driving at more than half the time. He's a mighty strong tobacco chewer, too, and spits clean as a fox—why clean as a fox I don't know,” he added, but he was evidently much pleased with this picturesque description of the colonel's favourite vice.

The stranger's glance had wandered down into the cool depths of the valley. It was twenty years since his eyes had rested on its peace and calm; its beauty of sun and shade and summer-time; much of his courage and more of his hope had gone in those years; he was coming back, wasted and worn, to the spot he had never ceased to speak of and to think of as home. He had looked forward to this return for health, but he knew now that the magic he had expected in his misery and home-sickness was not there; but he was inarticulate in his suffering, and perhaps mercifully enough did not know its depths, so even his own rude pity for himself was after all but the burlesque of the tragedy he had lived. Yet there still remained that greater purpose which was to make the road smooth for the child at his side where it had been filled with difficulties for him; there should be no more hardships, no more of those vast solitudes that sapped the life that filtered into them, that crazed or brutalized; these he had know; but these the boy should never know, for him there should be ease and riches,—splendid golden riches; his ignorance could scarce conceive their limit, the possibilities were so vast. Now he leaned far forward in his seat, hunger for the sight of some familiar object pinched his face with sudden longing.

“It's mighty pretty!” he said at last with a deep breath.

“Ain't it?” agreed Mr. Bartlett indulgently.

But the log cabins he had known were gone, and frame houses painted an unvarying white with vivid green blinds closed to the sun had taken their place. To the east and to the west of the town were waving fields of grain; with here and there an island of dense shade where a strip of woodland had been spared by the axe of the pioneer; on some of the more rugged hillsides from which the timber had been but recently cleared the blackened stumps were still standing. A blur of sound rose from the valley, it was like the droning of bees.

"That's the old Bendy furnace I hear, ain't it?"

"That's what it is," said Mr. Bartlett.

The stranger sank back with a gesture of weariness, "It's a hell of a ways to come," he said sourly. "It will be a lot easier when they get the railroads through here; that will knock you, pardner," he added as a pleasant afterthought.

"I don't know about that;" said Mr. Bartlett quickly. "I guess it's going to be a right smart while before we hit on anything to beat hosses; the railroads is all right as far as they go, but the stages is here to stay. I reckon folks will always be in a hurry for the mail."

"Well, I'd hate to think anything would ever interfere with you," said the stranger with an ugly grin.

"How far did you say you'd come?" inquired Mr. Bartlett casually.

"I allow I didn't say," said the other briefly.

"I reckon you ain't come any further than Pittsburg," urged Mr. Bartlett tentatively.

"You reckon not?" and the stranger smiled.

"Philadelphia?" queried the driver.

"No."

"New York, maybe?" cautiously.

"I been there, but that ain't a patch on the distance I've come."

"Sailoring, maybe?"

"Not any. I seen all the salt water I want to."

"Sick?" inquired Mr. Bartlett deeply interested.

"I like to throw up my toes."

"You don't say!"

Here the boy awoke with a start. "Are we there yet, Pop?" he asked, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

The man's lips parted in a smile. "That's Benson ahead of us, son; we're almost there. Them's the church spires; and that round, dome-like thing's the court-house that you've heard me tell about." There was not much of the town to see beyond the roofs of a few buildings which here and there showed among the trees, but the child was deeply impressed.

"Is that the place where you was a little boy, Pop?" he questioned in an awestruck tone. He was quite overcome by the sight of it; he stretched his tired limbs with a sense of freedom and physical relief.

It's a pretty gay looking town, ain't it? remarked Mr. Bartlett, with ponderous playfulness.

The child nestled closer to his father's side. "Is that the crick off yonder?" he asked.

"That's what it is, son, but the banks are pretty well grown up with willows since my time."

"Where's the sheep-wash, Pop, where you swum the lambs?" He was a grave little boy, and he had come a great way to see all these wonders.

His father turned a trifle shame-facedly to Mr. Bartlett:

"I been trying to hearten him up a bit on the trip," he explained; then he added, "You can't see the sheep-wash from here, son; it's off to the other side of the town."

"Oh! Where's the sugar bush, where you and Grandpap made the long sweetening, and where you killed the timber-wolf, have we passed that?"

The man glanced back over his shoulder, "I reckon from the look of things that's been cleaned up," he said regretfully. "I laid off to show it to you as we come along."

"I wish she was here, don't you, Pop?" said the boy in a whisper, and he tucked his small hand into that of his father. The latter made no answer to this.

"Do you plan to locate in Benson?" asked Mr. Bartlett.

"Eh?" said the stranger, roused from the revery into which the child's words had thrown him. "No, I guess not; I ain't come back to stop. I reckon I need more elbow room than you got left in this part of the country."

The boy nudged his father, and then placing a small hand with elaborate caution over his own lips as if to signify the need of reticence, smiled with deep cunning. The stranger lapsed into a moody silence and withdrew his eyes from the reach of valley into which they were descending, while Mr. Bartlett returned his undivided attention to the four horses he was driving. At intervals the child raised his eyes to his father's face as if to ask some question, but respecting his silence turned away again with the question unasked.

Having by his time reached the foot of Landray's Hill, Mr. Bartlett deftly released the brake, shook out his lines, and the stage made its rapid entry into Benson.

CHAPTER TWO

THE old stage road became the Main Street at Benson. Daily over its surface, beneath the thick shade of maples and oaks, creaked and rumbled the huge stages Northward and Southward bound. The drivers on these stages, a tanned and whiskered fraternity, were wont to get the most out of the short half mile that went to make up the distance between the covered bridge south of town and Levi Tucker's red brick

tavern on the square. Much pure display was achieved in the way of galloping horses and cracking whips, as well as some extra speed.

The arrival of each stage was the cause of a lively, if temporary excitement. No merchant was so busy, but he found time to hurry to his door to note its passing. Dogs barked shrilly; hens, vocal with fright, driving their panic-stricken broods before them, would scurry across the cool bricks of the checkered, grass-grown pavement, to seek safety under some lilac hedge. Even the idlers on the courthouse steps, rose wearily, as men swayed by a strong but repellant sense of duty, and slouched silently across the square. They were chary of words; for much sitting on those steps had given them the wasted speech of men who are talked out.

Previous to this sudden awakening, Levi Tucker would anticipate by his frequent appearance before his tavern, the coming of the stage. He would stand looking off down the road, nervously snapping the lid of his massive silver watch. A wait of five minutes sent him to the barn to Jim, the stableman, for a theory that would explain this extraordinary occurrence. A delay of ten minutes sent him to the bar for a drink. When, finally he heard the distant rumble of wheels, he would return his watch to the fob pocket of his drab trousers, and call to Jim: “Here she comes!” as the stage, reeling awkwardly from side to side, thundered through the covered bridge and out into the dusty sunlight.

The teamsters, loading their freight wagons at the warehouses along the river front, followed these arrivals with the easy flow of impartial criticism. As men possessing profoundly subtle views on horse flesh, no little detail escaped them. They, too, were a part of the life of that great artery of pioneer existence; and the road and its happenings, were to each one of them, as something intimate and personal. A change of horses or a change of drivers, were matters that could not be lightly banished.

The stage road followed in its general direction, over hills and through valleys and across long reaches of level land, what had been an Indian trail at the waning of the eighteenth century, when Andrew Ballard, of Pennsylvania, the first ripple in a vast wave of emigration, pushing manfully out into the wilderness, built his cabin among the hazel-bushes and scrub-oak south of Benson, where he lived for perhaps a year, the only white man in all that region.

The next settler, a solitary Jersey man, penetrated some five miles further into the wilderness to the west of Benson, and set up a forge, from which he supplied the Indians with knives and hatchets.

Another year elapsed, and Colonel Stephen Landray of Oxen Hill, Westmoreland County, Virginia, surveyor and soldier, with horses, wagons and a few slaves, following the Indian trail, found his way into the country. He wintered with the Jersey axe-maker, after sending his wagons back to Baltimore, loaded with ginseng for the Chinese trade.

The fourth settler was a lone Yankee, Jacob Benson, who came down the trail from the lakes. With chain and compass he layout the town, with its large public green, its Main Street, its North Street, and South Street, and its Front and Water Streets, together with one hundred and sixty lots in Section number five, Township eight, Range five, United States Military District. Then, with his town plot in his pocket, he made his way on foot to the nearest land office, eighty-five miles distant, and before a Justice of the Peace, acknowledged this important instrument; whereupon Andrew Ballard, feeling that he had been crowded out of the country, got together his half-breed family and moved over into Indiana, where there was nothing but echoes to answer the crack of his rifle.

The country round about Benson was soon parcelled out in what were known as tomahawk rights. The pioneer cut his name with hatchet or hunting knife on some convenient tree, and thus marked his claim. Jacob Benson built his cabin of hewn logs on the south side of the public square and opened a store, selling guns, ammunition, cheap trinkets, and poor whisky to passing whites and Indians, at a fabulous profit to himself.

But the stage road had been a great highway long before Jacob Benson's day—a highway when the eighteenth century was younger, and Jacob Benson not at all. From time immemorial the Indians had used it in their passings to and fro between the Great Lakes on the north, and the Ohio River on the south. They were using it when the first white man set his foot upon the Western World. They were following its windings beneath the broad arches of the forest by summer and winter; when the sunlight lay in golden patches on the mossy mould of its surface; when snow and frost clung thick to bough and bush, and the sunlight glistened white and blinding among its pale shadows; and even further back than this, the trail had been there, a means of human intercourse between the North and the South. Strange earth-works and mounds rudely outlined its course, showing plainly that it had been known to the Indians predecessors. But the Mound Builder had vanished, and tall trees thrived at amplest girth on the mounds of his building. He had gone his way upon the trail, had stepped from it as silently as the sunlight faded over its length at evening to become as intangible as a myth; and the Indian had gone his way upon it too, leaving not even the print of his moccasin among the dead leaves rotting beneath the old trees.

Following the Mound Builders and the Indians, came the superior race to occupy the soil. Their first need was a road, so they felled a few trees at the trail-side, or blew out a few stumps with gunpowder, and the state established it as a post route between the lake ports and river points. Cabins sprang up along it and were occupied by the pioneers who made their living partly from their land; partly by hunting or in trading with the Indians.

As emigration increased, inns and taverns dotted the road; for it was destined to know the passing of those, who, impelled by the earth hunger, were pushing west, always west; on foot, on horseback, by wagon and by stage, to found states in the wilderness beyond. The blacksmith, gun-maker, wheelwright, cooper, and cobbler, plied their trades beside it; there was the busy hum of their ceaseless primitive industry.

It soon became a place of wonderful fascination and romance; with its own abundant life, its traders, teamsters, and drovers; its home-seekers, hunters, Indian fighters, and adventurers of every conceivable description. Up it went the first rumour of war in 1812, and back down it swept the first news of Hull's defeat. It saw the passing of General Winchester's troops north to the Lake in the dead of winter; many of them barefoot and all in tattered buckskin or ragged homespun, with their long, brown rifles held in their frosted fingers; and later it echoed to the news of Harrison's victory on the Thames, when bonfires blazed at

every cross-road station, and live trees were split with gunpowder.

And now the road had seen half a century of use. It was heavy with dust in summer from the almost continual trampling of the herds of horses and cattle, or droves of white, bleating sheep; and axle-deep with mud in spring and fall between frost and thaw; or rutted deep in winter where the wheels of the lumbering coaches and slow-moving freight wagons had cut.

In Jacob Benson's day, the fine old taste for classic learning still survived; men having the time as well as the inclination for such things; and many a land owner in plotting his town site, gave it some name culled from Greek or Roman history. The Athens, Romes, Homers, and Spartas, dotted the map; but old Jacob Benson, with the egotism of rude and satisfied ignorance, when he lay out his town, and dug or burnt a few stumps from the centre of what he hoped would some day be a street, named it after himself; and so it has stood to this very day, growing steadily and with no apparent haste, but growing always.

In the course of time the cabins, built by the early settlers, of unbarked logs with outside chimneys of mud and sticks, clapboard roofs, and puncheon floors, were replaced by more pretentious dwellings of hewn logs, with shingled roof, having sawed lumber for doors, window sash, and floors. These survived as stables, loom-houses, and shops of various sorts; for they in their turn gave way to substantial and often spacious homes of frame and brick. Indeed, as early as 1815, the town boasted a brick court-house which men came from afar to see. In their reckless pride the townspeople declared that it was one of the finest public buildings in the state.

They had been wonderfully patient in industry, these pioneers. They had built schools, churches, roads and mills; they had driven out the Indians; and had waged incessant conflict against the wild life of their woods. They had fought the forest back from their doors foot by foot, and from clearing to clearing; until their rail and stump fences were everywhere in the landscape, climbing every hillside or reaching out across every stretch of fertile bottom land. Nor had their activities stopped here. They had played their part in the war of 1812, a part men still spoke of with pride; Colonel Landray recruiting a band of riflemen from among the sparse population. They had sent a company of fifty men to aid Texas in her struggle for independence, they had furnished and equipped two companies of volunteers for the war with Mexico, and all this while, year by year, beckoning to them in the West was the wilderness, with its compelling mystery that drew them on to its subduing; that made them leave their homes when they were built, their fields when they were cleared.

CHAPTER THREE

MR. Bartlett drew rein before the tavern and greeted Mr. Tucker with a bluff “Good-morning.”

He looked as a man may look who has accomplished some great thing, for so he had, he had brought the news of the world to Benson's door; and what matter if that news had been stale for a week or better; if it chanced to be politics from Washington, or fashions from New York, these slight delays did not disturb Benson in the least, for the news had not always come so quickly.

Colonel Sharp, the editor of the *American Pioneer*, with his inevitable volume of the “Odes of Horace,” protruding from his coat pocket; and Captain Gibbs, editor of *The True Whig*, with his inevitable cigar protruding from his lips, hurried across the square from their respective offices, each intent upon receiving his bundle of Eastern papers.

Mr. Bendy, the postmaster, appeared, accompanied by a half-grown boy carrying a mail sack; and Jim, the stableman, led out the four fresh horses that were to take the place of Mr. Bartlett's jaded teams.

The child gathered up the small bundle which contained his own and his father's few belongings, and climbed quickly down from the box.

Before he left his seat, the stranger turned to Mr. Bartlett and tapping him on the chest with a long forefinger, said: “You're mighty curious, you are, but just you remember what I said about the graveyards and the fools; or maybe you'd better ask some friend's opinion—he'll see the point.”

He seemed to fling the words at him with an insolence that was indifferent of consequences, and before the astonished driver could make any reply, stepped to the wheel and from thence to the ground, and the coach an instant later rolled up Main Street.

The stranger stood like a man in a dream in the centre of the dusty road. He was a tall gaunt man of thirty-eight or forty, and, judging from the cheap decency of his attire, he might have been a mechanic or superior sort of a labourer in his best, for his clothes fit him illy, and he wore them as one accustomed to some other dress. He glanced across the hot square and on beyond it to the vista of shaded streets, where lay the spell of the summer's heat and lethargy. His appearance was that of one seeking out some familiar object, and seeking in vain.

After a moment's hesitation Mr. Tucker stepped to his side and touched him on the arm. The stranger turned on him with a frown of displeasure.

“Well?” he said shortly.

Mr. Tucker regarded him with amiable interest.

“Are you expecting to meet any one?” he inquired, smiling genially.

The stranger shook his head sadly. “No, I guess not,” he said slowly. “You don't happen to know a man by the name of Silas Rogers about here, do you? He used to run a blacksmith shop.”

“Why! Man, he's been dead near about eight years. It was all of eight years ago that we buried Silas, wa'n'. it, boys?” and he turned to the group of idlers before the inn.

“Going on nine,” corrected one of these laconically.

“He was well liked,” said Mr. Tucker.

The stranger made an impatient gesture.

“Maybe you know Tom Rogers?” he said.

“He's been dead about ten years,” answered the innkeeper promptly. “It was all of ten years ago that we buried Tom, wa'n'. it boys?” and again he turned to the idlers before the inn.

The stranger interrupted him quickly and resentfully.

“Seems to me you take a right smart interest in burying people; I reckon you have never thought how us that are left will feel when we come to plant you.”

At this, Mr. Tucker's mouth opened in silent wonder. He was a man of few ideas, and these did not yield themselves readily to words; but it occurred to him afterward that the stranger's chance of being present on the occasion alluded to, was highly problematical.

The latter stood for a moment scowling at the innkeeper, then he drew his tall form erect and taking his son's hand, turned abruptly on his heel and strode firmly off across the Square.

“Touchy, ain't he?” said Mr. Tucker, still amiably smiling.

Conscious that the eyes of the idlers were upon him, the stranger gained the centre of the Square before his pace slackened and his shoulders drooped again.

“It's everywhere!” he muttered to himself.

The boy looked up into his face with a glance of mute inquiry. He could not understand what the trouble was, but to him their homecoming was already a tragic failure. At last he said.

“Ain't this Benson, Pop?”

“Yes, it's Benson, sure enough, son.”

He glanced down at the child, and saw that his eyes were filled with tears. A spasm of pain crossed his own face.

“We'll find them presently, son; and they'll be mighty glad to see us when we tell them why we have come back; and we mustn't forget to ask about that pony I've laid off to get you when our ship comes in.”

But the child had ceased to care. He scarcely raised his eyes as they went down the street.

The maples cast cool shadows about them. It was very still, for the town seemed sleeping in the sultry warmth of that June day. Once, twice, the stranger paused, and glanced about him as if to make sure of his surroundings, and then went on unhesitatingly, leading the child by the hand.

“There was a many of us once, son,” he was moved to say in a voice of reminiscent melancholy. “Your grandpap built a cabin down on the crick bank.”

They had already left the centre of the town, and were approaching a region of grass-grown side streets.

“There, yonder, you can see it—that old log house through the trees!”

He had quickened his pace, and presently they came to a yard, neglected and overgrown with jimson-weed and pokeberry, and with here and there a tall hollyhock nodding above the rank vegetation. The ground fell way abruptly from the street level, and at the foot of a steep incline flowed the Little Wolf River. The house was an utter ruin. The windows were gone, and the huge stone chimney, built of flat rocks gathered from the bed of the Little Wolf, leaned dangerously. Like the windows the doors were gone too; the heavy hand-rived shingles were moss-grown; while daylight showed through the wide gaping chinks between the logs from which the clay had long since fallen. Nailed to the trunk of a great elm that stood near the street, was a sign with “For Sale,” painted on it in a palpably unprofessional hand.

The stranger surveyed the desolation with something very like dismay.

“I reckon twenty years is a right smart of a spell after all, son. It seemed like yesterday to me—coming back.”

But they were not unobserved. An old man had been watching them, and now he crossed the street, moving slowly with the aid of a heavy cane. He was close upon them before either became aware of his presence; then they turned, hearing his shuffling step upon the path, and saw that he was regarding them with eager curiosity out of a pair of beady black eyes.

“Maybe you are thinking of buying?” he said shrilly.

“No, I reckon not,” said the stranger; then his face changed with a look of quick recognition. “Why, you're old Pap Randall!” he cried. He seemed about to extend his hand, but the other gave him a blank stare; then he screwed his weazened wrinkled old face into a grin.

“I reckon I been old Pap Randall a heap longer than your memory lasts,” he said, chuckling. “Your father might a called me that, if he'd knowed me. The Rogers lived there onct, a do-less tribe outen the mountings of Virginia. Old Tom Rogers and me was soldiers in Colonel Landray's company in the second war agin the British; afore that, I'd fit under General Washington in the fust war—”

“What's come of the family?” asked the stranger.

“Gone—scattered like a bevy of pa'tridges as soon as they could fly. The oldest boy's dead; the second's gone back to Virginia; two of the girls married and moved west to Illinoy; and the youngest boy's in Texas or somewheres outen that ways. Old Tom was one of the fust settlers in Benson. He might a owned four hundred acres of land right about here if he'd a mind to, but he never held title to more'n this here scrap of an allotment, and a bit of an out lot up the crick, where Appleseed Johnny onct had one of his orchards; I reckon you've heard tell of him? He thought he had a call to kiver this here country with fruit trees; they say there ain't a county in the state but what's got its orchards that Appleseed Johnny planted.”

The stranger laughed shortly.

“I've heard you tell all this before, Pap.” he said, “and about when the first stage come through here from across the mountains.”

The old man caught eagerly at his last words. “Yes, and I rid on it too! I rid on the fust stage coach from across the mountings, and I'm a going to live to ride on the fust railroad. They're building the 'butments for the new bridge down by the old kivered bridge now.” His beady eyes were wonderfully brilliant. “I reckon you're a stranger here?”

“Well, no, I'm old Tom Rogers's son.”

And by nightfall, all Benson knew that Truman Rogers, who had gone to Texas, a raw stripling some twenty years before, had returned home from California.

CHAPTER FOUR

AS night came on the weather changed abruptly, and a cold drizzle set in.

At his red-brick tavern, Levi Tucker, in a splint-bottom chair, dozed in front of his bar. The rain now falling in torrents and driven by a strong wind, splashed loudly against the closely-shuttered windows. The sperm oil in the dingy reeking lamps, burnt noisily, protestingly. There was a steady drip from the eave troughs; and the gutters were roaring rivers of muddy water.

The innkeeper sat with his feet thrust far out, and his fat freckled hands peacefully clasped before him. The rain had served to keep people in doors, and there was a strong counter attraction at the church, just around the corner, where the apostle of a new and preposterous propaganda, known as the Temperance Movement, was lecturing.

The innkeeper was frankly indignant. What made the whole affair seem especially aggravating and personal, was the fact that his wife was a communicant of that church, Mr. Tucker's religion as well as his distillery, was in his wife's name, and her devotion cost him annually the equivalent of many gallons of his famous “Lone Stager Rye,” a whisky which sophisticated travellers had pronounced to be unrivalled west of the Alleghanies.

During the interchange of certain light domestic confidences that had preceded Mrs. Tucker's departure for the lecture, her husband had remarked that he did not believe in mixing liquor and religion; whereupon Mrs. Tucker, who was young and pretty and high-spirited had retorted that he could never be accused of doing that, since he never ventured inside a church door; this had led to more words; and Mr. Tucker with some heat had denounced the lecturer as a meddlesome busybody; he had further informed his wife that he served drinks every hour of the day, and every day of his life, to better men.

“Meaning yourself, I suppose.” said Mrs. Tucker, tartly, but with heightened colour.

Mr. Tucker had ignored this, and had reminded her that even ministers of the Gospel had been known to seek his bar, and had there slacked their clerical thirst, without fear and without shame, “As man to man,” he added feelingly.

“One minister,” corrected Mrs. Tucker, “and he had a very red nose.”

This seemed such an unworthy objection to Mr. Tucker that he had allowed the matter to drop. But the lecture and the rain combined had proven disastrous to business. Colonel Sharp had dropped in for his usual nightcap, a carefully-measured three fingers; he had favoured Mr. Tucker with a Latin quotation, and Mr. Tucker had favoured him with the opinion that they were likely to have a spell of weather. Next, a belated farmer had stopped to have a jug filled with apple brandy; he had ventured a few occult observations on the condition of the crops, and had informed Mr. Tucker that it was the first rainy tenth of June in two years, and that up to four o'clock in the afternoon it had been the hottest tenth of June in five years; then he had gathered his jug of brandy up under his arm, and had departed into the night; and the innkeeper, rotund and grey, with his two sparse wisps of hair carefully plastered back of his ears, and looking not unlike an aged and degenerate cupid, a cupid, who through some secret grief had taken to drink, dozed in solitude before his bar.

Suddenly, he was aroused by hearing a step on the brick pavement outside the door. A man seemed to pause there irresolutely; then a hand was placed upon the latch, the door swung slowly open, and Truman Rogers, with his son at his side, stood revealed upon the threshold.

“Come in, man, come in,” cried Mr. Tucker.

Rogers pulled the door to after him, and moved into the room; his clothes were wet and steaming, the wide brim of his hat drooped, hiding his face, and in the half light of the dingy lamps he looked more like a gaunt shadow than a living man.

The boy at his side kept fast hold of his hand; he, too, was shivering under the drag of his clammy garments, but he seemed to exercise a certain protecting care toward his father, for his glance was full of childish tenderness, not unmixed with concern.

“You'd better have a dish of liquor right now,” said Mr. Tucker; he added hospitably: “It's on the house, man; I knew your father well.”

The innkeeper hurried behind his bar, and the Californian poured himself a full glass from the bottle he pushed toward him. “Here's how,” he said, and he drained it at a single swallow.

Mr. Tucker emptied a dash of spirits into a second glass and added a generous portion of water; this he handed to the child, saying, “Here, sonny, this will warm you up inside.”

The child drank the mixture with a wry face. Mr. Tucker laughed.

“Takes right hold, don't it? Well, it's a good friend, but a poor master,” and he thoughtfully filled a third glass for himself. “Here's to you, and me, and all of us,” he said, smiling genially.

Rogers seated himself in the chair the innkeeper had vacated; the child stole quietly to his side.

“I reckon you didn't find many people you knew here about,” observed Mr. Tucker, as he returned his glass to the bar.

“Not one.” His tone was one of utter hopelessness. It gave a tragic touch to his drooping figure. The boy crept into his father's arms; his movement gave a new direction to the latter's thoughts. “I expect you're plumb tuckered out, son,” he said gently, smiling sadly down on the grave, upturned face. “I expect bed's about the best place for you; what do you say?”

The child nodded wearily.

Rogers turned to the innkeeper. “I suppose you can House us over night?” he said.

“To be sure I can,” answered Mr. Tucker promptly. “That's my business; entertainment for man and beast.”

“I'll put my boy to bed then; show a way with a light, will you?” he rose stiffly with the child in his arms, and preceded by the innkeeper, carrying a lamp, quitted the room. A few minutes later the two men returned to the bar, and Rogers resumed his chair. His attitude was one of profound dejection. His hope was dying a hard death. Perhaps he could not have told if he had tried, just all he had expected from his return to Benson, but for days and weeks and months, it had been the background of his splendid dreams.

Not heeding the presence of his host, he leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his knees, and his chin sunk in his palms, grim, desperate.

The innkeeper seated himself at the opposite side of the room, and fell to studying him. He had seen men look much as he looked, who had lost their last dollar at cards.

Mrs. Tucker, thrilled and edified, and under escort of the faithful

Jim, carrying a lantern, returned from the lecture and entered the tavern by a rear door. Her husband presently heard her footsteps in the room overhead, where the heels of her shoes tapped the floor aggressively; and he muttered the single word “Tantrums,” under his breath, while his face took on an expression of great resignation.

Here Rogers broke the silence. “Hope I ain't keeping you,” he said.

“You ain't,” answered Mr. Tucker, with what was for him unusual decision.

“I didn't know but you might want to close up,” explained Rogers civilly.

“I don't,” returned Mr. Tucker, with quiet determination. “I want to chew a little more tobacco before I go to bed.”

There was another long pause. Rogers continued to stare into vacancy, and Mr. Tucker, round-eyed and wondering, continued to stare at Rogers. They might have been sitting thus ten minutes, when suddenly the street door swung open, and three men entered the room. The first of these was Captain Nathan Gibbs, editor of *The True Whig*; The captain, whose title had been derived from the militia, was blond and florid, and attired in immaculate broadcloth and spotless linen. He was, perhaps, five and thirty years old, but he had been a man of many and varied activities.

His companions were Bushrod and Stephen Landray. They were men in the prime of life, and much alike in appearance. They were tall and lean and strong, with dark animated eyes, and fine expressive faces. There was something Roman and patrician in their bearing; and when they spoke it was with a perceptibly Southern drawl; for the Landrays were from Virginia, and of good cavalier stock. The fifth of their name in the Royal Colony, a Stephen Mason Landray, had afterward risen to a high rank in the Continental Army. His son, another Stephen Mason Landray, had been the third settler at Benson, and the great man of the community in pioneer days. His fame still survived; he had served with distinction against the Indians and English, when war was abroad in the land, and he had lived in times of peace, with much simple dignity and kindliness, among the ruder and poorer folk of the frontier who were his neighbours.

“Yes sir,” Gibbs was saying as the three men entered the room. “If what we hear is true, it offers the grandest opportunity for youth and energy; of new field for capital; a—”

“Hold on, Gibbs,” interrupted Stephen Landray. “This will never do; in common with the rest of the Whigs you were opposed to the annexation of Texas, the war with Mexico, and the seizure of California. If your memory fails you on this point, you have only to read some of your own editorials.”

“But this, my dear fellow, puts a new complexion on the whole matter.”

“Oh! no, it don't, Gibbs; you must be consistent,” urged Bushrod.

“Consistency be damned,” retorted Gibbs, as he turned to the innkeeper who had retired behind the bar. “The case bottle, if you please, Tucker. Thanks—She will be admitted to the Union inside of ten years; I wish to go on record as saying so. Gentlemen, metaphorically speaking, we will now proceed to moisten the soil of California.”

Then, as the three men raised their glasses, Truman Rogers rose from his chair; he was all alive now to what was passing before him.

“What's wrong with California, Cap?” inquired Mr. Tucker, with amiable interest. “What's she been a doing anyhow?”

“The Eastern papers say that gold has been discovered there,” replied Gibbs.

Truman Rodgers strode to his side, and took him almost fiercely by the arm. “Is that so?” he demanded, his voice hoarse with emotion.

The four men looked at him in mute surprise.

“Is that so?” he repeated. “Do they say where it was found?” he released his hold on the captain's arm, and rested limply against the bar.

“At Sutter's Fort, on the American River,” said Stephen Landray, slowly.

The effect on the Californian was electrical. He threw out his arms despairingly in a single gesture of tragic renunciation. “I'm too late again, my luck every time—damn them! Damn them! Why couldn't they keep still! the fools!”

“And why should they keep still?” demanded Gibbs toying with his empty glass.

“Why should they?” furiously. “What chance will there be now for the men who went into the country first—what chance will there be for me?” Again he threw out his arms, he seemed to put from him all hope; his mouth was bitter with the very taste of his words.

“You'll have as good a chance as any,” retorted Gibbs, still toying with his glass. “And, pardon me, you're a fool to expect more than that.”

“If what the Eastern papers say is true, there will be gold enough for all who are likely to go in search of it,” interrupted Bushrod Landray, good-naturedly. “You are Truman Rogers?”

Rogers nodded dully.

“And you are direct from California?” continued Landray.

“I left there five months ago, Mister.”

“You don't remember us, perhaps, I am Bushrod Landray, and this is my brother, Stephen,” and he held out his hand. “You have reasons for believing this news of Captain Gibbs to be true?”

“Mighty good reasons, too; that's what brought me here, fetched me all this distance, when I wa'n'. fit to travel.”

“You know the gold to be there?” and Landray regarded the Californian with quickened interest.

Rogers hesitated a moment; concealment had become second nature to him. At last he said, “I reckon I know as much about that as any man alive,” and now his sunken eyes began to flash, and the colour came and went on his waxen cheeks, his long fingers opened and closed convulsively. “I've seen it with my own eyes. I thought I was the only one who knew it was there, but the word must have come around the Horn on the next ship that sailed after the one I took, Sutter's Fort—that's a good hundred miles from where I found it.”

“What I'd like to know,” and Mr. Tucker cleared his throat impressively, “Is how you found it?”

“It's in small nuggets, or like fine dust.”

“The gold is?” said Mr. Tucker.

“Yes.”

“It's agin nature. Blamed if it ain't fishy,” and Mr. Tucker shook his head dubiously. “It may be true; mind, I'm not disputing your word; but I don't believe it. No sir, it's agin nature,” reiterated Mr. Tucker. “I reckon you didn't pick out much now, did you?” he added shrewdly.

“No,” said Rogers regretfully, “I didn't. I ain't fit any more; I got an Indian arrow through my right lung,” here a violent fit of coughing interrupted him.

“No, you ain't fit any more,” agreeed Mr. Tucker commiseratingly.

“I been looking to get even with the game,” said Rogers, with a flash of hope in his deep eyes. “But I reckon this news near about knocks me. I was empty-handed when I left here twenty years ago, thinking to better myself, but I've come back just as poor as I went. I've played it in the hardest kind of luck right along, friends. I fought Indians and Mexicans in Texas, and helped drive them out of the country, but some one else always got the pick of the land. I herded sheep and cattle, only to have them run off; and, last of all, the Indians cleaned me out, and killed my wife. Then I moved over onto the Coast, hoping for a white man's chance; and when I found the gold I thought my fortune was made,” harsh, unhappy laughter issued from his lips. He swept a hand across his eyes, emotion seemed to choke him. “I been like a boy thinking how I'd spend that fortune. I been staying awake nights figuring what I'd buy with it; but I reckon I'll have chilly fingers before it burns a hole in my pockets. I wanted to bring my boy home, and then I was going to go back overland. It's a damnation trip across the plains.”

“Indians?” asked Mr. Tucker, his mouth agape.

“Indians, and no water, and no grub, and no guides, and no nothing. It's a hell of a trip, and it's a hell of a country.”

“I can't see how this news hurts your chances in the least,” said Stephen Landray kindly, he had not spoken until now. “To be candid with you, I think it rather benefits you than otherwise.”

“Why, of course,” said Bushrod. “It will all tend to create an interest in such ventures as the one you have to propose.”

Rogers looked first from the one to the other. “If I could think that, I'd sleep easy to-night,” but he shook his head sadly. “The bloom's off; it ain't a secret any longer.”

“Yes, but don't you see this news is all in proof of what you would want to make people believe?” urged Stephen. “Not that any proof would be necessary, perhaps.”

“I've fetched my own proofs,” said Rogers. “Some of the gold. If it's proof you want, I reckon you can't better that,” and he took from his pocket a small glass vial filled with a dirty yellow substance. “There's over three ounces of gold dust there. It's worth sixteen dollars an ounce. I reckon you can't beat that. Want to hold it?” he added indulgently, and passed the vial to the innkeeper, who took it gingerly, caressingly, in his fat fingers.

At least two of his auditors were rich men, according to the easy standard of the times, while Tucker was well-to-do, and the editor fairly prosperous; but the romance of it all had taken a powerful hold on them. A subtle excitement was in the mind of each. Here, shorn of the vexations and delays of trade, and within reach of the strong arm of the willing digger, was that which was the measure of the world's necessity, that by which men guaged success or failure in life. In the presence of so simple a process, each felt a sudden distaste for his own task.

“I wish I was ten years younger and free-footed,” said Mr. Tucker, at last. “I'd pull out of here to-morrow, blamed if I wouldn't.”

The editor laughed softly. He was like a man rousing from a dream. “Nonsense! Luck won't be for one in a hundred; perhaps not for one in a thousand.”

“I'd run the risk, Cap; and if I found any of that dust, I wouldn't sleep or eat or drink, until I'd fished it out of the soil.”

“What will be my chance at making up a company here?” asked Rogers, and now he addressed himself to the Landrays. He recognized in their silence a deeper interest than that manifested by either Mr. Tucker or Captain Gibbs.

“Are you really in earnest about going back?” asked Bushrod Landray, curiously.

Rogers drew his tall form erect. “I allow there's just about two thousand miles of go left in me, Mister,” he said.

“And you think you could pilot a wagon train across the plains?” asked Stephen.

“You give me the chance to show what I can do—that's all I ask. Of course, I see now, I must have been clean crazy to leave the Coast when it took my last dollar, but I ain't fit for heavy work any more; I go shut like a clasp-knife; and I was near about wild to be with some of my own kin.”

“You may be able to make up a party here,” said Stephen.

“If you are wise, you will take your brother home, Bush!” said Gibbs.

Stephen turned to him: “Don't you see it would not be necessary for me to go to California to share in a speculation of this sort?”

“No, I can't see it Landray.”

“A company could be organized. Whoever wished to, could take shares in the venture; there would be little or no difficulty in finding men to go and do the actual work of digging for the gold.”

“Have you any scheme to propose that would guarantee a fair division of the profits in the event of there being any?” asked the captain.

Landray smiled slightly. “There would be no trouble about that,” he said hastily. “For, of course, we would only send men in whom we had the fullest confidence; and the returns could be made regularly by ship, by way of the Horn—”

“The small end of it,” suggested Gibbs, lightly.

Mr. Tucker laughed boistrously at this sally, but neither of the Landrays smiled.

Gibbs yawned. “I think we had all better go home and sleep on it,” he said.

“You're right, so we should,” said Stephen. He turned to Rogers. “I'd like to see you again, there are some questions I want to ask you. You'll be here for a while, I suppose?”

“There ain't any time to waste if you mean business,” urged Rogers eagerly.

“No, I suppose not; but I don't know that I do mean business. You must not take my interest too seriously, and yet—”

Gibbs slipped his arm through Stephen's. “Oh, come along! you will wake up sane in the morning. Good-night, Tucker. Goodnight, Mr. Rogers. Coming, Bush?”

CHAPTER FIVE

A YOUNG man in a dusty road-cart drawn by a sedate and comfortable looking horse, turned in between the tall whitewashed posts at the foot of Landray's Lane.

The occupant of the cart had reached that fortunate period where he was knowing the best of both youth and age, for he was, perhaps, six or eight and twenty, but so boyishly slight of figure that he might readily have passed for much younger; his apparent youth being still further accented by his smoothly-shaven face. It was in no sense a striking nor a handsome face, but it was fresh-coloured and pleasant to look at; while the frank glance of the grey eyes that lighted it, inspired confidence;and if there was a suggestion of the commonplace, there was also much good nature and not a little shrewdness.

As he turned in at the lane he permitted his grasp to loosen on the reins, and his horse, an animal of evident worth, which seemed to be instantly aware of a change of mood on the part of its driver, went slowly forward with head down, its hoofs and the wheels of the cart making scarcely any sound at all on the smooth, closely-cropped turf; now and again it paused to snatch at some tuft of tall growing grass, but this provoked its master to only the most indulgent of remonstrances.

On either hand were corn-fields. The long rows rooted in the rich, black loam of the flat bottom land were at right angles with the lane, down which ran the faint print of wheels, for it was little used. Beyond the corn-fields on the east was a low growth of willows, here and there overshadowed by the fantastically twisted top of some old sycamore; and beyond the willows and the sycamores was still another flat reach of bottom land, from which came the faint scent of freshly-cut hay.

The broad green leaves of the corn drooped and curled in the hot noon sun, or rustled softly where a breath of wind stirred them. There was intense, searching heat, and silence—the waiting, expectant silence of an August day when the long rainless skies are about to break their drought. A thin blue mist quivered in the level distance, and on the soft green undulations of the pasture land, which sloped up to the densely wooded heights of Landray's Hill, sun steeped and vivid; where the day first smote with light, and where in early

spring the arbutus bloomed among the melting patches of snow. In the valley, in the old Indian fields, as the first settlers had called the open grass-land they found along the creek-bank, short shadows from the sycamores barred the rustling corn with slanting shafts of a richer, darker green. Then in a remote field was heard the first sound that disturbed the silent noon hour; and from the meadow beyond the corn-field, came the keen swish of scythes in the tall grass, and a sharp metallic ring tuned to a certain rhythmic beat and swing where a mower had paused to sharpen his blade.

The lane ended at a pair of bars near a clump of trees which clustered about a spacious brick farm-house. This was the Landray home. Back of the farm-house could be distinguished the queer, high-hipped roof of Landray's mill; and from it now, mingling with the other sounds, came the rush of water and the droning splash of wheels.

The young man in the cart glanced about him with a quick sense of pleasure. He was in the second generation away from the soil himself; his father had been a trader, and he was a lawyer; but the peace of it all, the promised plenty of the great corn-fields, the distant droves of cattle in the shaded pasture lands, the scent of the hay, stirred him to something very like envy.

"And he'll be leaving all this!" he muttered under his breath at last; then he added: "And he'll be leaving her—I cannot understand it!"

A woman emerged from a path that led off across the fields, and came down the lane toward him. He did not see her until she was quite close; but when he became aware of her presence he rose hastily from his seat in the cart, and hat in hand, sprang to the ground at her side.

"Mrs. Landray," he said, and drew the reins forward from the bit so that he could walk beside her and lead his horse.

She was Stephen Landray's wife, and it was of her he had been thinking but the moment before, for he thought of her more often than he realized. To him she had always seemed a most majestic person, strangely mature, and with a dignity and repose of bearing that was the consequence neither of age nor any large experience.

He was vaguely aware that in actual years he must be older than she; but nevertheless on these not frequent occasions when they met, she made him feel conscious and ill at ease; he was oppressed by a sense of his youth and inexperience; and the fact that his acquaintance with life went no further than Benson, and the three abutting counties, became a thing to regret and realize even with shame. But why she, whose life had been quite as limited as his own, should seem to carry with her this breath as from a larger world, was something he could not explain, reason it out as he would.

Her beauty was of the generous Southern type. The soft waves of her hair gleamed like polished brass in the sunlight; it clustered in soft rings on her low, broad brow; her skin was like creamy satin. He allowed his eyes to rest on the masses of her hair, then on the strong beautiful face, her full round throat, and the lovely lines of her perfect figure.

"You have come to see my husband, Mr. Benson?" she said.

"Yes, Mrs. Landray; he sent for me." He hesitated an instant, for he did not wish to tell her of the nature of the business that had brought him out from the town. Then he added in a matter of fact tone: "I suppose it's something to do with this California project."

Mrs. Landray's face flushed, then it grew very white; she paused and her foot tapped the ground nervously.

"They are two very foolish men, Mr. Benson—I mean my husband and his brother."

"Then he has told you?" he said quickly.

"That he is going with the party—yes."

She put out her hand and touched the reins Benson loosely held. "You can spare me a moment? I have been waiting for you."

He bowed a trifle stiffly. To him she had always seemed, if anything, too undemonstrative, too self-reliant; but he saw now that she was shaken out of her dignity and serenity; she was struggling as her mother and her mother's mother before her had struggled, when the wilderness spoke to the men they loved; and she was knowing as they must have known, that this masculine passion which no woman could comprehend, much less share in, but against which she had set her love, was as vital as that love itself.

The lawyer put his hand in the breast pocket of his coat upon a paper there; one sentence in this paper burned in his memory: To my dearly beloved wife, Virginia Randolph Landray, and then the description of the property Stephen Landray owned and wished to pass to her in the event of his death. Benson had drawn up the will only the week before, and he was now taking it to Landray to be signed and witnessed. "I am a childless man, Benson," Landray had said, "and should anything happen to me, I want every dollar I own on earth to go to her." And Landray had shown no little emotion, for the moment putting aside the habitual reserve with which he cloaked any special stress of feeling.

"But what do you want with a will?" Benson had asked. "Whom have you but your wife?"

"I've got to worrying about that Californian venture of our's, and before I go I want to put my affairs in some sort of shape."

"Then you shall go, after all?" Benson had said.

"I must; there's no help for it. What do you think of the scheme, anyhow?"

"Well, I think better of it now that I know you are going to assume the direction of it."

"That's odd, with the knowledge you have," said Landray, with a short laugh.

Benson had not been surprised at what Landray had told him of his intentions; indeed, the whole project, the journey overland, with its hardships and possible danger, the search for the gold when California should be reached, would be but episodes in a speculation for which he felt the Landrays were singularly fitted. They were not business men, no one knew this better than he; they had possessed large means, though the fortune which they had inherited from their father was now much impaired by bad management and the luckless ventures in which they had involved themselves.

He had felt, however, that their lack of ordinary business thrift would not be any special hindrance in such an enterprise as this; where, after all, success would come more as the result of chance, than because of shrewdness or capacity. Even when he was most critical of the brothers, not being able to quite free himself of a secret contempt, since they had started life with such exceptional opportunities, and had made such poor use of them, he admitted that under such conditions as he imagined would be found in California, their strength and courage, their physical readiness and vigour would perhaps more than compensate for the lack of those other qualities in which they had proved themselves so deficient.

“Yes, I think well of the scheme now,” said the lawyer slowly. “Much better than I did before.”

Landray laughed again carelessly.

“One would think I had a long career of success to point to, lucky ventures and the like. But, Jake, we are going to come back rich men, and then, by George! no more risks for me! I'll just potter around out at the farm, keep some trotting stock, and breed fancy cattle, and let it go at that.”

“How does Mrs. Landray feel about this?” the lawyer had asked.

“Why, you can fancy, Benson,” and Landray's handsome face wore a look of keen distress. “She does not know yet, she only suspects. Indeed, no one knows but you, and of course, the investors; they have made a point of it that Bush or I go; indeed, a good share of the money comes into the enterprise on condition that one of us takes its direction.”

A humorous twinkle lurked in the tail of the lawyer's grey eyes. He knew it was the Landray honesty rather than the Landray ability, of which the investors wished to assure themselves.

“Rogers is all right,” continued Landray. “But he is not the man to handle such a venture, and then he may give down any day; it's a question in my mind if he lives through the fall and winter here.”

“So Mrs. Landray does not know yet?”

“I don't imagine there is much left to tell her,” said Landray. “It's too bad she's going to feel it as she is. If I could I would willingly make any sacrifice to be relieved of my obligation to go—short of giving up the chance itself to make a fortune. But one of us must go, our own money and money that would not have come into the scheme but for us will be involved. Bush is quite willing to make the trip alone, but I can't let him do that.”

“I cautioned you to avoid committing yourselves,” said Benson, “for I feared this very thing would happen.”

“I know you did,” said Landray ruefully, “but what was I to do? They hung back until we let them think that we were going; it was only then money came in sight.”

And Mr. Benson, who admired a nice sense of honour, considering it the loftiest guide to human action, had concurred in this view of the case; but now, with Virginia Landray's great sad eyes fixed upon him, his ready sympathy all went out to her. He regretted that he had agreed with her husband; he felt, for a brief instant, that the reasonable thing for the latter to do was to abandon the whole project, with credit if he could, without credit if he must; for what did it matter what men said or thought, where her peace of mind was concerned?

“You are Stephen's lawyer,” Mrs. Landray said, “and I suppose he has few secrets from you; perhaps you know more of his plans than he has told me; until now he has had no secrets from me.” She bestowed upon Benson a troubled, questioning glance, then she made an imperious gesture. “You are to tell me quite honestly if he is as hopelessly committed as he thinks to this matter, and to this man, Rogers—I am not to be put off!”

“He has told you that he is going?” asked Benson, who wished to be quite sure on this point.

“Yes,” impatiently.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. “Very well, then, I suppose I can speak plainly.”

She felt a sudden sense of jealous displeasure; by what right did he assume this attitude of intimacy with her husband; and how dared he even suggest that he might, by any chance, know more of Stephen's intentions than she did herself; but her resentment was only momentary. “You are to tell me if he is committed,” she said.

“I think he is,” said Benson slowly.

She set her lips firmly. “Then I suppose it is useless for me to object.”

“You are very much opposed to his going?” said Benson. She opened her eyes wide in wonder at the question.

“Would any woman wish the man—” she broke off abruptly, and glanced about her. “He will be leaving all this, and me; and for what?” She made a little gesture with her shapely hand and arm.

“It is rather incomprehensible, Mrs. Landray,” said the lawyer.

“But why should he wish to go? What can he gain by going? I wonder if I am to blame.” She regarded Benson with anxious, searching eyes.

“Men are restless,” he said lamely.

“But why should he be? You would not go—”

“I, no—I have wanted to, though. But it's better for me to stay. They are involved,” he went on slowly. “I warned them in the start that they must be careful or this would happen; and now they are stubborn and unwilling to abandon a venture for which they are largely responsible. Nothing would have come of this man Rogers's efforts without their help.”

“Have you taken shares in this absurd company?”

He smiled a little cynically. “No, and I scarcely think I shall.” he hesitated. “Still I admit the speculation has its fascinations. I can't quite explain even to myself what they are; but they exist. Yes, I've even wanted to go,” he went on, smiling at her, “but I've never found I could afford to give way to my impulses.”

“But in going you would leave no one who would suffer as I shall suffer if Stephen goes. I don't mean but that your friends would regret your absence—” she added hastily.

He looked at her curiously. A faint, wistful smile played about the corners of his mouth. “I haven't a wife, if that is what you mean,” he said at last.

She looked up quickly into his face.

“Do you mean—?” she hesitated.

“Mean what?” he asked.

“Do you love some one?” she coloured slightly.

“I'd hardly call it that—if by that you mean a person. Perhaps I'd better call it an idea,” he said, still smiling at her.

A sudden change came to her manner. A shade of reserve crept into it. The man was only her husband's lawyer, he was almost a stranger to her; even her husband, with the fuller democracy of American manhood, hardly counted him his equal; for he was old Jacob Benson's son, and old Jacob Benson had made his money in questionable ways no Landray had ever condescended to employ. More than this, as speculator and land owner, and afterward as member of the State Legislature he had been General Landray's rival and opponent in all matters of private concern and public enterprise. This was something no rightly constituted Landray would ever forgive. They might respect young Jacob Benson for what he had made of himself, handicapped as he was by such a parent, but they were not men to forget whose son he was.

Young Jacob Benson was, happily, wholly unconscious of the reason for her change in manner; if he noticed it at all, he attributed it to a natural feminine modesty—he spoke now with a generous wish that his words might prove of some comfort to her.

“One thing is sure, Mrs. Landray, they cannot go until spring, and who knows what may happen to change their plans.”

“They will go,” she said quietly. “I know Stephen too well not to know that.”

“I dare say, if the investors are of their present mind eight months hence—but they may withdraw.”

“That will make no difference to Stephen and his brother.”

“Even so, I don't think you need worry, Mrs. Landray. They will soon be sick enough of the venture. I fancy we shall soon see them back here. I know at first they had no intention of going; they were simply the largest shareholders in the enterprise. A more active part has been forced upon them by the other shareholders. You know almost five thousand dollars have been subscribed already, and as much more will probably be raised; and while there are any number of men offering themselves who are willing to go and dig for the gold, they are not the kind of men one would care to trust with the control of such a sum. Your husband and his brother have really been coerced into going; they would hardly admit this, but it is true, nevertheless.”

There was a long pause. At last Mrs. Landray said: “I don't speak of this matter to my husband any more.” She set her lips firmly and went on. “We do not agree on this point; but you can tell me how far their plans are made. I am quite out of his confidence; and it is just the same with Ann and Bushrod; he never tells her.” She smiled sadly. “You see this thirst for sudden riches has destroyed the peace and happiness of at least two homes. I wonder how many more are to be affected by it.”

“I suppose I am violating their confidence,” Benson said, “but I believe their present plan is to start down the Ohio in the early spring.”

Mrs. Landray turned from him abruptly; her emotion mastered her; a sob rose in her throat.

“Thank you, Mr. Benson,” she faltered with a poor attempt at self-control; and then she passed swiftly down the lane toward the house.

Benson followed her retreating figure with his glance until she passed from sight among the trees; then he climbed slowly into the cart.

CHAPTER SIX

ROGERS had taken up his abode at the tavern. The Land-rays had arranged with Tucker that he should be their guest, and that he should want for nothing.

At first he had shown some interest in the town and in the changes that had taken place during the twenty years covered by his absence; but as the summer merged into fall, and fall into winter, he kept more and more within doors, establishing himself in the cheerful tavern bar, where Mr. Tucker presided with a benignity of bearing that had mellowed with the years and the passing of the human traffic of the stage road, whose straying feet had worn deep hollows in the brick pavement beyond his door.

During those first weeks of his stay in Benson, Rogers might have been a Columbus newly returned, or a Ponce de Leon with discovered fountains of perpetual youth; and in the spell of the wonders in which he dealt, and in which his hearers delighted, Tucker felt his reason reel and totter and all but collapse. As he came and went about the place, his eyes were always turned in the direction of the grim Californian. They sought him out over the rim of his glass, each time it was raised to his lips; and he watched him by the hour as he sat in his chair and sucked at the reed stem of his red-clay pipe, sucked and marvelled, or meditated investment in the company, a transaction of which he invariably thought better, however, before the day was ended. And when Rogers was not there to tell his own story, which sometimes chanced, he did it for him, but always with the nicest regard for accuracy. He had not been ten yards from his own front door in five years, indeed, not since he had courted the third and present Mrs. Tucker, so that such news as he usually had to

disseminate was known to all Benson long before he was in possession of it; but the excitement of which Rogers was the centre, and in the reflected glory of which he now dwelt, recalled the days that had followed the knifing of Sheriff Cadwaller by Mr. Johnny Saul in that very room, and, considerately enough, with himself as the only witness.

Rogers had placed Benny in school, and each evening after supper he would steal up to the child's room, where Benny carefully rehearsed for his benefit such portions of the lessons of the day as he remembered, while his father listened, with a look of tender yearning in his dark, sunken eyes. Then, when Benny was safely bestowed in his bed, if custom was slack at the bar, and he alone with Tucker, he would sit silent and absorbed, thinking of the boy and the future he had planned, of the riches he would yet achieve for him in spite of sickness and mortal weariness. It was all so fair a dream, and his hopes so tenderly unselfish, that the harsh lines of his face would soften; and his thin, shaven lips whose hard expression usually indicated nothing beyond a dry reserve, would relax in a slow, wistful smile; and the old innkeeper watching him, would wonder in his vague way that one who had seen so much of violence and bloodshed, who, by his own indifferent telling, had been no better than others of his own reckless class, could look so mild and gentle.

“I tell you, Tucker, he's keen as a briar!” Rogers never wearied of telling his companion. “I reckon he's about the first of us Rogers in many a long year who's done more than make a cross when it came to signing his name.”

“But you got something better than learning,” Tucker would say, with a wise shake of his head. “You got knowledge; wonderful, astonishing knowledge. Personally you've wedged open my mind more than any other man I know, not excepting Colonel Sharp, who's been talking Latin to me, which I never did understand, for near about twenty years; but I can't see that it's ever done me the good you're doing me. What'll you drink?”

From the incipiency of the company on, that enterprise had seemed to Rogers to go forward with a deadly slowness: Those who invested in the shares requiring so much of him before they were convinced that their money would not only be safe, but would increase with the dazzling rapidity he said, and believed it must. Yet, devoured as he was by impatience, he told his story over and over, with an earnestness that never failed to fascinate his hearers, though he had to meet the habitual caution of men whose means had grown slowly in trade or petty speculations.

“It's disencouraging,” agreed Mr. Tucker benevolently. “But you couldn't a done better than get the Landray boys to take hold. Everybody knows them—they got money—they got influence; no one can't ever complain of any sharp practice from them. I've had dealings with them myself; I bought the distillery from them. I traded them land, a thousand acres in Belmont County. They took that at a valuation of twenty-five hundred dollars, and I got as much more to pay; but I'm trying to talk them into taking another thousand acres instead of the cash. My aim is to get shut of all that there land; then my money will be here where I can watch it.”

There were those among Rogers's auditors, however, who appeared quite ready to be convinced of the reasonableness of all he promised, arguing with him against their own doubt even; and when he thought it only remained for them to decide how many shares they could take, their enthusiasm would suddenly wane, they would become cold and hesitating, frankly anxious to make their escape uncommitted from him and from the Landrays, and this would be the last he would see of them for days; he would give them up for lost; and after he had fully made up his mind that nothing would come of it, they would appear and put their names to the paper which Stephen Landray always carried, and it was perhaps another hundred dollars added to the capital stock of the Benson and California Mining and Trading Company.

The necessity for haste was the one thing he urged on Stephen and his brother; but it was December before all of the shares were actually taken, and he was forced to own that to start across the plains in the dead of winter was out of the question, even if it had been feasible to make the first stage of the journey down the Ohio. They must wait until spring. This delay had seemed the last vengeful fling of fate. Whatever was evil to know and endure he had known and endured on that far frontier where his best years had been spent; he had acquired a fortitude and patience that rarely failed him; he had accepted hardship and danger as the natural, expected, things of life; and the ordinary deaths he had seen men die, by knife or bullet, he had himself bravely faced; but the slow approach of an enemy he could not see, but could only feel in his wasted muscles and weakened will, appalled him.

“I can feel it here—here—gnawing at my throat, gnawing like some hungry varment,” he told Stephen Landray. “I reckon if I was a praying man, I'd pray to die a sudden death; this is just wasting away—wasting and remembering, and hoping. God Almighty! Such hope and such remembering.”

But it was only to Stephen that he told his fears; he did not speak of them to the others, and they never guessed that a fever of despair was consuming him.

Stephen Landray was as free from superstitious imaginings as most men, but Rogers's low spirits, coupled with the sorrow and apprehension Virginia vainly strove to conceal, had its effect on his mental vigour. A dozen times he was on the verge of appealing to the other shareholders for his release from the active direction of an enterprise that was going forward under such distressing auspices; but he comforted himself with the thought that his absence would only be for a year or two.

Pride had a good deal to do with keeping him true to his purpose. He could recall the day when the property he and Bushrod had inherited had constituted a great fortune, by far the greatest in Benson, but times were slowly changing, improvements in machinery and methods had closed the carding and fulling mill his father had built during his lifetime; the distillery, which they had sold to Tucker, no longer sent its produce by flat-boat down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans. Shrewder men than he and his brother, had taken away their once profitable business as forwarding agents, and the great warerooms at the mill, which had once been piled high with barrels of flour awaiting shipment, were now all but empty. He felt that they were being slowly but surely elbowed into the background by strangers with greater capital or greater ability. This was a sore grief to both brothers, though it was, perhaps, not the loss of money they dreaded so much as the fancied loss of prestige.

While Stephen hoped that Rogers might live to enjoy the wealth he felt would be the fruit of their venture,

he cast about him for some man who possessed a similar acquaintance with the West, if not with the gold-fields, and remembered his cousin Basil. This Basil Landray was the son of his father's younger brother, the late Colonel Rupert Landray, of the United States Army. Of Basil he knew little, except that he had been at one time a civilian hanger-on of the army at Detroit; Later he had known of him as an employee of the American Fur Company.

In the early fall he hazarded a letter to this cousin at Council Bluffs, telling him of the undertaking in which they were about to embark, and asking him if he would care to join their party in the spring, at Independence. After many months a reply came; an illy-written, illy-spelt letter, that rather shocked the recipient. From the letter he gathered that Basil was seeking just such an opportunity as that he had offered.

About this time young Jacob Benson had occasion to drive out to the farm to see Landray.

“Tell Mr. Landray I'm here, Sam,” he said to the farm-hand who had taken his horse, and was preparing to lead it away to the stable. “He's at the mill,” said Sam.

“Let him know I'm here, please,” and the lawyer made his way into the house, where he was shown into the library. Ten minutes later Stephen and his brother entered the room.

“I hope we haven't kept you waiting, Benson,” said the former. “I've seen Mr. Stark, and it's all right,” said the lawyer. “I promised you I'd let you know at once.”

“So he'll renew the note?” said Stephen, seating himself before his desk.

“You are both to see him at the bank to-morrow,” answered Benson. There was a brief pause, and then the lawyer asked:

“How's the California scheme coming on?”

“I told you I had heard from our cousin, Basil Landray, did I not?”

“Yes, you had just received his letter the last time I saw you in town. Do you know yet when you shall start?”

“As soon as the Ohio is free of ice.”

“That won't be long now.”

“No, I suppose not,” said Stephen absently. “Look here,” he added abruptly. “We've got an offer for the mill.”

“Paxon?” inquired Benson.

“Yes. We find we shall have to let go of something,” said Stephen; there was a shade of embarrassment in his tone, for the subject was an unpleasant one. “And the mill is about the only piece of property we own that we care to part with.”

The mill, a huge structure of stone, had been erected by General Landray, and was said to occupy the site of a building of logs and bark, where almost half a century before had been ground the first corn and wheat grown in the county. Rude as had been this pioneer mill, it had represented the mechanical skill of the entire community. A sugar trough had served as a meal trough; while the stones had been bound with elm bark for the want of a proper metal.

“Well, Paxon is willing to pay ten thousand dollars for the mill,” Stephen continued. “Two thousand down, and the balance secured by his notes. This includes the water rights, and about ninety acres of land, and the miller's house.”

“It goes rather hard with us to let go,” said Bushrod Landray, who had been standing before one of the windows, his glance fixed on the out-of-doors, now he turned on his heel and faced his two companions.

Stephen moved uneasily in his chair.

“This silly fellow is influenced by all sorts of impracticable sentiment. He doesn't seem to see that we can't eat our cake and have it, too. If we go to California, we shall have to make some sacrifice here; and unless we go fully prepared to make the most of our chances, we would far better stay at home. I tell you, the men who go with a few thousands in hand to be put out in such advantageous speculations as may offer, will have unlimited opportunities for money-making. The mill isn't doing for us what it did for father; there is too much opposition for one thing, but Paxon says he can control a profitable Ohio River trade.”

“Yes,” agreed his brother reluctantly, “I suppose it is better in his hands doing something, than in ours, doing nothing. There's too much opposition, as you say. I can remember when there was not another mill within fifteen miles of here, and now there is twenty run of stone in the township.”

“And we have made a botch of the business!” said Stephen shortly. “Just remember we borrowed that money of Stark to buy wheat with, and the flour was thrown back on us when we shipped it to the lake. Musty and unsalable, the agent said. That cut last year's profits exactly in half: I'm sick of the mill!”

Bushrod sighed. “We have gone along easily enough, thanks to no special cleverness of our own, but we have been drones and spenders rather than anything else. If I oppose the sale of the mill, it is only because I have no mind to see the property dwindle.”

“Do be reasonable, Bush! A year or two in California will remedy all that,” said Stephen quickly. “Even Benson here has faith in our project!”

Thus appealed to, the lawyer said, “There will probably be many bitter disappointments, but there's no reason why cautious men, having some capital, should not do well in California, men of that kind are generally successful in new countries.”

“Why, you can't take up an Eastern newspaper without reading of fabulous strikes.” Stephen's dark eyes sparkled. “They say the country will soon be flooded with diggers from all parts of the world. Already they are crowding in from Texas and Mexico, and the Sandwich Islands. Of course, there will be some luckier than others, but thank God, there promises to be enough for all!”

Benson smiled cynically. The depth of Landray's worldly inexperience tickled his fancy. He knew better than to believe that man ever got something for nothing, or that Nature would suddenly open her heart to the gold-seekers as she had never before opened it to the struggling children of men. He saw that Bushrod

shared his brother's enthusiasm where their joint venture was concerned; it was only that he was somewhat less ruthless in paving the way for it. To Stephen, though he was the younger, was left the initiative. The latter went on: “We wish to leave the loose ends of several matters in your hands.”

“What are you going to do with the farm?” asked Benson.

“Oh, Trent's brother Tom is going to take it, stock and all. I keep the house for Virginia, who wishes to remain here. I wanted her to go into town, but she prefers not to.”

“Then there is the distillery,” said Bushrod.

“Yes,” said Stephen, “Tucker still owes us twenty-five hundred dollars on it, but we've about agreed to take a thousand acres more of his Belmont County land in lieu of the money.”

“How about the farm north of town where Leonard lives?”

“Leonard is to stay on. He pays a hundred and fifty a year, and you'll have to keep after him to get it. We have about five thousand dollars on our books at the mill; most of it's good, and I expect we can collect some of it ourselves, what's left we shall place in your hands.”

“Hadn't you better draw up a statement of your affairs?” suggested Benson. “Directing what I am to do during your absence, where such and such money is to be used? Of course, you will have to allow me a certain latitude, and you'd better keep a copy of the memorandum; for if you should be detained in the West longer than you think you shall be, you may need it to refer to.”

“If Bush agrees to the sale of the mill—” began Stephen.

“Oh, I guess I'll come around to that if you'll just wait a while,” interposed his brother rather hopelessly. “There wasn't a dollar against the property in father's time, and we have already sold the distillery; and now we are figuring on the sale of the mill.

“It simply means that while the estate was ample for the support of one family, it is not ample for the support of two; and times have changed; it costs more to live now.”

“I'd be glad to think the fault was not all ours,” said Bushrod.

As they talked, the light had faded in the western sky to a cold radiance. The room was illuminated only by the dancing flames of the blazing hickory logs upon the hearth. The three men had gradually drawn nearer the fire as the shadows deepened about them. Now Benson rose from his chair.

“We'd better get together at my office in the course of a week or so, and we'll fix up these matters.”

“Won't you stay and take supper with us?” said Stephen.

“No, thank you.”

There was a gentle tap at the door, and Virginia entered the room, carrying a lamp. She bowed slightly to Benson, whom she had not seen before, and who, to her, seemed to be taking much too active a part in her husband's concerns. Her dislike, for it already amounted to that, was scarcely reasonable, but then she was not always reasonable.

“I thought you would need a light,” she explained, addressing her husband, “and Martha is busy with the men's supper.”

“Thank you for remembering us,” said Stephen.

He had risen and now took the lamp from her hand; in doing so his fingers closed about her's with a gentle pressure, while his eyes looked smilingly into her's; but there was no answering smile. She turned abruptly and quitted the room.

There was an awkward pause, then Bushrod rose quickly from his chair, with something like a look of dismay on his dark face.

“I declare, Stephen, you shouldn't go! What's the use of every one being made miserable?”

“Nonsense, man!” said Stephen with a shrug.

A little later Bushrod and Benson drove away together, and Stephen, who had followed them to the door, paused on the porch watching them out of sight. A soft step roused him; his wife stood at his side, and placed a hand on his arm.

“I am sorry,” she said simply.

“You're not to blame,” he said kindly. “I know it's not the sort of thing a woman could have much interest in.”

“Oh, don't let us speak of it again! I want you to remember only that you were happy during these, our last days together, and that I loved you, as I have always loved you, Stephen—sometimes I think better than even you comprehend.”

“Why, you speak as if it were the end of it all, when it's only the beginning! Bush and I will make our fortunes—”

“Oh, why can't we be content to be just poor, Stephen? What does it matter what we lack so long as we have each other? Once, not very long ago, we thought that would be sufficient,” she whispered softly, and to him her every word was a reproach; only his fancied needs, defended by his native stubbornness and his inability to look down any path save that he had chosen, was keeping him true to his purpose.

“But we can't be poor,” he said at last doggedly. “I've wished it were possible, but it's not! We can't stand by and see the fortune go to pot!”

“But I thought our love was enough—it is for me,” she said sadly.

“Why, bless your heart, dear, and so it is!” he cried in a tone of sturdy conviction, slipping an arm about her.

“Then why must you go?” But she knew that opposition was useless.

“Nothing but our necessity is taking me from you.”

“Money!” with brave contempt. “We can live without that!”

"I'm afraid not, dear."

"Why do you so dread the loss of fortune? There are other things I dread more to lose."

"I swear I don't know; but there is something shameful in it to me," he said.

"But why?"

"Well, for us it would mean that we had failed, Bush and I, in everything; that we hadn't the ability to even hold on to what father left us. No, no, dear, the family can't go to the dogs quite yet: It's true we have no children, and sometimes I have been almost thankful, but there's Bush's boy to carry on the name; he's got to have his chance in life. I only hope he'll turn out a shrewder hand than either his father or uncle!"

"There will be enough, there has always been enough."

"That doesn't follow: We have about reached the point now where we'll feel the pinch. You mustn't think that anything short of a real need would take me from you; only that shall separate us, and the separation will be but brief; and then Bush and I will come back with a fortune—"

"Only return safe and well, dear, and never mind about the fortune," she said tenderly, as they turned back into the house.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE town bell had struck the hour, three clanging strokes, and even as their echoes lingered in the silence and the night, a candle blinked like a solitary eye in an upper window of Levi Tucker's red-brick tavern.

The night wind, an evil searching wind, that cut like a knife and chilled to the bone, swept both snow and rain in troubled gusts across the square; while the last quarter of an April moon gave a faint uncertain radiance. Smoke, illumined by a few flying sparks, which the wind promptly extinguished, issued from the tavern's kitchen chimney, and diffused itself low over the adjacent housetops. It seemed to bring with it certain domestic odours, as if a breakfast were being prepared, and so it was, the last which three members of the Benson and California Mining and Trading Company anticipated sitting down to in the town of Benson in many a long day.

The three wagons containing' the company's property stood before the tavern door, their white canvas covers tightly drawn; and Robert Dunlevy who, with young Walsh and Bingham, was to accompany the Landrays, was already busy in the stable putting their harness on the horses. He wondered why Bingham and Jim, Mr. Tucker's stableman, after promising over night to help him with the teams, had failed to appear; but evidently they had overslept themselves.

Across the yard in the inn he heard Mr. Tucker, his voice pitched in a most unusual key; but he was far too intent on his work to even pause to listen to what was passing there.

Presently, Jacob Benson and Bushrod Landray, well muffled in their great coats, hurried across the square; by the wagons they paused.

"This looks like business, don't it?" said Landray cheerfully.

"I guess we are the first," remarked the lawyer, glancing about.

"No, Rogers is stirring; I saw a light in his room a moment ago. Let's go in; Tucker promised to have a breakfast for us."

A few minutes later, when Stephen Landray pulled up before the tavern with Sam and the man who was to help back from Cincinnati with the horses and gear, he found that the teams were being led from the inn stable by Dunlevy and the tardy Bingham; they were whistling, "O, Susanna!" but they paused to hail him with boisterous good-will, and he returned their greeting with curt civility; their cheerfulness being the reverse of agreeable to him just then, for his thoughts were all of Virginia; each word and look of her's, each eloquent gesture, seemed to burn in his memory. To part from her had been so hard and cruel a thing to do, that his courage had almost failed him; and he had driven into town hoping, absurd as he knew the hope was, that something might have occurred to block the venture; and under his breath he cursed the implacable zeal of his teamsters, who were leaving nothing they desired not to leave, since no ties bound them to one spot of earth more than another. He would have welcomed with joy, a single day's delay; but that was not to be, and he looked about him with a feeling of utter helplessness.

Under the parted hood of one of the wagons, and holding a lantern between his knees, he saw the Californian with Benny at his side. Two spots of vivid colour burned on Rogers's hollow cheeks; his dark eyes were wondrously brilliant; a smile hovered about the corners of his mouth; he was knowing a foretaste of success. At last, out of talk and argument, endless considering and planning, out of the deluge of words that had preceded any actual doing, he had been able to get these men started. Seeing Stephen, he cried triumphantly:

"I'll show you California before you see this again, Mr. Landray!" and he swept the square with a fine free gesture.

"Is Bush here—and where is Walsh?" asked Stephen.

"Your brother's indoors, I haven't seen Walsh."

"He hasn't come yet, Mr. Landray," said Dunlevy, tightening a hame strap.

"Something's gone wrong with Tucker," said Rogers, "but I didn't stay to see what it was. I'm off for

California, and we don't climb down out of here until the first stage of the journey's done; do we, son?"

In the tavern, as he had intimated, all was confusion. Levi Tucker, powerfully excited, was stamping back and forth in front of his bar; while Landray and the lawyer were vainly seeking to calm him.

"Here's a pretty mess," said the former as Stephen entered the room. "Tucker's wife seems to be missing."

"Seems to be missing!" cried the innkeeper furiously. "I tell you, Bush, she's skipped clean out! Left me, do you hear? Left me! Well, I hope he'll trim the nonsense out of her—I do that!"

"What's this?" demanded Stephen, looking first from one to the other of the three men.

"He thinks Julia has run away," said Benson quietly, but his face was rather white. Mrs. Tucker was his cousin.

"Thinks!" snorted the innkeeper contemptuously. "What sort of proofs may you be looking for, Jacob? Ain't I furnishing them by the cartloads? She's kin to you, and you don't want to think ill of her; but just hear me, all of you—"

"He's been drinking," whispered Bushrod; but Tucker, whose senses appeared to be wonderfully acute all at once, heard him.

"Drinking!" he exploded, in a thin shriek of anguish. "Of course I been drinking. What was good, red licker made for if it wa'n'. for a time like this when you're publicly made a fool of by a trifling no-account woman, whose head never held an ounce of sense in all her born days! She's your cousin, Jake, I mind that, and my word! she's damn little credit to you—but she's worse shame to me."

Stephen, with some difficulty, possessed himself of these facts. The night before, the faithful Jim had taken Mrs. Tucker out to her father's farm on the South Road. She had sent him back with the message that her father would drive her home when she should be ready to return. Midnight came, and she did not appear; Mr. Tucker, somewhat alarmed for her safety, dispatched Jim in quest of her. He had shortly returned with the information that Captain Gibbs had called at the farm early in the evening and had proposed driving her home, and they had ridden away together, behind a most excellent span of horses which the perfidious Gibbs had hired of Mr. Tucker. This was the last any one had seen of them.

The tavernkeeper told Stephen this between sobs, and oaths, and threats.

"Think of it, Steve—she's quit me for that infernal scalawag!"

"You are too willing to think ill of her, Tucker," said Landray. "It may turn out all right, and then you will be the first to regret your haste."

"Man, I know she's gone with him!" cried the tavernkeeper.

"Ain't he been hanging about here for days past, and all to get a word with her—I seen it!"

"Perhaps they've stopped somewhere on the way into town, they may have had a breakdown, or their horses may have run off," suggested Benson.

"Run off? That team? No, sir! They have lit out together—damn her foolishness, and him just next door to nothing! I'll catch them yet, though! Jim! You Jim!" he bawled. The stableman appeared at the door.

"What do you want now, Tucker?" he asked.

"What I been wanting for the last half hour—a horse and fix!"

"That's what I'm trying to get for you, if you'd just leave off yelling for me," said Jim.

But Tucker paid no heed to him, he was threatening again.

"When I catch up with them it will go hard with him! I'll learn him he can't run off with no wife of mine! You hear me? Him or me'll go down!"

"But you are sure of nothing yet," interposed Stephen, shocked at the readiness he was displaying to think the worst of his wife.

"I've watched 'em together," raged the wronged husband. "I've seen her blushing and giggling. They thought I didn't see; getting too old to notice or have good sense, I reckon; but I ain't been married three times not to know what a pair of fools look like when they are in love." and he stormed back and forth in front of his bar. "I had good luck with all of my wives but her; they were perfect ladies, each of them, and to think she'd serve me a trick like this!" Then he calmed down. "You and Bush come into the sitting-room; and you too, Jacob."

The three men silently followed him into the adjoining room, where he threw open the door of a cupboard, and fell to rumaging among its contents. Presently he brought to light two huge horse-pistols, relics of the War of 1812. As they were much too large to go into his pockets he wrapped them in a gaily-coloured quilt.

"I'll have satisfaction," he remarked grimly. "I'll blow him as full of holes as he'll stick. They got my bay team and six hours start; but I'll be after them hot-footed with that fractious mare of mine, and when I come up with them it will be him or me."

"I hope you'll not do anything hasty, Tucker," said Stephen gravely.

"Don't you worry about me, Steve. The right's on my side."

He seemed so weak despite his rage and brave boastings, and he had aged, too, in that single night, that Stephen, feeling only pity for him, rested his strong hand on his shoulder with a kindly pressure.

"Come, Tucker, why go after him at all?" he said.

"Thank'ee Steve," cried the tavernkeeper in a husky voice, and his bleary eyes sought the handsome face of the younger man. "Thank'ee—but you can't keep me back. She's my wife, she's skipped out with another man, and now I'm going to make her skip back, and I reckon she'll do quite a little skipping one way and another before this affair's settled," and he shook his head ominously.

Then he said:

"Them deeds covering the transfers of that land, and the distillery, are in Jake's hands. He can get 'em recorded. It's all right to leave it with him to close up the deal, ain't it, boys?"

"Yes, certainly. He will have to attend to it," said Stephen.

Jim appeared at the door. “Well, Tucker, if you are going, look spry. The mare's hooked to the light fix.”

Mr. Tucker, who had been standing by the window with his head sunk on his breast, turned quickly, roused by his words.

“Thank'ee, Jim, I'm ready. You'll look after things until I get back?” and he gathered up the gaily-coloured quilt that hid the horse pistols. Jim seemed slightly crestfallen.

“Don't I go too, Tucker?” he asked. “You know when it comes to the madam you ain't no match for her. Don't you reckon you'll want me?”

“I'll attend to her. You do as you're told.” said the old man with a touch of unexpected dignity. He crossed the room to where the Lan-drays stood with Benson. “Good-bye, boys, and good luck to you!” he gave a tremulous hand to each in turn. “I'm mighty sorry to see you go.”

“And we are sorry to see you in this trouble,” said Stephen.

“I trust you'll not do anything hasty,” urged Benson.

“Well, I won't be too everlasting slow, Jacob,” said Tucker grimly. Then he followed Jim from the room. A moment later they heard him issue his final commands to his stableman, the crack of a whip, the clatter of four shod hoofs on the brick pavement, the rattle of wheels, and Mr. Tucker, his hat awry, and his two wisps of white hair streaming out behind his ears like a pair of cupid's wings, whirled out of the inn-yard, and down the street, the fractious mare at a wild gallop.

The three men looked from one to another in silence. Stephen spoke first.

“Do you think she's gone with Gibbs?” he asked.

“I shouldn't wonder, there's been a good deal of talk,” It was Benson who answered his question.

“We should not have allowed him to start off after them,” said Stephen.

“I imagine we would have had our hands full if we had tried to stop him,” responded Bushrod with a shrug. Here, Jasper Walsh entered the room.

“Let us be off, Mr. Landray,” he cried. He was a boyish-looking young fellow, with a refined and gentle face, that was now working piteously enough. A stranger in Benson, fresh from an eastern college, he had come west—bringing with him a young wife—to teach school and in his leisure time study law, but he had decided that a year or so in California would furnish him with the means to carry out his ambitions, and from the savings of his slender earnings he had purchased a few shares in the company. “They are waiting for us, they are all ready—can't we start?” he asked.

“Yes, I know, Walsh,” said Stephen, then he added, “See here, why don't you throw it over? I'll see that your interests are well looked to. Come, be sensible, and stay here with your wife.”

“No,” answered the boy determinedly. “It's my chance. It's best for her, and it's best for me that I go, and I've parted from her and the worst is over,” his lips quivered. “What's keeping us?” he asked anxiously.

“Nothing,” said Stephen, but he did not move. Bushrod laughed dismally.

“Walsh is right, let's start. I don't want to hang about here until Anna's awake, and sees us go past the house.”

Stephen looked at him in wonder.

“Until Anna's what?” he demanded sharply.

“Awake. Thank God, she was fast asleep when I left home.”

Stephen's glance dwelt sadly upon his brother for a brief instant, then he moved to the door and they passed out through the bar, where Jim had put out the lights and was already opening the heavy wooden shutters.

When they emerged upon the square, they found the wind had lulled. The rain was tailing in a quiet drizzle, with here and there an occasional snow-flake that melted the instant it touched the ground. Bushrod and Walsh said good-bye to the lawyer, and took their places in the wagons, while Stephen turned back for a last word.

“I'm leaving everything in your care, Jake,” he said, in a voice of stifled emotion, as he wrung Benson's hand.

“I understand, Landray. I'll do for her in everyway I can.”

“I know you will. God bless you, and good-bye.”

They passed down the silent street that echoed dismally to the beat of their horses' hoofs, they crossed the covered bridge and began the long ascent of Landray's Hill. As they neared the summit, the vapours lifted from the valley below them, and the first long level rays of the sun shot across it, just touching the woods that were its furthest boundary.

Stephen, who was driving the first wagon, leaned far out from under the canvas hood, for down in the valley he saw the dark bulk of the old stone mill; then the farm-house flanked by its great barns and lesser buildings, came into view; and, last of all, the white porch of his home, and on the porch a figure, that he knew had been waiting there since the day broke. He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and waved it frantically: there was an answering flutter of white, and then a turn in the road brought the leafless woods about him, and he had looked his last upon the valley.

As the sun swept higher in the heavens, and as the day advanced and the miles grew behind them, the drooping spirits of the party seemed to revive. Dunlevy and Bingham whistled or sang or chaffed poor Walsh who rode in their wagon; while Bushrod Landray and Rogers discussed the latest news from California, with an interest and cheerfulness that had been but temporarily eclipsed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AT Cincinnati, a dilapidated wharf boat absorbed the wagons of The Benson and California Mining and Trading Company, and an affable shipping agent, after dwelling with enthusiasm on the fact that freights were steadily advancing, and the oldest river men unwilling to predict their ultimate figure, agreed to furnish transportation for the party on the “Caledonia,” which was due to arrive some time the following day, and at a price which represented but a slight advance on the regular western rate; indeed, he assured Stephen he might reasonably consider the increase merely nominal, in view of the peculiar and extraordinary advantages this particular boat had to offer in the way of safety, speed, and comfort.

But in spite of the ample promises of this individual, Stephen found he had purchased a very limited amount of space indeed, for the steamer was crowded when they boarded it, and each stop it made added to the numbers who stamped the decks when the weather permitted, and at other times clustered about the smoky wood stoves in the dingy cabins.

As they steamed down the Ohio, they passed, or were passed, by other boats, each crowded with its adventurers. They entered the Missouri, and on its banks saw the camps and canvas-covered wagons of those who had come overland to join in the epic march of the gold-seekers. At first, it was two or three wagons—further along the two or three became a score—this score grew to fifty—the fifty to a hundred—a long, slow-moving monotonous line.

Late one afternoon they reached Independence, and tied up to the bank. A tall black-bearded man of thirty-eight or forty, in greasy buckskins, had established himself at a near-by wood-pile, from which he could command an excellent prospect of the river and what was passing there. He had kept his watch from dawn until dark for a week or more. It was only when some steamer made a landing in his vicinity that he would forsake his post; then he would hurry along the bank, thrusting his vigorous way among the passengers, eagerly questioning from whence they came. During those intervals when there were no boats arriving, he cultivated a measure of intimacy with the proprietor of the wood-yard; and the latter had hospitably urged him to make free with a shelter of blankets he had devised in the rear of one of the wood ranks. But his impatience had increased as the days passed, and the good-nature which had at first expressed itself in ill-flavoured jests at the expense of the emigrants seemed to leave him; this was Basil Landray. He saw the “Caledonia” tie up to the shore; and he watched her passengers as they made their way to land, laden with the more easily portable of their belongings; suddenly, however, he uttered an exclamation and strode down the bank.

“If your name ain't Landray, I'll never guess again!” he said, when he had made his way to where Stephen and Bushrod stood.

“Basil?” cried the former, “Basil Landray?”

In spite of certain differences, which later on became so apparent that they seemed to destroy all family resemblance, the cousins were wonderfully alike.

“How long have you been here?” said Stephen.

“Not above a fortnight. I counted on your getting here sooner; but you're full early; there's no grass to speak of yet, and you can't start a hoof across the plains until that gets up.”

In a covert, secret fashion of his own he was taking careful stock of the brothers. When Stephen's letter had been put into his hands at Council Bluffs the previous fall, it had required an effort of memory on his part to determine who this Stephen Landray was, and just how they were related. Of the writer's circumstances he had known absolutely nothing, and of these the letter gave no hint; this was a point upon which he had felt certain misgivings, but the very appearance of the brothers was in itself reassuring. He noted, for nothing was lost on him, that the others of the party treated them with a marked respect, which he instantly attributed to superiority of fortune, that to him being the basis of all social differences.

“Well, now;” he cried, with boisterous heartiness, “and to think I should have known the pair of you the minute I clapped eyes on you! Singular, ain't it?”

“No,” said Stephen, surveying the fine muscular figure of the fur trader with frank approval. “No, it is not so singular after all; for we do look alike.”

“Aye, with this off,” running his fingers through his bushy heard. “As like as three peas in a pod.”

Their wagons, which were among the last loaded on the “Caledonia,” and consequently among the first to be put ashore, were soon drawn up the bank; and Dunlevy, with Bingham and Walsh busied themselves settling the camp.

“Now,” said Basil, “What are your plans?”

The Landrays had drawn apart from the others, and had thrown themselves down on the short turf which was already specked with flowers. They told him first of the return of Rogers, and of the formation of the company.

“Yonder tall fellow?” nodding in the direction of the Californian.

“Yes.”

Basil grinned. “You must have had right smart faith,” he said. “I should judge you'd have thought twice before trusting yourself to him.”

“We did.” said Stephen. “It was then I thought of you.”

“Well, if he drops off, I reckon I can fill his shoes.”

“God forbid that he should drop off!” cried Stephen quickly. “I want to see him successful. He's a tragic and pathetic figure, with his hope and patience.”

Basil stared at him blankly, “Oh! I reckon he'll pull through,” he said at length.

They were soon absorbed in the discussion of their plans. They kept nothing back from the fur trader, for was he not a Landray? They told him how much was invested in the enterprise, what had been spent in equipment, and what, remained in cash in hand, which they intended to invest when they should reach California, together with five thousand dollars of their own. His dark eyes sparkled, and the enthusiasm which worked up out of the sullen depths of his nature quite mastered him. He felt his heart warm toward these prosperous kinsmen of his.

"Well, freeze on to your money," then he laughed as he added, "I didn't know any of the Landrays could round up so much. I suppose you sold clean out to do it?"

"Not quite," said Bushrod a little stiffly, and he glanced quickly at his brother; but Stephen avoided meeting his eye, for somehow he felt responsible for Basil, and Basil, he feared, was not quite all he had expected.

"Well, it's a lot of money," said the fur trader, "a lot of money. I've known one Landray who ain't seen so much in many a long day, how do you plan to lay it out?"

"If possible, in mining properties," said Stephen.

"And lose every doggone cent of it, like enough. No sir, I'd put it in something surer."

They looked at him in mute surprise. What could be surer?

He explained.

"Every one's crazy to dig, and while they dig they're going to be hungry—they're going to be mortal thirsty too. Start a store, or, better still, start a tavern; but keep your hands clean."

"We intend to," said Stephen drily. The fur trader swore a mighty oath.

"The crowd here's one thing, but what will be left of it after it crosses the plains will be something else. The soft-headed and the soft-hearted will turn back, but a many a one 'll go through, and if money comes easy it will go easy. They'll be a long ways from home, most of 'em will forget they ever had homes; I've seen how that works in the fur country. Drink and cards will do for 'em: I've seen 'em gamble their last dollar away—their horses—their Indian women—the shirts off their backs—and once the scalps off their own heads, it's the traders and gamblers makes the money." he broke off abruptly with a light laugh. "You'll figure it out to suit yourselves, I reckon, but there'll be other ways of getting gold than digging for it."

His unlucky candour acted like a wet blanket on the brothers. The manner of each became stiff, their tone formal; their enthusiasm changed to a forced and tepid warmth; but apparently Basil did not notice this; relaxed and at ease in his greasy buckskins, and with a short black pipe between his teeth, he lounged on the soft flower-specked turf, his mind filled with pleasant fancies.

"We'll pick up our teams to-morrow;" he said. "Mules cost a heap more than cattle, but mules are what you want."

"We heard at St. Louis that the cholera was here, and at St. Joseph," said Bushrod.

"I reckon what you heard was near about so. That's one reason why we want to pull out of here as soon as we can. When the first man died, there was a right lively stampede." he sucked at his pipe in silence for a moment. "I ain't partial to cholera myself," he added.

Then he explained with some show of embarrassment that his reckoning at the tavern where he had lodged since his arrival in Independence, was still unpaid, and that he was looking to the brothers to settle it for him.

As evening fell, the open spaces about the town, common and waste, smoked with the fires of a thousand camps. The rolling upland rioted with feverish life, or vibrated with a boisterous cheerfulness, for hope was everywhere. Numberless white-topped wagons gleamed opaquely in the gathering darkness; black figures moved restlessly to and fro about the fires; there was the continual lowing of oxen; now a noisy chorus of men's voices could be heard; then nearer at hand a clear tenor voice took up the words.

"I soon shall be in 'Frisco,
    And then I'll look around,
And when I see the gold lumps there,
    I'll pick 'em off the ground.
I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys,
    I'll drain the rivers dry,
A pocket full of rocks bring home,
    So, brothers, don't you cry!"

A hundred men roared out the refrain:

"Oh! California,
    That's the land for me!
I'm bound for San Francisco,
    With my wash-bowl on my knee!"

The fur trader grinned and nodded over his tin cup of steaming coffee.

"Some of 'em will do their singing out the other side of their mouths before they finish the first five hundred miles; eh, California?"

"I reckon so," said Rogers, sententiously.

"Stephen, here, tells me you've crossed the mountains?"

Again Rogers contented himself with a brief answer in the affirmative.

“Ever been in the fur trade?” asked Basil.

“No.”

“Oh, aye, just knocking about maybe?”

“Trying mighty hard to make a living,” corrected Rogers shortly.

“That's easy to pick up.”

“The kind I wanted wa'n'..”

“What kind were you looking for?” inquired Basil.

“Something a mighty sight different from what I got out of soldiering and ranching,” responded Rogers.

The fur trader devoted a moment to a close scrutiny of the Californian.

“It don't seem to have agreed with you specially well, for a fact,” he commented drily.

“Come, Basil,” said Stephen, “if you are ready, we'd better go into town before it gets any later.”

They found the town alive with the unwonted traffic of that season. Before the warehouses and stores, which for years past had outfitted the Santa Fe traders and the great fur companies, freight wagons from the river landings or from St. Louis were still discharging their loads. There were other wagons from the country about, each drawn by its six or eight oxen or mules, and laden with flour, pork, and farm produce; and from the distant trading posts were still other wagons, loaded with bales of beaver and buffalo robes. The teams blocked the street, and their drivers swore hoarsely at each other; and the crowds showered them with advice.

In the stores with their barbaric display of coloured cloths, blankets, and beads, and their stacks of rifles, an army might have been equipped and armed. In and out the crowds came and went, buying and trading with a feverish haste. In the stock-yards—which seemed to be everywhere—by lantern light, men bargained for teams. There was the slow drawl of the Southerner; the nasal twang of the Yankee; the French of dark-skinned Canadian voyagers; the Spanish of swarthy Mexican packers; the frank and loudly expressed wonder of the men of the frontier, teamsters, and trappers, at the sudden invasion of their trading centre.

Basil's reckoning at the tavern was settled, and the fur trader shouldered his pack and rifle, and they again sought the street.

“We'll go back to camp by a nearer way,” said he, and he led them down a narrow alley. Here a rapidly driven wagon caused them to draw to one side. A negro was driving the team of mules, and following him came a two-wheeled cart. In it were two men, one of whom held a lantern in his lap. In the light it gave they could see that the handles of a pick and shovel protruded from between his knees. His companion rocked drunkenly at his side.

Basil started back with an oath.

“The cholera!” he cried.

They were bearing a body to a grave on the plains, beyond the town and the camps of the gold-seekers.

CHAPTER NINE

MR. TUCKER took the south road out of Benson, his belief being that the runaways would drive across the State to Indiana. Events proved him so far right in this conjecture that he dined at the tavern where they had breakfasted, and supped where they had dined. Then, since they had gone on presumedly in the direction of Columbus, he mounted to his seat again and urged the fractious mare forward at the best pace which the condition of the roads rendered safe. He himself was now on the verge of exhaustion; and his desire to be revenged on the fugitives, alone sustained him; it was nothing that he ached in every bone and muscle, or that his old joints had stiffened so that as he swung forward over the rutted road, or splashed through mud-holes, he was tossed and jolted from side to side quite lacking the power to protect or save himself.

The bitter sense of shame never left him; and with each weary mile the wish to be avenged for the monstrous evil he was suffering grew in his sodden brain. Yet as darkness closed about him, between the paroxysms of his rage, he thought miserably enough of his own comfortable tavern bar, filled as he knew it must be with the pleasant odour of tobacco smoke—that soft familiar haze through which for thirty years he had looked each night. He thought of the long rows of bottles on the shelves back of the deal bar, and of what they held; of the open fireplace with its warmth and cheer, which Jim had heaped with great logs. There was something inspiring and of high domestic virtue even in the reek of the sperm oil in the brass lamps; indeed, there was not a single memory which his mind fed upon, that he would have had changed in the minutest particular, or that did not add to the wretchedness of his present plight.

He thought of the excellent and thirsty company that was gathering there, and the best company was always thirsty. He thought tenderly of the little cherished peculiarities of each of his cronies; of Mr. Harden the undertaker, and the accurate information he was always ready to impart touching the ravages of sickness and death in the county; of Mayor Kirby, and Squire Riley, and the argument on certain mooted points of constitutional law they had been carrying on almost nightly, for more years than he could remember; and which had become so intricate that these distinguished opponents were as often as not astonished to find themselves on the wrong side of the question, each upholding the opinions of the other with a most embarrassing force and logic; he thought of Mr. Bently, the postmaster, and his interesting political

reminiscences, the chiefest gem being the narrative of his meeting with Andrew Jackson, and the wealth of whose impressions concerning that remarkable man—which might be said to have compounded themselves most industriously—now bore no relation whatever to the actual time which the victor of New Orleans had devoted to Mr. Bently's case, generally supposed to have been the Benson post-office. He thought of Colonel Sharp, stately but condescending, and his agreeable conversation embellished as it was by classical quotations, which never failed to carry a sense of conviction and fullness to the mental stomach: of the British bullet he had brought away from the disastrous fight at Fallen Timbers, but which no surgeon's probe had ever been able to locate, and concerning the outrageous behaviour of which Mr. Tucker was expected to show daily the keenest interest, since the most subtle change in the weather, a rise or fall in the temperature, a shift in the wind, affected this piece of lead in the most singular manner, enabling it, so the colonel stoutly averred, to travel up and down his leg between the knee and thigh quite at its own pleasure, but much to his discomfort.

Probably they were all at the tavern even now; and here was he, wet and wretched, with a cold wind and a yet colder rain beating in his face, miles and miles away!

Then at last, out of the darkness and mist and the falling rain, down the waste of muddy roads, and far across the desolate fields, one by one the lights of the capitol city blinked at him. He drove up High Street, past the Niel House, for he was prejudiced against so pretentious an establishment; and turning down a side street drew up in front of a small frame building, which a creaking sign announced to be Roebuck's Tavern.

Roebuck was an old friend, though they had not met in years; and it was Roebuck himself, who, hearing the rattle of wheels before his door, hurried out from the bar, lantern in hand, to bid his guest welcome. He was a burly figure of a man, florid of face, but bland and smiling.

“John,” cried Mr. Tucker weakly, “John, I wonder if you'll know me!”

“Know you?” swinging up the lantern. “Know you?” scrutinizing doubtfully the limp figure in the buggy. “Why, God bless me—it's Tucker, of the Red Brick at Benson!”

He seized Tucker's cold fingers in a friendly grasp, and fell to bawling for his hostler. When the latter appeared, he assisted his friend to alight, and bore him indoors.

“Why, man, you're wet to the skin!” he cried. “You'll be after having something to eat, a drop to drink, and a pipe.”

“A dish of licker right now, if you please, John,” said Tucker, turning his eyes in the direction of the bar; and though he doubted if Roebuck would have anything to tell him, he made his inquiries concerning the runaways. Roebuck nodded.

“They stopped here for supper. Gibbs I knowed by sight, but his lady was a stranger to me.”

“Where are they now?” cried Tucker fiercely. “Here?”

“Nay, man, they only stopped for supper, as I told you. When they were leaving they asked me about the road to Washington in Fayette County; but they'll have to stop for the night on the way; their team wa'n'. good for ten miles more when they drove away from here.”

Mr. Tucker groaned aloud. “I'd keep on after them, but I ain't fit, John,” he said.

“You do look beat,” agreed his friend.

“I been after them since early morning,” said Tucker.

“Your daughter, maybe?”

“My wife,” answered Tucker briefly.

“You don't tell me!” cried Roebuck. “Let's see, it was your first wife I knowed, wa'n'. it?”

“My second,” said Tucker. “Sarah.”

“So it was. I mind now that was her name.”

“A good woman,” said Tucker, and said no more.

Presently, however, when he had eaten, and his eating included much drinking, they established themselves for privacy's sake in the tavern parlour near a small table, where as the night wore on, there was a steady accumulation of empty bottles, “Dead soldiers,” Roebuck called them.

It was then that Tucker poured the narrative of his wrongs into the listening ear of his ancient friend.

“I mind now I heard of your second wife's death, and that you'd married again,” said Roebuck, when he had finished.

“It was once too often, John,” said Tucker sadly. “I know it now though I didn't think so then. She was a tidy-looking girl when I carried her home to the Red Brick.”

“She's an uncommon fine looker yet,” Roebuck assured him.

“She is,” agreed Tucker. “I seen her the first time at her father's farm, I'd gone there to buy grain. Only to buy grain, mind you; I had no more idea of marrying again than nothing at all; but being married once makes a man bold, and I allow being married twice makes him downright reckless; so while old Tom Gough, her father—”

“I knowed him,” said Roebuck, interrupting him. “One eye missing,” he added, wishing to establish Mr. Gough's identity beyond peradventure.

“Fourth of July,” said Tucker. “Breach of his rifle blowed out.”

“That's him,” said Roebuck nodding. “Go on—old Tom Gough—”

“Went down to the barn to hook up,” said Tucker, resuming his narrative, “you see he wanted to show me his crops, I was intending buying in the field, and he left me setting on his front porch where I could see her through the hall whisking about helping her mother at the back of the house. Watching her I got so lonely that presently I called to her to come out where I was, and she called back that there was more between us than the house. 'More than the house between us,' says I, 'perhaps you mean a man.' 'Not a man,' says she, 'but I don't know as I fancy your looks, Mr. Tucker.' 'The liking of looks,' says I, 'is a matter of habit. Give me

time and perhaps you'll like such looks as I have well enough.' That," added Mr. Tucker savagely, "was the beginning."

"And you married her," said Roebuck.

"Damn her, I did," said Tucker.

"Trouble from the start?" asked Roebuck.

"No, we got along satisfactory, you might say, with now and then a spat as is to be expected, and which signifies little enough."

"Little enough surely," agreed Roebuck.

"And then along came this scalawag Gibbs."

"One man's as good as another until the other heaves into sight, I've noticed that," observed Roebuck.

"Exactly," said Tucker moodily.

Mr. Tucker left Columbus at dawn the next day, and in a pouring rain, which rendered the roads all but impassible.

The runaways kept their lead of him, and again he dined where they had breakfasted and supped where they had dined. This brought him to Washington. He followed them to Leesburg, almost due south, and he feared they were directing their course to some river point. At Leesburg, however, they turned north again taking the Wilmington Pike. He was now convinced that Gibbs had in mind reaching some station on the Little Miama railroad, and felt that if he was to overtake them he must do so that day.

Just beyond Wilmington where they had stopped at a cross-road blacksmith shop, the runaways caught their first sight of Mr. Tucker, who like a battered fate, toiled into view. They had scarcely reckoned on the old tavernkeeper showing such tenacity of purpose; indeed, he was within a hundred yards of them, when Gibbs happening to glance back up the road, descried the fractious mare, urged on by the injured husband, charging down upon them, and at a speed, which had this backward glance of his been delayed another moment would have brought the chase to a conclusion of some sort then and there. With a muttered oath he tossed a handful of change to the smith who had just replaced the shoe one of the bays had cast, and lashed his horses with the whip. Yet prompt as their flight was, he heard Tucker call, bidding him stop.

First the mare gained slowly inch by inch. Then the bays worked ahead. But they in their turn lost ground and the mare gained on them once more, until Mr. Tucker's voice could be heard again. He was calling to them to stop or take the consequences; but they did not stop and there were no consequences; for the bays quickly recovered their lead.

Gibbs stood in no actual fear of the old tavernkeeper, but he felt that under the circumstances a meeting with him would have its disagreeable features; and to do him justice, he was not lacking in the wish to spare the woman at his side the distress of such an interview.

The bays now drew steadily ahead, and Tucker dropped back until a good quarter of a mile separated him from the pair in the buggy; this grew to half a mile—three-quarters—though he plied the whip with desperate energy.

Suddenly he was surprised to see the bays slow down to a walk, but a moment later he realized what the difficulty was. They were approaching a ford. He had already experienced both difficulty and danger in fording swollen streams; perhaps this one would force the runaways to turn and face him. He slipped the quilt from about the pistols with one hand while he guided his horse with the other, for he had caught the glint of the angry current where it ran level with the bank, sending a placid stretch of dirty yellow water down the road to meet the fugitives. An instant later the bays splashed into this.

Gibbs drew in his horses. He had no intention of attempting the ford.

"I am sorry," he said to his companion, "but we shall have to meet him here, the ford is not safe."

Tucker saw the bays come to a stand, and shaking with excitement and rage, snatched up one of the pistols and sought to cock it; but his fingers were numb with cold, the lock rusted and stiff, and he could not start the hammer. He put the reins between his knees, and took both hands to the task. The hammer rose slowly from the cap. Then suddenly his fingers seemed to lose all power and strength, the hammer fell, the piece exploded.

When the smoke that for a moment enveloped him cleared away, he saw that Gibbs had changed his mind about waiting for him to come up. The bays were struggling in midstream, and when he reached the ford were just emerging on the other bank. He reined in his horse and considered. The stream had an ugly look. It was quite narrow, however, and he could see plainly where the wheels of the buggy had left their impress on the soft bank opposite. But his fury got the better of a constitutional timidity that usually turned him back from any hazardous undertaking. He touched the mare sharply with the whip; she started forward; and then as she felt the water deepen about her, flung back. He jerked her round savagely, and she plunged forward once more; but when she felt the force of the current, veered sharply, overturning the buggy. Tucker was pitched headlong from his seat. He gained a footing, but the water was waist deep, and the current instantly twisted his feet from under him, and he was rolled over and over like a cork. To have extricated himself would have been an easy task for a strong swimmer; but Mr. Tucker was not a strong swimmer. The current was sweeping him toward the opposite shore, and perhaps safety; but he was entirely possessed by the confused idea that he must recover his horse, which, rid of its master had kicked itself free of buggy and harness, and was now galloping down the road toward Wilmington.

He put his might against the current's might. It swept him further and further away from the ford. Splinters and fragments of the wrecked buggy floated after him. He gave up all idea of regaining the Wilmington shore. He wondered desperately if Gibbs had not seen the accident, and if he would let him go to his death in that flood of rushing muddy water without an effort to save him; but Gibbs had passed about a turn in the road, and knew nothing of the tragedy that was being enacted so close at hand.

He snatched at the drooping boughs of willows and elms where they trailed about him in the water, but though his fingers touched them again and again, he lacked the power to retain his hold upon them. The cold

was numbing him; his arms and legs had the weight of lead. Once he sank—then his dripping bald head, white scared face, and starting eyes appeared, and the fight for life went on. Twice he sank—and again he came to the surface, choking, strangling, his old face purple. A third time he sank—but this time he did not reappear.

CHAPTER TEN

THE weeks that followed Stephen's departure held for Virginia Landray the misery of a first separation. It was the uprooting of all she had counted on as most secure and abiding. That thousands of other men had left their homes on the same errand meant nothing to her, for it was not in her nature to generalize.

Her one comfort was his letters, which reached her at short and reasonably regular intervals. He was all buoyancy and hope; he seemed to think only of the success in store for them; and he so dwelt upon this need of money, a need he magnified to himself and to her, that it was not strange she ended by having a wholly wrong and exaggerated idea of the condition of the family fortunes.

“He is doing it all for me,” she told herself with quivering lips, “and that only makes it the more wicked and monstrous! He has left his home for my sake, becauses he wishes to give me every comfort and luxury; as if I cared for anything—but him!”

Inspired by this thought, she regulated her personal expenditures with an eye to the most rigid economy. These economies of hers threatened to become a scandal and a reproach to Anna, Bushrod's wife, who, however much she regretted her husband's absence, refused to believe that any sacrifice could be made even tributary to her comfort, or could in any way lighten the sorrow and apprehension, she declared she was knowing for the first time in her married life.

But Virginia, whose faith was rather less than her affection for this cheerful sufferer, determined to propose to her that they live together at the farm, and thus save the expense of one household. She planned it all in detail. Anna could have the big front room over the parlour with the smaller one adjoining that looked out upon the west meadow. It would do admirably as a nursery for little Stephen. She grew quite excited over this project, and was on the point of driving into town to see Anna, when Anna herself in all the ingenious gaiety of new spring finery, drove into the yard.

She swept up the steps to Virginia, who had hurried to the door to receive her, adjusting her bonnet with one neatly gloved hand, and gathering up her skirts out of the way with the other; her small person radiant with grace and charm.

She seemed to be thrilling with some pleasurable excitement; and Virginia immediately thought it must be a letter from Bushrod.

“Have you heard about Mr. Tucker?” she asked quite breathlessly.

“What about Mr. Tucker?” said Virginia disappointed.

“He's dead—drowned—my dear! I hurried out to tell you, for I knew you would be interested. One always is, in these dreadful shocking tragedies.”

“Dead! Drowned!” cried Virginia in horror.

“Yes, my dear, drowned!” said Anna, with a small air of triumph.

“Oh!” cried Virginia; and added, “Poor, poor old man!”

“He was following his wife and that dreadful Captain Gibbs—it's quite settled now that she ran off with him; he tracked them half across the state, it seems.”

“But how did he lose his life?” asked Virginia.

“It seems he attempted to ford a dangerously swollen stream and was swept away; no one has the full particulars yet, but I saw Mr. Benson, and he says there is no doubt but that Mr. Tucker is dead.”

“Poor old man!” repeated Virginia pityingly.

“Well!” said Anna, “Captain Gibbs will never dare to show his face here again. They say they will tar and feather him if he does; and I think myself that would be none too good for him.”

Virginia looked inquiringly at her. She wondered if she had come merely to tell her this.

“Did Stephen ever say anything to you about his and Bush's business with Mr. Tucker—the distillery, I mean?” asked Anna.

Virginia shook her head.

“I really think it shocking the ignorance in which those men have kept us about their affairs! Just suppose anything should happen to them!”

“But nothing will,” said Virginia quickly.

“How does one know that, my dear? The papers say the cholera is at Independence.”

“Oh! Don't, Anna! How can you?” and Virginia put up her hands appealingly.

“Well, dear, one mustn't always look on the bright side: It's just as well to be serious sometimes. Goodness knows! You are always saying that I am not half serious enough, and now when I am willing to be—”

“But I never meant in this way!” cried Virginia.

“I know, dear, but there is absolutely nothing else to be serious about!”

“What do they say about Mrs. Tucker and Captain Gibbs?” asked Virginia, wishing to bring Anna back to her original theme.

“They kept on of course; isn't it scandalous! I knew that woman was no better than she should be, but Bush always wanted me to be civil on account of poor Mr. Tucker. Imagine, my dear, she was his third wife! You must admit there is a sort of levity about such marriages that prevents one being altogether serious in thinking of them; but did Stephen ever tell you anything about the distillery? Every one seems to think that all of Mr. Tucker's property will go to his wife; and I always understood that he had never finished paying for the distillery; but Mr. Benson seems to think there was a settlement just before Stephen and Bushrod started West. Did Stephen ever say anything to you about it?”

“No,” said Virginia, “or if he did, I have forgotten it. But what were those papers they had us sign just before they left, don't you remember, Anna?”

“Why, yes—I am sure that Bush told me that it had something to do with Mr. Tucker. Well, I hope they won't lose the distillery,” said Anna.

“Mr. Tucker's death will make no difference,” said Virginia. And then she outlined her plan, which Anna received coldly and with every outward evidence of disfavour.

“What, me bury myself in the country?” she cried. “And to save a few dollars? No, indeed; and I am sure Bush would not be pleased if I did. He begged me not to mope—he was always such a dear; you may feel quite sure that they are perfectly happy; men always get along very well when they are by themselves like that. I sometimes think we are of no special use to them except to keep their homes and to mother their children.”

“How is little Stephen, Anna?” Virginia asked, and a shade of constraint crept into her manner. This was one of her hidden griefs.

Her little nephew had been named in honour of his grandfather, and there could never be a son of hers who might bear that name. She never thought of this without a secret jealous pang.

“I had intended to bring him with me, but I came off in such haste—”

“If you were at the farm”—began Virginia.

“Now don't, dear,” and Anna put up her hands in pretty appeal. “I know all the many advantages of this dreadful lonely place; I spent the first year of my married life here, and I'm not likely to forget it, for I never gave Bush a moment's peace until he had bought the place in town and we had moved into it. That nearly broke up the family! General Landray—a terribly determined old man—never forgave me for that up to the very day of his death; he wanted us to stay on here. I know just what you would say, Virginia; I know all you would do for Stephen. It's such a pity you haven't children of your own.”

Virginia said nothing, but the colour came and went on her cheeks. There was a pause during which Anna moved restlessly in her chair; when Virginia was serious she was very depressing.

Anna was small and dark and pretty, and under the cloak of yielding pliant femininity hid a stout heart and certain strenuous characteristics, conspicuous among which was a really notable determination to have her own way in all small matters affecting her comfort and pleasure. Any large purpose was quite beyond her mental scope, but in the trivial doings of life, its little intrigues and sly manouvres, she was an industrious schemer for petty victories and petty spoils. These were her failings; but on the other hand her good nature rarely forsook her, and she was prolific with those kindnesses that involved no special self-denial.

When Virginia spoke again, it was still to urge the merits of the change. Anna listened patiently and when the other had finished, said, tempering her refusal with a compliment.

“I declare, I never knew you were such a manager, Virginia. You are positively clever. Candidly, dear, I couldn't think of it. It's quite awful; and it's coming summer, too, with all those frightful noisy bugs and frogs to keep one awake nights—I should positively die!”

“That's absurd, Anna,” retorted Virginia sharply. “I do wish you would be sensible, Think of the economy of the arrangement.”

“That's the very thing I refuse to think of. Do be reasonable, Virginia; what will our petty scrimpings amount to in the course of a year? And Stephen—he must be kept at school, he is awfully backward for a child of his years,” and her face assumed a pretty look of maternal anxiety. “This fall I want to enter him at Doctor Long's Academy, and if he were at the farm that would be impossible.”

“It's easy enough to find objections,” said Virginia resentfully.

“No, dear, the whole difficulty is to overcome them,” answered Anna sweetly. “If I really thought it was for the best, I would gladly sacrifice my personal preference; but I don't think it is for the best. Besides, I have asked Mr. Benson to see Doctor Long, and arrange for Stephen's admission to the Academy in the fall.”

“I should have thought you would have preferred to attend to that yourself,” said Virginia, who cherished no little resentment where the lawyer was concerned, because of the innocent part he had been forced to play in the organization of the hated company.

“He is always very kind and considerate,” murmured Anna, who by nature was a lukewarm champion.

“Is he?” said Virginia, but the look on her face was cold and repellent.

“You don't like him!”

“There is no reason why I should either like or dislike him. He is merely my husband's lawyer. So you feel, Anna, that you cannot give up the house in town?”

“Impossible, dear,” briskly. Her conviction as to what was needed for her happiness was always perfectly clear; she seldom had cause to reconsider.

Anna was now ready to return to town; Virginia urged her to stay to dinner, but she had many reasons why her presence was needed at her own home, and Virginia saw that it was useless to insist. At parting she reached up to kiss Virginia, she had to stand on tiptoe to do this, but the latter with the stateliest of inclinations presented her cheek for the caress.

"Why, I believe you are angry with me, Virginia," she cried. "Let me look at you; yes, you are. Oh! How unfair of you, Virginia—and it is all on account of Stephen, I am sure you wouldn't have him grow up an ignoramus when he has his uncle's name, now would you?"

From her seat on the porch Virginia watched Anna drive away. She rested her chin in the palm of her hand and gazed out across the fields. She wondered if it were true, as Anna had suggested; if Stephen had wearied of the life that to her had seemed perfect in its peace and happiness.

"He didn't leave me because he would be happier away from me! he has gone to earn money for me—as if I cared for money! I hate it!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT was not until the morning of the third day following their arrival in Independence that the members of the Benson and California Mining and Trading Company fell in at the rear of the wagon train that since midnight had been moving in one unbroken line out from the town and its environs.

Day was just breaking when their three wagons, drawn by stout mules, wheeled briskly into place, and as the sun came up and they saw the train stretching out ahead of them, they felt afresh the inspiration of their common hope in this peaceful conquest of fortune. A wave of joyous exultation seemed to sweep along the line; whips cracked, the mounted men galloped to and fro; while out of the uncertain light beyond, as the sun crept up above the horizon, the white lurching tops of the great wagons burst into view, one by one; but growing always smaller until finally they became mere white specks, dropping back in the track of the receding mist.

For the first two hundred miles west from the Missouri the country presented vast reaches of freshest green, gently rolling and intersected at intervals by streams, along whose banks grew scattered elms and cottonwoods. Hidden away in the fertile bottoms they came upon farms or ranches, each with its patch of cultivated land; but as they advanced these became less and less frequent; the uniform view was now one wide, rolling plain, with a distant fringe of timber marking the water-courses.

Then the waves of land ceased, the soil seemed to lose its fertility; and a dead level spread before the unresisting eye. They were entering upon the region of the Platte River and the plains proper. Long ere this the slow-moving oxen had fallen to the rear of the line of white-topped wagons; the mules had outstripped them as they, in their turn, were outstripped by the mounted men. But a greater change was making itself manifest throughout the caravan. The enthusiasm of the gold-seekers was waning in the face of unlooked for hardship and suffering. The cholera had caught them as they left the Missouri, and their line of march was dotted with newly-made graves.

Then, even as Basil Landray had foretold, the faint-hearted sickened of their enterprise, and with the stricken ones who had lost friends or relatives, turned back. The fur trader, giving way to boistrous merriment, showed an inclination to chaff these as they passed; but Stephen sternly bade him keep silent.

He was finding Basil a sore trial, yet the fur trader retained a measure of his faith and confidence, for he displayed a tireless energy in the face of every difficulty. If their mules or horses strayed over night, it was usually Basil who found them in the morning; if there was a stream to be crossed, it was Basil who located the ford; if they needed game, Basil was almost certain to bring it into camp; these were real and tangible benefits which could not be overlooked.

Stephen and Bushrod discussed him privately; at first with a palpable bias in his favour, magnifying each redeeming trait; but gradually their feeling of exasperation toward him was wholly in the ascendent.

"He's positively servile to us," complained Bushrod. "That's what I can't stand. If he treated us as he treats Rogers, for instance, I don't know but what I'd like him a great deal better; at least I'd have a sufficient excuse to kick him out of camp."

"Don't you think we've allowed him to wear on us?" said Stephen. "After all, I don't know that we have any right to expect him to be different from what he is; and he certainly is the most useful member of the company; we must admit that."

"Yes, he's handy with the stock," said Bushrod grudgingly.

Early in June they reached Fort Laramie, where they camped with the intention of giving their teams a rest of several days. At the Fort, which had been one of the many posts of the American Fur Company, and which the government had only recently acquired by purchase, they found a detachment of Mounted Rifles, while the employees of the Company were still in camp on the river. Among these latter Basil found a number of former associates, and for a night and a day they saw nothing of him; but on the second evening he suddenly strode into camp, and flung himself down in the midst of the little group about the fire.

"I know what I reckon there's many a one would give a good deal to know," he said jubilantly. "Steve, how'd you fancy shortening up the trail into Salt Lake? I been talking with one of the company's men who knows all the country hereabouts, and he's marked a trail for me."

"I allowed you knew this here country yourself," said Rogers sarcastically. "The whole of it, too."

"I know the trail we been following, for it's the same I took when I helped fetch Brigham Young across the plains after he was run out of Illinois."

"Which, I reckon, was a damn good job," said Rogers.

"Which, I reckon, it was nothing of the sort," retorted Basil quickly.

"What about the new route?" Stephen asked.

"Oh, aye. Well, coming with Brigham Young we followed the Platte clear around until we came to the head of the Sweet Water, then we struck across to the Big Sandy, and on down to Jim Bridger's trading post, pretty nearly south. But see, now—" he took up a bit of charred stick, and rising, turned to one of the wagons whose canvas side showed clearly in the light of the camp-fire. "Now, here's Fort Laramie—Fort John it was in the old days—and off here's Fort Bridger, and way round here runs the north fork of the Platte, and here the Sweet Water lets in." He sketched rapidly, and soon the canvas was covered with a rude outline map. "Bear in mind that's the emigrant road, as they call it; now we can strike south from here and follow the Chugwater up toward its source; it runs hereaways for a matter of a hundred miles, with this range of hills to the westward of it; just here the hills break away, and the trail turns west; three day's march will bring us to the Laramie—which lets in here—eight days more will bring us off here to Bridger's Pass; and from there on, the trail is almost due west to the head waters of the Weber."

"And we won't go near Fort Bridger at all?"

"Certain we shan't; that's north of us. When we reach the Weber we'll follow it into the valley; and if we need anything there, I reckon I'll have little enough trouble in getting what's wanted; they won't have forgotten me, or if they have, I'll jog their memories for them. What do you say?"

Stephen looked at Rogers.

"What do you think?" he asked. "He did this because it had been evident from the first that Rogers viewed the fur trader with no friendly eye, just as it was equally evident that Basil's feelings for the Californian were similarly hostile, each regarding the other as a rival in his own special field."

"I don't know anything about this new trail," said Rogers sullenly.

The fur trader grinned and pulled at his black beard. "No? That's odd, too. I allowed you knew the whole blame country, from hearing you talk," he jeered.

Rogers ignored this, and addressed himself to Stephen.

"You'd better bear in mind that there'll be plenty of Indians, and instead of fifty or a hundred wagons which they daren't fool with, there'll be just three."

"I don't need to tell Mr. Rogers that these here Indians of his will be mostly armed with bows and arrows," said Basil scornfully, but he drew his bushy brows together and scowled at the Californian.

"No, and you don't need to Mister me," retorted Rogers.

"Well, among friends—"

"And you don't need to make any mistake about that either," cried Rogers quickly. "I ain't always been able to choose my company, but it's different with my friends."

"Why, you—" Basil began, his beard quivering; but Stephen put out his hand and rested it heavily on his shoulder.

"Go on, Basil," he said quietly. "How about grass and water?"

"There's enough of both," he answered moodily, with eyes still fixed on Rogers.

"But is the road possible for wagons?"

The fur trader grinned arrogantly. "It ain't a road, it's just something between a scent and a trail," he turned to his map again. "We'll strike water here, and here, and all along here, and where there's water there's grass. You'll admit, Mr. Rogers, the emigrant road is a pretty round about way to Salt Lake, if there's anything nearer."

"I'm not disputing the distances," said Rogers reluctantly, for he felt that the leadership of the company was passing from him. "But I don't like the risks of getting caught up with by the Indians."

"We'll think about it over night," said Stephen. "We shan't leave here until day after to-morrow, and, in the meantime, I'd like to see your friend."

"All right," said Basil, "That's fair enough. I'll fetch him round in the morning and you can talk with him."

The result of this was, that when the Landrays left Fort Laramie they turned to the south instead of to the west, and followed down the Chugwater.

"It's a mistake," Rogers said sadly to Walsh. "It's too much of a risk to run to save a few days. It's a big mistake."

Even Basil seemed to recognize that a caution greater than they had yet shown was now necessary; for he instructed his companions not, on any account, to leave the close proximity of the wagons, while their mules were no longer turned loose at night to graze, but were tied to the wagons instead, and grass cut for them.

At his request Stephen had bought a horse for him before leaving Fort Laramie, and he usually rode in advance of the company, alert and vigilant; sometimes Stephen or Bushrod rode with him on the saddle horses they had brought from the Missouri. Occasionally they encountered small roving bands of Indians, to whom Basil made protestations of friendship and trifling gifts, but he refused to allow them to enter the camp on any pretext.

Rogers, who was not beyond a certain fairness, admitted that the fur trader's presence was of supreme value, and he surprised the others by the unquestioning obedience he yielded him in all matters that bore upon their safety. His condition had steadily improved since leaving Missouri, he now insisted upon doing his share of guard duty, from which he had formerly been exempt, and Basil declared him the most trustworthy member of the party.

"I don't have to stir about when it's his watch," he told Bushrod. "He don't go to sleep like Walsh and Bingham, who have to be kicked awake every now and then, and he don't take the flapping of the wagon canvases for Indians like Dunlevy does. I reckon he's been a man in his day."

But beyond the Chugwater an incident occurred which effectually destroyed the apparent good feeling that had prevailed since they left Fort Laramie. They had camped for the night at the head of a small stream, and not far from a sparse growth of cottonwoods, whither Basil had gone with Rogers and Dunlevy to bring in a

supply of firewood. Benny, near the wagons which had been drawn together in the form of a triangle, had already started a fire of dry twigs against the return of the choppers. Not far off the others of the party with their hunting-knives were busy cutting grass for the mules and horses.

Suddenly, coming from the cottonwoods, Stephen caught the sound of angry voices. First it was Rogers's voice, high pitched and bitter with the ready rancour of ill-health; a pause succeeded, and then Basil seemed to answer him, but in a more moderate tone. Stephen, suspending his work, glanced at Bushrod in mute inquiry, and at that moment Dunlevy stepped out of the wood.

“Landray!” he called loudly. “You and your brother had better come here.”

The two men dropped their knives, and strode toward him in haste.

“Basil must let Rogers alone,” said Bushrod. “Can't he see the man's sick and to be pitied?”

They had entered the woods, and now they came out upon its furthest margin and upon a surprising group. Rogers, pale and shaking with rage, Basil very red in the face, and three figures on horseback. One of these was a white man, a tall fellow in a ragged uniform, which they recognized as that of the Mounted Rifles; his two companions were wrapped in gaudy blankets, their long rifles resting across the horns of their saddles. Stephen and Bushrod instantly divined that they were half-breeds, while the likeness they bore each other was sufficiently marked to indicate that they were brothers. Their glance was fixed on the fur trader, but the stoical composure they maintained told nothing of what was passing in their minds. The white man, too, was preserving a strictly impartial silence.

Rogers was saying: “I got as much to say about this as any one.”

Basil lowered at him with sour hatred. “You? Who the hell are you? You ain't got a dollar in the outfit!”

“I got what counts for money,” answered Rogers, and shook his fist in Basil's face.

“What's the matter, Basil?” demanded the Landrays in a breath.

The fur trader smiled rather sheepishly. “It's this fool, Rogers,” he began sullenly.

“Oh, go to hell!” interrupted Rogers. He pointed to the three silent figures on horseback and cried fiercely: “This half-breed outfit's his!”

“Easy!” said the uniformed stranger, with a light, good-natured laugh. “I'm no half-breed, and I'm just mighty glad to see you white folks!”

“And who are you?” demanded Stephen.

“It's too bad, Cap, but I came off in such a hurry I clean left my kyards behind, but if you'll take my word for it, Raymond's my name.” He leaned slightly toward Stephen as he spoke, with an air of winning candour. “I'm real put out that yonder party's so upset.” He spoke with grave concern. “Yes, sir, real put out.”

“But who are you? And what are you doing here?”

“Raymond's my name, Cap,” repeated the stranger affably. “Like I should spell it for you?”

“Where's his rifle, why ain't he armed, and how does it come he knows your cousin?” cried Rogers.

“Party's eyesight ain't a failing him yet,” murmured the stranger in a tone of caressing confidence to Stephen. “Well,” he added, “since you seem to object to us, me and my friends here'll just cut loose.”

“No you don't, Raymond!” cried Basil angrily.

“See you in Salt Lake,” said Raymond, gathering up his reins. “Enquire for me.”

“I'll see you all the way there, too,” retorted Basil with an oath. He spoke sharply to the half-breeds, who at once closed up, one on each side of Raymond. The latter dropped back in his saddle, relaxing his hold on the bridle rein. Stephen regarded him in silence for a moment.

“Didn't I see you at Fort Laramie?” he asked.

The stranger, still smiling, nodded, and raising his hand to the corner of his mouth spat decorously back of it.

“In the colonel's quarters, was it not?” said Stephen sternly.

“The blamed old tarrapin was snapping away at me right lively;” he was still smiling pleasantly. He gestured slightly with his hand. “Out here, me and him would have had some sort of a falling out I reckon, but back yonder I had to swallow what he said, though his words were choky enough. Them army men's real candid.”

“I believe you had attempted to desert,” said Stephen, with illy-concealed disgust.

“Well, you might call it an attempt. I reckon the colonel counts it more then that. I held the lead for more than a hundred miles, and I reckon I'd be holding it yet only my hoss went lame. It was the best hoss the colonel owned, too.” His smile never lost a certain amiability; it seemed to spring from the unperverted innocence of his nature.

“How did you get here?” demanded Stephen.

“Ask him. He done it,” and he jerked his thumb in the direction of Basil. Stephen turned to the fur trader.

“What have you to say about this?” he asked gravely.

“He's all right. I'll vouch for him and the half-breeds,” he said.

“That isn't what I want to know. I want to know how he happens to be here,” insisted Stephen.

“I fixed that with the half-breeds,” and Basil laughed.

“You mean you got them to break jail for him?”

“What the devil difference does it make?”

“The man's a deserter, and the part you have played in releasing him—”

“What odds does it make to you?” retorted Basil. Then he moderated his tone. “Oh, come now, Steve, what's the use of your sweating about this? Louis and Baptiste here will help with the stock; Raymond's all right, too. They're three mighty good men to have about.”

But now Rogers broke in with objections. “It's right enough for the rest of you. But my wife was killed by

the Indians. These are half-breeds, but I got no more use for half-breeds than whole breeds. They're all one to me."

"Yes," said Basil roughly, "you'd have used your rifle on Louis there. Lucky for you I saw you getting ready to shoot."

"I may have a chance to use it on him yet," answered Rogers, and he directed a volley of abuse at the fur trader. The latter flushed hotly.

"Come aside, you two," said Stephen, nodding to his brother and the fur trader. "Now," he said, when they were out of ear shot of the others, "am I to understand, Basil, that you induced those halfbreeds to liberate that man?"

"You've got the idea exactly. See here, Steve, Raymond's a friend of mine; his father's one of the big men in Salt Lake. Raymond and the old man never got along any too well, and a while back Raymond joined the army. He knew that would make the old man hop and swear, but he found he'd rather overdone the business, and, naturally, he tried to cut loose from the whole thing. He deserted, and was fetched back; that's when you saw him. I heard he was in the guard-house and managed to see him; and he offered me five hundred dollars if I'd help him out and get him into the valley where all the soldiers in the United States can't touch him. As he ain't any money, and as he's pretty slippery, I just had the two half-breeds bring him along so I'd have him where I could keep my hands on him. They're to get half the money, you see."

Stephen had regarded the fur trader in blank astonishment while he explained the part he had had in the deserter's release. Now he turned to Bushrod, who burst out laughing.

"This is a unique adventure for two law-abiding citizens."

"What would you do?" asked Stephen.

"Do?" cried Bushrod. "Send the miserable rascal back, with our compliments to his colonel."

"Try it!" said Basil, sullenly.

"Well, and what if we do try it?" said Bushrod, flushing angrily at the other's tone and manner.

"Try it!" repeated Basil doggedly.

But Stephen shook his head slowly. "We're two hundred miles from Fort Laramie," he said.

"You can keep on. I'll take him back myself, and join you in Salt Lake," said Bushrod.

"No, if one goes back, all must go back."

"Well, then, none will go, Steve, you know that."

"But what about the two half-breeds and the deserter?" asked Stephen, with a troubled frown.

"I expect they'll accompany us into Salt Lake," said Bushrod, with a shrewd smile. Then he turned on his cousin.

"We'll dispense with you when we reach Salt Lake, do you hear?"

That night the two Indians and the deserter hobbled their horses and went into camp on the edge of the cottonwoods, and within a stone's throw of the wagons.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AS Anna turned from the lane into the public road she met a cart which held a man and a woman. They were on the point of entering the lane as she left it. She smiled and nodded gaily to the man; then she stared hard at his companion. She wondered whom it could be that Mr. Benson had with him, and what he was doing there. Then she regretted she had been in such haste to leave Virginia.

"I am always doing the most stupid things," she said with a sigh. "I've almost a mind to turn back and pretend I've forgotten something. I wonder if I haven't?" but a hasty search revealed that her purse and handkerchief were in her pocket, and so, perforce, she continued on her way into town.

Meanwhile the cart had kept on up the lane toward the house. "That was Mrs. Bushrod Landray," Benson explained. "I might have taken you to her, but I think you will prefer to meet her sister."

When they reached the horse-block by the front steps, Benson climbed briskly down from the cart and turned to assist his companion to alight; but he saw that she hesitated. His glance was full of sympathy.

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Walsh," he said gently, and his whole manner was the extreme of kindness; then his face brightened. "Perhaps you'd rather I saw her first alone; I can just as well as not. It will save you all explanation. If you don't mind sitting here—" Mrs. Walsh hesitated. "I hardly like to ask so much of you, you have been more than kind already."

"You must regard me merely as your intermediary. We lawyers are accustomed to execute all kinds of commissions." and he handed her the reins.

"But not always for such an unprofitable client, Mr. Benson," she answered gravely.

"Sometimes the mere ability to serve carries its own recompense, Mrs. Walsh. The idea of any other would degrade the service," and he made her a formal little bow. Then he turned away and went slowly up the steps.

He had not seen Virginia since the day he had driven out to the farm to consult Stephen about the renewal of the note. Virginia herself answered his knock, but her beautiful face was impassive and calm, and her glance strayed on beyond him to the woman in the cart. He felt a sudden sense of exultation in her presence,

and the blood mounted warmly to his cheek. He half extended his hand, but while he hesitated, Virginia drew back a step, it might have been unconsciously, and his hand fell at his side.

“Will you grant me a moment in private, Mrs. Landray?” he said deferentially, for even when he came to have the feeling for her that was neither hate nor love, but some part of each, he still paid her this tacit homage; his manner never altered.

Virginia looked at him in surprise, but said: “Certainly, will you come into the library, Mr. Benson?” The conscious severity of her manner toward him did not relax.

This call was quite incomprehensible to her. She acknowledged, however, that to gratify a reasonable curiosity on this point she must sacrifice the opportunity to show her just indignation at the part she still believed he had played in sending her husband West. She led the way down the hall and into the library, where she silently motioned him to a chair. He seated himself and carefully placed his hat and gloves on the floor at his feet. While he was thus engaged her calm eyes were fixed upon him, their look grave and inquiring; and he experienced somewhat the same feeling he had known some five years before when he faced his first judge and jury; there were the same dry lips and parched throat, the same wonder in his heart if anything would come of it when he opened his lips to speak. He knew that his task would not be lightened by any word of hers.

“It's rather a difficult matter that brings me here,” he began haltingly. “I should not have ventured on this errand had it not been that the need was very urgent. You will remember that when your husband went West he took with him a young man by the name of Walsh?”

It was an unlucky start, for Virginia's face hardened perceptibly. He was immediately conscious of this, even while he did not divine the reason for it. He bit his lip, angry with himself that he had not first made his appeal to her pity. Then his pride came to the rescue; this was not the first hostile judge he had confronted.

“Walsh was only recently married when he joined the company; he was a stranger here, but, I believe, a man of excellent antecedents; however, the really serious part of it is, that his wife is quite alone and entirely friendless.”

“I have no patience with him for leaving her,” said Virginia.

“It is hard to condone,” admitted the lawyer.

“It seems to me, Mr. Benson, that since he was too careless to think of his wife's happiness himself, some friend should have reminded him of his duty.”

“I am aware his judgment in the matter may readily be called into question, Mrs. Landray, but I suppose he expects to make his fortune.” He was bent on agreeing with her. He felt her anger but was unable to determine a motive for it.

“And so make amends for all his selfishness? As if he ever could,” cried Virginia in a tone of keen exasperation.

Benson picked up his hat and smoothed the crown nervously. Her manner was inexplicable.

“I wonder you did not advise him as to his duty,” added Virginia.

“I, Mrs. Landray? Why, I never spoke ten words to the man in my life until the day before the company left; then he came to my office and placed one or two small matters of business in my hands.”

“Oh,” said Virginia haughtily. “Your advice was reserved for your friends and clients.”

“Really, Mrs. Landray,” answered Benson quietly, “I am very unfortunate in that I seem to have offended you, but I assure you I am quite in the dark as to what my misdeeds are.”

But Virginia was in no mood to explain; indeed, she considered him quite unworthy of any such frankness, which would have argued an intimacy she did not admit.

“Just now you were speaking to me of Mrs. Walsh,” she said, with a swift change of position, and with a polite if passive interest. “What more have you to tell me of her?”

“While I quite agree with you that Walsh was singularly negligent of her happiness in going West, and in leaving her here among strangers, still the fact remains he did go, but that's not the worst of it. It seems—and Mrs. Walsh told me this with the greatest reluctance—it seems that the money he had put aside for her support in his absence has been lost in some speculation of his brother's, in whose hands the money was left. As nearly as I can gather, Mrs. Walsh is absolutely penniless. She has appealed to me for advice, and I am quite at a loss to know what to suggest; I suppose she can secure employment here of some sort.” Benson paused, and rubbed his chin reflectively and a trifle ruefully. “The whole matter is rather out of my line; but she is so manifestly a lady that I should say it narrowed her chances very materially; naturally, too, she is crushed and humiliated by the whole circumstance, and is hardly able to think for herself. I hoped—I thought—you might be willing to see and advise with her. I know I have no right to impose this upon you, still you have nothing to fear from her, in the way of becoming a dependent, I mean; she is in no sense an object of charity; on the contrary she shows a commendable pride and entire independence of spirit; but she is very young and inexperienced, really scarcely more than a child. I thought you might be able to suggest something she could do. I hardly know what, but surely there is some occupation she can take up until such time as her husband can make suitable provision for her,” he concluded hesitatingly. “I didn't know whom to turn to, until I thought of you.”

There was a pause during which Virginia considered the matter in all its lights. At another time her sympathies, which were always generous, would have led her to prompt action, but now, with the idea of the decay of the family fortunes firmly implanted in her mind, she was reluctant to take a step that might involve her in any way.

Benson's face fell. He had expected something different of her. He half rose from his chair.

“I fear I was entirely too hasty.” There was palpable disappointment in his manner which he did not attempt to conceal.

“No, no,” said Virginia quickly. “I was only wondering if I knew of anything.”

“Then you will see her?” he was immensely relieved.

"Oh, yes, I will go out to her," and she turned swiftly to the door, but he detained her by a gesture.

"If you will permit it I will ask her to come here to you; probably she will prefer to see you alone. I'll just step down to the mill; I wish to see Paxon," he said.

Virginia signified her assent, and taking up his hat and gloves he hurried from the room and, a moment later, Mrs. Walsh came quickly into the library, though, evidently, with no little trepidation. She was very young, as Benson had said, slight and fair, and exceedingly pretty. She was dressed in black, but her veil was thrown back so that Virginia could see her face.

"I am very glad to meet you," said Virginia kindly; then she made a forward step, extending her hand. "Won't you sit down? It's quite a drive out from town; do make yourself comfortable." And she led her to a chair.

Mrs. Walsh was vastly relieved by her cordiality. She mutely looked her gratitude. After a moment's silence she said: "I should hardly have dared to come to you, Mrs. Landray, without Mr. Benson had urged it. I can't tell you what cause I have to be grateful to him, he has been so kind."

"It was his place to be kind," said Virginia; and something told her visitor that Mrs. Landray did not like Mr. Benson. This caused her an instant's surprise.

"You know I am an utter stranger here, Mrs. Landray; my husband came West to fill a position as instructor in Doctor Long's Academy." The connection had evidently seemed a notable one to the young wife, for she referred it it with manifest pride.

"I think," said Mrs. Landray shortly, "it was very foolish of him to leave you, and sacrifice such a desirable position."

"I thought so, too," agreed the young wife, "but he hopes for such great things from this journey to California. His letters are so brave and full of courage. I am trying to share in all he feels. It was not easy for him to go; I am sure this separation is quite as hard for him to bear as it is for me."

"But what about you, my dear?" said Virginia. "The fortune he is to make is all in the future. What about the present?"

"Ah, that is very serious," and her face clouded with doubt. "I shall not know where to write him until after he reaches California; and even then I must wait weeks and months for his answer telling me what to do, and all that while I must live—but how?"

"Then you are quite without means?" said Virginia gravely.

"Yes, but when Jasper left, there was a small sum of money which he had placed with his brother in New York when he came to Benson. He had arranged, as he thought, that this money was to be sent to me, and I was to place it in Mr. Benson's hands for safe keeping, who was to let me have it as I needed it; but now Jasper's brother writes that the business in which the money was invested has been a failure, and that it is lost; that there is no hope of recovering any part of it."

"Has he made no effort to recover it?" asked Virginia frowning. It was a matter of no small regret to her that this brother had been permitted to shirk his responsibilities. She felt that something should be done to him.

"Mr. Benson has written him, and I, of course; but all he will say is that his business is a failure, and that he has been able to save nothing from the wreck. It is useless to look to him for help; I must do for myself."

"And what can you do?" asked Virginia.

"I might become a seamstress, or a nurse, or a companion."

Virginia shook her head. "You are not strong enough to be a nurse, and I know of no one who wants a companion; as for sewing, it is illy-paid work at best; you could scarcely make a living at that. Have you no one—in the East, I mean, who might be willing to help you until your husband can provide for you himself?"

"My aunt, with whom I lived as a child, has died since my marriage, and Jasper only has this brother, and he is on the point of leaving for California himself."

"I should like to see him," said Virginia. Mrs. Walsh looked at her in some surprise. "I would give him a piece of my mind." Virginia added, for her fuller enlightenment.

"He is not very reliable, I fear," admitted Mrs. Walsh.

"So I should suppose," said Virginia drily

"Dr. Long would have given me a position in his academy to teach the very small children, but his daughter will do that so really he can do nothing for me. I think he was rather put out at my husband's leaving so suddenly. Of course, I went to him first. I have been very wretched and lonely—" and her lips quivered pathetically.

"My dear," said Virginia with sudden animation, "you shall stay here with me until you hear from your husband!"

"Oh, Mrs. Landray!"

"I am lonely, too. It may be that we can cheer each other up. At any rate you shall remain with me until your husband knows of your need and provides for you. It will not be for long, and I shall be most happy to serve you in this way."

"But I can't be a dependent—that of all things—"

"But you won't be. No, I won't listen to your objections. I know Stephen would expect me to do this."

Just then, through the open window, she saw Benson crossing the yard from the mill. She turned toward the door.

"Here comes Mr. Benson. I will see him and tell him it is all arranged."

She found the lawyer with one foot on the porch steps, hesitating as to whether or not he should enter the house.

"Mr. Benson," she said in her clear, calm voice, "Mrs. Walsh will stay with me. May I ask you to see that her

trunk is sent out from the town in the morning? Though, perhaps, I'd better send Sam in for it, so I need not trouble you.”

“It will be no trouble in the world,” he made haste to assure her. “Mrs. Landray, this is most kind of you, most generous; I am more than grateful,” and his boyish face flushed with real feeling. Virginia's face, however, remained wholly impassive. She did not ask him into the house, but stood above him on the top step, statuesque and beautiful, her tall figure sharply outlined against the dark green of the woodbine and wisteria that rioted over the porch. Benson stole a glance at her. His face was still radiant. This was what he had secretly expected of her, and his own generous enthusiasm leaped up to touch her's; but it met with no response.

“She doesn't want praise,” he thought. “She is satisfied to be kind and generous.” He hesitated irresolutely, but there was no invitation in her manner, and she did not speak. It occurred to him that she might be waiting for him to go, and his face burnt again.

“I will drive out and see Mrs. Walsh in a day or so if I may.”

“Certainly,” said Virginia. “Perhaps you will see her before you go?”

“You will say good-bye to her for me, please. I'll not go in.” He half hoped she would insist; but her attitude was one of waiting. He turned slowly toward his horse.

“If there is anything I can do, Mrs. Landray, I trust you will not hesitate to command me,” and he took his leave in some haste; more haste, it occurred to him afterward, than the occasion warranted. .

As Virginia turned back into the hall, Mrs. Walsh met her. “Oh, has he gone?” she said. “I so wanted to thank him.” and her voice was full of regret. “What will he think of me, after all he has done! Can't I run after him?”

“It is too late now, I fear, but he will be here again and then you will have your opportunity.” Then her glance softened. “You are such a child,” she said, extending her hand with a cordial gesture. “What is your name?”

“Jane,” answered the other, smiling happily and forgetting all about Benson; and then she slipped her arms about Virginia, and there was a moment given up to hushed confidences on the part of the young wife in the darkened hall. At last Virginia cried: “Oh, my dear, how could he leave you when he knew that?” and her great eyes, now all softness and tenderness, swam with pity. “How could he?” she repeated.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE deserter squatted on his haunches and spat reflectively at the fire; his mild blue eyes, large and oxlike, gazed into the dancing flames, with an expression of placid content. Stephen and Bushrod lay on their blankets, weary from the day's travel. Walsh was playing cards with the two teamsters. Rogers leaned against the wheel of one of the wagons, with Benny asleep in the shadow at his side.

The deserter nodded silently to each in turn and they as silently nodded back to him. He glanced from the group he had joined to the group he had just left, and a matter of fifty feet separated the two. The burly half-breeds sat motionless and erect in the circle of light cast by their camp-fire, their blankets drawn about their shoulders. The fur trader was deep in earnest conversation with them and the deserter, noting this, his face took on a curious, puzzled expression; then, with a lingering glance in Basil's direction, he turned to Stephen. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

“He seems to find plenty to say when I ain't about. Mr. Landray, white's no name for the way you've treated me. I reckon I'd be mighty lonely if I'd to mess steady with them.” He spoke gratefully in a slow, soft voice; he put up his hands and shielded his face from the campfire's light and heat. “A week or so and I'll be doing my best to get friendly with father; but I reckon fatted calf won't form no part of the first meal I set down to with him,” and a shrewd, sly, smile curled his lips.

Ten days had elapsed since the complete disruption of the party, when Basil had cast his lot wholly with the half-breeds. His intercourse with his cousins was now limited to the fewest possible words. Not so the late member of the Mounted Rifles. Had he been an ordinary ruffian, they would have regretted the evident preference he had displayed from the very first for their society; but clearly he was not an ordinary ruffian. He appeared a frank, simple soul; and even his morality, which was more than doubtful, seemed entirely a matter of accident, and something for which he could not be held responsible. He came and went freely between the two camps; he treated all with the same gentle affection; he overflowed with a graceful considerate charity of deeds; and he was helpful, not alone in deeds, but words of the most winning friendliness accompanied all his acts.

“We can't be far from Green River,” he suggested tentatively.

“Something less than forty miles, I should say,” Stephen answered.

Raymond pondered this in silence but when he spoke again, he had apparently lost all interest concerning their nearness to the river. “I've heard father say when Brigham Young fetched the saints out here, he'd promised 'em a land leaking with milk and honey; the land about Salt Lake looks as if it'll be a right smart while before it does any leaking. The trouble with this blame country is there's too much of it. I reckon it'll take a thousand years to fill her up.” he speculated idly.

“Was your father always a Mormon?” Stephen asked.

“He went into the business about as early as any of 'em, Mr. Landray. He's always had a gift for religion.

He's tried 'em all. He was a Methodist to begin with, but I've heard him say he mighty early got discouraged with that as a means of grace; then he took up with the Millerites, had his robes ready and climbed up on the housetop to get his start for the kingdom come. You've heard of the Millerites, I reckon.”

“Oh, yes,” Stephen said; he added, “Religion doesn't seem to have occupied your thoughts to any extent. I should have imagined, with such an example before you—”

“Me? Oh, no; I don't see no reason for worry. I figure it out this way; I always been lucky, and I sort of look for some one to snake me in and say: 'Why, how are you, Raymond? I'm mighty surprised to see you here.'.rdquo;

“They'll hardly say less than that,” observed Stephen drily.

The deserter meditated in silence for a moment, and when he spoke again it was with an air of amiable tolerance.

“Yes, sir, father was so certain sure he'd never have any more use for it, that he gave away as good a farm as ever lay out doors. He wanted to feel that nothing was holding him to earth.”

“Meaning no offence to you, he was a pretty considerable fool to do that,” said Rogers, who had been listening to the conversation, and who now joined in it.

“No, you can't quite say that, for he deeded it to mother; he know'd he'd be pretty bad off if the world didn't bust according to prophecy, and he wanted to keep the property in the family; though I've heard him say he was that sincere he'd made up his mind that just him and a few of his friends was to be saved; he looked for all the rest to get scorched up bad; but he was uncertain about having the date of the bust up just right, and if it went over another season he thought he'd like to skin the farm for one more corn crop. He's always been powerful forehanded in them ways. What was this millennium anyhow, that old Bill Miller had him so stirred up over?”

“I don't know quite the sort of a millennium that your father was expecting,” said Stephen, “but I believe the millennium is supposed to mean a period which is to last a thousand years, when the world will be free of sin and death.”

“No deserting—no horse-stealing,” said Bushrod.

“You got me there!” said Raymond pleasantly. “So that's the millennium; it's a right pretty idea, ain't it? But tedious I should reckon.”

“Is your father satisfied with Mormonism?” asked Stephen.

“Yes, sir, and it's a pretty fair sort of a religion.”

“How about Brigham Young?” said Stephen.

“Oh, they're thick as thieves. Brigham's right smart of a schemer, too,” with gentle approval. “There's no foolishness about him—none whatever.”

“I suppose you are acquainted with Young, too?” said Stephen.

“Me? Oh, yes. I tell you, Mr. Landray, the valley's no healthy place unless you keep on the right side of him. I've heard father say that even after he'd been made elder, he kicked over the traces, and they had to baptise him all over a few times, to give him a fresh start. I reckon they didn't keep him in long enough 'airy time, if I'd been doing the job I'd left him in over night.”

While he talked his glance had been continually straying in the direction of the fur trader. The latter's apparently earnest conversation with his companions had come to an end, and the two halfbreeds had stretched themselves on the ground, but Basil still sat beside the camp-fire, his pipe between his teeth, moody and solitary.

The deserter hitched a little nearer Stephen, and dropped his voice to a low whisper.

“I'd like mighty well to tie up with you gentlemen, and give Basil yonder the slip. It was downright underhand of him to run me and the breeds in on you the way he done; I was real distressed, honest I was. It'd about serve him right if you helped me cut loose; we could wait until we got to the valley, and then if you'd just furnish me with a gun—” He looked wistfully at the row of rifles that leaned against the wagon-bed, each within easy reach of its owner's hand “and if there was any shooting to be done—him, I mean—I'd do it. Of course, his being kin to you, you wouldn't just want to do that yourselves. I'd want to feel though, that you'd take care of the half-breeds until I done for Basil. You never can trust a half-breed anyhow.”

“You're not in earnest, Raymond; you're surely not serious?” cried Stephen, drawing away from him in disgust and horror. The deserter gave him a swift, searching glance, then he laughed easily.

“Well, no, I ain't. I was joking—just joking.”

“It was a poor joke,” said Stephen sternly.

Raymond came slowly to his feet. “Well,” said he, “I'll turn in. You couldn't oblige me with the loan of a rifle, if I made up my mind to strike off for Fort Bridger?”

“No, we have no guns to spare,” said Stephen shortly.

A look of keen disappointment appeared on the deserter's face, but it swiftly passed and left him smiling and ingenuous.

“Good-night,” he said.

The camp-fire died down until nothing remained of it but a mass of glowing embers. The teamsters and Walsh had put away their cards and wrapped themselves in their blankets; Bushrod and Rogers had followed their example; their heavy breathing told that they already slept. The night wind that threshed the wagon canvases blew raw and cold. Stephen took up his rifle and made the circuit of the wagons, looking closely to the mules and horses, for the first watch was his.

His mind reverted more than once to the questionable wit of Raymond's joke, and it occurred to him as a thing to be steadily borne in mind that the Benson and California Mining and Trading Company had chosen illy who should be its friends. It would be a matter for deep thankfulness when they should reach Salt Lake, and could forever dispense with Basil, the half-breeds, and the too-smiling Raymond, whose perverted sense

of humour permitted him to jestingly propose a murder.

The camp was astir at the first break of day. The night wind had blown itself out, and the sombre plains were heavy with silence. One by one the gold-seekers shook themselves out of their blankets, and without waste of words began their preparation for the day's journey.

Rogers drove the mules to water at a muddy hole a quarter of a mile from camp and beyond a slight ridge. He had just disappeared beyond this ridge, when the half-breed, Louis, took two of the horses, and started after him on the same errand. A moment later Basil and Baptiste mounted their's and rode out from camp. Raymond lounged across to his friends.

“Basil says you can start on if you like; he's gone to see if he can't knock over a buffalo cow, we're about out of meat,” he explained, and then, as if in verification of his words, they heard the sharp report of a rifle. “I reckon they've found what they're looking for,” said Raymond.

“I thought the shot sounded down by the water-hole,” said Bushrod.

“Yes, they were going around that way on account of their horses. Here, Mr. Landray, let me give you a hand with them blankets.” For Bushrod was making a roll of the bedding, preparatory to stowing it away in one of the wagons; the others were busy wedging up a shrunken wheel.

An instant later Rogers appeared on the ridge, but without the mules; he came running toward them, with his long rifle held in the crook of his arm.

“I've done it!” he cried hoarsely. “I've done it!” he repeated, when he reached them.

There was silence for a moment. No man spoke, for each feared to ask him what it was that he had done.

“I tell you I've done it, are you dumb?” he cried in wild and agonized appeal, and he looked from one to the other of his friends.

“What have you done?” Stephen asked.

“I've killed him.”

“You've killed whom?”

“Yonder half-breed. Damn his soul, he'll never get in a white man's way again—he'll keep his place!”

“You've murdered him, you mean?” Stephen spoke in a shocked whisper.

“It wa'n'. murder, Landray, I swear to God it wa'n'.! Who says murder to me, I've always been a fair man—who says murder to me?” and his wild, bloodshot eyes searched the circle of white faces.

“He'd a done for me if I hadn't shot him. He came down to the hole with his two horses; I was ahead of him, but he yelled to me to get out of his way; and when I told him he'd have to wait until I'd watered my stock, he tried to ride me down. I didn't lift a hand until then.”

Raymond was the first to speak.

“I wonder if that don't save me a hundred and a quarter; they certainly ain't entitled to his share, now are they?” But if they heard him, no one replied to the deserter, who continued to regard Rogers with an envious admiration. “The eternally condemned bag of bones, where'd he get the heart for it?” he muttered.

And then a savage cry came from the direction of the water-hole, telling that the body had been found by Basil and Baptiste. Stephen turned to Rogers.

“Get in one of the wagons, and lie still—take Benny with you—and, no matter what happens, stay there!” to the others he added: “Mind, right or wrong, we are not going to surrender him to them. That would but make a bad matter worse.”

“What's your notion, Steve?” asked Bushrod briskly. “Hadn't we better look sharp for the half-breed?”

“Yes, but don't be hasty. I'll attend to Basil.”

“Say, Mr. Landray, if you'll give me a gun I'll make the shot for you.” said the deserter officiously. He was not regarded, but he continued to loudly lament that he was unarmed.

Rogers had scarcely disappeared in one of the wagons when Basil and Baptiste galloped into camp; they flung themselves from their horses and confronted the little group about Stephen.

“Where is he?” Basil shouted, seizing the latter by the arm. “Where's Rogers? You're no kin to me unless you give him up to us.”

“Basil,” said Stephen quietly, falling back a step and freeing himself from the other's clutch, “it was the result of a quarrel, the fight was a fair one.”

“It's a lie—it was murder!” the fur trader cried hoarsely. “Where is he?” and he glared about him.

“Where you shan't touch him.”

“Shan't?” he raged, his black beard bristling.

“No.”

“Where've you hidden him?”

“Never mind. Where you can't find him?”

“Do you make this you're affair?”

“I won't say that, but it was self-defence. If he hadn't shot the Indian, the Indian would probably have shot him.”

“Who says so? Did you see the fight? Fight?” he laughed aloud. “Fight? It was murder, cowardly murder!”

“No, we didn't see the fight,” Stephen answered calmly.

“Oh, you take his word, do you? Well, I don't,” and he started toward the wagons. “He's in there, and by God, I'll have him out, and Baptiste here shall settle with him!”

“Dunlevy! Walsh!” called Stephen sharply.

The two men stepped in front of the fur trader.

“Basil,” said Stephen, “we'll inquire into this when we're all cooler.”

"We'll settle it now!" swore Basil, with a great oath.

"If he's done wrong he shall be punished; but not by you, not by us; the law—"

"Damn the law! There's only one law for the plains."

"We'll hand him over to the commandant of the first military post."

Rogers, who heard every word that was said where he lay in the bed of one of the wagons, with a barricade of boxes about him, smiled grimly at this.

"No they won't, son," he whispered to the boy. "You and me will see California for all of them."

He reached up over his barricade, and with his hunting-knife cut a slit in the wagon's canvas cover. The slit was just large enough to accommodate the muzzle of his rifle.

But now Basil withdrew to his own camp, taking with him the halfbreed and the deserter. The latter went with him reluctantly enough, for he knew the fur trader was in no mood to tamper with.

The five men about the wagons waited, never relaxing their vigilance. They expected something would be done or attempted, they scarcely knew what. They could hear nothing of what passed between Basil and his two companions, but they saw that he was talking earnestly with Raymond. Twice the deserter turned and looked toward them, finally he appeared to give a satisfactory answer to what Basil had been saying, and the conference came to an end; they heard the echo of his light laugh. He turned from Basil and the half-breed and approached Stephen, whom he seemed to regard with a quickened interest, but the friendly smile never left his selfish, good-natured face.

"Well, good-bye," he said, and extended his hand. "I reckon I'll have to go with him yonder."

"Are you willing to go with him?" Stephen asked.

"Oh, yes," smiling evasively. "Yes, I'm plenty willing to go with him," he said.

"Because if you have any fears for your safety—"

"No, I'm worth a heap more to him alive than I would be dead," responded the deserter with an air of complacent conviction. He added pleasantly. "I reckon, though, it's right handsome of you to want to look out for me, and me a stranger." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "He'll calm down some; give him time. I allow he feels Baptiste is looking to him to take on like hell, but once he cuts loose from you gentlemen you needn't bother about him; he'll be mainly interested in getting on to California. Now if you keep on about due west you'll strike Green River sometime to-morrow; after you ford it, your trail leads a little south of west to the Bear." He looked hard at Stephen.

"Thank you," said the latter.

"Beyond the Bear you shouldn't have any trouble. You'll strike the Weber next, and you can just follow it into the valley, crossing Kamas Prairie. I know all that country—and don't worry none about him, he ain't hunting trouble. Well, good-bye, and good luck."

He rejoined Basil and Baptiste.

"Why did he tell us that?" asked Bushrod suspiciously.

"Just his good-nature," said Stephen indifferently, and thought no more of the deserter's advice until it became necessary to follow it.

The three men mounted their horses, and the fur trader again approached his cousins.

"Once more, will you give him up?" he asked.

But no one answered him.

"You won't give him up, eh? Well, look out," and he shook his fist at them. "Look out, for I'll even this before I'm done with you."

They heard his threat in silence, then seeing he was not to be answered, he wheeled about, and, followed by the half-breed and Raymond, crossed the ridge at a gallop. They stopped at the water-hole just long enough to lash the dead man to his saddle.

But Raymond, the deserter, rode away rejoicing in the possession of Louis's rifle which Basil had given him. When they had disappeared from sight, Stephen said to Bingham and Dunlevy: "Go down and look up the stock; if you find it's strayed from the water-hole, come back and we'll all turn out after it."

Then, followed by Bushrod, he went to the wagons and called to Rogers. "They've gone. You've nothing to fear," he said. The Californian crawled stiffly from his place of concealment. His friends were silent as he emerged from the wagon, against which he leaned for support.

"God knows it was a fair fight, Landray," he said tremulously, for now, that the sustaining excitement was past, he was like one shaken with the ague. His face was drawn and ghastly, and his dark eyes burnt with an unearthly light. "He'd a done for me if I hadn't shot him. It was him or me; but it was mighty fair of you to stand by me."

"We've stood by you, but I'm not satisfied, Rogers," said Stephen moodily. "It's true he was an Indian, and it may be true, as you say, that you did the shooting in self-defence; I hope it was; but you've had bad blood for them from the start."

"Bad blood! Yes, curse them—and curse me! for I've lived and camped with them for days and nights," cried Rogers fiercely, glaring at Stephen. "If I'd been the man I was once I'd a fetched it to an issue long ago. See—" he held out a shaking hand, "You might think from that, he was the first. The heart's gone out of me with this cough that's tearing me asunder. It was the Indians killed my wife; I reckon if you stood in my place now you'd wonder why the hell we was arguing whether I shot yonder varment in fair fight or not: She'd gone to the corral—I'm telling you how my wife died—when I heard her cry out, and I ran to the ranch door. It wa'n'. two hundred yards to the coral, but it might as well been miles and she'd been no worse off; for it was surrounded; and when she ran shrieking through the bars, trying with all the strength God Almighty had given her, to make the house, they closed in about her and I saw one of them drive his axe into her brain." The sweat stood in great beads on his brow. "I saw I was too late to help her, and I went back into the house and fastened the door, I still had him to think of—" pointing to the child. There was a long pause. Rogers

gulped down something that rose in his throat, and went on: “Well, when the settlers who'd been hot on their trail ever since they broke loose on the settlement, come in and drove them off, and pulled Benny here and me out of the burning ranch house, they laid out ten of the red brutes. I'd let the daylight through.” He threw up his head defiantly. “What the hell do you suppose I care for one greasy half-breed!” and he clutched the stock of his gun with trembling fingers. “For God's sake,” he moaned, “Let's be moving. It was only a half-breed, what the hell's use quarrelling about him. I've sent him where he'll do no more harm.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEY saw no more of Basil Landray, Baptiste, and the too-smiling Raymond, which caused them some surprise at first; for the fur trader's sinister threat at parting had not sounded like an empty menace; yet when a week elapsed they decided that he had spoken rather for the half-breed than to them.

“What can they do?” said Bushrod contemptuously. “I've been looking for them to take pot shots at some of us; but after all that would be a risky business.”

“I wish,” said Stephen, “that we might find another way into Salt Lake; I don't like this thing of keeping on after them.”

“No,” said Rogers slowly, as though he were himself reluctantly abandoning some such idea. “No, our best chance is to keep on as we are going until we strike the head waters of the Weber. But look here, Mr. Landray, I didn't count on seeing the last of them so soon. Do you reckon they've hatched some plan to hold us up there in the valley?”

“How could they?” Stephen demanded. “You mean you think they may try to hold us for the murder,” he added.

“Mr. Landry, it wa'n'. no murder,” said Rogers, deeply offended at his unfortunate choice of words. “I wouldn't ask to die no fairer than he done.”

“I didn't mean to say that, Rogers,” said Stephen hastily.

“No, but you think of it as that,” retorted Rogers bitterly. “There's no use of our quarrelling about it, Rogers,” said Stephen. “You settled with him in your own fashion.”

“I never knowed of a case,” said Rogers moodily, “but I've heard of a white man being tried for killing a redskin; and the one I shot was a half-breed, and so some sort white just as he was some sort red.”

“I hadn't thought of that,” said Stephen.

“Well,” observed Rogers, “three or four days now will bring us into the valley. Mr. Landray, that's one redskin I'm mighty sorry I put out of business; if I'd been at the same pains to stave off the trouble I was to fetch it to a head, or if I'd sort of nursed it along until we got to the other side of this two-wife country, it might have saved us a heap of bother.”

Early the following morning Rogers was roused by Stephen, and as he came to consciousness he felt Stephen's hand on his shoulder.

“Turn out, Rogers,” said Landray. “One of the mules has broken its rope and strayed.”

The Californian crawled sleepily from among his blankets.

“What do you say—the mules—”

“The piebald's slipped her picket rope.”

“Dam her pepper and salt hide anyhow!” said Rogers, now wide awake. “I bet I rope her to-night so she don't get loose.”

“She can't have gone far for she was here when Bingham relieved me three hours after midnight.”

It was then just dawn.

“Where are the others?” asked Rogers, glancing about.

“They have gone down into the valley; suppose you take the back track up the pass while I get breakfast. Will you ride?”

“No, it ain't likely she's strayed far.”

He went back down the pass narrowly scanning the ground for the trail of the straying animal. A walk of a mile brought him to a point where a small canyon led off from the pass; a high separating wedge-shaped ridge lay between the two defiles, and it occurred to him that if he climbed to the summit of this ridge he would command a view of the pass proper as well as of the smaller canyon. He made the ascent with some difficulty and gaining the top of the ridge carefully scanned the pass, down which he could look for a mile or more; then he turned and found that he was overlooking a small valley, which but for the canyon would have been completely enclosed by a low range of hills, beyond which but at some distance rose the grey flanks of the mountains.

He did not see the lost mule, but he did see something that caused him an exclamation of surprise. Across the valley, and just rising above the low hill, what looked to be a small blue cloud was ascending lazily in the clear air. It was smoke; smoke from some camp-fire; and the camp-fire probably that of some roving band of Indians.

He went down the ridge a matter of half a mile, and entered a thick growth of service berry, aspin, and willows; this was so dense that he no longer saw the hill opposite and toward which he was bending his steps.

He worked his way well into the thicket and had gained the centre of the narrow bottom, when he suddenly became aware that a man or some animal was crashing through the bush ahead of him which not only covered the bottom but clothed the base of the hill as well. Man or beast, the disturber of that solitude was coming forward rapidly and apparently with no attempt at concealment, for there was a continual snapping of branches.

Rogers paused; he could see nothing though the sounds drew nearer each moment. He cautiously forced his way yet deeper into the thicket, his gun cocked and swung forward ready for immediate use. Then suddenly he came out upon an open piece of ground, and found himself looking squarely into the face of the smiling Raymond. But the deserter was not smiling now. With a startled cry he had swung up his rifle and presented its muzzle at Rogers's breast; yet quick as he was, the Californian had been equally prompt, his long rifle was levelled, too, and his forefinger rested lightly on the trigger. There was this difference, however, the hammer of the deserter's gun still covered the cap. It forever settled a most important question.

“Drop it!” said Rogers quietly between his teeth; and Raymond, whose face was grey and drawn, and whose eyes never left the Californian's eyes, instantly opened his hands and the gun dropped at his feet. By a quick movement Rogers kicked it to one side. There was a long moment while the two men, breathing hard, glared at each other. It was the deserter who spoke first.

“Why, Mr. Rogers,” he said in a shaken whisper, “I wa'n'. counting on seeing you.”

“I bet you wa'n'.,” said Rogers briefly, but with grim sarcasm; and moving forward a step he kicked Raymond's rifle yet further into the brush.

There ensued an ominous silence. A tortured sickly smile seemed to snatch at the corners of the deserter's mouth, but it was past his power to fix it there; it left him loose-lipped, gaping helplessly down the muzzle of Rogers's long rifle. He was struggling with a terrible fear that the Californian might make some sudden and deadly use of his weapon. He remembered how they had found the half-breed with the single round hole in his hunting-shirt attesting to the excellence of his slayer's markmanship.

“Why don't you shoot?” he cried at last in agony.

“Hold your jaw!” said Rogers in a savage whisper.

“If you're going to shoot, why don't you?” the deserter demanded with hoarse, dry-throated rage.

“I reckon that's something I'll take my time to,” said Rogers calmly. “Maybe I'll shoot and maybe I won't. I'm thinking about it—hard. Fall back a step, I got no hankering for your company. There, that'll do, and if you so much as raise your voice again—” he did not finish the sentence, but tapped the stock of his rifle with sinister significance. There was another pause and then Rogers said more mildly, “I reckon you can tell me how you happen to be here.”

Raymond took grace of his altered tone; with a final desperate twitching of the lips the smile fixed itself at the corners of his mouth. “You pretty nearly took my breath away,” he faltered.

“You're right there, I did,” said Rogers with sudden ferocity.

Raymond smiled vaguely. To the very marrow of his bones he feared this gaunt captor of his.

“Quick now,” said Rogers sternly, “what are you doing here?”

“Well, you see I've give Basil the slip—”

“That's a lie,” retorted Rogers. “Whose smoke is that off yonder back of you?”

“I reckon you mean my camp-fire.”

“That's another lie. Some one's been throwing on wood, green wood, since we been standing here,” said Rogers with an ugly grin. “Look and see—the smoke'll tell you that as plain as it tells me.”

“You're plumb suspicious, Mr. Rogers, it's my camp; ain't I always been a friend?”

“You ain't friend to no man, unless it be to yourself, that's my idea of you,” said Rogers.

“It's my camp-fire I tell you—”

“Yes, and Basil's there, and the half-breed's there,” he took his eyes off Raymond's face, and for the first time noticed that he had exchanged his ragged uniform for an excellent suit of grey homespun. “You've crossed the range and been down into the valley. Now what are you doing here on the back track when you were all so keen for trying your luck in California?”

“Well,” said the deserter with a quick shift of ground, “maybe Basil is there, and maybe the half-breed is there; what does it signify?”

“Why are you following us?”

But at this Raymond shook his head vehemently. “Following you—and why'd we be following you? I'll tell you the truth, fact is, sometimes it gravels me to tell the truth; but with a friend—we're taking a party of Saints back to the Missouri. There was money in the job, and darn California anyhow; it's a long way off, and they say in the valley the bottom's dropped clean out of this here gold business. It's all rank foolishness, they are beginning to come back, and the Saints are feeding them and helping them on toward the States; we mighty soon got shut of that notion when we'd seen and talked with a few of them that'd crossed to the Coast; and when Young offered to hire us to take a score of his missionaries to the Missouri we jumped at the chance.”

“You daren't go near Fort Laramie,” said Rogers, but his theories as to what had brought Raymond there had been rather shaken by the excellent account he was now giving of himself.

“I wa'n'. aware I said I was going near the fort. No, sir, we're going out the way we come in. We allow to hit the trail a hundred miles the other side of old Laramie.”

Rogers looked at him doubtfully, yet he was almost inclined to believe that it was as he said, that the first rush of emigration might have encountered a few discouraged ones who had gone into California the preceding fall, and who having been unfortunate were making the best of their way back to the States—this might even have resulted in a stampede among the emigrants. He recalled how the fear of the cholera had turned back thousands before a quarter of their journey had been completed.

With his shifty eyes narrowed to a slit, the deserter watched the Californian. He could see something of what was passing in his mind and he could guess the rest; yet when he spoke again he said, “I reckon you don't take any great stock in what I'm telling you; come up to the top of yonder ridge and you can see our camp, and that it's exactly as I say.”

This was the very thing Rogers had resolved on doing.

“I'm going with you all right, but look here, if you so much as make a sign or a sound, to let 'em know we're close at hand, I'm going to blow the top of your head off. Here, walk before me, and heed every word I say. If I find you're telling me the truth about its being a party of Mormon missionaries, I'll bring you back here and turn you loose. We'll leave your gun here.”

“That's fair enough,” said Raymond genially. “Well I certainly am proud to see you, though I took you for a redskin first off; lucky you spoke—”

“I allow it was a sight luckier for me I got you covered first,” said Rogers sourly. “Go ahead now, and mind you, no noise.”

It was evident, however, that the deserter felt he had quite as much at stake as Rogers himself, for he advanced cautiously through the thicket that clothed the base of the hill. Rogers followed him with his rifle held ready for instant use, but no thought was further from Raymond's mind than betrayal. At first he had felt the desperate need of some explanation, that would account for his presence there; and the story he had finally told had seemed to him to cover the case and to leave no reasonable room for doubt in Rogers's mind.

As they neared the top of the ridge he threw himself flat on his stomach and wormed his way up toward its broken crest, and Rogers keeping close at his heels followed his example. He gained the crest, and peering about the base of a stunted pine, found that he was looking down into a snug pocket of the hills, and so close to the camp that he might have tossed his cap into it, though it lay far below him. He counted eighteen or twenty picketed horses; a number of men were moving about, and a glance told him they were white men. He looked long and earnestly, and then turned to Raymond with a frankly puzzled expression. The deserter was smiling and triumphant.

“Want I should take you into camp?” he asked in an eager whisper, but Rogers shook his head; he was not convinced, yet why and what he doubted was more than he could have told.

“We'll go back,” he said at last. “Go first;” and they descended the ridge in silence. Rogers was vainly seeking to fit some explanations to the mystery, beyond Raymond's words. When they reached the scene of their original encounter, he paused for an instant.

“I reckon you'll have to go on with me for a little spell before I turn you loose,” he said. “No, you can come back here and get your gun when I'm through with you,” and he laughed shortly.

“Oh, all right,” said Raymond cheerfully. “It's just as you say.”

“You bet it's as I say,” and he motioned the deserter to precede him again.

They crossed the ridge that lay between them and the pass.

“I reckon this'll do,” said Rogers. “I sha'n'. want you to go any further. Look here, the Landrays treated you all right.”

“They did indeed,” said Raymond gratefully.

“Well, what are those men yonder in camp for?”

“I just got through telling you that, Mr. Rogers,” responded Raymond with an injured air. “The outfit's bound for the States. Old Brigham reckons you godless cusses back East need some converting; that's what he's up to, and I'm helping rush 'em to the river.”

“I'm pretty certain you're lying whatever you say,” observed Rogers.

“Well, sir, I've fooled people telling them the truth,” retorted Raymond. “But that was their own fault.”

“I reckon maybe that's so,” said Rogers.

“This is a mighty one-sided conversation anyway you look at it,” said the deserter pleasantly, and smiling without offence. “No, sir, I'm telling you God Almighty's truth, they are Mormon missionaries going back to the States.”

“Well, whatever they are, I sha'n'. want you any more; you can travel back to 'em as fast as you like; but look here, you see that none of them don't stray in the direction I'm going.” And the Californian moved off up the pass.

“Good luck, Mr. Rogers!” the deserter called after him, and then he began leisurely to climb the ridge.

When Rogers reached the camp he saw that the mule had been found and that the teams were made up and ready to start.

“What's kept you so long?” asked Stephen.

“I was following what I took to be old piebald's trail,” answered Rogers.

At first he had been undecided as to whether or not he should tell the others of his encounter with Raymond; but he had finally determined to say nothing of this meeting. Silent and preoccupied he took his place in one of the wagons, seeking some excuse for Raymond's presence so close at hand, beyond that which the deserter had himself given.

Their trail first led across a narrow valley, and then they entered the pass again, which with each slow mile mounted to a higher altitude; but by the middle of the morning it seemed to have reached its greatest elevation, for on beyond them it wound down and down, opening at last into a wide level valley lying in a vast amphitheatre of hills and mountains.

“Mr. Landray, I don't know but I'd like to ride your horse for a spell,” said Rogers.

“You'll find it much cooler in the wagon,” said Stephen.

“It is hot,” agreed the Californian, wiping the sweat from his face.

Nevertheless he swung himself into the saddle, and fell in at the rear of the wagons; and then he increased

the distance that separated him from the train, from a few yards to almost half a mile, keeping his horse at the slowest walk. Once or twice in the last hour before their brief noon halt, he thought he heard the distant clatter of hoofs in the pass back of him, but he dismissed this as a mere nervous fancy. A little after midday they entered the valley. For a matter of two miles they toiled forward over a perfectly level plain, barren and bare of all useful vegetation.

Stephen who was in the first wagon reined in his mules to say, “We'll let our teams have a few minutes rest.”

“I'd push ahead, Mr. Landray; I wouldn't waste no time here,” said Rogers anxiously, as he rode up.

“In just a moment, Rogers—hullo! what's that?”

He was looking toward the point where they had entered the valley. Rogers turned quickly and saw that a number of small black objects were emerging from the pass; distant as they were, all knew they were mounted men.

“What do you make them out to be?” Stephen asked.

“I reckon I don't know and I reckon I don't care. Do you see that bit of a hill ahead of us? There's water and grass somewhere near there; push on for that.”

He fell in at the rear of the last wagon, and the look of indifference his face had worn a moment before vanished the instant he was alone. He rode in silence for perhaps five minutes with his face turned toward the black dots. He never once took his eyes from them.

“Faster!” he called. “Push the mules!”

Now the black objects had become individual, separate; they were men who rode in open order, and as they rode they spread out in a half-circle that swept momentarily nearer the train. Presently he caught the hoof beats of the swiftly galloping horses, now loud, now scarcely audible in the sultry stillness; and then it became a steady beat like the rattle of hail on frozen ground; the beat and throb of his own pulse took up and magnified the rhythm until his temples ached with the sound.

“Faster!” he called again. “Faster yet! Give them the rawhide!”

But his companions knew now why he urged greater speed; and the long lashes of their whips fell again and again on the backs of the straining mules.

“We must make that hill—don't let them cut us off from it!” cried Rogers, as he reined in his horse and faced about; he dropped the butt of his rifle to his shoulder and sent a bullet in the direction of their pursuers.

As the first shot vibrated sharply across the plains the horsemen were seen to draw rein, but this was only for a brief instant, and then the race for the hill was begun afresh, and with renewed energy. The huge wagons lurched to and fro, tossed like ships in a seaway, the mules at a gallop; while Rogers, a spectral figure, his long hair flying in the wind, hung in the rear of the train, or rode back and forth menacing their pursuers.

“Keep off!” he called, and sent a second messenger in the direction of the horsemen; this at closer range than the first seemed to find a mark, for one was seen to sway in his saddle, and there was a momentary pause in their onward rush as his companions gathered about the wounded man.

“I can shoot yet!” said Rogers with grim joy, He loaded his rifle again with a deliberation and care no peril could shake, then he felt his horse's forefeet strike rising ground, and glanced about; he had reached the base of the hill, he turned again in the saddle, fired, and without waiting to see the effect of his shot, drove his spurs into his horse's flank and fled forward after the wagons.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE wagons were arranged in a triangle on the hill, and their wheels chained together. Into this enclosure the mules were hastily driven and secured. While Bushrod, assisted by the teamsters and Walsh, was busy preparing this defence, Stephen and Rogers stood ready to repel any advance on the part of the horsemen; but having failed to cut the train off on the open plain they circled once or twice about the base of the hill, taking care, however, to keep well out of gun-shot range; then they separated into two bands, one of which rode rapidly off toward the west, while the other remained in the vicinity of the hill, withdrawing after a little time to a distance of perhaps half a mile.

Stephen and Rogers had watched their movements closely and in silence; now Landray turned to the Californian: “What does that mean?” he asked.

Rogers shook his head. He looked at Stephen as if he expected him to say something more, but evidently no suspicion had entered the latter's mind; yet to the Californian the disguise was so apparent that he wondered at this. A few fluttering blankets and a smear of red dirt would never have deceived him; the silence they had maintained with never a shout nor shot as they spurred in pursuit of the wagons, was characteristic of men who saw no glory in mere murder, though they might be keenly desirous of the profits it could be made to yield.

“What are they doing, Steve?” Bushrod asked, stepping to his brother's side.

“They seem to be waiting.”

“They act as though they had pocketed us and could finish this business in their own way and time,” said

Bushrod, with a troubled laugh.

“I reckon that won't come any too easy to their hands,” said Rogers quietly.

“Look here,” said Bushrod, “what do you say to my banking up the earth under the wagons?”

“It's an excellent idea; I'd do it,” said Stephen.

“Come,” said Rogers, “lets you and me take a look around, Mr. Landray. I reckon they're in no hurry to try this hill, I wouldn't be if I was them.” They crossed the barricade, and inspected their surroundings. The top of the hill was perfectly flat, and an acre or more in extent; beyond this level space the ground fell gently away to the plain below.

“It's right smart of a place for a fight,” remarked Rogers, after a brief glance about.

Stephen nodded; he admitted to himself that with such an enemy the spot had its own peculiar advantages; he could believe that they might hold it for an almost indefinite period, even against much greater odds. His memory reverted to the glories of the freshly fought fields of Texas and Mexico: Odds? What had odds meant in the past to the men of America; and what were they still meaning on a thousand miles of lonely frontier?

To the west, near the base of the mountains, a fringe of cottonwoods and willows marked a water course; there the herbage of the plain was a richer green. Stephen almost fancied he could seen the water sparkling among the trees, then he remembered that their own supply was wholly exhausted. Rogers seemed to understand what was passing in his mind; he touched him on the arm.

“We could never have made it, Mr. Landray,” he said regretfully. “They'd have cut us off in the open.”

The horsemen who had ridden away toward the west were now nearing the cottonwoods. Rogers turned from regarding them to look at the forted wagons.

“Your brother 'll fix the camp snug enough. I reckon after he gets finished we can make it hot for the redskin who thinks his road lays across the top of this hill.”

“You have told me of these fights; what chance have we?” asked Stephen gravely.

“No twenty men that ever lived can cross them wagon poles unless we are willing they should.”

“But why should they attempt that when they can keep us here on a strain until our powder and lead is exhausted, or the need of water forces us to abandon the hill?”

“I reckon that'll be their game; but see here, by the time our guns are silent we may have them pretty considerably crippled up. I needn't tell you that twenty men in the open against six with good cover like we got, have their work ahead of them.”

“Look!” cried Stephen, pointing.

On the edge of the cottonwoods which they had just reached, the horsemen were joined by a much larger party which suddenly rode out of the timber.

“We reckoned 'em too quick and too few,” said Rogers simply. “There's forty or fifty of the varments.”

The horsemen were now galloping toward the hill. Rogers watched them in silence, then turned again to Stephen.

“Good God! Mr. Landray, don't you see no difference?” the Californian demanded almost angrily. Stephen's lack of all suspicion was too much for him.

“There is a difference in dress, if that is what you mean.”

“Yes, that; and do you note the size of their horses?”

“They are smaller certainly.”

“I wa'n'. going to let you know, but it's a heap easier to be fair with you; those down yonder's white men; this new lot's Indians—there's no mistaking that.”

“What!” cried Stephen in astonishment.

“It's Basil and Raymond and some cutthroats from the valley trigged out to look like redskins.”

“Nonsense, Rogers, that's the wildest surmise; how can you know that?”

“You don't believe me. Well, I seen him.”

“You saw whom? Basil?”

“No, Raymond.”

“The deserter—when?”

“This morning;” and Rogers told him in the fewest words of his meeting with Raymond. “I allow they're mainly after me, and I reckon you can make some sort of terms by handing me over to them. I ain't saying but what it would be right for you to do this; you got your folks back East to think about; I only got Benny; I reckon you'll look out for him. My first notion was to let matters stand until we'd put our mark on a few of them, knowing it would be too late to do anything then.”

“No,” said Stephen, “if it's so, if it's Basil, he's wanting more than revenge; he knows we have a large sum of money with us.”

“Well, I allow we've both made a few mistakes,” said Rogers.

He added, “I'm ready to do what's right. Give me your horse, and I'll make a dash for the hills. You can tell 'em you've turned me out of camp.”

But Stephen shook his head. “Why, man, we wouldn't think of that!” he said earnestly.

Above the mountain tops the sun was sinking, filling the grey plain with floods of glorious gold and violet. Rogers took off his hat and faced the west; his mouth twitched and his look of resolution softened.

“This is mighty decent in you, Mr. Landray, it is so. I ain't saying much, but Benny and me won't forget this in many a long day.” and he held out his hand. “Maybe it is the money they're after, as you say; I reckon it is, for they've undertaken right smart of a contract just to get even with me for killing that half-breed.”

The two bands had now united, and after a brief parley, charged down on the hill with loud yells. Stephen and Rogers withdrew from their exposed position and sought the shelter of the barricade.

“There's no need of throwing away ammunition,” said Rogers, surveying the little group that formed about him. “There'll be plenty of noise, but you'll get used to that. Hear the vermin yell!”

His first thought was of Benny. He hid the child away in a safe place.

“Is this an Indian fight, pop? And is them real live Indians?” the child asked eagerly, as he nestled down in the nook his father had found for him.

“I allow some of them will presently be dead Indians, son,” answered his father hopefully. “You pray that your old daddy's aim may be what it used to be, for he wants mightily to fetch you and him out of this with a whole hide apiece.” and repeating his injunction to Benny to lie very still, he rejoined his companions.

A glance sufficed, and the experienced eye of the frontiersman told him that as yet little harm had been done by his companions fire, though it had served to keep the Indians at a respectful distance.

In spite of the presence of their white associates, the tactics of these latter did not differ materially from what they must have been had they been alone. They circled about the hill evidently keenly sensible of the fact that there existed a zone of deadly peril into which it was not wise to venture; on the outer edge of this they hung with noisy zeal, and it was only when some one of their number more daring and reckless than his fellows dashed in toward the wagons, that the men on the hill levelled their rifles; but they were not long in discovering that these displays of prowess were more than likely to be attended by fatal consequences; for twice Rogers stopped them in mid career; once Bushrod was similarly successful; he killed the pony and crippled the Indian; then as he showed a disinclination to fire on a wounded man, Rogers who had withheld his hand out of consideration for what he conceived to be his friend's rights in the matter, made the shot for him.

“That's three!” he cried in high good humour. “I tell you, Lan-dray, you mustn't hang back from giving them their full dose. It's them or us, and I'm all in favour of it being them.”

“How long will this last?” asked Bushrod, crouching at his elbow. “Why don't they come in where we can get at them?”

“It's their notion of fighting; they'll draw off when night falls.”

“I suppose there is no hope of their drawing off entirely?”

“Not until they've had a fair try at us.”

While he was speaking his gun had been thrust cautiously over the top of the barricade, and fired at a savage who had ventured within easy range, but the light was now uncertain and the bullet sped wide of its mark. With a muttered oath he turned to Bushrod. But before Landray could bring his rifle to bear on the savage the latter's gun was discharged, and Dunlevy at the opposite side of the barricade rose from his knees with a startled cry, spun round once and fell back among the mules. Walsh who was nearest him, turned a white scared face on Stephen.

“Poor Dunlevy's hurt I think! Won't you help him, Mr. Landray? I can't, the sight of his blood makes me ill.”

But Rogers had already crept to the teamster's side; he reached out a hand and pushed the boy back in his place.

“Never mind him, you keep out of sight,” he said quietly.

“Do you mean he's dead!” cried Walsh.

Here Bushrod Landray's warning cry recalled the Californian to his post.

“They seem to be forming for a charge,” he said.

“And they're nearer than they need be,” rejoined Rogers, throwing his rifle to his shoulder. The group melted away at the flash, but one of the savages tumbled from his saddle and lay as he had fallen until one of his friends crept up on hands and knees and dragged the body off; at him the Californian fired again, but apparently without effect.

“The varments will fetch away their dead and wounded every time if they can!” he said.

“Dunlevy was killed outright?” asked Landray.

“Yes, he wan't much of a shot, and he would raise his head to see what was going on. I heard your brother tell him more than once to keep down,” said Rogers resentfully.

The fight continued until the sun sank beyond the ragged lines of peaks; and its glory turned first to grey and then deepened into twilight; a twilight through which the horsemen moved vaguely like shadows; then suddenly the attack ceased; the brisk volleys dwindled to a few straggling shots, and silence usurped the place of sound, silence absolute and supreme. Bushrod turned to Rogers who rose slowly and stood erect. “I reckon it's over until daylight comes again,” he said.

They lifted Dunlevy into one of the wagons and drew his blanket over his face. Now that the excitement of the day was past, a deadly weariness had come upon them; they were oppressed and silent; they ached like men who had been bruised and beaten. Looking about them they saw things that they had not seen before; two of their mules were dead, and three others wounded, the wagon covers were in tatters. They seemed hours away from the fight in point of time, and yet their ears still roared with the sound of crashing volleys, the clatter of hoofs, a medley of yells and shrieks; yet while these sounds had been in actual continuance they had scarcely heard them.

When they had eaten a few cold mouthfuls. Rogers said:

“I'm going to take the first watch. Mr. Landray you'll relieve me; your brother can follow you; and Bingham and Walsh can finish out the night together. I reckon I needn't tell you all, that you'd best get what sleep you can.” And with this he took up his rifle, crossed the barrier, and with noiseless step made the circuit of the wagons.

The enemy had withdrawn to the cottonwoods where their blazing camp-fires were now plainly visible. At his back in the shelter of the forted wagons, his companions had huddled close together in the darkness, and were now talking in whispers; he heard nothing of what they said, and presently the murmur of their voices ceased entirely.

Until this day he had known never a doubt as to the success of their journey; the reasonable uncertainty he might have felt had long since faded from his mind; others might fail, but he never; and now their way was blocked. Twenty white men alone he would not have feared; the Indians by themselves he would have feared even less; but together, the cunning of the one supplemented by the intelligence of the other, was something he had not reckoned on. Even should they beat them off, their whole plan must be changed. He was quite sure that it would not be safe to venture into Salt Lake. He had heard too much of the justice the Mormon leaders were wont to mete out to such of the Gentiles as came under their displeasure, especially when these Gentiles had in their possession valuable property; and Basil knew, and probably by this time Raymond knew, that they had with them a large sum of money. The needy saints would never let them out of their hands while any pretext remained on which to detain them; and what better pretext could be furnished them than that some of their co-religionists had been killed by members of the party. Then his brain became busy with the problem of immediate escape. They could mount the mules and make a dash for the mountains; but his reason warned him than any such desperate measure must be attempted only when their need of water had rendered the hill absolutely untenantable; for the chances were that thy would be surrounded and butchered before they had gone a mile. No, clearly such an attempt should be made only in the last and direst extremity.

In the stillness of his own thoughts the noises of the camp in the cottonwoods came to his ears. He heard the neighing of horses, the voices of men; now it was a burst of laughter, a fragment of song, that reached him; the white men were carousing with their red allies. He stood in an attitude of listening; he seemed to find something insulting in these sounds, and scarcely knowing what he did he fell to threatening the camp; he shook his gun at it and waved his free hand menacingly, then, he fell to cursing under his breath, softly so as not to disturb the others. How long he continued thus he did not know; he was finally aroused by hearing Stephen call his name; and Stephen stepping to his side placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Why, Rogers, what's the matter?” he asked in a whisper.

“Matter, Landray? They're having water when better men are going thirsty!” he said stupidly, and his utterance was thick and difficult. “That's matter enough I reckon,” he added, with something of his usual voice and manner; he was like a man waking from a dream.

“You have seen nothing?” questioned Stephen.

“Nothing—have you slept?”

“A little; not much.”

Here a burst of sound from the camp reached them, long continued and sustained; it was strident, fierce, primitive; Stephen turned to Rogers.

“I'd almost say they were singing hymns,” and he smiled at the fancy.

“They are dancing our scalps,” said Rogers.

“That's premature,” said Stephen.

Rogers moved off toward the wagons. A moment later he had stretched himself on the ground at Benny's side.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

STEPHEN fell to pacing about the wagons as Rogers had done. He saw the fires of the Indians die down until they became mere specks of living colour that seemed to glare steadily at him out of the distance. As the fires died, so did all sound until at last a mighty silence held the plain in its spell; and with the silence came a tormenting loneliness. But for the black outline of the mountain peaks against a lighter sky he might have been looking off into infinite space. The night wind sinking to a murmur, sighed about the wagons, softly flapping their bullet-torn canvases. It seemed to hold the very soul of that lone land. He turned his face to the east; somewhere there beyond the night, in the new day that was breaking, was Benson. With a gulp of sudden emotion he saw the valley as he had seen it on a thousand summer mornings, with no special realization of its beauty; dawn, the day's beginning; here and there a lantern flashing in and out among barns and outbuildings; the darkness growing always greyer, always toward the light, until the sleek cattle could be seen in the fields, newly risen from the long wet grass and with the dew yet sparkling on flanks and sides, crossing slowly to pasture bars to be fed and tended; and then far down the valley a touch of glowing colour that crept above the low hills to become fixed in a narrow luminous rim which changed swiftly to a great flaming quadrant of light that grew into the level sun.

Regret, terrible because it was unavailing, lay hold of him. Virginia was there. Was it possible that by any gift of divination she could know of their danger? She had told him more than once that no evil would ever befall him and she be wholly unconscious of it, no matter what the distance that separated them. He hoped this was so. He prayed that if the coming day closed on a tragedy, she might learn at once of the destruction of the train; but who would there be left to tell her of the end? None of his companions would survive, he was sure of this, if Basil and Raymond were responsible for the attack; indeed, it would be the merest chance if she ever knew. He would not go back to her—that would be all; this alone she would know, that he had not returned; the rest would be conjecture.

He recalled how they had passed in indifference the graves by the trail side; they had not once been moved to curiosity, even the most idle; for what were these little tragedies in the supreme selfishness of that rush across the plains, and who would stop or turn aside to unravel the small mystery of their last stand? What man would care who they had been, or whence they came, when the certain hand of death had done its work?

Their very bones might bleach there for a hundred years before another white man climbed that hill.

He told himself his fears were cowardly; he sought to reason himself out of his forebodings; a thousand things might happen when day came to make the situation seem less hopeless. It was only the night, the unspeakable loneliness and silence, or the memory of that ghastly presence in the wagon, with its white upturned face, that filled him with abject fear. He closed his eyes, but the white face was there before him—always the white face—with the small dark stain on the temple among the brown curls; the visible cause so inadequate measured by the consequences. Dunlevy might have lived for sixty years without that mark; and sixty years were countless weeks, endless days, hours and minutes innumerable; and yet all in a second the possibilities of life had been withdrawn, and there remained only the senseless clay and the uncertainty that hope and love had crystallized into its high belief of immortality.

To get away from this he tried to think only of Virginia. He saw her again on the white porch of their home; he could only remember her so; the days they had spent together seemed blotted out and to have dwindled to the agony of that last look; yet even this gave him hope and courage. He thought now of the time when the toil and effort of the trail should be ended, when he should have made or lost in this foolish enterprise, to his sobered judgment it mattered not which.

But what if this was his last night; his lips parched, and his breathing became laboured; already in anticipation he tasted death. What if it would be his lot to share poor Dunlevy's sleep! He thought with bitter regret how he had filled Virginia's heart; there were no children to take his place; all her strong maternal love had been given to him.

His mind drifted back to commonplaces. He had disposed of his business in an orderly fashion before he left home. Benson knew just how matters stood, and he believed Benson to be scrupulously honest. There would be ample left for her, if the worst came to the worst, out of the wreck he and Bushrod had made of the family fortunes; ample for the simple life she would choose to live. Then he remembered the packet of papers in his pocket; among them was the memorandum which he and his brother had drawn up at Benson's request and which included an accurate inventory of their interests. He had intended sending Virginia a copy, but had neglected to do so.

The sound of a light footfall roused him from his revery; he turned quickly. In the grey light he saw the figure of the child; his hold on his gun relaxed; the boy stole to his side.

“Why aren't you asleep, Benny?” he asked in a whisper so as not to disturb the others.

“I have been sleeping,” the boy answered, “but I waked up and got lonely, and I couldn't wake my pop.”

“Couldn't wake your father? That's odd; he usually rouses at the slightest sound.”

“I know; but he didn't to-night, and I got scared.”

A horrible doubt flashed through Stephen's mind. “Here,” he said, “you hold my gun, and I'll go and see if he's all right.” And he made his way to the Californian's side, but the latter's regular breathing instantly dispelled his fears. He returned to Benny. “What did you do; did you call him?” he asked.

“Yes, and I put my hand on his face as I always do when I want him to wake up.”

“Oh, well, he's very tired, that's all.”

“Have they gone away, Mr. Landray?” the boy asked.

“Are you afraid, Benny?”

“No”—slowly and uncertainly—“at least I reckon not so very afraid. Are they still there?”

“I expect they are.”

The child was silent. Stephen stood leaning on his rifle looking down at him with a wistful pity in his eyes. He had scarcely noticed him before, he was so silent, so little in the way; and now for the first time he was seeing how small and weak he was. Why had Rogers brought him with them; why had he not left him behind with some woman who would have cared for him? His sudden sense of pity made him bitterly resentful of what he considered the man's ignorant unimaginative devotion, for of course he knew that the boy was all in all to the Californian; but why since he loved him had he brought him out into the wilderness to face hardship and possible death? It was bad enough for men, but this child—he sickened at the thought.

Then he recalled with no little satisfaction that even Basil had shown more than a passing interest in the boy; brutal and hard as he was with every living thing, the child had yet found a way into his surly, grudging regard, and this in spite of the open breach that from the first had existed between Rogers and himself. Remembering this, he could not believe that the fur trader would allow any harm that it was in his power to avert, to come to him. Then he thought again of the packet of papers in his pocket; why not give them to Benny to keep?

“See here, Benny, do you think you could take care of some papers for me to-morrow?”

The child nodded interestedly. “What are they?” he asked.

Stephen took the packet from the pocket of his flannel hunting shirt. “I am going to give you these papers to take care of for me, Benny,” he said. “Now you are to remember, if anything should happen to me they are to go back to Benson.” He paused hopelessly; could the child understand?

“Yes, sir, they are to go back to Benson.”

“Now think, Benny, how would you send them there?”

“I'd give them to Mr. Bushrod, or to my pop, or Mr. Walsh.”

“Good, so you would, Benny; they would know perfectly what to do; but if anything should happen to them, you are to keep in mind just two things, the name of Benson, and the name of Landray. Do you think you can remember?”

The child laughed softly. “Why, of course I can, Mr. Landray. I can remember you; and Benson's the name of the place where my pop was a little boy.”

“Yes, but do you know where Benson is?”

The child's face fell for an instant, then it lighted up with sudden intelligence, he turned quickly and

pointed to the East. “It's there. That's Benson,” he said.

“It's there true enough, but it's a long way off, a very long way. Benny, Benson's in the State of Ohio; do you think you can remember that?”

“Benson's in the State of Ohio,” said Benny dutifully.

“That's right, Benson's in the State of Ohio,” Stephen slowly repeated after him. He smiled almost pityingly, his hope hung by such a slender thread; a child's drifting memory.

“Yes, sir,” said the boy, “Benson's in the State of Ohio.”

“And you are never to part with these papers unless it is to give them to some white man who will send them to the person whose name is written in the packet; and should you ever meet Basil Lan-dray again, you are not to let him know that you have the papers.”

Benny looked at him shrewdly. “He won't come around, Mr. Landray. My pop 'lows he'll fix him if he ever shows his head in this camp.”

The papers were in a buckskin bag that closed with a stout drawstring. “You can wear it around your neck, Benny—so,” said Stephen. “Keep it under your blouse, like this—it will be safe there. It's a very important matter, Benny, and you are such a little fellow for so big a trust.”

Here he was interrupted by the discharge of a gun, and within the barricade Rogers sprang to his feet. Almost simultaneously with his warning cry, the dark slopes of the hill were lighted up with spurts of flame from the belching muzzles of fifty rifles.

It had all been so sudden and unexpected that for a moment Stephen was stunned and stupefied; then he gave a swift glance about him, and felt rather than saw that a score or more of dark forms were stealing up the slope of the hill. He heard Rogers storming and cursing as he bade his startled companions rouse and arm themselves. He gathered up the child in his arms and darted toward the wagons: there he met Rogers.

“Is this the way you keep watch?” the Californian shouted fiercely. “You've thrown our lives away!”

“Sprang to Rogers' aid”

Between the wagons where Stephen entered the enclosure, ten or a dozen dark forms now appeared. He put down the child bidding him run and hide himself in a safe spot, and sprang to Roger's aid where he stood beating back the enemy with the stock of his clubbed gun. It was only for an instant, however, that they faced these odds alone; for Bushrod, Walsh, and Bingham rushed to their assistance, and there succeeded a wild moment; the mingled sound of blows and oaths, and then the attack having failed, the dark forms melted

silently away in the grey light.

“Who's hurt?” Rogers inquired eagerly.

“I guess I'm not, for one,” said Bushrod. “How about you, Steve, and you, Walsh, are your skins whole yet?”

“Yes, but good God, where is Bingham! What's become of him?” cried Stephen.

“He was at my elbow a moment ago,” faltered Walsh. There was a pause while they stared blankly at each other. Then from the plain below they heard a yell of savage triumph.

“Hark, what's that?” said Stephen, but his blood ran cold at the sound.

“What does it mean, Rogers?” Bushrod demanded, for the yells continued. “Why don't you speak, man?” he cried.

“I was listening to see if I could hear him; he must have been done for when they fetched him off with their own dead and wounded. Hear the devils yell! I reckon he can thank God Almighty he died in time;” and he licked his dry lips with the tip of his tongue.

“You mean—” began Stephen in a voice of horror; but the Californian cut him short.

“I tell you he was dead when they found out who they had fetched away; ain't that enough for you to know?” he cried, but he clapped his hands to his ears, and stood rocking from side to side.

“How did they get so close?” asked Walsh at last.

“You'd better ask Landray that,” said Rogers bitterly. “It was his watch.” He had stooped, and was picking up his rifle which he had dropped the moment before.

“No, it was mine,” said Bushrod. “Why didn't you call me, Steve?” They were grateful to have something to talk of.

“You were asleep, and—well, I couldn't sleep, so what was the use of calling you?”

They could see now indistinctly what was passing below them; merely a dark cluster of huddled men and horses, where they waited for day to come; but with the first streaks of yellow light the plains resounded with the beat of hoofs.

Half an hour passed, and then Walsh pitched forward without a word or groan, shot through the heart; an instant later Bushrod put aside his rifle.

“You'll have to finish it,” he said shortly to his brother, and held up his right hand; his wrist had been shattered by a ball. He looked at the hurt member for a moment considering what he should do; and then began moodily to wrap it in long strips of cloth which he cut with his hunting-knife from the front of his shirt.

The sun rose higher and higher in the sky, until its rays fell vertically on the three men and the child. Stephen and Rogers, their faces black with powder stains and their lips parched and swollen, intently watched the enemy; from time to time they warily raised themselves on their knees and made a hasty discharge of their rifles. Benny, at his father's side, helped him to load; his little face, pinched with suffering and terror, was streaked with sweat and grime. At Stephen's elbow, Bushrod, working clumsily with his uninjured hand performed the same offices for his brother; thus they managed to keep two rifles always loaded. In this manner the morning passed.

The Californian's fire had slackened by imperceptible degrees; now each time his gun was loaded it was jerked recklessly to his shoulder and discharged without aim; his dark eyes lighted wildly, he began to sing the emigrant's song,

> “Oh, California,
>   That's the land for me,
> I'm bound for San Francisco
>   With my wash bowl on my knee.”

At first he sang the words under his breath, crooning them softly over and over to himself; then the song grew louder and louder until he finally bellowed the words in a deep rugged bass. The sound cut like a knife, and Benny shrank from his side in alarm.

“Be still, Rogers!” ordered Stephen sharply.

“Why the hell do you want me to keep still? I'm letting 'em know how gay we feel,” and he began to sing again,

> “I soon shall be in 'Frisco
>   And then I'll look all round—”

“I tell you, Rogers, keep still!” cried Landray.

The Californian paused, and glared at him vacantly.

“Rogers,” he repeated slowly, “Who's talking about Rogers? That's a good joke; Rogers is dead—the redskins done for him handsome; but first he killed ten of the devils. They stripped off his shirt and cut ten gashes in his back, and then they stabbed him ten times, and drove a stake in his eye and filled the hole with powder and blew his skull to pieces. That's the trick they played Rogers.” He seemed to dwell on this horrible fancy with positive delight. “Rogers was a murdering cuss anyhow, but God Almighty fixed it so he got come up with all right!” While he was speaking he had half risen to his feet, but now he squatted down once more. Benny thrust the stock of a rifle toward him, his hands closed about it instinctively; he seemed to be recalled to himself. “Keep low, son,” he cautioned, “they sha'n'. serve us as they served Rogers. Presently we'll be on the move.”

But Benny, wide-eyed and frightened, and not comprehending the change that had come over him, only

shrank further and further away. An instant later the Californian dropped his gun.

"What's the use!" he cried, springing to his feet.

"Get down, Rogers! Get down, you fool!" cried Stephen angrily.

"I want some of Bingham's luck!" He swung about on his heel, searching the horizon with heavy bloodshot eyes. "Where's the West? There's gold there; put the mules to the wagons—let's be moving—gold! Do you hear? Me and Benny needs it!" And before they divined his purpose he had leaped the barricade. Bushrod sprang after him and with his uninjured hand sought to draw him back; they struggled fiercely together for a moment, and then Rogers exerting his strength dragged him across the hilltop.

"Let him go, Bush!" shouted Stephen.

Bushrod freed himself from the madman's clutch and turned to regain the shelter of the wagons; but at this moment a horseman galloped swiftly up the slope and drew rein not ten paces distant; he threw himself from his horse and raised his rifle. It might have been some horrid fancy that the eyes that looked at him out of the smear of paint were Basil Landray's eyes, but there was no mistaking the beard.

"You!" he cried, and with his left hand sought to draw the hunting-knife from its sheath at his belt, since save for this he was weaponless. The fur trader thrust his rifle across his horse's back and taking deliberate aim, fired. Bushrod, with his eyes still fixed intently on his cousin's face, and his hand still fumbling clumsily with the hilt of his knife, sank first to his knees, then he pitched forward with a single groan.

It all occupied but an instant in the doing, yet each slightest detail was distinct and vivid to Stephen. Until Bushrod fell he made neither sound or movement; he durst not use the loaded rifle he held in his hand, since his brother stood between him and the fur trader; but as Bushrod sank to the ground he strode forward with his piece resting loosely in the crook of his arm. Basil saw him coming and his first impulse was evidently flight; then he released his hold on his horse, dropped his rifle, and drawing a pistol from his belt, stepped eagerly forward to meet his cousin.

When the two men were quite near, the fur trader lifted his pistol. Stephen saw his black beard bristle like the mane of some angry animal, and caught the glint of his cruel eyes along the short barrel; the hammer fell, the cap exploded, but there was no report; and with an oath Basil threw down the useless weapon.

"It's my turn. I knew it would come," said Stephen sternly; and he drew the stock of his rifle up to his shoulder. He was so secure in this belief of his, that no power on earth could have moved him to haste. He heard the hoof beats of the horses as they charged up the hill, yet the gun came slowly to his shoulder, and his aim was taken with the utmost deliberation. It seemed minutes while his eyes were finding the sights.

Basil, with an uncontrollable emotion of fear and horror, threw out his arms in a gesture of mute entreaty; then he covered his face with his hands, while a sob burst from his twitching lips; a deep groan followed almost instantly.

Stephen stood like a man in a daze, with his still smoking rifle held in his hand. The trampling of the horses roused him to some thought of his own safety; he took his eyes away from the writhing figure on the ground, and turned, intending if possible to regain the shelter of the barricade; but what was the use? One place was no better than another, for the end had clearly come. He seized his rifle by the barrel and heaved up the stock.

"Come on!" he cried hoarsely; and at his words the dark shouting mass of straining men and trampling horses closed about him.

He struck out fiercely but never blindly; each time his weapon was raised he selected his victim, and each time he crushed the life out of this victim with a terrible sweeping blow; for he had gone beyond fear, the dread of wounds and death, even the strong desire of man's strength in its prime, to live. A dozen guns blazed in his face; now he was down, now up; now down again; his footing slippery with his own blood and with that of his assailants; but now he was down, and for the last time; and the savages struggled fiercely among themselves, each intent on striking the body of this mighty fallen warrior.

The Californian had kept on down the western slope of the hill. When Basil released his horse, the animal trotted off toward the cottonwoods, and before it had gone a hundred yards Rogers caught and threw himself astride of it, and fled out across the plain, while back to the hill making lessening head against the freshening wind was borne snatches of his song. He had covered a third of the distance to the cottonwoods, when a child's frightened voice reached him.

"Pop! Pop! Come back! It's me—Benny!"

He drew rein instantly, turned, and at a canter rode back toward the camp. There was absolute silence there now, save for the screams of the terrified child, who stood outside the barricade, clinging to the spokes of a wagon wheel.

"Benny, where are you?" Rogers called, when he reached the foot of the hill, and his dull eyes lit up with a sudden sense of things.

For answer there came a crashing volley; and out of the drifting patches of smoke a great bay horse appeared to spring, and stung with wounds dashed along the plain dragging the limp figure of a man whose heavy-booted foot had caught in a stirrup-iron.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE letters which the brothers and Walsh had written at Fort Laramie, and which they had entrusted to a party of returning emigrants, were the last that reached the town of Benson. They were poured over in secret; and afterward Colonel Sharp was permitted to print in the *Pioneer* such descriptive passages as were deemed of general public interest.

They marked the end of what had seemed as permanent as anything can seem in this world; and all that remained in record of what three men in their varying ways had counted of supreme worth, was the yellowing paper with the many seals and the words that meant so little or so much.

One month, then two, then three, dragged by in silence; a silence which Virginia, and Jane, and Anna, bore with differing degrees of fear and uncertainty, as they waited from day to day for some sign from the gold-seekers; but no word came. The trail and the campfire with the love that watched beside them had spoken for the last time.

Each day Virginia with Jane, from the white porch of the farmhouse, anticipated the coming of the north bound stage which carried the western mails. They heard it with its squeaking brake block hard set against the wheels the moment it began the long descent of Landray's Hill; they watched it with anxious glances as it came careening into sight, tossed and troubled in the ruts of the Little River road; and their eyes, now filled with a world of hope and yearning, followed it until it was lost in the depths of the covered bridge at the foot of Main Street.

Sam West, sometimes dusty, and sometimes muddy—for they would not let him start for town until they saw the last of the coach since they found some comfort in sending him off post-haste, and in bidding him ride hard, and above all things be sure and bring back the letters—would each day present his honest red face at the little square window in the post-office, with a cheerful, “Anything to-day, Mr. Bently?” And Mr. Bendy, who knew there was nothing for him would answer, “No, I think not, Sam, but I won't be sure; just wait a minute and I'll look.” And he would search through the letters only to lay them down with a regretful shake of the head. “I am sorry, Sam, but there don't seem to be as much as the scratch of a pen,” he would say.

At first, Sam, by a variety of ingenious theories strove to explain away the repetition of this tragic fact; then theories being exhausted, he fixed his faith for a time on the inherent weakness of human nature.

“I didn't think it of Stephen Landray—I vow I didn't! Looks like out of sight out of mind, don't it? Well, I'm dummed!” However, the cynic's mood endured but briefly. “I wish she wouldn't send me,” he told the postmaster one rainy day late in September. “I'd give a good deal not to have to go back and tell her there's nothing; why don't he write; what's to hinder him, anyway?”

“I don't know what's to hinder, Sam, but something is a-hinder-ing,” said Mr. Bently.

“Mighty singular; ain't it?” and Sam meditated in silence for a moment. “Do you reckon anything's wrong with them?” he asked, dropping his voice to a confidential whisper. He could never quite rid himself of the conviction that the postmaster, with all those letters, must have a means of knowing.

“I hope not; I'd hate to think that,” said Mr. Bently.

“You don't reckon the letters could be lost?” Sam ventured hesitatingly, for to him the question somehow seemed to argue lack of faith in Mr. Bently's official ability.

“That might happen, Sam; I won't say it is at all likely; still it might happen.”

“Can I tell her that, Mr. Bently, that you said so? I got to tell her something; she just listens to any fool thing I say, and turns back into the house without a word except a 'Thank you, Sam.' She's got to stop sending me, or I'll quit the place! It don't make no difference if Stephen Landray did tell me he wanted me to stay on. He ain't acting right, not letting her know where he's at.”

“I am afraid the boys made a big mistake,” said Mr. Bently. “They was well fixed here.”

“They was indeed,” agreed Sam. “Say, would you mind looking at them letters again to make sure, Mr. Bently? No? Don't it beat all why she don't hear from him! Well, I must be getting along, she's waiting for me. You think there is some sort of a slim chance that the letters are lost? It will be a comfort for them to think that. Indians, maybe?”

“No, I wouldn't say a word about Indians, Sam,” objected Mr. Bently hastily.

“Well, then, they are just lost, you reckon.”

“That may be, Sam, I don't say it's so, but the western mails are very oncertain. They probably had to give their letters to some party that was coming East, and they may have lost them.”

“Then I'd like to put my hands on the cuss that done it! I'd make him jump clean out of his skin to get shut of me.”

The honest fellow galloped back to the farm through the mud, and in the face of a cold rain that drenched him to the skin. It was early candle-light when he entered the lane, and he walked his horse up the strip of soggy turf while he meditated on what he should tell Mrs. Landray. The storm had driven her from the porch, but as he turned the corner of the house on his way to the barn he saw her face at the library window, and merely shook his head.

When he had stabled and fed his horse he hurried into the kitchen. Martha, his wife, met him with a look of inquiry on her broad, good-natured face.

“No letters?” she asked, and he answered her with her own words, “No letters.”

“There's a drink of brandy for you, Sam,” she said. “Mrs. Landray wanted you should have it.”

Sam stalked to the table and emptied the glass at a swallow.

“Best French spirits! The Landrays always was gentlemen when it came to their drinks.”

“We are expecting things, we are,” said his wife. “You're to be ready to go into town after supper for the doctor, if he's wanted.”

In the dining-room with its dark walnut wainscoating, doubly sombre in the half light of the flickering candles that burnt on the mantel, Virginia watched and waited alone. No sound came from the room above;

silence filled the house with a hush that was like expectation. But a moment before she had heard Martha moving to and fro; a chair had been pushed across the floor; and she had heard the sound of voices. She had listened intently but the words they spoke had been indistinguishable; perhaps Jane was resting more quietly now.

An hour had elapsed since Sam had rattled out of the yard in the covered cart, the beat of his horse's hoofs on the spongy earth soon dying away in the distance. He had been dispatched in urgent haste into town to bring Dr. Harrison.

Meanwhile Martha had the care of the sick woman; for Virginia had no heart to go near her. If she should be needed, or if Jane asked for her, then she would go; but not unless. The situation with its hope and uncertainty baffled her usually ready courage; she could only think of that boyish husband, for so Jane described him, and his absence and silence. Why had he gone—he of all men? What fitness had he, with his impractical Latin and Greek, for the hard actualities of the plains?

From her seat before the fire, she heard the sullen insistent rush of the wind outside; and at intervals the dull surging echoes the wooded heights of Landray's Hill gave to the storm. They had roared among those oaks for perhaps a thousand years, as now, when the grey clouds and slanted mists of the equinox were tossed and twisted in the face of the night. She rested her cheek in the palm of her hand; she heard the fall of the rain in a lull of the storm; and again rising out of the silence, the wind, as it roared on the hill and sweeping nearer beat against the shuttered windows high up in the gable of the old stone mill: then it dribbled and died away on the brown meadow land of the Little River bottom.

Jane was quite happy; how happy, Virginia had only her woman's instinct to tell her; she had talked incessantly all day of the future when her husband should have returned. But what if he did not return, what was in store for her then? This doubt now took possession of Virginia's fancy, for her own hope had crumbled; perhaps it was only the night, the loneliness; perhaps later when all was over, her courage would come back; and then there was the morrow, it might bring the looked-for letters; it surely would, she had waited patiently; but now—now she could endure no longer.

Presently disturbing her revery the brass knocker on the front door sounded discordantly. She rose hurriedly, and picking up a candle hastened out into the hall to admit Dr. Harrison; but she admitted more than the doctor; for there in the portly physician's shadow, bowing and smiling, not quite diffident and not quite confident, stood young Jacob Benson.

The doctor was saying as Virginia opened the door, “So it was you, Jacob; we heard your horse floundering through the mud after us all the way out from town and wondered who it was.”

“Yes, it was I, doctor,” but Benson looked past him to Virginia, who stood in the doorway shading the light she held with one hand. There was a brief silence; the doctor seemed to smile behind the turned-up collar of his great coat. The lawyer spoke first.

“I trust you are not ill, Mrs. Landray?” he said.

“I? Oh, no, Mr. Benson—pray come in.”

The doctor grinned at Virginia, who gave him a slightly embarrassed glance; and Benson noting it, felt somehow that he was in the way; yet he followed the physician into the hall and closed the door. In the library, Dr. Harrison promptly divested himself of his outer coat and fell to warming his hands before the fire. Benson stood at a little distance fingering the rim of his hat, and wondering who was ill since it was not Virginia.

“You must have had a very disagreeable ride, doctor,” Virginia was saying.

“I'll leave Jacob to speak of that; he couldn't have enjoyed it any more than I did.” He smiled again; then picking up his case of medicines he quitted the room.

“Won't you come nearer the fire, Mr. Benson?” said Virginia; her words were civil enough, but there was the old hostility in her manner, which Benson had never been able to explain.

“I rather fear I've chosen a poor time for my call,” he observed.

“If it is to see Mrs. Walsh—”

“It is to see Mrs. Walsh,” he replied.

“She is not well.”

“I'm very sorry. It's nothing serious, I hope?” he said.

He drew forward a chair, and seated himself with no little composure before the fire.

“I am not detaining you?” he said suddenly, half rising.

“No, I think not; Martha is with her.”

He wondered vaguely at her reticence regarding Jane.

“There's a good deal of sickness,” he said, as one presenting a valuable fact for her consideration.

“So I hear.”

“I fear her affairs are in a rather bad way,” he continued, suddenly recalled to the ostensible purpose of his visit.

“You have heard from her husband's brother then?” said Virginia quickly.

“Not from him personally, but from a lawyer in New York for whom I occasionally transact business here.”

“Oh!” and Virginia waited for him to go on.

“I gather that this brother of Walsh's is entirely irresponsible. In the first place his business did not fail; he disposed of it at a remunerative figure.”

“And the money which was left for Jane is lost?” asked Virginia.

“That seems to be the case. In fact Walsh has himself sailed for California.”

They were silent. Benson had said all there was to say, yet he made no move to go. That he had not seen Mrs. Walsh did not matter since the real purpose of his drive to the farm had been accomplished. He had

seen Virginia; he had lacked the strength to deny himself this perilous joy. Away from her he forgot rebuffs and slights; he remembered only her beauty, the depths of her eyes; the poise of her head; some swift graceful gesture; and he lived in the spell of these things; and the desire, strong and not to be denied, to see her, would assert itself. To be near her was to feel himself ennobled, to thrill with a curious sense of purification; but he was conscious that his feeling for her, which had grown out of a boyish admiration for a woman's beauty that seemed finer and nobler than anything he had known in a woman before, was sweeping him away by imperceptible gradations from all his ideals of conduct and manhood; yet he would have been loath to call this secret ecstasy he knew in her presence, love. In his moments of self-searching he told himself that her indifference more than punished him for the pleasure he derived from being near her; but he expected to suffer; that was something he could not hope to escape.

Virginia moved impatiently.

“I will tell Jane all you have told me, when I think she is able to bear it. It will be a terrible disappointment to her.” Then she shot him a swift glance. “You have not heard from Stephen?” she spoke unsteadily, and to Benson it seemed reluctantly as well.

“Not since he left Fort Laramie. I suppose we can hardly realize the difficulties he encounters in sending his letters East for mailing, here we have every modern convenience; the stage each day—”

Her grave eyes were bent upon his face; she was seeking to determine the depth of his conviction.

“What would you do if it was one you loved who was so strangely silent, who had gone, and from whom you could not hear?” she asked.

He met her glance helplessly.

“Perhaps the letters are lost,” he said at last.

“That's what every one tells me,” she smiled wearily.

“It is not an unreasonable conjecture,” he urged.

“Nothing is unreasonable; but nothing will satisfy me until I hear from him.”

“No, of course not.”

“It was three months ago—three months ago—that I heard last!”

“But consider the difficulties, the distance; I wouldn't give way to—” he did not finish the sentence, for Virginia had risen, and moving swiftly to the window stood with her back to him, looking out into the night.

“Can't you explain his silence? I am dying for some word of comfort—why don't you speak and tell me he is safe!”

“Most assuredly I think he is safe, Mrs. Landray,” said Benson, who had also risen.

“What do you understand by their silence then? I've wanted to ask you,” she turned toward him as she spoke.

Benson fell back a step, and under her steady gaze his face lost colour.

“Why, I—I hope for the best,” he said at last.

“Then you do think this silence means something more than the mere loss of letters—you—” she choked and could not go on, and her hands went up to her white round throat.

“No, no!” he cried hastily. “God forbid that we should think anything but the best for them; we can hardly understand their situation, a thousand things might stand in the way of your hearing.”

Her hands fell at her side.

“You are a man; you should know more of these matters than we women; what are the dangers that they may meet?”

“I don't know. Really, Mrs. Landray, you exaggerate the gravity of their silence. You mustn't give way to your fears,” he said with gentle insistance.

“My pride, my courage, has kept me up till now, in Jane's presence and in Anna's; perhaps because they were weak too, weak and helpless as only women can be; but you are a man, and it makes no difference to you!”

“Pardon me, it makes every difference to me; if you mean by that, this fear you have that some harm has come to them. I regard your husband as my best friend,” his voice shook with real feeling. “He is one of the few men to whom I am sincerely attached. Of course, I grant it is impossible that I should feel this silence as deeply as you feel it—”

“Yet you urged him to go!”

“I—Mrs. Landray? Surely you cannot think that!”

“You told me so.”

Benson flushed hotly at her words. “Oh,” he said coldly and resentfully. “This accounts for a good deal I was at a loss to explain.”

“You mean—”

“Your quite evident dislike for me.”

“Well, was not that enough to make me hate you?” she cried fiercely. She was very beautiful in her wrath, as she stood before him drawn up to her fullest height, her head thrown back, and the quick colour coming and going on her face.

“It is very unworthy of you,” he said indignantly. “To hold this against me when I had nothing at all to do with his venture.”

“But you told me in the lane that day that he must go—”

“Pardon me, I told you he could not honourably withdraw.” It was plain that he was shaken by her words and manner. “I warned him in the first instance that he must be careful or he would become committed; I warned him repeatedly. Frankly, I thought the venture singularly ill-advised and rash. I told him so.”

“He owed a higher duty to me than to any one else! What does money count for beside my love? I have endured everything that a woman can endure, since he left; I have been a prey to every imaginable fear—”

“I am very unfortunate in that I have earned your dislike. I shall never cease to regret that,” he said at last, furious with himself that he should have harboured a moment's resentment against her, unjust as he felt her to be in her attitude toward him.

While he was speaking he had slipped his hand into an inner pocket of his coat where his fingers closed over a letter. He debated whether or not he should show it to Virginia.

“What is there to think, Mrs. Landray, but that he is safe and well wherever he is?” he said, after the lapse of a moment.

“Oh, I don't know, but why are there no letters? If we could only hear from them!”

“The letters will come if you will only have patience,” he said.

“Patience!” and she made him a scornful gesture.

Benson drew the letter from his pocket. “Of course it was quite unnecessary, and I can only explain it on the score of my sincere regard for Stephen—” he hesitated.

“A letter! It is from Stephen!” she cried.

“No, I only wish it were; but it is from the commandant at Fort Laramie. I wrote him last month. I thought since we were not hearing from them—my dear Mrs. Landray, you need not be alarmed,” for Virginia had grown white, and had uttered a startled exclamation. “This is the reply to my letter, I received it to-day.”

“May I read it?” she asked breathlessly.

“To be sure;” and he handed her the letter.

“Oh, thank you—but why did you not tell me before?” she added reproachfully. She did not wait for him to answer, she was already devouring the letter with eager eyes.

“You see he says he remembers the party perfectly, and he speaks of them as in excellent health. That's very encouraging, is it not?” He had feared she might ask him why he had written to Fort Laramie. His motive he would have found difficult to explain even to himself.

She finished reading the letter. “May I keep it?” she asked.

“Certainly, Mrs. Landray.”

“Oh, Mr. Benson, thank you so much for what you have done!” and she held out her hand.

He had passed into her confidence; and his heart throbbed with a sudden intoxication that was new and strange. But he still feared the questions she might ask, and turned reluctantly to the door.

“I thought the letter very encouraging,” he murmured.

“Must you go?”

“Yes, it is quite late.”

“That's very encouraging, is it not?”

She followed him into the hall, eager now to make amends for all her former unkindness.

“You have made me very happy, Mr. Benson, and it was so kind of you to come out through all this rain. I don't know how you thought to write! It seems a very natural thing to have done. It's not like hearing from him, but it is such a comfort to know that he was well!”

“You will hear from Stephen when he reaches Salt Lake City,” he assured her confidently. “Good-night, Mrs. Landray.”

He threw open the door and a sudden gust of mingled rain and wind assailed him. Apparently Virginia did not hear another door that was opened and closed somewhere in the silent house, but Benson did; and he was quite sure he caught the weak fretful cry of a new-born child. A look of sudden intelligence crossed his face; he blushed furiously as he hurried away.

“I should have known! Well, I guess I've plenty to learn, and especially about women!” he murmured.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TWO men had built a fire beside a boulder that half filled the narrow pass, and with their feet toward the cold ashes of this fire, still slept in the friendly shelter of the rock.

To the west the pass broadened, forming a miniature valley, where a partially dry watercourse circled about the base of the cliff; on the steep hillside above, stunted pines clung among the masses of rocks. The valley supported a scanty growth of coarse grass, and here two gaunt mules fed and shivered in the half light. Shadows filled the pass, but high above in the cloudless sky the birds sang; and long stretches of purple and gold and orange rested on the mountain side.

At last one of the sleepers rose stiffly from among his blankets and looked about him; then with a stick he searched the remains of the camp-fire until deep down in the ashes he discovered a live coal, he added some dry grass and an armful of fuel, and fanned the spark into a blaze, then he gravely took a chew of tobacco.

The builder of the fire was a lank, loose-jointed man of thirty, with a face disfigured by a ragged red beard of many days growth; his skin was sallow and his hair sun bleached.

As it had been dusk when he went into camp the night before, he now inspected his surroundings with mild incurious eyes. He seemed quite emotionless, to accept their forbidding aspect with a certain languid indifference, that was almost weariness; and yet with an inward secret satisfaction since they were as bad as he had anticipated; lastly his glance sought the ground and the figure of the sleeping man.

Then he went slowly up the pass and down into the dry bed of the stream and paused beside a muddy pool; he had been drawn thither by some consideration of personal cleanliness, but the pool did not tempt him, for he shook his head.

“No, I reckon not, it's bad enough inside,” he drawled softly; and he went back to the camp, where after making choice of what he knew to be a vulnerable spot, he gently kicked his companion.

“Get up, Jim!” he said, as the sleeper moved. “It's time we was stirring.”

Jim threw off his blankets and stood erect; he evidently had no lingering prejudice in favour of cleanliness, indeed he had gradually discarded each unessential labour, conserving himself for the hardship of the trail. He did not even go down to the stream as the other had done; he merely put on his hat, and his toilet was complete. His companion took stock of the omission.

“I notice that it ain't your day to wash,” he drawled.

“It ain't,” said the other shortly.

“I reckon it's a mortifying oversight to that pink skin of yours, Mr. Orphan. I'd rather fancy having you tuck along sweet and clean myself; but your habits is your own—”

“You bet they are.”

His friend surveyed him with a mild jocularity of mien.

“Well, they don't brag none for you, but I reckon maybe you're figuring on taking all of this heah God-forsaken country you can right along with you into California. I certainly am glad it suits you.”

Jim ignored this, and they ate their breakfast in silence.

“You ain't saying much,” observed Jim, as if this was an unwonted occurrence.

“Can't you wait until I thaw out?” demanded his friend with some asperity. “I like to froze last night; give me time; opinions will come to me right lively when the sun crawls up yonder above them rocks.”

He moved leisurely off in the direction of their mules, while Jim stowed away the blankets and cooking utensils in the packs. They were soon in the saddle, their mules limping wearily forward. They had gone half a mile when they crossed the dry bed of the stream; its general course until now had been nearly parallel with their trail.

“This must be the head waters of Flynn's Fork,” said Jim.

“I reckon Flynn was a pretty mean spirited cuss or he would never have named such a dribbling chuck hole after himself,” observed his companion. Then he added, “Perhaps he was killed by the Indians heah about and his friends did the naming; all I got to say is it was a mighty mean advantage to take of a dead man.”

“Thawed out?” inquired his companion.

“Not entirely,” and he lapsed into silence for another half mile.

They had met for the first time on the banks of the Missouri. In the party to which they had then belonged were forty wagons and over a hundred men, representing almost every state in the Union; but the cholera had broken out among them just as they were commencing their journey, and had followed them into the mountains beyond Fort Laramie. Their numbers had dwindled day by day; many died, but many more had turned back. Then their overloaded teams failed them; they had thrown away the bulk of their belongings, but still their stock gave out; for thousands of teams had been before them, and grass was scarce along the line of march. At last, these two, abandoning their wagons and taking two of the best mules remaining to them, set out alone for the land of promise.

At Fort Bridger they had fallen in with a truthful trapper who had told them of a route into Salt Lake by way of the Weber, which he had declared to be practicable for mounted men; he had further drawn them a map of the country, whose accuracy was a source of constant joy to the red-whiskered man, who had himself written in the names of the mountains and rivers.

Jim came from Illinois. All his life had been passed on the frontier, where there was still the mystery and romance of new lands into which men went and from which they sometimes returned with tales of wonder for the credulous; and Jim, a meek and silent lad, had cherished a chilling fear that the last Indian would be killed, and the last beaver trapped before he could quit his home.

He had told his companion, while under the spell of the other's frank confidence concerning himself, that his father had only recently died.

“It was him being so old and all crippled up that held me,” he had said. “Or you bet I'd a been out here long ago. Of course I knew he couldn't last forever, but when he did go, I had such a heap of trouble settling up and selling out, some times I almost wished he hadn't died at all.”

And his friend, bearing in mind this recent bereavement, usually addressed him as “Mr. Orphan.”

After they crossed the dry bed of the stream, the valley narrowed to a pass again; and the jutting rocks seemed almost to touch high above their heads.

The red-whiskered man spoke again in his soft drawl.

“Ain't this the doggondest country? And I was well fixed back yonder in old Missouri. I owned as good a farm as ever lay out doors; right on the river it was, and I was selling rotten fence rails to steamboats at cord wood prices. I certainly wish I was roosting on that old punk pile of mine right now—I do so.”

Jim shrugged his shoulders. “Seems like I've heard of that farm of yours before, maybe it was yesterday,” he said with fine sarcasm.

“Why, you dough-faced son of a gun, I bet there ain't such land in the whole State of Illinoy. Illinoy! I like to bust when I hear a man talk of Illinoy!”

“Like enough,” said Jim stolidly.

The Missourian groaned aloud. “Eight head of mules gone to thunder, and they was good mules, too; two wagons, and a whole raft of other stuff; why, man, we began to chuck away dry-goods, and grub, and lickers, and tools, from the time we crossed the Platte!”

“Well, we wasn't the only one's done it,” retorted Jim.

“No,” said the Missourian, “we wasn't. I ain't complaining, but I want this heah country to know what I think of it; for I don't reckon I'll ever pass this way again—not any!” with emphasis; then he subsided into his usual drawl. “Say, I reckon it's a whole heap nearer hell than any other section of these heah United States.”

He relapsed into silence, and they rode on without speech for another half mile; then the Missourian spoke again, sadly, plaintively.

“I was certainly doing well back yonder. I was making money hand over fist; and like a doggone fool I had to lope off out heah. I had no more gumption than that!”

“Well, this suits me,” said Jim.

“I suspicioned it did; but I allow if any one had a told me a year ago that I'd be tackling a thousand miles of God knows what, with these heah legs of mine hung over a spavined, wind-broke, saddle-galled, caterpiller of a mule, I'd a been fighting mad; but the Lord's with us, Mr. Orphan, He says you mustn't be in any thing of a sweat for riches—and we all certainly ain't. My, what a country! Nary a drop of water fit to drink; nary a stick of timber fit to burn; nary a blade of grass; but I reckon it will get some better when we strike the Mormon country. Ever know anything about the Mormons in Illinoy, Jim?”

Jim shook his head.

The Missourian continued. “I know'd 'em in Missouri before they was run out of the State. It must be a mighty nourishing belief for a man who ain't no ways industrious himself and yet likes to see things going forward, but it must be powerful harassing on the ladies. Still, I reckon it's a lot easier for a dozen ladies to support one man, than for one man to support a dozen ladies. If I was a Mormon, I allow that's the way I would look at it.” He turned to his companion, but Jim's glance was fixed ahead; he was giving no heed to what his friend was saying, but the latter was in no wise discouraged by his lack of interest. “I seen Jo Smith before he was killed; I may say I knowed him slightly.”

“Did you have a hand in that?” asked Jim, and he now displayed a languid interest, but the Missourian shook his head.

“No, you bloodthirsty cuss, and I'm mighty glad I didn't.”

By a glance Jim inquired why.

“Well, you see, there's been a right smart fatality among them that did; considerable many of them has died since. This heah Smith was a prophet; he run the whole doggone shootin' match; he done it by revelation; and no matter what he'd said before, or promised, or sworn to, if he changed his mind, all he done, was to get a new revelation; and in the end it was these heah revelations that soured his dough; a man who got his orders direct from the Lord, people found wa'n'. a good neighbour. It made him too blame arrogant, for one thing.”

They had ascended a long, rocky incline, and had gone down a steep boulder-strewn declivity; now the walls of the pass fell away and they entered a wide valley; it was crescent-shaped, and possibly fifteen miles in length, while its breadth was half that. It was without timber except for a sparse growth which could be distinguished toward the west. Both men knew there would be no water until they reached this timber, for, as they moved along, the level plain became more and more barren, while from under the feet of their mules a fine white dust arose and enveloped them.

Presently the Missourian reined in his mule, and pointed with a long forefinger to something on the ground in front of of him.

“Look heah, Mr. Orphan, what do you make of those there?”

Jim answered with a slightly nettled air.

“Wagon tracks. What did you suppose I'd make of them?”

“Yes, but they are going our way—see where that mule planted a hoof beside yonder bunch of cactus? How do you reckon they got heah? They couldn't have come up the trail we came by; you couldn't drag a wagon through there for the rocks, not to save your neck!”

“That's so!” agreed Jim. “But I reckon there's a way in below.” He glanced over his shoulder. “You can see where their trail runs off to the south.”

“I reckon that's it.” said the Missourian.

It was some hours later when the afternoon was wearing to a close, that the Missourian called his friend's attention to a low hill which rose from the perfectly level plain. As they neared it, two buzzards rose lazily from the summit of this hill; and a grey object, the size of a mongrel dog, fled down its nearest slope and skurried away toward the timber. The Missourian noticed this; nothing escaped his mild, incurious eyes.

“I wonder what's up yonder. Hello! Right smart of a crowd's been heah. How old do you reckon them signs is, Jim?” and he drew in his mule.

Jim scrutinized the ground before he answered.

“Horses this time; ain't it? Maybe they are a week old,” but he unslung the long rifle he carried attached to his saddle; seeing which the Missourian laughed.

“Now, what do you allow to use that on, Jim? Don't you see it ain't Indians? Most of these hosses had their forefeet shod. Emigrants, don't you reckon?”

He pushed back his hat, and leaned languidly forward in his saddle.

“They seem to have been doing right smart cavorting about heah, don't they? Some pretty aimless riding

for folks who was going anywhere in particular—no—” slowly, “they certainly seemed pushed for time—these hosses was on the jump. Say, Jim, why do you reckon they was on the jump?” He moved forward a step or two, with his mild eyes still fixed on the ground. “Fact is, they seem to have been riding in a sort of a circle about this heah hill—”

A dark shadow slipped across the sandy plain, and the Missourian glanced up quickly. It was another buzzard; but it was winging its way toward the hill. His glance followed it—it flew straight, with large lazy flappings.

“That bird certainly knows where it's going, and it ain't wasting no time in getting there; what do you reckon's on that hill, Jim?”

Jim moved uneasily in his saddle, but he managed to say with tolerable composure.

“If you're so blame curious, why don't you go see?”

“Well, I'm doggone certain if I left it to you we'd never know.”

“We wouldn't,” the other said positively.

“Well, you hold my mule; I'm going up.” He swung himself out of the saddle, and strode off up the hill. He gained the summit, and paused there, a tall dark figure against the red of the sunset.

“Oh, Jim! Come heah!” he presently called.

“What in blazes do you expect me to do with my mule and yours?” Jim answered angrily.

“Turn them loose, they'll make for the water, it ain't more than a mile or two from heah,” advised the Missourian, with placid good nature. “Bring your gun,” he added, and then he stepped forward a pace, and Jim saw only the top of his battered hat bobbing about.

When Jim joined him he was digging in a great pile of ashes with the charred spoke of a wagon-wheel. At a little distance from him were the remains of numerous mules. The Missourian looked up from his work as Jim approached.

“There was at least three wagons burnt heah; I can tell that by the iron work I've found; but most of their loads must have been carried off, or else they was pretty nearly empty.”

Jim received this information with stolid indifference; had the Missourian called him there to tell him that?

“I wonder why they took the trouble to burn their wagons?” continued the Missourian. “You'd a thought if they had wanted to get shut of them they'd just left them.”

And now Jim's ill-temper mastered him.

“They was probably figuring on some damn fool happening along this way—” he began, but the Missourian cut him short.

“They must have had you in mind then,” he said. “Hold on, Mr. Orphan, can you tell me why these heah parties pulled up to the top of this heah hill?”

“To burn their wagons,” retorted Jim sarcastically. “Ain't that plain?”

“And why did they want to burn their outfit?”

“Because their stock had all give out; that's plain, ain't it?” said Jim promptly.

“Exactly; and the stock gave out the minute the wagons was burnt; but I don't reckon you see anything curious in that,” retorted the Missourian triumphantly.

While they were speaking, he had been pursuing his investigations in a constantly widening circle. Now he stepped quickly toward a shallow ditch the rains had cut in the south slope of the hill. Jim was at his side, and the two men came to a sudden pause on the bank of this ditch.

“I guess it's a bundle of bedding—or clothes—” said Jim nervously, and with a tremor in his voice.

“I reckon there's another guess coming to you,” said the Missourian as he cautiously slipped into the ditch.

“I'd be careful if it was me. Maybe it was the cholera,” cautioned Jim.

“Hell! I never thought of that!” and the Missourian sprang back to the bank. There was silence while they looked into each other's eyes.

“Man, there was five of them!” said the Missourian at last in a hoarse, shocked whisper, and his bearded lips quivered. “I noticed a part of a shovel and a right good pick back by where the wagons was burnt; don't you reckon we could spare the time to heave this heah bank in on top of them—those damn buzzards—”

“Look here, pardner, I'm all for getting out of this. I wouldn't expect any one to bury me if I up and died of the cholera,” said Jim.

“I'm not so doggone sure it was the cholera; hand me that stick, I'm going to find out,” and he slid back into the ditch. He worked in silence with the stick for a moment while Jim watched spellbound, fearing to stay and yet not daring to leave, for their discovery had filled that wide solitude with a sudden chilling horror. “No, this gentleman's got a bullet hole in his head—that ain't the cholera.” There was another pause while the Missourian was busy with the stick; then perspiring but indefatigable he spoke once more.

“Look heah, Jim, right through the heart; you can see where his shirt's all bloody. Me and you have seen enough of cholera to know that ain't the way it takes a man.” The stick was used again. “This heah consumptive looking chap's all shot to pieces; whoever done it made a sieve out of him.” He gained the ditch bank.

“I wish I had a good drink of licker right now,” said Jim weakly.

“Same here,” echoed the Missourian. “Well,” said he, after a moment's reflection, “it ain't a job I hanker for, but I'm going through their pockets. I am going to see who they was and where they come from. You go fetch that pick and shovel; we'll be ready for them in a minute.”

But he was white faced and shaking when his fruitless search was finished. He had found nothing that served to throw any light on the identity of the dead men.

“There ain't the scratch of a pen about any of them; no letters—no papers—no nothing. Somebody's been

ahead of me."

"I wouldn't have did what you just done for five hundred dollars!" declared Jim.

"I wouldn't either—for the money," said the Missourian. "Give me the pick."

The two men attacked the bank with feverish energy and their task was soon finished; then the Missourian said:

"Now we'll just take one more look about among those cinders and then we'll get away from heah just as fast as the Lord will let us. I seen places I liked a heap better."

But the search revealed nothing new.

"Who do you allow done it? Indians?" asked Jim, as they hurried away in the direction their mules had taken.

"Who else would it be?"

"No one else, judging from the way they'd been used. They—"

"Shut up!" cried the Missourian with sudden fierceness, "I ain't likely to forget how they was used! Good God! That's going to stick in my crop to the end of my days, I reckon—don't you rub it in!"

"Well, you done what was white!" said Jim, with unexpected and generous enthusiasm.

But for the rest of that day and far into the night, they could talk and think of nothing else than those dead men in the ditch.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE Missourian and Jim camped on the edge of the timber. So little of the day was remaining to them after they left the hill that they had been forced to stop here; but they were in the saddle again with the first pale glimmer of light that shot across the plain.

"We'll tuck along out of heah in pretty considerable of a hurry, Jim," said the Missourian.

They crossed the narrow bottom and entered the mountains; but before these quite closed about them, moved by common impulse, they turned for a last look at the hill.

"I certainly am proud to see the end of that!" observed the Missourian as he faced ahead once more.

"You bet I wouldn't care to loaf around there none; most any place'd suit me better," and Jim took a long, deep breath.

"I tell you, Mr. Orphan, daylight's a thundering fine thing, and I'm going to hanker for it for twenty-four hours at a stretch from now on for right smart of a spell. What sleep I took last night I took in jerks; and what, between seeing Indians and finding dead men, there was no manner of comfort in it."

"I was some that way myself," admitted Jim.

"But there's a thing or two I can't just understand, Jim; there wasn't so much as the broken haft of an arrow anywhere about that hill; and a many of them hosses was shod all round."

"What do you think?" asked Jim.

"Well, I reckon I don't think—I'm plumb beat."

"I'd like mighty well to have learned who they was, and where they came from. I reckon they got friends and kin back in the States who wouldn't mind hearing what had become of them," said Jim.

"I guess there's no use our figuring on finding that out; it's annoying, but it can't be helped," and the Missourian shook his head with an air of settled conviction; "I done my best; I went through 'em for papers or letters; but you seen there was nary the scratch of a pen."

"I had a brother once," began Jim, with an air of reminiscent melancholy, "George was his name; and he was some older than me. He went like that; leastways he just sort of never came back to explain what was keeping him. He crossed the Mississippi to hunt and never showed up any more. We 'lowed after a time the Indians had got him all right; and when folks would come round the place asking if we'd heard anything new about George, it was powerful distressing to mother; she'd a sort of special fancy for George."

After this they continued in silence for a little time, and then, as usual, it was the Missourian who renewed the conversation.

"Who do you reckon had a leg over them shod hosses, Jim?" he asked.

"I ain't the least idea in the world, unless it was redskins," Jim responded.

"I guess you're right, maybe. It must have been redskins." Yet it was plain that he was not satisfied, for again and again as the morning advanced he returned to the subject. Finally, however, he seemed to weary of fruitless theorizing, for he drew the map with which the trapper at Fort Bridger had furnished him, from his pocket, and fell to studying it.

"He was a right clever cuss, Jim—we've covered each day just about the distances he said we would; I've marked 'em all off. At this rate about four days more will fetch us out at Raymond's ranch on the bench above Salt Lake; that's the first Mormon settlement we strike. He was sort of sour on Mormons in general, but he spoke well of this heah Raymond."

The contemplation of the map, and the prospect of so soon reaching the valley had a noticeably cheering effect on him; he began to sing, and the song was a classic of the trail.

“Oberdier, he dreampt a dream,
Dreampt he was drivin' a ten mule team,
But when he woke, he heaved a sigh,
The lead mule kicked out the swing mule's eye.”

But he got no further than the end of the first verse when the words suddenly died on his lips; he reined in his mule and turned to Jim.

“We seem to have found their trail, and they seem to be going in toward the valley; do you see that?” he said.

“I noticed,” answered Jim laconically.

The Missourian dismounted and examined the signs which had compelled his attention. His examination was brief, however, and when he settled himself in the saddle again, he said quietly:

“It's them all right. You and me's got company ahead of us, Jim.”

“They got plenty start of us,” said Jim, moving restlessly in his saddle.

“That's so, these signs are all of a week old. We dassent take any chances trying to find another road into the valley.”

“Scarcely,” said Jim, with a vague, uneasy smile.

An hour later they came upon a spot where the party preceding them had evidently camped, for the ground was trampled and bare where their horses had been picketed. Here, too, were a variety of bulky articles of comparatively small value.

“They seem to have been getting shut of a good deal of their stuff heah,” was the Missourian's comment.

“We know how that goes,” said Jim.

“I reckon they was sort of dividing up their plunder, and chucked out what they didn't think worth toting farther; for you see this couldn't well have been a night camp. I 'low they must have halted heah about midday. You notice their hosses was picketed close, not turned out to graze; if it had been a night camp, a party this size would have let their stock range, because there was plenty of them to herd it through the night.”

From this point on, for perhaps a mile, the signs were quite plain, and then the party appeared to have broken up; one well-marked trail led off to the south; another kept on toward the west; but presently this, too, turned into a branching pass and was lost.

“Humph!” said the Missourian. “Those was mostly the shod hosses; pretty singular, ain't it?”

But it was evident that both he and Jim experienced a sense of positive relief.

All that morning they had toiled through the mountains; but toward the middle of the afternoon they emerged upon a high ridge; here there was good grass and a scattering growth of small timber. They crossed the ridge and descending found themselves in a fertile, well-watered valley.

“We'll camp heah,” said the Missourian, with a sweeping gesture. “Yonder, by that thicket—a stream heads there.”

As they neared the spot he had designated, Jim, who was riding a pace or two in advance and to his right, all at once swung around his long rifle. But the Missourian threw up his hand in protest.

“Don't shoot, Jim!” he called, urging his mule into a shuffling trot.

There was the sound of a stealthy, guarded movement in the tangled undergrowth they were approaching. Jim, whose sense of sight and hearing were strained to the utmost, heard a dead branch snap loudly, and then he saw a small, vague object appear on the opposite side of the thicket, and run limping away. His nerves were quite shattered by the events of the previous day, but here was something tangible, something at which to shoot, and, in his present frame of mind, the mere noise of his gun in that sombre solitude would have been a consolation; but the Missourian's ear caught the ominous click of the lock as he drew back the hammer.

“Don't shoot, you blame fool!” he called again as he crashed through the thicket in pursuit of the fleeing object. The race was a short one, and through an opening in the brush Jim saw his friend rein in his mule suddenly with a savage jerk, and swing himself from his saddle; at the same instant he heard him say:

“There, son, I ain't going to hurt you.”

An instant later Jim broke through the intervening thicket himself, and to his astonishment found the Missourian bending above the prostrate figure of a child.

“He tripped up and fell, he was powerful keen to get away,” explained the Missourian. “I might have hollered at him and saved him the tumble,” he added regretfully.

The boy was lying prone on his back on the ground, gazing up at the two men. Bewilderment, doubt, and fear were mingled in his glance. He did not speak.

“And you wanted to shoot the little cuss, Jim,” he was mildly resentful. “You're always in such a sweat to use that gun of your's, seems like you'll not be content until you plug some one with it.”

Jim merely looked at the child. He saw that he was wretched enough; that his face and hands were torn and bruised, while his clothes were a fluttering mass of unpicturesque rags. The man's mouth opened in silent wonder.

“I certainly am mighty glad we found him,” said the Missourian; and at these words a look of keen suspicion flashed in the child's eyes. Then they had been hunting for him! That was what the man meant!

“Look at him, Jim,” continued the Missourian, all of whose emotions were easily translatable into words. “If he ain't most starved to death I certainly don't know what starving is! He's all skin and bones—what you had to eat, son?”

The child struggled to his feet with difficulty; he was, evidently, very weak, for he shivered and trembled as he stood there. The Missourian put out a staying hand.

“There was things growing on the bushes—I ate them,” he said in a hoarse whisper, begotten of hunger, fatigue, and exposure.

“Wild plums I reckon you mean. Well, sir, me and my pardner here will fill your pinched little carcass full of bread and bacon. Wild plums! Hell! and him a growing child.”

“Where's your folks?” Jim now asked, he had found his voice at last.

“I ain't got any,” replied the child sullenly.

“You ain't got any? Then what in blazes are you doing here all by yourself?” demanded Jim; he was quite indignant.

The child made no response to this, but his restless glance searched the faces of the two men. His expression was one of dark mistrust; it almost seemed that he meditated flight; but the Missourian's hand was on his shoulder.

“And so you ain't got no pa?” said the latter ingratiatingly, for he recognized something of the boy's distrust and suspicion, though he was quite at a loss to account for it.

“He's dead,” and his lips trembled pathetically.

“Dead,” repeated the Missourian after him.

“You knew that,” and the child turned on him with sudden fierceness, his small hands tightly clinched, and his eyes glittering feverishly.

“I suspicioned it,” said the Missourian.

“The Indians killed him!” the boy added dully.

“But I allow your pa put up a pretty stiff fight; it was on a hilltop, now warn't it? and your pa drove his teams up there and took out and fit them from behind the wagons—him and those who was with him?”

The child shrank from the questioner's touch, but he answered:

“Yes, it was on a hill.”

“I knowed it,” declared the Missourian triumphantly.

“Knowed what?” demanded Jim with some impatience.

“Why, this little cuss came out of that scuffle back yonder; most anybody would have guessed that but you, Jim.”

“And he come here all by himself? Not any,” but his friend ignored what he said to turn again to the boy.

“There were four other men beside your pa with the wagons, warn't there, son?”

The child nodded, but his eyes still flashed with a precocious sense of wrong and hate.

“I knowed it,” declared the Missourian in triumph a second time. “And it was the Indians they fit with, you're sure about that?”

“It was the Indians,” said the child indifferently. “My pop said it was the Indians.”

“I reckon he ought to have knowed,” said the baffled Missourian. “But they were certainly curious Indians from what we seen.”

“It was the Indians, they said they was Indians.”

“Who?” cried the Missourian quickly.

“The men,” answered the child.

“The Indians told you that, did they? Well, they was real obliging.” He turned to Jim. “I'm having doubts about these heah Indians.”

“Look here, son, what was your idea about them redskins?” asked Jim.

The child did not answer him, but there came a sudden flash of intelligence to his pinched little face which the instant before had been quite expressionless in its abject misery. It was plain he understood what the man meant when he spoke of the Indians; then he smiled slyly, cunningly.

“What I want to know,” said Jim, “is how he got away from them.”

“That's so, son, how do you happen to be heah?”

“The Indians fetched me here,” answered the child readily enough.

“And left you heah?”

“I ran away in the night; when they was all asleep.”

“So you fooled 'em—well, you was smart; but didn't they hunt for you any afterwards?”

“I hid in the rocks.” He pointed vaguely to the broken hills in the west. “They looked all around for me and never found me, but I saw them. Then they went away.”

“How long ago was that?”

The child looked troubled.

“I don't know,” he finally answered.

“I 'low you ain't forgot your name?”

“No.

“Well, what is it, son?”

“Benny Rogers,” then all at once he began to cry from sheer weakness and wretchedness.

The two men were puzzled and mystified. There was that one point about the Indians that they could not understand; and yet what they had seen in the ditch was in accord with their preconceived notions as to Indian warfare.

“We'd better go into camp, Jim,” said the Missourian. “You keep hold of the boy while I unsaddle the mules

and turn them out," but midway in his task he paused and glanced at the child who was still crying softly, miserably.

"I half believe the little codger lied to us," he muttered. "Well, maybe it was Indians after all, he surely ought to know."

CHAPTER TWENTY

EPHRIAM RAYMOND, standing in the doorway of his ranch house, well within the shadow of the foothills, was watching two horsemen as they crept along the trail.

To the west, where the land dropped from bench to bench until it finally found the level of the flat valley with its farms and irrigating ditches, lay Great Salt Lake; a gleam of sunlight was reflected on the water, and a few misty clouds low in the sapphire light betokened its nearness.

A year before, and the trail had been illy marked through the mountains; and scarcely more than a trace, as it crossed the desert beyond, where it wound its course from failing streams which fought the dry, thirsty sands, on to brackish water holes that were evil to smell, and yet more evil to drink from. But that single season had altered without lessening its terrors. It was heavy now with alkali du$t, dry with the season's rainless suns, and fine with the grinding wheels of freight and emigrant wagons; it was further marked by the bones of cattle and horses. No one could mistake it now.

As the two men came nearer, Ephriam saw that they were mounted on mules, and that one of the men, a gaunt, red-whiskered fellow, shared his saddle with a child.

"Is this heah Raymond's settlement?" the latter demanded, reining in his mule before the ranch house door.

"Yes," answered Ephriam. "Won't you light down?" he added. He was a kindly, venerable man, with a patriarchal beard and long, grey hair; there was more than a touch of the ministerial in the decent black broadcloth suit he wore; the fact that he was collarless, and that his trousers were tucked in at the tops of his heavy boots, did not detract in the least from his palpable pulpit dignity.

"We will, elder, if it's agreeable to you, and we'd admire to fill up on kitchen victuals." And the red-whiskered man drew the back of his hand across his bearded lips.

"You're just in time," said Ephriam smiling.

"I told you, Jim! Elder, I smelt 'em from the moment we broke out of the hills." He lifted the boy down as he spoke, and making a common movement with Jim, swung himself stiffly from the saddle; a half-grown boy had appeared from the direction of the corrals, and at a sign from Ephriam led away the mules.

"Are there no more of your party coming?" said the old man.

"What's left of us is right heah, elder," answered the Missourian; then he saw that Ephriam was regarding Benny curiously. "Oh, him? You allow he don't belong to either Jim or me—and you're right, elder, for he don't."

Ephriam turned on him with unexpected sternness at this.

"Perhaps that is your excuse for his condition!" and he pointed to the child, whose white, scared face wore a preternatural look of age and suffering; and whose tattered clothes scarcely covered his pinched little body; while his hands and bare feet were cruelly torn and bruised.

"Well, sir, I admit he ain't much to brag on, and his looks is a scandal to this outfit. We picked him up only four days back; he says he'd run off from the redskins. He'd most starved to death."

His own gaunt frame and hollow cheeks, however, told plainly of the hardships all had endured, and lack of food had not been the least of these. Ephriam's face softened.

"Yes," he said, in apology for his momentary suspicion, "I can see you have suffered."

"But you have got a fine climate, elder," broke in the Missourian, bent on being conciliatory. "Jim and me noticed that right along. This is the place to come for climate; there's nothing else heah to take your mind off it; it's heah thick."

But Ephriam's glance had gone back to the child.

"Poor little fellow! Some emigrant's boy, probably."

Benny looked up quickly into his face and stole to his side. Whatever those first suspicions of his concerning Jim and the Missourian they had in no wise abated; all their kindness had not altered his doubt of them. The questions they had asked him, but more than all their strange and to him utterly incomprehensible knowledge of so much that had taken place on that hill, had bred conviction in his brain. He hated and feared them.

"Seems to fancy you, elder," said the Missourian. "We certainly done what we could for him, which ain't saying much, for we'd liked to do a heap more."

A young girl appeared in the doorway; the Missourian turned quickly, hearing her light step, and swept off his battered hat with an elaborate flourish.

"Ma'am," he said.

Jim, by a casual gesture, brushed the flapping brim that shaded his eyes; he was speechless.

"If you will come in, dinner is on the table, father," said the girl. She had outgrown all curiosity concerning these wayfarers from the States; yet she gave the Missourian a smile, and to him that smile was an event.

Seated at the table the old man contented himself with seeing that his guests wanted for nothing, while his

glance constantly shifted first from one to the other of the men and then on to the child.

Jim ate in stony silence, but his more social companion, once the first rigours of his hunger were appeased, was disposed to talk.

"Our finding him, elder," indicating the child by a flourish of his knife, "was certainly mighty curious."

"Yes?" inquiringly.

"It was four days back. Jim and me had come to a sandy valley, it was like a good many other valleys we'd seen, except that it had a little more sand and a little less of grass than some of the others, but, perhaps, the most singular thing about it was a flat-topped hill that stood right out on the plain; a wagon trail led up to the top of that hill, but just where the trail struck up the slope, we noticed that it was crossed and crossed again by another trail—not a wagon trail—which led in a circle about the hill."

"Indians," said Ephriam; he was deeply interested.

"But a many of them hosses was shod, elder, and Jim and me made it our business to go to the top of that hill; we found there had been some sort of a scuffle there; there was five dead men in a wash on one of the slopes, and we could see where three wagons had been emptied of their loads and burnt; but the uncommonest thing about it was those dead men; for, when we come to examine them, we found their pockets had been looked through and pretty well emptied, and no letters nor no nothing left to show who they was or where they come from. The next day we found this boy; he remembered about the hill and about the fight, said his pa had been killed there, and said it was the Indians done it."

"What of that? It was all quite likely," said Ephriam.

"But was it so blame likely?" remonstrated the Missourian. "Recollect a many of the hosses was shod."

"But the dead men?" asked Ephriam.

"Well, what had been done to them was a plenty; but I made up my mind that in some sort it was a white man's job," responded the Missourian, staring fixedly at him. The lids of Raymond's eyes drooped for an instant.

"A white man's job?" he cried. "White men?" he repeated dully; he seemed stunned by the idea.

"Which it might have been redskins," said Jim, with his mouth full. "Elder, this cooking hits me hard."

"Does the boy know who he is, and where he comes from?" asked Ephriam.

"He knows little that's going to help in finding his folks; but I don't allow he's got any. He's a pretty complete orphan."

"Who are you, and where do you come from, child?" asked the old man gently, and he placed his hand on Benny's head, his long fingers straying among his sunburned curls.

"My name's Benny Rogers." He spoke with a shrill little voice. "And where do you come from, Benny?"

"From Benson," answered the child.

Ephriam seemed to consider, then he looked at the Missourian, who shook his head.

"Never heard of it," said he shortly.

"Benson—and where is Benson?" and Ephriam turned again to Benny.

The boy's glance instantly became troubled.

"I don't know, but he told me I was to remember," he said at last.

"Who told you to remember, Benny?"

"Mr. Landray."

"Where is he?"

"The Indians killed him."

"Where?"

"On the hill."

"When? How long ago, I mean?"

"I don't know."

"You are sure they killed him?"

"I seen them," in a frightened whisper.

"And they were Indians?" he watched the child's face narrowly.

"Yes—"

"You are sure, Benny?"

Benny looked up into the old man's face doubtfully; he appeared to hesitate before answering.

"Yes, I am sure they was Indians."

The three men glanced at each other.

"And your father, Benny, what became of him?"

"The Indians killed him; but that was after they killed Mr. Landray."

"That's every blessed thing we could get out of him, elder," said the Missourian.

But here a quite unexpected interruption occurred. There was the sound of wheels on the trail, and an open carriage to which was attached four spirited horses, drew up at the door. Ephriam rose hastily from his chair.

"Finish your meal," he said, and with that he quitted the room.

"He's a right friendly old party," was the Missourian's comment. "I reckon, Jim, it wouldn't take much to plant me heah. I might even get a revelation to take the young wife of some old Mormon saint."

On leaving the house, Ephriam found himself in the midst of a score or more of armed and mounted men who were riding in from the trail; but without giving heed to these he hurried to the side of the carriage, which held a solitary occupant; a florid-faced, good-looking man of perhaps fifty, who, in spite of a certain

physical coarseness, was a not unimpressive figure. He was carefully, even fastidiously dressed, while his whole air was that of one who placed a high opinion upon himself.

To him Ephriam presented himself, but for the moment he was entirely ignored. The florid-faced man looked on beyond him, and through the open door of the ranch house, where the two men and the child could be seen, and inspected them narrowly. One of the horsemen seemed equally interested in Raymond's guests; for he had ridden up close to the single window that lighted the room and peered in. Now he turned, making a slight gesture which the occupant of the carriage acknowledged by an almost imperceptible movement of the head; then he said to Raymond:

“Friends of yours, brother Ephriam?” and his short under lip and heavy chin quivered with some secret emotion.

“They are emigrants, Brother Brigham,” answered Ephriam quickly.

“Still they might be friends of yours, Brother Ephriam,” returned the other significantly, but he held out his hand frankly and cordially.

This matter of the emigrants was a sore point with Raymond. He had given such broken spirits as passed his way what comfort he could; and this, he knew, was a thing that lay heavy against him, since the thrifty Saints saw a special Providence in the coming of the gold-seekers who could be made to pay handsomely in a variety of ways.

Brother Brigham stepped from his carriage, and beckoning Ephriam to follow him, led the way out of hearing of the others.

“The Lord has greatly prospered you; not amongst our people have I seen such fields as yours,” and Young placed his hand on the older man's shoulder; there was real kindness and real regard in this involuntary gesture, and in the genial warmth of his companion's mood, Raymond seemed to expand and glow.

His memory harked back to their recent exodus, when the church had been removed over a thousand miles through an unmaped country full of dangers and difficulties. Like Moses of old, this man had led his people—men and women and children; destitute, poor, and illy prepared to meet the hardships of such a journey; yet, almost without a murmur, they had abandoned a land they knew, for a land they did not know, and had followed him. His unyielding determination had inspired them all; it alone had made that journey possible. Without him there could have been nothing but ruin and failure; they had seen the graves grow up by the trail, marking the course they had come; they had reached Salt Lake, their stores spent, their strength shattered by the sufferings they had undergone, to find their land of promise a desert; new and strange and terrible; death by starvation stared them in the face; but Young had been equal to that hour, and to their need. He silenced all their murmurs; he brought order out of impending discord; he plead, commanded, threatened, prophesied; while, with a restless and determined energy he set them to work. They had strengthened, and their desert had become a land of plenty. This was all so recent that Ephriam's wonder of it never failed him; surely this man had his gifts from God. Young spoke abruptly.

“Who is that child?” he demanded.

In a few words Ephriam told the little he knew of Benny's history. The other's cold, grey eyes never left his face. Once or twice he nodded slightly, as if Ephriam's words were confirming facts with which he was already acquainted.

“And he says it was the Indians! Brother Ephriam, they must be looked to.”

“But that seems to be a matter where there may be some doubt,” said Ephriam.

“Ah!” and Young turned on him quickly.

“The men who found him say that the horses of the murderers were, many of them shod.”

Young shrugged his shoulders.

“The boy should know better than they. I am surprised, Brother Ephriam, that you should give any credit to their crazy tales.” He spoke in a hard, rasping voice, and Raymond was aware, that for some reason which he did not understand, it was distasteful to Young that there should be any doubts entertained on this point.

“What are you going to do with him?” Young demanded, after a moment's silence. The old man looked blank.

“It rests with them, not me. I suppose they will try to find his kin.”

“Yes, but where, Brother Ephriam?”

“In Benson, wherever that is,” and Raymond looked puzzled. He added: “It will not be difficult to learn. I think—”

But Young cut him short.

“Brother Ephriam, don't think. The boy's father is dead; his friends are dead; what more do you want to know?”

Ephriam hesitated; he seemed about to speak, but was silent. There was a long pause. Young looked at him with his uncertain grey eyes, narrowed to a slit. Here was a good man, a man of scruples and convictions, and evidently capable of a most unsaintly stubbornness, in whom it would be neither wise nor expedient to fully confide. At last he said:

“It is best for the child that he should remain here with you, Brother Ephriam. Those men can do nothing for him.”

“Yet they may not wish to give him up,” interposed Raymond quickly. Young smiled.

“They may have to. And you, Brother Ephriam, must round up your shoulders to bear this burden.”

“I am willing enough to take the child, if—”

“You can't make terms with me. There are no ifs to obedience. Either you do as I wish, or you don't,” said Young, coldly. “This is a matter that has more to it than you can know now. It is not safe for those men to leave here with the child, no good can come of it to them. Do you understand, Brother Ephriam? You will be placing them in great danger. Now are you willing to do that?” There was a sinister significance to what he

said beyond the mere meaning of his words that was not lost on the old man. Young continued. “Try them; tell them you are willing that the child should remain with you until such time as he can be sent back to the States. Satisfy them in what manner you choose, but keep the child; and, Brother Ephriam, advise them to remain silent concerning these foolish suspicions of their's. No good can come from talking of them,” and Young turned abruptly from him.

Raymond followed Young to his carriage; he meditated rebellion; but, in spite of this transient feeling of hostility to the other's commands, he knew that he would accept the responsibility he was seeking to fasten upon him. It would end in his keeping the child, through fear that a greater wrong might come of it if he did not.

These thoughts occupied his mind to the exclusion of all else; and it was only later that he sought for an explanation for Young's interest in the matter, and this explanation was destined to come from a most unexpected source.

Moody and preoccupied, he watched Young and his bodyguard disappear down the trail. He was recalled by hearing the Missourian's drawling voice at his elbow.

“Well, elder, the boy was so tuckered out he plumb fell-asleep at table, and the lady she toted him off to bed; she allowed she knowed what he needed.”

“Were you going on to-day?” asked Ephriam quickly.

“Yes, but the lady's got the start of us; she's got the kid,” said the Missourian. It was plain he approved of the lady.

“What shall you do with him?” demanded Ephriam.

“Doggone if I know!” said the Missourian rather helplessly. “Send him back to the States, I reckon, as soon as we can.”

“Then you'd better leave him here with me.”

“We certainly are obliged to you,” cried the Missourian.

“But look here,” it was Jim who spoke. “What about them five men? If it was redskins, it was all right; but if it wasn't redskins, who the hell was it?” He glanced from one to the other.

“I reckon you got folks down in Salt Lake who'll make it their business to have a look at that trail?” said the Missourian.

“It is better that you say nothing of your suspicions,” said Ephriam.

The Missourian turned on Raymond swiftly, and pushing back the brim of his hat looked him squarely in the face.

“I'm a talking man, neighbour,” said he in his slow drawl. “I done a heap of talking in my time, and I allow to keep right on giving people the advantage of my opinions. I don't fancy being advised to keep my mouth shut about this.”

“You misunderstand me,” answered Ephriam quietly. “If it becomes known that there is reason to doubt the Indians were solely responsible for the killing of those men, it will make talk; and, supposing the guilty parties are in camp near the city—and many strangers are in camp there—we may have to look far for them when we want them.”

“That sounds a whole lot better,” said the Missourian. “Well, we'll tuck along into town, and we leave the boy with you to send back to the States.”

Ephriam led the way to the log stables. He wanted to see the last of these two men, before he repented of the part he was playing. They seemed simple, kindly fellows, who would have dealt fairly by the boy.

The Missourian wrung his hand with fervour at parting.

“You let us out easy, yet it ain't really fitting we should carry him on to California,” he said.

Ephriam stood by the corral as they rode away.

“They are honest fellows,” he muttered at last, and then he realized that he was staring at a stretch of empty road, they had passed from sight down the trail.

He went slowly back to the house. His daughter met him at the door.

“Why, have they gone?” she said in surprise.

“Yes—”

“But the boy, father?”

“He is to stay with us until I can send him to the States,” he told her. She saw nothing unusual in what he had done; since this kindness, for such it seemed to her, was wholly characteristic of him.

“That's just like you, father; you are always taking trouble for other people.”

“Am I? I didn't know.” He smiled at her. “Do you mind?” he added.

“No; poor little fellow. He fell asleep at the table, and I carried him up-stairs and put him to bed.”

Ephriam chuckled softly.

“I guess you're every bit as bad as I,” he said.

He seated himself on a bench by the ranch door, and fell to considering the child's story, seeking to fix some explanation to it, that would account for Young's interest in him.

Inside the house the girl came and went. Lost in thought the old man did not note the passing of time, and it was only when his daughter appeared in the doorway to tell him that supper was on the table, that he roused from his long revery, but with the problem as far as ever from solution.

“Bless me, it's almost candle-light,” he cried. “Where's the boy?”

“He's still asleep.”

“Then we'll let him be,” he said. But after they had eaten, he stole up-stairs where he found Benny still resting quietly.

"He's sleeping yet, but I'll go see him again before I go to bed," he told his daughter when he rejoined her in the room below. But when, two hours later, he mounted to Benny's room, he found him wide awake and sitting up in bed. Seeing Ephriam he smiled in friendly recognition, and sank back on the pillow.

"You've had a long sleep, Benny," said the old man. He seated himself on a low stool beside the bed, placing his candle on the floor at his feet. "Are you hungry?" he added.

"No, not a bit," said Benny.

"Benny, you're sure it was the Indians that killed your father?"

Benny instantly sat erect again.

"Did they tell you to ask me that?" he demanded, with keen suspicion.

"They? Who do you mean, child?"

"The men."

"No. They have gone; you are to stay here with me."

Benny smiled, then his face fell.

"But they'll come back for me," he said.

"No, you'll probably never see either of them again; they are going on to California."

"And I'm to stay here with you?" he asked.

"Yes—"

"For always?" he demanded eagerly.

"Yes, as long as you like."

"I shall like that—always," he declared, with an air of settled conviction.

"Could you understand what the Indians said to you, Benny?" asked Ephriam.

"Oh, yes."

"They spoke as I am speaking?"

Again the child nodded. Ephriam looked sorely puzzled.

"Hadn't you better tell me the truth, Benny?"

"But I am telling you the truth; and if I told you any different they would kill me."

"Who, child? The Indians?"

"Yes."

"Why were you afraid of those two men?"

"Because they know," said the boy promptly.

"Know what?"

"Know all about it, where my pop was killed and Mr. Landray and his brother, they know all about it—"

A light broke on Ephriam.

"Oh, I see, and you think they were with the Indians?"

Benny nodded, and answered a whispered yes to this.

"Perhaps you had better not tell any one what you have told me, Benny; but some of them were Indians?"

"Some," said Benny, still in a whisper.

Ephriam turned away.

"Wait!" cried the child. "I got something to give you." And from about his neck he unfastened a string to which was attached a small buckskin bay. "He gave me that," he said, extending the bag to Ephriam.

"Who, Benny? Your father?"

"No, Mr. Landray. He said I was to give it to some white man who'd know what to do with it. You must send it to Benson."

"And do you know where Benson is, Benny?" asked Ephriam.

"No. I've forgotten. He told me, and he told me I mustn't forget, but I have. It was where my pop came from long ago when he was a little boy like me."

Ephriam moved to the door, and the child stretched out his small limbs with a keen sense of physical comfort; an instant later he was fast asleep.

When Ephriam returned to the room below, he placed the candle on the table, drew up a chair, seated himself and opened the bag. He found that it contained nothing but papers which concerned themselves wholly with dry business details. All he gathered from his perusal of them was that they had belonged to a certain Stephen Landray.

He saw that the papers were of no actual value, and feeling convinced of this fact he was conscious of an immense sense of relief; he could withhold them, and no one would suffer because of his act.

He wondered if this Landray had been in any way involved in what he, in common with all Mormons, was wont to style the persecution of the church; for he believed just as other Mormons believed, that those inveterate enemies of the Saints who had dipped their hands in the blood of that chosen people, were doomed to a swift and terrible punishment. Such a theory satisfactorily explained Young's interest in Benny; for might it not have its origin in a wise benevolence; a wish to lift from him the guilt that had come to him as a birthright?

This was so comforting a thought that he dwelt long upon it. Suddenly, however, he was startled by hearing a sound at the outer door; it was as if some one had struck it sharply, and then a heavy object seemed to fall against it.

He hid the papers in the pocket of his coat, and snatching up the candle, hurried into the adjoining room. Midway of it he paused to listen. It might have been his fancy, but coming from beyond the closed and barred

door he thought he could distinguish the sound of whispering voices.

He unfastened the door and threw it open, and in the circle of light cast by his candle he saw a tall figure swaying loosely just beyond the threshold, while off in the distance he caught the clatter of hoofs growing less and less audible as if several mounted men were riding rapidly away.

The swaying figure moaned.

“Who is it?” demanded Ephriam.

The man attempted to answer him, but the words he would have spoken failed him; he staggered toward the door and half fell into the room. The light shone full in his face.

“My God, Tom!” cried the old man.

Tom Raymond groaned again, and collapsed into a chair.

“Licker,” he gasped. “Bring me licker—”

When this was brought him and he had drunk of it, it seemed to give him strength.

“How are you, father?” he said, with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

“What has happened to you, Tom?” asked his father.

“I been shot. Oh, I got bored pretty,” he groaned. “But I'm a heap better than I was—-where you going?”

“To call your sister.”

“You needn't. Plenty of time to see her in the morning. Give me another pull at that,” nodding toward the bottle which Ephriam still held in his hand.

“How did it happen, Tom?”

“Indians,” said Tom, speaking with difficulty. “I been in the army back at Fort Laramie, but I'm on the mend now.”

“But how did you get here in this condition?” demanded Ephriam.

“Friends brought me—was almost well, but coming in I got a fall from my horse, and my wound opened; had to lay by in camp on the Weber for a week,” he explained between gasps.

His father got him into his own room, where he propped him up on the edge of the bed and silently rendered him what aid he could in removing his clothes. Almost the first thing the wounded man did was to take from about his waist a heavy belt that gave out a metallic sound as it slipped from his weak fingers and fell to the floor.

“Pick it up, father, and shove it under my pillow. It's my savings,” he said, with a sickly nervous grin.

Once in bed, fatigue and great bodily weakness together with the generous stimulant he had taken, caused him to fall at once into a troubled doze.

Ephriam drew up a chair and seated himself at his son's bedside. Tom had been gone for over a year, and their parting had not been a friendly one; but his present anxiety made him forget all this. Tom seemed very ill to him, as he lay there pale and haggard in the light of the single candle, and though he slept he was neither silent nor motionless; he moved restlessly, with strange mutterings and chokings.

Ephriam could see the bloody, dirty bandages that swathed his right shoulder, where the collar of his shirt had been cut away, and he wondered how serious the wound was.

Suddenly he started. The name of Landray was on Tom's lips. Then the wounded man woke with a start, and seeing a look on his father's face which he did not understand, demanded:

“What am I saying, father?”

“Nothing, Tom, nothing,” said the old man brokenly. “Humph!” said Tom, and turning his face to the wall, slept again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BENSON was not mistaken. He had achieved a permanent place in Virginia Landray's regard. She had definitely accepted him, and in the exact degree in which he had wished he might be accepted. She came to rely on him as she relied on no one else; his words, his opinions, always on the one momentous subject of Stephen's return, had weight with her. He took her such maps as he could find, and together they followed the course of the gold-seekers. He dilated upon the possible obstacles and difficulties they had encountered, while making light of the dangers. Whatever could account for their silence he dwelt upon and exaggerated; and this in spite of his own growing conviction that Stephen Landray and his companions had gone to their death in that rush across the plains.

“What if she never hears from him?” he asked himself this over and over, not coldly and without calculation, but as one who might be brought face to face with an altered condition.

Virginia was young and beautiful; there would be no dearth of suitors if she were widowed. Yet, could she be made to realize, that for her, Stephen Landray and Stephen Landray's love had ceased to be, in all but memory? There was something horrible and unnatural in the thought that for her, life might cease to have any special meaning beyond passive endurance. If she had been less beautiful; less radiantly youthful; if a casual if compassionate interest had been possible where she was concerned; he might have found something in the nature of compensation in this conception of his as to what her devotion would be; now he saw it only as an unmitigated tragedy. Yet he ended by glorifying her for those very qualities that made him despair

most.

He contrasted her with Anna, for whom he was feeling nothing but contempt; a contempt, however, that was not unmixed with pity, for he realized the impermanency of her emotions; she had adjusted herself to a cheerful acceptance of the situation; they would hear from their adventurers in the spring; it was folly to expect letters now that winter had set in, and she was not going to mope.

Benson was constantly irritated by her requests for money; and when he finally refused to yield to them out of simple justice to Virginia, whose interests he felt were threatened by her extravagance, she quietly worsted him by gaining Virginia's sanction to her demands.

It was in vain that he remonstrated with the latter. She listened patiently enough to his explanation, but with an apathy that included all worldly concerns.

He was exasperated and annoyed, since the situation promised to present certain very tangible difficulties. The mill had been a dubious enterprise in the hands of Paxon, the new man. In January he was to have made his second payment, but was unable to do so, and turned back the mill. The brothers had directed that this money be used to take up their note to Mr. Stark; and Benson took up the note himself.

He showed the note to Anna the very next time she came to the office, hoping it would prove an impressive argument in favour of greater economy; but was much chagrined to find that she regarded the matter as settled, now that the note had passed out of Mr. Stark's hands into his.

“But, my dear Mrs. Landray,” he urged, “suppose anything should happen; suppose I should die suddenly; the note would be found among my papers—it might be very inconvenient, you know.”

“But you are not going to die, Mr. Benson,” said Anna cheerfully. “I have just been remarking how well you look,” and she rose reluctantly to go.

“We never know,” said the lawyer, rising with evident alacrity. He followed her to the door. Anna sighed and frowned.

“If only Bush were here, I shouldn't have to bother you; I can manage Bush, but I don't seem able to do so very much with you, Mr. Benson. I wonder why it is?” she turned to him smilingly.

“I am fortified by the necessities of the case,” he said.

“You are a very determined character; I don't wonder people have such confidence in you,” she hoped this flattery might move him, but the lawyer merely bowed. “Can't we mortgage something? Bush and Stephen were always doing that.”

“They were almost too successful, Mrs. Landray,” said Benson.

“Well, I shall see Virginia,” and Anna sighed again.

“I shall see Virginia, too,” muttered the lawyer, after Anna had taken her leave of him. “The little idiot cares for nothing but money!” and he turned back into his office again.

The house Benson occupied was on the north side of the public square. It was a two story frame structure having an ungenerous porch across the front. Everything about it spoke for a depressing utility, a meagre sufficiency. Its walls were mere husks which enclosed large barren rooms, which successfully resisted all attempts at adornment. A narrow strip of turf separated the house from the sidewalk, this was divided by a gravel walk which led from the gate to the front door; the edges of this path were bordered by whitewashed stones the size of a man's two fists.

Since his father's death, Benson had used the large double parlours as offices; a side door from the rear room, over which his modest sign was displayed, opened on Water Street; and by this door his clients came and went in steadily increasing numbers.

He had few pleasant memories of his boyhood to attach him to the place. His mother had died when he was a child; and his father, who had his own ideas about the rearing of children, had made his up-bringing stern and rigorous; he yet recalled the latter with greater awe than affection; indeed, a certain fear of the old pioneer had followed him into manhood.

He still remembered vividly his first trial; how glancing up from his brief, he had found his father's dark restless eyes fixed upon him; their coldly critical glance had filled him with something very like terror; and when he had spoken his voice faltered, and he had seen the shaven lips curl contemptuously; afterward, his father had said with that frank unsparing candour of his, “I suppose you can't help it that you are a fool, Jacob;” then he had added, “I always thought you took after your mother's folks; none of them ever amounted to much that I heard tell of.” But he had lived to reconsider this hasty judgment; he had seen his son grow steadily in men's esteem.

Old Jacob Benson had been a very rich man, his opportunities considered. The big brick warehouses on Front Street had been his, and for years he had been the principal merchant in the town.

On coming into this property, young Jacob had disposed of the store; and he was content to collect his rents from the warehouses without any speculative interest in the grain and produce they housed. He was studious and ambitious. He might have done many things with the fortune that was his, but he had preferred to remain in Benson where the very men who had distrusted his father, the men who had reason to remember him as hard and close, Had every liking for the son.

When Anna took her leave of him, the lawyer turned to his desk. He had scarcely settled himself at his work again, when a carriage drew up at the curb. Sam West was on the box, and Benson hurried into the street and was just in time to open the carriage door for Virginia.

“I have wanted to see you for several days, Mr. Benson,” she said.

“Is anything wrong? What can I do?” He had led the way into the office; now he found a chair for her.

“There is something you can do,” said Virginia, seating herself.

“What, Mrs. Landray?”

She put out her gloved hand and rested it lightly on his arm.

“It's the one thing,” she said, smiling sadly. “I want your advice now; for later I shall want your help. It will

soon be spring again, the Ohio will be open, the ice gone—”

“Yes, it can't be long now until you hear,” he prompted encouragingly. .

“But I am not going to wait to hear,” she said slowly.

“Not going to wait to hear?” he repeated, vaguely disquieted by her words and manner.

“No. I am going West to find Stephen.”

“Impossible, Mrs. Landray!” he burst out; but she checked him by a gesture, a gesture that imposed silence while it banished his objections as trivial.

“I have waited. I can wait no longer. I must know.” Her look had become one of settled determination.

“But, Mrs. Landray, pray hear me—”

“I know you will wish to dissuade me; so will Anna, and Jane, and what you will say will be prompted only by kindness; but it will be of no use, Mr. Benson. Don't you understand I shall never be satisfied unless this is done? I must hear again—even if the message is from the dead.” Her voice faltered, but she went bravely on after an instant's silence. “It is quite useless to reason with me; for this is not a matter that can be reached by reason.”

There was a long pause. Benson saw that while she was in her present mood there was nothing he could say in opposition to this plan of hers that would have any weight with her.

“I know Anna and Jane will think it foolish, so I came here to win you to my purpose first.”

“I fear you can't do that, Mrs. Landray,” and he smiled doubtfully.

“It will be possible to find the money, will it not?” And Benson regretted that Anna's extravagance had made it necessary for him to exaggerate the difficulties of raising money. He felt a sudden guilty pang that he had imposed this further burden on Virginia; he hastened to reassure her.

“I did not mean in that way,” he said.

“How, then, Mr. Benson? No—I want you to say just what you think. If you are to help me with the others you must think and believe with me.”

“But you cannot go alone, Mrs. Landray.”

She smiled superior. She was already prepared for this objection.

“No, of course not. I shall join some party. Other women have gone. In the spring other women will be going again; I will join some such party.”

He seated himself in a chair at her side.

“I know you will listen to me, even if you had rather not hear what I am going to say; but have you really considered the difficulties, the hardships, the actual dangers?” he asked.

“They are nothing, compared with what I am suffering now,” she said simply. He hurried on.

“If you will only wait, you may hear from him. Indeed you must make up your mind to wait until the river opens; you cannot start until then. I beg of you wait just a little longer; pray don't misunderstand me, I am not going to oppose any project you may have set your heart upon; that would be quite without my province.”

“Then you really think I should go—”

“No, Mrs. Landray, I can scarcely conceive—you will pardon me for saying it—a more ill-advised undertaking; but I think you will see it this way, too, when I have pointed out some of the difficulties.”

Virginia's face fell.

“I will do anything to help you,” he went on warmly. “But how can your quest prove conclusive? You will be a member of some party whose whole interest will be to cross the plains as quickly as possible. They will not want to stop to prosecute such a search; and do you realize the magnitude of such a task? You will have to cross hundreds of miles of desert, and explore a region that will some day be divided into seven or eight States larger than Ohio.”

“Men can be hired to go where I can not,” said Virginia reluctantly. Then she drew herself up imperiously, “I have thought of all you say, Mr. Benson, and in spite of obstacles the means of success will not be lacking, I am sure of that.”

There was a long silence. Benson rose and paced the floor. Virginia watched him gravely.

“It will be possible for you to raise sufficient money?” she asked at last. “I shall need a large sum.”

“I beg your pardon—oh, yes,” when she had repeated her question. Benson paused in his rapid walk.

“I suppose you know how absolutely helpless you will be,” he said. “How dependent on mere chance kindness, on mercenary interest, Mrs. Landray? I appreciate your heroism—it is beautiful—believe me I am not unmindful of that; but it is altogether impractical. If any one goes, a man must go. A man who will be superior to chance kindness or purchased interest, who can conduct the search himself from beginning to end, and who will not have to trust any one.”

“But where could I find such a man?”

The lawyer's face flushed.

“Would you trust me, Mrs. Landray?”

“You—Mr. Benson?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” rising and going quickly to his side. “You are not serious, you could not go; so many people need you here!”

“They can very well get along without me,” he said shortly.

She searched his face eagerly; there was a faint wistful smile on her lips. It was plain she was uncertain as to how she might take his words.

“I am quite in earnest, Mrs. Landray,” he said. “You could trust me.”

"Oh, yes—implicitly."

A swift sense of joy came to him. He was about to do a very foolish thing; but the fact that it would be for her, dignified the folly; it became desirable, a privilege.

"But can you go?" doubtfully.

"Why not?" and he laughed boyishly. "What's to keep me if I wish to go? However, you must understand that I am making a promise that future events will probably render void; so you need not thank me, since I can't think I'll have the opportunity to earn your thanks."

"But I do thank you!"

"And you agree to my going if it's necessary?" he questioned eagerly.

She looked at him doubtingly.

"I wonder when you speak so confidently of my hearing from Stephen in the spring, how much is conviction, how much kindness—the wish to put from me till the last moment a terrible, hopeless knowledge?"

His glance wavered under the intensity of the look she fixed upon him; he could not meet her eyes.

"I know you mean to be very kind, Mr. Benson. Your friendship has been my greatest comfort, and now you will make this sacrifice; I fear I am very selfish in allowing it, but don't you understand? This is the last, the only thing I can do; after this, there is nothing—nothing—everything will have ended for me; and so, in my extremity, I am willing to let you go for me."

"Don't say that, Mrs. Landray!" he cried. "Nothing really ends; in some form or another the thing we cherish lives on."

"But what will be left for me?" she asked simply; and he was silent.

It was all so recent, but later when time should have done its merciful work, some peace of mind would surely come to her; he could not believe that this tragedy could be wholly tragic.

"When I go," he said gently, "I shall want you to believe that I shall leave nothing undone that devotion and singleness of purpose can suggest, or money accomplish. But we must wait a little longer; you will be patient, Mrs. Landray?"

"Haven't I been patient?" and she raised her sad eyes to his. "I only wonder how I have lived through the winter. Can you conceive anything more awful—some one you love, who is all in all to you; and for that person to take his living, breathing presence out of your life, and never to hear, never to know, only to wonder; to go on from fear to fear—"

"Yes," he cried generously. "God knows, you have been patient, Mrs. Landray; but I only ask you to wait until we shall have had time to hear; until the river and western travel opens. Then if you do not hear from him, I will start at once. We will end this suspense. The more I think of it, the more it seems the reasonable thing to do."

And now that he was determined to make this journey for her, he glowed with a generous enthusiasm. If Stephen Landray still lived he would bring to her the tidings, and would find it in his heart to rejoice with her.

"But I wonder if it is right of me to allow you to do this," and her face was troubled. "Perhaps my first idea, to go myself, was best."

"No, Mrs. Landray, you will wait here until I bring you word of him. Your idea was beautiful and devoted, but the very fact that you are a woman would stand in your way. So if any one goes, I must go. You can trust to my devotion, my friendship, where you could not trust another whose interest you had merely purchased. I shall go single hearted to find him; that will be my sole purpose."

He felt exalted by the sacrifice to which he was committed. He wished it might be greater; then it would be the more worthy of her.

"I can only think of him as ill, with some terrible illness, or—or—" and speech failed her.

"I know," he said softly.

"I wish you could know all you have been to me; the comfort you have given. I don't mean now, I mean since that night when you brought me the letter." She rose as she spoke and gathered her wraps about her.

"It is nothing—nothing," he assured her, as he walked with her to her carriage.

"I will be patient," she said as she bade him good-bye. "And though you will not hear of it, I am aware of the sacrifice you will be making for his sake."

"For his sake," repeated Benson slowly, as the carriage rolled away; and he turned back in the twilight that had fallen, and reentered the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I WONDER if she will never understand!" Benson asked himself, as he stood by the window and watched the carriage roll across the square and disappear down Main Street.

With the twilight, silence had fallen also; not that the town ever expressed itself with any accumulated volume of sound, but the score of teams that had stood hitched by the curb all day while their owners traded or gossiped, were now seeking the lonely country roads that led toward home.

In the half light, Benson saw vaguely outlined, the court-house, the jail, two newspaper offices, four dry-

goods stores, one grocery, two saloons, and the tavern; the mere externals of middle West civilization at the end of the first half of the nineteenth century. Along the fences, in the gutters, and beneath the sheltering eaves of the houses, were dirty patches of melting snow and ice; mud and slush filled the street, and over all, between the changing grey clouds, the rising moon sent a faint uncertain radiance.

The winter was almost at an end. If he went West it must be soon. He sought to recall all that had been said, and all that he, carried away by the stress of his own emotions—his pity, and his love, had promised Virginia.

“And people call me shrewd and capable! Well, one thing, it will never profit me,” he mused sadly. “She will never forget him. She's the sort of woman who doesn't forget; I must bear that in mind.” The conviction had come to him slowly and reluctantly that Stephen Landray and his brother and their companions had perished; for this was the only theory that could explain their silence. It had been either the Indians or the cholera; and the entire party must have been destroyed or they would have heard from the survivers. The wealth of the train, and the money Stephen and his brother had in their possession, might have induced dishonesty; but he was unwilling to believe that either Walsh, or Dunlevy, or Bingham, could have been guilty of the crime of silence if anything had happened to the brothers; of Rogers he felt he knew nothing.

“Stephen's dead; of course, he's dead.” Then his memory reverted to her gratitude when he had told her he would go, and his heart leaped again with a swift intoxicating sense of joy. Yes, he would go for her gladly—and perhaps—

The office door opened, and the lawyer turning quickly from the window confronted a muffled figure.

“Are you quite alone, Jake?” and the voice was strangely familiar.

“Quite,” said the lawyer. “But who the dickens are you?”

The man laughed, and pulling off his cap, smoothed his hair and turned down the collar of his ulster; and Benson had the uncertain pleasure of gazing on Captain Gibb's flushed and florid face.

“Well, how are you, Jake?” said that worthy, easily.

“What has brought you back?” demanded the lawyer with some sternness.

“Some damn bad roads, and hard travel,” said the captain; he moved a step nearer and half extended his hand.

“There,” said Benson scornfully, “I don't need to shake hands with you.”

“Not if you feel that way about it, you don't;” and the captain laughed shortly, but he added, “Oh, come now, Jake, don't you be so high and mighty.”

He went to the fireplace and threw on a fresh log; the fire leaped up and its light filled the room. Benson gazed at him with some interest.

“That's better,” said Gibbs cheerfully. “We can see to talk now.”

“What do you want, Gibbs? What brings you skulking back?”

“You're making it very difficult for me to keep my temper, Jake,” said the captain blandly. “I didn't skulk. Can't you guess why I am here?”

“No.”

“Oh, try again, Jake, you didn't half try.”

“I am too indifferent to try,” retorted Benson. “You deserve—”

“Never mind what I deserve,” interposed the captain with a touch of sullenness.

“I was merely going to observe in a general way, that a coat of tar and feathers would not be unappropriate; and Tucker had a good many friends who probably think the same.”

The captain shifted his position before the fire, but his face turned a trifle pale.

“I came here to see about my wife's property.”

“Your wife? I didn't know you had a wife.”

“Well I have,” doggedly. “It's a damn funny thing you can't understand who I mean when I say my wife.”

“Then you have married her?”

Gibbs hitched his chin higher at this.

“I'm a man of honour,” he said briefly.

“Oh, are you!” retorted the lawyer contemptuously.

“Are you prepared to dispute it?” demanded Gibbs truculently. “It's hardly worth disputing,” said Benson. “But you haven't told me why you've come to see me.”

“Haven't I? Well, I hardly thought that would be necessary,” said the captain smilingly. In the main he was a cheerful person, and his resentments were for the most part short lived. “You were Tucker's lawyer, weren't you?”

“Oh, I see!” and the two men looked at each other in silence for a moment; then Benson spoke again.

“You say you have married Mrs. Tucker; I'll take your word for that when you produce the proofs.”

Captain Gibbs again laughed shortly, and took a large leather pocket-book from an inner pocket of his coat, and from one of its many compartments drew forth a folded slip of paper.

“Here they are,” he said.

Benson with great deliberation lighted a taper at the fire, and then the candles on the mantel; then he took the folded slip of paper from Gibbs and leisurely examined it.

“The lady's to be congratulated,” he observed sarcastically. “Thanks,” said the captain sententiously. “I am not mistaken, am I, in supposing that you were Mr. Tucker's lawyer at the time of his death?”

“No.”

“Did he leave a will?”

“He did.”

“As—as Mrs. Tucker's husband, have you any objection to telling me how he disposed of his property; and its extent?”

“Not the least in the world.”

There was another pause. The captain was waiting for Benson to go on; but Benson was silent.

“To whom was the property left?” Gibbs questioned.

“To your wife.” Benson suddenly handed back the paper the captain had given him. “Here, take this, I don't want it,” he said.

“How much did he leave?” inquired Gibbs, with illy-concealed eagerness.

“About fifteen thousand dollars.”

“You don't say! And it all goes to her?”

“Yes.”

Gibbs moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

“I didn't know the old fellow was so well off,” he said at last.

Benson shrugged his shoulders. The sordidness of the whole affair disgusted him.

“You don't ask any questions about her—I mean Mrs. Gibbs.”

“I am not curious.”

“Oh, come, she's a relative of yours, and the very last thing she said to me was, 'Tell Jake I am quite happy."'

But Benson seemed quite untouched by this mark of affection.

“Naturally you'll take an interest in her affairs.”

“Naturally I'll take in them no interest at all,” said Benson with much deliberation.

“A very uncousinly attitude on your part; and one to be deplored,” responded the captain, smiling and unabashed.

“Where is Mrs. Tucker?” asked Benson.

“Mrs. Gibbs,” corrected the captain reproachfully.

“Mrs. Gibbs, then—where is she?”

“She is in St. Louis,” said the captain. “We didn't know of Tucker's death until a month ago. Lucky we heard of it when we did, for if we hadn't, we should have been on our way to California as soon as the season opened; this will change our plans. There is no use going to California for what we can get nearer at hand, and with much less trouble; and it won't come amiss; your cousin is altogether lacking in Benson thrift.”

“She is not a Benson.”

“Well, that's so, too,” admitted the captain.

He stared into the fire in silence for a moment; a smile hovered about the comers of his mouth. He was thinking of this windfall, old Tucker's money, as he squinted and blinked at the dancing flames. At last he roused from his revery; a sigh of deep content burst from his swelling chest.

“I suppose it will be best for her to dispose of the property here?” he said.

The lawyer nodded slightly. Gibbs laughed.

“Oh, come now, Jake, wherever he is, Tuckers all right; God Almighty makes it up to the losers, I'm Christian enough to think that; so you'd better thaw out and take stock with the living. I'm happy clean through! I'd be an infernal cheat to pretend otherwise.”

“What do you wish me to do?” asked Benson coldly.

“Oh, come nearer to the fire, or your words will freeze to your lips. Let out a tuck in your morals, man; be human; be glad with me!”

“What do you wish me to do?” repeated Benson sternly.

“Wishing don't seem to do any good,” said the captain plaintively. “In enlightened society, to be the father of a baby, to be elected to a public office, or to inherit money—means whisky.”

“Not here,” said Benson shortly.

“So I discover,” said the captain. “The customs of refined society are in abeyance here. Next time I come, I'll bring a jug.”

“If there is a next time,” said Benson angrily. “That poor old man you led to his death was my friend—”

“You needn't rub that in,” said Gibbs, his cheeks paling. “Do you suppose I'd have let him drown if I'd known what was going on? I didn't know it until months afterward. Don't speak of that again, I won't have it!”

The two men glared at each other, but Gibbs was the first to recover his temper; the ruddy tint came back to his cheeks.

“Well, since we can't drink, suppose we talk about the tavern and distillery. Do you think you can find a purchaser for them?” he asked.

“Yes.”

The captain spread his coat tails before the fire and beamed on Benson. He seemed in no haste to take his leave.

“I don't admire your manners, Jake, but I do respect your business ability. I suppose some correspondence will be necessary with Mrs. Gibbs touching these matters?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” said the captain, “I'd better get back to St. Louis. I'll have to ask you to look out for her interests here. I don't bear malice. I put it all down to youth and inexperience. One of these days you'll master the

great moral truth that there ain't any good in what's fun for you, and that there ain't any fun in what's good for you. I've cut my cloth accordingly.” He mused in silence for a moment, and then asked suddenly, “What do you hear from the Landrays?”

“We hear nothing,” said Benson briefly.

“That's odd,” and the captain fell silent again.

“Have Mrs. Gibbs inform me of her wishes,” said Benson, desiring to be rid of his caller.

“Oh, yes, but hold on, I was thinking about the Landrays. I didn't tell you, did I, that before we heard of Tucker's death, we'd gone up to St. Joseph; while there I fell in with a trapper in the employ of the American Fur Company—a French Canadian named LaTour—he had some fine beaver skins that Mrs. Gibbs was anxious I should buy for her; well, I didn't buy them, funds were too low; but I did make one purchase of him, and you'll never guess what it was! It was a sheath-knife with Stephen Landray's name cut in the horn handle.”

And now Benson was deeply interested; he forgot all about his righteous contempt for the captain, in his eagerness to learn more.

“Did you ask the trapper how he came by the knife?” he demanded.

“Naturally. LaTour said he had lost his own knife, and had bought this one of a Mormon freighter he met in the mountains near Salt Lake.”

“But did you learn how the knife came to be in possession of this Mormon?” asked Benson.

“Why, no. LaTour asked him no questions. I suppose Stephen must have lost the knife; it probably dropped out of its sheath, you know.”

“I dare say;” and Benson turned this over in his mind; he felt that it was a matter to be carefully thought out. For one thing, it meant that his search need not begin east of Salt Lake, and this was a very important point. He was grateful to Gibbs; and his manner became almost friendly.

“How long do you expect to remain here?” he asked.

Gibbs laughed uneasily.

“I left the stage at Columbus and hired a man to drive me over,” he explained. “I guess I'd better go back there the first thing in the morning. You were unkind enough to suggest tar and feathers; the hint wasn't wasted.”

“Perhaps I was a little severe, Gibbs,” said Benson grudgingly. “But you know she is my cousin.”

“I'm delighted at the connection,” and the captain bowed.

“Well, what are you going to do?” asked Benson.

“I was going to one of the taverns; but I guess that's hardly safe. Oh, I'll put in the night somehow.”

Benson hesitated a moment, and then he said:

“You'd better have supper with me, and spend the night here. I'll drive you back about day. You'll run no risk.” And he led the way into the dining-room, while his guest followed him with a hangdog look on his face. This unexpected kindness effected him more deeply than all Benson's previous contempt; and the man's heart was touched.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BENSON began his preparations for the journey West with some reluctance, and it was well into May before he felt he could even fix on a date for his departure; but one morning Sam West brought him a brief note from Virginia that made him repent the weeks he had wasted.

She feared he was finding his promise impossible of fulfillment. Would he not forget that he had ever made such a promise, and tell her what steps it would be necessary to take to raise money sufficient for her to make the journey.

This note resulted in immediate action on Benson's part. He saw Judge Bradly and told him he expected to leave for California the first of the following week; then he drove at once to the farm to inform Virginia of his decision.

When he reached the farm he found Virginia and Jane, with Jane's baby, seated under an old apple-tree that grew by the corner of the house. He had tied his horse in the lane by the bars; and as he crossed the yard toward them Virginia advanced to meet him.

“You received my note?” she asked, as they shook hands.

“Yes, and your doubt of me was not unmerited. I must have seemed horribly dilatory to you; but my plans are all made; I shall start this day week. I can understand that to you I have seemed to go forward very slowly in this matter.”

“Did I seem very impatient?” asked Virginia humbly; but he saw there were depths of suffering back of the light his words had kindled in her eyes; and his conscience troubled him not a little that he had withheld the comfort his departure on this mission of his, would have given her.

“Not in the least, I am fully alive to your anxiety; your patience has been greater than I expected,” he assured her.

“I fear I am too willing to let you go; but I shall never forget, Mr. Benson—never, as long as I live!” and she

raised her beautiful face to his with a look of gratitude that went beyond mere words.

"I am ashamed," he burst out generously, "to have let anything detain me."

"It has been my terrible anxiety that has made the days so slow in passing. Won't you come and see Jane and the baby?—why, you have never seen the baby, Mr. Benson!" with a poor attempt at gaiety.

But a pall was upon the three. Jane greeted him with a pathetic gentleness of manner that was meant to take the place of the words she dared not speak. He turned from her only to meet Virginia's laboured cheerfulness; and he was troubled and ill at ease; yet he made a tolerable success of maintaining that air of judicial composure in which he usually took refuge when he came near to suffering. He even made certain tentative and austere attempts at playfulness with the baby; and then he drifted into small talk which he felt to be as leaden as it was small. When at last he rose to take his leave he said to Mrs. Walsh:

"I hope I shall come back with good news for you," and he held out his hand in farewell. His words brought them sharply back to the actualities. Jane looked up quickly from the sewing which her small hands now clutched despairingly.

"Good-bye!" and then a low cry broke from her. "You will bring them back?" and her tears began to fall.

"I shall try," he said gravely. "But we must all be hopeful." Then he looked into Virginia's serious eyes, and caught the tremor of her lips; and was silent. What right had he to speak his senseless platitudes; he who was on the outside of all this sorrow?

He turned away; Virginia followed him, and they moved in silence across the lawn. It was Virginia who spoke first.

"You will write me as each stage of your journey is finished; won't you, Mr. Benson? And you will leave nothing undone? You will not come back until you know?" She dwelt upon the last word with almost tragic insistence. Her wistful glance searched his face. "Forgive me, I know I have no right to question it, but you will not rest content until you have exhausted every source from which knowledge may be gleaned? Days and weeks, even months, will not count with you?"

"Neither weeks nor months shall count with me. I shall do all that money and devotion can do. I shall not turn back until I know," he said simply.

"I am sure of it, Mr. Benson; and I thank you again and again!"

"I shall go direct to Fort Laramie," he said. "We know they have reached there in safety; from there on I shall ransack the country for news of them. I may be able to send you letters after I leave Fort Laramie; I will if I meet any parties of returning emigrants. At any rate you will hear from me when I reach Salt Lake. If I find they passed through Salt Lake, I shall push on to the coast, and pursue my search in the various mining camps; at least, this is the plan I have decided upon; but when I get West, I may find it advisable to take a somewhat different course; but you will understand."

"I shall know you are doing all any one can do, Mr. Benson."

"The arrangement I have made with Judge Bradly admits of an indefinite absence on my part. I shall not be hurried; I shall take my time, and leave nothing undone that holds the shadow of a hope. You will need money before I return, and you are to go to the judge for that; your affairs are temporarily in his hands. There is just one thing I beg of you; don't let your sister take advantage of your kindness in money matters. Bush provided for her, and there is absolutely no reason why you should make sacrifices, or continue those you have already made."

"I will remember."

"I am glad to hear you say that. I hate injustice, I hate to see you the victim of it."

"Have I been? It has all seemed so unimportant; but perhaps I have done wrong. I shall remember all you have said to me."

"I wish you would," he said. "And another matter, you have not told Mrs. Walsh just how matters stand with her, about that brother-in-law of hers?"

Virginia shook her head.

"I haven't had the courage."

Benson gave a sigh of relief.

"I am glad you haven't. Well, let her go to the judge, too, he understands; it will be all right."

"You are very generous,-Mr. Benson."

He reddened at this.

"Oh, no, it's not that. What I may do is nothing to what you are doing; and I still reproach myself with that."

"But you needn't. It has given me something to do, something to think of."

They had reached the lane. He vaulted lightly over the low bars, and from the other side held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Landray; I shall be very busy until I go, and unless you need me, it is doubtful if I find time to come out here again."

"How shall you go?" she asked.

"By stage to Portsmouth."

"And when?"

"This day week."

There was a pause; then Virginia said slowly.

"I shall miss you, Mr. Benson. I begin to understand how dependent your kindness has made me."

"You are to go to the judge for everything, you know?" he said. "Advice, and all that. You'll find him very kind."

"Yes—but I do not think he can take your place."

An unexpected joy shone in Benson's face.

Virginia's glance sought the wooded heights of Landray's Hill. There she had seen the last of Stephen Landray. Now a long line of freight wagons was just disappearing about the turn in the road where months before she had caught the flutter of his handkerchief. She pressed her hand to her heart. What had she been thinking of, why had she let him go? Even then she might have stopped him; it was not too late—but she had let him go. She rested her arms on the bars, while uncontrollable sobs shook her.

Benson watched her, white-faced and miserable, and with a bitter sense of the futility of words. A puff of wind showered the bowed head with the petals of the apple blossoms, which caught among the masses of her hair. For a moment Benson looked with all the hunger of his love in his eyes; and then he turned away.

He had begun to unfasten his horse when a hand was placed upon his arm, and Virginia was smiling on him through her tears.

“If I am not to see you again, I want to thank you once more for what you are doing for us.”

“It is nothing,” he assured her. “Please don't think of it.”

“But I do, I must, perhaps I am very cruel and heartless to allow you to go. If it was dangerous for them, it is equally dangerous for you. Suppose something should happen to you—I should have this to reproach myself with to the end of my days.”

“But nothing will happen to me!” and he laughed confidently, but she regarded him with questioning gravity. It occurred to her that he was very young, and that perhaps she had taken advantage of this quality of youth, and generous enthusiasm. She felt a pang of remorse at the thought.

“Please don't worry about me, Mrs. Landray,” he said. “Or I shall be quite desperate,” but he was too sane to misinterpret her interest; he accepted it at its full value; his vanity added nothing to it. But the next moment she had forgotten him.

“You will not neglect to write?” she repeated anxiously.

He understood the change, and, oddly enough was relieved by it.

“No, Mrs. Landray, you shall hear from me as often as you could wish.”

He held out his hand again.

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

She stood watching him as he rode down the lane; and she was still watching him when he turned from the lane into the road.

Benson was as good as his word. Just one week later he left by stage for Columbus. From there he went to Portsmouth, still by stage, where he took a fast river packet for St. Louis. Arrived at St. Louis he first established himself at a hotel and then hunted up Gibbs, whom he finally located in a dingy room over a grocery store. A sign announced it to be a “Printing Office,” and when he had mounted a long, and exceedingly steep flight of stairs, he found himself in a small room, furnished with a desk, two chairs, and a dictionary; while in a larger room that opened off from it were presses and tables. In the far corner of the larger room he descried an inky youth who was busy setting type; to him Benson made his presence known.

“You want the colonel? Well, I'll have him here in no time.” And he stuck his head out of the open window at his elbow, and called to some one in the street below.

“Hi, there! Just step round to the licker store in the next block and ask Colonel Gibbs to step this way! Gentleman wants to see him! It's right handy for him,” he explained to the lawyer.

“So it's Colonel Gibbs?” said the latter smiling.

“Yes, sir, Colonel Gibbs.”

“Since when?” asked Benson.

The youth seemed to regard this as an excellent joke.

“I reckon he was born that way,” he answered facetiously.

Here they were interrupted by a vociferous protest from the street, and the youth again stuck his head out of the window.

“You say he ain't there? Did you look for him good?” he demanded being assured on this point he requested the person in the street to go over to James's drug store. “I shouldn't wonder if he ain't playing checkers there,” he added.

This quest proved successful, for two minutes later the captain, wearing an air of cheerful and contented prosperity, bustled into the room.

“Bless me! Is it you, Jake?” he cried in astonishment, on seeing whom his visitor was.

Benson's greeting was curt but civil.

“Where are you stopping?” asked Gibbs. “And what are you doing here, anyhow? Not that it is any of my business, for it ain't.”

Benson briefly explained the nature of the mission that was taking him West, and as he did so, the captain rubbed the tip of his nose with his forefinger, regarding him the while with a growing wonder.

“Have a drink?” he demanded, when the lawyer had finished.

“No.”

“Signed the pledge?”

“No.”

“Oh! Joined the Infant Bands of Hope?”

Benson smiled at this sally, and the captain laughed.

“So you're going to find Stephen Landray?” he said, suddenly checking his mirth. “Considering the size of your contract, you take it easy enough, but I guess you don't know what you're in for.”

“Have you still that knife, Gibbs?”

“Yes, it's in my desk here.”

“I'd like to look at it if you have no objection.”

“Not the least in the world,” and he produced it from the disorder of a pigeonhole. Benson took it and examined it.

“I wish you'd give me this,” he said.

“Want it for yourself?”

Benson shook his head.

“Well, present it to her as coming from me, will you?”

“Certainly,” and Benson slipped the blade back into the sheath, and the sheath into his pocket. Gibbs watched him with a smile that constantly widened.

“So you are going across the plains to look for Stephen Landray?” he observed drily.

“Yes.”

“Interested in finding any of the others of the party?” asked the captain.

“I am as much interested in the others as I am in him,” said Benson quickly.

“Oh, no you ain't, you don't give more than a casual damn about the others. I can tell you why you're going—no—you don't want me to? Well, I'll tell you anyhow; she asked you to.” He shook his finger playfully in Benson's face. “Oh, fie—fie, my dear young friend, and you would have me think your motive purely disinterested.”

Benson shrugged his shoulders, and said rather sternly:

“I'm sorry you find it difficult to believe in my disinterestedness.”

The captain closed one eye, he was in a most jocular mood.

“Not for a beautifully sane character like you, Jake; there's a lake down in Georgia that's six miles across and four inches deep, but you ain't like that lake; there's a good deal of your father in you. It will come out one of these days, and when it does you will take the skin right off of people's backs, and you will do it without a pang.”

“Thanks,” said Benson.

“Don't mention it,” retorted the captain airily. “It ain't worth while. I can't let you claim all the virtues, something's due fallen humanity.”

“I have disposed of the tavern for Julia.” The lawyer was willing to change the subject.

“First the man of sentiment, now the man of affairs.” And Gibbs beamed upon him. “How much will it fetch?”

“Four thousand dollars. I have brought the papers for Julia to sign.”

The captain beamed upon him afresh.

“That's good; but before I forget it I want to tell you a thing or two that may be of use to you. You don't quite like me yet, but you'll like me better when you know me better, and meantime I am going to serve you in several ways, all touching this mission of yours. I happen to know a trader who is outfitting for Fort Bridger; I am going to introduce you to him and you can cross the plains with him. My advice is that you begin your search at Salt Lake; that knife was purchased of a freighter who was coming out, so Stephen must have reached Salt Lake, or some point near there. If he passed through the city he must have had dealings with the Mormons; you may find some one who will remember him.”

“Yes,” said Benson, “you are working it out just about as I worked it out. I am glad to have your opinion,” he concluded frankly.

“Now we'll go to the house and see Julia,” said Gibbs. “It isn't far, and then I'll take you to the tavern where the trader I spoke of is stopping; that's not far either.”

To Benson, this meeting with his cousin was an embarrassing ordeal, for she received him with an effusive cordiality that was quite unexpected, and to which he found it next to impossible to respond, but Gibbs came at once to his rescue. He fell to explaining the purpose that had brought him West, and with a secret relish and a significance of manner that made Benson's cheeks redden with anger. Mrs. Gibbs, however, was, fortunately, quite oblivious to his meaning, and his studied reiteration of Stephen Landray's name conveyed no idea to her; she evidently accepted her cousin's mission at its face value, a fact which only added to the captain's amusement. When Gibbs finally subsided, Benson quickly concluded his business, and announced that he was ready to go in search of the trader.

“Rodney, my dear,” explained the captain.

“Such a nice man, Jacob; I'll go, too, and ask him to take the best of care of you,” said Mrs. Gibbs.

Benson entered a feeble protest; he was mainly concerned in wishing to escape from this rascally pair, but the captain cut his protest short by saying:

“Then hurry into your bonnet, Julia, for Jake's got no time to spare.”

And presently they emerged upon the street, accompanied by Mrs. Gibbs, resplendent as to dress, and affectionately leaning on the captain's arm, the very picture of wifely devotion. The moral squalor of the pair moved Benson to a disgust so deep that he found it necessary to cloak his sense of outraged decency in a lofty silence.

They found Rodney lodged at a small tavern near the outskirts of the city. To him Gibbs explained the case, and introduced Benson, and the black browed trader professed himself as delighted at the prospect of the latter's company.

“When do you start?” asked Benson.

“At daybreak to-morrow,” answered Rodney.

“You'll need a horse and arms,” said Gibbs. “We'll go buy them now, and you'd better arrange to sleep here

to-night."

"Indeed, he'll do nothing of the kind," expostulated Mrs. Gibbs.

"My dear, I'm thinking only of his comfort," said the captain meekly. "He'll spend the evening with us." And to this the helpless Benson yielded a reluctant assent, but he saw an end to the civilities they were thrusting upon him; this fact alone made the situation tolerable.

Gibbs was a real help, however; he knew the proprietor of a stockyard who had for sale just such a horse as Benson would require, and to this man's place of business the three now repaired, where the captain drove a sharp bargain, and secured what afterward proved to be a most serviceable animal; next he selected a saddle and a rifle and two pistols, and then he relinquished Benson to Mrs. Gibbs, who shopped industriously in half a dozen stores in his interest, and with such vigour and decision that at the end of two hours she had accumulated what her husband declared to be an entirely adequate outfit. By way of a gift, Julia added a case of needles and thread and the captain, not to be outdone, a drinking flask, and the purchases were bundled up and a negro dispatched with them to the tavern, there to await Benson's arrival.

While this questionable pair had been exerting themselves in his behalf, Benson's righteous disapproval of them had slowly dissipated itself. There was something bohemian and reckless about them, a suggestion of easy improvidence, a joyous freedom from responsibility, that was new to him. The captain, swaggering much, his hat cocked well over one ear, and with manfully swelling chest under a vivid velvet vest, twirled a light walking-stick with happy nonchalance. He was assertive and noisy, perhaps, but eminently good-natured. Benson smiled and wondered. Evidently the next best thing to having a good conscience was to have no conscience at all. And Julia, with her fine eyes and clear skin, a handsome, dashing figure, cousined him with a confiding affection that quite disarmed him; he couldn't approve, but they seemed happy and well satisfied with each other; and he allowed them to bear him back to their home in triumph.

It was quite late when he reached the tavern, whither the captain had insisted on accompanying him, and as they shook hands cordially at parting, the latter said:

"I'll see you in the morning, Jake, so I won't say good-bye now."

"I wish you wouldn't bother, Gibbs, it will be very early, you know."

"I shan't mind that, Jake. I'm going to see you off."

Before Benson went to bed that night he wrote to Virginia, and arranged his purchases, stowing them away in the canvas packs he had bought for that purpose; then he undressed and stretched himself out on the bed.

It was barely dawn, and he seemed to have slept but an hour or so, when he heard Rodney pounding on his door, bidding him be stirring. He dressed by candle-light, and hurried downstairs, where he found the trader and his two Mexican packers already at breakfast.

In the inn yard their horses were being saddled and the heavy packs with which the trader's mules were to be freighted were ready to be strapped to the backs of the animals.

When they had finished their breakfast, Benson followed Rodney into the yard. As he swung himself into the saddle the lawyer felt he was about to turn his back on the decorous, and, as he would have expressed it, the civilized life of the East, and he gave a last thought to his clients, and hoped the judge would do his best by them.

But he had no sooner left the yard than he dismounted hastily, for there, hurrying up the street, was the captain and Mrs. Gibbs.

"She would come, Jake!" panted the captain. "I told her you wouldn't expect it, but she would come!"

"It was very kind of you," said Benson, "but I don't know that I deserved it."

"Law!" cried Mrs. Gibbs briskly. "Do you think I'd let you go off like this without seeing the last of you?" and she bestowed a vigorous embrace upon him.

"I fear I'm keeping them waiting," said Benson. "Good-bye, Gibbs—good-bye, Julia—God bless you both! I shall see you when I return. Good-bye." He kissed Mrs. Gibbs, shook hands warmly with the captain, and mounted his horse again.

Now that he was really going, and the parting over with, Mrs. Gibbs wept copiously, while the captain endeavoured to console her.

As he rode away after Rodney, Benson looked back more than once, and saw them move slowly off up the street, arm in arm; the captain with expanding chest and twirling cane, and Mrs. Gibbs still plying her handkerchief; and this was the last he saw of them in many a long day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BENSON arrived in Salt Lake City in August. After three days of unsuccessful investigation he sought an interview with Governor Young, at his office. He was ushered into a plain, businesslike room, where he saw a large man with a handsome, florid face, seated before a desk littered with papers. He rose instantly as the lawyer entered the room.

"Mr. Benson?" he said inquiringly.

"Yes—this is Governor Young?" he was rather at a loss to know how to address this dignitary, whose peculiar functions were about evenly divided between the religious and civil; this ex-painter and glazier who, to some thousands of his fellows was a god in his own right, as well as prophet and ruler; who ran mills, and

sold cordwood, or dealt in groceries; and who, in the midst of these activities found time to balk and insult a weak, vacillating Government at Washington, and drive its representatives out of the State he had founded in the desert, when they chanced to fall under his displeasure, as they were sure to do if they attempted to enforce the law they had been sent thither to uphold.

Standing there, square and broad, full personed and vital, with his ruddy cheeks and square chin, he looked the man he was; capable, magnetic, determined, and not too weakly scrupulous, perhaps not scrupulous at all.

Each devoted a moment to the scrutiny of the other.

“Well, sir, how can I be of use to you?” asked Young.

“I hardly know that you can be,” said Benson. “It's a chance, and I fear a remote one; still, I am very grateful to you for granting me this audience.”

“Have a seat,” said the governor.

“I am not intruding on your time?”

“Not in the least. Now, sir?”

When they had seated themselves. “I have come from Ohio,” explained Benson, “and on what, I begin to fear, is a hopeless quest.” And as briefly as possible he told his story. Once or twice he fancied that Young started, or it might have been that he merely moved in his chair; but he paid him the compliment of the closest attention and his interest did not relax until Benson had concluded his narrative.

Then he asked sharply: “What reason have you to suppose that I can help you?” and he watched the effect of this question, but Benson met his glance quite frankly as he answered:

“None. But it is my hope that you can, that you may be willing to exert yourself in my behalf.”

“But how?” demanded Young.

“That I hardly know,” said Benson reluctantly. “Unless you can aid me to find the freighter from whom Stephen Landray's knife was purchased.”

“A great many of our people are engaged in transporting supplies and colonists across the plains.”

“Perhaps you will suggest a more direct method; I confess I am finding myself rather at a loss in the matter.”

“I suppose you are aware that your friends might have been stricken with the cholera, for instance; or the Indians may have killed them; or they may have gone astray on the plains and so lost their lives; or they may have been made prisoners by the Indians, may even now be prisoners? Or,” continued Young, “for reasons of their own they may wish you to think something of this sort has happened, and at this moment be alive and well in California.”

“That,” said Benson, “is quite impossible. If they are alive their families would have heard from them.”

“Their families? Men sometimes forget,” and the governor's short upper lip curled unpleasantly.

“Some men might, not these.”

“Had they much money with them?”

“Yes, a large sum,” and he added, seeing the drift of Young's mind, “but only a small part of what they might have brought. The leaders of the party were men of ample means.”

“Then something must have happened to them; men don't abandon money.”

Benson ignored this; but it occurred to him that Young was probably speaking now in his worldly capacity, and that his worldly views were very worldly indeed; the views of one who neither trusted nor respected men.

“I will tell you what I will do,” said Young. “If they got as far as Salt Lake they must have had business dealings with some of our people. I can have inquiries made, if you will furnish me with a description of these men.”

“I have already been to the stores and shops,” said Benson.

“I will extend the inquiries beyond the city. Meantime I've a man here who may be of use to you,” said Young after a moment's thought.

He called to the clerk in the outer office, but before the latter answered the summons, he changed his mind.

“I'll fetch him myself,” he said, and left the room.

He was gone, perhaps, ten minutes, and then returned, accompanied by a heavy set man of not especially prepossessing appearance, who wore goggles and blinked through them at Benson with weak eyes.

“Mr. Benson, this is Brother Hickman,” said the governor, by way of introduction. “Now, Mr. Benson, kindly tell Brother Hickman what you have just told me.”

And Benson went through the narrative a second time.

When he had finished, Young turned to Hickman:

“Mr. Benson has already spent three days here, but so far he has learned nothing. It just occurs to me, Mr. Benson, that our people, while they would not, of course, really deceive you, still might be reluctant to answer your questions frankly.”

“But why?” asked Benson in some surprise.

“They have learned caution. They might be suspicious of you for one thing; this is why I advise you to secure Brother Hickman's help. They all know him, and know he would not mix in any affair that would bring them into trouble.”

“But I can't understand why they should be suspicious of me!” urged Benson.

“Then it's evident you know nothing of the Latter Day Saints,” said Young.

“Very little,” admitted Benson.

“We've been accused of crimes; and we've been lied about until a stranger from the States has to prove

himself before we accept him for what he seems. You have come to me frankly, not like some of these Gentiles who sneak in here to make trouble. Why, sir, they even quarrel among themselves and take their troubles into our courts; get justice, and then go away and swear they have been robbed; or, they come here without a dollar, and live on our charity, and then go away and vilify us.” He seemed to be lashing himself into a rage at the memory of these wrongs, real or imaginary. “But it hasn't ended with these scoundrels that turn up here to make discord, the wrong has gone further; the Government at Washington has used us shamefully; it's trampled the constitution under foot in its dealings with us; it's ridden recklessly over all law to persecute and drive this people; and now they talk about sending troops here. You may as well tell me you can make hell into a powder-house as tell me you can let an army in here and have peace!” He rushed on with his grievances. “If I have forty wives, they do not know it; neither did I ask any judge for them. I live above law, and so do this people. Before we left Nauvoo, not less than two United States senators came to receive a pledge from us that we would leave the United States; and then, while we were doing our best to quit their borders, the poor degraded cusses sent a requisition for five hundred men to go and fight their battles in Mexico. That was President Polk; and he will welter in hell for it, with old Zachary Taylor; and that's where the present administration will soon be if they don't repent and let us alone!”

He paused, and Benson made haste to assure him of his entire sympathy. In spite of his coarseness the lawyer realized that Young spoke as one who had suffered oppression; or else he joined with an aggressive, quarrelsome disposition, the happy faculty of believing always in the justice of his cause, and that he was as firmly fixed in the right, as his enemies were hopelessly involved in the wrong.

A pause succeeded, and the governor came back to the matter in hand.

“When I think of our wrongs, Mr. Benson, I lose my temper; but they are nothing to you; what do you think, Hickman? What would you advise?”

Hickman turned to Benson and said:

“We can look about here, and try and learn if the party got this far.”

“Would it be possible to continue my investigation among the Indian tribes?” asked Benson.

“Oh, it ain't them,” said Hickman. “They'll steal an ox to eat, maybe; but they wouldn't attack a well-armed party of whites. If it was the Indians, it was them back on the plains, you may be certain of that.”

“If it was the Indians—” broke in Young, “it's my business to know it. I'm Indian agent here; and if they are up to any such deviltries I'll sweat repentance out of them!” and he looked ugly.

Benson rose from his chair.

“Thank you,” he said to Young gratefully. “With your help I may be able to learn something. At any rate you shall hear from me in a day or so.”

A week elapsed, and Benson sorrowfully confessed that so far as his purpose was concerned, he was not one whit wiser than when he arrived at Salt Lake City.

Each day, Mr. Hickman, at the handsome figure he had fixed upon as a reasonable remuneration for the benefits he would confer, bore him company in his search; at first displaying a sardonic humour which his employer wholly failed to enjoy; later this changed to a sneering petulance, for the lawyer's persistency was of a kind he had scarcely bargained on. Yet, in the end, Benson's determination provoked him to a grudging admiration to which he gave expression in characteristic speech.

“You certainly ain't much of a quitter, sir,” he said. “What's your next move going to be? For I reckon there's a next move coming.”

“Several next moves,” said Benson, slightly nettled by the man's manner.

“Well, we'll take 'em one at a time. What comes first?” Hickman asked grinning.

“The Indian tribes in the mountains,” answered Benson with quiet determination.

“That will be just like chasing thistle down,” and Hickman's grin widened.

“Then I'll chase it!” said Benson shortly.

“And never come up with it.”

“That remains to be seen.”

“Even if you manage to locate the different camps, you don't suppose, do you, that any redskin will own up he's had a hand in doing away with your friends? And if you venture in among them, what's to hinder them from serving you some trick?”

“That's a risk I shall have to take.”

“I guess you'll find it's more than a risk—”

“Of course, if you prefer not to accompany me—” began Benson.

“Oh, I ain't afraid. It would take right smart to scare Bill Hickman, and Brigham's appointed me to see that no harm comes to you.”

“Has he? That's very kind of him.”

“Oh, I reckon he's got his reasons,” said Hickman coolly,

“And you carry out his wishes?”

“I take counsel.”

“What's that?” inquired Benson.

“It's principally doing what I'm told. That's why you can count on me, young man, no matter what you do.”

“I suppose it will be necessary to secure the services of an interpreter and guides; do you know where I can find a man who is acquainted among the various tribes?”

“I'll have to think that over for a spell.”

But the very next day Hickman arrived early at the hotel and informed Benson that Young wished to see him.

They found him in his office, but not alone. With him was a tall, gaunt fellow, whose deeply-lined face, in spite of its sunburn, showed an unwholesome pallor.

The president shook hands cordially with Benson, and motioned him to a chair.

“As the result of a curious set of circumstances, I have news of your friends at last, Mr. Benson; but you must prepare to hear the worst,” said he, and he turned to the stranger. “Come here, Raymond, and tell your story,” and Raymond, who had been standing apart, now joined the little group by the president's desk, and dropped into the chair Young indicated.

“How do you do, sir.” He addressed himself to Benson, and his manner suggested a kindly sympathy that was not lost on the lawyer.

“Brother Brigham tells me you're looking for Stephen Landray and his brother? I guess I can tell you as much as any man alive about them, for I was with 'em—”

“They are dead, then?” said Benson abruptly. He was very white of face, and his voice was almost a whisper.

Raymond nodded a single emphatic inclination of the head. He cleared his throat, and went on in his soft, slow speech:

“I was with 'em when the redskins put 'em out of business. It was a snug clean up, and it was only by God Almighty's mercy that I fetched myself off.” He turned back the collar of his shirt as he spoke, and Benson saw an ugly scar. Raymond laid his finger on this. “You can see how near they came to fixing me.” he said.

“But how is it that you were with them?” asked Benson.

“I joined the party this side of Fort Laramie. You see, I was a friend of Basil Landray's. I'd known him a right smart while. I was coming in toward the valley and I knew a cut off round by way of the Chugwater that they was keen to try. That was their mistake. If they'd stuck to the emigrant road, this wouldn't have happened.”

“Yes?” said Benson.

“They was mighty agreeable men,” said Raymond, in accents of sincere sorrow. He gave Benson a shy, furtive glance. “And you've come all the way out here to learn what happened to 'em? Well, I reckon their friends was real distressed, not hearing from 'em.”

“But tell me the particulars,” said Benson breathlessly.

“It was a war party of Indians from the plains.”

“What did I tell you? I knew it wa'n'. diggers,” said Hickman. “Diggers? No, I guess not. It was a regular war party; and they showed up when we was within five days of the valley here, but I reckon they'd been following us for right smart of a spell, just waiting for a chance to take us when we wa'n'. looking for it. We stood 'em off for two days and a night; but by then they'd pretty well used us up. Rogers and the kid was dead; Basil was wounded so he couldn't use his rifle; not counting me, and Steve, and Bush, they was about the best we had back of the wagons; the others didn't count for much; well, the morning of the third day we just couldn't hold the redskins off. I reckon there was close on to two hundred in that war party. Two hours after sun-up there was just me, and Steve, and Bush left. Walsh was dead, and Bingham was dead, and Dunlevy had been shot through the hips, and was out of it, along with Basil. Our three guns couldn't keep 'em off, and they swarmed in through the wagons. I saw 'em kill Bush, and then they made an end of Steve, but I hadn't as much as a scratch on me yet, and I threw down my gun thinking I'd take chances; and that's where I was smart. At first some of 'em wanted to kill me then and there; but others was in the notion to take me back with the tribe, which was what I'd counted on. And this was what they decided to do with me. Those who'd been so keen to kill me, found Basil, and Dunlevy, and killed them instead; and that comforted 'em some. Anyhow, after they had robbed the wagons of what they wanted and burnt what they didn't want, we started back into the hills, I watching for a chance to give 'em the slip. Well, the chance come. I got off with a good hoss and a good gun, and this hole in my neck.”

“And how long ago was this?” asked Benson.

“The fight? A year ago, just. I was with the Indians for pretty near a month, and I was almost two months in getting home. I was fixed so bad I daren't travel and this here wound kept opening on me; she opened three times and I had to lay by and let her heal up. And when I did get home I was sick; I am only getting round now,” he added with plaintive pity for himself. “I'm that weak, if you was to shake your finger at me I'd be ready to set down and cry. I been back there, though—I went back this spring. You see I only knowed their names, I'd never heard any of 'em say where they'd come from, except Rogers; I remembered to have heard him say he'd lived in Texas where he'd fit the Mexicans, but I knowed the others wa'n'. from Texas.”

“And what did you find?” asked Benson.

“Well, as far as I could see, everything was as the Indians had left it; but there was nothing to tell me what I wanted to know.”

He had told this monumental lie of his without the flicker of an eyelid; and with a touch of sorrow and gentle melancholy that had endeared him to the lawyer. Now Young joined in the conversation.

“You see, Mr. Benson, I had heard of this fight of Brother Raymond's, at least I'd heard he'd been attacked by a party of Indians; but yesterday Brother Raymond's father, who is an elder in the church, was here to get his instructions, as I was sending him into the southern part of the state to establish a settlement, and we got to talking of Brother Thomas; and he told me the particulars of the fight.”

At this Brother Thomas favoured the governor with a shy smile.

“Father hated powerful to go,” he said, “but he reckoned it was the Lord's business you was sending him on, Brother Brigham; and he knuckled under.”

Benson felt stupefied and crushed by what he had just heard; he thought of Virginia with infinite pity. He turned to Young.

“I want to see where this massacre took place,” he said. “I think my clients would expect this of me. Now, how many days will it take.”

“Raymond will be better able to tell you that than I,” said Young.

“How many days will it take, Mr. Raymond?” asked Benson.

“Five days to go there, and you'll have to come back to Salt Lake if you want to catch up with a party going East.”

“Can I secure your services as a guide?” asked the lawyer.

“Me? No, I guess not—” said Raymond quickly; but Young interrupted him.

“Certainly, Raymond will go with you, Mr Benson,” he said.

“Look here, Brother Brigham, you never said I'd have to go,” objected Raymond. “I got business of my own to attend to.”

“If Mr. Raymond is unwilling—” began Benson.

“Oh, he's willing enough,” said Young, rather grimly. “You'd better take Hickman, too.”

“He won't need me if he's got Bill,” said Raymond doggedly.

“Yes he will. Understand you'll be paid, well paid. Mr. Benson expects to be fair and liberal with you.”

“I don't want his money,” muttered Raymond sullenly.

Hickman, who had seemed vastly amused by something in the situation that was not patent to Benson, now slapped Raymond on the back.

“Oh, come!” he cried. “You want anybody's money; that's your kind, Tom Raymond. You needn't be scared about the Indians, they're all in my contract.”

And in spite of Raymond's reluctance to take part in Benson's quest, he led his pack-mule when Hickman and the lawyer rode out of the city at dawn the next morning.

“I am sorry that he seems to be going with us against his inclination,” said Benson. He was disposed to have a greater liking for Raymond than Hickman had been able to inspire him with, and he thought he understood the former's objection to being of the party, and liked him none the less for it.

For two days they followed the emigrant trail eastward; but on the third they left it and struck off into the mountains. Raymond led them unerringly, but his sullen temper endured.

The fifth day they made their longest march, and it was dark when they went into camp.

“To-morrow I'll show you what you've come to see,” said Raymond, as he drew his blankets about him, and stretched himself on the ground preparatory to sleep. Yet the following morning, after they had eaten their breakfast, he still lingered by the camp-fire, and it was only after much urging on the part of Hickman that he took himself off to bring up the horses, but he returned with only two of them.

“Where's your horse and the pack-mule?” demanded Hickman angrily.

“I shan't need 'em to-day,” answered Raymond.

“Why not?”

“This is the place, do you see that hill off yonder? I reckon you'll find what you're looking for there.”

“We'll go there then—at once,” said Benson, drawing in his breath quickly.

Raymond fell back a step at his words.

“You and Bill go. I been there before. I'm not going again. You'll see where I buried 'em, where the banks of a wash are heaved in. You and Bill go look.”

Hickman exploded in a burst of laughter at this.

“Well, now,” he said, and repeated, “well, now—why damn your soul to hell, I got chickens at home with more heart. What are you afraid of, Tom Raymond?”

“I ain't saying I'm afraid,” but his face was ghastly.

“No, by thunder! you ain't saying it, you don't need to. What do you expect to see anyhow? Ghosts?”

“Shut up, Bill.”

The hill Raymond had indicated was, perhaps two miles distant from their camp, and in a little less than half an hour they had reached its summit.

“It's easy to see what happened here,” said Hickman, glancing about him. He moved away, circling the top of the hill, while Benson examined the charred wood and rusted iron work that littered the ground. He was thus engaged when Hickman called to him.

“Come here; I've found the spot,” he said, and the lawyer hastened to his side.

He was standing on the edge of a gully the rains had cut in one of the slopes of the hill.

“See,” he said, “there's where Tom Raymond heaved in the bank. The Indians are keen to kill, but they're damn slow to bury. I wa'n'. none too sure that Raymond had been back here, but this settles it.”

Near-by was a broken and rusted shovel, and a pick with a charred handle. Benson examined the shovel narrowly, and on the iron that secured the wooden handle he found a name stamped on the metal; scraping off the rust with the blade of his knife he was able to decipher the name, “Bendy.” It had been made at the Bendy shops in Benson.

Hickman pointed to the ditch.

“Are you going to see what Tom's covered up there?”

“No, God forbid!” cried Benson.

“We'd better ride back to camp then, if you're ready. I wouldn't put it past Tom to quit us.”

“Then suppose you go and make sure that he doesn't,” said Benson. “I'm not ready to go yet, but I'll join you there presently.”

“What's going to keep you?” asked Hickman curiously.

“I wish to mark the spot,” Benson explained, and for an hour or more after the Mormon left him he toiled at

this task, and by the end of that time had raised a rude pyramid of loose stones; then he mounted his horse and gazed about him for the last time.

He looked at the bleaching animal bones; at the circle on the bare earth where the fire had been; then his glance wandered over the plain; level, solitary, devoid of life. Miles distant on either hand the barren sands yielded to the barren rocks, and the rocks rose to the eternal snows. Off to the west, in the full glory of the August sun, was their camp of the night before. It was hidden by a strip of timber, and out of this timber a single thin ribbon of blue smoke ascended from the wasting embers of their fire.

And here the end had come to Stephen Landray and his companions; on this hill, in this solitude. Here, in the shelter of their wagons they had fought and fallen. He almost saw the savages on their galloping ponies, as they swept nearer and nearer, and then the end—swift, brutal, sufficient.

Suddenly there came to him a quick, shocking sense of joy.

“God forgive me!” he muttered, aghast at the feeling. “God forgive me! I mustn't think of it—yet; I'm only sorry for him; only sorry for her. I must keep myself out of this!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ON his return to Salt Lake, Benson wrote to Virginia. This letter he intended to carry to St. Louis to post, where he expected to wait for a few days; but his pen faltered, and more than once he left his chair to pace his dimly-lighted room. He wished to spare her, but he wished her to know that Stephen Landray was dead. Yet, when he had finished his letter he felt the result to be pitiful enough, with its poor attempt at consolation; and his face showed pale and haggard in the faint light of the sputtering candle on the table before him. At last, impressed by the utter inadequacy of his commonplaces, he abandoned the idea of writing Virginia then, and wrote Judge Bradly instead.

From St. Louis Benson went to Portsmouth by boat; at Portsmouth he stowed himself away inside the coach in which he was to complete his journey. He found himself seated opposite a tall, dark man of unmistakably clerical aspect who was swathed in shawls and travelling blankets beyond any need that the weather occasioned. The other occupant of the coach, there were but the two beside himself, was a little brown man, with shrewd, squinting eyes, a grizzled beard, and closely-cropped bullet-head. He wore wide, bell-mouthed trousers, and a short jacket with large bone buttons; at his neck was carelessly knotted a flaming kerchief; while perched upon his head was a small canvas cap of strange pattern.

Benson regarded this person with frank wonder; a wonder the man himself seemed both to understand and enjoy, for his shrewd eyes twinkled with amusement.

“Hullo, young fellow!” he said chuckling. “I bet you never seen anything like me before; now did you? It worries you some, don't it?” Benson drew back with a muttered apology.

“No offence!” cried the man good-naturedly. “You're welcome to guess my breed, but you'll never hit it. I'm a sailor.”

“So I imagined,” said Benson.

“Hold on, not so fast!” interposed the man quickly. “That's only part of it; I'm an uncommon kind of sailor; I reckon the only sailor Styles Cross Roads way up beyond Marietta ever turned out, or ever will. None of your lake or river lunk-heads, but a true sea-faring man, Ohio born and Ohio bred, and from Styles Cross Roads, which it's a combination that's hard to beat.”

“It must be,” and Benson smiled indulgently.

“The other gentleman knowed me the minute he clapped eyes on me. He flirted me a look that told me that plain as words.”

But the third occupant of the coach was not to be drawn into the conversation. He neither smiled nor spoke, nor showed that he heard what was said.

“Kick him in the shins,” advised the sea-faring man from Styles Cross Roads in a hoarse whisper. “Maybe he's hard of hearing.”

Benson shook his head in dissuasion of such a course; however, the sailor appeared to abandon the idea with so much reluctance, that the lawyer said pleasantly, wishing to change the current of his thought:

“So you're from Styles Cross Roads?”

“Have you ever heard of the place before?” demanded the sailor.

“I think I have,” said Benson, not quite truthfully.

“Well, I guess it ain't much of a place, it warn't when I left it. This is how it happened,” he continued, squinting hard at Benson. “A good while back, I guess long enough before you was born, young man, old Captain Whipple built a schooner at Marietta, and took her down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans. I shipped with him as cook's boy. At New Orleans he picked up a cargo of cotton for England, all but me of the crew going home by up river flat boats. In England we got a cargo for St. Petersburg, Russia; but when we reached there, the port officers seized the schooner; they said the papers were forged, that there warn't no such port as Marietta. The captain swore his papers were legal, and that Marietta was a port of clearance. 'You're a most awful liar,' said the Russian officer, with his tongue in his cheek. 'You're a benighted foreigner,' said the captain, 'or else you'd have heard of Marietta, which it's in the State of Ohio.' 'Where's that?' said the Russian. 'Well, I'm damned,' said the captain, 'never heard of Ohio? Never heard of Marietta,

Ohio?' 'Never,' said the Russian. 'Extraordinary!' says the captain. 'And I pity you, for that's where I come from. Fetch me a map of the United States of America, and you can tell your grandchildren when you get to having them, that you've looked on the finest country God Almighty ever dared leave out of doors over night!' So they fetched him a map of America, and he found the mouth of the Mississippi, and Coursed up it with his thumb to the mouth of the Ohio, and up that to the mouth of the Muskingum. 'And there you have it!' said the captain. 'That's Marietta—Marietta, Ohio, and my Port of clearance.'.rdquo; The seafaring man from Styles Cross Roads chuckled softly. “That was my first voyage; and there's thirty years between my leaving and my going back; but when I came ashore at New Orleans off my last voyage, I made up my mind I'd make a clean run home.”

Thus happily launched on what might be termed a flood of narrative, he imparted to Benson a variety of information touching the countries and places he had visited. From time to time he even attempted conversation with the dark man opposite; but the latter's manner rebuked such advances, and he ended by confining his remarks to the lawyer, whose courtesy was unfailing.

The miles grew up behind them, the stage stopping now and again to change horses. There was dinner and supper; and they came to a stand at last in front of the tavern where they were to pass the night.

Drawn up in the dusty road before it, were a score or more of great freight wagons. From strange pens came the lowing of cattle; the bleat of sheep. Indoors the bar was thronged with teamsters and drovers, Some of these men Benson knew, and they had known Stephen and Bushrod Landray, and he stopped to shake hands with them, and to answer their eager questions.

He was up betimes the next day, and was soon swinging forward again on the last stage of his journey. His two companions of the day before still kept him company; the sea-faring man from Styles Cross Roads, as communicative as ever, the other reserved and silent. But about midmorning the latter turned abruptly to Benson to say:

“I observe, sir,” and his manner was precise and formal, “I observe, sir, that you appear to have come some distance. If I mistake not I saw you on the boat up from Cincinnati? May I be so bold as to ask if you are going much further?”

“No, fortunately; I am almost at my journey's end. Benson is my destination,” answered the lawyer.

“Oh, indeed? That is my destination, also.”

Benson inclined his head. There was a long silence. The coach stopped at a wayside tavern; and the sailor, after shaking Benson warmly by the hand, left it, to finish his journey across the State by other means.

The dark man watched the rolling figure of the sea-faring man, as he disappeared through the tavern door, then he cleared his throat.

“I understood you to say you were going on to Benson?” said he, resuming the conversation where he had previously abandoned it.

“Yes, it is my home.”

“Perhaps you are acquainted with my brother, Mr. Stillman, the Baptist clergyman?”

“Oh, very well, and you are Dr. Stillman?”

As he spoke, the lawyer glanced curiously at his companion, for Dr. Stillman was famous.

“May I ask your name?” said the doctor.

“Benson; you probably knew my father.”

The doctor gave him a wintry smile. He felt that his purposes separated him from the busy bustling world; its trafficking laity he had found, rarely paused that it might understand his motives, and he had long since ceased to look for sympathy from men occupied with their own concerns. It was the emotional sex which seemed to understand him best.

“You have been engaged in missionary work in India?” said Benson.

“In Burmah, yes; I have only recently returned to America, and have spent the summer lecturing. Now I am going to my brother's for a short stay.”

Benson was aware that the man had a certain curious distinction. His eyes, dark and deep set under narrow brows, were piercing and compelling; they could burn, too, with a wonderful light, just as his reserve could drop before the wealth of his own emotions, emotions that he could make others feel poignantly, while they yet seemed oddly foreign to the man himself.

“Do you expect to return to Burmah?” asked Benson.

“My absence is only temporary. My labours are not finished there yet; indeed they are only just begun.” With an absorbed air, he continued. “Events made it seem advisable for me to temporarily abandon my work, for only recently I suffered a most serious bereavement in the death of my wife.”

“I regret exceedingly to hear it,” said Benson civilly.

“From the first, when she joined me in the East, where I had preceded her, I doubted if she could endure the climate.”

Benson ventured the opinion that such being the case, he would have abandoned so unpromising a field; but Dr. Stillman merely smiled in a superior way which the lawyer found singularly exasperating.

“Personal considerations should never be allowed to clash with one's manifest duty,” he said.

In truth, he had never spared himself; and he exacted of others quite as much as he gave himself.

“Not if one can always be sure of the manifest duty,” said Benson.

“I was sure.”

“You were fortunate,” said the lawyer drily.

There succeeded a long pause which continued for many a mile. Dr. Stillman gave himself up to his own thoughts; and Benson fixed his glance on scenes beyond the coach window; as the day waned, these became more and more familiar, and just at nightfall they began the descent of Landray Hill.

Benson's heart was beating fast. There, off to the right, he saw through the branches of the bare maples and chestnuts, and the dead, dry foliage of the oaks and beeches, the light he was looking for; while out of the shadow back of it grew the huge bulk of the old stone mill.

They clattered noisily through the covered bridge and up Main Street, to come to a stop before the tavern. Dr. Stillman folded his blankets in a compact bundle; and drawing the folds of the vast dolman-like garment which he wore, closer about him, stepped from the stage. Benson quickly followed him.

The doctor was welcomed by his brother; an amiable little man who all but wept over him as he embraced him with fervid enthusiasm in the region of the thighs.

"My dear John! My dear, dear John!" the little man kept repeating. "You're home again! There have been many changes, but it's still home." Then he espied Benson. "Why, God bless me, Jacob, and so you are back, too! Shocking news you bring, my dear boy. My heart bleeds for those poor ladies! But we are all in His hands, it's His Providence, the mystery of His Ways;" and he wrung the lawyer's hand feelingly. "This is my brother; you have heard of him!"

"We have met," said Benson.

"Oh, yes, to be sure, to be sure! Well, good-night, Jacob; I'm glad we have you safe back." And he turned hurriedly away in pursuit of his brother who was striding off across the square, and in the wrong direction from that in which he should have gone.

Benson watched the two out of sight; the tall missionary, and the portly little man, who, holding him fast by the arm, puffed and panted at his side in a vain endeavour to keep pace with his long strides; then he crossed the square in the direction of his own home.

Benson saw Virginia the next day.

There was a touch of weariness in her manner when she greeted him, and the shadow had deepened in her eyes; but aside from this there was no change; her beauty was as rare and wonderful as ever. He drank it in by stealth; and the recollection of those months he had passed without the potent spell of her presence dropped from him in a twinkling; yet because of this, he seemed to have lost ground in his absence. He had lived beyond his unspoken devotion. He had toiled and laboured for her as one only toils and labours for the one they love; and he recognized that he had returned to less than he expected. Would he never get beyond this irksome regard, in which he felt he was held, because of the affection she supposed him to have had for Stephen Landray?

"You received my letter from St. Louis?" he said, scarcely knowing where to begin the conversation.

"Yes, days ago, Mr. Benson."

"At first I was quite unable to satisfy myself with a letter, I found it was easier to write Judge Bradly; it was less difficult to write you then, knowing you would be in a manner familiar with all that I had learned."

"I understood perfectly."

Her composure was beyond what he had anticipated, and he was grateful for the restraint she put upon herself.

"I want you to tell me all!" she went on. "All you did, and all you found. I am trying to understand it. Do you know, that in spite of the conviction I have had since last winter that he was lost to me, I am still unprepared for the positive word you bring. It is all new each time I think of it; and I think of nothing else! You are sure—sure? There is no doubt in your mind?"

Her glance searched his face beseechingly.

"You mustn't ask me to give you any false hope," he said with grave kindness.

"If I could only go back to the doubt. Even to that; for this is so much worse. This leaves me nothing!"

Very gently Benson began, starting with the recovery of Stephen's knife from Gibbs, and his trip across the plains.

She did not speak until he had quite finished; then she said in the long pause that followed:

"And you think—you think there is no hope?"

"None," he said gravely.

With a sudden eloquent gesture she pressed her hands to her heart.

"I can't quite realize it yet," she faltered; for how could he be dead when her love was all alive, when it had undergone no change? She was weighing each point; she would have given much to have believed there was yet hope; but since this could not be, she tried to believe death had been swift and merciful to the man she loved; and the man who loved her was so far forgotten, that afterward she suffered more than one accusing pang when she recalled how inadequate the expressions of her gratitude had been, measured by the weeks and months he had devoted to her service.

Benson seemed to divine that there was a question she wished to ask, but lacked the courage; and he proceeded to answer it in his own direct way.

"When I returned to Salt Lake I made arrangements to have a block of granite cut to mark the spot. I suppose it has been conveyed to the mountains before this. I should have waited to see it in place only I feared the winter might set in and prevent my return to the States until spring; I dared not risk that."

"You have seen Anna?" she suddenly asked.

He understood; she wished to be alone. He realized this with a quick sense of disappointment. He rose reluctantly from his chair.

"Really I might have gone there first. Where is Mrs. Walsh?" he asked.

"She is with Anna. We fear to leave her alone. It seems she never for one moment lost hope, or had any other belief than that they would come back safe and well."

"And are you alone here?" he said.

"Yes, for the present."

“I should think you needed Mrs. Walsh rather more than she does,” he commented with some little brusqueness.

“You must go to her at once when you return to town. I am sure she will feel it if you do not,” urged Virginia.

He drove straight to Anna's. There in the darkened parlour he waited impatiently for a full half hour before she made her appearance. When she at last entered the room, she greeted him with such lack of warmth, that he instantly felt that here he was held in positive disfavour.

“I heard last night that you were home, and I have been expecting you all the morning,” she said resentfully. “Have you seen Virginia?”

“Yes.”

She frowned slightly.

His lips parted in a faintly cynical smile.

“I suppose Virginia told you that I had been utterly prostrated since the cruel news came?”

“Yes,” said Benson. “But I heard last night of your condition; I drove out to the farm first. I knew Mrs. Landray would be able to tell me if it would be advisable for you to see me.”

She looked at him with lurking suspicion; but he met her glance frankly, and she was half convinced of his sincerity.

“I am sorry I kept you waiting,” she said relenting.

“I was so distressed to hear that you were not well,” he murmured. “You must let me come again when you are stronger,” he urged. “I don't think you are in a condition now to hear what I have done; you must be spared that until you are more yourself.”

“But I shall never be that!” cried Anna, with a choking sob. And at this touch of real feeling, he regretted that he had stooped to play a part.

When a little later Benson went back to his office he found Judge Bradly waiting for him.

“You have seen them?” questioned the judge. “My dear Jacob, it must have been a trying experience.”

Benson nodded, and slipped into a chair before his desk. The judge watching him, shook his head with settled melancholy of manner.

“When I made their loss known to them Bushrod's wife fainted, Jake, keeled over at the first word; and when she came to, her grief was most heartrending. Her sister-in-law's composure was remarkable; while Mrs. Walsh showed much emotion—a nice little thing, Jacob; did I understand you to say quite penniless?”

“Yes.”

“Too bad, too bad! wholly incapable, I should say, of meeting the situation by herself. You are convinced in your own mind that Stephen and Bush and the others are dead?”

“Yes,” said Benson shortly.

“Shocking! Shocking!” said the judge, holding up his hands in horror.

“Have you seen either of the ladies since you took the word to them?” asked Benson.

For some reason the judge coloured slightly.

“I think, indeed, I am quite sure, that I have seen Mrs. Bushrod Landray, being close by—you understand,” he paused, and looked hard at Benson.

Benson shot the judge a covert glance.

“A most estimable lady,” continued the latter warmly. “I trust Bush left her well provided for?”

“He did,” said Benson.

“I am relieved to hear it. I had feared that the boys were badly involved. It's a great misfortune for a young and handsome lady to be left as she has been left,” concluded the judge, smiling blandly.

“Yes,” agreed Benson, “it is;” but now he turned on the judge with a quickened interest. The expression on his face was half quizzical, half cynical.

“Do you suppose she will marry again?” asked the judge with studied indifference.

“How should I know?” demanded Benson sharply.

“I did not know but that you might have formed some opinion,” ventured the judge with a slightly embarrassed air.

He became silent. He settled his stock, and took his tall hat from the table at his elbow, and Benson fell to pulling over the papers on his desk.

“When you are ready, Jake, to look into what I have done in your absence—” remarked the judge, about to take his leave.

“In a day or two. I have had a pretty long holiday, you know.”

“Well, whenever you are ready,” said the judge, quitting the room.

Benson turned frowning to the papers on his desk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WHEN the railroad came to Benson, it reached down from a lake port, a feeble little tentacle of iron which joined another feeble tentacle that had pushed up from a river point. Theoretically, its coming was in response to the town's need, because of its mills and warehouses, and the bounty of its waving fields of grain; so Colonel Sharp declared in an editorial which contained much Latin, some very superior English, and numerous allusions to destiny; and the town, lacking not in local pride, and having had dreams of civic greatness, was prepared to believe that its importance as a commercial centre was the magnet that drew the road thither.

But Jacob Benson and some others knew that the real reason the railroad came, was that they had exchanged certain dollars for uncertain stock; that but for this, the line would have sought the town of Carthage, distant some twenty miles to the east, where the air was heavy with the reek of soft-coal smoke, the chimneys of the blast furnaces blazed unceasingly in the night, and a small but active population worked, drank, and fought, beyond what was habitual to any other population of its size in the State.

While the general public was favourable to the road, there were certain wise ones who clung with satisfaction to the memory of days when the pioneer turned the corn of his clearing into whisky; his wheat into flour; and rafted his produce down the Little Wolf River, and thence by the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans, where boat and cargo were exchanged for Spanish silver. These, dubiously regarding what the world in its short-sighted folly was pleased to call progress, pointed out that even yet, all the town traded in, found its way conveniently enough by the stage road to lake or river point; so it mattered not that the Little Wolf had become a failing stream, flowing through depleted forest lands; so shallow, where it had once floated great rafts, that now the lightest skiff was steered with difficulty among the encroaching sand-bars.

These ancient oracles, looking back over forty years through a haze of pleasant memories, took no stock in Colonel Sharp's mouthfilling sentences. They declared that the advent of the railroad meant the town's ruin, for how could a town reasonably expect to thrive unless it was at either one end or the other of a line?

For full ten years there had been talk of this railroad, but when it did come and when the first brief wonder of it was past, it was at once as a familiar thing; even in the full effulgence of its newness, it was not quite a miracle; it had been a miracle when fifty miles away; it was still a miracle when this distance had been reduced to ten miles; and then when the first train steamed into Benson, the wonder seemed almost as remote, as the day when the first horse was broken and ridden by the first man, that pre-historic genius who had found his own legs all too short for the work they must do.

The railroad came to the town of Benson the year Benson, the man, returned from the West. It came visibly one cold February day in a flurry of snow, and with the fall of twilight; a puffing, panting engine, of even then obsolete type, drawing a single dingy coach, once spectacularly decked with streamers and flags, now wet and bedraggled. It rumbled out of the deep cut north of town, at a rate of speed variously estimated by the crowd of men at the station at from ten to thirty miles an hour.

Young Jacob Benson, as a stockholder, with certain other public-spirited citizens, who between them had taken some hundreds of shares in the enterprise, formed a little group with Mr. Cammack the mayor; Captain Tompkins, the sheriff; Mr. Bently, the postmaster; the members of the town council, Colonel Sharp of the *Pioneer*, and Judge Bradly, whose presence could be counted on at any public gathering where there was the slightest possibility of argument or oratory, for both of which, so eminent an authority as Colonel Sharp had declared him singularly fitted.

This opinion having been carried to the judge, it had provoked a sentiment of such tropic warmth on his part, that the colonel rarely crossed the square going from his office to the tavern for so simple a thing as a drink of whisky, without the judge, whose office windows also overlooked the square, starting in instant pursuit. Being favoured as to the distance he had to cover, he was usually able to plant himself squarely in the path of his victim; and the colonel, mild of eye and mein, and lacking in decision of character, invariably proffered the expected invitation.

Now the judge held the editor affectionately by the arm; but ventured only such remarks as he felt must fully sustain the other's opinion of his intellectual attainments; but to live up to the flattering opinion the colonel entertained for him, had its difficulties; it was quieting and not conducive to conversation; and while he felt the present was a great occasion, an occasion pregnant with deep significance for the future, he searched his mind, which was pleasantly vacant, for some thought that would be adequate to the moment.

A wave of enthusiasm diffused itself over the crowd as the engine's headlight swung out of the cut north of town.

“Why, the infernal thing's smoking like a cook stove!” cried Mr. Bartlett at Benson's elbow.

Benson turned to the stage driver,

“Are you going with us?” he asked.

“Me ride on that doggone wheezy contrivance, me risk my life on that blame steaming invention where I'm likely to be set afire any minute? No, sir! You don't catch me!”

Benson laughed.

“I don't think you need fear that; you'd better come along.”

But Mr. Bartlett only shook his head.

“And they say the stage is done for, put out of business by that ornery looking concern. I don't believe it, people's got too much sense. I wouldn't like to think my fellers was such damn fools. What time will she make, do you reckon; ten miles an hour?”

“Twice that, three times that,” said Benson.

Mr. Bartlett shook his head.

“That,” said he, “is one of your yarns. It can't be done; a man can't set still and get his breath going at that clip. Blame it! we are coming to pretty times. It will scare the hosses, it will run over cows; damned if it ain't real dangerous! What's to keep it from just scooting off through the fields, from getting clear loose?” He skipped back suddenly in some alarm as the engine rolled past, but when it came to a stop he recovered his

courage. “The town's done for,” he mourned. “I'm glad I ain't a property owner; catch me owning a house in a town that's got a railroad! Travel will just be sliding past at a top-notch gait; it ain't going to be like the stage, where all hands stop to take a drink at the tavern and put good money in circulation. Now they'll be piling through in their foolish haste. The big towns 'll suck the blood out of the little towns.”

“His is the world-old cry against the new,” murmured the judge in the colonel's ear with a wise shake of the head.

“They say the government's stopped work on the national roads!” cried Mr. Bartlett more in sorrow than in anger. “And the canals is done for, too! Well, there's plenty of sense in a canal, for its natural to ride on the water, and I ain't opposed to anything that's natural, but I'm agin all foolishness.”

An old man, bent and withered, and leaning heavily on a cane, pushed his eager way into the centre of the little group.

“Why, Mr. Randall, what are you doing here?” said the stage driver. “I reckon you don't take much stock in this foolishness? You've heard a heap too much nonsense talked in your time to be fooled now.”

The old man shot him a shrewd glance out of his beady black eyes.

“It's fat Jim Bartlett!” he said in a shrill cracked treble. “Fat Jim Bartlett, who's seeing the last of his easy hoss-driving job.”

“Don't you believe it, pap!” said the stage driver good-naturedly.

The old man rapped on the new station platform with his heavy thorn walking stick.

“Why ain't there more doing, jedge?” he said. “You should ha' seen us here when the fust stage coach come through from clean acrost the mountings.”

“Do you remember that?” asked Colonel Sharp interestedly.

“Do I remember it! I've seen this here country grow outen the timber. It was rolling green for two hundred miles, smooth and round as a duck's breast, when I crost the mountings; not a clearing, not a road, not a house. I seen the fust booted foot that was put onto the trace; the fust shod hoof; I seen the fust grist of corn that was ground on the Little Wolf; I seen the fust barrel of whisky that was run outen a still; I seen the fust flat-bottomed boat that was poled up from the Ohio; I seen the fust wheeled cart that General Landray fetched in from Virginia, when he come with his niggers; and I seen the fust stage coach, and rid in it, too, long enough afore your time, fat Jim Bartlett! That's enough to crowd into one life time, ain't it?”

“You seen a plenty when you seen the stage, pap,” said Mr. Bartlett, tolerantly. “I believe in letting good enough alone, I do. The world got on pretty tolerable well for a many year without none of these here railroads!”

But the stage driver had the argument to himself; the judge and

Benson and their friends were entering the coach, and they had taken old Pap Randall with them. And then presently the miracle of steam and iron rumbled off down the track to cross the new railroad bridge which spanned the Little Wolf River not two hundred yards distant from where the old covered bridge stood, stained and weather-beaten, with here and there a board missing.

The river rippled beneath the bridges, the old and the new, where it had once swept in silent volume, soundless and deep. From the bank above, the big warehouses cast long black shadows.

The day of flat boats had come and gone; the river, with its failing flow and the sand-bars that choked its channel, had been the first means of pioneer trade; and now the stage road was doomed too, this new marvel had come to usurp its use, to take its place, its trade, its life; the life of cross-road shops, and stores, and taverns. It would soon be shorn of its dignity, its traffic of herds and flocks, and heavy merchandize, the hurry and bustle of its flying mail stages; to be left a thing disused, a mere country highway, the relic of a day of lesser needs and smaller activities. Two strands of wire, hung on poles, followed the course of the railroad; and on these the wind played a dirge.

It was midnight when their little journey by rail ended; and Judge Bradly attached himself to Benson as the party separated. The night was cold and raw, and the two men walked rapidly up the street. They came to the judge's boarding-house, and Benson paused.

“Good-night, judge,” he said.

The judge was searching his pockets one after another. “I seem to have lost my key. This thing of boarding is a great mistake. Every man should have a wife to let him in when he stays out late!”

“See if you can make some one hear; if you can't, you'd better come with me,” said Benson.

The judge mounted the steps and began to pound vigorously on the door. He continued this for a minute or two, pausing at intervals to listen.

“Oh, come along!” cried Benson impatiently.

The judge abandoned the attempt, however, with some reluctance, but he rejoined Benson after delivering a final kick to the door.

“I like,” said he, adjusting himself to a new and pleasant train of thought as they moved away, “I like a hot whisky when I come in late; it's been one of the little luxuries I have carried into my lonely state.”

“You shall have your hot whisky, judge,” said Benson.

“My dear Jake, you must not let me put you to any trouble; for I know that admirably conducted as your house is, you rather ignore the liquids. So if hot whiskey makes too great a demand, I'd suggest that just plain whisky is preferable to no whiskey at all. When a man is on the wrong side of fifty, his little nips do him a world of good.”

They had reached their destination, and Benson unlocked his office door and motioned the judge to precede him into the room.

A lamp was burning on his desk, and the big logs he had thrown on the fire earlier in the evening had wasted to a mass of glowing coals. He added a stick or two, and soon a cheerful blaze was roaring in the wide chimney. Having rid himself of his hat and coat, Benson produced a black bottle and two glasses from his

cupboard, and sugar and a pitcher of hot water from the kitchen; the judge watched these preparations with grave but silent approval. This approval grew and reached its zenith, when he on one side of the fireplace, and his host on the other, smiled and nodded over the rims of their glasses. They sipped in silent enjoyment, with their feet thrust out toward the fire.

“Jake,” said the judge, “it's well that the pitcher has capacity. This is just right. If you attempted to duplicate it, you might fail. Failure is always a sad thing, Jake, a thing to be avoided.”

“It is,” agreed Benson.

“My dear boy, I am troubled,” said the judge. He threw a certain significance into the glance that accompanied these words.

“And what have you to worry about?” questioned the younger man lazily.

“I'm alone,” began the judge in his mellow voice. “Quite alone. I may say a homeless vagabond. This is the second time I've been locked out this winter. Now I ask you, Jake, what sort of a life is this for a man of my years, and if you will allow me, my position?”

“Well,” said Benson, cheerfully, “you shouldn't forget your key.”

“That's a detail I never had to burden myself with in Mrs. Bradly's lifetime, sir. It was her pride to care for me in such matters; it furnished her with occupation.” There was a long pause, during which the judge's glass was filled and emptied and filled again, and then he spoke.

“Have you seen Mrs. Landray recently?” he asked.

“Which Mrs. Landray?”

“Bush's widow.”

“Not recently; why?”

“I was merely curious.” And he was silent again, but not for long. “Jake?”

“Yes, judge.”

“She's going to make a fool of herself.”

“I dare say,” said Benson indifferently.

The judge stared at him in some surprise.

“You dare say?” he repeated.

“I mean it's quite likely.”

“In what particular?” demanded the judge.

“Oh, in any particular,” said Benson. “I haven't formulated any definite theories where she is concerned.”

The judge considered this in silence for a time.

“This is merely a general opinion?” he asked at last.

“Merely a general opinion,” said Benson amiably.

“Then you haven't observed any new developments?”

“No;” and Benson yawned.

“You have heard no gossip?”

“None; I didn't know there was any.”

“You are quite sure you haven't noticed anything, Jake?”

“Quite.”

“Not this new bent of hers?”

“Oh, you mean her religious interests? Why, they're natural enough. I thought them rather hopeful.”

“Hopeful!” repeated the judge bristling.

“Yes, certainly; religion's a good thing for any one.”

“Religion!” and the judge snorted the word with angry contempt “Well, if you choose to call it religion!”

“What do you call it?” inquired Benson.

“Observe me, Jake; a man seems as necessary to some women's religion as a God. In her case, it's that long-legged scarecrow from India! You mark my words, the little fool will marry him! Well, she could 'a done better.”

“What!” cried Benson. “Dr. Stillman; no!”

“The little fool will marry him,” repeated the judge slowly and sternly. Then he sighed deeply.

“And what if she does,” said Benson.

“Well, I am glad you can view it so calmly.”

“I can, just that calmly,” said Benson cheerfully.

“I can't,” said the judge. “To me, sir, it is a mater of considerable moment.”

“Oh, I see,” said Benson.

“My dear boy, this is a weakness I shrink from revealing, but I feel assured of your delicacy, so I shall speak frankly and without reserve.” The judge considered for a moment. “I have had, how many whiskies, Jake?”

“Five,” said his host promptly.

“I made it four; but never mind, it's a point on which I am likely enough to be mistaken.”

“What's that to do with it?” inquired Benson.

“The vine,” said the judge, “inspired some of the choicest outbursts of classic poetry; I suppose the distillery will some day inspire a truly American muse—you don't follow me?”

“Not quite.”

“The point is that I may speak with an abandon I should eschew at another time. Five hot whiskies make a

difference in the intensity of a man's emotions. To-morrow I shall probably regret my candour; so I want to feel that in remembering what I say to-night, you will not fail to recall that this excellent mixture may have had something to do with it.”

“I think I understand,” said Benson laughing.

“Two o'clock in the morning confidences are always personal, Jake; a man seldom stays up late unless it is to talk of himself, or to drink, and in either case the result is the same; he says too much.”

“Aren't you rather forgetting Mrs. Landray?” inquired Benson.

“Jake, it's outrageous that she should be allowed to sacrifice herself.”

“I didn't know—” began Benson.

“You are going to say you didn't know it was a matter of any interest to me.”

“Something of the sort,” said Benson. “When I came back you did seem interested, but I didn't take it seriously; and to tell you the truth your interest struck me as premature.”

“That was only your inexperience, Jake; it's quite evident your knowledge in such matters is all gleaned at second hand. I dallied with the situation too long. I couldn't quite make up my mind; there are merits in being married, and there are merits in being single; you can't have your cake and eat it, too; and while I was pondering the matter, Stillman cut in. It was plain from the very moment he arrived in town that he was to have the pick of our eligible female population. Disgusting, ain't it?”

“Very,” agreed Benson.

“I'm threshing over old chaff with you, Jake. My chances now are about like the camel's at getting through the needle's eye, not worth mentioning.”

“Then you did come to a decision?”

“After I had hung fire long enough to decide I wanted what some other man had won. That's one of the risks you take when you wait until you're sure you're right before you go ahead.”

“As a widower, judge—”

“At present a widower, Jake; kindly phrase it so; for who is master of his fate?” he adjusted his stock rather pompously. “I am a man of some sentiment. Drat it! At fifty odd, and with sound health, one does not willingly admit that the best things in life are past! There are other widows—damn it, sir! There are maids, too!” and he wagged his head and leered knowingly at Benson. The hot whisky had steadily diminished, but for its disappearance the judge and not Benson was responsible. The judge now tilted the pitcher over the glass he held in his uncertain right hand, but only a drop or two fell from it; he looked hard at his host, but his host avoided his glance. With a sigh he placed the pitcher bottom up on the floor at his feet, and his glass beside it, also inverted. “Jake, have you any influence with her?”

“Not the least in the world, judge.”

“Hum! That's unfortunate. I hoped that you might have, and that you might be willing to exert it in my behalf; casually, of course, very casually; a word here, a word there.”

“I would if I possessed it, judge; but you see in trying to control her expenditures I have sacrificed some portion of her regard.”

“And her money will go to that confounded missionary!” and the judge groaned aloud in bitterness of spirit.

“But how do you know that it will?” asked Benson.

“It is as plain as the nose on your face! He is always there, and she has become a terrible prig; and last night I found her reading, what do you think, Jake? Edwards on 'Redemption!' She told me she felt instructed, quickened, strengthened, by its precious message! Now she'd stick to a lighter intellectual diet if there wasn't a man in sight; she's after more than redemption! Jake, can't you help me? I'm to be pitied, sir! I no sooner see some female capable of engendering a sentimental interest in my breast, than fate intervenes,” he smiled darkly. “I don't mind telling you that this is the third minister of the Gospel who has crossed my path.”

He had fallen more and more a prey to his sorrow, until it quite unmanned him, his forebodings becoming of the most gloomy character imaginable.

“I shall nip the bud of affection next time before it becomes the open flower of love! I'm marked for disappointment; I feel its blight, and I succumb! Confound it, Jake! she led me on, now I come to think of it—her conduct's been highly scandalous! I wonder what her friends, what her sister-in-law is going to say, when this gets out?”

“I wonder, too!” said Benson.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WHEN Virginia first heard the gossip that linked Anna's name with that of Dr. Stillman's, it won from her a shocked and indignant denial; but a doubt was born in her mind; it troubled her not a little the more she thought of it; and she drove at once into town determined to learn if possible the whole truth.

She found Anna at home. With her was a tall, dark man, a man with a narrow receding forehead, a sallow skin, and lean jaws. With much apparent solicitude she was hovering over this visitor whom she was regaling with afternoon tea. To Virginia she introduced him as Dr. Stillman, and in a single swift glance Virginia took

stock of him as she acknowledged the introduction by a curtsey, that was palpably most disquieting to the missionary; indeed, her manner was so cold and distant that the smile which had relaxed his thin lips frittered itself away in the embarrassed silence that fell upon him.

He was aware that he must reckon on the antagonism of this splendid beauty; for he had been quick to recognize that the antagonism was there. It shook his sleek self-approval, and he turned to Anna,—Anna with her soft ways and pretty flatteries which made him feel strong and masterful and thoroughly at ease in her parlour, with a pleasant proprietory interest in her and in all that belonged to her;—but he was at once made to understand that in this small family crisis he was to stand alone.

He had heard the phrase, a great lady, and the younger Mrs. Landray lived up to the title in a most disquieting fashion. There was a subtle claim to superiority on her part that he weakly accepted without a challenge or the wish to assert himself. Anna's quite uncommon prettiness, too, paled beside Virginia's fuller beauty, which had never been complimentary to others of her sex.

Virginia, meanwhile, had been indulging in certain frigid civilities that did not exactly include the doctor, yet did not actually ignore his presence; they were sufficiently restrained, however; and he eagerly availed himself of the first opening to beat a retreat, and backed awkwardly from the room. On the steps with the house door closed at his back, he paused, and an unhealthy glow suffused his cheeks. The memory of her manner toward him rankled and hurt his pride; then he recalled Anna's soft farewells, and clapped his tall beaver on his head with an air that was almost jaunty, while his dark eyes flashed with triumph.

“So that is Dr. Stillman?” said Virginia, when the door had closed on the missionary; and as this did not seem to call for a reply, Anna was silent. “I have been hearing a good deal about him.” She shot Anna a swift searching glance.

“Yes,” said Anna airily, “he is very much before the public.”

“I don't mean in those ways,” said Virginia. “He doesn't seem a very cheerful person,” she added.

“That depends on how you take him, and I must say, Virginia, you were almost rude to the man, I never saw him so ill at ease.”

“Was I? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be.”

“That was the trouble, you didn't mean to be anything to him; he might just as well have been a piece of furniture, for all the notice he got from you.”

“Don't you think it unwise of you to see so much of him?” asked Virginia abruptly.

“Why is it unwise?” demanded Anna, who was instantly on the defencive.

“It will make talk,” urged Virginia gently.

“Anything will make that;” Anna said. “I'm sure I'm careful, I see almost no one, I go nowhere! I don't know what more you can ask of me, Virginia.”

“But the doctor comes here very frequently, does he not?”

“Dear me!” said Anna fretfully. “One can hear most anything if one will only listen.”

“Of course, I know it's the merest gossip—you couldn't—” she broke off abruptly.

Anna elevated her eyebrows. “I don't see why any one should say anything; he calls occasionally, he is interested in—”

“Interested, dear, in you?” questioned Virginia.

“Oh, dear, no! In my spiritual welfare,” she dropped her eyes prettily.

Virginia laughed quite audibly at this.

Anna shivered at the sound. She hated ridicule.

“Since poor Bush's death, I have felt that my life has been so worldly; indeed, I feel that I can never return to my former career of folly,” she sighed.

“Isn't that a rather harsh name for it? But I don't see what Dr. Stillman has to do with that,” said Virginia.

“Amusements have lost their relish. I am feeling the need of a more evangelical faith,” murmured Anna. The younger Mrs. Lan-dray laughed outright at this.

“And I suppose that is the reason you delight in the doctor's evangelical conversation.”

Anna sighed.

“Of course nothing is sacred to ridicule.”

“Oh, don't be silly!” said Virginia sharply. “Don't confound the doctor with his teachings!”

But Anna repelled the idea by a look.

“I do wish I knew what you meant,” said Virginia.

“Oh, I am so lonely!” cried Anna, with sudden frankness. “Of course I loved Bush, but I can't live in the memory of that! I am not like you, Virginia; there is this difference, why don't you try and understand it;” and then, by degrees, she told Virginia all; while the latter sat at her side, shocked, silent, and indignant. She had promised to marry the missionary. “I thought life had ended for me with Bush's death, but I find I can still be something to some one,” she added in justification of the step she had taken.

“I see,” said Virginia, with unexpected gentleness, and the anger faded from her eyes, and in its place was only sorrow.

“I was devoted to him while he lived—you know that, Virginia?” insisted Anna, almost fiercely. “And I adore his memory, and always shall, but it's not enough,” she looked up into her sister's face. “You will never marry again, you are different from me. Oh, I wish I were like you, dear!”

“What about little Stephen?” asked Virginia quietly. She accepted the situation, she felt there was nothing more to say.

“We shan't take him with us,” said Anna, greatly relieved by the other's altered tone.

“Take him with you where?” demanded Virginia.

"To India," answered Anna.

"To India!" cried Virginia.

"Yes, to India;" but there was no little trepidation in her manner.

"You surely don't mean to tell me that man proposes to marry you and take you to India?"

"Why, of course, dear," meekly, and as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

Virginia looked at her in wonder. With Bush, she had always had her own way, he had denied her nothing. Virginia remembered her insistence; that she had never abandoned a purpose or desire until he yielded; and she mentally contrasted the handsome, easygoing fellow with this narrow-browed stranger from over the seas, and was moved to something very like pity for Anna.

"Why don't you leave little Stephen with me?" she at length asked.

"I thought you might like to have him; of course not for always," she hastened to explain. "But the doctor says India is no place for children."

"He is going to return there? You have not sought to dissuade him, to use your influence?"

"I haven't tried. It would be useless. He has started such a great work there among those dreadful pagans; he thinks I can be of such help to him in his labours."

And Virginia saw that vanity, and probably a very real sense of loss, had worked this change in Anna; she also realized from the ready acceptance of the life the doctor had mapped out for her, something of the man's determination of character, a force that was all the stronger because of the narrow channels into which it had been directed by the chance that had determined his career.

"So I am to have little Stephen—poor little fellow!"

They were silent for a time and then Anna said, still in justification of her course.

"It's my chance for happiness, Virginia. I'm too young to bury myself alive, I know Bush wouldn't expect it, I know he would approve; and you can't think what a comfort that conviction is!"

"And you really expect to marry Dr. Stillman?" Virginia set her lips. "Then I have nothing more to say, Anna, absolutely nothing; you must judge for yourself. I don't propose to criticize you, or your future husband; no good can come of that, and we won't be friends long if I do. Of course I'll take little Stephen, you know that all along I have wanted you and him at the farm; I'd rather have you both, but I see that will never be," she quitted her chair as she spoke.

"Oh, please don't go just yet, dear," entreated Anna. Now that Virginia knew, and seemed so reasonable in her opinions she would have liked to keep her and make her her confidant; there was much to tell, so much in the way of profitable discussion of her plans. But Virginia had heard enough.

"I must go, Anna, I really must go; Sam West is tired of waiting for me, and I wish to go home," she sighed gently. "I shall be sorry to lose you, dear," she said graciously, "and perhaps when I am a little more familiar with the idea I shall see it differently; more as you see it."

But on the drive home, the cheerfulness she had assumed in Anna's presence left her; she realized that it was but a few months since they had really known of their loss, and already Anna had formed new ties and interests, and these far removed from anything that had fallen within their past experiences. India—it vaguely suggested the ends of the earth, but beyond this it was only a sound, it carried no meaning.

It was found that Anna's affairs and their adjustment, presented certain difficulties which necessitated the calling in of the patient Benson. By the terms of her husband's will, she was, in the event of her second marriage, to take one third of his estate and the house in town, the remainder going to little Stephen.

Virginia consented to the expedient of mortgaging the mill. It was in vain that Benson expostulated; pointing out the manifest unfairness of such a course; but a very satisfactory condition resulted from the buying out of Anna's interest; he was relieved of her, and now he could administer Virginia's means to the best possible advantage.

He would like to have known just what Virginia thought about Anna's marriage, but he never ventured to ask; and he fancied he detected in her manner a certain reserve whenever it was under discussion.

Benson also found a purchaser for Anna's house in town, and she overcame her dislike for the country sufficiently to go out to the farm with little Stephen, where she remained until her marriage, which occurred late in the summer following Benson's return from the west. To the very last she was sustained by her love of excitement; but when Benson, and Dr. Stillman, and Dr. Stillman's brother, who had performed the ceremony, had withdrawn to the library where they spent a gloomy half hour in waiting for Sam West to drive up to the door; and she and Virginia with Jane had gone up-stairs to finish packing her trunks; her gaiety quite left her; she appreciated for the first time the radical nature of the change that was before her; and she clung to Virginia with many endearments, weeping softly.

"I may never come back, Virginia; and if I don't, you will be a mother to my boy?"

"He is more to me than any one else in the world, now that you are going away, dear," said Virginia gently. She had forgotten all of Anna's selfishness, her general unfairness, and the fact that she had not disdained to drive an exceedingly close bargain in the division of the estate; the latter, a point that the exasperated Benson could not get over and which he had kept before her with some insistence. These were the contradictory elements in human nature she felt; and her only emotion now was one of generous pity.

"Where is Stephen, Virginia?"

"He is with Martha; shall Jane go for him?"

"No, not yet. Let him stay with Martha till the last minute; until just before I go. You will do more for him than I could, Virginia; it is only believing this that makes it possible for me to leave him. You are lots wiser than I am, so perhaps it is providential that he should be left with you. When I come back in three or four years I expect he will be quite a big fellow, but don't let him forget his mother. Perhaps I haven't been just the best mother in the world, but in my own way I love him; you will not let him forget me—promise! Oh, it is so dreadful to be torn by these different loves and duties, I wish I was sure that I was doing right! The doctor

doesn't seem to have any doubts, he is quite sure that I am.”

But Virginia had nothing to say to this. She disliked Dr. Stillman, for with true feminine constancy she had refused to modify her first unfavourable opinion of him. Anna she could forgive for her weakness and selfishness, and for what she considered her lack of any deep feeling, for Anna belonged to the family and bore the name of Lan-dray; but the doctor was to be judged by quite different standards; the charity she chose to exercise in the one case did not apply to the other.

And Anna having done exactly what she wished, having had her own way in every particular, and having sacrificed nothing of her feelings, her convenience, or her worldly fortunes, was now bent on being handsomely contrite.

“I have been frivolous and extravagant, and I expect a great care to you, Virginia, since poor Bush went away. I hope you will forgive me.”

“You have nothing to reproach yourself with, dear,” Virginia assured her.

“Oh, yes, I have! I fear even in settling up the estate I was selfish I should not have asked you to buy out my interest. Mr. Benson said I was involving you and the property. I don't see why he should have added that to my burdens at this time. I don't think he likes me any more; but it doesn't matter about him, Virginia; I don't care what he thinks, but it means *everything* to me what you think! And you won't be influenced by what he says about the property; that I should pay back the extra money I had before we knew? That was pure spite, Virginia!”

“I am sure he didn't mean it as you think, dear.”

“Then I wish he hadn't said it; for I shall always be troubled by it, especially as I think it is quite true; no, I can't cheat myself I am going away with a guilty conscience in the matter; my only consolation is that I shall probably have to make great sacrifices for those awful pagans! The doctor has assured me that my life will be one of the greatest self-denial; you can think of me out there as being all I was *not* here, but *should* have been!”

“I wish you were not going!” said Virginia.

“I feel that I am passing out of your life, and out of Stephen's; perhaps I shall never come back—I begin to be afraid!”

“Oh, no, that is nonsense!”

“Do you really think so, Virginia? You are such a comfort! You will have Stephen write me, I shall get so much happiness from his dear little scrawls!”

By this time she was dressed for her journey; and Virginia and Jane were busy with her trunks. Anna sat and watched them, slowly drawing on her gloves, and occasionally favouring them with suggestions and advice. She had already recovered much of her cheerfulness; and it was plain that the proper packing of those trunks was now the matter that rested heaviest on her mind.

Down stairs in the library, Benson and Dr. Stillman, and Dr. Stillman's brother sat stiffly in their chairs and watched the gilt hands of the big marble clock on the mantle-piece. Benson, erect and uncomfortable, and monosyllabic as to speech, was finding Mr. Stillman fussy and objectionable; and he had all along considered the doctor generally offencive; furthermore he thought the whole affair scandalous and wholly without justification. But he resented it most on Virginia's account; she would have to take up the burden of Anna's neglected duties in the case of little Stephen; and she already had Jane and Jane's baby on her hands; cares of his providing, that were now a misery to him to think of.

Presently Sam West drove up from the barn and hitched his team. The three men heard him open the front door and mount the stairs. He had gone for Anna's trunks.

Benson heaved a sigh of relief and quitted his chair with alacrity: the doctor and his brother rose, too.

“Can I offer you a seat with us into town?” asked the former, civilly turning to Benson.

“No, I thank you, I have my own horse and cart here.”

The doctor extended his hand.

“Good-bye, sir,” he said coldly, and Benson touched the tips of the three nerveless fingers he had given him.

“Good-bye,” said the lawyer.

“You will drive in with us, Andrew?” and the doctor turned to his brother.

“Yes, indeed, my dear John; I must see the last of you and Anna,” and he patted the missionary affectionately on the arm, who now turned from him abruptly and moved toward the door opening into the hall.

On the stairs above, Anna, and Virginia, and Jane appeared. Anna was smiling radiantly, though there were still traces of tears on her cheeks, for she had just parted from little Stephen. Virginia, who was watching her, knew that no deep nor stable emotion could long possess her light nature; and she felt her own heart fill with tenderness for the child.

Benson, roused out of the apathy, in which he had passed the last hour, to something like brightness, said:

“I wonder when we shall see you again, Mrs. Stillman? Those heathen over in India are to be congratulated.”

“Confess you are not sorry to see the last of me!” said Anna, giving him her hand.

“I shall confess nothing of the kind,” he assured her.

“Those are your civilities, sir—I know what they are worth, and I am not misled. I expect I have been a great care to you;” she smiled up brightly into his face. “But now that I am going away you must forgive me, you really must; for I want to feel that I am leaving only friends behind.”

Imperceptibly the doctor had edged her toward the door while she spoke, and through the door, and out on to the porch; and now she was standing at the head of the steps leading down to the path where Sam West waited at the horses' heads. She turned with a little smothered cry of dismay to throw her arms about

Virginia for the last time.

"Be good to him!" she whispered. "Oh, I know you will!" she added in the same breath, and then the doctor urged her gently down the steps. From the door of the carriage she turned again, quite tremulous in her grief; but Virginia had disappeared, and there was only Jane and Benson.

"Good-bye!" cried Anna, "good-bye, and God bless you all!"

"Good-bye!" they called back, and then the doctor pushing his brother before him, mounted stiffly to his seat and closed the door; Sam touched his horses lightly with his whip, and the carriage rolled down the lane, and was soon out of sight on its road to Benson.

"They are gone!" said the lawyer at last, withdrawing his eyes from the spot where the carriage had last been visible through the trees that overhung the road. "We Americans are becoming a dreadfully diffuse people."

Jane looked at him inquiringly.

"He must be a very good man to do all he does do for people who don't appreciate it," she suggested.

"He is!" said the lawyer. "No one but a very good man would risk being so excessively unpleasant."

"You don't like him," said Jane; "but you think he will be good to her; do say that."

"Oh, he's probably a man of high domestic virtues. Yes, he'll be good to her, in his way." They were silent for a moment, and then Benson asked: "How about little Stephen; how did he take his mother's going?"

"Poor little fellow!" said Jane. "He doesn't understand yet."

"He never will!" said Benson. "Mrs. Landray won't let him."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BENSON'. love for Virginia was the one unusual thing in his otherwise ordinary life. It gave him the joy of a great hope; and it held the fear of a proportionate disappointment. Time had brought only the most superficial changes in their relation; she was as far removed from him, as unapproachable, as she had ever been; speech was still a great distance off. But his silent worship had only grown more devout; with the passing of time it had become a dreamy ecstasy in which he dwelt in the splendid solitude of his perfect fancy.

Virginia treated him with charming friendliness, but beyond this he dared not push his fortunes; he must have infinite patience, infinite tact. Of the remote and greater possibilities of their friendship she had never been conscious, because to her these possibilities could not exist. She had forgotten nothing, could forget nothing, that had made up the sum and substance of her love for Stephen Landray. Benson in seeking to understand her always came back to this, time had not changed her here; and he appreciated that love might be a much greater thing, more sacred and more binding than the mere day to day evidences of its existence indicated. He wondered not a little what manner of man Stephen Landray had really been. He had known him only as a kindly tolerant fellow of apparently no unusual brilliancy, and possessing apparently no unusual delicacy of mind or feeling; who had always been too generous in his business dealings, with a taste, inborn and not to be eradicated, for a manner of life beyond his means; yet having an excellent moral courage which had always enabled him to speak his mind and hold his own opinions whether they were popular or not. Benson was aware that he himself had much of the close-mouthed conservatism of middle-class prosperity. His own convictions he held too tightly, but defended loosely, as if he were more than half ashamed of them. Virginia rarely mentioned the dead man now. When she did, it was without visible emotion beyond a certain tenderness that unconsciously stole into her voice and manner. In the face of her unending, unyielding devotion to Stephen's memory, Benson now and again gave way to a despair that was not far from abject in its hopelessness; and yet quite apart from his selfish interest in all that affected her, this devotion of hers was most pathetic to him. Was she going to waste her splendid youth in that great house out there beyond the town, away from people, and apart from all that was supposed to make living worth while? It would have hurt him to have thought of her as he did of Anna; but she was the younger, and her beauty was only now reaching the fullness of its perfection, and after a decent period had elapsed, then surely she might think of taking up life again. No worldly advantage could ever have any weight with her; but he knew that he was, as he was reputed to be, the richest man in Benson, that he had much to offer her, a way of life entirely suited to her tastes and traditions. He thought of these things, wondering if she could ever be brought to comprehend the value of all he had to give. In the absence of any closer tie he comforted himself with the thought that it was much gained to be her friend; yet on each occasion when they met, he sought to discover in her face that altered look which would bid him speak; but the change never came, and in her dark eyes there rested always the shadow of her sorrow.

He was still boy enough to wish that he might do some gallant deed, make some great heroic sacrifice for her sake, and so, splendidly, tell his love; but he knew that such opportunities were rare in the practical age into which he had been born. He owned almost sadly, that even had they existed, he was gifted with a thrifty shrewdness that would probably have stood in his way. No, his parts were not brilliant. By no stretch of imagination could he see himself the hero of a spectacular achievement of any sort.

He longed to be a poet with no theme but her, her beauty, her charm, and his love. But this wish was so absurd, that he found himself laughing at it, along with his other fancies, but with a certain joy and wonder that they had come to him; and with the wish that they might be something more than fancies. And so day

after day, as he sat in his office, where he gave most excellent advice in a vast variety of cases, these thoughts filled his mind; they followed him out into the street when the cracked town bell summoned him to the dingy court-room, whither he walked with much deliberation and dignity; for he was aware that his youth, though beginning to be largely a matter of appearance only, was still not exactly in his favour.

He sometimes wondered what his clients—serious minded people for the most part, who were suing for judgments on bad debts, or involved in squabbles over line fences, or had foolishly acquired or rashly bestowed black eyes and broken noses—would have thought, if they could have known that under the mask of his professional interest in their affairs, he cherished such an array of dreams.

So he lived this double existence; Benson the lawyer, and Benson the lover, who dwelt removed and remote in a secret ecstasy all his own, and of which no man knew or guessed. It was the season of a generous enthusiasm, when he strove manfully toward a greater measure of worth, for his were the ideals that no man attains to but only desires; and only desires when he is young and generous; and this season, saw the passing of another season beyond the windows of his quiet house. The leaves on the maples, crimsoned at the touch of frost, faded and fell, clogging the open gutters with their faded heaps; the snow lay two feet on the level, and then came the period of frost and thaw; of melting snow and ice; and the imperceptible change from stagnation to life; and it was spring, and the maples were in bud again.

All this while he managed to be of use to Virginia in many ways. He watched over her interests with rare good judgment, for he was determined that no advantage should be taken of her. He found a tenant for the farm—Trent, whom Stephen had left in possession, having proved himself unworthy after the first year or two—and over this tenant he held a tight rein; and many were the trips he made to the farm to see that he failed in no part of his bargain. Then there was the mill, which he had rented on very desirable terms to a man by the name of Crawford, who came from a distance, and had some little capital and considerable energy.

He supposed, though she gave no sign, that he could interpret in support of his opinion, that there was much self-denial in the life that circumstances forced upon her. It was the same thing, without break or interruption, day after day, and month after month. Once, and the time was of course, well within his memory, the Landray home had been famous for its hospitality; but Virginia had neither the inclination nor the means to continue this; indeed her few friends in the town itself gradually dropped away, and her interests narrowed to the immediate members of her own household, who furnished her with something that stood for occupation. Jane's baby developed a variety of inconsequential ills such as babies usually develop, but of which Virginia was always inclined to take an extreme view as of potentially tragic possibilities. She had also been directing little Stephen's studies for some time; though she had assumed this responsibility with serious misgivings as to her fitness for such a task, since her own education was of the simple sort such as usually fell to the lot of girls at that period, and went no further than a fair use of the English language, a treacherous acquaintance with figures, and a very little French, which she had forgotten, she found, with a thoroughness that was quite disproportionate to so vague a knowledge as this had been at its best.

From Anna she heard occasionally. Her letters came at irregular intervals, great bulky packages filled with agreeably written descriptions of the places she was seeing. These, Virginia sometimes loaned the lawyer to read; as she took it for granted that he had the same interest in Anna that he had in her.

The summer that followed Anna's marriage passed; and the winter that succeeded it; and spring came again, and found Benson still committed to a self-denying silence. It was one of the first warm days of early summer and Virginia had sent for him; her note had been left by the farm tenant and the lawyer had discovered it on his desk when he went home to dinner after a morning spent in court, and by the middle of the afternoon he was jogging over the pleasant country road in the direction of the farm.

“It's about Stephen,” said Virginia, when they were seated in the library. “I must begin to think of his future. I am thinking seriously of sending him away to school!”

“But why burden yourself, Mrs. Landray? There is the public school—temporarily,” he added hastily, for he detected a look of quick resentment.

“His father and uncle were college-bred men, Mr. Benson, and I can't bear to think that his opportunities are to be limited in a way their's were not!” And, sadly, “He will have need of every advantage.”

“Not limited, except in the immediate present,” he made haste to say; “and don't you see, to send him East to some preparatory school would be a great trial to you? Might it not be dangerous as well? He might form undesirable associations, for instance.”

“For that reason, perhaps, I should prefer Dr. Long's school!”

But Benson was opposed to this purpose to which she was evidently only too willing to devote a part of her slender income. Stephen if he were properly ambitious, would do very well in the public schools.

“I don't wish to urge my opinion,” he said apologetically.

“Tell me, Mr. Benson, what I really have to look forward to in the way of money; I have never quite understood.”

“Well, there is the income from the farm, Mrs. Landray, and the rent from the mill; of course, part of this is absorbed by the interest you are paying.”

Virginia gazed at him thoughtfully.

“Of course,” she said slowly, considering the question, “the interest on the money that has been borrowed must be paid, and the money, too. Am I extravagant, do you think I am?”

“Oh, no!” and he smiled at the idea. “But you are inclined to be too generous where others are concerned.”

“Please tell me just what I owe?”

“In the first place, part of the debt is Stephen's.”

“Poor little fellow! And he is to begin life burdened by debt! How much *do* we owe, Mr. Benson?”

“The estate owes nine thousand dollars.”

“It's a very large sum, I don't know that I ever understood exactly how much it was before.”

“After all my explanations?” he said reproachfully.

"How much is the interest?"

"A trifle over six hundred dollars."

"And how much is the income?"

"Well, there are the earnings from the farm; last year, in spite of a partial failure of the season, your share sold for five hundred dollars; and of course your actual expenses here are small; the rent from the mill is six hundred and fifty. Then there is the rent of the farm north of town, which is one hundred and fifty more. It figures up thirteen hundred dollars, which leaves you clear something over six hundred dollars."

"That doesn't seem so bad, does it?" she said hopefully, but she added quickly, "I forgot, the debt itself will have to be paid eventually." And her face fell.

"I wouldn't worry about that yet." And he explained that the mill, and water rights, constituted such excellent security that Mr. Stark had signified his willingness to wait her pleasure in the matter.

"I don't know what I would do without your help and advice!" said Virginia, when he had finished.

He moved his hand in disparagement of this.

"Have I made it quite plain to you?" he asked, with grave kindness.

"Yes, I think so, but we haven't settled yet how I am to send Stephen to school, even to Dr. Long's academy."

"We might very easily induce Mr. Stark to advance more money!" he ventured tentatively, but Virginia shook her head.

"No, I am afraid of debt; and it is not only my own means, it is Stephen's start in life that would be involved. I must exercise a greater economy."

"My dear Mrs. Landray, that is quite out of the question, unless you deny yourself in ways I cannot even bear to think of!"

Virginia did not seem to hear him, and the tone that had unconsciously crept into his voice, escaped her notice. He could only guess at the needless self-denials she might practice, inspired by her love and sense of duty! She was too fine for that sort of thing; she had always seemed to him to adorn the easy circumstances for which the Landrays had been famous. It had not been great wealth, perhaps, but in that new country it had been riches; since relatively, little money purchased so much.

"If you will allow me"—he hesitated, and then continued—"to advance what money you need, it will give me the greatest pleasure."

"You are very kind," she said; it was plain she was rather surprised at the offer.

"I don't mean that you are to sign any more notes," he hastily explained; "but it hurts me to think that you may be limited in any way. It can stand as a personal debt that some day you will repay when the other matters have been settled. I assure you it will give me great pleasure to aid you," he finished warmly, but Virginia turned to him with the question:

"Mr. Benson, please tell me one thing, when you went West for me, who bore that expense? Did you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Landray;" but the admission was made with reluctance.

"It never occurred to me until this moment that that was possible! It has not been returned to you?"

"But it has not been my wish that it should be," he rejoined quickly.—

"I wish you had told me of this before!" she continued a little reproachfully.

"Why?" he asked.

"It might have been easier."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Landray! To tell you the truth I had forgotten all about it."

"But when the estate was settled, should it not have gone in with the other claims?"

"It's not a debt in that sense; please don't place me in the position of a creditor!"

Virginia wished to do him full justice, yet she rather resented that she had not known of this before. His silence was a mistaken kindness; for had he spoken sooner, Anna would have met her share of this debt. With the feeling she had of the melting away of the fortune, this even was a matter of some moment. Benson, watching her narrowly, conjectured much of what was passing in her mind.

"Let us dismiss the whole matter!" he said. "I wish I had not told you. It is quite unimportant."

"I fear I have never quite appreciated the full extent of your kindness." she said, "nor how fond you were of Stephen, your friendship for him. I must have seemed very unreasonable to you in many ways, at first."

Benson was silent. He feared to speak. He felt he could not continue in the false position in which she was placing him.

"You will let me return what you have expended," Virginia continued.

"Do you find the obligation so irksome?" he asked, with a touch of exasperation in his tone.

"Any obligation must be irksome when one is so uncertain as to how it is to be met!"

"But you see that it has not worried me!"

"You are too kind to let it, too generous in your feeling—

"No," he said, with sudden deliberation, "I am not so generous as you think. I wanted you to know that I was your friend. As your friend, all that I could do was a privilege; I gained more than I gave."

Instinctively she drew back at the turn the conversation had taken. Her glance as it sought his face, lost something of its former frankness, but she had not been alarmed by anything he had said, for his meaning was still remote from his words; and she was so unsuspicious of him, had come so to regard him only as her dead husband's friend; and measured by the standard set by her own love, it was not strange that Stephen should have inspired such a friendship, or that it should extend in some lesser degree even to her; indeed, it was the most natural thing in the world.

But Benson had noted the subtle alteration in her manner, no change there ever escaped him; he felt that he had betrayed his secret.

“Friendship has its limitations, that is the unfortunate thing about it. It is not like—not like other things,” he finished abruptly.

She looked up quickly into his face; and what she saw there, caused her steady glance to waver. Her eyes fell. Perhaps she had not understood; perhaps—but her cheeks coloured, not with resentment, but with shame, at the thought that had laid hold of her. She rose from her chair, with all that dignity of manner in the presence of which he was wont to stand abashed and silent.

“I have offended you!” he said. “Please let me explain!”

“There is nothing to explain, you only meant to be kind, to spare me—”

“Oh, not that!” he cried, with sudden recklessness. “That shall be as you wish—I had no right to argue the point with you!”

She made a step toward the door.

“*Mrs. Landray, you* must *let me speak!*”

“Please!” he cried, “Mrs. Landray, you *must* let me speak!”

She turned on him swiftly; her eyes wide with wonder at the change that had come over him.

There was dead silence in the room.

Now that he had spoken, now that circumstances had led him on until there was no turning back, he could have bitten off his tongue that had betrayed him.

What she felt he could only guess; but it was clearly none of those emotions he might have expected to arouse. It was not embarrassment, it was not dismay; the look on her face was one of angry wonder.

He felt his cheeks pale under the steady glance with which she regarded him, and he was aware of a swift sense of pity for himself. Had he waited and struggled for this! After the years of patient devotion he had rendered her, was she so unmoved in the presence of his love; did it mean so little to her!

“You know it now!” he said in a low voice.

Even as he spoke, he was conscious that the angry wonder in her eyes changed to a look that was almost one of contempt; and the colour surged back into his face, until his cheeks burned with it. But her quite evident scorn of him served to rouse him. He met her glance with a look of quick resentment that she

understood, and liked him none the less that he had been so ready to summon it.

“I think you are mistaken, Mr. Benson, you don't really wish me to stay. I'd better go.” She spoke coldly, but with a certain latent pity in her tone.

“Yes,” he said doggedly, “I do wish you to remain, I do wish to speak to you! I have waited, I have hoped the time would come when I might—”

“It is not now. It will never come,” she said slowly. “You have been very good, always—I am grateful to you. Be content with that; don't force me to say more than this, please, for I cannot listen to you with patience.”

“No, that won't suffice!” he persisted; roused by something in her manner to a stubborn determination to be heard, no matter what the consequences. “I haven't struggled to win your gratitude. That won't suffice, unless it leads to something else.”

“What more have you expected?” she asked quietly. But he was not misled by her restraint.

“What does a man expect when his heart has gone out of his keeping—”

“Don't!” she cried quickly, putting up her hands as though to ward off something. “Don't! How can you!”

“Why not?” he asked. “Every man says it sooner or later to some woman; and every woman hears it sooner or later from the lips of some man!”

“You must not!” she repeated.

“I have waited, I have tried to be patient; don't give me your answer now! If it is no, it will leave me nothing! I have lived and struggled for this day; that I might tell you that I love you! You may not be ready to hear it—I did not intend to speak; nothing could have been further from my purpose ten minutes ago; but I have spoken, and you know that I love you. This love seems to go back to the very beginnings of my life—I don't want to think of a time when I did not love you; it seems impossible to even imagine such a time, as impossible as to imagine a future when I shall have ceased to love you! You may not value my love, but it is as much yours as any other possession you have in the world!”

Her resentment toward him was slowly taking a definite shape in her mind, she was seeing the fullest reason for it. She had counted him her friend, generously disinterested and wholly self-forgetful; she felt he had advanced under the cloak of friendship for Stephen, until he dared to speak of love to her. To her! To the widow of the man for whom he had professed such devotion! Yet she parted from her ideal of him with a sense of bitter personal loss, as from a living presence on which she had come wholly to rely. If she could not trust him, whom could she trust! He dwindled in all the generous goodness with which she had unconsciously invested him, to contemptible littleness and petty self-seeking.

His patient kindness, his innumerable sacrifices of time and convenience had been but the stepping stones toward this moment, when he dared to tell her that he loved her! Her anger flamed in her face; but when she spoke she still maintained the control which she had put upon herself from the start.

“I wish that you had allowed me to leave you before you said what you have. Of course it would have made no difference in the opinion I had formed of you, but I should not have been forced to speak of it.”

He would have said that in his fancy he had already lived through the possibilities of this moment; but he had never quite conceived it possible that she could treat him with such cold scorn. In his bitterness he could only ask himself how had he failed so utterly. At her words, however, and the tone in which she had spoken them, his selfrespect came to his rescue.

“You need not say anything that you may regret later on; that is quite unnecessary, for I think I know just how you feel toward me,” he said gently.

She knit-her brows in an angry frown, but his words impressed her, and her manner became more one of resentful kindness. After all she had no wish to hurt him; only he must understand the extent of his enormity, for in her jealous love for Stephen Landray it was nothing else.

“Have I ever said anything, has there ever been in my manner toward you, anything that could lead you to think I could so far forget myself as to wish to hear what you have just told me, from the lips of any living man?”

“No,” he said, “there has not been; yet—”

“If I have been at fault you must tell me. I will hear you without offence; then I can the sooner forgive you for the way in which you have misjudged me, I should almost be glad to think that in some way I had been to blame!”

“No,” he answered, “I have known always that you would not care to hear this; that it would only hurt you.”

“Then why have you told me?” she demanded.

“The reason was in my words—because I love you!” he said. “I hoped that the time might come—”

“Never!” she cried, with fierce insistence. “Never! It can never come!”

“Even so; that I should love you was inevitable, you might have foreseen that! How could I meet you day after day, be near you, be your friend, and not come to love you! I only wonder that I was able to hold my peace so long as I did!”

“Then I was not at fault, none of the blame was mine?”

“None,” he assured her; but he was white to the lips.

“Then if I am not at fault I shall never forgive you!” There was a ring of triumph in her tone. She had wished his own words to vindicate her.

“Perhaps you may. It may even come to forgiveness,” he said. “No, I shall never forget the advantage you have taken!”

“I have paid you the highest compliment I could,” he said steadily. She made him a scornful gesture, and though his cheeks burnt, he went on. “That I have loved you, that I do love you, is my right; my own unworthiness, of which you cannot be more aware than I am, has nothing to do with it.”

Understanding her as he did, he fully realized her sense of outraged decency; he could think of it as nothing

else. If he had loved her less, if he had parted from any portion of his high esteem and reverence for her, he would have urged his suit, he would have appealed to her pity, her generosity, and above all he would have urged the depth and constancy of his devotion; but he felt he could make no such appeal to her; the most he could hope was that when her anger against him had somewhat abated, she would see that he had taken no advantage of her; and that she would respect him for the restraint he had until now put upon himself. He knew her better than to suppose she would ever feel flattered by the declaration he had made. Whatever her secret vanities were, and he supposed they existed, they were not of that strictly feminine character that could pardon what she had first deemed an offence, because later she found this very offence included a compliment; and he was quite certain she would never look back to that moment with any feeling even remotely approaching satisfaction. The most he dared to hope for was that they might gradually return to their former relation, where he could begin again with tireless patience to recover the ground he had foolishly lost, since he had no thought of giving her up; that never occurred to him as possible. She had become as necessary to him as the very air he breathed. He knew that for the past years he had been living for these interviews with her, which had meant so much to him, while they had meant nothing to her. At the thought that they might be denied him in the future he turned sick at heart; the possibilities of such a thing seemed to sweep away the whole purpose of existence, to rob him in a twinkling of all that made his life worth while. He was sick with the dull ache that filled his heart. It was more than the mental appreciation of an impending catastrophe; it was a definite physical anguish. But the hope that had meant so much to him in the past, came to his rescue again. What did it matter if he waited years merely for her tardy forgiveness, the whole of his life belonged to her! His tenderness and patience should be infinite; and the time must surely come when the last vestige of her anger would have faded from her heart, and they could begin anew. He told himself that this was the one great emotion he should know. But for her, he lived in a world of dull commonplace; and she, whether she were aware of it or not, without intending it, had glorified his life.

In realizing what his love meant to him, he, for the first time fully realized what her love for Stephen Landray might still mean to her. He felt endless compassion for her. How she must have suffered, and she had always shown such courage. It made her all the more desirable that her own constancy had been so fine and true.

“You must forgive me!” he said. “Think that I forgot myself, and forget if you can what I have said!”

But she had no forgiveness for him; little things she might easily overlook, or they passed her by without being even noticed, but this was a hurt that only time could heal. Her pride was a stubborn thing, and it was her pride, her very self-respect, that he had hurt.

He glanced into her face and saw how far he was from forgiveness. In the telling of his love he had roused her anger to no purpose; he had destroyed the very thing that had been her stay through all these years, and there was nothing left her! He had cheapened each sacrifice he had made; for in her eyes he had performed each service, each generous act, with the idea that it would help to win him her love; he felt he could not argue with her, the justice or the injustice of her feeling for him, there was something fixed and final in this attitude of hers.

“You must try and forgive me!” he repeated.

“I shall try,” she said.

“Which means you will fail!” he retorted bitterly.

“Am I so unjust?” she demanded haughtily.

“I wish you might see it and feel it for one moment, as I see it and feel it!” he said, with hoarse emotion. “It might move you to mercy!”

“You are asking for friendship now?” she said.

“Yes”—he hesitated—“yes, friendship.”

“Will you be content with that?”

“Can it ever be friendship after this? Will it not be less—or more?”

“Less,” she said.

“I suppose so,” he admitted dully. “It's a small matter to you; but an hour ago I would have said it was a matter of life and death to me! You suffered—you loved!”

“You have no right to speak of it!” she cried. “Because I have trusted you—” She broke off abruptly.

“And I suppose you think I have taken advantage of your trust! I did not know until now—that is, I could not have imagined that a man could so offend a woman merely by telling her that he loved her.” She did not answer him; and after a moment's silence he went on. “Can you tell me how out of the wreck I seem to have made, I can preserve some portion of your esteem? In Heaven's name, let it be friendship if it is nothing more!”

“Wait!” she said, not unkindly; and then softening, “Oh, how could you, when you knew that I trusted you; that has been the cruelest part of it!”

“It was so easy,” he said. “But we look at it from such hopelessly different points of view.”

“You are never to speak to me of this again; you are to forget what has passed to-day, and I shall try, too! You must promise me!”

But he did not answer her directly.

“So you are going to impose silence on me; isn't that a little hard? Not,” he added bitterly, “that I find myself with any inclination to anything else!”

“It is necessary if we are to meet in the future,” she said quietly.

“But isn't it an unnecessary condition?” he persisted.

Her anger toward him seemed to have passed, and his courage was reviving. He threw aside his baffling manner and said frankly: “I'm more sorry than I can say, Mrs. Landray; and you shall not find me unworthy a second time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BENSON carried with him continually now a sense of hurt; and out of this came a certain subtle change in the very fibre of his love itself. He lost something of the spirit of worship, he seemed to be struggling for dominance. The reserve of his former attitude toward Virginia was lost. Once he had hoped to win her love, now he felt that he must compel it. He always came back to the one rankling conviction that she had been unjust; that she had allowed him to make sacrifices and to do for her in numberless ways she should not have permitted, unless she were willing to accept, not his love necessarily, but the full consequences of their intimacy, since it was perfectly incredible to him that any man could know her as he had known her, and not come to love her; he came to blame her that she had not understood.

It was not unnatural perhaps that the after effect upon Virginia of Benson's declaration was less pronounced than upon himself. Her active anger was of brief duration only, and she soon forgave him his unlucky utterances in remembering his real kindness. She would have liked him to know this; but she was sensible it would be unsafe to show it, and after all, a marked but kindly reserve was only a reasonable precaution. She was sorry for him, and his restrained manner in her presence only tended to deepen her feeling of pity; yet she considered him both a foolish and presumptuous young man.

In the first stress of her emotion she had meditated radical and salutary treatment of him. She had even thought of asking him to retire from the management of the estate; but she had decided that this would be a needless severity. When they met she was ceremoniously kind, but either Jane or Stephen was present. At first Benson had been rather inclined to smile at this; it struck him as being such a distinctly feminine maneuver; but the chaperonage when it was firmly persisted in, ended by becoming rather galling; it argued such a lack of confidence, as well as a fixed unwillingness to allow him to ever again revert to the subject which he had most at heart.

Virginia had found that even Dr. Long's select academy, with its modest fees for tuition, was out of the question; and was forced to send Stephen to the public school. At first Sam West drove him into town each morning, returning for him in the afternoon, and Benson pointed out to Virginia that when the winter actually set in these drives would be rather a hardship for the boy, and proposed that he stay with him when the weather was severe.

“Oh, no, I couldn't think of that!” said Virginia. “He would be such a care to you.”

“You leave that part of it to me, Mrs. Landray,” answered the lawyer good-naturedly.

“And I should miss him dreadfully, and he might be homesick!”

“He probably will be at first; but you'll be sending him off to college presently; this will prepare you both for that time.”

“Well, perhaps, when the roads get very bad indeed.”

After his first experience in town, Stephen carried Virginia such an enthusiastic account of his host's kindness that it won from her a grateful little letter of acknowledgment and thanks.

From the start Benson exerted a certain influence over the boy that was destined to increase with his development. The lawyer was the first man he had known of his own class; all his short life had been passed among women, they had been his companions and friends; and he slowly abandoned the reserve with which he had first met Benson's advances, until finally he talked to him almost as freely as he would have talked to Virginia herself.

If Stephen had never known men, it was equally true that Benson had never known boys, his father having made his own youth a period of the most rigorous industry; he had also been quiet and studiously inclined; the latter a characteristic which he noted Stephen did not appear to possess. He remembered that the boy's father and uncle, while they were educated men, had possessed a much greater respect for books than knowledge of them; and it impressed itself upon him that Stephen was most unlikely material from which to recruit a member of one of the learned professions. In short the boy evinced an utter and astonishing lack of curiosity concerning the lawyers well selected library which had been placed at his disposal. When Benson commented on this fact, Stephen informed him quite frankly that he didn't care for books; he had all the reading he wanted at school.

“How would you like to be a lawyer, Stephen?” Benson asked him on one occasion.

“I shouldn't like it, Mr. Benson,” he said promptly.

“Why not, Stephen?”

“I don't know, only I just know I shouldn't.”

“But you've got to do something,” urged Benson.

“I suppose so,” said the boy slowly. “My Aunt Virginia wants me to be a professional man, but I tell her that is all nonsense.”

“But to please her,” suggested Benson.

“I'd do a good deal to do that, but what I want is something out of doors. And I'd want there should be a great deal of money in it, whatever I did!”

“And if you got a great deal of money what would you do with it?” asked his host.

“Give most of it to my Aunt Virginia, and keep some for myself,” answered Stephen.

“That's a first-rate idea,” said Benson.

“They, my father and uncle, must have had a lot of money once, Mr. Benson.”

“Yes, they did—a fortune.”

The boy frowned.

“Well, I wish it hadn't been lost; then there wouldn't be this talk about my being a professional man. What are all the professions anyway, Mr. Benson?”

“The law, medicine, the ministry—”

“Oh, well, I guess I'll have to argue my Aunt Virginia out of that notion!” he said in evident low spirits.

Stephen was rather good looking and mature for his years. All his ideas, such as they were, were well thought out and definite. He was dark like his father, and had the Landray air of high breeding; indeed, his manner toward Benson was one of courteous and restrained good-fellowship, he was neither boisterous nor familiar; and the lawyer, considering those points which were most in his favour, decided that while in some respects he was only an average boy, he yet possessed certain fine possibilities of manhood, though he was forced to own he did not quite know what they were, and was dubious as to their practical value. He remembered that his father and uncle had both been exceptional men, but he would hardly have called them successful men.

If Benson's opinion of Stephen was not wholly complimentary, no doubt of the boy's capacity or brilliancy ever entered Virginia's mind. He was a Landray, and she was sure he would develop into such a man as his father had been. She felt that the future of the family rested entirely with him, and had her own ideals of what this future must be.

She had so fixed upon a profession for him that he soon ceased to combat the idea, though it was peculiarly distasteful to him; and this distaste grew as he grew, until his apathy on this one point was so great that Virginia's confidence was shaken somewhat; however, during the second winter of his attendance at the public school he delighted her by suggesting the law, since it seemed to him that with Benson's help it could be mastered with rather less personal inconvenience than any other of the professions; and probably it would be all right, but he had his doubts, still to please his aunt he was willing to make the effort; and so the law it became.

The following winter he worried through Humes's “History of England,” and then in very low spirits took up Blackstone, and felt that he was hopelessly committed; but he bravely guarded his speech that she might not know how great a sacrifice he was making.

In his fancy, speculating on his future, he saw himself as he saw Benson, digging away at his desk, among piles of papers, or delving into yellow calfskin volumes; or arguing his cases in the stuffy little court-room; or returning dusty or muddy, according to the season, from the round of the circuit courts; and this cheerless prospect filled him with a secret anguish that time in no wise abated. He did not dare tell any one what he would really have liked to do, which involved leaving home and going West; the life there, as he imagined it was the only kind of life he could think of with any degree of satisfaction. But this he knew could never be for him; so he plodded grimly on in his studies, and while he was not brilliant he wasted no time, but persevered in his uncongenial pursuits with a dogged tenacity that went far to atone for his lack of heart in his work. It would not have been so bad, if he had not felt he was surely building toward a future in which he could take no vital interest.

One day, during his fourth year in school, his teacher was called from the room, and on his return went to Stephen's desk.

“You are wanted, Landray, at home,” he said. “No, there is nothing wrong there,” he added, seeing the startled look on the boy's face. Outside in the hall Stephen found Sam West.

“What is it, Sam?” he asked anxiously.

“I don't know, but your aunt sent me in for you, she wants to see you. Wants you should go back with me right away.”

“But what is it, Sam? You're sure she is not sick?” he persisted, in vague alarm.

“No, she ain't sick; she's all right. I was in town this morning and took a letter out to her; she read it, and sent me in for you; that's all I know about it,” Sam explained.

On reaching home Stephen hurried into the library where he found Virginia waiting for him.

“There is nothing the matter with you, is there, Aunt Virginia?” he questioned anxiously. “You're not sick, are you?”

“Oh, no, dear—were you alarmed?” Virginia asked.

“Well, yes, I was!” he answered. “You see I couldn't make out why you should send for me.”

“Sit down, Stephen. I have heard from Dr. Stillman. Sam brought me the letter two hours ago.” Her manner was very gentle, and the boy saw that her eyes were red as with weeping.

“Is there anything the matter with my mother?” he asked quickly.

“Yes, dear,” said Virginia softly.

“She's sick?”

“Yes, she has been very ill, Stephen.”

He looked up into her face.

“You mean—” he began, with strange hesitancy.

“She is dead, dear. Your mother is dead.”

“Dead?” he repeated. He did not seem to understand. “When did it happen?” he asked at length.

He saw that his aunt expected some show of emotion from him, but he was conscious of no emotion beyond surprise. With the years that had intervened since her going away, his mother's letters had grown less and less frequent. She had long since ceased to write him with any regularity, and when her rare letters did reach

him, they had been a burden to him rather than a pleasure. He had not known how to answer them.

"Would you like to see Dr. Stillman's letter?" Virginia asked.

He shook his head.

"No; you tell me what he says," he replied.

"It is very brief, it was posted over four months ago. She died in upper Burmah, where she said they were going in the last letter we received from her, you remember, dear?"

He nodded slightly.

"It seems that her death was very sudden, a fever of some sort. Aren't you very, very sorry, dear?"

The inadequacy of his emotion, as she felt it, was a shock to her. "Why, yes, of course I am!" he said. "I wish I remembered her better. You'd like me to show a good deal of feeling, wouldn't you? but how can I, when I don't remember her so very well? You're the only mother I've had, you've been a real mother to me! I suppose you feel it more than I do, and you're surprised at it."

"And you don't remember?" asked Virginia with tender pity; pity for him, and pity for the dead woman.

"Oh, yes, I do, in a way. I remember her saying good-bye and going off in the carriage. I watched her drive away from the hall window up-stairs, and you came to me there, and found me crying, you were crying, too; I remember a lot about her before that, long before that; and I remember him—the doctor, I mean. Why, I must have been a good-sized boy when they left!"

"Yes," said Virginia sadly.

"I thought it was longer ago than that," he muttered.

There was no use in his trying to show a grief he did not feel; his aunt would have detected the false ring if he had attempted it; yet he wondered, disquietingly, that he was so little stirred.

He never asked to see Dr. Stillman's letter, and only read it when he found that Virginia was really anxious he should; and then having read it, he returned it to her without comment beyond the words, "I don't like him!" meaning the doctor; but then, as a child, he had not liked him.

CHAPTER THIRTY

TOM BENSON, a younger brother of old Jacob Benson had emigrated to Ohio some time in the early twenties. He was a superior sort of a mechanic, and when Newton Bendy established his iron works, Tom sought and found employment with him.

He was an excellent workman, acquainted with all branches of his trade; and Bently did not disdain to acknowledge that his foreman knew more of the practical conduct of the shops than he did himself.

"But don't tell Tom Benson I said so!" he always added, when he had been dwelling on the Yankee mechanic's skill and judgment. "He don't need any boosting from me! Why, I expect he could go to Carthage to-morrow, and get double the wages I'm paying him!" But Tom Benson had no idea of going to Carthage, or anywhere else. Yet if Bently supposed that he was not aware of his own value, he was grievously mistaken in his man.

This was proved one day by his leaving his bench and walking into the office with his coat on his arm, where without waste of words he coolly proposed to Mr. Bently that he take him into partnership.

Bently, when his first surprise had somewhat abated and he had found words which he deemed adequate to the occasion, intimated that he would see him damned long before he would even vaguely entertain such an idea; whereat Tom Benson turned on his heel, merely remarking in an offhand way:

"Well, you know where to find me when you want me!"

"I sha'n'. want you, I'm done with you, Tom!" said Bently ungraciously enough.

"Oh, no, you ain't!" retorted the mechanic, slipping into his coat. "You'll want me the worst kind of a way before the month's up! Who've you got to set them engines you're making in the shops?"

"What's to hinder me from getting out and doing that job myself?" demanded Bently.

Benson laughed in his face.

"Maybe you think I can't!" cried Mr. Bendy.

"I ain't said it," answered Benson briefly, and with that he walked out of the office.

At the end of just two weeks, work was at a standstill in the shops, and on the two most important contracts Bendy had ever been able to secure. Then he sent for Tom Benson. His messenger—it was Williams, the bookkeeper—found the mechanic in his room at his boarding-house. He was sitting by his open window in his shirtsleeves, his elbows on his knees, his chin sunk in his palms, and the stem of a short black pipe clinched between his teeth. He heard Williams quietly, then he said:

"Tell Bendy he knows where to find me when he wants to see me. I sha'n'. stir out of here for two weeks more."

This word being conveyed to Bendy, he swore he would close the shops rather than again hold any communication with the obdurate mechanic.

"Me go to him, when it's been me paying him wages? I guess when his money's gone he'll think differently about who's to do the running back and forth! I'll quit business before I'll jump at the snapping of his fingers!"

But a week later when it seemed this was the very thing he would be forced to do, he sent his bookkeeper once again to the mechanic.

“Sort of smooth him down, Williams!” he said. “He always was a cross-grained cuss! Make him the prettiest speech you can, but fetch him back herewith you, we're just playing hell with them two jobs!”

And Williams found Tom Benson still by his open window, still in his shirt-sleeves, still with his chin in his palms, and still smoking. He interpreted Mr. Bendy's request for a speedy audience with all possible tact.

The mechanic remained unmoved.

“Bendy knows where to find me when he needs me; and don't you come back here, Williams, unless you want I should throw you down them steps.”

But Bendy waited yet another day in the hope that Tom Benson would relent, then he hurried to the mechanic's boarding-place. The latter heard him on the stairs, and as he entered the room, put out a long muscular leg and courteously kicked a chair toward him. He pointed to it with the stem of the pipe he had taken from between his teeth.

“Set down,” he said.

“What's your proposition, Tom?” demanded Bendy gruffly. “Me—oh, I ain't making none now. I'd a gone to you if I'd one to make like I done before, but your coming to me sort of made me think—” Here he broke off to ask, “How are you getting on with them engines anyhow?”

“All right,” said Bendy, with stern untruth.

“That's good,” was Benson's only comment.

“Come! what's your proposition, Tom?” urged Bendy irritably. “Oh, well, you ain' needing me so very bad, I guess you made a mistake in coming round.”

“What would you say to a fourth interest in the shops?”

“I wouldn't even say thank you,” shifting his position to spit out of the window.

“You wouldn't!”

“I wouldn't. That was to have been my proposition three weeks ago, but the parts of them engines warn't laying about the shops then, like so much scrap iron. That makes a difference.”

“I suppose you're standing off for more of an interest! Pretty underhanded of you to creep up like this!”

“Well, I'm going to stop creeping. I reckon this will set me on my legs good and fair,” and Benson grinned.

“Is it a half you're after, Tom?” demanded Bendy sourly.

“Well, yes, make it a fair half, and I'm your man!”

In the end Bendy accepted his terms, and a few years later, Tom Benson, who was a good-looking fellow, repaid his kindness by running off with and marrying his daughter. The relations between the two men were never quite friendly. Bendy drifted more and more into politics, first holding one office and then another; while Tom, at the shops, freed of his active opposition, began to build heavy machinery, and secured contracts his father-in-law would never have dreamed of taking, and could not have filled, had he taken them.

Benson was consumed by a great ambition, not for wealth exactly, though wealth must have been an incident. The railroad had already greatly extended their market, but this did not satisfy him; he felt that the world was at the beginning of an age when iron and steam would be used for a multitude of then unknown purposes. He was experimenting with improved machinery, machinery that was to largely displace the costly hand labour which at its best could not be counted on for results that were always uniform, since the human equation seemed to combat organization, to limit production. He imagined machinery, tireless, and skillful far beyond the skill of men, and unvaryingly effective; but above all, his great dream was to cheapen iron and steam. Toward this end, he was always planning, always contriving.

Mr. Bendy, now established at the post-office, swore a good deal at what the energetic Tom was doing; however, when he ventured into the shops he was meek enough, his displeasure and disapproval manifesting itself only in an air of cynical derision with which he listened to the Yankee mechanic's plans and theories.

Yet at the end of ten years, under Benson's management, the works covered an acre of ground, and employed fifty men where they had not kept twenty busy when he assumed control.

His family now consisted of his wife and a daughter; he lived in a large house on Water Street, which built according to plans of his own, violated every known law of beauty, but conformed to every requirement of strength and durability.

Jacob Benson was on the best of terms with his uncle. As a result of their intimacy Stephen came to know the mechanic and his daughter Marian, who was frequently her father's companion when he strolled around to the lawyer's office of an evening to chat—for he had a mighty hankering for political discussion, and certain radical convictions of his own were as fundamental with his nephew as they were with himself, being in truth a part of their very blood and bone.

At first the girl treated the boy with shy defference, while toward her he assumed an air of lofty tolerance; but imperceptibly this attitude of his changed; he grew shy, she tolerant. While he liked Marian, he did not altogether approve of her family. Her mother he compared unfavourably with his aunt. He was now a tall young fellow of seventeen or eighteen, and in his last year at the high school.

When Virginia, learned as she did in time, where many of his evenings were spent, she would have discouraged his visits to the Water Street house had she known how; but she feared the effect of opposition. She was aware that he was stubborn in his quiet way. Yet undeclared as her disapproval was, he was conscious of it, and it was unpleasant to him. He thought her unfair in this particular instance; he appreciated that neither Tom Benson nor his wife were the kind of people she would care to know, but he resented that she should include Marian in this evident feeling she had for them.

Stephen was graduated from the high school, and settled down to read law in earnest, but his zeal came and went by fits and starts. Success in life was highly desirable, but it seemed no more than a vague possibility. He would have liked to try his hand at the farm, but the income it yielded forbade his doing

anything there. They must live, and he was not so sure there would be anything to live on while he experimented with crops.

He felt more and more as time went on, the inconvenience of their limited income. It made it the more difficult that he believed he was wasting his time in Benson's office, and that the law offered but an uncertain and precarious means of escape from the perplexities that were already hedging him in.

But events were to shape his future for him in ways he could not know.

One April day as he sat alone in the office by the window that overlooked the square, he saw Ben Wirt suddenly appear in front of the little one story building which was occupied by the Western Union as a telegraph office. Wirt was the operator. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and he carried in his hand a fluttering strip of paper.

For an instant he stood in front of his office, glancing back and forth across the square, as though he were looking for some one, but for the moment the square was deserted; then he espied Benson just issuing from the court-house half a block away, and hurried after him, calling as he ran.

Stephen closed his book, and watched them; they spoke together, and he saw the lawyer take the slip of paper and examine it. Then they were joined by one or two other men; and he saw the paper pass from hand to hand.

Now quite a crowd had collected about Wirt and the lawyer. Court, which was sitting, seemed to have adjourned for some inexplicable reason. There was the dumb show of eager questions and answers. And then Benson detached himself from the group and came hurrying across the square. When he entered the office, Stephen turned to him questioningly.

“What is it?” he asked eagerly.

“They have fired on Fort Sumter!” cried Benson.

“What if they have, that's about what I've been expecting. Is that what they were talking about out there?”

“Yes; they began firing on Fort Sumter early this morning; this means that the other slave States will join those that have already gone out!”

“Oh, no, they won't!” said the young man easily, and with sudden cheerfulness. “We won't let them!” he tossed his book to the table and left his chair. “We won't let them!” he repeated.

“We!” cried Benson.

“Certainly!” he laughed queerly, gleefully. “I shan't be able to stop them alone, but if there's going to be a war, they'll want soldiers to fight—that will just suit me! I'll enlist!”

“You! You'll do nothing of the kind!” said Benson sharply. “Why, you're just ready to be admitted to the bar.”

“I'll never make a lawyer!” the boy kept on with growing enthusiasm. “I've known that all along; but soldiering—”

“You're too young,” began the lawyer.

“I'm twenty, and it will be the young fellow's fight! The old fellows will stay home and talk fight just the way they have been doing ever since I can remember—what are they ringing that confounded court-house bell for anyhow?”

“They are going to call a meeting, I suppose,” said the lawyer.

“To pass resolutions?” shouted the boy, laughing. “To encourage us young fellows to go down South and get shot? It takes experience to knock together a batch of resolutions that look well on paper; that's the job for the old fellows! Stiff joints don't disqualify a man for that sort of thing. I'll bet they make you chairman, you or old Bradly.”

“You seem to find a good deal of amusement in this,” said Benson.

“I do. I'm just thinking what a lot of talking and quill driving has gone to get this thing started, but the real work will be done in quite another way; and it's the other way that suits me!”

“I wish you'd leave yourself out of this, Stephen,” said Benson shortly.

“I want to get you acquainted with the idea that I am to be in it!” retorted Stephen.

Benson shrugged his shoulders.

“I suppose you think that a good strong set of resolutions from the town of Benson in the State of Ohio, will settle the business,” said the boy, still laughing.

“Suppose there should be a call for men, and you should enlist; how do you think your aunt would feel?” inquired Benson.

This sobered Stephen instantly.

“Well,” he rejoined slowly, “if there's a war, I don't suppose it can be carried on by the orphans of the country; but, come to think of it, that describes me, though I hadn't thought of myself as that before!”

“No; and why hadn't you thought of it?” demanded the lawyer quickly.

“Well, I never think of myself in that way; my Aunt Virginia's been too good to me, for me to have missed anything in my life in the way of affection, you know that!”

“And you are now considering making her this singularly grateful return for all her goodness.”

“That's so,” said Stephen drily. “I'm all she has, just as she is all I have,” but the acknowledgment was made reluctantly enough.

“I was sure you would think of that,” said Benson.

The boy turned with a sigh to his chair by the window.

“Perhaps there won't be any need of men,” he muttered.

“Let us hope not,” Benson gravely rejoined. “Will you come with me?” he added. “I'm going back to see if Wirt has heard anything more.”

“No, it's not for me, you've shown me that,” said Stephen quietly, taking up his book again.

He remained in the office and read on, doggedly and determinedly seeking to close his senses to all external sights and sounds. Whatever happened, duty and devotion left but one course open to him.

That evening—it was Friday—he went home; he wished to escape from the fever of excitement that he knew was raging all about him, though he had voluntarily held himself aloof from it as from something he feared.

Early the next morning he hunted up Sam West, who had spent half the night in town. Of him he eagerly enquired the latest news; the bombardment of Fort Sumter still continued. In the afternoon, Jackson, the farm tenant, was able to tell him that a meeting had been called for Monday night; and that Captain Jim McKeever, a veteran of the Mexican War, who had recently failed in the liquor business, had already been to Columbus and had returned with the governor's authority to raise a company of volunteers in the event of there being a call for troops.

Stephen knew the captain, a dissipated little man, whose record as a citizen was far from spotless; but in the boy's eyes he suddenly assumed heroic proportions, for he had met the occasion in the one way it could be met, he had risen above profitless discussion. He slowly turned this latest information over in his mind as he strolled about the place. One thing was certain, he would not go into town; most of all, he would not go near that meeting on Monday night.

Yet when Monday came, and never before had a Sunday seemed so long in passing, or such a useless interruption to the affairs of life, he found his interest in the meeting all consuming and not to be denied; Sumter had fallen, and surely something would be done! During the afternoon he informed Virginia that he was going in to see Benson; and after supper rode in with Jackson who expected to attend the meeting. But when they reached town, the court-house was already packed to the doors; Stephen could not have gained admittance had he wished; but he no longer wished to, for what was going forward on the square he found infinitely more to his taste.

The centre of interest was Captain McKeever, who, mounted on an upturned barrel was haranguing the crowd that pressed about him. The whole scene was more one of popular rejoicing than anything else; for no one then realized the blackness of the shadow that was falling on the land; all was life and excitement, and joyous anticipation. How soon this was to simmer down in the realities of war, no one could have foreseen; but that, too, was again a phase of the national uprising, which was only national as it was widely individual.

Stephen was not in the least moved by McKeever's speech; he had a certain contempt for oratory; even the quiet restraint that characterized most of Benson's utterances in public, and he rarely ventured on a metaphor or happy turn, had always offended him; but his glance was fixed yearningly on a score or more of men in red shirts, who kept together about the speaker. At intervals, from the court-house there issued the sound of cheers and the heavy stamping of feet, but he had no interest in what was passing there; it was McKeever who was worth watching, McKeever and his men! Yet after a time he disengaged himself from the crowd, and was about to turn away, when some one touched him gently on the arm. It was Marian Benson.

“I've been standing close at your elbow for the past ten minutes, and you never saw me, you hadn't any eyes for me!” she said, laughing up into his face.

“I was listening to McKeever,” he muttered.

“But you were looking at the men who've enlisted, you never took your eyes off them; you looked and looked.”

“Did I? Aren't you afraid here alone in all this crowd?” he asked.

“I am waiting for papa,” she explained. “He has gone into the court-house, but I wanted to hear Captain McKeever, so I told him I would stand here by you. Isn't it dreadfully exciting? Do you think the captain will be able to raise his company? How fine it was of him to go to Columbus and offer to enlist men for the government!”

“Oh, yes, every one seems to want to join,” said the young man moodily.

He drew her further from the crowd. They turned the corner into Main Street; here there was silence.

“I suppose they are afraid it will be over with so soon, don't you?” suggested the girl.

“I don't think they need worry about that,” answered Stephen, moved to prophesy. He was conscious that his head ached, and that to have left the crowded square came as a welcome relief to him. “Why should we think it's going to be all our way?” he asked. “I suppose down South they are thinking the same thing; probably they and we are both wrong.”

“Shall you go, have you enlisted?” she asked quickly. She was in a flutter of foolish excitement; she had been eager to ask him this. Mentally she clothed his erect stalwart figure in a splendid uniform. War had no significance to her beyond the externals; that it might mean death, and suffering, she had not considered.

“No,” he said slowly, but added in the same breath, “not yet;” for he noted the quick change that had come over her, and knew that she was disappointed in him.

“If I were a man—” began the girl, and then stopped abruptly, abashed and diffident, realizing to what her words would lead.

“And what would you do if you were a man, Marian, surely you wouldn't want to be a soldier?” he said, smiling down at her.

“Yes, I should want to be a soldier! What can be more noble than to fight for one's country?”

Stephen gulped down something that rose in his throat; his breast seemed to swell to bursting with dull anguish, that it should be required of him to play so mean a part in this crisis.

“Why, Marian, I believe you want me to enlist!” he said at last in miserable perplexity.

“No, I don't, I haven't any right to want you to do anything,” she gave her head a scornful little toss. “Perhaps you wouldn't like to be a soldier.”

“You have no right to sneer at me!” said the boy, in a tone of bitter injury.

He was not even aware of her silliness; his one thought was that this was the way all women would feel,

except only his Aunt Virginia, who seemed so resolutely opposed to all that his heart hungered for. His father and his uncle had been brave men! Every one would expect something of him; and here he was doomed to stay at home and read law. Read law! Why, he would be the laughing stock of the town. In his quick unreasoning vanity he saw himself disgraced, an object of ridicule; how was he to hold up his head? He turned unsteadily to the girl at his side, forgetful of the momentary hurt she had given him.

“If I go, Marian, shall you forget me?” he asked.

“Are you going, are you really going?” she cried, resting her hand on his arm, and glancing into his face with smiling eyes.

“You'll not forget me,” he repeated, “we've been such good friends, I can't bear to think that you might be able to forget me; yet if I go—” He covered the hand she had rested on his arm with his own.

“Of course I shan't forget you, Stephen,” she murmured. “Why, how absurd of you to speak of that! I shall always remember you, I never forget my friends, never!”

“When I come back may I tell you something I've wanted to tell you for ever so long—may I?”

She half hid her face on his arm, the pretty face that was making him a traitor to his duty. A new and strange emotion mastered him, as he felt her tremble at his side, the pressure of her little hands on his arm, her cheek against his sleeve; he drew her closer to him, and upward, until her flushed face was on a level with his own, and then for the first time he kissed her—not once, but again, and again.

“You know what I mean, Marian!” he whispered rapturously. “I'm not going to wait to tell you that I love you, I'm going to tell you now before I go;” for he was going, he could not stay to be held in contempt by her.

Presently they retraced their steps, the boy still drunk with ecstasy. The band was playing now; McKeever had ended his speech. Marian's eyes sparkled at the sound, her little feet kept eager step.

“Isn't it glorious!” she murmured, clinging to him. “Who wouldn't be a soldier that could be! I am so glad you are going, Stephen, I was almost afraid to ask you at first.”

But Stephen did not answer her. Joy in the pride of his asserted manhood left him dumb; he had broken free of the dull office, with its drab walls and dusty walnut woodwork, and littered desk, its bookcases with their yellow calfskin volumes; his future was to be wholly given over to heroism and glory! He was sure that he had made a choice that none, not even his Aunt Virginia or Benson, when they fully understood how he felt about it, would censure him for having made.

The drums and fifes rattled on merrily, the lights in the courthouse windows flashed out over the noisy mob on the square. Stephen found a place for Marian on the tavern steps where she could see all that was passing.

McKeever's Company, with McKeever at its head, was making the circuit of the square. Here and there as it moved along, a man would break through the crowd and fall in line, to be greeted by a burst of frantic cheering.

The company crossed the north side of the square, then the west and south sides, now it was approaching the east side and the tavern where Marian, clinging to the boy's arm, stood flushed and eager; but as the marching men came opposite them, she uttered a little smothered cry of dismay, for Stephen had gently released himself from her hold.

An instant later and he had vanished in the crowd, and when she saw him again he was one of the marching men.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I'VE enlisted,” said Stephen to Benson.

The crowd had dispersed, and silence had fallen on the square. Benson had just entered his office whither Stephen had preceded him. The latter stood before his friend, shame-faced and dogged, with his blood quite cooled, and accused by an awakening sense of duty, which denied by his act, was now protesting against that act.

“I've enlisted,” he repeated, “and I must go home and tell my Aunt Virginia.”

“You've done what?” cried Benson, wheeling on him.

“Don't I make it plain to you, I've said it twice—I've enlisted. I'm going to the war.”

“You'll do nothing of the sort!” said Benson sharply and angrily. “What do you expect me to say to you?”

“I hope you'll be careful what you say,” retorted the young fellow, grinning with a fleeting sense of humour at the situation, “for I'm a soldier now!” He seated himself, and buried his hands deep in his trousers' pockets. “I've thrown over the whole thing, I'll never be a lawyer now, I've chosen a better trade, why don't you congratulate me? They have been patting me on the back and calling me a brave boy, haven't you anything to say?”

“I'll get you out of this in the morning,” declared Benson shortly.

“No, you won't!” said the young man quietly. “This is my affair. You can't get me out of it unless I am willing to be got out, and I won't be willing—my mind's made up; in fact, it was made up the moment I heard the news, only I didn't know it; but I know it now. It's the sort of a chance I've been looking for all along to escape from this. It's been all nonsense my reading law; but this, this is going to be right in my line.”

“Stephen,” said Benson sternly. “Pardon me, but you are talking like a fool. It's nothing to me what you do,

I suppose if you get shot I can survive it."

"So may I!" retorted the boy laughing. "You know there are worse things than that!"

"You'll oblige me by being serious," said Benson curtly. "I am thinking now of your aunt, you know that."

"Yes, I know," answered Stephen, a trifle weary. "I've thought of her, too," he added softly.

"This will be a serious matter to her, Stephen; and don't you think that enough sorrow has entered into her life already without you doing all you can to add to it?"

"Oh, what's the use of going into that phase of it to-night, I've thought of all that!"

"Then where's your love for her?" demanded Benson.

"It's just as deep and strong as it ever was!" said the boy defiantly. "You know it is; but can't you understand—I have to go—it's in me to go. I pledge you my word, I've made up my mind a score of times not on any account to be led away by my own wishes, but to stick it out here with you, and perhaps one of these days get where you'd give me the small end of your practice. I am quite hopeless, you see; I shall never be able to stand alone in this profession. I'll never fill the toes of your shoes even, you see I'm not to be fooled!"

"You're doing very well," interrupted Benson quickly. "Of course, you are not exactly cut out for the law—"

"Then what in God's name am I cut out for, have you been able to discover that?"

"A young man may doubt his ability, that is natural enough, but it argues nothing; and in your case it is certainly no reason why you should throw your life, your chances all away!"

"If it were not for my Aunt Virginia I should be perfectly happy to-night; but having to go home and tell her —" Stephen frowned and was silent.

"But you don't have to go home and tell her! That's the very thing you are not to do!"

The boy shook his head. .

"I'm going to get it over with as soon as possible."

"To-morrow morning—to-night—we'll go and see McKeever, and arrange it with him. Come, be reasonable!" urged Benson.

"No, we won't see him, not for that, anyhow!" retorted the boy.

"Look here, what do you suppose McKeever's after? He hopes to get a commission, and you are helping him along in his ambition!"

"Quite right. He should get a commission, he's gone ahead and done something worth while, why shouldn't he get what he wants? He's the biggest man in town to-night!" cried the boy with frank enthusiasm.

"He's a needy adventurer, Stephen, a man of no character; who has made a failure of his life solely *because* he was a man of no character."

"Well, call him what you like; but it isn't helping me to think what I'll tell Aunt Virginia. That's the only thing I've got to worry over!"

"I tell you I can arrange it with McKeever!" insisted Benson. "You will just drop out. You are only committed in so far as you foolishly gave your promise to join his company; you were excited, carried away, and did not stop to think of the consequences. Now you have had time to cool off, and you are seeing in what direction your duty lies."

"No, I'm not going to appear ridiculous, or as if I hadn't known my own mind!" said the boy doggedly, but secretly he was rather alarmed by the lawyer's opposition, and he feared that he might take steps in the matter which would humiliate him.

"I suppose you had rather appear merely ungrateful," observed Benson contemptuously.

"Well, that's all in the family. Understand, please, you are not to see McKeever, and you are not to say anything to him if you chance to meet him. Please, now—I don't want you to! It's my affair—"

"He had no business to accept you." Benson placed his hand on the young man's shoulder, and let it rest there with a kindly pressure. "Don't you be a fool, Stephen!" he urged gently. "All you have to think about is your Aunt Virginia, her feelings, her anxiety, and suffering, if you enlist!"

The boy rounded his shoulder at the touch, and looked up sullenly into his friend's face.

"What's the use of your working yourself into a state of mind over this! I tell you it's settled," he declared, in a tone that he meant should stop further argument.

"Think of her!"

"I tell you it's settled. Let me stay here with you to-night, and tomorrow you drive out and tell her what I've done, that's where I lose my grip."

"No, I'll have no part in breaking that news to her; but you stay here to-night, and in the morning we'll hunt up McKeever."

But Stephen only shook his head.

"I thought you'd help me," he said, with much dejection of manner.

"Not in this, not in the way you wish me to."

But Benson was fast losing his temper. The boy's selfishness, and stupid determination, exasperated him to the last degree. He was feeling infinite pity for Virginia, who for years had done nothing but deny herself for this ingrate, who was proving himself so unworthy of her love.

"I didn't think it of you, Stephen," he said at last, as much in sorrow as in anger. "I looked for better things from you, I did indeed!"

The boy burned to vindicate himself. He felt that all his motives were being misjudged; he wanted Benson to understand just why he had enlisted.

"Look here!" he burst out. "I've fooled my time away here digging into your law books just to please my Aunt Virginia, but it's got to stop; there's no use—no sense in it! I can only be of use to her by being of use to myself in my own way! I can't think with her brains nor hope with her hopes; I've got my own hopes, my own

sense of things, and they don't fit with hers—that's all there is to it! Of course, it's going to be a wrench to her, it's going to be a wrench to me; maybe you don't think I love her? I tell you I do! She's been all the mother I have ever had—you know that—and because of her I've never missed anything in my life, but she's got an awfully strong will; she'll make endless sacrifices of herself, but her opinions are like iron, and she's never been able to see what I see! I've told her all along that I was wasting my time here with you; but she's set her heart on my having a profession; nothing I can say moves her, you know that—you know what I say is all so!" he finished in an injured tone.

"This is all beside the question," said Benson coldly.

"No, it isn't! The wrench has got to come. I've got to have my own head in choosing for myself, and this lucky war comes just in time. It's my one chance to get away and get started on my own hook decently, and I'm going to enlist! Now we won't discuss that side of the case again, please. It's settled."

"I was merely going to propose that I take your place," said Benson quietly.

"You take my place—where?" demanded the boy.

"In McKeever's Company."

"Well, you *are* funny!" laughed the boy.

"I'm quite in earnest," answered Benson stiffly.

"No, no! You don't mean that!"

"I'm quite in earnest," repeated Benson.

"Do you mean you'd enlist just to keep me from enlisting?" inquired Stephen incredulously.

"That's what I said."

But Stephen waived this aside.

"Oh, you come, too!" he cried. "It will do you a world of good, it's just the sort of thing you need, Mr. Benson!"

Benson frowned.

"I said I'd go in your place."

"Well, that's nonsense," objected the boy.

"Very well, then. There is nothing more to be said. Only this, if you don't do what it is your manifest duty to do, what your sense of gratitude should make you do willingly and gladly, I'm done with you! and this war won't last always. You'll be coming back one of these days, it may be within a month or so, and you won't find me the friend I have tried to be, and am still willing to be, if you will only let me serve you!"

At his words Stephen rose slowly from his chair, and took up his hat from the table. His face was white.

"I may even be able to stand that," he said in a voice he vainly strove to render firm; then not daring to trust himself further he turned quickly to the door, and hurried from the room.

He was deeply hurt, so hurt that he did not realize where he was going until he found himself striding along the deserted country road in the direction of his home.

"And he didn't call me back!" he thought bitterly. "He let me go and never said a word!" Then his mood changed. "I've accepted too many favours from him, if he has begun to keep count of them." But he could not understand how Benson could have so quickly ended a friendship which he had come to regard as one of the immutable relations of his life.

It was almost midnight when he reached home. There was a faint light burning in the hall, and the library door stood open. His aunt had waited up for him.

"Is that you, Stephen?" she called softly, as he closed and locked the front door.

"Yes," he answered her, and then as he entered the library, "I'm sorry you waited up for me. If I'd thought you were going to, I'd have gotten home sooner."

"Surely you didn't walk home, Stephen!" she said. She saw that his shoes were muddy.

"But I did though. I went to see Mr. Benson, and when I left him, every one was gone from out this way, so I had to walk."

He slipped into a chair at her side.

"Are you very tired, dear?" she asked.

"No, it was nothing, why did you wait up for me? You know I might have stayed at Mr. Benson's all night."

A shadow crossed his face. The lawyer's words came back to him. He felt that he had been cast off, that that relation had suddenly ceased to be; and he was both hurt and puzzled by the readiness with which Benson had seemingly dismissed him from his regard and liking. He was most undemonstrative himself, but until that night he had as firmly believed in Benson's affection for him as he had believed in any other tangible fact of his existence; more than this, he cherished a great liking for the lawyer; he had been proud to consider him his friend. He did not know that Benson's concern for him, and interest in him, was but one of the many manifestations of his love for Virginia Landray.

"Was there much excitement?" asked Virginia, after a short silence.

"Yes, a good deal. There were speeches at the court-house and a lot of committees were appointed to do a lot of things," he explained vaguely.

"Who addressed the meeting? Did Mr. Benson?" she questioned. She knew he had more to tell her, but she knew he would tell it in his own way.

"I don't know, I didn't go in. There was more going on outside." and then he fell silent again. He was thinking of Marian.

"What was the excitement, Stephen?" Virginia asked

"Captain McKeever was enlisting men. You see, President Lincoln has issued a call for men—"

"Did many enlist?"

“Yes, a good many, a hundred, I should say.”

“But you didn't wish to, Stephen?” she said, searching his face anxiously.

“Why do you think that?” he asked, to gain time.

She did not answer him directly.

“I am glad you have come back to me,” she said tenderly, “for I shan't let you go into town again until the excitement is past. It is no place for a hot-headed boy who might easily be led into folly, and you will stay quietly here with me, won't you? Sam can go in tomorrow and bring out your books. That will be the best way; won't it, dear?”

The boy set his teeth in his endeavour to control the workings of his face, which he felt must betray him.

“I suppose it seemed for the moment the only thing left for men to do,” Virginia went on gently. “But the realities of war are so dreadful, that if we would only stop to think, I am sure a better, a wiser way could be found to settle our difficulties.”

He moved restlessly in his chair.

“Oh, this won't be much of a war, Aunt Virginia. President Lincoln only wants men for ninety days, I suppose he knows what's needed. The fellows who enlisted to-night will probably go to Washington, or maybe they won't get any further away than Columbus, where there's to be a big military camp established; but the enlisting was sort of interesting to watch, everybody was cheering and there was a lot of enthusiasm and noise.”

How was he going to tell her of what he had done! He had felt the excitement himself as an intoxicating draught that carried forgetfulness with it. He had gone to extremes of feeling that night of which he had hardly thought himself capable. Men had slapped him on the back, telling him he was a fine fellow, a brave fellow, and every inch a Landray! But more than all, Marian had smiled upon him with love and pride and hero-worship; but how was he to make his Aunt Virginia understand this, or the need he had of the very experience that was to take him from her. She must have realized something of what was passing in his mind, for she said in sudden alarm:

“You are not telling me all, Stephen—you are keeping back something!”

And he answered her with a look so miserable, that she was instantly convinced that this was so.

“Dear Stephen, listen to me, you must stay quietly here and finish fitting yourself for your profession. You will have responsibilities and cares enough, poor boy, just here, you need not go away from home to seek them; the family fortunes need rebuilding, and you must do that. They have been wrecked by just such folly as this, by this love for adventure. You must be very sane and reasonable, you can't give way to these impulses; don't you see it this way, too?”

Her words did not shake his resolution in the least, though they made him profoundly wretched, since he despaired of her ever comprehending his distaste for the career she had mapped out for him. Yet it seemed to him a most brutal thing to do to even try and explain this to her.

“I'm sorry,” he said, with a gulp. “But you'd better know it now—I've enlisted!”

The hand she had been resting on his arm, fell at her side. There was a ghastly pause.

“Stephen! Stephen—how could you?” she cried.

“I am sorry,” he repeated, and there was such depth of misery in his tone that she forbore to reproach him.

“Does Mr. Benson know what you have done?” she asked. As in all her difficulties, she turned now as then, instinctively to the one person who had always been equal to the occasion.

“Yes,” said the boy, “I told him;” but his face clouded.

“What did he say? Didn't he think you had done very wrong?” questioned Virginia.

Stephen nodded.

“What did he propose?”

“Never mind, Aunt Virginia, he proposed all sorts of things, but nothing that fits this case. I'm a member of Captain McKeever's Company, and I shall remain a member as long as there's any need of it. I've given my word, and I've put my name on the muster-roll. I can't take back my word, and I can't take off my name; but we don't know yet how much of a war there is going to be, no one thinks it is going to amount to much. I wish you wouldn't take it so seriously!”

“Won't you tell me what Mr. Benson proposed, Stephen?”

“There is no use thinking of him, Aunt Virginia, he can do nothing, for I shouldn't let him. And anyway, we have had a row about this very matter.”

“You have quarrelled with Mr. Benson!”

“If you choose to call it that—yes. Only I had rather not talk about it.”

But there was one thing more he wished to tell her; and this was what had passed between Marian and him. He knew it would please her if possible, even less than the news of his enlistment; but he deemed it well to get it all over with at once, then they could adjust themselves the sooner to these new conditions which he had so suddenly created.

“What else is there, Stephen?” Virginia asked.

“How do you know there is anything else?” he inquired.

“I can always tell; what is it?”

“Haven't I told you enough for to-night?” he said.

“I would like to know all.”

“Do you know Mr. Benson's uncle?” he asked.

“What about him?”

“Well, do you know his wife?”

“Slightly.”

He gave her an embarrassed smile that she did not understand.

“We Landrays are a proud lot; aren't we? Her husband could buy us out and never feel it—; pay all our debts into the bargain, too, and yet you don't know him or his wife, Aunt Virginia.”

“There is no reason why I should know them.”

“But what have you against them?” he persisted.

“I have nothing against them; they are very worthy people in their way.”

“Oh, Aunt Virginia!” cried the boy. “That's the last thing you can say of any one! I wish you knew *her*.”

“Knew whom, Stephen?”

“Well, Mrs. Benson, and Miss Benson—Marian—she's the prettiest girl in town.”

“Has Mr. Benson permitted you to form an attachment of which I knew nothing? Did he take you to the house of those people for that?”

“Those people!” scoffed the boy. “I wish you would be a little more generous, Aunt Virginia! It's unfair to judge her like that; and Mr. Benson don't know anything about it anyhow!”

“What do you wish me to think, Stephen; for I suppose I am to take this as a confession of some sort.”

“I've known them—I've known Marian, for four or five years,” muttered the boy sheepishly.

“Well, what of that?” with some displeasure.

“You don't approve?” he asked gloomily.

“No—if you wish me to understand that you have committed yourself, I don't approve. There is every reason why I should not.”

“I wish you did,” he said, “for it's settled—about Marian, I mean.”

Yet later when he went to his room, he had the grace to be bitterly disappointed with himself, and with the situation.

He felt that they had grown strangely apart. That the war, and Marian, and his own act, had come between them, and that in spite of his real affection for his aunt, the old frank relation could never again exist.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MCKEEVER'. company left Benson the day the Confederate Cabinet in session at Montgomery, Alabama, greeted with jeers the news that President Lincoln had issued a call for seventy-five thousand men; but neither its mirth nor the scenes attending the departure of McKeever's handful, in any way foreshadowed the struggle to which the nation was committed. McKeever hustled his men into the cars reserved for them, and the crowd, some thousands strong, that had assembled to see them off, slowly dispersed. During the four grim years that followed, the town grew familiar with these departures, just as it did with the return of the remnants of companies that had gone forth, and men came and went in this new profession of theirs, and only those immediately concerned in their fortunes took note of them.

As they left the town behind, Stephen was conscious only of a sense of freedom. He had cast aside the burdens that had oppressed him. He conceived that in the career he had chosen there would be no perplexing problems, no horror of the law. His one fear was that the war would soon end; and each time this possibility was advanced in his hearing, his heart sank within him.

But if Stephen was disturbed by the prospect of the war's abrupt ending, there were those who did not share in this optimistic view that so widely prevailed. Among these was Tom Benson; who as soon as the call for men came, made ready to cast cannon for the government. When Newton Bently heard of this, he hurried down to the shops. He'd tell Tom a thing or two; did the fool think the country'd waste any time on those lunatics down South? The war would be over with by the middle of summer; then who'd want his cannon?

“And you think that the war will end in two or three months?” said Benson, when he had heard what Bently had to say; and he grinned in large pity of the little man. “Well, think it hard—if it's any comfort to you; man; you see no further than the tip of your nose. You'll never earn your salt as a prophet; this is war if there ever was war.”

“All right, Tom Benson!” sputtered Bently. “If I want to see no further than that, it suits me well enough not to. But I'll tell you one thing; you're doing your best to send this concern straight to hell. You're going to make cannon, are you? When do you expect to use 'em, next Fourth of July, maybe. You're wasting good stock, on which you'll never clear a dollar's profit. I'll not stand for the spending of one cent on such damn foolishness.”

“I'll get it somewhere else,” said Benson sourly.

“Not on the firm's name, you won't; mind you that!” shouted Mr. Bently flying into a rage.

“The firm!” sneered Benson, elevating his bushy eyebrows. “Look here, don't you think the firm's lasted quite long enough? It's been my head against your jaw. It's a hell of a pardnership!” he thrust his hands deep in his trousers' pockets. “Come, which shall it be, do I step out, or do you? One of us has got to go!”

“I guess you'll buy, Tom Benson,” said the postmaster, with a shrewd shake of the head. “I'll not have you moving across the street to set up shop under my nose.”

Benson threw back his head and laughed aloud at this.

"You got a heap of confidence in me. That's a pretty way to talk to your son-in-law, ain't it now?" he said.

"You ain't of my choosing, Tom, I never made any bones about that," retorted Bently.

His candour must have agreed perfectly with the mechanic's rude sense of humour, for his grin widened.

"Nobody'll ever accuse you of saying anything less than you think," he said. "Well, if I moved across the street, I could show you how shops ought to be run."

"I ain't so sure there's anything I can learn of you! I was a mechanic when you was a nursing baby."

"About then, I should say," answered Benson. "But the world's slipped forward a cog or two since then."

"Better buy me out, Tom!" urged Bently. "It's your chance to let the world know how smart a fellow you are!"

"You'll sell then? It ain't all talk?" said Benson.

"Make me your offer, you know what the shops are doing; make me a fair offer and I'll leave you alone here, since that is what you want, to play hell with the business!"

"You'll have my offer inside of two hours," said the Yankee mechanic coolly.

"Make it cash, Tom, I want none of your paper; people will be building fires with it inside of a twelve month," he jeered.

Benson turned on his heel and went back through the shops to the pattern-room. From his desk there, which he unlocked, he took a device in polished wood and steel and nickle. This he slipped under his coat, for it was too bulky to carry in his pocket; then he went straight to his nephew's office, where he wasted no time in explanation.

"I want to buy Bently out, Jake," he said briefly. "I've got money enough put by to meet his price. Now'll you go in with me? for I must have a partner with capital. Wait a minute—I want you should see this before you give me your answer;" and he placed the mechanism he had brought from the pattern room in the lawyer's hands.

"Do you know what you got there, Jake?" he asked, after a moment's silence.

"It's the stock and breech of a gun," said the lawyer, turning it over.

"It's a repeating rifle, Jake—my own invention, and even if I do say it, it's the greatest weapon ever made! Put that in the hands of one Yankee, and he'll be the match for twenty rebels; do you think the government's going to stand off when I get it in shape to offer? I sha'n'. be able to fill the contracts! Look here, it loads with this special cartridge—automatic—do you see? And feeds from the stock where ten rounds will be carried, and them ten rounds will be available in almost as many seconds. Jake, once I begin to manufacture them rifles, secession's got its death blow; nothing will make good the difference between a muzzle loading musket and that weapon! Once that's in the hands of the Yankees, they will be hunting Jeff Davis in his own back-yard—nothing'll stop 'em!"

"But what do you want me to do?" asked Benson.

"Join me in making that arm! I'll ask you for no money now, all I want is that you should stand ready to put in a few thousands—say eight or ten—in case we're slow in realizing on our contracts."

"How soon will these demands begin?"

"Not under five or six months."

"Very well," said the lawyer. "You can close with Mr. Bently while he's in the humour to sell; later we can draw up papers covering the partnership—there's no hurry about that."

And before the two hours for which he had stipulated had elapsed,

Tom Benson had closed with Mr. Bendy, and rather less than twenty minutes later he was back at the shops and had given orders to have the old sign which read "Bendy's Foundry" painted out, and "The Benson Iron Works," the new firm name, under which he intended to continue the business, painted in its stead.

Before Stephen left Camp Jackson, near Columbus, where he was mustered in, he was displaying so great an aptitude for his work, that McKeever, now advanced to a colonelcy, urged his claims to such good purpose, that when he was wounded in a skirmish at Romney, Virginia, and was sent home on sick leave, a lieutenant's commission shortly followed him thither.

His first home-coming his Aunt remembered long afterward with entire satisfaction. Their little estrangement was forgotten; he was frank and affectionate as he had always been.

He had developed wonderfully; his shoulders had broadened and he was brown and muscular, the boy had become a man. He had quite lost his air of troubled preoccupation born of his doubt and foreboding of the future, for his future no longer troubled him.

Virginia made much of him, and he accepted her solicitude and Jane's, with infinite good-nature.

"A fellow don't have any chance with you two!" he told them laughingly. "Especially when his arm's tied up as mine is."

"But, dear, this is all we can do!" said Virginia sighing, and adjusting his bandages with tender caressing fingers. "When we heard that your regiment had been in battle, it was just as if you were the only one—as if there were not thousands of others!"

The one disturbing element in Virginia's happiness was Stephen's devotion to Marian Benson. It was little short of tragic that this sturdy handsome fellow should be determined to throw himself away on Tom Benson's daughter. Her prejudice here she felt was not altogether groundless, for Benson at her request had brought his cousin to the farm to call; the meeting had not been very successful however; Marian had been embarrassed and ill at ease, and Virginia had not been able to see in her at all what Stephen Saw. With this one tentative attempt at an acquaintance her efforts in that direction had ceased.

Stephen had been delighted when he heard that Marian had driven out to see Virginia. He heard this from Marian herself, Virginia had not mentioned it.

"Why you never said Marian had called," he told Virginia, almost reproachfully.

“Didn't I, dear?” she asked drily.

“No; and Marian only chanced to mention it to-day. Didn't you think her very pretty?” he questioned eagerly.

“Yes, she is certainly pretty,” agreed Virginia, but without enthusiasm.

“The prettiest girl in Benson—and quite as nice as she is pretty! I wonder you didn't tell me that she had been here; I hope you'll see lots of her, Aunt Virginia.”

“You know, dear, I've quite gotten out of the way of meeting people.”

His face clouded at this.

“But I'm sure you'd like her mother; and Mr. Benson's a very superior sort of man. He showed me an invention of his to-day, a rifle, if he can get it accepted by the government he'll make a fortune. It's certainly a wonderful thing.”

Virginia heard him in silence, and then abruptly changed the subject. He was puzzled, but remembered that Marian had been equally reticent. He decided that for some reason they had not gotten on very well together, and that the friendship which he had confidently looked for the moment they met, was even further off than if they had not met at all. But he took comfort in the thought that when he and Marian were married, the relation between her and Virginia would change entirely; she would be of the family then. There was Harriett, a stranger might have found it difficult to say whether she was Jane's daughter or Virginia's. The latter seemed to feel an equal interest in her with her mother. This was all so characteristic of his aunt, that he felt once they were married, her love would go out to Marian in the same way.

It was during the continuance of his furlough that Virginia determined to sell the mill. It had taken Benson six months to find a purchaser for the property, but he was at last successful; and Stephen drove Virginia into town the day the deed was signed.

“You are satisfied to have the sale made, Stephen?” Benson inquired.

“Certainly,” said the young man a little defiantly, “the ready money is better than the property.”

“I dare say.” responded the lawyer.

In the afternoon, Benson drove to the mill with the new owner. Afterward he strolled up to the house to see Virginia.

“I have just been going over the accounts,” she told him, a trifle ruefully, and held up an inky forefinger.

“I was aware that the sale of the mill would not do all you hoped it might; that it would not clear off the debts even. I can't bear to see you continue this useless struggle; it hurts me as nothing else has ever hurt me. I am proposing nothing unusual—men go to the aid of other men—business is not entirely a matter of calculation, sentiment does enter into it; I want to make this situation easy for you; let me clear up those debts, then you can put this money in the bank.”

“No,” she said quietly.

He left his chair and took a turn of the room.

“Have you forgotten what I once told you, Virginia?” he asked, pausing and facing her.

“You were not to mention that to me again.”

“Have I spoken of it only in words, Virginia?” he asked.

“You have been—most considerate always,” she said guardedly.

“You did not think that I had forgotten, Virginia—or that I had ceased to care?” he said.

“I hoped you had.”

“There is not an hour of the day that you are out of my thoughts, you have given me every decent impulse I have known—you have been more to me than I can ever tell you! You must hear me—you must know how I love you—it is no matter of yesterday or the day before—for years now I have thought only of you, Virginia! Show some mercy—let me think that there is some hope.” He looked at her imploringly, but her face had only hardened as he went on, there was no sign of the pity he implored. He did not wait for her to speak. “I have been patient—I have waited—I have hoped, that you might relent; but we seem to be drifting further and further apart. I see you oppressed and burdened; I find you struggling with cares and a situation you are not fitted to meet, and which I can so quickly remedy; but you will accept nothing from me even as a friend—that is the bitterest part of it; I seem powerless to help you! If you would only let me—that would be something! You leave me only the one thing to do—to ask you again to be my wife. I know—I know,” he put out his hand, imposing silence. “Your struggle is as hopeless as it is unnecessary, the condition you are trying to fight off is older than you know—it had its beginning before Stephen and Bush went West; they felt it coming—that is the real reason they went—and what can you do but wear your life out to no purpose! Be reasonable, and escape from a condition you can not meet!”

“I can't escape from it that way.”

“Listen to me, Virginia!” he said, with gentle firmness. “I love you—you must marry me.”

“I shall never marry—such a thing is impossible.”

“No, not impossible,” he replied, doggedly determined to keep it before her as a possibility. “Why should we wear out our lives. I might have struggled against my love instead of living for it; but the result would have been the same. I should have ended here, as now, trying to tell you what you are to me, how empty my life is without you; and to think that I have failed so miserably in the one great purpose I have known!”

She was softened for the moment by the deep sincerity of his tone. “I have valued you as a friend—you have given me every reason to—I still want you for my friend.”

“That is not enough,” he said with a gesture of bitter disdain. “It is all I can give you.”

He heard Stephen come whistling up the path from the lane, and shaken by his emotion threw himself down in his chair.

“I will attend to the notes,” he said, with an attempt at composure as Stephen entered the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

AT the expiration of his leave Stephen was detailed for service at the recruiting office that had been opened at Benson; an appointment he received with a very bad grace indeed since if he continued in the post it put a most effectual stop to his career of glory. Virginia, however, was delighted, and even Marian was hardly inclined to give her hero the sympathy he demanded in view of what he conceived to be the extraordinary hard luck that had befallen him.

He now devoted his leisure to Marian, and urged upon her the desirability of their speedy marriage. He found an unexpected ally in Mrs. Benson, who like many mothers, once it was decided her daughter was to marry appeared only anxious to have it over with as soon as possible.

The father of the family, wholly occupied by his invention which he was seeking to have adopted by the government, was ready to agree to anything so long as no demands were made upon his time which was absorbed at the shops, and by the frequent trips he was making to Washington where he had become a familiar figure among the army of hungry contractors, jobbers, and inventors, who like himself had schemes to further with the War Department.

“What about young Landray and Marian?” the lawyer asked him one day; they were in the mechanic's office at the shops.

“Oh, I don't know!” said Tom Benson irritably. “Ask her mother—I got nothing to do with it, Jake.”

“I have asked her; it seems they want to be married before Stephen returns to the front; do you approve? But I suppose you do.”

“Don't lose your temper, Jake, it can't be helped; you're a good enough lawyer, but you know damn little about women or you'd understand why I don't meddle with their plans!”

“I suppose you know that young Landray has very little beside his pay?” said Benson.

“Is that so? Well, I can't see that it matters much. Marian's to stay with us anyhow; and she'd turn up her nose at a man that didn't wear a uniform—and young Landray's all right; he's got quite a knack for machinery, he's a good deal here,” said Tom Benson.

“You mean you can do something for him when the war's over?” inquired the lawyer, who seemed interested in this phase of the case.

“That's about what I'm figuring on doing. I guess Marian's mother'd look to me to see that the young folks didn't want for anything; and she might do lots worse, Jake. I've told him one thing though, I want him to get a couple of thousand dollars and invest them here with me, for him and Marian—in the gun, I mean—he says he can't get the money unless his aunt will borrow it for him.”

“I don't like that!” said Benson quickly. “I wish you'd done nothing of the kind; the demand can only embarrass her.”

“Oh, it ain't that I want the money, Jake. I'll give Marian what'll amount to a good deal more. I want to do my share at starting 'em in life, and this'll be a nice little nest-egg for him when he comes back; and ain't he entitled to something from the estate?”

“I suppose he is,” said Benson grudgingly.

“Well, then, he'd better take it and put it in here where it'll amount to something; he ought to have the handling of his own money.”

“The sum's small enough if a strict accounting was made,” said Benson hastily.

“Still there's something coming to him,” urged the mechanic.

“Of course,” answered Benson reluctantly.

“Well, he'd better put it in here with us, Jake. Look here, I don't want him to be other than fair to his aunt; but if he's going to marry my girl he's got to think of himself.”

“Well, there's nothing to be gained from talking with you,” said Benson frowning. “They'll marry, and that'll be the end of it.”

“No, no use,” admitted Tom Benson absently. “I've got my hands full without trying any arguments with Mrs. Benson; your aunt ain't open to argument—or rather she is; but conviction's a long ways off. Get married yourself and you'll understand why I can storm around down here at the shops, and why I go home as meek as a wet kitten.”

“Of course, I don't want to interfere,” began the lawyer.

“No, you'd better not. The family's on pretty good terms with itself, a thing it never was in your father's day; and all because he wanted to think for us all. That's why him and me never spoke for the last ten years of his life. No, let them have their own way, it'll save a lot of trouble. If there's a wedding, you and me'll act as if we enjoyed weddings!” He fell to rubbing his unshaven chin with the back of his hand; then he took up the model of the breach and stock of his rifle which he had been considering when his nephew entered the office. “It's a great gun, Jake,” he said with fond pride in his invention. “I've got the assurance that it will be given a fair trial; first a company, and if that works, then a regiment. What do you think of calling it the 'Peace-maker?' That's what the country's looking for.” He fixed Benson with his eye. “What do you say to making a thousand of the perfected pattern, against the demand there's sure to be?”

“But you have been making them?”

“Yes,” said the mechanic, “we've about five hundred on hand, but of a former pattern.”

“So many as that!” cried the lawyer. “What do they cost apiece to manufacture?”

“About ten dollars, but the cost is coming down all the time. The first hundred stood us about fifteen, but that was because there was too much hand work put on them. I made the second hundred for twelve and a half; and the last hundred for a shade over ten, but I'll peel it some yet.”

“Do you mean to tell me all that's a loss?” demanded Benson with some show of concern.

“No, of course not, I'll make those over,” responded the mechanic.

“And until you do, about seven thousand dollars are tied up!”

“Somewhere's near that,” said the inventor indifferently. “But look here!” he added quickly. “Just think of the men the government's got enlisted; and once our rifle's given a fair trial every mother's son of them will be lugging a 'Peace-maker;' I'm looking for big returns. We'll be thinking in thousands where we're thinking in hundreds now and holding our breath. Damn the small things! Bently kept me down to them until I pretty near sickened of the business here.”

“Well, don't ruin me,” said Benson.

“Ruin you, Jake! I'll make you ten times the man you are!” said the mechanic.

“Don't you think you'd better go a little slow until you're sure the gun will be accepted?” said the lawyer.

“Oh, I'm sure enough now; but I been pretty near badgered to death by them government experts, as they call themselves; pretty nigh discouraged—but we are to have a fair trial now, and you'll find you've made your best venture with me, Jake.”

About this time Stephen was informed that he would be expected to rejoin his command within six weeks. He went to Virginia and presented the matter to her; he wished to marry Marian before he went to the front, would she be willing to borrow money for him? He had the grace to be shame-faced and embarrassed when he made this request, for he was more than remotely conscious of its selfishness. He also wanted to make the investment Tom Benson advised; in fact, the mechanic was rather urging it upon him. He believed in the rifle himself, and if the mechanic's eloquent figures told the truth, it would give him something to look forward to when the war ended. If they could borrow about twenty-five hundred dollars it would be ample. He only wished the loan to run a year; then he would take it up out of his profits; or if they failed to eventuate by that time, Tom Benson had assured him that he would himself let him have what money he required.

When he enlisted Stephen had determined that he would never again make any demands on Virginia for money; he had even gone through the mental process of relinquishing all claim on the estate; but was glad now that he had not told her of this benevolence of his.

It annoyed him greatly that Jacob Benson would have to know just how the money was secured; but he hoped that some day he could remove his affairs beyond the scope of the lawyer's knowledge. It was deeply humiliating that he should have this intimate acquaintance with them, for he knew that Benson would have his own opinion of him, and he knew him well enough to be aware that he would invest the transaction with none of the large charity with which Virginia was sure to regard it. Virginia said she would see Benson, and learn just what they could do, and with Benson's help, the money was raised; and Stephen was married to Marian three weeks later on the eve of his departure for the front.

Virginia accepted this as she always did the inevitable, with much composure and few words. It was useless to think that Marian could ever be anything to her—perhaps it was her own fault, and she was ready enough to admit that it might be; but there was no affection between them, and she felt that none was possible; and she was more sorry for Stephen than she had ever been for herself, for she knew he must suffer a bitter disappointment.

Tom Benson's gun had its trial, and he came home from Washington where he had received the report of the experts who had conducted the tests, one cold February morning, an aged and broken man. It was scarce day when he arrived in town, but instead of going home he went straight to the office, where he let himself in with the key he always carried; and when Jim Williams the bookkeeper, presented himself there shortly after seven o'clock, he found him still with his hat and overcoat on, and seated before his desk with his hands buried deep in his trousers' pockets, and seemingly quite unmindful of the bitter cold in the fireless room. He had been there for an hour or more but had hardly moved; first in absolute darkness, then the thin grey light had stolen in through the frosted windows, and the sun's faint rays as the day broke. But he had not noticed the change, and it was only when he heard Williams fumbling with numb fingers to fit his key to the lock that he stirred, gruffly calling to him to enter.

“When did you get back?” demanded Jim in frank surprise.

“This morning,” said Benson shortly.

“Train must have been late,” ventured Jim.

“Four hours.”

“Snow?”

“Yes.”

He had removed his hat and outer coat, and was hanging them up on their peg back of the door by his desk.

“Stir round, will you!” said Benson. “And see if you can get a fire started—it's as cold as hell here!”

He had never been an especially agreeable man in his relation with his subordinates; and the bookkeeper after building a fire in the office stove went back into the shops, and informed Shanley the foreman that “The old man was hipped over something, and that he was a mighty good proposition to let alone.”

“Then I'm just the lad to leave him be, if that's so,” said the foreman jocosely.

And Shanley profiting by the hint kept out of the office. Jim's duties, however, did not admit of his taking a similar precaution; but he found that Tom Benson took no notice of him. He sat idly before his desk all the morning and if he noticed anything it was the skirmish line of the heat on the frosted window panes in front of him, which as the day advanced, retreated from the centre of the panes until a circle had been cleared in

each, through which one might look.

He was still seated there at midday when the foundry bell clanged clear and sharp from the little square tower on the roof over his head. He watched the hands as they came hurrying out of the big gates, he heard the crisp sound of their footfalls as they disappeared up and down the street, where the snow lay heavy and white; and a smothered curse broke from his twitching lips.

“Did you speak?” asked Jim, who was putting coal in the stove preparatory to leaving, too.

“No,” said Benson gruffly, “I didn't.” Then as the bookkeeper was slipping into his coat, “Stop at the hotel, will you, and have them put me up a snack and a pot of coffee. You can fetch it with you when you come back after dinner.”

But when Williams brought the lunch, he hardly tasted it; and the coffee was cold before he gulped down a cupful of it. This was all he took.

All the afternoon the shops clanged and echoed as the work there went on. It was a sound he had loved once, but now it only brought to him the sickening consciousness that there would come a silence which he should be powerless to vivify into life and energy.

At last he took up a pen and found a sheet of paper and began to write, or rather scrawl, and this scrawl took the form of a letter which he afterward put in an envelope he had already addressed to his nephew. This was what he had written:

“I am just back from Washington. The gun is a failure. It has been finally rejected by the experts, which does not so much matter, for it seems that my patents are not so sound as I supposed. There were others ahead of me with the same idea, and they got the best of it. When I got you to join me in this venture I did not know that I was infringing on any one; but this point was established beyond doubt while I was in Washington, where I had several interviews with the other parties' representatives. I am sorry for you; but you will remember that you yourself told me to go ahead and that you would stand back of me. I did so. You will find that you are much more deeply involved than you have any notion of. I should say that your individual losses will easily reach fifteen or twenty thousand dollars. My own are much heavier, so heavy that I can never meet them. Knowing this, you will understand why I take the course I do.”

The afternoon wore on. He watched the tracery of the frost creep up the panes again. Lights flared in the long rows of windows in the shops, but the sounds there and the rumble of heavy machinery continued until it was quite dark. Then all this ceased with a sudden bang and jar; and again overhead the big bell rang out clear and sharp in the cold night air.

“It's zero weather,” commented Williams getting down from his stool, but his employer gave no heed to what he said, and he busied himself noisily in stamping into his overshoes, then he put on his hat and coat. Benson roused himself.

“Jim!” he said.

“Yes, sir,” answered the bookkeeper briskly.

“What are they doing inside?”

“They are going ahead with the guns.”

“How many have they got?”

“Something over fifteen hundred.”

Benson groaned aloud. It was worse than he supposed. He said huskily:

“You can stop them in the morning. I ain't the heart to; but the government's soured on the whole scheme. It's infernal experts say the gun's no good!” he brought down his fist with a mighty thud on the desk before him. “And its damned Patent Office has allowed me to go ahead with a mechanism that's an infringement on patents already granted; what in hell's name do you think of that!” he left his chair and lurched across the room toward Williams, who was open-mouthed with surprise and dismay. “I've had to spend money like water to find this out! I been buying meals and drinks for the small fry of hungry, thirsty harpies, and taken rebuffs from the big ones in office; me, that counted myself as good as the best! I've had smart lawyers who told me to go ahead, that I was all right, that my gun didn't conflict with no patents issued; the head man in the Patent Office told me the same, but day before yesterday a little twenty-dollar-a-week clerk showed me where I did conflict; and it was so plain that anybody but a government bat who ain't responsible to any one on God's earth for his mistakes, would have seen it with half an eye!”

“It's too bad!” said Williams, at a loss for words.

“Yes, it's too bad!” echoed Benson, with dull inadequacy, dropping back into his chair.

“Hadn't you better go home?” ventured Jim.

“What for?” snarled Benson, relapsing into ill-nature, and regretting his momentary frankness.

“Well, you can't stay here.”

“I want to dip into the books. I want to see where we stand, and figure out what I've dropped on this. I'll go home presently—and you keep your mouth shut until to-morrow.”

When Jim left him, he opened the books which the former had placed on his desk; he knew before he opened them just what he would find; yet he had a vague unreasoning hope that their figures might tell a different story. For half an hour he pored over them and then closed them with a bang.

“I'm a ruined man!” he muttered. “And Jake ain't much better off.”

He took up the lamp from his desk, and unfastening the door that led into the shops, disappeared among the machinery. For a little time his lamp moved to and fro; presently, however, it became stationary, and there was the clanking of a chain; this ceased, and he seemed to be moving some heavy object across the floor, dragging it; then suddenly the light was extinguished, the chain clanked again, violently this time—then there was absolute silence.

Williams, rather troubled by the news that Benson had imparted to him, had gotten no further than the square when he met Shanley the foreman. To him he confided all that their employer had just told him.

“So his gun's no good! I bet he didn't like that; he's always so blame sure of himself;” and Shanley did not attempt to disguise a certain lingering satisfaction that at last Tom Benson had encountered failure.

“It's nothing to chuckle over!” said the bookkeeper resentfully. “If you'd seen him!”

“Well, of course he'd take it hard; he takes everything hard, even his good luck, how'd you expect him to take this?” demanded the foreman.

“If his gun's no good, he's been losing money hand over fist. Look here,” said Williams. “I want you to go back with me.”

“Back with you where?” asked Shanley.

“Why, to the shops; I left him there.”

“You left him there?” cried Shanley.

“Yes, worrying over the books. I got my doubts about him.”

“Hold on, do you mean you think—”

“I don't know what I think; but we'd better go back.”

“He'll think we're spying on him, and I don't want to get the rough edge of his tongue.”

“Neither do I,” agreed Williams. “I'll tell you what we'd better do—we'll go get Jake Benson, and have him go back with us. I tell you we'd be doing all wrong to leave the boss alone there. I don't feel right about it.”

As they were standing on the corner in front of the lawyer's house, this took only a moment; and as the three men turned back toward the shops, Williams briefly explained his fears to Benson, who at each word quickened his pace; they arrived at the office panting and out of breath, but there was no light there now, the frosted panes showed white and clear.

“He's not here—thank the Lord!” said Williams.

“Gone home, I guess,” suggested Shanley.

“Have you your key?” asked Benson of the bookkeeper. “If you have we'll go in and make sure.”

Williams unlocked the door and pushed it open; then he struck a match and rather cautiously entered the room. The others followed him close, treading softly.

“No, he's gone sure enough,” said Williams, giving a sigh of relief. “Probably he's home by this time.”

“Of course he's home if he ain't here!” insisted Shanley. “Well, you've given us a pretty scare!”

“What shall we do?” asked Williams of Benson, as he dropped the end of the match he had been holding.

“I think we'd better go to his house and satisfy ourselves that he's there,” said the lawyer, speaking quietly from the darkness that enveloped them.

They groped their way out into the night again. Williams locked the office door, and then turned to his companions.

“I can go in and ask if he's there; and if he ain't, I can say we were expecting him back, and I thought he might have got in on the late train; we don't want to alarm them, you know. If he's there I'll make some sort of an excuse, say I lost my key in the snow and came to get his so I can open the office in the morning before he gets around.”

It was a short walk to Tom Benson's; and the lawyer, and Shanley, paused in the street opposite the house while Williams crossed and knocked at the front door. It was opened almost immediately and Williams entered the house. A moment later the door opened again, and the bookkeeper rejoined his two companions.

“He ain't there,” he said. “What next?”

“He may have gone up street,” suggested Shanley.

“I think we'd better go back to the office,” said Benson, “and look around again; perhaps he's inside somewhere—possibly in the pattern-room.”

Arrived at the office, Williams again unlocked the door; and the two men followed him in as before, treading softly.

“Find a lamp,” said Benson. “I want to make certain this time whether he's here or not.”

A lamp was found and lighted, and then for the first time Williams noticed that the door leading into the shops was standing slightly ajar. He called the attention of the others to this.

“I closed and fastened it when I left,” he said. “I always do before I go out.”

“He's in the pattern-room probably,” said Benson. “But we'll go back and make sure.”

They were half-way down the long room among the lathes and shafting, when the foreman who was in advance, started back with a cry of horror; for there not ten feet in front of him was a large dark object which seemed to be suspended from the arm of a heavy crane. It was swinging gently to and fro. Near it was a moulder's case set on edge. Then as they looked, the object turned slightly, and the light of their lamp shone full on Tom Benson's rigid face and starting eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BENSON was aghast when he came to look into the affairs of the shops. The condition there was beyond anything he had anticipated; for in seeking to further his invention, Tom Benson had completely lost his head. He had spent money lavishly; the business he had so largely extended during his years of careful management had been neglected until nothing remained. But at last the ruinous record was complete; by the middle of summer the last creditor satisfied; and the lawyer was able to coolly consider the situation. He was terribly crippled by the failure. The very house he lived in was mortgaged, and he applied himself to his profession and his client's interests with an assiduousness he had never before manifested.

He was just beginning to breathe freely again when one day he received one of Virginia's rare summons, and drove to the farm.

“Mr. Stark was here yesterday,” she said, when she greeted him, with an attempt at composure that was hardly successful.

“Mr. Stark?” he repeated. He looked blank.

“Yes; he wants his money, Mr. Benson,” she said unsteadily. “And he dared to come here to you!” burst out Benson furiously. “He promised me he'd wait!”

It was that last loan made at the time of Stephen's marriage. While he had supplied the money himself, Stark had acted for him; but during the summer he had been forced to realize on the paper, and the banker had accepted it as security for one of the several loans he had made to him.

“I am sorry I troubled you, but I thought you might be able to tell me if there was anything that could be done.”

“I'll see him at once!” said Benson; but he was sick at heart with what she had told him. He saw that his misfortunes were extending to her.

He hurried back to the town, where he confronted the banker in his private office with a lowering brow.

“Ah, Jacob, take a chair,” said Mr. Stark, with a winning smile.

“See here,” said Benson abruptly, “I have just seen Mrs. Lan-dray.”

“Yes; I understand you go there quite frequently, Jacob,” and the old man laughed slyly.

Benson glared at him, speechless and white with rage.

“I'm here on business, you'll be pleased to understand!” he said curtly.

“Quite as you prefer, Jacob,” and the banker instantly corrected his levity of manner.

“Do you recall that when I turned back that mortgage on the Landray farm, you agreed that it was to stand as long as the interest was paid?”

“I think you are mistaken, Jacob, the loan was for one year, if my memory serves me.”

“That has nothing to do with it—I refer to our conversation; and my understanding was that you would not press the payment as long as the interest was kept up!”

“I really don't seem able to recall any conversation to that effect,” said the banker blandly.

“You don't?” said Benson with stern repression.

“No; but perhaps you made a memorandum of it.”

“I didn't, more's the pity, and get your signature while I was about it!”

“It was a pity, Jacob. At my age—eighty-one, Jacob—a man's memory is not his strong point, and you know you have a very persuasive manner with you.”

“You agreed to wait!”

“I can't recall it, Jacob. If I did it's quite slipped my memory. Would you like to examine the mortgage? I have it by me.”

“I suppose you intend to buy in the farm,” said Benson scornfully.

“Very probably I shall make a bid on it—why shouldn't I, Jacob?”

“Mr. Stark, I ask it as a personal favour that you abide by my recollection of our conversation,” said Benson, choking down his rage.

“No, Jacob, I shall have to act according to my own memory in the matter. This terrible, wicked war is ruining us all, and the closing of the shops has made so many men idle; why, they have been without work eight months now; I don't know what our merchants will do; it's a calamity for them. And Tom Benson was always such a hard-headed fellow, a really excellent man of business; who could have foreseen he would go as he did!”

“When I turned over that mortgage—” began Benson.

“Why speak of it again, Jacob? Really the circumstance should be a lesson for us both.”

“I want to know what I am to expect?”

“Haven't I made that clear, Jacob?” and the old banker looked at Benson over the tops of his steel-bowed spectacles, while a dry smile parted his lips.

“It is not at all likely that Mrs. Landray can raise the money for you; as for me—you know I haven't it!”

“That's unfortunate,” said Stark in the gentlest and most pitying of tones. “Very unfortunate, for you know the alternative.”

Benson shrank from him as if he had received a blow.

“You can't do that, you won't—” he cried.

“I will have to, Jacob.”

Benson sank into the chair at the corner of the old man's desk.

“You must let me satisfy you,” he urged.

“Have you the money, Jacob?” asked the banker sharply.

"No; you know that."

"Can you get it, Jacob?"

"Not unless I get it from you—not unless you'll take a second mortgage on my home."

"I am sure you won't mind my telling you so, but I think you are carrying about all the loans you should; you will pardon me, it is merely an old man's interest in your welfare." He became thoughtful, and for a moment Benson hoped he would relent.

"Mr. Stark, as a favour—"

"No, Jacob, that must all come out of hours; here, I have only one rule for friends and strangers."

Benson without a word more, turned away. He would try elsewhere; surely he had friends who could help him. It was only at the last moment, however, that he was willing to admit, that temporarily at least, his resources were exhausted.

Virginia accepted the situation with surprising fortitude; she neither complained nor repined, but arranged to leave the farm early in November, and put the cottage on the small place north of town in order. She expected, and in this she was not disappointed, that the farm would bring much more than enough to satisfy Stark; yet when the day came when she must leave it, her composure almost failed her. She wondered how she could find the courage to begin anew; how it would be possible to go forward from day to day amid strange surroundings when such brief happiness as she had known had been here!

Jane had gone to the cottage early in the day taking Harriett, and Virginia with Sam West had remained to see that the house was emptied. After this was done, and after the last loaded wagon had driven off, she turned back to pass swiftly through each room. It was her farewell.

A day or two later Benson presented himself at the cottage; he looked worn and haggard.

"You see we shall be quite comfortable," Virginia said, showing him into her small, low-ceilinged parlour. "Please don't take it quite so hard!"

"This would never have happened if I hadn't been so terribly involved; for the first time in my life I have been unable to get money when I needed it!" He spoke with bitter unavailing regret.

"Yes; but I could not have taken your money," she said. He smiled slightly.

"You couldn't have helped yourself! I should have had my dealings with Stark!"

She looked at him gratefully. His despondency, which he did not seek to hide from her, moved her to a feeling of greater sympathy than she had ever known for him.

"I am quite content here—it is only that it is strange now, but that will wear off."

The lawyer's face suddenly lighted.

"I sha'n'. be burdened as I am now, long—I'll buy the farm back, and then you shall return to it, Virginia!" he said.

"No," said Virginia. "I shall never go back there."

"But why not?" he asked.

"I don't know. But I knew when I left, that I should never go back. I sometimes think that if I could, I would leave here."

"Leave here, Virginia!"

"Yes, there are nothing but memories for me, and memories may not always be pleasant things to live with. I don't know, but perhaps I should go East—I only know that I should not stay here!"

"Then, thank God you cannot go!" he said, but in the same breath he added, "I don't mean that—you know I don't, Virginia!" He looked into her face with a world of longing in his glance. "Virginia, how long is this to continue?" he asked.

She did not answer him.

"You don't answer me," he urged.

"I have not changed; I never shall," she said.

"If I could convince myself of that I would be silent—but I can't believe it; perhaps because I dare not! Some day you will change toward me. When I first saw you I was a boy of twenty or so—it was when Stephen brought you here; that was seventeen or eighteen years ago. I have waited all that time, and I am still waiting, and twenty years hence—only you must change, Virginia—I shall still be waiting for you; whether you value my love or not, you may be sure of that. You have always held me here; to be near you, that has been the perilous happiness I could not deny myself. I should have gone to California but for you—you kept me here, though you did not know it. I should have gone into the army when the war broke out, but I felt then, as I still feel, that it was my place to watch over you. Virginia, who else have you! Stephen has gone out of your life; you do not like Marian and you never will, so you have lost him. Of them all you have only kept me; does that mean nothing to you?" He paused. "I suppose you will come to hate me—hate me or love me—because of my insistance. But I feel that I shall go on dogging you, persecuting you with my devotion, until I force you to change! Which will it be, Virginia? It can't last so forever—which will it be—hate or love?"

"I have forbidden you—you must not speak of this to me."

"Yes, you have forbidden it, but somehow I don't obey your commands any more. I don't even fear your displeasure. I suppose I am really beginning to persecute you! I wonder if I ever shall do that, Virginia—and I wonder why I shouldn't, my life is empty of the one great blessing I have coveted, as empty as if I had not lived at all! Do you think you have any right to make me suffer?"

"No—no, it is not I who make you suffer."

"Yes, it is you! It is because you will abide by an ideal!"

"It is not an ideal!" she cried passionately. "But a living presence still—always a living presence, as it was when he left me!"

"Then why didn't he stay? If he had, we would both have been spared!"

She looked at him resentfully.

“You have no right to speak of him!”

“Yes, I have; for I would have done more—sacrificed more—”

“Be silent!” she commanded, and he saw the white anger in her face; he rose and went to her side.

“Forgive me, Virginia—God knows how I love you.”

“Do you think I shall forgive you because of that!” she asked. “Yes, perhaps because of that! Circumstances have kept us together from the first; they are still keeping us together—it will always be so.”

When Benson reached home, he found a stranger seated in his office, who rose as he entered the room.

“Is this Mr. Benson?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the lawyer. “What can I do for you?”

“My name's Southerland,” said the stranger. “Mr. Benson, I want to talk to you about a tract of land in Belmont County, on which you have been paying taxes, though I understand it don't belong to you. The county clerk gave me your name—told me where to find you—I'm from Wheeling, West Virginia, myself.”

“The property belongs to a client of mine—a widow. I have it in charge,” said Benson briefly.

“Is it on the market?” inquired Southerland.

“Yes; my client will sell for a price,” answered Benson.

“You have had offers then?” suggested Southerland, with a tinge of disappointment.

“None that we care to consider,” replied Benson.

“There's two thousand acres more or less?”

“About that,” agreed Benson, nodding slightly.

“What do you hold it at?”

Benson surveyed him critically. He wondered what his business was; he wondered also what was the value of the land and if it had not a special value to Southerland—he rather thought it had.

“I'll tell you,” he said at last. “I'd like to look over the property myself before I commit my client in any way.”

“You won't see much but scrub-timber and rocks,” said Southerland.

“And minerals,” suggested Benson at a hazard.

“Coal,” nodded Southerland.

Benson was thoughtful.

“Go back with me,” advised Southerland. “I'll show you over it. I know every rod of it.”

“Do you?” said Benson drily. “Well, I'll go back with you.”

“When, Mr. Benson?”

“At once—to-morrow if you like,” answered Benson.

His first impulse had been to see Virginia; but on thinking it over, he decided not to arouse her hope until he was sure something would come of it.

The next day he boarded an east-bound train in company with the Wheeling man. It was an ugly region into which he was introduced, defiled by soft-coal smoke, and unpicturesque with tall foundry chimneys; a region of pig-iron, coke, iron rails, and mammoth castings. He found that Southerland was a man of substance and importance here. In his own smoky atmosphere he talked in a large way, and with an enthusiasm for his schemes and ventures which he could not altogether repress. He was up to the neck in iron, he told Benson, and he was all for going deeper.

To look over the Landray tract involved an entire day in a buggy over the worst of roads; and, as Southerland had said, there was not much to see.

“I'll tell you, sir,” said he, chewing a blade of grass and watching the lawyer out of the corner of his eye. “I'll tell you, sir, I want this land. I'll give as much as the next—maybe you'll find I'll give more. After you get through with me you're perfectly welcome to go about and learn all you can. I don't want you should think I'm trying to keep anything from you. I want this piece of property. I've been buying coal; I want to stop that—I want to mine it. You'll note the property's out of the way just now, that's what's kept it back; but if I buy it I'll have a railroad over here inside of a twelve month.”

They had left the buggy, and were seated on the ground with a flat rock between them which was littered with the remains of their lunch.

“I'll make you my offer. I'll give—” he paused for a brief instant. “I'll give fifty thousand dollars for the tract. Now if you can beat them figures, you're at liberty to!” He had risen, and stood looking down on the lawyer. Benson did not speak, he did not look up, for he did not want Southerland to see his face. Fifty thousand dollars! He wondered if he had really heard aright. Fifty thousand dollars! A great joy engulfed him, he could only think of what this would do for Virginia—the relief, the ease—again the comfort of ample means. Yet when he spoke his habitual caution prompted him to ask coldly:

“That is the best you can do?”

“Yes. Think it over,” said Southerland. “I'll get up the horse,” he added, and strode away.

Benson did not follow him at once. Fifty thousand dollars! This was rare news he should carry home. He did not propose to commit himself to Southerland then and there however, he would learn first, if he could not do better. But he had the premonition that he would accept this offer in the end, since something in Southerland's tone convinced him that he was offering all the land was worth.

On the drive back to town they seemed by mutual consent to avoid any reference to the offer. When they drew up at the curb before Benson's hotel, Southerland said:

“I suppose you'll want to-morrow to look about, and then you'll have to consult your principal before we can settle anything.”

“Yes,” agreed Benson. “If I see you in the afternoon, I suppose you will be ready to put your offer in shape for me to submit? I expect to take the night train west. If your offer is accepted, I'll be back by the first of next week to conclude the deal.”

Benson took a train west the next evening. He carried with him Southerland's offer, which he had satisfied himself Virginia could do no better than accept.

From the first his feeling had been one of generous enthusiasm. He could hardly wait to see Virginia. The speed of the train that was bearing him across the State seemed utterly inadequate to the great occasion. She would be a rich woman again; the smile faded from his lips. The thought smote him like a sudden blow.

His one hold upon her had been her dependence; and what comfort he had been able to cheat himself into taking was all based on the idea that as Virginia's fortunes grew desperate, she must inevitably turn to him. Now he would have nothing to offer. She was free to leave Benson if she chose.

It was two o'clock in the morning when he descended to the station platform at Benson. He slept late the following morning, and after he had breakfasted went into his office to look over his letters. These were but few. He soon disposed of them, and he was at liberty to go to Virginia. But he had parted with the desire. His first generous enthusiasm had quite left him. He assured himself that he was still unspeakably glad for her sake, it was only that for his own sake he could not be glad. He must surrender all idea of her; but it was folly to imagine he could do this all in a moment, all in a day. In his life, where each sane and modest desire had known its accompaniment of modest achievement, this love of his had been the supreme thing; great, compelling, uplifting, unsatisfied.

There was one thing he could do; and suddenly he found himself thinking it out step by step until the smallest detail was clear in his mind. He might buy the land of her, paying her as he now could, some small sum for it that would benefit her, and yet keep her near him, and still dependent. If he did this, of course he could not accept Southerland's offer. He would hold the land just as Virginia had held it, deriving no benefit from it. This would be a disgraceful and a cruel thing to do, but it could be done—that is, it would be simple enough to do.

It provoked a dull wonder in him that he could consider so base a betrayal of her trust and confidence, but the details of this miserable scheme kept recurring to his mind. He even assured himself that it was no longer possible to be honest in his dealings with Virginia; for to be so, was to forever banish the slight chance of future happiness to which he clung with a determination and desperation that had become a part of his very love for her.

He lived through each phase of the supposititious transaction, but not without suffering to himself. Then he dismissed the matter from his mind. He felt as one does who has awakened from a bad dream. To wrong her was impossible. He would do what was honest because it was honest, and because the habits of a lifetime would admit of nothing else.

But why had he played with a possible temptation, why had he allowed such a fancy to possess him? He gave way to fear—fear of himself; and he was again weighing the merits of his case, the justice even; and he knew that it had become a struggle, a struggle to maintain himself against the willingness to do her wrong.

Strangely enough he seemed to be able to watch quite impersonally the struggle that was going on in his own soul. He wondered what this tempted man would do, who in a single day had fallen away from all his nice ideals of honour!

“I have found a buyer for your wild land near Wheeling,” Benson told Virginia two days later. He stood by the window with his back to the light; to him the air of that low-ceilinged room was close and stifling.

“You have done what, Mr. Benson?” Virginia asked, turning quickly toward him.

“I have found a buyer for your land near Wheeling,” he repeated huskily.

“But should I sell? Is there need for it now?” Virginia asked doubtfully.

“Why continue to pay taxes on the land?” but Benson did not meet her glance. If his life had depended on it, he could not.

“Stephen always thought it might prove valuable some day.”

“I fear that day is a long way off,” he said in a low voice, and still with averted eyes.

“So, then, you think I should sell the land, now that I have the opportunity?”

He was silent for an instant and then asked, “Would you—would you—consider five thousand dollars for the land?” The words came with an effort; they seemed to choke him.

“Do you think that is enough, Mr. Benson?”

“It is an unimproved property, you know.”

“But even that would be almost double what Stephen and his brother paid for it.”

“How do you mean, Virginia? They took it in trade from Levi Tucker.”

“Oh, yes, he traded it for the distillery, have you forgotten? The distillery was valued at five thousand dollars, and the land at twenty-five hundred.”

Benson glanced at her sharply.

“Do you know the exact acreage, Virginia?” he asked.

“There are a thousand acres; at least, I seem to remember having heard Stephen say it was a thousand acres.”

It flashed upon him that she had known nothing of that second transfer of a thousand acres that the old tavernkeeper had made to the brothers. Probably she thought the sale of the distillery had been concluded by a cash payment, and that the money had been taken West for investment.

Benson hesitated. An abyss seemed to be yawning at his feet. What evil chance was it that had left her so illy-acquainted with her own affairs? In all the business he had transacted for her, she had signed the necessary papers without even looking at them. If she sold the wild land, the acreage could be managed.

"You remember, don't you, that this land is yours? That when Anna married it was agreed that you were to take over this property in lieu of an increased equity which Stephen was to have in the mill and farm? I simply wish to recall this point to your mind so that you will understand why this is a transaction that does not involve Stephen in any way."

She knew what was in his mind, and said reproachfully:

"You don't like Stephen."

"No, I don't," he answered frankly. His tone was one of bitter hostility.

"But why? You always seemed to like him up to the time he enlisted," said Virginia.

"Didn't that furnish me with sufficient excuse to change in my feelings toward him, what more was needed?" demanded Benson harshly. "He should have remained with you, Virginia, he had no right to enlist; that he *did*, was sheer wrong-headedness. We quarrelled over that; at least, I told him what I thought of his conduct, and I suppose he was offended by it."

"But he was carried away by the enthusiasm of those times. He was only a boy—he became involved before he knew what he was doing, and then it was too late to draw back. Remember, he had all a boy's foolish pride," she urged gently.

"I offered to take his place if he would stay here with you," said Benson almost roughly. He wanted her to know just what he would have done for her, he was hungry for approval.

"You offered to take his place?" she said in surprise; yet not quite understanding what he meant by this.

"Yes, I was willing to go in his place. Can't you guess what prompted me to make the offer?"

They were silent for a moment, then Virginia raised her eyes to his, and he met her glance with a look of dumb appeal.

"I thank you as much for what you have sought to do for me, as for what you have actually done, Mr. Benson. If I have seemed ungrateful—"

"If you would let me—" he burst out. "There—forgive me, Virginia, I don't want to offend you. What were we saying? Oh, Stephen—he had as little business to marry as he had to enlist. I'd have prevented that if I could, but I couldn't. His folly was all of a piece, I am angry whenever I think of it."

"I wonder what he will do when he comes back," said Virginia.

Benson said nothing. The farm would not have been lost but for

Stephen's selfishness. This, had there been any other lacking, would have given him an excuse to hate the young fellow, and he was ready now to hate all the world.

"It is not too late for him to take up the study of the law again," suggested Virginia.

"Not too late if he thinks that is what he wants," said Benson briefly. He went on in a gentler tone, "But why do you worry about him, Virginia, what's the use? He will have his own plans, and you will forgive me, he will prefer them to any plans you can make for him. You know him well enough to know that."

"But may I not think that you will aid him where you can? That you will interest yourself in his future?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders moodily and frowned.

"I told you I have not forgiven him for his selfish ingratitude to you; but, well—I shall probably end by doing whatever you want me to do. Perhaps that was not very generously said. We have gotten away from the land; you are satisfied with the offer, you think you will accept it?"

"You advise me to; do you not?"

He did not answer her directly, but took up his hat from the chair where he had placed it when he entered the room.

"To-morrow, perhaps, I shall bring the deed for you to look over and sign," he said, as he made ready to take his leave of her.

"But who wishes to buy the land?" asked Virginia.

"Page Stark," said Benson, turning back into the room. "You probably know that he has always dabbled in cheap lands."

Page Stark was the old banker's son, a reserved and silent fellow; and Benson had arranged with him to act for him in the purchase of the land. There was no one else whom he could so fully trust to hold his tongue.

"I can't go on with this," he told himself as he quitted the house, and for the moment he felt that he must abandon the whole project. But when he reached his office he found a telegram on his desk. It was from Southerland, reminding him of the promise he had made that he would be back in Wheeling by the first of the week. It was now Saturday. This moved Benson to a furious anger; he tore up the telegram with swift nervous jerks, and tossed the scraps into his waste-paper basket. "Damn the fool, why does he bother me!" he cried. "Does he suppose I have nothing else to think of! He'll be surprised when I write him that the deal's off."

But did he dare write Southerland this?

On Monday came another telegram; the Wheeling man was evidently growing restive under the delay. This second telegram threw Benson into something of a panic. Suppose Southerland should come to see Virginia! He had not thought of the possibility of this before, and he realized in spite of the spacious promises he had made himself, that the transaction would have to be brought to a conclusion of some sort; for clearly Southerland was not a man whom it would be safe to ignore.

Benson did the only thing he could think of under the circumstances. He wired, putting him off until the end of the week; which brought an immediate reply. Southerland now wished to know if his offer was accepted; and to this, Benson could only answer in the affirmative.

But even after the deed was drawn up, it lay on his desk for two days; and then it was only the apprehension that Southerland might present himself to Virginia, that induced the lawyer to conclude the purchase.

When he reached Wheeling, and Southerland saw the deed, he was not a little surprised. But he was an

excellent man of business himself, in all that the term could imply by the most liberal construction that could be put upon it; and he decided that the smooth-faced lawyer was a sharp hand himself; and made no comment.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

IT was an April morning, mild and warm, in the rutted roads, in the pillaged, trampled fields the sassafras and honey-locust had claimed for their abiding place, two armies were drawn up. Between them, skirmishers moved with the brisk rattle of musketry; while at intervals dull echoes woke to flow reverberatingly across the wasted land.

Suddenly the firing ceased. The long line of advancing men in blue halted. The enemy was withdrawing and was rapidly disappearing from view in the direction of Appomattox Court House.

In front of many of the regiments the officers had formed in groups, and from group to group spread the news that the expected battle was not to be fought.

“A white flag,” one would say, and then they would fall to shaking hands, silently, ceremoniously. If there was any doubt expressed, there was the answer ready: “It's so—I tell you it's so! They got it from a staff-officer who said it was so!”

Further afield small parties of men, medical attendants, and stretcher-bearers, were moving to and fro, gathering in the wounded who had fallen on the skirmish line.

At one point, on the edge of a strip of woodland, lounged the members of a company that had been recalled from the front. Their captain had gone down into the woods, fifty yards distant perhaps, to a spring that gushed out of a bank at the foot of an old oak. This captain was Stephen Landray. Having satisfied his thirst he now sat on the trunk of a fallen tree with a battered tin-cup held idly in his hand. There was nothing of the boy left; and in other ways as well, the physical strain, the hardship, and the suffering he had endured had told on him. His skin was dry and sallow and his worn uniform hung loosely to his erect, nervous figure. Now and again his glance sought the men on the edge of the wood. He had seen soldiers resting before in their intervals of inaction, but he realized that there was a difference now; some subtle change had taken place in their mental relation to their surroundings that said as plainly as words—it is over. Yet curiously enough the realization of this seemed not entirely satisfactory. With it had come a sense of loss at the sudden withdrawal of a purpose, that had been all absorbing and to which they had clung tenaciously; but now that the accomplishment of this purpose was immanent they seemed to feel only the loss of what for four years had been the main motive in their lives.

Landray had gone through that very process himself, only he had carried his speculations beyond the immediate present, and into the future. He would go back to Benson to his wife, and to the old ties; and then what? He had said many times that he would be glad enough when the war was over; and yet now that it seemed the general conviction that it was over, he was conscious of no special satisfaction, and he felt neither enthusiasm nor elation; on the contrary he was strangely quiet, strangely repressed. He wondered what he would take with him from his four years of soldiering that would be useful in the struggle he saw before him; he wondered how these thousands of men would be absorbed in the ordinary channels of life. There was a movement among his men, and he glanced again in their direction, and saw that an officer followed by an orderly, had ridden up and was speaking to one of the loungers. The distance was too great for Stephen to hear what was said; suddenly, however, the new-comer swung himself from his saddle, and leaving his horse in charge of his orderly, came striding across the open woodland toward him. He was a pompous red-faced man, middle-aged, but vigorous and sturdy, and dressed in a handsome well-fitting uniform. Landray scrambled to his feet and saluted. His salute was graciously returned by the stranger, who said:

“I see you have a tin-cup, captain—” pausing, and bestowing an instant's scrutiny on the young man. “Would you mind letting me get a drink with it?”

For answer, Stephen stooped and filled his cup and handed it to him. .

“Rather warm for so early in the spring, general,” he said.

“Thanks—eh? Oh, yes, very warm indeed. The season's unusually well advanced.” He sat down on one of the exposed roots of the oak, and removing his hat carefully, polished his bald head with his handkerchief.

Stephen had seated himself on the fallen tree again. The stranger tossed his handkerchief into the crown of his hat, and fixed the latter on his head with a decided rake over one eye; then he looked across at Stephen and smiled, showing a row of white even teeth.

“Well, young man,” he observed briskly, and with an air of pleasant patronage, “I reckon you're beginning to think of the home folks, and I reckon the home folks are beginning to think of you; but maybe there's some one else you're thinking of hardest of all! I guess she'll be glad enough to see you back, eh?”

“That was all settled when I got my first furlough,” said Stephen laughing, “and that was over three years ago.”

“Was it though! Well, I guess we can consider this rumpus at an end; I understand General Grant and General Lee are going to get together and see what can be done to stop the effusion of blood. I hope Grant will be in a complaisant mood, there's never any harm in making it easy for the other fellow to quit.” He paused, and looked the young man over attentively. “Ah—Ohio regiment! An Ohio man yourself, captain?”

interrogated the general beaming blandly upon him.

“Yes, born there, and lived there until I enlisted,” answered Stephen.

“What part of the state do you come from?” inquired the general after another brief pause.

“The central part of the state, a little place called Benson.”

“Benson—the devil!” cried his questioner, starting. “I lived there myself once—owned a paper there, in fact.”

“Did you indeed?” said Stephen.

“Yes, sir, I did, and I had a pretty wide acquaintance. Dabbled a bit in politics, too, and knew everybody in the town, and pretty near everybody in the county—what's your name, sir?”

“Landray, Stephen Landray.”

“Landray?” cried the other. “Why, God bless my soul, young man, I knew your father well—we were the same as brothers, for I take it you're Bushrod Landray's son—yes, of course you're Bush-rod Landray's son, for Stephen had no children.”

“Yes, my father was Bushrod Landray,” said Stephen; he wondered who the stranger might be.

“He was one of my most intimate friends, a man I admired immensely. I'm pleased to know you;” and he held out his hand. His delight seemed unbounded, for he wrung Stephen's hand with a hearty good-will. “Well, it is a small world, ain't it? And to think I should meet you here after all these years! Eh, you want to know who I am? Gibbs is my name— General Gibbs of Missouri, formerly of Lyon's staff.” It rolled sonorously from his lips.

“I have heard of you, General Gibbs,” said Stephen.

“I bet you have!” said the general chuckling.

“I mean they have not forgotten you at Benson,” Stephen made haste to say. He was rather embarrassed, however, for he was aware that he had never heard anything of this old friend of his father's that was in any sense creditable; indeed he had not known until that moment that he had been a friend of his father's—but Gibbs himself seemed very sure of that point.

“Of course they ain't!” still chuckling and unabashed. “I usually manage to make myself felt in one way or another—ain't always the best way perhaps, but it's usually warranted to last. Tell me about everybody—your own folks—I love any man by the name of Landray!”

“I've not been home in two years,” said Stephen.

“How's your mother?”

“Didn't you know—but of course you couldn't, she is dead.”

“God bless my soul, you don't tell me! I'm shocked to hear it,” cried Gibbs. “Inexpressibly shocked to hear it, when did it happen?”

“Years ago, she died out in India. She had married again, and had gone there with her husband who was a missionary.”

“You don't tell me!” repeated Gibbs. “And your aunt, Stephen's widow?”

“She is well; or was when I heard from her last.”

“Never married again, eh?” said Gibbs.

“No.”

“Remarkable! but I reckon it wa'n'. for any lack of opportunity, she was a most beautiful woman as I recall her.”

“She is still a very beautiful woman,” said Stephen, but for some reason he did not care to discuss Virginia with Gibbs. He had felt no such reluctance where his own mother was concerned.

“What about Jake Benson? I've sort of lost track of him, we used to exchange occasional letters, but I drifted about a good deal. I was living in Alabama when the war broke out, but I got back to St. Louis in a hurry then, my politics were of the wrong complexion for down South. But what about Jake Benson? I reckon he's gone on piling up the dollars; give him a start and you'll never stop a Yankee doing that.”

“Of course you are not aware that I married his cousin.”

“Didn't know he had any cousin left when I took my wife,” said the general.

“His uncle's daughter, you know,” explained Stephen.

“Oh, yes, of course—Tom Benson's daughter—I recollect he had a daughter. I declare that sort of makes a tie, don't it? But how is Jake? He wa'n'. such a bad fellow as I knew him; he had his notions, that was the worst I ever had to say of him. I used to tell him that all he needed to make a right decent fellow was to limber up some. Well, you must look me up at headquarters, I'd like to show them there the sort of a chap I used to carry around in my arms when he wa'n'. no higher than a walking-stick.”

“If you all ain't using that tin-cup,” said a gentle voice, “will you kindly give it here a minute?” The speaker who had approached unnoticed and now stood at Stephen's elbow, was a lank loose-jointed young man of about Stephen's own age. A sandy stubble that had not known a razor in many days covered his chin and lips, his hair was long and almost swept his shoulders, but his eyes were mild, and in the corners of them lurked a humorous twinkle which softened his savage unkempt appearance, giving him an air of genial burlesque. He was clothed in tattered grey homespun, and halted on one foot as a man will who is footsore. On the damaged member he wore a list slipper, the other foot was encased in a soldier's rough brogan. “I've just been gathered in,” he said, with a slight deprecatory gesture and a pleasant twinkle. “They picked me up along with my whole company. We didn't know anything about the white flag until it was too late. Gentlemen, do you think it's over?”

“Yes,” said Gibbs promptly. “I think it is, the backbone's broken.”

“Well, the stomach's been empty for some time,” murmured the stranger with gentle melancholy. “And it got to us—yes, it certainly got to us bad!” He took the tin-cup Stephen had filled and now extended to him,

and gulped down thirsty swallows of water. “Well, I'm glad it's over with, if it is over with,” he said, returning the cup to Stephen. “I done my share of fighting. I've run from you all; and I've run after you all when you were going in that direction.”

“Which happened now and then,” said Gibbs laughing good-naturedly.

“Oh some; but I don't wish to disparage what you've accomplished,” said the stranger, laughing too. “Taking it altogether, I'm satisfied. I don't care if I never see another war.”

Gibbs approved of his attitude, for he commended it highly. “That's the proper spirit! You stood out for your convictions, as long as you could; for it's safe to assume that General Lee is fully convinced of the futility of further resistance.”

“Well, I don't know as I had any convictions; I'm a Utah man myself; and it was just my contrary luck that I happened to be in Texas buying cattle when Mr. Davis and the rest was for going out, and I was asked by an intimate friend which I preferred—being hung or joining the army—he got my answer right off, and I joined.” He meditated for an instant in silence. “I reckon I must have thought they needed just such a soldier as I knew I'd make. But the war's been fought to a finish without any one higher than a corporal ever asking my opinion. Well, I'm glad to get acquainted with you, gentlemen; I been living on what I could just naturally pick up for the past week, and there was mighty little to pick up; but I hear you all have got grub, so I reckon it's a heap worse not to get captured than it is to get captured. I want somebody to set me down with a skillet and a coffee-pot, and leave me alone for a spell with plenty of Yankee groceries to my hand!”

Gibbs and Landray had risen to their feet while he was speaking, and now the three turned back out of the wood.

In the open fields, the long line of halted men were already in motion. They were being withdrawn from the front of what was to have been the Union position. Where they emerged there was considerable confusion. A battery had just come up from the rear, while a regiment recently arrived from the skirmish line had broken ranks and its thirsty members were hurrying down to the spring to fill their canteens. They left the Confederate captain with his men, a sparse handful as wildly tattered and unkempt as himself, with whom the blue-clad soldiers were already sharing the contents of their haversacks. Stephen extricated his company and prepared to march back to the camp he had quitted at four o'clock that morning. For a moment he and Gibbs lingered to speak with the stranger; to commend him to his captors and to wish him well; and then Gibbs turned to Stephen.

“Well, good-bye, Landray,” he said, as he swung himself into his saddle; then he leaned forward in the direction of the young man.

“Now, don't forget—be sure and look me up if you get the chance; I want to see more of you!”

“I will, with pleasure,” answered Stephen heartily, for he meant to see Gibbs again. The latter galloped away With his orderly at his heels.

“Landray!” muttered the Confederate, staring hard at Stephen. The name was strangely familiar—he had known some one once—“Landray!” he repeated, still under his breath, and watched Stephen and his men move briskly off across the field. They were about to disappear from sight behind a clump of trees, when he turned suddenly to one of his guards.

“Call him back!” he cried excitedly. “Tell, him a man by the name of Rogers wants a word with him! You won't? Well, maybe it wa'n'. him.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

STEPHEN was mustered out, and returned to Benson, where having nothing better in prospect he opened a real estate office; but from the very first this feeble enterprise was doomed to failure; and in disgust, at the end of a few weeks, he disposed of the business for a trifling sum to an aimless appearing stranger, who endured for perhaps a month in a small and dirty room at the back of a large gilt sign which read “Thomas Carrington, Successor to Stephen Landray, Real Estate and Insurance. Money to Loan.” The last being the merest fiction, and meant to meet a future contingency; and then Mr. Carrington, no more fortunate than Stephen had been, retired precipitously from business, and was successorless.

It was shortly after his retirement that he chanced to meet Stephen on the street.

“Anything doing, captain?” he asked casually, and with the happy unconcern of a gentleman the stress of whose condition was relieved by a temperament that rendered even failure endurable.

“No,” said Stephen; he was slightly embarrassed, he recalled the trifling sum he had taken in exchange for the fiction of good-will. Glancing furtively at his questioner, he was impressed by the fact that Mr. Carrington was looking the reverse of prosperous, his coat was shiny and the seams showed white in spite of the liberal inking he had given them with the last ink in the office ink-well.

“I didn't know but you might have hit on something. You got out easy, yet not so easy as I did; I was kicked out. Couldn't pay my rent. But I figure I'm saving ten a month; that's better than nothing.” Carrington said with a cheerful twinkle.

“Yes,” agreed Stephen, “that's better than nothing.”

“It only shows up on paper though,” said Carrington. “Now if I could live on paper—”

“Some of my friends are urging me to go into politics,” said Stephen. “They want me to run for county clerk.”

Carrington nodded; he had heard this it seemed.

“If I secure the nomination, I am certain of election. And I may be able to throw something in your way—I should like to,” said Stephen.

“Why?” asked Carrington.

“Well, our first transaction couldn't have been very satisfactory to you.”

“Don't worry about that, captain; bless your heart, I always knew the business wasn't worth a damn. When do you begin your canvass?”

“At once.”

“Say supposing you don't get the nomination?” and Mr. Carrington surveyed him critically. “Young man,” he said, “why don't you pull out of here while you can? Go West. What you want is a place where you can get out and hustle, and fill your lungs with fresh air. Politics! Why, sir, you're wasting time and money. You ain't cut out for that game—not the way they play it here.”

And Stephen remembered this when the nomination he had worked for through all of one hot summer, went to another. In his bitterness, Carrington's words remained with him, repeating themselves over and over again; go West—there he could make a start amid new surroundings, unhampered by the tradition of family riches and position. He broached the subject to Marian, and found her not only willing but anxious to consider some such change.

At this crisis in his fortunes Landray received a letter from Gibbs. The general was now located at a place called Grant City in Kansas; located permanently, he informed Stephen, and in a region destined soon to sustain a great and thriving population. He entreated Stephen not to waste life and energy in the overcrowded East, when he could come West and enjoy the more abundant opportunities offered by a new country. He imagined that Stephen's needs were somewhat similar to his own; and in his case, by all odds, the most urgent of those needs was the need to make money. He was convinced that Grant City was the place for this; he had gone there early—in fact, it appeared that he had actually preceded the town into Kansas; for with his clear vision he had detected the necessity for just such a centre as it was bound to become. It was on the projected line of a projected railroad, it was also the projected county seat of a projected county. It was many things besides; but most of all it was clearly and logically the spot for a town.

This letter gave Stephen what he lacked before, an objective point.

His mind fastened itself upon Grant City. He wrote Gibbs asking for fuller particulars, and that there might be no misconception on the part of the latter, informed him frankly that he would have nothing to invest. Marian discussed the proposed change with him eagerly, and did not attempt to hide her impatience; for she knew that if they went at all it must be soon while the means remained to them, and if they went to Grant City it would not be quite like going to a strange place; General Gibbs would be there; they could count on him to help them where he could; indeed he had intimated that he had an opening already prepared for Stephen if he would only come and take it.

“You must decide quickly,” she urged. “Of course he can't wait for you, he will get some one else.”

“I suppose there is that danger,” said Stephen dubiously. “If it just wasn't for one or two things I shouldn't hesitate, we'd start West to-morrow.”

“Yes, I know—your aunt. But if it is for your good, Stephen.”

“I'll never be able to convince her of that, she just won't believe it; she thinks I should stay here in Benson, where I belong and am known.”

“But what good is there in being known?”

“Little enough, apparently; I'll write Gibbs to-morrow.”

“Don't be over-persuaded, Stephen,” she said, following him to the door. “Your aunt won't want you to go, but remember this does look like an opportunity.”

“I know it does,” he said as he left the house. He admitted to himself that he was terribly anxious, he felt singularly unfit for the struggle that was before him; he had no large adaptability, the power to push himself he was sensible he altogether lacked; but the West was still the West; there, muscle was capital. If his aunt could only be made to understand this; and that she might, he found himself preparing his arguments with such skill as he had. He was still doing this when he walked in on Virginia.

“I've just had a letter from General Gibbs,” he observed, sinking into a chair at her side. “You remember Gibbs, don't you? You know I told you how I met him, and that I saw a good deal of him afterward in Washington. He's gone to a place in Kansas called Grant City; it's a new town—he wants me to join him there.”

“But surely you are not going, Stephen—you have no thought of that?” said Virginia quickly. He realized with a touch of bitterness that much as he might wish it, it could not be otherwise, his purposes and desires would always be at variance with what she would have chosen for him.

“Well, I'm not so sure about that, Aunt Virginia,” he said, smiling moodily.

“What does Marian say?” she asked.

“She is willing enough. She knows I must do something. I've rather made a failure of it here.”

“I suppose if you and Marian have decided that this is the thing for you to do, Stephen, no argument of mine will have any weight with you.”

“I don't want you to feel that way about it; but what am I to do? I haven't any choice. There is nothing that I can get here that you would care to see me take.”

“I don't want you to go West, Stephen,” said Virginia.

“It's not likely that I shall remain there always.”

“If you go, the more successful you are the less likely your return will be.”

“If there was anything for me here, I wouldn't consider it—but there is nothing, and I've very little money

left. Gibbs has something definite for me."

"You'll have to decide for yourself, Stephen," said Virginia with a touch of weariness. "I don't know what is best for you; you only can settle that point."

"Well, then, I think it's Grant City," he answered. "Fact is, I've felt it was Grant City ever since I heard there was such a place. It's too much of a problem for me here."

"Would you mind if I saw Mr. Benson, and found if he knew of anything?" asked Virginia.

Stephen frowned but the frown cleared itself away almost immediately.

"No," he answered. "Not if you are careful to let him understand that I don't ask you to, but I don't think he can or will do anything for me; still, if you want to see him, if it will be any satisfaction to you, I'm quite willing."

Virginia saw Benson the next day, for while she had seemed to accept Stephen's decision, she was determined to keep him near her if she could. .

"He is arranging to go West to General Gibbs. I think I told you once of their meeting," she said to the lawyer.

Benson remembered and smiled. He was rather amused that Lan-dray should have pinned his faith to Gibbs.

"Can nothing be done for him here, Mr. Benson—I mean will you do nothing? Can't you sec him and discuss matters with him?" she asked.

Benson moved impatiently.

"I don't see what I can do for him now, I wish I did, for your sake, Virginia."

But there was a notable lack of warmth in what he said that did not escape Virginia.

"Tell me," she said. "How do you feel about General Gibbs?" Benson smiled.

"I've no doubt if Stephen joins him he will help him in every way he can. There are much worse men than Gibbs."

It occurred to him that he should feel safer with Stephen removed to a distance; if he stayed in Benson there was always the danger that he might blunder into a knowledge of the advantage he had taken of Virginia.

"And you can do nothing?"

"For Stephen? I fear not, Virginia."

"Are you not interested in Marian?" she asked.

Benson shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps I should regret it; but such ties mean very little to me; and they are meaning less and less all the time."

"You have changed," she said almost resentfully. "Once I could come to you feeling that you would do all in your power—"

"You still may," he interrupted quickly.

"No, it is not as it was. I have not the same confidence."

He bit his lip.

"Perhaps the change has been in you, Virginia," he said. "My feeling toward you remains the same—"

"I do not mean that."

"What is the change you think you see?" he asked curiously. "You are less kind, for one thing."

"Nonsense, Virginia! You don't mean that. Whatever I can do, whatever I have is yours! You know this—and you have asked so little where you might have asked so much; I would have lifted every burden!"

"You could not; they were a part of my life," she said quietly. But after she had gone, he fell to wondering if he had changed.

Not quite a year had elapsed since he had bought the land of her, and yet he was finding that his business sense, his inherited taste for a good bargain, was enabling him to invest the proceeds of his fraud to the utmost advantage. He did not seek to justify or excuse himself; his moral perceptions were not weakened in the least; but he was conscious that a hardening process was going on in his own nature. He was less kind—as she had said—more willing to seize on an advantage; less under the influence of his generous impulses.

Stephen heard again from Gibbs, and what the general had to offer became the deciding influence that took him West.

He parted from Virginia regretfully enough, since he was aware that his return to Benson must be uncertain, and he was depressed by this conviction. It was true she was not entirely alone, she had Jane and Harriett, but he felt that in spite of love and gratitude, he had failed miserably in his relation to her.

Yet his spirits rose as he travelled West through the autumn landscape; he seemed to be leaving disappointment, failure, behind; and a larger hope than he had known came to him as the horizon lifted and widened.

They reached Kansas City, where following Gibbs's instruction they lodged at the small hotel from which departed the tri-weekly stage for Grant City. Taking the Saturday's stage they journeyed south and west.

The first day took them through a pleasant settled land dotted with prosperous looking farms; but it was rather in the nature of a shock to Stephen that none of their fellow-travellers in the Concord coach had ever heard of Gibbs or of Grant City. Still the consensus of opinion seemed to be that this was nothing against either Gibbs or Grant City—there might be such a man, and there might be such a town.

The driver, however, proved to be better informed; and from him Stephen gleaned certain facts that went far toward reassuring him. He had been able to secure a seat at his side the second day, he and Marian alone remaining of those who had filled the coach at its start. According to the driver, Grant City was right smart of

a place; did he know General Gibbs? Yes, he knew Gibbs—everyone knew Gibbs, he was right smart of a man, a busy bossy sort of a cuss who was always hollering; it was Fourth of July every day in the week and Sunday, too, with him.

He had been very successful, Stephen ventured. Well, yes, the man supposed so, but he only had Gibbs own word for it.

They lapsed into silence after this, but whether or not his informant entirely approved of Gibbs, Stephen was unable to decide. The driver slowly considered Stephen out of the corner of his eye, then he drawled:

"You going to Grant City?"

"Yes."

"Going to start up in business, maybe?"

"Perhaps."

"Know Gibbs?"

"Yes."

"Well, I guess you're all right then."

"There is a hotel, I suppose?" said Stephen.

His question moved his companion to something like enthusiasm.

"You bet there is—the Metropolitan—Jim Youtsey runs it; it's the best place in three counties to get a square meal of well-cooked vittles!"

"The town is very new?" suggested Stephen.

"As new as a two day's beard," agreed the driver.

"But a thriving, growing place."

"A perfect mushroom."

Just at sundown Stephen caught his first glimpse of Grant City; a huddle of houses on a slight eminence; and as they drew nearer he saw that these houses were mostly unpainted frame structures that straggled along two sides of a dusty country road, their rear doors and back-yards boldly facing the wide-flung prairie.

The coach drew up in front of the largest building in the place. It gave out a pleasant odour as of new pine and clean shavings; across its front was hung a large sign which announced it to be the Metropolitan Hotel.

A tall man in his shirt-sleeves, with a sandy beard, and a quill toothpick held negligently between his teeth, stepped to the coach. Stephen conjectured that this was no less a person than Mr. Jim Youtsey himself.

"Friends of the general's?" he inquired affably.

"Yes," said Stephen, stepping to the ground.

"The general asked me to keep an eye peeled for you. He's over in the next county, will be back to-morrow if nothing happens—a splendid man! You couldn't have a stronger indorsement, sir, I'm glad to know you, glad to welcome you into our midst!" And Mr. Youtsey shot him a sunny smile over the tip of his toothpick and held out his hand. "Present me to the Madame—Youtsey's my name."

Stephen did so, and Mr. Youtsey removed his hat with one hand and his toothpick with the other; his hat was returned to his head, and his toothpick to his mouth by a common movement of his two hands, and he led the way toward his hotel.

"What you see, sir, is the newest thing in Kansas. A year ago there was nothing here but sunshine and jack-rabbits."

He further begged Stephen to particularly note that Grant City was not a cow town; its wealth being derived entirely from the cultivation of the soil; where were the farms? Just scattered about. Yonder was the general's office; and through the falling twilight down the street, Stephen, following the direction of Mr. Youtsey's useful toothpick, was able to distinguish a very small building with a very large sign; indeed the number and size of these signs greatly astonished him, since no building seemed complete without one. Commenting upon this fact, Mr. Youtsey kindly paused to explain that Grant City had assembled itself on the prairie with such haste, and with so little regard for the proper housing of its citizens, that such buildings as had been erected were not only places of residence, but were used as offices and stores as well—hence the signs. Having made this point clear, Mr. Youtsey personally conducted them to their room, still accompanied by his hat and toothpick, with both of which he seemed loath to part.

He left them, and presently a small coloured boy appeared with a pitcher of ice-water, and the information that supper was served. On going down-stairs to the dining-room, they found Mr. Youtsey at the head of a long table at which were seated half a score of men. There immediately followed numerous introductions. Of the ten men, five, Stephen gathered, were in the real estate business; four were recent arrivals like himself who were looking about.

The last to be introduced was a small elderly man with a very red face and a generally dissipated air, whom Mr. Youtsey presented as Dr. Arling.

"I hope you'll find things home-like here, ma'am," and Mr. Youtsey addressed himself to Marian. "We are shy on ladies, it's strictly a voting population." Then he permitted his duties as host to absorb him, and when he had seen that his guests were served, he seated himself with a pleasant:

"Any one that hasn't had, just holler!"

Stephen's first impression of Grant City had been distinctly unfavourable, but he said nothing of this to Marian; he felt it would be wiser to wait until he saw Gibbs before he committed himself to an opinion.

He saw Gibbs the next morning; on going down to the hotel office he was welcomed by his friend who fell upon him and fairly embraced him, then he held him at arm's length.

"Well, Landray, I am glad indeed," he ejaculated.

The general was not less florid than of yore, but his face had a battered look; for the rest, he was sleek and prosperous to the eye.

“They tell me you've brought your wife, Landray—that looks as though you'd come to stay! I'm so sorry my Julia ain't here, but she's visiting friends in St. Louis. What do you think of this year-old child of mine? Something to have accomplished in a twelve month?” and the general patted Stephen affectionately on the back.

Then Stephen must drink with him, and they retired to Mr. Yout-sey's bar accompanied by Dr. Arling.

“This is to success, Landray!” said Gibbs smiling over the rim of his glass, and Stephen smiled and nodded, too; Dr. Arling merely tilted his glass into a toothless cavity and drew the back of his hand across his lips, for as Mr. Youtsey was accustomed to observe, “He shot his slugs without a rest.”

“Another round, Jim!” commanded the doctor.

Mr. Youtsey took the toothpick from between his teeth, he had apparently acquired it along with his clothes when he was dressed, and said affably:

“Ain't you a little early, Doc? You'll have a pair of hard-boiled eyes for breakfast if you keep on.”

“Shove along the drinks, don't keep the gentlemen waiting!” ordered the doctor huskily.

And Mr. Youtsey spun the glasses jingling across the bar.

The breakfast bell sounded a moment or two later, and they left Dr. Arling leaning limply against the bar, while they repaired to the dining-room where Gibbs met Marian, and did the honours with great gallantry.

“Now, my dear lady,” said he, as they rose from the table, his manner breathing benevolence and urbanity, “I am going to take this husband of yours down to my office for a chat and smoke.”

When they reached the street, Landray said:

“Well, general, prosperity seems to be smiling on you.”

“It's grinning from ear to ear; Grant City ain't pretty; architecturally she belongs to the year one—she's about the way Rome was when Remus got himself disliked by jumping over the wall; but it's as good as money in the bank.”

“It seems to offer an inviting field for real estate agents,” said Stephen.

The general laughed.

“Oh, don't let that trouble you, Landray! It's Gibbs's eggs that'll hatch out first, so don't you worry. We'll stand shoulder to shoulder. You haven't any capital? Well, no matter—here brains and character will see you far; and you got both, for you're a Landray.”

They had reached the office by this time, and Gibbs forced his friend into his best chair; he then provided Stephen and himself with cigars, and was ready for business.

“I want you to take right hold, Landray, and look after things,” he said. “I'm going to branch out; I find I can't tie myself down—the office work don't suit me. We're not only going to sell lots, we're going to put up the buildings on them as well—this will be in your department. I'm going to make it my business to keep Grant City before the public. I'll have a weekly paper running here inside of the next thirty days, and I got my eye on a seat in the State Legislature, too; I want to play strong for that, or a worse man may fill it; but you ain't interested in all this yet; naturally you're wanting to know where you come in and what I got to offer you. I'm going to make you the right sort of a proposition here and now, a proposition you can't afford to turn down.”

And Gibbs was rather better than his word, for just twenty-four hours later Stephen was established in his office with a satisfactory salary and an interest in the business as well.

He had been inclined to look upon the town as something of a farce, but he soon decided that in this hasty opinion he had formed, his judgment had been at fault. Men straggled in by stage and prairie schooner; there was a steady demand for lots, indeed the demand was only exceeded by the supply; and he was rather dubious as to the wisdom of the town-site speculators who with the aid of tape line and stakes seemed willing to apportion the greater part of Kansas to the future needs of Grant City.

“They'll overdo it,” he told Gibbs.

“I guess not,” said Gibbs. “You can't really overdo a good thing, and Grant City's the best thing in Kansas. It's getting about that it is, too—the public's waking up to the fact.”

But while Stephen never quite believed in the methods Gibbs seemed to consider so admirable, he saw that the cheap and hastily erected houses they were building, principally on credit, all found tenants the moment they were habitable.

He and Marian lived in one of these houses, one of several that formed an unpainted row that overlooked the dusty Main Street which later when the winter rains set in, became a bog that the citizens—knowing its perils—navigated with caution. It was here that a son was born them, who was christened Stephen Mason Landray.

Gibbs would have had this event celebrated in some public manner; for, as he said, little Stephen was the first native-born citizen of Grant City, but out of consideration for Stephen's wishes in the matter, he compromised by deeding the child a town lot.

“It will probably be worth thousands by the time he comes of age, Landray,” he told the father. “But how is Marian?”

Stephen looked grave.

“Why, she don't seem to rally,” he said.

“What does Dr. Arling say?” asked Gibbs.

“He seems to think she will have her strength back as soon as it gets warmer.”

“To be sure she will, a few mild days will see her up and about. I have all confidence in Arling; I know—I know, his habits are not what you'd look for in a man of his attainments; but it's no use to expect him to be different from what he is.”

Gibbs had established his newspaper, the *Kansas Epoch*, which he conducted with much noise and vigour.

“There's no use my denying it,” he told Stephen, “but I got the editorial faculty. A newspaper in my hands becomes a personal organ in the best sense. I reckon you can see me in every line. I take the responsibility pretty seriously, too. I know you don't just believe in the *Epoch*, because it don't show a profit in dollars and cents; but the loss in money's a gain in prestige.”

Which was quite true, for Gibbs was the great man locally; an admired and respected presence at Mr. Youtsey's bar. It was the general here, and the general there; the echo of his name constantly filled the ear. He was vain, bustling, ostentatious; the small fry of struggling country newspapers heralded his passing to and fro in the State with much noise; for that fall there had been a hotly contested State election, and Gibbs with an eye single to his own advancement had taken the stump. Even so far away as St. Louis one of the big dailies had chanced to speak of him as “General Gibbs of Kansas,” a tribute to his growing fame which seemed to argue that he had already become almost a national figure. Perhaps it was this divided interest that was responsible for his business methods, for they struck Stephen as being entirely haphazard, nor could he induce him to make any change here.

Mrs. Gibbs had returned to Grant City during the winter fully prepared to make friends with Marian; but Marian conceived a dislike for her which she was at no pains to conceal, and in the end Julia informed Gibbs that Landray's wife was a stuck-up little fool, which seemed to amuse the general immensely.

Stephen felt that it might have been to their advantage had Marian sought to conciliate Mrs. Gibbs, since he did not know how Gibbs himself might be affected; but Gibbs was affected not at all; he commented upon their mutual hostility with characteristic candour.

“God bless 'em! The ladies can't help it, Landray, and it might be worse if they were intimate. Now, my Julia can't carry to Marian any little thing I chance to let drop about you, and Marian can't take up any slighting criticism you may make of me. I don't know but that we have a good deal to be thankful for; anyhow—God bless 'em, let 'em fight it out! It won't upset our friendship. I knew from the first that we were cut out for a business connection; you're long-headed and conservative; I own I'm something of an idealist—my imagination runs away with me. You're the steady hand, and by the time we've talked a scheme over we get together on a pretty sane conclusion.”

To Stephen this was a flattering opinion that he hoped the general might never have cause to reconsider.

Apart from his anxiety concerning Marian, Stephen was on the whole, happy and well content in Grant City. But Marian grew no better; indeed as the summer advanced, he sometimes fancied he noted a change for the worse, though Arling, still the only doctor in the place, pooh-poohed this fear of his.

“Yes, but why don't she get better?” Stephen would demand.

“She will, Landray; give her time. I'm free to say it ain't just a usual case, but there's no organic trouble, she ought to be a well woman.” And he would scuttle off in the direction of Mr. Youtsey's bar, where he could always be found when wanted.

And all this while Grant City seemed to grow and prosper. The huddle of houses increased by the roadside; there were side streets sparsely built upon it is true, but there was the beginning of a perceptible movement in this direction. The place was taking on the semblance of a town.

The stage carried a constantly increasing traffic; the tri-weekly gave place to a daily service; next there was both a midmorning and afternoon stage, but even this failed to entirely meet local needs, for as Mr. Youtsey said, the town was throwing a fifty-inch chest.

There was talk of issuing bonds for what Gibbs called municipal improvements; the town-site speculators clamoured for graded streets and gas, and the general, in the *Epoch*, demanded a speedy settlement of the vexing question of the county seat. More than this he announced that he would personally make it his business to see that they secured the county seat; and he took himself together with the logic of the situation to the capital there to lobby for the measure; and all this while the wilderness of pegs grew out upon the prairie.

Winter came again and brought a lull to the trafficking; but early in the spring a corps of railroad engineers pitched their camp on the outskirts of the town, and more additions were plotted and more pegs driven to keep pace with the impetus given by this most recent development.

Gibbs was still at Topeka in the matter of the county seat which he had not been able to adjust, since Grant City had a rival that dared to claim this honour for itself, though no one seriously regarded its claim—certainly no one in Grant City, where the town-site speculators ridiculed the idea when it was advanced in their hearing, and Gibbs, in the *Epoch*, wrote sarcastic editorials that were much admired, and that proved as clearly as pen and ink can prove anything, the county seat must come to Grant City.

But one night after Stephen had gone home to his sick wife, he heard a loud knock at his door, and on going down to answer this summons, found Gibbs, whom he had supposed to be still in Topeka, standing on the threshold.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

GIBBS, his battered face red and perspiring, tramped the length of the room without speech; then he turned and tramped back again.

“When did you get to town?” asked Stephen, putting down the lamp he carried. He knew that Gibbs had not come on the afternoon stage for he had been in the crowd at the hotel when it arrived.

“Oh, I missed the stage, and got a man to drive me across,” said the general, pausing and moodily mopping his face. “Well, what they did to us up at Topeka ain't a little. We don't get the county seat! I don't know who gets it, but we won't—you can everlastingly make up your mind to that!”

“Is there nothing you can do?”

“Do!” cried the general in a tone of infinite disgust. “I didn't have a chance to do!”

Stephen looked his dismay.

“A little public spirit and we might have landed it, but I was left to give my time and spend my money, as if my personal influence unsupported, was all that was needed! I been made to look foolish! Well, when they ask me where those county buildings are, I'll tell 'em they can search me!” and the general shrugged his shoulders to indicate the indifference he did not feel. “It's news to sleep on, ain't it?” continued Gibbs. “Grant City's given itself county seat airs from the start, now all we got to do is to lose the railroad, and we might just as well shut up shop. Well, we ain't lost the railroad.”

“No,” said Stephen clutching at this hope. “The engineers are in camp here now.”

“It's going to give us a set back,” said the general, who was still thinking of the county seat. “But I reckon we're strong enough to stand it—annoying though, ain't it?” and he paused in his tramping which he had resumed, to stare hard at Stephen. “How do you feel about it anyhow?” he asked.

“It's a calamity,” said Landray gravely.

“It certainly is,” agreed the general. “We thought we had it sure, didn't we? Well, there is such a thing as being too sure. I tell you, Steve, we ain't the only fellows in Kansas with land to sell; there was plenty of others in the same line, and I went up against 'em hard at the capital, and they sat down pat on our little scheme. We got to go slow, things will come steady presently, but until they do we got to slack off on the building. I am sorry I got you up to tell you nothing better than this; don't worry though. How's Mrs. Landray?”

“About the same.”

“Humph! What does Arling say? I wonder if you hadn't better get away from here, Steve?” asked the general with kindly concern.

“And leave you to face the crisis?”

“It won't be the first one I've faced,” and Gibbs expanded his chest. “Maybe the climate just don't agree with her.”

“No, I sha'n'. leave you; and I doubt if Marian could make the change now.”

“Well, you know best, Landray, only don't let any sense of honour hold you here when it's to your interest to leave. I'm willing to split with you to-morrow if you say the word, and I'll think none the less of you. I ain't always been above running away myself. Just remember there's some money to divide now, and there may not be a red cent six months hence.”

“I'll chance it,” said Stephen firmly.

“Just as you like, but I want you to know that I don't consider you in any ways obligated to me. You have earned all you have had out of the business; it wouldn't set well for me to pretend otherwise.”

“Thank you, general,” said the younger man gratefully.

“Well, it's so. You sleep on what I've said.”

Then the general took his leave, and Stephen went back to his bed, but not to sleep. He had thought himself on the high road to fortune, and all at once things began to look black. In the morning he went early to the office where Gibbs soon joined him. He looked into Stephen's grave face and smiled.

“I guess my call didn't give you pleasant dreams, Landray. I've thought it over and I guess we'll just keep quiet and see what happens.”

But before the day was over, it was evident that the information

Gibbs brought from Topeka was not held by him alone. Before night there was a well-developed stampede among the owners of lots. This acted on Gibbs rather differently from what might have been expected.

“We'll show 'em,” he said, “that we got confidence; let 'em get in a panic, let 'em get rid of their lots, let 'em play the damn fool, Grant City's here to stay! It's got a future in the very nature of things. We don't need the county seat; they can locate that wherever they blame please; but we do want to get rid of these speculators, I always been opposed to speculation. I'd rather see things go back to the normal, even if we do lose; I would so, Stephen.”

But hard on the news that Grant City was not to get the county seat, came the news that neither was it to get the railroad.

“It's a lie! They can't afford to ignore us!” cried Gibbs when he heard this. “It's a trick to depress real estate! Any one who's fooled by it deserves to get skinned out of his last dollar.”

But the rumour was verified, and even Gibbs was forced to own that for the present at least they had lost the railroad.

“You ain't involved, Landray,” he told Stephen. “You stood to share only in the profits; and I can't lose much, for I hadn't five hundred dollars when I came here, and I got seventy or eighty lots that are worth something, and fifteen or twenty houses.”

Here Stephen recalled to his mind the fact that these houses were in the main unpaid for, and that his creditors might swoop down upon him at any moment.

“My creditors? Oh, hell—let 'em sweat!” and the general snapped his fingers almost gaily, and said in the same breath, “I expect you're cussing me, Steve, for fetching you here.”

“Nothing of the kind, general!” said Stephen stoutly.

“If I fooled you, I fooled myself, Steve; I knew there was some foxy gentlemen in this part of Kansas, but I thought I was the foxiest thing on two legs. I have had my ambitions too, Steve, and they ain't dead yet, a

man of my calibre don't give up readily; but I'm adaptable. I don't sit down to weep over an unpropitious occasion, in some fashion I dominate it. For the present I suppose there is nothing for us to do but wait and see how things turn out.”

And through one long hot summer they watched things turn out. They saw the departure of the town-site speculators; they saw the settlement of tents and prairie schooners disappear from the waste beyond the town, until at last there was only the rolling plain, with its thousands of pegs that marked the lots of the various subdivisions, or the streets by which they were to be reached; and with this swift panoramic change came a leaden depression which ate into the very soul. There was no more poker at the Metropolitan, once a feature of the nightly gatherings there; the wilderness of signs creaked idly in the breeze; half the houses stood tenantless; the stages ceased to rumble in and out of town; the remnant of a population loafed in heavy lethargetic idleness.

Gibbs and Stephen sat through that long summer, idly for the most part, in their shirt-sleeves in the shade of their office; the only business they had was to see Gibbs's creditors, and in the end these ceased to trouble them.

At first Stephen had been somewhat sustained by Gibbs's confidence; for Gibbs had been sure things would come right, that the depression was only temporary; but in the end even his fine courage failed him. He spent less and less time in the shade of his office, and more and more time at Mr. Youtsey's bar; but at last Mr. Yout-sey announced that he was about to leave to seek fortune elsewhere.

“I've sat up with the corpse,” he told Gibbs jocosely, “and now I'm going to pull out. I leave the last words to you, for you seem to be chief mourner; I reckon you'll stay to the finish.”

“I don't know about that,” retorted Gibbs briskly. “You can't keep a squirrel on the ground; but I'm free to say I don't want to make any mistakes next time. I'm getting along to a time in life when I don't expect to make more than two or three more fortunes before I quit.”

“Well, you don't squeal none, general, that's what I admire about you; win or lose, there's a kind word still coming,” said Mr. Youtsey admiringly.

In private to Stephen, Gibbs deplored the conditions which he semed to think were largely responsible for their present situation; he was seeing deeper than the mere surface of things.

“The war was a mistake, Steve; patriotism and sentiment aside, it was a big mistake. It's knocked half the country into a cocked hat. The South is dead, and in my opinion we won't live long enough to see it come to life. If it had been just left alone, it would have been mighty interesting to have seen how it would have settled the nigger question. And what's been the result to the nation at large; we've lost over half a million of men—young men who'd a pushed out into the West here, and made this country a wonder. We wouldn't be waiting for population if they'd lived. But it wasn't to be! The country's filling up with all sorts of riff-raff from Europe, a class that never used to come; not the good English and Scotch and Irish, who came because they wanted elbow room; but greasy serfs, who ain't caring a damn for anything but wages. I tell you in twenty years an American will be a curiosity. And to think the way they were wasted, just thrown at each other by the thousands, in the greatest and crudest war of modern times.”

But Stephen could not sit there gossiping with Gibbs while Grant City sank into the prairie, or its shabbily built houses collapsed about his ears; he must do something, yet what was he to do? Gibbs came to his rescue with a suggestion.

“I been thinking of your luck, Steve,” he said one day with kindly concern. “I can hold up this building quite a while by myself just by leaning against it; I reckon it will be about a hundred years before anybody sells a lot again in Grant City, and you can't wait on that, on the chance that you will be the lucky fellow.”

“If I could go!” cried Stephen, with savage earnestness.

“But you can't! Now look here, the farmers have had a pretty good season; you can always sell a farmer improved machinery, and I understand you can secure an agency without any capital to speak of.”

“Why don't you try something of the sort?” asked Landray.

Gibbs shook his head.

“I'm too old a man, Steve, to knock about the country the way I'd have to; besides, I'm getting ready to start up in business.”

“Start up in what?” cried Stephen.

“In a small way in the licker business,” said the general with dignity.

“You mean a saloon?”

The general averted his eyes.

“Well, yes—it will have to be retail—I suppose you might almost call it a saloon,” he admitted reluctantly.

“We are coming down between us, general,” said Landray with a scornful laugh.

“Not at all, Steve, not at all. I've never claimed more than that I was up to the occasion, and Youtsey's quit here; fact is, before he left I made a dicker for what was left of his stock. His going makes an opening for a commercial enterprise of this sort—in a small way, of course.”

“Very small, I should say.”

“No, Steve, you must own there are a few people left; not many, but a few; and they are not going to be any less thirsty in the future than they have been in the past. I'm not counting on riches, but merely enough to tide me over until I see an opening. Maybe the venture might justify a partnership; if you think it will, I'm ready to whack up,” concluded Gibbs generously.

“Excuse me, general,” said the young man haughtily, “but we'll reserve that until the last.” He saw that Gibbs was hurt by his words and manner, and hastened to add, “I think your first suggestion was the best, do you know where I should write?”

“There are all sorts of catalogues in the office. I'd write to half a dozen different firms. I merely suggested this as a temporary makeshift; you might add insurance and lightning-rods.”

“We'll stop with the farm implements, more than that would only be funny; and I'm in desperate need.”

“I really shouldn't wonder if you didn't do quite well, Landray, after you get started,” Gibbs said, with ready faith in this new enterprise. “The farmers farm the land, you'll farm the farmers;” and Stephen's letters not appearing sufficiently hopeful in tone to his critical mind, he ended by drafting them for him. “Now I reckon they'll get you consideration,” said he, when their labours came to an end. “What! You ain't got any stamps? Why didn't you tell me you were that hard put? I ain't got much myself, but I always put down a little nest-egg. I hoped you'd done the same—why didn't you tell me?”

He brought from an inner pocket an old leathern wallet; it was limp enough, but it contained two twenty dollar bills, one of which he forced Stephen to accept.

“I never give up quite all; and if I'd known about the county seat a week earlier, there'd a been a few more gone broke here, but it wouldn't been you or me, Steve?”

A week later Stephen was present at the formal opening of the Golden West Saloon in their former office, Gibbs presiding with typical versatility.

There still lingered in Grant City those who either could not get away or were too indifferent to try, whose imagination had utterly failed them; and occasionally, though rarely, the wagons of emigrants paused for repairs at the blacksmith's; thus there was still the semblance of life, though half the houses in the town stood vacant; these seemed to fade away, to disappear in the rank grass that had come back to flourish in the small trampled lots, and in the midst of this universal decay, this final phase of the small tragedy of settlement, Stephen waited and organized the business Gibbs had suggested, but with no large measure of faith in it.

If Marian's condition would only improve sufficiently so that they might quit Grant City, he was almost certain that by some tremendous effort the money he would then require would be forthcoming.

However when he finally got to work the effect on him was that of a tonic; and through that fall, and the ensuing winter, over desperately bad roads, he travelled far and wide; and by spring when he began to reap the benefits of his winter's work, he saw that he was not only clear of debt but that he had actually made some money.

And while he toiled for her, Marian was left alone with a slatternly unattached female, who was both housekeeper and nurse; and for medical attendant there was Dr. Arling, who found Grant City entirely congenial. Drunk and sodden, he was not unskillful; and when he was needed he could always be found at the Golden West Saloon, where he loafed tirelessly, and where he played countless games of checkers with Gibbs.

It never occurred to Stephen that Marian might not recover. To him it seemed only a question of time until her strength would return; but he was the only one who was really ignorant of her condition. Arling had no doubts as to what the end would be, nor had Mrs. Bassett, the sick woman's attendant.

The end, when it came, came when he was least prepared to meet it. It was fall again, and he had driven in from the country to be with Marian over Sunday. He had stabled his horse, and had come up from the barn, lantern in hand, cold and stiff from his drive home from a farm far out on the plains.

Mrs. Bassett was in the little kitchen fussing over his supper when he entered the house by the back door. She had seen his light in the stable.

“I'll have your supper ready for you in just a minute, Mr. Landray,” she said. “You've got time to run up and see Mis' Landray. She knows you're back, I called up and told her you'd come.”

“How is she?” asked Stephen.

“Well, she seems to be about the same, I don't see no difference,” answered Mrs. Bassett guardedly. She turned and followed him with her eyes as he went through the sitting-room and entered the narrow front hall from which the stairs led to the floor above.

He was gone but a moment, then he came quickly into the kitchen, his face very white.

“She is worse!” he said in a husky whisper. “Why didn't you tell me so?” but he did not wait for an answer. “Where is the child?” he demanded.

“I carried him across the back lots to Mis' Gibbs a spell ago. I couldn't tend him and her, too, he was real fretful.”

“I must go for the doctor,” said Stephen.

“You needn't, Mr. Landray, Mis' Gibbs said she'd go to the saloon for him; I seen her lantern just a moment ago. You'd best have something to eat,” she urged.

He turned away impatiently.

“I'm not hungry. Have the doctor come up-stairs as soon as he gets here.”

But when Arling arrived a few moments later, accompanied by Gibbs, and joined Stephen in the chamber above where he sat holding his wife's hand in both his own, he merely shook his head. It was as he had expected, only the end had been longer deferred than he had thought possible. He stole from the room and rejoined Gibbs in the kitchen.

“You tell him, Gibbs—I can't,” he said.

Gibbs rubbed his straggling unkempt beard with a tremulous hand.

“Maybe he don't need to be told,” he suggested. “But if you think he should be, I'll do it;” and he stood erect, with something of his old air.

He mounted the creaking stairs. Stephen must have heard him coming, for he opened the door and stepped out into the narrow hall, that was barely large enough to hold the two men and the small stand, where Mrs. Bassett had placed a smoky lamp with a dirty chimney.

“Where's the doctor—why don't he come back?” Landray demanded in a fierce whisper. “Is the drunken fool going to do nothing?”

“Steve,” began the general, with white shaking lips, “Steve, bear up, Arling says there ain't anything he can do.”

Stephen looked at him, scarce comprehending what it was he said.

"He don't know what he's talking about—the fool's drunk!" he said roughly.

"I reckon he is," lamented Gibbs weakly. "I'd'a had him under the pump if there'd been time, but my Julia said for him to hurry, and I closed up and brought him along just as he was, he wasn't fit to come by himself."

"Send him up here again," said Stephen with stern insistence. "There is something he can do—my God—" and he broke off abruptly and re-entered his wife's room.

"Come!" said Gibbs, when he had returned to the kitchen. "Come, stir around!" he ordered, laying a hand on Arling's shoulder. "Come, there's something you can do, and you've got to do it." He was in a panic of haste. He snatched up his dingy medicine case and thrust it into Arling's shaking hands. "He's waiting for you, go up and do what you can."

"Haven't you told him, Gibbs? She is dying, all he's got to do is to look at her to see that."

"You're the one to tell him then—poor Steve—you go to him. I must go fetch my Julia and the baby;" and he stumbled out into the darkness with neither hat nor lantern, and fled across the back lots toward the light that burned in his own window.

He soon returned with Julia, who went at once to the room above. In the narrow hall she encountered Arling, who had just come from Marian's bedside, where he had administered to her some simple restorative. She brushed past him without a word.

"Thank you for coming, it's good to have a woman about," murmured Stephen, glancing toward the door as she entered.

Marian lay on the bed without speech or movement, but her eyes, now brilliant and filled with a strange light, followed every movement of the two. Julia, with Stephen's help, made her more comfortable; they smoothed her pillows and raised her higher on them, for Mrs. Gibbs had been quick to see that her breath came with difficulty.

She had never liked Marian, and Marian had never liked her—but she had forgotten all this—which, after all, was only that chance which determines who shall love and who shall hate. Now she was all tenderness, this brisk energetic woman, with the lines of a shrewish temper already stamped upon her face; and her glance always softened when she looked at Stephen.

There was little either could do but wait; and Marian, save for the look in her eyes and their restless turning, gave no sign that she knew what was passing about her.

Presently Julia stole down-stairs to the kitchen. She found Mrs. Bassett, the general, and Arling still there; the boy fast asleep in her husband's arms.

"Law!" she cried. "Haven't any of you had sense enough to put that child to bed?" and she whisked him out of Gibbs's arms and carried him into the adjoining room.

After that the four fell to watching the clock as if the slow moving hands would tell them when all was over; and as they watched, the row of ragged lights in the uncurtained windows that looked out upon Grant City's Main Street, disappeared one by one, and it was midnight and very still.

At last Julia rose from her chair and without a word went up-stairs; she seemed to know that all was over. She noiselessly pushed open the door and entered the room.

Stephen's face was buried in the pillow beside his wife's. A glance told her what had happened during her absence from the room. She stepped to the bedside and placed her hand gently on the man's shoulder; she felt him shrink from the sudden touch.

"Come," she said kindly. "You mustn't stay here any longer, Mr. Landray. You go on down-stairs and ask Mrs. Bassett to come up here to me."

"Is she—" he gasped chokingly.

He had risen to his feet, and she urged him away from the bedside with gentle but determined force.

"You must go down-stairs, Mr. Landray," she insisted.

"She never spoke—never once," he cried, turning his bloodshot eyes on her.

"But she knew you; do go down-stairs, Mr. Landray, indeed, you mustn't stay here any longer."

She had pushed him from the room as she spoke, and he crossed the hall and went slowly and heavily down the narrow steps.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

IF Virginia had been unable to influence Stephen's life as she wished, this was far from being the case with Jane and Harriett, who had wholly abandoned themselves to her care and control, which had to do, unselfishly enough, with their comfort and convenience. They were also indebted to her for their mental outlook. They echoed her opinions and acquired her convictions, by which they endured with unshaken pertinacity, and she had furnished them with such prejudices as had found a home in their gentle unworldly hearts. In sentiment they were quite as much Landray as she was herself; and their pride in the name was quite equal to her own pride in it; while their affection for her was, aside from their affection for each other, quite the deepest emotion in their simple lives.

Under these conditions Harriett had grown into young womanhood, a shy pretty girl, who looked out upon

the world with soft, inexperienced eyes. But her father's death, and Stephen Landray's, and perhaps more than all, Virginia's beauty and silent devotion to her dead husband, had supplied a background of romance and mystery of which she was never wholly unconscious. Of society, as it was understood in Benson, she knew nothing; her mother had never made any friends in the town, and Virginia's own circle had narrowed; she went nowhere.

Some day Harriett knew she would teach; this Virginia and Jane had decided for her. It was their conviction that it was the one thing a young lady could do without compromising her position, it was entirely dignified, a polite and unexceptional occupation where one was so unfortunate as to have her own future to consider; and so to teach, Harriett was fitting herself, when something happened which materially changed all her plans.

Mr. Stark, who for many years had been the pioneer banker in Benson, had long since gone to his reward, and now there were several banks in the town; chief of these was the County Bank where the interest on certain loans which Benson had made for Virginia, with the money he had given her for the land in Belmont County, was regularly paid. Here Harriett often went for Virginia, and it was here she first met Mark Norton, whose uncle, Judge Norton, was interested in the fortunes of the bank; indeed, young Norton was supposed to be mastering the intricacies of the banking business under the judge's eye.

He came of an excellent family in the county, and Harriett had frequently observed the young fellow. She had even noted that after business hours, the easy hours of banks, he indulged himself in the pleasure of driving most excellent horses. His father was a rich farmer, which doubtless had much to do with the soundness of the son's judgment in the matter of horse-flesh; it also explained why it was that he was able to keep fast horses, a luxury not within the reach of the ordinary bank clerk. Harriett had seen all this, as he frequently drove past the cottage presumably on his way into the country beyond. It afterward developed that Norton had observed the slight figure of the girl on the lawn in front of the cottage with the two elder ladies, and he had noted that she was very pretty—singularly pretty, he would have said.

But it was Harriett's privilege not only to see him in his hours of recreation, but also when she went to the bank on some errand for Virginia. He never ventured on anything that could be termed conversation, though he occasionally appeared to be anxious to discover Miss Walsh's opinion on such impersonal subjects as the weather; or if it was a warm day he obligingly called her attention to that fact. He always addressed her as Miss Walsh. He had been almost the first person who found such formality necessary, and that he did, had provoked her to a new and gratifying emotion.

But on one occasion when she stopped at the bank, he was rather more disposed to talk than was usual with him, but Miss Walsh was in some haste to go, once the business that had brough her there was transacted; indeed, so great was her haste that she did not observe that she had left her check-book.

Later in the afternoon, as she sat on the lawn with Virginia and her mother, Norton appeared, striding briskly up the street. He opened the gate, and crossed the lawn to them, smiling and at ease.

“I didn't give Miss Walsh her check-book,” he said. He addressed himself to Virginia. “I thought she would find it out and come back—but you didn't”—he turned to Harriett as he spoke—“and so I've brought it.”

They were all very grateful to him; that is, Virginia and Jane expressed their gratitude. They thought he had been most kind and had put himself to a great deal of trouble in a really unimportant matter. Harriett said nothing, but she suffered an accusing pang when she recalled that she had shown no interest in the weather.

Virginia asked him to be seated, for though he had given the book into her keeping, he still stood before them hat in hand.

Norton sat down with alacrity.

He was not under ordinary circumstances a garrulous young fellow, but on the present occasion he talked hard and fast, as one will who is trying to gain time; but the burden of what he had to say was directed to Virginia. Instinct warned him that it would be her opinion that would have weight with the others, that if he was ever to return there, as he hoped he might be permitted to do, it would be because she was willing he should come; and though Virginia regarded him a little critically at first perhaps, there was nothing of unkindness in her glance.

At last he quitted his chair; but he was manifestly most reluctant to go; they rose, too; and the four walked slowly across the lawn. Norton lagged more and more as they neared the gate; it involved a positive effort for him to tear himself away. In this extremity he fell to admiring the flowers; he was particularly fond of flowers, it seemed; no doubt because he had always lived in the country and was accustomed to having growing things about; he even ventured the hope that Mrs. Landray would let him come later when the roses were in bloom.

“I hope you may come again, Mr. Norton,” responded Virginia kindly.

“Thank you—if it won't be an intrusion, I'll be only too glad to come;” and he stole a swift glance at Harriett.

It may have been the merest chance, but after this in one way and another, Harriett saw a good deal of Norton, for his love of the country took him past the cottage very often. Harriett knew this because she read much by the window in the small parlour.

One night as the three sat in the parlour, the girl's quick ear caught the sound of wheels, and a horse at a rapid trot drew up at the curb. She hid her face in the book she was reading, and her heart beat rapidly. There was a brisk step on the path, and a brisk knock at the door, which Mrs. Walsh opened, and there stood Norton. To the girl's eyes he seemed wonderfully confident, wonderfully sure of himself, and later she might have added, wonderfully discreet, for he devoted himself almost exclusively to Virginia.

He had, it developed, a lively interest in local history; his own maternal grandfather having been a contemporary in the county with General Landray; during the last war with England he had served as a captain in the company of riflemen which the former had raised; furthermore his father had known Mrs. Landray's husband, a fact of which Mrs. Landray herself was well aware. These were all points that were calculated to make her feel a certain liking for the young fellow himself, which was only intensified by his quite evident respect for the very name of Landray; nothing could have been more commendable or better calculated to show him a person of proper instincts. Virginia recalled that as a girl she had been a guest at

his mother's wedding; and that General Harrison—to whom Mrs. Norton was distantly related—had been present.

But while they talked of these matters, his glance drifted on past Virginia to the pretty silent girl.

When at last Norton took his leave, he was hospitably urged to call again, an invitation he professed himself as fully determined to make the most of.

He was the first young man who had ever called there, though this was not because there was any dearth of young men in the town; but Harriett was aware that Virginia's point of view regarding strangers was conservative to say the least; here, however, was a young man whose grandfather had been a prominent man in the county when a Landray had been the prominent man of all that region.

So Norton was welcomed graciously whenever he chose to call. Yet somehow after that first call they avoided all mention of him; even repeated visits did not provoke them to discussion; and at this, Harriett wondered not a little.

At last Virginia astonished her small household by announcing that she had invited Norton to tea. They dined in the middle of the day, but on this particular evening tea became a very elaborate affair indeed, for it was the first time in twenty years, or since Stephen Landray's death, that Virginia had bidden a guest to her home. Even Harriett, who thought she knew all the resources of the household, was astonished at the old silver and glass and china that was brought out for the occasion; nor had she ever before seen Virginia dressed with such richness; and she did not wonder that Norton whispered to her as Virginia quitted the room on some errand:

“What a beautiful woman Mrs. Landray is, I wonder she never married again.”

“She will never marry, she is devoted to her husband,” said Harriett.

“Odd, isn't it, that one should always be thinking of that?” he said.

“You mean her devotion to his memory?”

“No, not that—I mean that one should always wonder why a pretty woman doesn't marry.”

“But when you have lost some one you love.”

“Of course—I suppose love only seems so important in our own lives because we know what it has meant to some, and so hope it may mean the same to us.”

“Does it seem so important?” she asked, the colour coming into her cheeks.

“Doesn't it?” he asked quietly.

“Really I don't know, I had never thought of it—in that way.”

“It's a part of what we call success in life; it may be the better part—it should be, Harriett.” His voice dwelt lingeringly and caressingly on her name.

She gave him a frightened, embarrassed glance. It was the first time he had ever called her anything else than Miss Walsh. She hoped all at once that her mother or Virginia would come into the room; but she knew they were busy elsewhere and would not appear until tea was served.

“Don't you think that?” he asked.

“I don't know. I have never thought of it,” she said faintly.

“I wish you'd think of it now,” he insisted.

“Why?” she faltered.

“Can't you guess?” he asked. “As something that might affect you, as something that might affect—us.” He leaned forward in his chair until his face was very close to hers. “Don't you understand what I mean, Harriett?” he went on, and his voice had become suddenly tender. “I wonder if you could think it worth while to care for a fellow like me; don't you know why I've been coming here?”

“To see my Aunt Virginia,” she faltered.

“Well, no—hardly, Harriett; but I fear you are not quite honest with me. You know that you have brought me here. I wanted to come long enough before I did; but there seemed no way. What are you going to tell me about caring for a fellow like me; caring in a particular way—I mean?”

The colour came and went in the girl's face.

“Of course I can wait—after all you don't know me so very well yet; but I'd like to think that my case is not entirely hopeless. Won't you tell me what I want to know, Harriett,”—he heard the swish of heavy silks in the hall, it was Virginia returning. “I'm going to come to-morrow for your answer,” he said quickly.

The next day, after the young man had taken his leave of her, Harriett fled up-stairs to her mother's room with a burning face; while Norton drove away from the house apparently in the best of spirits, for he had the unmistakable air of a man who has just heard something that was unqualifiedly pleasant to hear. The girl hesitated nervously.

“Mr. Norton has just left,” she said.

“I thought I heard him, or some one, drive up to the gate.”

“It was he,” said Harriett.

Her mother went placidly on with her sewing.

“He wants me to tell you that he wishes to come and see you very soon, mama,” said Harriett at last, with a little gasp.

“Wants to see me, dear?” in mild surprise.

“Yes.”

“But what about?”

“About—about me—he wants to tell you something.”

“He seems to have told you already,” said Mrs. Walsh.

The girl dropped on her knees before her mother, burying her face in her lap. There was a little silence

between them, and then Mrs. Walsh said.

“We must tell Virginia. I hope, dear, that she will approve.”

Harriett glanced up quickly at this. She was very white of face.

“Oh, you don't think she won't—you don't think that?”

“Then you want her to approve?”

And Harriett nodded; a single little emphatic inclination of the head.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

BEYOND the windows of the Golden West Saloon, a cold rain deluged Grant City. Gibbs, in his shirt-sleeves, sat on the edge of his bar and dangled his fat legs. Arling, disreputable and evil to the eye, nodded in a warm corner by the stove. Gibbs was speaking, and he addressed himself to Stephen Landray, who was striding back and forth across the room.

“Better shut up the house, Steve, and let Mrs. Bassett go; and you and the boy come over and camp with my Julia and me. It will give Julia something to think of,” he urged hospitably.

“Thank you, general, but I must remain just where I am. In the spring I shall go further West—that is if I can stay until then.”

“I understand just how you feel,” said Gibbs, with ready sympathy. “And wherever you go I want you to remember that I don't consider myself permanently located here. I wish we might get into something together again.”

He tucked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. He, at least, was perennially hopeful. If there was a Gibbs of the Golden West Saloon, there was also a General Gibbs of Kansas. He might be purple-faced, and his dress might be shabby and neglected, but dissipation could never do for him all that it had done for Arling, his pride and his ideals measurably sustained him in his evil fortune.

“Nothing's final, you know,” he went on. “I reckon there's still the last word to be spoken on most topics; and while I own I'm winded, it ain't going to be for long. I've had ups and downs before, and with half a chance it's in me to finish a winner. This place has got on my nerves, and it's not suiting my Julia either—it's on her nerves, too. Well, I never believe in evading the plain facts in a case, and I know I'm not just acting in a way to satisfy an ambitious woman, and my Julia's got her ambitions. You know what's wrong, I don't need to go into that; but I will say this much for myself; a dead and alive existence is mighty depressing to an active man such as I've always been, who's had his nose in large affairs. I can't stay here and go to seed; what's to hinder us from pulling out together in the spring? You can't leave before that, and it ain't long to wait.”

“No, I can't go before spring,” Landray reluctantly agreed, “unless I can find some one who will pay me a lump sum down on my contracts.”

Virginia had written him, begging him to return to Benson, but he was determined never to go back no matter what happened. Later, Virginia had asked him to send the child to her; but neither would he do this. His little son must remain with him wherever he went. Without the boy he felt his own life would be quite worthless; he felt, too, that Marian would have wished him to decide as he had decided.

The winter was of unexpected severity, but to Stephen this was one of its lesser hardships. He travelled far in all weathers, not sparing himself. Night after night he came back cold and weary to his little son and his comfortless home. He saw the huddle of houses under a thousand different aspects—against the red of the winter sky; when the swift twilight had fallen; by the cold moon, which sent long black shadows streaming out across the white untrodden snow; and he learned to hate it all, as something animate and personal that had made a wreck of his life.

There was no welcome now for him in the ragged rows of lights in those uncurtained windows that overlooked the streets Gibbs had named in the very prodigality of his patriotism—Sherman Street, Farragut Street, Porter Avenue, Lincoln Boulevard; he only had his boy, his memory of Marian, and his terrible loneliness for companions. Would the spring never come, would the winter never lose its hold on that frozen land! Sometimes in sheer desperation he went down to Gibbs and Arling at the Golden West Saloon, where the man of science, when not too drunk, played strategic games of checkers with the ex-editor; and where the ex-editor mixed hot whiskies for the man of science; and the frost bound loafers who still called Grant City home, congregated sparsely.

But at last the snows melted from the crests of the ridges, patches of prairie sod became visible and spread down the slopes, as the sun crept back day by day toward its summer solstice.

One raw spring day just at evening, Stephen drove into Grant City. It had been raining and he was wet to the skin, but cold and chilled as he was, his bronzed cheeks burnt with an unwonted colour, while his dark eyes were brilliant with an unusual light. He drove not to his home, but straight to Gibbs's saloon. Hearing him, the general came to the door.

“Hullo, Steve, want me?” he said cheerfully.

“Can I get you to go to the house with me, and put out my horse?” asked Landray. He spokely stiffly over the turned-up collar of his coat, and he was conscious that the words that issued from his lips had an unfamiliar sound; he scarcely recognized his own voice.

“Why, what's the matter, Steve?” demanded Gibbs in some surprise.

“I'm not feeling just right, that's all.”

The general vanished from his open door, but reappeared almost immediately with his hat.

“You ain't feeling right?” he repeated as he climbed in beside Landray. “What's wrong with you, Steve?”

“I seem to have taken cold,” said Stephen, still stiffly and thickly over the upturned collar of his coat. “I want to get to bed as quick as possible.”

“I guess that's where you should have been for the past hour,” said the general, surveying him critically. “You ain't got the least notion of taking care of yourself, Steve, you're doing yourself a rank injustice, exposing yourself this way!”

When they drove in at the barn Gibbs had to help him from the buggy or he would have fallen to the ground; he led him to a sheltered spot, then he drove the horse in out of the rain and tied it.

“I'll come back and take out; but first I'm going to get you to bed, Steve,” he said.

“I'm afraid—I think I'm going to be sick,” said Landray, and now his teeth were chattering.

“Why, Steve, you're wringing wet!” cried Gibbs, placing an arm about him to support him as he led him away to the house.

“I've driven in from Hazlets in the rain.” Hazlets was a good ten miles out on the prairie.

“You shouldn't have done it! You take no sort of care of yourself.”

By the time Gibbs had gotten his friend to his room, and undressed and in bed, he was shaking with a violent chill. Gibbs piled the blankets on him, and went down to the kitchen where he told Mrs. Bassett to prepare a hot whisky for the sick man.

“You give it to him, and I'll be back with Arling in a minute or so,” he said, and ran to the saloon, where he arrived panting and out of breath.

The doctor had received his monthly remittance the day before, and the results had been disastrous; but Gibbs was equal to the emergency. He dragged him unceremoniously enough from the chair he was sleeping in back of the stove, and laid him flat on the floor; then he brought a bucket of water from the well in the yard, and splashed it in his face. This produced immediate results. The doctor opened his eyes, groaned, and sat up.

“What the hell you doing to me, Gibbs?” he sputtered angrily, for the deluge continued.

“I'm trying to sober you, Doc, Landray's sick.”

“Want to drown me? I tell you I'm sober enough. What's the matter of Landray?”

“He's sick—is having sort of a chill.”

“He don't take no care of himself, never seen such imprudence,” said Arling crossly.

“Can you walk?” demanded Gibbs.

“Yes,” and the doctor scrambled to his feet. “Course I can walk!”

“Come along then,” cried Gibbs, seizing Arling's hat and thrusting it into his hands.

“Stop a minute, where's Landray now?” asked Arling, reasonably sober.

“Home and in bed. I told Mrs. Bassett to give him hot whisky.”

“Nothing better than that!” said Arling.

As soon as he had left the doctor in charge of his friend, Gibbs hurried off across the back lots. He was going for his Julia.

“This is a hell of a place!” he moaned miserably, as he stumbled along through the darkness. “I wish I'd never got him to come here; but I couldn't foresee how things would pan out!”

His was a simple emotional nature, but he was capable of no little depth of feeling, and he loved Landray as his own son. He wanted him to live, he wanted to vindicate to him his own capacity for a substantial success. It hurt him that he should think, as he sometimes fancied he did think, that he was impractical and erratic; he wanted him to know just the sort of man General Nathan Gibbs really was; for externals bore hard upon his character, and he was aware without his Julia telling him of it, that Gibbs of the Golden West Saloon was but a poor shadow of the epauletted soldier who seven years before had turned his florid face and expanded chest toward the new West. Those had been his great days, but in some form they must return; he never doubted this.

“What a shabby guzzling hound I've become!” he told himself in his abasement and disgust. “I wish he could think well of me, for he's the only gentleman left in Grant City.”

He soon returned with his Julia, who, after bestowing certain little attentions on the sick man, rejoined her husband in the kitchen, where she viewed certain manifestations of Mrs. Bassett's housekeeping with compressed lips and elevated eyebrows. Then she proceeded to clean up, and in Mrs. Bassett's absence from the room, remarked to the general:

“Seems as if nothing short of a death in this family will ever get this house red up! I wonder what that woman finds to slouch over all day long!”

Stephen was delirious for the greater part of the night, a fever following quick upon the chill; but toward morning Arling came from the room and joining Gibbs, told him that Landray's condition was much less serious than it had been.

“Well, if that's so,” said Gibbs, quitting his chair, “I guess I'll slip up and see him, and then go home and get an hour or two of sleep, and then go down and open up the saloon. If you want anything, send for me. Julia will be over right after breakfast.”

“Mighty capable lady!” remarked the doctor.

Gibbs found Landray very white and weak, but sitting up in bed.

“Well, how goes it, Steve?” he asked cheerfully.

“I don't know,” said Landray wearily. “It's my head.”

“Well, you keep still for a few days, and your head will be all right,” said Gibbs, drawing up a chair to his bedside and settling his untidy person in it.

“I don't know what I'd do without you and Mrs. Gibbs,” said Stephen gratefully, as he sank back on his pillows.

“As soon as you can, you must get out of this, Steve,” said Gibbs. “Why can't you write to your aunt, or Jake Benson? He owes it to you to do something; it's not much to ask.”

But Stephen shook his head.

“Oh, come now, that's merely your pride. Just make up your mind to let things drop here; you shouldn't risk your health racing about the country; at best you'll only clear up a few hundreds, even your aunt could do that much for you and not feel it.”

“You don't understand, Gibbs; I cannot ask anything of her; her means are small enough, and my obligations to her are already greater than I can ever hope to discharge.”

“Well, of course, you know best; but I want to see you get away from here, Steve, you are using yourself up to no purpose. It's a dog's life; I feel it, and things don't grind into me the way they do into you.”

Later in the day the fever which had left him returned; and a feeling of despair laid hold of Stephen. Suppose he did not get well—suppose he should die! It would be so much more easy to die than to live; why should he wish to pass again beyond the four white walls of that room! Then he thought of his little son, and begged Gibbs who was watching at his side to find him pen and paper. These were brought him, the general propped him up in bed with pillows, and the sick man took the pen with feeble fingers. After all, in his poverty and sickness, his misery of body and spirit, in what he now believed was the final dire extremity, he turned to Virginia. She had been his first friend and she was his last. With infinite difficulty, for his eyes seemed ready to leap from their sockets, and the pen would slip from his weak fingers, he wrote two letters. The first was to Virginia; the other to Benson. This labour, for it was a real labour, he finished at intervals during the afternoon. The result was two rambling incoherent letters which bore entirely upon his son's future; of himself he said nothing. What was in these letters Gibbs did not know then; but when they were written, he said:

“Now I suppose you want me to post 'em for you, Steve?” Landray shook his head.

“No, we'll wait until to-morrow.”

“But why wait?” urged Gibbs impatiently. “You'll be changing your mind the first thing I know, Steve.”

“Perhaps I shall—I may not send them at all,” and he lay back wearily among his pillows. “I don't want to alarm my aunt needlessly,” he added.

“The sooner she knows of the situation here the better satisfied I shall be,” said Gibbs.

“I believe you want to see the last of me, general,” said Landray, smiling whimsically at his friend.

“No, I don't, Steve, but I do want to see you get out of this. I figure on joining you wherever you go; you need me; you're too much of a gentleman to get money easy, and you need me.”

“But how about you, general?”

“Being a gentleman?” a wide grin overspread the general's battered face. “Well, I ain't any illusions left on that score. I about manage to hit the prevailing level. Put me down as good company; I'll keep up my end anywhere. I'm versatile; but I reckon you know the best and the worst of me, Steve—it's the common human average. That's why you need me; you're just a peg above the average, so was your father and uncle; and everybody loved 'em for it; but it didn't stand in the way of their taking advantage of 'em. Now nobody's ever got into me very deep; I've always been able to take handsome care of my own skin; and when Providence settles with the meek in spirit, the name of Gibbs won't be mentioned; there'll be nothing coming to me that I ain't got!”

Stephen passed a restless night, while Gibbs, shabby and dissipated, watched tenderly at his side; but in the morning he felt so much better that in spite of Gibbs's protests he insisted upon dressing, and went down-stairs. The following day he was able to leave the house, but he paid dearly for his imprudence. The fever returned and he went back to bed, he was again delirious, and the second day he passed in a semi-conscious state from which he only aroused at long intervals.

Gibbs and Mrs. Gibbs and Arling watched him constantly. The doors of the Golden West Saloon were closed and locked, and the thirsty of Grant City going there, tried the door in vain, looked in at the window, and went sadly away.

“He ain't showing any nerve, nor any wish to live!” wailed Gibbs. “He's sinking because he ain't trying to keep up! Unless he helps himself we can't do anything for him!”

And it was as Gibbs said. Stephen now lacked both the inclination and the power to help himself; he faced the thought of death with indifference. This continued for a week.

It was Gibbs who was with him when the end came. All at once Stephen roused himself from his lethargy and sat erect in his bed.

“Gibbs!” he called hoarsely.

“What is it, Steve—I'm here; don't you see me?” asked the general from his seat at his side, and he rested a shaking hand on the younger man's arm.

“Take him to his aunt,” muttered Landray, “to his aunt, do you understand? I mean the boy—take him to his aunt, take him there first.”

“Yes, yes, Steve, don't worry; I'll do just as you say,” cried Gibbs in a choking voice.

“Do you hear me—he's to go back to Ohio,” gasped the dying man with painful effort. “She's all he has left. You'll take him there—as soon as you can;” and with that Landray fell back on his bed and spoke no more.

CHAPTER FORTY

GIBBS settled Stephen's affairs, and there was left in his hands a small sum of money, which, by dint of borrowing, he increased to a figure that enabled him to take the boy to Benson. The occasion was like a tonic to him, the buoyancy of a dauntless spirit spoke in his very air and manner; he forgot Grant City, the Golden West Saloon, his shabbiness; and his travelling companions learned early who he was, and to most ears, General Gibbs of Kansas, had a large sound. He reached Benson just at nightfall. The place had an unfamiliar aspect. A village had become a town, the town almost a city. He had expected changes, but he would have said that he could have found his way to what he had known years before as the Leonard farm in spite of any changes; yet again and again he was forced to pause and ask his way. Even when he reached the house itself he would not have known it. He paused at the gate and glanced about. Below him was the level valley of the Little Wolf River. It was dotted with rows of lights; they diverged or ran in parallel lines and marked streets, streets in what in his day had been the best corn-land in all the county.

Gibbs entered the yard and followed up the path to the front door. Virginia, herself, answered his summons, and seeing her there in the door, in the light that streamed out and about her, he owned that the years had been kind to her.

What Virginia saw, was a red-faced man who smelt strongly of whisky and stale tobacco; a man with his hat off, which exposed a shiny bald head, and a thin fringe of grey hair, bleary eyes, and bulbulous nose; but who in spite of his dissipated look and his shabbiness, the shabbiness of well-worn clothes and soiled linen that had been slept and travelled in, still maintained a jaunty and a gallant air even. She saw further that he was holding by the hand a small boy, a very small boy indeed, who looked absurdly little for short trousers and roundabouts, and as if he had been suddenly advanced from skirts and had not yet grown accustomed to the change.

“Mrs. Landray,” Gibbs spoke in a husky throaty voice, “I see you don't recall me; but it ain't to be wondered at. Gibbs is my name, General Gibbs of Kansas;” he threw out his chest. “I am delighted to see you again after all these years; it's an honour, a pleasure,” he placed his hand on his heart, and bowed low with old-fashioned courtesy. The sight of her had taken him back full twenty years. “An honour, a pleasure,” he repeated.

The look of surprise on Virginia's face vanished. She understood. It was Gibbs and Stephen's baby—this other Stephen Mason Landray whom she had never seen, but who stood there in the light, blinking at her sleepily with Landray eyes; the small upturned face had the Landray features. Stooping quickly she raised the child in her arms. The general followed her into the house.

“I had written you, general, for in your letter to me you made no mention of the child,” she said, and now she gave him her hand.

“My oversight, my neglect,” said Gibbs blandly. “Fact is, I wasn't thinking much about him just then—it was poor Steve.” His voice broke, and she saw his eyes glisten and fill.

“But he had you to the last,” she said gently, gratefully. “You were with him during all his sickness.”

“I did what I could for him, and so did my Julia. Everybody loved him, he was a real Landray in that.”

Virginia had motioned him to a chair; then she seated herself with the child still in her arms.

“I feel better now he is with you,” said Gibbs beaming on them benevolently.

“He's very like—very like his father, don't you think?” said Virginia, her face pressed against the child's soft cheek.

“I reckon he's good and tired.” Gibbs rose from his chair. “I'll come in the morning to see how he gets on.”

“But won't you stay? I'm alone just now; Mrs. Walsh who makes her home with me, it at her daughter's, Mrs. Norton's; but I'm expecting her back any minute.”

“I want to find Jake Benson,” said Gibbs. “I reckon I'll pass the night with him. Good-night, son;” he gave the boy his fat forefinger. Then from his pocket he took the letter which Stephen had written Virginia, so largely at his instigation. “It's from Steve,” he said simply, as he handed it to her.

“I've said nothing of my gratitude to you for all your kindness;” and Virginia drew the child closer to her breast.

“It was little enough I was able to do, Mrs. Landray. God knows I wanted Steve to live, but it wasn't to be.” He mopped his face with his handkerchief. “It wasn't to be,” he repeated sadly, then he bade her an abrupt good-night and hurried from the house.

As the general had intimated, he proposed being entertained by Benson. The trip East had involved such nice calculation that this would be necessary unless he expected to practice extraordinary selfdenial on the way home; and freed of the care of the child he proposed permitting himself a certain latitude on the return journey.

The lawyer no longer lived in the house on the square; he had moved to a more remote part of the town where he had built a home which stood in the midst of extensive grounds. It was altogether the most costly and imposing place in Benson.

Gibbs found his way thither. From the servant who answered his ring, he learned that his friend was not in, but was expected home shortly.

“Then I'll wait for him here,” said Gibbs.

This the servant seemed reluctant to allow, but Gibbs pushed resolutely past him.

“Tell Jake—” he corrected himself artfully. “Tell Mr. Benson that it's General Gibbs of Kansas;” and he was

shown into the library; he had hardly seated himself when the street door opened again, and a moment later Benson hurried into the room.

"Why, Gibbs, what has brought you back?" he cried.

The general took him warmly by the hand.

"Jake, how are you!" he said. "I've fetched Stephen's boy home to Mrs. Landray," he added, answering Benson's question.

"That was very sad about Landray," observed the lawyer gravely.

"I don't know when I felt a death as I felt his," rejoined Gibbs huskily, and his under lip quivered.

There was a brief silence in which the lawyer gave himself up to a critical scrutiny of his guest.

"What are you doing, Gibbs?" he asked abruptly.

"I? Oh, I'm trying to rub the creases out of a cocked hat," answered the general lightly. "I am sort of resting on my laurels, Jake, waiting for the tide to turn."

"It's good to have laurels to rest on," said Benson. "Come into the dining-room and we will have something to eat and drink."

Gibbs quitted his chair with alacrity.

"You were speaking of Landray a moment ago," said Benson when they had seated themselves. "He was not very successful, was he?"

"At first he was, he made a good deal of money; and I reckon if he'd lived he'd soon been on his feet again; but we struck a wave of temporary depression; you know how those things go," said Gibbs stoutly. He was not blind, but it was not in his nature to admit an unqualified defeat; beside Benson was the last man to whom he would have told the truth where it touched Landray's pathetic struggle.

"Too bad!" and again Benson's shrewd glance comprehended his guest. His lips curled cynically; in that moment he was quite without pity for Gibbs, who looked the shabby adventurer all too plainly; whose flame-coloured face and shaking uncertain hands told their own story. How could Landray have been deceived by Gibbs! He felt only intolerance and contempt for what he conceived to have been Stephen's utter lack of judgment. It was his determined wrongheadedness that had wrecked his life; no one could have saved him.

"It's not necessary for me to ask if Landray left anything. I suppose his little son is quite unprovided for?"

In spite of himself, something of his feeling had crept into the lawyer's tone. This was not lost on Gibbs, and resentment showed in his battered face, but he contented himself with merely saying:

"If he'd lived he'd won out, but he died at the wrong moment. No, he didn't leave anything."

"Humph!" said the lawyer, and fell silent.

The general poured himself a drink of whisky, emptied his glass, and poured himself another; the immediate effect of this was that he was somewhat mollified. He looked about him with undisguised approval in his eyes.

"You have housed yourself rather handsomely, Jake; I wonder what the old man would say if he could come back and see how the money he made out of pelts and whisky had been spent; appearances never bothered him," he said, disrespectfully. "And you have changed, Jake; you've sort of taken on additions, too. I'd never have thought you had a taste for luxury; but here I find you living like a prince."

"How have I changed?" asked Benson curiously.

"Well, I should say you were less frank for one thing, Jake; and you have accumulated dignity along with your dollars; but it's a combination that's hard to beat; I wonder you ain't ever married."

There was another silence, in which Gibbs applied himself to his glass.

In a quiet easy going way, without haste and with an economy of effort that seemed to argue entire indifference to worldly success, Benson had yet thriven exceedingly in his various enterprises. He stood at the head of his profession; men much older than himself, and of much wider actual experience, yielded him precedence. Hardly any venture was embarked upon in the town but his advice or help was asked; for it was known that he could always command money. In part this had fallen to his character and ability, in part it was because of the thousands Southerland had paid him for that wild land in Belmont County. It was because of the good use he had made of those thousands, that people were now able to speak of him as a millionaire. His riches seemed to have detached him from those traditional intimacies that belong to life in a small town; only a very few of the older men in the place ventured to call him Jake; this while it amused him, yet had a certain subtle influence on his character. He was fundamentally much too frank and simple for any external show; but he was also too sensible to despise the solid advantages that flowed to him from this attitude of his townsmen, and in a way he was remotely flattered by it. It was only Virginia whose manner conceded nothing, and who paid no deference to his worldly success and growing position as the great man of the town. It was nothing to her that he was adding house to house and farm to farm; these things did not impress her; and he saw that to her at least, his position had remained exactly what it had been in her husband's lifetime. If anything, her manner toward him had grown more formal, more as if she were defining his place for him, since he was in danger of forgetting it.

There were times, days of depression and suffering, when his loathing of himself was the more bitter because of the very respect men so readily gave him. What if they could know, what if he were suddenly and relentlessly held up for the scorn and contempt he merited, his hypocrisy made known! The hypocrisy of his charities, the hypocrisy of every decent untterance that fell from his lips, placed side by side with the black record of his hidden act. Gibbs had spoken of a change; and the change was there deeper than he knew; a rotten spot in his conscience that was spreading—spreading.

A moment before and he had hardly been able to hide his contempt for Gibbs; now he was ready to abase himself before him; for at his worst, Gibbs was a blatant easy-going scamp with a kindly generous streak in him that had probably held him back from much rascality.

"I expect you were a good friend to Landray, Gibbs; and doubtless helped him through the worst of his

troubles," he was moved to say.

"Who told you that, Jake?" asked the general quickly.

"I don't have to be told it, I know you," said Benson.

"I don't deserve any praise; we were poor together at the last, and as long as you ain't got anything you can afford to be generous." He took from his pocket a letter and handed it to Benson.

The envelope was unsealed and there was no superscription. Benson drew forth the letter it contained and read it. Gibbs watched him narrowly the while. But the lawyer's face was expressionless, and told nothing of what was passing in his mind. Having read the letter, Benson returned it to its envelope, then he caught Gibbs's eye. It held a question.

"You know what Landray has written here?" he said.

"Yes, Steve had me read it and the other letter he mentions, which I gave Mrs. Landray."

"What was in the letter you gave her?" asked Benson.

"He wanted her to have the boy, if you would do nothing for him. You see he was sure of her, Jake."

"Yes, he could be sure of her; one can always be sure of her," said Benson enigmatically.

Gibbs shot him a quick glance.

"I reckon so," he said quietly.

"But not of me," and Benson laughed a little bitterly.

"Well, I gathered, not so much from what he said as from what he didn't say, that you and he weren't friends;" and with a stubby forefinger Gibbs made a pattern on the polished table with some whisky and water he had inadvertently spilled from his glass. "I find it's a good thing to let death square all grudges," he ventured. "I think at heart he counted on you, Jake, because of Marian."

"I don't consider that any one has any claim of that sort on me," said Benson sharply. "Few men stand more alone than I do; and when Marian died it was about the last of the connection—except your wife, Gibbs."

"And the boy," interjected Gibbs hastily. "You're forgetting him, Jake."

"And the boy," repeated Benson. "But his is a rather remote claim; and I all but ruined myself on account of Marian's father, I suppose Landray told you that."

Gibbs nodded slightly. The lawyer went on.

"Julia is nearer, but you don't seem to be looking to me because of that, Gibbs."

The general's red face grew very red indeed at this.

"I'm not asking anything for myself, Jake Benson, or for my Julia. I've stood on my own feet too long to want to go poking them into any one's else shoes, when I do you can tramp on my toes."

"Oh, come, Gibbs!"

"Well, don't take up with the idea that I'm here to ask favours for myself, for I ain't! I've fetched you a relative," said Gibbs.

The lawyer regarded him curiously. Gibbs disinterestedness was something he found exceedingly hard to credit.

"I don't know what I shall do about the boy," he said at length. "But he will not suffer in the present; Mrs. Landray will care for him. He could not be in better hands."

"It was the future Steve was thinking about when he wrote to you, Jake; and it will be pretty hard on Mrs. Landray if you leave the child with her until she becomes attached to him, and then take him away."

"Mrs. Landray's attachments are all traditional. She is probably quite as fond of him this very minute as she will be ten years hence."

"I'd almost say you were tricky, Jake; one gets damn little satisfaction out of you," said Gibbs. He made one or two futile efforts after this to bring the lawyer back to the matter he had most at heart, but Benson baffled him, and in the end Gibbs retired to his room considerately helped thither by his host, and quite nonplussed by the other's perverseness.

Gibbs lingered in Benson two days as the lawyer's guest, and on the morning of the third started home to his Julia and the Golden West Saloon. He was satisfied that he had acted rather handsomely in a crisis; and he was cheered and sustained by the conviction that both Benson and Virginia appeared fully sensible of this.

"She's the reason Jake never married; well, in spite of his luck he's wanted one thing he couldn't have;" and the thought gave him no little satisfaction, his feeling toward Benson being then rather one of censure. "He owed it to me to say what he'd do for Steve's boy; it was distinctly my right to know, I wish I'd told him that."

It might have been an added comfort to Gibbs had he known that his departure left the lawyer rather depressed, and wondering moodily why he should have the feeling he knew he had for Stephen and Stephen's boy. It seemed a long way back to the directness of those motives that had once influenced him for good. He rancorously lived over the past and the days slipped forward while he nursed his grudge. He did not see Virginia, and he made no effort to see the child.

Virginia's feeling of hurt and injury grew as the months passed and he made no sign; then quite unexpectedly he surprised her by calling.

"I suppose you have counted me rather remiss in the matter of Stephen's boy, Virginia," he began smoothly.

"I don't know why you should think that. Perhaps there was no reason why you should feel any interest in him," answered Virginia.

"You don't think that, Virginia. You know that Stephen wrote me just before his death? I understood Gibbs to say that he had told you of this letter—of its purport."

"Yes," but she glanced at him in some alarm.

"Stephen wished me to assume the burden of the boy's education. He knew that I could do more for him in a worldly way than you, Virginia, and he had tasted the bitterness of a struggle to make a place for himself.

To write me, to feel that he must turn to me in his extremity, must have been a blow to his pride. In his letter the awkwardness of his constraint shows itself. The feeling he had for me remained with him to the end."

She knew what he meant, but did not answer him. He went on.

"Years ago, Virginia, when Stark took the Landray farm, I made up my mind that some day you should return there. I have had to wait, but recently the farm was sold to me. It's a whim—a fancy, if you will—but I want you to go there and live."

Virginia shook her head.

"I shall never go there," she said.

"Wait!" he interposed quickly. "I want to sell you the place. Remember it was your home all those years; you went there when you first came to Benson."

"I know—I remember," said Virginia softly, and the shadow deepened in her eyes.

"You will reconsider? You will take the place off my hands?" he urged impatiently.

"No; I seem to have lost all desire to go back," said Virginia almost sadly.

"Then I am too late," he said bitterly. "It should belong to Stephen," he urged, making his final appeal. "And it should come to him from you; it was his father's home, and his grandfather's, each generation has lived there since the Landrays came to Ohio; it should remain in the family."

But Virginia only shook her head.

Benson, too, was silent, but he was more deeply hurt than he would allow even to himself. He had set his heart on her going back. It would be something accomplished in the way of reparation for the wrong he had done her; it would have made it the easier for him to endure the consciousness of that wrong, since he lived in its presence always; more than this, he had conceived it possible that amidst the old surroundings the old relationship might be re-established. He was haunted by his memories; he wished to know again the sentiment of days long past but unforgotten and unforgettable. And now, as always, he encountered her opposition, and realized that her will was stronger than his own; surely love had written failure large at each crisis of his life. It had made of him, an honest man, a trickster and a cheat. What was he living for; he was verging on fifty; there were moments when he felt his age in all its tragic incompleteness. He had been defrauded of what was best in life; unfruitful endeavour had embittered him, and shame was in his heart. After all, the wrong he had done her was insignificant when compared with the wrong she had done him, for he might at any time by a simple act well within his power make restitution; but nothing could give him back the years he had wasted in her service, and at every turn he had found her unyielding and determined, willing to profit by his devotion, but returning nothing.

"You were speaking of Stephen a moment ago," said Virginia.

He did not answer her at once, his anger toward her had not left him.

"About the boy," wheeling suddenly, and allowing his glance, moody and resentful, to rest upon her. "Perhaps you will think what I have to propose, unreasonable; but what little I have done for you has been done as you would have it, never as I wanted it, and we have both suffered unnecessarily in consequence; but with the boy, if I am to do for him it must be in my own way, otherwise I can do nothing."

Virginia did not speak, but at his words the look of alarm came into her face again.

"It was Stephen's wish that I should assume the care of his son. He probably felt that I could do for him in ways you never can, Virginia. I will take the boy," he said abruptly.

"You will do nothing of the kind," answered Virginia quietly, but her eyes flashed.

He did not seem to hear her, for he continued:

"I have at last decided that I can do this. Perhaps it is my duty; after all, he is no more a Landray than he is a Benson."

By a gesture Virginia seemed to put aside this idea. The boy had the Landray look.

"He is the image of his father," she said tenderly.

Benson smiled.

"It has taken me a good while to decide what I can do, Virginia. I hope you have not given your heart wholly to the child."

Still she did not fully comprehend the drift of what he was saying.

"If you will surrender him to me, I will make myself responsible for his future. I shall, of course, be willing that you should see him."

"Willing I should see him!" exclaimed Virginia. "Mr. Benson, have you quite taken leave of your senses?"

"I mean that I do not care to share my responsibility with anyone, not even with you, Virginia; for I cannot believe in a divided authority in so serious a matter. The mistakes made in Stephen's case must not be made in his."

"What were the mistakes?" cried Virginia. "Was there ever a better, braver boy—did he ever fail in affection? That he was unfortunate, that he too early in life took to himself burdens he should not have assumed is true enough, but his faults were the faults of a generous youth!"

"They were disastrous enough," retorted Benson coldly. "And I wish to spare his son similar error, similar hardship. I don't expect you to decide to-day—"

"I have already decided," answered Virginia. "I would not trust him to you."

"When have I been unkind, Virginia?" he asked.

"I no longer feel that I know you," she replied.

"There is one answer for that, one explanation; you Know what it is, Virginia," he said still coldly.

"You blame me after all these years."

"They have been lonely ones," he said.

"Because I could not give you what was not mine to give."

He ran his fingers through his thin grey hair, and smiled almost whimsically.

"I am not grateful for failure; I find that day by day I am taking more account of success, no matter what its kind; and but for you, Virginia, I might have been a happy man just as I have been a successful man; though after all success is easier won than happiness. You will want to know what I will promise on behalf of the boy, and it's quite right you should—"

"I have heard enough," she said, but he went on unheeding her.

"You must remember that aside from Gibbs's wife, the boy is nearer me than any one else, and that I am a rich man; yet you are to understand that what I may do for him will be much or little as he proves himself worthy or unworthy. But he shall have every advantage that money will give. You are ambitious for him; he shall have a profession and a free and unhampered start in life. Can you do as much for him?"

"You know I cannot," she said. "Why do you tempt me? Of course I am ambitious for him."

"Then let me gratify you; I do not mean that you are to be entirely separated from him; but until he goes away to school I wish him to be an inmate of my house. This is not an unfair demand; you could hardly expect that I would ask less."

"But how do I know how you will treat him?" asked Virginia.

"You can learn from the boy himself," answered Benson smiling. "I did not suppose that you think me capable of unkindness or brutality," he added with quiet sarcasm.

"He will be lonely."

"Most likely," said Benson composedly. "Understand, Virginia, if you prefer to be alone responsible for his future, I have no desire to interfere in your plans, though Stephen's letter gives me a definite claim; but I shall never urge this claim, it is simply that I do not believe in a divided authority; and I beg you to remember what Stephen's life was."

"You must not speak of that to me, I could have saved him had I known!"

"It was the hardness of conditions that killed him. He only knew failure; and I have something better than that to offer his son. You love the boy, Virginia, how do you know I may not love him, too? Few men are more alone in the world than I, why should I not love him just as you love him?"

"My plans for him as I have thought them out, would be to send him away to school as soon as he is old enough. This I regard as necessary, for if he remains here, he will inevitably get a wrong idea, perhaps an injurious idea, as to his relation to me, and his expectations."

"You have not even seen him," said Virginia.

"But you tell me he is like his father. I was fond of his father once."

"Yet you would do nothing for him," she said bitterly.

"He did not want me to; he would have accepted nothing from me had I offered it. I don't reproach myself with anything there. It was only that his love for his son was a stronger passion than his pride, that made it possible for him to appeal to me."

"But I am to see Stephen."

"As often as you like, but he is to live with me, Virginia; this is to be clearly understood between us; my house will be his home. You can trust him to me quite safely, and I shall end by caring for him; perhaps not as you love him; but still I may feel deeply and sincerely toward him."

"I will give you my answer in a few days," said Virginia rising hastily.

"As you like," said Benson, following her example, and a gleam of triumph flashed in his eyes. He knew what her answer would be.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

STEPHEN was a lonely little figure in Benson's great house; he was vastly depressed by the formal manner of life to which the lawyer had adjusted himself, and for which Mrs. Pope his housekeeper was primarily responsible, for Benson was a silent man in his home, and admirable lady that she was, Mrs. Pope was neither a gay nor cheerful person, nor was she gifted in ways to inspire others with gaiety or cheerfulness.

By day the house was his to wander through; there were also the grounds, into which he was thrust at stated intervals by Mrs. Pope, all of whose acts were depressingly regular and ordered. In the gardens, working diligently among the plants or vines, or cutting the acre or two devoted to lawns, Stephen found a taciturn German whose name was Peter, and who limited his remarks to brief requests for the boy to let the flowers alone; nor was he to touch the small fruits; for these, like the flowers, Stephen was given to understand, were grown expressly for Mr. Benson's use and profit.

He gathered that the world had been created for this austere gentleman, whom he knew as his Uncle Jacob. He was indebted to Mrs. Pope for this idea, since she served the lawyer with an eye single to his comforts. His Uncle Jacob objected to dirt, consequently he must keep clean; his Uncle Jacob objected to noise, he was restricted to silence; his Uncle Jacob liked flowers, and Peter laboured that they might bloom for him. Things were only of two sorts; what his Uncle Jacob liked and what his Uncle Jacob did not like, and as one heeded his likes and dislikes one touched hands with morality and righteousness.

As Benson had promised, Stephen was not entirely separated from his aunt; at least twice each week he was dressed in his best, and by Mrs. Pope taken to pay Virginia a visit. But these visits were functions attended by such formality that he derived small comfort from them, and in time he came to rather dread the preliminary ordeals, of which he was the victim. There was always a bath, and he donned the freshest of fresh linen, stiff and miserably unsympathetic; an unfamiliar suit of clothes to which he never grew accustomed, and in which his small limbs were cheerlessly draped, completed his toilet. Thus attired, Mrs. Pope would lead him to the front steps, and Peter would drive around from the stables with a closed carriage. Then there invariably ensued certain lively and apprehensive inquiries on the part of Mrs. Pope as to whether or not the team had shown any undue levity while being harnessed, for the good lady was timorous of all horse-flesh as well as the prey of an abiding and illy-concealed doubt of the German's skill as a driver; however, being satisfied on the one point if not on the other, she would embark her small charge, and then herself; driving to the cottage with the carriage door held slightly ajar, a precaution favouring instant escape in case of danger. Arrived there she would leave Stephen with Virginia and be driven away in painful state to take the air.

Then came a period of freedom and relief for the boy; he had Virginia, and there was his Aunt Jane, who occupied an almost equal place in his affections with Virginia herself; and sometimes there was Harriett Norton, too, with a very pink-faced baby, named Elinor, and a husband who Stephen discovered early in their acquaintance could be persuaded into the most delightful extravagance in the matter of candy; and for perhaps an hour he would be quite happy, so happy he could almost forget that he had an Uncle Jacob; and at this period of his life, his Uncle Jacob seemed responsible for all the misery in the world.

Then Mrs. Pope would return, and Virginia with a strange hardening of the heart would restore him to that august lady. Benson could not have divined how well he was hated.

The lawyer had contented himself with seeing that Stephen wanted for nothing, that he was well dressed and well nourished; but he was such a little fellow, and so palpably depressed by the authority which Mrs. Pope administered, that Benson almost regretted he had forced Virginia to the step he had. His triumph left an aftermath of selfreproach and disgust. He had stooped to petty persecution, and clearly the boy himself was far from happy as a result. It was his wish to mitigate the wrong he felt he had done the child, which in the end provoked him to a display of something approaching personal interest. He was conscious that Stephen met his advances with childish mistrust, but this wore away; the lawyer's gentleness and kindness had their effect just as he intended they should, and Stephen put aside his doubt of his Uncle Jacob, and concluded that he was ever so much better than Mrs. Pope's account of him.

Benson felt that he should have associates of his own age, that Mrs. Pope and Peter were not exactly the most engaging companions he could have, but there were no boys in the neighbourhood whose manners or morals fitted them to be his playfellows. True, there was a region of back streets and alleys in the rear of his ample grounds, overlooked by small frame dwellings; here there were children of all ages, and in course of time Stephen came to know certain of these youthful neighbours of his, for while he had seemed cut off from them by barriers whose nature he did not comprehend, he had long been aware that the world held the possibility of a more desirable companionship than that he was knowing.

There were also strange small boys whom he occasionally saw scurrying through the garden or dodging among the grape arbours. They had appeared with the first half-ripe strawberry; they came again when the big Lorton blackberries were hard as bullets; then their visits languished for a little space; but when the early harvest apples on the two big trees back of the barn were the size of turkey eggs, they reappeared, this time armed with clubs, and there was a fine rattling among the branches.

The effect of these depredations on Peter was not wholly pleasant; indeed at first Stephen had regarded him with wide-eyed terror; for the German would explode in guttural mutterings and strange oaths, as he rushed in pursuit of the thieves, who as they fled before his advance on nimble legs, hurled back taunts and insults.

“Dutchy! Who's afraid of Dutchy! Dutchy can't run! Dutchy's got a belly full of beer—belly full of beer!”

In possession of the field, Peter would retire to the stables where he would supply himself with nails and hatchet, then he would make an examination of the high picket-fence back of the garden, and here he was almost certain to find a spot where a board had been removed to favour a hasty retreat; this he would restore to utility with many unnecessary nails.

One day as Stephen was wandering aimlessly through the garden and among the ripening grapes, he came suddenly upon a boy somewhat older and larger than himself, but brown and barefoot, who was eating Peter's grapes. Earlier in the season Stephen had seen this boy, but always at a distance and always in full flight, routed red-handed from among the strawberries or fleeing from among the blackberries. It was this same boy who had led in the assaults upon the early apples, and here he was back again with the first ripening colour that touched the grapes.

Stephen's first idea was to withdraw; he felt keenly the embarrassment of the situation, since the boy was clearly most immorally engaged in theft, but while he still paused irresolutely, hardly knowing what to do, the barefoot stranger suddenly suspended his attack on the grapes to glance warily and shrewdly about, and saw Stephen in his turn.

It was apparent that his first uncontrollable impulse was flight, for he expected Peter to be somewhere close at hand; but the gardener was working the lawn-mower remote on the front lawn, and the rattle of his machine came reassuringly to his ears. His mind relieved on this score he instantly resumed operations, now and again casting a glance over his shoulder in Stephen's direction. Evidently he had expected the latter to rush off to warn Peter, but Stephen did nothing of the sort, he merely stared at the intruder.

“Hullo, poppy eyes!” said the boy. “What are you doing here? Ain't you afraid old Dutchy will come swarming out here and light into you?”

Stephen answered him by a shy, wistful smile; he felt that he had at last made a comforting acquaintance.

“I got enough,” said the stranger. “Green grapes are great for the cramps.”

Stephen did not know this, but he was politely interested; there was one thing he wanted to ask the

stranger, and now he said:

“Ain't you afraid of Peter?”

“Afraid of Dutchy?” with infinite scorn. “If he comes around here, him and me will see times! Say, what's your name?”

“Stephen Landray.”

“Mine's Benjamin Wade; but you can call me Ben for short if you want to.”

Stephen looked his gratitude for the privilege.

“Where did you get in?” asked Stephen.

“Over the back fence and up through the orchard. I manage to keep a board off the fence most of the time, but old Dutchy's pretty patient about nailing it up. Them Germans ain't easily discouraged; seems like he is always hoping he can get it to stick.”

Then he showed Stephen the inner economy of his ragged jacket; he had removed the linings of each pocket and the result was a sacklike receptacle which he told Stephen, after calling upon him to admire the ingenuity of the arrangement, would hold by actual measurement, a peck of apples.

“I'm fond of fruit,” he explained. “Once, old Jake Benson caught me here—I was in his strawberries. Say, I was stiff! He most scared the life out of me, he come on me so sudden, but he only asked me what I was doing; he's all right! What did you say your name was?”

“Stephen Landray,” repeated Stephen.

The boy considered.

“There's Landray's hill, Landray's woods, Landray's race, and Landray's mill—but it ain't running any more—and Landray's fork; ever been to any of 'em?”

Stephen was forced to own that he had not.

“Well, I'll show 'em to you some day. I go to all them places often.”

Benjamin Wade was preparing to take his departure, and the smaller boy was sorry enough to see him go.

“I'll tell you, I'm coming back—maybe about this time to-morrow; and I may bring a feller or two with me. I'll show you where you be back of the arbours so as we can find you.” And he led the way to a snug hiding-place, well screened from observation. “You be here just about now to-morrow and we may happen along.”

Benjamin Wade seemed a person of perfect freedom, but one whose social obligations were numerous and pleasantly diversified. Stephen followed him to the back fence, and stood with his small wistful face pressed between the pickets, watching him from sight down the alley. The lonely little fellow was in a fever of impatience for the morrow. He wondered whom the fellers would be that Benjamin Wade would bring, and he hoped that he would not forget to come as he had promised.

Benjamin Wade was as good as his word. He appeared promptly the next day at the appointed place and hour, and with him was a small boy whom he introduced as Spike. He invited Stephen to accompany him and Spike to a swimming-hole in Landray's fork, and when Stephen declined the invitation, as he felt constrained to do, the two boys promptly left him, after making certain insulting comments on his lack of independence.

He feared that he had lost them forever, and was reduced to tears in consequence. But the very next day Benjamin Wade reappeared at the same hour and at the appointed trysting place, accompanied by Spike and a second small boy called Reddy.

The four squatted on the grass back of the arbours and proceeded to assiduously cultivate an acquaintance. Reddy was of an inquiring mind beyond what was natural even to a small boy meeting a strange small boy for the first time. Stephen's occupation seemed to rest heavy on him. He wanted to know what his pursuits were; and the nature of his responsibilities in life; and particularly where the authority of his elders limited his freedom.

Stephen dutifully told him of Mr. Benson and of Mrs. Pope; that it was she who sent him out into the yard to play; that he had the choice of either the front lawn or the garden, but that the barn was under a ban as being dangerous.

“You hear that, you fellows? I'd be gosh darned if I'd let her dictate to me!” said Reddy who was of a violent nature. “Does she give you anything to play with, that's what I want to know.”

Stephen was forced to confess that she did not.

“That's just like a woman! I wonder how she thinks you're going to play! I just wouldn't play, I'd learn her she couldn't boss me!”

He seemed quite incensed at the unreasonableness of the situation, and Stephen was not free from an uneasy suspicion that he regarded him as mean spirited in consequence of his quiet acceptance of it.

Then it appeared that Reddy, his name was Riley Crittendon, was the only child and despair of a widow whose straitened circumstances were sufficiently advertised by his clothes, which in no way fitted his lean active figure. Benjamin Wade explained that Reddy, like the barn, was under a ban; and that he consorted with him only at great personal risk, since his father had repeatedly threatened him with corporal chastisement if he so much as recognized his iniquitous existence.

Stephen's innocent eyes grew wide at this.

The same was true in the case of Spike. All that Benjamin Wade's father had promised Benjamin Wade, Spike's father had promised him, and Spike intimated that he was singularly capable of fulfilling each promise he had made; yet in spite of this, they both associated with Reddy indefatigably, but in the unostentatious manner favoured by back alleys.

Reddy's career of crime seemed to have embraced a long category of evil and wrong-doing. He had once run away from home with a circus; he had twice narrowly escaped drowning, by venturing on the thin ice he had been forbidden to venture on in the early winter; his crowning achievement, however, was having been blown up in a Fourth of July celebration which he had arranged with stolen powder; but the complete list of

his crimes would have filled a long summer afternoon.

It was Benjamin Wade who constituted himself Reddy's historian, though he received occasional promptings from Spike, who seemed most anxious that he should overlook no act that had gone to make up the sum and substance of Reddy's iniquity; and while Benjamin Wade was thus busy, Reddy himself was seen to visibly swell with pride.

Stephen, piously reared and with certain maxims of Mrs. Pope's New England morality fresh in his mind, and rejoicing in the recently acquired knowledge that there was such a place as hell, apparently especially designed for little boys who were a trouble to their elders, or who told lies or stole, or otherwise misconducted themselves, was in momentary fear that the hardened sinner before him would be forcibly dragged from their midst by a legion of devils; but nothing of the sort happened. Reddy chuckled and gurgled as Ben and Spike proceeded with the story of his crimes; no Voice issued from the wide blue arch above them, and the earth at their feet did not rend itself; evidently Mrs. Pope's facts were not designed to fit the peculiar case of Riley Crittendon.

“But you are almost as bad; ain't you?” he said to Benjamin Wade. “You steal;” but he spoke with some trepidation, at its worst this was evidently a venial error.

“I ain't a patch on him, am I Reddy?”

“Naw,” said Reddy disdainfully.

“There ain't a feller in this part of town, maybe not in the whole town that can touch Reddy!” said Spike generously; and Reddy chuckled and gurgled again at this.

When they had sufficiently glorified Reddy, they imparted to Stephen facts that he had not known before; amongst others, that old Jake Benson was the richest man in town, and that he, Stephen, was reputed to be the lawyer's heir, this was very pleasant, but Stephen was profoundly shocked when the abandoned Reddy said:

“I should think you would be mighty anxious to have him die quick so as you could get your hand on his money and spend it—I bet I would!”

After this Stephen saw much of the boys, and they helped him through the long summer days; but he only saw them in the safe retreat back of the grape arbours; they dared not venture further into the grounds with him where they would fall under Peter's eye, and he dared not quit the grounds with them, though once or twice he mustered courage to go into the back alley with Benjamin Wade, and was promptly returned to his own domain by the sinful Reddy, who seemed to have established himself his mentor in all nice questions of morality. It was also Reddy who advanced the theory that when they came to see Stephen, they must let old Dutchy's fruit alone, and when Spike took it upon himself to violate this rule of conduct it was the capable Reddy who blacked his eye.

In the end Stephen came to see more of Reddy than he did of either of the other boys, and he finally asked Benson's permission to have him in to play—and would he please tell Peter not to chase him out of the yard.

Benson seemed to think it well that he should have a playfellow of his own age, that is, if this playfellow were a good boy; and Stephen answered diplomatically, that Reddy was always a very good boy when he was in the yard.

“Oh, then you have had him in, Stephen?” and Benson laughed.

“Yes, but only near the fence; he's afraid of Dutch—of Peter.”

“Well, if he behaves himself as well as you say he does, I guess Peter won't interfere with him. I'll tell him not to. What's his name?”

“Reddy,” said Stephen, for beyond this he did not know that his friend had a name.

Fortunately this meant nothing to Benson who had never heard of any such boy.

When Reddy was informed that he was free to play in the grounds, he inspected the entire premises with wary caution, and could not on the first visit be induced to go within several hundred yards of the gardener. Yet on a subsequent visit Peter coming upon the small sinner quite unexpectedly, presented him with a red apple, and thus peace and good-will was established between them.

“After that I'll never yell belly full of beer at him any more,” said Reddy contritely.

Stephen would have liked to introduce him to the splendours of the house itself, but he never succeeded in this; nothing would induce Reddy to enter it; and he fled instantly at sight of Mrs. Pope; which, after all, was perhaps just as well, as she saw him but vaguely through glasses which she was never quite able to bring to bear upon him in season, and so he escaped identification which could only have resulted disastrously. She said he seemed a shy child.

But Benson was preparing for Stephen's future in accordance with certain theories of his own. Business had taken him East during the summer, and while there he had visited several boys' schools. At last he found just such an institution as he was looking for. It was both a school and a home. Here Stephen would have the care he could not himself give him, he would have proper associates of his own age, and there would be no danger of his acquiring false and harmful ideas as he grew older as to his expectations in life. It was no part of the lawyer's plan that the boy should be brought back to Benson, at least, not until his habits and judgments were formed. As to his promise to Virginia that she should not be wholly separated from Stephen, it had already become irksome to him. Stephen was his care, his responsibility; no part of it would he share with her; the boy must learn to look to him for everything.

His farewells were a bitter, grievous thing to Stephen. They came quick upon Benson's return home, and the parting with his Aunt Virginia, and his Aunt Jane, and Harriett, and the baby, tore his small heart as no grief that had yet entered into his life had torn it. The very stability of things seemed to shake under him; he was stunned and stupefied. He was to go so far away, he could not see his Aunt Virginia, his Aunt Jane, Harriett, or the baby—and the boys! He would probably never see Spike, or Reddy, or Benjamin Wade again!

The promise of a return to Benson the next summer, which the lawyer had not been able to deny him, was no comfort to him. If the intervening months had been years they could not have been more terrible to him.

This knowledge that he was to go away, and his farewells at the cottage, all fell on one sad afternoon that he remembered long afterward with a dreadful sinking of the heart. Then Mrs. Pope appeared with Peter and the carriage, and as Virginia led him down the path to the gate, she said:

"You will not forget to love us, Stephen dear; and it will not be for so very long, for you will come back next summer;" and so she surrendered him with a final kiss to Mrs. Pope.

Stephen shrank into his seat as they were driven away; he did not trust himself to look back at the little group they were leaving, for he was aware that Mrs. Pope was not sympathetic when small boys were moved to tears, since grief was quite as objectionable to her as any crude or noisy expression of joy.

When they reached home, he walked disconsolately in the garden. He hoped Reddy, or Spike, or Benjamin Wade, would visit him in his misery and sickness of spirit, for they had not heard the tragic news, and he would have greatly valued an expression of opinion from one of them. And as he was hoping that one of them might come, he heard a shrill familiar whistle, and Reddy appeared from the back alley.

Stephen told the sorrowful news, and as he told it, strange things happened to Reddy's face. Then all at once he burst into loud wailings, and turning from Stephen, fled across the green lawn, down the shaded rows between the grape arbours, through the apple orchard, through a hole in the fence, and disappeared in the alley beyond. It was in vain that Stephen called after him, shakingly, chokingly:

"Reddy! Reddy, come back! That ain't near all! Oh, please, Reddy, come back!"

With the last flutter of Reddy's ragged jacket in the distance, Stephen's heart seemed to break. He threw himself face down on the ground, and wept bitterly.

The next day he was led resolutely to the 'bus by Mrs. Pope, where his Uncle Jacob had preceded him, and whither his small trunk had already been conveyed; and as he slowly took his seat beside the lawyer, he glanced from the window and saw across the lawn three small bare-legged figures in the street.

It was Reddy, with Spike, and Benjamin Wade; they had assembled to see him off, and now, as he left the grounds, they cheered him lustily. At least, Ben and Spike did, for Reddy, in the gutter was turning handsprings—his most valued accomplishment—with bewildering rapidity, to hide his emotions; while descending upon the three, Stephen caught sight of Peter armed with a garden rake. This was the last he saw of them; for though he looked again and again, his eyes were blinded with tears.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

IN the silence and solitude of his home, by his winter fireside, Benson diagnosed his own case. His, he knew, was a moral malady. The years had given him everything save happiness; and because he had not happiness he was sick. Life had been worse than wasted.

It was in the final analysis that he reduced his case to this. He was aware that it was not alone in his relation to Virginia that he had changed; he knew that he had grown hard, and none too scrupulous; that while his outward manner remained one of consideration and kindness even, he had developed a secret passion for accumulation. This had been of steady growth. He desired wealth and power, not in any very wide sense perhaps, since he was content to be the great man of his own little community.

He compared himself with what he could recall of his father, and knew that he was reverting to the strongly marked family type. He was becoming more and more the shrewd New Englander. The receding sap of pioneer times was leaving him dry and externally emotionless. Men seemed to understand the change. They came to him less often now than formally with generous projects, more often with money-making schemes. In these he was always interested.

Yet throughout he had preserved a cynical contempt for himself, with a latent feeling of pity, too; for he knew just the sort of man he had been, just the sort of man he had become; and he blamed Virginia. Indeed he had come to blame her for each corrupting influence to which he had yielded, and since he blamed her, he wanted her to feel the force of his resentment. The boy had given him this opportunity in the fullest measure. He had removed him from her home, he had sent him from Benson, and he was determined that she should not see him again until it suited his whim to be generous. This might be a year hence, or it might be ten years hence; he only knew that it would not be until his mood changed, until he was ready to show kindness to her.

Thus it was that Stephen's first summer was passed entirely in the East. Benson told Virginia it was better that he should become thoroughly accustomed to his surroundings; that to bring him home would only be to unsettle him. But he himself went East and Stephen spent two weeks with him.

The second year passed much as the first had done, and now Virginia understood that Benson wished to wholly separate her from the boy.

The lawyer had arranged that she should receive periodic reports as to his health and progress. As these were always satisfactory, she had no grounds for demanding that he should be brought back. She had Stephen's own letters, too, which after he had outgrown his first feeling of homesickness, showed that he was quite happy and contented. But with the passing of time his letters became more and more perfunctory.

Benson he saw once or twice each year, and his affection steadily strengthened toward him. His Uncle Jacob was able and generally quite willing to confer most tangible benefits, he could not have been more generous, nor have shown a greater readiness to do for him in all reasonable ways; and Stephen early learned that an appeal to him was certain of results. These benefits might be accompanied by admonitory hints as to the folly of extravagance, but he could always skip these hints, and the lawyer's check was an

asset that gave him great prestige among his fellows.

He was fortunate in his teachers perhaps, and it was all in his favour that he was constitutionally predisposed to good influences, and that they made a lasting impression on him; since his development was largely a matter of chance, he might easily have gone very far wrong and no one been the wiser.

After the first two or three years at school, he gave up all idea, as he lost all desire, to return to Benson. His summers were passed agreeably enough just where he was. He could safely count on his Uncle Jacob coming East during his vacation, and then there were pleasant trips to the mountains or seashore.

Benson rarely spoke of his aunt to him. He early sensed it that they were not friends, and he adapted himself to what he considered the lawyer's prejudices. He gradually ceased to inquire about Reddy or Benjamin Wade or Spike, for here the lawyer's information was meagre and uncertain; and after a few years his Aunt Virginia, the boys, Peter the gardener, and Mrs. Pope the housekeeper, fitted into the background of those hazy memories that now made up the substance of his life in the Ohio town. He came more and more to think of the lawyer as a solitary man without friendships or associations, and save in his own case, as both lonely and unapproachable. It would have surprised him not a little had he been told that in his own circle Benson was a powerful and dominating figure, even sinister at times, with concerns and interests whose magnitude exceeded anything he could have imagined possible.

His feeling of mingled tenderness and pity increased as he grew toward manhood. He wished his Uncle Jacob could be made fully aware of his affection, but he was always conscious that there was something in the lawyer's manner that repelled any emotional display; that beneath his kindly dignity, the fibre of his nature was cold and hard. The utter barrenness of his life, as the boy imagined it, explained this. It was the awkwardness of one who had lived much in solitude, with few intimates and fewer friends.

He had been away at school ten years, when something occurred which took him back to the very limits at which his memory was active, and which showed him that Benson might have intimacies of which he did not know. He had written for money, and instead of the usual letter from Benson, there came one in a strange hand. Mr. Benson was absorbed in important litigation, the writer said, and had requested him to see to the mailing of the enclosed draft; the writer also ventured the hope that his young friend had not altogether forgotten him, in spite of the years that had intervened since their last meeting. The letter was signed with a flourish, Nathan Gibbs.

Stephen remembered vaguely that there was such a man, but whether he really remembered him, or only remembered having been told of him, he could not have said. He wondered though how long Gibbs had been in Benson, and why his Uncle Jacob had never mentioned him.

Gibbs, once started on the down grade, had gone from bad to worse. There had been ten doleful years during which he had sunk lower and lower. Now and again he had made a manful rally to recover his lost estate, but it was no use. Finally such a point was reached that his Julia took matters into her own hands. She had written Benson, and her letter had been an urgent appeal for assistance. The lawyer had heeded it, but he had no intention of helping Gibbs at arm's length. If he was to make himself responsible for the general's future, he would have to be close at hand where he could keep him under some sort of surveillance.

He had made his arrangement with Julia—the general appeared quiescent and was not considered—and Julia, with the memory of those ten hard years eating into her soul, was now only too glad to return to Ohio.

As Benson had desired it, the pair came direct to him. He was rather dubious as to what the outcome would be, and when he met them at the station one cold November afternoon, he owned sadly to himself that the general's appearance was not calculated to inspire one with confidence.

After dinner Mrs. Pope and Julia retired to the drawing-room, leaving the two men to their cigars. It was then that Gibbs grew confidential, he had been merely garrulous before.

“This was right handsome of you, Jake,” he said feelingly. “But that letter of Julia's was her own inspiration. I didn't know about it until she had yours in reply; I guess she wanted to spare me if you said no. Now how are you going to use me? I want to be useful. Put me to work, Jake; no matter what it is, I'm your man!” He stepped jauntily to the fireplace, and spreading his legs far apart, entrenched himself on the hearth rug.

The lawyer watched him over the tip of his cigar. He saw that in spite of the gay show of spirit, his hands twitched, that his puffy face was scarlet, while what hair time had left him was snow white. He had aged, too, in those years, so that Benson would scarce have known him. Yet Julia had done what she could for him. His clothes were new, his linen fresh, and the lawyer correctly surmised that he had himself met the cost of this excellent outfit. It was a long glance back to Gibbs of the *True Whig*; florid, good-looking, good-natured, aggressive Nathan Gibbs, who had made love to Levi Tucker's wife, under Levi Tucker's very nose, in Levi Tucker's own Red Brick Tavern on the square. He had not withheld his hand; he had taken ruthlessly what he had desired—Tucker's wife, Tucker's life, and he had spent Tucker's fortune.

Benson's lips parted in a slight smile. If ever a man had gone swiftly to his desires, Gibbs was that man. Chance had been more than generous—as generous as it had been to him—the smile left his lips. He frowned; surely he had nothing in common with Gibbs—no analogy was possible!

“What are you going to do for me, Jake?” insisted Gibbs. An inner sense of things told him that he must have at least a semblance of occupation, that idleness would be his ruin. “Make a place for me somewhere, Jake, I don't care what it is,” he pleaded. “Give me something that will keep me busy.” He was silent for a minute and puffed greedily at his cigar, with coarse protruding lips. “I been brought down to hell, Jake, I've seen the sides of the pit.” He said at last. “I never could do anything after Grant City busted. You can't see where it was now. I been away from there for seven or eight years, in Kansas City and back in St. Louis, but I never got a grip on things; and when I began to hear people talking about old Gibbs, I got the notion that I was counted past my prime. Well, I couldn't pull up; a man's luck and a man's habits generally travel in company when he's sixty odd. But you've put stiffening in my backbone. My Julia will have no cause to complain from now on. A woman of remarkable force of character, Jake—you'll recognize that when you come to know her better. Now how are you going to use me? We ain't settled that yet.”

“I don't know yet; I can't tell,” said Benson slowly.

Gibbs's face clouded.

“Look here, Jake, don't you take up with any snap judgment that I'm past my usefulness; just give me a chance. Because a man's no longer of much account to himself, it don't necessarily follow that he's no good to any one else.”

Yet when Benson found work for him in his office, where Gibbs made himself useful in the collecting of rents, the overlooking of repairs, and the drawing up of leases, this meekness of his changed somewhat. While Benson was able for the most part to keep him within reasonable bounds, there were periods when he relapsed; when he swiftly sounded the depths of his degradation; and from these periods he emerged with much contrition and a multitude of promises as to his future behaviour. He accepted Benson's severity, which was often bitter and unsparing, with wonderful gentleness, acquiescing in all the hard things Benson found to say of him.

“I don't defend myself, Jake,” in a tone of miserable despondency. “Ain't it just hell, the beast a man will make of himself; and an old man like me who ought to have some pride to keep him up! It ain't as if I'd been bred to the gutter. If I do say it, I been something of a man in my day. I've worn Uncle Sam's uniform and I've carried his commission, but here I am making a spectacle of myself for people to point at. You can't trust me, and I can't trust myself—I wonder I don't end it; but it's harder on Julia, Jake—I pity myself, but I pity her more;” and his bloodshot eyes would fill with ready tears.

He was not an agreeable sight at such times, but the next day he would be himself again; the man of the world; the man who had mingled in large affairs, and to whom other men had deferred and conceded, paying court; and he was ready to criticise his patron's business methods, his exactness in matters of detail; inferring plainly that his own methods had been suited to bigger things, bigger stakes, and a wider outlook.

Benson's attitude was one of mingled tyranny and kindness. For days together he limited his intercourse with the general to sharp commands, indicating unmistakably that he preferred to see just as little of him as possible; but Gibbs always met his severity with an air of large and genial tolerance. Again Benson's mood would be one of studied consideration and friendship, when he would seem to invite the intimacy Gibbs was always anxious to thrust upon him. To Gibbs's expansive temperament, affection was as much a part of his life as the air he breathed; and since he could no longer glorify himself, he ended by glorifying the friend who had shouldered his burdens for him. He showed a tactful consideration for Benson's habits and prejudices, he was tirelessly useful, he dealt in pleasant flatteries, and he boasted privately to his Julia that he could wind Jake Benson around his little finger.

In the very first stages of their relation Benson had merely tolerated the shabby old man; he rebelled against the anxiety he always felt when Gibbs was not promptly at the office each morning, and there were times when he would have been glad to be rid of him on any terms; but in the end he succumbed to Gibbs. There was no resisting him. He had lived alone all his life, and the general's willingness to fit into his rather empty existence, to be silent or talkative as his mood was, to share his feelings and adopt his point of view, made him more dependent than he realized; but above all he felt the glow of Gibbs's affection, and understood that it was as sincere as any emotion he had ever known, as sincere in its way as his love for himself.

From seeing him only at the office, and limiting their intercourse largely to matters of business, he came by degrees to depend more and more upon him for society. Day after day he took him home to dine with him; and this intimacy, as it strengthened, was the very breath of life to Gibbs. The luxury of Benson's well-appointed house and table, the rich wines he was allowed to use in moderation, these, to his pagan soul were the very end and aim of existence. At the office, where only petty concerns were entrusted to him, he was on the whole unobtrusive enough; but in Benson's house, the great man's chosen guest and boon companion, he relaxed and was at home, too. .

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

STEPHEN had not been able to believe in the reality of his home going until he was settled in the cab that bore him swiftly across the city. He had made so many trips into New York, that his journey of the night before had not been at all convincing; but the squat ferry-house which he now approached from a tangle of crowded streets was new to him, and with the salt breeze blowing full in his face, and the Jersey river-front brilliant in the sunlight beyond, he could feel that he was really going home, that his college days were over, and belonged to a phase of his experience that he had definitely put behind him.

As he hurried aboard the ferry, trim, well built, and more than commonly blessed in the way of good looks, he was jostled by a young fellow carrying a large yellow leather satchel, conspicuously new, who turned with a muttered apology; and Stephen saw a tanned face, the lips partly concealed by a small moustache several shades darker than the shock of bushy red hair inclined to curl, that almost reached the low turned-down linen collar he wore. There was something oddly familiar in the face, which without being in any way handsome, was not unattractive. It might have been merely some trick of expression, but while Stephen was struggling vainly to remember where they could have met before, the crowd separated them. Yet later when he took his place in the line that had formed at the gate, the yellow satchel was just ahead of him.

He followed it down the long platform, and when he went aboard his car, he found it on one of the seats of the section he was to occupy. He settled himself with his newspaper and was absorbed in its perusal, when the owner of the satchel emerged from the smoking compartment at the other end of the car. Stockily built and very muscular, he came swinging down the aisle to drop loosely into the seat opposite him.

Stephen glanced over the top of his paper and caught his eye, shrewd, inquiring, with the least suggestion of a squint, fixed upon him. His first feeling was still so strong, that he was impelled to say, putting aside his paper:

"I beg your pardon, but haven't I met you somewhere before?"

"No, sir, I guess not," rejoined the stranger, and his clear blue eye narrowed.

"Probably I was mistaken after all," said Stephen apologetically. He would have stopped with this, but the other now asked abruptly.

"You ever been West, my friend?"

"What do you call the West?"

"Well, not Jersey;" and he grinned, and jerked his thumb in the direction of the flat landscape beyond the car-window. "Say Colorado."

Stephen shook his head. The other slid deeper into his seat and extended his legs. He was apparently grateful for the opportunity Stephen had given him for speech.

"Give me Denver or Kansas City; those are what I call towns, and Omaha's a right bustling little burg, too; but I'm coming back here when I make a million. It ain't in my class now; it's no place for yearlings."

Then he became communicative. Colorado was his State; he was in cattle; he had been in mines, but cattle suited him better, and he had been lucky. This luck of his was evidently such a recent matter that it was plain to Stephen he had not yet fully accustomed himself to it.

"You fooled me, too, for a fact. I had the same notion you had," he said, suddenly renewing the conversation which after a little time they had permitted to lapse.

"What notion was that?" asked Stephen pleasantly.

"Why the notion that we'd met somewhere. These resemblances are mighty curious; ain't they? You look like a fellow I've seen, but to save my life I can't say where."

There was another pause. He stared at Stephen, and Stephen stared back with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Did you say you were going through to Chicago?" the young fellow asked.

"No, no further than Ohio. The central part of the State, to a place—" suddenly it flashed upon Stephen who he was. He leaned forward and smilingly held out his hand. "Why, you're Reddy!" he exclaimed.

The other started. He shot Stephen a quick glance.

"You're dead sure about that, my friend?" he demanded. "You ain't just chancing it on the colour of my hair?"

"Yes, I am dead sure. Don't you remember me? I'm Stephen—. Stephen Landray."

"Well, of course! I'd been almost willing to bet money I knew you!" cried Reddy. "But I wasn't looking to meet you here. Say, where you going anyhow?" and he wrung the hand Stephen had extended, with visible feeling.

"I am going home—home to Benson. I have not been back in twelve years."

"What you been doing anyhow, in business somewhere?"

"No, college," said Stephen.

"Well, you took your time to it," commented Reddy, in quite evident surprise.

"I am afraid I did," and Stephen laughed. He was aware that he had not distinguished himself. "But of course you have been back?" he added.

"Oh, yes, once, to see the old lady. I expect I was a good deal of bother before I got sense; but I'm going to make it up to her right here and now." He kicked the yellow satchel, which he had displaced when he took his seat. "I got it full of truck for her. I tell you, Landray, I've had my eyes opened. There's a girl—" he blushed under his tan—"she made me feel cheap, the way I'd always acted; never thinking much of any one but myself. She's got me committed to a programme that'll astonish the old lady. I'm going to give her the time of her life regardless of expense." He slapped his knees, and laughed aloud. "She"—Stephen understood that he was speaking of the young lady who had been the instrument of his regeneration—"went for me so my eyes stuck out. I expect you could have snared 'em off with inch rope—but I was a made man, my friend, when she got through with me. I saw a whole heap of things as plain as day, and I'm going to blow myself in making it up to the old lady. I'm going to take her to Colorado with me."

"When were you at Benson last, Reddy?" asked Stephen.

"Let me see—about three years ago. I did the wild West for 'em. Say, Landray, I was an awful chump; I was the cowboy every minute, and don't you forget it; wore a sombrero and all that sort of rotten nonsense; but this trip—well, that girl said it would have to be a derby, and what she says, goes here. It's got to, my friend, for you see she's been to Vassar, and knows lot a more than I ever expect to."

Stephen laughed.

"Well, Reddy, her instruction don't seem to have been wasted on you."

"I hope it ain't, for I want to get next the right thing. I'll take a hunch off most any one, and say thank you for it."

"What's become of Benjamin Wade, and Spike?" asked Stephen.

"Well, I guess no one knows anything about Spike. You see his folks moved away from Benson years ago; but Wade's there yet, he's a lawyer. You'll like him, Landray, everyone's got a good word for Ben."

Then Reddy began to question Stephen, and after he had made himself familiar with the salient points in his career, he spoke of himself more freely than he had yet done, and incidentally told many strange tales of the West. But to Stephen the strangest of all was the story of his luck. He had gone to Colorado with a cattle dealer the year after Stephen left Benson; in short, he fulfilled his early promise, and ran away. He had helped the cattle dealer West with a load of registered stock, and had reached Denver with only the few

dollars saved from his wages, in his pocket. From there, he had drifted into the Black Hills, where after years of varying fortune he struck it rich in a modest way, and had found himself possessed of the sum of ten thousand dollars. This he had put in cattle, and had prospered exceedingly. But this was not all—there was a girl; the same girl who had pointed out to him his duty in the case of his mother; her name was Margaret Rogers, and to her, Reddy had given his soul.

“I wish you could know her, Landray,” he said. “Maybe you think it's against her that it's settled between us; that's about how I'd look at it, for I can't see what she finds in a proposition like me to tie up to. It ain't that I've made my little pile, for Colonel Rogers is worth a cool million.”

It was plain to Stephen that Reddy had drunk deep of the spirit of the West. That night they sat in the smoker, under the dim lamps, and talked until it was almost day, and through the next day; and as nightfall came again, they rolled into Benson, with Reddy “dry tongued and plumb talked out.”

Here they separated. Reddy was keen, as he expressed it, to hit the trial for the old lady's shack, and Stephen watched him disappear, tugging at the yellow satchel, heavy with his peace offering, the truck he was taking to her; then as the crowd thinned out from about him, he glanced around. He had more than half-expected that Benson would be there to welcome him.

As he stared about him for a sight of the familiar figure, some one touched him on the arm. He turned, and saw a shabby old gentleman, with a red puffy face and a fringe of white hair showing beneath the rim of his dingy silk hat.

“Steve”—the old man spoke in a husky tremor, as if his emotions were about to master him—“Steve, my dear boy, how are you?”

Landray owned to a feeling of mystification, but since the stranger appeared on terms of such intimacy with him, he gave him his hand.

“'You don't know me; well, it was hardly to be expected you would.”

“Oh, yes, I do!” cried Stephen quickly, a light breaking in on him. “You are General Gibbs.” But he had pictured the general as erect, grizzled, of military aspect; hale and vigorous, with the righteous years he had lived. This grossly fat old man, was a distinct shock; the touch of his clammy hands, the pressure of his tremulous fingers, for Gibbs now held the hand he had given him in both his own, was almost repulsive.

“Surely, it ain't possible that you remember me, Steve?” cried Gibbs. “I reckon you knew Jake wouldn't send any one but me to meet you. Here, let me carry your satchel—no? Well, come this way then to the carriage. Your Uncle Jake wasn't feeling just himself to-night. Oh, nothing serious. Odd, though, ain't it—I'm a good ten years his senior, and I say it without pride, Steve, I've lived a faster life than he has, and I don't know what sickness is. My dear boy, I'm glad to see you, I've been the friend, the intimate associate, of two generations of Landrays, and you're to make the third; for we'll keep up the ancient custom, trust me for that. Are you quite comfortable?”

They were seated in the carriage now.

“Oh, quite,” said Stephen. His first impression of the general was distinctly and unqualifiedly unfavourable. Gibbs was speaking again.

“It's quite a coincidence that I should meet you, Steve; of course you don't remember it, but I brought you here after your poor father's death. He was my very dear friend, we were like brothers. We had been comrades-in-arms, and we were in business together almost up to the time of his death.” Gibbs was industriously swabbing his face with his handkerchief as he spoke. Stephen was silent. He did not know just how to take this old friend of his father's, the wealth of whose emotions embarrassed him, and he was greatly relieved when the carriage turned from the paved street into a gravelled drive, and he knew his journey's end was reached.

The house door opened, and Benson appeared on the threshold. Stephen sprang from the carriage and ran quickly up the steps. Gibbs followed more slowly, with the coachman and the luggage.

“Right up to his room, Andrew—the front room over the library,” Gibbs ordered. He turned to Benson. “I suppose Steve will want to go up-stairs too, Jake. Hadn't I better show him the way?”

Benson gave Stephen a quiet smile.

“I am quite in Gibbs's hands,” he said. “He has been in consultation with the cook for over a week, preparing the dinner we shall sit down to presently.”

“Good Heavens, Jake, I didn't want the lad to starve,” said the general, as, bustling and eager, he led the way up-stairs. While Stephen was busy removing the signs of travel from his face and hands, he established himself in an easy-chair from which he beamed affectionately upon the young fellow.

“Jake's in the hands of his servants. They never do anything for him if it puts them to the least trouble, but they stand about for me! Damn 'em, I give 'em a taste of army discipline now and then, and a good rousing cussing when I think they need it. I don't know what he'd do if it wasn't for me, since Mrs. Pope went away. I reckon you remember her, Steve?”

“Oh, yes.”

In the fuller light, Gibbs seemed more unprepossessing than ever, and there was that about him which explained as fully as spoken words could have done, the cause and nature of his dependence on Benson. Stephen saw in their relation, as he now understood it, only a manifestation of the lawyer's charity and goodness.

It was Gibbs who kept the conversation alive during dinner. He called upon Stephen to admire each course as it was served, it was all his idea, he had battered sense into their heads in the kitchen. They slouched for Jake, but they knew a whole lot better than to try that on him; he made 'em stand around. But presently this topic was exhausted. Stephen turned to Benson.

“Do you remember a boy called Reddy, Uncle Jake, a little fellow I used to play with before I went away to school?” he asked.

“Riley Crittendon, you mean, he was back here some years ago. He is doing very well in the West,” said the

lawyer.

"I made the trip from New York with him. Yes, he says he is very successful."

"His mother rents one of Jake's houses—nice little old lady—not so very old either," said Gibbs.

"He told me about another of my friends, Benjamin Wade," said Stephen. "Reddy says he's a lawyer."

"A very clever one, too, which I suppose he didn't tell you," said Benson.

"And a young fellow who is going to travel far and fast, if some one don't stop him," said Gibbs grumpily.

"Gibbs don't like him any too well," said Benson.

"Humph! He never courted my approval; I reckon he'll flourish like a green bay tree without it. I saw Mrs. Landray to-day, Steve—your Aunt Virginia." added Gibbs abruptly. "I told her you were expected home. I reckon she'll look to see you to-morrow."

Benson frowned slightly at this.

"I have a vivid recollection of Aunt Virginia," said Stephen.

"You ought to," said Gibbs, turning a sudden purple. "I fetched you here to her, and you lived with her for a while; but you were only a little fellow then, Steve. It ain't to be wondered that your memory don't travel back into the past as freely as mine does. She was a second mother to your father."

Stephen was less and less disposed to like this shabby disreputable old man. He wondered why it was that Benson tolerated him at his dinner-table, and his wonder grew as the dinner progressed; for Gibbs taking advantage of the occasion applied himself diligently to the wine, and with disastrous results. As he relapsed from sobriety, his conversation became questionable; he was profane, and he was vulgar; or in recalling the past, to which he constantly reverted, he went swiftly from drunken sentiment to drunken tears. At last Benson stretched out a hand and took the bottle from before him.

"You've had enough, Gibbs. We'll go into the library," he said coldly.

"Oh, come now, Jake—don't we make a night of it?" expostulated Gibbs. But Benson merely pushed back his chair and rose from the table. Stephen followed his example, and the general scrambled uncertainly to his feet. He took Stephen by the arm in an access of affection.

"He screws me down most damnably, Steve—cross him, and you'll find him a tyrant; he knows I wanted to celebrate your return—the return of the native—it's an event! Jake and I here are selfmade men, but you belong to the old aristocracy. You may not think it, but the West's had its first families."

"I always supposed the Bensons were of their number," said Stephen.

"The Bensons! Shop-keepers, Steve—mere money getters; isn't that so, Jake?"

"I fear it is, Gibbs," said Benson laughing, as he led the way from the room.

In the library the general promptly fell asleep in his chair. The lawyer nodded toward him.

"You'll find him better than he looks," he said.

"He seems devoted to you," said Stephen, at a loss for anything else to say in his favour.

"Yes, so he is." Benson was thoughtful for a moment. "I shouldn't have permitted him to get in this condition," he said with real concern. "It won't please my cousin, and I owed it to him to see that he did not. You must be tired. I'll call Andrew and have him take Gibbs home."

The next morning Stephen was roused by hearing some one knock at his door. Thinking that it was Andrew, who in his person seemed to combine the functions of coachman and butler, he called to him to enter; but in place of Andrew, Gibbs opened the door. Gibbs, sober, and with a flower in his buttonhole, a sprig of scarlet geranium, and his tall hat held gracefully and jauntily over his forearm.

"Good-morning, Steve!" he cried. "How did you rest, you weren't expecting me, eh?" he chuckled. "I want to see your Uncle Jake. Think he's aged any?"

"No, I can't say that I do, but you know I saw him quite recently."

"So you did, when he was East during the winter. You are going to see your Aunt Virginia the first thing; ain't you, Steve?"

Stephen looked at him sharply. He could not understand just why Gibbs should be interested in what he did.

"I suppose I'll go there some time to-day," he said.

"Go there the first thing," urged Gibbs. "He'll expect you to. If you don't, he'll score it up against you." He dropped his voice to a confidential whisper.

"He—who?" asked Stephen.

"Your Uncle Jake."

"He never mentions her."

"And never will," said Gibbs. "But that don't mean he don't think about her. You take my advice and go there the first thing. I know Jake Benson better than you do. He's an amiable mass of contradictions, I reckon it's the Yankee in him."

"I thought; I don't know why, but I thought always that they were not even friendly."

"She ain't," said Gibbs significantly, and chuckled again. "I expect if she ever eases her mind about him, you'll hear things; but just let me tell you this, he ain't going to like it if you are anyways remiss in your duty to her. Humph! there's the bell, I'll leave you to dress."

When Stephen went down-stairs he found Gibbs and Benson at breakfast.

"I thought I'd come round and see if you had any orders, Jake," Gibbs was saying briskly. "I didn't know that you'd want to go to the office to-day, there's no need of it."

"I'll go down as usual, unless Stephen—"

"I think I shall go to my aunt's immediately after breakfast," said Stephen. He had decided to profit by Gibbs's advice and see what came of it, but apparently nothing came of it, the lawyer's face was quite

expressionless, he showed neither satisfaction nor displeasure, but it was Gibbs who offered to accompany Stephen to his aunt's.

"No, sir," said Gibbs, taking the young man's arm as they gained the street. "I never been able to understand Jake's relation to your aunt;" then with an impressive show of confidence, "I rather think, though, that he's been in love with her. That's the only explanation that offers itself to my mind. Years and years ago I thought this, at the time he went West to find your grandfather—no, you never heard about that, I'll tell you when we have more leisure. Little things your father told me confirmed me in that opinion; but bless you, there was a time when the Bensons were not counted much, and the Landrays were everything. Time's rather upset these conditions, but your Aunt Virginia has not forgotten and never will. I reckon Jake Benson's money never impressed her; but whatever his personal feelings for her have been or are, he has the greatest respect for her. He wouldn't think well of you if you failed there either, though I don't know that he'd be above feeling a certain satisfaction that he'd gotten the best of her where you're concerned. You understand, that's merely one of the contradictions of his nature, for at heart Jake's as sound as a dollar, one of the best and truest hearted of men. He's been like an elder brother to me, and I love and revere him; but damn him, I'm not blind to his little faults. It would be no compliment to him if I were; no, nor no kindness either."

Arriving at the cottage, Gibbs parted from Stephen at the gate.

"You'll be making her very happy, Steve," he said, as he left the young man.

A maid answered Stephen's ring, and he was shown into Virginia's small parlour. He had scarcely time to glance about him when Virginia came swiftly into the room.

"Dear Stephen, it was so good of you to come at once," she said, as she advanced with outstretched hands, and he realized that for some reason which he did not understand, he was much to her, and that he had made her very happy, as Gibbs had said he would. He kissed her and led her to a chair.

"It wasn't good of me, for I wanted to see you."

"You hadn't forgotten your old aunt? I was almost afraid."

"Old!" he scoffed. "Have you no one to pay you compliments, Aunt Virginia?"

He had been genuinely surprised. In her way Virginia was as far removed from the commonplace as was Benson himself; only, he could not have analysed it, her distinction was the finer, rarer thing. She was younger, too, than he had expected to find her; for while Benson's appearance added years to his actual age, she still retained her youth in an unusual degree.

She searched Stephen's face with tender concern.

"Am I at all satisfactory?" he laughed.

"Yes, you are wholly a Landray, Stephen," she said. "You look, dear, as your father did at your age. You are older than he was when he went to the war; yes, you look as he did. All the Landray men have the same look, and you could never be mistaken for any one but a Landray."

"Some day you must tell me about my father," he said gently, entering into her mood.

"I shall, for you must be interested in your family, it's a duty, you're the last Landray. I shall have a great deal to tell you. You are through college?"

"Yes, I am home for good."

"What are your plans, Stephen?" said Virginia a little anxiously. She wished he might understand how uncertain a prop Benson could be; she did not want him to rely on the lawyer, but she forebore to tell him this. There might come a time when she could, but clearly now was not that time.

"I haven't any," and Stephen laughed easily.

"But you have selected a profession."

Stephen looked at her with dark puzzled eyes.

"No, my one idea has been to get through with what I had in hand and come home."

"Then you do regard this as home, Stephen?"

"Most certainly. Uncle Jake has kept that idea before me—I am to make my start here."

"He is quite right in that; you belong in Benson, it is the home of your family."

"I am trying to cultivate an intense local pride," he assured her smiling, but he was not altogether pleased at the turn the conversation had taken. His future was not causing him any special anxiety, and he was not grateful for being reminded of it, it seemed unnecessary..

He was relieved when the conversation was interrupted as it now was by the entrance of Mrs. Walsh's small sombre figure, for she had never laid aside the mourning she had put on when Benson brought them the news of her husband's death. She was not alone, there followed her into the room a tall girl with rich masses of dark brown hair and dark hazel eyes, which Stephen was aware lighted up charmingly with shy recognition the moment they rested on him; they were instantly veiled by long dark lashes. Instinct told him that this was Harriett's pink-faced baby.

"I fear you will have to put me right, or I shall blunder terribly. It's Aunt Jane, of course;" but he looked beyond Mrs. Walsh to the slight graceful figure of the girl.

"This is my Harriett's Elinor," said Mrs. Walsh.

"We may be a little confusing at first, but there is only papa and mama, and my sister Clara," said Elinor as they shook hands.

"You were the baby when I was here before," Stephen said. "And where is Clara?"

"My sister is away from home, but there is some one here you will want to see, we were just speaking of you—Ben!" she called.

"Yes, Elinor," said a masculine voice from the hall, and a tall young fellow, rather shabbily dressed, but carrying himself with smiling self-confidence, entered the room. He was clean-shaven, and the outline of his shapely head was accented by his closely cropped black hair; his nose was long and prominent, his eyes black

like his hair, when he smiled, and he was smiling now, he disclosed two rows of white even teeth. His attitude toward Stephen from the first moment of their meeting was that of an old friend.

"It's awfully good to see you, Landray," he said.

"And it's good to see you, Benjamin Wade," said Stephen laughing. There was something about the young fellow which made his surname oddly unsuited to him.

"I haven't been called that in years, not since I outgrew corporal punishment, how many years ago it seems! I've seen Reddy, he hunted me up first thing this morning, and he told me you were home. I suppose you are going to stay with us?"

"Oh, yes. They tell me you are a lawyer, Ben."

Wade waved a hand deprecatingly at this.

"A weak limb of the law, Landray, and only just beginning to make trouble for my neighbours. Your aunt here was one of my first clients; and for a longer time than I care to tell, she enjoyed the proud distinction of being my only client."

"When you're famous, Ben, just think—that will be something for Aunt Virginia to boast of," said Elinor.

Ben turned toward her, and Stephen thought he detected a careworn look in his eyes. He smiled, but only with his lips, as he answered:

"Pray heaven, it won't be too long a time in coming, my dear girl!"

Somehow Stephen instantly resented their intimacy.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

REDDY took his mother West. It was a journey that he ===conducted with much ostentatious display, but the opportunities in this respect were far less extended than he could have wished. It was only when they were West of Chicago, however, that he felt perfectly at home; for out of Chicago the sleeper was crowded with men who talked tirelessly of cattle and mines, and who told how much they were worth, or any other little personal matter that might be accounted of general public interest, with simple candour and without shame. In their presence Reddy parted with the last vestige of suspicion that the conservative East had bred in him.

"These are the people!" he thought.

Mrs. Crittendon, a mild little woman who had not yet recovered from the shock of Reddy's reformation, and who regarded that redeemed young man with wordless awe, since it was all really too good to be true, bore him company with much inward trepidation. She was small and placid, with smooth grey hair neatly parted and plainly drawn back of her ears; she was not only small and slight, she was trim and graceful as well, with a youthful walk and sprightly carriage. The top of the small tight-fitting black bonnet that framed her face came just on a level with Reddy's broad shoulders. All her life had been spent in Benson, she had never been fifty miles away from there before; and she was the victim of a depressing fear that Reddy had made some fatal mistake in the train, and that they were speeding recklessly in the wrong direction; a circumstance it was impossible for her to conceive could end otherwise than tragically. Indeed the flippancy with which her son bought tickets and changed cars impressed her as bordering on a suicidal folly. Afterward she always said it was a mercy they reached the ranch; but Reddy never understood what she meant by this, and she never enlightened him. But reach the ranch they did—a trifling matter of forty miles from Carson, the nearest point on the railway—and in a cloud of dust, and behind a span of half-broken colts that were the apple of Reddy's eye. Here she began to adjust herself to the wide horizon, to the barrenness of the grey rolling plains, the distant fringe of mountain peaks.

Strangely enough she was not lonely; she hardly missed the gossiping friends she had parted from at Benson; she had Reddy, and there was the ranch foreman and the ranch foreman's wife who cooked for the boys, and the boys themselves, who spent their days either in idleness or on horseback. They had neighbours, too, whose ranches dotted a strip of territory that stretched away to the south a hundred miles, and to the north another hundred. With these, she discovered, Reddy maintained a sparse but cordial intimacy; many of them he saw as often as two or three times a year, but this was not true of all; there was Colonel Rogers, whose comfortable ranch house was distant a hard day's ride, and whose powerful patronage gave Reddy a position in that region he could not otherwise have had.

In due time the colonel and his wife drove over in a light buck-board for a stay of several days with Reddy and his mother, and while the ladies sat in the ranch parlour, which Reddy had furnished in hot and stuffy red plush, and exchanged confidences or gossiped; the two men, in their shirt-sleeves, sat on the top rail of the corral fence for the most part, smoked pipes, and talked cattle.

The colonel was a tall grizzled man, with a gentle kindly manner; no one would have supposed him a millionaire and a man of determined but quiet force of character, while Mrs. Rogers was a motherly woman, whose faith in the colonel—she always gave him this military title—had never experienced any shocks; and her reminiscences of the early days when as a young bride he had brought her into the country, impressed Mrs. Crittendon with a profound sense of that mild-mannered gentleman's capabilities. She was glad Reddy had such a friend.

But what impressed her most was that while they were on such intimate terms with her son, and though he was going to marry their daughter, they yet apparently knew nothing of him beyond such limited confidences

as he had chosen to indulge in; indeed Reddy's standing in the community seemed to be a strictly personal matter, and it belonged to the present absolutely. He had come into the country, a stranger with a bunch of cattle, he had proven himself an excellent neighbour, and above all he had not shown any desire to put his brand on cattle he had not paid for. She discovered that beyond the fact that Reddy originally came from Ohio, nothing was known of his antecedents. This discovery she made one day at dinner, and she proceeded to enlighten their guests; since to her, Reddy belonged as much to Benson as did the soldiers' monument on the square. She was well into the family history when the colonel, who had been placidly listening, suddenly put aside his knife and fork.

"What was that you said about a town called Benson?" he asked.

Mrs. Crittendon had merely said that Reddy had been born in Benson—she had given the year, the day of the month, and hour of his birth.

"Your home!" cried Rogers, and he gave his wife a glance. "Well, that beats me. Benson—Benson, Ohio—they fit together; you'd hardly believe it, ma'am, that for forty years I been wondering off and on where Benson was. I reckon I could have found out easy enough, but I never did; and I had pretty good reasons for wanting to know, too. Benson, Ohio—that's what he told me," he mused in silence for a moment, running his fingers through his grizzled beard.

"What do you want to know about Benson?" asked Reddy. "I guess I could have told you."

"Never heard you mention it, Riley," said the colonel. "And, well, I reckon you never heard me mention it either, but my folks were Benson folks, too." He turned to Mrs. Crittendon. "How long did you live in Benson, ma'am?"

"Always, I was born and reared there."

"Were you though—well, well! I wonder if you ever heard anything of a party that started West from there some time along about '49, as I reckon it?"

"The Landrays went," said Mrs. Crittendon promptly.

"Landray—that's the name! Landray—I ain't forgotten that. Now, hold on again, there was Landray and his brother, and a man by the name of Walsh, a youngish fellow as I remember him, and an oldish grey-whiskered man named—Bingham."

"He was my father's cousin," said Mrs. Crittendon.

"Was he, ma'am? Well, I declare! And there was my father, of course, and myself. I always wished I could meet some one who could tell me something about him."

"I have always heard it was a Rogers who brought the first news about the finding of gold in California," said Mrs. Crittendon.

"That must have been my father. I reckon now, you never saw him," said the colonel with regret.

"Not to remember him if I did."

"Well, of course not, you were too young. I wish I could recall more about him, for I've always thought that fight left things a sort of blank with me. I only remember what happened back of it by fits and starts. What I'd like to know, though, is how those folks in Ohio learned about the outfit and what come of it—or did they ever learn?"

"Mr. Benson went West to find out. It's too bad I don't know more, but I've only heard the older people talk about it. Mr. Benson was the Landrays lawyer, and people say he was in love with Stephen Landray's wife."

"Did she marry him?"

"No, she never married again, nor Mrs. Walsh either. She makes her home with Mrs. Landray mostly, though she's got a married daughter, Mrs. Norton."

"I wish you'd tell me something about the Landrays," said Rogers.

"Why, there is Mrs. Landray, and Stephen Landray, a young fellow just out of college," said Reddy.

"Whose son is he, Riley?" asked the colonel.

"Why he's Mrs. Landray's nephew," said Reddy.

"Her grand-nephew," corrected his mother. "He is Captain Landray's son."

"A soldier in the late war?"

"Yes."

Rogers hit the table sharply with his open hand.

"I swear then he's the man I met at Appomattox! You've seen him, ma'am, of course? What's become of him?"

"He's dead; he died years ago out in Kansas."

"And only Mrs. Landray and his son's left?"

"Yes, least I never heard of any others."

"Sort of makes me feel like the last leaf on the bough," the colonel stroked his grey beard reflectively. "This all fits into what I can call up. You know after the Indian fight, I was taken in and brought up by old man Raymond—Tom's father, Riley—you ain't forgot Tom?"

Reddy shook his head. Rogers chuckled.

"It takes all my influence to keep 'em from running Tom out of the country; Tom'll happen along here some day, ma'am, and you'll wonder why any one's prejudiced against Tom." The colonel's lady made as if to interrupt the conversation, but the colonel restrained her by a gesture. "I don't indorse Tom, but his father was a mighty good friend to me when friends were scarce, and that gives Tom a sort of hold; I've kind of made myself responsible for him. There never was a better man than old Ephriam Raymond, Mormon or no Mormon! He brought me up, and gave me my start in life; I ain't forgot that, and I reckon I'll put up with considerable of Tom's cussedness yet for his sake."

He was thoughtful for a moment. Ephriam Raymond had done all that he had said and more. That he had died while Rogers was still in the army, had always been a matter of keen regret to the latter; for Raymond's daughter had married years before, and had gone to the coast with her husband, an apostate Mormon, and there had only been Tom with him in his last sickness; Tom, who was always on the verge of trouble more or less serious. The colonel thought of all this, and regretted those vicissitudes which had left him with a vague and uncertain memory of his own father, and had separated him from his best friend at a time when he might have been of some comfort to him.

He turned with more questions to Mrs. Crittendon, but the Lan-drays and the Benson and California Mining and Trading Company, had long since taken their place among the traditions of the Ohio town. She had the sentiment of the tragedy rather than the details.

“Mr. Benson could tell you all you want to know; he must have known your father. He came West and brought back the news of the massacre; he could tell you all about the company, just who was in it, and everything.”

“Well, maybe some day I'll write him.”

“Why don't you do it to-night?” suggested Reddy.

“There's no such hurry,” said the colonel hastily. “Guess I'll wait until Margaret gets home. I'll have her write the letter for me.”

“You know you'll never write at all if you wait; do it now,” said Mrs. Rogers.

The colonel gave her a pleasant smile as he pushed back his chair and reached for his pipe.

“Just think of the jobs I've saved myself, mother, by putting them off. Half the things I make up my mind to do, I find by waiting ain't so urgent as I supposed; but I'm going to write that letter the first thing when Margaret gets back.”

The next day the colonel and Mrs. Rogers departed for home.

“Now bring your mother over soon,” urged Mrs. Rogers, as they prepared to drive away. “Don't wait for Margaret to finish her visit in Cheyenne.” Reddy blushed guiltily. This was exactly what he intended doing. “But just come whenever you can.”

The colonel added his voice to hers as they drove off, then he lapsed into silence at her side, and the silence endured for many miles. He was thinking of the conversation of the day before, and he was still groping vaguely among memories of the past. At last he turned to his wife, and began telling her of the trip across the plains, with the Landrays and his father. It was a confused narrative, for there seemed to be mingled with it incidents that belonged to another journey that had been made under different circumstances.

“Do you know, I'd like mightily to write to Mrs. Landray,” he said at last.

“Well, why don't you, colonel?”

“Well, maybe I will when Margaret gets back.”

It was dusk when they reached home, and as they drove up to the ranch house door, two men came out, hearing the sound of wheels, and to one of these the colonel surrendered his team. The other, a weazened swarthy man, touched him on the arm as he was about to enter the house.

“What is it?” he asked, turning back.

“Tom Raymond's here.”

The colonel groaned aloud. The speaker grinned. He was the ranch foreman, he had been with the colonel many years and he knew almost as much of Roger's affairs as Rogers did himself. He understood the nature of Raymond's hold on the colonel, and he regarded it as a conspicuous weakness on the part of an otherwise sane and rational man.

“What's the matter?” demanded Rogers.

“He's in trouble again, I reckon,” said the foreman.

“Well, was there ever a time when he wasn't?” asked Rogers with some show of temper.

“He wouldn't come up to the house, I happened on him out back of the corrals. He's hid in the old bunk-house he wants to see you the worst kind of a way.”

“Go tell my wife I've had to go down to the corrals. Tell her not to wait for me, but to eat,” said the colonel.

The old bunk-house was a small building of poles, now no longer used. It was remote from the house, and rarely visited; and toward it the colonel bent his steps in the gathering darkness. The bunk-house door was slightly ajar, and he pushed it open. The room was apparently empty, for he heard no sound. He struck a match, and in the momentary brightness he saw a man asleep in one of the bunks, a gaunt, loose-jointed man with long grey locks that fell to his shoulders. He had been sleeping with his head resting on his arm, and the light flashing full in his face roused him, he sprang up with a startled exclamation, and Rogers caught a sound which he understood perfectly.

“Put that up, Tom, it's only me,” he said composedly.

“Oh, it's you, Ben, old pardner? Didn't know who it was. When did you get back?”

“I just came. Buck told me you were here and wanted to see me.”

Tom had quitted the bunk, now he was sitting on the edge of it. Rogers could just distinguish his head with its thick unkempt thatch of grey hair, and his bulk of bone and muscle.

“Well, Ben,” he said in a drawling voice, “I reckon you're going to see the last of me; I reckon I'm going to quit the country this time. I've stayed mainly to be near you, old pardner, but I'm clean crowded out at last.”

The colonel was quite unmoved by the other's sentiment, he had heard the same thing before many times. Tom had come into a comfortable property on his father's death; this he had promptly squandered. He had gone from bad to worse—guide, scout, packer, and lastly buffalo hunter, who between debauches had done his part in the ruthless war of extermination which had been waged against the great herds of the plain; but the herds had disappeared, and this shiftless means of livelihood had gone with them. Sometimes he worked

with Roger's forces, but most of the time he spent in and about Carson, subsisting by means it was not well to inquire too closely into. He was counted a dangerous man, not that he had ever risen to any very splendid villainies, but he was a man that the other men shunned unless they were of his own class.

"What is it, Tom?" said Rogers, "You're in trouble, I suppose, or you wouldn't be here hiding."

"There was trouble in Carson," said Tom in a meditative drawl. "Benny, these here cow towns is the God forsakenest places in all this God forsaken country. Who'd a thought that me at my time of life, when I've always done what I thought was right—"

The colonel moved impatiently.

"Get down to business, Tom," he urged.

"Well, say Benny, can you stake me for a long jump? I reckon it'll be plumb to Texas this time."

"What have you done, Tom?" asked Rogers.

"I've shot a man, Ben."

"I reckoned so," said the colonel in a hard voice.

"A man that said I sold beef that hadn't 'airy brand of mine on it. Now that was a hell of a thing to say of a man who's always tried to act right and square."

"Who was it?"

"Which he knew it was a lie, and you know it was a lie, Benny."

"Who was it?" repeated Rogers.

"Chesney."

"Did you kill him?"

"I dunno. Hope so," said Tom indifferently. "I didn't wait to see, I just pushed out for here."

"And they'll be pushing after you."

"I reckon that's so all right, as soon as they can get together a posse."

"I can't have them find you here, Tom," said the colonel. "You know there's a limit—"

"I didn't think you'd show me your back! I've been a good friend to you, Ben, and if I hadn't been, father was. Can you deny that—no, sir!"

"He was the best friend I ever had."

"I'm glad you ain't forgot it, Ben Rogers! He gave you your start—you've always been man enough to own that."

"Don't you think I've about squared that with you?" said the colonel again impatiently.

"I ain't here to ask no favours, Benny, you can rest easy on that; I'm here to make a fair trade."

"Yes," said Rogers wearily. He was familiar with the old buffalo hunter's idea of a fair trade.

"You're seeing the last of me, Benny, you'll be clean shut of me when I hit the trail this time."

The colonel hoped so, though this hope did not find, expression in words.

"I'll want a good horse, for I played mine out getting here."

"Yes," said Rogers.

"And I want money—but hold on a minute, I got something I want to sell you, Ben. Yes, sir, I am going to make a fair trade; a thousand dollars."

"That's more than I can lay my hands on to-night, Tom, so come down to reason."

"Well, five hundred then," said Raymond eagerly.

"What's your trade, Tom?"

"You know when father took you in you gave him a buckskin bag full of papers. Where do you reckon they are now?"

"I don't know, I never had any more than your word for it, but you always said when I asked about them, that they had either been lost or destroyed, at least they were not among your father's papers when you came to look them over, but perhaps you lied."

"That's about the size of it, Benny," said Raymond coolly. "I lied. I had my own reasons for wanting to keep them papers out of your hands."

"But they were not yours! If I had been with your father at the time of his death he would have given them to me."

"Maybe he would, he was mighty curious in them ways; but you wa'n'. there, so he did the next best thing, he gave them to me instead."

"To give to me, I suppose."

"That part of it's plumb slipped my mind. Anyhow I got the papers."

"And you want to send them to me now?"

"That's the idea, Benny."

"And if I gave you the money?"

"Five hundred dollars, Benny."

"You'll clear out of here for Texas?"

"I bet I will," said Raymond cheerfully.

"Where are the papers?" questioned Rogers.

"I got 'em by me;" but he made no move to produce them.

"I'll go to the house and get the money, and I'll have Buck get up a horse for you."

"All right;" and Raymond stretched himself out in the bunk again. He felt certain that the posse would not

arrive at the ranch until early in the morning, and by then he would have put many miles between it and himself.

He was alone but a few minutes, and then he was rejoined by Rogers, who carried a lantern.

“Did you fetch the money, Benny?” demanded the old buffalo hunter eagerly.

“Yes, I have it here. Now let me see those papers.”

Raymond produced a greasy pocket-book, and rescued from its depths a small flat parcel wrapped in several folds of oilskin. He surrendered it to Rogers, who undid the parcel and satisfied himself by a glance that the yellow papers he held in his hand were those for which he had bargained. Raymond watched him, a toothless smile relaxing his lean jaws.

“All right, Benny?”

“They seem to be—yes.”

“Then fork over, and I'll quit you here and now.”

The money Rogers gave him he hid about his person; then he gathered up his hat and weapons, and moved to the door. Rogers followed him, and in the shadow of the corral fence they saw Buck holding a horse. Raymond moved toward it with alacrity, and swung himself into the saddle.

“I don't know as I was so much run out of the country after all. I been wanting a change. Well, good-bye, Benny, take care of yourself, old pardner! So long, Buck!” and with that he put his horse to an easy canter.

Rogers watched him out of sight with a feeling of infinite relief. He had ceased to see him long before the clatter of his horse's hoofs died out in the distance; but at last there was neither sight nor sound of him. The colonel turned to Buck.

“I guess if any one asks about him, Buck, he ain't been here—just bear that in mind.”

“Do you think he'll get away all right?” asked Buck.

“Oh, I reckon he will. I find I'm sort of counting on his doing it. Perhaps I shouldn't, but I am—Hullo! What's that?” for his ear had caught the sound of a rapidly ridden horse, but coming in the opposite direction from that Raymond had just taken. Buck heard it, too.

“Tom hit the trail none too soon,” he said. “His luck always was the damndest,” by which he meant that it far exceeded his deserts.

“I can only make out one horse,” said Rogers at last. “It ain't the posse. We'll just walk up toward the house;” and they had scarcely reached it when the horseman galloped up and drew rein.

“Who's that?” called Rogers.

“It's me—Crittendon, colonel,” said the horseman.

“What's the matter, Riley?” his voice showed that he was immensely relieved. “Get down. Buck will take your horse;” but Riley had nothing to say until Buck had moved off out of hearing, then he turned to Rogers.

“Look here, colonel—Tom Raymond's in trouble again, and mighty serious trouble, too.”

“I know, Riley, he's been here; just gone, in fact.”

“I knew he'd come here the first thing. Just after you left this morning I got the word he'd shot Chesney, and that they were getting together at Carson to go after him; and I hustled out here to warn you that there was nothing you or any one could do for him, that they are bound to have him.”

“He'll have to take his chances. I've done all I could; given him a horse and money. He's started for Texas.”

“He'd better keep going—yes, he better had!” said Reddy.

“I reckon he knows that,” said Rogers significantly. “Well, I've done as much, and more than most honest men would do under similar circumstances, and it's up to Tom to do the rest. He's getting along in life, and I reckon his capers are about at an end.”

“Chesney's dead, you know,” said Reddy.

“No, you don't tell me!” Rogers fell back a step. “You don't mean it, Riley?”

“Died within an hour after he was shot,” said Reddy briefly.

“Well, I just had to help Tom,” said the colonel, after a momentary silence. “It was one of those things I couldn't get out of doing. I've always been doing things for Tom I wouldn't do for any other man alive—but come into the house, I got something I want to show you. Something Tom left with me.”

Rogers conducted Reddy into the dining-room where his own supper was still waiting for him. Mrs. Rogers wearied by the long drive had already eaten and had retired for the night.

“I reckon you're hungry after your ride, Riley,” said Rogers. “So am I. Getting Tom off sort of put me out of the notion of eating even if I'd had the time.”

The two men ate in silence, but when the rigours of their hearty appetites were satisfied, the colonel produced the papers Tom Raymond had left with him. He told their history, and then the two fell to examining them with much eagerness.

“Well,” said Rogers at last. “I can't see that there's anything here that concerns me. I reckon they ought to be passed along to Mrs. Landray, though I can't see that they are of any value. Still I ought to send 'em to her.”

“No doubt about that,” said Reddy.

“You know her, Riley?”

“Well, yes, I've met her, and she knows who I am well enough.”

“How'd you like to send 'em to her, Riley? You could tell her the way they first came into my hands just as I've told you; how Tom Raymond got hold of them, and how he'd always said they were lost. I'd like you to make it plain to her it wasn't me held 'em back, I wouldn't want her to think that.”

“No, of course not.”

“Mind writing her?” inquired Rogers. He was rather sensitive about his own penmanship—and Margaret

was in Cheyenne.

“No, not exactly, but if it's all the same to you I'd rather send 'em to her lawyer. He could sort of explain things to her. I'd feel freer to write him. I was going to write him anyhow, he's an old friend of mine.”

“That's the best idea yet, Riley,” said the colonel, much pleased by the suggestion. “I reckon a little tact won't be out of place in bringing these papers to her notice, and her lawyer's the man for the job.” He folded up the papers as he spoke. “I'll leave the whole thing in your hands, Riley; take your time to it, and make it plain to your friend how I got the papers first, how they were lost, and how I got 'em again from Tom Raymond.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

REDDY wrote Ben Wade and sent him the papers, asking him to explain matters to Mrs. Landray; and Wade took them at once to her together with Crittendon's letter. Virginia was not at home; Mrs. Walsh was there, however, and he left the papers with her. Then he remembered that he was to dine that night with Stephen and Benson. His watch warned him that he had no time to spare, it was already after six, so he hurried across town to keep his engagement.

“I'd about given you up, Ben,” said Stephen, meeting him in the hall. “I thought you had forgotten.”

“I had to go to your aunt's on an errand; sorry I'm late;” and he followed Stephen into the dining-room, where they joined Benson and Gibbs.

As Reddy's letter seemed a matter that he could make public, and as there were certain questions he wished to ask Benson, he turned to the lawyer after they were seated, to say:

“Mr. Benson, do you remember a man by the name of Rogers who went West with Stephen's grandfather and uncle?”

“Yes, perfectly; and no doubt Gibbs does, too.”

“A fellow who thought he could suppress the news of the discovery of gold in California,” said Gibbs.

“He had a son; had he not?”

Gibbs nodded.

“A little chap of eight or ten—you recollect him well enough, Jake—he was the apple of Rogers's eye.”

“Yes, I remember him,” said the lawyer absently. He was hardly hearing what was said. Words, apparently chance words, were taking him swiftly back to the past. He felt in his face the rain and sleet of that March morning long past, when he had gone to Tucker's Red Brick Tavern to say good-bye to the Landrays. He saw the canvas-covered wagons looming large in the darkness, the one dim light in the bar, and poor old Tucker, half-crazed with drink and grief. He glanced at Gibbs and wondered if he recalled that day; but the general had not been engulfed by any such rush of sentiment. His conscience was singularly inactive: not a line of his bad old face showed emotion. He was eating and drinking with unabated relish; perhaps it had not occurred to him that out of his part in that day's doings a tragedy had come.

“Yes, I remember the child,” repeated the lawyer.

“Well,” said Wade, “Reddy's nearest neighbour is this man Rogers's son.”

“Impossible!” cried Benson.

“Why impossible, Mr. Benson?” said Wade.

“Because the boy was killed along with the others, Ben.”

“It seems not,” said Wade. “He's furnished pretty conclusive evidence that he is very much alive. He's just sent through Reddy a bundle of old papers that belonged to Stephen Landray.”

The knife dropped from Benson's hand with a noisy clatter. He uttered an angry exclamation, but recovered himself immediately. It seemed an accident, though later each of the three men present at his table remembered the circumstance.

“What were these papers, do you know?” he gave Wade a sharp glance.

“I don't,” said Wade, and he met his glance frankly. “But it seems they were papers that Stephen Landray gave the boy the day he was killed. He wanted them sent to his wife; but they fell into the hands of a third party, and Rogers only recently recovered them. In the meantime he appears to have forgotten all about them. It will be rather startling to Mrs. Landray to receive them after all these years.”

“I still think there must be some mistake,” said Benson. “As you are Mrs. Landray's lawyer you'd better advise her to be cautious in dealing with this man Rogers. Of course, Crittendon is perfectly honest and well meaning in the matter.”

Wade looked at the older man with a puzzled smile. This struck him as the absurdest of theorizing, the most primitive of suspicions. It was the first weak spot he had ever detected in the lawyer's judgment. It was more than primitive, it was positively childish.

“Perhaps, you were not aware that I visited the scene of the massacre; I was accompanied by a man who had taken part in the fight, and who assured me that every member of the party but himself had been killed by the Indians. As he afterward buried the bodies, it is scarcely likely that he could have been mistaken.”

“But it seems he was—that is, I am going on the assumption that the papers are what they purport to be. A point, of course, that only Mrs. Landray can settle.”

The lawyer gave him a frankly hostile glance. It angered him that Wade should abide by his own conclusions in spite of what he had said.

“My guide, he was the survivor of the party, of whom I have spoken, stated specifically that the boy was dead. It is incredible that he could have been mistaken, when he returned to the scene of the massacre weeks, it may have been months, afterward, and buried the bodies.”

“I admit that's a hard point to get around. On the other hand, how does Reddy's friend know all the facts he appears to know? Can you explain that?”

“Likely enough he got 'em out of Mrs. Crittendon; she knows a good deal about the Landrays,” suggested the general.

“Her father's cousin was a member of the party,” said Benson. “It is possible she knows all that any of us can know.”

“But the papers, Mr. Benson, the papers! Suppose they are genuine, what then?” asked Wade.

“We don't know that yet. Mrs. Landray will determine that point.”

“And you always understood that the boy was killed with the others?”

“Yes, Raymond distinctly stated—”

“Wait a minute—who's Raymond, Mr. Benson?” interrupted Wade hastily.

“He's the man of whom I've been telling you.”

“Well, Rogers claims to have recovered these papers from a man named Raymond.”

Benson looked a trifle blank at this. He tried to remember just how Raymond had impressed him, but the years had effaced whatever impression good or bad he may once have had of his guide. He was troubled in spite of himself. While he could not think that the papers meant anything, yet there was something ominous in their recovery after all these years.

“Well, you must admit it's a mighty singular incident any way you view it,” said Wade. After all he was not disposed to hang to a point when it displeased Benson, for the older lawyer had been useful to him in the past, and it would not be his fault if this use was not repeated in the future.

“I'd advise Mrs. Landray to look out for this man Rogers. His recovery of the papers comes too pat on Mrs. Crittendon's meeting with him.”

“Oh, I don't think that,” said Wade. “Reddy says he's a rich man, and that he's known him intimately for some time.”

“Rogers is the name of the girl Reddy's going to marry,” said Stephen.

He had been an interested listener to all that had been said, though he had taken no part in the conversation. He believed that the whole circumstance of the recovery of the papers was merely one of those mysteries that occasionally come into the lives of people. He was willing to accept the explanation Reddy had offered for what it was worth; he could not imagine any motive for fraud such as Benson apparently suspected.

“That's so!” said Wade. “Rogers is her name, and she is the daughter of one of his neighbours. I guess it's the same, Stephen.”

Benson had quite recovered his composure, and that he had lost it had been only evidenced by a certain sharpness that had crept into his voice when he addressed Wade. If the papers were what Reddy said they were, they were probably nothing more than letters; or perhaps the list of the share-holders in the ill-starred venture in which Stephen Landray had lost his life; undoubtedly this was what they would prove to be.

With the passing of Benson's opposition to Wade's facts, the conversation drifted into other channels, and presently, for the time being at least, they forgot all about Reddy's singular communication.

That is, all forgot but Benson; he could not forget.

And even while they were discussing them, Virginia and Mark Norton had been poring over the papers.

“It is a very remarkable circumstance,” murmured the banker. “I see—accounts of the Benson and California Mining and Trading Company. Did you know that my father had money in that venture? I declare, here's a list of the stock-holders—and here's his name—he's down for two shares. No, I can't see that these papers are of any importance to you, or ever could have been. They relate to matters that must have been long since settled by Mr. Benson.” He had been turning the papers slowly as he spoke. Suddenly he paused to glance sharply at a paper he held in his hand.

“What is it?” Virginia asked.

“Why, how much land did you own in Belmont County?”

“One thousand acres.”

“One thousand acres,” he repeated, “that's what I thought, then there is some mistake here. In the list of his holdings, your husband has entered two thousand acres as held by him and his brother in Belmont County. You can see—here,” and he showed her the place.

“But I only sold Mr. Benson one thousand acres, no, there couldn't have been more than that; there is some mistake.”

“Oh, you sold the land to Mr. Benson?”

“He bought it for Page Stark.”

“Well, here is your husband's memorandum in his own handwriting; he mentions two thousand acres which he owned in Belmont County. I don't know, but of course there may be some mistake. Yes, there must be, though it's hardly likely that he could have been in error in such a matter. Mr. Benson, you say, sold this land for you to Mr. Stark, sold all the land you owned there? I wonder if it is possible that you could have transferred a larger acreage than you were aware of.”

“Impossible!” cried Virginia. “Mr. Benson is too careful a man for anything like that to have happened.”

“Of course, it is hardly a reasonable supposition, but on the other hand, Mrs. Landray, your husband

certainly knew whether it was one or two thousand acres he owned."

"You don't doubt Mr. Benson?"

"I don't know whether I do or not," said the banker. "I certainly think your husband would not have written the word two if he had meant one! I think you'd better show this to Ben Wade; let him ferret around among these papers. I'll send him up here to-morrow." The next morning, Mark Norton stopped at Wade's office on his way downtown.

"You're early, Ben," he said.

"I don't want any clients to turn away because my door's shut; and not only that, I was expecting a letter from Clara on the early mail."

"Her mother complains that you seem to be getting all the letters; but see here, Ben, Mrs. Landray had me glance over those papers you left for her last night." He looked rather grave. "I don't understand them; and the more I've thought about them, the less I understand them. So what I want to say is this, you go over them carefully."

"Why, what's wrong?" asked Wade eagerly.

"Mrs. Landray will tell you. I don't understand the matter at all. But I want you to be quite sure you're right before you hazard an opinion, or there may be serious consequences; serious to her, and serious to us all. Just keep this clearly in mind, that's all."

"Do you mean that she wants to see me this morning?"

"Yes, can you go there now?"

"Certainly, if she wants me;" and Wade reached for his hat.

What the banker had said, took him in hot haste to the cottage.

"I wonder if old Benson has been up to any tricks!" he speculated as he strode along. "He was her lawyer when she had money, and she looks after her business in a way to make her a temptation to her attorney."

Mr. Wade was himself quite honest. He had certain large ambitions, and these coupled with small opportunity had saved him from any false steps; but he did not always give others the credit of seeing as far ahead as he saw.

He reached the cottage, and found Virginia waiting for him. She rose from her chair as he entered the room.

"I have just left Mr. Norton," said Wade, as he greeted her. "He said you wished me to call."

"Yes, Mr. Wade, I did," said Virginia gravely. She had been seated at a table that stood by one of the windows through which the morning sun was streaming, and Wade saw that the table was littered with papers. He conjectured that they were the papers that Reddy had sent.

"Did Mr. Norton tell you anything?" asked Virginia.

"Not a word, Mrs. Landray, except that you wanted to see me. He intimated though that something had happened."

"Something has happened," said Virginia, with a swift intake of her breath. "Please sit down, Mr. Wade—here by the table—is the light too strong? I want you to look over these papers. They are those you left yesterday."

"You mean that I am to read them, Mrs. Landray?" he asked, as he seated himself and deftly arranged the papers in a neat little pile.

"Yes, Mr. Wade," and Virginia placed herself opposite him.

He realized that her composure had received some sort of a shock, but he understood that if it had been merely some belated word of farewell from the dead man she would not have sent for him. No, clearly it was a business matter, and he thought of Benson again with a hard cynical smile. Was he to be given a glimpse of some past dereliction on the part of the old lawyer! Mr. Wade's smile was both evil and unkind, but the next instant his lips straightened themselves, and his gravity was equal to Virginia's as he asked, "These papers are exactly what they assume to be?"

"How do you mean, I don't understand your question," said Virginia.

"I mean they are genuine?"

"Yes, they were my husband's."

"A very singular circumstance," said Wade, as with great deliberation he began his examination. Virginia watched his face. But it was expressionless, beyond that it betokened complete absorption in his task. The first paper he took up seemed to be an account of moneys due the Landrays. He ran through it carefully.

"This, I suppose, goes back to the time when your husband and his brother owned the old mill," he said at last. "It is a list of credits they had given. Am I right? I see there is written here at the bottom of the page, 'In Benson's hands for collection.'.rdquo; He glanced at her, and now his expression was one of curiosity, he wondered if she had discovered anything here.

She seemed to understand this unspoken question, for she said, "I want you to examine all the papers, Mr. Wade."

He put the first aside, and picked up another. It proved to be a list of the share-holders in the Benson and California Mining and Trading Company, with the number of shares each investor had taken, set down opposite his name. He glanced through this hastily, for he knew that it could have no bearing on the present situation, since the tragic failure of that enterprise had in the very nature of things cancelled all obligations.

There were other papers dealing with this luckless venture; accounts covering the expenses of the party from the time it left Benson until it reached Fort Laramie. When he put the last of these aside, only two papers were left. One of these proved to be a brief memorandum of the personal indebtedness of the Landray brothers.

Again Wade looked at Mrs. Landray. But her face told him nothing, and he turned his attention to the last

paper on the table.

It gave briefly a description of the various properties owned by the Landrays. This he put aside with the others.

“What's wrong, Mrs. Landray?” he said, after a momentary silence.

“Did you see in that first paper—” He found it while she spoke, “—where something has been crossed out?”

“Yes, here, an item of twenty-five hundred dollars. What is it, 'Deferred payments on the—' what? I can't make it out.”

“On the distillery,” said Virginia.

“Oh, yes, that's it! 'Due from Levi Tucker—'”

“And now in the very last paper you looked at, my husband mentions two thousand acres in Belmont County.”

Wade nodded.

Virginia leaned toward him in her eagerness.

“Do you suppose there could be any mistake about that, Mr. Wade?”

“How do you mean, Mrs. Landray?”

“I mean, could he have written two thousand when he meant only one thousand.”

Wade shook his head.

“Why, no, why should you suppose that? The memorandum shows careful preparation, to my thinking. But I don't at all understand your question—two thousand, when he meant one—what has become of the land anyhow? Who owns it now?”

“I don't know—I sold it to Mr. Stark, Asa Stark's son, but I only sold him one thousand acres. Mr. Benson arranged the sale.”

“You sold a thousand acres,” Wade repeated. “What became of the other thousand acres?”

“I don't know, that is what I want you to discover for me.”

“But I don't understand at all about this land.”

“You see, Mr. Wade, my husband and his brother accepted a thousand acres of land from Mr. Tucker, it was part of a large tract which he owned in Belmont County.”

“Oh, in trade for the distillery—I see.”

“No, it was in part payment for the distillery. I supposed at the time my husband went West, that there was still twenty-five hundred dollars due him from Mr. Tucker—you see that is the sum he crossed out—but afterward, Mr. Benson said not. He said Mr. Tucker had finished paying for the distillery; and my impression was that the money was taken West for investment.”

“So,” said Wade. “Mr. Tucker owned several thousand acres in Belmont County, and of this tract he traded one thousand acres for the distillery, leaving twenty-five hundred dollars unpaid?”

“Yes, as I remember it, that is how it was,” said Virginia.

“Do you know what the valuation of the property was?”

“Five thousand dollars.”

“Then,” said Wade, with a ring of triumph in his tone, “if Mr. Tucker had subsequently turned over another thousand acres to clear himself, it would tally with the list, wouldn't it? And you sold this land?”

“I sold a thousand acres.”

“You sold a thousand acres to a man by the name of Stark. What was the consideration?”

“Five thousand dollars.”

“Was it cash?”

“Yes.”

“But are you sure, Mrs. Landray, that you only sold a thousand acres?”

“That is all I intended to sell; indeed I did not know that there was more than that to sell.”

“But you saw the deed?”

“Yes.”

“You had it in your hand?”

“I don't know, I don't remember that part, I think Mr. Benson read it to me.”

“But who was present?”

“A notary, I think, and perhaps Jane, and Mr. Benson.”

“And you didn't see this man Stark at all?”

“No.”

“But his name appeared?”

“Yes.”

Wade whistled softly under his breath. Perhaps it was a generous impulse that prompted him to ask.

“Don't you think we'd better ask Mr. Benson to explain this transaction?”

“Why should we ask him?”

“He might be able to explain the circumstances. As the matter stands now it doesn't look altogether creditable; and when you had sold this thousand acres, that seemed to end matters so far as you owning land in Belmont County was concerned—Mr. Stark didn't appear with offers for more land?”

“Apparently I had sold all there was to sell,” said Virginia.

“Did you want to sell the land? Had you asked Mr. Benson to find a purchaser?”

“No, I don't know how he found Mr. Stark, or how Mr. Stark knew I had the land, I never heard Mr. Benson say.”

“But he advised you to sell the land?”

“Oh, yes, he said it was producing nothing, which was quite true; and that it was of little or no value, but that Mr. Stark seemed to think he could do something with it, at least he was willing to take it off my hands.”

“As a great favour, I suppose,” said Wade, smiling faintly. “What's become of Stark?”

“He's dead.”

“Then there is only Mr. Benson who might have the facts we want to know, Mrs. Landray. What is your theory?”

“I think at the very last, just before they started West, Mr. Tucker must have induced my husband and his brother to accept more land in payment for the distillery.”

“And the deeds were left in Mr. Benson's hands, that was probably the way of it, Mrs. Landray; so Mr. Benson knows all that we should know.”

“But must we go to Mr. Benson?”

“Don't you wish me to speak to him?”

“I don't,” said Virginia quietly.

“Then it would be easy enough to go across to Belmont County and look into the records. I suppose you never saw the original deeds; they were among the papers your husband left with Mr. Benson.”

“I suppose so.”

“What do you want me to do, Mrs. Landray?”

“Can you go to Belmont County?”

“Most assuredly, if you wish it. Perhaps that is the best plan—there's no dodging the records in the case, you know.”

While Wade was entirely friendly to Benson, he was more of a lawyer than a friend, and the case had certain romantic interest for him; spectacular possibilities on which his mind fed subtly, fascinated. Then there was the lapse of time, the curious way in which it had all worked out, the idea of being opposed to Benson in litigation that would shake the town to its centre, the splendid publicity.

All these phases of the possible case he saw, charmed and inspired him; and he swore softly under his breath as he strode back to the office.

“I'll make a case, if there's a hair to hang on!”

But his first act in the making of this case was to light a disreputable cob pipe which was reserved for times of great mental activity; then he locked his door, and committed the facts Virginia had given him to writing, but the form of this writing was a letter to Clara Norton. He finished his letter by asking her to preserve the formidable missive he had produced; for he said, “I shall never be able to state what I see quite so clearly to anyone else. I shall write you from Belmont County the first thing. I know you will hope with me that my theorizing is not all moonshine, and that I'll come on the substance of fraud, for this will mean so much to us both;” and then Mr. Wade blew a cloud of smoke with smiling tender lips, and reduced to a single paragraph the wealth of sentiment he suddenly felt stirring within his soul.

He left town that night, and without seeing Stephen; for he feared that he might let slip something of their discovery. Of one thing he felt quite certain; Stephen, if it came to taking sides, would cast his fortunes with Benson. He could not think that he would be so blind to his own ultimate interests as to do otherwise.

He was absent from Benson just two days. The morning of the third he returned, and though the hour was early, he went at once to Virginia.

“Well?” she asked, after they had shaken hands. He was smiling, and from that smile she argued ill for Benson.

“It looks ugly, Mrs. Landray. I knew you'd want to know what I'd found the minute I got back, so I came here from the train, just stopping to leave my satchel at the office. Yes”—he was slowly drawing off his gloves now—“yes, it looks bad for Benson. I wouldn't care to stand where he stands. I accomplished more than I set out to. Stark must have been the merest dummy in the transaction; the real purchaser never saw him. As in your own case, he had his dealings entirely with Mr. Benson.”

“I should never have thought he could have been so false!” cried Virginia.

“You can never tell until a man's tempted,” said Wade placidly.

“But the land,” said Virginia. “The number of acres?”

“The memorandum was correct in every particular; no matter what you thought at the time, you actually transferred two thousand acres to Stark. But,” he took a turn about the room, “the best is yet to come! I found Southerland, the man who owns the land. I went on to Wheeling to see him, and he was perfectly willing to talk. He tells me he paid—fifty thousand dollars for the land! The various transfers touching the final disposition of the property all fall within the space of less than two weeks, and according to Southerland's story, Benson must have had his offer before he presented the fake offer from Stark; indeed, he was on there, and in Southerland's company visited the land; this grew out of Southerland's having been here—I suppose you never knew that?”

“No.” A hard look had come into Virginia's face. She grasped only the big salient fact of Benson's utter treachery; for the manouvres which led up to it, and which so impressed Wade, she cared nothing; they did not interest her now that Benson's dishonesty seemed clear. She was thinking of what Stephen Landray's life had been in Kansas, for Gibbs had long since told her the whole story of his failure there; and she hated Benson for his lonely death. If that money had come to her, he might have been saved.

“I wish you would tell me what you want me to do, Mrs. Lan-dray,” said Wade.

“I shall sue Mr. Benson,” said Virginia.

Wade nodded eagerly.

“Of course, you can't let the matter slip; it wouldn't be just to yourself.”

“Or to Stephen,” added Virginia.

Wade gave her a blank stare at this.

“I am getting to be an old woman, Mr. Wade; for myself I no longer care; whatever I do will be for that poor boy's sake—for Stephen's sake.” She gazed sombrely at Wade, and he hid a smile; to characterize Stephen as that poor boy, struck him as being very funny, a touch of humour of which he had not suspected her capable.

“Yes, Mrs. Landray?” he prompted, for she was gazing abstractedly from the window.

“I must see Stephen. I have told him nothing yet,” she said.

“But this does not necessarily affect him,” he urged at a hazard.

She turned impatiently.

“You do not understand me, Mr. Wade, this is not a personal matter in the way you see it. He is a Landray, and it is the Landray fortune that has been scattered, and it becomes his duty as a Landray to see that justice is done. No doubt he has a certain affection for Mr. Benson, but how can he trust him in the future when he learns how false he has been in the past? He is wholly dependent on his whims.”

“Those are points you will have to make clear, Mrs. Landray; and frankly, I would make them very clear.”

“You are willing to undertake the suit?” said Virginia, suddenly changing the subject, for his doubt of Stephen offended her.

“I, Mrs. Landray?” he cried. “I'd consider it a most tremendous compliment to be retained in the case; it would be the making of me; but I don't know that you would be doing right in leaving it all to me. Mr. Benson will probably employ only the most eminent talent; he can't afford to do less.”

But Virginia put this aside.

“You will continue to be my lawyer, Mr. Wade.”

“I shall do my best for you, Mrs. Landray,” he said warmly.

“What did you mean by what you just said about Stephen, Mr. Wade?”

“Well, you know he'll be involved; he can't remain friendly to you and Mr. Benson, too.”

“He will go with his family.”

“But he is doubly related,” urged Wade. “And if he casts his lot with you he will be giving up a good deal for very little—I mean what Mr. Benson may do for him.”

“How do we know that Mr. Benson will do anything for him?” demanded Virginia bitterly. “He was once just as fond of his father apparently. And he is doing all he can to ruin the boy, he is without ambition or purpose, a dependent.”

“He's a pretty nice fellow, you must admit that,” said Wade generously.

“But he is dependent on Mr. Benson; he is in Mr. Benson's hands, who may do much or little for him, as the whim takes him.”

“Well, of course, that's so, but certainly Mr. Benson displays the greatest affection for him,” said Wade. He wanted Stephen left out of it, for he felt that if they counted on his active partisanship, nothing would come of it, a contingency he was determined should not arise if he could possibly prevent it.

“Individually, I no longer care,” said Virginia. “My own needs are few. I shall probably always have enough for my simple way of life, and unless Stephen is in full sympathy with me, I shall not care to do anything.”

Wade gasped.

“I think we ought to look at it from his standpoint.”

“What is his standpoint?”

“Well, it's generally understood that he will inherit largely from Mr. Benson, and Mr. Benson is probably worth a million at least, no one knows how much. If we ask him to side with us, we will be asking him to give up his really great expectations for little or nothing. Of course, even if he sided with Mr. Benson, Benson might trick him, might leave him with nothing after leading him to expect great things.” And he left this shrewd suspicion to do its work with her.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

HE was unaware of it, but none the less Stephen was on trial with Benson. The lawyer had neither the wish nor purpose to influence him in any particular, he seemed quite willing that the young fellow should develop in his own way and after his own fashion; and if it were a good fashion it would be well with him; if it were not a good fashion, it would not be so well with him. Yet no matter what Stephen did or failed to do for himself, within certain limits which were already clearly defined in his own mind, Benson intended to right in him the wrong he had done Virginia Landray. The least he would do would be to provide adequately for his future. So he settled down to watch Stephen drift; a thing Stephen was ready enough to do, for he was finding existence very pleasant in the little Ohio town; certain of its aspects rather amused him, but on the whole it was not lacking in culture and dignity, while the concerns of life were carried on with considerable zeal. He was regarded locally as Benson's heir; a thing he, too, believed when it occurred to him to speculate on the future.

In time the lawyer came to have a real and deep affection for the young fellow; he became more and more dependent as the weeks slipped by. He had not understood before how empty his life was; and as his affection for Stephen grew, he became less critical of him, until he finally ceased to watch him from any such impulse. But Gibbs was not so well satisfied with the situation. He, too, felt a fatherly interest in the young fellow. He was familiar with Benson's prejudices, and was conscious that if Stephen had been any one else the lawyer would have heartily disapproved of him. Gibbs wondered how long it would be until Benson reverted to his normal standards. He hoped there would be no disappointments in store for Stephen. One day alone with Benson in the office, he took occasion to say:

"Jake, what's Stephen going to do with himself? He ain't going around with his hands in his pockets all his life, is he?"

"Why shouldn't he, if he wants to, and if I want him to?" retorted Benson sharply.

"Well, you're rather down on idleness as a general thing, Jake; mighty little of it's entered into your experience."

Personally, Gibbs had no illusions about industry, he considered it a fine thing, so long as it paid.

"The Bensons have always worked hard enough," said the lawyer.

"That's not so true of the Landrays, he favours the Landrays," and Gibbs chuckled.

"He is half Benson. Why shouldn't we enjoy now? I am glad enough to see some one who is gracefully idle; who seems to be able to do nothing without getting into mischief and making a mess of it.

"Well, he seems to have an infinite capacity in that direction. I've never heard him complain of not having an occupation. It ain't a thing he misses much, I should say," said Gibbs.

If Gibbs could not rid himself of the conviction that Stephen should be thinking of his future, Virginia was very strongly of this same opinion, too. She had no faith in Benson, and his indifference in the case of Stephen she felt was fraught with disastrous possibilities for the latter. His strength and vigour, his very manhood would be sapped by his condition of dependence. From her, this feeling spread to Mrs. Walsh, and Harriett, and Elinor, and even to Mark Norton, who partook in some measure of all their prejudices, for he found that incessant reiteration sooner or later fastened them upon him.

Stephen's lack of all ambition was a blow to Elinor. She had more than liked him from the first, but Ben Wade had always been held up to her by Clara, as a shining example of what a young man should be; and Clara's convictions, which were always advanced with singular steadiness, never failed to impress her. If Wade was all Clara said, and she hoped Clara was not mistaken, surely Stephen's lack of all apparent ambition was anything but praiseworthy. She would have liked to rouse him, to have pointed out to him, that a young man who had leisure for afternoon calls, was in the nature of an innovation in Benson. She did not doubt that when she returned home this was one of the first things Clara would do, for Clara was the soul of uncompromising candour.

Of Ben Wade Stephen saw much. Wade's attitude was that of a lifelong friend who was resuming a merely interrupted intimacy, and in this light Stephen came to look upon him and to accept him. Wade possessed a wide popularity, but the liking in which he was held extended to no other member of his family. Wade himself did not appear to notice this, certainly he did not resent it. This struck Stephen as odd, and it was one of the things he admired his friend the less for. Another thing he was not slow to observe, was that he was very welcome at the Norton's; but he admitted that Ben could hardly be blamed for having made the most of his opportunities, whether professional or social.

Ben was also his aunt's lawyer, and it was from him that he came to know something of his aunt's affairs; that the sale of what had once been farm-land about the cottage, was her only source of revenue.

"She'll be in a bad way when she gets to the end of that," said Wade rather indifferently.

"You mean she has nothing beyond, no investments, no income?" Stephen asked.

"Nothing that I know of. She's been selling off lots for the past ten years whenever she needed money; luckily she hasn't needed much."

Wade's explanation was off hand enough, and Stephen was rather offended by it. He had all along been sensible of a certain callousness on the part of his friend, which Wade with all his shrewdness either could not hide, or else did not know existed. He wondered if this was not one of the results of those hard knocks he had probably received.

"I had an idea, I don't know where or how I got it, that Uncle Jake was my aunt's lawyer," said Stephen.

"Used to be," said Wade, jabbing the blade of his pen-knife into the arm of his chair. They were seated in his office, where Landray, in his idleness and lack of all occupation spent much of his time, since Wade, too, was cursed with a larger amount of leisure than was wholly satisfactory to him.

"He's a mighty interesting man—Mr. Benson, I mean—no matter who you are or what you are, sooner or later you're made to feel his importance. If you are a poor man, the time is certain to come when you'll house yourself in one of his tenements, with the privilege of handing over the rent each month to old Gibbs; if you are in business, it's pretty certain he can help or hinder your schemes. There is just one thing! Don't lock horns with him; those who do, go away crippled. He's a potent influence in the life here, Steve; perhaps we don't analyse or realize it, but he stands for the power that money gives; he is the first and last expression of that power to most of us."

"But he's very simple and kindly," suggested Stephen.

"I don't know, with so much to say in the affairs of his neighbours, he'd hardly dare to be autocratic; but he's a great lawyer, for a country lawyer, he's really a big man; there's no gainsaying that." Wade spoke with enthusiasm. "When he takes a case now, he picks and chooses; his fighting days are over, and he is on the winning side or else out of it. He's always been most kind to me; first and last he's thrown quite a little practice my way."

"You're an energetic fellow, Wade, and deserve to get on. They can't say enough about you at the Nortons."

"They're mighty good to me there," said Wade heartily. "You know, my people not being rich or important

here has made a difference. There were those who were disposed to patronize me. I mighty soon let 'em know I wouldn't stand for that, but from the first, Mr. Norton and his family just let me know they were plain friendly.”

“Is Clara interesting?” asked Stephen insinuatingly. Clara he had not yet met.

Ben shot him a shrewd glance out of the corners of his eyes, then he centred his attention on the knife with which he was still jabbing the arm of the chair.

“Well, yes,” he said hesitatingly.

“Pretty?”

“Yes;” and the yes came slowly from between slightly smiling lips.

“She's younger than Elinor?”

“Yes—two years—you'll like her, Landray.” A slight but perceptible enthusiasm was betraying itself in his manner. This aggravated Stephen. Why should Wade want him to like Clara, and why shouldn't he?

“They're both nice girls,” said Wade.

Landray looked out of the window and said nothing. Wade now saw fit to change the subject.

“I heard from Reddy the other day—oh, yes, I told you.”

“I liked Reddy,” said Stephen.

“One would have thought that he'd have made fine practice for a lawyer,” said Wade, “but nothing of the sort has happened. The spirit of prophesy has gone wide of the mark in his case; he is so successful, in a moneyed sense I mean, that he's hardly gotten over the surprise of it. He can't repress a latent enthusiasm at the thought that he's Riley Crittendon, with several thousand head of choice beef cattle all his own. Perhaps I found him depressing because he's gotten ahead so quick.”

“But you'll find perhaps that your point of view will change with a little of the same kind of luck, Ben,” said Stephen.

Wade shook his head.

“No, I don't know that it will. I've always expected to succeed; I've been impatient that I should be kept out of my own; but by the same token, I won't feel any special enthusiasm when I come into it.”

When Wade had told him, as he had, that much as he despised society, still from motives that always bore upon professional gains, he found it well worth his while to keep in and do the right thing, Stephen was inclined to jeer. Then he made the discovery that he was curiously involved with Wade; and realized that in assuming the burden of his social destinies as he had done, that thrifty fellow was still doing only the right thing, and with an eye single to his future; that somehow he was to be made contributary to his success present and to come, and that it was something more than mere affection that had prompted him to claim an intimacy on the score of their boyish friendship.

“Every one wants to meet you, Steve,” he had once said.

“Why?” Stephen had asked.

“It's natural, ain't it? First and last, the Landrays have filled a pretty conspicuous place here, and then your relation to Mr. Benson makes you interesting; everybody thinks you'll come into a lot of his money one of these days, and they're none of them above wishing to get next to a potential millionaire.”

“What about your designs on me, Ben?”

“Oh, well, I guess whoever writes my epitaph will have to say, 'He never did anything for nothing.' At the least I shall expect to be your lawyer. My designs are no more sinister than that.”

Stephen laughed. He rather liked him for his candour. He felt that the best of Wade was his candour.

In spite of the social obligations with which he sometimes accused Wade, in the character of friend and mentor, with having loaded him up, he was oftener at the Nortons than at any other house in town.

It was Elinor who drew him thither; she had attracted him from the hour of their first meeting. There were times when he thought, when indeed he was quite sure, she liked him. There were also other times when he was equally sure she did not.

He even went so far as to suspect Wade in some degree with being responsible for the vicissitudes he suffered at her hands. He was quite sure she liked Wade; and Wade's relation with her, as well as with her father and mother, was that of a close and valued friend. He wondered if he had not a right to demand an explanation of Wade. He did not want to appear absurd, but if she was in any way bound to him, he felt that he should know it. He made elaborate plans to trap Ben into some sort of a confession on this point, but Wade, expert in evasions, was never trapped. When he avoided Wade and stole off to the Nortons by himself, he invariably found him there; sometimes playing cards with the banker, but more often with Elinor at the piano. Stephen rather despised men who sang, and the sound of Wade's clear tenor voice filled him with disgust.

“I haven't seen Wade in two days,” he told Elinor one night. “Do you know what's become of him?”

“He is out of town.”

“He's terribly energetic,” said Stephen.

“Don't you think he has done remarkably well, Stephen, for so young a man, and one who has had no help?” she asked.

“I can't quite agree to that. It seems to me that every one does help him; and those who don't, he uses whether they want to be used or not. Take your father, for instance, you can hardly deny that he has done what he could to push Wade; and even Uncle Jake seems inclined to go out of his way to advance his interests.” Stephen was not in a frame of mind to admire Wade.

“I think you overstate the importance of what others have done for him; his own people have never been able to help him at all, and now he is doing what he can for them; he is going to educate his brothers.”

“Well, he should be glad of the chance; I hope he don't make capital of that!”

"Evidently it hasn't made capital, as you call it, with you, Stephen. I didn't know you could be so ungenerous."

"It isn't that, Elinor, but I am sure you never say the good things of me you find to say of him."

"Perhaps you don't give me the occasion to."

"Don't give you the occasion! I am just waiting to hear you launch out in commendation of me!"

"I don't mean—"

"You don't mean what?" he asked.

"I have no right to criticise you," she said.

"I like that!" he laughed. "So I am a fit subject for criticism? Well, I want to be criticised. Come—it's a duty! Through neglect of the proper functions of criticism there is no telling how far wrong I may go. At home my uncle and Gibbs never say anything; affection must dull the sight terribly. I am sure you look at it differently, you are not blind to my imperfections."

"Are you blind to mine?"

"You haven't any, Elinor. Beyond your unwillingness to point out to me where I fail, they are undiscoverable."

"I am afraid you are not very serious, Stephen."

"I am sure that if I had your opinion of me I should be serious enough. I can read whole volumes of adverse criticism in your eyes."

"Do you really want me to tell you what I think?"

"I do indeed. I have always desired enlightenment on that one momentous subject, you will never know the speculation it has provoked me to."

"But I have no right to judge you."

"That is what we always say, but we judge just the same."

"I wish you would take an interest in things, then, Stephen, in real things."

"What are the real things that need my attention?"

"What are you going to do with your life?"

"My dear Elinor, I expect it will be what my life does with me."

"I hate to see you drift so aimlessly."

"You'd equip me with a purpose, a purpose such as Wade has—to use all his friends?"

"That is very unjust."

"I'll grant that; well, yes, I am drifting, very much so."

"I blame you for that attitude. Are you going to compel nothing, are you always going to drift?"

"And so you think I should display more activity; but what about, my dear Elinor? Point out the direction in which duty lies."

"But I cannot direct you, you must see for yourself."

"I wish you would direct me."

She frowned and blushed slightly at this.

"I'd willingly resign all my independence to you, Elinor."

"This is nonsense, Stephen," she said quickly.

"You always put me off with that!" he said. "You know it's not nonsense! You know I am serious. Help me make something of myself—shall I tell you all this involves?" he reached out, but she avoided his hand. He drew back ruefully. There was a moment's silence, then he said:

"There's one thing I'd like to know, Elinor, it's about Wade. May I ask you?"

"About Ben, what about Ben?" she asked.

"Do you care for him?" he demanded eagerly.

"Yes, very much, but not as you have evidently been silly enough to suppose. How could you, Stephen! It is Clara he is interested in. You are not usually so dull."

"Clara?"

"They are waiting until Ben can make a living. She is very young. I don't suppose mother would be willing she should marry even if Ben's practice was as large now as he seems to think it will be in two or three years."

"Well, I think Ben might have told me that!" cried Stephen.

"I wonder he didn't," said Elinor.

"Elinor, let me tell you—"

"Don't tell me anything, Stephen, I don't want to hear it!" she said determinedly, the colour coming into her face.

"Why not?"

"You are not in a position—" again she came to an abrupt stop. "To marry—you would say? Why not, Elinor?"

"Why, Stephen, what have you to offer a woman?"

"As much as any man—my love," he said stoutly.

"A girl might accept that, and might not care to share the position you accept, of dependence;" but when she had spoken, she caught her breath with a little gasp of dismay. She had said not more than she felt, but much more than she felt she had any right to say. "I mean, Stephen, that while you may be satisfied with your relation with Mr. Benson, it might not be so satisfactory to the girl you marry; she would not wish to feel

dependent.”

“She needn't, I don't feel dependent.”

“I wish you did Stephen; it would be the saving of you.”

“Thank you,” he laughed shortly, for he was taking a sense of hurt from her words.

“I wish you were not so devoid of ambition.”

“How do you know I am?” he asked. “And frankly, I don't feel my dependence, as you call it. Uncle Jake has never intimated that he felt it either; so why should I worry? None of you like my uncle; Aunt Virginia don't, I am aware of that; but I do appreciate his goodness to me, I try to repay it as best I can, in the way most satisfactory to him. I've told him I ought to be doing something. I know that; but I suppose there's no hurry; he don't seem to think so, anyhow.”

“But you can't be free on that basis, Stephen. Don't you see, if you displeased him—don't you see he will always control you?”

“Well, what of it? He is not unjust. He is the most absolutely fair minded man I ever knew, and kindness itself. Look how he tolerates old General Gibbs! But my aunt's prejudiced against him, and you reflect her feeling in the matter.”

“Aunt Virginia never says anything about Mr. Benson! I don't believe I ever heard her mention his name ten times in my life!”

“No, but she gives one more to think about by reason of what she leaves unsaid, than by what she says. I've known from the first that she didn't like him, and I tell you candidly, I think her attitude all wrong, and most unkind. She's making it so I can't go there with any degree of comfort; I'm always conscious of her feeling of hostility. I fancy she would like to see me break with Uncle Jake, but you know I never shall do that, he's been too good to me!”

“He has done nothing Aunt Virginia would not have done gladly if she could!”

“I am not making any comparisons,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “But this is not what we were speaking of a moment ago, Elinor.”

“I told you what I felt, and what I thought.”

“That my position of dependence was wholly displeasing to you. I've tried to make you see that I do not regard it as a position of dependence.”

“Not for yourself, perhaps, you are the best judge of that; but for another—I should feel that it was, and almost any girl would do the same. How could it be otherwise, Stephen?”

“You'll certainly provoke me to activity of some sort, Elinor; but heaven only knows how disastrous the results may be! I'll study law, and get Ben to take me into his office! How would Wade and Lan-dray look on a large gilt sign?”

“You are not serious.”

“Not in the sense that you are, but I began life seriously enough. The first year at school I thought I'd die of home-sickness. I was the most utterly wretched boy in the world; and then I adjusted myself to the situation. I decided, what was the use! I learned to take things as they were.”

“Don't you think it was needlessly hard of Mr. Benson to keep you away from Aunt Virginia?”

“How can you say he did that! It was circumstances that kept me away, that was all.”

“But during your vacations?”

“I was generally under a tutor then, for I don't mind telling you I was not especially brilliant; it took a lot of pushing to get me through, and my tutors led a dog's life of it trying to cram me with wisdom my mental stomach would reject. I fancy the scholarship of the Landrays was never their strong point.”

“You must have been very lonely all those years.”

“I was; and do you wonder that I feel for Uncle Jake as I do, that I resent any slighting thought of him? Why, he was the only one who ever came to see me!”

“But you must not be unjust to Aunt Virginia.” She was feeling a great pity for Virginia. If Ben's mission proved fruitful, Stephen would hold to his faith in Benson; gratitude and self-interest alike would sway him. “You know we are all devoted to Aunt Virginia here, and the least criticism of her—”

“Have I criticised her? You can't admire her more than I do. I only wish she and Uncle Jake hit it off better, I feel somehow placed between them, she makes me feel her dislike of him; I'm hurt by it!”

They were silent again, and then he said:

“You don't answer me, Elinor, I don't know how you feel toward me.”

“You must wait, something may happen.”

“But nothing can possibly happen to change my feeling for you.”

“You don't know, you may be wiser in a day or so; no, you must wait and see! I have no right to tell you, I have no right to even hint at anything—there! you must not ask me to explain—I can't!”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

WADE watched Stephen furtively out of the corner of his eye. To his practical mind, partisanship had its price. Self-interest had always been the paramount consideration with him, and he believed it would be so with Stephen. He had urged Virginia to act independently, but to this she would not hear; so he had brought Stephen to her.

"I wish, Mr. Wade," it was Virginia who spoke. "I wish you would tell Stephen what it is we have discovered, I think you can make it clearer to him than I can."

Stephen turned to Wade in mute surprise. He had not understood why his aunt had sent for him.

"Certainly, if you wish it, Mrs. Landray." Stephen had the uneasy feeling that something not entirely pleasant was about to happen. Wade began by telling briefly of the papers Reddy had sent.

"Now, Steve," he said, "there was just one curious fact that the examination of these papers revealed. Among the properties described was a certain tract of land. Mrs. Landray knew about this land, that her husband and your grandfather had accepted it from a man by the name of Levi Tucker in part payment for property in the town here. Your aunt knew of this first transaction; but her husband's memorandum shows that there must have been a subsequent transfer by Tucker. The first transaction was for a thousand acres, the second was for the same acreage. This land your aunt accepted in the division of the estate when your grandmother married a second time. She supposed she was getting a thousand acres, the records show that she actually received two thousand acres. This land she held for a number of years, but finally at Mr. Benson's instigation, sold it. That is, to the best of her knowledge she sold a thousand acres. The records tell quite another story. She deeded away two thousand and some odd acres."

At first Stephen had hardly comprehended the drift of Ben's explanation. Now he wheeled on him with quick anger.

"What do you mean to insinuate, Wade!" he demanded.

"Hold on, Steve—" began Wade steadily.

"Don't Steve me!" cried the younger man hotly. "We are not friends after this."

"That may be as it may be," said Wade grimly, the colour creeping into his sallow cheeks; "but you will have to hear me out, Lan-dray. Not because it concerns me in the least, but because it is a matter that vitally concerns your aunt. I didn't suppose you'd like to hear what I'm going to say. In your place, I shouldn't."

Stephen told Wade curtly to go on; he avoided looking in Virginia's direction. He wished to spare her the knowledge of the bitterness of his feeling toward her. But Wade's level voice broke the painful silence, he had carefully marshalled his facts, for while he believed he knew just the stand Stephen would take, for the sake of the case itself he wished to make the points very clear to him; then if he desired to break violently with his aunt, so much the better, she would have a double motive for wishing to go on with the suit.

He held Stephen with his eyes as he piled up the evidence against Benson, and Landray's face went red and white by turns, for as he warmed to his task, Wade's arraignment of the old lawyer became more and more incisive and vicious. He dwelt almost passionately on Virginia's trust and confidence in Benson, and then he told of the sale of the land, of the pittance she had received for it, and of Benson's subsequent transaction with Southerland.

"And I've copies of the records, Steve, properly attested by the County Clerk, you can compare the dates." He took the papers from his pocket, and tossed them on the table. Hardly knowing why he did it, Stephen took them up with shaking hands.

"There is some mistake," he said, but his voice was strange even to himself.

"I think not, Steve," said Wade smoothly. "Can you point it out?"

Virginia said nothing. She was watching Stephen's face, but his eyes were turned resolutely from her, he would not meet her glance, and her heart sank. Did it mean, that right or wrong, he would cast his lot with Benson!

"I want to look over these papers myself," said Stephen gruffly, and he spread them out on the table before him. "No, I don't want your help;" for Wade had made as if to draw up a chair.

Rebuffed, Ben withdrew to the window. The young fellow would have a bad quarter of an hour while he mastered the facts contained in those papers, and he was conscious of a sense of placid satisfaction at the thought. Stephen pored over the papers with burning eyes; their legal phrasing obscured their real significance at first, but in the end he was able to grasp the facts that Wade wanted him to grasp, the number of acres, and the dates of the various transfers.

"Well?" he said, glancing up, and turning toward Wade.

"Your aunt supposed she was selling one thousand acres. Am I right, Mrs. Landray?"

"Yes," said Virginia, but her eyes dwelt yearningly on her nephew, though he still avoided her gaze.

"She received five thousand dollars for the land. Mr. Benson was more fortunate. He received fifty thousand dollars for it. Look at the dates, you will see that not two weeks elapsed between the two transactions."

"But here, what about this man Stark?" asked Stephen, catching at a straw.

"Stark was merely used as a decoy, your aunt never saw him. That his name appears only makes the evidence of premeditated fraud the stronger."

Stephen winced at the word.

"You saw the original—" he was at a loss for the right word.

"The original entries, yes." Wade's voice was hard and emotionless, but it rang with a triumph he could not wholly repress or deny himself.

"And you are sure that they correspond in every particular—the dates I mean—with those given in the copies?" asked Stephen.

"Those copies are correct in every particular," said Wade shortly.

“Well, what does it mean!”

“It means, Steve, that Mr. Benson tricked your aunt out of forty-five thousand dollars by a most inartistic swindle. It means also, that he bargained for a thousand acres, and took two.”

“I don't believe it!” cried the young man hoarsely. “There is some mistake, it is impossible!”

“There is some mistake—it is impossible!”

“Not unless dates and figures lie, Steve.”

“Have you seen Uncle Jake?”

“Not yet, there is plenty of time for that,” and Wade smiled evilly.

“He can probably explain the whole thing away.”

“Will you go to him for an explanation?” demanded Wade eagerly. He would have liked that, it would probably finish Stephen with the old lawyer, and force him to side with his aunt.

“I? What do you take me for?” exclaimed Stephen, and his face was white. “Do you think I'd so grossly insult him, do you suppose for one minute I could doubt him—I, of all people, when he has conferred nothing but benefits on me all my life long!”

“According to my figures there is still something due you in the shape of cash,” said Wade coldly. “Your father's interest in that thousand acres.”

“Well, what does that amount to?”

“Very little, I grant you, Landray, but your aunt is not related to Mr. Benson as you are; she does not feel under any special obligations to him, she considers that she has been defrauded out of a large sum of money by him. That, you must admit, is a serious matter to her; a matter she can't well ignore.”

“And what are you going to do?” asked Stephen in a dry-throated whisper.

“If Mrs. Landray will take my advice, she will sue Mr. Benson.”

Stephen looked helplessly from one to the other.

“You are all wrong!” he burst out almost entreatingly. “I'd stake my life on it! You'll find you have no case; but think of the humiliation to him, the opportunity for mean-souled envy to smirch a great reputation!”

Wade shrugged his shoulders.

“He'll have a chance to clear his reputation in the courts, he'll come out spotless if he is spotless.”

“Go to him first!” urged Stephen. “Ask him to look over these papers with you. Why, probably a word from him will explain the whole thing, and make it clear as day.”

“Will you do that, Landray?” then he turned to Virginia. “You are quite willing he should discuss this question with Mr. Benson?”

“Yes.”

But Stephen drew back from this.

“I've told you it is impossible for me to bring it to his notice.”

“I mean in the most delicate way you can, not formally as a direct charge reflecting on his honesty. Look here, Stephen, it's only fair to yourself that you should hear from his own lips what he has to say. There is no haste, you'd better think it over, I don't doubt that you can bring the thing to his notice with less offence than another.”

“But if Stephen feels as he does,” began Virginia. She did not like the manner in which Wade was forcing the matter upon him.

“No, no, Aunt Virginia, it's right enough. If you are in doubt on these points, they should be made plain to you. I am sure Uncle Jake will be ready and anxious to explain, for his own sake as well as yours.”

But Virginia was not so sure of this; her conception of Benson's character being quite different from Stephen's. The Benson she had known and liked and trusted had died long ago, and in his place stood a hard, tyrannical man, a man she confessed she did not know, but feared. He had sacrificed Stephen Landray; and he had taken from her Stephen Landray's son. She owned to the bitterest feeling toward him, she wanted to see him despoiled and published to the world for what he was. She had no mercy for him. He had done the Landrays a monstrous evil, and it was right that he should suffer. Her code was simple and severe.

She put no faith in those possible benefits that might come to Stephen if he remained friendly with him. She did not believe for one moment that Benson had ever, or even now expected to do for Stephen in any large way. At best the benefits he conferred smacked of charity and gifts, the boy's character was being destroyed by his indulgence. But if they could only recover this money, it would give him a start in life of which he need not be shamed, for it was the Landray money, and time and circumstance had wonderfully increased it.

The loss of Stephen's affection and respect she believed would be but a slight matter to Benson; certainly the boy's father had loved him once, and he had quickly parted with him, and apparently without even a passing regret; it would be the same with this Stephen. As for the disgrace, the shame of exposure, she knew the world too well to suppose that the world's manifestation of scorn would ever touch Benson; the tangible evidence of his power and riches were too apparent for that; whatever men might feel in secret, they would not falter in the external show of respect; they would still need and desire his help and countenance in their affairs. She did not even believe that Benson himself would suffer. That he could have done this thing, argued to her an utter and astonishing depravity. She remembered that at the very time when he had bought the land, he had not ceased to declare his love for her. She flushed hotly at the recollection. If she could only make Stephen understand his duty as she saw his duty, all would be well with him. There would again be a Landray fortune, the family would again step into its old place of importance in the community, and the young fellow before her would be the same sort of a man his grandfather and her husband had been. She thought with bitterness of his father, and his pathetic failures; and her eyes filled with tears.

But Wade wished to arrive at some definite conclusion. If suit was to be brought, he wanted to know it soon.

“See here, Landray,” he said, “you can't decide at once; the matter can rest for a day or so, if Mrs. Landray is willing, while you make up your mind.”

Stephen glanced at Virginia. He was incapable of feeling any very great sympathy for her just then, but he wanted to spare Benson if he could. The mere suspicion they had been seeking to implant in his mind seemed as insulting as it was untenable. That there was any foundation for it, except what might have arisen out of the loss of some papers or through some stupid blunder, was too absurd for him to even entertain. He did not doubt Benson's ability to fully vindicate himself. Now he grudgingly admitted that he might furnish such an opportunity with less offence than another, certainly he did not want Wade to go to him. Wade was too assertive, too sure of his ground, too sure of Benson's trickery. Mentally he sought to frame the question with all the delicacy, the vagueness, he could wish. He quitted his chair by the table.

“I'll let you know in a day or two, whether or not I can tell Uncle Jake of this, Aunt Virginia.” He ignored Wade. He was willing to think that the lawyer might be solely responsible for the situation.

“Wait,” said Wade, “I am going your way, if you will have it.” He was determined not to be snubbed or affronted, and as soon as they were out of the house he said kindly and with an air of good-natured remonstrance that Stephen could not well resist. “Look here, Steve, you can't act this way with me. I won't have it. You've got to be reasonable. I've been your friend, and I'm bound to remain your friend. I'm your aunt's lawyer though, and she's got a right to expect me to take an interest in her concerns. If she hasn't me, whom has she? Not you, certainly; and you must just bear this in mind, it's an important matter to her, for if there's, any chance of getting thirty or forty thousand dollars out of Benson, she can't afford to let it pass, particularly as the money's hers. Don't you see this?”

“Yes, I suppose so; but, Ben, this whole thing's absurd, why, you know that Uncle Jake could not have done anything of this kind, it's just some mistake.”

“Well, if it is, he can best explain it away,” said Wade encouragingly. “I pledge you my word I spent a good deal of time in trying to find the mistake, but it baffles me. Still you never can tell,” he added cheerfully.

“I'd stake my life on it that he never wronged anyone—man, woman, or child!” cried Stephen.

“Ask him about it,” urged Wade. “I swear I'd like to see him stand clear. I'm no harpy; ask him, Steve.”

“I'd like to, that is I feel it's my duty to, but don't you see, I'm afraid of hurting him; I'm bound to him by numberless kindnesses.”

“Of course you are, and you can put the matter to him without offence,” said Wade soothingly.

"If I only thought I could!" said Stephen. "If I only thought I could!"

"Now, if I went to him—" began Wade meditatively.

"You—you mustn't!" interposed Stephen shortly.

"No, I suppose not. He might freeze up with me, and I wouldn't stand for that. After all, I'm your aunt's lawyer, and my dignity's my client's. If I go to him, I'll exact what's due me; it's not a personal matter; really, I have every reason to like Mr. Benson." He seemed so reasonable, so charitable, that Stephen's heart warmed toward him, as Wade intended it should. "I think you are counting on his being rather more sensitive than he is, Steve. He's been in active practice for a great many years, and disagreeable things are always cropping up. Just ask him about it offhand, in no formal way you understand, but make it clear to him what we have stumbled on. I agree with you that he should have every chance to explain we don't want to rush into litigation that is going to make us appear absurd; for I tell you when we really fall foul of Mr. Benson it's going to stir up a hornet's nest, it'll shake things loose!"

"You mustn't count on me," said Stephen. "It's not that I'd be making a sacrifice, the sacrifice would be nothing in itself, but I can't hurt him."

"I understand exactly how you feel. I don't want to see you get yourself involved; but I do think that you are the best person to bring this to his notice."

But Wade had no illusions concerning Benson. The explanation he was urging Stephen to invite, he knew could explain nothing; but it might bring about a rupture with Benson, and then Virginia would have every motive for beginning suit at once; and Wade saw himself on the threshold of a great career, his plodding shyster days at an end.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

BUT to bring himself to the point where he could speak freely and without reserve to Benson, was more difficult even than Stephen had conceived it would be. With singular patience and tact, Wade left him alone with his purpose, and when they met, carefully avoided all allusion to the half-hearted promise Stephen had given him that day they left his aunt's.

The days wasted, and he did nothing. He would tell Benson some evening. But for a week Gibbs was a guest at dinner each night, and the opportunity was denied him. His courage grew cold, his self-imposed task became more and more difficult as he waited.

The responsibility he had assumed, imbittered him against his aunt, and he hated the very sight of Wade. Why had he ever been urged to this step! If Benson promptly turned him into the street, it would be no more than he might expect; certainly he should never question the justice of the act.

But at last his opportunity came. They were at last alone together. Gibbs had gone home from the office, and they had dined by themselves; now was his chance. But he was slow to avail himself of it. However, Benson himself furnished him with an opening. They had left the dinner-table and were seated in the library.

"Stephen," he said quietly, "what was it that Crittendon sent your aunt, have you ever heard?"

Stephen started.

"Oh, yes," he said.

"I didn't know; you never mentioned the matter. I trust your aunt was not distressed on receiving the papers—they were papers, were they not?"

"Yes, papers."

"A letter, perhaps?" said Benson. Stephen's reticence struck him as being odd. He glanced sharply at him.

"No, it was not a letter," said Stephen slowly. "Merely some business papers."

Benson turned toward him quickly.

"What is that you tell me?" he asked. "All of Stephen Landray's papers were in my hands."

"Not business in that sense, Uncle Jake; accounts and memorandum of one sort and another."

"Oh, I see," said Benson drily.

"There is one matter they don't quite understand," faltered Stephen.

"What's that?" asked Benson.

"Why, it seems it is something about a thousand acres of land," he hesitated.

"Yes?" said Benson, but his cheeks grew like white parchment. There was a brief pause.

"It seems"—said Stephen, with stolid determination—"It seems my grandfather and his brother owned some land my aunt knew nothing about—" he came to a painful pause.

"What do you mean, Stephen?" asked Benson in his usual calm voice. "She was certainly informed by me."

"No, she only knew of one thousand acres, and it appears there were two thousand."

"And I suppose your aunt does not understand," said Benson, smiling faintly.

Stephen took heart at this.

"I told them there was some mistake!" he said impulsively.

The lawyer drew in his breath sharply.

"Oh, it's that, is it; and you told them it was a mistake? Whom do you mean by—them?" he added sharply.

"Ben Wade, and my aunt."

"So Ben's advising her." Benson seemed to be making a mental note of this for subsequent reference.

"He's been going over the old accounts for her—yes."

"And what do they find?" demanded Benson calmly.

The young fellow looked at him wretchedly.

"You can speak quite frankly to me, Stephen," he said with dignity. "In almost fifty years of active practice this is not the first explanation that has been asked of me. I am not so sensitive as you appear to think."

"My aunt was always under the impression, uncle Jake, that she sold you only a thousand acres of land."

"I was not the purchaser. She'd better refresh her memory there. Stark bought the land, I merely acted for her in the matter."

"She is sure Stark only paid for a thousand acres."

"The deed will show what he bought, and what she sold," said Benson, with cold composure. "Unfortunately, Stark is dead, and the land has probably changed hands many times in all these years; but the deed will show what she sold—"

"The records show that she sold two thousand acres."

"How do you know that?"

"I have seen the copies."

"Humph! They have sent for those?"

"Yes."

Benson meditated in silence for a moment.

"It's a great pity your aunt's acquaintance with her own affairs should have been so imperfect, but perhaps I should have seen that every point was clear to her mind. Since the records show that she sold two thousand acres, it is quite evident she parted with all the land she owned in Belmont County; and Stark is dead; however, I blame myself for the obscurity which seems to have surrounded the transaction. I will take on myself the responsibility of seeing that she is satisfied, though I admit no legal claim, I was merely her lawyer. In the morning I will send her check in payment for this thousand acres which she thinks she did not sell, but which according to the records Stark seems to have bought. It is hardly worth while to enter into a dispute about so trivial a matter. Stark paid five thousand dollars, as your aunt supposed, for a thousand acres; I will send her a like sum for the other thousand."

Stephen gulped a great free breath. This was a simple dignified solution of the whole difficulty, but in the same breath he remembered that it was not five thousand but forty-five thousand dollars than his aunt expected to recover. How was he going to explain this to Benson. He sat staring blankly at the carpet at his feet.

"I think"—and the lawyer's voice was frigid, while a thin smile relaxed his shaven lips—"I think Ben Wade will find I am not to be trifled with in this manner. I have been disposed to think well of him in the past. I trust I shall be able to make my displeasure sufficiently evident in the future."

But Stephen said nothing to this, he was not caring just then what happened to Wade. Benson's resentment and displeasure could take what form it might there, it mattered not to him.

"Certainly I have no explanation to offer," said the lawyer haughtily. "For many years I managed your aunt's affairs to the best of my ability; she is a troublesome, a dangerous, and an ungrateful woman. Yet I hold Wade responsible; of course, he is back of the whole agitation."

But Stephen's silence, and Stephen's face, which spoke plainly of his utter misery, distressed Benson more than he could have thought possible. He had no feeling of resentment toward Stephen, but he wanted to hear him speak, to hear him declare himself; he longed to hear him say generously that his confidence and affection were unshaken. For years he had felt entirely self-sufficient; he had desired nothing of any man; but now he found that he was suddenly hungry for these expressions of trust and love. The loneliness of his life came back and smote him. He was growing old, and only Stephen had brought youth to his door. Did the boy doubt him? In his first feverish impulse to bind him to him at any price, he was almost tempted to tell him the whole truth, of his love for Virginia Lan-dray, that so base a motive as that of gain had never entered into his mind, but this he put aside as a momentary weakness. He would not offer any explanation to any one, but in the morning he would send for Wade, and pay for that land, this done, he would have saved himself with dignity and self-respect, and he would have saved himself in the boy's eyes. And then he thought of the price he had received for the land, in the excitement of the moment he had quite overlooked this point. Was it possible that Wade had carried his investigation as far as that! He could believe that once started he would go to the bottom of things. He remembered to have heard Stephen tell Gibbs only the night before that Wade had been out of town for a day or two recently. Very white of face he turned to Stephen, who met his glance miserably enough, and with a mute appeal.

"Go on!" he commanded harshly. "What more have you to tell me?"

"There's something about the price you got for that land," said the young man huskily.

Benson shook his head.

"You'll have to be more explicit, Stephen," he said cautiously; "and you seem to have forgotten that I have just told you Stark bought that land."

"They say he transferred it to you."

"Subsequently he did, but that is neither here nor there. It was my privilege to buy it from Stark if I wished to." He smiled almost tolerantly. "I hope your friend Ben Wade does not dispute my right in that particular."

"He seems to think that Stark merely acted for you; that you were the actual purchaser."

"That is the merest conjecture, Stephen. I must say that Ben's imaginative faculty is well developed." He was feeling tolerably secure again, evidently Wade had not gone as deep as he had at first feared was the

case. But Stephen's next words undeceived him.

“I haven't made it clear to you, Uncle Jake,” he said, in a low voice. “But Ben asserts that you sold the land for fifty thousand dollars, that you induced Aunt Virginia to sell it by representing that it was valueless—or nearly so.”

Stephen felt that the worst was over with; now Benson knew all that he knew. He did not look at him, he could not meet his glance. There was a long pause, then Benson said slowly.

“To have handed over five thousand dollars was one thing, I might do that to save myself from possible annoyance; but when they talk of sums like this, I am not so sure that my first idea was not a mere weakness.” He rose from his chair. “Good-night, Stephen. I think I will go to my room.” He made an uncertain step toward the door, and Stephen sprang to his side.

“For God's sake, don't think—don't think—” he could not bring himself to say it. It was like a fresh insult to this hurt man.

“What am I not to think?” asked Benson.

“That I knew anything of this until they sent for me! They wanted me to tell you, and I agreed, I thought it would be less painful to you if you heard it from me, otherwise Wade—'

“Wade! That scum! That scoundrel! He'd better keep out of my way!” cried the old man, his eyes blazing.

“I told them,” Stephen hurried on, “that they were mistaken.”

“You were right, Stephen, they are mistaken—but the ingratitude of it!” he stumbled weakly toward the door.

“Let me go with you to your room!” cried Stephen, with a sudden feeling of great tenderness, but Benson waved him away with a tremulous hand.

“Good-night,” he murmured in a broken voice, and went from the room.

Stephen heard his slow step in the hall, his slow step as he mounted the stairs, and knew that he was clinging weakly to the hand-rail as he climbed. He threw himself down in his chair. He had done all they had demanded of him; and he felt that in doing this he had dealt a mortal blow to the man, who more than any other, claimed his love and faith. In that moment of shame and great bitterness, he hated his aunt, he hated Wade, even as he hated and despised himself.

But what if Benson offered no explanation, what if he refused to see Wade or his aunt; and he believed him capable of some such course of action; the hideous thing would have to go forward; his aunt would be urged on by Wade's implacable zeal. He sunk his head in his hands, and endeavoured to think of some way in which matters could be adjusted. He had confidently expected Benson to offer an explanation that would be full and conclusive, and show luminously the utter futility of further action; but he had not done this.

“He knows it is not necessary with me,” the boy thought generously. “He knows just where I stand.” Yet he was far from satisfied. Benson owed it both to himself and to his aunt, to explain the whole circumstance of the sale of the land, and his part in it; otherwise, and the conviction made him sick and dizzy, his aunt's only course would be to take the case into the courts, and there force the explanation from him that he was unwilling to make. He thought he understood Benson's pride, and his sense of offended honour; he could sympathize with him here fully, but he felt that it was not wise to preserve silence in the face of these charges; he must be made to see this; in the morning when he was calmer and less shaken by his emotion he would himself tell him.

And in the morning Benson ate his eggs and toast, and drank his coffee, in placid dignity and apparently at peace with all the world, but under his calm of manner there lurked an austerity that warned Stephen that he must not revive the subject of the preceding evening.

Benson was in haste to quit the house, and Stephen finished his breakfast with no companion but his own troubled thoughts. He felt the need of some one with whom he could talk, and decided that he would see Wade at once and tell him what had happened. He wanted to learn what Ben would do now that Benson had declined to make any explanation.

Early as it was, he found Wade at his office, but he had evidently not taken up the business of the day for he was in his shirt-sleeves and smoking a cob pipe; his feet rested on the corner of his desk, and his chair was comfortably tilted at a convenient angle. When Stephen entered the room, the unusual gravity of his aspect told Wade that he had a purpose in his call, and he guessed the purpose. He brought his feet down with a thud to the floor, and slewed his chair around until he faced his caller.

“Well, what's wrong, Landray?” he asked briskly. “First though make yourself comfortable, will you smoke?”

“Everything's wrong,” said Stephen shortly, as he threw himself down in a chair.

“You've had your little talk with Benson then?” said Wade quickly.

“Yes.”

“How do you stand with him now?”

“How should I stand?” demanded Stephen indignantly.

“Oh, he took what you had to say in good part, did he? Well, I'm glad of that, Steve.”

“Certainly,” said Stephen.

“Well, I am glad,” said Wade. “Just before you came in I was thinking—it hadn't occurred to me before—that in asking you to bring this matter to his notice, we were requiring too much of you. You see, it might have prejudiced your own interests with him,” He glanced sharply at Stephen. “But it didn't.”

“No,” said Stephen drily. “It didn't.”

“Well, I am glad,” repeated Wade, in a tone of hearty good-will. “I suppose you have something to tell me. What's he going to do?” he added.

“So far as I know—nothing.”

“You don't mean to say that he is going to try and ignore us? Do you mean to tell me he has no explanation to offer?” said Wade vehemently.

“I don't think you'll ever get a word out of him,” said Stephen.

“You don't! Oh, yes, I will,” said Wade easily. “I bet I get a good many words out of him before I'm done with him. He can't ignore me, for I've no notion of being ignored! A dignified silence won't work with me. But it's pretty clear that the reason he wants to keep quiet is because there is nothing he can say. You don't want to think it, and maybe you can't—but it's as clear a case of fraud as one would want to see. Now, I know Jake Benson, and if there was anything he could say, he'd say it fast enough; he'd never run the risk of his coming to trial, not for one minute he wouldn't! You are sure he feels all right toward you?” he gazed into his friend's face with a comprehensive eye.

“No, he doesn't blame me,” Stephen assured him wearily.

“I suppose it's me,” said Wade grinning. It pleased his vanity to realize that he had suddenly become of importance to Benson. It raised him pleasantly in his own estimation.

“Yes, it's you. He blames you altogether.”

“But it's quite wrong of him to have any personal feeling—I haven't, you know. I suppose, though, he's had that money so long he thinks he ought to be let alone to enjoy it for the rest of his days. Well, I'm sorry for the old gentleman; it's hard lines; but don't it beat all how these things round in on a fellow? You think the skeleton's laid away, and then, by golly! it takes on flesh and stalks out of your closet with the bloom of youth on its cheeks, and ready to play hell with you!”

Stephen stared gloomily at him.

“What are you going to do next?” he asked at last.

“Why, get the thing to trial as soon as I can,” said Wade briskly. “Look here, I've got the complete record of the transaction, not a paper missing. You may as well look it over; it shows up strong.'

“No,” said Stephen shortly.

“Suppose you tell me just how the matter came up, and what he said. I promise you I'll use nothing of what you say.”

Stephen's cheeks reddened angrily.

“I thought this was a matter of mutual confidence,” he said haughtily.

“Well, so it is, that's what I say, but I'd like to bet that Benson said nothing that would be of any use to anybody. But I understand just how you feel, and frankly, I don't see how you can afford to take sides with us. I am trying to make your aunt see this, but she will only see that you are a Landray, and that this is a holy war we are going to wage against Benson for the recovery of the Landray fortune. For the money itself as money, I don't think she cares the snap of her finger; and if you'll believe me, Steve, she's doing the whole thing for you!”

“For me!” cried Stephen.

“For you. She has no confidence in Benson, you see, and she doesn't think he will ever do anything for you, so she's going to take care of your future. She's a remarkable character; her motives are as plain and straight as a string; no ins and outs to her mental processes!”

“Do you think I could induce her to drop the whole affair right here and now?” demanded Stephen eagerly.

“Not if I can balk you,” said Wade, with simple candour. “Steve, if this thing goes through I'll be building one of those dinky little Queen Anne's up along side of Norton's big house. He's got a vacant lot he ain't going to want, and it's at my disposal the minute I'm ready to build. Elinor says she's told you all about Clara. Wait until you see her!—there is a girl!” he sucked at his pipe with smiling wistful lips. “Don't you take a hand in this and spoil my little romance! I've had a hell of a hard row to hoe, and old Benson won't mind the loss of forty or fifty thousand dollars once he familiarizes himself thoroughly with the idea; and I'm not alone in wanting to see the thing pushed for all there is in it. Mrs. Walsh and the Nortons are tremendously anxious to see your aunt get the best of Benson”—he chuckled at some memory—“Mrs. Walsh thinks it would be lovely for her to get all that money—I heard her say, 'You know you need it, Virginia, and deserve it.' And look here, Steve, your aunt's got nothing much to anticipate in the way of money unless she sells her cottage and rents or buys a cheaper place. You're interested in Benson. Now, try and see her side of it, too. I understand she did everything she could for your father; and you owe her something on his account, just as you owe Benson something on your own account. Now, I've looked into Benson's affairs as far as I could, and I've learned some things about him that are not generally known. In the first place, when your grandfather. Thomas Benson, failed in business, Benson was involved with him. From what I can learn I understand that he was pretty nearly ruined, and that he came out of the failure up to his neck in debt. It was at this critical moment in his fortunes that he got hold of that land. The price he got for it put him on his feet; he was shrewd and he was fortunate in all his investments. That was the beginning of his great wealth. Of course, he's been kind to you; one step in the wrong direction don't prove that a man's soul is sown to corruption; but the way I look at it, it was really your aunt's money you have been spending. That he was able to be generous to you, must have been a sort of sop to his conscience.”

Stephen writhed in his chair. Wade, seeking to palliate and explain Benson's wrong doing was more painful than Wade denouncing him for it, for his argument seemed born of the gospel of expediency; and what Stephen saw in the situation, Wade, thick-skinned and callous, with a shrewd intelligence that he had developed at the expense of all finer feeling, did not see even vaguely. He was remote from spiritual consciousness of any sort; he dwelt in an atmosphere of unrelated facts.

“I've gotten all the points your aunt can give me,” said Wade. “And I've heard from Southerland, who seems ready enough to help us. He came here to make his first offer for the land. He wanted to pick it up cheap, but Benson wouldn't have it. He went on and saw the land himself, saw there was coal on it; then he told your aunt he had found a buyer for it and on behalf of this buyer offered five thousand dollars; mind you, he was her legal representative at the time; she had absolute confidence in him. He told her the land was of no value,

and urged her to sell. Your aunt always supposed the sale was made to Stark, but Stark never actually held the land; he at once turned it over to Benson, who was then ready to do business with Southerland. Is this clear to you?”

It was horribly clear to Stephen. These facts that Wade had gathered, could only point to one thing. Wade continued:

“I've looked over the old records here, of that time, and I find that Benson held not a single unencumbered piece of property; but within a few weeks of the transaction with Southerland he began to clear things off; and from that time on, the records are thick with transfers of real estate to him. I venture to say, that but for that money he wouldn't be worth a hundred thousand dollars to-day. Of course, I'm outside the strictly legal aspects of the case, but I want to know my ground, and you and I, Stephen, are bound to consider the matter with a dash of sentiment thrown in. Of course we can realize just how great a temptation had presented itself to him. Your aunt had no one, she trusted him absolutely; your father was in the army, he was not a man of any wide business experience and there was nothing to fear from him. Benson had convinced your aunt that the land was worthless, and that she had better get out of it what she could. The game played itself, and he had the strongest motives for dishonesty. Such an opportunity could not have come at a time when he would have been more likely to use it to his own advantage.”

“How do you know all this?” demanded Stephen, astonished at the array of facts Wade had gathered.

“The old records at the court-house, what your aunt remembers, and then my father learned his trade in the old Benson shops, and knows a good deal about your grandfather's failure; and I've picked up a good deal in talk about town.”

In spite of himself conviction was fastening itself upon Stephen, just as Wade intended it should. These facts—many of them outside the cognizance of the law, as he knew—Ben had gathered solely for his benefit. To Stephen the situation took on tragic and awful possibilities. The justice that his aunt demanded, found an echo in his own heart. But there was Benson, the man who had done everything for him, who had denied him nothing, who had been a father to him. He would have liked to escape from the whole miserable tangle, but there was no escape for him, and it was apparent to him that he would either have to sacrifice his aunt or Benson.

He quitted his chair and fell to pacing the floor, and as he tramped to and fro, Wade's relentless logic, the logic of stubborn facts and figures, poured in a steady stream into his ears.

Then Wade went into the purely legal aspects of the case. He told Stephen just what he hoped to do, and how he hoped to do it. Perhaps this was not entirely discreet, but the case he saw, with its spectacular and dramatic possibilities, was like wine to him, it loosed his tongue and made him reckless.

At last Stephen paused in his walk to say,

“But you don't imagine, do you, that Mr. Benson will remain inactive? Suppose he comes forward with facts that offset your facts.”

Wade shook his head.

“He can't do it, Steve. We've run him to earth, and he knows it. The game played itself for him, and now it's playing itself for us.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

THE position Benson had taken and which he was evidently determined to maintain, was inexplicable to Stephen. He was absolutely silent on this matter that had become of vital significance. He never alluded to it, and he never permitted Stephen to allude to it in his presence. His whole manner toward him, however, was one of increasing kindness and affection, dependence even; and Stephen often encountered his gaze, wistful and searching, fixed upon him as if he were seeking to read his thoughts. Beyond this there was no change that he could discern; yet there was a change, for Gibbs said to him one day.

“What's the matter with your Uncle Jake, Steve? Will you tell me what's got into him?”

“Matter!” repeated Stephen doubtfully. “Nothing that I know of.”

“He's a mass of nerves. I don't seem able to please him with anything I do; I wonder if he's sick. Why don't he take a rest? That office will be the death of him! He's grinding his soul out in the hunt for dollars—it's growing on him; and he's getting awful cranky! Why, only yesterday I said something about Ben Wade, and he flared up in my face, just went all to pieces. Do you reckon Wade has offended him?”

“I guess not,” said Stephen evasively. He meditated on what Gibbs had told him. Then Benson was suffering, and suffering keenly. He was hiding it from him, but at the office he had not been able to do this, and poor old Gibbs thought it was overwork.

Stephen had kept away from his aunt, he had kept away from Elinor; in spite of a consuming desire to know what they were doing, thinking, saying, he was quite cut off from them. He harked back and forth over those points Wade had marshalled for his benefit, and in the end it became as impossible to think that a hard-headed fellow like Ben could be mistaken, as it was to think that he could possibly be right in this particular instance.

Wretched days passed in uncomfortable companionship with his own thoughts. At last it was not to be longer borne. He must see and talk with some one. Wade had told him that the Nortons were wholly in his

aunt's confidence; he would see the banker and get his opinion. He had the utmost respect for his judgment. He wondered he had not gone to him before.

He went down to the bank, but it was already late in the afternoon and Norton had left for home. He would not be back that day. Stephen went at once to the house, where Norton received him with frank cordiality; and Stephen felt his heart flow toward him. Here was a sane and reasonable judgment on which he felt he could rely.

“I was asking Wade only last night where you'd hidden yourself away, Stephen. Come in,” said Norton, for Stephen had paused irresolutely at the door, and he led the way into the house.

“I suppose,” began Stephen, when they were seated, “that you have heard about Wade's discoveries.”

“Yes, certainly, rather sensational, too. Upon my word, I was in a muddle for days after they told me of them.”

“Of course, I don't need to ask how Mrs. Norton feels in the matter.”

“You don't, Stephen. My wife agrees with her mother, and her mother agrees with Mrs. Landray. She always has and she always will.”

“I suppose then, the facts, if we are to consider them facts, are as well known to you as they are to me.”

“Probably, yes. They are hard to go back of, Stephen,” said Norton, with grave kindness.

“What are they going to do?” asked Stephen.

“I suppose it will mean a lawsuit; it certainly will if Wade can bring it about. Have you seen your aunt?”

“Not recently.”

“I think you should, Stephen.”

“Well, perhaps; but look here, either I must stop this thing coming to trial, or I must leave Uncle Jake's house. I think if I asked her to, my aunt would drop the whole matter; and if I remain in my present relation with Uncle Jake, I feel it's my duty to ask her to do this. And if I don't, it's my duty to leave him. Now I can't well ask her to abandon what may mean a comfortable fortune to her; something's due her.”

“Very much is due her,” said the banker decidedly.

“Well, yes,” admitted Stephen. “But see, it's not that I fear to lose any benefits that some day may come to me from Uncle Jake, I don't care the snap of my finger for all his money, but what I do care about is having him think that I'm a base ungenerous brute. Mind, I don't for one minute admit that I think he's ever taken advantage of my aunt—I don't, I can't—I won't!”

“Naturally,” said the banker kindly. “You have the greatest regard for him. You'd be singularly unworthy if you hadn't; but really, Stephen, he is not acting as a man should who knows he is in the right and has nothing to fear. If he can explain the transaction, he can explain it as well now as later on, and save himself a lot of annoyance into the bargain; you must realize this. Now we know Mr. Benson, and if he is one thing more than another, he is dispassionate and reasonable; he has neither false pride nor weak vanity; he is a cool, level-headed man of large affairs who has lived a long time in the world, and who must be fully conscious of the folly and weakness of the stand he has taken in this case; he is silent then because there is nothing he can say.”

“Then you agree wholly with Wade?”

“I am sorry to have to say it to you, Stephen, but I do. And you can't question your aunt's right, her perfect right, to go ahead with this matter. You must try and see it as she sees it. All her affairs were in his hands, and he took the basest and most contemptible advantage of her trust.”

“I can't believe it!” cried Stephen.

“My dear boy, some facts are so plain and simple they can not be doubted. The facts Wade has gathered are absolutely convincing in themselves, and you don't doubt them really; you are only unwilling to believe them. At first I felt much as you feel, but after one or two talks with Wade I had to come around to his way of thinking; there was no help for it.”

“Well, I wish I knew what to do,” said Stephen gloomily. He had secretly hoped that Norton would be unpersuaded.

“I think you should consider your aunt somewhat, Stephen; she has no more land to sell unless she sells the cottage. In a way, you owe her more than you do Benson, for when General Gibbs brought you here, you went to her. Benson's interest in you was aroused later; and just fancy what a wrench it was to her when she relinquished all claim upon you.”

“I never quite understood that she did,” said Stephen.

“That was the condition Mr. Benson imposed. Of course she's hard and embittered; and can you wonder at it?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“You'll find my wife and daughter strong partisans of your aunt's. There comes Elinor now.”

Stephen glanced from the window and saw her approaching the house. He quitted his chair.

“Don't go,” said Norton. “We need not mention this before her.” A moment later Elinor entered the room. After a few words with Stephen and her father, she said:

“I am just starting to Aunt Virginia's, Stephen; don't you think you should see her, too?”

“Why?”

“You have not been there in days. She is very anxious about you. Come with me, it will make her so happy. She is afraid she will lose you; that Mr. Benson will object to your coming to see her.” Stephen bridled at this.

“Mr. Benson will not interfere with me. I am as free as I ever was. Yes, I'll go to Aunt Virginia's with you, there is no reason why I shouldn't.”

He walked in silence by her side as they strolled up the street toward Virginia's cottage. At last he said, “Elinor, this can only end in much ill-feeling and the breaking of all friendships. You must see this; I wish you

cared."

"I do care, Stephen; you know I care," she said gently. "Whatever I do, I am going to be bitterly dissatisfied with myself. You're convinced; you cannot understand how I'm not, and you will never appreciate my motives; you'll always question them. This makes my love all the more hopeless."

"Never mind that now, Stephen," said Elinor. "Just promise me one thing. Aunt Virginia has been so distressed at not seeing you, I think she would agree to anything to spare you; but you must be fair to her. She has no right to sacrifice herself even for you."

"Do you think she cares that much for me?"

"Cares for you!" cried Elinor. "She is devoted to you! You don't know her at all, or you would know this. There is no sacrifice she would not be capable of making for your sake."

"I shall insist upon her being guided by your father and Wade."

"Isn't he wonderful; Ben, I mean—I don't think any one else would or could have done all he has done!"

Stephen heard her in stony silence; for in his heart he cursed Wade for his zeal and shrewdness.

It was not Virginia's habit to show emotion, but Stephen saw that his call was as much a pleasure to her as it was a surprise and he was glad for Benson's sake, that he had come with Elinor, if only to properly present him; they would know now that much as they doubted him, he was at least superior to all littleness, and scorned to make use of him in any small revenge he might have taken. Elinor and Mrs. Walsh did not follow them into the parlour, and Stephen understood that Virginia had something to say to him.

"I've wanted to see you, Stephen," she began gently. "Perhaps I should have sent for you, only I did not know that Mr. Benson would want you to come here."

"Uncle Jake shows no inclination to interfere with me," said Stephen quietly.

"After all, Stephen, perhaps you were right; perhaps nothing should be done—about the land, I mean. At first I was very bitter toward Mr. Benson, I could only see that he should be punished; but I am more tolerant now; at least, I don't want to involve you, or make your position difficult, and I don't see how this can be avoided if suit is begun. You are his only relative." He saw that this admission cost her something, for it was made reluctantly. "I am going to tell Mr. Wade my decision to-morrow. I think this will be best."

"But my dear Aunt Virginia, you can't do this, I can't let you make any such sacrifice for me!"

"For whom else would I make it, Stephen?" she asked simply. "But it is not so great a sacrifice as you imagine."

"I can't allow it, Aunt Virginia. If Uncle Jake has done what you think, it is only just that he should make reparation."

"Don't you think it is very strange that he will say nothing, will explain nothing?"

"Perhaps he will, if you will be patient," said Stephen.

But Virginia had nothing to say to this.

"I can only see that the thing will have to go on," he said, but perhaps he spoke half-heartedly; for after all if she dropped the matter, it offered him an easy escape from his difficulties; and he had even thought of asking her to do this very thing, though now that she suggested it of her own free will he was rather appalled by the proposal, since the burden of it would rest on him. He pictured Wade's rage and chagrin; and how would Elinor and the Nortons feel about it! The difficulties of his position became more and more apparent. No, the thing must go on, no sacrifice of his aunt's interests would right matters; only the law offered a solution of the problem, and even the solution might be an imperfect one, for who could foresee the end!

"The thing's started, and it will have to go on," he said with dogged insistence.

"But do you need to be involved?" she questioned.

"I don't know. Just at present I seem to be a friend with all factions, but how long this can continue is more than I can say. No, I am not fit to advise you; it will have to be Wade or Mr. Norton, and they have already declared themselves."

But afterward he was moody and preoccupied; and when he walked home with Elinor that night, he left her at the door and would not go in.

He reached home, and let himself in with his night-key. Benson called to him from the library, and Stephen turned with a sinking heart. Benson's habits were regular and old-fashioned; he retired early, and rose early; what was he doing up at that hour?

"Come in here, Stephen," called the lawyer.

Stephen entered the room.

With great deliberation Benson put aside the book he had been reading.

"Sit down, Stephen," he said, indicating a chair. There was a firm set to his lips, and Stephen felt that he had waited up for him, impelled by a purpose that might not be entirely pleasant. "Stephen, when did you see your aunt last?" said the old lawyer sharply.

"To-day—to-night, I took supper there. I went there from the Nortons."

Benson smoothed the thin white hair that lay on his temples, with thin well-shaped hand.

"I suppose," he began thoughtfully, "that your aunt has few, if any, secrets that exclude them."

"If she has, I don't know what they are," said Stephen.

"And her opinions are their opinions. Was my name mentioned?"

"Yes—they—"

"Never mind the connection, Stephen," he interjected austerely. He was silent for a moment, but the movement of his hand continued. "Naturally you can't quite agree with them." He favoured Stephen with a shrewd scrutiny.

"I do not," and Stephen met his glance frankly.

“Thank you.” There was a droop to his eyelids and his glance sought the floor at his feet. “That being the case,” he began slowly, “you will agree with me, I think, when you have time to consider the point, that in future it will be more agreeable to you not to see your aunt or the Nortons. Feeling as you tell me you do, the acquaintance cannot be entirely pleasant.”

“It is more than an acquaintance,” said Stephen. He felt rebellious of the condition Benson was seeking to impose.

“You must hear many pleasant things of me,” said the lawyer, with cynical humour. “It must be pleasant for you to sit and listen to them denounce me—eh? Or are they more tactful in your presence?”

But Stephen was silent. There was no answer he could make to this, but he felt his cheeks redden.

“Humph!” said Benson. “You don't answer me,” he added in the same breath; “but you don't need to. I suppose you see that scoundrel Wade?”

“No, I haven't seen him in days.”

“Don't you think you would enjoy travel?” asked Benson. Stephen stared at him blankly. “Why not go abroad?”

“No, I can't go abroad—I don't wish to, and—no, I don't wish to—”

“I merely suggested it as an easy way of breaking with these people. You might be gone a year, two years, I might even arrange my affairs, and join you later.”

“You don't understand, Uncle Jake, I have no desire to break with my aunt; as for the Nortons—” Benson's glance became hostile, menacing, and Stephen felt a quick sense of resentment. This was a man he had never known before, a side of Benson's character with which he had never come in contact.

“I don't quite see how you can remain a member of my household and also remain friendly with your aunt, for instance. The time has come when you will have to choose finally between us. I had hoped you would see this, that you would be sufficiently alive to your own best interests, and that is would not be necessary for me to recall them to your mind.”

“My own best interests have nothing to do with the situation; but just as I owe much to you, I owe something to my aunt, one obligation is as urgent as the other.”

“The ways separate here and now,” said Benson coldly. “If you remain under my roof. I must ask certain things of you. It is not much to require under the circumstances.”

“It is a great deal for me to agree to, I find,” said Stephen.

Benson glanced at him frowningly.

“I am rather surprised to hear you, Stephen. I am sorry to say it. I was hurt when I learned that you had spent the afternoon at the Nortons, and I was still more hurt when you told me you had spent the evening at your aunt's. I had hoped that you might see what was due me, without my having to call your attention to it.”

Stephen was rapidly losing control of himself. The strain under which he had lived for days, was beginning to tell. Here was opposition, and his temper rose to meet it. He felt that Benson was unjust in his demands; surely his aunt had been more generous. But what hurt him most, was the fact that Benson should have made an appeal to his self-interest. That was the last thing he considered. In his present frame of mind it seemed of no importance whatever.

“I owe something to my aunt,” he repeated, with dogged insistence.

“What has she done for you?”

“That is not the measure of my regard either in her case or yours.”

“Humph!” said Benson.

“Am I to understand clearly and distinctly that I am not to see my aunt again? That it is your wish, and that you equally object to my seeing the Nortons?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I mean.”

“I think I'd better tell you that my interest in Elinor Norton is not mere friendship.”

“The Lord save us!” cried the lawyer, with unpleasant mirth. “What has that to do with it?”

“A good deal I think,” said Stephen haughtily.

“What are your prospects that you can consider taking a wife?”

“As good as the prospects of most men who have nothing,” retorted Stephen stoutly.

“If you are reasonable in this one thing, you will have something better than that to offer the woman you marry—only it will not be Miss Norton.”

“It will be no one else,” said Stephen quietly.

For a moment they gazed at each other with flashing eyes and set lips; then Benson came quickly to his feet.

“Think it over, Stephen,” he said, and abruptly left the room.

CHAPTER FIFTY

STEPHEN came swiftly into the library. The early morning sun streamed in through the long windows which stood open, and by the table in the centre of the room sat Benson reading his morning paper.

"Uncle Jake," said the young fellow huskily.

The lawyer glanced up from his paper.

"Good-morning, Stephen," he said pleasantly. His mood had changed somewhat over night, and he had decided not to be too exacting with the boy. But Stephen could not know this. His face was very white and resolute. He had slept but little. The gross injustice of Benson's demand was a conviction that had remained unalterably fixed in his memory. He met Benson's glance waveringly. Something rose in his throat, but by an effort he mastered the emotions he felt might sway him to weakly temporize with a situation which he had told himself over and over could not be longer borne.

"In view of last night's conversation, Uncle Jake, I have decided that the best thing for me to do is to leave your house. I am sorry that this is so. I am here to thank you for the benefits, the numberless kindnesses you have conferred upon me—and to say goodbye." He took a forward step and extended his hand. The words he had rehearsed many times, but the feeling that flowed with them was real and spontaneous and of the moment itself.

The paper shook in the lawyer's hand, but he did not put it aside, nor rise to his feet. An angry frown gathered between his brows, but this smoothed itself away, and left him cold and unmoved.

"Just as you think best, Stephen," he said, without show of resentment or regret, and dropped his eyes to the paper again.

There was a painful awkward pause, in which Stephen heard the beating of his own heart. His decision and Benson's acceptance of it had been reached with tragic swiftness; and he recognized that the affairs of life are sometimes affairs of seconds only; that one can shatter ruthlessly as well as rear patiently. He paused irresolutely in the doorway.

"Uncle Jake, won't you speak to me—"

"I have nothing to say, Stephen," said Benson, without lifting his eyes from his paper.

At this, Stephen turned on his heel and left the room. A moment later, and the house door closed, and save for the servants Benson was alone in his house.

He read on imperturbably until the breakfast bell rang, then he got up slowly, and walked slowly into the dining-room.

On the street Stephen paused and took stock of the situation. He had broken with Benson, and where was he to go? There was only his aunt; he would have to go there. He could ask this of her for the time, until he could do something for himself. He was hurt and embittered. It was a terrible blow to him that Benson's affection had died so quick a death. He wished he might have been allowed to say more, to explain fully why his attitude was as it was, and just how impossible it had become for him to break with either his aunt or the Nortons.

It hurt him, too, though he did not own this even to himself, that after all these years he had made himself of so little consequence to Benson. He would have dismissed an incompetent servant with as little show of feeling.

But Benson was not happy. He dispatched his breakfast in haste and hurried down to the office.

"Gibbs," said he to the general who was already there. "Stephen has left my house."

"Left your house, Jake—I don't understand."

"He has left my house," repeated Benson sharply.

"Good Heavens, Jake, what's happened?" cried the general in dismay.

"Never mind what's happened, Gibbs. You are not to mention his name again in my hearing; that is all I have to say to you."

"Oh, see here, Jake," began Gibbs, but Benson gave him such a look that he dared say no more.

"This is a matter we will not discuss," said he frigidly. "Now bring in your accounts, and we will see about your collections for the month."

All that morning poor Gibbs worked as a man in a dream; but at noon Benson went home, and he promptly put on his hat and shuffled out into the street. He was consumed by a burning desire to know why Stephen had left the lawyer's house, for what would Stephen do without Benson, and what would Benson do without Stephen? One had seemed as dependent as the other in this relation of theirs. He wondered what was the nature of Stephen's offence. He felt that he must have exceeded the limits set by Benson in some particular. Probably he had been extravagant, he could think of nothing beyond this; scandal he would have heard. He knew that for some days Benson had seemed worried and anxious, and this explained it. Stephen had been the cause of it, but what was it that Stephen could have done!

These were the points he pondered as he hurried away in the direction of Wade's office. He would see Wade and get word to Stephen. He found Ben alone.

"Have you seen Stephen Landray to-day?" he demanded without ceremony or introduction.

"No—what's wrong, general?" said Wade.

"Matter enough!" said the general moodily, as he sat down weakly in a chair. "But what it is I don't just know. I'd give a good deal to—"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"He's left Jake Benson's, Ben! Jake called me into the office this morning the first thing and told me he'd left—gone for good—and that I was not to mention his name again. Now what do you think of that?"

Wade bounded from his chair and snatched up his hat.

"You don't say! Well, this is news!"

“Ain't it awful!” lamented the general.

“Well, of course that's one way to look at it,” said Wade, grinning.

“Where are you going, Ben?” for he saw that Wade was making preparations to leave.

“Out to Mrs. Landray's; I want to see Stephen, I expect to find him there.”

“Hold on, Ben,” said Gibbs, detaining him with a feeble hand. “Do you know what's wrong? Has Stephen been in any trouble that you know of?”

“Nothing that I know of, general, I give you my word on that.”

“No debts, no escapades that Jake Benson would be likely not to approve of?”

“None so far as I know,” said Wade impatiently.

“Then what's wrong, can you tell me that?” asked Gibbs weakly.

“No, I can't,” said Wade.

“I suppose both of them lost their tempers over some trifle,” speculated the general. “But look here, this ain't no trifle to either of them; the boy's future is at stake; and this is no light matter to Jake either, for all his damn airs! I'll bet they just flared up over nothing at all, and now I want to see 'em flare down and get back to their senses. You're going to see Steve?”

“Yes, that is if he is at his aunt's as I expect he is. I am going there now.”

“Well, you tell him for me, Ben, that I want to see him, to-night at my house, will you do that?”

“Certainly.”

“Tell him it's very particular. I'd go to him myself, but Jake might not like that if he ever found it out; but there is no harm in his coming to me; that's quite another matter.”

“Quite,” agreed Wade.

“I'm going to patch this thing up,” said the old man. “Jake Benson ain't acting right, and he knows it. He's got no business to turn that young fellow out of doors without a day's warning. I'll tell him so, too, if he don't come to his senses damn quick!”

“All right, general—all right. I'll give him your message,” said Wade from the door.

“Thank you, Ben,” and Gibbs shuffled after him, but by the time he had reached the street, Wade had disappeared.

This was news indeed that old Gibbs had brought him, for there could be but one reason why Stephen had left Benson.

“He's objected to Stephen going to his aunt's. Stephen probably told him he was there last night. These people—these people! who are ready to chuck up everything for a fancied point of honour, who are always losing sight of the main thing! How am I ever going to keep them sane and faced about in the right direction!”

He found Stephen at the cottage but reserved and taciturn, and quite evidently none too well pleased with himself, and apparently very resentful of his own prompt appearance, especially when he told him of Gibbs's call and message. But Wade was not sensitive; he carried a stout heart under a thick skin, and much had been accomplished, for Stephen had broken with Benson. This was more than he had hoped for.

Virginia came into the room, and with a muttered excuse to her, Stephen left them. She was not reserved. She thought Benson's conduct had been outrageous.

“But what was the trouble, Mrs. Landray?”

“I don't know, Stephen hasn't said, but he has left Mr. Benson for good;” her eyes flashed with the sense of triumph she was feeling, and which she could not hide from him. She had asked Stephen no question, and he had told her nothing beyond the fact that he and Benson had disagreed and that he could not go back there.

“Well, now we can go ahead, can't we?” said Wade eagerly.

“Yes, I am glad you came, for I want to know what I must do.”

“We'll offer Benson back the five thousand dollars he paid for the land,” said Wade.

“But I have no such sum as that!” said Virginia.

“Oh, that's all right. Mr. Norton will let us have the cash for an hour or so. Of course, Benson won't take it, the tender is the merest formality, and don't really mean anything in itself,” explained Wade.

“Is it necessary?”

“Well, yes, it's a good point. Don't you see, you will have offered him his money back; it shows you are in earnest. Yes, I should hate to dispense with that; and to tell the truth, I've already arranged with Mr. Norton for the use of the money. He quite agrees with me that we should leave nothing undone that will give our case authority. When it gets to trial, I expect that we will find that Benson has not been quite so inactive as he seems. He has influence and he has money, and he will use them both; that's a foregone conclusion. This is going to rip the town wide open, Mrs. Landray; nothing like this has ever happened here before; no case of exactly the same calibre has ever been brought to trial in the county.”

He took his leave of her with some precipitation, for he feared the riot of his own enthusiasm. He had doubted and feared, but now the case was assured; and the dinky little Queen Anne on Norton's vacant lot seemed to be digging itself a cellar among the roses; and then it grew as never a house had grown before, until he could fancy himself approaching it with springing step, and Clara, that paragon of charming femininity, waiting for him just inside the door.

That night Stephen went to see Gibbs. The general had prepared for the meeting with unnecessary elaboration. He had induced his Julia to retire to a neighbour's.

“She don't know yet that anything's wrong between you and Jake, and I hope to get you back on a sane basis before I tell her you've had this little flare up. My dear boy, I want you to put your case in my hands and leave it all to me; a little tact, you know—”

“My dear general, you don't understand the situation,” said Stephen, but he had no intention of telling him the nature of their difference, he had too much regard for Gibbs. He could not shake his faith in Benson. That would come soon enough.

“I ain't asking to know the ins and outs of your little difference,” said Gibbs magnanimously. “I take it, it was just a friendly little quarrel, that I can patch up in about ten seconds when the time comes for me to take a hand in the matter.”

Stephen shook his head.

“Now, you don't mean that you ain't willing to patch it up?” expostulated Gibbs.

“I should like to retain Uncle Jake's affection—”

“Well, I don't reckon that's entirely out of your reach, Steve. Let me say something to him as coming from you; I'll wait until the time's ripe, trust me for that,” urged the general. “He's told me I mustn't mention your name again in his hearing, but I'll risk it. He can't put on those airs with me; I ain't no patience with such damn nonsense anyhow, and he knows it! Let me tell him you regret what's happened—I don't know what it is, and I don't ask to know—but just let me tell him you are sorry. I want to see you back there both for his sake and for your own. I know Jake Benson, I know him better than he knows himself; and if you say I may, I'll lodge the sort of an idea with him that'll stick. Let me fix it up for you, Steve,” he entreated.

“No, you must say nothing, general. In fact there is nothing you can say.”

“Don't let your pride obscure your reason, Steve, you got too much at stake to act this way. You can't afford to affront him.”

“But I've not affronted him, in the sense you mean; you will know all there is to know before long, and then you will understand.”

“And you won't let me say a word to him?” grieved Gibbs.

“It can only make trouble for you, general, and nothing can come of it.”

“You shouldn't have lost your temper, Steve. Of course, I know he's rather exacting at times—”

“No, I've nothing to complain of; he has always been kindness itself to me. I appreciate your wish to help me, though I can't make use of it.”

“Just let me edge in a word now and then,” urged the general. “My disagreement with Uncle Jake is not of the nature you suppose, and is not to be adjusted. The breach can only go on widening. I am sorry to have to tell you this.”

“You don't mean you broke with him for good and all!” wailed Gibbs.

“That's about the amount of the matter.”

“But you can't afford to, Steve.”

“It's an extravagance in which I am going to indulge myself, at any rate,” said Stephen, smiling sadly at the old man.

“I thought it was just some little difference,” said the general. “You're sure you don't exaggerate?”

“I fear I don't. But I thank you for your wish to serve me.”

“It was for him as well as you, Steve. You been everything to him. Now he's got only me, and we'll doze over our wine night after night as we did before you came—well, I'm sorry there's nothing I can do, but I suppose you know best. Well, I hope it will work out right, for I've set my heart on your getting his money one of these days. I don't want to see it go to some damn charity!”

Wade had told Virginia that their first step would be to offer Benson the five thousand dollars he had paid for the land. She had not understood that she would have to make this demand in person, but later Wade made this point clear to her.

“Of course it's not a thing one would care to do if one were going to pick out just the things they'd like to do,” said Wade, smiling into her face. “But we'll catch him at his office when only old Gibbs and the bookkeeper are there; they'll do very well as witnesses,” he explained.

“And I must go there—but not alone!”

“No, no, I'll go with you.”

Virginia looked at him doubtingly.

“It never occurred to me that I should have to do this, Mr. Wade,” she said.

“I don't expect the law is ever very pleasant to any one except the lawyers, but I should think this would be a rather more difficult occasion for Mr. Benson than for any one else.”

“Does Stephen know what I shall have to do?”

“I don't think he does.”

“Then he'd better not be told until it is all over.”

“Probably not,” agreed Wade.

“If it were not for his sake I should not care to make this demand; but don't you see, he will have absolutely nothing unless this suit is won. It is most important that the money should be recovered.”

“It is,” said Wade.

“And you have no doubt but the suit will be won?” she asked anxiously.

“Well, of course, one can never tell; but I've put the question to myself many times in the last few days, and I feel certain of the outcome. I think we had best get the preliminary steps over with as quickly as possible.” He was aware that the interview with Benson would only seem the more impossible the longer it was deferred.

“I have not seen Mr. Benson in years,” said Virginia thoughtfully. “Once I should not have thought it possible for him to wrong any one—”

“Well, we know in Stephen's case that he was hard enough—to call it by no other name,” said Wade.

“Yes, that is true.”

“My dear Mrs. Landray, there is nothing extraordinary in the situation. I am sorry to say it, but suits of this sort are far from uncommon. You had every confidence in Mr. Benson, and he saw his opportunity. Men play for riches without much thought of anything but the stakes. Not to get found out is the principal thing.”

But Virginia was not giving any attention to Mr. Wade's slipshod views on morality. She was thinking of the Benson she had once known; the Benson who had sacrificed himself to meet her lightest wish, whose kindness had seemed infinite. He could not have wronged her and remained the man she Had known. The change had begun then, and it had gone on, and the manifestation of it had come to her in many ways; in his treatment of Stephen's father, and now in the case of Stephen himself. The thought of the two Stephens always stiffened the spirit of her resentment against this former friend.

“I think the sooner we get it over with, the better,” said Wade. “What do you say to some day next week?”

“Is there any reason why we should wait?” asked Virginia.

“None whatever, but I thought you might prefer to.”

“No, I will see Mr. Benson at once.”

Wade's eyes sparkled.

“Mr. Benson is usually in his office between eleven and twelve. If I call here with a carriage and the money at half-past ten tomorrow, will you be ready?”

“Yes.”

“I declare, Mrs. Landray, you are almost as good as a man! We are sure to find old Gibbs there, and Miss Murphy, the bookkeeper. The thing will be over with in a moment; the anticipation is much the worst part of it.”

“Come at half-past ten,” said Virginia; and Wade hurried down town to see Norton.

He stopped at his office just long enough to write a note to Stephen, whom he asked to drop in on him at half-past ten the next day, and to wait there for him until he came. He wanted to get him out of the way until Virginia should have had her interview with Benson, when it would be too late for him to interfere to any purpose.

The next morning, assisted by Jane, Virginia dressed for the ordeal with more than her usual care.

“Where is Stephen?” she asked of the latter.

“He has just gone to see Mr. Wade, dear. He had a note from him this morning asking him to call at the office, so he told me.”

By turns Virginia was hot and cold, but her composure was steady and unshaken, though when they heard the carriage drive up to the gate, she sat down abruptly and stared rather helplessly at Jane; yet a moment later when she descended the stairs, all her firmness had returned.

On the way downtown Wade carefully outlined the points she was to cover.

“You think you can do it, Mrs. Landray?” he asked anxiously; “You don't think it will be too much for you?”

“It is nothing I should care to do for the pleasure of it,” said Virginia, with a gleam of nervous humour at the thought. She set her lips firmly. “I think I can remember all you say. You will go in with me?”

“Oh, yes, you don't think I'd desert you?” he said reproachfully. He was in a fever of excitement, though no one would have guessed it from his manner.

“Then stand close at my side where I can touch you if I want to,” said Virginia.

“I'll be right there, Mrs. Landray,” he answered laughing. “Still I don't see why you should feel it. Benson is the one who has done wrong. All you want is the land, and I've the money here for him, if he'll only take it.”

The carriage drew up at the curb in front of Benson's office, and Wade opened the door and sprang out and helped Virginia to descend. He looked closely into her face, but beyond that it was quite colorless, it betokened nothing of her feeling at that moment. He could not help seeing what a fine and imposing figure she made. He noted the firm set of her lips, and knew she would be fully equal to the occasion.

For a moment Virginia paused before entering the building and glanced about her. Perhaps she did this unconsciously, but Wade thought he understood her feeling.

“Courage!” he said.

She entered the building and went swiftly up the single flight of steps that led to Benson's office. Wade made as if to offer her his arm, but by a quick gesture she declined it. He kept his glance fixed on her face. He would have been quick to detect any sign of wavering on her part; but her face had become a mask which hid all emotion.

They entered the office. In the outer room sat Gibbs writing at his desk, with his bald head just showing where he bent above his work. At another desk Miss Murphy was similarly occupied. An arch which could be closed with folding doors, separated the outer office from the inner and more private room, and here sat Benson. But he was not alone. Dr. Ward, the Episcopal clergyman was with him, and they were talking together.

Wade glanced about him with a swift turn of the head. He saw Gibbs and Miss Murphy; and beyond the arch, Benson and Dr. Ward; and a slight smile parted his lips. Dr. Ward's unlooked-for presence only added to the dramatic value of the moment that was to come, and Wade's alert mind saw beyond the present. It would be all over town in a few hours, and he would be the most talked of lawyer in the county. He nodded pleasantly to Gibbs, who had glanced up from his writing, and whose eye he caught. He smiled at Miss Murphy, who was pretty, and turned to Virginia.

“Courage!” he whispered between his teeth.

Virginia advanced straight to the wide opening between the two rooms. She did not see Gibbs, and she did not see Miss Murphy; though she was conscious of their presence in the room. But she did see Benson, and knew in a vague sort of way that he was seated at his desk talking with a man, but she did not realize who

that man was until afterward.

When he saw Virginia, white-faced, but resolute, and determined, Benson realized what was to follow, what was indeed happening then; and he came slowly to his feet. He even took half a step forward to meet her.

“I am very glad to see you, Virginia,” he said in a low voice. “Won't you sit down for a moment? I shall be at liberty then.”

He wanted Dr. Ward to go before she hurled her charges at his head.

Virginia turned rather helplessly to Wade. She was conscious all at once that what had been a mere idea had suddenly become an entity, and the entity was this gentle smiling man whom she had come there to charge with fraud. But Wade gave her a quick glance of encouragement and nodded his head with cool decision. At the same moment he slipped into her hand the packet of bank-notes which Norton had furnished for the occasion.

In a clear voice, a voice that vibrated richly with feeling, Virginia began her demand. There was a gasping pause—and then a deathly stillness in the office which the sound of her voice filled, not loudly, but clearly and distinctly.

Miss Murphy let the pen slip from her fingers. It rolled across her desk, and fell noisily to the floor. Gibbs half rose from his chair, and stared at Virginia with bulging eyes fixed in a stare of unutterable astonishment. Every scrap of colour had fled from Benson's smooth-shaven cheeks, and his thin lips twitched, seeming to follow her words with some utterance of his own; but no sound escaped them. Word for word he kept up this dumb show of speech, while his fingers played nervously, absently, the while, with some papers he held in his hand.

But of all, Dr. Ward was the first to recover himself. He uttered a startled exclamation, once the full meaning of what Virginia was saying was clear to him, and took a step toward her.

“You're mad, Mrs. Landray!” he cried.

Apparently he had it in his mind to stop her by some physical act, but Wade put out his hand and waved him away.

“Don't you see—don't you understand—this is a matter of business, let Mrs. Landray go on! This is no concern of yours,” he said in an unshaken voice, and glared angrily at the would-be interrupter.

But Virginia had already finished. There was a brief pause.

“The money, Mrs. Landray, you have it in your hand,” said Wade, grimly insistent that the farce should be played out; and obedient to his prompting, Virginia took a forward step and extended the bundle of notes.

Benson raised his head and looked at her. Then he said in the same low voice in which he had before spoken.

“I don't know what you mean, Virginia. No, the sale of the land will have to stand;” and he turned imperturbably to Dr. Ward.

“He has answered you, Mrs. Landray. We will go,” said Wade quietly; and they moved back through the outer office, past the astonished Gibbs, and past Miss Murphy. It was only when they reached the head of the flight of steps that Virginia spoke.

“I forgot nothing? I said all that was necessary for me to say?” she asked.

He realized that she would have been ready to return if this had been needful.

“Indeed you did!” he chuckled.

But as they went down-stairs her gloved hand rested quite unconsciously on his arm, and he noted how it shook, and divined that the ordeal through which she had just passed had been perhaps greater than he had at first supposed. When they reached the street, she turned to him and said:

“You need not go back to the house with me. I really think I prefer to go alone—only tell the man to drive fast, please.”

“But hadn't you better let me go with you?” he urged.

“No, you are very kind. And please don't come to see me until to-morrow; this has been enough for one day.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

|WADE found Stephen waiting for him when he entered the office.

“I am sorry I was detained,” he said smoothly. “But the fact is I've been to see Mr. Benson. I took your aunt there. I tell you she's a trump! She's the one person I know, who's just a little more than a match for him!” He threw himself down in the chair by the desk and sought among the litter of papers for his pipe and tobacco.

“My Aunt Virginia has been to see Mr. Benson!” cried Stephen. “Yes, sir, I just sent her home in a carriage,” said Wade coolly.

“I should have been told about this, Ben,” said Stephen resentfully. “It was my right to know what you were doing.”

“Oh, see here, Steve, that's no way to look at it. We wanted to spare you. You can't muss up in this; you

wouldn't have cared to go to him yourself."

"I? I couldn't!" said Stephen. .

"Of course you couldn't, and so your aunt did the trick." He began to fill his pipe, and as he worked the tobacco down with his forefinger, he described the interview.

"But what did Uncle Jake say?" asked Stephen impatiently. He found that after all he had counted much on some explanation the lawyer would have it in his power to make.

"Say? Nothing," snorted Wade. "I didn't expect he'd say anything. What would he say?"

"But he denied it?"

"Not in the way you mean, Steve. But of course he declined to accept the money your aunt tendered him."

"What will you do now?"

"Get it to trial as quick as ever I can. Enough time's been wasted already."

Stephen was silent. He rested his head in his hands; he was sick at heart. The idea that the hideous thing had been given publicity was nauseating to him. Wade smiled at him genially through a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"I won't ask you to join me in three cheers, Steve, and out of respect for your feeling in the matter I won't indulge in them myself; but say, don't look so mournful—cheer up! I don't expect you to enter into the spirit of my joy, but do you know there's a fellow named Ben Wade who's given five priceless years of his life to the odd jobs of legal practice, runty little cases, where if he snaked out a five or ten dollar fee, it kept him and his girl up half the night building Queen Anne cottages! Well, from now on Ben Wade will have a free field for his genius; the day of odd jobs is over for him—he's come into his own! Of course I don't expect you to take much interest in the short and simple annals of the poor, for I guess you never sat up many nights with your best girl building Queen Annes with ten-dollar bills; but if you had ever known all the things a fellow can do with a ten-dollar bill, the torrent of hope that a greasy trifle like that, earned, can pour into his soul; you'd understand why I'd like to stick my head out of that window and give three cheers for myself, and your aunt—yes, and for old Benson, too—God bless him! I mustn't forget him, for he's done his part in promoting the welfare of a fellow being!"

They were silent again. Wade pulled serenely at his pipe, and Stephen stared from the window. He was trying to fathom his relation to the events of which Wade had told him.

On the street below, Gibbs suddenly appeared from around a corner. He paused when he was opposite the building, and glanced across uncertainly at Wade's windows; then he hurried forward at the best speed of his old legs. Stephen followed his movements with his glance.

"What are you looking at, Steve?" asked Wade.

"General Gibbs, he seems to be coming here," he said, and then they heard Gibbs come shuffling up the stairs and down the hall. Purple-faced and perspiring the general entered the room.

"Is Steve here?" he demanded gruffly. Then he saw the two young men by the window. "I want to see you, Steve," he said, ignoring Wade. "I been out to your aunt's; Mrs. Walsh told me I'd probably find you here."

Stephen glanced questioningly at Wade, who quitted his chair.

"I'll just step out for a minute; no doubt the general will prefer to see you alone." He put down his pipe, and reached for his hat.

Gibbs appeared to be having some sort of an attack. He was sputtering and choking. Then he whirled furiously on Wade.

"Don't you speak to me—I forbid it!" he roared. "You scoundrelly busybody—you miserable sneaking shyster! Never speak to me again, or damn your soul—I'll strike you with my cane!"

Stephen placed his hand restrainingly on the old man's arm, and sought to draw him toward the front of the room. He gave Wade a glance of mute appeal, but Wade was standing with his hands buried deep in his pockets. He was regarding Gibbs with a smile of kindly tolerance. Resentment was remote from him. The thought of his success rested on him like a benediction. He was not to be moved by anything so impotent as the general's rage. He turned at last with a light laugh and quitted the room.

"I can't contain myself!" sputtered the general. "If I was ten years younger—yes, five years younger, I'd horsewhip him within an inch of his life—yes, I would, by God!" He mopped his face with his handkerchief. His burst of anger left him helpless and wretched. "Ain't it awful, Steve?" he moaned.

"Yes, general. Here, sit down." He drew forward the chair Wade had vacated, and the general collapsed weakly into it.

"You know that your aunt has charged Jake Benson with stealing—never mind the legal points—that's what it amounts to; Jake Benson, mind you—Jake Benson!" his voice rose in a thin quaver of anguish.

"It's not so bad as that," said Stephen.

"I heard it all!" cried Gibbs, in a shocked voice. "She came there to the office, and before us all, charged him with fraud—charged Jake Benson—my God—my God! What does it all mean, Steve; can you tell me that?"

"It means a suit," said Stephen sadly.

"But Jake Benson never done it—he couldn't! I've known him all my life; he's stood at the very head of his profession; he's built a great reputation, and now—it's a conspiracy to pull him down!"

"I don't understand it, but Wade has certain evidence—"

"I don't believe it!" shouted the old man. "Steve, they've corrupted your judgment. You know he couldn't do it. Any other man might, but he couldn't—he just couldn't!"

"How is he? Was he terribly shaken?"

"He must be, Steve. How could it be otherwise? But he don't show it to look at him. He's going round with his head up just as if nothing had happened, but take my word for it he feels it through and through. I know Jake Benson. What he says or shows, is the smallest part of what he feels. He's cut to the quick; and can you

wonder at it?"

"Of course," said Stephen gently.

The old man placed a tremulous hand on his arm.

"But you feel for him, Steve; you ain't given yourself, body and soul, to the traitors."

"No, no; I am more sorry than I can say that I should seem to have any part in this."

"Yet this is why you left him, Steve!" said Gibbs reproachfully.

"He sent me away, general; at least, he made it so I could not stay."

"He wants to see you. He wants you to come to the house tonight. He'd like it if you'd dine with us."

But Stephen hesitated.

"Come, you can't deny him that, Steve," Gibbs insisted. "You won't. Let me go back and tell him you'll be there. Just remember the friend he's been to you."

"But do you know why he wants me?"

"I haven't the least idea. Let me tell him you'll come!" entreated Gibbs.

"Very well, but I'll come after dinner," said Stephen.

"You won't dine with us?"

"I can't, general;" and his tone was so final, that Gibbs forebore to urge him further.

"I'll tell, Jake then, that you'll drop in during the evening," he said as he took his leave.

Stephen did not tell Wade of his promise, and he did not tell Virginia, but after supper at the cottage he excused himself and set out for the lawyer's. He found Benson and Gibbs waiting his coming over their wine.

Benson welcomed him kindly and as though nothing had happened to mar their relation; while the general nodded and winked reassuringly over a long and very black cigar.

They talked of indifferent things for a time, and if he had not known of the events of that morning, Stephen would have supposed that nothing unusual had taken place, and that the day had been like many other days at the office. Even Gibbs had recovered from the shock of Virginia's charge, and save that he looked a little haggard, there was nothing to indicate the strain of the emotions by which he had been buffeted earlier in the day. As for Benson himself, he was as inscrutable as ever. His face told no secrets. At last he rose from his chair.

"Stay here, Gibbs," he said to the general. And to Stephen. "Come with me;" and Stephen followed him into the library.

Benson closed the door after them. Then he went to his desk. In the woodwork just above it, a small iron safe was cleverly concealed, having been built into the wall itself. It was, Stephen knew, the receptacle of many of Benson's private papers. He unlocked it and took from one of the pigeon-holes a long envelope. He turned to Stephen with this in his hand.

"Please sit down here by the light," he indicated a chair by the table. From the envelope which he now opened, he produced several sheets of paper. "I sent for you because I think it is only right that you should know the full significance of this paper I have in my hand. I had not expected its contents would be made known to you until after my death; but, recent events have altered my intentions in this respect. Will you oblige me by reading it from beginning to end." He smoothed out the several sheets as he spoke, and handed them to Stephen; then he lighted a cigar. "Kindly read it carefully; it concerns you vitally."

And Stephen drawing the lamp toward him did as he desired. There was a page devoted to a number of small bequests to old servants; next followed careful instructions relating to certain investments that were to be made to create an annuity for Gibbs; a similar provision was made for his Julia; and then Stephen came upon his own name. He saw that Benson had made him his heir. He was prepared for this in a measure, but he was not prepared for the amount that was devised for his benefit, for the lawyer had given a methodical and accurate description of the properties he owned with the approximate value of each.

Stephen had believed him a very rich man, but the will was a revelation to him; his actual wealth was far in excess of anything he had ever supposed possible.

When he came to the end of the last sheet of paper, he carefully folded them and handed them back to Benson. The lawyer waited for him to speak, but he said nothing. He was thinking of the astonishing revelation that Benson had just made. It was true he had once expected to inherit from him, but never such a fortune as this.

"I want you to tell your Aunt Virginia of the existence of this will," said Benson slowly. "You saw from the date that it was drawn up since you left college—no, wait;" for Stephen seemed about to interrupt him. "I merely ask you to make her acquainted with the facts with which you are now familiar. You may add the assurance as coming from me, that it is the last will I shall make, unless—" he paused, as if to choose his words, but only said abruptly, "Tell her what you now know."

The reading of the will had moved Stephen profoundly, for it had made plain to him just the regard in which he had been held by Benson.

"You will tell her, Stephen?" the lawyer urged.

"No," said Stephen, weighing the matter deliberately, "I can't tell her."

"Why not?"

"Why, don't you see, if I told her of this will, and the condition—" he hesitated.

"What condition? I have made none."

"But one is implied."

Benson was silent; he did not dispute this point.

"If she knew of that will she would drop everything. There is no sacrifice she will not make for those she loves."

“Yes,” said Benson shortly, and with great bitterness, “just as she will sacrifice any one she does not love, for the sake of those she does.”

“I really don't see why she should care for me. I am not conscious of having done anything to merit it.”

“You are a Landray,” said Benson.

“No, it's more than that,” said Stephen.

“Will you tell her of the will?” repeated Benson.

“No, Uncle Jake, I can't tell her,” said Stephen doggedly.

“You could do justice by her.”

“She would never accept it from me; at least, she would not feel the same.”

“And you will not tell her?”

“I can't, Uncle Jake,” said Stephen quietly.

Benson struck the papers open with his hand.

“You will not tell her?” he repeated again. Then he struck a match. Stephen thought it was to light his cigar, which had gone out.

“No, neither now or later—certainly at no future time; I had much rather she never knew.”

“She never will,” said Benson grimly. He held the still burning match in his fingers. He glanced again at Stephen, and then thoughtfully applied it to the sheets of paper one by one. As the flames crept up them, he dropped them on the hearth of the empty fireplace. Once he stirred them with the toe of his boot.

Stephen watched him without visible emotion. It had all happened so quickly that he hardly yet understood that he had relinquished a great fortune. When the last vestige of what had been his will was destroyed, Benson raised his eyes from the contemplation of the little heap of grey ashes that remained in witness of his act.

“You will always have the satisfaction of knowing that you sacrificed a fortune to a nice sense of honour,” he said cynically.

“I am very sorry that I could not do what you wished,” said Stephen awkwardly. “But I am grateful to you for showing me what you did.”

“Why?” asked Benson curiously.

“Because I understand now just how you must have felt toward me,” he said simply.

“I trust the realization of that is a satisfaction to you,” observed Benson coldly.

“It is,” said Stephen.

“We will go back to Gibbs,” said Benson, rising abruptly.

“Please say good-night to the general for me,” said Stephen rising, too. “I think I will go home.” He held out his hand with frank good feeling. Benson touched it with the tips of his fingers.

“Good-night,” he said.

|CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

STEPHEN did not see Benson again, and he confided to no one the purpose the lawyer had in mind when he sent for him. He had two reasons for this. He did not want his aunt to know of the sacrifice he had made; and after a time he came to feel that the whole incident had been discreditable to Benson himself. He would have made him his heir, not because he longer cared for him, but because it would have quieted Virginia. In the end he found he had carried away the impression that a bribe had been offered him.

As Wade had foreseen, the news of Virginia's demand speedily became public property; but there was nothing in Benson's attitude to indicate that he was conscious of the buzzing tongues of gossip that were everywhere. He carried his head a little higher, that was all. No man could say he feared to meet his glance; and there were those who said he was dead to all sense of shame. These were willing to think ill of him on general principles, and not because they had any reason to. There was another faction, however, all sympathy for him. They denounced Virginia's charge as the irresponsible attempt of a woman to levy blackmail. It was remembered as something not quite creditable to her that she had always been peculiar, and had held herself aloof from the town and its social life. But by far the bitterest denunciations were heaped upon Stephen. He was held to be a base ingrate, who had turned on his benefactor and had joined with Virginia to despoil him of at least a portion of his wealth.

Stephen felt the injustice of the position in which he was placed; and Virginia felt it for him and for herself. They would both have liked to run away from the consequence of her act had it been possible.

Yet few people took the case quite seriously in its ultimate aspect. There were even those who were disposed to chaff Ben Wade; but his air of quiet self-confidence, his smiling reticence, and his genial good nature in the face of ridicule had its effect, just as he intended it should. He prepared and filed his papers in the case, and it was whispered that they were models in their way.

Benson, although he had become an object of widespread and general interest, neither shunned nor avoided the public's gaze, its stare of covert inquiry. He went his way in undisturbed serenity, and with no sign of shame or fear. He was as impressive as ever. The same austerely kind, dignified, figure he had always been; and his air of pleasant patronage and courtesy suffered no eclipse; and the most bitter of his detractors

yielded him what he by his very manner claimed for himself, and had claimed these many years.

It was only poor old Gibbs who showed shame and fear, and no one noticed him. He would gladly have hidden himself away somewhere if he could; but he could not; and so he slunk in and out of the office, looking no man in the face where he could avoid it. He had expected Benson to rise in the might of his spotless integrity and silence Virginia. But most of all he had looked for him to punish Ben Wade for the part he had played in the matter. But he either would not or could not do anything of the kind, and a cruel suspicion, the first he had known, began to obtrude itself upon him. What if it were true, what if Benson had defrauded Virginia! But this was so utterly inconceivable to him, that he never really believed it.

Each day he stole down to the office, choosing his way through alleys and by unfrequented side streets, expecting that something would be done. Surely Benson must decide who was to defend the suit for him; and Gibbs wanted to feel the excitement of those preparations. But each day he was doomed to disappointment. The subject was never even mentioned between them. He had hoped that Benson would make some denial to him, so that he might know of a certainty just how false Virginia's accusations were; but the denial was never made; and so far as he knew nothing was done. Apparently nothing would be done. Was it possible that Benson did not intend to contest the suit! His anguish, for it amounted to that, left deep lines on his splotched and bloated old face. The earth, the solid earth that had rested secure in the very shadow of Benson's greatness, seemed slipping out from beneath his feet.

In this stress, unrebuked, he took to drink. Night after night he carried a tall bottle home hidden under his coat, and his Julia was powerless to control him. She could hear him for half the night, as she lay on her bed in the room over the small parlour, stamping about in his stockinged feet, or lurching through the hall to the water-cooler that stood on the sideboard in the little dining-room, muttering to himself as he went, and his mutterings were querulous cursings of Wade and Virginia.

All day at the office he watched Benson with eyes that held a doglike devotion, and each time the lawyer called him to his side, he shuffled eagerly into his presence, thinking now surely he would say something; but it was never what he wanted to hear from his lips. The days wasted themselves and nothing was done.

Perhaps Benson would have found it difficult to explain his attitude had he felt called upon to do so. He was conscious that he had no wish to exert himself. He was strangely indifferent to the whole course of events. The thing that hurt him most was the realization that Virginia would never know why he had wronged her. She would probably go on to the end of her days, firm in the conviction that the money itself had been his sole object. He reverted more and more to the days of his generous love. In the light of his awakened memory, the present bore less and less upon him. He had yielded up a lifetime's devotion and had lost everything—love itself, reputation, the approval of his own conscience; and now he was to be exposed. In the end he would stand amidst the wreck of every purpose and hope.

He had even lost Stephen. The boy had developed character and determination where he had least expected him to display these qualities. He had desired him to be merely a gentleman. He smiled cynically. He had trained him better than he knew.

But if he carried his head high, and gave no sign of fear or shame or remorse, he was yet living under a terrible strain.

Gibbs noticed that his shaven cheeks were growing hollow, and that while on the street, or where he felt that he was being observed, he was as erect and active as ever; when they were alone together his shoulders drooped, the vigour seemed to leave him, and he moved slowly and wearily. He scarcely allowed Gibbs out of his sight. Each day he took him home to dine with him. These dinners were cheerless enough. Benson was invariably silent and absorbed in his own thoughts, and the general was permitted to drug himself with old port; and his usually careful host did not seem to be aware of the advantage he was taking of the situation.

Three weeks had now elapsed, and Gibbs befuddled but faithful and devoted, was spending the evening with his friend. They were sitting in the library over their wine and cigars. At last Benson glanced at the clock on the mantel, and rose slowly from his chair.

“You'd better go home, Gibbs,” he said. “It's late, and I don't think Julia likes your being kept out at all hours.”

“How do you feel, Jake?” asked Gibbs, rising too.

“How should I feel?” demanded the lawyer sharply. Then his manner softened. “It's very good of you to take care of me as you do, Gibbs. The evenings would be very lonely without you.” He rested his hand affectionately on the general's arm.

Gibbs was instantly on the verge of tears, he was so stirred by the other's gentleness and kindness.

“I am afraid I bore you more than I do anything else, Jake,” he said brusquely. “It's only your goodness that allows you to see how damn fond I am of you, and let that make amends for the multitude of my shortcomings.”

They had moved into the hall as he spoke, but Benson still rested his hand on his arm.

“You're a better fellow than you'll ever know, Gibbs,” he said.

“I guess not,” said Gibbs chokingly.

Benson so rarely spoke out of keeping with his habitual reserve that his words seemed weighted with the solemnity of some final utterance.

“Andrew will be around presently to put out the lights and close the house. You need not call him, it will be all right; Goodnight;” and he moved toward the stairway.

“Good-night, Jake;” and with his hand on the door-knob Gibbs turned to look after him. He noticed the droop to his shoulders, that he walked with a lagging step, and his heart swelled with pity for this patient, stricken friend.

“Jake!” he called in a voice shaken by emotion. He wanted to say something, to let him know that he suffered, too, that he did not believe one word of all that had been said; that he could not and never had.

Benson turned quickly, and his foot seemed to catch in the fringe of the rug at the foot of the stairs. The rug

slipped treacherously across the polished floor, and the lawyer fell with a startled cry.

Gibbs, his old knees knocking together in his terror, hurried to his side, and bent over the prostrate man.

"Jake, are you hurt?" he cried. But Benson did not answer him. Kneeling down, he strove to raise his head. He jerked away his hand with a startled cry of dismay. There was blood upon it; for as he fell, Benson's head had come in contact with the sharp edge of the bottom step.

Gibbs glanced about him helplessly. He had not strength sufficient to lift him. Then he thought of Andrew, who must be somewhere about, and he shouted his name; but his voice echoed emptily through the silent house. He was not answered. He glanced again at Benson, and then leaving him, ran down the hall and through the diningroom to the back of the house. In the kitchen he found Andrew asleep in his chair. He shook him roughly by the arm.

"Come, wake up!" he cried. "Mr. Benson's had a fall!"

The man stirred sleepily, and opened his eyes.

"What's that you say, sir?" he asked.

"Jake's stumbled on the stairs, you fool—come with me!" he shrieked.

But when they reached the hall, they found that Benson had recovered consciousness, and was sitting up with a dazed expression on his face.

"How did it happen?" he asked of Gibbs.

"You slipped on the rug, and you got a nasty fall," said Gibbs.

Benson put his hand to his head, but took it away quickly.

"I seem to have cut myself," he said.

"Do you think you are much hurt, Jake? Here, wait a minute, Andrew and I'll help you up—the other side, Andrew—take him by the arm."

To get the lawyer on his feet was a more difficult task than Gibbs had anticipated; but when at last he had accomplished this, with the servant's aid, Benson seemed unable to hold himself in the position in which he had been placed.

"Take me to my room," he said weakly.

They got him up-stairs and undressed and in bed, and then Gibbs sent Andrews down-stairs for brandy, his own unfailing panacea.

"As soon as he brings that, he'll go for a doctor. How do you feel now, Jake?" said Gibbs.

"I seem more confused than hurt; it was the surprise, the sudden shock," said Benson.

"Who shall I send for?" asked Gibbs.

"No one, yet. As soon as Andrew comes, take my keys—you'll find them in my pocket—and go to the safe in the library. There's a paper there I want you to bring me. It's in a long yellow envelope, you can't miss it."

"Never mind your papers, Jake, a doctor's more to the purpose," said Gibbs, but the injured man moved impatiently.

"Do as I say!" he whispered.

"Just as you like, Jake," said Gibbs soothingly, and as soon as Andrew came with the brandy he hurried down-stairs and found the papers as Benson had directed. "Now are you ready for Andrew to go for the doctor?" he asked, as he re-entered the room and placed the paper in Benson's hand.

"Not yet, Gibbs. Get pen and ink—and Andrew, you go rouse the cook. Tell her to come here as quick as she can."

When Andrew had gone he said to Gibbs.

"It's my will, and it's unsigned."

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

STEPHEN was aroused by hearing knocking at the front door. He slipped from his bed and went to his window which overlooked the front of the house.

"Who's there?" he, called.

"It's Andrew, sir," a voice answered from the darkness below, and an indistinct figure emerged from the shadow of the house. "Mr. Benson has had a fall, sir. You are not to be alarmed, but he wants to see you."

"Wait a moment," said Stephen, and he struck a match, lighted the gas, and dressed hurriedly. As he quitted the house, he stopped at Virginia's door, and told her what had happened, then he joined Andrew.

As they strode down the deserted street, Andrew more fully described the accident.

"But was he alone at the time?"

"No, sir, General Gibbs was with him."

"And is still with him, I suppose? But you have been for a doctor?"

"Yes, sir, I stopped at Dr. Anderson's as I come along."

"Do you know whose idea it was that you should come for me?" asked Stephen with sudden doubt. He could hardly believe that Benson had sent for him.

"Mr. Benson wanted you."

"Are you sure? He gave you the order?"

"I was in the room. I heard him tell the general that I was to come for you."

Stephen quickened his pace. He asked no more questions.

When they reached the house, he left the man in the lower hall, and hurried up to Benson's room. Here he found Gibbs and Dr. Anderson, who had preceded him by some minutes, and had already finished his examination of the injured man. Stephen went at once to the bedside, Gibbs giving place to him.

"This is too bad, Uncle Jake," he said cheerily. "I am more sorry than I can say."

Benson turned slightly on his pillow, and regarded the young fellow with a look of wistful affection.

"You will not go away again, Stephen," he said in a voice that was raised scarcely above a whisper.

Stephen was shocked at the change he saw in him. The hale vigorous man seemed to have shrunk and dwindled appallingly. He moved a chair to the bedside and seated himself.

"Dr. Anderson says it's nothing but the sudden jar and shock. That he'll be all right in the morning;" it was Gibbs who spoke.

"Of course he will," said Stephen heartily.

"I hope so," said Benson drily. Then he lay back without speech or movement, but his glance was fixed yearningly on Stephen's face.

At the other side of the room Gibbs and Dr. Anderson were speaking together in whispers. Gibbs was giving the physician the particulars of the accident. Presently the general went softly from the room to find Andrew, whom he wished to send with a message to his Julia. He was only gone for a moment; and came stealing back on tiptoe. He had been all but drunk earlier in the evening; but he was perfectly sober now. He crept to the bedside, for he did not know whether Benson slept or not. When he saw that he was awake, he asked huskily.

"How do you feel now, Jake—some better?"

"I am resting very well, Gibbs; but you had better go to bed, you look worn out."

"No, no—I am doing very well. Don't you worry about me. I've just sent my Julia word of what's happened, so she'll understand why I won't be home to-night."

"I hope you didn't unnecessarily alarm her," said Benson with concern.

"No, I told her it was nothing serious, but that I didn't like to leave you; though you'd be in the best of hands, with Steve and the doctor here, if I did."

Benson closed his eyes, and seemed to sleep; and presently Stephen left his side and drew Gibbs out into the hall.

"What does Dr. Anderson say, general?" he asked.

"Come further away from the door," said Gibbs. "I'm afraid he'll hear us and be disturbed;" and he led the way down the hall. Stephen saw that the air of confidence with which he had borne himself in the sick-room had quite left him now that they were alone together. "Well, the doctor don't say much," said Gibbs, sinking his voice to a whisper.

"But he hasn't given you to understand that he fears any serious consequences from the fall?" said Stephen anxiously. "Of course, any severe shock at his age would be more or less serious."

"It ain't his age, Steve. I reckon I'm eight or ten years older than he; but you could roll me down those stairs drunk or sober, and I'd be on my legs in ten minutes and as good as ever. It ain't the shock I fear for him, it's those terrible charges your aunt's made against him that's sapping his strength. I don't need to ask you if you saw any change in him?"

"But he has seemed not to feel it."

"I guess I'm the only man alive that knows anything about the inside of Jake Benson's brain. That fool doctor said that, too, said it was only the shock of the fall; but I don't know that it makes much difference where he's concerned, for you can't dose a man for a broken heart; and that's the big part of what's the matter of Jake this minute."

"I hope not," said Stephen gravely.

"He's let go. I can see it in his eyes. He'll never want to get out of that bed!" moaned the old man, giving way to a sudden passion of grief. "He'll hide himself there until he dies, he'll never muster strength to face the evil-tongued gossiping world again!"

"You mustn't think that, general. He'll be himself in the morning."

"Never! He ain't been himself in weeks past. I've seen his heart break! I've looked on and seen it break—and could never find one word of comfort to give him! For all I know he thinks this minute that I misjudged him, too, that but for my dependence on him, I'd turn against him, too, like all the rest!" and the tears trickled down his bloated cheeks. "I wish to God I could let him know just how I feel toward him—but I never can—I never will! He'll die, and never know!"

"I'm sure he understands, general," said Stephen gently. "And I am sure he relies on you as he does on no one else."

"Do you think that, Steve, do you really think he knows how I feel about him? I've wanted to tell him, but by God, I can't insult a man like him by even letting him know that I hear what people are saying and believing! Damn them because they're a foul-hearted, foul-mouthed, tribe of ghouls! I don't blame your aunt; but I do blame Ben Wade; and by God! I've known the time when he and I couldn't have lived in the same town without bloodshed!"

It was in vain that Stephen strove to calm him. The barriers of his silence were down. Here was some one with whom he could freely speak, and he was not to be restrained.

"Who'd a thought that with all I been through, I'd have lived to such a thin-blooded old age, where my friends can't count on me to do for them the things they can no longer do for themselves! Since your father

died, Steve, I haven't cared for any man the way I care for Jake Benson. I was some use to your father; but I'm not a damn bit of use to Jake.”

“But you mustn't take this view of the case,” urged Stephen. “After all, he will probably be up and about in the morning.”

“Do you think that, Steve?” demanded Gibbs with passionate earnestness.

“Yes.”

“Well, I don't! He'll never leave that bed alive!”

They went back into the room, but there was no appreciable change in Benson's condition. He slept, or seemed to sleep, and Gibbs was finally prevailed upon to go into the next room and lie down, while Stephen and Doctor Anderson watched the sick man. And while they watched, the night wore on; and at last the cold grey of dawn filled the room; and the lamp they had kept burning on a stand back of a screen in one corner of the room, was extinguished.

By this time the whole household was awake. They heard the servants moving about below stairs; and presently Andrew tapped softly on the door, and told them that breakfast was served. Stephen went down alone, and then relieved the doctor; next Gibbs was called, and breakfasted, and it was midmorning; but Benson still lay as he had during the greater part of the night.

Julia came and established herself in the region below stairs, assuming the direction of the household. The sick-room she left to Stephen, the doctor, and Gibbs.

In the afternoon Benson seemed somewhat better. He talked now as he had not before done, to Stephen and Gibbs. At last he called Stephen to his side.

“Do you think, Stephen, that your aunt could be induced to come here, to humour the whim of a sick man—a very sick man? Do you think she would come if you went for her?”

Stephen's face betrayed the amazement he felt, for Benson said:

“Does it seem so singular a request to you?”

“Why, no, Uncle Jake,” faltered the young fellow.

“But you think she'll not come?” then a look came into his face that Stephen did not understand. “I must see her, Stephen—now, before it is too late; will you go for her?”

“If you wish it—yes,” said Stephen, but his heart sank. What if Virginia would refuse, what if he would have to return without her! But perhaps after all this was only some vagary on the part of the sick man; perhaps his mood would have changed by the time he got back—if he went at all.

“Tell her it's an act of charity to a sick man.”

“I think she will come if she thinks you really wish to see her,” said Stephen doubtfully.

“Will you go for her at once?” asked Benson eagerly. “Have Gibbs order the carriage. I want you to go. Perhaps you can say something that will bring her.” In his interest and excitement he had half-risen from his pillow; now he sank back weakly. “Bring her if you can,” he ended abruptly.

But when Stephen was gone, he had Gibbs station himself by the window, and instructed him to announce when he heard or saw the returning carriage. It was already twilight, and the darkness deepened as the general watched by the window. A half, three-quarters, of an hour passed.

“She won't come!” muttered Benson. The light darkened in his grey eyes; but even as he spoke, Gibbs called out that he heard the carriage wheels on the drive.

“Can you see whether Stephen is alone or not?” demanded Benson with eager interest.

“No, he's not alone, he's bringing Mrs. Landray,” said Gibbs after a moment's pause, in which he had seen two figures leave the carriage.

There was the sound of some one coming up the stairs, and Stephen opened the door and entered the room. He crossed to Benson's bedside.

“Are you ready to see my aunt, Uncle Jake?” he asked.

'"Yes.”

Stephen beckoned Gibbs from the room.

“I think he will wish to see Aunt Virginia alone,” he said.

Virginia came slowly up the stairs. She passed Gibbs and Stephen, and entered the room. The latter closed the door after her. She quietly approached Benson's bedside. He heard the sweep of her garments; he looked up into her face; he saw there a certain wonder and pity.

“It was very good of you to come, Virginia. I don't know that I had any right to expect it,” he said softly.

There was a moment's silence.

“Won't you sit down, Virginia?”

She took the chair at his side as he desired.

“I am sorry to see you ill and suffering,” she said at last, gently, compassionately.

“I do not suffer. It is nothing, it does not matter,” he said indifferently.

“But you will be well and strong again soon,” she said encouragingly.

“I don't know that I shall be. I don't know that I care to be. I suppose you cannot understand why I sent for you,” he said after a brief silence.

“No,” answered Virginia. “After what has happened.”

A spasm of pain contracted his face.

“I have hidden myself away from that at last—here,” he said.

“I wish we had never known,” said Virginia.

“Do you, Virginia—why?” he asked.

"Because I am indebted to you for so many kindnesses."

He made a feeble denial with his hand.

"You must not doubt that justice is all on your side. I want to tell you one thing; and it was for this that I sent for you. My motives were altogether different from what you must have supposed them to have been. Later, perhaps, they became horribly mixed; for things divide themselves sharply into two sorts—right and wrong—"

He paused, and lay weakly back on his pillows; his eyes, brilliant and searching, were fixed on her face. He wanted her to understand, to see clearly, what was so plain to him; that she might believe in him again, as she had once believed in him.

"You were very kind, then," she said. "After Stephen's death—"

"How long ago it seems!"

"You must have suffered!" she said pityingly.

"At first I expected that the matter would right itself. I wished to compel you to marry me, Virginia, I dreaded to see you become independent of me; I wanted to keep you where you would always have to come to me. I wanted to serve you, and I thought love might come out of dependence; but I could never have really known you; my God! how I have loved you, Virginia—I think I still love you! I told you once I should die loving you—and perhaps I am dying now."

She gave him a startled glance, but his pale face had undergone no change. He was still smiling up at her—wistfully, tenderly.

"You were the most beautiful woman in the world to me," he said softly. "I loved you before he went away—and I grew old and hard in waiting—for you never cared for me! I became embittered and angry with you because you could not love me in return. How could I deal honestly with you, how could I place riches in your hand? I wanted to keep you here, for I still had hope. But I found I could not wrong you, and remain the man I was. I changed so I did not know myself. Since I suffered, I was willing you should suffer; it was only right! The money was nothing to me at first but a shame and a reproach; but later I changed in that even; money came to mean more and more to me. From believing in much, I came to believe in little—" he paused again, and then went on. "But as far as now lies within my power I have made it right. The bulk of what I leave, is yours, Virginia, in tardy recompense of the wrong I did you, a wrong I freely acknowledge. Only in thinking of it, Virginia, think of the motive that prompted it. As for Stephen, I have left him nothing; since I know what is yours will be his. It is better that you should do for him, and I wish him to have every incentive for love and devotion—though once I wished to take that from you, too, Virginia."

"You must not talk of death," said Virginia.

"It will be no further off for not speaking of it," he muttered.

"I am sorry for the charge I made."

"I am not. If you had not made it you would not be here now. When I built this house, I could still believe that some day you would be its mistress. That was almost thirty years ago, and you have never entered it until to-night, to spend the last hours of my life with me! I wish you would say that you forgive me!"

"I do—but—"

"But what?" catching at the word.

"How much better it would have been if you had not done the thing you did."

"I don't know, I have waited all my life for a little tenderness from you, and you have never shown it until to-night. No, what we do, fits into the scheme of our existence. You would not deny me this moment!"

"You have paid a great price for it," she said pityingly.

"But it is worth it," he answered perversely. "I made my bargain with fate, and I am satisfied." His glance wandered about the room, but the familiar objects he saw only vaguely. The spell of her presence, desired but denied so long, made it all seem strange and new. Instead of the end, this seemed but the beginning.

"Perhaps you will come here to live with Stephen," he said after a pause.

"I haven't thought of the future," she answered him, and then realized that the future of which they spoke was something in which he would have no part. He fell silent again. Perhaps he was thinking of this, too; a long silence, in which he seemed to be drifting, slipping away into the shadows. Through half-closed lids, he kept his glance fixed upon her face, that seemed to have taken on youth and beauty.

Perhaps she understood the change that was coming to him; but she did not rise or call the others. She knew that he wished to be alone with her. She gazed long and earnestly at the pallid face. Her heart welled with sorrow for him; yet she was conscious that there was something perverse and pagan in his attitude; in his satisfaction with himself and with that moment.

He opened his eyes wide.

"You will not go away—you will not leave me?" he whispered. "No."

"You almost tempt me to get well, Virginia," he murmured smilingly.

She had rested her hand on the edge of the bed; now he found it with his own, and his fingers closed about it.

"Virginia!"

"Yes—what is it?" and as she bent her head to catch his reply, he moved, and turned his face toward the wall; but the smile still lingered on his lips.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FORTUNE OF THE LANDRAYS ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable

effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.